

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 1

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 1

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The Goodreads M/M Romance Group invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they produce.

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set with two additional bonus volumes, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Volume 1.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group*

strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

These stories are a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Nearly two dozen members chipped-in to help; the M/M Romance Group would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

The story titles link back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The author names also link back to their Goodreads author profiles.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance.

Enjoy.

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DIRTY BOYS

By **Kyle Adams**

Photo Description

A young man is trimming his hedges wearing only a pair of dirty jeans showing off his muscular body.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I saw this guy every Saturday last spring and summer during my routine trash pickup route in his neighborhood. I could never find the courage to speak to him. I feel like something keeps pulling me towards him. How can I approach him? What will he think of me... a garbage man?

Sincerely,

Gina

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: lust, mutual masturbation, striptease, light and fluffy, blue-collar

Content warnings: It's dirty.

Word count: 5,123

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DIRTY BOYS

By Kyle Adams

“You’ve got it bad, Devon,” Mark said, loud enough that I could hear him over the engine noise emitting from the garbage truck.

I shrugged off his comment and only responded with a casual, “Whatever.”

Mark is my best friend and coworker. We’re waste collectors, more commonly known as garbage men. We have been lucky enough to be on the same route for almost seven years now, since I started with the company at eighteen, right after graduating high school. Mark was a few years older than I, but we became fast friends. Working with Mark made the monotonous job almost enjoyable. It wasn’t all bad, but it would have been very repetitive without Mark’s companionship. I won’t lie, sometimes there are nasty surprises waiting inside the trashcans, but mostly it isn’t too bad. Dale, the driver for our route, wasn’t bad either, but I didn’t know him that well, as we didn’t have as many opportunities to talk like Mark and I did. Mark and I spent a lot of time hanging onto the back of the truck and chatting with each other, which helped distract us from the worst of the horrors lurking inside barrels with poorly-bagged garbage.

I finished returning the now-empty trashcan to the sidewalk in front of our current stop—Connor’s well-landscaped home. Connor is the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. I learned his name when he moved in last summer and the recycling container I delivered had his name on the paperwork.

I took my time, wanting to get one last glimpse of him. He was mowing his lawn and not paying attention to the people picking up his trash. Why would he? I couldn’t help but admire his taut ass as he pushed the mower in the opposite direction of me. His back muscles stretched the fabric of his red T-shirt. His jeans hugged every inch of his muscular legs all the way up to that stunning ass.

I’d give anything to bury my cock in his ass. I knew that one fuck would leave me wanting more, but I’d settle for just once. I was really looking for a

relationship, but I wasn't so delusional that I didn't realize it was less likely to happen than winning the lottery. I've never even spoken to him, and I knew I was dreaming when I thought about trying to start something with him. He lived in a nice house, in a nice quiet neighborhood. I was only the garbage man who lived in a small apartment too close to the train tracks. It was clean and affordable though, and while the trains were loud at first, I got used to the noise after a couple months.

If only I could somehow find the nerve to approach him. All last summer I watched him work in his yard. It was the highlight of my Saturday mornings, seeing him tending his lawn, often only half-dressed. In the fall, I'd wait all week just to get a glimpse of him raking leaves or bundling sticks. And winter! Not only was it the worst season for a man in my business, weather-wise, but it was also the time when most people disappeared indoors. And stayed there. Unfortunately for me, Connor was no different. Those few occasions when I caught glimpses of him getting in his car over the long cold months were like rays of sunshine.

But, who was I kidding? If, by some miracle, he was even gay, he would most certainly never want the trash man. At least it was now spring again, and I'd get to see more of him. I'm not sure what it says about me that my attraction to him has lasted through all the seasons. I'm starting to think I'll never get over it.

"You have it even worse than I thought." I heard Mark speak, and it drew me back into the present. I turned away from Connor just as he was getting ready to loop around pushing his mower in my direction.

Looking up to meet Mark's eyes, I replied casually but loud enough to be heard, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Please, you're totally smitten." I gave him my best "you're crazy" stare.

He was, of course, unfazed and continued with his explanation, "Look at the previous guy's can." Mark pointed towards the house whose trash we'd just emptied. "It's fucking rolling down the sidewalk and is almost in the street. While" —he stopped to point at Connor's waste bin—"Pretty boy's container, you've all but put it away for him."

I figured that if Connor saw Mark waving his hands, he would assume Mark was yelling at me about something. I was relieved that he wouldn't hear what was being said over the truck and his lawn mower.

I didn't look back at Connor's cans because I knew they were where they were supposed to be. "It's not my fault they," I waved my hand in the direction of the fallen container, "bought cheap trash cans that can't stay upright and roll easy," I said, as I hopped up onto the truck where Mark was already waiting. The truck took off, and it was conveniently too noisy to talk easily.

Unfortunately, at the next stop, Mark started the conversation back up right where he left off. "You should talk to him. Ask him out." He said it encouragingly, and not for the first time.

Yeah, like it was that easy. He was always telling me to at least wave or nod if I wouldn't say anything. Sometimes he'd even try coaching me in what to say: "Tell him you like his primed rosebuds." He winked at me. Ever since he heard rosebud was a synonym for asshole, he liked to say it as lewdly and as often as possible.

"I don't even know if he is gay," I muttered.

"He's gay." Mark sounded certain.

"How do you know?" I asked skeptically.

"I have excellent gaydar." Mark smiled smugly.

"You're not even gay," I pointed out.

"You don't have to be gay to have a solidly functioning gaydar detection system." Mark carelessly slung the can he was finished dumping back onto the sidewalk. "I've seen him looking at you too, the same way you look at him," Mark said, as we jumped back on the truck heading to the next house.

Jumping off the truck at the next stop, I asked Mark, "What look is that?"

"You know, the I-want-you-so-so-bad-but-I'm-too-chicken-shit-to-even-say-hi look."

That was the first time Mark had said that he'd seen Connor looking at me. I felt my heart falter as I allowed myself to feel that maybe Connor was

attracted to me too, if only for a brief moment. Doubtful, I thought. Mark must have been reading Connor wrong. I forced myself to finish the job at hand, returning the bin I'd just emptied to the sidewalk and jumping up on the truck. I knew Mark was right about me acting scared. I wasn't convinced Connor was giving me the same look, though. Either way, I didn't have anything else to say to Mark about it.

I pretended I didn't hear him when he again yelled across the truck. "Seriously, if you won't talk to him, I'm going to do it for you."

The next Saturday...

Connor wasn't wearing a shirt today, just a pair of loose and really dirty jeans with a sleek black belt keeping them up on his waist. He was using a hedge trimmer that showed off his muscular arms as he held it up to the shrubs. He had a full pack of ab muscles and well-defined pecs with perfect small brown nipples. His light brown hair was a short buzz-cut that looked really good on him. Not for the first time, I imagined how our bodies would feel against each other. I was a little taller and a little wider than he was. My body was in good shape. I had strong arms and shoulders, but my stomach wasn't quite as ripped as Connor's killer six-pack.

I emptied Connor's can and returned it to the curb as slowly and quietly as I could, trying not to draw attention to my actions. I wanted all the time I could get to admire Connor's perfect body, but didn't want to be caught doing it. Connor in action was something I would never forget. When I finally turned around to hop back on the truck, I came face to face with Mark.

Rubbing his shoulder and neck, Mark said, "Switch sides with me." He started slowly rolling his shoulder up and down. "My left side feels tight, and I need to hold on with my right."

I nodded my agreement and started to step past Mark to get to the other side. I looked back over at Connor, and saw he had turned off the hedge cutter and was setting it on the ground. When he looked up, our eyes connected. I felt a moment of panic being caught looking, but it quickly faded as my foot

suddenly caught on something and I nose-dived into the pavement. At that point, all I felt was sheer humiliation. I wasn't sure if Mark had tripped me or if I stumbled over my own feet. I didn't really care at the moment. I just wanted to get up before Connor noticed that I fell like a clumsy fool. I groaned, remembering that we had been looking at each other when I fell, so there was no way Connor hadn't noticed. *Fucking fantastic.*

Laughing, Mark said, "Watch where you're walking there, buddy." He followed it up with more laughter.

I started to push myself up, when a firm hand gripped my arm and helped pull me to my feet.

"Are you okay?" Connor asked, keeping a hold of my arm as if he was worried I might fall again.

I opened my mouth to say something, though I wasn't quite sure what, but Connor didn't give me the chance to speak. "Maybe you should sit down until we're sure you're okay."

"You're right," Mark chimed in, appearing on my other side and feigning concern before Connor could try to make me sit down. I glared at him, not sure what he was up to. "We can't wait for Devon though, we have got to go empty the truck, and it'll take at least ninety minutes. Can you stay with him, and we'll come back and pick him up after dumping this load and refueling?" Mark phrased it as a question, but his tone didn't leave any room for refusal.

My glare deepened, and I knew I was probably looking at Mark like I wanted to kill him. Before I could say I was okay and that the truck wasn't full or needing gas, Connor responded, "Of course, I'll make sure he's taken care of."

"Thank you," Mark told Connor before leaning into my ear and whispering, "You'll thank me for this later."

The last time he said those words to me, I ended up being robbed when he and his wife had taken me out to my first gay bar for my twenty-first birthday. Yadda yadda, I woke up to find my shit, which I had cleverly hidden in the

oven, gone. It was not a fun experience, and I still blamed Mark for that disaster to this day.

“I’m Connor, by the way,” he said, as the truck pulled away, leaving us standing in the street.

Even though he wasn’t looking at me, I smiled and said “Devon. Nice to meet you.”

When Connor then spoke the words, “Let’s get you inside and cleaned up,” I had a feeling Mark was right. Connor led me toward his house, and as I glanced back at the truck fading into the distance, I thought I might end up actually owing Mark for this one. I might even have to forgive him a little for the birthday disaster. Maybe.

As much as I wanted to go inside with Connor, I felt bad for troubling him. He hadn’t sounded put out or inconvenienced when he spoke earlier, but just in case, I offered him an out. “I’ll be okay if you’re busy. You don’t have to stop your work to help me.”

Connor’s pale blue eyes met mine. “I was already done with trimming the bushes, and I’m not just going to leave you out here waiting for them to come back.”

He pulled my arm towards his house. I glanced down at his hand, realizing that before, so much was happening that I really didn’t notice how warm his hand was, or how good it felt against my arm. I was so distracted thinking about how that hand would feel wrapped around a different part of my body that I wasn’t paying attention to the fact that I was letting him guide me. Unfortunately, I failed to see the curb and stumbled forward. I would have fallen again, but Connor had quick reflexes. He brought his free hand up to my chest and kept me from completely losing my balance.

“You okay?” His voice showed his worry. He left his hand on my chest, and I was afraid he could feel my heart pounding like a jackhammer.

I felt my face flush, and I wasn't sure if it was more from embarrassment or a reaction to the intimate contact. My cock was more than half-hard, so I must not have been too embarrassed.

"I'm not usually so clumsy," I said weakly. I really didn't want Connor thinking I was a total klutz, but it was probably a little too late for that.

"I'm sure, but you did just fall down. Are you dizzy or anything?" Connor asked, sounding concerned, though he didn't falter at all leading me towards his house. I made sure to look where I was walking as we continued on toward his porch.

"Seriously, Connor, I'm fine."

"You're not actually. You have a cut above your eye."

It must have been the adrenaline rush, or my near panic and embarrassment, because I had not realized that I had cut myself. It couldn't have been very deep or I would have felt it bleeding.

"Thank you again for helping me; sorry my friend just *dumped* me on you," I said, trying to make a little joke.

"That's okay, I love a good dump," Connor said automatically.

I couldn't help but stop walking and laugh. I looked at him and his cheeks turned a little red, so I tried to stop laughing.

"That didn't come out right. I meant that to sound a little flirty, not gross."

I didn't know what to make of Connor's revelation. Did he really want to flirt with me, or had he just said that as an excuse? If he *had* been flirting, then maybe if I played my cards right, he would end up doing more than just flirt.

When we reached the steps leading up to his front door, he paused. As I looked at him, he was nervously biting his bottom lip.

"Seriously, I can walk up the stairs by myself. I'm fine, really," I said, saving him from having to ask whatever he was biting his lip to avoid. To demonstrate, I casually shrugged out of his grip and walked up the two steps without stumbling once. Smiling triumphantly, I raised both hands and said, "See?"

“I’m sorry. I’m overreacting. Seeing you fall just freaked me out I guess.” Connor walked past me to open the front door.

Stepping inside, I toed off my boots, peeled the gloves off my hands, and took off my bright reflective vest, leaving it all just inside his front door. I followed him inside, looking around at the clean house. I surreptitiously sniffed myself. Thankfully, I didn’t smell. At least I didn’t think I did. I said a word of thanks that there hadn’t been any accidents or broken bags this morning. Thank God, it wasn’t one of those days where I was hit with some unidentifiable substance shooting out of the crusher.

Connor led me through his comfortably decorated living room and into the kitchen. He pulled one of the chairs out from his round, wooden table and turned it to face the room. “Go ahead and sit here while I run and grab some supplies,” he said, as he walked out of the room.

I took the opportunity to wash my hands in the sink, as I hadn’t realized they’d gotten so sweaty. I imagine that had more to do with being so close to Connor than because of the gloves. They were used to the gloves.

I was sitting in the high-back chair by the time Connor returned. At first, he looked relieved that I was still there, like I would actually leave. But then his face shifted into a smile sweet enough to make my insides melt. The fluttering in my stomach had nothing to do with the embarrassment I’d felt earlier and everything to do with the way Connor was currently looking at me. I really liked how eager he was to take care of me, even if I wasn’t really hurt.

He set his first aid kit on the table, pulling out what he needed. Turning to face me, he opened an antiseptic pad. I was already looking up at him, but he still put his hand under my chin to tilt my head further back. I could feel the warmth of his hand all the way to my toes. His grip was firm but gentle, and although it wasn’t sexual, his touch made my cock even harder in my jeans. “This might sting,” he warned.

“It’s okay, I’m a big boy,” I said playfully, looking him in the eyes.

He licked his lips and said in a low voice I almost didn't hear, "I just bet you are." He pressed the pad to my forehead above my left eyebrow, and I flinched and closed my eyes. It wasn't too painful, just burned a little.

A few minutes later, after he finished cleaning and then putting a bandage over the scratch, he asked, "Were you hurt anywhere else?" He let his gaze travel down my body, and I knew he saw my hard-on when his eyes widened a little.

I realized I was holding my breath as I watched him swallow. I had trouble taking my eyes off his throat, but eventually our gazes met. He'd already seen my obviously-aroused cock, but my desire and willingness must have been readable in my expression because his smile spread sensually across his face.

It must have been all he needed to know, as seconds later he was dropping down between my spread legs, resting his hands on my lower thighs. Looking back up at me, he said, "Did you scrape your knees or anything?"

I gently shook my head, letting him know my knees were fine, if you didn't count the anxious shaking he undoubtedly felt. "So, there is nothing else I can help you take care of?" he practically purred, letting his eyes drift down to the bulge of my hard cock pressing against my jeans.

His hands very slowly slid up my thighs, and I watched as he licked his bottom lip. "I wouldn't be a very good nursemaid if I didn't make sure you were fully taken care of. And it looks like you have some swelling I could help alleviate."

"Okay," I said hoarsely. My brain was pretty much short-circuiting at this point. I may not have been formulating sentences, but I knew what Connor was offering, and no way would I say no.

He didn't waste any time getting my jeans undone and fishing my hard cock out of my boxers. "Beautiful," he said appreciatively, stroking my throbbing erection from base to tip in a tantalizingly slow movement. I bit the side of my thumb trying to distract myself from how embarrassingly close to coming I already was.

Thankfully, Connor didn't notice. He seemed to be in a trance, watching the head of my cock disappear and reemerge through his fist. A few slow jerks later and he looked up, giving me a devilish smile. "I *was* going to taste you." I moaned at the images his words sparked, and then he continued. "But I think I have a better idea." He finished his sentence by letting go of my cock and standing up. "It involves at least one of us getting naked."

"That"—I swallowed—"sounds like an amazing idea."

"Yeah?" he asked, slowly starting to roll his hips, tracing his hand across his denim-covered erection. "Since I'm already half way there," he purred, slowly unhooking his belt and unsnapping his jeans, "and you have to go back to work..." He lowered his zipper sinfully slow. "I figured it should be me."

"Even better," I said breathlessly, unable to take my eyes off him.

He grinned, but said nothing as he continued to shimmy his hips to the teasingly seductive rhythm he had set. Spinning around, he hooked both sides of his jeans with his thumbs and slowly lowered them over his firm, rounded cheeks. He had on pink boxer briefs that were tight enough for me to see his ass dimples. If he had been performing his strip tease any closer, I would have reached out and squeezed them, but for now, I had to be content with just looking.

"Come here," I quietly stated, trying to sound commanding but sounding more desperate instead. He just smiled and shook his head while continuing his erotic dance. "Please?" I practically begged, badly wanting to touch him.

Grinning over his shoulder, he said, "Not yet."

"Tease." I meant to say it playfully, but it came out a growl.

He let his pants drop and kicked them away before turning back towards me wearing just his underwear. I could see his cock was equally as hard as mine, and he had a nice wet spot spreading across the material. I licked my lips, wanting to suck my way to his luscious cock right through the thin cotton covering it.

I knew this was Connor's show, though. He was the one with the courage to initiate everything; I could wait and let him continue to do it his way. His

very slow, but extremely sexy, way. God, the sensual way he moved! I could watch him grind his hips all day.

I couldn't contain my low moan when he pulled his waistband forward, letting his dick snap up and smack his stomach just below his bellybutton. The string of pre-come connecting his cock head with the briefs snapped as he continued lowering his undies. When he revealed his low-hanging balls, my mouth watered. The man I'd been fantasizing about for almost a year was standing before me in all of his glory, and I wanted to touch and lick every amazing inch of him. Still, I managed to stay in my chair not moving, not even touching my own cock, waiting for Connor to decide when it was time to take this to the next level.

Dropping his underwear, he strode toward me with a comfortable confidence that showed he knew how badly I ached for him. "Lower your pants," he said.

Obediently, I lifted my butt off the chair and pulled my jeans and boxers down towards my knees. I was going to slip them completely off, but suddenly ended up with a lap full of Connor. He straddled my legs, positioning himself so our cocks could rub together. "Better get your shirt out of the way, too," he said, grabbing the bottom of my shirt and lifting it over my head, hooking it behind my neck. It was tight, but not restricting, and it did leave my stomach and chest exposed. "Mmm," he hummed appreciatively, thrusting his erection gently against mine while he started rubbing my nipples.

My hands instinctively grabbed his ass, squeezing and caressing. Finally being able to feel him satisfied a craving that had been building since the first time I saw him. He smiled down at me, looking into my eyes as he spit into his right hand, sliding his left hand up to rest on my shoulder. Wrapping his fingers around my shaft, he slowly stroked up and down, spreading his slick spit evenly. Keeping our gazes locked, I spit into my own hand and started rubbing his engorged member.

He closed the short distance between us and crushed his lips against mine. The kiss was sloppy and wet, tongues tangling in and out of each other's mouth. His hand jerking my cock sped up, and I increased my speed to match.

His passion and vigor was sensational, and too pleasurable for me to hold off climaxing. I pulled back from the kiss to grunt, “I’m coming.” Moaning, I shot ropes of come on my chest and stomach. My hand stroking him faltered, but once I recovered from my release, I picked my pace back up.

I took my other hand off his backside and pressed my middle finger into Connor’s mouth. He sucked gently, and after he got it nice and wet, I returned it to his ass, running my wet finger down his crack. I gently rubbed it against his opening a few times, before slowly pushing inside his tight body, while with my other hand I massaged the underside of his head with my thumb on each upward stroke. His loud moaning and mantra of, “Please don’t stop, never stop, I’m almost there,” along with his closed eyes and expression of total bliss, encouraged me to start thrusting into him, fucking him with my finger while simultaneously working his cock over the edge.

His release mixed with my own on my chest, but I didn’t mind. I felt amazing, invigorated, and ready for another round in a few minutes. Connor, on the other hand, looked dreamily content and ready for a nap. He stretched and reached for something on the table behind me. Bringing a handful of paper towels back, he quickly wiped away the evidence of our orgasms and tossed the used towels towards his trashcan. I knew I’d be smiling and remembering this when I emptied that trash next week.

I was surprised when instead of jumping off my lap, he let his head fall onto the junction between my neck and shoulder. I felt his lips press gentle kisses against my skin. One hand I left caressing his ass; the other I rubbed along his back, just enjoying how his body felt as I held him close.

I wasn’t sure how long we stayed like that, when it dawned on me that he probably had other things he needed to do, and I had no idea how soon Mark would be back. This also reminded me that I definitely needed to thank Mark for pushing us together. With my hand wrapped around Connor’s lower back, I squeezed him once before murmuring, “You probably need to get back to your yard work.”

“I have a confession to make.” I felt him smile against my shoulder. “I hate yard work. I only do it so I can see you.” His body felt good relaxed and

snuggled against me. I liked that he wanted to cuddle and wasn't in a rush to separate. "Looks like I might have drooled on your shirt a little." I was pleased when he didn't pull away from me like I expected him to.

"Really?" I asked with disbelief clear in my voice.

"Just a little, though you probably won't be able to tell it's wet."

"I meant, you really only do yard work to see me?"

"Are you kidding? You're so hot. I was frustrated that I couldn't find excuses to be outside during the winter. I even tried shoveling the sidewalks when it snowed, but the neighbor's kid always conned me into paying him to do it." He sounded exasperated, but there was affection in his voice when he talked about the boy from next door.

"Why didn't you ever say anything—if you were interested in me that is?" I asked with genuine curiosity.

"You always seemed busy, and I didn't know if you'd like me hitting on you while you were working. Why didn't *you* say anything?"

"You always seemed busy, too." I tried fibbing, though he *had* been busy. At his snort, I could tell he didn't quite believe me. So I was honest. "I didn't think you would be interested in a garbage man."

Connor smiled and gave me a quick kiss. "That never bothered me for a second. Besides, I bet I'll never have to worry about you forgetting to take out the trash."

I smiled back at him and gave a cheesy reply, "I promise I'll always take the trash out as long as you promise to always mow shirtless."

"It's a deal." He smiled and leaned down to gently press his lips to mine. I could feel his answering promise in his soft kiss.

THE END

Author Bio

Kyle Adams started out dabbling with writing gay romance stories for fun. He writes what makes him laugh and hopes anyone who reads his work laughs with him. Kyle had two books nominated in the Goodreads M/M Romance Group 2012 reader's choice awards. He was nominated in the categories for Best Free Story and Best Humorous Story.

Kyle has a hard time picking a favorite anything (color, book, music, quote, et cetera), so trying to write a decent bio was quite the challenge. He is a very quiet person and is used to keeping things to himself. If there is anything you want to know, just ask.

Contact & Media Info

Kyle loves hearing from readers. Always feel free to contact him or add on any of the following:

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)

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MISSION: X

By Kim Alan

Photo Descriptions

The first photo is a profile view of a young, clean-cut, dark-haired man sitting framed in a sunlit bay window, wearing only a T-shirt and boxer shorts while he reads.

The second photo is faceless. Male hands—strong, with chipped black nail polish and leather-cuffed wrists—cupping himself over a black, studded, leather belt, and the fabric of his low-slung, red plaid kilt.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is X. As you can see from the image, he's a pretty bookish and calm fellow. He likes nothing better than cuddles and early morning sex and then some more cuddles.

It wasn't his choice to be dressed in dark jeans and a super tight tank top to go to a fetish club of all things. He doesn't even own leather! BDSM is the new thing, his best girlfriend said. Haven't you read that book? She asked.

Now, because he owed her one, he went. And then this guy walked into his view. The Dom doesn't seem to care about the newbies snickering at his "skirt" or his black nail polish and everyone else seems to respect him a lot.

X wasn't there to attract attention, but a little mishap and suddenly he's on his knees next to the guy and... he feels right at home? What the hell?

Where does the story go from there? And please, don't make it about pain as much as about submission and servitude. That's all I ask. Everything else is up to you, dear author.

Thanks in advance!

Sincerely,

Tia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, geeks/nerds, age gap, snarky humor, giant bears, brazen
twinks

Word count: 19,495

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Author's Note

There is hot sex in this story, but the issue of protection is left somewhat ambiguous. In real life, be safe without question.

MISSION: X

By Kim Alan

“Why do you insist on doing that to yourself?”

Xander stumbled to a stop at the front step of his little house and threw a pained grin at Lara, his closest friend. Sweat dripped into his eyes and his shirt clung to him uncomfortably, cooling quickly now as his heart rate slowed in the early morning chill.

“You know why,” he rasped, falling clumsily to the step next to her with a grateful grunt, taking the offered bottle of water in one hand and coffee in the other. “I sit on my ass all day and I’m inherently lazy. If I don’t force myself to do something before I begin all that inactivity, I won’t do anything at all.”

“It’s exhausting looking at you.” Lara flipped her long blond bangs and made a show of examining her perfectly manicured nails. “And you kind of smell.”

“Yes, well, showering before running tends to be a waste of time.” He chuckled.

Lara poked him in the ribs with a bony elbow. “That’s a matter of opinion.”

“You could come over fifteen minutes later in the morning,” Xander pointed out, admiring, as usual, his lovely pint-sized friend. “You don’t have to be here to witness this part.”

“Eh.” She shrugged. “This is as close to real exercise as I’m going to get.” Her smile turned wicked. “Besides, today’s the big day.”

He groaned, his good mood evaporating faster than his sweat. “Oh, God. You’re really going to make me go through with it, aren’t you?” He shivered—from the chill, that is—and stood, leading the way into the house.

“You know it, big guy.”

Xander groaned again. There was no getting out of it.

“Quit whining,” Lara laughed. “It’s totally going to be worth it, I promise.”

“I don’t need to go to a leather club to find a boyfriend, Lara.

“Please.” Big blue eyes rolled exaggeratedly. “I’ve never seen such a string of boring dates. Besides, three strikes and you’re out. It’s my turn, now. You promised.”

Xander scoffed. “You don’t have to hold me to that, you know. And, what about Jonathan? He wasn’t boring.” At least not in the ways Lara should know about, but Xander was keeping *some* things to himself. Besides, even Jonathan had lost interest in him. What, exactly, did that say about Xander?

Lara snapped her head up as if waking suddenly. “Wha—? Oh, I’m sorry, honey. I fell asleep there, right after you said ‘Jonathan’, the most uninteresting gay man that ever lived. Did you say something else?”

He snorted. “You know the real problem is that I’m the boring one, don’t you?”

“That’s not true. Well, it’s not your fault.” They both quieted at the grim reminder of why Xander had sworn off bad boys. So maybe he’d gone a little too far and alienated anyone remotely interesting in the process.

“You could still let me set you up with my boss,” Lara offered for the eight millionth time.

“No,” he responded for the eight millionth time. There was no way in hell he would face the man who’d witnessed Xander’s most mortifying moment of his life.

“You’ve never even met him.” It was an old, exhausting argument.

“No. But he’s met me, hasn’t he?” He tried not to sound bitter, but he knew he’d failed.

“He doesn’t think any less of you because of—”

“But I do.” Xander sighed and dropped into a chair at his small kitchen table. “Lara, I can’t remember him being there, that’s how fucked up I was.”

“It’s not your fault!”

“It is.” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, still careful of his right eye, even after all these months. “I should never have been so stupid.”

“Honey.” Lara sat and pulled his hands away, clasping them tightly in her own. “You—”

“Walked into a strange bar, accepted a drink from someone I knew I shouldn’t trust, and fell for the oldest trick in the gay basher’s book.” The humiliation was almost—*almost*—as bad as the pain had been.

“And, you know something? It’s actually worse that I did most of the damage to myself.” It was sad, but true. His panicked attempt to flee in his impaired condition had only resulted in him clumsily slamming eyeball-first into the corner of a dumpster, knocking him to the ground, where he hit his head and passed out. The black eye and concussion were far worse than the injury from the single blow that had landed on him before he’d run. The still-pink scar on his forehead reminded him daily of how pathetic he’d been in that moment.

Humiliation coursed through him yet again. To learn later that he’d been found by none other than Lara’s boss, Mr. Forrest, the most perfect man alive, if Lara was any judge of character—and she was—only made the whole thing so much more nauseatingly mortifying.

“Aw, X,” Lara soothed, tugging on his hands to bring him back in the moment. “You were distraught, not thinking straight. You can’t keep blaming yourself!”

Xander turned his hands over and squeezed Lara’s. “I’m sorry. It’s... I don’t think I could look Mr. Forrest in the eye after that. I can only imagine what he thinks of me.”

“He doesn’t—”

“Please, just leave it, Lara.” Xander was tired of this argument. It only made him feel worse. On top of the horror of the night, he now had this shame of his irrational fear of meeting Mr. Forrest. A man he should be thanking, but instead was avoiding.

“All right, all right.” Lara gave in as usual. But then her wicked grin was back. “So that means you’re on for tonight, and you’ll be perfectly safe because the bartender and manager will know to watch out for you.”

“And you’re sure there’s no chance of Mr. Forrest showing up, there, right?” Xander had only agreed to go to the club when he could be assured the club owner was on one of his numerous business trips. He ignored the fact that he needed any reassurance that he’d be safe.

“Booked the tickets myself, didn’t I?”

“Fine. But I’m coming home early because I’m already sacrificing half of my Saturday, and I’m not losing my Sunday Smut day on top of it.” Xander narrowed his eyes threateningly, a look that was wasted because Lara was completely immune.

“God forbid,” she rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to interfere with your laying around reading gay porn—excuse me, *erotica*—all the live-long day.”

“You got that right.” Xander nodded as if he’d actually made some kind of point. But damn it, he’d given up enough of his *boring* days to Jonathan in order to keep the peace. His ex always had to be running. Constantly doing *something*. It had driven him crazy that Xander could and would spend an entire day in boxers and socks reading mindless romance novels. And napping.

“Yeah, yeah, Shakespeare.” Lara dragged him towards the shower and gave him that adoring smile that always reminded him of why he kept her around. “Get moving.”

Xander groaned again, but couldn’t help returning her smile with a small one of his own. He’d done a little research and had to acknowledge a certain amount of curiosity. Not that he’d ever in a million years admit it.

Paul Forrest disembarked the jet and moved efficiently—as he did everything—through the terminals. He had no luggage to stop for, and his ride should be waiting for him at the curb. He had barely enough time to get checked in, clean himself up, and get dressed in his club “uniform”. The sexy kilt and boots fit him a far cry better than the monkey suit he still wore, even though his last meeting had been hours ago.

He stifled the rush of excitement that threatened to undermine his control. He hadn’t been on the scene in over a year—since he’d stumbled upon Xander. Not literally, of course, having only met the man once in person, but the fact of the matter was that Paul couldn’t help comparing everyone he met to Xander. It was weak and sentimental. Paul would never say those words out loud to anyone, but there they were. And vocalized or not, he couldn’t deny the truth of them.

There had been a time, not so long ago, that Paul Forrest had been confident and correct in saying he was nobody’s fool. He would love to say it now, except, he was, maybe, his own self-made fool, seeing as he had spent an ungodly amount of money to return from his business trip three days early so he and Lara could implement this undoubtedly foolish plan to bring Xander to him. His Mission: X.

If only the boy hadn’t so stubbornly refused to meet with him after that night. Paul had stood beside Xander’s hospital bed, overcome with a protectiveness and possessiveness he couldn’t act on. He’d listened to Xander, bruised and bandaged and barely conscious, reassuring Lara, begging her not to cry, promising her everything would be all right. He couldn’t really blame Xander for not wanting to see him afterwards, but he happened to fundamentally disagree.

Paul’s chest did that suffocating thing it did every time he remembered. He ruthlessly shut it down, though, needing to focus on the plan, needing his head in the game. He’d hesitated when Lara set him up for tonight, not wanting to push the boy into something before he was ready, but Xander had gone and jumped back into the dating pool with both feet, and Paul wasn’t about to let

him walk into a BDSM club unattended and unprotected. Lara knew it; she'd banked on it.

Arriving at their predetermined pickup spot, Paul's attention was brought back to the present when he spotted Jay, his ride, right where he expected.

"Welcome back, Mr. Forrest." Jay, Paul's oldest and closest friend, greeted him with a knowing gleam in his eye. And well he knew, since he'd been the one to fetch Paul's things and book his room in Denver.

"Don't start, Jay," Paul warned, stubbornly refusing to respond to the charmer's infectious grin.

Jay took Paul's carry-on and briefcase and threw them in the back seat, then held the passenger door open and bowed in exaggerated deference. Paul slid into the car, but not before he gave a playful smack to the back of Jay's head.

"That's no way to treat the help, Paul."

"You're not 'help', Jay. You're freakishly and inexplicably invested in the outcome of my night." Paul had made the sorry mistake of confiding in his best friend about the plan, trying to shrug it off as doing Lara a favor, which wasn't exactly a lie. Unfortunately, Jay used his considerable skills as a Dom to get Paul to admit his confusing but undeniably strong attraction to Xander. Ever since, Jay had become a dog with a bone, voraciously devouring any tidbit of information fed to him.

Paul shot him a suspicious look. "You're not going to rent the room next door and drill peep-holes in the walls while I'm gone, are you?"

"Well, I wasn't going to, but now that you planted that seed..." He waggled perfectly arched eyebrows and Paul couldn't help laughing.

"Besides," Jay added. "It's your fault. You never should have dragged me into your nefarious plot." Jay grinned wolfishly, his green eyes glittering in the car's sunlit interior. Damn, but he was a good-looking man. Unfortunately, they had matching dominant personalities, and they'd concluded long ago that anything more than friendship would be disastrous.

Paul rolled his eyes. “Unwillingly spilled my guts under the threat of water-boarding, you mean.”

“You say tomato...” Jay shrugged and looked Paul up and down critically. “You ready for this?”

“Of course. What’s to be ready for?” Paul put as much flippancy as he could muster into his answer. This fooled no one.

“Right,” Jay drawled, with that infuriatingly knowing smirk.

“Just watch the road, would ya, ace?” They both put their sunglasses on as they hit the highway. “How’d everything go while I was gone?”

Jay shot him an exasperated look. “The same as when you called this morning. And yesterday. And the day before—”

“Okay, I get it,” Paul grunted, refusing to be embarrassed about his lack of focus the last few days. “And I appreciate you covering my ass.”

“That’s more like it,” Jay agreed, with a cocky flip of his stylish hair. The auburn color drew men and women to him from miles around, like a beacon.

Paul sighed, finally relaxing now that he was on the ground and he could put threats of flight delays or cancellations out of his mind. “You can drop me at the hotel, if you don’t mind. Thanks for picking me up, by the way.”

“Please,” Jay scoffed. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. I’m totally coming with you and helping you with your make-up, girlfriend.”

He should have known. “Fine. I could use some help with my black nail polish. I can never do my right hand without making a mess.”

“You got it, babe.”

Paul snorted. “Don’t call me babe, asshole.”

“Sure thing, lover.”

Twelve hours later, Xander was no longer smiling. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What?” The innocent baby blues weren’t fooling him for a second. “You look hot!”

Xander rolled his eyes and stared at the freakish facsimile of himself in the full mirror that was the hotel closet door. They’d driven the hour into Denver where she’d booked him a room, because, according to his pimp, er, Lara, there was no way he’d be up for driving all the way back to Loveland after the night he was about to have.

He—wisely, he thought—refused to comment.

She had crunched up his hair with something that made it look like it usually did *before* he showered in the morning. His brown eyes were lined with makeup, Lara claiming it made him look intense and mysterious. In his mind, it only accentuated the deer in the headlights look he was sporting.

But worse, his body was covered completely in black. Sort of. Tight jeans encased his ass and squeezed his package obscenely. The impossibly tighter black tank top was almost transparent, accentuating his notable lack of chest hair, and his nipples were clearly visible, which, naturally, caused Lara to wonder—out loud—if it was too late to go get his nipples pierced first. He could barely stop himself from crossing his arms over his pecs in self-defense.

“No.” Xander shook his head, not even bothering to acknowledge the nipple ring comment. “I can’t wear this.”

“Mm. Sorry, Xan.” She looked nothing close to sorry. “Part of the deal.”

He slipped his thumbs under the waistband of his jeans. “I’m going to be impacted by the time these come off.”

Lara guffawed the most unladylike laugh he’d ever heard. “You’ll be fine. You did all the cleansing—”

He rushed to cut her off, waving his hands in front of her face. “Oh my God! Stop talking right now.”

Xander felt his cheeks burn. Again. He was still scarred from the conversation they’d had earlier. He’d been trapped in the car with no escape

when Lara had so casually started with the “helpful” advice, including boldly suggesting he douche his ass so he’d be ready for anything. He’d spent the next sixty seconds speechless and contemplating how much damage rolling out of a vehicle moving at sixty-five miles per hour could possibly do, really.

He rubbed his cheeks against the embarrassment, checking for missed stubble while he was at it. “I don’t know that I should have shaved.” He stared in the mirror again, blatantly ignoring the panicked kohl-rimmed eyes. “I look seventeen instead of twenty-four.” Xander shaved every day for work, but nobody in a business office was going to card him—or try to pick him up because he looked underage.

“You’re fine.” Lara considered him with narrowed eyes. “You look at least twenty-one.”

Xander snorted. “Well, then.”

She laughed. “Did you shave your—”

“Seriously, you need to stop talking.” Xander held up a warning hand to her face. There was no way in hell he was going to explain the horror of his single, misguided attempt at getting waxed. The embarrassment was only slightly over-shadowed by the itch and irritation he’d suffered for days afterward. And he hadn’t even had anyone to appreciate it at the time. He’d done it on a whim, the shiny smooth asses he saw on the Internet making him think he should try it out.

“But—”

“I am not having this conversation with you.” Xander turned away and searched the floor for his shoes. He stopped when Lara held up a pair of black lace-up boots.

Rolling his eyes, he took the boots and sat on the bed to put them on.

“What are you going to do the rest of the night?” He changed the subject, desperately clinging to the last of his questionable dignity. He knew he wasn’t fooling Lara, but she kindly pretended like he was.

“I’m going to sit in the bar across the street for a while to make sure you don’t bolt the minute I turn my back, then I’ll drive home,” she answered, with what Xander unfortunately knew was complete honesty.

“I told you I’d go, and I’m going,” he grumbled. “I promised to give it a fair shot.”

“You did at that,” she agreed, rubbing his shoulder with her cool, soft fingers. Not for the first time, Xander wished the two of them were what did it for each other. He touched her hand with his own, accepting the unspoken comfort.

It was short lived.

“Did you read that book I left for you last week?” Her breezy tone was not to be trusted.

Xander curled his lip. “The ‘fifty ways to make a gay man cry’ book?” He shuddered. “I skimmed it. Got to this one part that involved a riding crop and girl parts and—” he made badly faked gagging noises. “I couldn’t finish.”

Lara hooted. “Really?”

He stared at her, mouth agape. “Didn’t you read it?”

“Hell, no! Are you kidding me?” She balked as if he’d called her fat. “I don’t read that trash.”

“You—” Xander stammered, lunging for her just as she ran. “You are such a—”

“Careful, now,” Lara teased as she dodged him. “You wouldn’t hit a girl, would you?”

Xander was pacing steadily closer, eyes narrowed with criminal intent. “You’re not a girl. You are an evil demon spawn sent to destroy my innocence.”

“Ha! And I’ve succeeded, haven’t I?” Her smile was infectious.

He caved and grinned, pulling her into a hug. Her head fit perfectly under his chin. “You have, indeed, wench.”

Her laugh was muffled against his chest, but her arms gripped him and squeezed the air out of him. “Yay! I’ll finally earn my pitchfork!”

Xander chuckled. “I am so going to get you for this.”

“You can try!” She sang, stepping out of his arms. She grabbed her purse off the sofa and rummaged through it. “C’mere.”

He stayed where he was, proud of himself for not running, but he still remained wary and poised for flight. “Why?”

“So distrusting.”

“With good reason.” Xander watched her suspiciously, not at all surprised when she advanced on him with a tube of lip gloss. “No.”

“Oh, yes.” She nodded, reaching for him with the offending tube in her hand. Knowing that fighting her was futile, he stood still, telling himself he could wipe it off when she dropped him at the club.

Still, he felt it was only right that he give a token denial. “Wait.” He sniffed. “Hey, is that strawberry?” Xander leaned in for a better smell.

“Mm,” Lara hummed, concentrating on painting his lips. “Okay. Done.” She stood back for a final examination of her work. Xander slouched and looked off in the distance in his brooding vampire imitation, eliciting a girlish giggle from her. “Perfect.”

Paul stood tall at the door, fighting his impatience for the night to get under way. He checked his watch, then tipped his chin at the bouncer. “I’ll cover here for a while. You head in for a break.”

“I don’t need a break.” The muscle-bound bouncer—standing many pounds and several inches over Paul—trailed off, softening visibly when he met Paul’s steely blue eyes. The bouncer’s countenance turned passive—and

maybe a little wistful—as he took in the thick, bare chest crossed with leather and the low-slung kilt at Paul’s hips. “Oh. Yes, sir, Mr. Forrest.”

“Very good.” Paul patted his shoulder and took encouragement from Seth’s reaction. Sure, he’d gotten the wolf-whistle from Jay, but Jay wasn’t exactly objective. It was always good to be assured one still “had it” by someone who actually wanted it. “I’ll see you back here in thirty, Seth.”

“Oh.” Seth looked surprised that Paul knew his name. “Okay, then.”

Paul cocked an eyebrow and gave the man a look that stopped him in his tracks.

Seth swallowed. “Okay, sir.”

Paul smiled his approval and preened a little on the inside when Seth’s whole face lit up in response. He noted the reluctance in Seth’s movements when he finally turned towards the bar to take his break. Paul felt him stop and look back at him when he reached the door, but Paul concentrated on the group of men approaching the club entrance.

“ID’s please, gentlemen.” He nodded to a couple of Doms he recognized to go on in and carefully studied the identification of the three younger men he’d never seen before. They were eyeballing his outfit and snickering at each other. He couldn’t allow that, now, could he. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared them down until they quieted. “New here, boys?”

“Yes, sir.” A chorus of breathy voices answered him and he only narrowly avoided rolling his eyes. There had been a day when he’d have been all over these nubile young men, their submission rolling off them in waves. One was now eyeballing his kilt like he could see through it, and Paul was pretty sure he heard somebody whimper. They’d have no trouble finding action tonight, he was sure, but it wasn’t going to be at his hand.

Paul watched the group enter, wondering exactly when he’d gotten so particular in his tastes. But then he knew; because he spotted the couple across the street, his lips quirking a little when Lara stood on her tiptoes to reach

Xander's face so she could kiss his cheek. Paul shook his head when Lara turned and saw him and threw him a saucy wink.

Paul was far more intrigued by the dark-haired boy with her, though. He watched with interest as Xander made his way towards him. Even as distracted as he was by the unconscious swish of denim clad hips, Paul would have marked Xander as a first-timer long before he made it across the street.

"ID, please." Paul didn't wince at the gruffness of his voice, but he wanted to. He kept his eyes pinned on the startled brown gaze staring back at him and waited, uncertain if he wanted to see a sign of recognition or not. The second Xander's eyes dropped Paul scoped out the rest of him, appreciating his lean length, showcased perfectly in skin-tight black.

Paul's attention returned to Xander's face, only Xander was checking out every individual piece of Paul's club attire. He could practically feel the scorch marks as Xander's gaze fell from the studded leather strapped across Paul's chest, to the matching cuffs at his wrists, the belt at his waist, and to the kilt clinging to his hips.

Paul forced himself to wait silently, letting the boy look his fill, but it was getting more and more difficult. When Xander finally met his eyes, Paul calmly raised an eyebrow. "Would you like to touch?"

Xander's cheeks flamed in a most alluring way. But Paul saw him fist his hands as if resisting the temptation to touch.

"Um..." Xander coughed lightly. "Sorry." He looked around, as if hoping a topic of conversation would fly at him through the air. "So, are you Scottish, then?" He nodded towards Paul's kilt, his eyes glued to Paul's, apparently determined to not be caught looking again.

"Nope."

"Oh." Xander blinked and took a few seconds to think it through. Paul couldn't stop the quirk of his lips, even before Xander said, "Irish?"

"Nope."

“So the kilt isn’t because of your heritage?” He looked confused, charmingly so.

“Nope.”

Xander must have finally caught the humor in Paul’s eyes because he smiled, nearly stopping Paul’s heart. “Skirt fetish?”

The laugh was out before he could even consider containing it. But it was completely worth it, because watching Xander light up in delight in response to it was worth every potential chip in his image.

“Not that there’d be anything wrong with that,” Xander added, eyes twinkling.

“Of course not,” Paul concurred.

Sobering reluctantly, Paul remembered he had a role to play here. He held out his hand. “You got that ID, boy?” He knew he wasn’t imagining the heat in Xander’s eyes at his choice of words.

“Oh,” Xander’s hand reached for his smooth chin while the other dug in his back pocket. Smooth muscles shifted and bunched, just enough to show that he took care of his body, but without obsession. “I knew I shouldn’t have shaved,” he blurted, looking surprised and uncomfortable once he’d said it. “I always get carded when I’ve shaved,” he added unnecessarily.

“We card everyone we don’t know,” Paul assured him, definitely *not* smiling. He studied the ID: Alexander Sherman Wallace. Yikes. He bit his tongue, though. “Are you a member, Alexander?”

“Um, no. It’s... it’s Xander.” He ducked his head and rooted into his back pocket again. “Here it is. I have a guest pass.”

Paul took the pass, heart pounding, but managed to only lift an eyebrow. “A guest of Mr. Forrest? Ah, yes. We’ve been expecting you.”

Xander stuffed his ID back into his jeans and shrugged. “I guess.”

“You guess?” Paul couldn’t help digging a little. “Do you know him?” He suddenly wanted desperately for Xander to know who he was. But he realized

Xander's stubborn refusal to meet him was rooted in a deep sense of pride, and Paul had decided ahead of time that this was how he was going to play it, not willing to risk sending Xander running.

"Not directly. I know he owns this property. His assistant is a friend of mine." For the first time Xander looked uncomfortable, as if he might be doing something wrong, but then he straightened his shoulders and spoke firmly, like a man used to having to project more self-assurance than he might have felt in order to be heard. "She assured me he'd given the pass to her—for me—personally."

Paul didn't react right way, and he had to admire the steady gaze staring back at him. He dipped his head and asked, "Did it seem unusual to you that he'd do that even though he was planning on being a thousand miles away at the time?" It wasn't technically a lie. Paul had planned on being gone, especially since Xander threw them for a loop by refusing to consider entering the club until Lara could guarantee that Paul wouldn't be there.

Xander cocked his head, mimicking Paul's movements, and stared, uncertainty only a tiny shadow buried under confident eye contact. "I wouldn't know." The slightest tremble of Xander's glossy lips distracted Paul enough that he couldn't answer. "Am I allowed to go in, or not?"

Shrugging, Paul reached for the door. "Please." He gestured for Xander to enter. "Be my guest."

Paul watched until Xander was inside, swallowed by the dim interior of the club, then finally let out a loud breath. Xander hadn't recognized him. Paul should have been relieved; because he didn't really have a back up plan, if seeing him had triggered Xander's memory. Still, the sting of disappointment was there, but Paul shrugged it off. What had he expected? That Xander would take one look at him, declare them to be soul mates and pledge his undying devotion to... the bouncer?

Paul had noticed Xander was slimmer, and appeared slightly more jaded around the eyes than the sunny, smiling pictures of the boy Lara was always showing him. At first, Lara had only shared her concerns and frustrations over

her friend's relationship choices. She'd detested Xander's ex, and the more Paul had heard about him, the more he'd agreed with her.

But it didn't take Lara long to figure Paul out, and once that happened, she became a relentless sales rep for the unknowing boy. She was smart about it, too. Telling Paul story after story that revealed the kind of man Xander was. She never said, "Xander is so kind and patient and generous." No. She would drop into a conversation how she had been kept waiting for dinner the other night because Xander had stopped to chat with his elderly neighbor and had ended up running to the grocery to get Mrs. Watts the walnuts she desperately needed in order to make the recipe that she'd no doubt have forgotten about by the time he returned.

Lara kept pictures of Xander on her desk, on her phone, on her computer. Silly little snapshots that she'd taken or that Xander would take of himself—like when he was stuck in traffic that time and his air conditioning had gone out and he'd stripped off his shirt and wrapped his tie around his forehead like a sweatband. He'd taken a picture and sent it to Lara just to make her laugh. Paul, however, had had trouble focusing on the humor of the photo. He'd been too struck by the smooth skin of Xander's neck and collarbones, shining with sweat and begging to be licked.

He'd heard her talking to him on the phone at least once every day, and knew for a fact that Xander always called her between three and four, which happened to be a known down time for Lara. She'd relax and eat a light snack while they chatted. Inevitably, Lara would end up laughing and would hang up ready to jump back into work.

But the best part, in Paul's mind, was when he occasionally caught her chatting with Xander on speakerphone while she worked, and obviously thought she was alone. So maybe he'd hovered in the hall wanting to listen to Xander's smoky voice tease and laugh, longing like a lovesick school girl for the chance to get one of those laughs for himself.

Paul was struck with another of those increasingly frequent—and annoying—waves of disconcerting uncertainty. He'd been half taken by

Xander before he'd ever met him. Then Xander had run off to that damn bar to prove some kind of point and had barely escaped with his life. Paul had started to go after Xander, but he'd been delayed by what, at the time, had seemed like a crisis. He would never forgive himself for letting work interfere even that little bit in what turned out to be all the time needed to change a boy's life forever.

Seeing Seth work his way back towards his post at the door, Paul tugged at his leather cuffs as if straightening his shirt sleeves, and settled himself firmly into dominant mode, ready to make Alexander Sherman Wallace his own.

Xander was still shaken and more than half hard—made worse by the sights and smells of leather and male skin spewing pheromones everywhere by the time he reached the far end of the bar. He slid onto the only vacant seat, which was thankfully as far as he could get from the door without cowering in the corner, or slipping down that dark hallway. He didn't even want to know about that.

Seated, arms crossed on the bar top in front of him, Xander allowed himself a moment to curse Lara and her cock-smothering jeans before he looked around casually, taking deep, but surreptitious breaths. He tried to appear unaffected and nonchalant as though he frequented BDSM clubs on a regular basis. Meanwhile, he was pretty sure that on the inside he was having a mild coronary, and prayed to the gods of bondage that he could manage to keep his face a mask of indifference. Or at least not show blatant hysteria.

He was lucky he was sitting in relative obscurity, since he knew he wasn't doing a very good job of hiding his reactions to the men surrounding him. From the leather-clad bear on the far side of the room, to the tiny, scantily clad twink scooting up next to him at the bar, and every variation in between; it was all new and exciting, he reluctantly admitted to himself. Not that he was that surprised; he did own a computer and was exceedingly proficient with it, after all. What did surprise him, though, was that he found the whole place welcoming and comfortable in a "free to be yourself" kind of way. Apparently,

to these particular patrons, “yourself” meant almost naked and/or outfitted in the skins of other mammals.

Xander couldn’t help returning the brilliant smile of the slight man—the aforementioned scantily-clad twink—who was bouncing on the balls of his feet next to him.

“Hi. You’re new here.” The sweet-looking stranger said, peeking at Xander over his shoulder while leaning over the bar to catch the bartender’s attention. Half of his ass was hanging out of the white go-go-boy shorts he wore. Half of his torso was visible under the barely-there, white spaghetti strapped top that was only meant to cover small parts of him. “I’m Wren.”

His smile was adorable, the deep dimples scoring his cheeks, flirting with Xander all on their own. Xander liked them—and Wren—immediately. “Xander.” He followed Wren’s lead and didn’t offer his hand, but by then, he was already plastered over the bar waving at the bartender again.

Finally, the bartender—looking both exasperated and amused—headed in their direction and Wren relaxed, which meant Xander could stop staring at his smooth, hard ass. Not that he was interested, really, but he could appreciate a nice ass when he saw one. He wasn’t dead, after all.

Wren ordered something that sounded like it was sure to come with an umbrella and a cherry while Xander asked for a vodka cranberry with extra ice. At Wren’s raised eyebrows, he shrugged. “It gets too warm before I finish it if I don’t add ice.” He grinned sheepishly. “I’m not much of a drinker.”

Wren stared at him, his head tipped, ironically bird-like. “You’re cute.” He ignored the drinks that were placed on the bar in front of them, but Xander dug—with difficulty—into his jeans for money.

“How much?” he asked, waving at Wren’s drink, which was, indeed, brilliant red and sporting fruit on the rim.

“He’s covered. He’s on a tab.” The bartender gave him a flirty wink. “You, too, handsome. Boss’s orders.”

“Oh.” Xander blinked. “Okay, thanks.” He left some bills on the bar top for a tip and turned to find Wren waiting patiently. Wren was eyeing him like a discerning connoisseur of man flesh, making it a struggle for Xander to remember what they were talking about. Oh yeah. Cute.

“You know, cute in that ordinary, boy next door kind of way.” Wren continued.

Xander choked on his drink. “Uh. Thanks?” Then he smiled and looked down at himself. “I don’t know about you, but my next door neighbor doesn’t wear see-through shirts.”

“Ha! Bet you wished he did!” Wren exclaimed with delight.

“You got that right,” Xander laughed, picturing the boy across the street from him growing up, all tough guy leather jackets and a Harley for his seventeenth birthday. “I’d have embarrassed myself for sure, I can tell you that.”

“Totally worth it though, right?” Wren looked like he was remembering his own teen-aged fantasy. Which Xander figured must have been when he was maybe, three years old.

Chuckling, Xander nodded and tried another sip of his drink. It was good. Crisp and cold. “Are you here alone?” He held his hand up when Wren gave him the bird look again. “Not trying to pick you up. I’m making sure you’re safe.”

“Aw, that’s sweet of you.” Wren’s smile returned full force. “But no, I’m not alone.” He reached for a necklace, holding an intricately woven pendant so Xander could see it. Xander brilliantly deduced that it must have been his collar. *Thank you World Wide Web.*

“That’s beautiful.” Xander leaned closer, trying to make out the design. “What is it?”

Wren was glowing like a new bride. “It’s our initials locked together. You need a special key to open it. He designed it himself.”

It really was unique. Xander reached out to turn it so he could see the whole design. “It’s—ow!”

His words cut off when his hand was slapped away. Hard. Xander gasped and rubbed his wrist. “What the hell!”

Turning, he found himself nose to chest with a mountain of muscle. “‘What the hell’ is right, boy. You don’t go around touching another man’s collar!”

Xander’s mouth worked and his wrist smarted. He felt the heat rise to his cheeks, “I—I’m sorry, man. I didn’t know.” So, maybe in his research he’d gotten somewhat distracted by the pictures and ended up actually reading very little.

“Bullshit.” The hulking beast loomed closer, nostrils flared in temper. Xander held his breath, mostly to hold in the squeak that was lodged in his throat. But he stood his ground, trying desperately to ignore the pounding of his heart in his chest, which should have been visible, by the feel of it.

“I said I didn’t know, and I apologized,” Xander responded as calmly as he could. “What else do you want from me?”

That seemed to stump the big guy. At least long enough for Wren to wriggle his way between them. “Daddy, please don’t. He was very politely admiring the collar you made for me.”

Daddy reluctantly dropped his fuming eyes from Xander to Wren. Immediately, he softened, lifting a hand to swallow the entire back of Wren’s head in his grasp before consuming his mouth in a seriously R-rated kind of way. Xander squirmed, trying not to watch, but finding it impossible not to, especially when Wren started whimpering and humping at the thick thigh that slid between his legs.

Xander swallowed and forced himself to look away, searching for something—anything—to focus his attention on. He found it when, across the room he spotted the bouncer who’d carded him wending his way through the mass of bodies. Xander couldn’t help but notice how the seas simply parted for

the Dom. That the man was a Dom, Xander knew without needing to be told. It didn't take a degree in Sadomasochism to figure out what he was.

All Xander knew at that moment was that the sight of the man made all the spit in his mouth dry up. It initiated the tightening of his balls that warned him that a full-fledged erection was on the very near horizon if he didn't do something to stop it. He shook his head. Surely he was too old to be popping uncontrollable wood in public. Wasn't he? The sound of Wren working himself into a frenzy next to him wasn't exactly helping matters.

Xander had to look away from the half-naked, kilt-clad temptation and was relieved to find Wren tucked safely under his daddy's beefy arm, apparently in a time-out from their mutual masturbation session. With supreme discipline, Xander managed to *not* check out the bulging rods in the couple's pants.

He raised his eyebrows when he saw the contemplative look on Wren's face. "I like him." Wren chirped.

"Yeah?" That was Daddy. And now he was looking at Xander with that same intense contemplation on his face, which, now that it was void of the hostility, was really rather nice to look at. But the scrutiny he was under was unnerving, to say the least. Xander's skin crawled with a confusing mix of unease and arousal.

"Um, name's Xander," he offered, needing to break the weird silence that had descended on them.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Xander!" Wren bounced a little—very little, actually—with the weight of his daddy's arm holding him moderately still. "This is Charlie. He's my daddy."

Xander laughed, and if the sound bordered on hysteria, he surely wasn't going to be the one to point it out. "I gathered that, what with the whole climbing his leg business."

It didn't faze Wren, who shrugged and smiled unabashedly. He turned in Charlie's arms, murmuring something Xander couldn't hear, not that he was

trying to listen. He was too relieved at having a name for Charlie that wasn't "Daddy".

"Oh yeah, baby bird?" Charlie straightened and pinned Xander with that look again. "You wanna keep him?"

And he was choking on his drink for the second time. Xander's throat was going to be raw if he kept this up. "What?" he yelped.

"Can we?" Wren was bouncing again, or attempting to. "Let's take him home! He's so cute with his big brown eyes and would you look at those lips? Can't you just see those lips wrapped around my cock, Daddy?"

Charlie groaned, and twisted so he could grind his giant erection against Wren's belly. Xander was hopelessly stunned stupid, his brain having locked horns in battle with his penis.

"Maybe around *your* cock? Would you like those full, shiny lips to suck you while I watch, Daddy?" Wren purred his seduction, practically vibrating visibly. "Check out his package, Daddy. Looks like he could stretch me out good. You know how much you love watching those big ones sink into me." He was crooning and rubbing sinuously against Charlie now, and Charlie was eating it up.

Xander held his hands up, sweat breaking out down his back, his heart palpitating dangerously, and he'd be damned if he could figure out whether it was his brain or cock causing it. "Um. That's really flattering, Wren. You're hot as hell, and all, but—"

Wren pouted. "You don't wanna come home with us?"

Damn. For a second, staring at that lusciously pouting face, he waffled. What the hell, right? He was single, Wren was hot, Charlie was a big ol' yummy bear who'd probably fuck him right into the ground, and he couldn't, at the moment, think of a single thing wrong with that. After all, wasn't this what he was here for?

But then he remembered. Comfortable as he was—or had been—in the relatively tame bar area of the club, this was a different scene, and he had no

idea what these two were into. Unbidden images of a riding crop slapping him in unmentionable places made him shudder and he opened his mouth to let Wren down gently.

“He’s with me.” The words hit him a second before the heaviness of an arm—a solid, warm, bare arm—fell over his shoulders. Xander didn’t even jump, his relief came so swiftly. He knew who it was without needing to look, so he simply smiled apologetically at Wren.

“Sorry, Wren,” he shrugged and lifted a hand tentatively to the one on his shoulder. His bouncer’s hand was hard, possessive, if that was possible merely by the placement of one’s hand on another’s shoulder. Xander decided it was because he was feeling very much as if he’d been claimed. More amazingly, Xander realized, he liked it.

“Paulie!” Wren flung himself against Paul’s chest. “It’s been so long, where have you been?”

“Paul.” Charlie clapped a hand on Paul’s shoulder and gave it a good shake. Even the sturdy Paul wobbled under the force of that massive paw.

Paul nodded at Charlie before chuckling at Wren. “Hey, little bird.” He squeezed Wren in a one-handed hug. “Still flitting around the joint, I see.”

“Yep.” Wren situated himself again under Charlie’s arm and pouted again. “But you just took away our fun for the night.”

Xander might have emitted a tiny little noise, because Paul’s arm tightened protectively around him. His whole body vibrated with Paul’s deep voice when he spoke. “Sorry. But we don’t share.”

“You used to share, Paulie.” Wren sulked for another second before delight filled his face. “Oh! This one must be special! Is he *the one*, sir?”

Xander was lost. He really wanted to burrow against Paul’s hard body and bury his face in his neck, but that only confused the hell out of him, so he stood there helplessly, no longer able to follow the conversation.

Paul was a few inches taller than Xander, putting his neck at the perfect height for nuzzling. Paul wasn't perfect, but for some reason it made him that much more appealing. There was no shiny six pack and dancing pecs here, instead, there was a thick, solid chest and taut abdomen that seemed stronger to Xander than any gym-built body.

He'd noticed all of this before he'd entered the bar. Right now he still hadn't worked up the nerve to take a good look. He was still weighing his options when Paul leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Put your arm around me, Xander." His words may have seemed casual, but it was nothing less than an order. Xander's skin prickled into goosebumps from the warm breath in his ear. It was only the breath, he was sure of it. It had nothing to do with that commanding, rumbling voice.

It seemed that Paul had arrived just in time, judging by the play of emotions crossing Xander's face. Paul didn't laugh, but he was tempted. Xander's eyes hid nothing, and Paul couldn't help imagining them staring up from beneath him, glazed with lust.

He could feel Xander resisting his inclination to lean against him, to accept the haven Paul offered, but he did as he was told and wrapped a smooth, cool arm around Paul's waist. Paul frowned a bit at Xander's resistance, but he understood it, even if he didn't like it. As he watched, Xander seemed to drift off, like a kid waiting for the grown-ups to be done talking.

"We have seats downstairs," Charlie was saying, all traces of his previous ire nothing but memory. "Why don't you two join us?"

Paul agreed and sent them on their way. When they'd gone, he turned to lean against the bar, trailing his hand over Xander's shoulders and down his arm to catch his fingers. Paul's heart stuttered in his chest when Xander met his eyes. He wasn't sure what those fathomless brown eyes were looking for, but Paul didn't hide his desire, wanting to be sure Xander understood exactly what was happening.

“You shouldn’t have come here alone,” Paul chastised, dismissing the fact that he’d known Xander wouldn’t be alone. *Xander* hadn’t known it. “You’re fresh, vulnerable meat in a place like this.”

Xander swallowed visibly, and his gaze continued searching Paul’s, but his lips quirked in a wry smile. “A little late, now, but duly noted.”

He seemed to finally notice that Paul hadn’t let go of him. He gave a tug as if to free his fingers from Paul’s grasp. But Paul only tightened his grip, appreciating the surprised, but pleased look that passed over Xander’s face right before an eyebrow quirked over a kohl-lined eye.

“Are you trying to tell me something else, um... Paul?” He tipped his head and his eyes twinkled. “Or is it Paulie?”

“It is *not* Paulie,” Paul growled, hiding his smile. “It’s Paul... or you could call me sir.” He ignored the flutter of his pulse while he waited for Xander’s response.

“Oh?” Xander narrowed his eyes, but Paul had seen the flash in them, and he could actually see the boy’s heartbeat pulsing in his neck. He ran his thumb over the inside of Xander’s wrist, damn near going hard when he saw the goose bumps spread over his skin.

But he wasn’t going to make it easy, Paul could see that before Xander spoke. “Sir, as in, the same thing the rest of the subs in the joint call you?”

Paul was *not* going to point out that Xander had more or less included himself in that classification. “Or, *sir* as in the Dom you’re with tonight.”

Xander’s eyes were wide, assessing, clearly wanting, but still slightly hesitant. With his free hand, Paul reached into the waistband of his kilt where a hidden pocket held a simple silver chain. He watched as Xander’s gaze dropped when Paul’s movements caused the kilt to slide down slightly below his hip. Hearing Xander’s breath catch was music to his ears and as effective a seduction as a lick to his cock.

He held up the chain. “I’m going to put this on you, and you’ll officially be mine for the night.”

“J—Just for the night?” Xander’s voice expressed a need that he probably didn’t even understand. But Paul did, and he was immediately filled with the inherent urge to protect and serve.

“For the night,” Paul affirmed, against his own screaming instincts. “This is a... placeholder of sorts, to take you off the market. Everyone here will know you’re with someone and they’ll leave you alone.”

Something flashed in Xander’s eyes, but Paul still wasn’t prepared for his response. “What if I don’t want to be ‘off the market’? What if that’s the complete opposite of the reason I came here tonight?”

“What is your reason for coming here tonight?” Paul asked.

“Why do you wear a kilt?” was Xander’s retort, complete with a cocky lift of his chin.

Paul allowed a half smile. “Maybe we’ll share those stories with each other in the morning.”

“Oh?” Xander laughed, sounding a little nervous and a lot interested. “So, is this where I swoon like a maiden and fall to my knees, offering you my body and my submission because I am *that* overcome by the sheer force of your masculinity?” The cocky tilt was still there, but Paul had the pleasure of witnessing Xander become a bit breathless by the time he’d said his piece.

Paul was completely enamored. “That would be the preferred reaction, yes.”

Xander’s laugh was hoarse and sexy as hell. And Paul knew he’d failed to hide his response to it from the way Xander’s eyes heated. He took a deep calming breath, remembering that he was way ahead of Xander in this game. “I can guarantee you’ll still enjoy the full experience while you’re under my protection.”

“Wait.” Xander pulled his fingers from Paul’s grasp. “Let me get this straight. You want me to wear your *temporary* collar, which has no doubt graced the neck of God only knows how many of these other subs practically

swooning at your feet, and you expect me to call you Sir while I'm wearing it? Because I'm in need of your protection?"

"No." Damn. The smart-ass had knocked Paul off his game, which was practically unheard of. "I purchased this chain this afternoon. I've never put a collar on anyone before—"

Too late, he realized what he'd said. He quickly changed direction. "When a Dom takes on a sub, it's often referred to as 'taking him under their protection.' It's many other things, of course. And it doesn't mean we think you're weak, or—"

"Okay."

"What?" Paul blinked. This was not going at all like he'd expected.

"I said okay." Xander's face softened, and he looked... amused, of all things. "I'll wear it, and I'll be yours for the night."

Paul stared so intently at him for such a long time he could see Xander trying not to squirm. "Do you have any idea what that might entail?" Now Paul was concerned that Xander had capitulated too quickly. Would he have bought this line from any ol' Dom in the joint?

Xander smiled, tipping his head to peer up through his lashes. "Now you want to talk me out of it?"

"No." His voice was too rough, but he was fighting to regain control of the situation.

"Then let's do this, Highlander." Xander's smile grew, but Paul finally got enough of a grip on himself to see that last-second flare of uncertainty. Xander was into it, but he was nervous, and his cockiness was a bluff, Paul was sure of it. The balance of power shifted back to him, more strongly than before, and Paul relaxed upon feeling his center return.

Paul didn't hesitate when Xander turned his back to him so he could loop the chain around Xander's neck. It was only a little like the collar Paul had

imagined crafting for Xander, but seeing this temporary chain was enough to make his chest swell with pride.

Resting his hands possessively on Xander's shoulders, Paul leaned in, deliberately teasing his boy's ear with his breath.

"Let's go downstairs."

"Um. Don't you have to go back to work?" Xander waved towards the front door, remembering where he'd seen Paul in the first place. He turned back to face Paul, trying not to panic. He couldn't believe he'd basically given himself to this stranger based on nothing more than a gut reaction to the look in Paul's eyes. The look that made Xander feel seductive, like tempting, vulnerable prey *and* like he was the most precious gift Paul had ever been given.

"No. I was covering so Seth could take a break." Paul pointed towards the entrance, where his position had been filled by a man Xander might have thought of as "big" if he hadn't been so recently introduced to Charlie. Xander nodded absently, too distracted by his thoughts and Paul's sheer potency to really care about who was working the door.

"So, what's downstairs?" Xander's mouth went dry when he was suddenly bombarded with flashes of the more alarming images of hard core BDSM scenes he'd stumbled upon on the internet. Not the enticing ones that gave him the sexy tingles. The ones that made his balls shrivel and his adrenaline spike in an urgent "fight or flight" response. "Flight" being the undisputed winner.

"It's what some would refer to as a dungeon." Paul was still staring at him in that way that made Xander want to slide down the Dom's half-naked body and stuff his face under that damn kilt. He was pretty sure he'd been hard for about ninety percent of the time he'd been in Paul's dominating presence.

"Is it going to make me run screaming from the building?" He was only sort of teasing, even if he was damn near swooning at Paul's feet and willing to follow him anywhere with a frightening lack of self-preservation.

Paul's lips twitched, and Xander very much liked the way a gleam of humor looked in those gorgeous steely eyes. "I think you're tough enough."

Xander hesitated for only a second before he nodded. A strange flutter went through his abdomen. He was surprisingly excited by the idea of exploring this bold new world, especially now that he was feeling completely safe with his new... um, Dom. He almost snorted out loud. "Safe" obviously being a relative term. He wasn't fooling himself that Paul had anything other than naughty intentions.

Paul was staring at him, a knowing smile on his face. But thankfully, he didn't say anything, simply turned and walked away, leaving Xander to follow. He did so dutifully, and not without pleasure. Watching Paul's back flex and his ass shift under his kilt was sexy as hell. Xander found that he really, really wanted to lick the hollow of Paul's spine from his ass to his neck. Xander was positive he'd never before felt such a compulsion to taste another man.

They reached the entrance to the basement quickly, and Xander came to an abrupt stop. Staring at the leather-clad man at the entrance who was checking membership passes, Xander slowly put the pieces together.

"I didn't have to give you my guest pass at the door, did I?" Xander demanded.

Paul didn't bother attempting to look sheepish. Or guilty. He lifted a shoulder and held Xander's gaze steadily. "The bar is public. This is not. And, I didn't ask for your pass. I just didn't stop you when you offered it."

"After you asked if I was a member."

"An innocent enough question." Paul's face gave away nothing.

"So, it had nothing to do with you checking out who I was with, then, huh?" Xander fought to keep his expression stern, but pleasure bloomed at the thought, even as he knew it probably shouldn't have.

“It had everything to do with it.” The predatory look was back in Paul’s eyes when he leaned close into Xander’s space. “Be glad I contained my caveman urges to club you over the head and drag you back to my lair.”

It shouldn’t have made Xander’s cock ache. It shouldn’t have made him tremble. And it shouldn’t have made him want more of it, but damn. It did all of those things.

There wasn’t much time for daydreaming though, because they were entering the basement, which was almost hushed compared to the busy, music-filled noise of the upper floor.

“They’re between shows,” Paul explained, waving an arm to encompass the partially seated, partially milling crowd that chatted quietly as they waited for the next demonstration.

“What kind of, um, show will we be seeing?” Xander asked, acutely aware that his wide eyes were exposing how naive he was as he took in the stage area, where spotlights were trained on the various pieces of equipment set up. Most of it looked fairly innocent until Xander started picturing bodies attached to them.

“Not sure what’s up next.” Paul answered casually. But Xander could tell that he was being observed very carefully and he realized that it didn’t make him uncomfortable being watched over like that. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he decided he liked it, somehow knowing Paul would be the first one to whisk him away if it became too much for him. It actually made Xander relax and experience the moment. *Safe*. It was a feeling he hadn’t felt for far too long.

“There’s usually a little something for everyone.” Paul continued, apparently completely unaware of the impact he was having on his temporary sub.

Xander was definitely catching the feeling of expectation in the air. He spotted Wren and Charlie across the room. Heading in that direction, Xander noted the marked difference in Wren. Where he’d been flamboyant and almost

hyper upstairs, he now sat serenely at Charlie's feet, a shoulder resting gently on the Dom's thick shin. Wren's eyes drifted closed as he leaned into the touch of Charlie's fingers combing through his hair. The sight actually brought a lump to Xander's throat.

Xander coughed in an effort to dislodge the emotion before he got all ridiculous. "Is this, I don't know, the norm in, um, these clubs?" Xander couldn't take enough of it in. There were singles and couples, a threesome doing something in the corner that he'd really like to get a closer look at, and everyone—excepting himself—appeared perfectly comfortable in their skin. And there was a lot of skin to see.

Paul shrugged. "This is pretty tame, actually. It's fairly small, with the bar upstairs and a few private rooms, and the equipment is pretty standard fare." Xander stifled a shudder, thinking again of some of the more extreme and frightening images he'd seen. He really should have been far more careful than thoughtlessly typing "BDSM" in the Google search bar.

When they reached Charlie and Wren, Paul moved to take the seat next to Charlie, but he didn't sit. He waited. Before Xander knew what was happening, Wren had him by the hand and was dragging him down to the floor with him. Wren knelt to the side of Charlie's feet, turning his attention towards Xander, simply smiling a bright welcome, but saying nothing.

Xander wasn't sure what he should do. But that wasn't entirely true, he realized. Though he hesitated, every cell in his body screamed that he knew exactly what to do. On his knees, he looked up at Paul, who was watching patiently. Xander felt the significance of this moment, both in the sense that Paul really appeared to need him to react in a certain way, and in the instinctive understanding that this was going to change something in him. Something irreversible.

Holding Paul's intense look, Xander slid awkwardly the rest of the way to the floor. Paul sat, and Xander was momentarily absorbed in the feeling of his shoulder pressed against Paul's leg in a mirror image of Wren's posture. And the approval and flash of desire in Paul's eyes told him he'd done it exactly

right. His cheeks flushed with pleasure and he dropped his eyes, embarrassed by the strength of the joy he felt from earning Paul's approval.

"Don't." Paul spoke quietly, but firmly. Xander raised his head in confusion as Paul leaned close. "Don't hide yourself from me."

"It's hard not to," Xander confessed.

"I know," Paul gave him an understanding smile. "That's part of it. It's your natural inclination to drop your eyes. I'm telling you not to." Understanding he might be. Willing to buckle, he wasn't.

Xander blinked and tried to gather his thoughts. "I'm—" He swallowed and moved closer, whispering, "I'm so confused." He blurted it out, certain that Paul would know if he tried bluffing. "I don't know how to do this, and until about thirty seconds ago, I didn't even know I wanted to."

Paul's eyes softened and he reached out, sliding his knuckles over Xander's cheekbone. "Does it help if I tell you that I knew? That I could see the submissive in you calling out for me?"

Xander's breath caught. "Not really." But did it?

"I'll take care of you," Paul assured him. "If you'll let me."

"I don't need taking care of," Xander automatically denied.

"This is a different kind of care." Paul's eyes were entirely too knowing. Entirely too wanting for Xander to withstand. "You'll see."

Xander studied him for the longest time, looking for deceit, manipulation, anything at all besides the steady, confident, strength and desire he saw. And he did finally find something. Something that surprised him. A flash of hope that was there and gone in an instant, but it was enough.

He glanced towards Wren and Charlie, watching them moon over each other. Conceding, he nodded, accepting how perfectly right this felt. Still, with a last glance over his shoulder, he said, "But I am *not* calling you Daddy."

Paul's loud, sudden laugh burrowed deep into Xander's core. He smiled, blushing at the attention they drew, but so elated that he'd brought his Dom

laughter. He'd explore the how and the why of this newly discovered side of himself later. For now, he decided to follow where it led him.

Paul combed his fingers through the back of Xander's hair, loving how the boy relaxed into his touch. Feeling Xander's bare arm pressed against his bare leg was ridiculously arousing. Paul was as equally fascinated by his body's immediate reactions as he was chagrined by the fact that he'd responded so viscerally to a simple, innocent touch. Neither changed the fact that he was battling his own body for control like he hadn't since his teens.

He smiled when he saw the couple that was approaching the stage. He knew the men; they were a long-time couple who had graced the club with their demonstrations for years. They drew a crowd because Lars wore his dominance with quiet confidence, and was a master of almost any type of whip, while Eli was a strong, eager sub who gave himself over so completely that he slipped into his sub-space faster than any other man Paul had ever seen. The pair was truly a beautiful sight to see.

Paul leaned closer to Xander. "Are you going to be okay with a whipping?" He hoped so, not because of the act, but because watching this particular couple was such a moving experience he wanted badly for Xander to see it.

Xander had noticeably tensed when the men had reached the stage, but he nodded. "That's not a question I ever expected to hear, but yeah, I'll be fine." Xander turned his face towards Paul, but he was obviously reluctant to lose sight of the stage, where Lars was cuffing Eli—already erect and shining with the sweat of pleasure—to the cross.

"That's Lars with the whip, and Eli, his sub. They've been together for about ten years now," Paul explained, knowing an established, committed couple would appeal to Xander far more than a pair of strangers.

"They look so in love," Xander breathed, then shot a quick, sheepish glance over his shoulder. "Sorry. That was stupid."

But Paul saw what Xander saw. Lars stroked gentle hands over Eli's limbs as he leaned in close to whisper to him; the men visibly shared a connection, and it was touching to see. "No, it's not stupid. It's part of why they're one of the most popular couples to perform here."

Xander was no longer listening, Paul realized. Like everyone else in the room, he had gone tight with anticipation. Unlike everyone else in the room, though, Xander jumped when the whip made its first contact, the sound loud and sharp in the hushed room.

Paul settled his hand heavily on the back of Xander's neck, so he'd feel his presence. It seemed to work, because Xander, while not exactly relaxed, did settle some. He only jumped a couple more times, which made Paul smile, because really, what was coming shouldn't have been a surprise.

The atmosphere of the room went from anticipation to relief when Eli visibly succumbed to his master. But it was quickly overrun by the thick, cloying sensation of arousal permeating the room. The whipping went on, frequently interrupted by Lars as he stopped to sooth and check the condition of his sub. The end, when it inevitably arrived, culminated with a hoarse cry from Eli as he was given the command to come. Lars petted him through it, speaking in his ear words only they could hear, but that Paul could easily imagine.

Xander's attention remained fixed on the couple, watching as Eli was released and gently escorted to a room in the back where he would be tended to. The whole time, Paul had divided his attention between Xander and the actions on the stage, which is how he almost missed the hitch in Xander's breath.

Alarmed, Paul grabbed Xander's chin and swung him around to see his face. "Baby, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Xander hastily responded, blushing. He was mortified at being so moved by what he knew many would have considered abusive. He felt an

immediate defensive reaction to the thought of anyone blindly making that assumption. Because it had been beautiful. The care Lars had taken with his sub, the trust Eli had given his Dom, the two had moved in such loving synchronicity that Xander had found himself overwhelmed.

While he was less certain about the pain aspect, not sure that he could go that far, himself, Xander was undoubtedly turned on by the whole experience. He wondered what it would feel like to have that kind of desire and devotion from someone he felt so strongly for. To be so secure in another man's control that he'd offer himself body and soul to him, and be embraced and... worshiped in response.

Xander couldn't look at Paul. He knew his every thought must be broadcast on his face, because he was out of his element and knew there was no way he had his control in place. He glanced at Wren, instead. The sweet-faced boy was watching him with a bit of moisture in his own eyes. He gave Xander a soft, understanding smile, reaching over to give his knee a quick squeeze. Xander returned the smile, feeling better that he wasn't the only one who'd been touched by the demonstration.

A light cough came from Paul, and Xander, remembering the order not to hide himself, finally chanced meeting his eyes. He offered an apologetic smile, but Paul didn't return it. He simply stared, eyes unfathomable, and reached out to brush his knuckles over Xander's cheek. It might have made Xander blush more, but he was caught in that look, wanting what it promised so badly that his already aching cock fought against the constraint of his damnably tight jeans.

"It can get pretty intense," Paul finally acknowledged, still caressing Xander's cheek. Paul was practically growling when he leaned forward and added, "You have no idea how fucking hot it is to see you react so strongly."

God. Now he couldn't look away. He was trapped in the moment, eyes locked on Paul, the bold possessiveness in Paul's eyes enough to make him choke back a whimper.

Xander licked his lips. “I wasn’t expecting the... intimacy of it, you know?” His voice sounded thick and rough in his own ears. He could tell by the flash of heat in Paul’s eyes that he was also affected. Paul stood and pulled Xander to his feet so fast his head spun. They were on their way to the exit, his hand gripped in Paul’s warm, hard hand, before his brain caught up with the fact that his feet were moving.

At the top of the stairs, Xander realized the stairway had led them to the dark hallway he’d avoided earlier. But he didn’t get much of a look around, because Paul stopped and pulled him close to his body. He could feel Paul’s erection against his hip and he was certain he could have come in about two seconds if he barely rubbed up against Paul once or twice.

Then he was against the wall, every inch of Xander’s body was pinned motionless by Paul’s weight. Xander tried to reach for Paul, but found his arms caught by the wrists and held over his head. Panting now, he tried thrusting his hips but they were trapped, too. He could feel the steel rod of Paul’s shaft pushing almost painfully against his own.

Paul’s cheek was against his, lips so close to Xander’s ear. “Tell me now that you want this, because I...”

“I want this,” Xander didn’t let him finish, squirming and striving to press himself closer, but he couldn’t move. “Please.” He didn’t recognize his own voice, it was so filled with a need he knew he’d never voiced before.

“Xander...”

“No.” Xander stopped him. “I don’t want to know. I just want to feel this and be yours for tonight like you said.” He writhed against the restraints, desperate for more friction. “You promised, Highlander.”

Paul groaned and dropped his face into Xander’s neck, breathing hard. Xander’s heart sank. “I thought you wanted this, too.”

Paul raised his head, disbelief on his face. “I’ve been hard since I saw you across the street.”

“Oh! Thank God!” Xander breathed, relief and arousal warring for dominance for about a second before arousal won. “I mean, me too. I don’t think I’ve ever been this hard for this long in my life.”

Paul tipped his head back and laughed. “Well, I’ll take that as a compliment.” He caressed Xander’s face, his own softening when Xander sought his touch. “And you should too, because it’s all for you, my boy.”

Again, Xander grasped onto the term, knowing it was foolish, but unaccountably proud to be Paul’s boy, even if it was only temporary.

Then Paul kissed him and every lucid thought flew from his mind. This was no delicate, hesitant first kiss. Paul’s mouth took his, claiming him, demanding nothing short of complete surrender. Xander opened up and took him in, welcoming the plundering tongue, encouraging more, taking, sucking, biting, and, oh, God, he was going to come from a single kiss.

A whimper left him and he stiffened, struggling to hold back, but Paul was ruthless. He ground his groin into Xander’s, thrusting their lengths together, all the while overwhelming Xander’s senses with his demanding mouth.

Pinning Xander’s wrists together, Paul held them with one hand so he could free the other. With a strength that took Xander’s breath away, Paul hiked him up against the wall, wrapping Xander’s thighs around his waist. Xander was overcome; it was too much. His hips bucked, seeking more and more friction, their cocks slamming together harder and harder.

Paul’s hand slid under Xander’s thigh to his ass, rubbing through his tight jeans against his tightened sac, pressing against his perineum, digging into his crevice, before slipping under his shirt to reach his hot skin. Xander arched into the pressure, his surrender to this powerful man a freeing and heady experience that had him aching for more before they’d barely started.

Paul’s hot touch seemed to be everywhere at once. Xander might have panicked if he’d seen it coming, but he was so lost in the moment that when Paul’s thumb finally rubbed roughly over his nipple, one of Xander’s hottest hot spots, there was no stopping.

Barely aware of the sounds emitting from his throat, Xander bucked and shook through an unbelievably powerful orgasm. His cries were caught in Paul's mouth and swallowed as if they were the sweetest wine.

Shaken, Xander sagged, held up solely by Paul's body pinned against him. Xander's head fell back against the wall with a thump, and he squeezed his eyes closed, reality cruelly returning in shards that punctured his serenity. He was horrified to find himself alarmingly close to tears for the second time tonight.

"Oh, my God. I'm so sorry." He'd ruined everything, he was sure of it.

"Sorry for what, baby?" Paul was still breathing hard, but he released Xander's wrists and cupped his chin, forcing Xander to look at him. "Wasn't that what we were going for?" His smile was so kind, so patient, Xander felt that much worse.

"I'm sorry for..."

Paul kissed him hard, stopping him. "We're not done, my boy. We're only taking a bit of the edge off before we get to the main event."

"Really?" Xander knew he sounded pathetic, but he couldn't stop the hopeful sound.

"Of course." Paul kissed his neck and Xander tipped his head to give him better access. "Did you think you were allowed one orgasm a day, or something?"

"Or something." Xander shrugged as if it was inconsequential, but of course Paul caught on to his discomfort.

"Why would you think that?"

Xander opened his mouth. Closed it. Tried again. "I guess my ex and I were, um, a 'before bed and go to sleep' kind of couple, you know?" He didn't mention that what they'd usually done before bed almost always consisted of Xander sucking Jonathan off while jacking himself to completion. It was the kind of efficient and mess-free sex that appealed to Jonathan most.

Paul studied him, but he didn't laugh or look at him as if he were a pitiful lost puppy, so Xander didn't feel as awkward as he might have.

"That's too bad." Paul rubbed against Xander's spent cock, making him gasp and feel the beginnings of recovery already. "I had you marked as a multiple comer right from the start."

"A what?" It was sadly very close to a squeak, which made Paul chuckle.

"Oh, yeah." Paul thrust against him, slowly, smoothly, methodically, making Xander pant. "I have a nose for these things."

Xander laughed breathlessly. "Oh." Stunned at how fast his body was responding, he moaned. "Please tell me you're one, too."

"Hell, yeah," Paul rasped, grinding again.

"Oh, God." Xander's eyes rolled back and he trembled, working his hips against Paul's as much as his limited space would allow.

"I have a room in town, but if you're more comfortable with your own place, we can go there," Paul offered, and Xander was relieved to hear the rough breathing of a man close to climax. "Let's take this out of here."

Xander struggled to think. "I'm right over there." He waved his hand in the general direction of the hotel where Lara had so brilliantly booked a room for him. "Couple blocks walk."

Paul was already moving towards the door. "Let's go."

"But—" Xander stood on wobbly legs, Paul's erection still pressed against him. "Um... what about you?" He reached for Paul's cock but was denied.

"I'm okay." Paul didn't look okay, but he gave Xander a wicked smile. "I'll hold off until I can come inside you."

The words were a slap of heat right to Xander's groin. "Oh. Yeah. That sounds good. More than good, but..." He trailed off, suddenly nervous.

"But what?" Paul held him close. "There are plenty of other things we can do, baby, if that's too much."

“No!” Xander almost shouted. “No. I want to, it’s that... I’ve never, uh...”

Paul went completely still. “You’re not a virgin.”

“No! Of course not.” Xander could feel his cheeks burning, even as his cock grew harder against Paul’s. “But I’ve never bottomed.” He rushed the words out so fast he doubted Paul caught them.

But he did. “You...” Paul stared hard into Xander’s eyes. “Why?”

Xander tried to squirm away but Paul held him tight, holding eye contact in a way that made him obey. “I... God. I’ve only had one serious relationship, okay? Before that was maybe a couple guys in college that I fooled around with. We never went that far. And Jonathan...” He paused, sure he was imagining the *growl* in Paul’s chest. “Um, he wasn’t really into that kind of sex.” He shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but he was burning up under the intensity of Paul’s stare.

“But you were into it, weren’t you, boy?” Paul’s voice changed. It had been powerful before. Now it invaded Xander’s body and made it quiver with need as he was once again pinned to the wall.

“Yes,” he whispered in response, blood singing in his veins.

“You didn’t want to be the one in control all the time, did you?”

Xander shook his head. “No.”

“The whole time you were aching for it, weren’t you. You were dying to be taken.” Paul thrust hard into Xander’s hips, and his voice dropped more, so deep he barely sounded like himself. “To be *owned* by someone strong enough to control you.”

Clutching Paul’s shoulders, Xander arched into him. “Someone like you.”

“Someone like me.”

“Yes.” Another whispered response. Xander couldn’t stop trembling. It was only getting worse.

“You want to give up that control, don’t you, boy?”

“Yes,” he hissed. Xander’s eyes closed, and his head lolled against the wall.

“You want to be held down and pounded into until you can’t move. Can’t breathe. Can’t do anything but feel and hang on for the ride.” Paul was working them together with every statement, his breath hot on Xander’s neck.

“God, yes.” Xander’s eyes met Paul’s but he couldn’t focus, swept unresisting into Paul’s seduction.

Another kiss of possession landed on his mouth, and Xander’s whole body shuddered its surrender until Paul finally raised his head, eyes scorching with unchecked need. No one had ever looked at Xander like that.

“Please, can we go?” Xander wasn’t above begging, apparently.

On the way out, Paul stopped by the bar, slipping through a staff door and returning with a button-down shirt. Xander must not have hidden his disappointment at his covering himself because Paul grinned and pressed a hard kiss to his lips. Xander’s cock flexed in its trappings, the slightest movement making him acutely aware of the cooling wetness sliding over it.

At the door, Xander stumbled to a stop, mind still hazy with Paul’s kisses, body lethargic from the recent orgasm. It was fortunate Paul was there—solid and strong—to hold him up. Still, it didn’t take brilliant powers of observation to spot the longing on poor Seth’s face. The bouncer straightened as soon as he spotted Paul, and Xander tucked himself closer, just to make sure it was clear who was going home with whom.

Paul nodded at the bouncer. “Have a good night, Seth.”

“You too, Mr. Forrest.” Seth answered, then froze. At first Xander didn’t know what the big dramatic pause was all about, but then he glanced over at Paul to see him staring stonily at the bouncer. Xander, made alert by the tension of the moment, finally realized what Seth had said.

“M—Mr. Forrest?” Xander could actually feel the blood draining from his face. He couldn’t be hearing what he—“Did you say Mr. Forrest?”

Now Seth was staring wide-eyed and speechless at the icy Paul... Mr. Forrest.

Xander pulled away from Paul and almost stumbled, light-headed and getting worse. “You’re... You knew who I was this whole time, didn’t you?” Shame, humiliation, and worse, betrayal swept through him, blinding him to reason immediately.

“Xander.” Paul reached for him, but Xander stepped back, stopping Paul from coming closer. “Xander, baby, please listen.”

But Xander was shaking his head, the pain in his chest making it hard to pull in air. “I can’t believe you did this.” It was barely a whisper, but he could see by the flash of regret in Paul’s eyes that he’d heard him. Without another word, Xander turned and walked away.

The walk to the hotel was made hurriedly and gracelessly. Xander was rarely smooth on his feet on an ordinary day; today was so far from ordinary there wasn’t the slightest glimmer of grace to be seen.

Reaching his hotel door without any recollection of how he’d gotten there, Xander’s hand shook so badly it took him several tries to get the key card into the slot and then it still wouldn’t work. Finally, using one hand to steady the other, he slowed himself down enough to unlock and open the door.

Xander stumbled through the door, clumsily making his way through the suite to the bedroom. He started stripping, suddenly claustrophobic in the body squeezing, semen-fused clothing. He released a heartfelt groan when he finally slid the zipper of his jeans open and his cock could breathe again.

He pushed his jeans down around his thighs when he realized he still had his boots on. Xander shook his head, trying to think clearly. Sitting on the side of the bed to pull off his boots, Xander numbly assessed the condition of his genitals. Having a raging erection trapped behind unforgiving denim for hours was no way to treat one’s man flesh. He gingerly peeled his cock away from his body, grimacing at the drying mess. Somewhere in his brain he wondered if, after its night of trapped debauchery, it could end up permanently swinging

to the left. In that same, faraway place he heard himself laugh in a decidedly unhinged way.

Of course, he thought, not yet willing to give the subject up, *rutting like a dog against a relative stranger in a dark hallway probably wasn't the ideal treatment for said man flesh, either*. But Paul hadn't really been so much a stranger, had he? Xander scrubbed his clean hand over his head. He was already regretting running, already realizing he'd had no small part in this himself.

Making his way to the shower, Xander's eye caught a glimmer of silver and he stopped, surprised to see the chain still around his neck. How he could have forgotten it, he had no idea, because he was now acutely aware of the heavy, welcomed weight that Paul had used to mark him.

Xander longed for Paul. Paul who made him feel sexy—actually *sexy*—and wanted. That was another first for Xander. To know, to really *know* that Paul had wanted him as badly as he had wanted Paul was an incredible feeling.

He touched the chain where it dipped between his collarbones, and in that moment his future lay before him with perfect clarity.

Paul stared helplessly after Xander, uncharacteristically indecisive. Paul Forrest was not an indecisive man. There was no waffling about once he'd made up his mind. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk, guilt ridden and unsure of himself, and pissed off at feeling vulnerable.

"Mr. Forrest." Seth came hesitantly into view, real regret in his eyes. "I'm so sorry! I didn't know..." Paul knew he'd scared him with his stony silence, and he knew it wasn't acceptable to leave a sub scared and uncertain—whether he was his own or not.

Paul sighed. "It's alright, Seth," he reassured him, laying a comforting hand on Seth's arm. "You didn't know. I've got no one to blame but myself."

"I really am sorry, sir." Seth ducked his head. "He looked pretty mad."

“That he did, buddy.”

“I could call you a cab, sir?”

Paul shook his head, making a point to catch Seth’s eye, to let him know they were okay. “Thanks, Seth, but I’ll walk.” He turned and started towards the hotel, still unsure what his plan was.

Slipping his phone from his shirt pocket, Paul hit the speed dial.

Jay answered without bothering with a greeting. “What did you do?” He didn’t sound the least bit surprised to be receiving this call.

“Nothing.” He blew out an exhausted breath. “I was outed before I had a chance to explain the situation.”

“Oh.” Jay paused. Paul could see him clearly in his mind, having witnessed his “thinking face” many times before. “What are you going to do?”

“Fuck if I know.” If there’d been a rock in his path, he’d have kicked it.

Jay exhaled impatiently. “Look, man. This kid has you in knots. Why do you let him get to you like this?”

Paul grunted. “I don’t know. I’m on unfamiliar ground. He’s not part of the scene. It’s like I’m dealing with a virgin who’s going to run screaming the minute he sees my hard cock.”

Jay snorted. “Wow. You are so egotistical.”

“Not helping, Jay,” Paul snarled.

An uncharitable laugh filled Paul’s ear and he ground his teeth together, cursing himself for calling in the first place.

Jay, never terribly concerned with being considerate, went on, “He’s a grown man, for chrissake, Paul. Why don’t you try treating him like one?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jay snorted. “Dude, you are the Dom. He is the sub. What’s your role, here? And why the hesitation?”

Paul stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, but didn't respond.

"Okay." Jay changed tactics. "Was he into you, too, before..."

"Hell, yeah, he was." Paul barely resisted groaning at the memory of Xander's hot, tight body quivering through his orgasm in Paul's arms. Hell, his entire groin still throbbed with unfulfilled need. "We were on our way to his hotel room."

"So..." Jay dragged the word out like a teacher expecting his student to fill in the blanks, finally letting out a hiss of derision when Paul said nothing. "What do you *want*, Paul?"

"I want Xander." The answer was immediate and as heartfelt as anything he'd ever said.

"And what have you always done when you wanted something?" If Paul had been in more of his right mind, he'd be far more than irritated with the tone of Jay's voice about now.

Instead, he reluctantly answered like that recalcitrant student finally figuring out the game. "I've gotten it."

"Good. Now, pull up your panties and go get him," Jay commanded. "And quit second-guessing yourself like you're fucking new at this or something. Your instincts have never failed you before. Trust them now."

Paul was thoughtful for a long time. "You're right."

"Of course I'm right."

"You're also an arrogant ass." But Jay was right, and Paul was relieved to have a plan of action taking place in his mind.

"Stop, now. You're making me blush."

Paul laughed at the cocky bastard. Then he had an inspiration. "By the way, man, I think it would behoove you to get off your lazy ass and head on down to the club."

"Please." Jay was not amused. "You know I don't like that place."

“I do know that. But trust me when I say it would be in your best interest.”

“I don’t think—”

“You won’t even have to walk through the door,” Paul coaxed. “C’mon, man. Live a little.”

“I’ll have you know I’m living a *lot*, Paul. In fact, as we speak I am relaxing in the ambiance of a bachelor’s condo by moonlight, from the comfort of my sofa, ice-cold beer in hand and naked as the day I was born.”

Paul chuckled. “Beer in one hand, lube in the other, huh?”

“Well, not now, genius,” Jay complained. “I had to put the slick down to answer my damn phone.”

“Fine, stay in with your lube,” Paul teased. “Don’t tell me I never give you anything, though.”

Jay grunted. “Whatever. Fine. I’ll go.”

“Now you’re talkin’.”

“Piss off.”

Paul laughed at Jay’s indelicate response and disconnected the call. He stared at the building across the street. He’d known, of course, where Xander was staying, thanks to Lara. Paul had only to enter to get to him. He shot a quick text to Lara, requesting Xander’s room number with a patience he didn’t feel. Why hadn’t he thought to get that ahead of time? Oh yeah. Because he’d been *that* certain he wouldn’t need it.

Paul went to his own room while he waited. He had to text Lara two more times and wait another hour before she responded. Paul figured she was doing her duty as Xander’s friend by holding him off as long as she deemed necessary, but he sure as hell didn’t like it.

Finally, the text came with Xander’s room number and a “don’t mess this up—again” message.

Now, Paul stood in front of room 314, game face on and ready to fight for his boy. He sucked in a deep breath, knocked on the door, and waited. And waited, only relaxing when he eventually sensed, more than heard, movement on the other side of the door.

“I can hear you thinking from here, Xander.”

Xander had been fresh from a scalding hot shower when the knock came. Now he stood, staring blindly at the door, barely able to hear anything above the thundering in his chest, which he was sure was echoing off the walls it was so loud. He was surprised Paul hadn't said he could hear *that* from the hall.

“Open the door, my boy. We're going to talk.”

Dammit! Even through a solid-core door, the timbre of Paul's voice penetrated Xander's chest and wound itself right on down to suck on his testicles.

He could feel the heat spreading from his chest to his cheeks. He'd been played as the fool, but he'd also been foolish enough all on his own. He'd been manipulated by two of the most important people in his life. But it was the second half of that realization that had stunned him into admitting that because of his own stubbornness and insecurities, he would never have willingly met Paul. Which meant he'd have *never known Paul*. And the thought of that was as effective as a sucker punch to the gut.

“Xander. I know you're there. I can feel you.” Paul's voice dropped, and Xander's body reacted so predictably he couldn't help pressing the heel of his hand to the base of his cock. He swallowed a pained moan as he grew harder.

Still, he hesitated, and he didn't know why. He'd been more than half hoping Paul would do this very thing. That Paul would come after him, push him until he abandoned his inhibitions, force his doubts away, stretch his boundaries, demand his submission. Xander wanted—needed—Paul to take his body, and his fear, and his shame and destroy it all until there was nothing ugly left.

He took a shaky breath, having no idea where those thoughts had come from. They shocked him, and scared him. But he knew the unquestionable truth to them, too.

All he had to do was open the door. Paul was here. He'd come for him. That meant he still wanted Xander, right? So, he had to swallow his useless pride and open the damn door.

But... "You lied to me, *Mr. Forrest*," Xander heard himself say. He hadn't meant to, but now that it was out, he held his breath in anticipation of the answer.

He could hear Paul's sigh through the door. "I know, baby. It was not my finest hour."

Xander didn't answer.

