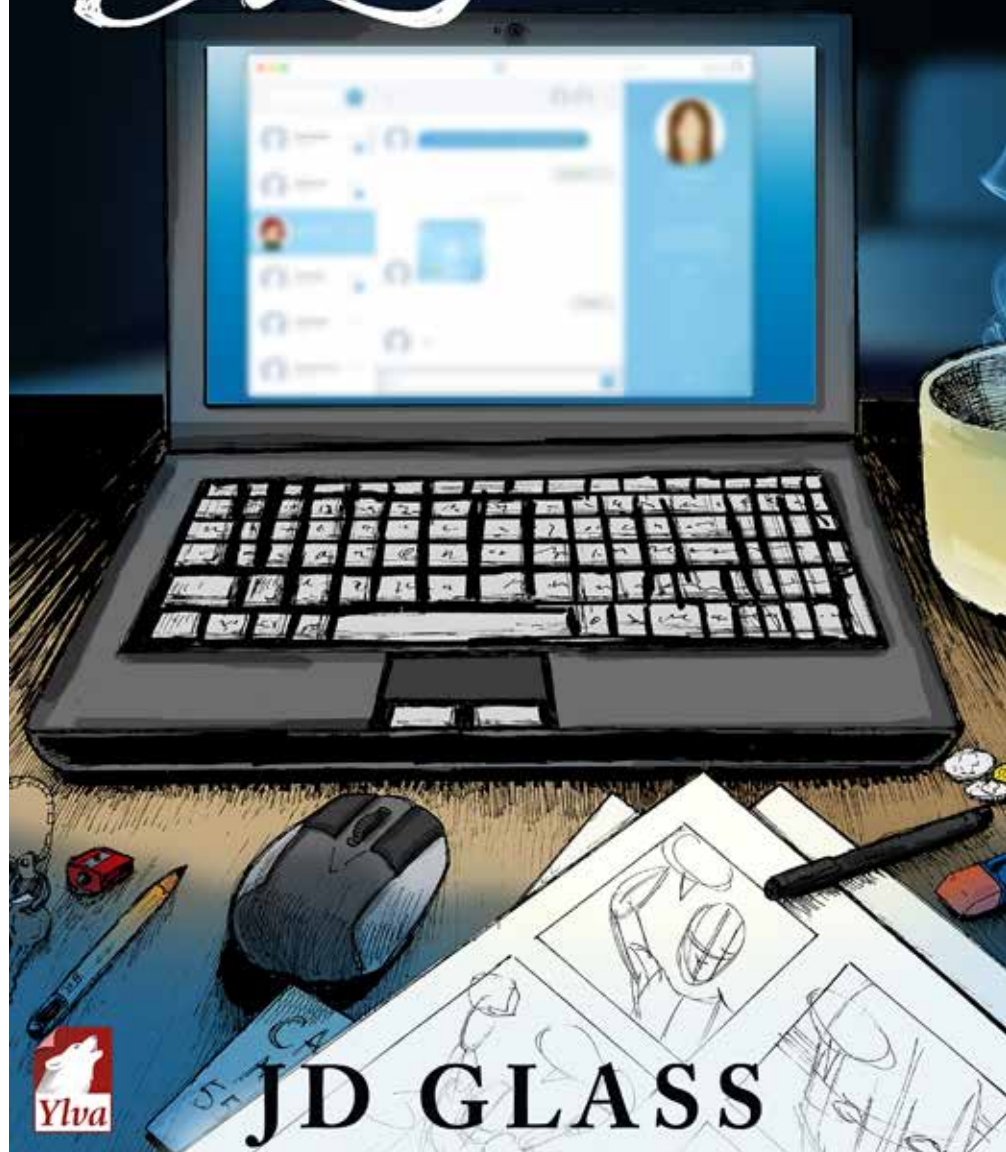


Drawn Together



JD GLASS

Chapter 1

From the Sent Files:

Use of this e-mail system is strictly regulated by a whole lot of nothing...

Fastercar: *I had a great time at dinner. You have good taste. I like your...shirt ☺ Let's do it again, like maybe tomorrow?*

ZoeGlennworks: *Dinner was nice, and thanks, but I've got a deadline. I'll let you know when I'm free.*

“OH COME ON ALREADY, ZOEY—ANOTHER one?” my mom asked with obvious exasperation in her voice and on her face. Her mug clunked down on the table, and everything, from the clank of the mug to her tone, was audible to me despite the usual Starbucks crowd that lined up along our table.

“What?” I feigned ignorance as I hit *send* on my phone, which hopefully—successfully—sent “Fastercar” away, simply, purely *away*. I picked up my mug and tried to hide behind it as I sipped, but truth to tell, I did in fact know what she meant.

I tried not to sigh.

This was our officially unofficial let's-go-out-and-get-caffeinated-together mother-daughter date, and given the new deadlines I had, I'd probably let it go for too long. But this one, this one was mandatory, since I'd finally agreed to meet—

“Grandchildren, Zoey. Grandchildren. I need pictures to share with my car pool. I need a worthwhile target to dwindle my future retirement

DRAWN TOGETHER

savings on. She's a nice person, Zoey, she's pretty, she's smart—and she's well employed!"

That last part was said rather pointedly.

I swallowed both my coffee and my sigh. This was rapidly becoming old territory insofar as conversations went, and I really didn't want it go any further.

"Yes, I know, she told me all about it," I said as mildly as I could. "How she measures and models in the lab, and puts together the molds, and how delicate and individual each prosthetic is."

I tried, very hard, not to roll my eyes as I remembered the details. It wasn't that they were boring per se; in fact, I enjoy most technical discussions. It's just that she'd had this way of grimacing and this nervous, quick lick of her teeth that left me squicked out, and there was this almost frantic, I-have-to-tell-you-all-about-this-*now*-right-*NOW*, without taking a breath delivery that really weirded me out.

Well, that and all the "Toni" talk. Who was Toni? Apparently Toni—who never ate Indian, worked as a realtor, and drove a Buick (seriously, whatever)—might not have been physically present, but there was this great ice cream place the two of them used to go to all the time, and maybe *we* could try it sometime, as in she and I, maybe, if I wanted, maybe, sometime, and did I want—

Yeah...

No.

That was *never* going to happen, because first, no, just...no.

