

Getting It Right

(Life Lessons 1.8)

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Content warning: this story contains strong language and alludes to m/m sex

This story takes place between the short story And to All a Good Night and the novel Breaking Cover.

Detective Jared MacLean pushed back from his desk impatiently. He was done with this. Just done.

The dead woman had called the cops a month ago on her ex-husband and had him picked up for smashing the planters on her porch. The man had been out on the street again an hour later. She'd reported him twice more for violating his court order, but both times he was gone before the patrol car showed up, and there were more urgent things for the cops to do than track the guy down. More urgent, until the neighbors called about screaming, and by then it was too damned late.

People were going to blame the cops, and Mac felt that responsibility deep in his gut. They had failed Bonnie Wilkins. But so had the rest of the system and a society that tolerated and glorified violence as a way to solve problems. One life ended, one smashed beyond repair. The ex had barely moved as they cuffed his blood-smeared hands behind him. Just blank dead eyes and silence, as they hustled him into the patrol car. Her future and his, both gone.

God, Mac was tired.

But thinking about going home lifted a little of that weight. He wasn't heading back to his little attic apartment, where the chilled air dropped off the single-pane windows like cold death. He was going to Tony's place. His secret haven. It would be warm, and if he was lucky something good would be cooking in the crock-pot. Even better would be the heat of Tony's arms around him, and that smile as Tony looked up at him. Every damned time, coming home to all that cracked a little more of the ice around his heart.

He'd worried for a while that it would be a bad thing. That being more open, more emotional, would make his job harder. But instead it was easier to put his game face on for work, knowing that at the end of the day he could take it off again. With Tony he could just be. No hiding, no masks, no pretending he didn't care and didn't feel. Best of all, no worries about what people might see and what they would think of him. Tonight, that sounded like heaven.

His partner Oliver glanced over from the neighboring desk. "Packing it in?"

"Yeah. This is cut and dried. I'm just detailing all the ways we fucked up and

failed to protect Wilkins, until finally she was dead and we could arrest her bastard ex for murder.” Mac’s tone was bitter, even to his own ears. “He’s going away now. Pity she’s not around to see it, but them’s the breaks, right?”

Oliver sighed and came over to sit on Mac’s desk. “You’ve got to let it go. I keep telling you that. You’ll fry your brain otherwise. Just make sure every damned i is dotted and every t is crossed, so he doesn’t walk. Then you’ve done your job and you move on.” He slid Mac’s coffee mug aside and settled in more comfortably. “So... did you hear about Hanson? Apparently he was taking his new girlfriend out to dinner, and it turned out his other girlfriend had just gotten a job as a waitress there. Hanson had to do some fancy tap dancing to make it slide by.”

“How do you know about it?” Mac wasn’t really interested in Hanson’s harem, but Oliver’s ability to dig up gossip was fascinating.

“Heard him talking to the new girl on the phone. Buttering her up. Sounds like the girls all know he’s not exclusive, but she didn’t like having her face rubbed in it. Hanson’s going to have to come up with something spectacular for Valentine’s tomorrow to make up for it.”

“I guess.” It probably could get expensive, stringing along multiple women. Not a problem Mac had ever had, thank God.

“So what are you getting your girl?”

“Huh?”

Oliver grinned at him. “You’ve been seeing someone, right? I’ve noticed you coming in with that fucked-out look lately.”

Never fucked out with Tony. Mac shrugged with careful nonchalance. “No special girl. No one I have to buy stuff for. Fortunately.” He was always pretty broke, although his money went a little further these days, with Tony cooking most nights. Eating out had been a budget-killer that he’d had a hard time resisting when he was alone. Now he had no desire to go out, when eating at home meant watching Tony wrap his lips around a forkful of something... Mac dragged his mind away from the thought of Tony’s lips.

“Doesn’t matter how casual it is,” Oliver said. “If you’ve dated a girl once and so much as held her hand, she wants something on Valentine’s Day.”

Still not Mac’s problem. Or... suddenly his brain stuttered, was it? After all, Tony was a romantic. He loved all the little gestures. Mac had once been digging in Tony’s

bedside drawer when the lube had fallen in and come across what looked like every casual note he'd ever left the man. Even little scraps of paper with, "*Gone running. Back in 30 min. M.*" on them were tucked away in there. So would Tony expect something for Valentine's Day?

Mac had always figured it was a day for women. All that red and pink and sparkly stuff was about ten miles away from what a guy was interested in. But maybe he should get Tony a card. Or something.