"I'm sorry." Even muffled by the door, Xander could hear the sincerity in Paul's voice. "I will make it up to you in every way I know how, Xander... let me in."

Thinking those three words, *let me in* could mean so many different things, especially when delivered with the intensity of Paul's powerful voice, Xander finally reached for the door. He was already so close to it, an arm-length away. When had that happened?

Xander tried to control his shaking hand when he turned the lock, but it didn't help. It also didn't matter, because the second it clicked free, the door was pushing in and Xander was moving aside to let Paul in. He closed the door quickly and stood with his back to it.

He didn't have the courage to look up, but the quick intake he heard from Paul sent a flush of gratification through him. Xander's cock flexed in response and could tell by Paul's breathing that he'd seen it, too. It had to be hard to miss, since Xander stood before Paul completely naked, save for the silver collar around his neck. Silence stretched between them while Xander waited for Paul's command.

“Look at me, boy.” Paul’s voice was so hoarse with need that Xander almost came on the spot.

“Yes, sir.” Xander took a bracing breath and lifted his head, meeting Paul’s very hot, very appreciative gaze.

“Is there anything you need to say before I take you?”

Xander’s mind shorted out at the question. There was so much he wanted to say, but how much *needed* to be said right at this very moment, *really*? Only one thing, as far as he could figure. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Good enough.” And that was that. Paul’s demeanor became sex and dominance the second those two words were gone from the air. “Remove my boots, Xander.”

Xander dropped before him, reaching for the laces. He glanced up once to see Paul watching with hooded eyes. He fumbled with the boots, anticipation and a driving need to please making him clumsy.

Then Paul made it worse. “Tell me what you want, Xander.”

He blinked, raising his head again. “Um... aren’t you supposed to tell *me* what *you* want?”

Paul quirked an eyebrow. “What I want is for you to answer my question. I wouldn’t have asked, otherwise.”

“Sorry, sir.” Xander took a shaky breath. He’d just been chastised, yet he was more turned on than ever.

“I don’t like to be second guessed, boy.”

Xander nodded his understanding. He focused on pulling Paul’s boots off while he contemplated the answer. What did he want? He lifted his eyes, the look in Paul’s hot enough to make his cock leak. *I want to bury my face under your kilt and taste you. I want your come in my mouth. I want to feel you buried in my ass so deep it hurts. I want your mark on me. I want my mark on you. I want to be your boy.*

But could he *really* say all that?

“Having a hard time deciding, baby?” Paul felt the familiar rush that filled him when a submissive was at his feet. To be handed complete control over a man was a powerful position that he didn’t take lightly. It was that much bigger because it was Xander, this time.

Xander was staring at him and Paul could almost read his every thought without a word spoken. He suppressed his smile, not wanting Xander to think he was being laughed at.

“Tell me,” Paul commanded. “All of it.”

“All of it?” Xander squeaked, and Paul nodded solemnly, despite the fact that Xander was making it harder and harder for him to stand there, seeing Xander at his feet, without tackling him to the ground and plundering.

Xander sucked in a breath, and let it all out in one shot. “I want to bury my face under your kilt and taste you. I want your come in my mouth. I want to feel you buried in my ass so deep it hurts. I want your mark on me. I want my mark on you. I want to be your boy.”

He stopped to inhale. “There’s a lot more I could probably think of,” he admitted, as if he were in confession and if he tried hard enough he could list sin after sin.

Paul felt his lips twitch and his cock reach maximum capacity, his mind filled with the images Xander was creating. “That’ll do.” He wiggled his now bare feet and held a hand out to help Xander up. “Let’s go to bed.”

Xander stood, stumbling drunkenly, which stroked Paul’s ego right along with the engorged member arcing up from Xander’s groin. It looked achy and needy, both of which suited Paul’s plans perfectly.

He brushed a single fingertip down the length of Xander’s cock, both because he wanted to touch so badly, and because he hoped to elicit a delicious response from the boy. Which he did, and it was exquisite.

Paul had Xander sit on the edge of the bed while he stood close in front of him. But damn. The sensual way Xander stared up at him was going to end him before they'd barely begun.

"Help me off with these things, would you?" He asked as he reached for the fastening at the side of his kilt. Xander scrambled to help, shaky hands creating more interference than assistance, but Paul said nothing. How could he, when he was the cause?

Finally, Paul stood in nothing but his leather wrist bands and a simple white jock-strap. He couldn't stop the smile when Xander blinked up at him, adorably confused.

"I thought you Highlanders went naked under those things." Xander's voice was raspy, not that Paul needed to hear it when the proof of his arousal was jutting right at him.

"I might have, but I knew I'd be seeing you, and I suspected I might need a little support so I wouldn't walk around tenting my kilt all night." His confession brought more heat to Xander's eyes. He held his breath when Xander reached out to touch, laying his hand over the bulging jock.

"Are you done, boy? I've been strapped in and hard for a long time," Paul chuckled.

Xander smiled and reached for the straps, and again, his reaction to the baring of Paul's manhood did not disappoint. The flush to Xander's cheeks and the way he licked his lips made Paul groan.

"A quick taste, baby." He cupped the back of Xander's head, burying his fingers in the short, silky hair. "I'm too impatient to be in you."

A beautiful whimper escaped Xander's throat as he leaned in to taste. One gentle swipe of the tongue was the only warning Paul received before Xander was taking him as fully into his mouth as he could manage. The surprise combined with the feel of Xander's hot tongue and tight lips and throat closing on him was almost too much, but Paul pulled back a bit and controlled their movements with pressure on Xander's head.

After having a few moments to revel in the way his cock stretched Xander's lips and the fact that he was so far down Xander's throat that he'd hear it in Xander's voice for days, Paul actually thought for the first time ever that he might be too big. He'd always been with experienced subs, most of whom had taken cocks his size and then some, and if they hadn't, they'd wanted to. But Xander was... different.

Paul reluctantly pulled himself from Xander's lips, smirking when the boy tried following, obviously also reluctant to let go. He lifted Xander up to him for a deep, demanding kiss. Paul had never tasted anything so sweet as the salt of his own pre-come slicking Xander's tongue. Xander moaned his desire into Paul's mouth and he agreed whole-heartedly.

"On the bed, Xander." Paul took a couple calming breaths as he moved to the bedside table, where the supplies were prominently laid out. "Face down, I want your ass in the air and your arms open wide."

Xander moved to the center of the huge bed, a heated blush covering his face and neck. Paul loved it. "Up on your knees, spread 'em as wide as you can, because the only friction you'll be getting on your cock is what reaches the bed."

There was that whimper, again. Paul could really get used to the sound of that. But for now, he grabbed the base of his cock, hard, to get his control back in place. He had to do something as he took in the vision that was Xander, spread out like a sacrifice with his pink, virgin ass offered up. For Paul. It was enough to drive all thoughts of gentleness right out of Paul's mind if he wasn't careful.

He knelt on the bed at Xander's side, close to his hip. "Okay, baby. I'm going to get you ready, all right?" A muffled sound and a nod was all he got. Sternly, he spoke again. "Xander. Turn your head this way so I can see your face."

That was more like it. Dazed eyes met his as Paul slid a soothing hand over Xander's smooth flank, up his back, and back down. Xander was panting like he'd been running, which did nothing to cool Paul's ardor. He was getting

pushed to the edge by Xander's responsiveness. It was simultaneously humbling, and arousing as hell.

He fumbled a bit with the brand new bottle of lube, but he finally got it opened. Positioned so he could see as much of Xander as possible, Paul leaned in close and swiped his flattened tongue from Xander's perineum to the top of his crack. The noise let out by Xander perfectly accompanied the rash of goosebumps that spread over his back. Paul smirked and did it again.

Xander trembled beneath him, obviously struggling to remain still under Paul's ministrations. But his hips writhed and his chest heaved, and that was before Paul even touched Xander's entrance with his slick fingers.

Keep it slow. Paul ground his teeth, chanting the words in his head, and watched his first finger disappear into Xander's body. He had to close his eyes, but he could still feel the gripping heat clenching around him. It was almost too much, especially when Xander bucked against his hand.

"Take it easy, baby," Paul rasped. "I've got you." His finger slid in and out, unfettered, loosening Xander quickly. Xander wanted this. His body wasn't going to fight him.

Paul added a second finger and pressed them in deep, aiming right for Xander's prostate. He held there, relishing the squirming of Xander's body, and the desperate noises Xander probably didn't realize he was making.

It didn't take long for Xander to be ready for a third finger. Paul bit back his impatience. It had been a long time, if ever, that he'd had to be so careful. He'd practically forgotten the whole 1-2-3 prep, it had been so long. But here he was, and he wasn't going to cut corners and end up hurting Xander. More than anything, Paul wanted Xander to fly tonight.

Xander stared blindly at the gorgeous, naked man who knelt so easily at his hip, face mere inches away from the hand buried three fingers deep inside him. If he hadn't been so mindless with need, he'd have been horribly embarrassed by his position. But looking at Paul, who was watching while he stretched and

prepared Xander for his cock, he couldn't have cared if rainbows had started shooting out of his ass.

He tried desperately to contain his movements, having not been given permission to move, but he wasn't doing a very good job. Xander's back arched, his cock flexed and leaked steadily onto the sheet beneath him, and he pressed back against every thrust of Paul's fingers. He had no idea it could feel like this. He couldn't get enough.

Panting, Xander gripped the sheets hard, his arms outstretched for balance. "Please, Paul... sir." He closed his eyes and moaned at the brush across his prostate. "God."

Paul was apparently susceptible to begging, because he was on his knees with the firm head of his cock against Xander's opening before Xander could gather enough air to plead again. Xander went perfectly still, waiting for an eternity for Paul to push into him. His muscles quivered uncontrollably, and Paul soothed him with wide, warm hands over his back.

"Are you ready for me, boy?" Paul rasped, making Xander jump and his skin tingle.

"Yes!" Xander twisted his hips. "Yes! Please, sir!" The words came naturally, as if he'd been waiting for Paul to come along and be his Sir. But before he could think any more about that, Paul was entering him. Stretching, filling, rocking his way slowly, deeply, inside.

Xander let out a moan—pain, pleasure, it all mixed together—that didn't stop until Paul had seated himself deep inside him. The only sound in the room was their labored breathing. Xander tried not to clench down on the intruder in his hole, but he couldn't stop completely. It burned, but the action elicited a pained groan from Paul, so it was worth it.

He curled his hips back, ready for more. Paul's hands gripped his hips. Xander could feel the tight restraint in them, and the realization that Paul was as close to the edge as he was shocked him. Thrilled him.

Paul slid slowly out, just a little, then thrust back in. The movements played out right over Xander's prostate, and he shook with the intensity.

"I'm not going to last, sir." His tone was apologetic as he gasped and met Paul's next thrust, and the ones that followed, each stronger than the last. Xander was crying out with every push of Paul's hips, struggling against the restraining hands.

Paul stopped, but only long enough to spread his arms out over Xander's, locking their fingers together. His legs slid over Xander's too, until they were stacked one upon the other in what Xander would later dub "the sexiest frog position, ever". Paul's mouth was on his neck, every breath hot on his skin.

Xander turned his head, begging a kiss, and was granted one. A messy, awkward kiss that was more arousing than the most smoothly delivered kisses Xander had experienced. It was too hard to maintain, though, once Paul gave up on the graceful, grinding movements for hard, demanding thrusts that pounded into Xander with the force of a machine.

With the gentlest of motions, Paul had pressed against Xander's prostate. Now, heavily draped over every inch of Xander's body, Paul was merciless, keeping constant friction on Xander's gland, slamming into him time and again until he couldn't do anything but ride it out.

If Paul was trying to cause Xander to come hands-free, he was doing a damn good job of it. Xander's cock was so painfully rigid it was arced up against his belly, defying gravity in its demand for release. With every thrust he was closer and closer, sensations overwhelming him, until Paul suddenly nailed him in a hard, rapid onslaught that forced the orgasm right out of him.

Xander wailed—a sound that had never come from him before—shaking and convulsing through waves and waves of a climax that wouldn't stop. Paul stilled and bucked a final few times behind him, and Xander vaguely realized he'd come, too. Satisfaction filled him right before he collapsed, boneless and wrecked.

It took ages for Paul's breathing to return to normal, and function to return to his limbs. He was barely managing to keep his weight on his elbows so he wouldn't crush Xander completely. Paul pressed open-mouthed kisses across Xander's shoulders, feeling more than a little smug that his boy was completely gone at the moment.

Paul sighed and stared at Xander's flushed and sweaty face, the satisfaction on it curling Xander's lips so sweetly. So lovely. So complete in his submission. Paul's chest swelled with dangerous emotion that wasn't to be voiced at a time like this.

With a wince, Paul pulled out of Xander and set about the task of cleaning them up. Xander barely moved, the slightest sounds coming from him indicating he was still conscious. When Paul finally eased into bed with him, Xander blinked open blurry eyes and gave Paul the sweetest smile he'd ever seen. Paul kissed him on the forehead and tucked him against his side before slipping into his own deep sleep.

Paul wasn't at all surprised that they woke in exactly the same position. He also wasn't surprised that his entire arm had fallen numb, because Xander's head resting on his shoulder had cut off all circulation. Easing his arm from under Xander, Paul turned towards him to find that he was awake. He decided he could easily drown in those deep brown eyes.

"Morning." Xander gave him a small, shy smile.

"Good morning," Paul purred with enough sex in his voice to make Xander blush.

"Well, you did it." His shyness turned playful.

"Did what, baby?" Paul ignored his tingling arm and used the other to lift a hand to Xander's cheek, scraping his knuckles over the beard stubble.

"You know." His eyes twinkled and his cheeks flushed redder. "Pounded into me until I couldn't do anything but hang on for the ride."

Paul's hardening cock perked up more quickly at the words. "I guess I did, didn't I?"

Xander's laugh was light and free. "You don't have to be so smug about it."

"Oh, I think I should be quite smug about it. In fact," he pulled Xander into a possessive kiss, dragging him flush with his body, "I think I'm going to do it again." He smiled knowingly when Xander's breath caught and his hips curled against him.

"Hm. You might be right," Xander gasped. "Carry on."

"Yes, sir."

Finally stepping out from the second shower of the day, and pushing check-out time, Xander watched Paul dress without bothering to conceal his affections. Xander needed to know, though. Was he going to be enough? Would he bore the man to tears before their first weekend was even over? Was he correct to assume there would be a weekend beyond the one night?

He'd thought so. It would be really crushing to find out now that he'd misread Paul's intentions. What if this wasn't really it? What if none of this was the real deal?

He blurted it out before he could rethink it, "What are your plans for the day?"

Paul raised his head. "Well, first, I'm going to my own room for my regular clothes. Then I'm driving us home. But then..." He smiled and walked his sexy walk to stand before Xander.

Xander was returning his smile, heart all aflutter, before he realized it. "And then?"

"Then... it's Sunday Smut day."

Yep. It was the real deal.

THE END

Author Bio

Kim Alan began writing for publication approximately thirty years after first making the declaration, “I’m going to be a writer when I grow up.” It’s fairly representative of the severity of her procrastination disorder. This is her second contribution to the M/M Romance Group’s annual writing event. She released Yours in May, 2013, through Torquere Press, hopefully with more to follow soon.

Contact & Media Info

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AN ANGELIC MEETING

By Vicktor Alexander

Photo Description

No photo

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I walked into the shower room at the gymnasium to cool down after exercise the other day. Suddenly the door to the steam room opened and a cloud of steam rolled out enveloping one of the most handsome nearly naked men I have ever seen. A strategically draped towel added interest. Was he real or was the steam slowly dissolving wings?

Sincerely,

John

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: angels/demons/gods, soul mates or bonded, opposites, gym, anal sex, m-preg possibility, action, HFN

Content warnings: m-preg possibility, conversations with a deity

Word count: 15,733

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AN ANGELIC MEETING

By Vicktor Alexander

CHAPTER ONE

Blake Marks was fat. He knew he was fat and so did everyone else. He stood at only five feet nine inches tall and he was one hundred and eighty-six pounds. He was only “slightly overweight” according to his doctor. But, according to the massively built guy from the club last night who’d face fucked Blake against the wall of the club, he was fat and “should be grateful someone would throw him a pity fuck”. He was tired of being a pity fuck. He wanted to be desired by others. Not just because they saw him as an easy lay, but because they actually enjoyed spending time with him. That would of course mean that he would have to make himself accessible to others, which he just couldn’t see himself doing. Not looking like he did. He needed to make a change. A big change. Maybe he should look into getting liposuction or the lap-band. Maybe losing weight was all he needed to make his life better and once he did that guys would want him, his parents would stop insulting him all the time, he’d have more friends and he’d get a promotion at his job. The only reason those things weren’t happening now was because he was about twenty or thirty pounds overweight, though if he were honest he’d be happy if he lost about fifty, though his doctor said it was dangerous. The man was straight though. What did he know about being gay? You had to be either a twink, a bear, a muscled stud, or a pretty boy in order to find a partner; you couldn’t just be medium height, fat, smart, funny and talented. It wouldn’t work, because if it did there’s no way Blake would be single. He needed to lose weight and fast. Until he could get the surgery done, whichever he finally decided to go with, he would work out at the local Gold’s Gym and tone up as well.

Walking into the gym on Merritt Boulevard in Baltimore, Maryland, Blake almost turned around and walked back out. Everyone in there was good

looking and fit. Like really, really fit. Blake looked down at his stomach, the round, almost flabby piece of flesh that looked as if he'd swallowed a watermelon, and grimaced. What the hell did he think he was doing? He shouldn't be in a gym with all of these hard bodies; he should be at home, gorging on Banana Split ice cream and birthday cake.

At the thought of the large, buttercream birthday sheet cake that he'd made for himself, his parents, and his three best friends, Blake's shoulders straightened. He had to do this. He had to work out and get in shape. With a deep breath of fortitude, Blake walked up to the reception desk.

"Excuse me?" he asked softly of the young lady behind the desk. "I'd like to buy a membership please."

Blake watched the young woman look up at him from the notepad she'd been furiously scribbling in and saw the exact moment that she took in his physical stature. Her eyes widened and her lips turned down slightly. He wondered how grotesque he had to look for her to make that expression and pulled his workout bag in front of his body.

"Of course, sir. My name is Eve. What kind of membership do you want to buy?" she asked nicely and Blake wanted to let her know that she didn't have to pretend to be nice, that he'd already catalogued her true feelings about him.

"I think I need a monthly membership. I've got a lot of work to do," Blake said truthfully.

"Yes sir," Eve responded with a smile.

Blake barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. He knew what she wanted to say. It was the same thing his father, who had been a professional baseball player for the Baltimore Orioles before Blake had been born, was always saying. "*Blake, you need to do a lot of working out if you want anyone to see you as anything other than the Pillsbury Doughboy.*"

Shoving away thoughts of his father and how he was always disappointing the older man, Blake returned his attention to Eve. He watched as the younger woman pulled out sheets of paper before handing them to him and gesturing

him to one of the chairs on the side of the reception desk. He took the papers and walked over to sit down, his eyes straying continuously to the sweaty male torsos that occupied the gym. Sitting down, he filled out the forms and then stood to his feet. Turning, he found himself facing a very tall, very muscled man with no neck. He swallowed thickly and offered the man a tremulous smile.

“Hey little man, you all done with that?” the stranger asked.

Blake felt himself bristle a little on the inside at the man’s patronizing tone and knew that if he were more assertive he would have put the employee in his place, but instead he just nodded his head and held out the papers.

“Awesome. I’m going to give these to Eve and she’s going to input them in the system. You can pick up your card when we finish the work out. My name’s Michiel, I’m one of the personal trainers here. There are sixteen of us who work here all at different times and if you find that you don’t like working with me, I can get you set up with one of the others,” Michiel said with a smile before gesturing for Blake to follow him.

Blake lifted his gym bag higher up on his shoulder and followed Michiel through the gym to the locker room. He tried to keep his eyes on the man’s broad shoulders, his dark brown hair or his tanned elbows that rocked back and forth as his arms swung with his confident gait, but he found he couldn’t do so. His eyes, the traitors, kept moving of their own accord over the other men in the gym. Now that he was noticing, he saw about eight other hulking men, in the Gold’s Gym employee uniform, the black shirt with the company’s gold circle logo in the center and shorts, all helping out the other patrons. At the door to the locker room Blake found himself frozen as he watched one rather huge employee as he lifted a very large bar, filled with large weights, lift the bar to his chest, balance it for a moment as he turned his hands and then lift it above his head, before lowering it back to his chest and lowering it to the floor. *Holy shit, what I wouldn’t give to be able to lift like that.*

“I see you’re checking out Rapniel’s lifting. He lifts that bar to warm up. He’s probably one of our more accomplished employees,” Michiel stated, pride evident in his tone.

“You seem like you’re very close to him,” Blake pointed out.

Michiel nodded. “I would hope so, he’s my brother.”

Blake smiled up at Michiel. “I would say something about how you sound like a proud parent, but I’m too impressed by him. Are you older or younger than him?”

“Older, but only by a year. He likes to remind me that he’s taller than me and stronger. The little brat,” Michiel stated with a fond smile. “Now, let’s get you changed and out on the floor so you can learn how to lift like that.”

Blake nodded and followed Michiel into the locker room.

Michiel was trying to kill him. Blake knew it with certainty when the other man had told him to “work through the pain.” Work through the pain? Didn’t Michiel know that the burn signifies that it’s time to stop?

Seriously, it does.

At least that’s what he’d always told himself when he’d worked out before. Though, thinking about it now, that hadn’t really served him well in the past since he was overweight, at least according to his doctor, and single, and ate all the time to chase away the loneliness. Which just made him gain more weight and made him more single and—wait—what was the point to his little mind rant?

Oh yeah, Michiel was trying to kill him.

“P-p-please Michiel. Please let me stop,” he wheezed as his legs slowly rose perpendicular to his hanging torso. He’d always seen the bars sticking out from the wall and had thought they were just there for someone to hang their towels on, but when Michiel had told him to stand between the two bars, he’d been confused. When the trainer told him to lift himself using the bars, he’d done so without thought. When the other man proceeded to tell him to bring

his legs up to make a right angle with his body, Blake had wanted to cry. And now fifteen minutes later he wanted his mommy. And he hadn't called her that since he was five.

"One more and then you're done for the day." Michiel finally relented and Blake wanted to sob in relief. Gathering the flagging vestiges of his strength, he lifted his legs once more before lowering the shaking limbs until they hung down, then he dropped to his feet and collapsed onto his knees. When he heard Michiel's laughter Blake wanted to hit the other guy in the throat.

"Forgot to warn you about the weak legs thing," Michiel said chuckling. "Look, I know you hate me right now, I hated my trainer when he first started working with me, but here's the thing, when you start to lose weight, have more energy, get some muscle tone, you're going to be thanking me. So go ahead and hate me right now. I can take it, but just remember this conversation okay?"

Blake hesitated for a moment, letting the bigger man's words roll around in his brain, before nodding his head at the other man. Yes, he did hate Michiel a little right then, but if all of those things did start to happen to him, well he'd probably beg the bigger man to marry him. Which would be a bad idea because he was pretty sure that Michiel was straight. At least he looked like it. Though he wouldn't really bet on his so-called "gaydar". It seemed as if the biological intuition he should have to know who was gay and who was straight was faulty, because if it worked properly wouldn't he have a partner by now? Or even a boyfriend? Hell, even a constant fuck buddy would work out for him right now. It had been six months since he'd last been fucked and he was almost certain that he was becoming a virgin again.

Blake nodded, returning to the conversation he was having with Michiel. "Yeah, I'll remember it."

Michiel smiled and nodded. "Good. Now, go and hit the steam room and then the showers and treat yourself to a fruit smoothie from the juice bar before you go home. Trainer's orders," the bigger man said before grinning widely at Blake and turning to walk away.

“Aye, aye Captain!” Blake said sarcastically, saluting the man’s broad back before turning to head towards the steam room. God above, what had he been thinking when he’d decided to come to the gym and get in shape? He could just walk around his neighborhood every day and lose weight. Maybe that’s what he would start doing instead, this whole actually working out thing had already lost its appeal.

Giving up already Son? I guess I should have expected it.

His father’s voice rang in his head and Blake grimaced. He would stick it out. He would work out and lose the weight and then happily tell his father that he’d actually *stuck* to something this time. Even if his trainer was an evil, sadistic bastard.

With a heavy sigh, Blake opened his locker and peeled off his sweaty clothes, putting them inside of his gym bag and wrapping a towel around his waist. He wanted to put his shirt on, try to hide his soft, round belly from anyone that might see it, but he didn’t want to get too hot while in the steam room. Squaring his shoulders even as he wrapped his arms more firmly around his waist, Blake hurried towards the steam room, not making any eye contact with the two males walking around nude in the locker room. Everyone in the gym was trying to kill him. First Michiel with his workout and now the gorgeous men in the locker room were trying to give him heart failure by walking around wet and naked. Blake dropped one of his arms and pressed it into the towel tenting at his groin. It would do nothing but get him in trouble if these hulking men saw him lusting over them.

As he approached the door to the steam room, an unidentified feeling swamped him. Anxiety flooded his system and Blake looked around, wondering why he suddenly felt as if something monumental was about to occur. Had someone noticed him checking out the men in the gym? Had they glanced at him and seen his erection? He really didn’t want to have to fight for his life today. He waited for a moment and when nothing happened, he shrugged it off, figuring that he was just wound up over walking around naked with other naked men walking around him as well.

Blake reached out a hand for the steam room door only to have it swing open before him. He stepped back and looked up, through the clouds of steam floating out of the room towards him. His eyes widened as he found himself looking up, up, up the long legs, trunk-like thighs, trim waist, and broad, broad shoulders of some unknown man. It was at the man's shoulders that Blake's eyes felt as if they were going to pop out of his skull. Were those... wings spread out behind the other man? No, no, it wasn't possible. It was just a trick of the light and the steam from the room. When the "wings" folded back, Blake felt his heart speed up and he gasped. His eyes continued traveling up past the thick neck, chiseled jaw, dimpled chin of the stranger to his full lips, thin aquiline nose, bright, cerulean blue eyes and brown hair before he finally heard the man's voice.

"What?" he asked stupidly, blinking up at the man.

"I asked you if you were going to come in or just stand out there gawking all day," the man said.

"Oh! Um... I'm coming in," Blake responded. He smiled shyly at the other man and stepped forward.

"Good. I think I'll join you," the tall stranger stated.

"But didn't you just finish in there?" Blake questioned the other man.

The giant of a man nodded and leered at Blake. "Yes I did, and I was all relaxed. Then I saw you and one very specific, very big and thick part of me got stiff all over again."

Blake flushed even as his eyes widened yet again. Was this man flirting with him? Him? Even as fat as he was? Really?

"O-okay," he said and nodded before stepping past the bigger man into the steam room. He could've sworn he heard the other man inhaling deeply as he stepped past him, as if he were trying to catch Blake's scent, which at that moment was "musk-a-la-Blake", and lightly touching Blake's hair. He couldn't be sure, but he was almost positive. Looking over his shoulder at the other man as he stepped towards one of the benches in the room, Blake noticed

the play of muscles beneath the other man's skin as he closed the door to the steam room and walked to a bench directly across from him.

His eyes traveled over the other man's muscled frame as the stranger sat and stretched his legs out.

"So, how long have you been coming to the gym?" the stranger asked him, lifting a hand and spearing it through his brown locks. Blake swallowed thickly as he felt his cock harden beneath his towel.

"Umm—today's my first day," Blake answered, his eyes feasting over the man's near naked form.

"I figured it had to be. I definitely would have noticed you if you'd come here at any other time," the brunet nodded.

Blake looked around the room to see if maybe the gorgeous man was talking to someone else, but realizing they were the only two people in the room, he pointed to himself.

"Me?" he questioned the other man. He shivered when the tall man chuckled, his noise of amusement sounding like crackling fire and Blake felt his body grow warmer than it already was sitting in the steam room.

"Yes, you. There's no one else in the room I could be talking about," the man answered.

"But why me?" Blake asked. He shook his head. He had no delusions about his appearance; he knew what he looked like. There was no way this man was talking about him.

"You don't realize how beautiful you are, do you?" The other man shook his head as if he couldn't understand that notion. "And apparently no one else does either if you don't realize how delicious you are."

Blake's eyes widened. "Are you like a cannibal or something?"

The loud bark of laughter took Blake by surprise. When the broad-shouldered man doubled over to continue laughing, Blake wondered what he'd said that was so funny. It had to be the only logical conclusion right? This man

was talking about him as if he found Blake to be some sexy man that he wanted in his bed. Blake knew that couldn't be the truth because while he wasn't a virgin, he'd been told by the men he'd slept with that it was either a pity fuck or they were only sleeping with him on a dare. It hadn't done much for his already low self-esteem, but that was the reason he was at the gym, to get in shape, so that he would never be considered a pity fuck again.

“What? It's a perfectly logical question. Why else would you be flirting with me?” Blake asked. He gasped when the other man's head jerked up and he saw his blue eyes flashing like fire. The stranger stood to his feet and strode over to Blake before crouching in front of him.

“I don't know who gave you such a low opinion of yourself but they are fucking idiots. You are gorgeous and smell wonderful. I'm a man who knows what he wants and doesn't stop until he gets it and I want you. Not because I want to eat you, at least not in the literal sense, though my tongue in your ass is definitely something that I want to happen and soon. I want to date you. Get to know you. Take you out to dinner and a movie. Hear you laugh. Find out your likes and dislikes. I'm not crazy or a serial killer. I'm just a man who finds you to be the most beautiful man he's ever seen in his life,” the other man stated as he looked into Blake's eyes.

Blake's breath caught in his throat as he found himself locking eyes with the handsome stranger. No one had ever said anything like that to him before and he couldn't believe it was being said to him now. The gym was obviously an alternate universe. One where he was attractive and not fat and disgusting. He never wanted to leave.

“Okay?” the stranger asked, a slow smile coming to his lips.

Blake nodded and was mute. He didn't know what to say in that moment.

“B-Blake,” he stammered. “Blake Marks.”

The other man held out his hand. “Nice to meet you Blake. My name is Sciniel G. Uardian and I'd love to take you out to dinner.”

Blake swallowed and nodded. “I—I'd like that Sciniel.”

“Great,” Sciniel said clapping his hands together in satisfaction. “Once we’re done here and we’ve showered, I’ll get your number and your address from you. What do you think about going to the Charleston? They make the world’s best grilled Colorado lamb tenderloin,” he asked, sounding excited.

Blake nodded. He’d always wanted to go to the Charleston, but with the intimate setting of the restaurant he hadn’t relished the thought of eating there alone. He’d go to dinner with Sciniel, have sex with the other man and then prepare himself to never hear from him again. Sciniel seemed as if he were just intrigued with the thought of sleeping with a fat man, so Blake would indulge his fetish and then try to avoid the other man at the gym.

Why else would the man want him? Regardless of what he said, Blake knew he was not someone that men wanted to date. Something like that would take a miracle and Blake had stopped believing in miracles when he was a young boy.

CHAPTER TWO

Something like that would take a miracle and I stopped believing in miracles when I was a young boy.

Blake's words pierced Sciniel's mind and he felt himself grow angry by his *dusha tovarishchi*'s words. How was it that Blake didn't see how amazing he was? Sciniel felt an overwhelming urge to find the people who had caused his future lover to think so badly about himself, and teach them a lesson on how to treat the mate of an angel.

Sciniel had just come back from meeting with the Almighty when the most delicious smell of vanilla, chocolate and clouds had surrounded him. Hastily bowing to the already smiling deity, Sciniel had quickly left the throne room and stepped into the steam room, a towel wrapped around his waist as he went to step out of it. The toga he wore in Heaven would stand out drastically in the human realm, and since he'd been summoned before the Lord while working at the gym, Sciniel had returned to the steam room since he hadn't sensed anyone in the room at that moment. It also happened to be the area where the delicious smell was coming from.

Sciniel had woken up that morning in his condo with butterflies in his stomach, a sign to all angels that something life-changing was about to happen. Thinking that the Principalities were going to launch another attack, Sciniel had explained everything to his brothers, telling them to be on alert. He and his nine brothers, those who were all created and born on the same day he was, shared a building, each of them had a condo which took up an entire floor in the building. Each condo had six rooms, a kitchen, a dining room, a library, a weapons room, and a game room along with five and a half baths. Though they were all currently unmated, they had built the lavish building and condos with their future mates and families in mind. All angels were sent to Earth to live and walk among the humans and demons that inhabited the planet, unless they were archangels, cherubim or seraphim.

Principalities and princes were what humans thought of when they thought of demons. They were evil, cold-hearted, immoral angels, who had been cast out of heaven. They were led by Lucifer and were identified by the black birthmark of a handprint on their right shoulder blade. It was where Michael, the archangel, had pushed them all out of Heaven when they'd all joined together to try to overthrow the Almighty.

Sciniel had never really understood why they would attempt such a thing. Their Lord was all-knowing, all-seeing and all-powerful. He'd provided everything they could ever hope for, and when he'd created humans and demons he'd given the angels a way to procreate. Princes found the idea of men sleeping together disgusting and slept with human females. Those women gave birth to sons who became known as Principalities. Disgusting, pure-evil creatures who looked like humans but had dark powers and relished the idea of killing, maiming, raping, stealing, betraying, and hurting others.

Demons were the offspring of angels and human males, or angels and other demons. They looked human, but they each had powers that were pure and filled with light. None of them knew what their powers were, wouldn't find out what it was until they'd mated their *dusha tovarishchi*, or soul mate, but they were always impressive. Sciniel knew a demon who had the power to bring someone back to life. It was a very impressive thing to see. The only problem with demons was that they were also easily turned to the dark side. Once they came into their powers they had to constantly be claimed by their mates, constantly had to do good for others or they would slowly become a principality. It wasn't a quick process, it took time, but once it did happen they became the most dangerous and most evil of Principalities out there.

Sciniel looked over at Blake and smiled softly. He'd been unsure at first if Blake was just a human male destined to mate an angel and therefore had the ability to give birth, or if he was a demon who hadn't come into his powers yet. It was as the other man walked past him and Sciniel got a whiff of the clouds on his skin that he'd known. His *dusha tovarishchi* was a demon. Blake probably had no idea what he was, or of the power inside of him, but Sciniel knew. Just as he knew that Blake was destined to be his. He'd take the other

man to the Charleston, treat him to a dinner that he'd never forget, and then he would take the other man back to his condo and fuck him through the mattress. And when Blake least expected it, Sciniel would cut the smallest of lines on his inner wrist and lick away the blood, marking him. Then, when Blake slept peacefully in Sciniel's bed, Sciniel would place the bracelet of the mated *dusha tovarishchi* on his right wrist and bind them together forever.

After he was sure that Blake would be his forever, only then would Sciniel tell him all about angels, demons, princes and Principalities. He would make sure he'd joined them together for all eternity before he told the other man anything that would make him run away from him. Blake Marks had no idea what he was in for, but Sciniel did. He was going to treasure the man created for him by the Almighty and keep him safe for the rest of their lives. Angels didn't die and neither did their *dusha tovarishchi*. There would come a point when the Almighty would call the two of them to Heaven and they would ascend and spend eternity in Paradise.

That was another difference between angels, demons, princes and Principalities. Angels could ascend into the heavens whenever they wanted to. Demons could only go to Heaven with an angel or when they were summoned by the Lord. Princes and Principalities could never enter Heaven. Ever. Sciniel didn't feel bad that the creatures would never be allowed to see the beauty and the wonder of Paradise; they certainly deserved being cast out and kept away for all eternity.

He huffed mentally. His animosity towards princes and Principalities hadn't dissipated at all over the years. The creatures were responsible for killing his closest human friend, Meynaurd, ten years before. Sciniel would never forget that, and he would stop at nothing to kill the ones responsible and send them forever into the Pit.

"Well, I'm going to go and hit the showers." Blake's soft, musical voice washed over Sciniel's senses, chasing away the shadows of the past. He blinked and offered Blake a wide grin.

“Excellent. Let’s go,” he said and got to his feet, holding out a hand to the smaller man. The feeling of Blake’s hand in his own made Sciniel shiver slightly, and his half-hard cock thickened and grew fully erect behind his towel. He saw Blake’s eyes lower to his tented towel and gasp. Sciniel’s grin widened.

“Yes baby, that’s what you do to me,” he said softly before turning, and still holding Blake’s hand, led him from the room to the showers so that they could both get clean.

Sciniel’s eyes followed Blake as the man slowly pulled away from him, as if he too felt the pull for them to stay together, and turned to walk into the private shower across from the communal showerheads. Sciniel frowned for a moment, wondering why the other man didn’t use the public showers like everyone else, then realized that even though Blake was obviously hiding because he thought his body was unappealing, Sciniel was much more comfortable with Blake’s body being hidden from the gaze of every other man in the general area. He wasn’t usually possessive as a rule, but this was his *dusha tovarishch* and he didn’t want to have to kill anyone because they were looking at his man.

Calm down the beast, Sciniel. He heard the Almighty’s voice in his spirit, and Sciniel’s head lowered a bit in a show of submission.

Forgive me, my Lord, he apologized and turned to twist the hot water handle for the shower.

It is okay, my angel. It is only for the benefit of your dusha tovarishchi that I give you the warning. Blake doesn’t know about the world beyond the human one just yet. He will not understand the possessiveness, nor the love you wish to surround him in. Give him time and keep calm as much as possible.

Sciniel nodded and felt the Almighty’s presence leave his mind. The “Big Guy” didn’t often intrude on the private thoughts of his creation, only stepping in when he felt they really needed him, but Sciniel had to admit that this time he was thankful for the omniscience of his creator.

Washing quickly, giving his hard shaft a passing stroke that still had his knees growing weak as he thought of his *dusha tovarishchi* showering feet away, Sciniel turned off the water and turned to grab a towel from the cabinet against the wall. He froze at the sight of Blake, his hips covered in a white towel, standing across from him, his shoulders and torso wet as he stared at Sciniel's groin. The pink tongue of his mate, licking across his lower lip, had Sciniel's cock hardening further and the shaft bobbed slightly as if beckoning Blake forward.

It seemed to work as Blake walked towards him, still staring at Sciniel's dick, as if he were hypnotized. Sciniel stood frozen in place wondering what his mate was going to do, when the door to the locker room slammed open and the sound of male laughter filled the room, shattering the daze the two of them were in. Sciniel watched in disappointment as Blake blinked his eyes and blushed up at him.

"I-I, um, I think I'll go change," Blake squeaked before turning to rush towards his locker.

With a growl of frustration, Sciniel clenched his fist and turned with it raised, prepared to slam it into the tiled wall.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a voice said behind him. Sciniel let out a breath of laughter. Turning he found himself looking into the green eyes of his closest brother, Justiel.

"Justiel," he breathed, reaching out to clasp the man's inner's elbow as Justiel returned the gesture of welcome.

"Brother," the other man said with a grin. "You seem a little tense. Was it the nice smelling demon that just rushed passed me?"

Sciniel nodded. "He is my *dusha tovarishchi*."

Justiel's eyes widened, his mouth dropping open before he let out a happy whoop of excitement. "Congratulations brother! That is wonderful news!"

Sciniel grinned and nodded. "Yes, but as with most demons, he has no idea about the other world. He doesn't know about angels, demons, princes and

Principalities. Has no idea about the war that is still being waged between good and evil.” Sciniel looked around and lowered his voice. “He has no idea that when we make love for the first time that it is most likely that he will get pregnant and give birth to a powerful, supernatural being.”

Justiel nodded his head. “Yeah, that could pose a problem.”

Sciniel snorted. “You think?”

Both men stopped talking when the person they had been discussing shyly stepped back over to the shower area, his eyes fastened on Sciniel’s still naked member. Justiel cleared his throat and Blake jerked his eyes up to Sciniel’s face. Sciniel felt the smirk on his face and had to stop himself from pounding on his chest with his fists like a caveman and declare that his *dusha tovarishchi* wanted him.

“Um—wasn’t sure if you still wanted my number and address. I mean, I completely understand if you don’t, but you know if you do want it, then—” Blake stammered.

Sciniel held up a finger to Blake’s lips, cutting off the rest of his rambling. “Of course I want your number. I want your number, your address, where you work. I want to know what your favorite color is, your favorite food. I want to know what your dreams are. We’ve already been over this Blake. I don’t just want sex from you. I want *you*,” he stated emphatically, ignoring Justiel who stood watching them with an intense gaze.

Blake let out a shuddering breath. “O-okay.” He offered Sciniel a shy smile. “Do you want me to wait for you to get dressed?”

Sciniel looked down and noticed that he was practically dry from standing and talking to his brother. He nodded at Blake and walked to the wall of lockers that was specific for the employees and owners of the gym, namely him and his brothers. Justiel was a silent partner in the gym; he spent his days as a police officer, keeping the streets of Baltimore safe while simultaneously fighting off princes and Principalities. Justiel was only one of two of Sciniel’s brothers who didn’t work in the gym in addition to having part ownership of

the building. The other one was Zogniel. Zog owned a number of businesses and was currently looking for artists for his new museum. Sciniel didn't understand Zog's incessant need to keep buying and building more and more businesses. They didn't need money, but the one time Sciniel had asked him, Zog had told him that their *dusha tovarishchis* were going to need the businesses. Sciniel hadn't asked any more questions. Zog had the ability to see the future, called the gift of prophecy, and though he wouldn't tell them much about what he saw, he shared enough that Sciniel and the rest of his brothers knew what to do to prepare themselves.

Sciniel pulled down his black shirt and shoved his cell phone and wallet in his black gym shorts. He turned and found Blake standing five feet away nibbling on his lower lip, looking hesitant.

"Give me your number, baby," Sciniel stated firmly but gently.

Blake nodded his head. "Yeah—right—okay." He rattled off his number and Sciniel quickly programmed it in his phone, underneath "Husband" since if anything ever happened, he wanted anyone around him to know who to contact. Granted, he and Blake had only just met each other, but they were going to be together forever and it was best to prepare for that eventuality.

He waited until Blake was looking at him and then dialed the other man. When Blake apologized and pulled out his own cell phone, looking at the number in confusion before answering it, Sciniel chuckled.

"Just wanted you to know that I have your number in my phone and I will be using it," Sciniel promised, watching as Blake's cheeks grew ruddy from his blush.

"O-okay," Blake breathed into the phone and Sciniel felt his cock harden in his shorts. "I—I have to go now. I'll see you for our date? When are we going out again?"

Sciniel felt his heartbeat speed up at the sound of Blake's arousal through the phone. Even though they stood feet apart, there was something about hearing Blake's voice through the phone that made Sciniel want to toss the

object away and pull Blake into his arms, before fucking the smaller man against the lockers. Sciniel couldn't understand it. Shoving the deliciously naughty thoughts out of his mind, Sciniel answered Blake's question.

"I'll see you tonight, Blake. Eight o'clock sharp," Sciniel promised.

The smile that appeared on Blake's face and reflected in the smaller man's eyes had Sciniel moaning in his chest. "That's great! I'll see you tonight. Good-bye," Blake said before hanging up the phone. Sciniel smiled back at the other man. It was a smile that grew tense as Blake walked towards him and, leaning up on his toes, pressed a kiss against his cheek.

"See you tonight, Sciniel," the young man whispered before turning to walk away.

Sciniel looked up at the clock on the wall and groaned. It was only two o'clock. Six hours to go. Now what? He could go to work, but the thought of helping people get in shape didn't appeal to him. The only thing he wanted to do was hold Blake in his arms while he fucked the other man silly.

Maybe he could masturbate for six hours.

CHAPTER THREE

Blake was on cloud nine for the rest of the day. When he returned to his job at the restaurant, he smiled at all of his coworkers and every single customer that came in and was seated in his station. His tips were out-of-this-world-huge for the first time ever, and he found himself whistling a little tune as he worked around the restaurant. His coworkers looked at him strangely, because he hardly ever came into work looking as if his world was going well, because it rarely was, but they wouldn't understand if he told them that the most gorgeous man in the world wanted to take him out to dinner that evening. How could they, when they didn't even know that Blake was gay? He'd never had cause to tell them because none of them ever spoke to him unless it was about a table or an order, and now he could see each of them opening their mouths as if they wanted to ask him a question before shutting it quickly when he quirked an eyebrow in their direction. He was more than willing to come out of the closet in that moment just so he could tell them all about Sciniel.

At five o'clock, Blake clocked out of work, folding up his apron, putting away his order pad and gathering the keys to his Miata. With a smile and a wave at his bewildered coworkers, he walked out of the door to the restaurant and headed to his car. Hearing his cell phone ringing in his pocket, Blake answered it without checking to see who it was that was calling.

"I know who you are demon, just as I know that you have found your *dusha tovarishchi*. I will stop at nothing to make sure that you and all of your kind are wiped from the face of the Earth," a disembodied voice said to him. Blake froze next to his car, his hand gripping his phone tightly. Was he seriously getting a homophobic phone call on his cell phone? How did the person even know he was gay? And how did he get Blake's number? This was beyond weird and Blake was scared out of his mind, his wonderful day falling into the crapper quickly.

"Look asshole, I'm not sure who you thought you were calling, but I'm not going to put up with your homophobic slurs," Blake said angrily, hoping the

voice couldn't hear the tremble of fear that was coursing through him in his words. "If you call my phone again, I'm going to have you arrested and charged with stalking and harassment. I have just as much of a right to be here, to live and find love and happiness, as you do. More than you since I'm not harassing anyone. Now, don't call me again."

Blake hung up his phone without giving the other person a chance to say anything. He hated homophobic idiots. Suddenly the words of the asshole on the phone permeated his mind. While it certainly hadn't been the first time that Blake had been called a demon, it was definitely the first time someone had told him that they knew he'd found his *dusha tovarishchi*. He didn't even know what that was. Giving himself a mental shake, and making a mental note to use his fancy translator software at home to figure out what the words meant, Blake climbed into his car and took off for home.

He had a date to get ready for.

Two hours later, Blake was still standing in his bedroom, clothes strewn about the floor, as he stood in front of his standing mirror, observing his naked form. He grimaced and pushed back his light brown hair. He still couldn't see why Sciniel wanted to take him out to dinner, but whatever the reason, the other man would be there soon and Blake still hadn't figured out what he was going to wear. Nothing looked good enough. They either made him look like a young teenager rebelling against his parents by wearing all black, or they made him look like a stuffy, nerdy accountant. He was neither of those things, but besides those clothes and his work uniforms, he didn't really have anything else. Charleston was a very nice restaurant, and Blake knew there was no way he could step into that place in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

Glancing down at his wrist, he grimaced. He had about fifteen minutes before Sciniel was supposed to show up. What the hell was he supposed to wear? Growling low in frustration, Blake stomped over to his closet and threw open his closet doors. His eyes moved over the empty hangers, still swinging from when Blake had yanked the clothes from them earlier and was about to

turn and pick something from off his floor when his eyes caught sight of a garment bag all the way in the back of the closet. He couldn't wear that, could he? Wasn't it in bad taste?

He stuck his hand out and grabbed the garment bag from where it hung on the closet rod and placed it reverently on his bed. He stared down at it, nibbling his bottom lip before unzipping the bag and opening it to reveal the garment within. It was an all-black Armani suit, with a white button-up shirt to go with it. Blake had worn a black tie to the event, but he didn't want to be confused with a waiter at Charleston, so he'd wear his purple one instead. Running his hand over the lapel, he swallowed back a sob.

He'd worn the suit to his grandmother's funeral six months before. She'd been the one person who'd seemed to understand him. She had told him that she often had dreams about him and "the nice young man" he was going to marry. She'd told him that the other man was big and strong, powerful and had a divine calling on his life. Blake didn't know much about Sciniel—okay, he didn't know anything about the other man—but three out of four wasn't half bad. Sciniel was definitely big, strong and powerful.

Blake debated briefly if he should wear underwear or not, before deciding against it. While it would definitely make his attraction to the gorgeous man more evident, Blake didn't often wear underwear, liking instead to go "commando." He could only hope that Sciniel didn't turn him on too much or Blake would be walking around with a white cum stain on the crotch of his pants. Grinning as an image of Sciniel kneeling before him licking at his cum-stained pants flashed unbidden to his mind, Blake hurriedly pulled on his shirt and the suit, expertly knotting the tie, seconds before his doorbell sounded throughout the apartment.

Looking over at the clock on his wall Blake chuckled.

"Eight o'clock exactly," he said and walked to the door. Pulling open the door, he gasped as a large bouquet of crimson red roses was held out to him. Blake blinked and looked up into Sciniel's smiling face. Reaching out he took the—he counted quickly—yep, that was two dozen red roses, and turned to

grab a vase from his kitchen. He froze midstep. He didn't have a vase in his apartment. He'd never had reason for one. He'd just have to buy one on the way home. Turning back to Sciniel, he gasped and placed the hand holding the roses against his chest. Sciniel stood a few feet away holding out a vase to him, grinning widely.

Blake huffed and took the vase from him. "Thank you," he said softly. He filled the vase a third of the way with water; after adding a small amount of salt from the counter, he took a can of Sprite out of the refrigerator, popped open the tab, and poured a small amount of that in there too. Grabbing a pair of shears from the drawer in the kitchen, he proceeded to cut the ends of the stems. He was very aware of Sciniel's presence close to him and his mind raced with something to say.

"What are you doing?" Sciniel's voice was like a storm brewing in the distance and Blake shivered.

"I'm cutting the end of the stems so that the roses live longer," Blake stated. He saw Sciniel nod out of the corner of his eye and continued cutting the stems until he was done. Picking up the roses, he placed them in the water, murmuring a word of thanks when Sciniel cleaned up the leaves and stems from the counter and threw them in the trash in the corner. Blake took the vase and walked into his bedroom, placing the vase on the nightstand next to his queen-sized bed.

"That's not big enough for the two of us." Sciniel's voice came directly behind him, and Blake squealed and turned, pressing his hand to his chest once again while his heart pounded furiously as if trying to escape.

"What. The. Hell?" Blake panted out.

Sciniel nodded towards the bed. "Your bed. We'll either need a bigger one or you'll need to come to my place, because that bed's not big enough for the both of us."

Blake huffed and placed his clenched fists on his hips. "Who said we'll end up in bed together tonight?"

Sciniel's raised eyebrow infuriated Blake until the taller man merely shrugged his shoulders. "Whether tonight or two months from now, or even two years from now... nothing will have changed by that point. I'll still be too big for that bed unless you plan on sleeping on top of me," he stated matter-of-factly. He grinned lecherously at Blake. "Which, by the way, I would have absolutely no problem with."

Blake felt shock course through him. "Who said you'll still be around two months, much less two years from now?"

His breath caught in his throat when Sciniel leaned forward, the air around him growing thick with sexual tension. Blake felt his cock grow hard behind the slacks of his suit and he swallowed thickly. He wanted to climb Sciniel like a tree. He wanted to wrap his legs around the other man's waist and beg him to fuck him. He wanted so much and he wanted it all in that moment.

"Didn't I tell you that you were my *dusha tovarishchi*? You were destined to belong to me and I am never going to let you go."

Blake stared at Sciniel in surprise. The other man had used the same words as the disembodied voice from the telephone earlier that day. He gave the bigger man a tremulous smile as Sciniel led Blake from his apartment and down to his awaiting Ford Expedition. Blake rolled the words around in his mind and knew that at some point in the evening he was going to have to ask the other man what they meant. He was pretty certain that Sciniel wasn't crazy or some sort of serial killer, but those words...

What did they mean? If the voice on the phone was to be believed, Sciniel's claiming Blake to be his *dusha tovarishchi* was going to put him in danger. And knowing that, why wasn't Blake running for the hills?

CHAPTER FOUR

Sciniel was aware that his future mate's thoughts were jumbled because of his statement. Blake hadn't spoken since they'd left the younger man's apartment. Sciniel knew that he was going to have to explain all about angels, demons, princes, Principalities and what it meant for Blake to be his *dusha tovarishchi*, but the smaller man's possible reaction had him hesitating. Everyone reacted differently to hearing that they were destined to be mated to an angel. Sciniel hoped that his future mate wasn't the type to give in to hysterics. He didn't really relish the thought of having to hunt down the other man and make him bend to the course his life was about to take. He wanted Blake to accept his words and be happy about it, to welcome Sciniel with open arms. But as Blake's thoughts continued to stumble over each other, Sciniel had a feeling that Blake was going to be one of those who had a freak-out.

They pulled up to the Charleston and Sciniel pulled into a parking spot. When he'd first come to Earth he'd been fascinated by the many different ways that humans traveled. Airplanes, cars, trains, buses, boats... they all intrigued him. Having spent millennia flying or walking throughout Heaven, Sciniel was the first of his brothers to learn how to drive. His siblings had all teased him for his desire to be more like the humans, but once they realized that they needed to drive to get around, each of them had approached Sciniel at different times to ask him how to drive. Sciniel had gladly taught each of them, and they had all picked up the ability quite quickly. Angels were quick learners and it only took hours before each of them were expert drivers.

Sciniel glanced at Blake after he pulled into a parking spot and cut off the engine to his large SUV. He knew they should head right in, but he didn't want to have a dinner that was reminiscent of their drive to the restaurant. He wanted to be able to talk to his mate. Get to know the man outside of his rambling thoughts.

“What's a *dusha tovarishchi*?”

Sciniel sighed. He'd hoped that Blake would save his questions for after dinner. He didn't want to evade his mate's inquiry, knew that the man deserved to know everything seeing as how his life was about to drastically change forever, but Sciniel really wanted the two of them to have dinner before he rocked the other man's world. He tried to think of a way to put the other man off and coming up with nothing he sighed again.

"Can we wait until after dinner? Then you can ask me everything you want to ask me and I swear I'll answer all of your questions. It's just that we have reservations and I'd really like to have a nice meal with you before we get into all of that," Sciniel asked, wincing at the note of desperation and the hint of whining he detected in his own voice.

Blake turned to look at him and stared at him intently before nodding after a moment. "I'll try not to bring it up over dinner, but just as soon as we get back to my place I want answers because I got this phone call using the exact same words, this *dusha tovarishchi*, and I brushed it off but now I really want to know what it means. Especially because this guy was threatening me," he stated with annoyance.

Sciniel's eyebrows flew up into his hairline. "What guy? Who threatened you?" His chest rumbled as a growl vibrated up through his mouth.

Blake shook his head and a mischievous grin came to his face. "Nope. If I don't get to ask you about those words then you don't get to ask me about the phone call. You have to wait just like I do," he said, his eyes twinkling.

Sciniel shook his head, realizing that his cute little mate was going to be trouble. He couldn't find it in himself to care in that moment. He'd found the man he'd come to Earth to find. The man who was his other half. He would deal with whatever he had to as long as he had Blake by his side.

He chuckled and nodded before pulling his key out of the ignition and opening the car door. He heard Blake as the other man opened his door and stepped out, before closing the door behind him. Sciniel straightened the jacket to his own suit and closed his door, pressing the key fob button to lock the car as he walked over to meet Blake at the back of the vehicle. He lowered his

hand to take Blake's right with his left, and felt a small smile stretch his face at Blake's gasp. He knew the other man could feel the electric current that was generated when they touched. It made him ecstatic. While he knew he was attractive, all angels were, it was a totally different thing to have his mate actually attracted to him.

He led Blake into the restaurant, happiness filling his being that not only was he touching his *dusha tovarishchi* but that he was about to have a date with the man. He stopped at the hostess stand and smiled at the blonde woman who stood there. He was aware of the blush that stole across her features and if the soft growl emanating from his mate's throat was anything to go by, Blake had noticed it as well.

"Name?" she asked, giving Sciniel a flirtatious smile.

Sciniel pulled Blake close to his side, wrapping an arm around the smaller man's shoulders and gesturing to the reservation book.

"I have a reservation under Sciniel G. Uardian," Sciniel stated, chuckling mentally as he thought of the name he and his brothers had chosen as their surname. There were other angels who chose human surnames that were quite common such as Smith, Jones or Anderson, but Sciniel and his brothers had decided to go with a representation of who they were. Guardian angels. So they all had the same middle initial, G, with the same last name Uardian. In all of the centuries they'd been on Earth not one person had figured it out, and Sciniel knew that unless they pointed it out, no one ever would.

"Yes, Mr. Uardian. Your table is ready. Right this way," the hostess said as she signaled to a waiter. A young man came and stood at the stand while the hostess led them to a semi private table in the back corner of the restaurant. Sciniel held out a chair for Blake and gestured for the smaller man to sit. When Blake was seated and comfortable, Sciniel pushed his chair in before walking around to sit in his own seat. He smiled up at the hostess when she appeared to be hovering, looking between Sciniel and Blake as if she were confused.

“Um—your waiter will be right over to take your order. If you like I can put in an order for wine for you and your—” she hesitated as if unsure that Blake and Sciniel were anything intimate to each other.

“Partner,” Sciniel supplied, ignoring Blake’s shocked look as he kept his focus on the hostess.

Her lips formed the word “partner” silently and she nodded her head. “Your partner,” she repeated in a soft voice.

Sciniel smiled. “I think champagne would be a much better idea. Blake? Baby, is that okay with you?” he asked, looking over at the still stunned young man.

Blake nodded, his eyes still wide. Sciniel chuckled softly before turning back to the hostess. “Champagne please...” He looked at the young woman’s name tag. “Diane.” She nodded and turned to walk away. Sciniel watched as she stopped one of the waiters and spoke with him before returning to the hostess stand. Sciniel shook his head before returning his attention to Blake. He couldn’t understand the brief flicker of disappointment and disbelief that had flashed through the young woman’s mind when Sciniel had claimed Blake as his partner. He knew that she’d found him attractive and had held hopes of flirting with him and having him ask her out, but to dismiss Blake? Was the woman blind? Blake was the most gorgeous man in the world, at least to Sciniel, and really his opinion was the only one that mattered.

“So, why don’t you tell me all about yourself as a little boy,” he stated to Blake, wanting to know everything there was to know about the other man.

Blake took a drink from his water glass before he launched into stories about growing up in his family. Sciniel listened to him in complete fascination. He could tell that his mate thought the stories were dull and boring, but he found them interesting. He was finding out about Blake. How he thought his parents were disappointed in him, especially his father, because of his job as a waiter and the fact that he was a little overweight. Sciniel didn’t see anything wrong with his mate’s body, he found Blake extremely attractive and wanted

to do nothing more than to sweep the younger man up in his arms, lay him out on the nearest flat surface and fuck him six ways from Sunday.

Returning his mind back to his mate and their present conversation, Sciniel found himself laughing at a story his mate was telling him about his attempt to have a pet as a kid.

“When my parents kept saying no, I decided to be creative and make my own pet. So, I grabbed my mother’s fluffiest bathrobe and a bag of flour. I then picked up a pair of my dad’s old rollerblades and I glued the fabric of the robe onto the bag of flour with super glue. Damn near glued my fingers together. Then I duct taped the flour bag onto the pair of rollerblades. I used my allowance to buy a leash, and then I cut off the head of my stuffed puppy, glued that onto the top of the flour bag, put the leash around its neck and I dragged it all around the house and the neighborhood. I even took it into school for show and tell,” Blake said with a laugh.

Sciniel laughed heartily, his head thrown back and eyes closed as he saw an image of a young Blake pulling along a flour puppy and taking it to school for show and tell. Though Blake recalled the memory fondly, Sciniel could hear the snickers and the cruel jokes of the other students. Not wanting to meddle too much in his mate’s memory but wanting it to be a happy one, he changed it. He manipulated the images in his mate’s mind and made it seem as if the flour puppy moved and barked and all of the children were enchanted by the creation. Sending out an angelic telepathic link, he asked a favor of every other angel that he knew to ask them to alter the memories of those who were in the classroom and were still alive.

It was a gross misuse of their powers, and Sciniel knew that he would be giving an account for his actions and his request of his fellow angels when he was next called before the Almighty; but as Blake laughed and shared the memory with him, Sciniel reveled in the lack of sadness and hurt in the memory. He sat back and listened as his mate, his *dusha tovarishchi*, regaled him with stories of college and his job, and the whole time Sciniel’s mind swirled with images of his mate’s life. Sciniel found himself falling in love

with Blake as they sat there, and knew that those words were something he absolutely could not tell the man seated across from him. Not yet. Blake might be looking for a man to be his forever, but he was still a practical man and he did not believe in love at first sight.

So Sciniel wouldn't tell him that it had happened.

Three hours after they'd walked into the restaurant, Sciniel and Blake were still talking. Sciniel had shared some humorous stories from the gym and the story of his trying to teach his brothers how to drive. He'd left out the fact that the year had been 1920 and that neither he nor his brothers had aged a day since then, but he didn't think Blake needed to know those things just yet. The waiter came around at some point to offer them dessert and coffee. Sciniel smiled when Blake looked at him first, as if afraid he would judge him for ordering dessert, and then Sciniel watched the wide grin sweep across the other man's face when Sciniel had ordered one of everything and then asked him if he wanted anything.

Sciniel had watched as their waiter's eyes had widened and then darkened as he took in Blake's smile. He could sense the arousal clinging to the man's skin and scent the pre-cum leaking from the tip of his cock as he stared at Blake in fascination. Sciniel growled low in his throat and grinned wickedly at Blake when he turned surprised eyes at him. The waiter rushed away, muttering apologies the entire time and Sciniel huffed out a laugh.

"Well that was kinda rude," Blake grouched. Sciniel merely shrugged.

"I don't care. You belong to me and I won't let anyone encroach on what belongs to me," Sciniel stated matter-of-factly.

"I'm not a piece of property that you can stick a 'No Trespassing' sign on you know," Blake pointed out, his eyes narrowing at Sciniel.

Sciniel grinned broadly at his mate. Glad to see his mate sticking up for himself, even though he was standing up against Sciniel. He reached a hand across the table and clasped Blake's hand within his own. He watched as

Blake first looked down at their joined hands and then looked up at him. Once the younger man's eyes were back on him Sciniel spoke.

“I know you're not a piece of property, baby, just like I know that I want to spend eternity with you.” Sciniel watched as Blake's eyes grew impossibly wide.

“You can't mean—you don't mean—” Blake stammered.

Sciniel nodded. “Yes I do. I come from a family that very much believes in love at first sight, soul mates and eternity. We believe that when we see our soul mates, our *dusha tovarishchi* for the first time that we'll instantly know who they are and it won't take long before we're in love with them. That's what I grew up believing and it's what I still believe today,” he stated, hearing the passion resonating in his words.

Blake was prevented from responding by the arrival of their desserts. The table was covered with sweet treats and Sciniel ate them with relish, watching as Blake barely touched his own. Sciniel sighed after a while and gestured for the waiter to come over. He asked for the check and steeled his nerves for the questions his mate was going to ask. He couldn't put it off much longer and truthfully he didn't want to. He wanted Blake to know all about the supernatural world, wanted him to know about angels, demons, princes and Principalities. Wanted the younger man to know about being Sciniel's *dusha tovarishchi* and then, when it was all over, he wanted to make love to the smaller man over and over and over again.

It was time to get Blake home and get this conversation over with.

CHAPTER FIVE

Blake watched Sciniel as the man wandered around his living room, touching picture frames and the lighthouse figurines he had stashed all over the place. He noticed that Sciniel seemed especially fascinated by the figurines of lighthouses with angels surrounding them or on them. He noticed the smirk on the other man's face and wondered why the man seemed amused by the way the angels were crafted. Sciniel was fascinating to Blake as well as incredibly handsome. Blake didn't know whether he wanted to sit and interrogate Sciniel about the whole *dusha tovarishchi* thing or if he wanted to just beg the man to fuck him.

His decision was made for him when Sciniel turned to look at him and Blake saw the man's blue eyes darken with arousal. Blake's questions could wait, right now he was all about getting laid.

He got to his feet from the couch where he was sitting and sauntered over to Sciniel, watching as the man's eyes followed his every movement. He lifted his hands and ran them over the large, hard pecs of the taller man, delighting in the feeling of the other man's muscled torso. He was aware of Sciniel's harsh breathing and the way his heartbeat sped up.

"What are you doing, baby?" Sciniel asked him, his eyebrow quirked.

Blake shrugged. "I'm suddenly feeling extremely horny," he said. Sciniel chuckled and lifted his hands up to Blake's shoulders and gave them a small squeeze.

"I thought you wanted to ask me some questions," Sciniel said as his hands traveled up to Blake's hair. Blake's eyes slid closed and he moaned as Sciniel began massaging his scalp, running his fingers through the brown tresses.

"I'll ask them later. Right now I really just want for you to fuck me until I pass out," Blake admitted as he lifted his hands and wrapped them around the back of Sciniel's neck. Opening his eyes he gave the older man what he hoped was a seductive smile and pulled Sciniel's lips down to meet his own. "I

promise. Just as soon as I recover from the massive orgasm you're going to give me, I'm going to interrogate you and ask every question I can possibly think of. I might even ask you why the sky is blue. But right now?" Blake shook his head. "Right now all I want is your cock in my ass."

Blake grinned at the groan that sounded from Sciniel's lips, and lifted himself up on his toes to press a kiss against the other man's mouth. He flicked out the tip of his tongue against Sciniel's lips, silently glorying when the other man's mouth opened to accept the muscle. Sciniel's tongue came out to duel with his own and Blake trembled with barely suppressed need. He shoved his hands beneath the lapels of Sciniel's jacket and pushed the fabric from the bigger man's shoulders. He released Sciniel's lips from their passionate kiss and trailed his lips over the other man's chin, to his jaw and down his neck, even as his fingers moved to the buttons of the other man's shirt. He unbuttoned Sciniel's shirt and licked and kissed the tanned flesh as he exposed each delicious inch of the other man's torso.

Blake shivered as one of Sciniel's hands moved from his hair and down his neck while the other began unbuttoning his shirt. Tingles were left in the wake of Sciniel's fingers drifting over Blake's torso. He gasped when one of Sciniel's hands dropped to Blake's groin and rubbed the hardened shaft that pressed against the zipper of Blake's pants. Blake whimpered as Sciniel licked at a spot at the base of his throat before slipping his hands into the back of Blake's pants and palming his ass. Blake shifted slightly and pressed his naked chest against Sciniel's. He lifted his arms around Sciniel's neck.

"Take me to bed, Sci. Please," Blake pleaded.

Sciniel scooped Blake up into his arms and carried him to Blake's bedroom, the only one in the entire apartment. Blake sighed as Sciniel placed him down on the brown and gold coverlet that lay on the bed. He watched Sciniel as the tall man undressed himself and then turned to undress Blake. Sciniel kissed, licked and nibbled on Blake's shoulders, his nipples, and the softness of his belly. Blake wanted to cover his fat, knowing how seeing it turned most men off, but he was prevented from doing so when Sciniel pressed

his face into his belly and began kissing it reverently as if he were trying to make out with it. Blake wanted to laugh at how much pleasure Sciniel seemed to be taking from simply kissing and licking his stomach, but then again he wanted to weep because no one had ever made love to his body the way Sciniel was doing at that moment.

“Sci, please,” Blake pleaded, trembling as Sciniel’s lips traveled down to Blake’s weeping erection which lay on his stomach. Blake watched as Sciniel blew over the head of his engorged cock, causing him to moan and beg for more, before sucking the flared head into his mouth. Blake’s legs shifted on the bed, his hands clenching and unclenching the coverlet and the sheets beneath him.

“Mmm, you taste so good, baby,” Sciniel muttered before sucking Blake’s cock into his mouth fully. Wet heat enveloped Blake’s erection and Blake whined, his hands flying up to sink into Sciniel’s hair. He thrust up into Sciniel’s mouth, pleasure swamping his senses as he pressed his head back into the pillow underneath his head. He felt Sciniel’s fingers alongside his cock inside the man’s mouth as Sciniel swallowed around his shaft.

The spit-slicked fingers of Sciniel’s hand pressed down beneath Blake’s balls to his tightly furled hole. He shivered as Sciniel ran a finger around Blake’s guardian muscle, before pressing the tip of a finger inside Blake’s body. He moaned and arched his back as the finger pressed deeper and deeper inside of him. One finger slowly became two and Blake forced himself to relax in order to take Sciniel’s fingers deeper into his ass.

“Do you have lube?” Sciniel asked as he lifted his mouth from Blake’s penis and Blake groaned as Sciniel pressed in a third finger, the burn aching deliciously in his ass.

“N-nightstand,” Blake stammered out.

Sciniel nodded and slowly withdrew his fingers from Blake’s channel before reaching over to the nightstand and pulling out the lube from the drawer. Blake watched the man intensely as Sciniel flipped open the lid of the bottle and poured the viscous liquid over his fingers. Blake shifted as he

waited for the older man to finish lubing his fingers so he could prepare Blake's chute.

"Sciniel, hurry, please," Blake whimpered.

He hissed when Sciniel nodded and dropped his fingers to the crease of his ass and pressed three fingers within Blake's ass. Blake lifted and lowered his ass on Sciniel's fingers as the man thrust his fingers in and out of Blake's sphincter. His cock grew impossibly hard and he clenched his fingers in Sciniel's hair.

"Fuck me now, Sci. Now," Blake demanded.

"Gladly," Sciniel said gruffly, before pulling his fingers free of Blake's ass and pouring lube onto his thick erection. Blake looked down and his eyes widened as he took in the length and girth of Sciniel's cock. The muscles in his ass clenched as he thought about being impaled on that thing and he was equal parts afraid and needy. He wanted to run from the very thought of having something that big inside his hole, while at the same time he wanted to beg for Sciniel to give him all of his cock, right then.

Blake let out a deep breath as Sciniel pressed the head of his cock against his ass. He relaxed his sphincter, exhaling deeply as he lifted his hips for the slide of Sciniel's thick member to fully penetrate him. He arched his back as Sciniel bottomed out within him and moaned the bigger man's name. Sciniel slid his cock out of Blake's rectum, pausing for a moment before sliding back in a little quicker. Blake's hands gripped Sciniel's biceps, the muscle too big for Blake's fingers to wrap around. He moaned and whimpered Sciniel's name as the other man began to plow his dick into Blake's ass. He lifted his hips, spreading his legs wider before wrapping them around Sciniel's waist.

He looked up into Sciniel's face as the other man leaned over him, lifting his lips for a kiss. He moaned when Sciniel took his lips in a deeply passionate kiss, nibbling, licking and sucking on Blake's lips and tongue. Blake pressed his heels into Sciniel's back, urging the other man to fuck him harder and faster. Knowing what Blake needed, apparently without him even needing to open his mouth, Sciniel began slamming his cock in and out of Blake's hole

and Blake wrapped his arms and legs tighter around the bigger man. Blake tried to get Sciniel as deep inside of him as he could. He thrust his hips up to meet each of Sciniel's thrusts.

He felt the tips of his fingers and his toes starting to go numb, his thighs began to shake and a zing of electricity raced up his spine. He screamed Sciniel's name as his orgasm roared through him. He clutched Sciniel to him as his entire body shook with the force of his orgasm. The wet heat of his seed splashed up between his body and Sciniel's, and Blake felt tears well in his eyes. Never before had he experienced such an amazing orgasm. Never had he expected to feel something so amazing. It was almost as if he could feel Sciniel within him. Not just physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually. It was as if their souls had merged into one and Blake trembled as he struggled to contain the wonder pulsing through him.

He felt Sciniel stiffen above him even as Sciniel's already large cock grew impossibly larger and wet heat flooded Blake's entrance. The knowledge that they hadn't used a condom should have freaked Blake out, sent him into a tailspin of worry, instead it warmed him with excitement and he was surprised when another orgasm pulled him under. He screamed for Sciniel to hold him tighter and gasped when Sciniel leaned back on his knees, bringing Blake with him as he continued to plunge his cock in and out of Blake's rectum, pumping his seed in and out of Blake's ass until his thrusting and shudders came to a stop.

Blake felt as if his head were floating. He felt as if he were becoming a whole new person. He opened his eyes then and gasped when he saw large white wings behind Sciniel's back, the feathers soft to the touch as they brushed his fingers where they rested on Sciniel's shoulders. He made to jerk back only to feel Sciniel's arms tighten around him. He wanted to fight and pull away, but there was an overwhelming feeling inside of him to crawl inside of Sciniel and never come back out, to stay with him forever.

There was also a tiny spark seemed to tell him that his life was about to change forever.

“You’re an angel?” he asked Sciniel quietly. He felt the other man’s head nod as he answered Blake’s question.

“Holy fuck.”

CHAPTER SIX

Sciniel watched as Blake paced the floor of his bedroom, wearing a sheet draped around his body as he muttered to himself. He wanted to go to his mate and reassure him, comfort him, but he knew, in some way, that Blake needed a moment to himself to try and process what he'd seen, felt and heard. The fact that Sciniel hadn't even told him all of it and Blake had reacted in this way just meant that when he conveyed the rest of the information to the younger man he was going to have a major breakdown.

"So—angels are real," Blake said after a moment, coming to a stop in front of Sciniel, close enough to be touched, but far enough to reject the touch if he wanted to.

"Yes, angels are real," Sciniel agreed with a nod.

"What about demons?" Blake asked, a slight tremble to his voice.

"Yes, demons are real, but humans have gotten the definition of demons wrong for millennia. Demons are not evil beings that possess the bodies of humans and make them do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. Demons are merely the offspring of human and angel joinings. Men who can give birth," Sciniel explained. He choked back a laugh when Blake's eyes widened.

"Men who can give birth? Are you fucking kidding me?! That's impossible! That's—that's just wrong and disgusting." Blake's words burst forth and Sciniel felt disappointment and sadness wash over him.

"It's not wrong and disgusting. It is the Almighty's way of giving a couple a way to continue their line. It is one of the greatest expressions of love between an angel and his *dusha tovarishchi*—the demon's ability to bring into this world the physical representation of his mating with an angel is a blessing and an honor. And as it should have always been," Sciniel explained.

"What do you mean?" Blake asked, Sciniel could tell the other man was filled with curiosity and the shock was beginning to wear off. He wanted to give a whoop of joy that his *dusha tovarishchi* knew about him and still stuck

around, which didn't happen very often, but he composed himself and decided to explain the truth about history to his mate.

“The story of Cain and Abel has been mistranslated a lot over the years, but the true story about them is that Abel was the *dusha tovarishchi* of an angel. The Almighty allowed the angel to come and claim Abel and because he was overwhelmed with happiness and joy, Abel gave an offering to the Almighty that was filled with love, gratitude, and thanks. He gave a pleasing offering. Now, Cain, who had married his sister, was angry by Abel's joining. Not only because Abel seemed so happy, but because Abel was a man sleeping with another man, and by the time Cain got angry enough to kill his brother, Abel had given birth to three children. Two boys and a girl. Cain's offering was filled with bitterness, resentment, and anger. Because he was suffocating in those negative emotions, his attitude upon presenting his offering to the Almighty, made his sacrifice smell like rancid meat to the Heavens,” Sciniel told Blake. He watched as Blake's eyes widened during the story and knew that he was going to be slammed with questions when the story was over. “When the Almighty rejected Cain's sacrifice, he grew enraged and killed his brother. Not only because of the sacrificial offering, but because of the fact that Abel was sleeping with another man and giving birth.”

“So Cain was jealous?” Blake asked and Sciniel could hear the fascination in the other man's voice and feel it as it vibrated through his mind. He shook his head.

“No. You see homophobia has been around since Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden. That was because Lucifer didn't want any of the angels to be able to mate with their *dusha tovarishchis* and he figured that if he turned the human race against men loving men then it would be easier for him to keep the angels from their mates,” Sciniel explained.

“Boy was he wrong about that,” Blake stated.

Sciniel chuckled, “Exactly. He didn't understand about the strength of the human spirit. Totally missed the fact that humans will do anything, endure anything, for the person that they truly love.” He looked over at Blake then,

his eyes taking in all of the features of his mate's face as the younger man took in his words.

"But—you don't—you're not talking about—" Blake stammered out.

Sciniel shook his head. "I don't even know you yet, Blake, but I know that you were created for me. I know that we are meant to be together. I know that I was made to love you and take care of you and you were made to love me and care for me. Those are things that I know and even if I have to fight you *for* you, you will be mine."

Blake licked his lips nervously. "Okay, tell me all about it then. Finish the story."

Sciniel nodded. "What humans think of as demons are actually Principalities and princes. They are dangerous and evil. They're the reason that there's so much darkness, suffering and heartbreak in the world." He sighed and rubbed at his forehead. "They hunt demons and angels, kill them or send them back into the heavens. They have no emotions, show no remorse. They revel in death and destruction, in pain." He shook his head. "They are to be feared by those who cannot fight against them and no one but an angel can do so."

"So there's some principality or prince who has my number and is going to come after me if we mate?" Blake asked him.

Sciniel cleared his throat nervously. This was going to be an interesting part of the conversation, he could only hope that Blake took it well.

"We—uh—we sort of already mated," he admitted.

Blake's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. He lifted a shaking hand to his mouth and then lowered it. "We—we what? But how can that be? We didn't have a ceremony or anything like that."

Sciniel shook his head. "We don't need to. Matings don't take place like that with angels and their *dusha tovarishchis*, all we have to do is have sex with our fated one and we are joined with them for all eternity."

Blake stared at him in surprise. “Eternity? But what—how is that even possible? I’ll be lucky if I live to see ninety, much less an eternity.”

Sciniel looked down at his hands. He’d never had to have this talk with anyone before. He usually left it up to Michiel or Lovstiel, they were much better at explaining things, but he couldn’t call his brothers and ask them to explain things to his mate. He’d have to do it himself.

“Angels don’t die, baby. There comes a time when we’re called back to Heaven and are prevented from returning to Earth, but we can’t die. Once we mate with our *dusha tovarishchi* their lifeline becomes attached to ours, and when we ascend to Heaven, they return with us,” Sciniel explained.

“So I’ll never die? I’ll just get older and older until it’s time for me to go to Heaven with you? And then what?” Blake questioned him.

“You’ll forever be the age you are now,” Sciniel told him. “And when we return to Heaven there will be jobs, tasks that you can do, but it’s Paradise and you’ll enjoy spending eternity there... with me.”

Blake stood to his feet and began pacing the room slowly, his steps growing quicker and his hands moving in an agitated manner. “I don’t—I mean, I can’t—I just don’t get it Sciniel. Why me? How is all of this true?” He shook his head and came to an abrupt halt right in front of Sciniel, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. “My parents, my friends, my coworkers... they’ll never understand the fact that I’ll never age. How am I supposed to explain that to them? And since I’m your *dusha tovarishchi* does that mean that I can get pregnant?” Sciniel nodded, swallowing thickly when Blake tossed his hands into the air. “How do I explain *that* to them as well? This is ridiculous! It’s crazy. It’s absolutely impossible. If I hadn’t seen your wings, touched them myself I wouldn’t believe this half-cocked story you just told me. But I know it’s real, I know you’re an angel. I just don’t know why you chose me!”

Sciniel nodded as he sat at the end of the bed and reached out to grab onto Blake’s hips. He brought the younger man close to him and pressed his face into Blake’s abdomen. “You were created for me. You complete me. My

weaknesses are your strengths and vice versa. You are the only one who will keep me sane, keep me grounded. The Almighty saw fit to make my perfect counterpart and place it inside of you. I didn't have to choose you, you were made for me." He sighed and looked up into Blake's eyes. "I know it sounds crazy and it's scary, but believe me when I tell you that it has been happening for millennia. We'll figure something out."

He pulled Blake down until they were eye to eye, and he bared his soul to him. "And no one ever created, no one who was ever born or ever will be born, will love you as much as I will. No one." He took Blake's lips in a deeply passionate kiss and it was only a few seconds before Blake relaxed and began to kiss him back, just as passionately, just as hungrily. He knew that things weren't perfect, but for the moment they were settled. He could only hope that what he'd told Blake wasn't a lie and that he had time to prove it to the younger man, because someone was after his mate and Sciniel would stop at nothing to keep his mate safe.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Blake went back to work the next day, his mind was a hazy mixture of confusion and sexual satisfaction. He and Sciniel had stopped talking about the supernatural after the angel's big reveal the night before and had instead moved on to talk about Blake's family and his job. They'd made love once more and Blake had been happy to wake up that morning with the bigger man's muscled forearm resting against his stomach, Sciniel's face buried in the back of his neck. He'd been a little surprised when the angel had told him that angels slept, but had been happy to know that meant he wasn't going to be alone ever again. He was mated, which was apparently the equivalent of a human marriage that didn't have the option of a divorce, to the most gorgeous man, angel, ever created. He should be on cloud nine, walking around with a perpetual smile on his face, but he found himself on a roller coaster of emotions. Happy, then scared, then completely freaked out, then happy again. It was exhausting him, and while he still smiled brighter than he ever had before, he began wondering if maybe he'd imagined the whole thing.

When his lunch break rolled around, he stepped outside of the restaurant and briefly considered driving the five miles back to his home to see if Sciniel was still there, or if the other man had at least left him a note, only to gasp when he saw the man in question leaning against the wall of the restaurant. Was Sciniel waiting for him? And if he was, why did it fill Blake with happiness and relief?

With a wordless cry, Blake launched himself at Sciniel, wrapping his arms and legs around the bigger man like an octopus when the bigger man lifted him up. He lowered his lips down to Sciniel's and moaned when the other man opened his mouth for Blake's tongue. He lost himself in the haze of lust and passion as their tongues dueled for dominance, and he ground his hardened cock against Sciniel's stomach as the bigger man's hands gripped the globes of his ass. He'd never felt such fire or such desire for someone before, and he didn't know how to handle it, or what to do.

His thoughts came to a shattering halt when Sciniel growled and turned, pressing him against the wall of the restaurant, shielding his body just as the glass at the front of the restaurant exploded. Blake started to tremble, struggling against Sciniel, trying to see what was going on when he heard his mate growl at him.

“Close your damn eyes, Blake!” Sciniel yelled, and hearing the tone of his mate’s words, Blake slammed his eyes shut.

Even with his eyes closed he could sense the bright light shining in front of him. The air was still, frighteningly so, and then slowly, sound returned and he felt the soft touch of Sciniel’s hand on his face.

“Open your eyes, love,” Sciniel’s deep voice sounded above him and Blake slowly opened his eyes to look up at the other man.

“What happened?” Blake asked quietly, noting the distinct absence of sirens, screaming or running feet.

“My brothers and I cleaned up the area, erased the minds of everyone in the vicinity, and Michiel went after the principality that shot at you,” Sciniel told him.

Blake began to tremble and heard Sciniel shushing him in an attempt to comfort him. “They know where you work. Know that we’ve mated. They’ll be coming after you now. I think it’s best that you come to live with me, Blake. For your own safety.”

Blake shook his head. “No. I’m not going to run away from this—this person or thing. You’re just going to have to protect me, but I’m not giving up my place, Sci.”

Sciniel sighed in frustration and closed his eyes. Blake looked around at the other men standing behind Sciniel. They were all tall and muscular, with very broad shoulders and grim looks on their faces. Blake knew they didn’t agree with his decision, but he didn’t care. His life had already been turned upside down because of Sciniel’s appearance in it, he’d be damned if anything else was put out of whack.

“Fine,” Sciniel acquiesced and Blake turned his gaze back to his mate. “You can stay at your place, but I’m moving in to protect you.” He opened his eyes and looked down at Blake with a lascivious grin on his face. “Besides, we’re mated now, and I don’t want to spend another night sleeping without you.”

Blake grinned broadly up at the other man. “Thank you, Sci.”

The taller man nodded and lowered Blake down to his feet. “Shall we go to lunch?”

Blake nodded and took Sciniel’s outstretched hand. There was so much more he didn’t know about his new status as Sciniel’s *dusha tovarishchi*, but he did know that their chance meeting in the steam room at the gym was the greatest thing that ever happened to him. No matter how many attempts were made on his life, he’d found an amazing man who wanted to spend the rest of his life with him. He couldn’t have asked for anything more than what he already had.

His life was finally starting to look up.

THE END

Author Bio

Hi all! I'm Vicktor Alexander but everyone calls me "Vic." Southern gentleman by day, completely displaced and living in Florida, and a writer and purveyor of steamy, sticky, hot man on man (sometimes on man on man on man on man on man) sex. I wrote my first story at the tender age of ten about my youngest biological sister and her destruction of the world... with her breath. I now enjoy writing about shifters, humanoids, cowboys, firemen, rent boys, fairies, elves, dancers, doctors, Doms, Subs, and anything else that catches my fancy, all sexy men falling in love with each other and having lots of naughty, dirty, man-on-man sex. I am the author of the best-selling series, The Tate Pack (which still blows my mind), and am a huge fan of the "happily-ever-after" ending. But while all my characters all ride off into the proverbial sunset, all sexually satisfied and in love (because it's the least I can do), they all bear the scars of fighting for that love, just like in real life. Out and proud, I don't believe that love only comes in one form, one race, one gender and that not only is gender fluid, but sexuality as well. I love to make people laugh (and guys hot) and when I'm not writing, or rather, procrastinating in writing, I'm reading, playing the Sims 3, hanging out with my very supportive friends, my somewhat supportive family, talking to my adopted daughter whom I call Chipmunk, seeking the man or men who can handle my crazy, stressful, soap opera-esque life and being distracted from said writing by listening to videos of John Barrowman, Scott Hoying, Charlie David and Shemar Moore. All interested men may apply, interviews for my partner (or partners) are being held every night... multiple times.

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PURA VIDA

By Sara Alva

Photo Description

A young man lies on his stomach at the beach, sand all over his chest, neck and face. From the slight glare he's giving, it seems as if he's just fallen and is now looking up at the person responsible.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I was on the beach, running through the cold waves that licked at my feet. I thought I was alone as I began heading back. Of course, he would have to show up right then, right where I didn't expect him. I tripped over my own damn feet, ending up sprawled into the fine white sand. It work its way everywhere, sticking to the sweat coating my body. My chest heaved as I stared up at him.

So, I set a scene in the story. Where will you take it from here? What is the back story? Is the "he" showing up a friend, enemy, or love interest? Acquaintances or is he a stranger lusted after from afar? What is about to happen? Who is the main character in the story? Why is he running alone and why did the other character's appearance shock him so much?

Author's choice on genre, as long as there is a new romance involved and you don't have to use first person. I don't care if the characters are friends before or strangers before the romance begins (not insta-love unless you're doing paranormal please).

Sincerely,

Alicia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: new adult, summer love, travel, vacation, family, turtle preservation

Word count: 25,403

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PURA VIDA

By Sara Alva

CHAPTER ONE

Number five looked German... or at least European. No one else wore swim trunks that short or that tight. Bleach-blond hair, wide, chiseled jaw, shoulders and arms that saw plenty of heavy lifting to be so thick, and steel-gray eyes. He strode across the beach as if he owned it.

Simon scratched near his left temple and tilted his head so he could continue observing as number five crossed in front of them and then headed away.

“Right here is fine.” Alyssa stood by while the service staff dragged out a couple of lounge chairs. The men left with polite nods, and she quickly stripped off her sundress.

Simon tossed off his shirt, too. He still had that exam-time paleness going on, but a day in this sun would fix things quickly enough. He settled into the chair beside Alyssa and scanned the beach again. It was a bit of a stretch for his eyes, but that was probably number six out there, bobbing in the ocean. He was dark-haired and had that rugged, couple-days-old stubble defining his cheekbones. The man kept diving under the waves and jumping up again, then throwing back his head and letting the water fly off. The glistening droplets shot out in all directions.

Wading in to get a closer look would’ve been nice, but the guy’s bikini-clad girlfriend beat Simon to it. She slung herself over his shoulders and blocked the view.

No matter. They were only an hour into their first official day of vacation, and Simon was already up to six worth-a-second-look guys. There’d have to be more.

He sent a silent wish toward the graceful white bird arching across the sky.
At least let me have that.

“Something for you, *señorita*?”

Simon turned to find another shirtless man had approached, though this time it was a local, peddling his wares to the vacationers. He’d set his sights on Alyssa.

“Not today, thanks.” She waved him past.

“For you, *señor*?” He angled his body toward Simon.

Sure, he could be number seven. Young. Probably twenty at the most. On the short side—but then a lot of Costa Ricans were—and muscled enough that the sweat-on-tan sheen made his abs hard to resist. Dark brown eyes blinked on in a hopeful face, waiting for Simon to pull the waterproof money pouch from his swim trunks and shell out for whatever touristy crap he had to offer.

“A hat, maybe? Good for the sun, no? I have bracelets, too. Maybe a nice souvenir for the lady?”

Simon huffed a short laugh. “The lady is my sister.”

“Another lady, then?”

This time it was Alyssa who snorted. She pulled down her sunglasses to watch the exchange.

“Uh, some other time,” Simon mumbled, aware of his sister’s judging eyes. He’d already let himself get too wrapped up in the sales pitch. Everyone knew you were supposed to avoid eye contact if you wanted to be left alone... and he’d gone and eye-contacted every bit of the guy’s torso.

He deliberately sent his gaze toward the cliffs that bordered the peaceful little cove. In the distance, the branches of the green trees that covered them bent and swayed, and the brutish call of the howler monkeys could be heard.

Whispering footsteps in sand told Simon the local had moved on, and Alyssa burst out laughing. “God, Simon. Why don’t you just take a picture?”

“What?”

“Pretend you’re texting someone or something and snap a photo. Then when we get back home, you can make a collage. Cover it with glitter and everything. Write the title in bubble letters: ‘Hot Guys I Saw While I Was on Vacation’.”

He grabbed a handful of sand and flung it at her.

“Dumbass!” She fought a losing battle to wipe it off her skin, as the fine grains remained stuck to her suntan lotion.

Simon crossed his arms to glare, but got distracted by numbers eight and nine. They looked like brothers, and they were kicking a soccer ball around a few feet to his right. Tall and lean. Normal-looking swimsuits, so they were probably either American or Canadian. He strained his ears to see if he could catch an *eh*.

“Seriously, though. You want some sisterly advice?” Alyssa relaxed back in her chair again, angling her chin up to catch even more of the sun’s rays. “Put on your sunglasses. Trust me, it makes the ogling much easier.”

“Whatever.” Still, he yanked his out of their beach bag and shoved them on. She had a point.

Another local—a woman—walked by selling brightly colored cover-ups. This time both he and Alyssa kept their eyes averted, and she quickly passed them.

“Hope we’re not getting bugged the whole time,” Alyssa remarked.

Simon shrugged and began scratching at one of the mosquito bites on his arm. Damn pests. They really should’ve eliminated them from fancy resorts like this. “Dad coming out?”

“Speak of the devil.” She jerked her head to the side.

Their father approached, in khaki shorts and his typical white vacation shirt, drink in hand. “There are the two beach bums. Already enjoying the sun?”

Even with the sunglasses on, Simon made sure to keep his eyes away from the possibly-Canadian soccer players. No need to start the vacation on a tense note.

“You gonna lay out, Dad? You could use some color,” Alyssa said.

“No, I’ll meet up with you at the pool later. I have a meeting with the contractor in a few.”

“Mom?” Simon asked.

“Spa.”

Perfect. Simon gave his father a nod and returned to his beach-scanning as they were left alone again. This style of to-each-their-own family vacation suited him just fine. Now, if only he could get rid of Alyssa, he could...

Do what? Find himself a little action?

Right. Because he was such an expert at that. Up to this point, his idea of vacation action involved creepily staring at strangers and using his imagination. And imagination probably wasn’t going to be enough to come back to Leo with. Not if he valued his pride.

“If you keep picking at that, it’s gonna leave a scar,” Alyssa said.

“So what.” He scratched harder, though he did try to keep his fingers from actually ripping the swollen flesh off his arm. “I’d rather have a scar than deal with this insane itching.”

“So you’ll ruin your good looks and end up a lonely leper.”

The clouds parted, allowing the full heat of the sun to pour down on the canvas chairs that dotted the beach. But just as the temperature rose, a breeze passed by to even things out again. The waves crashed a little louder in response.

“Besides...” Alyssa closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Simon couldn’t help doing the same. “It’s a small price to pay for paradise.”

Sunglasses didn't help at night. But hopefully the haze of odd lighting and general drunkenness of the crowd at the resort's club did something to mask Simon's staring. Blues and purples swept across the dance floor, illuminating all the bouncing bodies and making them look like the ocean waves. A few feet away, Alyssa swayed with typical side-to-side footsteps in the arms of some tall blond she'd met at the pool.

It was always just that easy for her. Simon yanked the little paper umbrella out of his drink and snapped the wooden handle, then used the jagged edge to scratch at the infernally itching bite on his arm.

Alyssa broke away and twirled up toward the bar, her still-wet hair flinging beads of water at his face. "Any luck yet, little brother?"

He rolled his eyes and took another swallow of his drink—something green and way too sweet and not nearly strong enough. "Sure. Because all gay guys wear a secret society ring that lights up when another one is near. I'll just look for the glowing pink beacon."

She laughed and tried to ruffle his hair, but he quickly ducked out of reach. "Then how 'bout getting off your ass and joining the party?"

"No thanks." He dug into his pockets to offer a tip to the bartender, even though the drinks were included at the resort. He couldn't really think of a worse job than catering to drunken vacationers every evening. "I'm gonna call it a night."

"Seriously?" Alyssa tugged his arm. "Are you nineteen or ninety?"

He pulled free. "I didn't say I was going to sleep. I might go for a walk or something. Maybe I'll find one of those cool-looking frogs this country is always pimping on all their T-shirts."

"Oh, Simon, Simon." Alyssa shook her head. "What're we gonna do with you?"

He took off his sandals and walked over to the beach. The moon wasn't out that night, but the stars shown down on the cresting waves. No beach he'd been to back in the States had ever been this dark. The resort was far enough

inland that very little of its light made its way to the ocean, and the embracing arms of the mighty bluffs kept any other man-made constructions completely out of sight.

The sand was emptied of all the human activity it saw during the day. Even the chairs had been dragged back onto the resort grounds, so that nothing marred the white dunes. It wasn't a *beach resort* anymore. It was just a place on earth where land met water.

The Costa Ricans had a saying for it. *Pura vida*—pure life. Sounded so nice and simple. Maybe if he meditated out here in the darkness, he'd cool off a bit. And not just in the physical sense. A few weeks without a warm body to press up against wasn't that terrible. He was perfectly fine with Leo's *let's-just-see-how-we-feel-next-year* stance. Or in other words, *let's screw whoever we want over the summer*. It made sense, anyway. Even if he'd gotten out of this family vacation, they'd still have been separated over the break.

And now he was nearly half the earth away.

A tiny crab scuttled by his feet. Or a shadow, or a wisp of blowing sand. It was hard to tell in the darkness. The light was brightest by the water, where the waves, tamed by the bottleneck of the cove, provided a reflective surface. Drawn to the calming crash, he shuffled forward until he collided with a large rock and landed on his knees in the sand.

Except, this rock was moving.

He backed up a few inches as his shaking hand flew to his phone. No cell service here, but the flashlight function worked well enough. He turned it on and swept the light in front of him.

"Holy shit." His words came out in a whisper, carried away by the wind.

The rock was a turtle. A giant, dark brown—or black, perhaps—sea turtle, struggling to pull its massive body through the sand.

Simon held himself completely still, muscles tensed somewhere between fear and excitement. Not that turtles were particularly fearsome creatures—he'd just never been so close to something so wild. The turtle's flippers pushed

through the sand and wet clumps flew at his body, but he didn't move until it had managed to get about a foot away.

Maybe he wouldn't be spending the evening alone, after all.

He quickly switched over to the camera and started to snap photos. Let Alyssa have her clubs and her hot blond men. And Leo his... whoever. How many people could say they sat alone on the beach and watched a sea turtle continue the circle of life?

The flash of the camera lit up the space around him, allowing him to make out more details of his friend's shell. A few rough gouges ran through it, and the back right edge was cracked and jagged. This turtle had seen some life.

More than he had, at any rate.

"Stop!"

A shout rang out in the silent night. Simon turned his phone back into a flashlight and waved it around in the direction of rapidly approaching footsteps.

"The light! Stop the light!"

For some reason, his brain did not cooperate, so even though it was clear what the voice was telling him to do, Simon sat there frozen with the phone still in his hands. He could make out the white shorts coming toward him, but the rest of the man's skin was bare, and dark.

Before the man could reach him, the turtle made a sudden move and a glob of sand landed in Simon's mouth. The creature was turning around, heading back to the ocean.

"*Idiota!*"

The owner of the angry voice was near now, hissing instead of shouting, but Simon was too busy watching the turtle leave to notice he was close enough to snatch his phone. The light winked off.

"It scares them away. *Mierda*. Now she is leaving."

The turtle became a rock-like lump again in the distance. Eventually a strong enough wave came and picked her up, and she disappeared into the ocean.

“I... I didn’t know. I wasn’t trying to bother her. I only wanted some pictures to show—”

Simon’s cellphone was slammed back into his hands, and he finally looked up to meet the person—obviously a local—whose country’s wildlife he’d just unknowingly tortured. The shame burned from the pit of his stomach and up into his chest.

And worse, Simon recognized him. He’d gotten a good enough look earlier in the day. Except now the boy wasn’t smiling, and he didn’t look hopeful. His eyes smoldered with a quiet fierceness, like they’d been the things to light the fire in Simon’s insides, and his teeth were clenched so tightly that his temples bulged forward beneath dark, wind-tossed hair.

Number seven. The shirtless local.

“I’m really sorry.”

He didn’t look over. The ocean waves must’ve been more interesting. “If you see a turtle again, do not shine lights.”

Then he walked off, leaving Simon to stare after his faint shadow, cast by the stars.

CHAPTER TWO

“Are you having a good time, honey?”

“Hm?” Simon’s sunglasses were firmly planted this time, so he didn’t think his mother could see his brooding eyes. “Sure.”

A waiter came by and dropped off two margaritas. Simon dug his into the sand so it wouldn’t topple over. The bar-to-beach service had been a thrill his first day out, but now he found himself keeping track of just how long it took a drink to arrive. Twenty minutes this time, the ice all but completely melted, when he could’ve walked back over to the resort and gotten his own in five.

“I’m a little surprised you came out with us this year.” His mother signaled for another member of the staff to drag the large umbrella a little closer to her chair, now that the sun was shifting in the sky. Lathered with sunscreen and under a large floppy hat as she was, Simon wondered why she even bothered coming out at all.

But the roll of his eyes was cut short by the sad look in hers. That *my-boy’s-growing-up-and-I-can’t-stop-it* thing that always made him feel just a little sorry for her.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He smiled and squeezed her hand. “This place is pretty sweet.”

She patted his fingers before slipping away to grip her book again. “I just meant, if you’d had some reason to stay home, we would have understood. What about that thing with that boy?”

“He went home to Oregon for the summer.” Simon dragged his arm back through the sand and shifted to reclaim the ocean view.

“Simon, you know if it were anything... important, your father and I would like to meet him.”

Important? Screwing when they were together and *screw you* when they weren’t? Not that Simon had ever been promised anything more. But it

obviously couldn't be too important, unless they decided to pick up where they left off next year. Until the next summer, of course.

He tried to picture a nice family dinner with Alyssa, some newly-hooked tall blond, his beside-herself-with-excitement mother, his father wearing an *I'll-force-myself-to-bear-it* face, and Leo. Sarcastic, sexy, and just a little bit cruel Leo.

Shit. He really did need to screw someone else to get Leo off his mind.