And really, the fact was I'd spent the entire evening so very aware of all the time I could have spent working and actually getting something *done* instead of smiling and nodding politely. What I could have—no, what I *should* have been doing was catching up with—

"She's creative!" my mother said enthusiastically. "She helps people!"

"She makes teeth, Ma, plastic *teeth*."

"Porcelain," my mother corrected.

This time, I did roll my eyes. "How's Carl? And have you spoken to Bob lately?" I asked, both to change the subject and because I actually wanted to know.

Carl was my mother's husband and, I supposed, my stepfather too. We didn't dislike each other, in fact, we were friendly—but he was more like

a distantish uncle to me. I didn't really know why, but still, we were okay with each other. Bob, on the other hand, had been a family friend for years, really was emotionally an uncle to me, and even more—like a father—in many ways, since mine had died before I could even really remember him.

I admit, it had taken me years to figure out the reason the wiry Vietnam veteran hadn't married my mother, despite their obvious closeness, was because he was gay.

But Bob did like Carl, and I trusted his opinion.

I always had.

"Oh, you know Carl," my mom said. "He's got another history project going on—he's off to Gettysburg and then down to Maryland for something Civil War." She waved a hand. "Bob's going too—he promised to send pictures of Carl in costume and to keep him away from musket fire and such."

I chuckled at the images all of that created in my head. "Glad someone's preventing lead poisoning."

"Me too, and glad you've learned the"—she held her fingers up in quotes—"social dodge so well." She fixed me with a look, then put her hands flat on the table. "Grandkids, Zoey. I want to spoil some."

"You know, Ma," I said with a deeply heartfelt sigh, "if you really want pictures of kids, why don't I ask Dion if she'll write up some for you?"

"Dion," my mom said warmly. "How is she doing? I like her a lot."

"Yeah, me too," I agreed and grinned. My distraction had worked. "She's doing good."

"That's great—so tell me more about what you guys are up to."

"Well, first off, there's this." I held up the letter opened on my phone.

Dear Ms. Rivera and Ms. Edwards,

We're very interested in learning more about your project: the graphic novel with the working title of *Con*, written by Dion Rivera and drawn by Zoe Glenn Edwards.

Please send us some further examples of what you're doing, as well as a synopsis of the work. It's always exciting when

DRAWN TOGETHER

there's synergy between two artists and something new is created.

Looking forward to seeing your work!

Best regards,
Gordon Ruth

Dion and I had been friends for a little while now, and the longer we knew each other, the better and better we got on.

"And that's from..." I quickly swiped to another screen.

D Rivera's Blog:

Hi all!

So yep, I've just started two new projects: another book (not part of the series-whoa!) and check this out: a graphic novel with none other than the absolutely furkin' awesome Zoe Glenn Edwards! Yes, THAT Zoe Glenn Edwards! Can I tell you that I'm thrilled? Can you tell that I am? So watch this space for news and the new story! And if you don't know Zoe Glenn's work—what are you waiting for! Go! Now!!! I'll wait...

Replies:

@D: happy to share this sandbox with you

@ZoeGlenn: it's an honor for me, truly!

"Zoey!" my mother exclaimed as she read from the screen. "This is fantastic. I'm really thrilled to see this happening for you." The smile she wore as she glanced back at me was beaming wide; it even shone from her eyes as she looked into mine. "So the two of you are really moving forward with this—that's perfect."

"I know, I completely agree," I said with a smile of my own I couldn't contain.

After all, it really had been a matter of time before we met: me, Zoe Glenn Edwards, a.k.a. Zoe Glenn, kinda well-known and well-regarded comic book artist, even if I did say so myself, and Dion Rivera, otherwise

known publicly as D Rivera, the edgy, enfant terrible of the queer-lit scene—who happened to run in similar, and even the same, circles I did.

We'd been peripherally aware of each other for a while, even belonged to some of the same professional organizations, but when I'd discovered her work, I mean, really got to see it and read it—I was amazed. I read her work, and I knew this was me in another medium, if that makes any sense, “me” if I had decided to write—if I had been *able* to write—novels.

Because, oh...

Words.

I'd never had words.

I had pictures and I had concepts and I could “show” with the lines I drew on paper or on screen, but I could never “say,” not the way Dion did.

She had the words, all the words in my head, every single one I had to dig so hard to find, to think; she spelled out everything I found so impossible to say. And her work, what she created with those words... It was so raw, so open, so...so honest.

Dion did with words what I did with lines—she built people and worlds and stories, people and worlds and stories I wanted to know, things I recognized, things I wanted to be a part of.

And I loved it—really loved her work.

I was delighted to discover, not too long afterwards, that she felt the same about my work, too; that I was *her* if she'd decided to write and draw comics.

God, I still remembered that first bit of exchange. We'd just officially become “friends” via social media, and then she had to go ahead and post an excerpt from the latest novel she was working on.

From the *Sent Files*:

finelines: *Those two lines are just a one-two punch of beauty. I really want to draw something to it, so to speak, if you don't already have something attached to it. May I?*

wanderer: *Actually, I'm beyond honored that you'd think of it, seriously. So yes, absolutely. Kinda floored, actually.*

finelines: *Can't help it – it's so damn evocative!*

DRAWN TOGETHER

wanderer: *Uh...I dunno if it's something you'd want to do/ think about for some day in the future, but I'm working on a graphic novel adaptation of some of my stuff (a couple o' few people have been really on me about it for a while, so I've finally said yes <g>) and, well, it would be kind of amazingly frikkin' awesome if you'd consider making it come to life.*

wanderer: *No rush on the answer and no worries, no matter what you decide.*

wanderer: *But when I think of artists I think would "get it" and make it their own, make it sing, I think of you.*

finelines: *Ah, thanks! I was going to ask if you had something like that in mind for next steps or whatever. You seem to be one step ahead of me all the way here. ☺ The highest compliment I can give—and very few writers I know get this—is that your words draw pictures in my head. Yeah, sounds lame and cheesy, but it's true. And I so appreciate writers who can do that. So, thanks! And thanks for letting me play with your work visually.*

wanderer: *I love the way you visually storytell. I can "hear" all the words, feel them, in your images. So yeah, I get it—and honestly, I thank YOU!!! ☺*

When the initial so-great-to-finally-meet-you-I-really-love-your-work conversations turned towards the more in-depth, at least insofar as creation and creative process were concerned, well, we both had come into the discussion knowing we had to do something together—so now, we were.