Oliver snickered. "You have that deer-in-the-headlights look. You do have someone you should buy for, don't you?"

"No!" Mac stood abruptly. "You're deluded. Also wrong. I was thinking about Anna. I should get her something." And that was true too. At least for his little daughter, he could go for pink sparkles and know that that her heart would be satisfied. Sometimes dealing with a four-almost-five year old was easier than figuring out how to handle a grown man.

He picked up his jacket off the back of his chair, ignoring the part of his brain that was chanting, *Often. Handle him often. And naked. And...* Better not to think about that in front of Oliver. "I need to get to a store, buy Anna a teddy bear or a tiara or something. Thanks for the reminder."

Oliver slid off Mac's desk, shoving back a few papers that tried to head to the floor. "You're welcome. Man, sometimes I wish my boys were that age again. They'll be buying valentines for their own girlfriends soon enough. Or maybe even now." His face fell, as he obviously thought about the boys he saw less often than he would like. But then he winked at Mac. "Not that this gets you off the hook. I know the look of a man trying to figure out what a woman wants."

That evidence that Oliver didn't actually have a crystal ball would have been more reassuring if it hadn't hit quite so close to home. What did Tony want? Mac sometimes felt like his very breath depended on figuring out the answer to that question. And he couldn't ask, because he was too damned scared to hear the answer. *Tony wants a real boyfriend, out in the open.* That wasn't going to happen, but maybe something nice, something to say *thanks for putting up with me*, was in order tomorrow. Mac would have to sleep on it. Maybe hint around, feel Tony out. Feel Tony up... He abruptly shrugged on his parka and zipped it up. "See you tomorrow, partner."

Tony averted his glance from the scarlet-and-black corseted dummy in the display window and stepped into the store. The influence of Valentine's Day tomorrow had clearly brought out a plethora of pinks and reds. His gaze slid over edible underwear and pink vibrators, and abruptly dodged a pair of cuffs lined with crimson fur. So not his tastes.

He headed further back away from the themed display, wondering whether he was doing the right thing here. He'd been planning to ignore Valentine's Day. After all, it was really unlikely to be Mac's thing. Tony had been friends with quite a few guys over the years and for most of them, unless they were straight and had a girlfriend to placate, V-day was a non-event. A few loathed it, the majority could care less, and only a couple had reveled in it.

But one of those two guys was the reason he was here. Because after mulling the whole V-day thing over and deciding not to be stupid about it, he had pulled out his phone to ask Marty what he thought. A dumb reflex, speed-dial lucky 7. He had actually pressed the button before the realization of what he was doing caught up with him. And the sudden pang of loss made him close his eyes as he flipped the phone shut. After half a year with that empty hole in his life where his best friend had been, Tony thought he really should have stopped doing that. Apparently some subconscious idiot down inside him still hadn't moved out of denial.

And then he had held the phone in his hand and just sat there. Because he could almost hear Marty in his head. *"How do you expect the man to learn how to be romantic if you don't nudge him along? Come on Tony, what could it hurt? You should get him something. Doesn't have to be sweet and pink, you know. Buy a red dildo, if you think that would make the man light up. But get something. You have to teach him how to be part of a couple."*

Marty had been an incurable optimist. And definitely in the minority with his love of V-day. But when it came to other people's relationships, Marty had often been right.

So Tony was looking for something not too sappy, nothing that would make Mac feel trapped. Tony had held back his first impulse to grab one of the cute valentines he'd helped Ben choose for his kindergarten class. Because even something as simple as *"Bee mine"* was pushing Mac a little too far. Tony knew very well, almost viscerally, that he had to go slow with Mac.

Mac still liked to pretend that this *thing* they had was all about sex. Or at least mostly about sex. So a sex toy. A sex something. Tony glanced around at the displays.

"Can I help you?"

The saleswoman was pert, blond and, um, enhanced. Even Tony's eyes were drawn to that spectacular endowment. He dragged his gaze back up to her amused eyes. "I think I'll just look around, thanks."

"If you need help with sizes or anything, let me know."

"Thanks. But I'm good." Tony turned away to hide his blush at having stared. She was probably used to that from guys, but Tony was flustered by having noticed a woman's boobs. Even if it was in an "I wonder why she doesn't tip over forward" way. He deliberately looked the other direction. Last time he was in this store the sales help had been a tall young guy, who had been either gay or bi enough to take a good look at Tony's ass. That guy he might have asked for suggestions. *So* not happening today. He should have ordered online, except time was too short.