“Hats! Bracelets! T-shirts!”

Simon's gaze flew up to the sound, and he recognized the sudden forceful thump of his heart. Hope that he'd lay eyes on the boy from the night before. Even if it was only to see that burning anger, because God, on him it was *hot*.

No luck, though. It was a different man—older, with weathered skin and tobacco-stained teeth.

Simon worked his fingers into the sand and wondered how many turtles had dragged their awkward bodies through it when night came and the wild claimed this stretch of land once again.

He'd probably have better luck meeting another turtle here than another man.

He left his mother and Alyssa at a karaoke night to comb the beaches again, either out of hope or guilt. Maybe guilt should've made him leave nature alone, but now he felt like he had to show someone... himself, maybe, that he wasn't just a dumb American tourist, messing with the ecosystem of another country.

This time, he'd only watch. From a respectful distance.

He walked left, toward the closer of the two bluffs that bordered the cove. There wasn't much of a breeze, and after about ten minutes he waded into the ocean, letting the touch of water provide some relief from the humid night air.

He took off his shirt, too, and used it to sop up the beads of sweat on his neck before tying it to the belt of his shorts.

Laughter caught his attention. He strained his eyes to peer ahead, but didn't dare turn on his phone. Not even when he caught more shouting—in Spanish—and a stream of bright light emerged from just on the other side of the bluff.

He picked up his speed. What if it were more tourists, bothering marine life? He'd seen some drunken Argentinians at the beach earlier. As he got closer, he was able to make out at least five different bodies. They were crouching over something, and one man had a large gray sack thrown over his shoulder.

That didn't look good.

Sand gave way to rocks, and Simon's feet slipped against them as the waves lapped into the crevices. "Hey! You guys, the lights are bad for—"

Someone grabbed his shoulder and yanked him toward the bluff. He fell back against the rocks, colliding with something sharp on his left side.

"What the—" A strong hand landed on his mouth, and he found himself staring into almost-familiar eyes.

"Quiet," the boy commanded.

Not that Simon had much of a choice, with fingers jamming his lips into his teeth. He shook his head to free himself. "But those men—"

"Are poachers."

"So what're you standing around here for?" He started edging along the bluff. "Yesterday you looked almost mad enough to punch me in the face for scaring that turtle, and now you're just gonna let them get away with... what are they doing?"

The boy gritted his teeth and leaned against the rocks beside Simon. "They take the eggs. And probably the mother, too. For the shell."

"Then let's stop them." Simon started forward again.

In another flash of movement, the boy's dark arms came to rest on either side of Simon, preventing him from leaving. "You care?" His tanned chest, bare yet again, pressed in close.

Simon's heart reacted immediately, the space between beats getting shorter and shorter, like some kind of alarm. *A collision is impending.* "Yes."

With a huff the local moved away, though he switched to Simon's other side so that he was still blocking him. "There are six of them and one of you."

"There's two of us," Simon corrected.

"Two of us, and six of them with machetes, maybe. I already called the police." He pulled out a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

"And they'll come?"

Ocean-smoothed pebbles plunked into the surf as the boy flipped them over with bare toes. "No." Before the next wave could crash, a hideous crack erupted in the night air, and his body tightened in on itself with a shudder. "It's over."

Simon folded his arms to give his skin some warmth. When had the night become so cold? As he stifled the chill, his hand grazed the sore spot where he'd hit the rocks earlier. The contact stung, and he pulled his fingers away to peer at the sticky substance on them—his blood.

"You're hurt?" the boy asked, bending over to see in the poor light. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" He turned abruptly. "Come, we can clean it up here."

"It's all right. I can just go back to the resort..."

But his companion was already walking away by then, so Simon shut his mouth and hurried after him. They traveled silently for several paces before the blanket of awkwardness on the still night forced Simon into small-talk. "I'm Simon, by the way."

"Juan."

Good. Now he could stop referring to him as *boy* or *shirtless local* in his thoughts. It seemed a little disrespectful.

He hadn't seen any houses around this isolated beach, and he was sort of wondering if they were about to venture into the rainforest and wind up at a little shack. So he felt like even more of a disrespectful ass when they arrived at a white concrete building just over a large sand dune. A sign out front read "Sea Turtle and Marine Animal Conservation" and what was probably the same thing in Spanish.

"This isn't your house," Simon pointed out. Genius, really. Pure genius.

Juan raised a brow. "This is where I work."

"I thought you, uh, sold stuff for a living."

"That I do for money. This I do for—" he squinted like he was searching for the word. "For heart."

Simon grinned, and some further stupidity took hold of his tongue. "Oh yeah? Like the short Planeteer?"

Juan gave him a scowl that clearly said he had no idea what Simon was talking about, but still figured he was being insulted.

"It's not a bad thing," Simon mumbled as Juan shoved his keys into the lock and led them inside.

The space was small, with a cot lying to the right and a desk with a computer on the left. Posters of anatomically labeled sea turtles lined the walls, along with a few underwater photos.

Juan walked him to the bathroom and yanked out a first aid kit from under the sink. He watched as Simon rinsed out the gash.

"The water's clean here, right?" Simon scooped another handful into his palm and gingerly let it fall against his side.

Juan's eyes narrowed—still accompanying that scowl—and Simon bit his tongue. He wasn't trying to be offensive, but his American first-aid-trained mind wouldn't let him get away without double-checking.

“All of Costa Rica’s water is safe for tourists. You have my promise.”

He’d heard that already, but it didn’t hurt to ask again, now that his innards were exposed to whatever was trickling out of the building’s faucet. “So much for not scarring myself while on vacation.”

Now Juan grinned at him—for the first time. The left side of his lip curled up further than the right, and he tilted his head, almost as if to compensate, but somehow it seemed fitting for his dark oval face. “Scars are the body’s way of telling stories.”

Simon stuck on a large Band-Aid to cover up his wound. “Is that Costa Rican poetry?”

Juan’s grin disappeared, and a frown replaced it.

Shit. It really wasn’t Simon’s intention to come off as an ass every other moment.

“Uh, so what is this place? You study sea turtles or something?”

“We... save them. Preserve,” Juan added as an afterthought, like he’d just remembered the correct term. “They are endangered.”

“Yeah, I know. Pretty sad.”

Juan shuffled his feet against the tiled floor. Some dried sand dropped off and he flicked at it with his big toe. “You... want to see?”

“See?”

Juan turned and started walking toward the back of the building, so Simon followed. He stepped out a rear door and found himself back on the beach, but in an enclosed area. The ground was dotted with fences that surrounded piles of sand. And one of the piles was moving.

“It’s a good time,” Juan said, waving Simon forward. His eyes sparked to life with a brighter look than seemed possible for such dark irises. “The babies hatch.”

Simon peered over his shoulder and noticed a little track of dried saltwater on Juan's back. It must've dripped down from his hair, and maybe gotten mixed in with some sand and sweat on its way down. Luckily, the first signs of life within the fence below captured his attention before he could follow the trail all the way to its end.

A tiny green flipper burst out of the sand, and the white of a broken egg could be seen. An even smaller face poked out a second later, before more flippers, faces, and shells joined the fray.

"Oh my God," Simon whispered, right beside Juan's neck, which caused a waft of the salt-and-sweat smell of his skin to be blown into the air. He stepped back so he could think clearly instead of just inhaling the scent. "They're so adorable."

Juan chuckled. "Yes. Beautiful." He walked into the building again and emerged a second later with a plastic bin and some pairs of latex gloves. "Would you like to help?"

"Help? Help do what?"

"We release them now," Juan said, gesturing to the baby turtles. "To the ocean."

"Oh. Sure." Maybe Simon would be getting his chance to make things up to Mother Nature after all.

They scooped up the wriggling things one at a time and placed them in the plastic bin. Neither of them spoke, and Simon managed to keep his eyes off Juan for once, as the turtles squirmed under his gloved fingertips. A couple of times he glanced at Juan's hands, though, to watch the way he lovingly cupped each hatchling before gently putting them into their temporary home. It was pretty sweet, actually.

Once all of the turtles had been gathered, the two of them took off toward the ocean.

“Do you do this every night?” Simon asked. Juan still didn’t seem eager to make conversation, but that could’ve just been the language barrier. Too bad Simon barely spoke a word of Spanish.

“Every night there are babies. It’s safer to release them at night. Not so many predators. Or people.”

“Sure, makes sense.” They reached the water’s edge, and Juan waded in up to his ankles. Then he switched on a light.

He must have seen Simon’s mouth open to object, and he flashed that crooked grin again. “This time, it’s okay. The babies go toward the light on the water. Like it was the moon.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

“Now you stand back and put them in the sand. They will find their way.”

Simon followed Juan’s directions, taking a turtle and placing it down by his feet. Juan waved the flashlight in front of him a few times, and the hatchling started wriggling toward the water. An explosion of frothy ocean foam carried it out to sea.

“They’re so small.” Simon began putting the rest of them down in the sand. “Do they really stand a chance?” He’d seen those National Geographic programs when he was a kid. Tiny things in the ocean usually had a hard and short life ahead of them.

Juan shrugged. “Not all of them. But more now that we preserve them.”

A few hatchlings toppled over each other in their race to the water, and Simon bent down to set them straight again. “This has to be one of the top ten most awesome jobs. I mean, even if you only do it for *heart*, and not for pay.”

The last turtle disappeared in a wave, and Juan switched off his light. In the sudden darkness, Simon could only make out his lopsided smile.

CHAPTER THREE

“Again?” Alyssa stared at him like he’d broken out in pink polka dots. He could’ve, of course, if those damn mosquitoes had started biting any higher up on his body.

“Look, the beach is really... cool at night.” It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her just what *cool* meant, because even Alyssa would’ve squealed at the chance to play with baby sea turtles. But for some reason, he didn’t. “I’m just going for an evening run. You’re welcome to join me.”

And he’d said *that* because he knew damn well she never would.

“Right.” Alyssa spritzed on some bug repellent. “See ya.”

He doused himself thoroughly in the stuff, too, because the five bites on his leg from the previous night were enough to make him want to tear off a layer of skin. The fumes he inhaled from the spray were pretty toxic smelling, and the next few moments were spent coughing them out.

By then Alyssa had departed for one of her nightlife jaunts, so he wandered into the main room of the suite to find his parents curled up on the love seat, watching some foreign film.

“Oh, Simon, come and join us.” His mother waved him over.

“I’m kinda going out.”

His father’s eyes flicked up for a moment and then back down.

“To the beach,” Simon added, just so the ridge between his father’s brows would smooth out again. “Can I borrow your Taser?”

Now it was his mother’s turn to crease her forehead, though only for a moment. She didn’t like to make *worry expressions* for too long because they gave her wrinkles. “What for?”

“I dunno. I was just gonna go out for a walk. I can get to the other beach if I cross some rocks at the end of the cove, but I don’t really know who lives over there, and well, you know.”

“Well... all right. It’s in my purse.”

His dad made an uneasy *real-men-fight-with-fists* face, but didn’t comment.

Simon secured his mother’s self-protection weapon, then fixed his hair—stupidly, because the wind out there this evening would mess it up again—and left through the back entrance of his room.

The thought occurred to him that he might come across as a stalker, returning to find Juan for yet another night in a row. But he figured it’d be easy enough to tell him he was only interested in the turtles. He was thinking of majoring in bio, after all.

And it *was* the turtles he was interested in. Mostly.

He went to the little turtle preservation building first, but all the lights were out, and the door was locked. From the way the beach curved, it was difficult to do a full scan, so he backed up a ways and stood on a hill to look around. The only thing he could really make out was a faint flash of red, blinking on and off again, all the way at the other side of the cove.

With nothing better to do, he walked toward the light.

He saw Juan first this time, because of that red flashlight. As Simon got closer he could make out his dark form sitting cross-legged in the sand and examining something at regular intervals.

Juan shined the light at his face when he was a few feet away. “Oh. Simon.”

He liked the way Juan said his name. There was an extra emphasis on the *o* that made it sound a little more exotic, and a little less like he was named after a children’s game.

“Hey. I was out for a walk and I saw the red light. Is it a special thing for the turtles or something?”

Juan’s grin made him feel like he’d passed some kind of test. “Yes. It doesn’t bother them. If you want to watch them, this is what you should use.”

The wind died down for a moment, letting soft scraping sounds echo louder in the night. Knowing already what it would be, Simon remained exactly where he was and just craned his neck around Juan to catch a glimpse of another giant sea turtle, already over a foot deep into digging a nest in the soft sand.

“You’re watching over her?”

Juan nodded. “And when she’s done, I take the eggs to keep them safe.”

Simon crossed his legs and sank down into the sand beside him. “Cool. How long does it take, usually?”

“Hours.” Juan flicked the red flashlight on again so he could see black-brown flippers thrusting through sand.

“Shit, really?”

“If she likes this nest. If she doesn’t, she may go to another and take more hours.”

“Wow. And you just sit out here the whole time?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me to spend my summer on the beach.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Simon agreed, and then felt kind of shitty because his summer at the beach and Juan’s summer at the beach were two completely different worlds. He got to stay in a fancy hotel suite at an all-inclusive resort with his own room, his own TV, and their own private hot tub on the patio. Juan walked the beaches every night and lived... where?

“Hey, do you stay at that place? The turtle center?”

“I stay there now. A married couple runs it, but they are on vacation. During the year I live back in town with my grandmother.”

“Oh.” It’d never occurred to him that people who lived by a beach would take summer vacations. Where did they go? To a ski resort?

He almost opened his mouth to ask, but talk of resorts seemed out of place here, with only sand and sky and sea anywhere within eyesight. Better to keep the discussion to territory he knew Juan was comfortable with. “See any poachers out here today?”

“They are always here. Not so much this beach, because of the tourists.”

“Isn’t it illegal? I mean, aren’t you guys all about eco-tourism and stuff?”

“Yes.” An ant crawled across Juan’s knee, and he watched it go about its way. “Some people simply continue with what they know. But less now than what it was.”

Continue with what they know. Like Simon had done, even after Leo had proposed their little hiatus. Why give up on good sex?

He flicked an ant off his own leg, accidentally brushing against one of the mosquito bites and biting the inside of his cheek as the pain flared and then subsided. “So what do they do with the eggs?”

“Sell them.”

He grimaced. “To make omelets?”

Juan laughed, the sound both deep and still partially a giggle. “It’s considered a... delicacy. Especially to increase...” He squinted. “Sex?”

“You mean like, an aphrodisiac? Or to increase libido or something?”

“Yes. That.”

“Idiots.” Simon swiped his hand over a patch of sand as if to clear away the image of dirty old men swallowing turtle fetuses. “Are turtles even known for their sexual prowess? Why don’t they eat bunnies or something?”

Juan laughed again, locking onto Simon’s gaze. “You would be surprised. They actually have big, powerful penises, when the time calls for it.”

A rush of internal heat most likely colored Simon's skin, and he ducked his head down to avoid Juan's still-laughing eyes. "You, uh, wanna do something about it? The poachers, I mean." He jerked to pull the Taser out of his pocket. He wanted to show Juan what it did, but not at the risk of disturbing the nesting turtle.

Juan's expression changed. Still a smile, but a patronizing one. "Not a good idea, Simon."

"Hey, I'm not saying we go after a gang. Maybe just pick off one or two? Just to rescue the eggs? I've seen this thing in action... it will incapacitate someone for sure."

Juan sighed, then stretched toward him. Simon licked his lips and swallowed sand, which didn't help provide any moisture for his throat.

"Here." Juan pointed to a spot right above his hip. Simon followed his finger to a slightly puckered area of skin, a few shades darker than the rest of his body. "Before I worked at the turtle center, I tried to stop someone. I was thirteen only. I don't think he meant to hurt me. Just... teach me a lesson."

"And give your body a story to tell," Simon added. Juan narrowed his eyes, but from the twitch of his lips, it was only mock-irritation.

"The story is, the best way to make a change is with education and preservation. Not fists."

Simon's face burned again, warmer than the air around him. It had been a pretty stupid idea. He wasn't sure how he'd even gotten it in his head. Maybe he'd imagined he and Juan would startle some would-be criminal, save the day for a sea turtle in need, and then celebrate with a fueled-by-adrenaline...

"But it was a... nice thought." Juan leaned back in the sand and rested his head on his arms.

Imagination, 1, Reality, 0.

For a long time, Simon couldn't think of anything else to say. Juan hadn't exactly invited him to stay and stand watch, but he hadn't said goodbye, either.

The red light flicked on again, and Simon took advantage of the moment to study Juan's body. In all the times they'd run into each other, he'd yet to see him in a shirt or shoes. Not that either of those things were necessary out here—and not that Simon would have wanted him to put on a shirt, anyway.

Apparently, he had a thing for small, compact guys. For guys whose ab muscles he could make out rippling just a tiny bit every time they breathed. Or for dark skin, or for lopsided grins.

Lopsided grins that were aimed straight at him, catching him in the act of stupidly staring.

He quickly turned so he was facing the turtle instead, but he could still feel Juan's eyes on him. Shit. Maybe sunglasses at night wasn't such a bad idea.

He chewed on his lip, his tongue taking in tiny grains of sand, and started brainstorming clever turtle-related questions to divert Juan's attention from his lapse in judgment. Should he ask how many eggs were laid in a... what's-it-called... clutch? Or maybe, what species this turtle was? How many came ashore in the summer...

"Simon?"

"Hm?" He didn't look over.

"You like... men?"

Oh, fuck. His stomach muscles clenched and a mouthful of sandy saliva stopped midway down his throat. According to the Internet, Costa Ricans were supposed to be fairly tolerant... in a don't-ask, don't-tell, don't-flaunt-it kind of way. But now that Juan *had* asked, was he supposed to say yes? No? Sorry?

Of course, he could just say nothing, since that made things obvious enough.

By the sounds of shifting sand, Juan was moving behind him. "We could... pass the time," Juan said.

Waves crashed with new intensity, the roar echoing in Simon's head. It wasn't until several seconds had passed that he realized it was really the crash

of his own blood within his ears. Had he missed cues? Or maybe he didn't even need to look for them at all. Maybe he just needed to go around making himself obvious enough that someone else could find *him*. Hell, it could be his go-to strategy for the rest of the summer... as long as his dad wasn't around.

He turned to face Juan. The crooked grin was much more tentative this time, but even with the language issue between them, he knew damn well what it meant.

He drew toward Juan slowly. "That sounds... good."

They kept their hands firmly planted in the sand, so it was only Juan's lips he touched at first. Rough, and with a few cracks running through them, but still full and warm. Salty breath slipped in with the kiss, drawing out the tip of Simon's tongue as it searched for the accompanying taste. He met only a wall of teeth, until he stretched his arm up to grip the back of Juan's head and deepen the connection. The wall finally parted, and just as Simon reached the start of a hot mouth... Juan pulled away with a grimace.

He spit in the sand and Simon had never felt as sick as he did then. Like his stomach was going to turn backward and empty all the shrimp and plantains and tiny balls of melon from the buffet along with anything else he'd ever eaten on the sand below. And Juan's laughter only made it worse, made him feel like running into the ocean and vanishing with a wave.

"You taste like poison," Juan said, still giggling.

Oh. "Shit! It's the bug spray. I kept getting bug bites, so I put on too much... um, I can run back to my room and wash it off, it'll only take a few—"

Juan grabbed his arm. There was sand on his fingers, and it scraped against Simon's skin as he started to pull him up. "We have water right here."

"Uh... you mean the ocean?" Juan's hand slipped away as Simon got to his feet. "But couldn't there be... sharks in there at night?"

"Yes," Juan replied.

Simon stopped walking, the tips of his toes touching the water line on the beach.

“There are sharks in the day, too,” Juan continued, his lopsided grin growing into a full, teasing smile.

“How comforting.” An enthusiastic wave crashed into Simon’s ankles, and he retreated a few inches.

“Simon.” Juan laughed his name, walking backward into the water and continuing to tease with the playful glint in his eyes. “You are a scaredy-cat?”

“Scaredy-cat?” He snorted. “Who taught you English? No one says that.”

“Coward, then?”

“I’ll show you coward.” He lunged forward and pushed Juan into the surf. Juan emerged spluttering something in Spanish a few seconds later, and even though Simon was expecting the counter-attack, he let Juan drag him into the waves anyway. He stayed under for a while, scrubbing his skin to rid it of that *poison* taste.

When he came up for air, a shot of burning salt water slammed into his mouth. He choked on it and rubbed frantically at his eyes so he’d at least stand a better chance of avoiding the next attack.

But it wasn’t a wave that hit him next. It was Juan’s lips. This time, he was sure all Juan tasted was salt. He caught a hint of sweet mango on Juan’s tongue, and he clung to it, drawing out the last moments of flavor before the sea completely overwhelmed his senses.

The waves continued to rock them, and they started to drift apart. Simon wrapped his arms around Juan to draw him close again. He wasn’t sure if that was too much *touching* for a hook-up, but there didn’t seem to be another option. And it wasn’t like he didn’t want to lay his hands on Juan’s skin, which still radiated heat as though it was holding onto some of the sun it had soaked up earlier.

Another big wave came for them, and as Simon was taller, he jumped and carried Juan with him to avoid being hit in the face. The undertow pulled them into deeper waters, where Juan couldn't stand. His legs tangled around Simon's, searching for a grip. Eventually he wrapped them around Simon's hips, allowing the bulge at his crotch to press into Simon's stomach.

"This how you pass the time with all the American tourists?" Simon asked.

Juan leaned in to nibble on his lip. "Some."

It may only have been more teasing, but it served the purpose to remind Simon he was supposed to be lusting here, not talking.

He dove into Juan's mouth, stopping to sputter whenever the ocean also forced its way in. After a few minutes, the kissing wasn't enough, and the rocking of the waves was making him crave more control over their movements.

"Should we go—"

A necessary leap above a cresting wave and the clink of Juan's teeth against his shut him up. Go where, at this point, really? The beach? Way too fucking sandy. And any other place would require time and awkward shuffling. The moment was now.

Juan let out a small gasp and then shoved his hips forward, creating pressure between their bodies. He was a little too high up on Simon's torso for it to be the *right* kind of pressure, though.

Something Juan easily remedied by unwrapping one arm and one leg from Simon's body so he could reach down, his nimble fingers slipping under the band of Simon's shorts and gripping him firmly. His skin still burned so much hotter than the water that his touch made Simon throw back his head and nearly fall away. Simon's eyes rolled upward, toward the sky. Toward a thousand stars, much brighter than they ever shown at home. Pinpricks of light mimicking the goose bumps rising out of his skin as the pleasure washed through him.

Juan kept hold of him with his other tightly wound leg, and a clench of his muscles brought Simon back to earth—or ocean—long enough to remember his part in this. They untangled briefly for his frantic hands to lower Juan's shorts, and then reconnected so he could latch onto Juan's erection as well. As the waves rocked them, they both pumped in sync.

Flashes of hot breath, the slap of the water against their skin, and the occasional bite of Juan's teeth on his lower lip drove Simon toward release. The friction wasn't as much as he would have liked, but the foreignness of what he was doing—of who he was doing it with, of where they were, of how the whole world seemed empty of everyone except them—gave him all the added fire needed. He thrust his tongue into Juan's mouth the way he wished he could thrust something else and spilled out into the ocean, where the traces would never be seen again.

Juan took a few seconds longer, bouncing up against him, before his hips jerked forward and his muscles hardened, and the throbbing in Simon's hand pulsed to a stop.

Simon unwrapped his fingers and stepped back, leaving Juan adrift for a moment. Juan kicked his legs into a lazy, spent treading motion. Even his grin looked more lopsided than normal.

Still adorable, though.

The move to pull him in for another kiss was cut short as something slipped through the water beside them, and instead Simon wound up practically jumping into Juan's arms.

"It's the turtle," Juan whispered, right next to his ear. It tickled and Simon nuzzled into Juan's shoulder to get rid of the feeling.

"Is she gone?" He clung to Juan a little too tightly—he couldn't remember if sea turtles bit people, but didn't want to chance it.

"Yes. She moves much faster in the water."

Simon finally eased up on his hold, reluctantly, and Juan pulled away. He sloshed out of the ocean and left Simon standing there, not quite sure if his legs were ready to function on dry land. "Time for work."

They put on gloves to gather the eggs and then walked back to the Preservation building together. Juan stood at the door, though, and blocked Simon's way in.

"Thank you, Simon," he said, glancing at him from beneath his dark lashes. He stretched up to kiss him quickly.

Clearly, the evening had come to a close. That chaste a kiss was meant to be *The End*. The point where Simon walked away and reveled in the glory that was a one-night-stand with an exotic foreigner.

His tongue shot out over his lips and he tasted salt. Probably just the salt dried on his own skin now, but it still reminded him of Juan's mouth. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

Juan froze with his keys in the lock. "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Simon dug a foot into the sand. "I just thought it might be... fun... to, uh, pass the time."

And maybe jerking each other off in the ocean, as exotic as it sounded, wasn't quite enough. He'd found a gay guy in the middle of the wilderness in another country. He had to take full advantage, didn't he?

Juan blinked several times, his brow crinkling. It wasn't exactly a scowl, but it wasn't the crooked grin, either. "Tomorrow I'll be here," he said quietly. He pushed his way inside and gave Simon one last glance before shutting the door behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tomorrow I'll be here was not an invitation. Then again, it wasn't a ban, either. So Simon drank a margarita with Alyssa at the bar, played a few rounds of poker with his dad and his business partner, and even watched a Simpsons episode in Spanish with his mother. But at midnight, when everyone started to turn in and bedroom doors began closing, he knew he'd be going out to the beach again.

And even if he wasn't *expecting* anything, he tucked a condom and a small bottle of lube into his pocket. Couldn't hurt to be prepared.

This time, he walked around for almost an hour and found nothing. No turtles and no Juan. He eventually reached the edge of the beach where they'd been the second time they'd met, and he headed up to the Preserve. The blinds were drawn, but a faint light could still be seen inside.

He knocked quietly at first, and got no response. Deciding that meant no one was there, he had no reason to feel embarrassed about how much louder he pounded a minute later.

The door swung open and he stumbled back a few inches. Juan looked up at him, eyes half-lidded and unfocused with the heaviness of sleep still on them. "Simon?"

"Oh, shit. You were sleeping? I thought since you worked nights..."

Juan rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Well, shit, sorry I bothered you."

He started to turn away, but sand-coated fingers stopped him. Juan's touch always felt gritty, since that very first time he'd had his hand over Simon's mouth. Even in the water he'd still had a layer of sand stuck to him, like he was part-sand himself.

"You can come in, if you want."

"Oh, uh, okay."

He stepped inside and looked over at the cot, where the blankets were clearly jumbled from a hasty departure.

“Uh, so, no turtle action today?”

Juan shook his head. “I walked the beach for a while, but nothing. There are less turtles coming here every year. I will go back out in a while.”

“Oh. Guess you don’t get a lot of rest, usually.” And here he’d gone and interrupted Juan’s brief nap because he was a horny American teenager.

But the momentary shame wasn’t quite enough to distract him from the look of sleepy-innocence on Juan’s face. Because Juan wasn’t as innocent as he appeared, and that just made Simon’s blood pump even faster.

Juan sat on the edge of the cot and patted the spot beside him, so Simon took it. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Simon considered revving up the small talk—even remembered some of the questions he’d come up with yesterday about marine life—but he stopped himself. *Talk* wasn’t what this was supposed to be about. Besides, he’d let Juan make the first move yesterday. Now it was his turn.

He placed his hand on Juan’s face. There wasn’t so much stubble there, but the sand served as almost the same texture. Leo had always been clean-shaven, and the different sensation made Simon smile.

Maybe Leo was right. Maybe they really had needed to get out there and see what else the world had to offer.

When Juan stared up into his eyes, Simon took that as acceptance and moved in for the kiss.

Juan lay back on the bed and Simon moved to hover above him, still attached to his lips. Inches from Juan’s torso, it finally registered that for the first time since they’d met, Juan had on a T-shirt. It was one of the kinds they sold at all the souvenir shops, with a toucan and a frog and that *Pura Vida* slogan written across it. And even if it would’ve been natural to be peeling off that shirt at a time like this, the novelty of Juan fully-clothed had Simon’s

breath rushing out in uneven bursts of air. His hands roamed above the fabric, searching for the indentations of the muscles he knew lay beneath.

Their lips broke apart, and Juan gave him a studying look. Whatever he was expecting to find escaped Simon, though, and his impatient brain kicked into babbling to try to force things forward.

“I brought stuff. I didn’t know if you had, or if you wanted to...”

Juan bit his lip and nodded. “We can.”

Then Juan began undressing himself, and Simon fumed silently, because maybe if he hadn’t opened his mouth he could’ve been the one doing that. He could’ve been the one to slip his hand beneath that colorful shirt and coast his way up Juan’s skin as he took it off. He could’ve been the one to sneak a finger into the band of his shorts and yank them down, tracing his lower abs and groin along the way.

Instead, he just took off his own clothes and waited until they were both naked on the cot.

Juan flipped onto his stomach, which at least solved their next problem without requiring Simon to talk. Dark-skinned and dusty with that ever-present fine layer of sand, Juan’s body lay spread out before him. Simon dragged his hands along Juan’s back, the grains of sand grating under his fingertips.

No need for further discussion... and maybe too much foreplay wasn’t a good idea, either. Simon retrieved the lube and condom from his shorts at the side of the bed. He prepared and slipped in as gently as possible, grabbing hold of Juan’s torso to help control the thrusts.

Juan groaned something wordless into the sheets of the cot.

Simon closed his eyes, but they kept opening again without his permission. Kept skirting over Juan’s back, over his dark hair, clumped into little dreads by saltwater and sand. He focused in on Juan’s skin so deeply he could make out the tiny hairs rising from it, fine and golden, somehow... maybe bleached blond by the sun.

Juan arched up into him and came against the sheets in long streaks that only narrowly missed a lumpy gray pillow. Simon wasn't quite there yet, so he finally shut his eyes completely and concentrated on himself. He drove in harder and ran his fingers over Juan's tensing muscles, breathing in the thickening scent of sweat that rose off his body.

With one final thrust, Simon released, his eyes shooting open as a drop of his own sweat landed on Juan's now-slick skin. It followed a zigzag trail between grains of sand before pooling at Juan's spine.

The last pleasurable shudders left Simon's body, and for a brief moment, he wanted to lay a line of kisses at Juan's shoulders. But instead he just slipped out to clean himself off.

Juan scrambled up so he could pull the sheets off the thin mattress. He tossed them in a heap on the floor, pulled up his trunks, and crawled back onto the cot.

"Sorry about the sheets." Simon offered a half-smirk as he put on his shorts.

"It's okay."

Silence followed. Juan pulled his knees up to his chest and gave him a smile, but his Adam's apple slid down his neck a little too rapidly.

"Um, everything okay?" Simon found his voice oddly tight, his own throat closing on swallows of air.

He'd done what he'd set out to do. What Leo had practically *pushed* him into doing. So where was the promised reward? Coming? He could do that on his own, really. Why did he feel so damn guilty all of a sudden?

Juan looked up quickly. "Of course. It's nice to spend time with someone who can... share your interests."

Share your interests? It could've been that whole language thing again, but Simon didn't think he meant his casual interest in marine life. He was pretty sure it meant *because we both like to fuck guys*.

Which was the entire point of a hook-up.

Simon shifted to dangle his legs over the side of the cot. “Do you want me to leave now? Or, um, we could...”

Juan chuckled softly. “If you want to go again tonight, I need a moment. Long day, and it’s been very hot outside.”

“Yeah.” It had been a scorcher, but then again, Simon had been lying by a poolside with a drink in his hand, while Juan had been walking the beach under the blazing sun with a heavy bag full of souvenirs to sell. “Lie down and rest a while, then,” Simon found himself saying. “I’ll keep you company.”

Were those hook-up words? Probably not. But they were human words, and Simon wasn’t just going to *use* Juan. Not like Leo had *used* him as a warm place to lie the whole freaking year, only to write him off...

Juan squinted at him with a new kind of a smile, pulling him from the negative thoughts. Still crooked with his lips, but it came with those narrowed eyes and raised brows and it meant *I’m not really sure what to make of that...* or maybe he just wasn’t sure what to make of Simon.

But he did what Simon had suggested. Simon lay next to him, squished up against his side because there wasn’t room for anything else.

The rest didn’t last long. In the quiet there were only noisy voices in Simon’s brain, repeating Juan’s words. *Share your interests*. Because even if this was all about the sex, that didn’t mean Simon had to be a shallow jackass who didn’t give a damn about who Juan was, or what his real interests were.

“So, uh...” He placed his fingers on Juan’s arm and scattered away a few grains of sand. “You in school?”

Simon didn’t look at his eyes, because there wasn’t really a whole lot of room to turn his head, and because he just knew Juan would be making another one of those confused expressions. It was taking him too long to answer.

“Yes. I go to school.” Then Juan paused again. “Many tourists think because I sell cheap things to them in the summer that I live in a rainforest hut.”

He laughed, and Simon chuckled along with him. And no, Simon wasn’t going to dwell on the fact that for a split second, he’d maybe thought that, too.

“I study business. I could open a store one day... or maybe a place like this” —he gestured at the walls around them— “that can make money from the tourists and use it to help do more for the wildlife.”

This time Simon did shoot his eyes over to Juan’s face, and caught him blinking rapidly. Blinking through surprise, like he hadn’t expected to divulge so much information.

“Like a non-profit place. That’d be awesome.” He squeezed Juan’s arm to let him know it was okay to have opened up. “I’m in school, too. Penn State.”

He couldn’t offer more information than that, because he didn’t have the whole life-plan as of yet.

Juan shifted onto his side, which Simon didn’t like, because it took away the point of contact between their bodies. But a second later he laid his arm across Simon’s chest and grinned down at him. “Tell me, are all American parties like the ones on the TV? Like the... *Beverly Hills 90210*?”

Simon choked on a snort of laughter. “Um, I dunno. I’ve only been to Beverly Hills once and I wasn’t invited to any parties. It’s all the way on the other side of the country for me.”

Juan nodded. “But you live in a mansion, like they do.”

“No, I don’t live in a mansion.” Simon rolled over, too, so he could tickle Juan’s ribs. Juan squirmed back against the wall, but there wasn’t room for him to escape Simon’s touch. “I live in a house.”

“Okay, okay.” Juan laughed and pushed his hands away. “But it is a big house.”

Simon frowned. Sure, it was large enough. Real estate developers didn't usually live in studio apartments. "It's family-sized. For me, my parents, and my sister. And a dog. Why, what kind of house do you live in?"

"A rainforest hut," Juan responded, straight-faced.

Simon rolled his eyes and moved in to tickle him again until he had Juan's dark skin stained red with laughter.

They didn't go at it again that night. Just talked until Juan got too sleepy, and then Simon kissed him goodnight and crossed the beach back to the resort, the taste of salt and sand still on his lips.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Seriously.” Alyssa had him cornered at the deep end. “Where have you been running off to every night? Even Mom and Dad are starting to notice.”

“Nowhere.” Simon searched for a route of escape, but the pool was so crowded his only option was to climb up the water-fountain feature he was leaning against.

“In the last week I think you’ve spent all of... an hour with us after dinner. I’d say you were just acting like a retiree, but I checked your room a couple times and I know you weren’t in there.”

Busted.

He sighed and flicked the surface of the pool to get some water in her face. Before she could hit him with a bigger splash, he held his hands up to signal defeat. “All right, I’ll tell you... but just, keep it to yourself, okay?”

She crossed her heart and mimed sticking a needle in her eye. He splashed her again.

“I sorta... hooked up with someone.”

“I knew it!” Her clap created a mini spurt of water between her hands. “You’ve just been too damn happy at breakfast. I mean even Dad’s gonna know you’re getting some if you keep smiling so big at all his corny jokes.”

Simon used his whole arm against the pool this time to hit her with a sheet of water. “Shut up.”

She ducked under the surface and came back up again, still grinning like an idiot. “So, where’s he from? He staying here? Why don’t you invite him to dinner with us? You know Mom’s dying for that day, and I so wanna see Dad there because you know how he gets that stupid look when—”

“Alyssa!” He gripped her shoulders. “It’s nothing like that, okay? It’s just... a hook-up. I’m not inviting him to meet Mom and Dad, or you, for that matter. It’s totally casual.”

“Oh.” She ruffled his hair before he could stop her. “Well, that’s kinda a bummer, but I get where you’re coming from.”

“So then lay off.” Simon dropped his arms back to his side before his nervous fingers could start to twitch.

Of course she got where he was coming from. There wasn’t any other place from which to come.

Simon turned a spherical white egg over in his hands. He could tell it would be soft to the touch, but he wouldn’t take off the gloves to test the theory. Juan would probably have his head.

“Big clutch,” Juan said, scribbling something down in a little notebook now that they’d finished clearing out the nest.

“Maybe it’ll make up for the one I scared away.” Simon chewed on the corner of his lip before sticking it out in a mock-pout.

Juan rolled his eyes and recovered the egg from Simon to place with the rest in his sack. “She found somewhere else, later that night or another day. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, but somewhere else could’ve been a not-so-great place, right? Like on that other beach where the jackasses are.”

“If you feel so bad, you can come out tomorrow while I sleep,” Juan suggested, crooked smile teasing him, as always.

As always. The thought snuck up on Simon and wiped his own smile away. Could there be an *as always* with someone you’d only known for a little over a week?

No. Definitely not.

They began the trek back to the preserve, strong waves riding up to their ankles, as walking on the wet sand was easier than trudging through the dry stuff. The same ritual Simon had come to know over the past several days awaited them—secure the turtle eggs in a new nest, strip off all their clothes,

dive into the cot... or the floor, or that one and only time on the sand behind the building—and enjoy each other’s company. Then a little conversation—not too much, though—and he’d return to his resort to start a new day in paradise.

Juan cast a sidelong glance at him before returning his gaze to the ocean. “You are staying in Costa Rica for many weeks?”

It was the first time either of them had brought up the topic, and it almost made Simon wonder if Juan could read his thoughts. “Three. My dad builds condos for ex-pats, so he’s kinda here on business.”

“Oh.” Juan jogged a few steps forward to splash into an oncoming wave. “It’s a lot of time. You should travel to other parts of Costa Rica while you are here.”

Simon tripped a little as his foot came down on a jagged piece of shell. Was Juan trying to get rid of him? Maybe he had overstayed the hook-up welcome. “We, uh, yeah. We might.”

Juan reached an arm back to steady him and he was still smiling, easing some of Simon’s fears. “There are many beautiful places in the country. Not that here isn’t beautiful.” He dropped his hand, and his eyes trailed down Simon’s body before focusing on the sand.

Shaking his head in hopes of ridding it from the blush, Simon took a larger step to stand by Juan’s side again. He stared out at the moon’s wavering reflection on the surface of the water. “Yeah. I mean, I look at this place sometimes and it’s like... shit. There’re no words for how stunning the view is. I feel like I could stare at it for ages.”

Juan tipped his head in agreement.

“I wonder if people always feel like that about nature-filled places when they’re from the city,” Simon continued. “One of those... grass is always greener things.” He returned his gaze to Juan. “I mean, you ever get bored of it? You see this same sight day after day, year after year. Does it get old?”

“Same?” Juan furrowed his brow. “Not the same. The tide is always different. The waves make different marks on the sand. The animals are different. The stars and moon and planets move in the sky.”

Simon felt his cheeks widening in a smile, but he managed to bite back the laughter. “God, do you know how to *not* be poetic?”

Juan shoved him, hard, and it took several splashing steps before he regained his balance.

“That was not poetry. That was facts.”

“The planets moving in the sky?” Some of the laughter rippled out of Simon’s throat this time.

Juan glared. “Venus. You can see Venus, right there.” He shoved an angry finger up to the sky.

Simon caught it and brought it to his lips. He almost kissed Juan’s fingertip, but then realized that would be far too... *romantic*. So he drew it into his mouth and sucked it slowly instead.

The annoyance slipped from Juan’s face. “If you are impatient, we can—”

“No. Not in the sand again, please.” Simon grimaced. Some things were better left in cheesy romance movies. “Why don’t you come over instead?”

The words surprised both of them. And really, why hadn’t Simon thought of this before? Instead of doing it on a rickety twin-size cot, or the gritty floor, or in the shark-infested ocean... he could invite Juan back to his suite, where he had an entire queen size bed and a room to himself.

But maybe he hadn’t thought of it before because it was a *bad* idea.

On the other hand, this wasn’t his house, or his dorm room, with posters slung haphazardly on the walls and memories of Leo’s sleep-tousled hair lying against his pillow. It was an impersonal hotel room.

Juan blinked and stared. “Over... where?”

“To my room at the resort.”

With a shake of his head, Juan turned away and started to walk faster, leaving the ocean behind as they headed toward the building. “You stay with your family, no?”

“We have a suite. I got my own room... even have my own back entrance onto the beach. My door locks, and besides, my parents know not to mess in my business.”

Alyssa might not have, but he had faith in the lock.

“A suite?” Juan arched a brow. “So you *are* rich like *Beverly Hills 90210*.”

“We’re not—” He sighed. “Fine, we’re a little rich. Whatever. Do you wanna come?”

“No.” The answer was brisk and seemed final. But a few steps later, Juan glanced back over his shoulder with a softening look. “I have work to do.”

“Well, after we put the eggs away. With me helping, doesn’t it go twice as fast?”

Juan stopped walking and rubbed at his forehead. “But... there are guards. You need the special bracelet.” He pointed to the yellow one bearing the hotel’s name on Simon’s wrist.

“It’s late. They probably won’t be watching. Besides, I bet you could be sneaky about it.”

By the frown on Juan’s face, he was looking to object again, so Simon pressed on before he had the chance. “I have a big bed. A really nice big bed.”

Juan passed his hand over his face again and licked his lips. Thrown by his own actions, Simon concentrated on the space behind Juan’s shoulder for most of the ensuing silence, until a small huff of breath dragged his gaze up long enough to catch a glimpse of the struggle in Juan’s eyes.

“Okay,” Juan finally said. “We can try.”

“C’mon, now!” Simon whispered into the darkness. Juan shot out from behind some pink flowers and scrambled up the concrete walkway to the room.

The few guards still walking around the pool area didn’t seem to notice anything, and probably wouldn’t have cared even if they had.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it.” Simon slammed the glass door shut before any mosquitos could make their way in.

“No.” Juan peered around the room for a moment. “It’s nice here.” He eyed the freshly made bed. White sheets and white comforter, to go with the stark white look of the whole room. “And clean. I’ll get it dirty.”

“Yes, because you’re made of sand, aren’t you. I knew it.” Simon reached out and tickled him. He really couldn’t get enough of the way it made Juan laugh in that low, rumbling giggle as his skin changed from brown to maroon.

Juan batted his hands away. “But the sheets!”

“So why don’t you take a shower?”

“Shower?” The blink-and-stare was back. And Simon knew damn well Juan understood the word *shower*, so he was really starting to wonder what was going on in his head behind that look.

“Yeah. It’s right over there.” He pointed to the glass enclosure inside the room, with backlit frosted panes probably meant to make the place look more modern. “It’s pretty cool, actually. Has jets along the side and everything. Here.” He grabbed a towel. “Go on. I’ll wait.”

At those words, Juan’s lost look only deepened. Had anyone ever looked so confused about a shower before?

Simon gave him a pat on the butt. “Go!”

Juan stumbled away.

It wasn’t until the shower was on and Simon could make out the outline of Juan’s body behind the opaque glass that he had some clue about his behavior.

The invitation, the flirting, the tickling. And now the offer of a nice shower... alone... instead of hot, steamy shower sex. Was Juan in there now, wondering if these moments of theirs were meant to be something more?

Because that would be a mistake. And Simon wouldn't mislead him. Not like Leo had done to him.

He'd just have to make sure things were clear.

Juan emerged about five minutes later, bright white towel wrapped around his dark skin. And all thoughts of *making things clear* went flying right out the sliding glass door. Because Simon had never felt that skin completely clean and his hands twitched at his side, eager to touch.

He threw back the blankets on the bed and gestured for Juan to get under the covers. Juan slipped in, and the towel fell from his waist to the floor.

"Well, Simon?" Juan prompted as Simon stood over him, staring.

Simon collided with Juan's lips in a kiss, his fingers gliding over every reachable point of warm, exposed skin. He only stopped when he felt the rumble of Juan's laughter against his chest.

"You are still wearing your clothes."

"Oh. Right." Too aroused to be embarrassed, Simon stripped off the last barrier between them. Juan braced himself against the headboard in the meantime, apparently intending to keep to the pace of their last two occasions together.

Except this time, Simon couldn't resist kissing along Juan's shoulders, or down his smooth back. Juan smelled of the hotel's soap—a light green tea scent—but somehow there was still a hint of salt on his skin. Simon let his tongue play around on the contours of Juan's body, leaving a long, wet trail in his wake.

Juan shuddered under him with a mixture of laughter and panting breaths. "It tickles."

“Sorry,” Simon responded. But he wasn’t, and he could’ve kept on going, if Juan hadn’t reached around to stroke him until he had no more control over the shapes his mouth was making. He readied himself and Juan rocked back into him, wholly consuming him in the tight embrace.

It was nice that Juan was nothing like Leo. Not in build, in skin color, in hair color, in scent, in words, in actions. It was nice that Juan was just *Juan*.

No expectations. No responsibilities. Just fun.

Mindful of the sheets this time, Juan yanked up the towel before he came. He tossed it aside as Simon got up to dispose of the condom.

By the time Simon returned, Juan was already pulling on his shorts.

Maybe there was no need to have a talk. Juan knew what was up. Hell, he’d even admitted to doing this kind of stuff with tourists before. He never tried to drag out anything after sex. He was always ready to pack up and move on.

So he’d leave, and Simon could lie there wondering whether or not he was going to go back to Leo when the summer ended. Whether they’d compare conquests and decide they’d sowed enough wild oats. Whether they were ready to settle into a relationship again. At least for the next year.

Except he didn’t want to think about it. Not now, anyway. It was nicer to think about lusty, crooked smirks and dark eyes and salty lips.

“Uh, you wanna stay for a bit?”

Juan stopped dressing. Blinked. Confused again.

“I mean, you could hang out for a while if you wanted. We could watch a movie or whatever. And there are some beers in the minifridge.”

All the things Simon wasn’t supposed to do. But it didn’t seem to matter so much in the next minute. He was expecting a rejection, or at least an awkward acceptance, and was caught off guard by the eruption of Juan’s lopsided grin. “Okay.”

He grabbed the beers and some plantain chips and they both settled on the bed. The air conditioning was blasting at full force to combat the humid night, so eventually they yanked up the comforter and lay underneath it. They watched part of *Die Hard* in Spanish, as the dubbing provided enough entertainment that Simon didn't have to understand the dialogue.

A few beers later, Simon's eyes started to droop. He yawned and stretched out on the bed, knocking the blanket off his chest.

Juan's fingers flew to his side and landed on the drying scab at his rib cage. "Sorry," he murmured.

"Please. It's just a scratch. And it'll give me a story, right?"

Juan grinned and touched his lips to the edge of the wound. "What story will you tell?"

A wave of heat followed by cold passed through Simon. He tucked himself under the blankets again, blocking his chest from Juan's view as a shaky breath passed through it.

What would he say, when all this was just a memory?

He wasn't sure what story he even *wanted* to tell.

"Hey." He turned to Juan. "You got a boyfriend?"

Juan drew back. Probably because that question was way too personal, and he knew the rules of this summer fling far better than Simon seemed to. He searched Simon's face and then seemed to find something that both relaxed the tension in his shoulders and made his mouth twitch into a quick frown.

"No. You do?"

Simon shook his head, but it took his traitorous lips a little too long to answer. "No."

"You have something," Juan responded. There was no anger or annoyance in his voice. Just thoughtful certainty. He must've seen it in Simon's eyes from the beginning.

For a moment, Simon considered lying. It might spare Juan's feelings, or make sure they could keep *passing the time* together. But the whole point of this... whatever-it-was... was to not deal with all the complicated parts of a relationship. To just be himself. *Pura vida*, without any of the shit people liked to throw in the mix. And that would include lying.

"Yeah, I have a something." He sighed and thrust his fingers into his hair. "But not a boyfriend, really. He and I decided to... keep it open during the summer. See where we stand again next semester."

Juan tipped his head and quirked a brow. "You will go back to him, then?"

"I dunno."

"Do you want to?"

Well, damn. That question definitely wasn't in the rules. And Simon didn't have an answer, either. He shrugged and avoided Juan's eyes.

After a moment, Juan spoke again. "I should go. My grandmother picks me up in the mornings and we go back to town for breakfast."

Simon nodded. "Yeah. Well, I, uh, had a good time."

When Juan left, Simon thought it best to go straight to bed. But that didn't stop him from pressing his hand up to the warm spot where Juan's body had been, or keep him from finding a single brown hair lying on his pillow that he rubbed between his fingertips before falling asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

“Something for you, *señores*?”

Simon heard the voice before he saw him, still several sprawled beachgoers away, and his heart reacted in a way that was starting to become familiar. *Beat, beat, beat beat beat beatbeatbeatbeat.*

Juan approached them a minute later. Only a small right-left flicker of his eyes betrayed any emotion. Simon was counting on the dark frames of his sunglasses to shield his.

“Something for you?”

“No thanks,” Simon’s mother responded with practiced ease, not even a slight glance in Juan’s direction.

Simon’s heart returned to a normal pace, but he kept watching the black backpack as Juan strolled away. And as happy as he was that they’d both played it cool, it was clear something had shifted between them. They’d gotten too personal the night before—sharing a bed, watching a movie together... very nearly cuddling as they talked about relationships. But whatever Juan had taken from the night wasn’t something that made him happy. There’d been no crooked grin, no lifted brows, not even a hint of a teasing spark in his eyes.

And the further his black backpack went into the distance, the worse that made Simon feel.

“Be right back, Mom.”

It only took him a few running footsteps to catch up to Juan, who turned toward him with wary eyes.

“Hey.” It was then Simon realized he didn’t have a reason for chasing after him. Wasn’t like they could hook up now, in broad daylight, with his mother a few feet away waiting to spend *quality time* with her son.

“Hi.” Juan kept walking. “You want to buy something?”

“What? No, no. I uh, I just wanted to ask if... you were coming over again tonight.”

Juan drew to a stop. There was a little bit of stray white sand on his lip, and Simon had to clutch a handful of his shorts to keep himself from brushing it off.

“I don’t know if that is a good idea.”

Right. There were a lot of reasons why it’d be better for them both to spend a night apart. But when the number of potential nights was so finite...

“Just think about it. ’Cause, I mean, I like spending time with you. And not just... you know.”

Heat traveled to Simon’s face and forced him to drop his head. At least shielding it from the sun would provide some relief, if he couldn’t get his internal functions under control. What was he even saying?

“Esto es lo que temo,” Juan muttered.

“Hey, no fair answering in a language I don’t understand.” The laughter in Simon’s voice quavered a little too close to nervousness. “What does that mean?”

“It means...” Juan took a long, deep breath. “I can come. Maybe at eight, so I can leave afterwards to check the beaches? I’ve been... missing some work there, since we... you know.”

Relief finally cooled Simon’s blush. “Great. I can, um, still keep you company on that, too, if you want.”

Juan’s grin spread slowly, and a rush of air left his nostrils. “Okay, Simon.”

Simon waited out behind the suite. Eight was a little early... he didn’t know why he’d agreed to that. He’d just barely escaped his parents and a trip to the hot fudge sundae bar. Luckily, someone his father worked with had come and snagged them for a drink.

Juan dashed in a couple minutes past the hour, the faint smell of some exotic fruits clinging to his skin. By the light, fluffed up texture of his hair, he'd already showered, or at least washed up.

Simon stepped toward him immediately and drew him into a kiss, then whirled him around and backed him up to the bed.

"I should rinse my feet," Juan mumbled into his lips. "There is still some sand..."

"Don't care." Simon pushed Juan's shoulders so that he fell onto the bed.

"You say that now, but when you try to sleep tonight and there are little pieces rubbing you everywhere..."

"Rubbing me everywhere? And you think I'm gonna let you make me wait after *that*?"

And shit, that grin of Juan's was adorable. Except Simon probably needed to get control over his mouth. It had had a mind of its own lately.

The best solution seemed to be a kiss, so he dove into Juan's lips for a second time.

"Simon?" Juan tilted his face so he could speak without Simon's tongue in the way.

"Mm?" Simon went after his mouth again.

"I think we should..."

Simon drew away rapidly. "What?"

Juan blinked—almost a twitch—and shook his head. "Never mind."

For half a second, Simon thought about respecting the *never mind*. But honestly, when in the history of those two words had they ever worked in getting someone off a train of thought?

"What?" he demanded again.

Juan licked his lips, and his eyes grew troubled. "I think—"

Alyssa's quick, clipped knocks interrupted. "Simon. Get your butt out here."

Juan scrambled up and went for the other door.

"No, wait," Simon hissed under his breath. "Just go stand over in the corner by the shower. I'll... be right back."

Juan didn't look too pleased with the suggestion, so Simon had to grab him and shove him where he wanted him. They weren't done with their conversation, and Simon would be damned if they were going to leave things like *that*.

He stepped out into the hallway and quickly shut the door behind him. "What?"

"Geez." Alyssa had to step back as he'd crowded into her space. "Suspicious much? What're you hiding in your room?"

"Nothing. What do you want?"

"Dad's friend Frank and his wife are going on a night boat tour of some... saltwater river or something. There's space and he wants us to come."

"No thanks. Tell them sorry, okay? I'm... going out." He turned back to the door, but Alyssa latched onto his arm.

"Don't be a jerk. It actually sounds like it'd be kinda cool. Lots of crocodiles, apparently."

"I already have plans." And even though he didn't really feel like sharing, he gave her a look he knew she could interpret. *Those* kinds of plans.

She huffed and released him, shaking her head as he ducked back inside and closed the door on her once again.

Juan walked over to meet him, his hands in his pockets. "You should go."

"What? Why?" Stinging cold—too cold to be from the air conditioning—hit Simon. Maybe this was what Juan had wanted to talk about. That they shouldn't *pass the time* together anymore.

“You’re here to be with family, yes? And your sister is right. It is amazing. Besides the ocean, I love the mangroves best.”

“But I have less than two weeks left, and I—” he cut himself off.

Fuck. He’d said the words. All the careful tiptoeing around to make sure neither of them got the wrong idea, and he’d had to be the one to start talking about the impending separation. Like they were really *together* right now.

Juan bit his lip. “I could... come back later, maybe.”

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Simon blew out a tense breath.

“What time?”

“Um, I have no idea. I’m guessing this is a private tour with someone Frank knows, so I’m not really sure when it’d be over.”

Juan shuffled his feet. “Maybe another night, then.”

Damn it. Another night? Another night when there were so few left?

And shit, there he went again...

“Here, take my key card.”

Juan’s eyes flew to his, wider than he’d ever seen them. “What?”

Shit! But the words were out, and as was his tendency, more stupid ones followed. “My key card. So you can, uh, do your thing, and then come back, and in case I’m not here yet, you can, um, wait here.”

He reached into his wallet and pulled out the card. He’d already sunk himself in this deep. No turning back now.

Juan took it from his hands and gingerly held it between two fingers. And very quietly, almost in a whisper, he said, “Okay, Simon.”

The boat cut through still waters, with immense trees and impressive roots lining either side of the river. Rustles and croaks on the shore promised

glimpses of elusive forest life, but Simon's eyes didn't stray from the water's placid surface.

"Searching for crocs?" his father murmured. No one had spoken above a whisper since they'd departed, for fear of scaring all the sights away.

"Sure," Simon murmured back.

At any moment, he was going to double over the side of the boat and vomit from the sheer insanity of what he'd done.

He'd given away the key to his room. To his parent's entire *suite*. To the place where his laptop was charging, and his mother's jewelry lay tucked in little velvet pouches, and their passports sat with their flight information—though hopefully those were locked in the safe. His summer clothes, his Kindle, his phone...

All in the hands of a near-complete stranger. Some guy he'd met on the beach a little over a week ago.

If his parents or Alyssa found out, they'd kill him.

But that wasn't what was making him so sick. It was the fact he was completely confident Juan wouldn't touch a thing. That if he got done before Simon did, he'd simply lie there and wait... not clean them out and make some quick cash off the "rich Americans".

How could he have that much faith in someone he barely knew? In someone he was just passing the time with?

"There!" Alyssa gasped, hand extending and then rapidly drawing back as an enormous crocodile rose up from the water.

Their mother let out a little shriek, and though she quickly stifled it, it was enough to knock a few bats off the tree to their right. They swooped down at the boat to the sounds of more screaming, and the crocodile took his leave.

The laughter and the rocking boat was enough to pry Simon from his turmoil. His father clapped him on the back as he let out loud guffaws,

probably alerting any other crocodiles within earshot to steer clear of the obnoxious intruders.

But at least when his father laughed like that there was no tension in his face, and no guarded look in his eyes. It was nice to know they could still have moments like these.

Simon let his worry settle in the background as he joined in.

It wasn't until he was standing on the other side of his door that the fear flooded his senses again. He gripped the handle but waited several seconds, only turning the knob when he heard Alyssa's footsteps behind him.

"Simon? Everything okay?"

"Sure." He forced himself forward before she could get a good look at his shaking fist.

Breath trapped in his chest, he swept his eyes over the room

Laptop. Phone. Clothes. All exactly where he'd left them.

And something else where he'd left it, too. Well, almost where he'd left it. Instead of standing and staring at him, Juan was curled up in the bed, his arm slung around a pillow while his face rested flat on the mattress. His eyes were closed and from the even rise and fall of his chest, he was fast asleep.

Simon released his breath slowly. Juan looked irresistible there, tucked into the blankets, dark lashes resting against the bright white sheets.

He climbed in next to him. "Hey."

"Hm?" Juan rolled over, brows lifting even though his eyes remained closed.

"It's me. Sorry it's so late. The place was kinda far away. But you were right, it was completely amazing. I've never been so close to a crocodile. We actually could've touched it! And some kind of weird anteater thing, and the bats—"

“S good,” Juan mumbled. Then he gave opening his eyes another try. Lids still partly closed, he stretched up to kiss Simon. “I was just... resting for a moment.”

Something in Simon’s chest tightened as he watched Juan struggle to come back to full consciousness for him. *For him.*

“No you weren’t. You’re fast asleep.”

“Maybe.” Even Juan’s grin was tired.

“It’s okay.” He nuzzled into Juan’s neck. The skin there was warm and smelled of the hotel’s soap, so Juan must’ve washed up after his walk on the beach. Simon moved his head down and kissed his shoulder. “Go back to bed.”

Like he’d been waiting for Simon’s blessing, Juan’s lids fell shut again, and his body slackened into peaceful sleep.

Simon wrapped his arms around him, still in his clothes, and still uncertain about why he wanted to hold on so tightly.

Why his vacation hook-up was sleeping in his arms with a total of zero orgasms in the count today... and why that suddenly made him happy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

White light hit Simon's face, piercing through his closed eyelids. He groaned and sought out darkness again, burrowing into the pillow, but that wasn't enough to beat out the Costa Rican sun.

"We forgot to pull the blinds yesterday," Juan mumbled from beside him.

The last traces of sleep left Simon as he forced his eyes open. He still had one arm wrapped around Juan, who was resting a few inches below him, mouth pressed into Simon's chest. Same way he'd woken up for the past five days. Apparently, Juan didn't care for pillows.

Leo was the only other person he'd ever woken up to on so many consecutive mornings. But those memories were fading now, and something warm and real was in their place.

"Good morning." He brushed his lips through Juan's hair.

"Good morning."

Scooting down a few inches, Simon pressed in for a quick kiss. He tightened his hold on Juan's body. "Do you have to go? To meet your grandmother?"

Juan shook his head, a lazy smile spreading across his lips. "No. Today is Sunday. She goes to church." His hand traveled up Simon's torso, sun-warmed fingers searing into his skin.

"You, uh, you don't go with her?" Words were a little more difficult to form as Juan had reached his chest and was pinching at his nipple.

"No. There are some things she knows I won't be saved from."

From the lustful smirk, that was probably meant as a joke. But as Simon paused to double check his interpretation, Juan's confidence faltered into a blush. "It's okay. She may not understand, but she accepts."

“Yeah. Guess that’s something.” Juan’s hand slipped away but Simon caught it, pulling it toward him so that Juan was forced closer. “Kinda like my dad. He’s... you know, not thrilled. But... I guess he’s trying.”

“That makes him a stronger person than most,” Juan said. “To be open to change.”

Simon let the words roll around in his head for a moment, and his mouth eventually curved up in a smile. “I guess you’re right. Guess we’re both lucky, then.” Simon bent down for another kiss.

“He has met your... boyfriend?” Juan asked before their mouths could connect, and it was Simon’s turn to blush.

“Well, no. I mean, he would have, probably. I just... never introduced them. Maybe because I...” He faltered and chewed on his lip. Some skin sloughed off in his mouth and he turned away from Juan to spit it out.

“Because of what?” Juan pressed.

“Because I was... never completely sure of where I stood with Leo.” Simon let out a sigh, and Juan’s hand was on his chest again, though this time it was gently patting. “Leo wasn’t into... defining things.”

Juan tipped his head thoughtfully, his hand continuing its gentle massage. “You both decided to be apart this summer? Or he decided?”

Simon chuckled softly. “Am I that obvious?”

“Know as many people from as many places as I have, and you get better at reading them,” Juan said, and though his smile was full, the comment only darkened Simon’s thoughts. How many people had Juan *known*?

“So what about you?” He shifted to get Juan on his back, allowing him to lay a few kisses along his neck. If they were going to talk about *serious* things, the least he could do was keep up the foreplay. Then the escape of pure, carnal release was only a gripped-erection away. “Ever had any serious relationships?”

“No. Not serious.” Juan snatched at Simon’s mouth with his own when it hovered near.

“Mm.” Simon mumbled into his lips. “Why not?”

Juan’s eyes were closed as they separated for only a moment mid-kiss. “All things have their end.”

A quick breath left Simon’s lungs, but he refused to give Juan’s comment any deep thought. They weren’t beginning anything, so there didn’t need to be concern about an *end*.

“Yeah, you seem like the independent type, huh.” He placed a few more kisses on Juan’s waiting lips. “Walking the beaches alone, saving all those turtles by yourself. So stoic.”

Juan scoffed, and the burst of air made Simon scrunch up his nose. “I know how to have my fun.”

“Obviously.” He puffed back, just to see Juan’s face do the same thing. Cute, as he’d predicted. “So... what made you decide to have fun with me?”

Juan relaxed back on the bed, his head falling out of reach from Simon’s mouth. He squinted and looked up to meet Simon’s eyes. “You are... open.”

“Open? You mean like, obvious in the way I kept gawking at you?” Simon laughed and dipped down for another kiss. Juan returned it but then broke away.

“No. I mean... open as a person. You care to learn about things you don’t know. And you understand we are different, but you don’t judge or try to change. You just... let things be as they are.”

“That’s kinda your whole country’s motto, isn’t it? *Pura vida*?”

Juan chuckled, possibly at Simon’s clumsy accent. “I guess you could understand it like that.”

Simon nodded and pushed off of Juan’s body with a loud, deliberate sigh. “So it had nothing to do with how hot I am, huh.”

In a flash of white and brown, both Juan and the sheets were suddenly on top of him, cocooning him in a warm, bright tent. “Vain American,” Juan whispered, then slid down to grind against his crotch.

Simon laughed, making the trapped air even warmer, and Juan’s fingers curled into the band of his boxers.

A series of loud knocks interrupted. His father’s. “Simon, we’re heading out to get some brunch in a few. Then maybe white water rafting, if your mother is feeling brave. Get dressed.”

Simon groaned, pulling Juan close and failing to stifle another upward thrust of his hips.

Juan kissed the corner of his lips. “Go. I will see you later.”

“More scars.” Juan chuckled later that night, smoothing a small amount of aloe onto the scraped-red portion of Simon’s calf.

“Shut up. It won’t scar. And it’s not my fault Alyssa doesn’t know how to keep a raft afloat.”

Juan held a finger up to Simon’s lips, signaling for lower voices. The nesting turtle was only a few feet away, still shell-above-sand in her efforts.

“Sorry.”

“I forgive you. This time.”

The teasing glimmer in Juan’s eyes couldn’t be ignored, and Simon snaked an arm up to encircle his body and flop him over onto the sand for a kiss.

“You will scare her!” Juan hissed. “Stop moving so suddenly.”

“Stop driving me crazy then.” Simon crashed hard into Juan’s lips, and any real objection Juan had died in a few seconds as he reached up to grip Simon’s neck and draw him in even closer.

There was already sand in more places than Simon could count, and if they hadn’t been so close to the resort with this turtle, he would have considered

ending his ban on beach *activity*. But he was a little sore from the rafting, and there was still the possibility of some couple out for a late night romantic walk stumbling upon them. A few other resort guests had appeared on their nightly excursions, but thankfully they'd only been talking or recovering eggs then.

The turtle moved abruptly, and Simon froze. She seemed to be turning right and heading away from her nesting spot. "Shit. Shit. I'm sorry." He held his breath, lungs involuntarily constricting and thankfully shutting him up. Maybe if he just kept his mouth closed for a few minutes, she'd reconsider abandoning her endeavor.

Juan moved slowly to pick up his red flashlight. He flicked it onto the nest and shook his head. "There is a rock. She is moving to find a better place."

"Oh. Good." And thank God it wasn't his fault this time.

The turtle traveled only a few more feet to the right before evidently deciding she was ready to begin again. With rough, forceful jerks, her flippers began their tedious cuts into the sand.

Juan lay back, his head resting against Simon's shoulder. "We don't have to stay here the whole time. It will be hours still."

"Yeah, but isn't it better if we watch out for her? I mean, what if the poachers come?"

"They don't come here so much. Not so close to the resort."

"Okay, what about dumb tourists then?"

Juan shifted to look at him as he laughed. "Yes, there are those." He threaded a hand into Simon's hair. "You really want to stay? To protect her?"

"Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I?"

Why wouldn't he? How about because Juan was clearly offering him a chance to screw him in the next few minutes, instead of four to five hours from now. If they could even stay awake that long.

Juan turned back to stare up at the stars, a quiet smile on his lips. "You are not like the others," he said softly. Almost to himself.

“Other whats?”

Juan said nothing, so Simon was forced to fill in the blank himself. “Summer fucks?”

He felt Juan’s body stiffen beside him. And the words *had* tasted bad coming out of his mouth. They were so... cold. They didn’t seem to define what it felt like to lie next to Juan, watching over a mother turtle and counting the stars. “Sorry.”

“No, those are the words. I just could not remember them in English so quickly,” Juan responded. He laughed, but the hollow sound didn’t carry on the wind.

“Oh. Right.” Simon breathed out slowly. “So, uh, how many... how many tourists have you, um, spent summers with?”

Juan’s head pulled away from Simon’s frame and settled into the sand. “I always use protection, if that’s what you worry for.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“Then you ask if I’m a slut?”

“No!” Simon flipped onto his side and propped his head up on his hand so he could see Juan, and hopefully get a better read on the effect his clumsy words were having. “I meant... this.” With his free arm, he pointed to the turtle, then waved generally toward the sky.

A ripple of movement passed through Juan’s face, ending in a clench of his jaws. None of it touched his eyes, though, which continued to stare straight up at the stars.

“Juan?”

“Wear pants tomorrow.”

Simon glanced down at his legs. The red marks from where he’d collided with the rocks during numerous drops into the rapids still stung, but not as much with the cool coating of aloe. “Um, why?”

“And your bug spray.” Juan rolled over—slowly, for the turtle’s sake—and met Simon’s lips. “But not on your face. I want to show you something.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Simon dropped the hotel's fluffy white robe from his shoulders and turned to appraise himself in the mirror. He'd managed a decent tan in the past few weeks, though today there was a little too much redness on his nose and his cheeks... and on his shoulders, which had born the brunt of the hour of pool volleyball he'd played with his family. He winced a little as he pulled on his clothes and the fabric connected with the sensitive skin.

At least Juan had that aloe. Simon's reflection smiled over at him. *Rough hands, gently smoothing the balm over his shoulders before trailing down to his...*

"You have any plans this evening?" Simon's father stood in the doorway. "Thought maybe we could play a few rounds of poker with Frank and his sons. They just flew out to join him."

"Oh." Simon flicked his eyes away from the mirror guiltily, as if there were some way his father might be able to see into his thoughts. "I was... I was gonna go out."

His father nodded slowly, gaze lowering to the floor. "All right. Just, uh, be safe."

Simon felt his lips begin to twitch into a grin. He attempted to bite down on it, rather unsuccessfully, as his father huffed a small chuckle of his own and turned away.

Chuckles were progress, though.

"Hey, Dad?" Simon blurted out before his father could disappear around the corner.

"Yeah?"

"Um, thanks."

Confusion wrinkled his father's brow. "What for?"

“For... for being open... to change.”

He got a small shake of the head and a grin from his father, and he finally let his own smile go free.

A trickle of sweat made its way down Simon's leg, sticking to his khakis and gluing them to the inside of his knee. He jerked to yank the fabric away, which only caused more sweat to break out on his skin.

This was not a climate for pants.

“Almost there,” Juan said.

Juan wore pants, too, with a brown belt holding them up higher than most people his age would have them back in the States. Still, he was hot enough to pull off the look.

“We've been walking for like two miles. My dad has a rental car, you know. I coulda probably borrowed it and driven.”

“Lazy.” Juan's smirk softened the insult. “A car would have taken just as long with the roads as they are.”

“Yeah, but a car has air-conditioning.” Simon took an awkward side-step to unstick his pants from his inner thighs this time. “Why'd you make me wear these?”

“Protection.” Juan's stride lengthened as they approached a squat brown building, standing small and unobtrusive against the backdrop of dense, towering trees. “You don't need to add more injuries.”

“Hey, I'm not injury-prone.” Simon glared, though he was sure Juan couldn't see it in the dark. But then Juan took a sudden step to veer around the office structure, and Simon stopped short. “Wait, are you taking me in there?”

“Yes. You like nature, no?”

“Well yeah, but um... it's dark.”

Juan reached back to grab Simon's arm, as though he were afraid Simon might suddenly take off if not pulled forward. "I have a flashlight."

"But what exactly is this place?"

"A small forest preserve. Why, you are a scaredy-cat again?"

The door of the building creaked open, and Juan's fingers slipped away to sheepishly rub at his hair as a young woman appeared in the threshold. "Juan?"

"*Hola, Claudia.*" He looked over at Simon hesitantly. "Ehh, Claudia, this is my friend Simon. Simon, Claudia."

She bounced her gaze to Simon and then back to Juan with a sly grin. "*¿Trayendo uno de tus amiguitos aquí? ¡Qué novedad!*"

Juan rolled his eyes and started walking again, jerking his head to signal that Simon should follow. "*Hasta luego, Claudia. Pura vida.*"

Simon waited until they had traveled a few feet into the forest, where the woman was out of earshot. "You guys use that pura vida thing for goodbye, huh."

Juan nodded, then reached into his pocket and handed over a flashlight. "A good way to send people off."

"Sure." Simon crossed in front of Juan's path and flicked the flashlight onto his face. "So, you gonna tell me what she said?"

"What who said?" Juan stepped around him. "Watch where you put your feet. We must keep to the trail."

"Don't even try that." Simon grabbed Juan's waist and spun him back around. "I may be a gringo, but I'm not stupid. What did she say?"

Juan huffed. "She said... you are not as cute as you think you are. Now be quiet, or you will scare everything away."

Simon released him and obeyed, letting his senses adjust to the silence of the night. Only, it wasn't so silent. They were away from the roar of the

ocean—though the smell of salt still carried in the air—but the hum of insects and frogs blanketed the forest in an eerie cloak of hidden life.

He stepped closer to Juan's side.

"There." Juan's voice was almost lost amid the chirps and buzzes filling Simon's ears. "Careful. It is poisonous."

Simon froze and looked down warily, in time to see a black and brown snake slither deeper into the woods, a thin rattle on the end of its tail adding to the night's chorus.

"Cool. Shit. How poisonous is that thing?"

"Very."

"You won't let me die out here, will you?"

Tipping his head to the side as if deep in thought, Juan drew in a long breath. "Maybe, maybe not."

"Shut up." Simon forgot to keep his voice down as he pulled Juan against him.

"So hard to believe?" Juan quirked his lips into his trademark grin. "You don't really know me."

The croaking of the frogs filled the silence that stretched between them as the drive for playful banter abruptly left Simon's thoughts. "I guess... I guess you're right. Tell me about yourself, then."

Juan pushed away and started walking again. "If we talk we will—"

"I know, I know. We'll scare the deadly snakes away. I don't care. I wanna know."

"Know what?"

"I dunno. Anything." Simon reached out to inspect a white flower, glistening with the moisture from the air. A small green insect lay nestled inside. He wished he'd brought his camera—then he could've gotten a picture

of Juan, too. How come he'd never thought to take any pictures of him before? "Like, about your family or something."

Juan took a few more silent footsteps before speaking. "Five brothers. I am the youngest. They live in San Jose, near my parents."

"Five brothers? Shit. And now you just live with your grandmother?"

"While I go to school, yes. To save money."

"You don't get... lonely? Or maybe you just needed some peace and quiet after growing up with so many siblings. Shit, if there were five of Alyssa, I don't know what I'd do."

"I'm... the different one of my family. I fell in love with the beaches here and wanted to stay." Juan shrugged. "Alyssa, she is your sister?"

"Yeah. You sorta met—" Simon stopped himself. There was little chance of Juan remembering their very first encounter, and beyond that she'd only been a voice in a hallway to him. The raised-brow confusion on Juan's face confirmed it.

Simon took in a breath of heated air, the moisture making it thick and hard to swallow. "Would..." He licked his lips. "Would you like to meet h—"

Juan's eyes went wide, and he clapped a hand over Simon's mouth. "Do not move," he whispered. Then he began edging away from Simon, toward an outstretched tree branch. He scooped something into his palm and held it out for Simon to see.

A spec of bright blue and red, no bigger than a silver dollar. With little eyes and little legs and little amphibious toes on each limb.

"We are lucky," Juan said. "They are not so many here."

"Wow. That is just... amazing. The colors are so intense." Simon reached out a finger to stroke the frog's back, but Juan jerked it out of reach.

"Careful. If you have any cuts, you shouldn't touch."

Simon pulled his hand back reluctantly. "Let me guess. Poisonous."

“Beautiful things many times are.”

Pretty as the frog was, it had nothing on Juan’s smile. “Again with the poetry.” Simon leaned in to claim Juan’s lips before he could get annoyed, and the frog croaked in agreement.

Juan broke away to replace the frog on the tree, then pulled out a small cloth from his pocket and wiped his hand clean. Simon waited only long enough for him to complete the task before grabbing him again and moving in for another kiss.

“I don’t think we should do anything in here,” Juan murmured, his eyes closed as he stood on tiptoe to meet Simon’s mouth. “Too many plants and animals.”

“Yeah, that’s okay. I just want to kiss you. Even if you might be poisonous.”

Juan fell back on his heels to laugh. “*You* are the one who sometimes tastes like poison.”

Simon caught Juan’s chin and held it in place so he could keep the lock on his eyes. “So we’re both beautiful, then. But you might be the most beautiful person I’ve ever met... and I don’t just mean on the outside.”

Juan’s eyes widened and his mouth twitched like he wanted to laugh again or say something to deny it. He must’ve come up empty, though, because he said nothing for several seconds.

Then he dragged his hand down Simon’s arm until their fingers met. Met and intertwined.

It was so much less than what they’d already done together, it hardly seemed like it should matter. But as Simon clung to the warm, rough skin, as his thumb moved up and down to caress Juan’s knuckles, he just *knew* it was more.

“Come.” Juan pulled at his fingers, though by the way they’d settled into place within Simon’s, it was clear he wasn’t letting go. “There is much more to see.”

“I have to get out of these clothes. Seriously.” Back on the sands, Simon peeled off his soaked shirt. The sea wind had been absent in the dense growth of the forest, and it now offered the only relief from the sticky perspiration drenching his skin.

“So do it,” Juan said, and within a second he was fumbling with the button of Simon’s pants.

“Hey, what? Here?” But even as the words came out, Simon pulled at Juan’s belt, loosening its grip on his trim waist. Clothes were scattered across the sand, and the blissful air touched Simon’s body for only a moment before he was clutching Juan against his chest, lighting it up with fire once again.

Juan kissed him, hard, fingers already sprinkled with sand pulling at Simon’s face to draw him down and deeper into his mouth. His erection rose up against Simon’s thigh—one more point of heat between their bodies.

Inside Simon burned, too, as they stood there naked on the pristine beach... completely out in the open, with sea and stars the only witnesses. Sweat coated their skin and the sand flew up to meet it, making each frantic grope grittier than the one before.

Juan broke away, breathless, and pulled at Simon’s hand. “Come.”

They ran toward the waves together, kicking at the foam and splashing into the midnight-blue depths, fingers still entwined. The current dragged them into calmer waters, where Juan’s arms locked around Simon’s shoulders for stability as they continued to kiss.

But the kisses were calmer now, too, maybe because they’d been literally cooled by the Pacific. Warm as the water was here by the equator, it still couldn’t compete with the summer air.

Simon pulled away from Juan's lips and stared at the brown eyes in front of him. Thoughts bubbled up in his mind, and naked like this in Juan's arms, he no longer had any means to stop them. "Five more days."

A few of Juan's fingernails dug into his back, but all Juan did was try to stop Simon's mouth with more kissing.

"I'm... I'm not going back to Leo."

The decision hadn't been made until the words left him, but as they hung above the constant roar of the surf, Simon couldn't find any regrets.

A relationship—*love*—wasn't supposed to be about settling, or practicality, or putting things on pause while each one hoped for something better. There had to be a risk for the reward, maybe some amount of defying the odds. And if leaving the safety of Leo behind meant he had a chance to fill his heart with *real* passion again, it was the only choice he could make.

Juan's chest shuddered against his.

"Juan, I—"

God, there was so little time left. What could he say? What did he even want to say? That a few of Juan's poetic words had helped him mend part of the rift with his father? That they'd put to rest the struggle in his mind over a relationship that had really already been over? That he wanted for the two of them to—

Staring straight into Simon's eyes, Juan shook his head. The movement was small but unmistakable. *No*.

Simon closed his mouth as Juan rested against his shoulder, arms encircling him in a tight embrace. Waves rocked them as they clung to each other, but not enough to pull them apart.

The last of the heat drained away. No more words, no more kisses. Just a quiet hug Simon wished could last forever.

But it couldn't. "I'm kinda tired," he murmured.

"Me too. It's late."

They separated most of the way, though Simon still held Juan's hand as they battled the breaking waves close to shore. And even after they'd reached the sands, he couldn't bring himself to let go.

"I have to be up in a few hours." Juan said. "Since we are both tired, it would be better if we... went to our beds."

"Yeah." The word scratched its way out of Simon's throat, and as soon as it hit the air he wanted to snatch it back.

Juan smiled and tugged on his hand until Simon leaned down to kiss him. He pecked Juan chastely, but Juan went in for more before he could pull away. His tongue slid in and wound around Simon's, mouth widening until their teeth scraped against each other.

It didn't really feel like a goodnight kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

“What?” The cup in Simon’s hands, thankfully empty, slipped from his grasp and bounced on the bar counter before he recovered enough to grab it again. “When... when did you decide this?”

“Last night.” Alyssa frowned and reached out to pluck the glass from his weak grip. She replaced it safely on the bar. “We looked for you to talk about it, but you weren’t there, and well, Mom really wanted to go. We didn’t think it’d be a big deal.”

“But it’s... it’s the last four days of the vacation. Don’t I get a say?”

“I guess you would’ve if you’d been there... but it seems silly to spend our whole time here when there’s other stuff to see in the country. Dad’s done with his business stuff for now, and the hot springs are supposed to be amazing.”

“I... I had plans.” He didn’t, though. He’d had no plans since last night, since he’d kissed Juan until they’d both pulled apart and gone their separate ways to bed.

Alyssa squeezed his shoulder. “Sorry. They already cancelled the room here and booked a place in Arenal. We leave tomorrow morning. Hey, does this have something to do with—”

He moved away. “I gotta go. Pack my stuff if you have any free time.”

She didn’t shout back the expected scathing rejection of that idea, but Simon was too focused on leaving to really care.

An hour of pacing the sands from one bluff to the other left his lips cracked and his throat parched and his exposed skin probably sunburned. His family would be waiting for him to join them for lunch by now.

At long last, the black backpack appeared, threading its way through the sunbathing crowds. Simon fought the sand for traction on every step as he raced toward it. “God, there you are! I’ve been looking all over!”

Juan's eyes met his hesitantly, partially shrouded by his lowered lashes. It was as close to *shy Juan* as Simon had ever seen. "Hello, Simon."

Simon grabbed his wrist, thumb pressing against a rapid pulse—although that could've been his own. "Listen, my parents changed our plans. We're leaving tomorrow for Arenal."

Juan's face betrayed nothing. No movement passed across his dark skin. "It is beautiful there. You will enjoy it."

At a loss for words—at a loss for what he should be feeling, even, Simon didn't respond.

"I should go on now."

"Right." He dropped Juan's arm. "But I still have tonight. Meet me at my place."

He didn't wait for the answer or even look back as he turned and ran away.

At nine, there was nothing. At ten, the same. No knocks, no small figures creeping through the carefully pruned plants outside the suite. At eleven, Simon shut off his TV and went to sit on the concrete path, knees drawn up to his chest.

If he left now and went out searching, there was every chance they'd miss each other. And even if this... thing they'd shared was meant to easily fade away, at the very least he needed to say goodbye.

Goodbye and thanks for the good fucks. Never mind the handholding, the shared smiles. The lazy morning cuddling and the trips into magical forests full of unknown creatures. The turtles and the eggs and the tiny hatchlings they'd given a fighting chance at life. The soft kisses and the hug that had stretched on and on, speaking words Simon couldn't bring himself to say. Or words Juan didn't want to hear.

By midnight, it seemed clear Juan wasn't coming. And maybe that was for the best. Simon could just keep the whole experience tucked in a metaphorical

box somewhere in the back of his mind, to be dragged out when he was much older and looked back on with only fond memories.

Something crawled across his foot, and he stared down at it, stifling the immediate urge to slap it away. At first glance he thought it was an insect, but a closer inspection revealed it to be a lizard, no bigger than his thumbnail. It crossed his ankle and then dropped back onto the concrete before scurrying out to the sand.

Simon got up and followed.

The moon hung low and bright in the sky, casting light in new places on the usually dark beach that night. Enough light that Simon was able to make out the staggering figure, heading up from the ocean and in the direction of the turtle preserve... and not toward the resort.

He didn't run this time. As he approached his chest tightened with an emotion foreign to him in Juan's presence—anger. Before there'd only ever been curiosity, lust, and maybe longing. Now he felt the presence of this strangling grip on his heart, and it made his insides cold while his skin burned.

"You weren't coming, were you. After all this, you weren't even gonna say goodbye." He ground the words out through a clenched jaw.

Juan kept his body turned away, one arm wrapped around his stomach as he dragged his feet through the sand.

"Are you even gonna look at me?" Simon's hands tightened into fists, and he slammed them against his thighs.

"I... I was busy," Juan said, but his voice was slightly garbled. He bent over and spit in the sand.

By the grace of the moonlight, Simon could make out the red splatter against the white grains of sand. *Red.*

His anger evaporated in an instant and he gripped Juan's shoulders to spin him around. "Oh my God. What happened?"

“Nothing.” Juan spit again, and thankfully this time there was more saliva than blood. “Only another lesson.”

Juan’s left eye was swollen, and even in the shadows, a deepening red and purple bruise was visible by his temple.

“The poachers?” Another new emotion hit Simon, close to the anger from earlier but tinged with fear. “What the hell! Why would you go after them alone? You’re the one who told me what an idiotic idea that was. It doesn’t make any sense. That... that just isn’t like you!”

Juan yanked himself out of Simon’s grasp and staggered a foot away. “Like me? You don’t know me.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Simon moved to stand in front of him again. “Come back with me. You need ice.”

“I need to go to sleep. And so do you, for your trip tomorrow. Go home, Simon.”

Home. The resort wasn’t home. Home was thousands of miles away. A place where he’d never see Juan again.

“Juan, come on.”

“No,” Juan mumbled, but the last of the word came out with a small moan. He took a few steps away, doubled over, and threw up.

“Fuck. You probably have a concussion.” Simon hurried to his side and stroked his back. Juan didn’t shirk away from him this time, but he looked like he wanted to as his muscles tensed under Simon’s touch. “You need to see a doctor.”

Juan’s face hardened. “I do not.”

“Uh, yeah, you do. Don’t be an idiot.”

The fire in Juan’s eyes—the same one Simon had seen their very first night together—ignited. It hardly seemed possible that such ordinary brown eyes could contain so much fury. “I am not an *idiot*. And I do not need to see a doctor.”

Simon's own internal fire rose to match "I don't give a shit what kind of voodoo medicine you people practice down here. When you think you have a concussion, you see a fucking doctor!"

"Voodoo medicine?" Juan roared back at him. His nostrils flared, and as his lips parted again to hurl out some vicious reply, Simon grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him.

It wasn't a romantic kiss. It was a *shut-up-and-listen-to-me-because-I-care* kiss, and it served its purpose. Juan stood still and gaped at him.

Simon couldn't find his voice, either. His mouth hung open as he tried to process his own reaction. What could possess someone to kiss a person who had literally just thrown up?

Well, he had some idea. But he wasn't going to say it. Or even think it.

"Now come on." He reached out and took Juan's hand, and together they headed back to the resort.

"Simon?" Alyssa yawned and scratched at her hair, peering up at him from her dark room. "What's going on?"

"Juan got hurt. Do you know where that directory thing is? The one with the list of nearby clinics?"

"What? Juan? Who is Juan? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind." He slammed the door shut on her. "I'll find it myself."

"Simon." Juan called out to him in a whisper from his bedroom. "Calm down."

"I am calm," Simon barked back.

Sure, calm. Calm is what had him waking up his sister at one in the morning. Calm had him thrashing through the brochures and binders in the living room of the suite, searching for the one that held the necessary information.

Alyssa emerged from her room in a robe. She'd made the transition from drowsy to fully alert pretty damn quickly. "Okay, start talking. Now."

Simon rolled his eyes and kept tossing aside pieces of paper. "Juan is... he's... you know who he is. These jerks hit him and I think he might have a concussion and I'm trying to find the damn paper that tells me where—"

"Simon!" Alyssa grabbed his hands. "Start at the beginning. Where is he right now?"

"He's here."

Alyssa darted away from him and toward his bedroom before he could stop her. "Here here?"

He'd left the door ajar, so she only had to stand by the entrance to see where Juan sat on the edge of Simon's bed, a can of beer held against his forehead.

"Oh, uh, hi there." Alyssa waved.

Juan's brows flew up and he grimaced, probably from the pain it caused his head. "Hello."

"Where is the damn thing!" Simon pressed in behind Alyssa, shoving a wad of papers into her arms.

"Simon?" Another groggy voice joined in. His mother, face smeared with night cream and eyes blinking wearily into the light.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered.

"Okay, Simon, you go in your room and take care of... him. Mom and I will find the clinic paper... although, shouldn't he know? I mean, he is um... local, right?"

"He doesn't want to go so I'm gonna call the damn place and have *them* tell him that he needs to be checked out."

"Checked out? Clinic? What's going on?" His mother's voice rose.

"Inside, now." Alyssa shoved him through the door. "I'll fill Mom in."

Simon stood still for a moment, eyes fixed on Juan. Then he noticed a trickle of blood by his jawline and scrambled to the sink, where he wet a washcloth. He returned to Juan's side and unceremoniously scrubbed off the blood with rough strokes.

"You are acting crazy," Juan mumbled.

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't have to if you'd just go to the damn hospital and make sure you're okay."

Juan sighed. The fingers on his free hand twitched closer to Simon's, but didn't touch. "Simon, I understand you care, but—"

"All right." Simon's mother poked her head in. "We spoke to a place. They said the best thing would be to send him in a taxi. Faster than waiting for an ambulance." Then she flashed a tentative smile in Juan's direction. "I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced. I'm Simon's mother."

She'd wiped her face clean, Simon realized. He wondered just how much Alyssa had *filled her in*.

"Uh, Mom, this is Juan. He... works at this nature preservation place. Saving sea turtles. And he um, got into this fight with the asshole poachers and well... yeah."

"That's just terrible, dear. Is there someone we can call for you?"

"No, thank you, ma'am," Juan answered quickly. "I don't want to wake my grandmother for nothing."

"It's not nothing if you have a concussion," Simon grumbled.

Alyssa latched onto his mother's arm. "C'mon, Mom. Let Simon walk him to the lobby."

Juan scrambled up, and it was good to see him steadier on his feet now. Of course, the awkwardness of the whole situation was probably a good motivator. "Thank you, sorry to interrupt your night." He was out the door before Simon gathered his wits enough to follow.

They walked the hallway in silence. When they reached the elevator, Juan finally turned to speak to him. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to say goodbye.”

Simon shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at his shoes. “Yeah, it’s okay. I get it. Goodbyes kinda suck.”

Especially the permanent kind.

The elevator dinged its arrival at the lobby.

“Do... do you want me to...” *Come with you?* But the remainder of the thought wouldn’t come to Simon’s lips. Juan would say no, anyway, and it wasn’t like he could really take off to a clinic in the middle of the night when they had a six a.m. wake up call for their trip to Arenal.

He took a deep breath and hoped the momentary quiet was enough to bury the failed sentence. “Just promise me you’ll actually get checked out. Even if you think I’m being stupid.”

“All right, Simon.” Juan rolled his eyes. “I promise.”

They stepped off into the harsh fluorescents of the lobby, and a small red car with a taxi light affixed on top sat just outside the glass front.

Juan stuck out his hand. “Well, Simon, it was nice... passing the time with you.” His lips ticked up slightly, halfway to his normal grin.

Simon gripped Juan’s sandy fingers—for the last time—and could only bring himself to nod.

“*Pura vida*, my friend,” Juan said.

“*Pura vida*,” he echoed back.

Juan’s hand fell away, and he walked out the double doors and into the night.

Simon turned his back on the scene as the taxi drove off. The glass panes at the rear of the hotel showcased an impressive set of fountains and pools, but he set his gaze out further, beyond the concrete and the chlorinated water.

A wave touched the shore and then receded, taking with it a little piece of his heart.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

“Simon. Simon. Earth to Simon.” Alyssa waved a hand in front of his face, her fingers cutting across the view of sun glinting off ocean.

“What?” He tore his gaze from the horizon. Even through the sunglasses, the light had burned its way into his pupils, leaving his vision fuzzy for a moment.

“I was talking to you and you totally zoned out.”

“Sorry.” Simon squeezed his eyes shut and breathed deeply, hoping to clear his head. But the scent only dragged him back into the fog. Memories were harder to fight when they assaulted all his senses at once. “Guess I’m still a little jet-lagged.”

“Sure... even though it’s only a two hour difference.” She squirted sunblock into her hands and hastily rubbed it on her skin, leaving white streaks behind. “Anyway, when you wake up, there’s eye candy thatta way.” Her over-the-shoulder head jerk directed Simon to an Adonis-like blond oiling down washboard abs.

“Huh. Yeah.” His eyes flicked back out to the ocean.

“So...” Alyssa worked to smooth away most of the white globs, though she missed a clump on her forehead. “Things with Eric really over?”

“Mhm. We just weren’t the right fit.”

“Sucks.”

He nodded, but didn’t really think so. It’d only been a couple of months, anyway.

“Simon?”

“What, Alyssa!” He finally turned toward her, frustrated enough to slip up and give her exactly what she wanted—his attention. “I’m trying to relax here.”

“This thing you’re doing with school... it doesn’t have anything to do with... that guy, does it?”

Laughter bubbled up in him—half truthful, and half nervous. “Jesus, of course not. That would be pretty fucking stupid. I told you like a million times, our thing was totally casual.”

“Right.”

“Yeah. Right.” He huffed and shook his head. God, she was being annoying. And the trip had barely started. Thank goodness she and his parents were only staying a week and a half.

“So then you wouldn’t care if that was him over there.”

Simon sprang forward in his lounge chair so quickly his sunglasses clattered onto the sand. “Wh-what?”

She pointed a finger straight ahead, at a familiar figure. What were the odds? Well, really, not that astronomical. They *were* on the same beach. It was the same time of year.

But he hadn’t dared hope. Except maybe in the deepest, darkest, most hidden recesses of his mind.

And now Juan was there again, a few feet in front of him. The face and body Simon had committed to memory without any pictures to help him. The person he’d thought about on lonely nights, and even not-so-lonely ones. The mixture of happiness and sadness he’d carried with him the entire year.

His feet propelled him across the sand faster than he would’ve thought possible. And with each step, another level of the house of cards he’d built up on the whole *it-didn’t-mean-anything* lie came crashing down on him. Because *Eric who?* And what was love without the risk, and God, he’d give anything to see that smile again, to feel those fingers on his skin, to—

He'd reached his destination. "Hey."

Confused brown eyes met his. "*Hola, señor.* You would like to buy something?"

"What? No." He let out a nervous chuckle. "At least, not right now."

He waited for the grin, but all he got was a stiff, awkward smile. "*Bueno,* another time. Excuse me, *señor.*"

"What?" A sharp, cold pain hit Simon's chest, like an icicle piercing his heart. An icicle that would melt in a second of this heat and leave a pool of half-formed fantasies lying on the sand, ready to blow away with the next gust of wind. "Don't... don't tell me you don't remember me."

Juan squinted at him, either because of the sun or because he really was trying to place Simon's face. "I'm sorry, *señor.* Many people come here."

"You're... you're serious? You really don't..." He lost his breath as his chest refused to take in the salty air.

"I'm sorry." Juan offered an apologetic shrug.

Simon opened his mouth, only to have the crash of a wave drown out the pathetic *but* that left his lips.

Juan didn't remember.

Not that first kiss, with palms pressed into sand and eager lips stretching out for each other—even if they had been stopped by poison.

Not that ocean-rocked hand job, arms and legs tangled in the attempt to get closer when the waves wanted them apart.

Not that first time on the rickety cot, not *Beverly Hills 90210*, not eyes meeting with bright smiles as baby turtles clambered their way through the sand for their chance at life.

Not the goodnight kisses that turned into good morning kisses. Not bright poison frogs or skinny-dipping in the Pacific.

It'd all been forgettable.

There was nothing left to say.

Juan walked on past him, over a sand dune and out of sight.

“So?” Alyssa’s book lay abandoned when Simon returned to her. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Simon sat heavily in his chair. For a moment he stared off into space—into the space he and Juan had occupied only a moment ago—but when Alyssa’s worried eyes came into focus he retrieved his fallen sunglasses and slammed them on. “He didn’t remember me.”

Alyssa got up to sit beside him. “I’m sorry.” She placed a gentle hand on his back, and he was still too stunned to pull away.

“It... it has been like a year or whatever,” he mumbled, but his voice came out sounding distant and thin.

“Uh huh.” Her fingertips pressed into his shoulder. “It was more than just casual for you, wasn’t it.”

“What?” He forced himself to laugh. Even if the noise was bitter and clawed at his chest instead of relieving the pressure there. “No it wasn’t. Why would you think that?”

“Maybe it has something to do with the number of times you’ve used the word *casual* to describe it. I mean, who are you trying to convince?”

Simon let a deep, shuddering breath pass through his body as Alyssa’s arm slipped all the way around him into a side-hug. “Doesn’t matter anyway. He didn’t feel the same way.”

“Sorry, little brother,” she murmured, and he allowed his head to roll onto her shoulder for a moment of comfort.

“Everything okay?” Simon jerked up to the sight of his father—khaki shorts, white vacation shirt, drink in hand.

“Heartbreak,” Alyssa informed him. Simon pushed her away, his face reddening from more than just the glare of the sun.

“Shut up.”

Their father took a seat across from them. “Sorry, kiddo. Will a drink help?” He held his out to Simon.

Simon rolled his eyes beneath his sunglasses.

“This about that Eric kid?”

A genuine laugh—even if it was slightly watery—broke free from his lips.

“Uh, no.” He snatched the drink away and took a long, calming sip. “And thanks.”

Alyssa snorted beside him. “Yeah, Dad. Eric was *so* last month.”

The crunch of sand under Simon’s bare feet made him smile. It’d been a whole year since he’d felt it—since he’d been anywhere near warm enough to wander around in shorts and nothing else. The humid air already had him breaking out in a light coating of sweat, but he didn’t plan on leaving the shoreline, so relief was only a handful of splashed water away.

He wished he’d brought his special camera, but it was still packed with the rest of his school stuff, and it was little cumbersome to have to lug around. Tonight he just wanted to walk.

Alone.

An acidic churn of his stomach dampened his good mood. He forced himself into a run for some distraction, veering into the cold waves. Maybe things hadn’t turned out like a stupid fairy tale, but *his* memories were still worth something. And maybe eventually he’d be able to write Juan out of them, and just recall the first time he’d held a hatchling, or the adrenaline in his veins when he’d literally fallen over a majestic sea turtle. He didn’t need Juan for those things.

Juan.

Standing right in front of him.

Simon tripped over his feet and wound up sprawled in the fine white sand. It worked its way everywhere, sticking to the sweat on his chest, on his stomach, his neck, and even his face.

Quiet laughter joined the sound of the waves slapping against his hip and thigh.

Juan stretched out his arm to help him up. Simon waited a second before taking it, groaning into the sand and sending little flecks of broken shells flying.

In the dark, the whites of Juan's eyes alone shone out to him. "You are not hurt this time?"

Simon took stock of himself, pushing the sticky wet sand around on his skin as it refused to brush off easily. "No, I'm f—"

Hold it. *This time?*

He met Juan's gaze. "You're a fucking liar."

Juan immediately turned away, toward the ocean. But Simon wasn't going to let him get off that easily. Not again.

"What the hell?" He grabbed Juan's shoulder and spun him around. "That was fucking cold, what you did to me this morning. What was that for?"

Juan wouldn't look at him. His lips were pressed together firmly, and his chest rose and fell a few times, in sync with the waves.

Finally he shrugged. "I remember now."

"Bullshit."

The stream of a flashlight burst out from near the bluff on the other side of the cove, breaking Simon's train of thought—which had been close to making him punch Juan in his lying face.

"Fuck! I have a Taser... shit, I hope it didn't get wet." He took a few rapid footsteps in the direction of the light. "Better not be those fucking assholes."

Juan's hand on his chest stopped him. Simon didn't have a tan yet, so his skin looked almost deathly pale under Juan's dark fingers. "It's okay, Simon. The mother left already. I have the eggs." He pointed to the sack tied at his side. "They may search the emptied nest, but they will find nothing."

Simon frowned. Even if the eggs were out of danger, it wasn't so great that the threat to the species remained. And his heartbeat refused to slow down—maybe because Juan still had his hand against it. "Simon, huh? So now you remember me and my name."

Juan's hand slipped away. "Fine. I am a liar. That surprises you? You don't know me."

Simon rolled his eyes. "You love that line, don't you."

Juan began walking along the water's edge, his footsteps nearly silent in the wet sand.