"So...here." I quickly opened yet another file to show her. "These are the latest thumbnails I've done and the story it's going with—what do you think?"

I held my breath, then let it out slowly while I watched my mother's eyes widen with appreciation as she swiped along to view the images on the screen. A soft smile, a warm one, grew as she gazed.

D Rivera's Blog:

Ahem. Okay. Tap, tap, tap. I think this thing is on! Okay, so everyone ready? Then without further ado, here it is—and thank you, honestly and truly, for being as awesome as you are.

Con

Part I

I started cramping somewhere toward the late morning, hard and vicious, the sort of pain that lets you know you're in for it, and it floated over this...this sense...that I had: the edgy anticipation of something, or actually, someone, headed my way.

I hate that sense sometimes. I can go days, occasionally weeks, and if I'm lucky, a month, almost two, before it hits me again. When it does? I'm an edge-jangled mess, hyperalert and twitchy.

That it came now, on top of pain that was four days early—an extremely unusual occurrence—left me gritting my teeth. This...was going to be ugly.

The nerves and the pain were beginning to fuzz me out, while the effort to smile, to engage in animated conversation with strangers, the effort of separating mind from the aching throb that begged me to curl up somewhere dark to puke in peace, was surely eating away at the last of my reserves.

A slight lull in the crowd gave me my chance, and I excused myself from the table. I slipped between people and bags, costumes and weapons, with the haze between my eyes flowing down my neck, my chest, until I reached the door to the patio of the convention center that overlooked the river.

There were, perhaps, half a dozen people—mostly in pairs—scattered about the large deck. I found a comfortable spot

DRAWN TOGETHER

to lean against the concrete railing, lit myself a cigarette, and let the pain and the edge drift away with the smoke as I watched it.

I was clear and alert; the cramp settled to a warm, mindful discomfort in my belly. A name, a face drifted through my mind, and as my muscles seized—a twist that forced me to shift my legs, compensate with my stance—in the resigned way you know that whatever comes next, you’ll still be wrong and have to correct it—I knew she was near.

“JayJay.”

Her voice was the same: husky, low, and it sent that spike of resignation through my spine.

“Beth.”

I didn’t turn around, because she did what I knew she would: lean along the railing next to me.

“I heard you’d be here,” she said as her sleeved arm rested next to mine, and my peripheral vision caught her staring out over the water next to me.

I couldn’t stand the thought of my back so vulnerable to her. I shifted again—pain be damned—and the leather of my jacket rubbed up against the concrete, guarding me.

“Wasn’t a big secret,” I answered. That was very true; it had been announced on websites and boards, even in a couple of stores and a few e-mails. And then, there was always word of mouth...and there was always plenty of that.

“Hometown girl making it big, everyone who’s known you knows,” she said.

JD GLASS

The afternoon sun shone down on her and reflected back up into her face from the water that shimmered below. Ice blue, winter-sky blue, almost colorless eyes stared down at the river and the ice that lined its edges. Gray hadn't taken over her hair yet, though a few thick streaks here and there were strung among coal-black waves, waves that still flowed just past her shoulders.

"Are you bleeding?" she asked quietly, turning those eyes and those soft, soft lips to me.

"Huh. Around you? Probably," I answered as flippantly as I could.

"You look like you're in pain," she said in the same quiet voice, and she reached automatically, the way she had almost a lifetime ago, to touch me, to reach that spot that would ease the muscles.

I caught her hands halfway, gently pushed them back. "Again... around you? Definitely," I told her as I let go.

She stared at me, those ice eyes on mine, and for a brief moment, I wondered what she saw, what my eyes looked like to her. I knew that when I was at any emotional extreme, the outer ring turned a bright, emerald, green. But when I was hazy or, as both my mother and my beloved partner had told me, half-awake and furious, they shone an amber gold. I wondered what she saw—the green...or the gold?

Beth nodded. "I deserve that."

"You do, Beth. You do," I agreed.

I tossed my cigarette over the railing—it had lost its appeal—and shoved a hand into my pocket as I edged away.

DRAWN TOGETHER

"Can we talk?" she asked, as I took my first step.

I hesitated. The last time we'd spoken, she'd issued an invitation to her wedding that I didn't attend.

Eight years.

Eight years since I'd seen her to that invitation, eight more to this day on the patio.

She edged closer. "We haven't spoken in a long time, not alone." Her face was serious, sad, her eyes fixed on mine.

I glanced around the patio. The chill of the air off the water must have gotten to those who'd been outside, because with the exception of one lone smoker stationed about thirty feet away, she was right. We were alone.

"We haven't spoken alone since..." I let it hang, because the memory was dull, but the pain wasn't, another knife through my gut that made me want to retch.

"Since I hurt you," she supplied. She took another step closer.

"No, Beth. No," I corrected, stepping back with a shake of my head. "You didn't hurt me—you raped me."

Replies:

@D: OH MY GOD, what a start!

"It's good, huh?" I asked, my voice almost a whisper.

"Yes." She nodded slowly as she spoke. "It is—this is a very intense and intriguing work, and you two have a beautiful relationship." She smiled and handed back my phone.

"Yeah, we work great together," I agreed.

"That, too," she said, then her smile widened.

“What?” I knew my mom, and I knew that smile meant...something.

“What, what?” she teased back. “I’m your mother—can’t I have a smile just because I’m happy to see yours?”

“Oh...okay?” I answered a bit guardedly. Because I wasn’t sure what she meant, and usually, my mother meant something.

She nodded in agreement to whatever that something was, but I’m not certain what it was I’d just agreed to.

“Now how about your new apartment?” she asked briskly. “Is it still surrounded by that empty lot?”

“They’re rebuilding, Mom,” I said for what seemed like the hundredth time.

Property in any city was pricey, and Boston no different from the rest of them in that regard. I had found this two-bedroom condo for sale at a great price, because there’d been a fire, and the entire building had been gutted and rebuilt. And okay, sure, I had no neighbors at the immediate moment, but that was going to change soon, really soon, since I’d already seen signs of the realtor showing the spaces above and below me. Besides, every day, I could see construction progress on the building next to mine.

“It just seems so, so isolated, Zoey. And you’re already alone enough—I worry about you, you know. Why not a place in Brookline, or down here, in Beacon Hill?”