The few other shoppers in the place were all women. Would they consider the saleswoman advertising or competition? Or, judging by the loud discussion between the two brunettes over at the DVD section, perhaps they wouldn't even notice her. He wondered why the women were looking for straight erotica with the ugliest men in it. Doing the same thing as he was probably, trying to find something their own guys would appreciate. Only not procrastinating like he was.

Which brought him back to the problem at hand. Marty had suggested... *Marty in his head* had suggested a dildo. And Tony figured he could probably give Mac a pretty hot show with one of those. But it didn't seem right somehow. For a man who had spent a decade having sex with bar-pickups, there was something old-fashioned about Mac. He would watch Tony play, and probably like it, but he wouldn't join in. Tony needed something more interactive.

What he eventually brought up to the cash register was small, and not blatant. Unlike the large vibrator and bright pink corset the elderly woman ahead of him bought. His mind boggled slightly and he forcibly turned his attention to the suggestive keychain display. You could get rubber models of almost anything on the end of a key-ring... *Not going there*. He smiled slightly, imagining Mac pulling out one of those to unlock his cop car. Only in Tony's most unlikely fantasies.

When it was his turn, the saleswoman rang his purchase up with a friendly smile. "Just one? There's a mixed pack."

"This is fine." At least he hoped it was. Should he plan a fancy dinner for tomorrow? Or treat it like just another day, in case Mac really did want to ignore it? Was there a middle ground? Was he going to go crazy over-thinking every aspect of this

relationship? Tony stuffed the bag in his coat pocket and headed out to buy steaks.

Mac stood in front of the card rack in Target. He had a large white bear with a red neck-bow under his arm. He'd asked Tony casually last night what he should get for Anna.

Tony had rolled on his elbow and smiled. "Other than a stuffed animal?"

"She has so many of those."

"She loves her 'stuffies'. Especially the ones you buy her. It's like buying her a hug. I don't think she gets enough of those from Brenda."

Mac had felt a little hurt. "I hug her."

Tony kissed his cheek. "Yeah, you do. It's one of the things I love about you, the way you are with Anna. But even though we take her and Ben out a lot, and you see her on your own too, she still spends most of her time without you. Buy her something big that she can snuggle."

Mac had come to believe that Tony was far better at figuring people out than he was. So here Mac stood with a bear he could barely get his arm around, looking at cards to express how he felt about the man. Which would be easier if he had a good handle on how he did feel about Tony. Tony was his friend, the best one he'd ever had. The first guy he could really relax around and be himself. In fact, the man had become a downright addiction. There was nothing more important than beginning and ending his day in that man's arms. Well, except Anna and his work.

But all these red cards with the word "love" on them were too much. Could you call it love when you had to hide it? When you knew it couldn't last, that it was just borrowed time?

Now lust - he had no problem with calling it that, none at all. He eyed a card with an almost naked blue-eyed blond guy on the front of it. A little too bare and waxed for Tony's tastes, but very hot.

A woman reached for the same card at the same moment and their fingers collided. She grinned at him. "It takes a secure man to buy that for his girlfriend. I want it for a single friend of mine. I figure the fantasy is as close as she'll get this Valentine's."

Mac pulled his hand back, and watched as the woman snickered at the sentiment inside the card. *Maybe not.* Because if Tony was going to have Valentine's fantasies, Mac would be damned if that shiny pretty-boy was going to star in them. He walked away from the cards. Something else. He needed to find something else for Tony. Something that would be right, no matter how long it took to find it.

That evening he parked his car on the street two blocks down from Tony's apartment. He was lucky to get the spot. Snow-emergency parking had made good-side-of-the-street spaces hard to come by. He switched off the engine.

The big stuffed bear had been a hit. Well, Brenda had complained about the size, but Anna had loved it. Mac had a picture on his phone of his little girl with her arms wrapped as far as they would go around that bear's neck. She'd named it Poly-Pop. Her smile had been worth every penny.

Now it was time to see if his other gift was a hit. Although, he still wasn't sure if Tony even cared about Valentine's Day. The man hadn't dropped any hints. Not even when they talked about Anna's gift. So maybe he would hide the thing in his coat, until Tony said something first.

His phone rang. He glanced at the ID. Oliver. Huh.

“What's up?”

“Just thought you might be interested to know. Wilkins' ex tried to kill himself, almost succeeded.”

“How the hell? He was in custody.”

“What I heard is that they were transferring him, crossing a parking lot. A bus was pulling in. He jerked free and dove under the wheel. They don't know if he'll make it.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. I'd say he deserved it but that's pretty harsh.”