Simon followed. "Olive ridley or Pacific green?" he asked.

Juan's eyes flicked to him in surprise.

"The eggs." Simon gestured to the sack.

"Green."

"Cool. You gonna tell me why you lied?"

Several possibilities floated through Simon's head. Maybe Juan had a boyfriend now. Maybe he simply wasn't interested in a repeat of last year, and figured this was the easiest way out. Maybe he already had another tourist to *pass the time* with.

"I... can't."

"Can't tell me?"

"No." Juan stopped walking and crouched down by the waves. He gathered a handful of moonlit water and splashed it on his face. "I can't let my heart be a part of this. Boys come and boys go. It's the way of things here."

So it was fear. In some ways, Simon had known that was the answer all along. It was the same reason he hadn't pursued anything a year ago—the same reason he hadn't been brave enough to admit what he was feeling. And it was a legitimate fear, really, so he couldn't fault either of them. But now as he stood inches away from Juan, all he felt was regret at so much lost time.

"I bet you never asked any of those boys to stay," he said quietly.

Juan kicked the waves with a bitter chuckle. The moon caught the droplets that sprayed out from the surf and lit them up as they splashed back to the ocean. "I am not stupid."

"And I'm not a boy anymore. Neither are you."

The glare that issued from Juan's eyes seemed hot enough to evaporate the puddles forming around their feet. "I'm not going to let—"

Simon snatched his hand and squeezed it. "I'm here for a year."

Juan's glare widened into shock, and he jerked his head toward Simon. Finally, the eye contact was there. "What? Why?"

"Spending my junior year abroad as part of my bio major. I'll be traveling to different parts of Costa Rica, but we'll be close by for a few months when the Leatherbacks nest... and my parents' condo will be ready soon... so I'll be around."

Juan's mouth had fallen open, and it took him a few tries to bring his lips together for a response. "So you came back for the turtles."

"Well I certainly didn't come back for you, you jerk."

Juan pulled his hand away to snatch at the water and fling some at Simon's face. Simon did the same, only with both hands. Before he'd opened his eyes again after the sting of the salt, Juan had deposited the sack of eggs on the sand and was ankles-deep in the ocean, hurling an even bigger wave in retaliation.

They descended into an all-out splash fight. The heaviness in the air lifted as Juan's eyes crinkled up with laughter, as droplets glossed his face and darkened his hair.

An armload of water hit Simon, much of it ending up down his throat. He shut his mouth, and the next splash wound up being inhaled directly through his nose. “Ouch, fuck. Okay, truce. Truce.”

Coughs and giggles trailed off until they were left in silence again, staring at each other, Simon on the shore and Juan still up to his calves in the ocean.

Juan’s tongue shot out of his mouth and ran over his bottom lip. The memory of tasting the salt on those lips sprang to Simon’s mind, and he drew in a deep breath to keep from forcefully claiming the long-missed flavor.

“A year,” Juan said. “And... you want to pass the time?”

“No. Not with you, anyway.”

Juan drew back a step, into deeper waters. Almost as if he knew what was coming next. “Then what do you want?”

“I want there to be an *us*.”

Either Juan was sinking into the ocean floor, or he was still moving back. Maybe he was considering a cut-and-run... swimming style.

Simon pressed on anyhow. He’d come this far. “I want you to meet my family—for real this time. I think my Dad would really like you. And I want to meet your grandmother... and your parents and all your brothers, eventually. I want you to help me with my Spanish, because I took a course last year, but I’m still a total beginner. I want to see where you go to school. I want to take you out to dinner. I want to wake up and have breakfast with you... I want to spend time with you in the daylight.”

Not that Juan wasn’t beautiful in the moonlight, even with his jaw clenched so tightly and his eyes widened in fear.

The constant slapping of the waves and the hiss of the sand being dragged out to sea seemed to grow louder in the silence that hung between them.

When Juan finally spoke, his voice was thick, like he was forcing the words out through a mouthful of saltwater. “And after a year?”

The surge of courage that had pushed Simon forward began to subside. “I... I don’t know. There are risks here, obviously. And maybe it won’t work out. Maybe we’re too alike.”

Juan snorted. “*Alike?* How is it you think we are alike?”

“I dunno.” Simon had to grin a little. Maybe not the best choice of words. “I meant... we’re both afraid of risking our heart... or we wouldn’t have walked away from each other last year and pretended like we felt nothing.”

The lack of a denial on Juan’s part was at least something.

“I didn’t come back here for you, Juan, but I did come back because of the things I learned through spending time with you. You kinda... inspired me, or whatever. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have some secret hope I’d get to see you again. So now that I have... I guess what I’m saying is... I’m willing to take the chance.”

And there it was. All of it out in the open—emotions far too risky to have ever been voiced before.

Juan turned around and faced the oncoming waves. But even from that position, the shake of his head was clearly visible.

No. Just like before.

Simon’s heart sank into his stomach, though a sad smile touched his lips. Still no fairy tale, but at least he’d had the guts to say what he hadn’t a year ago.

And at least he knew he wasn’t *forgettable*.

“Simon,” Juan said.

He still loved the way Juan said his name—the rich way the *o* rolled out of his mouth. But this time Juan had only whispered it, like he was expecting the ocean to swallow it up. Like he was half-hoping Simon would miss it and walk away.

Simon remained where he was. “Yeah?”

A powerful breaker smacked Juan's legs as he turned around, but he didn't let it push him forward. Feet still firmly planted beneath the water, he slowly stretched out his hand.

“Quédate.”

In two seconds, Simon was at Juan's side, knocking him over and into an oncoming wave. The ocean spit them back out again and they rolled together in the sand, clumps of it sticking all over their bodies and scraping their lips as they kissed.

Because beginner or not, Simon understood that word.

Stay.

THE END

Author Bio

Sara Alva is a former small-town girl currently living in big-city L.A. with a husband, two cats, and an avocado tree. She recently discovered—after a year in her house—that she also has a fig tree in her backyard, which might mean she needs to get out more. But sometimes the stories waiting to be told demand more attention, and when she puts fingers to keyboard, it's usually to write about journeys of self-discovery, heartache, personal growth, friendship and love. When she isn't writing, she's teaching or dancing.

Contact & Media Info

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TRIPLE JUMP

By Tam Ames

Photo Description

Two men kneeling at the feet of a third, performing oral sex.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The two men kneeling knew someone was missing in their relationship. They were looking for a third to complete them. This story can include shifter, BDSM and must have a HEA.

Sincerely,

Todd

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: ménage, feline shifter, restaurant manager, true mates, camping, exhibitionist

Word count: 21,545

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TRIPLE JUMP

By Tam Ames

CHAPTER ONE

“So you into fisting?”

“Uh.” Patrick wasn’t sure how to respond. “No.”

“Huh.” The guy looked at Jeff and leered. “He take two at once?”

Even if Jeff did, he sure as hell wasn’t with this guy. “No.”

“You sure?”

Patrick tried to hide his flinch as Jeff’s fingers dug into his thigh under the table in the booth they’d grabbed in the corner of the bar. He took a swallow of his beer and looked at the guy across the table from them. He was well over six feet, his hair was brushing his shoulders and looked like it hadn’t been washed in a week and he obviously hadn’t shaved in far longer than that, or even trimmed.

“I’m sure. Look, Ken, I’m sorry, but I just don’t think this is going to work for us. We appreciate you coming out to meet with us and have a drink, but you know, it just has to be right.”

The guy shook his head and pushed out of the booth. He turned toward Jeff, grabbed his crotch and thrust it towards him. “You’re loss little man, I’m huge.” He then swaggered off toward a group at the bar.

The sound of Jeff’s head hitting the table drew Patrick’s attention back to the two of them. He rubbed Jeff’s back in what he hoped was a soothing manner. Jeff turned his head to look up at Patrick. “Why? Why does this keep happening? They don’t seem like assholes online?”

“I don’t know, hon.” He shrugged. He really didn’t. He thought they put themselves out there honestly, so they both kind of assumed other people did too, but obviously not.

Patrick met Jeff at a mutual friend's party nearly two years ago, and it had been lust at first sight. They'd spent the entire weekend together, and had moved in together about two months later. Things were going great when Jeff had started dropping hints; pointing out other guys, mentioning threesome porn. Patrick had freaked at first, figuring that Jeff was bored and looking for an alternative. But after they'd talked about it, they both agreed that having another person in their lives would be great, and didn't mean they didn't love each other.

The fact that Patrick often worked nights at his ambulance dispatch job meant Jeff had a lot of alone time in the evenings, and then Jeff often had to work weekends at the store. But it wasn't just loneliness; there was a hole neither of them could explain.

They started posting ads on-line after a few pick-ups didn't seem to be working. The guys they met in bars were looking for some kinky three-way sex, not a relationship. So, the ads were very clear, *couple looking to add a third permanent partner*. But it seemed most guys would say that's what they were interested in, then turn out to just want to fuck and run to say they did it. Or, they so completely misrepresented themselves, like good old Ken, and there wasn't a hope in hell they'd ever fit.

Jeff finally sat up. "Let's get out of here." He slid out of the booth and Patrick quickly followed. He heaved a sigh seeing Jeff's slumped shoulders as the man zigzagged through the bar, completely ignoring supposedly well-endowed Ken at the bar. Patrick figured if the guy was as truthful about that as he was about everything else he'd told them, the guy was probably seriously under-endowed.

Jeff walked on in silence and when they got to the car, he got in and slammed the door. Patrick hurried to the driver side and slid in. When he looked over, Jeff had his head back and eyes closed. "Maybe we should just forget it." Jeff's voice was so faint Patrick wasn't sure he heard him right.

"What? What do you mean? I thought you wanted this? Have you changed your mind?"

He opened his eyes, and flopped his head over to look at Patrick. “I did. I do. But this is too hard. Getting my hopes dashed every time is just too damn depressing.” He turned to look out the window. “Maybe I did something wrong. Maybe I don’t deserve to find two people to care about.” When he looked back at Patrick, his eyes were shiny. “I have you. Lots of people never even find one amazing person, why should I be greedy?”

Patrick reached out and pulled Jeff into his arms, trying to maneuver around the gearshift. “Oh, sweetie, you deserve everything and I want you to have it.” He knew Jeff was just feeling maudlin. It was the adrenalin crash from yet another meeting gone south.

With a kiss on the forehead, he pulled away from Jeff. “Come on. We’ll go home, eat ice cream and watch *Doctor Who* all night.”

Jeff sniffled a bit, but nodded. “Okay.”

After he made his way out of the parking lot and into the street, Patrick took Jeff’s hand and tangled their fingers together. Maybe they did need a break. Just to regroup, take a breath and then start fresh. They’d have to find another method of finding a guy. They’d do it though, he was out there somewhere, Patrick was sure of it.

Once they were home and comfily ensconced on the couch with bowls of ice cream and *Doctor Who*, they settled in with Patrick’s arm wrapped around Jeff. Suddenly Patrick’s body stiffened.

Jeff twisted to look up at him. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I just had an idea.”

“Uh oh. Should I be worried?” Jeff laughed as he said it, and Patrick responded with a light smack to the back of his head.

“Meanie. We need to get away, so why don’t I take off a couple of days next week when you’re off, and we’ll go camping. We can get out of the city, commune with nature, breath the clean air and start fresh.”

The wrinkled nose on Jeff at Patrick’s suggestion should have said it all, but Patrick knew his closet lumberjack never liked to drop his air of hipster ennui without a fight. “Camping? Like with no running water?”

“We’ll go to the provincial park. It’s got hot showers and flush toilets.”

“In a tent?”

“Of course.”

Jeff was silent for a few moments, and chewed on his lower lip. “With s’mores? And wieners?” The dirty grin on his face meant he wasn’t talking hot dogs.

“Mmhhh. All the wiener you can handle. In the great outdoors. And maybe hot dogs too.”

Nearly choking on his ice cream, Jeff laughed. “Okay, but I’m not putting up the tent.”

“I’ll do it, princess.” He tried to dodge Jeff’s rebuttal, a smack on the chest.

That night, neither seemed to be in the mood to get frisky. The whole debacle with Ken, of the self-proclaimed monster dick, left both of them a bit wrung out. Patrick spooned up against Jeff’s back and wrapped his arm around him, pulling him back close against his chest. After a moment’s silence, Jeff spoke up. “I had a dream.”

“Oh? About what?”

“About us. And a cat.”

“Okay. I thought you were allergic to cats?”

“I don’t know. My mom always said I was, but who knows. She lied about everything.”

“So was it a good dream?”

Jeff shrugged in the dark. “I guess. It’s not like the thing was eating our faces off. It was bigger than a normal cat, but it was sitting on the couch with us, watching TV of all things.”

“That’s weird.”

“Yeah, but...” His voice trailed off.

“But what?”

“Maybe it’s a sign. Maybe we’re just supposed to be us two and a cat. Maybe I need to adopt a pet and we need to stop looking for another person.”

Patrick squeezed his arms tighter around Jeff. “Let’s not think about it for a bit. Let’s just relax and go on our mini-vacation and then figure out what to do. We have time.” He tried to imitate a cat purring. “And if you want to get a cat we can. But only one. No crazy cat lady schtick for you.”

“I want a black cat. And I’ll call him Demon.”

“You would.” Patrick snorted. “Now go to sleep. We have to start planning our camping trip tomorrow.” He kissed the nape of Jeff’s neck and it didn’t take long until they were both asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Taylor wondered if his teeth would be worn down to stubs soon. He ground them so hard he could hear them squeaking as one of the waitresses stood in front of his desk.

“But, Tay-Tay, I need the weekend off.”

The urge to pick up the stapler and smack her upside the head for calling him that was strong. “Amanda, you’ve had the last two weekends off. You knew when you took this job that weekends were required. The other staff have commitments as well.”

“But my boyfriend is coming. We have concert tickets.”

He resisted rolling his eyes at her whiny tone. She sounded two not twenty. “I’m sorry. But I need you to work.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “Then I’ll quit.”

He’d reached the end of his rope. “Fine. Please clear out your locker and I’ll have your last check and separation papers ready for you tomorrow.”

He watched with some delight as her mouth dropped open in shock. She had clearly expected him to beg her to stay and let her have her way. But he was over that tonight. Before she could plead her case, someone knocked on the door and opened it. The seating host stuck his head in. “Taylor? You need to come quick. There’s an issue at the front and well, just come.”

He nodded and waited while a stunned Amanda left the office. He locked the door behind him, and quickly stopped to rearrange the servers who would have to cover her tables. They weren’t pleased, but thankfully the dinner rush was over so it would be manageable, and Taylor wouldn’t have to cover any tables himself. Although it wouldn’t have been the first time he’d done so.

As he approached the front entrance, the stench almost physically pushed him back. The air smelled like a rotting garbage can. He nearly gagged and saw Peter standing with a napkin over his nose, and what was obviously a street person, weighing well over three hundred pounds and obviously unwashed for days, if not months.

“Sir, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Jordy!” the man slurred. “Long time no see.” He grabbed Taylor and pulled him into a hug. At that point, Taylor gagged and nearly lost his lunch. His overly sensitive nose was punishing him tonight.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken. My name is not Jordy. You have to leave.”

“You didn’t go to UBC? But they said Jordy works here.” The man’s brows drew down. He was either mentally handicapped or drunk.

He grabbed the man’s arm, and led him toward the door. “I’m sorry, but there is no one named Jordy who works here.” He gently pushed the man out the door, another wave of stench causing him to gag. Thankfully, the man wandered off down the sidewalk muttering about Jordy. He watched pedestrians give the man a wide berth, and when a couple went to enter the restaurant they gave him a similar reaction. He realized the man had managed to contaminate his suit jacket.

With an apologetic smile, he hissed to Peter to fix the smell, and rushed to the back, hoping that he didn’t put off the appetite of any of the customers as he passed them. In the bathroom and peeled off the jacket and his tie and washed his hands three times with soap. He rolled up the jacket and realized he’d now gotten the smell on his hands again, but he grabbed a plastic trash bag from the storage and tied the clothes inside. He returned to the bathroom and washed his hands again.

He hadn’t even got to his office when one of the line chefs stopped him, looking frazzled. “Taylor, Chef said the salmon is off.”

He wanted to scream, but simply nodded and went into his office and shut the door. He slumped in his chair for a moment, and then picked up the phone. He had to get out of town, get away from the people. He enjoyed life in the city, but like most of his family, he needed his space and he needed time away. He sometimes wondered how his sister stood it, being married with four kids, but she claimed it was different when you fell in love, however he had his doubts. Being gay meant he was unlikely to find a long-lasting relationship anyway, he figured. Thankfully, he lived close enough to the wilderness to get away when he needed to.

He called the restaurant owner to fill her in. “Hey, Aria. Chef says the salmon is off.” He pulled the phone away from his ear as he waited for her to stop shrieking. Their fish supplier had been spotty lately, and he figured he may as well start googling wholesalers since he knew they’d need a new one. Once she calmed down, he spoke again. “Oh, and we need a new server. Amanda quit.” He’d expected another rant, but this time she seemed relieved. “While I have you, Aria, I am going to need to take next Thursday off. I’m off Tuesday and Wednesday, but some, um, personal stuff has come up, so I need to go out of town for a couple of days.”

Her agreement was quick. Taylor rarely took time off so he knew the request shouldn’t be a big deal, and Thursday was not an overly busy night. He figured Friday or Saturday would have been tougher to swing.

Before he started searching for fish dealers, he called up the website to the provincial park. He loved the new system that let him look at the sites that were available and choose something as isolated as he could find. It was still early enough in the season that mid-week meant a lot of empty spots. He found one way down at the end of a road with no other sites booked nearby. He hoped it would stay that way. He wanted space to relax and be himself, to not worry about vacationers and kids. He thought it might be childish to put red Xs on the calendar until he could get out of town, but he was sorely tempted.

CHAPTER THREE

Jeff and Patrick pulled up to the site with the car stuffed to the limit. They tossed everything into the campsite. Patrick had been disappointed there had been someone else down their road. However, the other site was about six spots away and it was well wooded so he could barely see a hint of the person's bright yellow tent through the trees. He just hoped it wasn't a family with a ton of kids. He wanted to enjoy some loving *au naturel*, and he didn't want to have to deal with possible rug rats in the area.

As soon as the car was unloaded, Jeff grabbed the keys, leapt in and took off back up the gravel road. Patrick chuckled and started organizing the site. He knew where Jeff had gone. He'd gone to the park store to stock up on wood. Patrick already had the tent up and the mattress and bedding inside when Jeff returned. He started tossing wood out of the trunk into a big pile. They were only going to be there two nights, and Patrick wasn't sure they could burn that much wood, but he'd never rain on Jeff's parade.

The man tossed off his plaid shirt, that he'd never admit he actually owned, and picked up his axe that had been leaning against the picnic table. His shoulders flexed in his tight white tank top. He lined up the wood and started chopping. Patrick tossed a few more things in the tent and then set up his lawn chair to watch the show. Jeff's shoulders bunched and stretched as he swung the axe. He was small, and probably would be considered a twink, but he worked out and could chop wood with the best of them. It was like Jeff's guilty pleasure. Watching Jeff's ass and thighs flex as he chopped was Patrick's guilty pleasure. No, that wasn't true. He felt no guilt, only pleasure.

When Jeff was about halfway through the pile, he stopped and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his arm, and dug a bottle of water out of their cooler. Patrick watched in delight as Jeff tipped his head back and drained it in one go. God he wanted to bite that neck and leave his mark.

Finally, Jeff turned to him. "What are you doing? Slacking off?" Patrick gave him a little shrug and beckoned him closer with a crooked finger. Jeff approached him. "What?"

When Jeff was close enough, Patrick grabbed his wrist and quickly pulled him down into his lap. Jeff squawked and struggled to get up, but Patrick held him tight. “Let me go. I’m all sweaty and gross.”

Patrick buried his face in Jeff’s neck and inhaled. “Mmm. You smell all sweaty and butch.” Jeff just raised an eyebrow. Butch he was not. “Well, I like you this way. Very manly.”

Jeff gave up struggling to rise and wrapped his arms around Patrick’s neck. “Fine, if you don’t mind the smell, who am I to complain.”

“That’s my love, admitting that I’m right. As usual.” He laughed as Jeff stuck out his tongue. Patrick pulled Jeff closer and they shared a kiss. The lip lock started out light and playful, though watching Jeff chop wood had Patrick ready to have a little fun, and before long he had his hands under Jeff’s shirt and the kiss was getting heated.

The sound of tires on the gravel road distracted them, and they looked up to see a black SUV driving slowly down the road with the driver’s window open. A gorgeous guy was driving. He looked over at them, and as Jeff went to wave, the man frowned as he saw them sitting cuddled up in the chair by the wood. He turned his head away and continued on.

Patrick snorted in disgust. “Homophobic bastard. I hope he stays down at his end of the road. What a jerk.”

Jeff shrugged. “Maybe he just wasn’t expecting us? Or anyone? Anyway, it’s not like we’re going to be hanging out with him. Just us this week right?”

There was a hint of insecurity in his voice that had Patrick frowning and pulling him in closer. “Of course. What’s up?”

He wrapped his arms more tightly around Patrick, buried his face in his neck and tried to shrug. “I don’t know. I mean, maybe you’ll find someone else, or another couple or something since we can’t find a third.”

Patrick pried Jeff away from him and frowned at the man. “Mister, you just wipe that stupid idea right out of your head. I love *you*. I want *you*. And if we find someone else, that’s great, icing on the cupcake, but believe me, I won’t

be missing a damn thing if I spend the next sixty years with just you.” He gave Jeff a hard kiss. “Got it?”

Jeff nodded. Patrick pushed the smaller man off his lap and gave him a slap on the butt. “Good, then go have a shower because you’re all sweaty and gross.” Jeff gaped at him in outrage, and Patrick grinned and made a beeline for the fire pit. “I’ll start a fire and we can think about dinner.”

“Fine. You’re such an asshole sometimes.”

“But that’s why you love me.”

“No, I love your asshole.” A quick grin and he ducked into the tent to grab the shower stuff, a towel and a change of clothes. Patrick shook his head and started digging through the pile of logs for some kindling.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Taylor pulled into his campsite, he cut the engine and rested his head against the steering wheel. That was why he didn't have a boyfriend. He was always screwing it up when he got around hot guys. He'd been frowning at the fact that someone had camped on *his* road at the campground, then when he'd seen the hot guys, he'd wondered if he'd been drooling. But he'd seen the flash of anger go across the bigger guy's face, and then he realized he'd still been frowning.

God, they probably thought he was some kind of righteous prick who was disgusted by two men together. And they'd definitely been together, given that the one guy was in the other's lap. Which really, why was he drooling anyway, they were obviously together. "Buddies" didn't sit on each other's laps.

He sighed and got out of his vehicle. It didn't matter. They were far enough away they wouldn't interfere with his plans for the next few days. He unzipped the tent, lay down on the sleeping bag, and stared at the roof of the tent. Did he want to be in a relationship? He told himself it wasn't compatible with who he was, that he needed too much space and alone time to be with someone permanently. But when he saw a couple like that, he felt a pang that something was missing. He then started to wonder if his sister was right. Would it be different if he fell in love with someone and then he wouldn't mind sharing his space?

As he pondered this, the sounds of the campground washed over him. He could hear the sound of a boat on the nearby river, there were birds and the buzz of insects and every now and then a masculine laugh punctuated the air, obviously from his neighbor's campsite. Before long, the stress of work dropped away and he fell asleep.

When Taylor woke, it was nearly dark. The sounds had changed, the birds quieting, the frogs singing. He stretched and climbed out of the tent. He didn't need a flashlight or lantern, his eyes could see just fine in the gloom. He could smell the wood smoke in the air from the many campfires in the park, and he

could even hear the crackle of his neighbor's fire and see the flickering light through the trees.

He opened the SUV and dug through the bags in the back. He pulled out some chips, then opened the cooler and grabbed a sandwich and a soda. He knew he *could* find some natural prey in his shifted form, but that had always kind of freaked him out. He preferred not to be hungry when he changed.

After he drained the last of the soda, he re-entered the tent and shed his clothes with the flap open. He took a deep breath and let the feeling wash over him. The fur sprouting through his skin tingled, and the world changed around him. In moments, he was now on all fours looking at the tent entrance.

He stepped outside and carefully looked around. There was no one to see him. He paused and licked the side of his paw, rubbing it over his face, smoothing the fur. He twitched his ears and flicked his short tail. He'd always felt bobcats got ripped off in the tail department. He'd love to have a long one like a tiger, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

He padded off quietly into the woods surrounding the campsite. While he may not want to eat anything when he was in this form, his instinct couldn't stop him from chasing prey. There was nothing like a good run after a rabbit or mouse to get his adrenaline flowing.

A few hours later, tired and feeling more relaxed than he had in weeks, Taylor made his way back toward his campsite. It was late he knew and he could hear the crackle of fire and still see the glow from his neighbor's site. It wouldn't hurt to just stop by and take a quick look. Just to make sure they were okay, and that their fire wasn't going to cause a forest fire. That's what he told himself.

As he crept closer, he could hear quiet moans. Was one of them ill? In trouble? Taylor found a spot where he could remain hidden and still see through the trees to the area around the fire. His eyes widened. There was no one in trouble, or ill. The smaller man was stark naked and standing with his arms braced on the camp chair, while the other man, pants around his ankles, still wearing his shirt stood behind him, slamming his cock into the man with abandon.

For a moment, Taylor froze in shock. He'd never expected to find this. He knew he should leave, that he was spying on them, but it was like he was glued to the spot. He was close enough that he could see the bottom's cock swinging between his legs, and the contraction of the top's ass every time he thrust forward. He could also hear them, even though they were keeping their voices low, obviously aware that they were not alone in the park.

"Do you like that, Jeffy? Are you a nasty slut who likes to get fucked somewhere you could be seen? Do you like it when someone watches me ream your hole?"

"Fuck yes," The man obviously named Jeff, or Jeffy, hissed out. Taylor swallowed. He wanted to shift right then and there and stroke off watching them, but that would be pretty hard to miss, and they'd probably freak out, not what he wanted. He wanted to see this end. He wanted the whole thing, and if he was honest, he wanted what they had.

Taylor couldn't take his eyes off them. He watched the way the other man ran his hand gently down the spine of the man named Jeff, how he leaned forward, and despite the nasty talk and roughness of the sex, gently laid kisses over the man's shoulders and neck. It was obvious they loved each other, and his gut twisted at the knowledge.

Before long, Jeff reached between his legs and started stroking his cock. The other man whispered, "Yes, do it." With a muffled cry, Jeff came, his body shaking. The man behind him gripped Jeff's hips and held himself tight against the man's body, his own twitching with the force of his orgasm.

He watched them until they pulled apart. The man pulled up his pants, eased the other man away from the chair, and then he pivoted so he was in the chair and brought the other man down into his lap. The man named Jeff curled up in his lap and rested his head on the other man's shoulder. Taylor could hear murmured words of love. The pain in his gut, watching two men share what he wanted, finally motivated him to move. As he stepped back, he shifted some small rocks, which rolled down a slight incline. He froze when the men's attention turned his way.

"What was that?"

When there were no other sounds, the bigger man spoke. “Just some creatures of the night.” He laughed and hugged the other man, then patted him on the ass. “Come on, let’s get into the tent before the mosquitoes get at your yummy bits.”

“Yummy bits?” Jeff snorted. “But I’m in favour of cuddling in the tent.”

Taylor stayed still until they entered the tent, then crept back in the darkness and returned to his own site. He slipped into the tent and shifted. He lay down and crawled into the sleeping bag. He’d thought after watching the two he’d be eager to jerk off to the memories, but instead, the images of gentle kisses on a shoulder blade, a hand softly stroking down a side and arms wrapped securely around each other after, curdled the sexual desire and left him with an aching sense of loss.

CHAPTER FIVE

Patrick and Jeff spent the day either lounging around the campsite reading, or hiking on the nearby trails. The lack of visitors in the park meant mutual blowjobs on a local trail. They were arriving back at the site feeling relaxed and easy, when their neighbor met them on the road walking the other way.

Patrick tensed, wondering if the guy would react to the fact that he and Jeff were holding hands, but Jeff was his usual outgoing self, and spoke up. “Hey, neighbor. Nice to finally meet you.”

The guy gave a shy smile. “Nice to meet you too.”

Jeff held out his hand. “Jeff Shields, and this gorgeous guy,” he pulled Patrick closer, “is Patrick Garner.”

The other man blushed and shook Jeff’s hand. Patrick watched closely waiting for some kind of negative reaction given the frown he’d seen the evening before, but there was nothing. “Taylor Weekes.” Patrick shook his hand as well.

“You here alone?” Jeff asked, bouncing a bit on his toes. Patrick could barely move after the hike, and Jeff was more energetic than ever. He’d probably chop a cord of wood if he could.

“Yeah. Chance to get away and decompress.”

“I gotcha. Little bonding time with my man.” Patrick noticed the look of longing that crossed Taylor’s face as he watched Jeff wrap an arm around Patrick and pull him in tighter. Maybe the guy wasn’t an ass, and looked like he was gay, or bi at least.

He spoke up on impulse. “Why don’t you come by our site tonight and join us for a bit. We usually just relax around the fire and talk.”

Patrick felt Jeff’s arm tighten around him, and he knew he’d have to explain later. He watched Taylor’s mouth hanging open, then he snapped it shut and hesitated. He looked at Jeff and licked his lips. Patrick’s eyebrows arched. “Um, okay.” He paused awkwardly. “I’ll, uh, stop by later. I’ll bring some beer.”

“Sounds good. We have plenty of wood.” Patrick laughed as Jeff gave him a shove.

“Well, I’ll...” Taylor waved awkwardly down the road toward the bathrooms.

“Right, right. See you later.”

Patrick glanced over his shoulder as Taylor walked away. Okay, the man had a nice ass, he couldn’t help but look. Jeff’s tug on his waist brought his attention back to the man.

“What was that about? I thought you said he was a homophobic jerk?”

“I might have been wrong.” Patrick shrugged.

Jeff let out an overly dramatic gasp. “Patrick Garner admits he’s wrong?” He took a step back before Patrick could retaliate. “Quick, someone get me a pen so I can write this date down for posterity.”

“Oh, you are a smartass.”

Jeff turned and stuck his tush out. “You weren’t complaining last night.”

Patrick took a quick step forward and gave Jeff’s butt a smack. “I never complain about that.” He sobered for a minute. “I saw the way he looked at you. He’s definitely gay, and he’s cute, and... it can’t hurt to be friendly since he’s alone.”

“Are you thinking...” Jeff trailed off.

“No! This is our time together but a couple of hours with him might be fun. And he looked kind of lonely.” He shrugged again.

Jeff gave him a hug. “My guy. Taking care of everyone.” He looked around the campsite and rubbed his hands together. “I think we need more wood. If we’re making s’mores we need a good fire.”

Patrick laughed as Jeff peeled off his shirt and picked up his axe. Patrick pulled up his chair to enjoy the show after getting a bottle of water out of the cooler.

It was pretty much dark when they heard footsteps on the gravel road. Taylor came to the entrance of their campsite and paused hesitantly. He had a six-pack in one hand. Jeff looked up from where he squatted poking at the fire, and leapt to his feet. "Hey, Taylor. Welcome, welcome. Oh, Patrick will be happy you bought that brand, not that he's overly fussy." He grabbed the beer and placed it on the table.

Patrick stepped out of the tent. "Taylor. Glad you came by." He glanced at the table. "Oooh, nice." He crossed to the beer and grabbed one. "Have a seat." Patrick motioned to one of the two lawn chairs.

Taylor hesitated. "Oh. I should have brought my own chair. I can go back and get it."

Jeff stepped forward and pushed him toward the chair. "Nah. My fave chair is right here anyway." As he said it, he flopped down in Patrick's lap and grabbed the beer from his hand drinking it down.

"Hey, get your own." Patrick grabbed it back and looked over to see a slight smile cross Taylor's face as he sat tentatively in the chair. The guy was so tense he obviously needed a beer or something to loosen him up. "So you live in the city, Taylor?"

"Yeah, more or less. A little way out." He took a sip of his own beer. "You guys?"

"We live near UBC. Can't afford to live right downtown."

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

A moment of awkward silence fell, but Jeff didn't let it last for long. "So what do you do, Taylor? Are you a model or something?"

Taylor choked on the beer he was swallowing and coughed. Even with only the firelight Patrick could see Taylor's cheeks turn red. He was damn cute when that happened.

"Definitely not." He coughed again. "I'm the assistant manager at Nuvis. The Mexican-Asian fusion place on Robson."

“Oh my god. Do you have Mexican egg rolls?” Jeff had perked up on Patrick’s lap. The more incongruous the food, the better Jeff liked it.

“Um. No. But we have Asian empanadas with shrimp.”

Jeff turned to face Patrick. “We have to go. Soon. I want to try those.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart.” As Patrick squeezed Jeff he looked over at Taylor and saw a fleeting look of envy cross his face.

Taylor cleared his throat. “We have some other interesting things too. Just let me know when you can come, and I’ll make sure we have a good table for you.”

“Oh cool. We’ll have to see when we both have a night off.”

“So, um, what do you guys do?”

Jeff spoke first. “I’m the manager of a handicraft store in Gastown. Well, it’s a co-op really, so the artists sell their stuff there. Glass, pottery, wood. Not much of the aboriginal stuff though.” Taylor just nodded, and Jeff kept on. “Patrick is a dispatcher for the ambulance service. Kind of crazy hours sometimes.”

Patrick shrugged. “Yeah, depends. We’ve been short lately so I’m covering a lot of extra shifts. Kind of sucks, but the money is nice.”

“Hey, s’mores!” Jeff leapt up and started digging in the boxes of food sitting on the picnic table. He pulled out the ingredients and the sticks for marshmallows he’d found in the woods near the site.

They all laughed and began the process, a few flaming marshmallows the result, since Jeff insisted the fire remain no less than three feet high. Taylor seemed to relax and they spent the next couple of hours laughing and chatting and licking chocolate off their fingers.

At one point, Patrick caught Taylor staring at him and Jeff, as Patrick licked the chocolate off Jeff’s fingers. For a moment, their eyes met and Patrick held the stare as he made a show of licking the sticky sweetness from Jeff’s hand. Jeff moaned, and that seemed to break the spell. Taylor stood up suddenly. “Um, I better go. It’s been a long day.”

Jeff wrapped his arms around Patrick's neck. "Thanks for stopping by. It was fun and we'll definitely come to the restaurant."

Patrick was feeling kind of floaty from the beer and was now nuzzling and kissing Jeff's neck. "Mmhmm, thanks for coming." Once again, his eyes met Taylor's and they both seemed to freeze.

"Night."

As hurried footsteps headed down the road, Jeff spoke. "I think you scared him off, love." But he tipped his head back giving Patrick more room to lick at his neck.

"Mmm. He could have stayed and watched." Jeff groaned at that. "I think you're an exhibitionist." Patrick bit Jeff's ear lobe as he said it.

"This is news how?" He gasped. "Oh god, yeah, that."

Patrick stood, and Jeff wrapped his legs around his waist. Patrick grabbed his ass to hold him up and carried him toward the tent. He knew Taylor was still awake and would likely hear them, but at this point he didn't give a damn, in fact a little devil on his shoulder hoped he did.

CHAPTER SIX

Taylor raced back to the campsite. He knew going there had been a mistake. It was like going to a bar when you couldn't drink alcohol. He was just frustrating himself, watching something he couldn't have or wouldn't have. He should have politely declined and done his usual thing.

He unzipped the tent, slipped inside and removed his clothes. He quickly shifted, and while tempted to go back to Patrick and Jeff's to see if they were still outside, he resisted. He knew that would only be punishing himself more. He moved off into the forest in the opposite direction, moving faster when he heard an exclamation of "oh fuck" drift down the road from the two men's site.

He spent several hours wandering through the woods, and staring at the stars. When he finally tired and moved back towards his tent, he softly padded past the other site. He told himself it was just to make sure that they'd extinguished the fire properly. It was dark and silent, the fire completely out. He inhaled and could smell the two men, under the overwhelming smell of wood smoke and fir trees. The smell of sex was in the air, and it only reminded him that he didn't have what they did.

Back in the tent, he shifted and fell exhausted into his sleeping bag.

When Taylor woke it was almost noon. There was silence in the immediate vicinity. He dragged himself out of the tent and headed toward the showers. He steeled himself to walk past Jeff and Patrick's campsite, but they were gone. Everything was packed up, but there was a huge pile of cut firewood stacked neatly by the fire pit. He wasn't sure if he was relieved he didn't have to face them after his departure the night before, or if he was disappointed he wouldn't see them again.

He supposed even if he couldn't touch, it was nice to look. They were both beautiful men. Jeff, lithe and lean, but strong. He'd taken to chopping some wood the evening before, and Taylor had been impressed by his strength. Patrick had seemed... He wasn't sure. Maybe indulgent. Every time Taylor

saw Patrick look at Jeff, there was a look of pure adoration on his face. Taylor knew that whatever Jeff wanted, Jeff got, if Patrick could manage it.

Yet Jeff didn't seem like a selfish prick. Bouncy, far bouncier than Taylor would ever be. He'd been a chatterbox, laughing, and making Taylor feel completely relaxed with them. He certainly didn't comment on Taylor's awkwardness or discomfort. He heaved a sigh. It didn't really matter. He was unlikely to see them again. While they'd said they'd come to the restaurant, few people actually did. It was the polite thing to say when someone worked at a restaurant. And while he knew their names and could likely track them down, making the first move, sexual or otherwise was not his thing. Again, he realized there was probably another good reason he was perpetually single.

After he got back, he had some breakfast and enjoyed the quiet of the campground for a bit, then eventually packed up the site and returned to the city. Back to reality, a crazy job, a lonely apartment. Same old, same old.

Ten days later Taylor was hunched over the desk in the office trying to figure out where the invoices for the linen bills were out of whack, when Peter stuck his head around the door. "Hey, Taylor? There's a couple of guys here asking for you."

He barely held back the gag. Those words brought him too close to the memory of the street person who had wandered into the restaurant looking for the elusive Jordy. "Please tell me they don't smell like the dumpster out back."

Peter laughed. "Nope. Not this time. They smell, um, normal. Not that I go around sniffing guys. Or girls. Okay, I better get back, they're at the table by the fish tank." He pulled his head back and was gone.

Taylor sighed, and stood to put on his jacket and make sure his tie was straight. If someone was going to bitch him out about something, he may as well look good while it was happening. As he walked toward the fish tank, a familiar laugh reached his ears. He frowned briefly, then when the waiter at a nearby table moved aside, he saw them. It was Patrick and Jeff, here, in his restaurant. His steps stuttered, but he couldn't help the smile that crossed his face when he approached them.

Jeff saw him first and leapt to his feet giving him a huge hug. “Taylor! You’re here.”

Taylor saw Patrick smile at Jeff’s enthusiasm, and once again, he had a pain in his gut, like someone had punched him. He smiled back though. “Glad to see you guys. I wasn’t sure if you’d come.”

“Why not?” Jeff was frowning.

“Well, it’s just something people usually say. ‘I’ll come to your restaurant.’ But they’re just being polite.”

Patrick snorted. “Jeff never says anything just to be polite.”

“Well, I’m glad.” Taylor knew he was blushing. “Have you checked out the menu? If you have any questions, I’d be glad to answer them.”

He spent the next several minutes answering Jeff’s questions. As usual, Patrick didn’t say much, but just went along with whatever Jeff wanted. Although when Jeff asked for extra cilantro on one of the dishes, Taylor noticed Patrick’s wide eyes and subtle shake of his head. He managed not to burst into laughter. Easy on the cilantro, he got it. It seemed people either loved it or hated it.

After the meal, he stopped by to deliver their coffee himself. Patrick spoke first this time. “Can you join us for a few minutes?”

Taylor looked around, things seemed to be under control and the invoice wasn’t going anywhere soon. “Sure.” He pulled out a chair and sat. “So how have you guys been?”

“Pretty good,” Jeff said with a grin. “The mini-vacation was great, although Patrick’s been working a lot of overnights. That sucks. I hate sleeping alone.” He stared directly at Taylor as he said it.

“Oh. Um. I guess I’m used to it.” Taylor wasn’t sure what that look had meant. He thought he heard Patrick mutter something like “not for long” under his breath, but he wasn’t sure.

After chatting for a few minutes about what they’d been up to, Jeff spoke up. “Hey, when’s your next night off?”

Taylor frowned for a moment. “Wednesday.”

This time Patrick spoke up. “Why don’t you come over for dinner? We can watch a movie, or,” he paused, “whatever.”

Whatever? What the hell did that mean? Scrabble? Taylor swallowed. “Um. Sure.” No, no, no. This was a bad idea. Just sitting with them had him buzzing. There was something about them, and the way they concentrated on him when he spoke, that made him feel like the centre of the universe tonight, and they were orbiting around him.

Suddenly a commotion from across the room grabbed his attention. It looked like the new waitress they’d hired was having issues with a customer. Taylor quickly stood. “I have to deal with this, guys. But, here’s my number, so let me know the details.” He pulled one of his business cards out of his pocket and laid it on the table, and with an apologetic smile was off to see what was causing the uproar. He glanced back once to see both men staring intently after him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Once in the car, Patrick placed his hand over Jeff's which were twitching in his lap. "You okay, love?"

"Are you sure?"

"I saw the way he looked at us at the campsite, and I saw his face when you hugged him. He's interested."

"But what if," he said the last words with a tremble in his voice.

"If he's not the one?"

"Yeah, I'm really tired. I'm ready to give up."

Patrick pulled him into a hug in the confines of the car. "I just, I don't know. I have a feeling. He's not *looking* for it like those guys in the bars. He could have made a move at the campsite but he didn't. And we know he's a decent guy. He has a job, he didn't lie about who he was or what he did. It's worth a shot, and if he says no, well, maybe he could be a friend."

With a sigh, Jeff kissed his neck. "I know." He pulled back. "He looks at you too you know." Patrick raised a sceptical eyebrow. Jeff was the attraction, all that energy and enthusiasm. That's why he hated that Jeff was so down about this. "It's true. You never noticed, but I caught him looking at you."

He gave a little snort. "Well, I guess that's good since we're a package deal." A hint of a question may have entered his voice.

The hug Jeff was giving him got a little tighter. "Always. And forever," Jeff whispered in his ear. Patrick returned the hug. After a few minutes, they drew apart. "Let's go home. We have plans to make. God, can you get off work?"

"Oh I'll get off work. The only thing keeping me away will be if the big quake hits and Vancouver falls in the ocean."

"Wow, that would put a damper on our plans."

Patrick laughed as he pulled out into the nearly empty streets of downtown.

“Are we ready? Is everything okay? What about the wine? Did you get the bread?”

Patrick pulled Jeff down into his lap. “Stop. It’s ready, it’s fine, we have everything. He doesn’t seem like the type to care about little details. He ate a burned marshmallow off a tree branch. I think he’s pretty much a go with the flow kind of guy.”

Jeff took a deep breath and relaxed against him. “I just want it to be perfect.”

“Perfect’s impossible. You know that. It will be fine. Really. We won’t push too hard, and give him an out so there’s no awkwardness.”

“What if he freaks?”

“He’s gay. I’m sure the idea of a threesome isn’t some foreign concept to him. It will be fine. Relax.” Patrick decided some distraction was in order, so he kissed Jeff until he stopped squirming and went all soft and pliant against this body. Just when Patrick was getting warmed up, the doorbell rang and Jeff let out a little yelp and leapt off his lap.

“Oh, my god! He’s here.”

“Yes, dear. Now answer the door.” He laughed as Jeff wrinkled up his nose at him and rushed to the door. Patrick rose to follow behind, standing to the side as Jeff took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Taylor! You came.” Jeff was bouncing.

“Um. You invited me?” Taylor looked confused.

“Well, I was worried you’d changed your mind.”

“No, of course not.” He held out a box. “I brought dessert.”

“Oh wow, thanks. Come in, come in.” Jeff stepped back and Taylor finally looked at Patrick. Taylor was blushing.

“Hi, Patrick.”

“Hey, Tay. Glad you could come.”

Jeff had taken the dessert into the kitchen and rushed back into the living room. “Sit, sit.” He swept his hand around the room taking in all of the furniture.

Patrick pulled him against his side. “Just pick one place to sit.” He tugged Jeff even closer and kissed him, trying to see Taylor’s response out of the corner of his eye. The man was staring at them. Patrick turned back to Taylor. “We don’t entertain very often, so this is a big deal for us.”

Taylor looked surprised. “Oh. Well. Um, I’m honored.”

Patrick gestured to the couch. “Sit. Do you want wine or beer or something else?”

“Wine would be fine,” Taylor said with a shrug. With a look, Jeff was off to the kitchen to get the bottle and glasses. While he was out of the room, Taylor sat at one end of the couch and Patrick sat at the other.

When Jeff got back, he busied himself pouring and handing out the glasses, then plunked himself down in between the two men, not bothering to put much space between them all. Taylor shifted but didn’t exactly move.

“So. Do you have a boyfriend?” Patrick groaned at Jeff’s question.

Taylor choked on his wine. “Um. No.”

“Why?”

“Jeff!” This was not Patrick’s idea of taking it slow.

“Well, I wanna know. He’s cute, he’s smart, he’s gainfully employed, he should be a catch.”

Taylor was blushing furiously now. “I guess, I just haven’t found the right guy.” He looked back and forth between the other two men looking wistful.

“Huh.” Jeff seemed to consider that for a moment, then completely changed the subject and started asking Taylor about the restaurant and how they got started.

The bottle of wine was pretty much gone when Jeff leapt up. “Oh, my god, dinner’s ready.” As he stood, he wobbled towards Taylor, who quickly reached out and steadied him with his hands on Jeff’s hips, before Jeff went

head first over the coffee table. “Oops.” Jeff rested his hands on Taylor’s for a moment, then Taylor looked over at Patrick and quickly pulled his hands back.

Patrick just smiled. “Wine and Jeff are a lethal combination.” He watched Taylor’s cheeks get pink.

“Come on you two.” Jeff grabbed Taylor’s hand and pulled him to his feet. Taylor followed behind Jeff toward the kitchen, a half-smile on his face. As soon as they got there, Jeff pushed Taylor toward the table. “Sit, Taylor. You’re our guest. Patrick, you get the salad, I’ll get the casserole.” He bumped into the counter.

“Are you sure *I* shouldn’t get the hot dish?” Patrick pulled him close and planted a quick kiss on his lips.

Jeff frowned. “Maybe. Okay. You do that. I’ll get the salad. And more wine.”

They continued bustling around the kitchen, Jeff managing not to do any damage as he nearly tripped over a chair on the way to his seat. Patrick placed the large casserole dish in the middle of the table, and Jeff plopped down, pouring more wine in their glasses. “It’s not fancy, it’s not Mexican-Asian fusion, but it’s food.”

Taylor smiled. “I get plenty of that at work. This looks great.”

Jeff grinned at him. “It’s my speciality. Pasta sausage cheesy peppery thing.”

“Mmm. Sounds delicious.” Taylor grinned back and scooped out a helping onto his plate.

They continued to chat over the meal. Patrick couldn’t believe how easy this was. Every time they’d gone on a “date” it had been so forced and artificial. Taylor was easy. The conversation flowed, they had a lot in common, and Taylor was freaking hot. What made him hotter was that he seemed oblivious to it, or didn’t think about it anyway. He didn’t preen and say “look at me”, he just seemed comfortable in his skin.

Jeff leapt up. “Dessert time!” He got the box from the fridge and opened it. “Ooooh. Tasty.” While Patrick cleared the dirty dishes and quickly put the

leftovers in the fridge, Jeff got the dessert plates and a knife. He set the cream flan, surrounded by berries in the middle of the table. “Oh, my god. I love these things.”

He reached out and stuck his finger in the cream in the middle and scooped some up. Patrick watched as Jeff met Taylor’s gaze and held it. “Mmm, cream. My fave.” Jeff then proceeded to lick the cream off his finger in a truly obscene manner, which had Patrick hard in his pants and Taylor’s face beet red.

When Jeff dipped his finger in again, Patrick caught his wrist. “Let me taste.” Jeff grinned and held his finger up to Patrick’s mouth where he took his turn licking the creamy digit, while both of them stared at Taylor. Patrick though he heard Taylor make a little whimpering sound.

One more scoop of his finger and Jeff held it out to Taylor. “Want some?” It wasn’t exactly clear from the question what he was referring to, and Patrick wasn’t sure Taylor’s face could get any redder.

The man quickly gazed around the table and grabbed a fork. “This will do.”

With a shrug, Jeff began to lick the remaining cream off his finger, still staring at Taylor. Patrick wanted to laugh out loud. Jeff’s tongue was a thing of wonder, and he was pretty sure that Taylor was imagining the things it could do elsewhere.

Patrick shoved the plates to the side and picked up a fork. “Dig in.” This seemed to bring Taylor back to the present from whatever fantasy was running through his head, and Jeff grinned at Patrick. Patrick shook his head slightly, but with a smile. Jeff could be persistent when he wanted something. Patrick knew that from the beginning of his own relationship with the man.

Once Taylor realized the cream licking show as over, he relaxed and they ate directly from the plate. It looked a little beat up when they were done, gouges out where they had all eaten from different parts and most of the berries missing from around the edges, but it had been tasty. Once they’d had their fill, Patrick stood to put the cake away. “Why don’t we watch a movie? You guys go pick something and I’ll put this away.”

“Okay. Come on, Tay.” Jeff grabbed Taylor’s hand and twined their fingers together. Taylor looked back at Patrick with a slight frown as Jeff pulled him along, but Patrick just gave him a wink and a smile. That only seemed to puzzle the man more. Patrick knew he’d figure it out soon, Jeff had enough wine to make it clear before long.

Before Patrick could finish closing the fridge, Jeff was back, grabbing another bottle out of the fridge. “Hey, haven’t you had enough? I don’t want you to pass out.”

Jeff laughed and laid a short hard kiss on him. Patrick could feel the energy buzzing through him. “Dinner helped, I’m fine.” Another kiss and he spun away to get the corkscrew. “You were so right. There’s something special here.” His eyes were sparkling.

With an arm around his waist, Patrick kissed Jeff’s neck. “I’m always right. But just try not to freak him out too fast.”

“Nah. I think he’s good now.” He dashed off with fresh glasses and the wine. Patrick followed and found that Jeff had somehow got Taylor into the middle of the couch, with Jeff on his right, leaving the space on his left for Patrick.

When Taylor saw him, he quickly went to move. “Oh, I can shift...”

Before he could move or finish, Patrick flung himself into the empty spot and patted Taylor’s leg, leaving his hand there. “No. This is good. So what movie did you guys choose?” He never moved his hand.

Jeff leaned around Taylor, or across Taylor more like, pressing up against the man. Patrick watched as Taylor’s eyes closed and he swallowed when Jeff leaned into him. “Avengers.”

“Mmm. Explosions and hot guys, perfect.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Taylor felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest. Jeff was practically laying on him, and he could feel the heat of Patrick's hand burning through his pants where it rested on his thigh. This was unbearable. How would he be able to hide the fact that he was so turned on he was about to start giving off steam or smoke?

Jeff leaned back and Taylor tried to take a breath. He realized his eyes were closed, and he opened them to see Patrick giving him a knowing smile. Oh, crap. They knew. They were probably going to kick him out or beat him up. Well, maybe not that. But Patrick just settled back on the couch, wiggling a bit to get more comfortable, which seemed to Taylor like Patrick was snuggling closer, not further away.

"Here." Jeff handed him a glass of wine.

He blinked and took it from him. "Um, I have to drive so I probably shouldn't." Not only that, but much more and what little self-control he had left would vanish, and the two men would surely regret asking him over.

"What time do you have to be to work tomorrow?" Patrick asked him. The man's hand now squeezing his thigh.

It took Taylor a second to answer. His brain really wasn't functioning well with this much hot man-flesh pressed up against him on all sides. "Uh. Three o'clock."

"Great. Then you can stay over if you want. I'm off tomorrow and Patrick doesn't have to be in until noon." Jeff snuggled in closer as he said it and patted his other leg, also leaving his hand behind. Taylor definitely felt like he was going to erupt. He took a big gulp of the wine hoping it would help distract him.

To Taylor's relief, Jeff pushed play and the DVD started. Besides some critique of Scarlet Johansson's actual usefulness as a character, not much was said, but before long, the wine seemed to have made them all a bit lethargic and they were slumped down, feet on the coffee table. Taylor was feeling

mellow and relaxed, and had kind of forgotten about the hands that still rested on his legs. Suddenly Jeff's head flopped onto his shoulder. He turned to see what was going on and the scent of grass came to him. Before he could even think about what he was doing, he buried his face in Jeff's short dark hair and inhaled deeply.

"You smell like grass." Taylor wanted to smack himself for letting that out. But it smelled like nature and outdoors, and called to him like no cologne he'd ever smelled did. The cat in him wanted to roll around in it.

Jeff tipped his head up from where it rested and smiled at him. His mouth was only inches from Taylor's face. Taylor swallowed. "It's great isn't it? Patrick thinks I smell like I've been rolling around in the front lawn, but it's organic. Makes your hair feel great too. See?" Jeff grabbed Taylor's free hand and brought it up to his head. He obediently ran his fingers over the short dark hair.

Taylor swallowed, and took another gulp of wine. In dismay, he looked at the empty glass. Patrick plucked the empty glass from his hand and set it behind him on the end table. "Yeah. It feels," he swallowed, "real nice."

Patrick leaned in on the other side. "Smell me."

This was the oddest thing Taylor had ever experienced, but he dutifully took a sniff. It smelled like shampoo, and Patrick underneath that. Kind of like citrus maybe. "Um. Nice."

Now it was Patrick's face to be inches away. "It's ocean mist. Does it smell like the ocean?"

"Not really. The ocean smells like fish and seaweed. It definitely smells better than that."

"Good point." Neither man moved from their positions with the heads resting on his shoulders, in fact they seemed to snuggle in closer. Soon Jeff grabbed Taylor's arm and wrapped it around Jeff's shoulders, leaving the man more room to get in next to him.

The movie was coming to a close, and Taylor knew there was no way he could drive. He could barely focus on the TV, although that may have been the

distraction of having two hot guys pressed up against him rather than the effects of the wine. As the climax came, Taylor didn't really want to think about climaxes, because he was pretty sure he was close to having one just sitting on a couch, Jeff and Patrick moved towards each other and kissed. Inches from his face. He couldn't hold it in. A moan escaped his lips.

Almost at once, the two men moved apart and then pressed their lips against Taylor's neck, one on either side of him. "Oh, god." The words came out on a gasp. He seemed to slither down further on the couch. Now Jeff tossed his leg over Taylor's lap, and was more or less laying half on him. Taylor thought he should probably just lie there, but his hand went to Jeff's head to pull him closer, and he wrapped his other arm around Patrick. He started to figure that if this was going the way it seemed, he may as well enjoy it, and at least get one good night out of it to console himself, because he was pretty sure this was a one-off.

Taylor gasped when Patrick nipped his neck. The man's hand came up to the side of his face and angled him down for a kiss. It tasted like heaven to Taylor. He'd never had that reaction to anyone else he'd ever kissed. It was like he couldn't get enough. He plunged his tongue into Patrick's mouth, searching for more of that taste.

A breath in his ear caused an all over body shudder in Taylor. "Let me taste," Jeff whispered as he ran his tongue around the whorls of his ear. Taylor pulled away from Patrick, and with his grip on Jeff's skull, he angled his head, and continued the kiss. He pulled back suddenly and Jeff blinked at him. Taylor's eyebrows drew down and he pressed forward again, tangling his tongue with Jeff's. It was the oddest thing Taylor had ever experienced. They both tasted the same. He knew they'd all been drinking the same wine, but even when he'd been in threesomes before, he'd never had this happen.

When Taylor pulled back, he was still frowning. "What's wrong?" Jeff asked his own eyebrows drawing down.

Taylor's head was still spinning from the kiss, the wine and the fact that Patrick's hand was up under his shirt with the man's fingers running in circles

around Taylor's right nipple. "You taste the same." He blurted it out, unable to censor himself.

Jeff just smiled. "The wine." Taylor shook his head, but pulled Jeff's face towards his and kissed him again, then quickly turned to Patrick to kiss him again. Taylor could sense perhaps a slightly different underlying flavor, but in general, they tasted the same. It was odd, but a hand fumbling with the button on his pants distracted him from the discrepancy.

Suddenly the coffee table slid out from under his feet and threw the three of them off balance. With a laugh, Jeff bounced to his feet, grabbed Taylor's hand and pulled him up. "Come on. We need somewhere with more space."

As Jeff pulled Taylor down the hall, Patrick followed behind. Taylor glanced over his shoulder, wondering what Patrick thought of all this and if he was on board, or if it was just Jeff's show. But he caught the man staring at Taylor's ass and rubbing his dick through his pants, so obviously he wasn't against the idea. When they entered the bedroom, Taylor's eyes widened at the sight of a huge bed.

He was taken aback at first when he saw what looked like a fur blanket. That's all he'd need, is to hook up with some kind of big game hunters, but he soon realized it was just fake fur. The huge bed had a padded cream leather headboard and sky blue sheets, all turned down invitingly.

"Wow. Huge." Taylor looked between the two men. "Do you guys, uh, do this often?"

Jeff and Patrick looked at each other. "Not... often. Sometimes, but it's more than just fun for us." Patrick looked less than confident for the first time.

"If it's not for fun, what is it for?" Taylor was completely confused. They didn't seem the serial killer type, but then again, serial killers rarely did.

Jeff jumped in. "We mean of course it's fun, but we'd be, you know, open, to having a third."

"I am the third." Taylor really started to think that the last glass of wine was one too many.

“We mean permanently.” Patrick tipped his head and looked at Taylor as if expecting him to reply somehow.

Taylor thought surely he’d misunderstood. People didn’t really do that. It was the fodder of porn and romance novels, not real life. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to say, so he just stood there blinking. He probably looked brain damaged, but he had no idea how to respond.

Arms came around Taylor from behind and Jeff pressed up against him. “We can talk about that later. Don’t worry, we always play safe. We can enjoy this and talk tomorrow.”

With Jeff’s hand working its way down the front of his pants, Taylor decided that figuring this out tomorrow, when he wasn’t half-drunk and horny, would be the way to go.

CHAPTER NINE

Patrick knew that Taylor didn't "get it", but they could explain it to him later. Most people didn't get it, and a year ago, Patrick wasn't sure he did either, but they had time.

With Jeff pressed up against Taylor's back, Patrick pressed up to his front, capturing Taylor's face in his hands and giving him a kiss that should have curled the man's toes. It seemed to be working because Taylor's body relaxed against him and he was kissing back frantically, as if his life depended on it. Patrick gentled the kiss and stepped back a half-step. Taylor made a small noise of distress and reached for him again.

"Shh. I'm not going anywhere." He reached down for the hem of Taylor's shirt and pulled it up and over his head, tossing it off to the side. Patrick saw that Jeff had flipped his tank up over his head, leaving his chest bare. Jeff had moved around to join Patrick in front of Taylor, and while Patrick peeled his own shirt off, Jeff pulled Taylor into a kiss. Taylor's hands roamed over Jeff's chest, rubbing at his nipples and just seeming to explore at random. Patrick knew Jeff's skin was amazingly smooth, and understood Taylor's fascination with touching him.

Patrick pulled Jeff back and laughed at the pout. "Let's taste." He winked and reached for the button on Taylor's pants. Jeff's grin was wide as he fell to his knees and waited for Patrick to finish. Taylor just stood there, breathing heavily and staring down at Jeff. Patrick got the zipper undone and pulled down the front of Taylor's underwear, pulling his cock and balls out over the top of the elastic on the red briefs he was wearing. Soon, Jeff had his own dick out and was licking his lips. Patrick dropped to his knees and pulled himself out of his pants, simply shoving the black jock he'd chosen to wear aside.

Jeff looked at Patrick, then up at Taylor and winked. Patrick could hear Taylor swallow from his place on the floor. He and Jeff both leaned in and ran their tongue up the side of Taylor's cock. Both humming in unison as the flavor invaded their senses. Taylor finally moved, and his hands came up to

rest on the back of their heads, one on each of them. He didn't push or try to direct them, but was definitely keeping a hold on them.

The two men on their knees took turns with Taylor's cock. First Patrick taking it into his mouth, and then Jeff. Taylor was moaning above them and they could feel his legs shaking.

Patrick pulled off and tugged on Jeff to get him to stand. "Come on, we better move this to the bed or he's going to fall over."

Taylor blushed and laughed nervously. Patrick admired the way his dark skin flushed. He had no tan lines, so Patrick surmised the toasted brown color of his skin was genetic, not from the sun, and Taylor didn't look to be the tanning booth type. Jeff pushed Taylor down on the bed and started tugging at his pants and underwear, soon getting them off and tossing them to the side as well.

Jeff shucked his own pants, leaving the shirt pushed up behind his neck, then proceeded to push Taylor further up on the bed, the whole while kissing him like he couldn't get enough, and Taylor was returning the favor. Patrick peeled off his own pants, leaving on the black jock for the time being. He crawled up between Taylor's legs and engulfed his dick. The man was delicious and Patrick wasn't sure he'd ever get enough. It was a strong, slightly more bitter taste than Jeff. Jeff was milk chocolate, Taylor was dark chocolate. Both delicious in their own way.

As Patrick took Taylor deep in his throat, Taylor cried out and arched his back, driving himself even further into Patrick's mouth. Patrick gagged and pulled up. "Sorry, sorry." Taylor's voice was strained.

"S'okay." Patrick dived back down for another taste. Out of the corner of his eye as he pulled his head up, he saw Taylor's hand on Jeff's cock, stroking and fondling, as the man struggled to split his focus between Jeff and Patrick.

A few minutes later, Patrick pulled off with a pop and slowly licked his way up Taylor's abs to his smooth chest, using the flat of his tongue to rasp over Taylor's nipples. Taylor pressed his head back into the mattress, his eyes tightly shut. "Fuck!"

Jeff's head popped up. "You wanna?"

Taylor stopped writhing for a moment, and lifted his head to look at Jeff. Then he laughed. "Yeah, I wanna." They all laughed which broke some of the tension.

"Me first." Jeff flipped over onto his stomach and batted his eyelashes at them.

Shaking his head with a smile, Taylor got up onto his knees and moved behind Jeff, tugging him over more in the middle of the bed, and then Patrick watched mesmerized, as Taylor's tanned hands on Jeff's pale butt, spread his cheeks and dived in. He started rimming Jeff with the same passion and enthusiasm he'd done everything so far. Patrick watched Jeff's eyes roll back and his mouth drop open. Taylor was scoring bonus points with Jeff, rimming him like that. Patrick had more than once made Jeff come from simply that.

Jeff was panting now and had worked his way up onto his knees, thrusting his ass back into Taylor's face. He finally focused for a minute on Patrick kneeling in front of him. Jeff reached up and pulled down Patrick for a sloppy wet kiss. Jeff thrust his tongue into Patrick's mouth over and over. He reached out with one hand and grasped Patrick's cock which was already starting to leak.

With a laugh, Jeff opened his mouth and gobbled Patrick down. It was like he was starving for cock.

Suddenly Jeff pulled off Patrick's cock and hung his head down between his shoulders. "Now, now, now."

Patrick knew that meant Jeff was ready to be fucked. "Tay? Tay!" He finally got the man's attention. He looked up from Jeff's ass, face wet with saliva and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "In the drawer? He's ready."

After blinking a couple of times, Taylor seemed to finally clue in to what he meant, and he leaned over toward the night table where he pulled open the drawer. He snatched up a condom and grabbed the tube of lube. Taylor hesitated looking between the condom in his hand and Patrick's erection.

Patrick nodded his head at Taylor. "Go ahead."

"You guys." Jeff whined it out to about four syllables. "Someone, anyone, I don't care. Just do it."

"Shhh." Patrick ran his head over Jeff's head. "He's coming." Then he laughed and winked at Taylor. "Well, not yet, but soon."

Taylor snorted as he ripped open the condom and rolled it down his cock. He snapped open the lube and poured some on the condom making sure it was well lubricated. He poured more into his palm and proceeded to rub it around Jeff's hole. Taylor watched, stroking his own cock as Jeff's groans floated up to him. Jeff raised his head, his eyes glazed. "Now."

"Okay. Now. Come on Tay. Do it."

He watched Taylor grip his bottom lip between his teeth and push forward. Patrick's gaze shifted between Taylor's face as he watched his dick sinking into Jeff's ass, and Jeff's slack-jawed pleasure. He knew when Taylor was all the way in because Jeff sighed, and his whole body seemed to relax.

After Taylor made a few thrusts, Patrick reached down and lifted Jeff's head. He had that goofy smile on his face he got when he was in his bliss space. Patrick leaned over and kissed him. Jeff kissed him back, his body moving forward which each thrust from behind. Patrick pulled back and reached for his own cock, holding it toward Jeff's mouth. Jeff reached up one hand on to Patrick's thigh to steady himself again. When he was about halfway down Patrick's cock, he raised his other hand and was now balanced between Patrick's thighs and Taylor behind him, the man continuing to pound into him, never easing up the rhythm.

Patrick saw Taylor lean back some and grasp both of Jeff's ankles, using them to lever himself more firmly against Jeff. The sound of skin smacking against skin was the loudest sound in the room Patrick knew he was moaning himself, but Taylor seemed to be mostly silent, just his breath rasping out as sweat poured down his chest. The occasional curse escaped him, but mostly he was silently drilling Jeff's hole. Patrick knew that if Jeff's mouth hadn't been full, he would have made up for the silence. The man didn't know how to be quiet during sex.

When Jeff nearly lost his balance and his hand slipped on Patrick's thigh, Patrick reached down and grabbed the shirt still rucked up behind Jeff's head and used it like a harness to help balance him and keep him from falling forward. When the vibrations started up around his cock, Patrick knew Jeff was close. When the man was happy or close to coming, he couldn't seem to stop humming. It was a weird trait, but Patrick didn't mind in the least, especially when he was the recipient of a blow job when it happened.

Minutes past, the grunts and groans filling the room, along with the slapping of skin and the smell of sweat and testosterone in the air. Eventually Jeff pulled back from Patrick. "Now."

Patrick knew what that meant. Jeff was ready to go, but one of his things was to have Patrick come on him. Patrick reached forward and Taylor seemed to startle as he put his hand on the man's neck and pulled him forward for a kiss. Taylor's hips stuttered and Patrick pulled back. "Pull out. Let him flip and come on him." Taylor frowned. "He loves it, trust me." Patrick kissed Taylor again, his tongue thrusting into his mouth.

Taylor nodded and shuffled back until he was standing by the bed, he peeled the condom off and dropped it and started stroking himself. Jeff flipped over and gripped his own cock. Patrick knew it wouldn't be long. "Finger him," Patrick whispered. Taylor shook his head slightly as if coming out of a daze and stepped closer as Jeff spread his legs wide. Patrick watched Taylor staring at Jeff's face as he continued to stroke himself while inserting two fingers inside Jeff. Jeff's back arched and Patrick knew that Taylor had found the perfect spot.

Jeff reached his other hand up to fondle Patrick's balls as he stroked himself over Jeff's chest, with a grunt he shot, he seemed to come forever, but like Jeff, it had seemed like days he'd been storing up for this. Before he could even catch his breath, Jeff let go. "Oh, fuck. God. Damn. Ugh." The expletives and moans and groans continued. Patrick slid down beside him to kiss him, the exchange kind of weak and a bit lazy, both of them replete. They then looked at over at Taylor, who now was stroking himself faster, his other hand which had been in Jeff's ass, squeezing his own balls. "Do it," Jeff said, as he ran his hands through the come on his chest spreading it around.

With a cry, Taylor squeezed his eyes shut and added his come to that already on Jeff. When he stopped, he was breathing heavy and looked a bit stunned as he finally opened his eyes. Jeff held out his hand and nodded toward the bed. "Come on." Taylor flopped on the bed and Patrick leaned over Jeff to kiss the man, then Jeff did the same. Taylor just lay there with a small smile on his face.

Taylor reached out and ran his finger through the mingled come on Jeff's torso and stuck it in his mouth. He frowned and Patrick spoke up. "Problem?"

"No." Taylor did it a few more times, scooping come from different areas. "Huh." Patrick wasn't sure what that meant, but if the guy was into it, that worked for him.

A few minutes later, Jeff jumped off the bed. Taylor groaned and Patrick just grinned. Jeff never had a lack of energy, even after just fucking him stupid, he was still full of energy. He went to the bathroom and while he was there, Patrick turned to Taylor. Taylor smiled, but looked a bit nervous. "Is he always like that?"

"Insatiably horny, or full of energy after you fuck him through the mattress?"

"Um. Both?"

Patrick laughed. "Yes, to both questions. He'll be back soon, do you need anything, a drink or something."

"No, I should probably..." Taylor trailed off and waved to the door.

"Uh uh. You shouldn't drive and you don't have to go to work in the morning, so you can stay."

"Oh. Okay."

Patrick moved around until he got the bedding adjusted and pulled Taylor under the covers with him, settling Taylor in the middle of bed with Patrick on the right hand side. "I have to be on the side with the clock. It's a thing. That okay?"

Taylor shrugged. "Sure. It's your bed."

“Hey, we want you to be comfortable here with us.” He could see the look on Taylor’s face that said, “Why, it’s a one-night thing, right?”

Before he could address it, Jeff was back, with water for everyone. Patrick was thankful, he was thirsty and Taylor drank his down as well. Jeff then climbed into the bed and snuggled up against Taylor, wedging the man firmly in between the two of them.

Jeff spoke after a moment. “See how good we are, Taylor? Patrick was right. He said you’re the one.”

“The one?” Patrick could hear the frown in Taylor’s voice, if such a thing was possible.

“You know. We told you we’re looking for a third. And we really like you, and we hope you like us, and the sex is, like, yeah wild.”

“Do you mean, like dating?”

“Of course. We don’t just use people to get our rocks off.” Jeff sounded a bit wounded by the concept.

“Oh. Well.”

“Is that all you wanted? Did you just want to have sex with us?” Patrick could feel the tension coming off Jeff. In his head, he pleaded with Taylor not to say yes to that question.

“No! That wasn’t why I came here. I liked you, and yeah, you’re hot, but I would never want to affect your relationship.”

“Taylor. We want you to affect us, in a good way.” Patrick finally spoke up. “We know it’s unusual, to want more than a quick fuck, but we know it’s right for us.” He squeezed Taylor tighter and reached over to grope for Jeff’s hand. “We hope you think it might be right for you.”

“Um. I’m just. Wow. I never expected this. I’m kind of...”

“Yeah, I know. It’s kind of a lot to throw at you, but we mean it. You don’t have to decide right this minute. Sleep on it and we can talk about it more tomorrow.”

Jeff seemed to relax and leaned in to kiss first Taylor and then Patrick. “Yeah. Think about it. We’d be good, I know it.”

“O-okay,” Taylor stuttered.

Jeff flipped around and pulled on Taylor’s arm so that he was spooning up behind Jeff, and Patrick pulled himself tight behind Taylor leaving them all spooned together. Patrick could feel the tension rolling off Taylor and could practically hear him thinking, but he knew they had to give the guy some space to adjust to the idea. It couldn’t be that foreign to him, surely.

After all of the extra hours he’d put in, it didn’t take Patrick long to fall asleep, the feel of both men in his arms more right than he’d thought it would be.

CHAPTER TEN

Taylor slipped out of the house, quietly closing the door behind him. He knew he was taking the chicken way out of this, he should have stayed to talk to them, but he was totally freaked out. The night had been amazing, the sex hotter than anything he'd ever experienced, and falling asleep wedged between Patrick and Jeff had felt so right. That, in retrospect, had totally caused a mini panic attack.

He showered when he got home and lay on his bed. His cell phone pinged a message and he checked. It was Jeff. He was asking if Taylor was okay. He just needed to get his head on straight. Or maybe run away to Seattle with his brother. That was only a fleeting thought because they'd likely kill each other within six hours of being together.

He decided to answer, because leaving them hanging seemed unnecessarily mean. "Fine. Need some time. Sorry."

In seconds, there was a reply. "Ok, but you can talk to us anytime." He let that go. They knew he wasn't dead in a ditch, he needed to think. He thought he should probably have a nap since they'd been up late and he had to work, but his brain wouldn't shut off. Finally, he picked up his phone again, scrolled through the names and hit dial.

"Taylor?" His sister Kelsey sounded worried. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? How can I help?"

"What the hell? Why would you think I'm hurt? I just phoned to say hi."

He heard her let out a whoosh of breath. "Do you know the last time you phoned to say hi?"

"Uh. Christmas?"

"Christmas 2008, four years ago."

"Oops. Time flies I guess."

"So really, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." He was getting a bit whiny. "How are the kids? Merv? Life?"

“Kids are great, youngest is starting t-ball soon, Micah’s in fifth grade, Merv got a promotion at work, life is good. Now what’s wrong?”

“Sheesh, were you always this bossy?”

“Duh. Yeah. I’m the older sister.”

“True.” He took a deep breath. “You know how I always said I never wanted a relationship?”

“Yeah.” She paused. “Oh, my god. Have you met someone?”

“No! Maybe. I’m not sure.” He put his arm over his face as he talked to her. “How did you know? I mean I’ve hated having roommates, Tyler and I nearly killed each other as kids.”

She cut him off. “Well, you and Tyler are twins and he’s a dick, so I don’t think that counts.”

“Kelsey!”

“Well he is.”

“Fine. What about Mom. She’s never been able to cut it with someone. Look at her and Dad.”

“Mom is a special case, Tay. You grew up with her. Would you be able to stand living with her?”

“But if you love someone, it doesn’t matter right?”

“Nice in theory, but loving someone like Mom is, impossible. Well, only possible in short doses.”

He was silent for a moment. “So how did you know? How did you know you wouldn’t scratch Merv’s eyes out the first time he left the toilet seat up?”

“Well, besides him being a nice guy, with a job, who treated me with respect and wanted to spend time with me...” She trailed off for a minute. “Okay, this is freaky deaky to talk about this with you. Especially after never having talked to you for four years.”

“What? Just tell me.”

“He tasted different.” He could almost hear her blushing over the phone line.

After a moment, he spoke. “You mean, when you, uh, well, yeah, that?”

“God this is awkward. Yes, that and kissing and hell, I suppose if I lick his skin. It’s just like the best thing ever.”

“Huh. What if two people taste like that? How do you know which one?”

“Sweetie, people like us don’t get two people who make us want to eat them up with a spoon. It’s called mating.”

“Ewww.”

“I know, I know, but that’s the way it is. Live with it. So. Did you find someone?”

He shrugged, even though he knew she couldn’t see him. “Maybe. It’s complicated.”

“Oh, put that on Facebook.”

“Ugh. You are still a bitch.”

“Yep.” She laughed. “But Tay? Seriously, if you think you’ve found the one, jump at it. It’s more amazing than you can imagine. Given how we grew up, I can’t believe how safe I feel now. I never worry that it will all disappear. I know he’ll love me forever. That’s the great thing about being who we are. When you find the one, it’s for keeps.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“And really, you have to come and see the kids. Bring the new guy, we’d love to meet him.”

Taylor wasn’t sure how that would go over. “*Family, meet my two boyfriends. Oh and boyfriends, did I mention that my immediate family can turn into bobcats on command?*”

“Yeah, maybe. Anyway, thanks. You helped.”

“Okay. Love you baby bro, and at least send me a freaking e-mail once in a while.”

“I will, promise. Take care and give the kids a hug for me.”

Taylor hung up and continued to stare at his bedroom ceiling. The taste thing kind of made sense. He didn't have any fantasies that either Jeff or Patrick would dump the other and run away with him. They were a set, and he wasn't sure he would even want one without the other. The question in Taylor's mind was why him? Why would two amazing, hot, capable, nice, friendly, he paused, his brain running away on the superlatives. Why would *they* want *him*? He was nothing special and there was that whole shifter thing.

He remembered when Kelsey told Merv. He'd freaked out at first and broken up with her, but eventually he'd realized it was no big deal to them as a couple, and now he was fine with it. But you never knew how people would react. He'd heard stories. It wasn't pretty.

After some more fruitless staring, he got up and had something to eat before leaving for work. He drank some extra-strength coffee knowing that with the owner being at the restaurant that night, he'd need to be paying attention, and being tired on top of stressing out that maybe he had two—Boyfriends? Mates? Spouses? Whatever, it was going to be hard enough.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Honey, you have to give him time.” Patrick watched Jeff pace around the kitchen Saturday morning.

“It’s been three days!” Jeff went back to his pacing. “He’s not going to call, he hates us, he’s never coming back. I give up.”

Patrick grabbed his wrist and pulled him to a stop. “Sit.” With a pull, Jeff tumbled into his lap. “He’ll call. I feel it. He just needs some time to adjust to the idea. Be patient.”

“I hate being patient.” Jeff stuck his lip out in a pout.

“I know. But you have to.” He kissed Jeff, which distracted him for a moment. “Come on. Get dressed and let’s get out of here. Sitting around the house all day will just make us crazy.”

“Fine. Let’s go to the market. I want cookies.”

“Cookies it is.” Patrick hoped he was right and that Taylor called soon or Jeff would have to start going to the gym twice a day to work off the sheer number of cookies he was consuming.

It was mid-afternoon and Jeff was starting on his fifth cookie when his phone rang again. “If Greg doesn’t get his shit together, he’s fired.” The assistant manager at the store had phoned about four times with various trivial issues leaving Jeff frazzled on top of his already stressed self. Patrick had managed to get him to eat a salad at lunch and lay off the cookies for a bit.

“What?”

“Um, Jeff?” The voice on the phone was hesitant.

Jeff quickly looked at the phone and gasped. “Oh, god. I’m so sorry. I thought you were Greg, from the store, he’s been making me crazy all day, and I didn’t check the call display.” He took a deep breath and Patrick squeezed his hand trying to get him to focus.

“Hey, no problem. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were pissed off at me.”

“What? Taylor. No. Of course not. We’re just glad you called.” Jeff looked at Patrick, the hope clear in his eyes.

“Can we, get together? I’d like to talk, but if you have to work or whatever, it can wait.”

“No! I mean of course we can get together. Patrick doesn’t have to be to work until nine o’clock and I’m not working today.”

“Okay. We could meet somewhere?”

“Why don’t you come to our place?”

There was a moment of silence, then Taylor spoke. “Okay. Around five?”

“Five sounds fine. And, Taylor? We’re glad you called. Really.”

“Me too. See you in a bit.”

Taylor hung up and Patrick’s looked at Jeff whose eyes were huge. “Oh, my god. Do you think he’s coming to blow us off?”

“Maybe he’s just coming to blow us.”

“Patrick!” Jeff slapped him on the arm.

“Come on. Let’s not speculate until he gets there. At least he wants to see us face-to-face, that’s a good thing.”

Taylor sat in his car down the block. It was 4:50. He supposed he could arrive early, but his heart was pounding. Was he really going to do this? If he decided to try this, he had to tell them the whole truth. Suddenly he wondered if he was going to throw up. He took a few deep breaths and took a swallow of water from a half-empty bottle sitting in the console.

One more deep breath and he pulled the car up to the curb in front of their house. He remembered what Kelsey said about grabbing on and not letting go, maybe she had a point. He got out of the car and before he’d reached the entrance the door flew open and Jeff was standing there looking at him wide-eyed. Taylor stopped and they both seemed to freeze just looking at each other.

Finally, Patrick appeared over Jeff's shoulder. "Come in. Jeff, honey, let the man in."

Jeff blinked a couple of times and then stepped back. His fingers were twisting in front of him. Taylor couldn't stand it. He understood why Patrick seemed willing to give Jeff whatever he wanted. There was something about him that just screamed out for you to take care of him and make him happy. He reached out and touched Jeff's hands, Jeff stared at him with those blue eyes, and the next thing he knew Jeff was in his arms, holding him tight. Patrick stood watching them, a small smile on his face. Taylor opened one arm and Patrick moved into the three-way embrace.

Eventually they moved apart. Jeff pushed out his bottom lip. "Do we have to talk? Can't we just have make-up sex and call it a day?"

Taylor laughed but shook his head. "Fun as that sounds, I think talking first."

"Fine." With a roll of his eyes, Jeff flounced into the living room and threw himself down on the couch, then patted the cushion beside him while looking at Taylor. Taylor glanced quickly around the room, wondering if maybe it would be better to sit further away so he wasn't distracted, but the growing uncertainty in Jeff's eyes made the decision for him. He went and sat beside the man, keeping a discrete distance.

Of course, Jeff was having none of that and scooted over on the couch until the length of his body was pressed all along Taylor's. Patrick sat down on the other side of him, although gave him a few inches of breathing space.

"So?" Jeff looked at him expectantly.

"Let the man talk, hon." Patrick looked around Taylor and frowned slightly at Jeff.

"Fine."

"Um. Well, I have to say that after I realized what you meant, I was kind of freaked out. I mean, I don't know. You hardly know me and guys don't usually ask me out, let alone two guys who already have a relationship." He took a deep breath. Both Jeff and Patrick were just sitting there watching him

and paying attention. “I wondered if you were just playing with me, leading me on, but you didn’t seem the type.”

“We’re not!” Jeff straightened up indignantly and Taylor patted his thigh.

“I know. I just couldn’t figure out *why*.”

Patrick finally spoke up. “We’re not really sure why either. Why we’ve both felt like we are meant to have someone else in our lives, or why we think you might be the person. It’s just,” he paused, “a feeling I guess. Something in our gut that says we’re meant to be three and since we’ve met you, well...” He shrugged.

“Believe me, you’re not the first guy we’ve met.” Taylor raised his eyebrows at Jeff’s declaration. “We’ve been looking for a while and we’ve done bars and on-line ads, and while sometimes on paper they look good, you’re the first guy who we actually like.”

Patrick chuckled. “What Jeff is trying to say, is that this isn’t some spur of the moment decision or passing whim for us. We’re serious. You fit what we are looking for. We’re compatible in so many ways, and as Jeff said, we like you.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes and Taylor absorbed what they’d said. Patrick spoke again. “But if we’re going to do this, you have to be serious too. We’ve met lots of guys who just want kinky three-way sex and then vanish. We aren’t looking for hook-ups, those are a dime a dozen, we want someone who is committed to trying to actually date and have a relationship. If that’s why you’ve come back, great, but if you just want to get your rocks off, we’ll pass. Or if you decide you can’t deal with this and want to be friends—”

“No!” Jeff’s exclamation cut him off.

“Jeff.” Patrick gave him a little warning. “If that’s what you decide, we’ll be disappointed, but will respect that.” He took a deep breath and lapsed into silence as if he’d run out of breath.

Taylor didn’t speak and he could feel Jeff practically vibrating beside him. He pulled the man’s hand into his and laced their fingers together, Jeff’s fair

skin against his own perma-tan an interesting combination. Jeff seemed to relax beside him slightly.

“I’m not looking for just a good time. I called—I called my sister.” Jeff looked confused. “I asked her how you knew someone was *the one*. She’s been happily married for ten years, like blissfully happy.”

“You told her about us?”

“No, not exactly. Well, I didn’t mention there were two of you.” He huffed a laugh a bit self-consciously. “She’s always been great about me being gay, but I’m not sure how that will go over.”

Patrick cleared his throat and got Taylor’s attention. “We won’t hide this, Tay. We’re not going to lie and say you’re just a friend or not touch you in public. If this is going to be a problem, say so now.”

“You’ll tell your families?” Taylor was surprised.

“Well, I haven’t seen my family since I was seventeen.” Jeff spoke first. “So it’s not really an issue.” Taylor figured there was a story there somewhere, but not for now.

Patrick shrugged. “My family will eventually get used to it. Until then, they’ll just pretend I never said anything, and will act like you’re just a friend, no matter what we do. Then eventually, when they realize it’s not a phase, they’ll just slide into it.”

“Ah, well, my family’s not that close. Do you know when the last time I talked to my sister was before the other day?” Jeff shook his head. “Christmas.”

“Seven months ago?” Patrick asked.

“You didn’t let me finish. Christmas, 2008.”

Jeff’s eyes were wide. “Seriously? Don’t you get along?”

“We get along great, but we come from a family that prefers to keep their distance, and well, my mom had issues when we were growing up, so we’re just not close. My brother, my twin, well, according to Kelsey, my sister, he’s just an asshole. Could be true.”

“Twins?” Jeff squeaked out.

“Fraternal. We don’t look alike.”

“So do you want to try? Spend more time together, see how it goes?” Patrick seemed to have had enough talking and was ready for a final decision.

Taylor took a deep breath. If he was going to jump, he had to tell them now because it would only be worse. “If it was just up to me, I’d say yes, but there’s something I have to tell you, and you may change your minds about asking me.”

“Are you married?” Jeff’s head was cocked to the side.

“No—”

“Are you HIV positive?”

“No! I would have told you that.”

“Are you a wanted criminal?”

“Jeffy!” Both men shouted in exasperation then chuckled.

Jeff sat back and crossed his arms pouting. “I was just trying to help.”

Taylor stood up. He started to take off his clothes. “Yay, make-up sex.”

With a smile, Taylor indicated Jeff should sit back down. “Not quite yet. I need to show you something.”

“We’ve seen you naked, Tay.” Patrick gave him an indulgent look.

“I know, but this is, this is different.”

“Okay.” The two men sat watching him. He knew it was now or never.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Patrick reached over and started playing with Jeff's fingers. Jeff scooted over closer to him. He had no clue what Taylor could want to show them naked that could make them question asking him into their relationship. He had no significant scars or mutations.

Jeff's squeeze on his hand brought him back to reality. The air was shimmering around Taylor like a heat mirage on the highway, and then... Patrick pushed back further into the couch cushions. There was a cat, in the middle of their living room. Well, not a cat really, it was bigger but Taylor was gone and there was a multi-colored giant cat in their house. He couldn't breathe.

With a squeak, Jeff pulled his legs up onto the couch and jammed himself against Patrick's side. "Holy fuck." It was more like a puff of air than his actual voice.

"Yeah." Patrick didn't know what to say. As the cat slowly took a step toward the couch, Patrick noticed the tail. "Hey, I think it's a bobcat, he's got a short tail." He would have sworn the cat grimaced.

"Is—is it real?" Jeff's voice was still faint.

"I think so. Looks real." The animal made a low rumbling sound, but Patrick didn't think it was a *danger, I'm going to eat your face off* kind of sound.

"Tay?" Jeff's voice was a bit stronger. The cat came closer to the couch and sat, looking at them both. Jeff slowly reached out his hand toward the animal and Patrick grimaced. Shit, if that thing bit Jeff, he's need stitches for sure. But the animal just closed its eyes, the rumbling getting louder as it rubbed its face against Jeff's hand.

It opened its white-rimmed eyes and looked directly at them. Jeff put both hands on the cat's face and stared into his eyes. "Taylor? Are you in there?"

The cat's tongue came out and licked his wrist. The air shimmered again and Taylor was sitting on the floor, Jeff's hands framing his face.

Jeff didn't move. "Wow. That's amazing."

Taylor looked at Patrick who couldn't seem to think. The guy he'd slept with, just turned into a bobcat. It was too weird. He stood up from the couch and Jeff went to grab his hand? "Patrick?"

He pulled away, and swallowed. His mouth dry. "I, uh, I just need a few minutes." He turned and headed to the kitchen, not looking back. He knew he was freaking out and figured better to do it in private. He grabbed some water, and quietly slipped out the back door onto their tiny patio hoping neither one of the men would follow him. He moved a chair over into a far corner where you couldn't see him from inside the house and sat down.

After a swig of water, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This was something out of fiction. People didn't really turn into animals. How could you keep something like that a secret for two thousand years? Someone had to know. Scientists, the government? Maybe Taylor was some kind of scammer who wanted to trick them in some way. That magician guy made an elephant disappear.

He knew he was lying to himself. Taylor was not a scammer, nor was he a magician. He'd seen it with his own eyes. But could he deal with it?

He gazed out at the neighborhood around him. It was "normal", but now he wondered what normal was. He'd have sworn Taylor was just a normal guy, but... Patrick supposed in his human form, Taylor was normal. Using the phrase human form in his head only brought home again, that the man wasn't human, well, not completely. Could he change Jeff or Patrick into a cat by biting them? He had a momentary panic that he'd left Jeff alone with him, but it passed when he admitted Taylor would never hurt Jeff. Taylor had been right though, this was kind of a deal-breaker for their budding relationship.

About fifteen minutes later, the door opened slowly and Jeff poked his head out looking for Patrick. When he saw him still sitting in the chair staring at the backyard, he slipped outside. "Patrick? Honey? Are you okay?"

He slowly walked up to Patrick as if he was wary of his response. Patrick looked up at Jeff. "Is he still here?"

“Yeah. Do you want me to tell him to leave?” Patrick shrugged, and Jeff continued. “He’s kind of freaked out.”

Patrick snorted. “*He’s* freaked out?”

“Be nice. It’s like coming out for him, only scarier.”

“I guess.” Patrick sighed, but said nothing more.

“Is this going to be an issue?”

Patrick looked at Jeff closely. “It’s not for you?”

“Well, I’m not saying I wasn’t freaked out, but, I don’t know.” He touched Patrick’s shoulder. “He’s still Taylor. And it’s kind of cool. It’s an amazing thing that most people never find out about.”

“I just don’t know.”

“Maybe you could come in and talk? See that he’s the same Taylor?”

With a shake of his head Patrick stood. “I think I need some time. I’m going to head into work early. They’re always short and can use an extra body. Just give me a little bit of space.” He slipped into the house and grabbed his wallet from the bedroom. As he walked past the living room to the door he caught a glimpse of Taylor sitting on the couch looking dejected, head in his hands. For a moment, he wanted to stop and reassure him, but the vision of the cat in his living room stopped him, and he kept going.

When they asked Patrick to work a double shift he agreed. He would be on the job for more than eighteen hours, but he just didn’t want to go home. He knew Jeff would be gone to the store when he got home, and he’d sleep and then go to work again. He let Jeff’s calls go to voicemail, but did text him that he was fine and that he was working extra shifts.

He knew he was avoiding the issue, but he just wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. He couldn’t avoid Jeff forever, they lived together and Jeff’s messages were getting more frantic. He was sitting in the break room three days later, his head resting on the table. He was exhausted, not sleeping well when he was home, his mind churning.

“Hey, dude. You need some sleep.”

Patrick looked up at his fellow dispatcher George. “Yeah. I guess.”

“So what’s up?”

“Huh?”

“There’s something going on with you. You’re usually yammering about Jeff or what you’re doing. You’re always Mr. Mellow. Now you’re Mr. Morose, and you haven’t even mentioned his name. You guys splitting up?”

“No!”

“Well then, what is it?”

After a few seconds of chewing on his lip, he took a chance. “Have you ever found out that someone you thought you knew, had a whole other side they’d kept secret?”

“You mean, like they lied, were cheating on you or something?”

“Not really lied, just a side that you never knew about, and now you’re not sure if you can handle it.”

“Like he wears women’s underwear or something?”

Patrick snorted. That visual had potential. “Yeah, something like that.”

“So it’s not something illegal?”

“No.”

“Repulsive or dangerous?”

He thought of the claws on the bobcat, but he was sure Taylor would never hurt them. And he wasn’t repulsive. It wasn’t as if he turned into an iguana. “No, just different.”

“Embarrassing in public?”

“Um, I suppose, but unlikely to come to light in public.”

“Are you being a judgemental dick?”

Patrick froze, his mouth dropping open. “Uh.”

“Think about it. Time’s up, buddy. Back to the salt mine.”

A busy shift didn't give Patrick much time to think about it. Why did so many people get sick or injured at night? Shouldn't they all be sleeping in bed? However, despite the lack of time, he thought George might have had a point. He liked Taylor, he loved Jeff, Jeff liked Taylor, they all got along, the sex was freaking hot, so what was his issue?

He turned down an extra shift and hurried home. He hoped to catch Jeff still in bed. He knew he didn't have to work until noon. He slipped into the house quietly, only to find Jeff curled up on the couch, clutching a pillow. That would explain why their rarely-made bed was made up the last few times he'd come home from the second shift. A pang went through his chest. George was completely right. Not only was he a judgemental dick, but he's been a total shit to Jeff. Patrick's communication skills had failed him big time.

Jeff shifted on the couch and Patrick removed his shoes and knelt beside the sleeping man, and brushed his hand against Jeff's cheek. Jeff's eyes flickered open and he frowned. "Pat?" His voice was sleepy and dazed.

"Hey, sweetheart. I thought you'd be in bed." With a shrug, Jeff cast his eyes down. "I'm so sorry." Patrick's declaration caused Jeff to snap his head back.

"Why? I'm sorry we pushed you. If you can't deal with it, it's okay."

"I'm a judgemental dick."

"What?" Jeff blinked a few times as if he wasn't sure he was awake yet.

"George at work asked me if that was my problem, and he was right. I realized that I was judging Taylor for something he couldn't help. It's part of him and I was being... bobcatophobic?"

Jeff snorted. "He hates his tail you know."

"Why, it was cute."

"Duh. If you're a wild cat do you want a *cute* tail? He can't help it. He was born that way, his whole family was."

"I know. Will you come to bed for a bit? I'll just sleep for a little while, then we can talk before you leave for work. But my brain is mush right now."

He thought he heard Jeff mutter “what’s new” under his breath, but the man got up and took his hand as they went to the bedroom. He helped Patrick undress and Patrick barely hit the bed and wrapped Jeff up in his arms before he was out cold.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Taylor was slumped in the office chair trying to make sense out of the latest set of invoices. He couldn't focus, all he could think about was how he'd screwed it up with Jeff and Patrick. Well, Patrick. He should have kept his mouth shut, although he supposed better now than when he was completely hooked on them.

Jeff kept talking to him every day and trying to reassure him, but he knew it was likely over. At least he'd had the hottest sex of his life ever, while he was still young enough to remember it. Okay, that was even more depressing, knowing that he wasn't even thirty and all sex from here on in would suck. He was doodling on one of the invoices when his boss burst into the office.

"What the hell is your problem, Taylor?"

He blinked up at her. "Um."

"You've been moping around for the last three days. You need to get laid."

Taylor shook his head at his tiny Asian boss. She thought getting laid was the cure for everything. Hadn't quite worked that way. "I tried that. Didn't work out."

"Ah. Boy troubles. Pick a new one. Boys are like fish, plenty in the sea."

He stifled his laugh. "We're not all as gorgeous as you, Aria. The boys don't flock to all of us."

"Bah. You're pretty. If I had a dick I'd sleep with you."

"I'm honored."

"Be happy. Fake it. You're depressing me."

"Yes, ma'am." He knew her intentions were good and that her way of caring was to give you a kick in the pants. She was right. Fake it, until you make it. That was some self-help mantra he'd read somewhere.

His phone chimed and she shook her finger at him. "It better be a boy, you get laid, you'll be happy."

Taylor shook his head as she swept from the room. He knew it was Jeff, he'd programmed a special ring tone for him. He thought that may have been a tad pathetic, but it was what it was.

"Hey, Jeff."

"Hi, Tay-Tay." Jeff sounded remarkably more upbeat than the last few days. Maybe Patrick had come home. Jeff had been worried that Patrick was considering leaving since he wouldn't talk and was avoiding Jeff.

"You sound chipper."

"Uh huh. Patrick came home. We talked."

"Hey, that's great. Sounds like things are working out." He was thankful that Jeff wasn't there to see that the words coming out of his mouth didn't match the grimace on his face and the twist in his gut.

"Yeah, really. Are you off tomorrow?"

"No. I have to be here at two until closing. Why?"

"Can you come over?"

"Is Patrick working? I don't want to make things awkward."

"No, he'll be here. He wants to see you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sure. He's a judgmental dick, but he's my judgemental dick."

"Um, okay."

Jeff laughed. "He's pulled his head out of his ass, and he wants to see you. So do I."

"When? For breakfast?"

"No, tonight. After you get off."

Taylor raised his eyebrow at that. The chances of getting off with anything more than his hand were probably slim. "It will be close to midnight."

"That's okay. I get home around ten, so it will work. Patrick can have a nap."

“Sure.”

“See you later. I missed you, Tay.”

“You too.”

As he hung up he couldn't help the little shiver of hope that went through him. Maybe Patrick had changed his mind. Taylor didn't want to get his hopes up though, only to have them dashed by the “let's be friends” speech later tonight. He did manage to focus on the invoices though and Aria gave him the big thumbs up when she caught him out talking to a customer. He'd had to stifle his laughter. Her enthusiasm for his nearly non-existent sex life was amusing.

Some people may have found it creepy, but building up the business had made them closer than just a boss and employee. Sometimes it felt like she was some kind of weird cross between mother, big sister and best buddy.

Just before midnight, he pulled up in front of their house. Last time he'd done this it had sucked. He supposed on that front, it couldn't really get worse. He squared his shoulders as he locked the car and walked up the path to the front door.

Once again, the door flew open as he arrived and Jeff was standing there, this time with a huge smile on his face. As Jeff got near him, Jeff flung himself into his arms and gave him a smack on the lips. Taylor blinked in surprise. He wasn't sure exactly what that meant if Patrick was home. He gave Jeff a squeeze in return and gently moved him back into the house. He didn't really think the neighbors needed a show, even at midnight.

Jeff finally untangled himself and Patrick was standing there looking at Taylor. Taylor wasn't sure what he should do. “Um. Hi.”

Without a word, Patrick stepped forward and pulled him into a tight hug. Taylor blinked in surprise, and then Patrick spoke near his ear. “I'm so sorry. I was a judgemental dick.”

Taylor couldn't help laughing. “So I keep hearing.”

Patrick took his hand and led him into the living room, Jeff following happily behind. Taylor could hear Jeff humming a bit. He'd noticed already

that Jeff tended to hum when he was feeling good. Patrick pulled Taylor down to sit next to him on the couch, and Jeff promptly flopped down across their laps, his arms around Taylor's neck. He was practically glowing he looked so happy.

"So. Uh. What's up guys?"

Jeff gave Patrick a look. Patrick cleared his throat. "I wanted to apologise. I'm not sure why I freaked out, but after talking with someone, I realized that it was me with the problem, not you. I pushed you away for something that is part of you, and I'm sorry. I don't know. My head just kind of got screwed on wrong."

Taylor shrugged. "It was a pretty big deal. My brother-in-law stopped speaking to my sister for nearly three weeks when she told him. I guess I didn't really expect you to have a positive reaction."

"Hey. I did." Jeff was pouting.

"Yes, you did." Patrick leaned in and gave Jeff a kiss. "You're a better man than I am. You've always been so totally accepting, and I was the idiot." He picked up Taylor's hand and wound their fingers together. His other hand rested on Jeff's leg. "If you're still willing, and I haven't screwed up too badly, would you like to try this again? The three of us?"

Patrick's eyebrows were up and he was giving the sad puppy look. Taylor couldn't hide his smile. "Yeah. I do."

Jeff flung his arms around Taylor's neck so tight he thought he'd choke. Jeff then leaned forward and did the same to Patrick. "Now?" He looked expectantly at them both.

"What?" Taylor was mystified as to what Jeff was referring to.

"Now we can get naked and fuck like bunnies?"

Patrick burst out laughing. "That's my love. Always getting down to the heart of the matter."