“Ma,” I sighed, because this was all part of that old conversation I’d been trying to avoid. “I like the part of Jamaica Plain I’m in. I’m close to downtown, every other realty price around is twice or more what I paid, and it’s charming, you’ve got to admit that,” I said and smiled at her, trying to get her to smile back.

“It is that,” she said, giving me a faint agreeing grin before she took a sip. “I’m surprised you didn’t decide to go to New York, actually, so I’m relieved and glad you’re closer than that.”

“Why would I have? I mean, what’s in New York?”

“Dion,” she said simply. “It would be easier for you to work together, right?”

“That...that’s just...” I sputtered. Because I’d already found the place, had been looking for a while already, when Dion and I had started working together, so really, why would I...why would my mother have even thought...?

DRAWN TOGETHER

“Internet, Ma,” I answered finally. “Telephone and Internet. They both work really well.”

“Oh Zoey...” she sighed, then shook her head slightly. Her expression softened as she gazed at me. “Zoey Glenn Edwards. Tell me more about what you and Dion have coming next. Are you going to, well, what is it, a conference, a convention—what?”

“We’re going to New York Comic Con!” I told her excitedly. “The plan is...”

Right next to working with Dion, talking with her or my mom about our project was my favorite thing, so I happily shared the details.

“...and hopefully we’ll have something really neat to bring to the con itself,” I finished.

“You’re certainly getting a lot done in a little bit of time—it’s like you’re on fire or something!” my mom said, and I could hear real admiration and approval in her voice. “I’m glad work is going so well for you. Then what comes next?”

I continued to share and while I did, I tried not to wonder why my mom kept looking at me with that strange expression and soft smile while we talked.

Chapter 2

From the Sent Files:

This e-mail system is protected by a firewall created by third-level demons. Fourth-level ones are scanning for contraband.

wanderer: *Oh, that's too fucking funny! Maybe you should have gone out with Toni instead!*

finelines: *Might as well have, since she came along anyway! Hey—you okay with that letter to Galump?*

wanderer: *Lol about Toni, and yes! Why do you think I said go ahead and send it? It's perfect! Yep. Hey—got time?*

finelines: *Sure!*

wanderer: *Calling you as soon as I get in. Give me about 5, okay?*

finelines: 😊

I GLANCED UP TO SEE WHAT was going on in the dog run as I pocketed my phone, and yes, there he was: my Jackson, a small but tough Boston terrier happily jumping all over Connor, a very large, golden-yellow Labrador who was obviously enjoying the attention.

“Ah, they’re such silly boys,” Barbara, Connor’s mom, said next to me.

I smiled at the playing pups, then at Barbara. “They are,” I agreed. “But I have to bring Jackson back in—we only had a few minutes, anyway. Jackson!” I called.

DRAWN TOGETHER

He immediately dropped Connor's tail and came running over, and Ann, Barbara's partner, came ambling up, two cups of what I knew would be tea in her hands. The sun shone on her white hair.

"You're always so busy," she said with a smile I could hear as I snapped Jackson's leash back on. "I'm officially retired as of next week, so stop in for tea whenever, okay? We're just—"

"Down the hall, I know," I said as I straightened. I gave her a smile of my own. I didn't get to see Barbara and Ann often—I didn't get to see anyone often, but it was true: they did live just down the hall from me, and on the rare occasions I could, I very much enjoyed their company—theirs and Connor's. He was an awesome dog, which was why I let Jackson play with him, while Barbara and Ann were an awesome couple, which was why I actually did want to spend time with them.

"I'm under a deadline," I explained to Ann as she handed a cup to Barbara. Man, they were so awesome, and I was smiling both at that gesture between them and the news I had to share. "I'm working on a new project, and this time it's with a collaborator!"

"Really?" Barbara asked with interest. "Who is it?"

"Have you ever heard of," I began as Connor shoved his massive head under my hand for a friendly scratch and I obliged him, "Zoe Glenn?"

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Barbara said with a delighted smile. "How did that—"

"What are you waiting for? You need to get working—go on!" Ann interrupted and shooed me with her free hand at the same time.

"I'm going, I'm going," I said, then laughed.

"Bring me something to read when you come over for tea!" Ann called as I crossed the grass. I could hear Barbara laugh.

Back in the apartment moments later and a cup of tea all ready to go, I shifted the position of Jackson on my lap so I could grab the phone. He gave me the doggy side eye, then went right back to sleep as I dialed.

Zoey was already laughing, the rumble of it low and rich in my ear when she answered. "Yeah...no," she said. "I think I dodged a bullet with that one!"

"Or a Buick!" I teased.

"Oh man—now that's what I should've told my mother!" she exclaimed through another laugh. "So hey...the Galump thing..." Her voice shifted from laughter to serious. "You're really good with that response?"

“Absolutely,” I assured.

I opened the e-mail version of the letter on my screen.

Dear Gordon,

Attached are signed and scanned copies of the contracts; physical copies are on their way.

Let’s set up a day and time to discuss the schedule, both for production and marketing further—Dion and I have already been laying some groundwork, and we think we have some very serviceable ideas.

And we’re both very glad to be working with you and Galump, too.

Best regards,
Zoe Glenn Edwards

“That was perfect—you’re perfect, and this is seriously exciting!” I told her, letting my own enthusiasm sound in my voice, because it *was* exciting; this was a really big deal. “And there’s no way this would be happening without you.” I added very honestly.

“Or without *you*,” she reminded me. “Met my mom for coffee the other day, and I showed her the thumbnails—that’s okay, right?”

“Of course, show anyone you like—I trust you,” I assured her.

And then, I waited.

Of course I wanted to know what Zoey’s mother thought, and for more than one reason. Sure, I wanted the feedback as an artist, but there was also the relationship Zoey had with her mother.

They were tight-knit, close—they were actually *friends*—so there was every good reason to think that there would be more to the response than just an opinion on the work. Zoey honestly respected her mother’s thoughts and opinions; they all carried weight with her.

Which meant they all carried weight with me, too.

DRAWN TOGETHER

“She really liked it—she liked it a lot—said it was intriguing and intense,” Zoey said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “She also said we work great together.”

I nodded even though she couldn’t see me, which made my hair loosen from the clip I had it in. “I’m glad she liked it, and she’s right—we do, we really do.” I quickly brushed my hair out of my face.