“So is what he did.”

“True.” Oliver's voice shifted from serious to teasing. “So are you sitting outside some woman's house trying to decide whether to give her whatever sorry gift you came up with?”

Mac jerked. If Oliver was going to become psychic Mac was in deep, deep trouble. “If I was, it would still be closer than you're going to get to a woman tonight.”

Oliver sighed. “Too true. Well, if you are, get the fuck on in there and kiss her. Woman will forgive anything if you kiss them enough. Give her an extra one for me.”

Oliver had *no* idea what he was suggesting.

“How about you stay the fuck out of my nonexistent love life. Concentrate on your own nonexistent love life.”

“We're a pathetic pair. Well, have a good evening, whatever. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Mac put his phone back in his pocket, but despite the chill seeping into the car, he didn't get out. So fate or karma or something had made up for the department's deficiencies and taken care of Wilkins' ex-husband. Only a little late. Love and hate. They were so inexplicable.

If the bastard was so sorry for what he did that he killed himself afterward, why the hell had he beaten her to death in the first place? How did anyone get to that point? Mac knew he had been blazing mad at Tony a time or two. Madder than at anyone else in his life, he thought, because scorn from Tony could cut to the bone. But if he ever put so much as a bruise on that fair skin... he shook his head. People were impossible to figure out.

He had a sudden flash of his old kitchen, back when he was small. Of his father's hand catching Mom across the cheek almost casually, and his father's voice. “*It's the wrong damned beer. What's the matter, you too lazy to go buy the right one?*” What had that been? Too casual for hate. Surely not love. And yet his father had been violently possessive. All this time as a cop, and he still couldn't figure relationships out. He shook his head. Maybe it was no wonder he couldn't figure out where he and Tony stood.

But suddenly he wanted the answer to that to be, *together, right now*. No worries about the long term, no looking ahead. Just him and Tony, in that small apartment, with the door closed. Tony's voice and Tony's laugh making the rest of the day fall away. He

grabbed the small bag off the passenger seat, stuffed it in his pocket, and got out quickly. Two snowy blocks to home.

Tony pulled the butter out of the fridge and set it on the counter to soften, next to the loaf of French bread. The sleeve of his robe dragged on the counter and he shrugged it a little higher on his shoulder. He hoped he was doing this right. He could be making a big mistake.

But he was certain there was streak of the romantic in Mac, even if it was buried deep. Look at that book Mac had given him for Christmas. *The Front Runner* had to contain one of the most loving gay relationships in literature. And Tony was going to completely ignore the fact that the book ended in pain and tragedy.

Mac wouldn't have picked that book if he really thought this was only about fucking. Tony was going to see if he couldn't use the fucking to find the romantic guy underneath. Slowly. Repeatedly. His body had been aroused for an hour, anticipating.

He glanced over and took a deep breath as he heard Mac's key in the door. Showtime.

Mac came in, bringing the chill of the outside air on his coat even after two hallways and an elevator. Tony hugged him anyway, and kissed his neck. "Hey, is it getting colder out there?"

"Yeah. It's nice and clear, gonna be a frigid one." Mac disengaged and went to kick off his shoes, hang up his coat in the closet and then stow his weapon under the sink. Tony followed him into the kitchen.

Mac cocked an eye at him. "Are you just out of the shower?"

Tony ran a nervous hand over the terrycloth on his hip. "In a way. A little while ago."

Mac glanced around the kitchen and sniffed appreciatively. "Something in here smells good."

"Stopped at the bakery for French bread. It's still warm."

Mac stuffed his holster in after the gun, and came to wrap his arms around Tony. “I love that smell. It makes me think of home.” He buried his nose in Tony's neck. “So do you.”

“Oh.” That got Tony, right where he lived. “Kiss me properly, damn it.”

For a long time, they just stood there, letting their mouths remember each other's taste and feel. Finally Mac leaned back a bit, his arms securely around Tony. “Oliver told me a woman will forgive anything if you kiss her enough.”

Tony tugged sharply on a wisp of Mac's hair at the back of his neck. “Do I look like a woman?”

“Not even remotely.”

“Do you need to be forgiven for something?”

“Not sure.” Mac slid a big warm hand behind Tony's head. “Maybe I'll make a deposit on account.”

“Might work.” Tony tipped his face up again for Mac's kiss. *Yeah, even better.*

Eventually Mac sighed and licked Tony's neck under his ear. “I'm torn between being hungry and being...*hungry*. And why the robe?”