Jeff shrugged but had a small smirk. "You've been working constantly lately. You've been neglecting me."

“This is true.” Patrick winked.

Jeff jumped to his feet and grabbed both men by the hands. “Come on.”

“Oh, my god. You’re so pushy.” Patrick winked at Taylor as he said it, grinning the whole time.

“Yeah. So. Move it you two.” Jeff had already pulled his shirt off and tossed it across the room where it hung precariously on the corner of the TV.

“We mustn’t keep the man waiting, Taylor.”

“Or what?” Taylor allowed himself to be pushed down the hallway toward the bedroom, the whole time Patrick tried to get his shirt off him.

As they got into the bedroom, Jeff tackled them both and pulled them down on to the bed with him. He propped himself up and looked down at Taylor, then gave him a hard kiss on the mouth. “Or I get very aggressive and topsey.”

Taylor and Patrick looked at each other burst out laughing. “Right.” They both drawled out.

“I do!” Jeff was indignant.

“Of course you do, love.” Patrick gave him a swift kiss. “Now why are your pants still on?”

Jeff looked down as if surprised by the fact. “Good point. Naked time.” He flipped over them onto his back and started on the button and zipper and pushed everything down in one fell swoop.

“Guess we better join him.” Taylor smiled at Patrick. He was enjoying the light playful attitude. Sex with other guys had always been such a serious undertaking. Or else completely impersonal and cold. This was fun, this was what he’d been missing in his life.

Jeff flipped himself over onto his front. “Fuck me.”

Taylor blinked. “Um. Who?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. Someone.”

Patrick snorted. “You, Taylor. I like to watch sometimes.”

“He’s pervy that way.” Jeff snickered from his position on the bed.

“Says the man who gets off on being watched?” Patrick gave him a smack on the ass.

“Whatever, unless Taylor gets moving, neither one of us is going to get what we want.”

“Sheesh, okay.” Taylor reached for the condoms and lube on the side table. He was kind of surprised he hadn’t even needed to touch himself and he was hard as a rock. These two were good for his libido.

Patrick pulled him in for a kiss and Taylor reveled in the taste. They both still tasted the same. It was more addictive than crack, well, so he’d heard. It wasn’t like he’d tried it.

“Hey, man waiting.” Jeff wiggled his butt and pulled his knees under him.

Taylor just laughed and snapped open the lube. He poured some down Jeff’s crack and watched it make its way to his hole, then used his fingers to spread it around, gently pushing the tip of one finger inside. “God, yeah.” Jeff groaned and pushed back against his hand. “Come on, now.”

With a raised eyebrow, Taylor looked at Patrick who’d settled himself against the headboard. Patrick gave him a little *go for it* sign, and Taylor pushed forward, one hand steadying his cock, the other on Jeff’s hip.

The sound Jeff made almost caused Taylor to come on the spot. He took a deep breath and pulled back slowly, then thrust forward. He leaned down and pulled Jeff up by the shoulder and gave him a sloppy kiss. Before long, he had a rhythm going. Jeff’s stream of consciousness swearing and moaning were the soundtrack, combined with the slapping of skin.

After a bit, Taylor pulled Jeff onto his side, his arms wrapped around his chest. Patrick moved up behind Taylor and nuzzled his ear. “I want to fuck you.”

“Oh, Christ.” Taylor’s hips thrust forward and Jeff cried out.

“Oh, yeah. Do it.” Jeff’s voice was raspy. “You’ll love it, Tay. His cock is like a lethal weapon in your ass.”

“Yeah, I want that.” Taylor could hardly speak, his mouth was so dry and his cock seemed to get harder by the second.

Patrick pulled away and Taylor heard the sound of the condom package being ripped open. Within seconds, fingers were prodding at his hole, pushing the slick lube inside, and stretching him. He stopped moving for a moment and leaned his forehead against Jeff’s shoulder and moaned. Soon the blunt head of Patrick’s cock was nudging at him and he pushed back which forced him onto Patrick’s cock and slid him nearly out of Jeff. The dual sensations were almost too much. He froze panting.

“You okay?” Patrick gently stroked his side and laid gentle kisses on his neck.

“Yeah, I just, it was almost too much.”

“Ah.” Patrick pulled back slightly and then slid back in. The movement behind him, pushed Taylor into Jeff in front.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. More.” Jeff had reached his arm back to try to pull Patrick in closer, which forced Taylor inside him more.

With another deep breath, Taylor tried to find a rhythm that allowed him to move between the two men. It was heaven. He leaned down to lick and suck on Jeff’s neck and ear. Delicious, that was the only way to describe it. There wasn’t a specific flavour. It wasn’t like chocolate truffles or fruit, it was just addictive.

He twisted around to kiss Patrick and was rewarded with the same flavour. Jeff was now stroking himself and Taylor reached around and tweaked his nipple while trying to focus on keeping the rhythm. “Oh fuck!” Jeff’s cry and the pulse of his orgasm around Taylor’s cock set him off as well. He jerked his hips forward, thrusting into Jeff and filling the condom. As he started to relax, Patrick’s movements picked up speed and Taylor tried to thrust back to help, and it didn’t take long until Patrick groaned loudly, then fell limp behind him.

“Wow.” Jeff’s voice was a bit wobbly.

“Uh huh.” That was about as coherent as Taylor could get.

After a few minutes, Patrick withdrew and grabbed some tissue off the nightstand, balled up the condom in it, and then tossed it on the floor. When Taylor pulled back, Patrick handed him a similar wad of tissue. Jeff rolled over on his back and stretched, his back arching. Taylor and Patrick both stared. The man was gorgeous.

They lay in silence for a few minutes, then Jeff spoke up. “Do you think gay guys want to be abducted by aliens?”

“What?” Taylor was completely lost.

“You know, because of the anal probing thing. You never see gay guys bitching about being abducted. I mean, you’re walking home from the club, you struck out, you and your hand tonight, you know the drill. Then suddenly you’re abducted and anal probed. Score.”

“Um. Maybe?” This was odd in Taylor’s experience.

Patrick chimed in. “But I mean there’s going home with someone unattractive, and then there’s aliens. Those little grays aren’t that hot.”

Jeff hummed and was silent for a moment. Taylor thought maybe the discussion had passed. “But what if they were hot? Like... Channing Tatum in the stripper movie.”

That got Taylor’s attention. “Oh god, with abs like that, he has to be an alien. No one looks that good naturally.”

“Hey, you do!” Jeff rolled to face Taylor. “You’re super-hot.”

“No, I’m not. You’re the hot one. Men and women must both follow you home.”

“Uh uh. It’s you.” Before long, Jeff and Taylor were wrestling and trying to convince the other that they were hot stuff.

Taylor stopped when he heard laughter. “What?”

Patrick was grinning at them both and leaned in for a kiss. “I knew when we met you it was something special. I think you’ve just proven we are all going to get along just fine.”

With a blush, Taylor kissed them both back. Maybe they were right, maybe this could be the relationship that he'd want to stick around for, like his sister had said.

One month later.

Jeff and Patrick sat on the couch watching TV, a large cat sat between them, also watching. Both men stroked the fur and scratched his ears. The purring was a soft background rumble to the TV program. Suddenly Jeff turned to Patrick. "Do you remember that night we met that Ken guy?" The cat growled.

"Hush. It was before we met you. Well, just before." Jeff continued. "I told you I had a dream?"

"Maybe? It was a long time ago."

"A dream? About a cat?"

Patrick paused, but kept scratching the cat's ears. "Oh yeah. You wanted to get a cat and call it Demon."

Suddenly there was a shimmer, and a naked Taylor was sitting between them looking indignant. "I'm not a *cat*. I'm a bob... cat. Well, you know what I mean. I'm not a house cat."

"Of course not, honey." Patrick tried to hide his grin.

"But maybe that was a premonition. That I knew we'd meet you." Jeff leaned in and kissed Taylor.

Taylor's lip pushed out a bit, but he settled back, and with a shimmer the cat was back. He seemed to enjoy spending time in his cat form when he was home, and it seemed to have made him more relaxed. Although maybe that was just the effect of being fucked six ways to Sunday on a regular basis.

"Oh look, it's the lesbian lizard and her potato side-kick."

Patrick scoffed. "He's not a potato. This is *Doctor Who* not *Torchwood*. Besides, he's more like an egg."

Instantly the shimmer happened and Taylor was back. He looked at Jeff and in unison they said “Humpty Dumpty.”

Sometimes Patrick was a bit surprised by how easy Taylor had fit into their lives. He could be goofy and flighty like Jeff at times, but he also had a more serious side he seemed to share with Patrick when they were alone. Their times together as the three were even better, and they seemed to all balance each other out.

They still hadn’t mentioned it to their families yet, but they’d wanted to make sure it was the real thing before they got that far. Why deal with the fall-out if you didn’t have to, but Patrick thought the time might be coming. He hated that Taylor might think he was their dirty little secret. Patrick wasn’t ashamed of loving two men, yes, he loved Taylor but he hadn’t said it yet, he didn’t want to scare him off.

He realized the two were still discussing Humpty Dumpty and if he had any genitalia. He started laughing and they both looked at him wide-eyed. “You guys are the best, you know that?” Patrick leaned over and kissed them both. They shrugged and Taylor slid back into his cat form and snuggled up next to Patrick as Jeff moved over closer to Taylor on the other side. Patrick was pretty sure the three of them were in it for the long haul, and he was just fine with that.

THE END

Author Bio

Tam Ames is a single mom to a teenage daughter who currently lives in Ontario, Canada, but spent three years in Central Europe in the late 90s for her job. It was the encouragement and dares of some friends that inspired her to start writing m/m romance, and she's grateful for their continued support. Traveling as much as possible with her daughter, reading, writing, and playing around online keep her busy, in addition to her day job.

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FATED

By Lexi Ander

A scruffy shirtless bald man in a red, green, and white kilt is standing with his feet apart looking up. He has tattoos on his upper right chest, and his arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help this poor Laird. He's a warrior and a leader, always alone. Now he's fallen in love with the enemy and his clan won't allow it. Please don't make him time travel, but he can shift for sure.

Hugs and please make sure he has an HEA. He deserves one. This is for Kevin and his incredible highlander addiction.

Sincerely,

Lucy

Story Info

Genre: historical, paranormal

Tags: men in kilts, non-wolf or -cat shifters, mythology, alternate world

Word Count: 30,991

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Dedication

For Kevin, Lucy, who have taught me to never say never. I swore I would never write a historical and look what happened. I hope your Scottish laird meets your expectations. Special thanks to Alison. This wouldn't have been half as good without her magic.

Author's Note

Writing a true historical set in the 12th century requires the author to be a bit of a poet. The cadence of the speech has a certain lyrical rhythm to it. Alas! I'm not a poet and this is not a strict historical because there are the hints of magic, of mythical wonder, shifters, and living curses. I chose the period because I needed a plausible time period for the pagan, Roi. It never crossed my mind to consider language of the period as well. I would have loved to write this as historically accurate in both the time period and the language, but there just wasn't enough time to do both. You will find that the language is from the 14th century and before. All other elements are as historically close as I could get with the short period of time I had for research. I hope you enjoy the story as it is.

NOTE: A lexicon of the old UK English used in this story can be found at the end.

FATED

By Lexi Ander

CHAPTER ONE

1164: the Battle of Renfrew

~Laird Ewen Meinneir, Thane of Malcolm IV, King of Scotland~

The red haze of berserker rage crowded the edges of my vision. By strength of will alone, I held the beast at bay. Since the battle began, my men and I had pursued the banner of Somerled, King of the Isles, only for the sly snake to slide through our fingers. However on this day, the scarlet-clad pagan Somerled kept close to his side broke away from the King of the Isles, seemingly quite determined to meet us on the battlefield, to all appearances leaving Somerled no choice save to follow him. I surged forward, my beast catching the scent of the man we needed to kill. In my haste, I almost became separated from my king, Malcolm IV, and my men.

The pagan in the flowing red robes wore no clear armour. He wielded his sword and shield with a fierceness that closely matched my own. Ere I could cross swords with him, the golden-haired warrior turned aside, and there ere me stood Somerled himself. Young Malcolm, King of Scotland, came up on my right. Under his steel helm, Somerled's eyes glowed with an ambitious light when he spotted Malcolm. Little did Somerled know he would have to go through me to kill my king.

Over these last many days of battle, we had watched Somerled. Those of us who fought beside Malcolm assembled at the end of each day to share our observations. The King of the Isle was kept within a circle of soldiers and he rarely lifted the sword in combat. I was well ware that the man I faced was fresh and not battle weary. Even so, he still would be no match for me and the beast contained under my skin.

The instant I stepped ere Somerled to face off with him, I caught the scent of another. The beast and I raised our upper lip and bared our teeth, the berserker haze that stayed at the edge of my vision during battle darkened and spread as the creature within me sought to go to the protection of the source of the amazing scent. The tight control I held over the beast's actions slipped away, leaving me utterly animalistic in mind, even if not in body, as I engaged Somerled with a single-minded savageness that caused my kinsmen to give us a wide berth.

At all times I exercised tight control over the beast within me, but in battle, I am not able to keep him bridled. When the animal fury grips me, I always come away far more drenched in blood than a common warrior, the bodies of the fallen mauled almost beyond recognition by my sword or axe. At times I lost myself so utterly to the animal I could not recall my actions. I endlessly worried I would strike down friend or family instead of the foes who faced me on the bloody field. Such was the outcome of the old lore of my people, of vows, curses, and battle rage.

I did not recall what I did or how long we fought.

The berserker rage I rode into battle with suddenly vanished. Never ere now had my inner animal been calmed so quickly or effectually. More oft than not, it took time for the rage to turn to calm, my kinsmen making sure I caused no harm once the battle finished.

The beast that shared my skin went from combative to curious in the blink of an eye, soothed and contented. My arms and shoulders tingled and ached from prolonged excessive exertion. I gulped air as sweat stung my eyes. The sounds of battle rang in the air about me, a noise I never wanted to remember but always dreamed about in the dark of night. Wounded and dying men alike cried out in sorrowful wails. The sound rivalled the fiercest of banshee singing. Ravens added their sharp cries to the discord as they circled above or hopped among the bodies. I did not want to take these memories back to my family or my quiet forest, though I knew I would never truly be free of them.

As I strained to catch my breath, shocked at the sudden withdrawal of the beast, my gaze took in the details of the waning battle. Somerled's invading soldiers retreated now their king and many of his lords lay on the field of battle. Ere me lay the headless body of Somerled mac Gillebride, King of the Isles, his body armour dented and cleaved in twain, as if parted by the powerful blows of an ogre or giant.

Malcolm moved up next to me and gazed down at Somerled. My kinsmen of Clann Meinnear loosely surrounded us to protect the king against a random attack, for all that the battle seemed to be over.

The red-robed warrior approached us with caution. I admired the heart of the foolish but fierce golden-haired man. Every day he wore flowing robes instead of armour, yet strangely never seemed to suffer injuries. The pagan advanced toward us slowly, his blue gaze unerringly locked on mine. Not knowing of his intent, I shifted my feet, readying my shield and sword to engage this new enemy even as he caused me to think of Granfather's tellings of the old ways.

Plaited golden hair lay in one long thick rope over the warrior's shoulder. Tattoos marked the fair skin of the man's face although the design could not hide the scarring that started at the right temple, flowing down the cheek to the neck. The pagan wore a short, tiny, cropped patch of hair, lighter than the colour of his braid, on the lower part of the chin. His upper lip, neck and cheeks were clean-shaven.

Eyes so blue they called to mind the land of ice in the far north held me transfixed as the man dropped his weapons and knelt on the ground on the far side of Somerled's body. His arms stretched wide, held out from his body, he finally broke eye contact when he bowed his head and bared his neck to me. With his king now dead, this man willingly gave his life for me to take. As I drew in his scent, my beast yowled and chuffed. This smell, this pagan, had both instigated a savage berserker rage and then soothed the beast. A long-ago journey with my granfather once again tickled my mind. I looked back upon

the warning. Many years had passed with naught coming of Granfather's words that I had begun to doubt.

The man kneeling ere me might be the man Granfather had foretold, whose future was yoked to mine, and yet I could only stare, dumfounded. Instead of ending his life, I scrambled to find a way to save him. Not able to, I unwillingly stepped forward, raising my sword for the killing blow I did not believe I could give.

"Ewen, enough," Malcolm's tired voice called to me and I glanced over my shoulder. My king stood within the circle of my kinsmen, war-weary and sallow faced. Chosen as Thane over Loch Raineach two years ago by Malcolm IV, King of Scotland, I spent my days in battle nigh him. I knew only I had the power to protect him. At twenty-four, Malcolm appeared as a man twice his age, and he had been in poor health for as long as I had known him. If I was weary, then he was doubly so, because he insisted on fighting uncaring of his malady.

"Enough blood has been shed this day. The king of my enemy be dead by yer hand. The battle be over and we hae won. Take the pagan, he be yers to dae with as ye will."

I breathed a silent sigh of relief but held onto a stern mask. I smelled Cinead, my cousin and clann chief, approach. Lately his scent had been mingled with the sour scents of the deceitful *Inglis*. With each visit to Glasgow, Cinead spent longer and longer periods of time, weeks turning into a month or two, beguiled by those who would test the loyalty of a Scottis to his king. Cinead foolishly believed none but his most trusted knew of his purpose. He forgot he could not deceive my nose.

Ever since Malcolm chose me as Thane, Cinead reeked of envy when he entered my presence. He laughed and clapped my back in a show of solidarity but I knew he searched for a way to be rid of me without being labelled kinslayer. In the meantime while he plotted, Cinead reminded me in many costly ways that I owed him my fealty. He pushed my tolerance and patience to the very edge with this new arrogance.

“Pagan doog,” Cinead spat, removing his steel helm. His dark hair tumbled loose from the tie at the nape of his neck to hang tangled in his face. He wore armour of better quality than that of his own kinsmen, with a coat of chainmail over the leine-croich, while *his* men wore segmented leather plates and bracers at *my* expense. We entered Glasgow to trade, not ware of the battle brewing west of the burgh. I could not in good conscience allow my kinsmen to enter battle clad in a mere leine and leggings. Cinead felt no obligation, spending coin only on his own defence.

“He be worthless and will only befoul yer house and name. Kill him and let us find some good drink and wench to warm the bed.”

I froze, my beast roaring to life at Cinead’s words. He had ordered me to destroy a gift of the king ere witnesses. I turned, giving my back to the foreigner, relying on my instinct that this man would not raise a hand against me, and faced Cinead. The men from my house outnumbered his two to one. As chief, Cinead’s position commanded the respect of the men of Clann Meinnear, but even so, he had stepped over his boundary of authority with this newest demand of me.

Malcolm had turned to leave, however he halted when he heard Cinead’s careless words of scorn for his generosity, his brow furrowed in a deep frown. If need be, Malcolm would be my witness if Cinead and I came to blows. I did not relish a fight so soon after the battle, even so I declined to allow Cinead to force my hand with regards to the pagan.

Keeping my voice calm, I replied, “I think no’, cousin. Ye cannot command me to destroy my ain property and a present of the king. I shall keep the warrior and take him into my home to attend me as a manservant. I hae nae quarrel with ye, Cinead Meinnear, nathless the fate of this man lies in my hands, no’ yers. This be no’ up for debate. Dinnae force my hand on this matter. Ye hae overstepped yer authority ere witnesses. It be my right to demand homage for the lack of honour ye hae shown me this day. Yer manners stink of *Inglis* influence.”

Cinead's cheeks puffed out and his eyes grew wide with anger. I dismissed him with a wave of my hand and addressed the men of my house.

“Edan, Olghar, gather the men and the wounded. Reap whit ye can from the field of battle and make sure homage be given to Malcolm. We leave for home at the morrow's first light. Hae all able-bodied men begin the preparations. Donn, Arait, attend me. We will escort Malcolm back to his tents.”

Glancing back at the pagan, I met his ice-blue gaze, waiting as Cinead stormed away. His men reluctantly trailed behind him, well ware they could not escape Cinead's fit of temper until the end of the day. The more Cinead acted out, the closer the clann came to choosing a new chief. I only hoped it would be ere Cinead did something harsh and cannot be forgiven. As it was, he would exact from me a costly homage for denying him. He wanted me dead and I knew not why.

I faced the kneeling man, giving him the full weight of my stare. “I be Ewen Meinnear, Thane of Loch Raineach. Whit be ye called?”

“Roi mhic Leoid.” His voice was low and accented, the sound of the rounded tone of one who spoke a tongue foreign to their own. The pagan, Roi, carefully watched my every move as if he thought I would change my mind and suddenly claim his life. His scent lay heavily woven with that of deep despair, not like any scent I had tasted ere now.

“Ye heard my words. Ye be my manservant now, only first I wid hae yer vow ere ye keep company with me and my king. For many days I hae watched ye. Ye hae never been far from Somerled's side.”

“No' by choice,” Roi said but did not speak further.

“Then it will be nae hardship to swear an oath to me. I be no' a hard master. All who live under my protection know me to be an even and fair man. Ye give me an honest day's work and in return, I shall give ye an honest wage. If ye refuse to give yer vow then I shall be forced to see ye shackled and guarded like a common criminal. Yer choice.”

For a short while, I thought he would gainsay my demand. Those blue eyes appeared to see through me, his countenance one of a person who did not understand what had just befallen him. My patience thinned as my body began to feel battle weary. Ere I could snap at him, Roi began to speak in a language, sounding much like Gaulish, it may hap Eburones or Tulingi. I had not heard those tongues spoken since travelling with Granfather as a boy. I had no need to worry for Roi soon translated.

“My shield in defence, my sword for redress, my arm in labour, my mind in council, my fate be now bond to ye. Yer life ere mine, yer house ere mine, yer kin ere mine, all of this I avow.”

I stared at Roi, scenting the air about him carefully, only sensing honesty. “Then rise and pick up yer weapons, there be much to be done this day.”

The man climbed to his feet, full of wonder and may hap a little stunned. I moved to the king’s side, ready to grab his arm if it appeared his strength would fail him. I feared that, with the decline of his health over the last few years, Malcolm would not be long with us.

Behind me, I heard Arailt address Roi, not unkindly but in warning. “Dinnae think him weak because he has shown mercy. If ye seek to cross him, judgment will be swift and he willnae be so merciful.”

I almost tripped when Roi replied, “All of my life, I hae waited for the guardian. This day, I was supposed to die hereupon this field. I can nae more raise a hand against him than I can against myself.”

CHAPTER TWO

~Roi Iain mhic Leoid~

Ere the Battle

Three times twelvemonths. Three long years of torment I endured under the thumb of Somerled mac Gillebride, King of the Isles. All the machinations, all of the labour I put into ending my servitude to Somerled and it was at hand. After all of that time, I patiently waited for his downfall while he twisted my gift and forced me to *see* for him. His yearning for power knew no bounds yet I applied great patience, knowing there would be an end to the oppression I experienced by his hand.

For days, as we battled Malcolm's army, I attempted to manoeuvre Somerled in the direction of Malcolm's standard bearers against his desires. The time of Somerled's undoing was oft within my grasp, only Somerled continuously declined to cross swords with Malcolm.

Until this day.

Cerridwen, Goddess of dark prophecy, whispered in my dreams last night. When I woke, I knew this forced servitude of mine would soon be at an end. Somerled actively avoided combat with the King of Scotland because any who challenged Malcolm were quickly and efficiently dispatched by the men who steadfastly defended him. This day would be different, for they would seek out Somerled and I would ensure the King of the Isles met them.

I rose and dressed in the crimson robes commissioned when I turned nineteen. The garments were the only possession I had saved from the fire that destroyed my Goddess's temple. Now, almost ten years later, I wore them for my final day in battle. A beacon to those who sought to bring Somerled down and as a poetic touch to the first vision I had *seen* of the warrior who would claim my life.

I had seen the visage of my dark warrior countless times ere now. Awake or sleeping, the visions cared not for my activity or where I happened to be

when they came upon me. My first vision of the highlander occurred when I entered the temple at the urging of my mother. The instant my bare feet touched the cool stone floor, I had been carried to a bloody field of battle. The clash of metal, the moans of the wounded, and the smell of the dying, all of it dulled and muted to my senses.

There were two things that stayed with me from my first clear vision. The prevailing amount of blood, the colour a vibrant red. The elixir of life, that whereat allowed us to live, created a carpet of crimson beneath my feet. The second thing that held my thoughts was the warrior, dark of hair and strong of arm. The man fought like a newly caged beast. He appeared to glow with an inner power as if part of him struggled to be free.

And he was *glorious*.

Over the years, I was given many visions of the warrior and slowly came to understand my life would end the day I met him. When I saw him ploughing through the soldiers this day, he looked as noble as I knew he would be, with his long, dark hair tied back beneath his helm, his sword glinting in the waning sunlight. A black bear was tooled on the front of his hard leather breastplate. My highland warrior fought with a single-minded tenacity, eyes glowing a bright golden-brown.

When Somerled lay dead on the ground and I knelt ere the warrior offering up all that I was, I had finally found peace. Unbeknownst to my fellow priests, somewhere over the years I had come to care deeply about the singular and violent man of my dreams.

That he would be the one to deliver me to the next life seemed right. *Fated*.

And yet, he spared me. Suddenly, I was set adrift. For as long as I could call back, I knew what would come. This day I was supposed to die. All the signs were there for a new beginning by my warrior's— Ewen's— sword. Now I stumbled about blind, rudderless, with no purpose. The only thing familiar in this dark landscape was my highlander.

Emotions buried long ago when I had first entered Cerridwen's temple threatened to overwhelm me. I had woken from the first vision confounded and affright, closed in by serious, stern-faced priests, to grasp clearly I had been cast aside. As one touched by Cerridwen's blessing, my mother left me to the mercy of the priests. They made me an acolyte and trained me for priesthood, all the while waiting for the greatness the gift would bestow on the temple. There, I quickly learned to hide excess emotion lest it be used against me.

I glanced toward the man who had challenged Ewen and pressed for my death. His light of otherness abounded with the portents of trouble. The sight caused a wave of soothing ease to wash over me. I retained who I was, my *sight*, even though the course of my fate had changed.

Dropping back from Ewen and the king, Arailt and Donn followed suit, crowding against me. Understandably, they did not allow me to be more than arm's length from them, not that I cared. I ignored the intimidation and distrust in their countenance. "Ewen's kinsman," —I tilted my chin toward the man— "he means Ewen harm. I behold much envy about him." I kept my voice low, yet the way Ewen cocked his head made me wonder if he had heard me anyway.

Donn closely resembled Ewen, with shoulder-length dark hair and a modest beard. Brother or cousin, either way I thought him for a close relative. Arailt had lighter colouring, milky-white skin lightly freckled on the nose, and waist-length red hair. Both he and Donn had an aura of power about them, similar to Ewen's, only not pinched with pain, as Ewen's appeared to be.

"If I didnae know ye arrived on the boats with Somerled, I wid accuse ye of seeking to cause discord within our clann," Arailt commented. I kept my visage blank, cursing my loose tongue. Ewen's clann chief planned to harm Ewen. Someone needed to guard against such treachery. Ewen kept these two close for the king's defence. I had believed them to be his most trusted men. It may hap I had been wrong.

“Intrigue, seeing, was this yer purpose in the service of the King of the Isles?” Donn’s gaze turned judging as he noted the tattoos on my face.

Discovery of my singular abilities more oft than not resulted in violent actions from men. They feared what I could do, what I knew. Those who yearned for power sought to bribe me to read those of their acquaintance. Others studiously avoided me, throwing salt when I walked by in an attempt to dispel evil spirits. For the most part, in Somerled’s court, I had been ignored by everyone but him and a few of his close allies or lords and lordlings.

I halted mid step, desperate to change the course of their interest even as my mind became blank. I waited with caution for their response. Would these men of Ewen’s be of the same ilk as the others?

“Answer,” Donn snapped impatiently.

I could not. My heart dropped in my chest. The frail hope that this new path would be better than my old life began to crumble, snatched away like dust on the wind because I kept my silence. Why had I said aught at all? Ewen. He was involved. He saved my life; by doing so, I became obligated to him. I gave my vow.

“Arailt, Donn!” We all glanced to Ewen. He and the king had stopped. They watched the three of us curiously. “Dinnae lag behind. There be much we hae yet to fulfill ere gloaming.”

Off to the right, three men rose from among the dead and dying, their gazes trained on Ewen and the king as they moved stealthily towards the two. At once I reacted, afraid words would cause confusion and lead to Ewen and the king being wounded. Ewen’s countenance changed from curious to alarm as I approached them at a run.

Arailt and Donn bellowed a warning I could not quite understand. Ewen responded by pushing Malcolm to the ground. He covered the king’s body with his own, a shield brought up to protect them from a blow. An ancient battle cry, both a call for death and prayer for life, left my lips as I leapt over

the two prone figures. The ravens feasting on the dead launched into the air in a dark thick mass, cawing loudly as they swirled about us.

The speed and power of my leap slammed me awkwardly into two of the fighters as I bashed them with my shield. The third man I caught with the hilt of my sword on the nose, his face caving with the crunch of bone ere I took one of the other two men to the ground with me.

A boot caught me in the lower ribs as I struggled to rise, stealing my breath away. I lost hold of my shield and the robes wound about my legs. Trying to roll away only brought the man under me along. The fighter had lost his weapon only to pull a belt knife. This close, my sword became useless. I grasped the man's wrist to stop the knife from slicing my throat open while I landed a blow to the warrior's chin with my other fist.

A roar sounded yet I dared not divert my eyes. Ewen and the king had two kinsmen to ensure the king's safety. I ignored the tumult and the piercing cries from the ravens. Struggling to keep from being stabbed, we continued to roll as I fought for a grasp on the dagger. My enemy rolled onto something that caused him to lose attention and jerk awkwardly. I took advantage, driving the knife to its crudely coloured hilt into the man's chest ere I quickly moved away. In a weary fog, I searched for a weapon. Two more cutthroats needed to find death at the tip of my blade.

Someone gripped my upper arm from behind. I turned, ready to fight, and lost all advantage. With lightning speed, both of my arms were twisted up behind my back and I found myself looking up into Ewen's dark-amber gaze, my chest flush with his so that every ragged breath I took pushed me into him.

It was not until then that I beheld his lips moving and yet I heard only the rushing wind. Blinking, I shook my head in confusion. Slowly, other sounds began to become clear.

"There ye go. Calm down. All danger be past." The words were low and gruff, right on the edge of a growl, oddly soothing instead of alarming me.

My eyelids fluttered closed at the sound of Ewen's voice. Of all the times I had seen the man in my dreams, I never heard him speak until this day. Gods above. How he affected me. What would he do once he knew I preferred men to women? Surely, he had obligations, a wife and children. Even if he did not turn away what I could offer, where would I fit in this noble guardian's life? I knew I no longer belonged anywhere, nonetheless I wanted to belong to him, be with him, stand by his side. And yet, I dared not speak of it, for I feared he would not understand. How could he? I had known him all of my life but he knew me not at all.

But to taste him, only once... I would ransom a nation to be able to freely do so.

I opened my eyes to behold his gaze locked onto me. His dark eyes, lined by thick sooty eyelashes, lightened to a soft brown-green hazel. Long, straight pieces of dark hair escaped the leather thong holding back the ebony locks. His skin was covered in sweat. Grime spattered the closely cropped moustache and beard.

The corner of his full lips lifted in a half smile. My groin began to feel heavy with need at the sight. "Ye will dae well, pagan, a fine addition to my house."

Ewen released me, his palms sliding up my arms ere they came to rest on my shoulders. I stamped down on my need, for the robes would not be able to disguise my rising desire for long. Ewen's nostrils flared and his pupils expanded ere he took a quick step back.

No one loitered within hearing, leaving us alone. Arailt and Donn, along with the king, were gone. The air was filled with the cawing of the ravens as they hopped about and over the corpses. If Ewen noticed the birds watching us instead of gleaning morsels from the field of battle, he said naught. They were the eyes of The Morrigan. Who they took interest in, whether it be he or I, I knew not. I made the sign of the battle blessing. Removing the correct rune from my belt pouch, I flipped the stone onto the field ere gathering my sword and shield from the ground.

He crouched over the bodies of the would-be murderers, fingering their ribands, the colour identifying them as men of Malcolm's soldiers. "This makes nae sense. Why wid they beset the king now? The battle were already won!"

I snagged a heavy coin purse off one and glanced inside ere passing the leather pouch to Ewen. "It be possible the target was no' the king."

Searching the other two bodies, I came back with similar purses with the same heavy weight of gold and silver coin. It was a small fortune, more than a soldier would earn for more than a twelvemonth of work. I ignored Ewen's stare, refusing to meet his probing gaze.

"Ye believe I were the target?"

I scowled at the two heavy purses in my fist, weighing what exactly I should make known to him. "I huvnae been in yer presence long. Still, even I could tell there be those who hae issue with ye. I spent three years in Somerled's court reading people. If they sought only the king's life, they wid hae ensured he was alone— no' with his best men."

We both stood at the same time. The day had been long. Weary in body, I wanted to be away, not hereupon the reeking field of battle. My head spun and sight blurred. When I blinked, Ewen had grasped my arm to steady me.

"No' much longer and we both can rest."

CHAPTER THREE

Ewen

By the time I walked Roi back to camp, Donn and Araitl had handed Malcolm off to his personal guards. They assured me the wains would be ready to pull out in the morn.

Earlier, Malcolm had graciously offered us the use of his officer's bathing tent, whereat I accepted. I sent Araitl and Roi through to bathe while I saw to last minute trifles. Even at the late hour, the victory celebrations continued, and they probably would until sunrise. Donn and I, finally done for the day, looked forward to a soaking. We stepped into the deserted bathing tent, the warmth and humidity enveloping us upon entering.

"Ye huvnae heard a word I hae said." Donn began to disrobe. Our armour had been removed earlier, leaving only our tunics and leggings, although we retained our sword belts. After the sly ambush earlier, all of my kinsmen were on edge.

"It be no' apurpose, brother. Much weighs on my mind." I pulled the leather shirt over my head and laid it to the side. We each had brought a change of clothes with us to the tent, mine being the only clean ones I had left. We would not be able to launder any garments until after we reached home.

I had commanded Araitl to find clothing for Roi after the pagan declined to retrieve any belongings from Somerled's tents. I wondered if he did not wish for me to see something, may hap how he lived, or evidence of how he served the Somerled. I cared not what the reason. I declined to take him across country in those crimson robes. The crude red colour would draw every outlaw and robber between us and Loch Raineach. I grew tired of bloodshed and did not wish to invite more.

"There! Again!" Donn accused. "Whit holds yer thought?" He stepped into a large, round waist-high wooden tub that could easily seat six men.

Ere I got into the water, I placed the shaving kit Arailt retrieved for me earlier on the stand next to the tub. “I hae been thinking about what Roi said this afternoon. He believed I were the murderers’ target, no’ Malcolm.”

“As I told ye ere now, he beholds whit other men dinnae.”

I sank down into the lukewarm water and sighed. Many days in battle and there was not a place I did not hurt. “I dinnae know why ye believe him gifted. He admits to nae such affliction. Natheless, he seemed sure about his calculation. If Somerled’s court be half as corrupt as I hae heard, then Roi’s judgment of the matter might be closer to the truth than I wid wish for.”

“Dae ye dare to trust him?”

We passed a lump of lye soap back and forth as we washed. “He smells...” I could not place my finger on the exact wording.

Granfather’s long ago words stayed fresh in my mind. He said one day I might meet a man who bore the markings of the old gods on his visage. He would be familiar to me, call to my inner self as an old lover or friend would, even though I knew him not. Bear would act unlike himself in the man’s presence.

This foreigner would have the ability to undo the heinous act of a long ago ancestor, Reginald the Wicked, who trapped a bear spirit under his skin becoming the first werebear. All of Reginald’s descendants were accurst, never able to leave the forest for an extended length of time ere becoming afflicted with a longing, that if ignored, would drive us mad.

I had never confided to anyone what he told me about our origins. When I was young, I did not want to believe I needed help to free my people. I had been born with the strongest will and the strongest bear spirit. Forsooth, if we were cursed, together Bear and I would break the binding. We did not need aid from an outsider to do so. The older I became, the harder it was to believe the elder’s mythical tales. Until the day came that I altogether quit believing in any of the tellings of the curse.

With the arrival of the pagan, I was once again made to think of Granfather's teachings. After a day ruminating over what I called up of the lore, I still did not believe my granfather's foretelling to be true. Even though Roi showed signs of being more than he appeared to be, he was only a man. Bear might desire to claim him but even so, that did not mean Roi had the power to save us whereat by the same token destroy who we were as a people. According to the legend, when the curse lifted we would be separated from our animals for they would then be free. What good were we without our bears? No, what I had seen in Roi so far was not the portent of ruin for my people.

Donn stopped scrubbing and stared at me, bringing me out of my dark musings. "Simply because ye cannot shift dinnae mean ye cannot glean information from Bear," my brother admonished.

The men and women of Granfather's bloodline shared their bodies with the spirit of a bear. Each bear revealed their name to their human, except for mine. He withheld from me his name, so I simply called him Bear. Everyone thought this was the name he had given me, not ware of my fight. My kinsmen shared an equal relationship with their bear spirit, I did not. Bear either ignored me or took over in battle with berserker rage.

"Bear be infatuated with him," I acknowledged. "Even now I struggle with him. He has no' been this active since I was a boy." The confession released a tension within that I had been not ware of.

As my brother, Donn knew of a few of the problems I had with Bear, but not all. I feared confiding too much because every now and then I saw his disapproving countenance when he believed I was not ware. He believed in the old ways, accepted as truth the ancient tellings, even the ones promising the return of the guardians. Considering we all were guardians of the Caledonia Forest, Granfather's claim made no sense. Donn's gave credence to the lore and my doubts of it were points of strife between the two of us that from time to time threatened to tear us assunder.

"Granfather warned our animals wid become attached to certain people. Methinks there be nae a rhyme nor reason why. Lannah's attached to Simon

because he be quiet while Tomas's bear likes Aimili's ability to climb trees," he pointed out.

"Whit wid Caitriona think?" I did not speak of her oft. I was surprised I did not choke and stumble over her name as I had done in the past.

My brother's amber eyes softened. "She knew the clann's heritage ere she agreed to be yer wife. She may hae been human but she accepted our ways. Our human side can choose a spouse just as our bears can choose a companion. At times the two be no' the same person." Donn ducked under the water to rinse his hair and then wiped water from his eyes.

"Be ye concerned because Bear chose a male companion, or dae ye feel guilty? Ye be widowed and ye hae been for over a twelvemonth. The time for mourning be past. Yer love for Caitriona willnae be lessened simply because ye hae found Bear's companion. She wid want ye to be happy. Look at Granfather. Seoc became his companion after Granmother passed. Ye know he loved her yet he adored Seoc deeply, albeit no' unlike the deep feelings he held for Granmother."

I nodded in agreement only to hide my worries. "Bear's reaction to Roi be strong. He attempts to overwhelm me if I dinnae hae a firm hand on him."

"Yer strangle hold causes Bear to turn a deaf ear to ye or to fight. If ye deny him his companion, yer bear could withdraw altogether," Donn warned.

Donn left the tub and dried off. After clothing himself in clean garments, Donn grabbed the shaving kit and came to stand behind me. I leaned back and waited as he created the shaving lather ere taking the shears to my hair.

Donn stared down at me, his face unreadable. "Will Roi be open to being a companion to ye? I sense he be unlike others, though that dinnae mean he wid consider ye for a lover if it be no' in his nature."

"I scented arousal this day when he came nigh. The way he watches me, as if he be expecting— something. I should wait until he comes to know us. He shall be living under my roof, and sooner rather than later, I need to speak to him about the clann's heritage. He makes keen observations. Even if he

consents to being in a companionship, it will come to naught if he cannot accept our bear spirits.”

Bear grunted, unhappy with my answer. He seemed sure of Roi’s acceptance and wanted Roi to himself— now. The certainty of Bear’s belief had become stronger the more time we spent with the pagan. I would almost say my bear knew Roi, save that was not possible as his memories were my own. I was sure we had never met.

I declined to admit to Donn the attraction I had for Roi stirred guilt within me. I know not if Bear’s attraction to the pagan swayed my own. Roi seemed familiar to me and yet again, I blamed the sensation on Bear. For so long my actions had been unhindered by Bear’s opinions. Now, with him active, I had trouble divining which emotions belonged to him and which to me. In part, I was overjoyed Bear had come alive but it took double the willpower to exert my command over him. I was afraid if I eased my grip on Bear, he would overwhelm me as he did in battle. What I would come to feel for Roi had to be me and not Bear, otherwise I could not be happy with Roi as companion.

As if understanding my concern, Bear withdrew, becoming almost dormant again. I was left with the keen understanding that everything I had blamed on Bear’s power over me did not leave with him. As Donn removed my beard and shaved the hair from my head, I struggled to admit to interest in someone since the death of my spouse. God help me if the arousal I scented upon Roi earlier had been for me. If he was willing, my resolve could very well crumble.

Bear seemed to watch me struggle, yet his emotions, his opinions, were hidden from me once again. I wondered if I should be concerned by his smug satisfaction when I silently lamented his absence.

I ducked under the tent flap. My scalp felt cold and chapped, I ran the palm of my hand over the smooth skin. Donn had done a good job of shaving my head and face. I felt naked, the coolness of the evening air causing the skin to prickle.

It did not take long for my sight to adjust to the dim interior of the tent. Without delay Bear rose up and demanded I search out Roi. I did not fight the impulse. In the back corner, Roi lay burrowed in the mound of hides and furs where my scent would coat him from head to toe. Bear made small grunts of satisfaction.

Undressing, I quietly climbed in between the hides. Accordant to habit, I would not travel this burdened, save the trip to Glasgow with Cinead meant a couple of weeks sleeping under the stars. Those like me, who could barely stand the press of the city, paid a farmer to allow us to pitch tents on his land outside Glasgow. With Somerled's invasion, our purpose had changed from trading to war. The shelter of our tents became a luxury among an army of so many.

The many layers of furs trapped heat and protected us from the cold ground. Sliding in next to Roi, I could not stop the tremble as our bare skin touched. I had not been so close to anyone since Caitriona passed. Bear desired to rub against the man, wrap about him, and hold him close. It may hap I was not the only one who missed having someone in my arms at night.

Roi moaned in his sleep, rolled over and moved into my side. His long blond hair looked white against the dark furs. With gentle fingers, I pushed back the strands and gazed at the scar on the right side of his face.

The burn was extensive, going from the hairline of his temple all the way down to his neck. The scar was thick, wrinkled, and paler than the rest of Roi's skin, whereat told me the injury was old. The skin about the eye pulled up only a bit. The burn was far enough from the outer crook that the skin had not healed gathered in the corner, narrowing the eye and affecting his sight.

With my fingertips, I traced the line of the tattoo, starting at the base of the ear, arcing up over the cheek to a point ere coming back down and connecting to the top of the ear. The design resembled an upturned, curved blade with three dots along the centre. From the hairline of his forehead to between his brows were two deep Vs. Dots filled the space between, with a fine scrolling of woad along the outer edge. Starting at the corner of his eye were swirls of

lines and dots that brought to mind the wakening bud of a flower, new and watchful. Roi's scarring did not allow him to grow a full beard. It appeared he kept his cheeks and upper lip shaved on a regular basis, allowing the hair to grow only on his chin. I was not used to the look but I found I was not opposed to the style.

Roi's muscular arm wrapped about my chest and a thick thigh wedged between mine. As he moved, Roi made enticing noises that caused my groin to tighten. I drew him closer. Bear demanded I check Roi's scent. Sniffing, we found only our smell upon him. Roi's nose nudged my ear ere Roi finally settled down. I did not believe I would sleep, though no sooner did I close my eyes than I fell into a light doze.

CHAPTER FOUR

Roi

I woke in the early hour of the morn trapped under a large snoring body. At once, panic flickered as I tried to place my surroundings. The events of the day ere pushed past the terror, only it did not help me to bring to mind the bald male who sprawled on top of me. Did I mistakenly climb into a tent not belonging to Ewen?

Striving to extract myself without rousing the man, I shifted to move out from under him. The soldiers were celebrating heavily last evening. I did not want this one to wake and know he had not tumbled into bed with one of the camp's women. Honest blunder or not, violence would ensue.

A low grumbling growl caused me to halt and tense. My body shamefully responded to the noise. I laboured to hide my arousal in Ewen's presence. Now here I was being made to think back to the many times I had denied myself the tender touch of another. I should have taken myself in hand last eve to relieve the tension, yet I had imagined being caught and all desire fled.

The man began to sniff at the crook of my neck and I went from partially aroused to aching with need. There would be no way I could get out of this without a fight. The large strong arms clasped about my torso constricted, holding me tighter as the man rolled his hips, digging a steely manhood into the flesh of my hip.

"Roi." The voice was rough with sleep but I recognized Ewen in that one spoken word. The matter had not changed. If he woke he would not look kindly on a man in his bed. Natheless, I was well and truly trapped.

Ewen continued to sniff my skin. At any other time, the soft puffs of air ghosting across my neck and chest would stir my blood. A warm tongue licked along the skin where my collar would lay, raising the skin to gooseflesh. I fisted the hides underneath me to keep from pushing back against Ewen as he rolled his hips again.

“Roi.” This time Ewen sounded harsh and full of agony.

I waited for Ewen to wake. When he raised his head and stared down at me with clear hazel eyes, the strain left my body. The dread leaked away and I became pliant under Ewen’s firm body.

“Tell me, dae ye— will ye— accept me?”

I should argue for time. There were things I needed to tell him, explain to him... but I had only ever wanted him. Would he understand what I am— who I am? Would it even matter?

In the end, I declined to deny him. With a boldness I oft lacked, I grasped his hips and ground my aching erection into him. The “Aye, please” I intended came out sounding like a groan. Ewen nipped my chin, pulling lightly on the short hairs ere burying his nose back into the crook of my neck.

What was I doing? I barely knew this Ewen who hovered over me. Dreaming about him every night had given me little insight to the man. The suspicious side of me wondered if my boundaries, my loyalties were being tested by the gods. The part of me drifting and scared, that foresaw my death yesterday, wanted to take the pleasure Ewen offered. To confirm I lived because I could not behold my future any longer.

I knew I should slip away, leave, because in all reality I belonged nowhere, especially not here, with him. Instead of planning an escape, searching for a way to return to my island and what was left of my people, I waited for Ewen to take me in any way he would. Because— to be able to play out every dark desire, to taste every part of him, wrestle him, submit to him and ravage him— gods above— I grasped clearly I would do aught to stay with him.

Releasing my hold on common sense, I rode the wave of ecstasy Ewen built between us with his open-mouthed kisses, his sensuous licking, and the grinding of his groin against me. I whispered pleading words as he grasped my hard column and stroked my length in time to the mind-numbing swivel of his hips until I spilled onto his hand. Ewen bit my shoulder as he grunted, his warm seed coating my belly.

As our heavy breathing sounded softly throughout the tent, his broad palms stroked my side down to my hip. I sought to soothe the skin where I had gripped him roughly, at the same time learning the lines and strength of his body. Would this be only the once? The release of stress after a successful battle? I hoped not, but life, of late, had not been particularly kind to me. If this was the only time I could hold my highlander, I would take it and deem myself rich, for in his touch I had found peace.

Ewen grabbed a square of linen from beside the fur pallet and wiped us clean. Not wanting to pull away or stop touching, I ran my fingertips through the dark hair on his chest. Over the left side of his breast, atop his heart, lay the tattoo of a Celtic knot, the symbol of the beginning and the end, a call back to the timeless nature of the spirit. The image of a dragon went from his left elbow up the bicep and over the edge of the shoulder. On the inside of his arm, below the elbow, a red star as large as my palm stood out starkly against his skin. When I ran my thumb over the symbol, Ewen jerked away as if I had burnt him. I wanted to make an apology but I knew not what for. The quiet breaths of awkwardness changed when someone scratched at the tent flap.

“Ewen, the Jews be on their way.”

“Give a bit to dress, Donn,” Ewen called back.

I shivered as the hides were pulled back and cool air invaded our cocoon of warmth.

“Arailt found clothing for ye.” He handed me a modest stack of garments that had been sitting nigh the foot of the pallet. “There be leggings, a tunic, boots, belt, and a kilt. The tartan be plain, yet once we arrive home, I shall hae one of my sett made for ye.”

A lump formed in my throat. I had lived such a long time without a family. The temple and the ever-present priests were certainly never such a haven. Even though I would be a servant in his house, it would be the closest I would come to having a home since my mother deserted me on the threshold of the temple.

The spark of flint and steel startled me into action. Someone had business with Ewen. I had heard of the bankers, the Jews the Norse brought over the seas to be money handlers. It would be unseemly for them to catch me in his bed. I pulled on the linen tunic that fell to mid-thigh and quickly wrapped the leather leggings, using *snaoim gatrain* knots to secure the garters hidden by the hem of the tunic. Wrapping the great kilt became cumbersome, then confounding.

“Huvnae ye worn a kilt ere, man?” A hint of humour touched his voice, his strong hand gently moved mine to the side as he patiently taught me how to wrap the garment.

“I be a priest of Cerridwen of the Temple of the Moon. I hae only worn her robes,” I confessed.

Ewen’s hands stilled after he buckled the belt. I glanced up to catch him staring at me with an odd countenance. “A warrior priest of old? Then Cerridwen must be proud of ye, at least until ye wore red robes into battle, making yerself a beacon for those who wished to kill ye.” A hint of anger tinged his voice, his hands fisting and wrinkling the woollen material.

My checks grew warm. “The colour was so I wid catch yer eye.”

“Why?” he finally asked. “Why wid ye want to draw my sight?” The beginnings of distrust moved into Ewen’s visage until a cold mask looked down at me.

“Because it was yer destiny to deliver the killing blow to Somerled.” Any hope that Ewen would be accepting of my gift crumbled to ashes even as Ewen continued to gaze at me with cool regard.

“How wid ye even know whit my destiny entailed?”

“I told ye, I be a priest of Cerridwen. She be the Goddess of the moon, of wisdom and understanding. She be the keeper of the cauldron of the underworld, and Goddess of dark prophecy.”

“Whit else dae ye know about my destiny?” I did not answer. “Whit about yers? Am I to die by yer hand?”

“No. I will never lift a hand against ye. I know naught else of yer life.”

“Why be that?” Ewen spat angrily. He wanted answers, some of which I could not give to him.

“Because I, too, was to perish by yer hand yesterday in battle. Ye hae changed yer fate utterly as surely as ye hae changed mine.”

He did not believe me and I wished I could take my confession back. He would have found out at some time. I wanted it to be my telling, natheless I had underestimated Ewen’s acceptance.

Ewen withdrew, emitting a low growl. What had I wanted him to do? He reacted the same as many of the others who uncovered my secret. I let myself believe this—he— would be unlike the days before. Suddenly I ached for the familiarity of my life on the island and the sameness of routine.

Scratching at the tent entrance put a halt to our conversation and any reply he would have made. Donn stepped through the flap and sniffed. The playful grin slipped when he noticed the strain between Ewen and me.

Behind him entered another, shorter man wearing a small red cap. His thick, curly midnight hair did not quite reach his shoulders and was matched by a full beard and moustache. His dress was that of a person of modest wealth. “Good morn, Ewen Meinnear of Clann Meinnear. I be Hiram Resnikov and I hae brought whit ye requested for yer children and yer estate.”

Ewen turned his back to me and drew the banker into the corner furthest from me, no doubt for privacy. Donn stepped into my line of sight and I sighed. Why did I bother to hope anymore?

“Whit happened?” Donn demanded in a low whisper.

“Whit always does when those like ye discover whit I be.”

Donn looked to be puzzled. “Whit be ye?”

“I be naught, simply a servant of Ewen’s house.” I turned, dismissing Donn, knelt next to the pallet and began breaking down the bedding. Ewen

wanted to leave at first light. I needed to make sure his tent and belongings were packed up.

Donn knelt next to me. “Explain yerself.”

I ignored him and continued to roll and tie the furs. Movement was the key. If I stopped, I would crumble under the weight of my wretched sadness doubled. So, I worked studiously and kept my countenance blank. After an instant of odd sniffing, Donn began to assist me. The kind gesture almost too much save that I swallowed down the choking emotions I did not have a use for.

Belonging. I belonged nowhere. At that point, I hated myself for wanting what I could never have.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ewen

Bear struggled against me all morn. The sorrow and despair in the air about Roi burnt my nose every time I passed by. I did not intend to hurt him, yet his words alarmed me, and even though Bear argued that Roi's scent was free of deceit, my human side took time to sort through what Roi's words signified. By the time I agreed with Bear, the damage had been done. The interior of the tent had been packed and loaded onto the wain with Roi nowhere to be seen.

Curiously, I could not locate Donn either.

Too many duties came ere I was able to search out either man. I wanted the kinsmen of my house away from Cinead's barely hidden hostility.

We had originally travelled to Glasgow with my cousin, Cinead. He wanted to commission masons to add a wing to his castle and I needed to purchase supplies. There, we became caught up with Malcolm and Somerled's battle. Planting season quickly approached and I needed the oxen and all the able bodied men in the fields.

Arailt took a couple of men to pay the warehouse where the wains were stored and bring back my purchases. I took the small amount of time between his departure and return to search for Roi as I wanted to reassure him. When Arailt rolled up with the heavily burdened carts, I had not yet found him. I fumed over Roi and Donn's absence. Kinsmen quickly hastened out of my way as I checked the loads.

We had purchased wax, carded wool, whale oil, salt, seed, pepper, exotic spices for cook, apothecary supplies, few pieces of fine dishes, second-hand silk handkerchiefs the ladies would disassemble and make lace from, and last but not least, ribands for my girls. Loot from the field of battle had been stashed in the space left.

Arailt brought about my grey-speckled courser, his charcoal mane and tail brushed and tangle free. The warhorse towered over the regular horses yet he

had to stomp a couple of times as if to preen in front of them. Kinsmen not riding one of my horses were either paired up to drive one of the three wains or would walk.

“Hae ye seen, Donn... or Roi?” I laboured to make the question casual to hide my growing worry about the absence of my brother and future companion.

Arailt was not skilled at hiding his smirk. “They be coming this way.” He notched his chin to a place over my shoulder.

Turning slightly, I glanced over my shoulder to behold Roi riding in front of Donn on the horse, the two speaking spiritedly until they noticed my steady gaze. A low rumble shook within my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Arailt move away quickly. I had been churlish all morn and beholding Roi riding within the circle of my brother’s arms did naught to improve my temper.

Dropping my reins, I stormed over to Donn’s rouncy. Bear bristled at the sight of Roi with Donn. Roi’s eyes widened in alarm as I strode toward them. I clamped down on Bear and kept command. It would not do to scare Roi and cause more damage than I already had.

“Roi, please go wait by my horse.” I gritted my teeth as he delayed. I understood his unwillingness; I thought again our earlier conversation as well. How was I to make amends when my brother was forefront in his thoughts?

Donn helped Roi slip down from the horse and it took everything I had to keep from gnashing my teeth at the familiar way my brother touched him. The weight of my kinsmen’s gazes pressed upon me, no doubt curious as to my ill-temper and the new man joining to my household. Soon I would have to reveal Roi as my bear’s companion. They would want to celebrate, nathless I first had to broach the issue with him. His actions this morn, along with his claim, told me he would have accepted me. After what I had said, I was not sure what his response would be now.

When Roi was safely out of hearing, I glared at Donn. “Whit dae ye think ye be doing? I hae been looking for the two of ye.”

Donn leaned down, his flinty stare matched my emotions. “Getting him away from ye,” he spat talking over my heated response. “He be yer companion and whatever ye said or did caused him to pull into himself. I convinced Roi to grab his belongings from Somerled’s tents, whit was left of them at least, to give ye time to decide.” I had not noticed until then the bundle tied to the back of Donn’s mount.

“To decide whit?” I ground my teeth together, angry that my brother urged Roi to do something he had adamantly declined to do ere now.

“Be ye gaunnae ignore the gift given to ye? Can ye accept who he be? If no’, then move aside.”

I was stunned. “He told ye...”

“It took some coaxing. I be surprised he trusted me at all, but aye, he told me his story. Ye be blind. All of the bears be reacting to Roi. If ye willnae claim him then ye must allow the others to court him.”

I cursed ardently under my breath. I had noticed my kinsmen’s reaction to Roi, yet thought naught of their eagerness to assist him. As the new man of my household, naturally they would be curious about the king’s gift. I glanced back up to Donn and caught him watching Roi with a somewhat wistful countenance.

“He smells of the moon and the stars, of the air at the summer solstice when the faerie magic be heavy in the air.” Donn sat back up on his horse and stared down at me with hard amber eyes. “I wid be one of those to woo him, even fight for him.” With a click of the tongue, his horse moved forward to where Roi waited.

What a bitter brew my brother had given me to swallow, and not a word of it false. I had reacted poorly. Now I had to persuade Roi to trust me, to consent to be my companion. If Roi could not forgive me then I would have to step aside and allow him to choose from among my kinsmen.

I waited as Donn spoke to Roi. The delay gave me time to bargain with Bear, who felt threatened by Donn's doting. The fault for this tangle could be laid wholly at my doorstep, not my brother's. I promised Bear I would win him back, sensing that if I failed, he would withdraw as Donn had warned. I might not be able to change like the rest of my family, nonetheless Bear's spirit lived within me. Losing touch with him would be the same as losing a part of me.

When Donn sat up, I approached them. Roi regarded me with wariness. I gave him my best smile and thought of how he looked earlier that morn. The responding blush and slight widening of his eyes gave me hope. "I wid like for ye to ride with me." I breathed in his scent and Bear grumped at the traces of Donn's intermingled with Roi's.

Roi stammered but he did agree after a short time passed. Feeling as if I had won a small victory, I shouted for all to mount up as I untied my new courser. The horse was black with white forelegs. Accordant to habit, I would not have two warhorses, but I claimed the animal after one of the battles. Having tested the mare many times, I found her to be mild of temper and quick to respond.

Presenting the courser to Roi to ride, I smiled widely with pride until I noticed the horror on his face. "Whit be it?"

He regarded the horse with a countenance that said he thought the animal would eat him alive. "I... I dinnae ride well."

I would have scoffed but Roi had become an odd shade of green. "Then ye can ride with me."

He dropped his head and gripped the wide leather belt at his waist until his knuckles turned white. "I cannot. I wid embarrass myself. It wid be folly on my part for I cannot be close to ye and no' give meself away. Shame meself and ye. Whit wid men think? I widnae befoul yer house or yer name. If ye permit, I shall walk."

“I wish to speak with ye at length while we travel. I cannot dae so while I be up there and ye be down here. I refuse to bellow at ye for all to hear. If the horse frightens ye, then ye can ride with me. I will skewer any man who maligns my name or kin,” I reassured him.

The man glowered at me. “I nae be afeard of the horse. I shall ride the beast to keep ye from—” Roi snatched the reins out of my hand and gave the horse a baleful glare.

I pursed my lips to hide a grin. “I acquired the animal as loot. She has a smooth gait and of good temper when she be no’ challenged by another horse. The pompous arse who owned her used a wooden saddle tree with a horsehair covering over the seat.” Unlike my own saddle of wool and leather with the slightly curved seat, the knight’s saddle lifted the rider above the horse’s back. “If ye wid like, I can lead the horse and ye can hold onto the saddle-bow.” Roi turned and glared at me. “Until ye be comfortable,” I added quickly.

Roi blew a forceful breath out of his nose ere nodding his head. Confounded, I watched as he mounted the horse in one fluid motion but said naught more. The mare shifted and stomped as the additional weight settled on her. He paled slightly and gripped the arching wooden front of the saddle.

I quickly mounted my grey-speckled courser, retaining the reins to the mare. With little other discussion, we set off with the three wains trailing and a dozen riders hemming them in.

“I ask yer pardon for my behaviour this morn.” Roi’s face closed up and he turned away until I could only behold the profile of his scarred right side.

With naught else to steal my thoughts, I could discern certain aspects of his injury I had not noticed ere now. The series of marks that from a distance appeared to be single wound were not meant to disfigure him, only maim him. Someone had been careful not to take his sight or hearing yet did as much damage as they dared without killing him. Even then, if the wound had become foul from the burns, which oft happened, he would have died no matter how careful his tormentor had been.

Dismayed at the keen understanding, I struggled against an impotent rage. I could not alter Roi's past. The man's future? I hoped it would lie with me. Bear may have prodded me to awaken but we both were drawn to him. "I were surprised and reacted poorly. I need ye to understand that I... there be something... I be unlike other men ye hae known. The clansmen of my house be special, separate from other clans. That which distanced us from our kinsmen would inspire others to assail us. I be responsible for their lives. We be cautious of who becomes ware of the qualities that set us away from others."

Roi glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "I wid never give yer secret away, even if I knew it. I know how life can be when people dinnae understand ye. I widnae cause ye or yer kin the suffering committed by men who hold such foul ideas."

"I admit I dinnae understand yer gift, Roi. I hope one day ye will trust me with yer ain secret. I wid never reject ye for whit or who ye be. My people be born with a gift of their ain, and I pray ye will be accepting of their true nature. Already my kinsmen hae a high regard for ye. More than one be waiting for me to blunder and lose ye. If I be rejected then they can pursue ye."

He scowled, his countenance turned unbelieving as he fully faced me. His stunning blue eyes held my gaze. "Yer kinsmen be accepting of such pairings?"

"Most of my people be accepting, aye. There be a few who widnae be kind with their choice of words when they vent their cause of offence, yet those who reside on my land willnae speak against us. There be much for me to explain. It shall be three days ere we arrive home. I hope by that time I will hae answered all of yer questions." We halted the horses next to the ferry landing. Donn dismounted to speak to the ferryman about passage.

Dismounting first from the courser, I raised my hands to assist Roi down. He may not have needed my help yet I wanted the excuse to touch him for a short time. When his feet firmly touched the ground, I stood staring into his ice-coloured eyes. How quickly he had ensnared not only my beast, but the

man as well. It may hap I should be alarmed. Granfather had always told us only fools fought the instincts of their beasts. I almost did earlier, allowing alarm to overwhelm me instead of relying on the calm assurance of Bear.

Did I miss Cairtriona? Aye. I wid continue to miss her, even so, life did not end because she passed on to the next. I lived close to a year as a man half dead, only beginning to pull out of the consuming grief at Yule. Now ere me stood the companion Bear wanted, a man who had shaken me awake and sparked a desire in me I thought lost. My beast assured me that with a little time, I would find myself growing fond of Roi. I could not disagree because Roi felt familiar to me already, as if we had already spent countless hours together.

Bear sniffed, wanting to touch, so I gave in and ran my fingertips down Roi's forearm. "I hope ye can answer a question for me now." I kept my voice low, yet emotion caused the words to break.

Roi leaned toward me. I took a chance, stepping closer until our chests touched and our breath mingled. Roi did not move away. His head tilted to the side as he gave a deep sigh, his eyelids sliding closed.

"Will ye please forgive me?"

CHAPTER SIX

Roi

I wish I knew why my fate changed, why my vision did not come to pass. Unlike the other prophetic dreams sent to me by Cerridwen, the one of my death had always been hazy. The only clear aspects were Ewen standing over me, raising his sword with both hands over his head. Never did he glance down or meet my gaze, merely stared at something over my shoulder.

Why, for the love of the gods, had I been spared?

Did I care anymore?

This morn, his touch caused me to spill my seed. This day I rode boldly at his side. Now he asked me for forgiveness already given.

Mother always told me I was more tender-hearted than the other children. The young men of the burgh teased me for soft emotions ere heading off to find their fortune. But as adolescence grew into manhood, they came to understand the value of hearth and home. More than one youth returned from high adventure in search of someone to care for and hold every night. The desire for a home at times held more than one meaning, but the outcome, the contentment men searched for stayed the same.

The priests thought I outgrew these soft childish feelings that Ewen brought to the surface. I had buried them deep within me, never giving voice to what I desperately wanted after I came to understand I would never be granted the boon of a family of my own. Such emotional ties would have killed me in Somerled's court; his supporters would have seen such as a weakness to exploit. I wanted to trust Ewen with the heart of me, nonetheless trust was a leap of faith I could not afford to give— for now.

Would I forgive him for his actions and suspicions? If only the man knew me. "I dinnae know that ye need to ask, for I believe I shall always forgive ye." Why could I not be quiet about this man? It was not in my nature to lie, instead I had learned quickly to turn questions aside or ignore them. Yet with

Ewen standing close and gazing at me as if I were one who mattered to him, I had forgotten how.

“I want ye to be mine,” Ewen whispered so low the wind almost stole it away.

“All my life I hae been yers.” Even after this morn, I could not keep from confessing the truth to Ewen. I cursed myself for a fool. No matter where I was or what happened, Ewen Meinnear unknowingly held a piece of my soul.

Rough fingertips ghosted over the unblemished skin of my left cheek. “Sometime soon ye will hae to share whit ye mean.”

I broke the gaze and swallowed thickly as we unwillingly broke away from each other. Forgiveness, I could give. Revealing the depths of my secrets? I would hold my tongue for another day.

Together, we readied the horses and wains to be loaded onto the ferry. I beheld Ewen’s kinsmen, who had been naught but kind to me since my arrival, gave me encouraging nods and knowing grins when they caught my gaze. Donn patted me on the back as he walked by and Ewen appeared by my side, drawing me away with him as Donn released a rough laugh.

“Donn dinnae want me.” I sought to reassure Ewen yet he still shot steely glares at his brother.

Other than a restless horse, the crossing of the Clyde River was quick and uneventful. A short time ago, I had arrived at the mainland by ship. The land here smelled unlike that of the islands. Even the wind differed, carrying curious sounds from birds we did not have on our small patches of rocky land. Would I ever again behold the place I had been raised? Draw into my lungs the salty sea air or hear the crash of water on the cliffs? I was in a way afeard. Everything seemed new and changed from what I was used to. Although being with Ewen made a dream come true, I felt lost. This new life promised to be wholly unlike the old one. Would I be able to make changes to who I am in order to fit in?

Teams of two oxen were hitched to each wain after the ferry touched the opposite shore. The roads closer to Glasgow were well kept, yet further out, away from the city, the path became so rutted I was thankful for the narrow, uncomfortable saddle. The road began to rise up into the mountains. Copses of aspen, birch, alder, and rowan dotted the landscape. The closer we came to the mountains, the thicker the trees became until the forest seemed to swallow us. Visibility went from great distances across fields to a couple of horse lengths. I cared not for the closed in feeling the dense wood brought.

Questions had nagged at me all day that I loathed to put voice to. Ewen and I had found a balance I lacked the desire to disrupt. However, with the uncomfortable distraction of the new surroundings, it looked as though I had not kept my visage clear.

“Whit be on yer mind?”

I did not relish speaking of my discomfort with mist-filled woods so I turned to my thoughts of Ewen’s home. “Who awaits yer return? I know no’ where we be going other than the highlands.” Who filled Ewen’s bed? Wife? Lover? Did I want to know? I would not presume the morn’s activities meant he wanted my warmth next to his through the night.

“I hae a modest estate on the west end of Loch Raineach, in the heart of the Caledonia Forest. I be responsible for ninety and three souls.” Ewen’s voice dropped low and became tinged with sorrow. “I hae been widowed now for a little over a twelvemonth. Caitriona gave me four children. Two boys, Eumann and Gibidh. Two girls, Brigid and Una.”

His eyes suddenly appeared older, haunted by what he relived while answering my question. He might be widowed, still the sound of his sorrow spoke of deep affection. My heart ached for him. I would wipe away his grief if I could. To lose a loved one was a hardship I would save him from, had such power been gifted to me in Cerridwen’s temple.

Not knowing how to console Ewen, I moved the talk to something neutral and on the surface inane. “Why did ye shave yer hair and beard?”

Ewen ran a palm over the dark stubble of his head, the skin lighter than his sun kissed cheeks. “It be tradition among the leaders of our family to shave the hair after a conflict that drew blood. The ritual brings to mind the blessing of a new beginning, that we be victorious and alive, albeit changed by the encounter. Shaving the hair shears off the negative energy so we dinnae carry the venom of word or deed back to our homes and kin.”

“That be a good ritual. It helps to re-establish harmony.” It may hap Ewen’s kin kept to the old ways more than other clanns.

“But leaves the head cold and chapped.” Ewen’s hazel eyes sparkled with humour. I was pleased I had steered him out of the dark memories of mourning.

“It may hap I should follow suit and shear my hair.” I pulled on the thick braid that fell over my shoulder to mid chest. The priests did not shear their hair unless a new comer seeking shelter brought in lice or some other pest. I had been fortunate, although I did have it trimmed on occasion.

“I forbid it.”

I snorted a laugh that caught in my throat when I glanced up at him. His vehemence and the haughty glower was that of a man who gave instructions and others followed without question.

Ewen’s pupils dilated as he spoke, the black swallowing the bright hazel. “If ye wish to be cleansed, there be other ways of doing so. But yer hair, it stays untouched.”

I swallowed thickly. “I understand.”

The rest of the day passed rather quickly. I hearkened as Ewen spoke of his estate and his kinsmen. I noticed that even though he addressed me, a wall of sorts built between us. The laughing light, the teasing, and the visage of lust that crossed his face every now and then went away. Left behind was a blank countenance and straight, stiff back. I knew not what word or action caused him to withdraw. The distance Ewen placed between us caused me to feel set

adrift, lost and inexplicably alone. By the time we stopped for the night, the easiness between us had turned aloof and cool.

We journeyed until it became too dark to travel safely. We pulled off the road at a place already cleared by others and containing a blackened fire ring. Ewen assigned duties to everyone aside from me. When I asked, he brushed my question away with a non-answer.

I had never been idle, even in Somerled's court where I learned not to rely on others for help. The castle servants never served me unless Somerled instructed them to do so. I may have stayed in a suite close to the King of the Isles but I was never waited on. I ate cold meal remnants standing in the corner of the scullery. I laundered my own bedding and clothes, all the while dodging unwanted advances. More than once, I had slept in a disused stairway or out-of-way nook because someone had picked the lock to my room.

So I assisted Ewen's kinsmen with the horses and hauled water from the high stream, stumbling over rocks and roots that caught by my feet. I would have to make peace with the hostile spirits of the wood if I did not want to end up with a broken neck. After brushing down and feeding the horses, I gathered kindling for the fire and assisted setting out the furs for bedrolls. Ewen's kinsmen did not seem to mind that I wandered from task to task. Ewen had set me away from the other men. I spent the last three years separate from those about me and it was frustrating that some things stayed the same when so much had changed.

After we made a quick meal of bread, cheese and dried beef, I claimed a fur for myself, not knowing where Ewen would have me. Men lay down to sleep, others walked into the dark forest to stand watch. Dry grit pricked my eyes and a huge yawn cracked my jaw. When Ewen did not return to camp, I gave up waiting and burrowed under the heavy coverings.

I had to wonder about the state of Ewen's wealth. He had not brought it up and I thought it impertinent to ask. The furs, the tents, the wains and horses, all of it heralded a life of privilege. I had known both prosperity and poverty. I had witnessed the deeds of men who had more good fortune than sense of

honour, yet Ewen did not portray himself like the self-important mongers of Somerled's court. Unfortunately, they were the only basis with which I had to judge the rank of others of wealth. Ewen's kinsmen were humble. I had not seen such character on landed men ere now.

I woke later when Ewen added his pallet and covering to mine. The air was cold and moist when Ewen lifted the fur to lie next to me. Oddly, Ewen's clothes were cool, yet his skin seemed warmer than mine.

"Ewen." The timing was wrong but he had dodged me all eve and I needed to ask the question while I had the chance.

"Aye, Roi," he mumbled into the back of my neck, sounding half asleep.

"Whit position dae I serve in yer household?"

Ewen breathed deeply. I thought him asleep when he suddenly answered, "Ye be the beast's companion."

The time I spent mulling over Ewen's confounding words must have been longer than I thought. When I asked Ewen what a beast's companion did, he snored loudly. It seemed I would not acquire an appropriate answer until the morn.

Wriggling out from under Ewen's arm, I stumbled to the edge of the low firelight, blinking rapidly in order to see into the dark woods. I would not go far. I had learned my lesson earlier hereunto the hazards of the forest floor. I simply needed discreet cover to relieve myself. Some did not need privacy, unless in the proximity of the fairer sex. I had been raised among priests in Cerridwen's Temple of the Moon. Being a pagan did not mean I was heathen as well.

Finding sufficient cover, I leaned against the tree. Somehow, my kilt had become askew, hanging longer on one side than the other. After all, I had mimicked Ewen's kinsmen who crawled into their pallet fully clothed. I had slept fully clothed ere, simply not in a kilt. The clothing of the island people had been heavily influenced by their Norse and Gaelic ancestors. I was

beginning to believe my robes and simple breeches had less material than the infernal kilt.

Finally not encumbered, I sighed as I released my water and stared out into the forest. I wondered again what the duties of a beast's keeper were. I understood highlanders were a pastoral people, cattle mainly, would I be accountable for all of Ewen's animals? What made him believe I could handle animals? I knew not what to do with them, other than stay out of their way. Give me a sword, medicinals, wood to carve, or even a small garden plot, I knew my way about those. I was an excellent fisher and could skilfully repair many types of nets. I did not believe I would be fast enough to chase cattle about.

Try as I might, I could not say I was thrilled with my new position, which I was woefully unready for. It would be a huge disaster, I was sure of it. As much as I enjoyed spending time with Ewen and getting to know the man, I could not picture myself being happy as a beast's keeper. I had spent too much of my life helping others and being useful in a dozen ways.

When Somerled and his Christian followers torched my temple, all my scrolls and the few fiercely guarded books we had were destroyed as well. I missed reading, and it appeared I would not be in a position to be able to do so again. Instead, I would stink of animal and dung if Ewen desired to come to me. I wrinkled my nose in repugnance. Knowing what I did about health and apothecary, I tended to be careful of personal cleanliness.

I shook off and settled the kilt into place. One of the leggings had sagged to right above the knee and the lacing of the soft boot had come undone. I ignored them. Camp was not far. I would need the firelight in order to figure out how to retie them both.

The sigh I exhaled carried, seeming louder than I had intended. Living past my fated death, travelling down this strange road to a new destiny I could not decipher, both discomfited and confounded me. An utterly new view greeted me and lately I found myself lost in the unknown. I was accustomed to being a priest, keeper of the temple of my Goddess. In what manner did a highland

Thane live? What were the customs of his people? I wished not to disappoint Ewen, though my lack of knowledge and skill guaranteed I would.

A noise sounded off to my right. I had been staring off into the dark, not really seeing aught while my mind turned over my circumstances instead of rushing back to the safety of camp. All my life I had lived by the sea. The Northmen were fond of telling hunting tales and describing the predators of the forest. My imagination supplied a collection of wild beasts that would rather eat me than ignore the ignorant fool who dared piss in their wood. The rustling came again, now between me and the muted glow of the campfire.

A large animal walked along the edge of campfire's dim light, nose to the ground as it sniffed much like a hunting dog tracking a scent. I held my breath as my heart sought to beat its way from my chest. Glancing about, I became aware of the harsh truth that I left sword and dagger in camp. For truly, naught my gaze touched herupon could I use to defend myself with. My body bade me to run but my mind called back to all of the tellings from hunters who said I would die if I did.

Hope quickened my blood when I spied a huge old tree that even someone as out of place as I could climb quickly with little trouble. The sprawling branches were my only hope. If I called out, the creature would be on me ere Ewen or his kinsmen could discover me. I had no hope of overcoming the beast unarmed and I could not slip away on foot. A sickening thought that mayhap the creature might climb the tree as well dulled my growing hope. The large round shape lifted its head toward me.

I ran.

I imagined every Northman I called friend laughed at me as my legs pushed me toward the haven of the tree with my mind's eye holding the vision of a huge boar pursuing me. Or it mayhap be one of those big cats with teeth longer than my fingers and claws able to cut open my soft belly with ease. Behind me came the harsh, appalling noise of breaking branches and disturbed forest litter as the creature gave chase.

I leapt and struggled up onto the lowest branch, too dismayed to glance behind me to behold where the animal was. I climbed up a few branches until there was sufficient distance between me and the forest floor ere I chanced a look. The creature sat at the base of the tree. I had yet to call to mind what the animal might be, and even though I harboured a pinch of desire to know, I would not be dropping down to check breed or gender of said animal no time soon.

The loose legging was lost, along with the boot. I bled from a couple of places but in the dark they did not appear to be deep. I did not think I had gone far, nonetheless when I searched for the glow of the fire, I found naught. I dashed away the thought of calling out for help when I imagined every hungry animal gathering under the tree to devour me. I would wait for the creature to wander away and then run back to camp. When I glanced down again, the dark beast still sat at the base of the tree, from time to time letting out odd grunting noises.

The rain started as a fine mist and worked its way up to fat heavy drops. I curled up against the main trunk of the tree and pulled the top of the kilt about my shoulders and head. I wondered, briefly, how I would endure this new yet curious way of life.

I dozed lightly, bone weary but too afeard of tumbling from the tree to truly rest. Each time I glanced down, the animal lay at the base. The barest lightening of the cloudy sky heralded the dawning of a new day.

“Be ye gaunnae stay up there all day?”

I startled awake, clutching at the rough bark to keep from pitching forward off the branch. Ewen stood below staring up at me. He was bare-chested, wearing only his red kilt, leather greaves, and boots. His feet were spread a measure length from each other on the muddy ground as he gazed up at me.

Afeard for his safety, I searched for a sign of the beast. “Ewen, it be no’ safe,” I hissed down as loud as I dared. “There be a large animal...”

Behind Ewen appeared a huge black bear, the muzzle a golden brown. I pointed with burning dread, fear gripped my throat rendering me not able to speak. The bear stood on its hind legs and gave a mighty bellow that made the hair on my arms stand on end. Ewen calmly turned to gaze at the beast.

“Dinnae wait for it to eat ye!” I bit out. Why did not he move? My mind was split between descending down the tree and fetching Ewen up or climbing further up myself.

Ewen laughed. “That be the reason ye slumbered in the tree?”

Were all highlanders this carelessly reckless when it came to wild animals? Was there a trick to taming the beast I was not ware of? Ready to bellow a bitter speech of foul curses at Ewen for his odd behaviour and unwarranted laughter at my acute sense of self-preservation, another more lightly coloured bear came barrelling out of nowhere to hit the looming black bear. The two collapsed in a blur of limbs. First there was churlish noises of rancour and then the two beast gave forth sounds of pain. Ewen stood and grinned fondly at the thrashing creatures. How had I missed the signs of lunacy? He seemed perfectly normal— until now.

I had faced armed men at the threshold of my temple, held a centre of calm when I braved the threat of flame as Somerled’s men scathed my visage. I fought for days in a battle with over fifteen thousand men to come away without a wound or mark. Yet never had I felt this terrified. I understood that part of the fear was the unknown; I had always seen the path I needed to take and now the visions had dried up, leaving me oddly vacant. Some of the dread came from the new customs and people, the uncertainty of my obligations, the strange life I would become well-acquainted with, and some from the understanding that I had little know-how to live this new life away from the sea. I was ware of all of this yet my mind’s reasoning was firmly intent in closing down, allowing the base needs to be brought forward and to take over my deeds.

I climbed further up the tree, looking for a way to escape, a place of safety, firmly intent to place more distance between me and all else that no longer made any sense.

“Roi, whit be ye doing? Where be ye going?”

I missed the sound of the waves against the beach, the smell of the salty air. I would never behold or hear another storm come across the water. Watch the sun melt into the ocean.

“Roi, ye hae to stop.”

Trees like this one did not grow on the islands. I had never been in a grove, much less a wildwood. The sight strangled my senses, made me feel as if my nose was pinched and a hand blocked the breath of my mouth. Rather than drowning from water, I was choked by the harsh colours of this new landscape that pressed in on me. No, no forests on the islands, only carpets of greenery and stubbly rocks with flowing beds of flowers in the summer. There was no temple there now either, it had been burnt to the ground.

“Roi!”

The scream of anger halted my mad thoughts. When I glanced down, Ewen appeared much, much smaller than ere now. The branches under me swayed in the breeze, rocking me and soothing my frayed nerves.

Ewen lifted his hand, fingers curled toward him, once, twice, in a come-hither gesture. “I need ye to come back down.”

The two black bears had stopped fighting and they too stared up at me. Why would I climb down? The bears’ manners were off. Was the forest enchanted? Had I by chance stumbled onto a sacred place and this was the reason for Ewen’s ease? I had heard tellings of the faeries, such as the Gille Dubh, yet I had never been sure if I believed the wild and unlikely tales. Not to say that I doubted all, that which for the most part, went unseen. After all, I received visions of the future from a goddess and read most people’s intent at a glance. Who was I to dismiss the impossible when I myself had performed the unlikely?

Below me, the form of the bears began to change as they both stood on their hind legs, taking on the shape of men until Donn and Arailt stood in the place of the two animals. Stricken dumb, all I could do was stare. There were no words of wonder, for my mind went utterly blank and my limbs began to feel heavy and blunt.

“Roi.” The anger fled from Ewen’s voice. “Wid ye please come down?”

The branches continued to sway in the wind in a gentle rocking motion. Freed from the rough and harmful thoughts by the calm of this high place, I grasped how bone weary I felt. After a long, wet, night without sleep, my hands and feet were chilled. And then I noticed her, a tawny owl, on a branch not too far from my precarious perch. She had a rounded head and a rounded body no bigger than a pigeon. A dark ring of feathers surrounded her face and eyes, the colour mainly reddish-brown above the paler ones.

Cerridwen’s bird of prey watched me as if she waited for me to grasp a matter of great weight. Why was she there? Why had Cerridwen left me in the land of the living? The bird and I spent a long while staring at each other. The tilt of her head signified she waited for me to listen long enough to become ware of that which would answer all my questions.

Then I understood. Not all of the confounding chaos of being inland, but enough— simply enough to give me a peace of mind. “Thank ye,” I whispered, not wanting those below to hear me. “Thank ye for reminding me there be more than whit I perceive with the eyes.” Without words, Cerridwen’s silent messenger told me I had not been cast away again.

Leaving the height of the tree with a kilt wrapped about me, would not be as easy as coming up had been. Half way down, the dead branch under my foot made a sudden sharp sound and gave way, leaving me hanging, swinging by one hand from the limb above.

Ewen called my name more than once talking quickly, even so I could not listen to him and climb at the same time. Unwrapping the sodden kilt, I dropped it to the forest floor, leaving me clad in simply a boot, a legging, and a thigh-long linen tunic that did naught to help keep my stones and breech

covered. The kilt hindered my downward climb, snagging on branches, and would have caused me to fall.

A warm, rough hand grasped my bare ankle as I hung from the last limb and I heaved a sigh of relief. I believed Ewen when he vowed he would catch me. I let myself fall into Ewen's and his kinsmen's awaiting arms. I glanced up at the tree, amazed I had in sooth climbed the tree, made it up to begin with, and then down without breaking a limb— or my neck. Cold and weariness caused me to tremble. A dry kilt, not my own, wrapped about me.

Ewen roughly massaged my numb hands, the fingernails chipped, torn, and an alarming shade of blue. Donn and Arailt loomed close about us, their countenance one of worry. At a point in my descent, they had dressed, whether truly or falsely, they appeared unchanged from who they were yesterday.

“Ye stubborn man. Why did ye dae that?” Ewen cupped my face, drawing my gaze to his.

I was angry with this man, albeit too stunned to speak of my displeasure. I chose to answer the question instead of causing a scene. “There was nowhere else to go.” I had not meant to run, it was not an action I would be proud of.

“I didnae mean to scare ye.” Donn's cheeks flushed a rose pink. “I thought Ewen told ye about us. When I came across ye when I were making the rounds I didnae look for ye to run and climb a tree.”

“He told me of a special gift, yet no' about the black bears. Methinks there be a great many things I dinnae know about all of ye.” I barely kept the frost from my voice. It was not Donn's fault I had not been warned.

“Why did ye no' come and call for me earlier?” Ewen demanded, ignoring my ire.

He may as well ignore me, I held no status with him or his kinsmen. A gift of the king, may hap a willing gift, but a possession natheless. I broke away and stumbled toward where I believed the camp to be. Along the way, I came across my leather legging and my boot. I snagged them off the forest floor

without stopping. Ewen, Donn, and Arailt trailed behind, the chatter between them easy to follow.

“Too many large animal scents on the wind.”

“Both humans and doogs,” Arailt added.

“There were a lynx that came through. I thought the small cats had been gone from the forest for some time. She moved away from all the smells left by the men, staying a distance watching us. I could no’ chance leaving Roi alone if the men were close. Neither could I call for help and give us away.”

Reaching the camp, I saw the bedrolls had been taken up, the oxen hitched to the wains. I approached one of the wains and leaned against the step as I began to wrap the legging.

I interrupted their suppositions. “Be all of yer kinsmen like Donn and Arailt or only those who carry the essence I behold with my eye about some of ye?” My tone was churlish.

Ewen halted in front of me, his countenance alight with wonder. “Be ye saying ye can see the bear’s spirit?”

I glanced between the three of them, examining the ethereal light that clung to them. “No’ all of yer kinsmen hae the light of other.”

“Which ones?” Arailt asked eagerly.

“The first day we met, the man who told ye to kill me and those who left with him. They carry no mark that I could see, yet everyone here does.”

The corners of Ewen’s mouth spread in a huge grin rife with smug satisfaction. “Ye can behold the spirit of our beasts.”

My anger with Ewen stayed fresh and hot. I knew of no reason why he would seem to be pleased with himself. Did my absence not cause him concern? Had I let my awe colour this man in an unwarranted hue? Did I misread all the many visions I had been given over the course of my lifetime, the very same ones I used to mark his character? It may hap, I misunderstood

the warning of my imminent death. I had assumed I knew him. I began to believe I had been wrong.

“I spent the night up in a tree in the cold and rain. I be weary and I dinnae think I could sit atop a horse without losing my honour by falling off.”

Ewen jumped in. “I wid ensure yer safety.”

I stared at Ewen. I would rather walk, as dead on my feet as I was, than ride with him. I think he saw the thought in my countenance for he withdrew, his face falling.

“If it be all the same to ye, I wid rather find a spot in one of the wains and rest for a bit there.”

“If that be whit ye want.”

“It be.”

Ewen hesitated as if he would say more but then thought better of it. Pursing his lips together, he withdrew. Donn and Arailt’s expressions became subdued as well. Too tired to make peace with them, I climbed aboard the wain. I knew I should ask after that which made them part bear, learn more about the people I would soon come to live with. Yet my anger burned hot when I thought back, he could have told to me at any time in the last day. That they had not served to prove Ewen and his clansmen did not deem me worthy of their trust.

Indeed, why should they? I would need to continue to remind myself I was a new comer, a stranger, in their midst. I may foolishly feel connected to Ewen, natheless, in essence I was simply another soul he had become responsible for. He might like me enough to share his bed from time to time, but I was not a confidant. I would not make that mistake again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ewen

Roi dozed off in the last wain. Bear desired to stay close, however Roi was displeased enough to shun my company. To keep Bear satisfied as to Roi's safety, I ordered Arailt to ride close and guard him. Even so, I could not resist the temptation to drop back and speak to one of my kinsmen so that I could behold with my own eyes how he fared while I mulled over his words.

I struggled with Bear. It felt as if I had been since Roi knelt at my feet. He would have me pursue Roi like a man besotted. Although I had come to respect Roi, found him pleasing to the eye, and I felt as if he were a long-time friend, Bear was more ardent than I. I sought to hold Roi at arm's length because I knew not where he would fit in my house, with my family, or in my life. I hoped we would become friends as well as lovers, and may hap, after some time, a type of fond devotion. Not mindfull of my unwillingness, Bear demanded I give more than friendship and casual fondness. Was I ready for the type of obligation Bear demanded I give to Roi? I was mature enough to know there were many levels to love. I believed I had a great consuming love with Caitriona and the loss had left my heart in tatters. In many ways, the person I had become was the ragged remains of the person I once was.

Then I woke alone that morn and was faced with absolute dread. Roi's scent was old, telling me he had been gone for some time. The brief thought that he had stolen away in the night, leaving me alone, again, made me clearly understand that whether I wanted to be or not, I did not wish a life without Roi. Unknowingly, I had become bound up in him more than I thought I could be with my shattered heart. The panic I underwent was mine, not Bear's. I had fooled myself into believing I pursued Roi more for Bear's sake than my own. The sharp fear clawing at my insides while I hunted for him told me another story.

Yesterday, as the day went on with Roi riding beside me, my heart shuddered each time his eyes glowed with delight. And when he smiled at me

with easy mirth, I became frightened. Caitriona's death knock me for whirl. I called to mind how the loss stole the light of the day from my eye, leeches away the joy I held for each of my children, leaving the core of me withered and blackened. It took more than a twelvemonth for me to begin to recover. I could not withstand another such onslaught of sorrow. So, I withdrew from Roi as the day wore on. Last eve I stayed away for as long as Bear allowed ere seeking him out.

Now the distance I so desired the night ere had come to pass. Roi declined to be in my presence and I despised it. How did one man crawl under my skin in a few days' time? I wish I could speak to Granfather about companions because I was lost.

Donn pulled his horse up next to mine. "Quit scowling so. Ye be distressing our kin."

"I dinnae know whit I be doing."

My brother stayed silent for a while ere asking, "Why did ye no' tell him about yer bear? I wid think that of all people he wid understand and no' accuse ye of being an abomination. Explaining our heritage should hae been easy and yet ye left him in the dark. Were ye trying to frighten him off or dae ye no' trust him? If it be a matter of trust then place him in shackles and retain this distance he has placed between the two of ye."

I shot an angry glare at Donn yet he ignored me.

"I feel guilty for scaring the man up a tree when he knew no' that we patrol in our animal form. I shall find some way to make it up to him. If ye be gaunnae place him in shackles, then I will pay for his freedom when we arrive home. He shall become an honoured member of my household and taught our heritage as I woo him to my bed."

"Guard yer words, brother, ere ye overstep yer bounds."

Donn reined his horse in closer until his thigh pressed into mine. "Companions be precious," he snapped. "Dae ye think being here be easy for him? We be unknown to him. He be an islander, has been all of his life. How

dae ye think he finds this place? Ye be responsible for his wellbeing and he be floundering. Any with eyes can behold his struggle— except for ye. Take care of yer bear's companion or I will keep my promise and take him from ye.”

“How? I know no’ whit I be supposed to dae,” I snapped back angrily.

Donn gave me a derisive sneer. “Yer *beast* knows. No wonder ye cannot shift. Ye ignore the needs of yer bear. Did ye listen to any of Granfather’s teachings? Dae ye think ye be the only one he told the lore to? Ye hae spent yer life forcing it behind ye because ye believe ye know better.” My brother snorted in barely concealed loathing before he prodded his horse and rode away to ride ahead of the wains, his back stiff and straight.

I wanted to be angry with him. I wanted him to be wrong. Even so, Donn did not say aught that was untrue. I had struggled with my bear, ignored him, and imposed my will upon him since the incident at the beginning of the tenth year of my life. Bear had a fit of temper and I lost my grasp on him. That was the one and only time I came close to shifting. Granfather had been the one to push Bear back. After that incident, my bear never came forward for the change. Not to say he had an absence of opinion, only that I held an iron grip over him.

Since Roi had come into our lives, Bear had become restless, pushing at the boundaries I set on him long ago. From then until now, outside of the field of battle, Bear had never been so assertive to the point I laboured to keep him in line. No one else struggled with their animal, yet neither were their beasts as strong as mine. If I lost my grasp on him at the wrong time, the outcome would be ruinous to my kinsmen and exactly the kindling the clann chief needed to be rid of me.

The activity of my beast was not the only issue. I seemed to be out of my depth, or out of practice. I did not believe I had floundered this much since... a soft snort of irony escaped. Caitriona. My undertaking to court her had been nigh as disastrous.

When the sky darkened to the point sight would be hindered, I ordered the men to make camp. Roi climbed out of the wain to assist with unhitching the

oxen. I stayed close even though he ignored my presence. Bear wanted to hold the man but I knew not my reception. I searched for something to speak to him about. Something as mundane as the weather and the coming growing season would have been sufficient. Even so, every single time I opened my mouth, the words dried up and drifted away.

After a cold meal, Roi laid out his bedroll. I placed mine next to his. He picked up the bedding and moved it across the campfire. My bear bade me to have patience. Keeping in mind Donn's harsh words, I hearkened to his wisdom. We watched Roi settle in for the night ere we crept over, sneaking our bedroll next to his. Hastily I crawled under our covers, snatching him back down when he laboured to rise.

"Please, hae patience with me. I be sorry I hurt ye. I be out of my depth. I promise I shall explain everything to ye soon."

He lay unyielding against me while I buried my nose his hair, inhaling his scent as my bear grunted with pleasure.

He turned and gazed at me, his blue eyes unreadable. "I still be angry with ye."

"I know, I deserve it."

His eyes softened. Hesitantly, Roi placed a palm on my stubbled cheek. "I wish I knew where my place be in yer world? I dinnae see how I fit."

"Yer place be with me."

Roi merely sighed. "We shall see."

I rolled onto my back, pulling him with me and settling him as firmly against my side as he would allow. Never ere now had I counted how fortunate I was to have kin such as the men about me. Holding Roi as I did now was not done in the open among the other clanns. Some clanns ignored such couplings as long as the interactions were kept behind closed doors, other clanns banished kin.

Not all of my clansmen would react as these men did. The clann chief, Cinead, would not be accepting, for all that our lands were as separate as they could be under the circumstances. With him and the followers true to him, we would have taken care because, as Roi pointed out earlier, they were not like us and did not understand the bond we had with our companions.

Roi did not believe me when I assured him his place was by my side. I knew he wanted me. Bear could smell his arousal, yet I had given him no reason to trust me. Ere sleep claimed me, I understood what I needed to do. My bear hummed, content for once, agreeing with my chosen course of action. I prayed the effort would not be too late.

The next morn, I saddled our two horses and put together several days' worth of provisions. "Ye be in charge until I return, Donn."

My brother stood behind me, his countenance a blank mask when I glanced over my shoulder. "Whit be ye gaunnae dae?" he inquired.

"I took yer advice and hearkened to my bear. He wid like to take Roi to his den."

"He may no' belong in our world."

"I know."

"Ye be willing to give him up if need be? Send him back to his home?"

"I shall dae everything in my power to keep that from happening... yet if it be whit he wants..."

Donn clasped my forearm and pulled me in for a quick embrace. "Leave behind the leader ye be and allow yerself to be the man I know ye were meant to be."

Roi approached the two of us, nervously eyeing the two horses.

"Ye and I will be travelling in another way than the wains," I explained.

Roi clasped Donn's forearm and said, "May the tides of fate favour ye."

Donn glanced at me in wonder. Neither one of us had heard that old salutation in a long time. Roi's words gave me hope. It may hap he was not as out of place as he believed.

Roi gave me a weak smile as I helped him onto the black mare. I quickly mounted and we headed down the road at a faster clip than we had travelled over the last couple of days. The wains were slower and had set the pace ere now. Roi seemed to keep his mind solely on riding, the colour of his skin remaining as pale as milk for some time. After a while, he appeared to relax, the set of his shoulders and back becoming less rigid.

We came to a crossroads of a sort. It was an old game trail that lead deeper into the Black Wood. The mare naturally fell in behind my gelding on the narrow path. As the track slowly climbed the slope of the mountain, the sun ducked in and out of the clouds. A fine mist clung to the forest floor in the lower areas.

The forest was waking from winter slumber. Ground foliage sprouted hints of new green. About us the birch, ash, rowan and alder were interspersed with cypress. We stopped about midday to rest, water the horses, and eat a cold meal of cheese and salted beef. Once Roi became more at ease with the woods, he began asking questions about the type of plants that could be found in the area.

"Whit did ye dae in the temple?" All the conversation up to this point had been about me and my kinsmen. Although I enjoyed Roi's interest, I had not been as diligent in coming to know him.

"I were the temple's seer." His ice-blue gaze glanced up to mine and then quickly away. I smiled hoping to sooth him. "The visions be given to me by the Goddess Cerridwen. The priests record whit I saw."

"Yet ye handle a sword very well and ye be skilled in the properties of plants and herbs. It be easy to see, ye be a man of many talents."

Roi blushed at my praise. "It be a good thing too. The priests wid hae yielded to my every wish if I had allowed them. As a boy, I sparred with the

children of the Northmen. A few became friends and taught me all I know of weaponry and battle. I learned apothecary from the oldest of the priests, helping him with the care of the sick or injured brought to us.” A soft dreamy smile across his lips. “And when I could get away, I went fishing.”

“There be fish in Loch Raineach. Ye will hae to teach me.” I had been fishing ere now and was not very good at it. He did not need to know that... yet.

The rest of the afternoon passed in comfortable silence. About the final bend of the game trail, the forest opened to a glenn. A thatch-roofed cottage enclosed by a waist-high stone wall that had once held a scullery garden not far away. Beyond lay a sprawling area where we planted barley and buckwheat. Along the furthest edge ran a river that tended to flood from melting snow in the spring. After harvest, the cattle would be brought up to graze in the mountain glenn.

Roi glanced about with interest. “Where we be?”

“There be many things I needed to speak to ye of and I dinnae know where to start. I thought it wid be easier if I brought ye to the beginning. This be the area where my kin first settled.”

“How long has the cottage been here?”

“As I understand it, since ere my great, great gransire’s time. We be tasked with the care of the Caledonia Forest, tied to the woods until it be no more. The cottage has been rebuilt a few of times. Each generation added something new—the garden plot, the fencing—until we grew too large in number and moved over to the loch. We maintain this as a shieling for the herdsman.”

“I dinnae understand why ye brought me here.” Roi wid not meet my gaze.

“I wanted to acquaint ye to my heritage. My bear wants ye—I want ye as our companion, however ye willnae understand whit that means or whit I be asking of ye. Ye huvnae said aught, but Donn believes ye be lost, adrift may hap with all that has changed. I huvnae anchored ye to us—to me. I hae been

struggling as well. I thought that if we spent some time alone and came to know each other and... this be my bear's way of taking ye to his den."

Roi frowned. "Why?"

I looked out over the meadow, searching for the words that would best convey what I wanted to say. "I believed I wid be a widower for the rest of my life. Since Caitriona passed away, I hae simply been existing from day to day. I love my children and my kin, yet something in me died with her. I never thought I would find someone else I could adore as much as I did her. For truth, the prospect of having someone else to love scares me because I know no' if I could continue to exist after another loss. I thought I would rather have a half-life than live with joy again.

"And then ye fell to yer knees at my feet. My bear roared in my ears, shaking the foundation of the life of ease I thought I wanted. He demanded I shield ye and drag ye home with me. Ye woke me from simply of being, yer very presence promising that I can dream again, live again and—I be scared. If I come to love ye, even a little, ye wid hae the power to tear me asunder. I sought to shield myself. And yet, when I woke alone the other morn and ye were gone, I know now I wid rather take that chance, and hae ye in my life for however long ye will stay, than hae naught at all.

"Tell me I no' be too late, that I hae no' ruined all regard ye had for me."