Because it was true, we did.

Anyone could have rightfully and accurately predicted we’d meet sooner or later, and we’d already been somewhat acquainted, if not actually friends, through a different social media platform. I honestly don’t know what prompted me to click when I saw her name pop up on “suggested friends,” but I thanked the impulse, wherever it had come from, and myself for following it. What she and I were working on had rapidly evolved into one of the most important things I had ever done.

To be both precise and clear, every single exchange between us had been purely professional at the start. Yes, I’d been surprised that Zoe Glenn Edwards wanted to do a project with me, but I also knew my worth—and then I dug more deeply into Zoe Glenn’s body of work...and was floored.

All those rich images.

There was no question nor doubt: I *definitely* wanted to work with her.

So we talked about it, or rather, went back and forth in e-mails, and then I had to go ahead and post an excerpt from my latest novel, words that drew a complete picture in her head, that she had—simply just *had*—to draw.

She asked me if she could because she wanted—she *needed* to—so intensely.

I said yes.

And just like that, we were off.

We were working together, no hesitation, no further discussion.

She’d asked me to use her given name, Zoey, since all her friends and family did—it was only work folks that called her Zoe Glenn anyway. And I’d asked her to call me Dion since only work folks called me D.

“Hey, you know, my brother just said the same thing a few days ago,” I told her, “that we have an incredible working relationship, I mean.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I smiled as I remembered. “I was talking with him about what we’re doing, and he said the same thing. Pretty cool, huh?”

"It is." She laughed. "I also happen to agree with both of them."

"Me too. So...how about you? How are you liking the way this is going?"

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "Can I just say that—"

We talked some more about the project and about the things we were working on individually, but at some point, I began to keep a half eye on the clock.

Kerry was going to be home soon, and I had to wrap up not just the conversation but the work on my desk. She'd been having a hard time at her job lately. She was the head accountant or chief financial officer or something along those lines for her father's company, which happened to own several new and used car dealerships. The company was in the middle of an expansion, and with that came all sorts of delicate work and due diligence and banking things I only sort of understood. They were preparing quarterly reports and trying to get a loan.

Anyway, between that and the ever-present medical issues with her mother (Kerry's parents were divorced, and Kerry was an only child, which meant care for her mother, such as it was, fell to Kerry—and to me), anything that interfered with what she had declared as "us time" was verboten—and that *especially* meant my work, with or without any collaborators.

"It's weird—I'll see you in a few weeks, right? We're still good for that?" she asked.

I shook my head, annoyed with myself for getting lost in the clock and the concerns that were now about twenty minutes away from hitting me. I brought myself firmly back to the present.

"God, yeah," I said with real enthusiasm. "I'm really looking forward to it—you? It's what, a five, six-hour drive?"

"Yep, Boston to New York is really under four hours, but it *can* be six if I get stuck somewhere in Connecticut," she said.

I laughed. "Oh, New England driving in the early fall. Try not to get all caught up in the scenery on the way."

"What, and miss all the fun for foliage? Not on your life! I'll be there, and thanks for letting me tag along."

"You're kidding, right? You *have* to be there—you're on that panel with me!"

"I do believe that panel was *your* idea," she reminded me.

DRAWN TOGETHER

I laughed again; Zoey always cracked me up. “Well, I just suggested it, I didn’t actually *make* it happen.”

“Uh-huh.”

Jackson stood from his curled up position on my lap. He gave a little half woof then sat, his eyes big, brown, and seemingly worried, on mine. My internal alarm snapped to attention, and I glanced at the clock.

Shit.

I’d gone from twenty to ten minutes. Kerry was going to absolutely flip out.

“I’m sorry, Zoey,” I said hurriedly. “I’ve got to run—Jackson—”

“I heard,” she said, smile still in her voice. “No worries. Go do what ya gotta, and I’ll catch you later.”

“You got it!” I agreed with a smile of my own.

We clicked off, and I put the phone back in its cradle. I so appreciated that Zoey always *got* me...

Well, time for fun was done. “Come on, Jackson,” I said to the fuzzy little guy and clapped my hands together. “Let’s get this all put away before your mom gets home.”

He scrambled around, picking up toys and dropping them randomly around the living room, while I shuttered my laptop, then put away my notes as well as my sketches and pencils. I left out a single notebook, the one for what I called “ideas and sketches.” This too, was nice, neat, and more importantly—closed—before I ducked into the kitchen to put up tea for Kerry.

The rest of the place looked fine—which it should, since I’d literally just done a “white tornado” spree the day before.

The only thing left to fix was me, so I quickly grabbed a fresh tank top to change out of the stained “work” one I wore, picked out a collared shirt—my favorite shade of indigo—to wear over it, then changed my “work” sneakers to boots.

I checked my belt to make sure it lay right, then breathed out with satisfied relief: I looked eminently presentable.

Okay, then.

I glanced at the clock. I had maybe a few minutes, and I had an idea from the conversation Zoey and I had just had...

I sat back at my workstation, then opened my “ideas and sketch” notebook to a fresh page. I had a pen in my hand and a pencil next to me without even thinking about it.

Yes.

This...this was where the story needed to go, and—

“Hi Jackson! Where’s my baby boy?”

Oh Christ! I jumped up from my seat, surprised, even though I shouldn’t have been. “Hey—hi Kerry!” I greeted as I approached.

“Hey,” she said shortly from her half kneel by the door, where she focused her attention on and played with Jackson. “Who’s my boy? That’s my jumpy little Jackson! You missed me? You did, I know you did!”

“Hi,” I tried again, and put on the biggest smile I could muster. “How was your—”

Kerry scooped Jackson up into one arm and stood, her glare raking me from toe to head and back again. “Is that what you’re wearing?” she asked. Her mouth twisted into a very familiar disapproving scowl.

“Yes.” I told her simply. I hooked my thumb into my belt loop and stared at her blankly.

“Just...fucking fine,” she huffed. “We don’t have time—get your bag. We’ve got to go to the nursing home.”

I grabbed my bag and jammed my notepad and some pencils and pens into it. I dodged into the kitchen to shut off the stove for the now-cancelled tea.

I glanced at the counter and saw my phone charger. I thought about it for half a second, then I grabbed that too.