“Um. It's your Valentine's present.”

Mac stepped back and looked him up and down. “Not complaining. You know I like you with bare feet and all. But unless I'm mistaken that's your old robe.”

“What's under it is new.”

Mac's eyes lit up. Then he said, “Wait. My turn first.” He went to the hall closet and rummaged around in his coat. When he came back he had a small paper bag, which he held out to Tony. “It's not much.” He looked tentative, and the way he bit the corner of his lower lip was just freaking adorable.

“Whatever. You got me something for Valentine's Day. I'm going to savor the moment.”

“Don't make a big deal out of it.” But Mac seemed to relax a bit.

Tony reached in the bag. His fingers slipped over cool hardness. Surprised, he reached in carefully and pulled out a small piece of polished carved stone. It was two wolves. One slept, curled in a ball so tight that its nose was buried under one hind paw. The other lay awake, its body protectively curved around the sleeping wolf, but head up and alert, ears pricked, eyes open. The shapes were perfect and yet a little stylized, not kitschy or cute. The stone was a soft veined grey.

Tony turned it over. On the flat base, a small round paper label gave the artist's bio and name. Ken Anawak. Tony would have to remember him. He looked more closely and realized the paper was folded, held by a clear sticker. Tony popped the edge free. Inside was the date of the work and the title. "*Guarding his mate.*"

"Wow." He looked up to see Mac's dark eyes watching him. Had Mac known the title of the piece when he bought it? Tony decided not to ask. He ran a fingertip over the guardian wolf's head. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

"It's not romantic or anything. I mean, I figured you wouldn't want anything sappy. I just liked it."

"It's perfect." Tony folded the label carefully under, and set the little statue on the shelf that held his wine glasses. The wolf's gaze looked steadily back at him. "Exactly right."

Mac probably didn't mean his sigh of relief to be quite that obvious. "So. You got something for me?"

"Now I'm embarrassed. Because I was even less romantic."

"That's fine. That's good. I don't go for romantic stuff anyway."

"Well hopefully you'll go for this." Tony slipped open the knot on the belt of his robe and slid it off his shoulders.

"Um. What is it? You look... interesting."

"Just interesting?" Tony slid a finger across his own bare chest, over the slightly sticky dark maroon letters there. He'd thought about the strawberry red – Mac loved strawberries - but red splotches on Tony's skin were still a trigger for bad memories. Purple was a Valentine's color too. He'd done a few spirals. And so sue him, he'd done some hearts. And Mac's name across his left pec. A couple of years of writing over his shoulder on the whiteboard while keeping his eye on his class made writing backwards straightforward. Although he'd checked it in a double mirror to make sure.

Mac touched that spot lightly. “I mean I like having you branded here. But it's clearly not a tattoo.”

“Edible body paint. This is black-currant brandy flavor. I tasted it. It's pretty good.” Tony pointed at the spiral around his right nipple. “Try some.”

Mac lowered his head, rasping over Tony's skin with his tongue. Tony leaned back and arched into that hot wet stroke.

“Mmm,” Mac said. “Not bad. Like cassis liqueur.”

Tony dropped the robe all the way and pointed at his hip. “There's more.”

Mac's smile could have powered a lighthouse. “I see you went to town with it.”

“Waste not, want not.” Tony touched the shiny stripe up the length of his aching cock. He'd been hard for an hour, thinking about Mac licking that one off. “There's more paint left.”

“How much more? And can I do some? I always wanted to do graffiti, never had the nerve.”

“I'll be your canvas. Your, um, concrete underpass.”

Mac snorted, but Tony could see that his big cop's slacks were looking uncomfortably tight.

Tony glided his tongue across his lower lip, slowly. “I might even paint you up too, if you ask nicely. It's hard to get this stuff off. Takes a lot of licking.” Tony rubbed at the smeared paint where his pec was wet from Mac's mouth, and then sucked on his fingertip.

“Damn.” Mac grabbed his other hand. “I want to lay you down and eat my dessert first.”

“Works for me.”

Hand in hand, laughing but painfully aroused, Tony let Mac pull him toward the bedroom. The sheets were clean, and dark enough to hide stains, and the little pot of paint was waiting at the bedside. He lifted their clasped hands to kiss Mac's knuckles. *Happy Valentine's Day, Mac.*

From its shelf in the kitchen, reflected and refracted in the surrounding glassware, the guardian wolf watched them go, into the heart of his domain.

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