Roi's shoulders relaxed and he boldly met my gaze. For the first time since we woke together in the tent on the edge of the Renfrew field of battle, his eyes held open desire. "It be dark soon. Show me the cottage and I shall put food together for us to eat while ye take care of the animals."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Roi

I dismounted the horse without planting my face in the soil. If I had fallen, I doubted I would have cared. The events of the last couple of days, along with Ewen's confession, left me in a daze. I wondered oft since I first looked into Ewen's visage why would I be spared my fate, handed over to the one person I had yearned for all my life, only to be dropped into a life of despair. As harsh as it may be, I would have rather spent a short and painful lifetime in the bowels of Somerled's dungeon than live a natural life within arm's reach of my heart's desire, not able to touch it. I deserved more than scraps of Ewen's affection and I had almost believed that was all I was worthy of.

Now he offered more and I was afraid to accept. To have a chance at a life with him, without fetters by dark perceptions from his kinsmen because I am male, was more than I could hope for. Yes, everything about me was unknown. Could I learn a new way of life?

I followed Ewen toward the cottage. The building was more narrow in width than length, the two ends rounded instead of square with outer stone walls. Inside, the stone floor was slightly dusty save naught a good sweep could not remedy. The exposed beams of the steeply-pitched roof were dark with age yet well kept and finely carved. The hearth was wide and deep, the table and chairs made of wood and antler. There were six cupboard beds wide enough to fit two or three adults each.

I checked the ticking of the mattresses. After he brought in our bundles of provisions, I bade Ewen help me move the best one to the bed closest to the hearth. While he cared for the horses, I lit a fire in the hearth, located the crockery, and started our evening meal. Afterwards, I drew water from the river and saw to a much needed wash, for I smelled of horse and sweat. Hoping an airing would help, I hung the kilt from a couple of hooks by the cupboard beds. The leggings were leather, so the best I could do was brush them out. The tunic, on the other hand, I scrubbed clean and draped by the fire

while I saw to my own bathing. By the time I concluded washing up, the linen was dry and I slipped it over my head as Ewen stepped through the entry.

I turned when I heard the heavy door shut. He stood within the threshold, his wadded kilt hanging from his finger tips, his tunic and leggings sodden, clinging to him like a second skin. The dark hair on his chest clearly seen through the wet garment. The stubbled growth of his chin and head stood out strongly against the deep flush of his cheeks. His gaze wandered hungrily over my body as he licked his lips. Never ere had another man gazed at me as if he would devour me. Always the encounters were in dark, out of the way rooms, quick and fleeting. This— Ewen— was unlike the others. This was not about lust or the simple need for release. If I was not careful, I would lose my heart to Ewen Meinnear.

“Here, ye must be freezing.” I grabbed the linen sheet hanging nigh the hearth that I had used to dry off. Crossing the room to him, I took the kilt from him and gave him the cloth. His steady gaze held mine, and as I watched, the hazel colour was swallowed by warm dark amber. These were the eyes that first greeted me on the field of battle, yet I was not afeard. “Take off the wet garments and hang them by the fire. I’ll find something to wrap ye in while yer clothing dries.”

I pushed Ewen toward the warmth of the hearth and carried his kilt over to the cupboard beds. I peeked under my arm as my trembling fingers sought to hang the garment on the hook. Ewen removed his wool leggings and then his wet tunic, hanging them next to the hearth. My mouth went dry as I gazed at his form. I did not behold all of him in the dark of the tent. I only had the memory of touch and even then, I had been too afraid to do much lest I break the spell as we slaked our lust against each other.

At the time, I had been happy with the little I learned of Ewen’s body. Now, as I drank in the lean hard form of his back and the powerful legs dusted with dark hair, I hungered for more. He used the linen sheet to remove excess water, the light of the fire giving his skin a golden glow. My heart beat like a wild drum in my chest as my groin tightened to the sight of him.

Glancing away, I turned my thoughts to properly attaching and hanging the kilt, keeping mastery of my arousal. There was no hiding my manhood as it pushed out the tunic, mayhap if I put on the kilt, the heavy garment would hide the evidence of my desire.

“Roi.” Ewen’s low, rough voice sent a shiver down my spine. “Yer hair be wet. Come dry it by the fire.” If I turned, he would behold what he did to me. I would be clay in his hands, yielding to the lightest of touches. “Please?”

I turned, shielding my groin from him. At the table, I took an ivory comb out of my satchel and grabbed a stool to set next to the hearth. The meal was finished and I pulled the crock off the fire, filling a bowl for Ewen and then myself. A quick search came up with a couple of wooden spoons ere I set his meal on the table. I moved back to the fire, setting my bowl on the floor to cool while I sought to work the tangles from my hair.

Ewen, the sheet wrapped about his waist, grunted and gave me a look of restless craving ere he moved a heavy, antler armchair next to the stool. My gaze kept straying to his chest. I wanted to run my palm over the dark hair there. He was not heavily furred, simply enough to heat the blood.

The noise of a hard rain could be heard from where we were. I tore my gaze from his tempting form to labour at detangling my hair. I was sharply ware of him settling in the chair behind me. When his rough hands ghosted across the back of my neck, I stilled. He pulled the damp hair and comb out of my hands, asking without words for my consent. I tilted my head back for him. He ran his palm over the crown, lightly touching along the edges of my temple ere his fingertips brushing the edge of the scar.

“I widgeon take this pain from ye if I could.”

I opened my eyes to behold him leaning over, gazing down at me with soft amber eyes. “I dinnae mind the marks anymore. I widgeon gladly suffer the torment again if the path led me to ye.”

Kissing the top of my head, Ewen settled back and ran the comb through my hair, working out the tangles. “I wish I knew how ye know me.”

Looking back on the last confession I made in his tent and the resulting cold shoulder, I did not feel the need to reveal that one secret. “First tell me of yer people, yer bear.”

Feeling guilty for evading his question, I turned my head and kissed the palm that caressed the damaged cheek. Behind me came the sound of a strangled inhale. Turning on the stool until I could see Ewen, his visage a mixture of wonder and desire as he gazed at the hand I had kissed. My mouth was suddenly dry and I swallowed a few times and cleared my throat.

“We share our bodies with the spirit of a bear.” I gave Ewen my back as he lifted the comb. “As ye hae seen, my kinsmen can take the shape of the bear, yet I cannot. Bear be here but...”

“Be there a reason why yer bear willnae emerge?” Did he know that his eyes changed? I had noticed the change when he stepped into the cottage and suspected his bear was close to the surface. Why did he not come out altogether?

“I almost changed once. Granfather took me on a trip, a journey all future leaders take with an elder, to the cradle— the place where we first came into being. I were very young and my bear strong. My weakness almost exposed Granfather and me to others who wid destroy us. My gransire pushed the spirit back, nathless since then he willnae answer the call to change. Granfather said it happens at times with the strongest spirits. There be still a chance that he will come forward, yet I dinnae believe he will.”

What Ewen and his bear endured on a daily basis left me speechless. For his bear to be caged, able to look out but not able to emerge and for Ewen to behold his brothers change, yet never be free himself, how tormented would that life be?

“I sensed that no’ all of yer kinsmen be like ye. As I said yesterday, I can see those who hae the light of other.”

“Cinead, our clann chief, were born of the line belonging to Granfather’s brother, Manus, who were born without the bear’s spirit. Manus grew to envy Granfather and took his household to make a home at the other end of Loch

Raineach. Cinead believes that we be cursed. He wid be rid of us yet he be no' willing to be called kinslayer. Never allow yerself to be alone with him," Ewen warned.

"He wanted ye to kill me." I called to mind Cinead's command as I knelt at Ewen's feet.

"Aye, he did. He were trying to prove his power over me though he didnae stop to bear in mind that he were commanding the destruction of a gift from the king. His open scorn of Malcolm dinnae bode well for his future."

"He plans to trap ye, turn yer kin against ye. That be whit I saw out on the field of battle. He wid behold ye dead."

Ewen's hands parted and gently combed, slowing in their care of my hair. Ewen did not yell in outrage or demand answers, some of which I would not be able to give. Being a seer could be a blessing or a curse. At times what the visions revealed was obscure and confounding, the meaning only becoming known as the event occurred.

Interestingly, Ewen made no demands, he did not question how I knew some of his kinsmen did not have the bear's spirit. Instead, he combed my hair and bade me to turn on the stool to face him. His dark amber eyes, the bear's eyes, gazed out with such longing.

"Our beasts choose companions much like the human wid choose a husband or wife. At times both the human and the bear choose the same person, at other times no'."

I thought I understood. "Ye chose Caitriona as yer wife, natheless yer bear didnae. So yer bear wants me to be his companion?" My gaze slid away from him, a bitter laugh escaping ere I could call it back. "When ye first told me that my purpose in yer household were to be the beast's companion I thought ye wanted me for a herdsman. I no' be good with animals and I... it dinnae matter whit I thought." As I spoke, what this meant, what Ewen said threatened to crush me with a horrible truth I did not want to admit to be true.

"I were enamoured with simply being in yer presence, overjoyed to spend time with ye, the man I saw in my dreams every damned day of this miserable

existence. Ye should hae killed me on the field of battle, Ewen. That death wid hae been more desirable than this life. I wid hae accepted ye and yer bear, yet ye dinnae... Why did my Goddess allow me to be plagued every single night of my life with glimpses of ye? I dinnae understand!" I shouted as I stood, knocking the stool over in my need to get away from Ewen. I could not stay seated with him close enough to touch.

"I hae watched ye grow from a boy to a man. I know yer visage so well I could fashion yer likeness in clay with my eyes closed. Why?" I screamed at the rafters, my chest hollow, eyes burning with impotent rage.

"Roi," Ewen sounded desperate and I cared not.

"Ye only want me for yer bear, never for yerself, never for me," I spat. The walls felt as if they were closing in on me. I could not breathe and so I charged toward the door.

I had to leave, get away from the pain of defeat, of lost dreams. I was such a foolish man, believing in the impossible. I did not call up going through the door. The rain was heavy and cold, stinging with every fat drop. I trudged away from the cottage, each step harder than the one ere until I could go no further. Tilting my head toward the night sky, I closed my eyes, the very essence of my soul leaking from beneath my eyelids.

A bellow of rage and fear filled the night. "Roi!" I thought it likely I would be tossed onto the muddy ground. Rough hands gripped the sides of my face, forcing me to gaze into Ewen's fevered eyes. Even now, I could not leave him.

"Ye lied." My voice sounded dead, without emotion.

"Naw, I didnae. My bear chose ye for all that, dae ye no' see? I chose ye, too. I've been trying to understand why I feel as if I know ye. Since the first time I laid eyes on ye, ye were familiar to me. I knew no' why then, yet now I dae. Ye hae watched over me, always beside me, guarding me. Please dinnae leave me now. I need ye. I think I always hae."

And then he kissed me. I did not fight him. I opened, tasting his lips and finding the flavour of him so much more than I had dreamed. He drank down my moans as if they were nectar from the gods, plundering my mouth until I

was giddy and breathless. When he broke away, we both gasped for air. I shivered, which caused him to growl and grab my arm to guide me back to the cottage. I had not gone far, only a dozen strides from the door ere I could lift my feet no more.

He closed and bolted the door behind us ere he began to disrobe me, pulling the sodden tunic over my head. “Whit were ye thinking running out in the rain?” His gaze flicked up to mine then quickly away. Catching up the linen sheet crumpled on the stone floor, Ewen began to dry me off.

After an instant of silence, he drew in a deep breath and caught my gaze again. “I refuse to live my life without ye by my side. However long it takes to convince ye, I shall prove to ye that I want ye. Starting now.”

Unlike the kiss outside, with its burning demand, he brushed his soft lips gently against mine, a breath of a touch, as I grasped his arms for balance. Each time he broke away, it was to whisper I was his, how he wanted me, begging me with both eyes and tongue to stay. I tried to keep up the feeble walls I had erected against him but with each vow, every soft touch, he stole away a little bit of my uncertainty until my soul lay bare in his hands.

“Promise ye willnae leave me,” Ewen begged, sucking on the cord of my neck, a hand fisted in my hair while the other pressed at the small of my back so that I was flush against him from chest to knee. I could feel every inch of him, his manhood a hot brand on the flat of my stomach.

“Ewen,” I breathed.

“Promise,” he growled.

“I could never leave ye.”

“Oh, thank God.” The words were choked, barely heard above the pounding of the heavy rain. This time I kissed him as I had wanted since the instant he went from being a wistful dream to reality.

CHAPTER NINE

Ewen

My kinsmen did not urge us against learning, examining our sensuality as youths as long as we did not cross the line and become dishonourable. Maidenhead, lost through piercing of the body of either the girl or boy, was kept intact if you did not wish to be handfasted at once. The bears could sniff out such deeds and no amount of excuses would save the youths a quick trip to the closest elder or kirk.

It had been many years since I had lain with a male. We had been eager youths with merely one goal in common, to empty our stones as oft as we could. Then I met Cairiona and fell in love, dedicating my life to her happiness.

Naught and all things about Roi brought to mind those youthful trysts. His body was the same only in the most basic way that made Roi male, and there the likeness ended. His mature form was full and strong, not the harsh angles of a growing young man. What I felt when I touched him made me think back on the hushed wonder of a new thing. It may hap, in many ways, I would discover something novel about Roi or even about myself. Possibly, with this union, both of us would be reborn new men.

Roi kissed me as if he was starved and I the only one who could fulfil his hunger. I walked him back towards the bed he had arranged for us and laid him down on the fresh linens. His hair spread out under him like spun gold, the strands damp once more from the rain. The tortured visage I had seen when he stared up at the sky was not one I ever wanted to behold on him again. Neither one of us would be leaving this cottage until he understood I would not be giving him up.

I buried my nose in the crook of his neck and breathed in deeply ere I licked across the base of his neck to his shoulder. The new growth on my chin rasped against his skin, leaving a pink blush behind as I kissed down his body.

Golden, almost colourless, hairs covered his upper chest though not his stomach. A thin trail ran within the hollowed valley of his belly to his groin. I brushed a thumb over his nipple causing him to gasp, my name falling from his lips. When I pressed the flat of my tongue over the pink nub, suckling gently, Roi writhed under me.

His form was lean yet strong. This was not the body of a priest but of a warrior. Certainly not the body of a woman, with plentiful mounds and soft curves. Slowly I learned his body, seeking for what caused him to demand more or made his breath shudder when he breathed out. He laughed when my tongue dipped down into his navel. Joy mixed with desire suited him, making his ice-blue eyes glow with life.

I settled between his legs, gazing intently at his cock and thinking the boys of my youth had never been so well endowed.

“Ewen?”

Roi appeared nervous and I grinned for him. “It be a long while since I took a male into my mouth, much less had a man in my bed,” —I glanced up at Roi— “no’ counting ye and our encounter outside of Glasgow. I were half asleep and striving to make ye feel good and... I hae been dying to touch ye ever since.”

“Whit be the difference between then and now?” Roi did not seem sure he wanted to know the answer.

“The difference be I want to make ye forget all who came ere me. I want to be the only man ye take to yer bed from now on. I want to give ye more pleasure than ye hae ever known.” I rubbed the stiff hair of my chin against the inside of his thigh and Roi moaned softly. “I be afeard that if I fail, I shall lose ye.”

Ere he responded to my confession, I grasped the hard length in front of me, the skin soft against my rough fingers. I pressed the flat of my tongue at the base of his shaft to lick up to the prepuce, pulling the skin covering the head back to reveal the flared tip. The scent of his musk filled my nostrils,

causing my bear to shift and roll within me. His desire for my possession of Roi felt like a shove.

I suckled the head, ran my tongue about the ridge, and was rewarded with a bit of his sweet essence. His shallow breaths and sharp gasps made me bold enough to discover more of what would cause him not to be able to stop filling the air with the stormy sound of his voice. His hips moved, pushing his cock further into my mouth until I grasped him firmly. Never had my blood burned as it did now. My cock was so hard I ached to the point I rutted against the linen to find a little ease. I sucked and licked with a pent up fervour, as if I had been caged and now was set free.

Roi's hands clutched the sheets when I took his stones in hand, rubbing and rolling the lightly-furred sack as I lost myself in the taste on my tongue, the feel of him in me, the way his manhood pulsed with pent up need. I laboured to bring him pleasure until he made sounds of impatience.

"Ewen." Warm palms caught my face and I rolled my eyes to gaze up Roi's body to behold his ice-blue eyes, stormy and so dark with desire they were nearly black. "If ye dinnae stop, I shall spill my seed. I want... I want..."

I slowly pulled off his cock, sucking until my cheeks hollowed out, his eyes fluttered closed, and his neck arched. With a final swirl of the tongue, I kissed the tip. "Ye want whit, Roi? Tell me," I rasped.

His gaze met mine again, his laboured breath of soft pants made me yearn to crush those full lips under mine. "I want ye to spill while ye... I want ye to breach me." His shy countenance was one I had not yet seen on him ere now. "Some prefer no' to dae such things. I understand if ye wish to dae something else."

My mouth went dry. "I hae never taken the maidenhead of another man." Roi's gaze slid away, I could see him struggle to be content. I would abate his torment. "Ye will hae to show me whit to dae. I dinnae wish to hurt ye."

His gaze returned to mine. Hope and desire returned to his visage. "Wait here." He slithered out from under me and dashed to the hearth.

He returned with a small clay pot that he secured in the corner of the wooden bed frame. Silently, he bade me lie on my back. The way his gaze roved over my body, the shy touches as he ran his fingertips through the spattering of hair on my chest caused my nipples to tighten. His heated gaze rested on my groin. The way he gazed at me made me pant with growing need.

Roi straddled my hips, and I gripped his strong thighs, more nervous than I could call to mind of being ere a coupling. He leaned over me, his face almost touching mine. A golden curtain of hair slid like a waterfall about us. I licked my lips and his gaze followed my tongue ere dipping down and stealing a tender kiss, and then another, and another. I would give him as many kisses as he wanted.

He swallowed the low noise I made when he gripped my shaft in his slick hand. My hips bucked upward into his grip. When he tore his mouth from mine, I gave a piteous cry and would have been ashamed save the smile he gave me made me forget why. Roi moved until my cock pushed against him, that dark secret place I would never dare to go without his consent. I gripped his hips tighter as I fought the sharp need to thrust, instead watched him.

I beheld his tender almost adoring countenance and lay very still, appalled at the thought of harming him. He bore down slowly, his tight heat stealing my breath away. Roi's eyes squeezed shut, his face twisting into a grimace as he shivered. He panted, the sound low and harsh to my ears as sweat formed on his forehead.

My hands moved to cup his firm buttocks, holding him firmly in place. "Nae. Stop, Roi. I be hurting ye."

He opened his eyes and gazed intently down at me, blinking a few times. "It be scarcely a bite of pain that will leave quickly. It has been a span of time since I hae had a lover of any—" My churlish growl ceased his words.

His body eased under my hands and he began to slide down my length again. This time his mouth sagged open, his eyelids fluttered closed as his breech connected with my hips. His body gripped my cock like a glove of the softest leather, so taut, so incredibly perfect. His palms rested against my

upper chest as his body slid up the length of my shaft, slow and sure. The breath burned in my throat overcome with all that I felt, stricken dumb. I stayed as still I could, watching with a heated gaze as Roi took his pleasure. The warmth of his body became a delicious torment, causing me to yearn for more. More of him. More of us. More of the touch that caused a growing fire to burn my blood. I wanted to thrust, to take him, to possess him, yet I worried my lust and eagerness would harm him. I would never forgive myself if I did.

His name spilled from my lips as he moved on my cock, swivelling his hips, his fevered stare pinning me in place. I ran my palms along his thighs, the feel of muscle moving under the skin, the hint of power, of strength prodded my lust until I gripped his hips so hard I knew they would bruise.

“Tell me, Ewen, who dae I belong to?”

“Me,” I ground out, my restraint weakened by the sly glint in Roi’s eyes.

“Am I yers?”

“Aye,” I snarled.

He leaned in close and whispered into my ear, “Then prove it.”

It was as if I had been unleashed. Growling, I rolled him, clutching him to me as I loosened the firm hold over my body and pushed further into him. His fingertips dug into my shoulders as his legs wrapped about my waist. His delighted laughter turned to sounds of gasping moans as I thrust with swift speed into him. He arched, meeting my hips with every move, our bodies working in accord.

Never had I felt aught like this wild, consuming heat. No matter what I did, he matched and met each move. We fit together so well I began to wonder how I had lived for so long and not known I was but half of myself. Roi grasped his shaft, eyes glazed as he began to stroke. My stones drew up against my body, heat gathered in my groin warning of the coming release.

“Roi,” I gasped. His name on my tongue sounded, low and harsh. I needed him to spill so I could watch as he split into pieces. For of me, only me.

His head slammed back into the bedding, the cords of his neck drawing tight as he arched against me. His mouth formed a quiet O as his arse clamped down on my cock and his seed painted our bodies. I could not hold back and thrust as far as I could into Roi to release into him as I was pulled asunder from the inside out. Marking him. Claiming him. My bear and I snarled, grasping Roi as my hips jerked, his name a litany that fell from my lips over and over as he stroked my sweat-slick back.

My bear hummed with bone-deep joy. I did not call back to a time with him being this happy—ever. Rising up on my elbows, I gazed down at Roi's flushed and damp face. His skin held a healthy rosy glow and his visage of open tenderness caused warmth to bloom in my chest and a riot of spring butterflies to flutter about in my stomach.

Gently, I withdrew my softening cock. The fear of being close to someone I could lose had been changed for the dread of Roi leaving me to go back to his temple and his goddess. "I hae never been jealous of a deity ere now."

My confession lit his features with delight. The scar hindered the lift of his lips, causing the right side to appear slumped compared to the left yet I did not believe he could be more appealing.

"I wid be remiss if I didnae point out that Cerridwen's visions be whit led me to ye, a gift laid at yer feet." The teasing light in his gaze dimmed.

"Then she cannot hae ye back. I know ye must miss yer home and if I were a better man, ye wid be allowed to leave if ye desired. I find the thought of ye no' by my side too crippling to think on."

Roi trailed his fingertips lightly down the side of my face. "Hae no' worries. I be yers. For better or worse, I will stand at yer side."

I buried my nose in his hair, feeling a small bit of shame at my weakness, yet Roi's calm comfort overwhelmed and pushed aside those dim, errant feelings. Finally, I rose in search of a cloth and the bucket of water. I tended to Roi, cleaning the seed from him as I stole sweet tender kisses.

Crawling into bed beside him, I drew a fur over us. “Dae ye ever wonder that the death ye thought ye wid hae by my hand meant the closing of yer old life in order to begin anew with me?”

“It may hap ye hae a point.” Roi chewed on his lip, his brow furrowed in thought. “I be a seer, always. Cerridwen has no’ withdrawn her blessing or power over me, otherwise the light of other wid be hidden from me.”

I caressed the dip at the base of his neck. Gooseflesh formed under my fingertips. “I doubt no’, for deities rarely forsake their people unless a grievous trespass forces the break. It dinnae mean ye cannot serve her from the hearth of my home.”

“Ye wid allow me to...” Roi’s mouth moved yet no words came forth.

Frowning, I replied, “I shall no’ remove ye from her. Yer faith be yer ain and no’ for me to command.”

“And if yer kin should ask, whit then?”

I chuckled. “Ye hae seen us, Roi. We, too, be unlike the rest of our kinsmen, no’ men nor beasts. We simply be better able to hide it, be all.”

His neck became red. “I be sorry.”

“For whit?”

“For thinking the worst earlier. It were unfair, after ye had told me why ye wanted me to stay ere then. I were afraid.”

I rolled onto my back, pulling him with me, urging him to settle against me with his head on my chest. “I take the blame, for I pulled away when ye needed me the most. How could ye know I were no’ pulling away again?” I brushed my lips over the top of his golden head. “I swear by the time we leave this cottage ye will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I intend to keep ye by my side. I hope ye will come to be at ease with me and trust me to answer yer questions.” Roi’s hand lightly stroked my stomach. If I had not spent my seed a few mere breaths ago, another part of me would have been begging for more of his stirring touch.

“Inside my home, ye be my equal. My kin will greet ye as my *hain*, my husband. Donn will hae told those who be willing to hear about me finding my companion. They shall want to meet ye and come for a *Cèilidh*. My home shall be brimming with well-wishers for many weeks.”

I grinned at his startled countenance. “Spouse...” he breathed.

“Ye will hae to keep in mind that outside our home, in the company of guests and callers, or with kinsmen who dinnae share a spirit, those ye must be wary of.”

Roi met my gaze. “*Hain*.” This time he said the word with firm surety, as if he was beginning to believe.

“Aye.” And he wid make a fine husband.

CHAPTER TEN

Roi

I cried out to the rafters, arching my back off the table as Ewen thrust into me, every now and then brushing against the spot that made my body sing. The heels of my feet perched on the edge of the table. My legs spread as far as they would go, with Ewen filling the space between them, his gaze watching every move I made.

Mercy of the gods, he looked as though he glowed above me. He leaned down, bending me nigh in half, and taking my mouth in a soul-searing kiss. He ate my cry as I came hard. My vision dimmed and my breath caught in my chest. Ewen reached his own pleasure soon after, breaking the kiss to stare down at me with his bright hazel eyes, jaw clenched as a deep groan pushed out from between his lips.

His weight crushed me to the table; I could barely breathe and did not mind. Breath coming in ragged gasps, I ran my hands down his sweat-slick back to the top of his arse ere beginning again at his shoulders. Finally he released my legs and I wrapped them about his waist.

Ewen started sniffing again, a sound I came to connect to his bear. The creature oft looked out of Ewen's eyes yet Ewen seemed not ware of. I did not speak of what I saw to Ewen. He spoke of his bear being wilful and yet I sensed no ill will from the creature. I could not help wonder why the animal would not emerge, as curious and possessive as I knew him to be. Ewen's light of other was still coloured with pain and I knew not what caused it. I would watch and learn more ere I decided what to do.

He and I stayed at the cottage for many days and nights, all were filled with now-familiar touches. We seemed not able to get enough of each other. I dreaded the time we would leave regardless of my desire to behold his home and meet the rest of his family. Our time together was coming to an end. For now, I revelled in having him all to myself.

When he stood, I groaned. I was quite stiff and needed his help to rise from the table's surface. The room strongly smelled of musk and man from our many couplings. I had never been as happy as I was here at the cottage. It may hap I would be able to convince Ewen to come up here again for a few days.

On shaky legs, we made our way across the room to the hearth. Ewen wanted to sleep next to the fire so we devised a thick pallet a safe distance away. We fell onto the furs in a riot of laughter. With lingering caresses, we cleaned each other. My skin felt raw in a few places from the stiff hair on Ewen's chin, not that I minded since it brought forth in my mind the one who possessed me so thoroughly. There was another part of me that loved how the beginnings of Ewen's new beard began to turn soft. I looked forward to the time when the hair would grow out enough so I could part it with my fingertips.

"On the morrow we head home. My children shall adore ye." He placed himself between the door and me, curling about my body until there was no space between us.

"I admit I be nervous about the reception of yer other kin." My own siblings and parents were faint memories of a time ere the temple.

"Nae. They will understand yer importance to me and my bear, and shall want to hold a party to celebrate our joining." I hoped he was correct. I would do what I could to win them over and ensure Ewen's happiness.

"Sleep now. We shall leave after the sun rises. The ride will take most of the day to cross the mountain."

Nervous as I was, I knew sleep would come. He and I had been very demanding of each other since the first night of coupling. Our nightly lovemaking had no end and left me utterly drained of strength. My eyelids grew heavy as I stared at the coals of the fire and the days of demanding lovemaking caught up with me. I would miss being able to slake our lust as oft as we wanted, waking each other in the night to start all over again, then sleeping late into the morn.

The first couple of nights I was afraid I would wake to find this all a dream. I spent hours watching him sleep, the banked fire of the hearth casting long shadows that showed signs of being a portent of dark times to come. Surely, the gods would not take him from me after all that had happened. I fell asleep believing I was spared for a reason.

The dream began the same as it had hundreds of times ere now. I knelt ere Ewen except the red robe was now a belted kilt and tunic. Ewen did not glance at me, only stared in despair behind me, his hands fisted about the hilt of a short sword as he slowly began to raise the blade over his head.

Most times these dreams did not come with sound, yet I clearly heard soft crying. Not able to help myself, I glanced over my shoulder to behold four men holding a young girl of eight or nine. She wept, huge sobbing breaths shaking her small body and by the look on Ewen's face, he knew her.

The door to the cottage stood wide open and two more men crept up behind him. The situation appeared to be hopeless. My gaze sought out his in time to see him mouth, "I be sorry." The world about me slowed to a crawl as Ewen began to bring the sword down.

I startled awake, gasping as I gazed about the room with rising dread searching for strange men. The crying of the child ringing through the air of the cottage followed by a whispered command that my foggy mind strove to grasp a hold of and fix in my mind.

I had not been given a vision since crossing the firth with Somerled. Although I read the glow about people, my night's sleep had been my own and not plagued with the presage of deeds that would soon come to pass.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I rolled out of the pallet and began to stoke the fire. With speed I found the last of the oats, placed them in the crock, and added water ere I moved the crock close to the coals to cook. As I moved, sore muscles called to mind the time spent with Ewen. I doubted we would be that active once we made his home.

I stretched again, added the last of our salted beef to the pottage ere searching out our clothes. In the cottage, it had become easy to wear only minimal attire since we were always taking them off. We passed time wrapped in furs unless we needed something from outside.

By the time the pottage was ready, I had wrapped the leggings and pulled the tunic over my head. Ewen sniffed then groaned as he rolled over and lifted his head. His gaze searched the room, finally coming to rest on me.

“Will ye no’ bestow upon me a kiss to start the morn, husband?” I cherished the knowledge he enjoyed calling me husband. I hoped it was a sign he would come to care for me somewhat in the future.

I grabbed Ewen’s clothing and crossed the floor, laying our kilts over the back of Ewen’s favourite chair. “First dress while I pull the pottage from the fire.”

Ewen grumbled, but began to pull on his clothing and move our nest of furs to the cupboard beds. I managed to dodge his lips until we both were fully attired.

“Ye did that on purpose,” he grumbled.

“Aye.” I grinned against his mouth. “If ye were no’ fully clothed a kiss wud lead to me keeping ye here another day.”

Ewen’s hands clutched the belt at my waist, holding me close when I would have pulled away. “Whit a shrewd man ye be. It may hap we shall stay anyway. This day. On the morrow. Whit difference will another night make?”

I pressed my forehead against his. “As much as I wud love to keep ye to myself, ye dae hae obligations. It dinnae mean we cannot come here at another time for a tryst in the future.”

He sought another kiss, this time with a half-hearted grope. I gave him a playful shove, ignoring the blush that heated my cheeks, still unused to his single-minded craving for me. I grabbed two sword belts to buckle onto him, one on each hip.

He chuckled and sought to avert me from buckling on the second belt. “One be enough, Roi. We be only a day’s ride from home. No one for us be out here. We be well within clann territory.”

I bit my lip to keep from replying. The messages of the dreams were told to no one outside those dedicated to Cerridwen. There was a steep price to pay for revealing what I knew. Besides, the vision could take place on the morrow, or a twelvemonth from now. With the dream so fresh in my mind, I had allowed myself to react when I should not have.

“As ye say.” I laid the sword and belt on the table and turned to see to my pack. Ewen stayed quiet, which turned into an awkward silence. “I shall attend to the horses.” On quick feet, I retreated out of the cottage into the early morn light.

The sky was overcast, promising rain later in the day. A half dozen steps toward the low rock wall, it dawned on me that I heard naught. Halting, I glanced about at the now familiar scene of the glenn stretched out ere me.

The trees swayed in the wind and yet no sound reached my ears. I should hear the water of the river, the song of the morn’s birds. Naught. Turning in a circle I began to count, the figure rose so high there became no reason to count their sum.

Ravens.

Hundreds sat in the naked boughs of the trees, their numbers so thick the new green of spring was utterly hidden by a pallet of deep black. All about the cottage, even on the slope of the thatched roof, the birds perched still and eerily quiet, their beady black eyes trained on me. Waiting.

I swallowed thickly. For the first time in my life I had something—someone—precious to lose.

As soon as the child’s scream pierced the air, I turned on my heel and ran toward the sound. My sword slapped against my thigh as my gaze searched for whence the cry came. A young girl with long black hair and clad in a simple

kirtle broke through the tree line, glancing behind her ere running toward the cottage— and me.

With my scarred and tattooed face, I had been told more than once I appeared quite fearsome, and yet this child reacted as if she knew me. When I caught her up, she clung to me as if she had found her fondest toy, and buried her face in my loose hair. I silently cursed that I had not tied it back ere I left the cottage.

I turned and dashed as fast as I could, burdened as I was. The ravens simply watched from their perches. “If we become separated, ye run to the cottage and lock yerself in and hide. Dae ye hear me?” I felt her nod her head.

I almost made the wall enclosing the cottage when I glimpsed two men sneaking about the side. I would not be able to get the child within the cottage ere they spotted us. Dread crawled up my spine as I turned toward the pen where we kept the horses. I could put her on one... I ran full force into two brigands. The child was torn from my arms and she screamed at the top of her lungs.

A violent shove landed me on my back on the ground where a solid kick to the ribs stole my breath. The new comer unsheathed my sword and, for an instant, I thought he would end me right then. Instead, both he and the man holding the child quickly stepped back, joined by two more who came from the tree line.

I rose to my knees, holding the girl’s gaze, signalling with my hand for her to wait while I addressed the men. “Whit dae ye want?”

The man closest to me look upon me with great scorn. I did not raise my arms in time to deflect the kick that caught me in the side of the head, knocking me flat on my back again.

“We dinnae answer questions from a Godless man.” He spat ere moving away.

From near the cottage came a roar so great, the air shivered with the power behind it. “Roi!” Ewen’s voice sounded guttural, my name barely plain.

Blinking the spots out of my vision, I rolled onto my stomach, rising once more to my knees to face the cottage and Ewen. He stormed toward me, the sword I had placed on the table earlier clutched in his fist. I wiped at the warm blood that dripped down my face.

His roving amber gaze took everything in with one sweep ere pinning the men with a stare that promised a painful redress.

“Brigid.” A growl punctuated her name.

The girl cried harder. “I be sorry, Father.”

He did not reply. The men I had spotted about the side of the cottage came forth, Ewen not ware he had been flanked.

“State yer business ere I decide to tear yer heads off for bringing harm to my family.” His grip on the naked blade flexed. He still wore the first sword I had belted to his hip. All I had was the dirk tucked in my belt.

I glanced over my shoulder. “We be here to deliver a message to Ewen Meinnear,” claimed the one holding Brigid.

“Spit it out, man, and get on with it,” Ewen prodded, his anger barely held in check.

“There be a price for defiance, Thane of Raineach. Slay the pagan and yer daughter will go free. If ye choose, again, to keep the heathen, the price shall be yer daughter’s life.”

I could sense his rage, his visage one of violent fury. Slowly Ewen’s face turned hard and unforgiving, yet when he glanced down at me only despair shadowed the depth of his eyes.

“Ye be making a habit of kneeling at my feet, Priest of Cerridwen.” I said naught, yet glanced with a purpose at the men stalking him, praying he would see and understand. “This day no’ be turning out as I had anticipated. Ye, on the other hand...” Ewen hefted the spare sword he had declined to wear, yet had grabbed off the table ere he left the cottage. “I trust ye,” he added in a soft voice.

“The Morrigan sent eyes to watch the field of battle.”

He raised his gaze, finally noticing the quiet ravens. “Then we shall give her a battle worth beholding.”

Ewen stared over my head, the dead eyes deceiving as his bear pushed forward, trapped, nonetheless ready to unleash the berserker rage Ewen spoke of. He wore the very same countenance when he faced Somerled on the field of war.

Grasping the sword double-fisted, he raised it over his head until the tip of the blade pointed down behind him. I grasped the dirk at the front of my belt and withdrew it. My body relaxed as I locked away all thought, all feelings, searching for the centre of calm where I floated, waiting for his move.

His face flushed with strain as he hurled his blade as he would an axe. The instant the sword left his fingers, I launched backwards, rolling arse over head to come to my feet next to the man holding Brigid. He stared wide-eyed at the sword sticking out of the chest of the man next to him. The ravens took flight, filling the air with their cawing as I tore Brigid from the cutthroat’s grasp.

“Run!”

I thrust my dirk into the throat of the man who had held her, any command he would have given lost. The instant of shock and wonder passed and the other men burst into movement. I swung my left fist at the skewered man. He stumbled out of reach, which was all I needed to grasp Ewen’s sword and plant my foot in his chest to dislodge the blade. He fell to the ground in a heap, the light of life fading quickly from his eyes.

Ere I could bring the blade up, a backhand caught me across the head where I had been kicked. Stumbling back, my vision turned hazy and spotted. Half blind, I turned and brought my blade up in time to narrowly catch the one coming down on me.

I fought like a man possessed. Ewen and his daughter counted on me. I would not fail them. An earlier glimpse told me the cottage door, open when

Ewen exited, was now closed and hopefully barred. I did not catch sight of Ewen or the other two manslayers.

Dropping low to the ground, I sliced the cords at the back of one foe's knee. His leg no longer holding him up, he fell to the side, howling. Ere I could catch my balance, a well-placed kick to my hip caused my leg to buckle and I went to one knee, blocking a thrust ere grabbing the man by his stones through his kilt with my free hand. A sharp pull and twist caused the villain to drop his sword. My next slash gutted the man.

Blundering to my feet, I kicked him in the chest, pushing him to the ground as he feebly strove to keep his insides from bursting forth. The one I had crippled by slicing through the meat at the back of his leg sought to crawl away. He glanced over his shoulder at me as he clambered away weakly, fear stretching his face tight.

The calm about me shattered. The ravens continued to circle, calling loudly to each other. Fury flooded my veins, pushing away the lethargy dragging at my limbs. I stalked toward the would-be murderer, kicking him in the shoulder to roll him onto his back. He glared at me with open malice.

“Pagan,” he spat. “Yer soul will burn in the bowels of hell.”

“I serve a goddess. Ye can keep the fires of hell for yerself.” With all my might, I buried the sword in the man's chest. Either my foot slipped in blood or my legs gave out from being drained of strength, I know not which landed me on the ground, heaving for breath.

The ravens quieted yet continued to circle like a black cloud in the sky above. The would-be murderer I had gutted, moaned piteously behind me. I needed to end his misery and then track Ewen. I prayed he stayed unharmed.

Wiping the blood from my face, I breathed through the spinning of my vision. I grasped the hilt of the sword that protruded from the man's chest, intending to use it to help me in rising when the flock of ravens landed all at once, becoming a thick ebony blanket spread about me in a wide, unbroken

circle. The silence became thick and heavy. I froze waiting for what would come next.

A low, growling chorus rumbled, rising in volume until the air shivered with the angry noise. Almost two dozen black bears of many shapes and sizes came forth from the tree line. Their heads were low to the ground, gazes trained on me. I let go of the sword hilt and waited. I would not raise my hand in defence, not against Ewen's kin.

The bears circled scarcely outside the blanket of ravens, each roaring and lunging. That the birds did not scatter at their presence confounded the bears. One lost patience, striving to breach the line of the ravens only to be swarmed and assailed by a half dozen ravens intent on driving him back. The bear yowled as if he'd been stung, which served only to incite the others who all began to press into the circle of ravens, intent on reaching me.

"Nae! Stop!" Brigid's pale face twisted with fear as she ran from the doorway of the cottage to me. The ravens parted, allowing her to come through untouched. She barrelled into my side, nigh knocking me over as her arms wrapped about my neck. I held her the best that I could as she buried her face in my neck and cried.

The bears backed away. "Donn? Arailt?" One of them had to know me. "Will one of ye search for Ewen? He may need help." I could not bring myself to feel ashamed for the pleading tone in my voice. I had a burning need to know of Ewen's wellbeing, yet knew if I left the safety of the ravens I would be slaughtered.

The bears rocked from side to side on their front paws and I wondered if they might not be able to understand me. I thought Donn had been able to in his bear form though I never asked, only believed it to be true.

Two bears broke off from the group and lumbered toward the cottage as the others began to harass the ravens again. A bellow, louder than all the noise made by Ewen's kin, came from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and the strain left me as Ewen strode toward us. I placed a palm on the back of Brigid's head to keep her from beholding the two heads held by their hair in

Ewen's fist. With an angry toss, the heads were hurtled at the bears closest to him as he bore down on them with great speed. Power from his bear rolled across my skin in a soothing tidal wave.

"Father!" Brigid ran to him. The ravens launched into the air with a sudden cry and flew away.

Ewen caught his daughter up in a tight embrace. I searched for serious wounds on him and was relieved when I did not discern any. As he approached, I slowly rose back to my feet on shaky legs. Catching me under the arm, he hefted me up the rest of the way and then crushed me to him.

"I think I want to go back to bed," I mumbled. I could not think again why I had been in a rush to cross the mountain. Ewen simply laughed and clutched me harder.

EPILOGUE

Roi

Our horses stood side by side as we looked down the side of the mountain onto Loch Raineach. Ewen's nine-year-old daughter, Brigid, straddled the horse behind me, holding onto my wide belt. Somehow, I had become her hero even though I had really done naught save comfort her the best way I knew how. Ewen simply looked on with pride and grinned slyly when Brigid insisted on riding with me and not her father.

I did wonder why she trusted me so readily. "Donn came to the house and told us the story of the savage warrior priest father's bear chose as a companion." Her small fingers ran over the outlines of my facial tattoos. "I be glad I found ye at the cottage."

We had stayed another night at the glenn. Both Ewen and I had small wounds to tend. His kin had transformed to human at his angry command and had to answer for their ill will toward me. Arailt and Donn were not among those who tracked Brigid. Most knew of me only by word of mouth and thought I had conspired to kidnap Ewen's daughter. I had never seen him so furious and, for a small while there, I thought his bear would come forth. Many contrite apologies were made and I accepted them. The countenance on Ewen's face told me he was not appeased. I vowed to speak to him later on this and soothe him.

The manslayers wore what Ewen's kin referred to as *bumbee* tartans, fabric woven to resemble a clann tartan yet not belonging to the clann. Ewen sent word to the Robersons, in the east, to notify them someone wanted to frame them for theft of his daughter and murder. Also, whoever sent the men did not warn them of the clann's otherness. I was ware of who put together the skirmish and I believed Ewen was too, although I refused to be the one to name the man without proof.

Now, as we stared down at Ewen's home and the burgh about the castle, I prayed I would be ready for what would come next. People stopped what they were doing when they caught sight of us. I glanced at him. He cut a fine figure,

sitting tall on his grey-speckled courser. Half the bears ambled in a staggering line ahead of us. The others surrounded him as if he were a beast-king of old. A niggling fragment of memory from long, long ago almost made me believe he could be.

I once thought my fate would be to die by his hand. Now I understood fate had placed me in Ewen's path so I could learn to live. Who am I to argue with fate?

THE END

Lexicon

Ain – Own

Aye – Yes

Be – Is, are, am

Burgh – Township

Cèilidh – /'kel or Kay'lay/ dance, social gathering. A Scottish Gaelic word for “visit”, as these began as informal gatherings in individual homes.

Crock – earthenware pot

Dae – Do

Didnae – Didn't

Dinnae – Don't, Doesn't

Doog – Dog

Gaunnae – Going to

Gille Dubh – /Geel-yuh Doobh/ Guardian spirit of trees

Great kilt – a kilt that is longer, usually reaching to the shin

Hae – Have

Huvnae – Haven't

Kirk – church

Kirtle – a long ladies dress

Leine-Croich – saffron shirt, war shirt, worn by ancient Highlanders

Nae – No

No' – Not

Sett – the colour and pattern on a tartan

Shieling – summer dwelling on a seasonal pasture

Snaoim Gatrain – special knots used to tie garters

Whit – What

Willnae – Will not

Wid – Would

Widnae – Would not

Wench – Women

Ye – You

Yer – Your

Author Bio

Lexi has always been an avid reader and at a young age started reading (secretly) her mother's romances (the ones she was told not to touch). She was the only teenager she knew of who would be grounded from reading. Later, with a pencil and a note book, she wrote her own stories and shared them with friends because she loved to see their reactions. A Texas transplant, Lexi now kicks her boots up in the Midwest with her Yankee husband and her eighty-pound puppies named after vacuum cleaners.

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PLAYING FOR KEEPS

By Lexi Ander

Photo Description

Two blond men with short crew cuts are caught in a deep, open-mouthed kiss. A third man stands slightly apart and behind the shorter man, with his arms at his waist tugging up his T-shirt. He is reaching around him to stroke the smaller man's stomach.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These men love each other and are happy together, but one of them (the one on the left) is starting to succumb to the pressures of being in a ménage à trois. Something the outside world doesn't even want to try and understand. He's not sure if he should let them go, so at least they can be together without all the added stress their kind of love brings. But doesn't he know they will never let him go.

Please no D/s or BDSM and a very HEA would be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Mandy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: M/M/M, college, sports, military, assholery, foot wrangling, established relationship, blackmail, don't mess with the mom

Word count: 22,598

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PLAYING FOR KEEPS

By Lexi Ander

CHAPTER ONE

~Brock~

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me!” Brock Everett threw his pen across the table as a Puma’s player unnecessarily hit the Ducks’ running back, number forty-three Trent Harte, yet again. The force of the tackle landed Harte on his back with a shoulder planted in his gut.

Interning for the local sports news channel, Brock normally loved the view of the football field from the press box. Not today, watching this bullshit. Certain Puma players had been dogging Trent Harte’s every step. There’d been half a dozen similar demonstrations of excessive force from the opposing team throughout the entire game. Every single time, the refs looked the other way. They ignored the clipping, chop blocking, tripping, *and* the two times a player grabbed Harte’s face mask to pull him down. At this last slam, Ducks’ Coach Penzaks looked like he was having a coronary on the sidelines, screaming at the ref before calling time-out.

“Penzaks should’ve pulled Harte from the game from the beginning. What does the coach expect? Harte’s an openly gay player. With the leak insinuating he’s depraved as well, the other players aren’t going to put up with that shit no matter how good he is,” said Natasha Lewis. The brunette, who interned for the rival sports reporting syndicate, leaned across the partition dividing the different news desks, her eyes bright as she waited for Brock’s response.

“Love your view of the players, Natasha. Don’t paint them all as narrow-minded assholes. No wonder you have problems obtaining interviews—you’re prejudiced and it shows.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Brock regretted saying anything at all within the barracuda’s hearing. She seemed to thrive on adversity, and he often wondered why she majored in sports

newscasting. With her adversarial reporting style, and the way she went out of her way to muddy the waters, there were other syndicates she would be better suited to work for.

“So what if it’s becoming more acceptable to be a homosexual player?” Natasha asked with a fake pout. “Regardless of that, the other football players aren’t going to allow a pervert to play amongst them.”

The intern from the other side of Brock, Robert Hooney, snorted loudly. “Right now his sexual proclivities are a rumor. We’re supposed to report the *facts* that have to do with the game. Even if it’s true and Trent is the boyfriend of two other men, how’s that any different from other players who traipse around clubs with two women hanging on their arms every weekend? Harte doesn’t party, he doesn’t club hop, and I heard he never drinks alcohol. If any of the many rumors are remotely correct and he’s involved in a monogamous relationship with more than one person, why the hostility?”

Natasha made a sour face. “Everyone knows that type of behavior isn’t normal. Anyone screwing around with more than one person at a time and dubbing it as a *monogamous relationship* is lying. It’s an experiment, not a relationship, and certainly not natural.”

Brock ground his teeth, despising that a player’s sex life even rated a mention in the press box.

“Says the woman who’s dated a half-dozen men. Your stance sounds very much like *marriage is only between a man and a woman*.” Robert’s voice held a note of censure. “If Harte was a heterosexual, he would be considered a *stud*,” —Robert made air quotes when he said the word—“by both men and women, and considered a catch. So why would it be perverted if it’s two men?”

“That is an unfair characterization!” Natasha’s scandalized expression twisted her face into an ugly mask of righteous indignation.

Robert grinned. “Just calling them like I see them.”

Natasha's response was lost when the time-out ended. The players jogged back onto the field. Brock watched as number forty-three, Trent Harte, took his place in the lineup. Brock's eyes narrowed. It looked like Harte moved with a slight limp.

Hoping he was mistaken, he gritted his teeth and made himself relax back into the chair. He wasn't friends with anyone in the press box; therefore, no one here knew he was one of the running back's lovers. As difficult as it was to listen to the discussion about his boyfriend, he wouldn't make a confession. It would be useless because they'd already formed their opinions.

Talk of Harte and his supposed lovers should have died down and become old news as time passed. The rumors were three weeks old, but the speculations regarding the number of men in Harte's bed stayed fresh. Brock thought he knew who to blame, but without solid proof, Trent would be disappointed if Brock took matters into his own hands.

The Ducks' quarterback, Brad Jones, snapped the ball. Harte shot like a rocket down the field for the catch, making the final touchdown with mere seconds left on the clock. Instead of breaking off, three Puma players tackled Harte after the play ended. Whistles blew, but the call came too late. The lack of referee involvement obviously pissed off the members of the Ducks' team, judging by the way they went after the three defensive players. Ten seconds left on the clock and it appeared there would be a brawl at the goal line. Brock grinned broadly, overjoyed Trent's teammates had his back. Referees converged on the group before the melee got out of hand, but the tension was running high.

The rest of the game played out with a field goal and a ten-point win for the Ducks. Packing up before the players started to file off the field, Brock made sure his written report on the game had been finished and sent. He knew he should've attempted to get a quick interview from the players, especially with the referee debacle, but his mind wasn't on his report.

Robert and Natasha snarled back and forth at each other over his head. He didn't bother to glance up when the two of them went quiet. He sensed them

watching him curiously as he packed up to leave instead of participating in the usual after game banter.

He attempted to disguise his emotions, but frustration still caused his hands to shake as he stuffed his laptop into the travel case. This wasn't the first time in the last couple of weeks Brock became fighting mad over the harsh treatment Trent received or from conversations he'd overheard. Watching his lover being needlessly pummeled on the field only added to the simmering anger Brock had been hiding.

Even his and Trent's cool-headed boyfriend, AJ Barnes, was susceptible to the constant hostility Trent had been subjected to. The other night, AJ came home with a fat lip and bruised knuckles. The former Marine claimed an accident, but Brock didn't think Trent bought the lie because *he* sure as hell hadn't. Later on, Brock learned through campus gossip AJ had been defending Trent against the harsh words of several bigots.

If their Marine could be injured, then Brock didn't stand a chance in a similar situation. Mouth shut, head down, he did his best to ignore people's prejudice and snide words. Trent reasoned if they ignored the remarks, things would eventually settle down. Brock didn't feel so sure anymore, even if some days were better than others.

Today wasn't one of them.

In the last play, when the three players tackled Trent for the final time, Brock's heart had stopped. After everyone moved off the Ducks' running back, Trent had simply lain there.

Motionless.

He'd been terrified. If Trent hadn't gotten up of his own accord, regardless of the consequences or how irrational the response, Brock would've done his best to cause bodily harm to every person responsible. His lover eventually rose from the turf and walked stiffly off the field with the team. Nothing had been announced regarding Trent's injury status, and Brock burned with the need to know, to make sure the man he loved was unharmed.

Without a word to the other interns, Brock threw the strap to his laptop case over his shoulder and strode out of the press box. Thankfully, today was Friday and he wouldn't have class until Tuesday. Until then, he had his men all to himself. He definitely needed some loving to help him fight the negativity haunting him.

Brock hurried to meet AJ. The shortest of the three of them, AJ made up for it by being bigger than life. The former Marine also had a dirty mouth, which AJ worked hard to change. Brock had never seen the man lose his temper, yell, or act out. The man exuded such calm, and Brock wondered if the trait came from AJ's Armed Forces training. On the days when Trent pushed Brock's buttons, the two of them would fight until AJ stepped in. He was the one who made them work things out, and then they'd have make-up sex. Brock felt the corners of his lips lift into a secret grin as his spirit lightened. The amazing sex was *always* a good reason to pick a fight.

Five years older than Brock and Trent, AJ was in his junior year working toward a degree in physical therapy. They hadn't yet talked about what would happen this coming summer when he and Trent graduated. Brock wanted a bigger, more permanent house but he didn't know what his lovers' expectations were.

AJ leaned nonchalantly against the wall outside the restricted press area. Brock's breath hitched a little when AJ straightened, moving with the grace of a dangerous predator. The man never walked anywhere. He prowled, so quiet sometimes he'd scared the shit out of Brock a time or two in the couple of years they'd been together. The first time it happened, Brock became so turned on he attacked AJ. The hot and dirty kitchen sex left skid marks on the floor where the kitchen table had slid across the linoleum into the wall as AJ fucked him.

Large, gray eyes met his and turned molten, as if something in Brock's expression had given away his thoughts. "I'll be glad when your hair grows out again," AJ commented as Brock approached.

“Not attractive?” He self-consciously ran his hand over his spiky hair. He’d cut off the dirty-blond locks in a military cut similar to AJ’s for the internship interview. “Come on, let’s go pick up Trent.”

He knew he should have gone with a simple trim. Unlike his lovers, Brock didn’t sport a hard body nor was he attractive. The small pooch around Brock’s waist, caused by his enjoyment of rich foods and lack of regular exercise, made his hair his best asset.

AJ crowded up behind Brock when he stopped to open a door. “You’re one handsome man, Brock Everett.” Hot breath skittered over the shell of his ear. AJ stood close enough he felt the man’s body heat through his clothing. “I don’t know what has gotten into you lately about your appearance. Bottom line, Trent and I will make love to you until you feel as gorgeous as we know you to be. Besides, who said I liked your hair for anything other than something to hold onto?”

Brock shivered at the thought. His pulse picked up as he considered the possibilities. AJ reached past him, grasped the door handle, and pulled. AJ smirked but didn’t comment as Brock moved his laptop bag in front of his groin to hide the evidence of his arousal. Brock stepped through the doorway and together they walked abreast down the corridor. The traffic in the hallway discouraged any more sexually heated conversation, but it was too late. Brock was hard and wanting. He hoped Trent wouldn’t be long, because he needed to be at home in bed with his guys.

“Did you watch the game?”

“Stupid assholes.” AJ didn’t raise his voice, but the calmly spoken expletive was his equivalent of a shout. When they first met, AJ’s vocabulary consisted of “fuck” every other word. The man sometimes slipped back into old habits when he was frustrated or upset. Brock considered his Marine’s comment very mild, and a definite improvement on what it could’ve been.

“You and I both know this is all George Mahoney’s fault. The rumors started right after he walked in on us.” Brock had been cussing George’s big mouth for the last couple of weeks.

They were well aware George enjoyed causing problems for other members on the football team. The man was a bully and had been knocked down more than once for his behavior. Unfortunately, confrontation only made his tactics more subtle.

“We knew better than to let our guard down around that loudmouth,” AJ responded. For various reasons, none of them were demonstrative in public. “Only our closest friends know Trent is in a relationship with us. We’re careful around people who could make life difficult for us, like Trent’s father. So far, we’ve been fortunate in the reactions we’ve received.”

Brock nodded in agreement. “It’s a pity your little sister brought George to the barbeque as her date. And even if you didn’t like the type of attention she was getting from him, most of George’s focus was on Susan.” Brock examined the events of the party carefully as he walked. “It was a bit odd that those two were the last to leave the party, though. From the way he was acting, I would have thought George would try to hustle Susan out earlier.”

“I should’ve made sure the door was locked when I escorted them out.” Brock suspected AJ blamed himself for what happened. “My head wasn’t where it should’ve been.”

“How were you supposed to know George would return to retrieve Susan’s keys?” Brock replied, attempting to sooth AJ. None of them could’ve foreseen someone stumbling onto their private moment.

“I still don’t understand why George attacked Trent. It’s not like he doesn’t know Trent’s gay. It seems strange that George would get so angry we’d need to kick him out of the house.”

“The next day the rumors about Trent began,” Brock added. “I don’t know why our names weren’t mentioned.”

“It’s personal,” AJ concluded. “Whatever is going on between George and Trent, it must be personal to George. He’s out to ruin Trent, and we aren’t important... let’s just hope George doesn’t realize he can use us to hurt Trent.”

Brock knew he shouldn't have allowed Trent to talk them into staying quiet. "So far, Trent's the one who's borne the brunt of the fallout." With George keeping the gossip mill running, Brock reconsidered his agreement with Trent. "It isn't fair to allow Trent to bear the burden alone."

"I agree."

Finally reaching their destination, Brock and AJ took up positions against the wall ten feet from the doors to the home team's locker room. Normally they waited in the parking lot, but with the continued hostility, he and AJ had taken steps to ensure Trent didn't go anywhere alone. People were less likely to cause trouble with witnesses around.

"Susan left another message on the landline this morning. She's still apologizing for what happened." Brock hated that AJ and his sister's relationship was strained because of the bigot.

The former Marine stared at his scuffed and worn sneakers. Brock was pretty sure AJ hadn't spoken to her since the party. The call to the house phone instead of AJ's cell only confirmed Brock's suspicions.

"You should call Susan. She's not responsible for George's actions," Brock encouraged, nudging his lover with his shoulder.

"No, it was my fault. I should've made sure the door was locked before I started anything. If I'd paid attention and not been so excited, we would've been interrupted by a knock instead of George walking in on us."

"AJ," Brock paused until his lover's dark brown gaze met his own. "George could've easily used the gate to the backyard if we'd been too occupied to hear him at the front door. Either way, unless we'd locked all the doors, retreated to the bedroom and closed that door as well... I personally believe George was determined to catch us at *something*. He's the one who didn't belong and the one who overreacted. He's never been a pleasant person, but his attitude has been malicious ever since then."

"Did you see how Pumas' players treated Trent?" AJ grumbled. The stress of the situation wore on all of them, even his even-tempered lover. Brock

understood the man wasn't upset with him but with the situation. "It's only a rumor and people are out there on the field intentionally hurting him. If I ever see George again..."

"No, you won't," Brock admonished, discreetly brushing his knuckles against the back of AJ's hand. "We made a promise to Trent, which I intend to keep until I can get him to renegotiate. Until then, if I can't twist George's balls off then neither can you."

The corner of AJ's firm mouth kicked up in a half grin, his gray eyes sparkling with mischief. "Yeah, you'd like to, wouldn't you?"

If his boyfriends only knew what Brock would be willing to do for them! "If I remember correctly, Susan already did."

"Too bad I wasn't there to see it," AJ said, a little too wistfully.

"Another reason for you to call her, to thank her." Personally, Brock thought Susan rocked. She'd been shocked when they'd physically hauled George out of the house after he busted Trent's nose. AJ returned to Trent while Brock stood on the porch and made sure George left. When the football player started cussing Trent in the front yard, Susan had taken the man in hand and shoved him in the car, alternately yelling at George and apologizing to Brock.

The door to the Ducks' locker room opened, and players began to file out. Some greeted family or friends waiting in the hallway. Most acknowledged Brock and AJ in some way, only a few scowled or ignored them.

A couple of long minutes later, George entered the corridor alone. His eyes widened when he spotted the two of them leaning nonchalantly against the wall. A barely concealed sneer crossed his face. The team's quarterback, Brad Jones, pushed George from behind as he attempted to exit the locker room and then grasped George's bicep while he whispered into the player's ear. By the expression on George's face, he didn't like what he heard.

Snatching his arm away from the quarterback, George stormed down the hall in the opposite direction. Brad watched the defensive lineman leave.

Hiking a heavy duffle higher on his shoulder, Brad hesitated a moment before nodding his head at Brock and AJ in acknowledgement.

“Guys,” he mumbled as he strode past them.

AJ scowled after him. “I wonder what that was all about.”

CHAPTER TWO

~Trent~

Trent left the trainer's room feeling slightly better than when he'd gone in. The deep tissue massage to loosen up the muscles in the small of his back and his left calf worked wonders. He would be sore and a little stiff for a couple of days, but that was it. No torn muscles or ligaments to worry about. The last thing he needed was to be injured while the NFL scouts were out.

He'd hoped everybody would be gone by the time he went back to the locker room. Most were, but Brad Jones and George Mahoney were yet to leave. Trent's heart sank when George dogged his heals back to the locker, the bully crowding Trent when he stopped.

"I'm sick and tired of playing second fiddle to you, Harte," George sneered in Trent's ear. "It's bad enough I have to play on the same team with you, but to watch you steal *my* spotlight when you're such a sick fuck is worse. People should know their golden boy isn't so perfect, then I would be given the attention that is my due."

Trent glanced up to meet George's hateful gaze. "Get out of my space, George. I don't know what your problem is, and I really don't care. You'd better back off."

Trent'd had enough of the sneers and cruel words from the narrow-minded asshole. He knew his fellow teammate fed the rumors. But the vitriol he threw at Trent whenever they were alone confused him. He hadn't done anything that he knew of to cause the man to hate him. Trent was past the point of attempting to figure George out. Now, the man's behavior only pissed him off, and ignoring George only seemed to make his attitude worse.

George disregarded Trent's warning and bumped his solid chest against Trent's. George was a huge defensive lineman and a virtual steamroller on the field. As a running back, Trent had strength and bulk but nothing close to the person who towered over him, crowding menacingly into his personal space.

“What would it take to push you off the pedestal Coach put you on? I don’t give a flying fuck about your *boyfriends*. I wonder what would happen to Everett’s internship if the sports network found out what you guys are doing in that dump of a house? Do you think they’d consider keeping his skinny ass on when they discover your filthy secret? Fucking pervert.”

Trent flushed with suppressed rage. This wasn’t the first time in the last couple of weeks George had threatened Brock or AJ. He ignored the sneers on the field, the clipping, chop blocking, and the referees looking the other way. What he wouldn’t allow was harm to anyone he loved.

Trent refused to reply to George’s threat. Any response would let George know he’d gotten under Trent’s skin. He needed to calm down before he did or said something he’d regret.

“Mahoney!” Brad yelled from across the aisle. “Harte already has a boyfriend, or are you trying to get in his pants too?”

“Fuck you, Brad. Mind your own business,” George shot back.

“You know, Mahoney, Trent has been frank about his sexuality from the very beginning. You’ve never indicated you had a problem with him until the last couple of weeks. He doesn’t party, he doesn’t go clubbing. I don’t remember seeing him out on a date. Trent’s been low-key all of this time. A friend of my sister’s said she took you to a barbecue at Trent’s place right before this mess began. I’ve been wondering where these rumors came from. No one seems to know how they started. Do you have anything to say about that?” Brad stood there in a white T-shirt and a loose pair of jeans with a towel around his neck, waiting for George’s response.

Trent didn’t know why George hadn’t claimed he was the one to catch Trent and his lovers together. Instead, the man started rumors without the information pointing back to him. Trent thought George hid his involvement to dodge the backlash from the team, or maybe he didn’t want people to know he’d been at Trent’s house. One lover or two, why did it matter to the man?

“Fuck you, Brad. You can’t tell me you want this sick asshole on the team.”

Brad threw his towel in the laundry bin. “You know what I want? I want to win. I want to keep my first-round draft placement, and right now all I see is a jealous asshole who’s doing his damndest to ruin my chances at a fucking awesome career.”

“He’s the one...”

“Shut the hell up. The Pumas were all over him tonight because of your whispers, you prick. If you fuck this up for me, I’ll make sure you regret it for the rest of your life. You’re messing with my goddamn livelihood because you can’t keep your nose out of other people’s business.”

George snarled, slamming his shoulder into Trent’s on the way out of the locker room. Brad followed close behind without a glance or word to Trent.

He slumped on the wooden bench, placed his elbows on his knees, and cradled his head in his hands. The stress of the last couple of weeks drained him. The derisive looks, the slurs, and the lewd comments echoed around in his head with nowhere to go. He’d attempted to ignore the overly rough behavior on the field, and the fact the referees turned a blind eye to what should’ve been penalties against the other team. What had been harder to dismiss were the growing number of threats to his lovers. The majority of the bullying came from people who didn’t know him, Brock, or AJ.

George was different though; Trent’s teammate *knew*. So far, the names of his lovers hadn’t been leaked, but it was only a matter of time before someone put together the clues. Would George follow through and disclose information about Brock to the sports network and jeopardize his chances of being hired on at the station? Or was the taunt hollow, designed to make Trent worry?

Trent removed the towel from around his waist, scowling as he stood and pulled on a pair of black briefs. Could he live with himself if Brock lost his internship? What would happen if word got out, or God forbid, a reporter snapped a shot with the three of them together? Just the implication would

sink his men. Would AJ and Brock be able to obtain a job without the employer scrutinizing their background and possibly finding out?

AJ's sister, Susan, was enrolled in human resource courses. Just last month she mentioned how employers conducted personal checks on applicants by searching through social media outlets such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Tumblr to evaluate the candidates' conduct.

Their relationship was unconventional, outside of what most considered normal. They didn't hide it but, understanding the pitfalls, the three of them had been careful whom they confided in. This vendetta of George's could ruin Brock's and AJ's chances at a solid career. His own placement in the draft picks was based on his performance, but it didn't guarantee he'd have a job after the first year, or his teammates' acceptance.

He'd deal with the repercussions to his own future, but could he stand by and do nothing if George followed through with his threat? The answer was no, he couldn't. Brock and AJ meant too much to him to allow their lives and futures to be destroyed because they were involved with him.

Trent's legs went weak, and he quickly sat back down to keep from falling on his face. He'd been with AJ and Brock for two, going on three, years. When did they become more important than anything else in his life? He would do anything to make sure they were safe. George would probably try his damndest to ruin them. There was only one way to keep that from happening. It was as if a tight band constricted around his chest, making it hard to breathe. Could he give up Brock and AJ? He wasn't sure he'd adjust to being without them.

Angrily, he shoved a leg into a pair of dark jeans. Did it make him selfish if he didn't want to leave them? That his mind ran a mile a minute searching for a way to keep them close?

He had the perfect life. It wasn't glamorous. They lived in a fifty-year-old duplex too small for his family of three. Everything they owned was secondhand, and it didn't matter to any of them. They had each other. The

feeling of home, the laughter, the pranks, the arguments, the quiet moments, the make-up sex, the love, all of it made his life *perfect*.

And it was slipping away.

Now, people he'd known for years looked at him as if they didn't recognize him. He'd seen some of the expressions of dark suspicion thrown at Brock and AJ. Would his lovers even tell him if they were being harassed? AJ had come home with a busted lip the other day and an excuse of an accident in his lab class. Had they already been hurt because of him?

Trent's father had called last night. He, too, had heard the rumors and demanded confirmation, which Trent refused to give. He'd said nothing to his lovers about the brief but caustic conversation. His father had demanded Trent's presence for dinner after the game—without his roommates. He could already hear the words of the one person who made no bones about his disappointment in Trent. It was hard enough to disregard his parent when he listed all the ways Trent was imperfect, and still choose to be an openly gay football player. He didn't want to get into an argument with the man for being in a monogamous ménage à trois.

Trent snatched up his tennis shoe and threw it across the empty room, where it slammed into the metal door of the linen cabinet with a loud ringing clang. "Goddammit!" he bellowed.

The door to the locker room burst open, AJ stormed through with Brock hot on his heels. The former Marine's gaze swept the area before coming to rest on Trent.

"There was a noise and a yell," AJ explained before he searched the room again.

Trent's blood warmed to see AJ ready to come to his defense. Brock rushed to him, his lover's expression one of deep concern. Trent blinked a couple of times to remove the grit from his eyes. He would do what he had to in order to keep them safe. What exactly that would be, he wasn't sure of yet.

CHAPTER THREE

~AJ~

Waiting for Trent in the corridor, AJ didn't think, only reacted to the loud noise and muffled yell. He pushed off the wall and stalked into the Ducks' locker room ready for action. Still pissed from what happened to Trent on the field, AJ was already pumped. He felt guilty because Trent bore the brunt of people's prejudice. He wanted to be standing next to his men, sharing the burden George had caused them. Trent made them promise not to do or say anything—yet. His lover had been sure the situation would blow over without him or Brock being dragged through the mud. AJ would prefer the mud to the silence.

Storming through the door, he was ready to hand someone his ass for not backing Trent up. Disappointment hit him when he discovered his lover was the only player left in the locker room. The pained expression Trent wore said something had happened. With an expert eye, AJ assessed his boyfriend, from his bare muscular chest to the running back's damp, dark hair, and the shaky hands that scrubbed over his face.

AJ moved farther into the room, glancing around again to verify there was no one else around. He noticed Trent's tennis shoe on the floor across the room and retrieved the sneaker. Brock rushed to Trent. AJ knew his lovers well and easily saw how upset and flustered Brock was. The man moved as if to touch Trent then shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks instead.

AJ grimaced. None of them, for various reasons, were comfortable with public displays of affection. At times like these, he wished they could express themselves better. Trent needed them. The sheer agony in Trent's blue gaze and the tension in those wide shoulders told him that.

They needed to get him home. Now.

“Are you all right? The Pumas were assholes.”

A small satisfied grin crossed Trent's face. "I'm sore but the trainer cleared me. I'll need to spend some time in the hot tub."

Brock's lids lowered as he pinned Trent with a steely gaze. "You were limping."

"I'm not injured," Trent promised.

AJ held back a snort of disbelief. When they got Trent home, he would be able to discover for himself if his lover had been injured.

He handed the shoe to Trent. "Come on, let's go home."

Trent's sapphire gaze didn't meet his. Something else bothered the big man. That was fine. AJ would pry the information out of Trent at home. The last couple of weeks had been tough, but he'd thought Trent handled the negative reactions pretty well. Something had happened today to shake up their running back.

Trent finished dressing in silence, with Brock hovering. The need to touch was visibly eating at Brock. AJ could barely stand the uncertainty on the man's face. He wanted to soothe both of them, but this wasn't the place.

"Come on," AJ urged, opening the door to the long corridor. Brock ushered Trent out.

He followed Brock and Trent out of the stadium to the parking lot. Only three cars filled the spaces, including theirs. AJ breathed a sigh of relief when it appeared there wouldn't be a confrontation with strangers. They needed to sit down and figure out a better way to deal with George's bullying. He may have promised he wouldn't do anything, but that didn't mean he couldn't call in a favor or two. AJ was one step away from doing just that himself.

The drive home was quiet. The last couple of years they'd lived off campus in the duplex. AJ smiled as he remembered their first days as roommates. The sexual tension had simmered between them for weeks. AJ was pretty sure he and Brock had been hard all the time before Trent tackled both him and Brock to the floor, kissing them soundly. The passion between the three of them exploded like a powder keg. For three days straight they screwed each other's

brains out, occasionally eating when they didn't sleep from exhaustion. It took much longer for them to sort out the bumpy road of their growing relationship. He glanced in the rearview mirror to see Brock leaning his head on Trent's shoulder. The result was worth weathering every dip and curve.

AJ couldn't pinpoint any one defining moment where he realized he'd fallen in love with them. He wasn't sure when their connection moved from friends with benefits to one of great affection. It wasn't something he dwelled on. The how or the when didn't matter to him. What did count was the here and now.

He parked the car in the driveway. Unusually for him, Trent got out without a word. Throwing AJ a worried glance, Brock followed. He made sure the car was locked up before he trailed after his two lovers, watching Trent carefully. Closing the front door behind them, AJ leaned back against the cool wood. Trent walked two steps into the living room before Brock pulled the big man into his arms. AJ studied their profiles, Brock's anxious expression, and Trent's pinched one.

"Shit, Trent, I worried you were hurt." Brock's fingers laced at the nape of Trent's thick neck, forcing the running back to meet his gaze.

Trent's arms hung limply at his sides, his face showing a wide range of emotions before an expression of naked anguish dominated.

"Brock," the big man whispered. "I'm fine, but if something was to happen to you or AJ..."

Brock looked at Trent with an aggravated expression. His thumbs caressed Trent's cheekbones. AJ watched as Brock held that blue gaze until Trent pulled Brock closer. He palmed the back of Brock's head, running a hand through the short bristle.

"I miss your hair."

"It'll grow back." Brock made a low, sexy noise. "God, I need you to kiss me."

AJ watched as they stared at each other, so much being said with their eyes, making words unnecessary. Seeing Trent drink in Brock's features, as if it had been too long since he'd seen Brock, made AJ want to join them. He held still against the door for now, waiting to see what happened.

AJ adjusted his aching erection, his gaze following Trent's plump lips as they brushed teasingly over Brock's, causing their lover to continue to make more delectable noises. When Trent finally pushed their mouths together, Brock pressed tightly against the running back. In no time, the kiss turned heated and ravenous.

Being a voyeur was something AJ acknowledged about himself as a teenager. There were times he loved watching just as much as, if not more than, participating. His lovers knew this and would sometimes put on a show for him as he directed. It wasn't something they did all of the time, but it threw a little extra spice into their relationship.

As it was, AJ grew harder as he watched his lovers kiss. Brock opened his eyes and turned his head to pin AJ with a molten-chocolate stare. Trent caught Brock's chin and brought his lips to where Trent easily drew him back into the kiss. The image they made together caused AJ's pulse to pound in his veins. The glimpses of tongues moving and the harsh breathing was just as arousing as the sight of Brock stripping Trent without breaking contact. He knew from experience how drugging Brock's kisses were.

Brock ran his hands lightly over Trent's firm body, first tweaking then soothing sensitive nipples, trailing the tips of his fingers through Trent's trimmed pubic hair. Trent fumbled with Brock's pants, not as coordinated as their lover in his attempt to unbuckle the sturdy belt so he could reach the treasure trapped underneath.

The shrill sound of a cell phone ringing broke the seductive atmosphere. Trent and Brock halted, trying to catch their breath. AJ knew who that particular ringtone belonged to—Trent's father, William Harte. The big man growled before bending to search the pants pockets at his feet.

He didn't look at either Brock or AJ as he answered, "Hello." Pause. "No, I didn't forget... No, you said six o'clock." Trent glanced at his watch. "That's only forty-five minutes from now. I—fine—no, sir."

AJ waited for Trent to tell them what his father wanted after he hung up. Instead Trent hitched up his underwear.

AJ pushed off the door. "What did he want?" he asked.

"The daughter of one of the stepmom's friends relayed campus gossip. She asked Dad about it." Trent gathered up his clothes off the floor, a scowl marring his forehead.

Trent's father was a cold bastard. William barely tolerated his son. From what AJ surmised, the man didn't care what Trent did as long as he was the best and kept his nose clean. Rumors of a scandalous ménage à trois affair definitely wouldn't meet William's strict criteria for his only son. In addition, AJ recently read about William Harte contemplating running for mayor in the next election. He could imagine what the old man wanted to "talk" about.

"I'm supposed to meet him for dinner at the Nines in forty-five minutes," Trent added, his fist gripping the cell phone until his knuckles turned white.

"Then let's get to it. We don't have much time." Brock headed toward the bedroom.

"Alone." Trent's voice was loud and slightly high-pitched in his vehemence. The single word stopped Brock in his tracks. "I was instructed to meet my father for dinner—alone."

Brock spun on his heel, anger sparking in his brown eyes. "If you think we're going to let you go talk to that—that—that man by yourself, you've got another..."

"Alone, Brock. I'm going by myself. It's not up for discussion." Trent stormed by Brock. AJ noticed Trent's barely hidden flinch at Brock's wounded look. Neither one of them moved until the bedroom door closed behind their lover.

“Something’s wrong,” Brock commented softly as he stared at the barrier.

“I know.” AJ pulled Brock against his side, running a comforting hand down Brock’s lean back as they gazed at the bedroom door.

Brock’s body issues made him insecure at times. AJ didn’t think Brock believed him when he confessed to loving Brock’s yielding, more natural body. He especially loved the extra softness right above Brock’s belt. He wondered sometimes if stroking Brock’s stomach was a kind of fetish or kink they didn’t have a name for. Simply stroking his lover’s waistline, feeling the slight swell under his hand, like now, aroused him.

Brock threw an arm around AJ’s right shoulder, resting his cheek at the crook to the left of AJ’s neck. Lost in thought, AJ’s eyes were trained on the closed door.

“What are we going to do about it?” Brock asked. “It feels like he’s shutting us out. I sensed it in the locker room. You know what happens when he visits his father. All of Trent’s happiness is leached out of him. When he returns, it takes him days to bounce back from an afternoon at home. I don’t know what that man does to shatter Trent’s confidence. It makes me glad mine died when I was young. For someone to have that much control over me and then to abuse it—I’d never go home.”

AJ ran a comforting hand down Brock’s back. Growing up in the foster system gave the man an unhealthy view of families. In the time AJ had known him, Brock had shunned any kind of family connection until he met Trent’s mother, Trisha Harte. While Brock usually dodged the coddling of his friends’ mothers, Trisha had a way about her that drew Brock in. The man seemed simultaneously confused and awed by her. When Brock began to dote on the woman, AJ knew Brock to be well and truly caught.

The bedroom door swung open and Trent strode into the living room wearing his best suit and tie, the one that matched his blue eyes. Damn the man was fine. Brock’s arm tightened around AJ as Trent walked by without glancing at them.

Wallet, keys, and cell phone; Trent pocketed them all. Pausing at the front entryway, hand grasping the knob, he stared fixedly at the door. “You know if anything were to happen to the two of you... if I was responsible, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

AJ waited for more, a clue as to what had upset the man, but all he got was a shake of the head and a slammed door.

“I don’t understand.” Brock sounded close to tears even though his eyes were dry. “What was that supposed to mean?”

AJ kissed Brock on the neck, the pulse under his lips thumped fast. He pulled out of the embrace and strode to the bedroom they shared. He glanced back. Brock followed, hands jammed into his pants’ pockets.

“It sounds to me as if he’s worried something will happen to one or both of us.” AJ opened the sliding closet doors and searched the farthest back corner.

“That makes no sense. What would hurt us?”

As AJ tossed a suit still encased in the dry cleaners’ plastic on the bed, he noticed Brock watching him closely. “Actually, it makes perfect sense.” He continued to dig into the closet, retrieving another similarly wrapped suit. “There’s twisted rumors on campus. Trent suspects I didn’t accidentally injure myself.” Brock snorted. “Imagine what people have said to him when we aren’t around?”

Brock’s eyes narrowed, his lips pressed into a hard line. “You think someone threatened him?” Brock grabbed the second suit from AJ.

“Us. I think someone threatened us.”

“So we go to the police, get restraining orders, move, whatever works.”

“Brock,” AJ faced his brown-eyed lover. His mind spun in so many dark directions he felt as if he were floating, his motions sluggish. Marshaling his thoughts into a coherent order he said, “Imagine a photographer sneaking a picture of us without any of us noticing. What would it do to us? Do you think a sports network would keep you as an intern or hire you full time after your

face is plastered all over the tabloids? *Headline: NFL Draft Pick Caught in Gay Ménage à Trois*. Do you think an employer will hire you after that? How hard do you think it'll be for me to get a job after graduation? I've got a year and a half left but with the spotlight of an NFL player, it could still be muddying the waters then."

"I could do something else," Brock immediately replied. AJ wondered if his lover even thought about what he offered before he said it.

"Being a sports writer is your dream job. I know it. Trent knows it. Do you think he won't blame himself if you miss out? If he was a regular Joe graduating with a BA in business, no one would care. But no, he's the best college running back, and his life will be in the spotlight. He'll feel responsible if he thinks being associated with him ruined our lives."

Brock unwrapped the charcoal-gray suit, his expression pensive. "Add into the mix that cold bastard and his wish to run for mayoral office. Son of a bitch! As if Trent didn't already have enough on his plate."

Brock stripped quickly and headed for the bathroom. AJ followed, taking in all of the smooth skin, Brock's ass flexing with each step. They didn't have time to take individual showers if they were going to drop in before Trent's father did any permanent damage. At any other time, AJ would've had Brock plastered against the tiled wall, working out the stress of the day. Today, they both felt a sense of urgency that ushered them through a quick shave and shower.

"You don't think he's considering leaving us, do you?" Brock asked, his voice barely above a whisper. He pulled on a pair of silk boxers.

"If he thinks we're better off, believes the spotlight will crush our dreams, or someone has threatened to harm us in any way? Then yes, he's giving it serious thought."

Brock angrily slipped his arms into the sleeve of a dress shirt. "I don't understand why."

AJ buckled the belt about the waistband of his dark slacks. “He loves us. He’s always tried to safeguard us. If he doubts his ability to shield us, he’ll sacrifice his own happiness to protect us.”

Brock went so pale AJ thought the man would pass out. “How do we keep him from doing something like that? AJ, I don’t want to lose him. I don’t care what people say or do.” Brock’s hands shook as he tried to slip the black leather belt through the waistband loops.

“We find him. Make sure he understands we won’t walk away from him, no matter how hard life becomes. And we call for help.” AJ scrolled through the contact list on his cell phone. Locating the number he searched for, he hit talk, and pressed the phone between his ear and shoulder to help Brock with his belt.

“Hello?” said a warm, throaty voice.

“Mrs. Harte, this is AJ Barnes...”

“AJ! How are you doing, son? Is Trent okay? I’m assuming that since you are calling me there is something wrong.”

“No, ma’am, he’s not physically injured, but there is a problem I need your help with.” AJ hoped Trent wouldn’t be too angry with him for what he was about to do. “Trent is meeting his father for dinner right now regarding his relationship with Brock and me.”

CHAPTER FOUR

~Trent~

Trent stood at the restaurant bar of the Urban Farmer inside of the Nines resort and waited for his father. He sipped a Coke with a half-dozen maraschino cherries sitting at the bottom of the glass. The coach would strangle Trent if he knew how many empty calories he'd consumed. It was still better than having a shot of tequila. Though, the alcohol began to sound better and better as the minutes slowly ticked by.

Trent wasn't sure what he'd give to go back and undo the day George caught them in the backyard. Not that he liked the secrecy. Truly, they weren't all that inconspicuous. A few close friends were aware of the intimacy between the three of them. Most people regarded Brock, AJ, and Trent as best friends and roommates.

None of them were fond of public displays. Trent didn't feel a need to stamp himself all over his lovers. He was secure in their affection and loyalty. If any one of them were to be poached, it would be Brock. Still, Trent had never worried because the man was oblivious. Brock didn't consider himself desirable. And most of the time, AJ exuded a stay the hell away attitude and only the boldest dared approach. When they did, AJ simply ignored them.

Since George started his crusade to ruin him, people had been looking at Trent with open scorn. There were times he was unable to ignore the derisive comments. Growing up with his father's overbearing personality and contemptuous words, he was used to acidic scrutiny. He'd also seen a few people regard his roommates with speculation, and he hated it. If people knew for sure, Trent didn't know how he'd react. He wasn't a violent man, but the first time someone treated one of his lovers the way he'd been treated, he couldn't guarantee he'd have the willpower to walk away.

At times, it had been difficult being an openly gay football player. The added pressure from the speculation of his involvement in a relationship with

multiple partners was slowly wearing him down. Strangers thought they had the right to comment on his lifestyle and attempted to reduce his relationship to something dirty. He didn't want Brock or AJ to be put under that type of stress. They shouldn't have to be subjected to the negative backlash currently drowning him.

"As hard as you're scowling at your drink, someone would believe it's offended you in some way."

Trent glanced up as a well-dressed forty-something gentleman sat on the barstool next to him.

"I'll have what he's having," the man told the bartender before he held out his hand. "If I'm not mistaken, you're Trent Harte, the running back for the Ducks. The newspapers say you are incredibly quick and run with power. You also have a nasty spin move that keeps the other teams guessing."

Trent's neck grew warm as a blush crept up into his cheeks at the stranger's praise. He gripped the cool, dry palm in a friendly handshake, clearing his throat. "That's what they say. I just play ball," Trent replied. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name." The gentleman seemed vaguely familiar but Trent couldn't recall where he'd seen him before.

"My friends call me Mack." Carefully combed dark hair was turning silver at the temples. Large sky-blue eyes were framed by thick lashes that crinkled attractively at the corners, giving the impression Mack laughed often. A straight, Roman nose dominated over full, smiling lips; handsome enough Trent doubted Mack ever hurt for a date.

"I hear your chances at being picked up by an NFL team are excellent. There's the scowl again. Are you rethinking your career choice?"

Trent sipped his Coke, stalling. He wasn't sure how he wanted to answer the question. His gut said honesty. Did he protect his lovers with a lie? Dishonor his relationship and what he felt for AJ and Brock with a half-truth which was essentially—a lie? Or respect them by telling the truth?

"I love football and I want to play for as long as I can."

Mack leaned an elbow on the bar, giving Trent his full attention. “I sense a but coming.”

Trent favored the man with a slight grin. Something about Mack was—different. Open, friendly, engaging. He made Trent feel as if they had known each other for a long time, which was crazy once he thought about it. For all he knew, Mack was a reporter trying to get a scoop on the “depraved” football player. Honestly, he needed to talk to someone, an unbiased person who wasn’t connected to him in any way. His thoughts had been swirling in vicious circles for hours now, and Trent desperately needed a sounding board.

Before he put any more thought into what he was about to do, he said, “I’m not sure I like the spotlight playing in the NFL would shine on my personal life.”

Mack laughed, his mouth stretching wide and eyes crinkling at the corners to make the man look younger than Trent had originally estimated. “Most players like the attention.”

“I didn’t mind it when it focused on my performance as a player. My personal life is mine, though, and I don’t want reporters digging around in it.”

Trent took another sip of his drink. His face was hot from shock and embarrassment. He couldn’t believe he’d revealed so much to a perfect stranger.

Mack was silent for a moment, nursing his own Coke. “I’d think being an openly gay player would desensitize you to such examination. You’d be the first acknowledged gay man to play in the NFL. You’re bound to get additional scrutiny simply for that—but I don’t think that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Not really,” Trent confirmed. “I’ve played four years of college ball just as I am. It took some of my teammates a year before they realized I wasn’t interested and wouldn’t molest them in the shower. I know I’ll have to go through a transition period again with whichever team picks me from the draft. Some of the comments this fall have been discouraging, but I do have a degree

and if things don't turn out as I had hoped, I can always change my career path. I love to play ball, Mack, but I don't have to play professionally."

"That sounds like you have a game plan." Mack set an empty glass on the bar and Trent grinned at the turn of phrase. "Then why are you concerned about the press?"

Trent gulped his Coke, almost choking on a cherry. He didn't think he could answer the question. Mack's brows made a hard V over the bridge of his nose when it became evident Trent refused to comment.

"Oh, I see." Mack ordered a refill.

Curiosity got the better of Trent. "You see what?"

Mack slipped a twenty to the bartender and waited for the man to leave before he answered. "The rumors?"

Startled, Trent stood up, ready to end the conversation before it could go too far in that direction.

Mack placed a staying hand on Trent's forearm. "I sincerely apologize. I didn't mean to spook you."

Perched again on the edge of the stool, Trent nodded, not sure if he wanted to wait around to hear what Mack had to say. He liked the gentleman and didn't want to be disappointed if the guy turned out to be narrow-minded. Glancing at his watch, Trent noted his father was late.

"Hypothetically..." Mack started, drawing Trent's gaze back to him.

"Hypothetically?"

"If the situation in the rumor existed, couldn't it be easily remedied?"

A part of him urged him to leave. A part of him wanted to see where the conversation went, and maybe a small part dared Mack to say something derogatory. "If the incident was singular," Trent replied, "then yes, because it wouldn't happen again. People would chalk it up to college fun, experimentation, or my personal favorite—all gay men are sluts and can't commit to a monogamous relationship."

Mack chuckled against the rim of his glass. The man wasn't snide or condescending as Trent had feared he'd be. Slowly, Trent began to relax again.

"Hypothetically, if the situation was more—permanent and the press able to come by proof..." Mack trailed off, scowling as if he just now understood the scope of such a situation.

"Then the livelihood of all parties involved would be compromised. The relationship is far out of the realm of ordinary; few would understand and even fewer would accept. Someone in that situation, if they were seriously involved, would have to consider all of the options."

Mack nodded in agreement. "Those options would be to distance themselves from the relationship, give up their dream career, or say 'to hell with it' and weather the storm. None of the choices are easy. The real question is what this person would be willing to do to keep the people they love in their life."

"No, Mack, the question is how to keep their loved ones safe because even if—hypothetically—this person drops their dreams, would their family be safe if the wrong people suspected and retaliated?"

"So, you're saying there are also threats of harm to consider?"

Trent didn't reply, only stared into his empty glass. He wasn't shocked anymore he was discussing his personal life with someone he didn't know.

Mack waved the bartender over, indicating Trent needed a refill. "Are you sure you don't want something stronger?" Mack offered. Trent politely declined. "It seems these partners will have much to consider together." Trent glanced at Mack inquiringly. "If they are in a relationship, then all involved are responsible for the outcome. One can't decide for the rest. Trust them to know their own minds. I wouldn't imagine these men are complete idiots. Only a foolish person would walk away without consulting them—hypothetically."

Trent stared thoughtfully into his glass, reluctantly admitting to himself Mack had a point. Would Brock and AJ understand he only wanted the best

for them? He'd hidden the difficulties he'd had, neither had he been upfront about the derisive comments, and now the threats.

"There you are!"

Trent turned at the sound of the husky feminine voice. He came face to face with a lithe and beautiful African-American woman. Her hair was cut close to the scalp; the ends of the dainty curls dyed caramel. With her sparkling eyes, full smile, and a formfitting red dress, she was stunning.

Mack leaned down, the woman turning for the kiss to be placed on her upturned cheek. The smoothness of their actions told Trent this was something that happened regularly. "No smudging the lipstick, love," she said when Mack frowned. "You know how long it took me to get it right."

"I told you a half an hour ago you were already perfect," Mack murmured. Trent wondered if he should move away and give them privacy. The intimacy of their joined gazes caused him to feel like an intruder.

"Keep playing your cards right and you might get a reward for comments like that."

Trent could tell by the way she regarded Mack, the man was already there. He'd seen the same expression on both AJ's and Brock's face more than once.

"Alissa, meet my new friend, Trent Harte." Mack slipped a possessive arm around her waist.

Trent choked back a laugh. Like he would steal Mack's girl. He took Alissa's hand between his palms. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Maybe we should come here more often if all the men are this courteous," Alissa replied with a mischievous sideways glance at Mack.

Mack growled, a playful grin twisting his lips as he gently pulled Alissa's hand from Trent's grasp. "As long as they are already spoken for, like Trent is, then I don't see the harm." Alissa chuckled.

"Trent, would you like to join us for dinner?" Alissa asked as she pushed out of Mack's arms.

“Thank you for the invitation, but I’m waiting for my father,” Trent glanced at his watch again. “He’s spectacularly late.”

“If he had been on time, I wouldn’t have been able to chat with you,” Mack pointed out. “Here, take my card. I’d like to get together again—and good luck!”

Trent raised a hand in farewell, slipping the business card into his pocket. He was surprised at how much he’d enjoyed the conversation. It didn’t turn out as he had anticipated, which was a good thing. He’d consider Mack’s invitation to get together again. God knew he could use a friend.

His father arrived fifteen minutes later, no apology or explanation given. Trent didn’t relish spending time with the man. Their interactions were always stiff and formal. He was aware he’d never please his dad—it had been proven time and time again. But the optimist in Trent continued to try.

When Trent started college, he wasn’t surprised when his mother divorced his father. She admitted the only reason she stayed had been for Trent’s benefit. She didn’t want her son to have to experience the dark side of divorce while still living at home. The only one who seemed to be shocked by the development had been his dad. Trent knew his father blamed him for his mother leaving. The uneasy father-son relationship went from cool to frigid.

His father’s cold, gray gaze scanned the room until it came to rest at the bar where Trent sat. Physically, the man was an older version of himself. Trent tried to find something of his own character in his dad and came up empty-handed. The outer shell seemed to be the only thing they had in common, which in and of itself was a blessing in disguise.

Appearing untouchable in his expensive charcoal three-piece suit, his dad strode to his favorite table. Trent knew his father often dined at the Nines because the man enjoyed the exposure and prestige of the five-star resort. Trent thought it was a little pretentious to claim the table without waiting for the staff.

He slid off the stool and grabbed his cherry Coke. William hadn't done or said anything, but Trent knew from experience he was supposed to follow. The only blessing about the evening would be the fact they were in public, which meant his father would curb his behavior because appearances mattered to him. Everything about the man circled around other people's perceptions, especially now that he was considering running for mayor.

A sharply dressed waiter in black and white arrived at the table shortly before Trent. The server poured water for his dad as Trent slid into the curving booth opposite his father.

"Would you like an appetizer, Mr. Harte, or are the two of you ready to order?"

"Bring me an amaretto, Tommy. My son will not be staying for dinner. I have other guests who will be arriving in a half an hour."

"As you say, sir." The server backed away.

Trent was tremendously happy he wouldn't be expected to stay and spend the evening being polite.

"Is there any substance to the rumors surrounding you?" William's palms rested on the table, his gray eyes steadily regarded Trent.

The question, more of a demand, triggered Trent's rebellious streak. He sat back, hands folded on the table in front of him. "What rumors are you talking about?"

Trent knew from experience he wouldn't like what his father had to say when the man leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Don't fuck around with me, boy," William hissed so vehemently spittle hit Trent. "You know very well what I'm talking about. I don't give a damn if you sleep with men or women. Pick one and only one. I am running for mayor in two years. I do not need to battle the press on your sexual deviancy. That you are queer will put the liberals in my pocket but this... this... experimentation will stop right now. I will not have you tainting my good name with these filthy activities..."

He'd known—Trent made himself breathe through the burn in his lungs—he'd known his father didn't love him, much less like him, but he'd never understood why. He'd worked hard for years in attempting to gain the man's approval only to continually fail. He didn't think he'd been a terrible son. But there were personal lines Trent refused to cross to please someone.

A year into the relationship with Brock and AJ, he'd finally come to the conclusion that he would never be able to please his father. The understanding hadn't helped, hadn't made him stop hoping. Even now, he wished he didn't care what his father thought. Just once he would like the man to look at him with a little pride. Trent held damn good grades, attended college on a football scholarship, and now it appeared he would be in line to be a first-round draft pick for a promising career in the NFL. How many people could accomplish that?

“...if you do not do what I said, I'll personally make sure your lovers—boyfriends—won't work in this city.”

Trent's blue gaze snapped up to see his father's self-satisfied expression.

“Are you even fucking listening to me?” His father hissed, his cheeks a splotchy red with indignant anger.

No, he hadn't been.

His father huffed a laugh. “Do I have your attention now, boy? I will make it to where no one will dare to be your lover, much less associate with you if you don't stop this depraved behavior. I'll start with your roommates.”

“You can't do that. You don't have that kind of pull,” Trent snapped angrily.

“What do you think I have been doing with my time since you convinced your mother to leave me? I've made connections, friends, people who will listen to what I say, people who will want to be on my good side when I am mayor. If I were to say something, what do you think will happen?”

CHAPTER FIVE

~Brock~

Brock felt so angry he practically vibrated. His mind supplied a slideshow of ugly scenarios of what William Harte could say to Trent. He'd barely heard what AJ said to Trisha on the phone earlier. He'd been getting into his suit and dreaming up ways of knocking Trent's father on his ass. Not that it would help, but he would feel better.

AJ was so calm on the surface. Anyone unfamiliar with his stoic lover wouldn't recognize something was wrong. Brock knew better. AJ dressed like he was suiting up to go into battle. Hands steady, voice hard, and the steely cast of his eyes that could cower the biggest men on campus. Brock found it so fucking hot that in any other situation, he would've jumped AJ and fucked him with complete abandon. How lucky was he to find not just one but two men to love? He was crazy in love and wouldn't change what they had for the world.

Brock watched as AJ buttoned up his black silk dress shirt with nimble fingers, his broad shoulders pulling the fabric snug. The former Marine's gray eyes were stony as he added silver cuff links. Brock had to admit the military cut looked better on their Marine's sandy-brown hair than on him. AJ fumbled with the blue silk tie and Brock gently tugged it out of his lover's hands. Draping the cloth around the upturned collar, Brock met AJ's hard gaze before glancing at the slightly parted lips below. The tip of a pink tongue darted out, touching the top lip in invitation.

Brock cleared his throat. "So what's the plan?" He noted the low, husky quality of his voice as he mentally undressed his lover, even as he worked to knot the tie. When he glanced up, AJ's eyes flared as if he could sense Brock undressing him in his imagination. The man probably could. He'd never been very good at hiding his emotions or what he was thinking from his lovers; they beat him at poker every time.

“We’re going in to claim our lover. Make sure he understands we aren’t going anywhere.”

Tie securely in place, Brock flipped the collar down. He smoothed his hands along AJ’s torso to rest them on the man’s hips. “And if he doesn’t understand?”

The harshness bled out of AJ’s expression for a moment. “Then we tie him to the bed until he does.”

Brock chuckled. “I like that plan, but I’m not feeding him like a baby.”

With a palm on the nape of Brock’s neck, AJ pulled him down into an all too brief kiss that promised wicked things to come. “Let’s go get him.” AJ donned his suit jacket, tugging the sleeves into place.

Brock scowled as he locked the front door behind him and followed AJ to the car. “If his father’s hurt him...” Brock didn’t finish the statement, but neither did AJ respond. His eyes though, they promised retribution.

The twenty-minute drive to the Nines was made in silence. Brock kept thinking about all of the times Trent had visited his father and come home quiet and withdrawn, his self-confidence shattered. Trent would work doubly hard in his classes, and at practice, until he dropped from sheer exhaustion. Brock hated it. He worried one day William would push Trent too far and his lover would end up in the hospital from trying to please the cold-hearted bastard.

The car was barely placed in park when Brock unbuckled the seatbelt and hopped out. Halfway to the front doors, AJ snagged his elbow.

“Slow down, wild man,” AJ soothed. “We’ll do this with some dignity. Running in there like a rejected lover and making a scene isn’t going to do anyone any good. We’re here to support Trent, show a united front.”

Brock understood, but he was angry and worried. People judged them and the type of relationship they chose, insisting they live their lives by a certain traditional standard. How was it anyone’s concern what they did behind closed doors? Well, fuck ’em all. His personal life wasn’t anyone’s damn business.

“I’d rather get to the part where we twist Mr. Harte’s arm into seeing things our way and leaving Trent alone,” Brock replied. He could help with the twisting.

AJ snorted a laugh. “You want to go Godfather on him? Strangely, I think Harte would understand that tactic.”

As soon as Brock stepped through the heavy, dark doors of the restaurant, his gaze searched the room until he spotted the old bastard. What Brock saw told him everything he needed to know. Trent sat glaring at his father, hands fisted on the table before him.

Not thinking about it, Brock grasped AJ’s hand and dragged the former Marine behind him into the posh restaurant. Neither Harte registered their approach until Brock halted next to Trent, AJ brushing Brock’s shoulder when he stopped.

Trent glanced up, a surprised expression crossing his face before it was replaced by one of intense relief. That was all the invitation Brock needed. He’d planned to let Trent know they were there and would be close-by, but his lover’s obvious relief blew that plan right out of the window. He refused to stay at a discreet distance when Trent needed them.

“Scoot over,” Brock urged. “Sorry we’re late. One bathroom between the three of us slows things down. Our next place will have to have two full baths. Definitely extra fixtures and a larger water heater because AJ always uses all the hot water. Besides, waiting on the two of you is getting old.”