“Okay, Jackson!” Kerry singsonged as she grabbed a bag filled with supplies for him. “We’re going to see Grandma! Take this”—she shoved the bag at me—“and this.” She handed me a jacket for him.

I put Jackson’s bag over my shoulder, then held the door so she could walk out with him. “God, you look like such a fucking *dyke*,” she muttered, shaking her head as she passed me.

Personally, I liked the way I looked. I figured it was more a cross between rock ‘n’ roll and hippie biker than anything else, what with my jeans, engineer boots, long hair, and all. The hair length created a soft curve over my shoulders while my shirt was collared, so therefore it presented a straight line... It worked for me, a combination of blending hues and mixed textures that I liked.

I inhaled steadily and slowly. I kept my movements deliberate and precise as I locked the door. I held my mood the way I held my tongue. “And what exactly would you like me to look like?” I asked as mildly as I could manage. The tumbler clicked.

DRAWN TOGETHER

"You know *exactly* what I mean," she said acidly as I caught up with her.

The walk to the car was silent, a silence that continued as Jackson was hooked up into his special seatbelt in the back seat. The car doors slammed, and the roar of the engine did all of the talking. I glanced back over my seat to peek at Jackson, who had already curled up into a ball. He gave me big eyes, then tucked his head under his paw.

The silence reigned for the first part of the drive, but it couldn't last.

"So," Kerry finally began. "Did you talk with Zoe Glenn today? Talk about your precious project, plans for your...conference?" Kerry coughed the word out as if it were a dreaded disease.

"Yes."

"Well, you're not coming in to see my mother with me and Jackson," she told me. "I'm gonna drop you off at Barnes and Noble, and I'll pick you up when I'm done."

"But I haven't seen her and—"

"I don't want you talking about that shit with her," Kerry spoke sharply over my protests. "Bad enough I have to see it when I get home."

I thought back to the small space I claimed as mine and how I'd tried so very hard to not have any of my work—any of *me*—be obvious. If it wasn't for that one spot, no one would ever even know I lived there...

"But—"

"Oh no, no, no. Absolutely no *fucking* way. She'll want to know what you're doing, and you can't just say 'nothing,' because that would be a lie, and you don't *do* that," she mocked. "A fiction writer that doesn't tell lies," she sneered. "And then it'll be all *me* this and *I* that and, of course, she'll want to know what you're doing with the great fucking Zoe Glenn and..."

She glanced over at me before she set a turn signal to change lanes.

"I really fucking hate all your Zoe-Edwards-and-the-great-fucking-D-Rivera shit! When are you just going to be a normal person? Pay attention to *me*?"

"Kerry, you know I have to do this so I can—"

"Fuck you, D!" she yelled and glanced at me quickly to glare at me. "I fucking hate D Rivera. I fucking hate your characters, and I hate, fucking *hate*"—she glared at me again—"your books. I hate all of it. So just, just *fuck* you."

With that, she turned the radio on and up too loud for other conversation, then really pressed on the gas. The car lurched with the burst

of speed, and I was glad there wasn't too much traffic, or I knew chances were strong I'd be privy to some rather...exotic...driving maneuvers which, although they were ostensibly safe, still managed to seriously scare.

I'm the one who's your mother's medical advocate, I wanted to say, I'm the one who needs to know what's going on with her, talk with the nursing home doctors and physicians' assistants and the nurses so I can give the best help I can, help make the best decisions.

But I said none of it. I swallowed my frustration, my fear, and, most largely, the hurt her words caused, then sighed quietly so she wouldn't hear me—I didn't want to inspire further road rage.

But still... This was not the first time I'd heard that, those words from her, I mean—about how much she hated me, hated what I did, and I knew pretty well it most likely wouldn't be the last. But somehow it *hurt*, every time I heard it.

Because, no, D wasn't me in my totality, no. But...it *was* the name I used for the work I did, work that I *loved* doing, everything about it, even the parts that drove me crazy. And if Kerry hated my work, what did that mean for how she felt about me?

Oh...fuck it.

I reached behind me to pet Jackson. At least I'd had the foresight to not only bring my sketchbook but also my phone charger.

The Barnes and Noble I was being dropped off at for however many hours until Kerry deemed it okay to leave her mother had a Starbucks, so at least I had books, caffeine, and probably a place to sit and work.

My phone buzzed, which meant I had received an e-mail, so I checked it as I walked through the glass doors.

The clean and bright smells of the bookstore greeted me as I read.

From Bruce:

Hey D,

Just got quarterlies in and wanted to give you a heads-up before you get your reports. Your numbers are okay, but I think they can be better—you know how the market is and that "they" respond to persona.

DRAWN TOGETHER

I know you've been busy working on your new project with Zoe Glenn—great, by the way, very nice promo!!!—But let's get you seen out and about with Kerry. You know how much people love to see a pretty couple, and you two are “it” at the moment.

There's a dinner tonight at 7 p.m., short notice, I know, but I WANT YOU THERE. There's a few people I want to introduce you to, let them get a dose of the D Rivera charm, and also let them know you've still got viable properties in pipeline.

This is your CAREER, D, so help me help you, okay?

Meet me at my office tonight, and we'll go from there—look sharp!!!

Bruce

I sighed. All right, then. I supposed it wasn't a bad thing that Kerry had brought me with her, since Bruce didn't live too far away.

I sighed again and found an empty seat tucked among the warren of shelves.

It wasn't the same as being at my desk with my system available to me, but at least I had my smart phone—and my notebook; anything I wrote by hand, I'd just have to transcribe into my computer later.

That...I could do.

And besides, I now had a new idea...

D Rivera's Blog:

So... I know you've all been patiently waiting (well, mostly patiently—and thank you, those of you who've taken the time to write to me about it). Soon—I promise! In the meanwhile, I encourage you, hell, I'm TELLING you to drop EVERYTHING and go see what Zoe Glenn is up to! ☺ After you get back (because believe me, you'll be glad you went!!!) from being completely mind blown, here's a bit more!

Con

Part II

She stared at me. "That's...that's not what happened." Her voice was barely a whisper, and her fingers fluttered, helpless, by her sides. "It's not what I meant."

My face was cold, but heat thrummed though me, forcing me forward. "Not what you meant?" I asked, incredulity warring with anger. "Beth, you had to call a fucking ambulance. And I'd probably be dead if you hadn't."