Trent obediently slid down the curved booth. Brock knew he was babbling but it was that or verbally assault Mr. Harte for upsetting Trent. AJ had said dignified. This was as dignified as it would get.

AJ slid in next to Brock, his body loose as his gaze raked over Trent’s father with disdain. AJ hadn’t met the man yet, and Brock figured the former Marine was finally able to put a face to all the stories Trent had told them.

“This is the perfect time for you to take care of that issue we were discussing.” Mr. Harte barely disguised a grimace behind a strained smile as

he glanced at AJ and Brock's clasped hands. When Brock attempted to let go of AJ's palm, his fingers were held more firmly.

Trent paled, turning a little green around his mouth and eyes. "This isn't the place..."

"Oh, I beg to differ. This is the perfect place. Being in public deters inappropriate displays of temper. Tell them and then send them away. If they won't leave, I can have security step in to handle them."

AJ growled low. Brock knew he was the only one to hear the tiny warning of danger as everything about AJ suddenly turned deadly. His calm, considerate, passionate lover had just been switched off. Briefly, Brock wondered if he should be worried. AJ's extreme protectiveness fired up his blood. He discreetly adjusted his inappropriate erection and attempted to not grin at the shit-storm that was about to happen.

"I don't think it is wise to pressure Trent to do anything at this time, Mr. Harte," AJ cut in coldly.

William turned his cool, dark gaze on AJ. "Really now? I don't believe I addressed you. I do not care to hear your opinion or appreciate you sitting at my table."

AJ ignored Harte's response. Brock watched as AJ's steely gaze pinned the old bastard to his seat. "If you valued your son at all, you wouldn't back him into a corner."

Harte's jaw flexed, mouth set in a stern, flat line. "He's mine. My son. He does as he is told. He always has and always will. That is his duty to me." The reply was smug, self-assured, as if it were an everyday occurrence for him to refer to his son in the same terms he'd use for a well-trained pet.

Under the table, Brock slid a soothing palm over Trent's thigh, meeting his lover's stormy-blue gaze. "He's not a dog, Mr. Harte," Brock replied in Trent's defense. "He's his own man, and a fine one at that. If you can't treat him with respect, then you don't deserve his loyalty."

The corner of Trent's mouth kicked up, his sapphire eyes softening, saying a hundred things as he focused on Brock.

"I am tired of these games, Trent. If you don't tell them I will," William snapped, his voice rising slightly in volume.

Brock liked to think Harte's discomfort was due to AJ's lethal stare.

"Tell them what, William?" asked a smartly dressed strawberry blonde. She halted at the edge of the table, her gaze swiftly assessing the situation. "Scooch, William." She waved a delicate, manicured hand at Harte.

Hesitating for a second, he gave in and moved down the seat. Short, glossy curls bounced as the woman slid into the booth.

Ecstatic Trisha had come, Brock beamed as she took her seat. He glanced over when he felt Trent's fingers slide through his under the table. He gave a gentle squeeze before turning his attention back to Trisha Harte.

"Trisha, what are you...?"

"Trent, how have you been? I haven't seen you since the barbecue. The game today was grueling. I already sent in a formal complaint to the school. The actions of the referees were deplorable."

"Evening, Mother. It's been a rough day. I can't wait for it to be over."

"Hmm." Trish turned her blue gaze, so much like her son's, on William. Her expression hardened. "I thought we had an agreement, William. You were to quit trying to force Trent to be someone he's not and I would leave you alone. Are you breaking your promise?"

"Now, Trisha, you know that I will be running for the mayor's office in the next election," William started haltingly, as if he was carefully considering each word before he spoke.

Brock was mesmerized; the cold bastard squirmed like a worm on a hook, not quite able to meet Trisha's gaze. AJ tightened his grip on Brock's hand, an infectious grin splitting his face. With rapt attention they watched Trisha work her magic.

“Good for you, William, but that doesn’t answer the question.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to allow this”—Harte pointed a finger at each of them—“embarrassing behavior to continue.”

“He is old enough to make his own decisions. His life is his own,” Trisha smiled at Trent.

“I will not allow his deviant behavior to tarnish my reputation. If he will not call it off, then I will make sure they leave him,” William ended the statement in a harsh whisper.

Trisha’s expression turned stony. “You should be worried about your own actions tarnishing your reputation, or have you forgotten? Is it necessary for me to remind you?”

“Now, Trisha,” William took her hand placatingly, which she immediately pulled away.

Using the thick, linen napkin, she wiped her hand as if William were contagious. “You don’t get to touch me. You lost that privilege a long time ago. This is the only warning you will get, William. Leave Trent alone, or we will be airing all of our dirty laundry in the public eye.”

Harte paled, his skin taking on an ashen color, but he shot a look of cold hatred across the table at Trent.

“I believe that’s our cue,” AJ said, rising from the booth. “I’m sure Mr. Harte has other plans for the evening.”

Brock slid out, pulling on AJ’s hand but the former Marine wouldn’t release him. Fine. He held onto Trent’s palm as he slid out of the booth, tugging the big guy along. At first Trent resisted, causing Brock to glance back at the big man. Warring emotions flickered across Trent’s face, reminding Brock of the silent movie he’d once seen in class, where the expressions were so clear he didn’t need dialogue to understand what the scene. Without realizing what he’d done, Brock had asked Trent to make a decision. None of them put on displays in public for various reasons. With the rumors, sneers, the rough plays on the football field, pressure from his father, and now

accidental pressure from him, Trent had been put on the spot. If the man continued out of the booth with his hands linked to Brock's and Brock's to AJ's, any who were watching—Brock loosened his grip, fingers slowly sliding across Trent's palm. He couldn't put Trent on the spot like that. He wanted to convince the man to stay, not chase him off with silent demands.

"Trent, we'll talk again," William barked.

Sorrowful sapphire eyes glanced at William Harte. Trent's expression changed from sadness to regret. "No, Father, we won't. Please don't contact me again. If you do, I'll have a restraining order brought against you." Trent paused after rising from the booth and held his hand out to his mother, assisting her. "If you think to continue with the blackmail, I'll ask Mother about this 'rumored reputation'. You see, this gay son of yours, who you are going to use to garner votes from the liberal community, may have a thing or two to say about his father if something were to happen to the people he cares about." Trent leaned closer to William, his voice lowered to the point that Brock could barely make out what his lover said. "Some dogs, no matter how well trained, bite the hand that hurts them."

Brock wanted to whoop and scream touchdown! If AJ hadn't been holding his hand he might have too, because he felt that good. Trent finally stood up to his father. People underestimated how hard independence was when strict obedience had been ingrained into a person. Breaking those invisible chains was difficult and complicated. Brock felt only the deepest respect for Trent for braving the storm and drawing the line. The emotional cost couldn't be counted. Trent had always strived to earn his father's respect—his love. But William Harte had the heart of a glacier and yet Trent had continued to try—until today. Brock prayed his lover wouldn't regret his stance later on.

The running back stood to his full height, shoulders straight and proud. He offered Trisha his arm and escorted her to the restaurant entrance, stopping several feet from the gentleman waiting there for her. Leaning down, he presented his cheek for her kiss. She left behind a smudge of pink lipstick.

“Do you know how much I love you? I’m proud to be your mother.” She smiled up at him with a warm, misty gaze.

Trent cleared his throat, his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed several times. “Yes, ma’am, I love you too.”

Trisha turned her attention to Brock and AJ. “I’m impressed. You came here to support my son, and I couldn’t be more pleased in his choice of friends and partners. You can never have too many people to love or be loved by.”

Brock and AJ accepted kisses from her before she said her good-byes and accepted the hand of the waiting gentleman.

After she left, Trent shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor with an uncertain expression. “I’m sorry you had to witness that.”

“I’m not,” AJ replied, touching Trent’s elbow. “Next time we would prefer to come with you, regardless of what that cold bastard wants.”

Trent glanced up, his cheeks taking on an attractive blush. “Yeah? Not that we’ll have any kind of a relationship now. I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Yes, we’ll come with you, regardless of what happens. Whether you choose to attempt to mend your relationship with your father or not, we’ll stand behind either choice,” Brock insisted.

Taking a white handkerchief from his pocket, Brock wiped at the lipstick mark on Trent’s cheek. The stuff was stubborn and Brock’s tongue pressed into his top lip as he concentrated. He thought he was probably scrubbing Trent’s skin off attempting to remove the cosmetic, but the big man held still. Glancing up, he found Trent’s gaze was riveted onto Brock’s mouth.

“Is it gone?” Trent’s voice had dropped an octave, sounding low and throaty. That was Trent’s special bedroom voice. The one that, if he were at home, promised they wouldn’t make it to the bedroom before Trent pounced.

Brock blinked. “W-what?”

“Mom’s lipstick... from my cheek... did you get it all?” Brock frowned. Trent’s lips were glossy—wet—what did he say? “You stopped wiping but you’re staring... not saying anything, so I thought I’d ask.”

“Ask what?” What were they talking about? Brock wasn’t sure anymore. He did know he was thankful for tight briefs and pleated pants; otherwise everyone in the restaurant would see, in great detail, how much he needed to be home—in bed.

A warm palm slid into his. Glancing down, he realized it was Trent’s. His heart kicked up a beat at the sight of a large hand engulfing his. Not that he had small hands, he just forgot sometimes how much larger Trent was compared to him and AJ. The back of his lover’s hand was slightly darker, the knuckles deeper, thicker.

Then it really hit him.

Trent was holding his hand in public. He never thought it was a big thing, simple physical contact. They touched each other all the time both in private and public. They horsed around, slapped each other on the back, gave slugs to the shoulder or thigh. They were open with their affection behind closed doors, and it didn’t matter because that kind of physical contact wasn’t for public viewing.

So he shouldn’t feel like—Trent holding his hand now—it shouldn’t be important. He knew where he stood with his lovers, didn’t he? But his itchy eyes, the frog in his throat, and the rock sitting on his chest told him he’d been wrong. This was more than simply significant. It was essential to him, even if it wasn’t to Trent. As AJ had claimed him earlier, Trent claimed him now.

Brock glanced over to AJ to see his reaction and noticed Trent held AJ’s hand as well. Brock blinked several times. The former Marine wasn’t shrugging in indifference at the modest contact either. His jaw was firm and his knuckles strained as if he were holding onto Trent tightly.

“Excuse me.”

“Hi, Alissa.” Trent flashed a genuine smile. “Please meet my roommates, Brock and AJ.”

A beautiful African-American woman in a stunning red dress turned large, dark eyes on AJ and Brock. She glanced at the clasped hands, and the corner of her mouth quirked up in a cute half grin. “Mack and I noticed you didn’t really have dinner. Come and eat with us, we would enjoy the company.”

“We’d love to,” Trent replied. “I’m starving. I haven’t had anything to eat since breakfast.” AJ frowned. “We can talk later after we go home.”

Brock watched, relieved as the tension drained out of AJ. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Trent released their hands and bumped AJ’s shoulder. “I’m counting on it.” For a brief moment, Brock absorbed the look of tempered desire Trent gave them before leading the way to the table where Alissa and a gentleman with silver temples waited.

He didn’t know if Trent needed the time to unwind, but Brock could be patient. Before the three of them had moved in together, he’d waited three months to approach Trent and introduced himself to the running back for the first time. He could endure a couple of hours before he ushered his lovers home for some much needed TLC.

CHAPTER SIX

~AJ~

AJ was going to walk out of the restaurant with blue balls because Brock was making them suffer. The man was so full of sexual energy, AJ expected his lover to vibrate right out of his skin before Alissa invited them to dinner.

He knew there was table conversation, intelligent table conversation. For the life of him, he couldn't have repeated a word he said. He wasn't quite sure he spoke. Maybe he nodded or gave a word here or there, he honestly didn't know. He could barely smile at their hosts. He was sure they were nice, but his focus wasn't on conversation or topics or whatever.

No, Brock and Trent claimed his full attention. The sexual tension only climbed higher the moment they sat down. Brock sent lingering, heated gazes across the table at them and still held a discussion that had Alissa laughing and Mack replying enthusiastically. The brush over his fingers when he passed the salt to Brock sent electric tingles through the palm of his hand to his balls.

For a moment he thought he was the only one enthralled, but glancing at Trent, the running back was practically a pile of putty. AJ didn't know where this sexual mastery came from, not that Brock was ever reserved when it came to making love. Passionate, aggressive, and vocal, they always had plenty of foreplay before they were screaming each other's names.

No, this new mood, with Brock exuding sex appeal like a Curos dancer from ancient Crete whose exotic dances were said to drive viewers into a frenzy of sexual need—it was different. He and Trent were being stalked like prey. It was disconcerting at first, because AJ was the one who usually did the pursuing.

This sudden change in his lover was titillating and slightly infuriating. If Brock excused himself to go to the restroom, AJ wouldn't care where they were. He would follow and fuck Brock in one of the stalls while Trent stood

guard. Then switch places with Trent. Their sexy man would come back to the dinner table well loved-on with extra incentive to go home.

Brock didn't leave the table.

As it was, he and Trent were stuck with discreetly adjusting their hard cocks while playing nice. Really, it was Trent's fault. They should've picked up drive-thru on the way home. But even as he thought it, he knew Trent needed the downtime. Mr. Harte laughed too loud in his corner table with his prestigious guests. Thanks to Brock, Trent only had eyes and ears for what happened at their table. The running back paid no attention to the stone cold bastard who ignored them as he left with his guests. AJ noticed. Strangely, Mack noticed, the man frowned deeply at Trent's father. But the important part was that Trent did not.

"Dessert, anyone?" the waiter offered while taking empty plates away.

"No!" AJ shared a look with Trent, cringing slightly at the vehemence behind their simultaneous answers. Luckily their hosts didn't take offense. Alissa hid a smile behind the back of her hand, glossy lips pressed together in suppressed humor.

Mack simply grinned outright. "I suppose it is late..." the older man hedged.

AJ checked out of the conversation again. Not his fault really. Under the table, his left calf was being stroked by Brock's foot. As if on cue, his right ankle was caressed by a wingtip belonging to Trent. The last time he played footsy in a public place—in a semipublic—in a—well, never. He'd never wrangled feet under a table with anyone.

He hadn't seen the point until now. The sly smiles both Trent and Brock gave him, the forbidden touches under the table. Yes, they were forbidden touches, more erotic than if one of his lovers had grabbed his cock in front of everyone in the restaurant. Secret touches full of promises, and holy crap, he didn't know that someone rubbing his calf would be such a huge turn-on. If he hadn't already been fully aroused from the dinner foreplay, the sneaky

fondling of his legs would've done him in. Right then he was happy he had a suit jacket to button and cover the evidence of his arousal.

Quickly, short of being rude, Trent thanked a bemused Mack and Alissa for a delightful dinner, promising to get together again. AJ ushered his lovers out of the restaurant. He and Trent watched Brock stride confidently through the parking garage. Trent had taken a cab so that was one less hassle, because honestly, AJ seriously considered the possibility of having sex in the car. Unfortunately, on a Friday night, the parking garage had too much traffic, so he forced himself to endure for another twenty minutes.

It was the longest twenty minutes of his life.

Brock. AJ glanced into the rearview mirror to glimpse the man in question staring back with a wicked smile. Brock's gaze silently promised every single desire would be met and exceeded.

AJ was turned on three ways to Sunday, and when he finally pulled into the driveway and the car was shifted into park, Brock slid from the back, his body moving sensuously. The slamming of Trent's car door jolted AJ into action. The running back prowled down the sidewalk, his wingtips clipping on the hard cement.

Brock used his keys to unlock the door, throwing a heated glance over his shoulder before he entered the house. AJ jogged to the low porch, ignoring the two steps as he leaped up immediately behind Trent as they filed into the house.

AJ shut and locked the door then, for the second time that day, he watched his two lovers as he leaned against the sturdy wood. Instead of an air of desperation, it was heavy with desire and suppressed need. Brock removed his suit jacket and laid it over the arm of the armchair, carefully removing his cufflinks. Trent watched hungrily, like a man starved and salivating because he knew the meal would soon come.

"You know," Brock started, "There isn't anything you can't share with us."

AJ pushed off the door and shed his own dinner jacket. "Brock and I had this crazy thought that you were thinking about leaving us."

Trent's shoulders sagged.

Brock paused in unbuttoning his own dress shirt. "Why... why would you consider that?"

The running back raked his fingers through his dark hair, causing it to stand up. "There have been things said that concerned me. The thought of the two of you in danger because of me..."

"Then we go to the police."

"Not threats of physical violence. What if you couldn't find jobs or your dream job passed you by because of these rumors? I don't want the two of you to regret being in a relationship with me because you lost everything else you cared about."

AJ slid his palms around Trent's waistband until they came to rest on the belt buckle. "I don't see how that's your call, big man."

AJ braced himself as Trent relaxed back into him. Their running back might be taller than AJ but he still trusted AJ to be able to hold his weight. AJ's tongue darted out to lick behind the curl of Trent's ear when the man tilted his head back.

Brock moved in close, slowly removing Trent's necktie. "Why would you presume to make decisions for us?" Brock asked softly, drawing Trent's gaze.

"I want you guys to be happy. I thought if I left then at least you'll have each other and not worry about whether someone is going to sabotage your futures," Trent muttered softly.

AJ forced Trent to face him. "How is that okay?" he demanded.

Trent sucked in a quick breath. "I won't have some greedy reporter make us look like freaks. I won't allow them to twist what we have into something vile or dirty. And I definitely won't be responsible for the loss of your dreams."

“What about you?” Brock asked. “What happens to your dreams? They could still go after you, dog your heels through the NFL. No matter what happens, the rumors will always be there. Are you just going to give up on your dream, your career?”

Moving out of AJ’s arms, Trent turned, cupping both AJ and Brock’s cheeks. “You, the two of you, are my dream. I would be happy knowing you’re safe... even if I can’t have you.”

“So that’s it? You get to decide for us, tell us what to do? We aren’t children to be shielded for our own good.” AJ attempted to keep his anger from his voice. Right or wrong, he did understand Trent’s only motivation was to protect them.

“You think it will be that easy to dump us?” Brock snapped. “Quit treating us like your father treats you. We’re not going to ask how high when you say jump.”

A flash of pain crossed Trent’s expression and he mumbled a response too low for AJ to hear.

It appeared Brock wouldn’t allow the meek answer to pass. “I didn’t hear what you said, Trent. Is it that easy for you to walk away from this, from us?”

“No!” the big man barked, finally lifting his gaze from the floor. “Don’t you know how much I love you two? I’m selfish for wanting to keep you two regardless of the consequences.”

“Good, because we hadn’t planned on letting you go.”

Trent looked at them with a startled expression.

“Did you think we’d simply give you up? That we didn’t love you enough to hold onto you with both our hands?” Brock asked in an agonized whisper.

“Oh, God, Brock, I didn’t...”

“You thought we would value jobs more than... are you serious...? Jobs? Is that how shallow you believe us to be?” Brock spun on his heel, making a hasty retreat to the bedroom.

AJ watched their wounded lover withdraw. Did Trent actually think they would rather have a job than him in their lives? Did he think of himself as dispensable or that their love for him wasn't equal to his own for them?

"I didn't... I just..." Trent seemed to be a loss for words.

Sighing deeply, AJ nudged Trent's shoulder. "You should've told us what's been going on. It's what partners do. You have to value our input, trust we know our own hearts. It isn't your burden to bear alone, because you aren't the only one in this relationship. It is a relationship, right? If not, then what the fuck have we been doing the last two years?" AJ nodded his head in the direction Brock went. "You need to go to him and answer his questions. I'll be there in a second."

Trent moved as if he were fifty years older, fists pulling at his dark hair. AJ stood where he could see and hear while he removed his suit jacket and tie. Brock stood in the bedroom with his back to the doorway, fists on his hips, head bowed. Trent moved up behind their lover but Brock shrugged off Trent's touch even as the big man whispered into Brock's ear.

Taking off the cuff links, AJ placed them in a bowl on the couch table, shed his dress shirt, and then headed toward the two most important people in his life.

"Baby, please," Trent begged in a tortured voice.

"I'm not going to make love to you if you're planning to leave us. Dammit, it already hurts. You can't... you can't..."

Trent grasped Brock's elbow and spun him around. The running back pushed Brock against the wall. AJ held his breath as he watched, his erection pressed painfully against his fly. He knew what Brock needed, what they both needed to hear from their lover before they would go any further. Was Trent already gone?

AJ didn't believe so. Trent had held their hand, claimed them in public, but they still needed to hear Trent say he wasn't leaving. As much as they swore to not let him go, they couldn't force him to stay. They could cajole, coerce, and

seduce, but if Trent later decided to walk out the door then they wouldn't be able to stop him.

It didn't mean they wouldn't try.

Trent loomed over Brock but the smaller man refused to look Trent in the eye. AJ pressed into Trent's back, only one layer of cloth between them, reminding the running back that AJ also waited to hear what he had to say.

CHAPTER SEVEN

~Brock~

Standing in the bedroom, Brock shook off Trent's touch. He ached to embrace Trent but his heart was already breaking. How were he and AJ to survive Trent leaving them? Something would always be missing. If Trent made love to them and then left, he knew he'd shatter.

A firm hand gripped his elbow and before he knew what happened, he was crushed against the wall. Oh. God. Trent's warm body pressed against him. How could he say no? His men knew he loved them, but he was unsure if they understood how much. Trent and AJ were it for him. People could scoff all they wanted but it didn't change the outcome. These two men were the great loves of his life, and he'd never get over losing either one.

The hard line of his lover's erection dug into Brock's stomach as Trent rotated his hips. He attempted to hold back a shudder, but he knew Trent felt it by the change in the man's breathing.

"Listen to me, Brock," Trent's words skittered across Brock's ear, raising goose bumps on his skin.

"Trent, don't," Brock forced out between trembling lips. He hated that sign of his weakness.

"Don't what?" Trent's large hand slid around and grasped the nape of Brock's neck.

"Don't make us think you're going to stay... I can't... not unless you choose us," Brock replied.

AJ moved around until he pressed into Trent's side, the former Marine's soft, gray gaze encouraging him.

Suddenly nervous, Brock studiously stared at the floor. He didn't want to see Trent's sad and resigned expression before the man walked away. But his lover refused to allow Brock to ignore him.

“Look at me,” Trent begged, voice full of gravel.

Staring at Trent’s wingtips, Brock was struck by a realization. Why should he allow Trent an easy way out? Meekly standing aside because he was hurting? With AJ’s help, Brock could remind Trent of what they had together and make it hard for their lover to walk away from them. No, he wouldn’t be quiet.

“Brock,” Trent pleaded in an agonized whisper.

He glanced to AJ, seeing the same resolve reflected back at him. AJ gave Brock a small nod and then slipped a hand between him and Trent. Their lover moaned openmouthed as AJ palmed Trent’s rigid cock through the dark dress slacks. Brock shifted his hips forward into the back of AJ’s hand as he met Trent’s heated gaze. The hand encircling the nape of his neck squeezed and massaged, bringing their foreheads together as AJ tortured Trent.

“Aren’t we worth fighting for?” Brock panted, working the dress shirt out of Trent’s slacks.

Trent’s breath came in quick huffs, his eyes dilated, the black swallowing the blue until it was a thin ring. AJ moved around, slipping both hands around to cup Trent’s erection from behind.

“Yes... you guys are worth fighting for.” Trent gulped air, panting. “This isn’t fair. I don’t want you guys hurt.”

Brock gripped Trent’s face between his palms. “You leaving will hurt us more than anything else. Tell us how easy it is to walk away. How are we supposed to pick up the pieces and continue to be the same without you?”

“You would have each other...”

“This isn’t a two-plus-one relationship. You can’t leave and expect us to have what it takes to stay together. We need you.”

“AJ... Brock...”

“Is it that easy to leave us behind? Can you go out there and live a perfectly happy and normal life without us?”

“No.” Trent squeezed his eyes shut.

“No, what? Tell us,” Brock demanded.

Trent’s breath hitched. “If I walked out of here now, I’d leave my soul behind. I’d die a little each day without you two.”

“Thank fuck,” AJ growled.

As scary, as stupid, as wonderful as he felt about Trent’s agonized admission, Brock could have shouted for joy. He brushed their lips together, swallowing the low whimper. His tongue swept past the parted lips to devour Trent’s mouth as AJ urged them toward the bed. Trent broke the kiss, panting hard, his lids fluttered closed as the weight of the belt caused his slacks to sag after AJ unbuckled them so he could delve into Trent’s briefs.

“So fucking unfair,” their big man gasped, bucking into AJ’s hand.

“Don’t expect us to be fair.” AJ’s voice had a hard sexual edge. “Not when we’re playing for keeps.”

Brock’s fingers fumbled at Trent’s shirt buttons. He trembled as if this were his first time making love. “I’ll buy you another one,” he snarled right before he grabbed the overlapping edges and wrenched them apart. The sound of torn cloth and the ping of buttons were lost to Brock as he attacked the exposed collarbone. Trent’s skin formed goose flesh in the wake of Brock’s tongue as he licked a path down the muscular chest. Soft cursing erupted when Brock nipped a small brown nipple.

AJ relieved Trent of his slacks and briefs. His feet becoming entangled, Trent fell backward onto the bed. The nervousness from the moment before gone, Brock deftly unbuttoned his own shirt. His stare raked over Trent’s straining cock, the ruined shirt caught at his elbows, dark hair tousled, pants caught on the man’s wingtips. Trent’s gaze locked onto Brock’s fingertips, following their downward motion, then jumped over to AJ who disrobed just as slowly as Brock did.

“I need you guys,” Trent confessed. “I’ll always need you. You’re buried so far under my skin...”

AJ moved fast, kneeling on the bed next to Trent, trapping his face between AJ's palms, and claiming Trent's lips in a rough kiss. They both moaned aloud. It was one of the sexiest things Brock had ever seen. AJ's wild bursts of passion consumed them completely when they were on the receiving end. Trent was being eaten alive.

Brock knelt to slip the shoes off of Trent's feet, freeing the pants. The running back leaned on his elbows as AJ pulled low, raspy sounds from Trent with a simple kiss. They were beautiful together. Trent's wide shoulders, large rippling muscles, sculpted firm pecs, and washboard abs were perfect next to AJ's Marine-cut body.

It had been a couple of years since AJ left the military service but his continued physical discipline kept the man's body toned and fit. Out of the three of them, Brock was by far the least athletic. He went to the gym, just not as religiously as he consumed his favorite foods. Not that his lovers seemed to mind his soft stomach and slight pooch; the fact they didn't require him to be perfect made him love them all the more.

AJ had maneuvered Trent farther across the mattress. Brock searched the side table drawer for the lube. Back on the California king, the kiss had turned into a raging fire that engulfed his lovers. Trent's fingers encircled AJ's cock as he slowly thrust into Trent's large hand.

Encouraging Trent to move so he could crawl between the running back's legs, Brock's gaze raked over the neatly trimmed pubic hair. Heavy, round balls nestled at the apex of Trent's thighs, right below a long, ruddy cock which pointed toward Trent's navel. Slowly Brock's gaze travelled up the rigid abdomen to meet the piercing expressions of both of his lovers. Their mouths were parted with soft panting, lips pink and swollen from kissing.

Trent's lids fluttered closed as Brock ran the flat of his tongue along the hard column to the flared tip. AJ's gaze narrowed as he watched Brock swirl his tongue around the tip before sealing his lips against the silky skin and plunging down the shaft. Brock felt powerful, sexy, and desired as his lovers

stared at him. He moaned around the thick shaft, and Trent's hips bucked forward, his breath coming in loud, hitching blows.

With lubed fingers, Brock readied himself. The need to be impaled on Trent pushed him to work quickly. Pulling off the hard cock with a pop, Brock moved to straddle his lover's hips.

"Oh, damn, Brock!" Trent groaned as Brock pumped his lover's rigid shaft before placing the head at his hole.

Steadily he bore down, his body stretching tightly around Trent's solid length "AJ... Trent..." His voice was full of suppressed desire. He couldn't think, much less express what he needed. All he could do was feel the coarse hairs of Trent's thighs that brushed against his legs, the rough hands that gripped his hips, and the column of firm flesh that filled him until he thought he would split in two.

"We've got you," AJ whispered against Brock's lips before slanting his mouth down in a luxurious kiss.

Yes. They had always been there to keep him from falling over the edge. What they had collectively, what they did, it wasn't sex or fucking or some kind of fun mutual release. No—the three of them made more than simple love. It went beyond fondness or sweet affection. Combined together, their bodies expressed passion, wordlessly spoken devotion, and trust. The music of their souls spilled ardor into each other until they were filled, full and complete within one another. It wasn't something strangers could see, nor could someone steal it away.

This is what Brock wanted Trent to remember. Right here was how their life was supposed to be. Not one, not two, but three of them entwined together, and that was what Trent needed to be reminded of. Trent's palms moved over Brock's thighs while AJ stole his breath away. In his lovers' touches, he found his resolve. He refused to allow anyone to take this away. There was more than one way to protect his lovers, and Brock swore he would bury anyone who attempted to break them apart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

~Trent~

Trent lay on his back and gritted his teeth as Brock's body slowly swallowed his rigid shaft. The grasping heat encasing his length made him want to arch into Brock to bury himself as deep as he could in his lover. But he allowed Brock to set the pace and watched with awe as he reached out to grasp AJ's thigh, needing to touch their quiet Marine as his body was sheathed inside Brock.

AJ was right there when Brock called out. The sight of the loving kiss given with such heated abandon always turned him on. They were the most beautiful part of his world, and being with them enriched his life tenfold. He'd give everything he had to be able to watch them for the rest of his days.

Brock's fingers entwined with his as AJ's palm covered Trent's hand where it gripped AJ's leg. Connected, all three of them linked together. Even when he woke in the middle of the night, they would have subconsciously moved until they were all touching in some way. How could he live without that?

Answer—he couldn't.

He should've known from the beginning he wouldn't be able to leave them. Sometime within the last two years, AJ and Brock had crawled so far under his skin, he couldn't separate them from him. He realized he didn't want to. If he left, he would only be a shell of a man, missing two huge parts of himself that he'd never be able to reclaim. Not only that, his leaving would crush them. They wouldn't stay together, because he would have unintentionally splintered them apart. In striving to protect them, he would have been the one to destroy them. Now he could clearly see what they had been trying to tell him all night. They were three equal parts of a whole, and the two wouldn't fit together without the one missing piece. He couldn't do that to Brock and AJ, because they were more precious to him than the air he breathed.

Brock's bottom made contact with his groin, breaking the kiss between Brock and AJ. Trent reached up to grasp AJ by the neck and pulled him down to claim his mouth. Brock groaned, and Trent reached for him with his other hand to bring him down into a three-way kiss full of heat and desire and a climbing urgency.

"Will you make love to me?" Trent pleaded. He gave AJ a firm pump. Those two weren't the only ones who could play dirty.

The corner of Brock's mouth cocked up into a sultry half grin. "You want us to what? Leave you alone?" Trent gripped Brock's hip, keeping him in place, half afraid Brock would actually leave. "No?" His lover's voice dropped low. "Or do you need us to remind you who you fuckin' belong to?"

"God, yes." Trent's reply turned into a loud moan when Brock rotated his hips, grinding his ass into Trent's groin.

Falling forward, Trent was bracketed between Brock's arms. "Was that a yes?" the man teased, warm, wine-scented breath filling Trent's nostrils.

He couldn't hold back. He thrust into Brock in a slow, torturous glide. His hands ran over Brock's slender bowed back until he gripped his lover's ass cheeks with his palms, spreading the globes wide. Bracing his feet, Trent drove deeper into Brock's tight heat, loving the way Brock's body clutched at him when he withdrew only to welcome him back. Palms on Trent's chest, Brock moved with Trent, head back, eyes closed as he made sweet sexy noises.

AJ captured Trent's mouth. They were past the foreplay kisses with closed mouths and gentle brushes of the lips. No, they were far, far past that point; AJ sucked Trent's tongue into his mouth so he could chase AJ's with his own. As soon as the former Marine pulled away, Brock took over, testing before going in for full possession.

God, I don't have enough hands. Trent wanted to touch and tease, to wrap around and sink into them. So many things—there was so much he want to do

with them, to them. Brock pulled back from the kiss. Trent needed air, his chest heaved, his breathing loud in his ears.

“You said something about needing us to remind you?” AJ held up the bottle of lube, raising a brow in question, and Trent quit breathing.

In answer to the unspoken question, Trent sat halfway up, abs straining as he collected Brock securely in his arms and flipped over. Brock lay on his back, lips parted as Trent firmly pushed into the man’s tight hole. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched AJ slick up his cock with one hand, the other stroking one of Trent’s butt cheeks. A thumb massaged his puckered entrance and he dropped his head to Brock’s shoulder.

God, he loved it when they were able to make love in this position. Different class schedules, jobs, and responsibilities meant they weren’t always home at the same time except for a couple of days a week. It didn’t mean they abstained from sex, only that when the three did come together he chose certain positions over others. He didn’t care where he ended up in the mix. This was his favorite, because all three of them became physically connected. In the beginning, it hadn’t been easy, but they’d had time to perfect it. Some things were all about timing.

“Hurry,” he barely choked out. He spread his legs wider, silently begging to be filled.

AJ moved behind him, stroking his hole with lube-slick fingers. Trent’s hips jerked, his whole body shuddered. He needed this, to be surrounded by them, holding them and being held in return. Brock made nonsensical noises in his ear, hands firmly holding Trent’s hips to keep them from following AJ’s retreating fingers. He always felt exposed when he bottomed—vulnerable. He was fortunate to have two lovers who could turn that feeling around into a burning desire until he would plead to be penetrated, needing it like he needed his next breath.

Brock’s hands slipped down until he cupped the globes of Trent’s ass in his palms and spread the cheeks apart for AJ. His balls were rolled, the taint rubbed until he pushed back far enough that he slipped out of Brock.

“Easy lover,” Brock crooned.

Confidently grasping Trent’s shaft, Brock guided Trent back into his body, whispering affirmations while Trent groaned from the dual sensations of his cock gripped in a tight sheath and a thick, calloused finger slipping past his guardian muscle.

Perfect. So perfect. He’d almost ruined what they had together because he’d been afraid. “I’m so sorry, so sorry,” he babbled, the virtual steel band around his chest tightening until he couldn’t breathe. His eyes burned, making him unable to see but feeling AJ and Brock all around him. “Please forgive me, I apologize... I...”

AJ draped over Trent’s back, the man’s hands stroking and soothing as he spoke in one ear and Brock in the other.

“We have you. We’re not going anywhere.”

“You’re safe. We won’t let you fall.”

“We love you.”

“Oh, God, what was I thinking?” Trent’s throat burned and he squeezed his lids shut.

“Not now. We’ll expect you to suck up and beg later but right now we just want to love you.”

Trent nodded. AJ nipped him on the earlobe, and Brock started sucking up a mark on his collarbone.

Chuckling at the low noise Trent made, the heat of AJ’s body retreated as AJ sat up and ran a hand down the cleft of Trent’s ass, tapping his hole with a finger. He heard the snick of the lube cap. A dark laugh sounded before cool slick trickled over his heated skin. Trent yelped and thrust, not that Brock complained as he gripped Trent hips with a “yes” hissing from his lips.

The sting of the stretch was a reminder of how long it had been since he’d received. He buried his face in the nape of Brock’s neck, gasping in pain, in

pleasure. He wasn't sure which ruled his body at the moment. He didn't care as long as they didn't stop.

The blunt head of AJ's cock nudged his entrance, and Trent tensed. Brock ran soothing hands up his arms over his back, down his hips to his thighs, cupping and rolling his balls. AJ whispered words he couldn't quite make out, because all of his attention was focused on the slow thrust that split him open, filling him completely until he couldn't possibly hold more.

"Come on, Trent," AJ coaxed. "Relax, let me in."

He breathed steadily, concentrating on loosening his muscles.

"There we go," AJ soothed. "You're so tight. We're going to love you so good."

Pubic hair brushed his bottom. The former Marine licked a path up his spine. Leaning back and wrapping an arm behind AJ's head, Trent pulled him in for a kiss. It was awkward and sloppy and amazing. Releasing AJ, he gazed down at Brock who patiently waited as he ran his hands over Trent's body. There for a moment, the briefest of seconds, Trent thought he would lose it, break down and be crushed by his emotions. Then AJ began to withdraw and the pleasure bloomed, forcing aside everything else.

"You like that?" AJ asked. "Is this what you want, big man?"

"Oh, yes, give it to me," Trent panted.

He held Brock's brown-eyed gaze. "Are you ready for some loving, baby?"

"About fucking time," Brock grumbled, but Trent saw mischief as well as anticipation in his lover's gaze.

After a couple of false starts, they found their rhythm. Trent felt himself riding a wave of pleasure that had him babbling. He wasn't sure what he said with his mind wound up in a cottony haze. By the noises coming from AJ, Trent knew his lover was close. Brock undulated under him, pupils blown wide in desire. Grasping Trent's face, Brock beckoned for a kiss. AJ gripped

Trent's hips roughly, grinding his groin into Trent's ass as the Marine came hard.

After AJ pulled free, he fell onto the bed next to them. Trent hooked Brock's knees onto his elbows and started searching for that sweet spot. He knew the moment he found it by the way Brock gasped and his neck arched, head back digging into the pillow as he released throaty groans of pleasure.

"Oh, God, there. Right there. Don't stop. Don't stop. Aww, fuck! I'm going to come!"

Brock palmed his cock and stroked to the rhythm of Trent's thrusts. Their breaths came in harsh bursts as they chased their orgasms.

"Come for me Brock, I need you to come for me."

Trent was holding on by the skin of his teeth, wanting his lover to come first. When the orgasm hit Brock, his lover clamped down on Trent, dragging him over the edge. He continued to thrust raggedly, drawing out the fantastic sensations. AJ drew Brock into a languid kiss. Almost at the same time, they reached up for Trent, dragging him down so he could join in the sweet and sloppy kiss.

Trent ran his fingers through the seed on Brock's belly, cum dripping down the inside of his thighs. Gently pulling out, he left the two lying limply on the bed while he went to quickly wash up. After switching on the light to the bathroom, Trent prepared three washcloths. He washed up before heading back to his men, who waited for him in the California king. After cleaning AJ and Brock, he threw the rags in the direction of the bathroom door and flopped on the bed on the other side of Brock. The tension began to build, and he gazed apprehensively at AJ and Brock.

"I'm sorry. I was worried you'd come to resent me if George went through with his threat."

AJ mirrored Trent, lying on his side, head propped as he leaned on his elbow. "Are you kidding me, that fucking asshole George threatened you?"

“You actually, both of you... and so did my father.” Trent nervously licked his lips and told them everything that had happened in the last couple weeks since George had walked in on them. Not only the conversations he had with George and his father, but the other things that had happened around campus. There had only been three altercations at school. While they were all nonviolent, there’d been spitting and slurs.

They were quiet for a while after Trent finished. He had expected a lot of yelling, not the silence. Somehow that was worse than raised voices. If they were screaming at him then he’d know how they felt.

“I, well, I think both Brock and I understand you wanted to protect us. I get it but you’re going to have to cut that shit out. You don’t have a right to make decisions for us, Trent. I don’t care how afraid for us you are. That is the same crap you complained about when it came to your dad.”

“I...” Trent felt positively sick, his stomach rolling with nausea. They were right. He’d pulled something his father always did.

“We are responsible for our own decisions. Trust us to know what is right for us.” Brock bit his lip. “Tell me something, did you want to leave?”

“No! The thought of leaving killed me. I believed I was being selfish, wanting to keep the two of you. I know we didn’t hide, but the reaction from some people made me...” Trent scrubbed a hand over his face and rolled onto his back.

“What happens if a reporter gets wind of the rumors and writes an article on us? It won’t matter if George and my father leave us alone. If I’m picked up in the NFL draft, a story could ruin all of us.” He glanced at Brock and AJ, who steadily gazed back. “I’m not worried about myself. I’ll find something else, but if you lose your dreams it will be my fault. And as much as I would like to, we can’t rewind the clock and go back to a time when people weren’t staring at me like I’m a museum display. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Nimble fingers laced with his. “You don’t have to have all the answers, Trent.” Brock tugged on Trent’s hand, urging him to come close. Rolling over, he put his head on Brock’s chest and reached across for AJ.

“Some things will have to change.” AJ smoothed Trent’s damp hair off his forehead. “We knew that at the end of the spring semester we’d need to make decisions on where to live, and where I would continue classes after you are picked up by a NFL team. This is just something else that we’re going to have to discuss and make plans for. But we have to do it together.”

Trent nodded. “Okay, together.”

~AJ~

AJ mindlessly worked his way through making breakfast. He also made a call, cashing in a favor to a friend who promised to have a “friendly chat” with George. The football player wouldn’t be hurt, simply reminded he wasn’t the biggest dog on the block. If that didn’t work then he’d call a lawyer friend and cash in another favor.

He worked on autopilot, thinking about what happened the night before. As much as he was upset at Trent, he couldn’t blame him. The big guy had been scared. AJ wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but so was he. He wasn’t worried about the reporters or the assholes. No, he was afraid the stress of having an unconventional relationship would wear on his men. If they were overcome by the pressure, he’d lose them. He was tired of losing people he loved. Or they’d pull through, better and stronger. His sister, Susan, was the optimist. Him, not so much after all he’d seen. She would go with the latter. He chose to believe in her optimism this time.

“What’cha thinking about?” Trent’s arms slid around his waist. “You’re frowning at the bacon. Did it go bad?” AJ had slipped on a pair of basketball shorts after his shower. His skin tingled at the feel of Trent’s bare chest covering his back.

“Thinking about Susan,” AJ replied. “I should go and see her.”

“Good man. It’s about time you spoke with her. George’s issues aren’t her fault.” Trent planted a kiss on AJ’s neck, then went fishing in the refrigerator.

He glanced over as Trent bent at the waist. The running back wore a pair of ratty, gray sweats with an overstretched, elastic waistband that allowed the pants to hang lower than they were designed to. He couldn’t make out any telltale signs of a pair of briefs. AJ shook his head. He had plans for the morning, and they didn’t involve getting back into bed.

“I thought I’d go to see her this morning, unless there was something we were supposed to be doing.”

“Oh my God!” Brock’s yell came from the bedroom. “You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me! Holy... Trent! You asshole! Oh my God!”

AJ followed Trent to the hallway. Brock strode out of the bedroom holding the slacks Trent had worn the night before, waving a business card in the air.

“I can’t believe you let me act like a... a... hussy last night.” Brock brandished the card like a weapon. “You! You couldn’t have told me who we were having dinner with and... oh my God! What they must think of me!” The man looked and sounded truly scandalized.

“What are you talking about?” Trent looked as confused as AJ felt.

“Don’t look at me like that!” Brock paced the hall. “We had dinner with the fucking recruiter from the Dolphins and I was... I was...”

“Oozing sex,” Trent replied, a lazy smile twisting his lips.

Brock halted, mouthed Trent’s words, and then scowled. “I all but threw my dick out on the table. That was not ‘oozing sex’. I was out of control. Now they know about us, and oh my God! They were scouting you, and I was humping your leg under the table.”

“I was too,” AJ confessed.

Brock’s eyes were huge as he turned to AJ. “Noooo...” Brock couldn’t have sounded more appalled.

Trent chuckled and immediately held his hands up when Brock turned his piercing gaze on him. “You did nothing, absolutely nothing, that was inappropriate,” the running back soothed. “Yes, you were sexy, and you had me hard throughout the dinner, but you have nothing to worry about. I spent a half an hour with Mack before Dad arrived and we talked about...”—Trent circled his finger between the three of them—“I don’t think he had a problem with us. He was also the one who reminded me of a couple of things.”

“Oh, yeah, what’s that?” Brock visibly swallowed hard as Trent approached.

“I think it would be better to show you.” Trent’s voice was low and guttural. The way he prowled seemed to make Trent appear bigger, taller. Brock’s eyes widened, his hand dropping to rub at the groin of his shorts, tongue darting out to lick his full lips.

Before Brock could reply, Trent had him flipped over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry, and continued to the bedroom. AJ chuckled at the antics. Today was so much better than yesterday. He wandered back into the kitchen to turn off the stove. It seemed breakfast would have to be put on hold until his lovers finished playing. Saturdays were the best days of the week. He thought he could visit Susan and be back before his lovers even knew he had gone.

“Oh, I forgot about the food.” Trent stood in the kitchen doorway, those ratty sweats hanging dangerously low.

AJ turned to Trent, puzzled. Why wasn’t he with Brock? “What are you... hey!”

In the blink of an eye, AJ was staring at Trent’s ass upside down. What a nice ass it was too. “I guess I can see Susan later,” he wheezed out as he slid his hands into Trent’s sweats.

EPILOGUE

~Trent~

The brilliant light, the camera shutters clicking, the murmuring, all of it was more intense than Trent thought it would be. The table before him was covered with a teal tablecloth adorned with the Dolphins' insignia. To his right was Jason "Mack" MacKinney, scout and recruiter for the Miami Dolphins; next to him sat the coach and the two assistant coaches. Trent had been introduced—twice—he knew their names, but if someone asked him right then, he wouldn't have been able to say what they were. To his left sat the four other players the team had picked up during the draft. He'd shaken their hands in greeting an hour earlier, but he was pretty sure they were in the same boat as he was—too stunned to speak intelligently.

A flurry of flashing blinded Trent. He blinked several times, but continued to see spots. On the other side of the table sat the press. Trent rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans. He felt eternally glad AJ had insisted on a dark blazer, because he was pretty sure anything else would have revealed his nervous sweating.

Over and over they had talked about this, he, AJ, and Brock. They had rehashed one argument after another about how public to make their relationship. Mack had coached them how to handle the press, what questions to answer, and set them up with a public relations manager. Brock and AJ held firm to their decision, and Trent continued to be terrified. The difference now—his faith that his lovers, partners, the two most important people in his life, would be there with him. And if needed, they would catch him.

He inhaled raggedly and rubbed his palms on his pants again. As luck would have it, they had Mack in their corner, and over the last several weeks Trent had come to admire and respect the man who'd become a friend. The owner and the coaches were aware of his concerns, and nobody cared as long as he continued to perform. But the real test was here, in front of him. He wondered if the reporters would eat him alive.

The press conference started out well enough. Coach Rogers fielded several questions before the board was opened up. With climbing optimism, Trent thought he might pass through unscathed.

“Trent Harte, there are reports you’re in a relationship with men.”

Trent couldn’t tell who spoke, because the spots caused by the earlier flurry of flashes continued to blind him. So he made his statement in the direction the voice came from. “Well, I am gay so yes, I have a relationship with men.”

“Trent, how many men are you dating currently and who tops?”

His eyebrows climbed up to his hairline as he coughed into his hand. Mack scowled at the reporter. “Stacey, I didn’t know you started working for Playgirl. Next question please.”

“Trent, how do you think your dating habits will affect your playing performance?”

Mack began to answer, but Trent raised a hand to hold him off. “I’ve been in a monogamous relationship for two years. My personal life hasn’t impacted my performance on the field.”

“Trent, you’re saying you’ve been in a monogamous relationship for two years...”

“Yes, our three-year anniversary is coming up in about a month,” Trent replied.

“All right, three years. How does that work?”

“George, I don’t see how this questioning has anything to do with...” Mack began.

Trent interrupted, “I’ll answer the question.”

Mack pursed his lips and addressed the press. “Fine, but from here on out, the questions will be kept professional or you will be escorted off the premises.”

Trent located the reporter who'd asked the question. "Being a part of a *ménage à trois*... a threesome—however you want to put it—this relationship is really no different than any other partnership. I'm accountable to two people instead of one. It requires me to be secure with who I am, that I practice respect, understanding, and compromise. I must have complete trust in myself, as well as in my partners. And it's extremely important to communicate. If I don't talk, if I can't express myself, then a relationship like this would never work."

The rest of the press conference was a blur. Questions were asked of the other new players and the reporters kept the questions respectful. Trent was well aware that this had been easy compared to what it could've been like, but there would always be a next time.

Mack rose from the table with Trent, and they walked out of the press room together. "Are you sure you guys won't come to the party? Alissa has been asking about you three."

"No, Mack, I think I want to go home for now. We're still unpacking. Maybe next time." Trent backed up a couple of steps toward AJ and Brock, who waited by the exit, their smiles open and wide. Mack glanced behind Trent before nodding.

"Next time, then."

Trent didn't hesitate. He spun on his heel and opened the door, ushering his lovers out of the room. The walk to the car was longer than he thought it should be.

"You did pretty good," AJ said.

"I thought you were going to throw up at the beginning." Brock took his hand.

"I did too. I think I still might," he confessed.

"Well, do it before we get in the car because I am not pulling over on the interstate," AJ said. "Miami has messed with my sense of direction. Do people get mugged on the interstate here, or is it carjacked?"

“Huh. Too bad,” Brock quipped, ignoring AJ’s question.

“Too bad, what?” Trent asked.

Brock scratched the bridge of his nose. “Well, I was thinking about sex and ice cream. Or ice cream and sex. But if you don’t feel good and if AJ is going to get us lost...”

AJ picked up the pace. “I won’t get us lost. I noticed an ice cream place near the house. We can grab it on our way.”

Trent tugged on Brock’s hand, hauling him along, attempting to keep up with AJ. “I feel right as rain. I’m good. I’m real good.”

Brock laughed. “I just bet you are.”

THE END

Author Bio

Lexi has always been an avid reader, and at a young age started reading (secretly) her mother's romances (the ones she was told not to touch). She was the only teenager she knew of who would be grounded from reading. Later, with a pencil and a note book, she wrote her own stories and shared them with friends because she loved to see their reactions. A Texas transplant, Lexi now kicks her boots up in the Midwest with her Yankee husband and her eighty-pound puppies named after vacuum cleaners.

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BOUND BY A RED THREAD

By **Ann Anderson**

Photo Description

A young man, around nineteen, leans against a brick wall, wearing a red, sleeveless, half-zip hoodie with the hood up and the zipper pulled down. His arms are crossed, and his arm muscles are large. His face is tilted slightly towards the camera, with an unreadable look in his eyes that goes with the blank set of his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Do you see this guy? He's The Worst. Truly. Literally. He's a hot jock, yeah, but he's also a bully. A very, very terrible bully. He calls non-jock guys fairies. He kicks students. He yells at teachers. He even beat his ex-girlfriend. He's about to get expelled. He's about to get kicked from the football team. He's a school enemy, hell, even every kid's enemy. He's the most useless specimen I've ever seen.

His notoriety is widespread. Many bad rumors circulate around him. Mostly bad—the rest just seem like a sick joke gone overboard. The most sickening rumor about him is that he's actually being sold by his own father as a prostitute. I mean, cliché much, right?

But then one night when I was on my way back from a sneaky yet steamy rendezvous with my friend (with benefits, of course), I saw him in a narrow alley near a red-light district. With some man's cock in his mouth, no less! And whoa, if he wasn't skilled. I was glued in my spot until he was done—I even forgot to hide myself. What surprised me was that he got some big money for it! So the rumor that he was a prostitute was true, after all?

But then, after the man was gone, I saw him spit on the ground with clear distaste on his face. And then our eyes met! In that instant I could see his

pained, sad anger as clear as an aquarium. And just in that fleeting moment, the red string had tied me.

What do you think I should do? What do you think he would do to me? Should I stay away? Or should I be one of those mainstream heroes, destined to be with him? Oh God, please not the latter. I'm sane, gay, and ordinary enough to be a hero for a problematic school jerk. Well... but maybe a blowjob like that could make me reconsider... if his fist didn't get me first.

Sincerely,

Ayu

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: high school, barely legal, non-explicit, bullying, homophobia, hopeful

Content warnings: mention of child abuse/prostitution/dub-con, no HEA/HFN

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BOUND BY A RED THREAD

By Ann Anderson

CHAPTER ONE

Owen strolled down the street, the crisp autumn air raising gooseflesh, but it wasn't enough to take away the warm, happy glow of satiation. Streetlights illuminated the sidewalk while casting alleys in shadow, but the silhouette of someone on their knees before another was clear in the darkness. Owen didn't want to interrupt anyone during their happy time—he'd have been pissed if anyone disturbed him when Mike had been sucking him off—but that didn't mean he couldn't sneak close. He might be eighteen but he was still a guy, and the thought of seeing someone, preferably someone male, giving a man a blowjob was an opportunity he knew he wouldn't find easily outside of porn.

Trying to hide in the shadows, Owen crept closer, eyes widening in delight as he saw it was another male sucking off the guy, who was currently saying some pretty lewd things. Slipping closer, staying just out of sight of the men, Owen froze in terror when the man giving the blowjob pulled back, revealing his face.

Holy hell, that's Kurt McAllen. Owen didn't know what to do. Part of him wanted to run—but another part, kind of perverted and sadistic, wanted to see Kurt, the douchiest douche in their town, pleasuring another man.

A harsh grunt drew Owen's eyes back to the man being serviced, and he watched as the man stepped back, tucking himself in as he chuckled and patted Kurt on the cheek. Kurt scowled, holding out his hand, and Owen swore his eyes nearly fell from their sockets as the man handed over a large clip of bills. The man walked away, not even looking to see if anyone had watched the little show he'd put on. Kurt spit on the ground and then shoved a finger down his throat, retching up the come he'd been forced to swallow.

It was a horrible sight, and Owen really wished his smarter side had won out. Even his perverted-sadistic side was sickened by what had happened and

was currently happening. Then Kurt looked up, and Owen felt his heart lurch as their gazes met.

There was a look of horrible, resigned wretchedness etched into every pore of Kurt's face. His lips wet and red, his eyes filled with water; whether they were tears of shame or disgust, or from the vomiting, Owen didn't want to know. Sure, he, like everyone else at his school, wanted to see Kurt taken down a peg—but this wasn't what Owen would ever want anyone to experience.

Then, as if realizing who was looking at him and what had just been witnessed, Kurt's eyes hardened, lips thinning in a scowl that had terror scratching at Owen's bones. He really should run. But before he could move, Kurt was on him, shoving him back into a wall.

"You didn't see anything," Kurt snarled, lips pulled back and baring his teeth. The smell of come and vomit filled Owen's nose, making him gag.

"See? What was there to see? I haven't seen anything except the night sky and the town," Owen babbled, even as his mind replayed Kurt's head bobbing. And was he a sick fuck or what for wondering what it must feel like, Kurt's lips on him? And Kurt wouldn't spit in disgust, he'd swallow, begging—

Owen winced as his body was slammed into the wall, his head spinning when the back of his skull connected with rough brick.

"You'd do well to remember that, pussy." Kurt spat at his feet, and Owen really wished he hadn't done that; they were new shoes.

Kurt pushed him, hard, a farewell reminder before he walked away with his shoulders hunched and hands buried in his pockets—his whole body screaming "I dare you to fuck with me." Owen kind of wanted to chase after him, to hold Kurt and tell him it would be all right.

Then he slammed his own head into the wall. "Get a grip," he grumbled. "You're not a superhero, or any kind of hero. He's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

Owen raised a hand to his head, gingerly touching the knot he could feel forming. Hopefully, his mom wouldn't notice. A vibration in his pocket had Owen digging out his phone, groaning as he saw the text from his older sister.

Mom's freaking. Where are you? Do you need the cops?

Sighing, he rubbed at his eyes—because, really, his sister was a cop, and if she thought he was in trouble, she would send the whole department after him. She was scary like that.

Fine. Just got sidetracked. Be home soon.

He hit send, hoping...

Right. Sidetracked ;)

Owen groaned, shoving his phone back into his pocket before pushing away from the wall, heading towards home and the ridicule of his sister and the worry of his mother. He couldn't wait until this year was up. Then, he'd be off to college without the two females of his family breathing down his neck. Plus, there was always the chance to meet other gay guys and experience what everyone had to offer.

Deciding to keep that thought close to his heart—it would help get him through AP Calculus—Owen strode home, his gaze occasionally flickering down alleyways, wondering if he'd see Kurt down one. He wasn't sure if he was expecting to see his schoolmate having sex or waiting to jump him. He was glad when he made it home unscathed.

School was hell. Monday mornings weren't fun to begin with, but having to worry that he might be pushed into an empty classroom and beaten made it worse. Kayla, his best friend in the whole wide world, kept giving him the stink-eye every time he glanced furtively over his shoulder. It finally came to a head during their fourth period study hall, when he was finally beginning to relax.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Owen said quickly, too quickly.

Kayla merely quirked her eyebrow, fingers starting a slow, soft tapping on the desk, which she'd turned to face his so they could "work" together.

It took all of twenty seconds before he was spilling some of what he'd seen. He wasn't stupid enough to reveal everything. "I saw one of our classmates having relations in an alley."

Both her eyebrows stretched towards her hairline. "Really? Do tell."

Owen groaned at the lascivious grin she gave him. "Can't."

"Oh?" She leaned forward, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. "It must be someone everyone knows if you're not willing to spill the 'who'. I'll let you keep that secret, but there's something else you're hiding."

Swallowing around the small squeak that he knew was trying to escape as Kayla leaned forward, Owen glanced around, wishing something would happen. Zombie apocalypse, alien invasion, heck, even someone pulling the fire alarm would be good, but nothing. Looking around to see if anyone was paying attention—no one was—Owen finally grumbled out the one part of last night's encounter he could spill.

Kayla stared at him blankly.

"What?" Owen leaned back in his seat, arms crossing defensively over his chest.

She sighed heavily, hand covering her eyes as she seemed to gather herself, then looked at him. The very air in his lungs froze as her gaze made him feel like prey. "I know you think I can understand everything you say, what with your penchant for talking with your mouth full of food, but I cannot understand what you say when you mumble under your breath in such a rush."

"Oh." Owen cleared his throat, moving back to where he'd been before whispering as loudly as he dared, "There was money involved."

Kayla nodded, settling back in her seat. "If I guess who it is, will you tell me?"

“No!” Owen looked around, grinning sheepishly at the annoyed look the teacher shot their way. Sheesh, it wasn’t like anyone else was being quiet. “I can’t.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Kayla said with a smirk, inspecting her nails. “Because you’ll give it away whether you want to or not.”

“Not fair,” Owen whined, slumping across the desk, using the chance to poke her in the stomach. She swatted his hand away.

“Oh, please, like you don’t use your knowledge of my weaknesses to your full advantage.”

Owen let out a pitiful sound he would swear he never made. He was glad when the bell finally rang, freeing him from the terror that was Kayla.

“See you at lunch,” Kayla said as she slipped her backpack over one shoulder and strode from the room.

“See ya.” Owen was about ninety-five percent positive that if she didn’t hang out with him, Kayla would be prom queen in a heartbeat. He was glad she was his friend.

Shouldering his own bag, Owen headed down the hallway, dodging around slow-moving bodies and those who stood in packs right in the middle of the hallways. He made it into his class with a minute to spare. Nabbing a window seat, Owen settled in, pulling his English notebook out and flipping to the last page he’d been writing on. At the moment he was plotting what he could possibly do as a career choice. He had five items on his list, and none of them were anything he’d actually want to do.

The usual noise of the classroom settled into a hush, and Owen looked up. He swallowed the sudden rise of bile as Kurt stormed into the room, snarling and cursing at anyone in his way. When he looked around the room, Owen tried to slouch in his seat, praying he wouldn’t be seen. His prayers went unanswered as Kurt’s eyes narrowed on him. Kurt shoved one of the girls aside, sneering at her when she gasped, before claiming the seat right next to Owen. Didn’t matter that there was already someone sitting there; Kurt just

looked at the guy and he was gone, moving to the opposite side of the room, where everyone else was suddenly jostling for a spot as well.

The unlucky trickled over to the window side of the room, giving Kurt wary glances and sending pitying looks to Owen, who was still frozen in his seat. When the teacher came in, his hair spiked in every direction, glasses slightly skewed, no one was talking. Mr. Barton didn't seem to notice as he chattered happily about starting the Shakespeare unit.

Owen ducked his head, staring unseeing at the page before him until Mr. Barton called his name for attendance. It took a couple of tries before his throat was clear enough that he could speak without squeaking. Some of the kids in the class chuckled, but he ignored it, resolutely keeping his eyes on the paper before him. He was terrified that if he looked up he'd meet Kurt's glare, and he really didn't want to die yet.

Apparently Mr. Barton did want to die. He finished attendance with a flourish and began handing out *Romeo and Juliet* packets.

"Now, you'll each work with a partner. The person sitting next to you will do just fine, and I expect—"

"No." Kurt's voice cut across Mr. Barton's instructions like a shot. Owen had been terrified by the thought that he'd have to work with Kurt on a project; now he knew he'd be going it alone, and his shoulders relaxed.

Mr. Barton turned slowly, the papers he'd been handing out still clasped in his hand. Owen noticed that there was a slight tremor as Mr. Barton looked at Kurt. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

Kurt snorted, his fist slamming into the top of his desk as he sat forward, his gaze flaying their teacher. "You're an English teacher. I thought you'd have a better grasp of the English language. 'No' means I won't do what you want. I'm not working with this pussy," he jabbed his finger towards Owen, "and certainly not any of these other fags."

"Mr. McAllen, you'd do well to remember that you're in my classroom. I've given you instructions, and I expect you to follow them unless you have an actual reason not to." Owen wasn't sure who terrified him more at that

moment, Kurt or Mr. Barton. He was beginning to think Mr. Barton was winning in the scary department, because the teacher had a tic going in his jaw that Owen had seen once on a mean drunk when the man had charged his sister.

“I don’t need to take this shit,” Kurt snapped, rising.

“Sit down.” Mr. Barton’s voice whipped out, and Owen could swear he saw the room darkening. Several of the other students sitting between Mr. Barton and Kurt looked ready to slide beneath their desks and hide.

Kurt moved around his desk, heading towards the classroom door. “And what are you going to do if I don’t?”

Mr. Barton put himself between Kurt and the door. “Sit down, Mr. McAllen, or I’ll have to notify the principal.”

“Ooo, I’m so scared,” Kurt sneered, shoving past Mr. Barton and wrenching the door open. “That turd won’t do anything to me.”

Mr. Barton’s face had gone bright red. He stormed over to the wall, jabbing his finger into the button to activate the office speaker.

“Front office.”

“It’s Barton. Tell Mr. Stevenson that Kurt McAllen has left my classroom and is roaming the halls,” Mr. Barton huffed out, his whole body trembling.

Owen had to wonder if Mr. Barton was trembling from anger or fear. Few teachers dared stand up to Kurt. When he got really pissed he was liable to throw desks or shove teachers out of his way, and sometimes he’d get physical with other students. At least now it was certain Owen wouldn’t have to work with Kurt.

The rest of the class period was more subdued, no one wanting to upset Mr. Barton more than he already was. The guy looked as if he might have a heart attack if anyone stepped one foot out of line. Even if Owen couldn’t understand half of what was being read, he still tried to answer when Mr. Barton called on him. It was *Romeo and Juliet*, so it wasn’t that hard to wing it.

Once the bell rang, Owen scooped up his stuff and made a beeline for the door, like every other student—but Mr. Barton caught him before he could leave.

“Owen, can I speak with you for a moment, please?”

Owen groaned but turned, walking over to the teacher’s desk. He glanced longingly at his classmates as they filed out of the room, talking in whispers about what had happened. Kurt was known for leaving his classes, but he’d never left one this early.

Once all the other students were gone, Mr. Barton’s sigh set Owen’s alarms screaming. “Owen...”

Oh, this is not good. Owen chanced a peek over his shoulder, wondering what the odds were that he could pretend someone had called his name and then make a dash for the door as if answering them.

“I’m sorry to say this to you,” —Owen groaned. He’d missed his chance—“but I can’t have you working by yourself on this project. It would be unfair to you, and unfair to your classmates, if I made a group of three. This project will be a big part of your final grade, and as much as I hate to say this, you do have to work with Kurt McAllen on this project.”

Owen opened his mouth to interrupt, because this was beyond unfair. His mom could clean his mouth out with soap all she liked, he’d repeat the phrase until someone let him out of this nightmare—but Mr. Barton’s raised hand forestalled him.

“I know. It won’t be easy, and I’ll understand if not everything can get done, but both of you have to contribute to this project and present it. And I will know if you do everything yourself or ask one of your other classmates for assistance. I’ll be speaking with Mr. McAllen’s father after school today, so everything should be worked out by tomorrow’s class. And I know I shouldn’t be asking this of you, seeing as it is your senior year and I’m sure you have other things on your mind, but I would appreciate it if you can try and find out what is going through Mr. McAllen’s mind to have him acting the way he is.”

Owen was sorely tempted to blurt out that it was probably because Kurt was prostituting himself—but he kept his lips firmly sealed, counting down from fifty, hoping he'd be free before he reached zero.

“Here's a hall pass.” Mr. Barton handed over one of the small yellow cards. “If it gets too bad, let me know. There's only so much more the school can tolerate before Mr. McAllen is expelled.”

Nodding, afraid he'd say something he really didn't want to, Owen took the pass and rushed from the room. He nearly bowled over a freshman, who yelped in terror. Owen smiled apologetically, but he was in a hurry. He slowed his pace when he saw some teachers loitering in the hallway, eyes focused on stragglers as the bell rang. Owen flashed his hall pass, handing it over when one of the teachers asked for it. They nodded, handed it back, and Owen hurried to his locker, changing out his books and grabbing his lunch. Scuttling down the hall, Owen made it to science just as the teacher was beginning the lesson. Wincing, because Ms. Yule could be vicious to anyone late, Owen tapped on the glass so she'd unlock the door.

The scowl she cast him had him flushing, embarrassed as she snapped the door open, standing before him like some avenging angel. He really needed to do something else with his time other than compare people to supernatural creatures.

“And why, Mr. Daniels, are you late to my class?” The raised eyebrow could rival Kayla's.

Fumbling, Owen dug out the pass he'd shoved into his pants pocket, handing it over with trembling fingers. “Mr. Barton needed to talk with me after class and it went a bit longer than he thought.”

“Of course he'd try to take any blame that lays with a student onto himself. Hurry up, and remind me after class to change your absence.” She turned sharply, heels clicking as she moved back to the front of the class. Owen quietly shut the door behind him and scurried to his seat, sinking into his chair as Ms. Yule stared at him.

“As I was saying before we were interrupted, today you’ll be working with your partner on Punnett squares. I expect you all to follow the directions and work quietly.” Her gaze narrowed at a group of cheerleaders giggling in the corner. Their mouths snapped shut, but there were still muffled giggles. “I also have some extra credit sheets up here for when you’re finished. If you have any questions, I expect you to come up and ask them.”

Owen looked at the packet before him, his lab partner looking at her own.

“How do you want to do this?” she asked.

“You can take the first two pages and I’ll take the last two?”

“Deal.”

Owen flipped to the third page, grimacing when he realized they were double-sided. It was a good thing he and Angie worked so well together; otherwise, this could be a lot more difficult.

The class period passed in relative silence, the occasional jock or cheerleader earning a harsh reprimand from Ms. Yule. When there were about five minutes left, Angie volunteered to take their finished packets to the front after Owen filled in the final answer. He watched as she walked up and gave Ms. Yule a bright smile, earning one in return from the usually cranky woman. Angie picked up two of the extra credit pages, setting one in front of him when she arrived back at the table.

“How do you do it?” Owen questioned, amazed that Ms. Yule still had a slight curve to her lips—until one of the jocks laughed, pushing his lab partner out of his seat. They earned detentions for that.

“It’s easy. Be quiet, do your work, do it well, and tell Ms. Yule on occasion how much you enjoy the class and her teaching style.”

“That’s it?” Owen asked incredulously.

Angie looked at him, and Owen had to wonder if all women went to a class early in life teaching them how to give him that particular look. “It’s called being nice.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Being nice?”

“What you say to her?”

“Of course.” Angie snorted, eyes rolling. “I enjoy biology. It’s a career path I’ve been thinking of pursuing.”

“Yeah?”

Angie sighed and put her pencil away, stuffing the extra credit page into her folder and slipping it into her backpack. “Yes, really. Is it so unbelievable that I would enjoy science?”

“Uh, no.” Owen blinked. He was confused. He’d been genuinely curious.

The bell rang, but Angie continued to sit, eyeing him as if he were some new species. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. Did you think I sat next to you in our shared science classes through the years just because I thought you were pretty?” He batted his eyelashes at her, but she just snorted again.

“You really think I’m good at science?”

Owen wasn’t really sure where this was going, but it was obvious someone had told her she sucked. Probably her mom. That woman could terrify a lion. “Yeah, I—”

Owen and Angie startled as a fist slammed into their table. They turned, staring at Kurt as he glowered at them. Ms. Yule was at the front of the classroom, watching them with obvious worry. Owen would be worried, too. He’d heard about the time Kurt had nearly set the woman on fire, even if there wasn’t any proof.

“You’re coming with me.” Kurt grabbed Owen’s wrist, the grip bruising as he tugged.

“All right, all right.” Owen grabbed his bag, clutching at the extra credit sheet at the last moment as Kurt dragged him from the room. Kurt shoved everyone out of their way as he stormed down the hall, heading towards one of the school doors.

Owen really wanted to protest leaving the building, but one glance from Kurt had him biting his tongue. He looked around for anyone who might help—but everyone had turned their heads, moving in another direction as quickly as they could. Even some of the teachers looked away, those who weren't staring at him with obvious dismay. It didn't help that Kurt looked like he could slam his fist through their heads with his bulging biceps, or that he was the star of the football team. Everyone knew that even if he was an ass, the coach would still try to get him out of any trouble.

The door leading outside slammed against the side of the building, and Owen found himself suffering the same fate. He swore but quickly shut up as Kurt got in his face.

“What the fuck did you tell her?”

Owen cowered, eyes wide as he looked for some form of escape. “Tell who, what?”

“What did you tell that fucking bitch? That slut of yours.”

Now Owen was really confused. “Who?”

Kurt growled, shaking him. “Your friend. The blonde. Kayla.”

“I didn't tell Kayla anything. And she's not a slut.” Owen lashed out, surprised when his foot actually connected with Kurt's knee and the bully released his grip. “Don't call her that.”

“Or what?” Kurt crowded him, hands pushing into Owen's shoulders, keeping him pinned when all he wanted to do was slide down the wall.

“Or this.”

Kurt fell to the side with a howl, clutching his side where Kayla had planted her foot. She held her foot over his crotch when he moved to stand.

“I wouldn't do that. Now, why don't you tell me why you're attacking my friend?” When Kurt didn't answer, Kayla pressed her foot down, stopping only when he winced.

“It’s none of your business, bitch. Fuck! Stop!” Kurt grabbed for her foot as she put all her weight down, and Owen had to feel sorry for the guy. That had to hurt.

“Try something else.”

“Fine,” Kurt spat. “I wanted to know why you were staring at me. I thought he’d said something.”

Kayla snorted, moving her foot away, but standing ready. “Everyone stares at you, especially when you make such a spectacle of yourself by storming from a classroom just because you have to work with someone else on a simple project. And what would Owen have told me—Oh!” She turned to Owen. “Him?”

“Shit,” Owen whispered, watching as Kurt’s face turned a mottled red.

“You fucking told.” Kurt reached for Owen, but Kayla kicked his hand away.

“He can’t hide anything from me. And he didn’t tell me who he’d seen, you did.” Kayla turned a calculating look towards Kurt.

Oh shit, Owen thought. He’d seen that look on Kayla’s face before.

“You’ll help Owen with his assignment,” Kayla said, arms folded over her chest.

“Or what?” Kurt finally rose, eyeing Kayla warily. *Smart man.*

“Or I’ll tell everyone the rumors are true.”

Kurt stiffened and Owen had to ask, “What rumors?”

Kayla did her eye roll and sighed heavily. “That his father’s pimping him out.”

“Wha—”

“Shut up!” Kurt was breathing heavily, hands clenched at his sides as he glared at Kayla. A lesser woman would have been killed. Owen wisely took a step behind Kayla.

“I never heard that rumor,” Owen mumbled, a bit upset that he hadn’t. He was supposed to be the one that knew all the gossip. Well, he usually knew it after Kayla told him. She was scary with her ability to know things.

“It’s not one I thought should be spread,” Kayla supplied, eyes still trained on Kurt.

“Who told you?” Kurt demanded, taking a threatening step forward, and Owen took a step back, giving Kayla more room to swing if needed.

“Rumors usually have more than one person spreading them,” she said, not backing down.

Kurt sneered but backed down.

Holy hell. Owen wondered if a zombie apocalypse was going to occur, because he would never have believed Kurt McAllen would step away from a fight.

Kayla nodded and turned, grabbing his arm and dragging him towards the door. “Remember, you’ll work together on any homework assignments where you’re in the same class—and you won’t hurt Owen at all.”

Kayla didn’t wait to hear if Kurt would answer, shoving Owen before her into the school and herding him down the hallway until they rounded a corner.

“Uh, thanks?” He knew Kayla was mad at him; he just wasn’t sure what he’d done.

She rounded on him, lips pinched tight as she scowled at him. “‘Thanks’? I just stood up to Kurt McAllen, probably one of the toughest—and meanest—guys at our school, and you say ‘thanks’?”

“Uh...” He stopped as Kayla wrapped herself around him.

“I’m terrified and hungry. You owe me a cheesy pretzel.”

“Deal,” Owen whispered, stunned by the fine trembles running through Kayla. He sometimes forgot how scared she could get, especially when she stood up to people. He held her close for a moment longer, then pulled back, giving a dopey grin. “Let’s go get you that pretzel. I’m starving.”

CHAPTER TWO

The rest of the day passed without any more incidents. It was mildly disconcerting after the morning he'd had, but Owen didn't want to push his luck—so he left everyone alone, kept his head down, and left school as soon as the final bell rang. He waited for Kayla by her car, glad they worked together at the same place and that he could bum a ride when they worked after school.

It was five minutes before he spotted her, with Kurt skulking behind her. He swallowed against the unease clawing up his throat, hoping Kayla wasn't blackmailing Kurt, because he was about one hundred percent sure that he'd be the one sporting bruises and broken bones if Kayla pushed too far.

"Ready?" she asked, unlocking the car and throwing her bag in the back.

"Uh... sure?" Owen kept an eye on Kurt as he climbed into the passenger seat, having a mild freak-out as Kurt climbed into the back and slammed the door a bit too forcefully. Kayla didn't say anything about it, so he didn't, either.

"Anything else happen today?" Kayla cast him a sidelong glance as he shook his head. "You sure?"

"Yep. Nothing eventful happened today. Nope, nothing."

Kurt snorted and Owen turned, staring at Kurt as he glared out the window. Kurt's hand cupped his chin as his breath fogged up the window.

"So, uh, what's going on? No offense, but I feel like I'm in the car with an angry tiger."

Kayla laughed. "He's coming with us to work. We're going to see if the manager has an open position."

"I don't think—"

"Mark and Ashley quit last week. I think Walt will be more than happy to have a big, strong high schooler to help out."

"Yes, ma'am," Owen grumbled, slumping in his seat.

Kayla gave him an indulgent smile and turned the radio on. It wasn't long until they were both singing along to every rock song that came on. Owen even threw in a few air guitar moves, throwing his head around when a particularly good riff came on. When they pulled into the parking lot of the local movie theater, Owen was in a good mood, grinning from ear to ear.

"You two are weird," Kurt snapped, scrambling from the car as if it were on fire.

"You just say that 'cause you're jealous," Kayla taunted, locking the car once they were all out. "Come on, Walt will want to meet you before hiring you."

Kurt grumbled under his breath but followed along obediently, face pulled into a frown as he trailed Kayla. Owen had to wonder if he needed to bring out his rusted karate skills. He hadn't taken a class in three years, and he wasn't sure he'd remember anything if he needed to defend himself or Kayla. Hoping for the best, he hurried after the two, nearly tripping over his own feet as he rounded the car. Luckily neither had noticed.

The theater smelled like popcorn as they entered, but it only took a few seconds before Owen couldn't smell it anymore. After working at the theater for almost three years, it was no wonder he could no longer smell the popcorn very well. Kayla had been working for Walt almost five years, volunteering for the first two, and she said she couldn't smell it at all unless she took a week off. Mitch, an older gentleman who looked like he'd be better suited in a nursing home, gave them a wobbly smile, raising his trembling hand before his gaze drifted back to the magazine he'd been reading.

"Hey, Mitch. Walt in?" Kayla asked as she strode past, giving the old man a bright smile.

"In his office," Mitch said, his voice almost too soft to hear.

"Thanks." Kayla strode away from them towards a closed door.

With nothing else to do, Owen slipped around Kurt, heading towards the locker room where their shirts were kept.

“Where are you going?” Kurt asked, fingers hooking the collar of Owen’s shirt.

Owen choked for a moment, looking to Mitch for help, but Mitch just looked at them with a fond smile. “I was going to get changed for work.”

Kurt growled behind him and tugged at his collar, forcing Owen to either stop struggling or risk ripping his shirt. He liked the shirt too much to have it damaged by an overbearing asshole.

“Fine, I’ll stay until Kayla gets back.” Owen refused to turn and look at Kurt, instead folding his arms and staring at Mitch.

Mitch sighed, staring at them with distant eyes. “Ah, young love. I remember when I was about your age, courting my wife.”

Owen spluttered. “What?” Okay, if they didn’t have proof, no one could say his voice had gone up into a soprano register. “No. Nuh-uh. Not us.”

“Really?” For an old guy, Mitch could give that disbelieving look just like Owen’s mother.

“You think I’d want to be with this faggot?” Kurt snarled, stomping towards Mitch and looming over him.

Mitch didn’t look impressed. “That’s no way to talk about Owen. I understand it’s still not accepted, but one of my granddaughters is a lesbian, so I won’t condone such language from you even if you are scared someone will find out your secret, young man.”

Owen choked on his tongue, but he couldn’t resist peeking over his shoulder. He had to turn away, biting his lip to stop the laugh bubbling up, because by the green earth, Kurt looked confused. Like he didn’t know whether he should be angry or shocked.

Walt’s voice drew Owen’s attention as he walked from the office trailing behind Kayla. “I don’t know, Kayla. I do need the help, but you can’t expect me to just hire one of your friends on the spot. He’ll need to show me a Social Security card at least, and a driver’s license or some other form of ID. You know the drill.”

“Come on, Walt, it’ll be fine. Right, Kurt?” Kayla looked at them, daring Kurt to disagree.

“Yeah, whatever,” Kurt grumbled, crossing his arms, which flexed his biceps, which, Owen had to admit, were intimidating and hot as the noonday sun.

And Kayla was smirking at him. *Shit*. If Kayla thought he had the hots for Kurt, she’d do everything in her power to try and hook them up—even if Kurt was a douche.

Deciding to make his retreat before Kurt blew up at Walt, Owen ran to the changing room. He was slipping into one of the theater’s shirts and stuffing his own onto a hanger just as the door opened and Kayla sauntered in, looking too smug for anyone’s safety.

“What did you do?” he asked, dutifully turning around when she reached for her work shirt.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh. I know that look. You did something,” Owen accused, tempted to turn around with his eyes closed so he could give her his “I’m being serious” face. The memory of the last time he did that stopped him before his muscles had even bunched to turn.

“Does it really matter?” she asked innocently.

“Depends on what you did.” Owen was terrified, and he knew Kayla knew it.

“Well...” The word rolled off her tongue, hanging teasingly in the air between them, wrapping around Owen until he thought he’d have to scratch himself to make the feeling evoked by that one word go away. “Mitch may have mentioned how it was sad that young lovers had to hide their attraction from the world, and how it was obviously putting strain on your and Kurt’s relationship, and how he wondered if I hadn’t dragged Kurt along to fill a vacancy because I was being such a good friend, and wouldn’t it be great if Walt hired Kurt so the two of you could have some time together without the

world throwing its hatred at you two. And I may have mentioned that I agreed with Mitch.”

By the end, Owen was staring at Kayla like she'd grown five extra heads, never mind that she hadn't told him he could turn around. Thankfully, she'd already pulled the shirt down when he turned around. “What?”

She just grinned at him and flounced from the room. Yep, she definitely could have been prom queen if she wasn't so busy destroying his life. He was sure now that Kurt would wait until it was dark before killing him. The guy obviously *wasn't* gay, even if he was servicing men in alleys, and it was clear from Kurt's attitude that he didn't want to be thought of as gay.

He slunk from the changing room and was taken aback by the sight of Kurt... not smiling, but not frowning either. There was a bit of resignation to the slump of his shoulders, but he didn't look too put out by the turn of events. Owen really wondered what Kayla had said to make Walt hire Kurt and to make Kurt behave for an interview, no matter how short it had been.

Giving up, because someone in the universe had decided that he just couldn't win today, Owen headed over to the group congregated around Mitch at the ticket booth. It looked like they were explaining ticket sales to Kurt.

When Owen drew close, Kurt looked at him. Owen did an about-face, deciding his time was needed cleaning the concession stand and making sure everything was stocked. Didn't want any of the Monday regulars upset if they couldn't have their favorite candy.

Most of the night went by without incident; there was only one small hiccup when Kurt got angry at a moviegoer for calling him slow. Kayla had quickly smoothed the situation over, and Owen wondered, aside from being a good employee, what she had planned. They'd taken Kurt with them for dinner, buying him a burger and fries, even though he said he wasn't hungry. He'd glared at them, proclaiming he wasn't a charity case, to which Kayla had said, “I know. Which is why you'll pay Owen back when you get your first paycheck.”

Owen wasn't going to demand payment—he paid for Kayla's meals all the time. But he nodded, stuffing mozzarella sticks into his mouth so he didn't have to say anything verbally. Kurt still terrified him even if they were almost acting like friends. When their reliefs came in, Owen felt exhausted, and he still had homework to do. Luckily, most of it was easy to do and wasn't due until later in the week, but the hour before bed would be spent working.

Stretching after he'd gotten changed, Owen headed out to the car, shivering slightly in the evening chill. There was a small crowd gathering for the last few shows of the night and Owen didn't want to be caught in the throng, so he decided to wait outside until the crowd thinned out. He'd just pulled out his science extra credit sheet when he spotted movement. Looking up, he froze as Kurt stomped towards him, a scowl etched into his face.

“Say one word to anyone else, I don't care if it's your mother, your father, or some damned priest, and I'll break your bones. Got it?”

Owen nodded, terror clogging his throat. Snorting, Kurt turned away, storming out of the parking lot and towards the area of town Owen had seen him in the previous evening. Oh, Kayla was going to be pissed. As if he'd summoned her, Kayla exited the theater, a self-satisfied grin stretching her face, until she saw Owen standing by himself. Her steps didn't falter, but they did gain force, and Owen wondered if there was anywhere he could hide.

“Where is he?”

“Don't know,” he said while pointing in the general direction Kurt had headed.

Kayla just sighed, unlocking the car as she rounded it to the driver's side.

“Why do you care so much, anyway?” Owen asked as he settled into the passenger seat, hugging his backpack as if it would shield him from the storm he was sure was coming.

Glaring at him, Kayla started the car, waiting until the current song ended before she muted the radio and buckled herself in. Owen quickly did his own seatbelt, glad for it when Kayla peeled out of the parking spot and gunned it

towards the end of the parking lot where a lone figure seemed to be walking with a purpose.

“Because he’s my cousin, but my parents hate his dad, so they refuse to help,” she gritted out, and Owen groaned, because if family was involved, Kayla would do almost anything to help them. It was why she always stuck by Owen. She considered him family, even when he knew he was being stupid.

Kayla rolled down Owen’s window as she pulled alongside Kurt, nearly giving both occupants of the car whiplash as she slammed on the breaks. “Get in the car.”

Kurt sneered at her and began heading away from the road.

Kayla threw the car in park before jumping from the car. Sighing, Owen put the parking brake on before turning the car off, unbuckling himself, and moving out of the car. Kayla was currently screaming at Kurt, and Kurt looked like he was ready to throw a punch. Knowing Kayla’s mom would freak if Kayla came home with one hair out of place, Owen stepped in front of her just as Kurt swung.

“Fuck!” he shouted as he felt the pain erupt in his nose. He could taste blood on the back of his tongue and knew it wouldn’t be long before it would be coating the front too. He gingerly cradled his face, glaring at Kurt, who looked... upset? Didn’t matter, Owen was now officially pissed.

“What the hell is your problem? I know she’s pissing you off by ordering you around, but that’s no way to treat her. Hell, she got you a job at a good place. What do you need money for so badly that you have to sell yourself?”

Owen’s panting breaths filled the air, and he realized belatedly that he might have said too much. Bracing for another fist to his face, Owen was confused when Kurt just turned away, jogging across the ground before disappearing amongst the buildings.

“Did I do something wrong?” Owen asked as he turned to look at Kayla, who was eyeing him with respect. *Oh, ye of little faith.*

“I’m actually impressed you decided to get injured.” She smacked him upside the head. “But don’t do it again.”

“Ow! I’m injured here.”

“Yes, and I could have deflected the blow if you hadn’t stepped in my way.” She gave him her best disapproving look before pulling him into a hug. “Thank you, and please, please don’t tell anyone he’s my cousin.”

“What is wrong with your family?” Owen pulled away, moving back to the car. He hoped he didn’t get too much blood on the seat.

Kayla snorted, following after him and getting in the car. “Don’t you mean, what isn’t wrong with them?” She sighed heavily as she turned the key. “It’s a long story, but to make it short, my parents had a falling out with his parents over money, so my parents disowned his parents and called them pariahs of the family. Kurt wasn’t that bad when we were little. I don’t know when it happened, but he became withdrawn at school, and then he wouldn’t talk or play with me.”

“Ah.” Owen remembered the time when he’d first met Kayla. She’d been curled up beneath a tree, cheeks streaked with dried tears and a decidedly put-upon look on her face when he’d approached her. But there’d been something that had forced him to keep bugging her until she’d finally sat with him at lunch, and they’d been inseparable ever since.

“Yeah. I don’t know when it happened, but he became kind of violent. It was little things. If someone demanded he do something, he’d snap. Now, though, it’s every little thing.” There was a heavy pause before she continued in a whisper, “I think his dad’s been prostituting him out for a lot longer than anyone could guess. If only I’d known.”

She cursed, and Owen wanted to let her rage, but he knew it wouldn’t do her any good. She was better when questions were asked. It gave her something to focus on. “How could you have known? When did the rumors start? And, if you’re cousins, why are you so terrified of him?”

She shot him a look for the last question. “You do realize what he did to your nose, right?” Then Kayla thought for a moment, before sighing, her hands loosening their death grip on the steering wheel. “You’re right, for once.”

“Hey!”

She grinned at him. “I couldn’t have known. Wouldn’t have even thought of it until I heard the rumor over the summer. I tried to investigate, but we were always busy at the theater, and my parents forced me into that college prep class. I still should have investigated sooner.”

“Hey,” Owen said softly, reaching over to chuck her under the chin as she drove, “better late than never, right? Besides, now that you know the problem, we can do our best to help him out.”

“Why would you want to help him? For me, it’s because he’s family, but you...”

“Hey, now.” Owen pretended to look offended. “I’m your family, and while I wouldn’t jump in to save your parents when the apocalypse occurs, your family is my family. And you know I can’t stand to see you upset. It’s no wonder people question if I’m really gay, given the amount of time I spend catering to your needs.”

Kayla laughed, just like he knew she would, and they settled into the silence of the car.

CHAPTER THREE

Owen dragged himself into school the next morning, wishing he could turn right around and crawl back into his bed. His head throbbed. Well, it was more his nose, but he could feel a headache coming on. Which is exactly the reason he had told his mom not to worry his sister by calling at ten thirty the night before, but would she listen? Nooo, because listening would be the sensible thing. Letting him go to sleep would also have been sensible, but no one had wanted to do that.

He couldn't get much further into bemoaning his fate, though, because Trisha Holland sidled up to him. If he was remotely acquainted with her this would have been okay, but she was *the* cheerleader, and having her walk next to him was close to terrifying. Almost on the same terror level as Kurt McAllen. Almost.

“So, is it true?”

“Huh?” *Very eloquent, Owen.*

Trisha rolled her eyes at him. “You know... about Kurt?” Her voice lowered to a whisper when she said Kurt's name.

“Uh... What about Kurt?”

“Yeah, what about Kurt?”

Owen *eeped*, glad that Trisha's shriek of terror drowned out the less than manly sound.

Trisha gave a strained laugh before pretending one of her friends was calling her and making a quick getaway. If Owen remembered right, she used to date Kurt, until she'd said or done something Kurt hadn't approved of; or maybe Kurt had been his usual douche-y self. The rumors said he'd hit her, and not anything like a light, or even hard, smack across the face. Nope. Rumor was that it had been a closed fist, right in the nose, kind of like what Owen had experienced last night. He wondered if it was a thing with Kurt, going for the nose?

“Why were you talking with her?” Kurt growled out, body tense as he crowded into Owen’s space.

“Dude, relax. I didn’t tell her anything,” Owen said, trying to slide along the wall away from Kurt, but Kurt just followed him.

“Bull.”

“Look—” Owen *eeped* again as Kurt’s fist slammed into the wall beside his head. *That has got to hurt.*

“Listen, you little pansy-assed faggot, I don’t want you in my business or spreading it, got it?”

Owen nodded his head, swallowing against the dry fear that choked him. “Yeah, sure.”

Kurt sneered before stepping back, shoving a kid out of the way as he stormed down the hallway, snapping at some of his teammates when one bumped into him. By all that was green, Owen really hoped Kurt wouldn’t show up to their English class, or to the study session Kayla had told Owen he would be hosting at his house after school—just him and Kurt. Could his day get any worse?

“Mr. Daniels, I’d like to see you in my office.”

Owen turned, wondering whom he’d pissed off, because there was no reason going to the principal’s office would be a good thing. And it wasn’t. Apparently, one of the teachers had decided to try and save Owen by informing the principal that he’d been taken out of the school by Kurt.

A day late and a dollar short. Owen snorted to himself at the thought. He had to sit through almost all of his first period class listening to a lecture about how it was his responsibility to stand up to anyone bullying him, and how he needed to inform those in a position of authority when he’d been pushed into doing something he didn’t want to. Teachers were there to help. Owen tuned out after that, giving the occasional nod in hopes that it would speed things along, but it didn’t. It seemed the principal had been waiting a while to give this speech to someone, and apparently Owen was the only one who’d ever shown a pulse after the first few minutes.

When he was finally released there was no point going to his first period class, since the bell would be ringing in fifteen minutes. Instead he headed towards the bathroom, nearly screaming in terror as he was grabbed by the back of his shirt and hauled into an empty classroom. He found himself connecting with a wall—and he was kind of getting tired of bodily meeting all these walls when none of them had even taken him out on a date first—as Kurt snorted into his face.

“What did he want?”

“Who?” Owen blinked, trying to figure out what was going on, and did Kurt really think shaking him would get him some sort of answer? “The principal? He wanted to lecture me about bullying and how I need to stand up for myself.”

Kurt seemed to relax, and Owen wondered what he’d thought had been discussed, but his tight grip on the front of Owen’s shirt didn’t slacken.

“Um, so, are you going to let me go now? I kind of have to pee, and the whole scaring me thing isn’t helping.”

Kurt gave him a look of disgust, releasing him and stepping back, almost as if he expected Owen to take a leak right then and there. Rolling his eyes, Owen left the room, more than a little unnerved when Kurt followed him. When he trailed him into the bathroom, Owen wondered if he’d even be able to piss at this rate.

“What do you want?” Owen sighed, going to the farthest urinal, angling his body so he could have some privacy, because even if Kurt scared the shit out of him, he really needed to pee.

Kurt rolled his eyes and unzipped his pants. “You’re not the only one Mother Nature talks to.”

“Dude, really?” Owen asked, talking to the wall because he really did not want to piss off Kurt when he had his privates hanging out.

The sound of shuffling drew Owen’s attention, dragging his curiosity to the fore. He peeked over his shoulder, wondering what his level of comfort was—definitely somewhere in the negative digits—and there was Kurt standing at

the urinal next to him. Looking for all the world like it was normal for him to be standing so close to another guy when there were so many options available that would have put a lot more space between them.

“Are you trying to freak me out? Going for a new level of bullying since you’ve already broken my nose?” Owen asked, wishing his bladder would hurry up and finish because he was practically squirming with how uncomfortable he was feeling. He would swear he felt the heat radiating from Kurt. He could also feel the glare he knew was directed at the back of his head.

He was glad when his bladder was finally satisfied, quickly tucking himself away and zipping up before skirting around Kurt, still refusing to look *there*, even if he was tempted. Owen had just finished washing his hands when Kurt came up beside him, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Owen debated the merits of running from the bathroom screaming like a little girl, but his thoughts were stalled when he heard Kurt mumble... No, he couldn’t have heard that right.

“What?”

Kurt glared at him as he washed his hands, flicking his wet fingers in Owen’s face, smirking when Owen sputtered and grabbed for a paper towel to scrub across his face. That was a stupid idea because he bumped his nose, and that hurt. He cursed, throwing the paper towel away in a huff, because, really, this was getting to be a bit much. Then he noticed that Kurt looked uncomfortable again.

“I said I was sorry,” Kurt finally spat, storming from the bathroom. Owen winced as the door smacked into someone, but whatever protest the person on the other side of the door would have made was cut off as Kurt shouted at the guy.

Owen shook his head, deciding he must have hit his head, because there was no way this was his life right now. Then his mind reminded him he’d be seeing Kurt after school, at his house, and he could only hope Kurt had something better to do.

Owen groaned to himself as he realized that, no, Kurt didn't have anything better to do than come to his house as Kayla had dictated—with the homework, no less. He grumbled to himself about wonders never ceasing and stormed up the front steps. His nose and head were throbbing, and all he wanted to do was down some aspirin, crawl into bed, and not move until he stopped aching. Unfortunately, Kurt didn't seem to understand body language—more likely he chose to ignore it—as he followed Owen into his house.

Not that Owen really cared, but he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder every once in a while as he led Kurt into his house, watching Kurt's reaction to the place Owen had grown up in. Kurt didn't appear to be impressed, but he also didn't show any disdain. There was a mild curiosity that quickly disappeared anytime Kurt noticed Owen watching him, but, for some reason, Owen found it promising. For what, he wasn't sure.

Owen led the way up the stairs to his room, pushing the door open and flinging his backpack onto his bed. He jolted as Kurt's bag flew passed his head, landing with a thump next to Owen's. Owen turned, meeting Kurt's smirk with a frown. He really didn't appreciate being scared in his own house. It wasn't as if there was anything he could say, though, so he turned back around and continued into his room, booting up his computer and turning on his music. He glowered when Kurt snorted at his choice of classical music.

"It helps with studying," Owen said, feeling as if he had to defend himself.

"Sure. Pussy." Kurt smirked at him, bulging arms crossed over his chest.

Owen sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Listen, I understand it's natural for you to say that, but if my mom, or sister, come home and hear you saying things like that, they'll probably wash your mouth out with soap. Or my mom might put you over her knee. As much as I'd like to see that, I don't want you to lash out at my mom, which I'm sure you'd do, because then my sister would be forced to arrest you. She'd convince my mom it would be in your best interest to press charges, which leaves you going to jail, me without a partner for this project, and the football team without their star player. Though

I'm sure there are several people at our school who'd be more than happy to see you behind bars becoming someone's bitch."

"You think someone could make me their bitch?" Kurt snarled, getting right into Owen's face. "I don't think so, you—"

Owen briefly wondered if he'd lose the hand he'd just slammed over Kurt's mouth. "Look, I know my parents aren't home at the moment, but you really shouldn't—What the fuck?"

Owen yanked his hand back, staring at his hand as if it had been splashed with poison. He glared accusingly at Kurt. "You licked me."

"You put your hand over my mouth," Kurt said with a shrug. "Next time, I'll be sure to bite."

Owen huffed, slumping down next to his bed as he glared at Kurt. Grabbing his bag, Owen dug out their English homework, ignoring the way Kurt settled next to him. Their shoulders nearly touched as Kurt moved, dragging his bag over and pulling out a thick folder. Owen pretended he didn't see the way Kurt's way-too-big biceps flexed, or that the muscles in his legs strained against the dark jeans he wore when he shifted, getting comfortable as he dug out his homework.

"What do we need to do?" Kurt's voice snapped Owen out of his perusal of the other's physique.

"Huh?" And didn't Owen feel all kinds of stupid for that intelligent response. "Haven't you read the packet?"

Kurt just looked at him, and Owen realized with a small coil of something low in his gut he would never admit to feeling around Kurt that there were tiny flecks of green and hazel in Kurt's blue eyes and that his short hair wasn't just any plain brown, but more like warm, dark chocolate. Shaking himself—maybe he needed to have an early meeting with Mike—Owen turned his gaze away, focusing on the packet he'd dug out.

"Mr. Barton wants us to pick one of the plays—not *Romeo and Juliet*, because he feels there's too much information out there about that story line—and come up with some ideas of how the plot can be found in today's culture.

We have to have a decision by the end of next week, along with a general list of ideas. If more than two groups pick the same play, then Mr. Barton will decide who has the best grasp of the play's general concepts and tell the other groups to pick a different play."

"Seriously? That's such bullshit," Kurt grumbled, flipping through the packet even though Owen knew he wasn't reading it.

"That's the reason why he's given us the deadline. It's so if we have a good idea, and those groups struggling with their initial play can have a chance to pick a different one and go from there."

"Right. Still doesn't make any sense to me. So, which play are we going with?"

Kurt folded his arms, attention fixed on Owen. Owen had to shift around a bit as those muscles flexed, settling a notebook over his lap—he was some kind of masochist, he just knew it. "Well, I was thinking something along the lines of *The Taming of the Shrew*. It's the only play by Shakespeare I've ever been able to actually read without using some kind of translator, and my sister really liked the play, so we could always pick her brain for any cultural references."

"Why am I here, again? Aside from the fact that Kayla has threatened me?"

"Because we both have to present our idea to Mr. Barton and we both have to work on this project. He'll know if I did it all and just had you rewrite it."

"How the fuck is he going to know?" Kurt gnashed his teeth, and Owen wondered why Kurt had to be so confrontational about everything.

"For one, it's highly likely you won't use the same language I would. And if you take something I've written and put it in your own words, it will still be my idea and the parts of the project will flow too smoothly together."

Kurt blinked at him, wearing a look that said he thought Owen was stupid. "Isn't that the whole point of doing a project with someone else? To make sure the parts flow together?"

Owen bit his lip, trying not to laugh. “No, the point of this kind of group project is to make sure that the work is divided equally. There’s bound to be differences of opinion and writing style.”

Kurt snorted, but he raised the packet and actually appeared to look through it. “What’s it about?”

“Huh?” Owen was caught off guard, and he was not staring at Kurt. The way his head was tilted to the side as he read, the way his mouth moved slightly as he processed the words. Owen felt screwed, and not in the nice, fun way, but the “holy hell, I’m lusting after a douche” kind of way.

“The story, about the shrew.”

“Oh. Oh! Well, it’s about this woman who most call a shrew because of the way she acts and—” The standard ringtone of Owen’s phone cut him off.

Sighing, Owen dug it out of the front of his backpack, checking the caller ID and wondering why Kayla was calling him. Usually she texted. Glancing at Kurt, Owen gave a shrug before flipping his phone open and pressing the send button.

“Hey, Kayla.”

“Did he show up?”