Somehow, impossibly, her eyes seemed even paler, as did her skin, and she shook her head. "It was...it was an accident, I swear to God!"

The haze I'd felt earlier kicked back, a vicious buzz that now impelled me and my hands, making my fingers curl around the cream-and-white lapels of the fashionably short trench coat she wore.

"Was it an accident that you fuckin' tripped me out, fucked me up, left me needing stitches? A fucking accident that happened almost three months after we broke up, after I'd moved out?" The words came out an angry hiss. My eyes were barely two inches from hers.

She blinked, flinched, under my hands, under the tone, and her face worked, tears in the corners of her eyes, as I watched her struggle for control, something I knew because I'd known her so very fucking well. And then...the dam broke.

"You were mine, you were fucking mine, you didn't belong to her, with her," she said, her voice a harsh rasp. She covered my hands with hers, skin smooth as always, cool from the wind.

It was my turn to flinch, and I let go of her lapels, slipped my hands out from under hers. I stepped back again. I had to get away. Memories, no longer dull, sharpened by her voice, by

DRAWN TOGETHER

her presence, flooded through me, as icy as the wind that had picked up off the river, of how much I'd been hers, of how it hadn't been enough.

At eighteen, Beth fed me vitamins and pasta, cuddled me to her skin, because she said I made her feel safe and loved; but except for the sensual, beautiful kisses, velvet-soft touches of her body and mine, wouldn't touch me, because, she said she was afraid she'd hurt me.

At nineteen, someone else—a beloved friend—did what Beth had said she'd been afraid to, because she asked me to, because she wanted me to. It also infuriated her, and since I lived one floor above her, she came into my room two days later with several bottles of wine and twined my body with hers. There we stayed for days following.

We matched, she said, we matched, and it was true, our hands were almost identical. I met her parents, her brother, her sister. When we made love that night, she wore my ring after. She came home with one for me the next afternoon.

Replies:

@D: is this just a blog?

@D: OMG—please post again soon!

@D: Intense, Miz D, very intense!

* * *

From the Text Files:

Bruce: *So...I hear congratulations are in order?*

Kerry: *Thanks! Wait—for what?*

Bruce: *D's contract with Galump for the project she's working on with Zoe Glenn.*

JD GLASS

Kerry: *That fucking cunt.*

Bruce: *Which one? LOL!*

Kerry: *Yeah, yeah, you're fuckin' funny. Anyhow, running late; had to bring D—it's been a while, y'know?*

Bruce: *Good, because dinner, tonight, as in business stuff, after you and Kate do...<eg>*

Kate: *You dropping her at Starbucks again?*

Kerry: *Would you rather she came along?*

Bruce: *Can I film that?*

Kerry: *Fuck you, Bruce! ☺*

Kate: *Maybe I should drop in and see how she's doing while she's "waiting" for you <eg>*

Kerry: *Don't you dare!*

Kate: *Lol! J/k...Love you—see you soon!*

Chapter 3

From the Sent Files:

Use of this e-mail system is strictly regulated by a whole lot of nothing...

finelines: *Hey, you got a moment?*

wanderer: *I'll be free in 5. You okay?*

finelines: *Yep. Just faster to talk than to type is all.*

wanderer: *Lol! So true! I'll call you in a few, 'kay?*

finelines: *I'll be here.*

OKAY, SO ADMITTEDLY, I WAS a little nervous while I waited. I really didn't like conflict or confrontation, and I didn't think this would be that, but I had an idea, and I wasn't certain how Dion would respond to it, I mean. Yes, we always agreed on seemingly everything, but it wasn't as if we knew each other that well yet. I honestly had no idea how she'd react.

I figured I'd be brave (such as it was) and just talk directly, instead of trying to figure out how to say it in an e-mail. Besides, e-mail left out tone and intent, and I wanted there to be no misunderstandings.

From the Sent Files:

Use of this e-mail system is strictly regulated by a whole lot of nothing...common sense is rare and fleeting.

JD GLASS

wanderer: *I'm so sorry—I just got caught up in some bullshit.
Call you in about an hour?*

Sure, yeah, I thought as I stared at the screen. I tapped my fingers, then realized I should probably type back, since we weren't at that level of clairvoyance with each other—yet.

From the Sent Files:

Use of this e-mail system is strictly regulated by a whole lot of nothing...

finelines: *oh yeah, no problem, no rush or anything. When you get to it*

wanderer: *I'll e-mail you right before I call, just in case you have to run out for a hot date or something! ☺*

I laughed at the screen. Oh, Dion thought she was funny, did she?

From the Sent Files:

finelines: *Actually, I do have a hot date! Since I now have a whole hour or so, I'm running (ok, I don't run, but I will walk) to Starbucks and picking up a VENTI caramel macchiato. So hot, in fact, they even give you a sleeve to hold it with.*

wanderer: *Doesn't that happen to anything you hold?*

I laughed, and then it hit me.

Oh.

Oh my.

Was that...was that flirting? Since when did we do that? We never did that, we—

From the Sent Files:

wanderer: *Didn't you tell me your hands are pretty sensitive to temperature extremes?*

DRAWN TOGETHER

Yeah.

See, now this was why I didn't really spend too much time talking with people; too much to misconstrue, misconstruct, misunderstand. Writing was sometimes easier, except, apparently, when I was the one doing it within normal human exchange. No wonder I drew more than I wrote.

From the *Sent Files*:

finelines: *I did, and they are. I'm surprised you remembered is all.*

wanderer: *I do pay attention, you know ☺*

Great.

Now I was *really* nervous.

Where the hell was my mind going? What was I thinking? Sure, Dion was awesome, I just so really liked her a lot...and in such a short time she'd become a true friend, and I completely loved her work, as well as working with her, and—

That brought me up short.

Oh.

Holy.

Shit.

Was that what my mother...I mean...

You know what?

Tea.

I needed a cup of tea.

No, I needed to go get that caramel macchiato that had started me on this track, or at the very least, a walk.

No.

Fuck it.

This...required ice cream, and I knew the perfect place to get it too.

I grabbed a jacket, checked for my wallet and my phone, then let myself out the door.

JP Licks. Original flavors, homemade (or at least, it could be if you bought the stuff and assembled it yourself), and guaranteed to make anyone happy—or at least take my mind off this for a bit. And then maybe, I'd go for a walk along Jamaica Pond, or sit on a bench by the boathouse.

JD GLASS

I inhaled deeply as I walked, enjoyed the descending mist in the not-quite-dusk air. Just my sort of weather, I observed, pleased, as I walked.

Yeah.

The park after JP was a good idea.

Salted-caramel cone in hand and a few tastes later, I was feeling expansive and clear as I made my way to one of the benches that lined this part of the pond.

I pulled my phone and reopened the latest update to the story from Dion.

D Rivera's Blog:

On a roll, so here goes!!! And thank you, as always, because you guys are the BEST!

Con

Part III

Everyone loved Beth: older, smarter, more beautiful. Even my estranged parents were something resembling happy that I was with her.

By twenty, I was her house pet, bleeding with her because she'd wanted to die, loving her through the blood and the pain, watching—over and over again—as she got drunk, brought someone home, wanted to hold me while he fucked her; kiss her, comfort her, fuck her until she finally came, nails deep in my back, slammed desperately close to me—hot and slick and wet—all to prove I loved her. And I did, I did.

Beth was my life, my home, my world—everything to me. And I was everything she wanted me to be.

She brought me women, she picked out men—I even dated a few for her because she loved to go out, have them watch while we made out, then go back home without them so she could suck me off.

DRAWN TOGETHER

And Beth loved, loved to watch me with other women, loved to join in, but still, in the end, I came for her, with her, and she for me.

There was only one line I drew:

No matter how she teased, no matter how she begged, even once when she cried—the only time her tears didn't change my mind—I would not sleep with any of the guys she brought home. I'd hold her, kiss her, anything else she wanted, but I did not want them to touch me, and they were as uncomfortable with me as I was with them. We touched her, but we kept a respectful distance from one another.

Until one day, she crossed that line, too.

Beth wanted kids, wanted them so much it was one of the things she cried about, because for various reasons, she couldn't have them. When I promised to have them for her, the smile she threw my way, the kiss she gave, the heart-filling touch in how we made love after that made me think that this...this was heaven.

Replies:

@D: I think...I think I knew her!

@D: This is so good and so intense!

@D: Oh God, ur words...they go right through me.

I agreed with the commenters—it was good, damn good, and so very intense. I was just so very humbly thrilled to be a part of it, and I began to think about how I wanted to work with the next sections moving forward.

My phone buzzed an incoming e-mail, and I already knew who it was even before I looked.

From the Sent Files:

wanderer: *I'm around if you are*

JD GLASS

The cool and calm I'd just regained from the ice cream and my walk now shivered and ripped apart like the waves on the water.

No.

I couldn't talk right now, not with all these thoughts in my head, and these feelings I didn't know if I recognized or not.

This...would not be safe.

From the *Sent Files*:

finelines: *My turn to get stuck. Catch you in a few days.*

I bit my lip as I hit *send*.

Yeah...that was probably a bit abrupt on my part. My ice cream melted some more as I thought on it.

That...had probably been hurtful. And hadn't the reason I'd wanted to talk instead of e-mail been to hopefully eliminate contextual misunderstanding?

I neither gazed at the water nor ate my ice cream while I waited for her response.

A cold wet drop on my hand reminded me that I actually did still have the remains of a cone in my hand, and I savored the salt and sweet of it as I watched the ripples from the landing ducks play across the pond.

A fog was truly descending, and though it wasn't quite twilight yet, the lamp posts had already brightened, casting fuzzy glows through the ground-bound clouds.

I jumped when my phone buzzed.

From the *Sent Files*:

wanderer: *Sure, dude. No problem.*

Dude.

I stared at the words on the small screen for a while, and somehow I knew, clearly and fully, that I had hurt Dion's feelings, and in the moment I realized it, I felt really bad about it.

I hadn't meant to do that.

The early evening now turned cold, the ice cream lost its flavor, and I shivered in the sudden chill.

Oh...fuck this!

DRAWN TOGETHER

I stood and threw out the rest of the stupid ice cream. Now I was not only feeling bad but also angry and frustrated, and I really wasn't sure who I was angry and frustrated with: Dion, for being, well, *Dion*, and just so fucking awesome and sensitive and unavail—

Oh, but...

Goddammit!

That wasn't her fault, either. She was her, and I was me, so yeah, of course I liked her. A lot. She wasn't making me feel or do or want—anything. That...was on me. And she was my friend, first and foremost.

Now I felt bad again. I didn't want to hurt my friend. Well, that at least I could fix. I pulled my phone out and my e-mail up, then typed:

From the *Sent Files*:

finelines: *So sorry, dude. Tell me a day and time, and I will make sure the time is clear no matter what, 'k?*

I held my breath when I hit *send*...

From the *Sent Files*:

wanderer: *You got it. Thurs sixish work for you? ☺*

I breathed out an easy smile.

From the *Sent Files*:

finelines: *You got it! Done and done! ☺*

Good.

It was smiles all around then. I sighed as I put my phone back in my pocket, then began to once again mindlessly walk the clouded path.

I took another deep breath, a blend of air and water, neither clear of the other, all of it obscuring the path before and behind. Just like me, I laughed at myself, all mixed up into something different.

I could hear the low splash of the water along the retaining wall and the shore.

It's just a few days, I told myself. It'll be fine then—I've just got to get this all under control. I can be cool, calm, and collected.

And suddenly, I felt clear, even a bit buoyant.

Okay.

My steps quickened now as I made my way back to my condo. I was going to be okay. I had the beginning of a plan in my head.

Because it wouldn't do me or Dion any good for me to feel anything other or more or different than the deep respect, admiration, and appreciation I had for her work, what we were doing together, and for our friendship.

I keyed the door to my building and walked up the flight as I thought.

Maybe...maybe I'd call—what was it, Karen? Kathy? Whatever her name was, since I had it in my other e-mail, I'd find it.

And hell, since she liked ice cream so much, maybe this time I'd introduce her to JP Licks. That would be cool—casual but listening, right?

Maybe.

And in the meantime, I had some new ideas and a deadline I suddenly decided I had to meet.

Jacket off and tossed on the couch, I hadn't even fully sat down yet when I pulled open a pad, some pencils, my last saved document, and then my e-mail.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

DRAWN TOGETHER

BY JD GLASS

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com