Owen chuckled softly. “Yes, and it’s so good to hear from you, too.”

He heard Kayla snort. “Good. Don’t let him harass you. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, and don’t forget, we have work tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mom,” Owen chimed, grinning widely at the playful growl from Kayla. “See you tomorrow.”

He closed the phone and set it aside, noticing that Kurt was staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

“What?” Owen asked.

“Why was she calling?” There was an undercurrent of strain, but Owen wasn’t sure why.

Owen shrugged his shoulders. “Just wanted to check that you’d made it and to remind me that we have work tomorrow.”

Kurt snorted and rolled his eyes, turning his attention back to the packet. Gnawing on his bottom lip, Owen decided to drop any questions he might have and went back to explaining the story and how they could use it for their project.

CHAPTER FOUR

The past month had been going smoothly for Owen. Kurt was still being a douche, but he seemed to have calmed down somewhat, and Kayla was always giving Owen looks that he chose to ignore. Owen couldn't help but wonder if there weren't some way he could help Kurt. He knew it was stupid, but he actually... kind of... liked Kurt. And he hated watching Kurt walk away towards the part of town where Owen had first learned his secret, whether it was after they finished work at the theater or—Owen had agreed to help Kurt in all his classes—after going over homework.

Pushing all thoughts of Kurt from his mind, Owen maneuvered the hallways with Kayla, neither saying anything as they headed to study hall. The normal buzz of chatter filled the space around them. If Owen hadn't been trying so hard not to think about Kurt, he probably would have missed hearing a group of cheerleaders start talking about him.

“Lauren, I saw Kurt in town the other night.” Owen's steps slowed, and he ignored the lifted eyebrow Kayla cast his way even as she slowed her steps as well.

“Ugh, I don't want to talk about him.” Owen glanced to the side, spotting Lauren, head cheerleader and most likely to be prom queen, scowling at one of the girls beside her. Everyone knew she'd been pissed ever since Kurt had turned her down last year, and she was always looking for something nasty to say about him.

“I think you'll want to hear this though,” the girl persisted, a smirk twisting her lips. “I saw him with a man.”

“Oh?” Owen froze as Lauren gave the girl a once over, and for some reason, Owen felt his blood beginning to heat. “Do tell.”

The girl giggled, using one of her hands to toss her hair over her shoulder in a move that had Kayla snorting beside him. “He was with some fat, old man, and I swear they went into some building together, but this wasn't normal because the guy had his arm around Kurt's waist.”

The other cheerleaders gasped, and Owen felt himself flushing in anger at the satisfied smirk pulling across Lauren's lips. For some reason his mouth moved before his brain as he turned to Kayla.

"Did you hear about Lauren? That cheerleader?"

Kayla gave him an amused look, and Owen realized they must have stopped walking, but raised her voice to match his as she said, "What about her?"

"I heard she was caught beneath the bleachers with two of the wrestlers, but not just any wrestlers." He leaned towards her, pretending to drop his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Twin Pimple-Faces."

Kayla chuckled, and there were a few other students who'd heard and were already whispering. Everyone had given the two fattest, ugliest guys on the wrestling team the nickname of Pimple Face, since both of them were covered in large, nasty pimples, but the real kicker that made everyone avoid the pair was the fact that they rarely seemed to bathe and tended to walk around with food stains covering their clothes. Owen heard a sharp intake of breath and turned, spotting Lauren's red, splotchy face twisted into a grimace.

As she pushed through the crowd, the heels of her shoes clicking harshly against the floor, Owen wondered if he'd gone too far. Students were parting, forming a circle around them as Lauren stopped in front of him. Her head tilted imperiously as she looked him over like a dead bug on her plate.

"What did you say, you little faggot?"

Owen could see her fingers flexing, the long nails looking sharp as they moved through the air. "What are you talking about?" He decided feigning innocence was his best course of action. He could feel Kayla's hand wrapping into the back of his shirt, as if she could somehow pull him away from the confrontation.

He knew he was going to be slapped, and that those nails would hurt, but part of him whispered to stand still and accept it. After all, he really wasn't the kind of person who would spread such vicious rumors, even if the look in Lauren's eyes said they might be true. Just as he was tensing, a large hand

gripped Lauren's wrist in a bruising grip, causing a gasp to escape between her lips. She jerked, turning to see who would dare stop her. Owen felt his eyes widen as he saw Kurt standing there, a scowl darkening his face as he stared at the two of them.

"And what do you think you're doing?" Kurt's voice was low, sending a fine tremor along Owen's spine.

Lauren tried to wrench her wrist away, but Kurt only tightened his grip. "I was going to slap the fairy for insulting me," Lauren shouted, and Owen thought he heard teachers trying to get through the crowd. Kayla's hand tugging at the back of his shirt was a second indicator that they should leave.

"Don't call him that," Kurt said, using his grip on Lauren's hand to shove her away, causing her to stumble into the girls she'd been talking with earlier. He turned to Owen then, grasping the back of his neck before leading him through the crowd, snarling at Kayla when she tried to follow.

Owen nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Lauren shriek, "What are you? His fag buddy?" Owen trembled, wincing at the tightening grip pushing harshly into sensitive skin. He didn't think his mother would approve if he came home with bruises on his throat. Kurt didn't seem to hear her, or, more likely, ignored her.

No one else called after them or followed them, and Owen quickly found himself shoved into an unused room with Kurt looming over him. There was a sense of *déjà vu*. Then the memory of the day after Owen had discovered Kurt's secret flashed across his mind. He vaguely wondered if this was how Kurt dealt with everyone who upset him, because Kurt was clearly upset. Though angry might have been a better word as he grabbed Owen's shoulders and slammed him into the wall.

"What the fuck were you doing?"

Owen winced as spittle hit his face, but he squared his shoulders as he snapped back, "Teaching Lauren that she can't just say things."

"And what business is it of yours?" Kurt snarled, his nose bumping Owen's.

“Well, we’re... not really friends, but at least we’re not strangers, or even mere acquaintances.”

Kurt didn’t say anything, just snarled again as he used his grip on Owen’s shoulders to force him to his knees, his face a breath away from Kurt’s groin.

“Do you want to know what strangers, acquaintances, and fucking friends do to me?” Kurt was panting, his hands trembling where they dug into Owen’s shirt. “They force me to my knees and demand I take them out and suck them until they come. They used to fuck me,” Kurt’s fingers jabbed harshly into the fabric covering his shoulders, and Owen could feel the nails digging into his skin as Kurt flexed his arms, “but I realized that bulking up made them less inclined to try that. Do you want to be on the same level as them?”

Owen gasped as Kurt clenched his fingers hard, dragging Owen’s upper body closer. Owen raised his hands, bracing himself on Kurt’s hips as he stared up at the guy he’d become at least a little comfortable with over the last few weeks. “No,” Owen gasped out, because he didn’t want to take from Kurt, didn’t want to force Kurt to do anything he didn’t want to. He wanted to fill Kurt up, to give him everything he could want, even if he was still too young to really understand what that meant.

“What do you want me to do?” Kurt choked out. For a moment, Owen was confused. Then he saw the fragile spark in Kurt’s eyes, and he unconsciously tugged on Kurt’s hip, dragging the other man down to his level.

When they were both on their knees, Owen wrapped his arms around Kurt, holding him close as Kurt trembled, breaths hitching as he sucked them in. Owen didn’t understand why now, why here, but he continued to hold Kurt, allowing Kurt to hold him like a life raft.

The bell signaling the start to the period rang shrilly through the room, but Owen didn’t heed it. He just hugged Kurt closer when he tried to jerk away. It was odd, and it was strange, but something had broken—and Owen knew it wasn’t just something in Kurt, because Owen had never felt so protective of another person in all his life. Not even Kayla.

Shivering as Kurt heaved lungsful of air in and out, dampening Owen's shirt with the force of them, Owen realized he had no idea of what to do. But, if for no other reason than he was holding him at the moment, Owen vowed that he'd help Kurt climb from the hellhole life had put him in. Someway, somehow. By the Green Lady, he was so screwed.

THE END

Author Bio

Ann Anderson is an odd little duck who lives in an odd little pond in an odd little place. It's a place filled with words, a pond filled with ideas, and a duck without enough time to listen and write them all down. Ann loves the usual reading and writing, but she also enjoys playing videogames when she can spare the time and isn't working or torturing her cats.

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ROUGH IN THE SADDLE

By **Hennessee Andrews**

Photo Description

Two men in ball hats, plaid shirts, jeans, and boots sprawl in their seats in a rodeo grandstand. Their heads rest together and their shoulders touch, and the man on the right has his hand around the other man's thigh. They are clearly friends, probably lovers. At the rail in front of and below them, three cowboys watch the action in the arena.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two guys were childhood friends. They tried to hide their relationship in the rodeo but they got caught, so they ran away. That is when they found the gay rodeo. HEA please, and not too much angst.

Sincerely,

Ang

Story Info

Genre: western

Tags: cowboys, coming out, friends to lovers, masturbation, gay rodeo

Word count: 23,209

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ROUGH IN THE SADDLE

By Hennessee Andrews

CHAPTER 1

A warm breeze blew through the newly budding trees, while the bright sun above cast its life-giving rays down to the earth below. The clothesline was loaded full of brilliant white sheets his mother had just hung out to dry.

Eight-year-old Wade stood proud with his new pair of Wrangler's on, complete with his boots and the spurs Santa brought him for Christmas. In his right hand, he held his lariat and practiced twirling it above his head. Macon Sumner, his best friend, was there for a sleepover, and the two were out in the front yard with a calf roping dummy.

Macon tossed his rope, yanked, and missed the back metal legs. Wade shook his head with disgust. "How you gonna be a heeler, Macon, if you can't throw a rope any better than that?"

Macon reeled up his rope and glared. "I bet you can't do any better."

"Oh, yeah?" Wade stepped up to the challenge and motioned for Macon to back up. "Get out of the way. I'll show you."

He narrowed his eyes in concentration as he swung his rope. "One of these days, I'm gonna be in the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame just like Jake Barnes. If you want to be as good as his partner, Clay Cooper, you better start practicing more."

"Just throw the rope, Wade." Macon poked his little hands into his pockets and gave an irritated growl.

"Don't rush me. I'm concentrating."

Macon rolled his eyes. "You ain't setting no records, that's for sure."

"Shut up, Macon."

“Throw the rope since you think you’re so good,” Macon taunted him.

Wade’s rope twirled faster above his head while he worked on his aim, remembering what his dad taught him. Concentrate, steady as you throw. He could almost imagine being on a horse and chasing the elusive prize, a calf running out of a chute with trails of dust flying up behind him. He threw and Macon snickered.

“Miss, ha!”

Wade pointed his finger at Macon. “It’s your fault. You laughed when I threw the rope.”

“You’re just mad cuz you missed and ain’t no better than me,” Macon smarted off, and stuck out his tongue at him.

Wade jerked his rope and began pulling it back to him. “Am too.”

“Are not.” Macon straightened his posture, bowing up for a fight. The boys played hard and fought hard if they took a notion to.

Wade glared. “You wanna fight?”

“Oh, no. There won’t be any fighting or fussing, boys.” Wade’s father spoke in his deep baritone voice as he walked up.

Wade crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at the ground. “He said—”

“No fussing,” his father repeated himself. “Roping is hard work and takes a lot of practice. No one is good when they first set out. Fighting doesn’t help either. Hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” Wade didn’t bother to look up. When his dad laid down the law, he knew to listen and keep his mouth shut.

“Y’all go on up to the house and get washed up for lunch. Afterwards, I’ll come out and work with you two. Remember now, it takes lots of practice and team work. That’s why it’s called team roping.”

Macon nodded, his fingers wrapped tightly around his rope. “Sorry, Wade.”

Wade shrugged and looked off into the distance. “Sorry, Macon.”

That event had happened fifteen years previously, and now twenty-three-year-old Wade Sutherland woke up to his annoying alarm clock. He pushed up to a sitting position and put his feet to the floor while thinking about times long ago when life was simple and easy. Back then, his biggest worries were breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Now, he felt lost and without direction.

The sun peeked through the blinds as it rose. He looked at the time and scrubbed his head, trying to wake up. There was a lot to do at his father’s ranch today. He blinked the sleepiness from his eyes and summoned the energy to rise, wishing he could lie back down instead.

Wade padded out of his tiny bedroom toward the kitchen. Coffee was his first order of business to attend to. He realized he missed being at home. His mother would already be up, with a fresh pot of coffee waiting and breakfast cooking on the stove. Since he moved out nearly six months ago, his diet consisted mainly of toaster-ready breakfast meals in the morning, lunch at his parents’ house, and most anything off the menu of the local diner, Angela’s Place, for dinner.

It had been past time to move out. But who in their right mind would purposely leave a place with home-cooked meals, laundry service, a job, and all bills paid? The event that changed his life eight months earlier helped nudge him out of the nest, only because he couldn’t stand the tension any longer, or the crummy looks his father offered as a result.

One scoop of ground coffee, then two, dropped into the waiting filter. He yawned as he pulled the pot out and moved to the sink to fill it. As he turned on the water, he looked out the window to the driveway. His shiny, blue Ford truck shimmered in the sunlight. Outside of that truck, and the trailer parked by the fence, Wade only had one other possession he adored. That was Macon Sumner.

The water ran over while he got lost in his thoughts. Wade wasn't much of a morning person, at all. He shut the faucet off and poured the excess out. His ears perked up as a familiar rumble outside grew closer and closer. He smiled and poured the water into the maker, then flipped the on switch.

The back door flew open and Macon entered. "Hot damn! What a great day." He grinned and pulled out a chair and sat down. "I see you're up, but that's about all I can say." He motioned to the fact that Wade was still wearing his boxers and sporting morning wood.

Wade shook his head. Macon was a morning person, and an annoying one at that. Wade leaned against the counter and leveled his gaze on the sandy-blond-haired guy he grew up with. Even after all these years, Macon still had his crooked grin and dimples when he smiled extra hard. Macon's bright blue eyes regarded Wade, raking over his naked torso. "Have I ever been a morning person, man?" Wade raised a questioning brow.

"No, but it's about damn time. Tell that coffee maker of yours to hurry it up. We need to pour a couple of cups down your throat and get you jump-started."

Wade chuckled. "You're like that annoying rabbit that keeps going and going."

"Really?" Macon adjusted the front of his jeans. "That's the first complaint about my energy and stamina." He winked and took off his ball hat and tossed it on the table.

The guy never ceased to surprise Wade or to excite him. After all they had been through, he never tired of looking at Macon's handsome face, bright blue eyes, and short, stylish hair. His smile was one that Wade couldn't resist and it never failed to brighten his day. He liked many, many other qualities about Macon, and those concerned his fit and muscled body, tight, round ass, and what was concealed beneath the denim.

Macon chuckled and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms while appraising Wade with a grin. His legs were relaxed and gaped open wide, with

his boot-clad feet sprawled out in front of him. The worn denim of his jeans molded around his muscular legs and highlighted his bulge. Around his waist was the belt Wade bought him a few years back, and the buckle they won in the team roping championship last fall prominently commanded his attention. “See something you like?”

“As always.” Wade grinned and turned to pull two cups from the cabinet. “As much as I’d like to explore, I’ll have to take a rain check. Dad has a shit-ton of calves that have to be worked today. I need to get my ass over there and not give him any more reasons to be disgusted with me.”

“Is it still that bad?” Macon reached for the cup of coffee Wade handed him.

Wade shrugged. “He’s actually down to one or two offhanded comments a day now. How’s your old man?”

Macon sipped his coffee. “Whew, hot.”

“You know it’s hot, so why do you do that?” Wade shook his head and snorted.

Macon awarded him with a middle-finger salute.

Wade smiled. “Later.”

Macon sat his cup down and tapped his fingers on the table for a moment. “To be honest, my dad isn’t a barrel of fucking laughs either. I’m just getting better at ignoring him.” He paused and shrugged. “I figure it’s my life, not his, or anyone else’s. My business is my business and really, they can all kiss my ass. You should adopt that attitude as well.” He nodded his head as if speaking the gospel.

Wade took a sip of coffee. *If it were only as easy for me.*

“Oooh, shit. I’m going to be late for work.” Macon hopped up out of his chair. “I’ll be by to pick you up at seven.” He walked over to Wade. “Be ready.” He kissed him softly. “I’ll have everything loaded.”

Wade groaned and grabbed Macon's belted waist and pulled him closer. "Oh, believe me, I'll be waiting." He angled his head to the side and gently kissed Macon's neck. "All the things I'm going to do to you, boy."

"Shit, man." Macon backed up and looked down. "See what you did? Great, I'm going to work with a hard-on, again!"

Wade reached over and grasped Macon's cock through his jeans. He gave a playful squeeze and grinned. "I promise to make it up to you."

Macon licked his lips, closed his eyes, and moaned. "Damn right, you better."

Wade laughed and let go. "Get to work."

"That's what I want to say to you." Macon opened his eyes. They had already taken on the lustful glaze he got when aroused. Wade had to work to control the desire tenting his form-fitting boxers. Macon looked down and his lips quirked up. "Looks like you'll be leaving the house as hard as I am."

"Nah, I have time to stroke one off before I leave," he teased, rubbing his erection for Macon to see. "Tick, tock. You're going to be late."

Macon growled and turned to leave. "I don't know whether to hate you or fuck you sometimes."

"You forgot your hat," Wade called.

Macon stomped back toward the table and picked up his hat. "Tonight, man, be ready," he warned, and pulled his hat down onto his head. His blue eyes twinkled with enjoyment. They teased each other all the time, and Wade found it heightened their later encounters.

He watched as Macon jogged from the house, his tight jeans showcasing his marvelous ass with each quick step he took. Wade couldn't be sure who lost this battle. He supposed they both did, as he had lied and actually had no time to tame his highly alert cock. Macon's truck roared to life outside and Wade smiled, stopping to pick up his coffee on the way to his bedroom.

He dressed quickly and sat down on the edge of his bed to pull on his boots. His little stunt created a painful situation when he bent over. Excitement about the upcoming night made him smile. Every year, at this same time, the pair camped out by the river on the back of his dad's place. The tradition started when they were thirteen. During that year, their parents had finally agreed they were old enough to camp alone. He and Macon continued the tradition, until the one camping trip back in high school when they were seniors changed everything between them. At eighteen, both were full of raging hormones, and awoke each morning with their soldiers standing at attention.

That night, so many years ago, was one Wade would never forget. He was sure Macon wouldn't either. That fateful night they went from being best friends to lovers. Macon hauled his father's stash of porn magazines to the campsite, and Wade managed to get his hands on a twelve pack of beer. They drank beer and sat by the campfire looking at endless pictures of R-rated sex in full color. Both became mesmerized by the sight and also extremely hard up.

Wade recalled that night as if it were yesterday. Macon had never been shy about anything and had no qualms about pulling out a tube of lubricant he'd stowed away in his backpack. "Look what I brought." He'd grinned as he tossed the tube down between them and began unbuckling his belt.

Wade became nervous and oddly excited about the notion of jacking off with his best friend. "Don't you feel weird about this?" he'd asked, and averted his gaze, but he couldn't keep his eyes from wandering down to watch Macon unzip his jeans.

"Hell no. It's not like we haven't seen each other's dicks before." Macon sat up on his knees and pushed his jeans down. His erection popped out, his pale flesh highlighted by the fire. "And don't tell me you don't stroke yours."

"Well, I—"

Macon had laughed and grabbed the tube, flipped open the lid, and squeezed out a healthy dose. "Suit yourself, liar."

Wade watched with eagerness as Macon lubed his shaft and groaned with enthusiasm. There was something about the deep sound of his voice when it rumbled in his chest, and the way his face took on a contented expression. Something about the moment just left him awestruck and rendered him speechless.

“Oh, yeah, this is awesome.” Macon hummed while pulling slowly from the base of his cock to the tip, before traveling back down the length again. The fire made the lube glisten and shine.

Whether it was the alcohol, countless erotic pictures, or Macon stroking his cock in front of him, Wade couldn't decide which had him more turned on. The warm orange light of the fire homed in on Macon's face, accenting his cheek bones and the curve of his lips as they opened and then smiled with a sensual expression. Wade couldn't peel his eyes away from the scene playing out in front of him. A new desire percolated through his veins, a feeling unlike any he'd ever experienced when around any girl he had dated. The feeling so overwhelming, in fact... it caused his dick to become painfully erect.

“You know you want to, Wade.” Macon spoke softly and opened his eyes, his hand still working his swollen shaft. “This is between you and me. It will never leave camp.”

Wade wobbled as he moved to his knees. The alcohol had his mind abuzz, and the moment caused his heart to race erratically. His fingers fumbled with his belt. He couldn't shake the newfound thrill that made his skin tingle. Quickly, he managed to gain control of his faculties, unbuttoning and unzipping his jeans. Macon offered an approving smile as Wade shoved his jeans down and reached for the lube. His hands shook as he squeezed out almost a handful, not meaning to take so much.

As his heart irregularly beat in his chest, his hand reached for his cock. The heat from the fire, and his nervousness, made him break out in a sweat. His cock hurt so bad, he could barely stand to stroke it. Watching Macon pleasure himself without regard or embarrassment caused Wade's balls to pull up tight.

“That’s it, Wade, stroke it,” Macon encouraged him, never losing his rhythm. His hips moved, pushing his cock through his grip with slow and easy strokes. His flat washboard abs flexed while his hips wiggled and thrust forward.

Wade’s breaths came quickly, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He was so hard and so wound up at that moment. He couldn’t stop the uncontrollable desire or the quivers that raced through his gut. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His release hovered seemingly at the tip. He didn’t want to blow so fast in front of Macon. Wouldn’t that make him seem weak, he wondered, as he took another large gulp of air.

When he found the control he wanted, he opened his eyes and Macon was there, a few inches away. Something feral and dark loomed in his expression. His normally playful blue eyes were narrowed, piercing. Wade wanted to speak, but couldn’t. His words lumped in his chest when Macon grabbed his cock and took over the task for him. A shuddered breath was all he could manage. Having Macon grasp his cock terrified and shocked him, but more so, it excited the hell out of him.

“I’ve always wanted to do this, Wade,” Macon stated with an intense look on his face. “I’ve dreamt of this, me and you... like this.”

“You—you have?” Wade stuttered, and his stomach muscles tightened. It felt so wrong, but at the same time, so right.

“Oh, yeah.” Macon pulled Wade’s cock with a tight grip, sending Wade’s head spinning with an overload of emotions. “I’ve always wanted to do this, too.” He paused and moved closer, pressing his cock against Wade’s. He wrapped both of his hands around their swollen shafts and slowly moved his hips back and forth, rubbing them together. “Oh, hell, it feels better than I could have imagined.”

Wade couldn’t summon the courage to move or mutter a word. He was overcome with longing to experience more. The feel of their cocks gliding over each other in Macon’s hands was out of this world. His eyes closed as he succumbed, and he reveled in the new sensation. Each and every defined

ripple of their shafts bumped over each other's and sent a new jolt of electricity to his nerve endings.

"It feels awesome, doesn't it?" Macon thrust with a little more intent and squeezed tighter.

"Yes." Wade gasped and opened his eyes. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to touch Macon and feel his lips pressed against his own. With a tentative hand, he reached out and grazed Macon's bare chest. His skin was smooth with hard muscles flexing under his flesh. Nature took over, pushing out all rational thoughts and feelings. Slowly Wade moved closer, his eyes connecting with Macon's as he neared. He moistened his lips and his body quivered when his lips were a breath away. "Can I kiss you?"

Macon smiled. "Hell, yes."

Wade's mouth sealed over Macon's and engaged his lips in a gentle kiss that began to build with shy enthusiasm.

"Oh, hell yeah, Wade." Macon gasped between their heated kisses. His hips bucked harder.

Wade's tongue thrust deep into Macon's mouth, gathering his tongue up, sliding and pulling, tasting the sin of beer and pleasure that bubbled between them. His hands wrapped around Macon's neck and pulled him closer as Wade thrust with more force into Macon's mouth. His hips rocked slowly, finding a cadence with Macon's. At first it was awkward, out of sync, but they continued, working together until their hips complemented one another. When one pushed, the other pulled. Light moans broke the still night air and joined in with nature's symphony of croaking frogs, hooting owls, and energetic crickets. They pumped their cocks with a steady rhythm, kisses hungry and demanding. Their breaths were heavy, turning to panting, each sucking in much-needed air before engaging their mouths again. Hands touched and explored, groping and squeezing.

"Oh, shit, Macon, I'm about to blow." Wade tried to pull away, but Macon held him, thrusting his cock harder as his grip tightened.

“Me, too.” Macon let go with a loud cry. His thrusts picked up and he stroked harder as his come erupted, leaving a hot trail over Wade’s stomach.

“Fuck!” Wade stilled, and come spurted out in long streams. He shivered and held Macon’s forehead against his, aftershocks of pleasure making his body quiver from head to toe. They both laughed as their hands stroked one another, taking all the pleasure from the moment they could.

Macon breathed heavily and kissed Wade again, keeping his eyes open and staring directly at him. His expression was deep and longing, happy, yet sad. Something new was developing between them, much more than best friends, so much more.

CHAPTER 2

“‘Bout time.” Wade’s father looked up from the kitchen table, annoyance narrowing his eyes and furrowing his brows.

His mother came in and kissed him on the cheek. “Good morning, Wade. Can I get you breakfast or coffee?”

“No, but thank you. I brought a thermos with me.”

“I’ll be at the barn when you’re ready.” His father rose, leaving his plate behind for his mother clean up.

When the door shut, Wade exhaled an exasperated breath. “How long is this going to go on?”

“Your father is a difficult man. You know that.” She hugged him around the waist. “It will get better. Just give him some time.”

Wade shifted his weight and shoved his hands into his pockets, shaking his head. “It’s been eight months, and it’s not as if I fell for a perfect stranger. Macon has always been my best friend. I mean, he practically lived here most of time.”

“I know, and we love him like a son, but you have to understand your father’s feelings in the matter. It isn’t fair or right.” She shook her head, her once-youthful blonde hair highlighted with silver strands. “It took us both by surprise. I think he’s still in denial, and I also wonder if he doesn’t blame himself, maybe believing he somehow raised you wrong.”

Wade gave a sarcastic chuckle. “You can’t be serious. I couldn’t have asked for a better life.” He looked at his mother and exhaled. “I am what I am. There is no blame. I love Macon. Always have and always will.”

“I know, sweetie.” She offered a sympathetic smile, but looked away. “Better get out there and get a move on. He’s waiting.”

By lunchtime, Wade and his father had vaccinated nearly half of the eighty head of calves they had weaned earlier in the spring. Sweat trickled down

Wade's temples, and he wiped it away before opening the chute and allowing the last calf out. He scanned the lot of the remainder left to work after lunch. Half of this year's crop was his, and he wondered if he shouldn't just sell them all and try to buy his own land somewhere, far enough away from prying eyes, but close enough to see his mom. Home was in Kansas and the thought of leaving bothered him, but staying bothered him more.

They walked to the house without words exchanged. Wade hated the silence, hated that the close bond with his dad had been reduced to being held at arm's length. His father walked with long strides. At nearly six feet, the man covered a lot of ground with few steps. One part of Wade wanted to yell at the man. After all, he was his only son, and also only child. He was gay; not a criminal, not a drug dealer, not a murderer or anything of that nature. His only crime was falling in love with his best friend.

Where his sexuality was concerned, Wade had wondered for years why he turned out the way he did. It wasn't like he didn't try to be heterosexual. He had, lots of times. But with Macon, everything was easy. There were no games to be played, no worries. He wasn't expected to be a gentleman. He wasn't expected to open doors, woo for his attention, or pretend to be anyone other than himself. They complemented each other like two halves of a whole. They understood each other and shared the same dreams and goals. What more could he ask for? Wade was attracted to Macon in a way women couldn't compete with.

Macon packed his truck with all the essentials he and Wade would need. It wasn't like they were going deep into the wilderness or camping out for a week or anything, but he liked to be prepared. The beer chilled in the cooler of ice. The tent was loaded, groceries, blankets... lube. He smiled when he thought of it all. One night at the river and his most important item outside of beer was lubricant. *Maybe two days were in order.* He pulled into Wade's driveway. With his job and Wade's responsibilities at the ranch, neither seemed to have enough time for each other.

Ideally, Macon wanted to share the small house Wade rented, but his friend had said no. They lived in a small town and everyone suspected the truth of their relationship. But Wade wasn't comfortable with coming out for all to see. Yeah, it hurt, but what could he do? Macon understood Wade's feelings and still loved him, but he yearned to wake up each morning with Wade, or cuddle on the couch in the evening for a movie. Hell, he'd settle for the local news.

Nothing would change as long as they resided in this sleepy, backwoods town. It was a town where everyone knew everyone's business, a place where half the residents were related in some form or another. A place where Bibles were kept on nightstands and where people believed there was no room for gray. The place was small town, rural America. It had one stop light, one school, four churches and two convenience stores. And if something wasn't in the Good Book, well, it was wrong.

Macon parked behind Wade's truck and got out. Wade had chosen a place on the edge of town because he wanted privacy. The only downfall was the neighbors, and they were nosy ones at that. He wished attitudes were different, that people could understand or even turn a blind eye so he and Wade could just be together the way they wanted to be.

Dogs from the adjoining yard barked as he walked to the back door. "Shut up!" he shouted as he turned the knob. "Stupid fuckers." He continued to grumble as he walked into the kitchen.

"The neighbor's dogs are quite a treat to listen to." Wade dropped his overnight bag on the table. "The dumbasses were barking at two this morning."

"Sounds like you had a good night's sleep, then. No wonder you were so grumpy when I got here this morning."

Wade rolled his eyes. "Well, that among other things."

"Hold that thought." Macon strode across the kitchen, closing the gap between them. He grabbed Wade's collar and pulled him to his mouth. He

brushed his lips over Wade's, kissing him, allowing his tongue to peek out. "Fuck them all. We have a night of fun to have, just me and you."

A smile curved on Wade's face. "Yeah, just me and you."

The spot they camped each year lay on the river, the farthest point from the main house on the Sutherland's six-hundred-acre ranch. It was only accessible from one gate on the property and required a key. Wade got out of the truck and unlocked the gate for Macon to drive through. After closing and locking it back, Wade jumped into the truck, ready to hide away with Macon. The truck bounced and bumped across the field in an area where groundhogs had torn up the ground.

"I feel like a bobblehead doll," Macon laughed, and tried to correct the steering after striking another hole. "Holy shit, there must be an entire colony living here."

Wade steadied himself with what he called the "Oh shit handle" above the door. "A couple of guns and a little time would take care of this."

Macon's truck leveled off, seemingly out of the groundhog village. Wade cracked open a beer and the truck struck another hole. "Damn!" Beer sloshed and bubbled from the top. He sucked the fizz that kept bubbling up.

"I got something you can suck." Macon grinned.

"Oh, don't worry, I will." Wade offered Macon a wink.

A large grove of trees sat in the distance, with a small clearing cut in the middle. Macon remembered cutting the path through the small saplings with Wade when they were young. Since that time, they maintained it every year.

The sun was still high in the sky, but waning. The air was slightly warm and lightly blowing through their open windows. Macon loved this time of year. Everything in nature came back to life after the winter slumber. With the weather mild and not quite warm enough for a plethora of bugs... spring had always been the perfect time to camp.

“‘Bout there, man.” Macon drove along their path and down the sloping hill that led to the river and their campsite.

“‘Bout time. I’ve worn more of this beer than I’ve drunk.”

Macon pulled his truck along a row of trees and cut the engine. The river flowed nice and smooth, rippling here and there over fallen logs. A bright shimmer glared back off the clear water, making him squint. He knew the water must be freezing still, because when warm, the water took on a murky brown appearance. Skinny dipping that night with Wade would be out of the question.

“Do you want to put up the tent?” Wade asked as he stepped out of the truck and surveyed everything Macon had brought with them.

“I’d like to sleep under the stars, but I’m worried we’ll have a cold morning wake up.”

“I’ll keep you warm.” Wade walked over and gave him a smack on the butt.

With the sun moving toward the horizon, they gathered up enough wood to keep them warm through the night. The same fire pit they built ten years ago with large rocks from the river served them as well as the day they built it. Wade smiled when he lit up the dry driftwood with the help of a little diesel and a torch. Macon busied himself with constructing a bed. He had brought along two bales of straw and was scattering them over the ground, fluffing the matter up so it would act as a cushion under their blankets. The other reason for the straw was to keep them off the cold, damp ground.

The fire began to crackle and roar to life. Wade helped him lay the thick wool blanket over the straw to keep it from poking up. Macon’s enthusiasm kicked up a notch. He and Wade hadn’t been intimate in nearly a week. If they only shared the same address, he thought, he wouldn’t be so hard up by the end of the week.

A couple of thick quilts were laid down next, adding an extra layer of protection. For the top, Macon had brought two down-filled sleeping bags. He

wasn't sure why he was worried about being cold. As hot as he expected their night to be, he might need to peel some blankets back in order to cool off. He chuckled as he finished up, and Wade gave him a quizzical look.

"Care to share?" Wade opened the cooler and fetched them both a beer.

Macon chafed his bare arms briskly. The warm air had become cooler with the setting sun. "I'm just damn glad to be here with you. I didn't think this week would ever be over." He accepted the beer Wade handed to him. "Are you hungry?"

"Mmm, hmm." Wade closed the gap between them. "But I don't want food."

"Oh, yeah?" Macon sipped his beer and rubbed his growing erection. He hoped Wade would say that. A week had felt like an eternity.

Wade took their beers and set them on the truck. He returned with purposeful steps, never stopping until they were toe to toe. "We have some business that needs attending to." He grasped Macon's head with both hands and pulled their mouths together. Hunger radiated between them, the kiss becoming urgent in nature.

They broke apart and tore into their clothes, stumbling as they worked to kick off their boots, hands touching and pawing at each other. Macon could feel Wade's lips smile just before Wade pushed him. Macon fell to the makeshift bed and pulled Wade with him. They landed with a thud, Wade on top of him. Laughter erupted for a moment before it became heated again. Their mouths crashed together, with tongues delving deep and swirling together. Macon could feel Wade's erect cock pressing against his own. Their championship buckles clanked and scraped together as they moved.

"Boy, I plan to wear your ass out," Wade growled between kisses. "Damn, I've missed you this week."

Macon moaned with pleasure. He loved hearing Wade's admission. If they were anywhere else besides Small Town, USA, maybe their lives would be different, better. All he knew was he couldn't stand their arrangement. All the

hiding and sneaking around wore on him. Earlier in the day, he had received an interesting call, exciting his imagination. The information could wait, though. Currently, his dance card was as full as the jeans stretching with his straining erection.

Soft lips caressed Macon's neck, moving lower to nip his shoulder. Wade knew how to bite him, not too hard and not too gentle. He loved having the man's teeth and mouth nipping and sucking every square inch of his body. Wade tugged his T-shirt out of his jeans and pulled it over his head when he leaned forward. The cool evening air made Macon's nipples perk up. Wade warmed them, lashing over each, stopping to suck and roll the nubs between his teeth.

"Fuck, yeah," Macon moaned, and ran his hands through Wade's thick, brown hair. His hips rolled, causing friction between their denim jeans. The distinctive clank of metal was the only noise to be heard outside of the crackling fire. "We have too many clothes on." He wiggled and let out a surprised moan when Wade sucked his neck hard.

Wade rose up on his hands and loomed above him. His blue eyes twinkled in the firelight as a wicked smile lit his expression. "Impatient, are we?"

Macon studied his gorgeous face, noting the cute dimples when he grinned. God, he loved Wade, loved him more than life itself. "Very." He reached forward and pulled Wade's shirt over his head. His strong chest, thick arms, and muscles flexed, rippling down over his abs to the waist of his jeans. "Take 'em off."

"Demanding, too?" Wade teased and leaned back on his heels. "Do I have something you want?"

Macon moistened his lips. "Oh, yeah." He watched as Wade took his time, slowly tugging and releasing his belt buckle. His strong hands wrenched the belt apart and moved to the button of his jeans. Underneath his Wranglers was heaven, in the form of a very large and thick cock. The zipper eased down at a snail's pace. Macon nearly demanded he hurry up.

“Are you going to suck it?” Wade asked with a grin.

“Damn straight.” Macon could almost taste Wade’s precome, so salty and sweet, touching the tip of his tongue. The orange light from the fire highlighted Wade’s features. The moment was so much like their first time. The outside world didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except them and how they made each other feel.

Wade pushed his jeans down, allowing his cock to flop out, heavy with its weight.

“Stroke it for me,” Macon demanded and licked his lips. He loved to watch Wade pleasure himself.

Wade’s strong hand cupped his girth, slowly rubbing from root to tip. Precome glistened, oozing from the top. Wade ran his finger through it and spread it around his crown. “Do you want this cock?” He gently bucked his hips and pulled his bottom lip with his teeth. “I’d love to feel it inside your mouth with your lips wrapped around it.”

“Well, come on.”

Wade shimmied out of his jeans and kicked them off the bed. He crawled over Macon’s hips and straddled his waist and chest as he moved closer. He held his dick in his hand and wagged it in front of Macon’s mouth.

“Don’t tease, or I’ll bite it.” Macon eased his hands up Wade’s thighs.

“Mmm, do it, bite me.” Wade playfully smacked his cock against Macon’s lips.

Soft hair rubbed his chest as Wade’s balls dragged over his collar bone. Unable to take any more teasing, Macon grabbed Wade’s cock and pulled the tip to his mouth. A loud moan erupted from Wade’s lungs when Macon bit down, just enough to get his attention.

The smell of Wade’s clean soap and musky skin invaded his nose. Wade possessed a unique scent that drove him crazy. Macon traced the crown of his cock, which became rigid at his touch. He probed through the slit at the top to

taste. Wade moaned and watched him. Macon wrapped his hand around the shaft and pumped, moving with the rhythm of Wade's hips rocking his cock into his mouth.

"Yeah, suck it," Wade growled, and caressed Macon's face. "Mmmm." His head fell back, his body moving, muscles flexing with delight.

Another round of Wade's sweet fluid coated his tongue as his cock swelled even more. Macon loved that feeling, knowing he caused Wade to get hard with pleasure. He looked up while he slid his mouth over Wade's shaft, catching Wade staring down at him. His expression was intense and wild, yet loving. He pulled out of Macon's mouth and stood up. He looked like a carefully carved statue from antiquity, all lean and muscular, with a wide chest, narrow waist, and large cock standing at attention.

"I'll be back." Wade grinned down at Macon before sprinting barefooted to the truck. He opened his bag and hurried back. Kneeling down beside him, Wade unbuckled Macon's belt. When he unbuttoned and unzipped the jeans, Macon lifted his hips for Wade to pull them off. "Nice hardware, boy." He reached for Macon's dick and lowered his mouth over it, taking him all in.

"Oh, fuck!" Macon writhed with enjoyment. Wade pulled back to the tip, tightening the suction of his mouth. Macon gasped and squeezed Wade's thigh. Over and over Wade repeated the process, making Macon's back arch while his hips wiggled and thrust up into Wade's awaiting mouth. *Son of a bitch, he knows how to suck a cock.* "Easy or I'll blow, man."

Wade chuckled and lightened the suction, stopping at the tip to twirl his tongue over the head. The cool night air blew across Macon's wet cock and it helped calm him. He pulled at Wade's leg. "Bring your ass over here." Wade moved and lifted his leg over Macon's chest, straddling him and backing up so that his dick was even with Macon's mouth.

The soft hairs on Wade's chest brushed over Macon's bare stomach. Wade's hand resumed and grasped Macon's shaft again, tongue flicking over the tip. Macon ran his hands up the back of Wade's legs, up to his ass where he stopped to squeeze and knead it. He caressed down between the cheeks of

Wade's ass, paused at his perineum and gave it a gentle rub. Wade moaned, sending vibrations down Macon's cock buried deep in his mouth. Wade lifted and positioned his swollen crown above Macon's lips. Macon opened and Wade eased in, inch by inch, meeting resistance at the back of Macon's throat.

"Relax, man." Wade pumped Macon's saliva-covered cock with his strong grip and took it back deep into his mouth.

Macon squeezed Wade's thighs as he flexed again. Wade's cock tickled the back of Macon's throat, making his eyes water. Even after all these years of sucking Wade, Macon struggled to do what Wade loved most. He swallowed when Wade eased out. During the next thrust, Macon opened his throat and Wade's cock slide all the way in.

"Fuck, yes. I love when you do that," Wade groaned, and gently fucked Macon's mouth. "Holy shit." He gasped and palmed Macon's cock in his callused hand.

Wade nipped lightly up the inside of his thigh and pushed his legs further apart. He touched Macon's tight hole and massaged cool lube into it. Macon's fingertips dug into Wade's ass, guiding his lightly pumping hips, which drove his cock stroke after stroke into Macon's mouth and down his throat.

"I can't take any more of that." Wade pulled out of his mouth. His wet cock dragged over Macon's chest. His finger breached Macon's opening and wiggled.

Macon hissed. He was so sensitive to Wade's touch. Wade knew where and how to touch him to make his heart race. Two fingers invaded, easing in and out, stretching him. Wade moved his body off of Macon and settled between his thighs. His fingers continued to impale him, his thumb pressing the sensitive region under his balls.

"Suck me, Wade," he pleaded with a raspy voice, his breaths becoming short and fast. He loved to have Wade's hands and mouth on him, loving and pleasing him in a way that only he knew how. His hot mouth pulled his cock

deep inside, tongue wrapping around the circumference, sliding up and down the length of him. God, he was so close. It felt so good to be like this.

The hot fire kept them warm. Sparks leapt from the flames and soared up into the air. Stars twinkled above, winking and shining down on them.

Wade removed his fingers and Macon whimpered his protest. Wade chuckled and reached for the lubricant and squeezed a liberal amount into his palm. "I hope you're ready, because I can't wait any longer." His hand spread the slick gel over the length of him.

"I love to watch you stroke your cock, Wade."

Wade grinned. "And I love to stick my cock deep in your ass." He leaned over, held his weight off Macon, and nudged his entrance. His smooth crown rubbed and eased in past the ring of muscles. He paused and allowed Macon to adjust. "So damn tight," he hissed, and leaned down to pepper Macon's chest with soft kisses.

Macon reached for him, brushing his hands over Wade's thick biceps. A bite of pain radiated outward as his sphincter worked to accommodate Wade's thick girth. It always hurt at first, but he knew it would soon turn to intense pleasure.

Wade's lips touched his, brushing softly over them. "I love you," he whispered, and slid further inside.

"Oh, wow." Macon squeezed Wade's arms as he adjusted further. "Kiss me."

Their kiss started slow and built until they gasped for air. Macon's hands glided down Wade's sides to his waist and urged him to continue. "I'm okay, fuck me, please." Macon flicked his tongue over Wade's lips.

With a loud grunt Wade pushed all the way in, his balls settling against Macon's ass. His muscles flexed as he pulled back and pushed in again, burying himself deep.

“So fucking good.” His eyes burned with intensity. “I’ve missed this.” He eased back and thrust back in with more force, and moaned. “I miss the old days of being on the road before prying eyes were watching us—” He thrust in a series of quick bursts and Macon whimpered with pleasure. “I hate being forced to sneak off just so I can touch you.” His eyes became passionate and filled with pain. “You are my world, my life, Macon.”

Macon pulled Wade’s mouth to his and poured his heart into his kiss. He knew Wade loved him, but to have him admit it, with his confession that he’d harbored doubts regarding their current relationship status, made his heart swell to overflowing. Their hands caressed while their lips and tongues tangled with desire. Wade delivered thrust after thrust, measured and loving.

Any discomfort Macon previously felt had morphed into extreme bliss. The bulbous head of Wade’s cock tickled the inner walls of his channel and rubbed his prostate. He felt full and deliciously stretched. “More. Give me more, Wade. Harder.”

Wade leaned back and grabbed Macon’s legs and pressed them forward. Macon’s knees pushed against his chest, revealing his ass and opening him wide. Wade’s thick length was still impaled inside him. The soft light blazed in the depths of Wade’s eyes as he smiled. “You must need a good fuckin’. Don’t you?”

“Mmm, yes.” Macon moaned. The position allowed Wade to sink deeper inside him.

“Stroke your cock.” Wade’s voice was husky as he picked up his pace and began to fuck him with more enthusiasm. “Yeah, stroke that beautiful dick of yours.” He grunted and thrust harder, their skin slapping together upon impact. His cock sank deep, so deep.

“I’m close, Wade.” Macon pumped his cock hard.

“Me too, and I’m going to unload inside you.”

“Fuck!” Macon reached his summit. Jets of come spurted from his cock and landed on his chest. He took a deep breath and groaned with delight. “Fuck yeah!”

“Here it comes!” Wade hollered, pounding in deep, and let go with a loud cry. His hips bucked, milking his cock with urgency. “Oh, man.” He fought for air and collapsed on top of Macon.

Macon held him and wrapped his legs around his waist. He could feel their hearts hammering in their chests and Wade’s hot breath on his skin. Wade nuzzled his neck and kissed it sweetly. This was heaven for him.

“I didn’t mean to blow so fast.” Wade kissed Macon’s chest. “It’s been a long week.”

“We have all night.” Macon tightened his hold around him.

Later that night, Wade sat in his jeans and bare feet in a folding chair next to Macon. The sounds of frogs gently croaking in harmony echoed through the trees. It was peaceful out, serene. He thought about his day and the way his father gave him the “look” when he said he and Macon were going camping. Eight months should have been enough time for his father to at least try and understand his relationship with Macon. Everything changed that night at the championship last fall, when a reporter caught him kissing Macon beside his trailer. Hell, the rodeo was over, and had been for an hour at the time. Why the nosy fucker was out in the parking lot with his camera was anyone’s guess, but the asshole made sure the photo went public.

There were a few golden rules that the reporter broke that night. The most important was “mind your own business”. Wade wasn’t the type to go poking around in other people’s business, so it royally pissed him off that his private moment became front page news. Since then, his usual posse of ropers who got together to practice quit calling. Residents of their tiny town give him disapproving looks and whispered when he walked by, more so if he and

Macon were together. Sometimes, he just wanted to yell at them, ask if they'd like their private lives to become public knowledge. He was sure a few of the fine residents wouldn't want their dirty laundry hung out to dry. Was his and Macon's relationship so scandalous, so wrong, that they deserved the moral shunning they'd received?

"Great night, huh?" Macon spoke as he looked up at the stars.

"Yeah, sure is," Wade replied and chugged down half of his beer with disgust.

Macon touched his arm and looked at him. Somehow, he always knew when something big was weighing on his mind. "Out with it."

Wade growled and polished off the remainder of his beer and tossed the can aside. "I'm just sick of it all."

"Me too, man." Macon entwined his fingers between his. "I had an interesting call earlier."

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember a guy by the name of Zander Wesley? We met him early last spring. One hell of a bronc rider."

Wade thought a moment and shook his head. "Nah, I don't recall. What about him?"

"Well, he invited us to his ranch up in Montana."

"Why?" Wade reached into the cooler beside his chair and pulled out another beer. "Need another one?"

Macon nodded. "It seems we're not alone in this world, outcasts of the rodeo and all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Wade cracked open his beer and turned it up.

"Zander hosts a big rodeo every year up there."

"And?" Wade didn't know where he was going.

“This rodeo is for guys like us.” Macon pointed at him and then back at himself. “It’s a gay rodeo.”

Wade busted up laughing and spit his last drink out. “Gay rodeo, huh? Do they ride through the arena with rainbow flags?” He chuckled harder. “I bet they have a cross-dressing drag queen for a rodeo clown.”

Macon didn’t join in and Wade sobered. “For someone who’s tired of being stereotyped, you sure as hell do it just the same.”

“Macon, I-I-I didn’t mean it that way. It just sounded funny. I guess I don’t really look at us as being gay in the way that other men are gay.”

“That is the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard. Why would other gay men be any different? Okay, so there are some that may subscribe to a different way of life or dress, but deep down, are we really any different?”

Wade thought about it for a moment. Outside of the small town he grew up and resided in, he knew little about the outside world. He grew up in the country, farming with his father. Other than driving endless miles from rodeo to rodeo during the summers, he had experienced little. “I’m sorry, okay. We’re different, or at least I think we’re different.”

“How so? You suck dick, Wade. Hell, I love to suck dick. You like to stick your dick in my ass and from time to time, you let me stick my dick in your ass.”

“We love each other.” Wade gave him a serious look. “We’ve been best friends since we were kids.”

“We’re gay, man.”

“Yes, thank you, Macon. I’m very aware that we are gay, but that doesn’t mean I want to join up with a bunch of other gay men and proclaim my sexuality in front of an audience.”

Macon looked hurt by his words. “Are you embarrassed about us?”

“Hell, no!” Wade sat up straight in his chair and turned toward Macon. “I love you, and nothing will ever change that.”

“Yet we stay here in this little shithole town while everyone looks down at us. We have separate houses even though everyone knows. We—”

“I know.” Macon interrupted. “I’m sorry. I hate it, too.”

Macon sipped his beer and grew quiet. When Wade didn’t continue, Macon got up and walked to the fire, his back facing Wade. Wade hated what was happening and had been happening. What was he to do? His father couldn’t run the ranch alone, and he had a vested interest in the place and cattle to tend to as well. The idea of picking up and moving never seemed to be an option. Not that he didn’t want to. Besides, where in the hell would they go? Nothing would please him more than to be somewhere far away from society, where he and Macon could live in peace without narrow minds judging them. The thought of further complicating their lives by competing in a gay rodeo didn’t seem a good idea either. What would his father say? Or Macon’s father?

Why did life have to be so complicated? Why couldn’t he love anyone he wanted to love? Wade got up from his chair and walked up behind Macon. He wrapped his arms around his waist and held him. “If we compete in this gay rodeo, don’t you think it will just cause us more trouble than we already have?”

Macon sighed and leaned his head back on Wade’s shoulder. “Can it be any worse than it already is? I mean, have you given any thought to the upcoming season and what we will face? It will be the same town to town. I just thought it would be nice to go and meet others like us and compete in a rodeo where we’re accepted.”

He made a lot of sense. Wade wondered if coming out and proclaiming their sexuality by competing in the event could harm them anymore. Ideally, the damage was done. Everyone knew. There was nothing innocent or in team spirit about that headline-grabbing kiss. Men playing football could pat each other’s asses and nothing be said of it. Two men celebrate and share a kiss? Scandalous. “When is this rodeo?”

“Two weeks. Zander invited us to come and stay on the ranch beforehand so we could practice. You do realize that since last fall we haven’t roped once.”

“Yeah, I know.” Macon was right. They hadn’t joined one local roping practice in order to get ready for this season. Normally, by this time of year, they would have been to several and have made a little extra money to put in their pockets along the way. No invitations or calls had come letting them know of any, and Wade suspected it was because they weren’t welcome.

“Please consider it, for me.” Macon turned around and looked into his eyes. “I need to know there’s a place for us, a place where we can be who we are without judgment. Most of all, I just want to be with you and not have to feel like shit because of what people think of us.”

“Fine, I’ll go. Hell, I don’t know what we have to lose. I need to get away from here for a while, anyway.” Wade pulled Macon close and kissed him. “Me and you, always.”

CHAPTER 3

Two days later...

Wade's bags were loaded and ready. He looked at his watch and completed one last walk-through of his house. With everything in order, he locked the door behind himself and headed to his truck.

The day had started on a sour note. He'd gone to the ranch and helped with the feeding. He'd been nervous about telling his father he planned on leaving for the next two weeks, and he honestly felt bad about it. In previous years, when he was away at rodeos, his father hired someone to help out. This year seemed different. Hell, everything was different. When he broke the news, his father became irate. Wade knew it wasn't because he would be gone roping, because that was a given every year. It was because his father knew he was going with Macon and their relationship was as strong as ever. He did leave out the part about the gay rodeo they would be competing in. There was only so much a homophobic father could take.

He left after kissing his mother on the cheek and telling his father to pay the help with the proceeds from his cattle check when he sold their calves the next week. Wade didn't want to owe him anything or feel indebted to him. His mother hugged him and apologized for his father's attitude, but it wasn't her place and he said as much.

The blue Ford roared to life with his horse, Caesar, and his tack loaded. Macon had called and was ready and waiting. Wade pulled out onto the chip and seal country road in front of his house and headed north toward Macon's. As he drove, his tiny house grew smaller in his rearview mirror. All the anger that welled inside his stomach began to dissipate somewhat. He was leaving, color him gone, fuck 'em all. He was an adult and would live life in the manner that suited him, and to hell with anyone who tried to stop him. The warm weather made him itch to ride and rope. A new sense of enthusiasm built the closer to Macon's he got. Bright sunshine and the usual tug of the trailer on

his truck made him smile. Saddle up, boys, Wade was back in the saddle, he thought and shifted gears.

Within minutes, he pulled into the long drive of the Sumner's place. Macon led Diablo by his halter out of the barn and waited for him. Wade cut the engine and got out to open the trailer. Macon led his horse in and tethered him as Wade began loading Macon's saddle in the tack section. This gooseneck trailer was a Cadillac to them. The upfront section was a small living quarters, complete with bed, sink, refrigerator, cook top, shower, and bathroom. A tack area and separate door divided the living area from where the horses stayed. Holding tanks for water allowed them to keep their horses hydrated on long trips. They had lived the better part of the last four years inside that trailer through the summers. The space was a little cramped but afforded them all they needed while on the road. The bed wasn't the most comfortable in the world, but it served its purpose.

"Hot damn, boy. Let's get the hell out of Dodge!" Macon was in high spirits when he stepped in the door with his bag. He tossed it to the floor and clapped his hands together. "Two weeks, man. Riding and roping, and lots of beer drinking. Now this is what I call a vacation."

Normally they'd already planned and mapped out their summer, one rodeo at a time, but they hadn't this year. It occurred to Wade that in reality, they allowed the views of others to dictate their lives. Fear of returning to the rodeo world had lodged into both of their brains, stealing away what they lived to do. He, for one, had had enough of it. How he planned to deal with reality was something he was unsure of at the moment.

"Boys." Jared, Macon's father, walked up. His hands were on his hips and he looked torn with indecision. He hadn't taken the news about their relationship any better than Wade's father. "Be careful." He looked off toward the pasture for a moment before turning his gaze back to them. "It'll be rough in the saddle for a spell. Don't give in, and don't let 'em know it bothers you."

Wade knew what he meant and nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Jared thought they were headed to the usual kind of rodeo, and that was fine by Wade. The sentiment was worth everything anyway.

Macon gave his father a manly hug. “See you in two weeks.”

They got in the truck and set out on their journey. Just having Macon’s father give them somewhat of an approval made Wade’s spirits lift higher. He only wished his father would come around the same.

Hours went by as they traveled the long stretch of interstate. The radio blared country music and when a good song came on, he and Macon belted out the lyrics with a twang in their voices and feet tapping to the rhythm. They liked old country, Merle-Haggard-and-Hank-Williams-Jr. old country.

During the thirteen hour trip they had stopped three times for fuel and to check on their horses, allowing time for water, feed, and rest. There were four pee breaks and one fast food run along the way. Macon drove for the last six of those hours, following the directions Zander gave him. The dirt roads seemed to wind endlessly through the middle of nowhere. There had been no houses or signs of life as far as he could tell. It neared ten at night when lights broke through the darkness off in the distance. Between them and the only notable signs of civilization was a large gate. He pulled up and found a key pad. Zander hadn’t mentioned a code. A call button was his only resource.

Wade stirred when he noticed they had quit moving and looked around. Macon pressed the button and waited.

“Is this it?” Wade rubbed his sleepy eyes.

Macon’s fingers tapped the steering wheel. “I think so.”

“State your name.” A deep voice erupted over the intercom.

“Uh, Macon Sumner.”

The large gate opened before them. “Proceed.”

As they drove down the long, narrow road, Macon noticed many more lights as they grew closer. From a distance, he had only noted a few. Now, he was seeing lots of lights, scattered over a vast expanse.

“What in the hell is this place?” Wade asked.

“It’s supposed to be the XYZ Ranch.”

“Do they have an army working for them?”

“I don’t know,” Macon mumbled when the place came into full view. A large barn and main house sat forefront, with smaller-looking cabins and outbuildings scattered as far as he could see. Trucks and trailers were parked neatly in a row on the far side of the barn. Bright lights flooded an arena behind the barn, which wasn’t visible from the road. Men were out on horseback, leaving trails of dust as they raced by.

When they stopped, two men approached them as they got out. “You must be Macon and Wade. I’m John and this is Dean. Welcome aboard.”

John was a thick, muscular cowboy. His jeans were covered by brown leather chaps embellished with silver conchos. Bright green eyes regarded them with interest as Wade shook the man’s hand. “Nice to meet you both.” He nodded. “I’m Wade.”

Dean gave a loud whistle and two guys came out of the barn. The pair walked up and waited for instructions. “Take these men’s horses to the pasture for some exercise and fresh water.”

“Yes, sir.” One guy walked to the back of the trailer with the other, who looked no older than Macon or Wade, following.

Macon, who never seemed at a loss for words, stood quietly, sizing up the two cowboys in front of them. The men were older in years, he guessed mid-thirties.

“Zander is up at the main house. We’ll take you up to see him.” John waved for the guy leading Wade’s horse over. “After you get their horses settled, you and Jamie grab their bags and bring them up to the house.”

The guy nodded. “Yes, sir.” John winked at him and the guy grinned.

The house was enormous as they approached. It looked like a fancy ski resort cabin, decked out with cedar siding, large windows, and a huge deck supported by thick timber logs. The oversized front door was embellished with wrought iron work. John opened the door and entered ahead of them. Macon wondered what kind of host they would be meeting.

A tall cowboy with black hair walked up as soon as they entered. He was easily in his late thirties, distinguished by a few laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. The man smiled as he extended his hand. “Damn good to meet you boys. I’m Zander. Let’s go have a seat and get to know each other.”

Macon and Wade followed, with John and Dean directly behind them. Macon looked around wide-eyed at the woodsy décor with large elk and deer heads mounted on the walls. He felt a hint of nervousness as they continued on. John and Dean seemed like henchmen, quiet as they walked, their boots lightly clunking on the wood floor behind them. It was obvious Zander was the man, the leader of this, what was it? Organization? They weren’t dealing with just any cowboy. This place was something more.

“Have a seat.” Zander directed them to a leather couch. He took an opposing leather chair adjacent to them. “John, get these boys a beer.” He turned back to them. “You do drink beer, don’t ya?”

Wade and Macon nodded. Macon wasn’t sure if they had made a good decision by coming there. He expected a small ranch with maybe a couple of ranch hands and a makeshift arena. This, he looked around, was no small venture. These men were big time.

Zander studied them for a moment as John came back with a bucket of cold beers and set them down, pulling two out and handing them to Macon and Wade. “Thank you,” they said, nearly in unison.

Zander leaned back with his beer. John and Dean took a seat on a smaller loveseat opposite them. "I guess you two would like to know what this is all about." He stopped and took a sip from the bottle.

They nodded.

"It's like this." He motioned to John and Dean. "We started this outfit nearly seven years ago, just the three of us. In the off season, we run over a thousand head of cattle on this ranch. We've grown, and now we employ hired hands and have shareholders as well. We all reside here. We work hard and we play hard. This ranch is a place we can be ourselves without the outside world meddling in our business."

Macon chewed on that for a minute, and Wade shifted uncomfortably next to him. "Why did you call us?" He was confused by the strangeness of the situation. Why would they need them?

"I thought you'd never ask." Zander smiled. "Rodeo is our world, our lives. As you two have already experienced firsthand, the rodeo world hasn't taken too kindly to men of our caliber."

Wade piped in, "You mean gay?"

Zander chuckled with his dark eyes dancing with amusement. "That would be what society has labeled us."

"So, you're ga-gay?" Macon couldn't help the surprise in his tone. He had an idea the man was gay, but he sure didn't look it. There was nothing about his appearance that would hint of his preference. It shocked him nonetheless.

Zander laughed loudly. "You could say I fancy men." He looked over at John and Dean and winked at them.

Realization struck Wade about the time it did Macon. "Ohhh." Macon felt his cheeks get hot.

"How long you boys been together?" John asked with his elbows resting on his thighs, a beer in his hands.

Wade looked at Macon. "Well, we've been friends our entire lives."

Dean chuckled and slapped his leg. His dark brown eyes danced with enjoyment. “I think what John meant to ask is, how long have you boys been fucking?”

Wade choked on his beer and began to cough, much to the amusement of the trio of cowboys flanking them. Macon felt his own cheeks burn. He wasn’t accustomed to talking about their relationship. They had been in the closet better than five years now. Well, until that reporter splashed the photo of them kissing after the rodeo last fall.

“We want to know how solid is your relationship, boys,” Zander rephrased the question.

“No, I really want to know how long they’ve been fucking.” John grinned and sipped his beer.

Dean belted out a laugh. “I’d like to know that as well.”

Macon glanced toward Wade. “Five years.” He turned and looked at them all. “We’ve been fucking five years.”

Zander smiled as if he was pleased and shifted his weight in the chair he occupied. “Good, that’s real good. We need men with solid foundations here.” He took a sip of his beer and paused. “We’ve managed to corral the best of the best who enjoy our lifestyle. Our aim is to win every contest at the Nationals this year.”

Wade leaned back to get more comfortable. “So your goal is for gay men to win every competition. Am I right?”

“That’s right.” John leveled his stare at Wade. “We want to win the whole fucking thing.”

“Ain’t nothing soft about us, is there?” Dean sounded off and high-fived John. “The stereotypes have to go. When people think of gay cowboys, they think of pansies wearing rainbow colored bandanas and asking for help to get on their horses. Stupid bastards don’t have a clue.”

Zander laughed as he looked at Dean, then shifted his gaze back to Wade and Macon. "Sore spot. You understand."

"If I'm understanding this correctly," Macon spoke up, "Y'all are in need of team ropers, gay team ropers?"

"Give this boy another beer!" John shouted, and stood up. He walked to the ice bucket and pulled out another for Macon.

Zander smiled at John before turning his attention back to them. "You boys were the projected winners at the Nationals last year, what happened?"

Macon shook his head while thinking back to the event the previous year. After the news broke of their relationship, everything took a turn for the worse. With their families caught off-guard and dealing with the drama, their winning streak nose-dived fast. They ended up placing fourth overall. "The news came as quite a shock to everyone."

"Holy shit!" John belted out a laugh. "Y'all were in the closet."

Macon nodded. "The shit hit the fan, and with all the damn drama, we choked under pressure. It's as simple as that." The truth was the truth, no matter how bad he hated to admit it.

"We're not going to let that happen again. If you decide to stay, for the next two weeks we will be getting ready for the gay rodeo. Although it isn't big yet, I suspect one day it will be. This is a way for those much like you to compete without the bullshit stigma. Take the next two weeks and hone your talents. We'd love it if you two would stay and help out the cause, but if you decide not to we'll understand."

Macon pondered his words. He and Wade could sure use the practice. The ranch offered everything they needed, plus an environment that wouldn't look down on them. He glanced over at Wade. "You okay with staying two weeks and competing?"

"Count me in." Wade turned up his bottle.

“John will get you settled into a room. We’ll see you two in the morning.” Zander smiled and stood up.

The long drive had taken its toll on Macon. A bed was all he needed at this point. They followed John upstairs and down a long, rustic hall.

“This is one of the largest rooms in the place, with a private bath.” He opened the door and allowed them to enter. “On a serious note, give Zander’s offer a lot of consideration. It’s a great opportunity and will also bring light to our world if we take the Nationals like we plan to.”

“I will. Thank you.” Wade sat down on the bed and began taking off his boots.

John exited quietly and Macon fell back on the bed. “Oh, my God, this bed is so comfortable.”

He looked over at Wade. They had a room, together. If he wasn’t so tired, he’d take full advantage of it.

Wade stood up. “I’m going to hit the shower. My ass is dragging.”

Later that night, they cuddled together under the down-filled comforter. Heat radiated between them, keeping them both nice and warm. Macon yawned and Wade followed. They had a lot to think about and serious decisions to make, but right now, he couldn’t summon the energy and drifted off.

CHAPTER 4

Macon awoke as the sun broke over the horizon. The pale orange of its rays flooded through the window. Wade slept soundly beside him, his arm still draped over Macon's waist. For the first time in months, Macon had slept peacefully. Having Wade holding him close kept the demons that haunted his dreams at bay. This is how he wanted to feel when he rose in the morning, content and happy. Back home, he and Wade couldn't share the same bed. It wasn't as if he didn't want to or yearn to, but the small minds would spread gossip like wildfire. He understood Wade's position, not wanting to add fuel to the fire, but Macon was sick of it. He loved Wade and knew Wade loved him as well. Why couldn't they be together without assholes making them miserable?

This new adventure was one he was willing and ready to jump into. He had nothing to hide, and the only people he truly cared for already knew his position. Wade, on the other hand, would be a different story. His father seemed to enjoy busting his balls daily about their relationship. That was the reason Wade kept him at arm's length and didn't want to share a place together. Macon couldn't understand that. He knew Wade had admitted to his family that he was in love with Macon, but he seemed unsure of taking the final leap.

At the moment, Macon decided to push out the offending thought and just relish their current position, loving Wade pressed against him, soundly sleeping. This was what he'd dreamed and hoped for. Somehow, he had to make it happen. He loved Wade more than life itself and would trade anything, do anything, to make his dream come true. All he wanted was to be with his best friend, his lover, his mate, always.

Gentle kisses to his back made him smile. Wade's hand brushed over Macon's chest slowly and began to trail down over his abs. His cock twitched with anticipation. Behind him, Wade was already hard, his hips gently rocking, rubbing his shaft against Macon's ass.

“Good morning.” Wade’s raspy voice came out as a whisper. He continued to kiss Macon’s back, moving up to his shoulders and sensitive neck.

Macon groaned and closed his eyes. The soft bed was like lying on a cloud, all fluffy and soft. Wade’s strong hand moved lower, teasing his cock with a light brush of his knuckles. Blood pulsed, sending it racing through his veins to the region that demanded it. His cock grew painfully erect and sensitive to the touch. “Oh, golly, good morning,” he moaned, and squeezed Wade’s forearm, hips grinding against Wade’s groin.

To wake up in Wade’s arms in such a luxurious bed was a dream come true. Once, he and Wade had drunk too much at Wade’s house for either to drive. They spent the better part of the night falling into the pleasures of the flesh. They had passed out near one in the morning. By five, Wade was up and getting ready, urging Macon to do the same. Macon knew Wade didn’t want the neighbors to know he’d stayed the night. Although he was so exhausted that he could barely rise, he grabbed his clothes and dressed quickly, leaving within five minutes. That morning still haunted him. In truth, it hurt him deeply. He wanted to wake up in this position, with Wade loving him and working him into a frenzy of lust.

Wade hummed at his ear, sending a new wave of want trickling down his back and flip-flopping his stomach. “I know we have a big day ahead and are probably expected to be downstairs soon, but first I’m going to take advantage of this bed. I plan on fucking you so hard and deep, your ass will hurt in the saddle. When I’m done, I’m going to suck you until you come.”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Macon groaned. Before he went to bed the night before, he’d placed a tube of lubricant in the nightstand, hoping for this kind of wake-up. His hand fumbled with the drawer and opened it. Wade had already begun shoving his boxers down and untangling them from his ankles. He immediately started removing Macon’s, stopping to grip his cock and give it a gentle squeeze.

“I don’t mean to rush, but I need to be inside you, now,” Wade whispered, and pulled the tube from Macon’s hand.

Macon's heart pounded in his chest as adrenaline built. Wade might not need to suck him off, because he was sure he'd blow soon. Without the worry and the burden from prying eyes, his heart swelled as well as his cock.

Slick fingers ran between the cheeks of his ass, generously lubing him. Wade's teeth nipped the side of his neck as his finger eased into Macon's tight hole. "Oh, fuck." Macon took a deep breath. The initial pain caused his muscles to contract everywhere. This was the only downside of being gay. They couldn't just get to the good stuff right away.

"Easy, babe," Wade coaxed, and wiggled his finger. "Relax."

Macon stroked his cock as Wade stretched his opening. Easy thrusts while Wade's thumb rimmed his hole made Macon's tense muscles loosen up.

"There you go." Wade inserted a second finger. "Son of a bitch, I can't wait to sink my dick into you."

"Yes." Macon panted and worked his cock. "Now, do it now." He was ready, and unable to wait any longer.

The hot, bulbous head of Wade's shaft nudged his opening. Slowly he pushed in with a grunt, stopping when Macon gripped his hip tightly.

"Easy." Macon winced with pain. "I swear your cock is bigger in the morning."

Wade chuckled. "It's because I'm well rested."

When Macon quit squeezing and rubbed Wade's ass, Wade pushed further in. The guy was a very sensitive lover. "Are you okay, Macon?" Wade stilled.

"Mmm, yeah."

They started at an easy pace. Wade gently pushed in and out, lovingly kissing Macon's neck, his hand grazing over his flesh. It was tender and affectionate. He reached under Macon's leg and lifted it, opening him wide and sinking deeper inside him.

Macon moaned and reached over his head to run his fingers through Wade's thick locks of hair. "Yeah, baby. Fuck it."

Wade's hand glided down the inside of Macon's thigh. He rubbed Macon's cock, stopping at the tip to run his finger through Macon's precome. "Put some lube on my fingers," Wade said, grunting and thrusting deeper.

Macon did as Wade requested. He shuddered when Wade sank inside, blow after blow, into Macon's ass. "I'm so sensitive," Macon moaned, and gripped the blanket. Wade pulled out of him and thrust his cock up along Macon's cock. He held the two of them together and continued to move, his dick gliding over Macon's as his grip encircled them.

The entire time, Macon tried to soothe his racing libido. Wade lovingly nuzzled his neck. "I love you, Wade."

"I love you more than you'll ever know," Wade rasped at his neck. His hand let go and he gave Macon's ass a slap. "On your knees."

He maneuvered around under the thick comforter and got on his knees, spreading his legs wide open. Wade inserted his thumb inside him and rubbed his prostate.

"Yeah, mmm." Macon moaned.

"Get ready, boy, the storm has just begun," Wade warned, and thrust his cock in roughly. "Fuck, yes. I love watching my cock disappear inside you." He sounded out of breath. His thumb rimmed Macon's opening around his thick circumference, sending a new sensation racing to every part of Macon's body.

Wade's motions became more demanding and hard. Skin slapped against skin. Wade's sack bounced off Macon's each time.

Macon wailed into his pillow for fear he'd wake the entire house. Stroke after rigid stroke impaled him hard, pushing his bare chest back and forth over the silky sheets. Wade slapped his ass, and Macon's muscles contracted tighter around him.

"Yeah, grip my cock. Damn, I love your tight ass," Wade said with a growl. He pulled out abruptly and ran the length of himself between Macon's cheeks. "Fuck, I'm not ready to let go." He gripped his cock and smacked it

against Macon's ass cheeks, almost as if demanding it to mind. Then he was there, pushing back in roughly and groaning with satisfaction. He grabbed Macon's hips and vigorously fucked him. "I'm gonna come in your ass, boy."

"Yes, do it." Macon gasped for air with his body jiggling. Wade's hips slammed over and over against his ass.

"Oh, shit!" Wade thrust in deep and hard with a growl.

Heat radiated, and Macon felt Wade's cock twitch inside his channel. His own shaft begged to release as well, but he bit his lip hard, hoping to stave it off until he could feel Wade's mouth on him.

Wade pumped, milking himself, with his hands gripping Macon's hips tight. He grunted with each thrust, emptying the last of his release. "Oh, God," he gasped, as he wrapped his arms around Macon's chest. His lips brushed over Macon's back. "What a hell of a way to start the day."

"I wish it could always be like this." Macon quivered with each gentle kiss Wade delivered. A new desire overtook him. "Roll over on your back, Wade."

"Uh, oh. I think I have an idea of what you want," Wade teased, and gently stroked Macon's semi-erect shaft.

"I hope you don't mind, but I want it." Macon squeezed lube over his fingers. "I want to repay the favor." He grinned and fell over on top of Wade so he could feel their bodies pressed together. His teeth nipped Wade's bottom lip as his erection nudged Wade's tight hole. Wade's hands caressed his back and urged him on.

"Oh, my, my, my," Wade gasped as Macon drove slowly inside him.

Macon sucked Wade's neck and shivered as his cock continued to delve deeper. A tight grip from Wade's muscles nearly sent him over the edge. No wonder Wade liked being the top so much. He himself didn't always have to have it, but times like this, when he yearned to be closer and more joined with Wade, his desire peaked the most.

"Damn, Wade," Macon groaned when he was fully seated.

Wade hummed and licked his lips. “Ah, man, give me a second.”

Their mouths connected, sweeping their tongues between each other’s lips. Wade’s hands slid down Macon’s back and squeezed his ass. Macon could feel Wade’s tight muscles begin to relax and twitch, gripping Macon snugly and then becoming more lax.

“Fucking fabulous.” Macon took in a quick breath as he moved. He gave a wiggle, his hips rubbing the inside of Wade’s thighs. As he pulled back, Wade’s muscles gripped him tighter. “Oh, yeah, like a glove.”

Slowly he worked, unhurried and gentle. Wade’s legs folded around his waist in a close embrace. They kissed as if enjoying the best dessert on the planet, reveling in all the sensations of each touch and caress. Macon felt electrified, and daggers of pleasure tingled his nerve endings. He hissed as the overwhelming urge to let go consumed him. He didn’t want to, not yet. They were together and joined. No impending doom floated above them like a dark rain cloud anymore. They were free, free to love, touch and fuck as they pleased. The boulder of condemnation was gone, leaving behind two men who yearned to love one another without fear.

Sweat trickled down Macon’s forehead as he delivered each loving stroke. An approving groan escaped his lips. He sucked in a breath, a hiss echoing through the room. “I can’t hold it,” he gasped, and felt his arms tremble. Being with Wade like this put his dreams to shame. If he was dreaming this adventure up, he never wanted to awaken.

“Let it go.” Wade pulled Macon’s mouth to his.

The bed began to rock with a steady rhythm. Macon’s breaths became short. A quiver in his sack built, turning to a tremor of euphoria. “Oh, yes. Hell yes!” He groaned and growled as he buried himself deep and let the wave of his release pull him under.

They held each other, heavy panting breaking the silence. Their hands caressed one another’s flesh as if it were the first time. Their love was deep, the kind that should give a person peace with the knowledge, but for Macon,

he knew that love alone could not conquer the storm they faced. For now, he took what he could get while praying for a brighter tomorrow. If this venture failed, their relationship might fail as well.

Downstairs, they sat at the table with Zander, John, and Dean. A woman in her later years fussed with John about using his manners. Wade had to laugh because she sounded much like his own mother. It seemed that the only people residing in the main house for now were the five of them. The house was enormous and boasted multiple rooms. Why the man needed such a big house was indeed a mystery.

Before Wade's mind could form more questions, the smell of bacon wafted from the kitchen and made his stomach growl. The last thing he remembered eating yesterday was a bag of cheese curls, and that was around seven.

"Marjorie, breakfast smells divine." Zander grinned at her while she set a large platter of sausage and bacon in the middle of the table.

"I do my best." She hurried out of the dining room to the kitchen and immediately came back out with a basket of biscuits. Dean got up and went into the kitchen to help, and reappeared with a bowl of gravy.

"No need to get it, Dean. I'm capable of feeding you all. You need to cultivate a little patience."

"How can I cultivate patience when you make the best gravy in the world?" Dean smiled up at her as he sat down, making her smile in return. "Besides, we need to help you more."

"Oh, rat's ass. I'm old, but I'm not dead. Better eat up before it gets cold." She waved her hand at him to get started.

"I don't need to be told twice." John already had a biscuit in one hand and a butter knife in the other. He looked toward Macon and Wade. "Better get it while the gettin' is good."

Wade's stomach growled again, urging him to fill his plate. Zander smiled like he had a secret. Wade could tell he wasn't a man of many words, but his mannerisms spoke volumes. Macon passed him the platter of meat after loading his plate up. Next to come his way were the biscuits and gravy. With a loaded plate, he dug in. Sweet heaven, he understood what Dean meant about the gravy. As much as he hated to admit it, Marjorie's recipe topped his mother's.

"Great cook, ain't she?" Zander spoke up as he lifted his cup of coffee. "Miss Marjorie has been taking care of our sorry asses for the last six years. The woman is a saint and one hell of a cook."

Macon smiled as he chewed. Wade knew he was a breakfast guy, but he himself hadn't had a home-cooked breakfast since he moved out of his parents' house. He also wasn't much of a cook. His idea of dinner was a frozen pizza or a trip to the local diner.

"Man, this is awesome," Wade finally replied after he swallowed.

"Damn right it's awesome." Macon took another bite and hummed with enjoyment.

The other men chuckled and continued to eat.

After breakfast, Macon and Wade followed Zander out to the arena. The same younger guy who had put their horses up and brought in their bags the night before was waiting for them.

"Morning, boss." He was all business. Their horses were already saddled and tied off to the pipe railing.

Men were standing around while others worked. A few guys hollered as calves thrashed and banged against the pen they were held in. It would seem that Wade and Macon were on show this morning. There was nothing like waking up in a new place only to discover a group of men waiting to see what they were made of. Wade cursed under his breath. He and Macon hadn't practiced in ages.

“I’ll go get my rope and gloves.” Wade turned and felt his forehead break out in a sweat. It wasn’t like him to get nervous, but this was different.

“I already brought your things up.” The young guy smiled at him as Wade turned around. “I hope you don’t mind. It’s sort of in my job description.”

Macon offered a confused a look at Wade, as if secretly saying, “What the hell?”

Wade shrugged and turned around again.

“Go ahead and warm up your horses, boys,” Zander directed them.

Wade and Macon climbed over the rail and mounted. *Please don’t suck, please don’t suck.* Wade felt his anxiety grow. Why he cared was irrelevant. It was important to Macon, and that’s all he needed to know. This could be a great opportunity, and he didn’t want to blow it right out of the gate. They also sorely needed the practice. He spurred his horse on in a steady lope. Images of the event last fall and how they blew it ran through his mind as the cool morning air raced over his face. Even as he had readied behind the line that night, his mind hadn’t been on roping. It was on the thousands of eyes watching him. All he could do was wonder what they thought about him and Macon. Was the world really against them? Or did he have it all wrong? In their hometown, they were met with leering eyes and whispers following the newspaper article. How could he expect much more from the rest of society when the people that had known him his entire life turned a cold shoulder to him?

His pace increasing to a steady gallop, Caesar whinnied and got a little fresh with excitement. Wade knew horses got as much enjoyment from the sport as their riders. Caesar showed his enthusiasm with a snort and threw his head down, his hooves plowing through the soft dirt of the arena.

“Easy boy. We’ll get ’em,” Wade coaxed and leaned forward to pat him on the neck. He rode over to the men at the rail to retrieve his rope. God, he loved this. Nothing spoke more to a cowboy than a rope in his hands or the smell of fresh dirt mixed with leather.

While making another lap around, Wade swung his rope over his head. Macon's father's last words before they departed entered his mind. *"It'll be rough in the saddle for a spell. Don't give in, and don't let 'em know it bothers you."*

"Ready?" Macon loped up beside him.

"Not really, but let's give it a go." He turned in order to head up to the end of the arena and take his position. This shouldn't bother him and he knew it. Never before had he been affected by an audience. He had to shake this feeling of dread off.

Two men walked behind them and secured the ropes across the front of the boxes they waited in. A longhorn calf thrashed in the chute, making a heap of noise, ready to run. Caesar snorted and pawed the ground. Wade looked over at Macon. The guy always seemed so collected and cool under pressure. The sunlight kissed his face, highlighting his rough jawline and cheekbones. He had his ball hat pulled down in order to shade his eyes. Macon turned to glance at him. He smiled and offered a wink. Under Wade, Caesar nervously pranced in place, ready to give chase. Wade reined him in, taking control.

Men sat on rails here and there, all waiting to see the action. The man at the chute waited for his cue. Caesar grew impatient and reared back a little. Wade was the one to call, so Macon kept his eyes open for his cue. When Wade nodded, the chute opened and the calf bounded out like his ass was on fire. Caesar broke out in a run a fraction of a second ahead of Macon on Diablo. Macon chased, his rope above his head, his eyes homing in on their target. Wade roped the calf's neck. A split second later, Macon caught the calf's back legs. Diablo backed up as the rope stretched tight. His nostrils flared as he took deep breaths, his hooves still ready to run and impatiently shifting his weight from one leg to another.

Wade jerked his rope free and reeled it up into his hand. He was pleased and also relieved. Macon gave his rope a toss, allowing the calf's feet freedom. The calf bolted immediately to the far end of the arena. Two men opened a gate and it darted inside a pen.

“Hot damn, I’ve missed that!” Wade shouted as he rode up. “Not at all our personal best, but we’ll get back there.”

Macon looked as determined as ever. “Yeah, we will. We have to. I don’t intend on blowing it again this year.”

With a nod, Macon galloped toward Zander and his small posse.

Wade followed and dismounted as soon as he met up with them. “Well? How’d we do?” He was almost too nervous to ask. He felt a stall in time before he threw his rope. That equaled wasted time, and tenths of a second mattered in this sport.

“Not bad. Not bad at all. Five point one.”

“We can beat that,” Macon said as he tied off his horse. “Our best is almost a second faster.”

Zander beamed. “If you can hit that time, we can take it all. I have no doubt. The arena is yours for the next hour. Take the time to practice. Afterwards, let Chase take care of your horses and meet me back up at the house. I want to tell you about our business proposition.”

CHAPTER 5

It had been two weeks since Wade had come with Macon to the XYZ Ranch. The burden and sense of dread Wade had carried the last eight months were now nonexistent. He rose every morning with a little more enthusiasm than the one before. Each day had become more routine and natural. They practiced every day during their allotted time, and the remainder of the day they worked on the ranch just like the other men.

The highlight of their stay had been when they and a large group of cowboys at the XYZ Ranch headed out on horseback to round up cattle. Just as cowboys a century earlier would have, they corralled and branded all the new calves. They also vaccinated and wormed them. That was a side of ranching Wade had never experienced, but always wanted to. Back home on his father's ranch, he brought cattle in on horseback, but the experience was much different. Their cattle were tamer and easier to handle, for starters. Secondly, the men here labored together as team, like cowboys before them did when they made the work their sole source of income.

Outside of his newfound love for wide open spaces, he and Macon had settled in well, becoming close friends with the men they worked with. They also spent their day of rest together, able to comfortably and without angst lie down in a bed next to each other without fear of gossip or prying eyes. More and more Wade found himself loving the new closeness of their relationship. He gave serious thought to taking Zander up on his offer. Macon had already said he was in but would respect Wade's decision if he chose not to, and leave with him after the rodeo.

Day after day had passed and not once had Wade's parents bothered to contact him. He supposed the line went both ways, but it bothered him just the same. Thoughts of returning home to a place he no longer felt welcome didn't sit well. He also couldn't be sure if he could trust Zander and the deal he outlined. He'd always heard that if a deal seemed too good to be true, it probably was. Outside of being a little quiet, the man seemed honest. But

could Wade really know someone well enough after two weeks to join a partnership with him? If indeed the provisions were accurate and the figures as well, he and Macon could make a lot of money. Not that money was everything. The peace of mind and atmosphere here were worth so much more.

Macon exited the bathroom with a spring in his step. "Today is the day, man. You ready?" He pulled his belt through the loops of his jeans. "First rodeo of the season and I'm hard just thinking about it."

Wade pulled on his boots and chuckled. "Save the thought, we're quickly running out of time. We need to get downstairs for breakfast and then out the door to load up."

"Oh, we'll be doing some celebrating tonight. We're gonna win, baby!" Macon shouted, and almost trembled with excitement. The guy performed better with adrenaline coursing through his veins. Wade called him an adrenaline junkie. Macon was the type of guy who'd perform crazy stunts just for the high.

"Simmer down." Wade walked over to him and put his hand around his neck, pulling him close in order to kiss him. "Don't burn off all that energy yet." He smiled against his lips. "You'll need it later."

Macon growled and wrapped his arms around Wade's waist. His tongue slipped between Wade's lips, insisting on entrance. They fell into a deep, sensual kiss, slow and loving. Wade traced the line of his jaw with his thumb, urgency flourishing deep in his gut. Heaven help him, how he wished for an extra hour. Their kiss heated up. Macon's firm mouth pulled his, teeth scraping Wade's bottom lip as he inched back.

"I want you." Macon pecked his lips. "I know we don't have time and I'll have to wait as usual, but I just wanted you to know."

"Mmm, I'd love nothing better than to get back into that bed with you." Wade inhaled a sharp breath through his nose. The scent of Macon's clean soap and skin flooded his senses. The guy always smelled rich and sinful.

Wade always figured Macon let off a chemical only he could sense, and its sole purpose was to drive Wade crazy with lust. “We better get a move on.”

“I know, I know,” Macon complained as he backed away. “I’ll get my boots on and meet you downstairs.”

As Wade opened the door the noise of loud voices, lots of voices, floated up the stairs. It sounded like the whole damn ranch was in the dining room. It would be a feat, even in such a large space, and he jogged down the stairs to see what the ruckus was about. In the dining room, the large table had been moved and now sat against the far end of the room, covered with platter after platter of food. Other tables had been placed on adjacent walls, with even more food and drink on them as well. Men stood in line with plates, working their way around the room and heading out the back sliding door to the large deck where tables and chairs lay in wait.

“Mornin’,” Zander greeted him as he entered.

“Good morning. Wow, you know how to put on a spread.” Wade looked around again and noted extra help was there for Marjorie. “Extra help, too?”

“We’re a family. I do this before every rodeo, and once a month so we can all catch up. Most other times, everyone likes to go home and rest in the peace and quiet of their own places. This is how we stay connected.” Zander nodded as if agreeing with himself. “Better get in line. These men have voracious appetites.”

“I will when Macon comes down. Thank you.” He meant what he said. In two weeks, Zander had shown him more respect and good will than he had received in a very long time.

“My offer still stands. We’d like to have you and Macon on board,” Zander added.

“Yes, sir. I appreciate it.”

Macon bounded down the stairs. “Holy shit!” he nearly yelled when he hit the landing. “Marjorie isn’t the only one trying to feed everyone, is she?”

Zander belted out a loud laugh. “She’d hang me by my ball sack if I didn’t hire her help.”

Macon looked around at all the extra hands helping out. “They are using her recipes, right?”

“No need to worry, Macon. Marjorie is in charge. She’s too stubborn and bossy to let anyone else.”

“I heard that, Zander James Wesley.” Marjorie walked by and stuck her tongue out at him. “I’m not bossy or stubborn.” She lifted her chin defiantly. “Things just run smoother when I’m in charge.” She ignored Zander’s laughter and went about her duties.

“She really is stubborn. Don’t let her fool you.” Zander offered a wink and left them.

The pair filled their plates and walked out to the deck, and ended up having to lean against the deck rail. Apparently someone had miscounted how many seats were needed. That suited Wade just fine. This way he could talk to Macon with relative secrecy.

“What do you think about the ranch?” he asked before he shoveled in a mouthful of biscuits and gravy.

“I really like it here,” Macon admitted, stopping to sip his coffee and place the cup on the rail.

Wade nodded and continued to chew. For him, it wouldn’t be hard to stay. His only worry was how his mother would take it. Being the only child, a son at that, meant he was due to inherit his father’s ranch one day. Really, he didn’t want it, not if he had to live the type of life he had been recently. Here, here he could be himself. He would have to admit he was still trying to get comfortable. Seeing other men kiss and grope one another in front of him was different, to say the least. Before coming there he hadn’t known a single gay man, nor knew how they acted when together.

With him and Macon, their relationship was strictly a “when no one’s watching” kind of union. Out here on the ranch though, the men had no

qualms about kissing or touching. Even though it made him uncomfortable, it also gave him a sense of peace. He and Macon weren't alone after all.

"What are you thinking about? You look constipated or something." Macon nudged him in the ribs.

"I'm not constipated," Wade growled but had to smile. "I'm just thinking. That's all."

Macon grinned. "You're thinking of staying, aren't you?"

"Yeah, the place is really growing on me, but I worry."

"Bout what?" Macon asked between bites.

"Can you leave Kansas and never look back?"

Macon choked on his food. "Of course I can." He coughed. "And it isn't like we'll be sequestered here and unable to go home to visit if we want to."

"True." Wade sipped his coffee. His other worry was how his family would take the news if they knew where he'd moved to. Likely his father would say, "Don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out." Or something equally as sarcastic. The man wouldn't be pleased, but hell, he hadn't been happy with him during the last eight months. It was time for Wade to make his own decisions and not feel compelled to please his father.

Men finished up and dropped their paper plates in a large trash can. They filed out toward the barn, all getting ready for the day ahead. Wade and Macon finished up as well and joined the ranks. As they walked, Wade laughed. "I feel like we're heading into battle. The only problem is we don't have a flag."

Macon snickered. "I'm going to laugh my ass off if we get there and they're flying a rainbow flag."

Wade shook his head. "I may be what society deems gay, but I'm not ready to ride around with a rainbow flag declaring it."

"Everyone knows and I say fuck 'em. I'm tired of worrying what others think about me. If they don't like it, they can suck it." Macon spoke with anger lacing his words.

“No, they can’t.” Wade’s lips curved into a grin. “That’s my job.”

Enthusiasm continued to build as they pulled into the rodeo grounds. Macon stared at all the trucks and trailers, noting the men from the ranch weren’t the only ones participating. This rodeo was bigger than Zander had let on about. He expected a small-town rodeo, and this was anything but small.

“Motherfucker,” Wade whispered as he pulled up into a spot and parked.

“What?” Macon looked around to see what he was so bugged about.

Wade pointed and Macon bust up laughing when he noticed a rainbow flag flapping in the breeze. “I told you so.”

“Shut up.” Wade allowed a chuckle to erupt. “Not funny.”

Macon bounded out of the truck. His laughter rang across the parking lot. “I can hear you.” Wade pitched his voice so Macon could hear him.

“And it’s still funny!” Macon shouted as he walked to the back of the trailer.

Wade opened a small door on the side of the trailer and slipped inside, in front of the horses. He untied Diablo, and waited for Macon to finish opening the rear door and move the butt bar out of the way so he could unload. As Wade backed Diablo out, Macon was still laughing.

“My father would shit golden Twinkies if he knew I was competing in a gay rodeo.” Wade shook his head.

“If he does, just think, we’d make a bundle of money!” Macon teased as Wade tied Diablo to the side of the trailer.

“Yeah, well, I suspect he’d be less interested in the money and more worried about the pain in his asshole from doing so.”

“Yeah, a straight man would have trouble passing something that big I suppose.”

Wake shook his head. “Oh, wow, that’s a vision I wish wouldn’t have popped into my head.”

Once they finished saddling their horses, they set off to find the check-in where Zander said their number tags and everything they needed would be ready for them. They found the place and got in line behind half a dozen other cowboys. Macon looked for faces he recognized. Here and there he noted men from the ranch, but besides them, he only noted a few that seemed familiar. He wondered if the men in front of them were gay as well. Must be, he supposed, doubting a straight man would enter such a rodeo.

The line thinned until they were next. He overheard that the men ahead of them were here to team rope as well. Macon listened, already sizing up their competition. The men filled out the paperwork and were handed the entrant tags for the back of their shirts. Much to Wade’s approval, the tags looked much like any other rodeos’. Macon noticed his smile.

When it was their turn, they stepped up in line.

“Names and event, please,” the woman said.

“Wade Sutherland and Macon Sumner—” Before he could state the event, she interrupted.

“I have everything ready for you. Here are your tags, good luck.”

“Wait a minute.” Wade looked down at his tag. “This has rainbow colors on it. The other guys got a regular tag.”

She laughed as if very amused. “Honey, that’s because they’re not gay. You are.”

“So! Why do we need to point it out? I suppose we have separate drinking fountains, too!”

“Wade, calm down,” Macon whispered, and noticed eyes turn toward them.

“Sweetheart, this is a battle ground, not segregation. Zander Wesley makes the rules, not me. Are you competing or not?”

“Just take the number, Wade.” Macon let out an irritated growl.

“Fine, but I’ll be talking to Zander about this.”

Macon sighed and wondered if and when Wade would ever come around. He knew deep down he was gay, but he held a shield up, as if embarrassed by his sexuality. That bothered Macon, because it meant Wade was embarrassed by Macon as well.

“Fuck.” Wade growled, long strides covering the ground beneath his feet.

“It’s not that big a deal, Wade,” Macon told him, and Wade stopped walking.

“Yeah, it is. I’m not here for a social revolution. I’m here to rodeo.”

Macon nodded and looked down at the ground.

“What?” Wade asked, and Macon looked up at him.

“If you’re embarrassed by it, you’re embarrassed by me as well.”

“What? No, I’m not embarrassed by you.”

“Really? In the last two weeks, have you shown any affection toward me outside of the bedroom?”

Wade put his hands on his hips and scuffed the dirt under his feet.

“Answer me. You seem to be the only one with a problem. The others don’t hide their feelings for each other, but you, you do, and I have to admit, it hurts.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you, but this isn’t easy for me.” Wade looked down at the ground and didn’t bother to make eye contact.

“I’m sorry, too. Sorry that you can fuck me behind closed doors, only to act as if I’m just a friend anywhere else.” Macon turned and walked away, leaving Wade standing dumbfounded.

As he walked, Macon tried to fend off the acid brewing in his stomach. They had come this far and worked their asses off to be ready for this event, and here they were, in much the same situation as last year at the Nationals. He

couldn't let that happen again and wished he'd said nothing and ignored it, at least until after they competed. Now the worry he'd kept secured and tucked back worked its way forward, making his stomach a queasy mess, again.

Wade wandered around looking for Zander. His irritation about the rodeo was less of a worry now than before he and Macon had their argument. He hated that he couldn't shake the stigma associated with their relationship. He loved Macon more than life itself and would do anything for him, even leave Kansas to live on the XYZ Ranch where they could be themselves. Macon was right, though. Since they came to the ranch, he hadn't bothered to show any affection outside of the bedroom, and he hadn't really noticed until today. Maybe he was still living in Kansas in his heart, waiting for disapproving looks to follow. There was no way to know for sure, but the problem was more psychological than anything. His father's own looks of disgust had lodged deep in his brain and often visited when he closed his eyes, reminding him of his shame. The man shouldn't have that kind of effect on him. Whether Wade was right or wrong, it was his life to live.

Zander appeared, and the anger dissipated. Somehow it wasn't worth the fight anymore, especially when he realized the error of his ways. "Hey, man, you ready?" Zander asked with his charismatic charm and wide smile.

"Yeah, but I do have one question."

"Shoot."

Wade held up his rainbow colored tag. "Why the distinction between participants?"

"Ah, well, this is as much a statement as it is a rodeo."

"I really didn't sign up for a gay pride gathering," Wade replied dryly.

"Why not? Aren't you tired of the bullshit that follows you because your heart loves a man and you can't help it?"

The statement sank in for a moment.

“For me, this is a declaration to the rodeo world that we will not be shunned or ignored. We have just as much right to compete as any of these other assholes. Some, but not all, believe that because we’re gay, we’re weaker. I’m just here to prove them wrong and open closed minds.”

Fucking crusader. He should have known, and he started to walk away.

“You know, I’ve been there,” Zander called from behind him.

Wade turned. “And where’s that?”

“Stuck between the family you seek approval from and what your heart desires.” Zander closed the gap between them. “I see myself in you right now. I was in your same position once upon a time, and let me tell you, it can be a lonely damn road. What you and Macon have is something most of us dream of. Don’t squander your future based on the ideals of a few.” He shook his head as if thinking back. His dark eyes welled up with whatever he was reminiscing about. After clearing his throat and more than likely his mind, he returned his gaze to Wade. “Do what you love and love who you want. That’s all I’m saying. I’d hate to see you where I wound up by trying to please my family fifteen years ago.”

Wade thought, and before he could stop his mouth, he was already speaking. “Where was that? I’d like to know. For some reason you think you can relate to me and my position. So tell me.”

Zander got a faraway look in his eyes and scrubbed his jaw. “I lost my best friend. The one person I could always count on. I hid away our relationship, kept him at arm’s length. He got tired of waiting, and it wounded him beyond repair. When the dust settled and my father found out about my little secret, he kicked me out. He said he never wanted to see me again. So in the long run I lost my family anyway, but what broke my heart was losing Seth. Either way, I’m the biggest loser.”

“Oh, man.” Wade turned to keep from looking into the face of a man who had lost it all. His eyes showed the pain. “I’m sorry to hear about that. I meant

no disrespect.” He looked at him again. “Have you ever contacted your family again?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve contacted them many times.”

“And they still feel the same?” Wade couldn’t believe someone could be so cold, until he thought about the blank stares his father offered him. His mother seemed sympathetic, but far from happy about their relationship.

Zander nodded. “I can’t help how I feel or who I am. It took me a lot of years to realize that the one person I need to please is me. I could spend the rest of my life trying to earn the respect of my father and more than likely still come up short. I’m the one who has to look myself in the mirror at the end of each day. I need to be true to myself and I’m happy with who I am. When I was hiding away with Seth, I hated the person that reflected back at me in the mirror.” He stopped and kicked the ground. Dust flew up. “And I fucking ignored my heart. Didn’t matter though.” He offered a sarcastic chuckle. “They ended up hating me anyway, and I lost him.”

Wade thought he himself had it bad. Not. At least his family knew, and although they weren’t pleased, they still spoke to him.

“I see the similarity between Seth and Macon. I also see me in you. Think about it.” Zander tipped his hat and walked away, leaving Wade in a stupor.

The horses were ready, and chute time was fifteen minutes and counting. Macon looked around, wondering where Wade had taken off to. He hadn’t seen him for the last two hours. When Wade took a mind to be pissed off it was easier to give him space, and that’s what he was doing. He wondered if Wade had forgotten their time or, worse, had decided not to compete after all.

Macon sat down on the fender of the trailer and leaned back. The sun shone on his face, warming it. A cool breeze blew, reminding him of so many years ago when he and Wade played as kids. He smiled while thinking back. The scene was surreal, when all was right with the world. They were young with their lives ahead of them, kids really, playing and dreaming, each in a pair

of Wranglers that was a little too big. Wade had thought he was big shit with his shiny, silver spurs. He chuckled. They were so naïve about the world outside of that front yard. Little did they know, the world wasn't all fun and rodeos.

“Hey, no sleeping. We ride in ten minutes.” Wade interrupted his thoughts.

“I was just resting my eyes.” Macon stood and squinted in the bright sunlight.

Wade just grinned and walked closer. “Likely story.”

Wade's approach, with that gleam in his eyes he got when lustful thoughts entered his mind, made Macon shudder in response. Of course they were out in public, so likely Wade was messing with him. Before he could smart off, Wade stood just inches away. His heart beat faster, hoping maybe—

Then Wade's lips were on his, and his arms pulled him close. Fear and exhilaration spiked through his veins at the same time. He didn't know what had come over Wade, but he loved it as their kiss deepened. He moaned with delight as their tongues pulled and tangled. Wade slowed, kissing him leisurely as if they had all the time in the world. Their last kiss at a rodeo wasn't this hot, or in broad daylight.

“Mmm.” Wade hummed and broke away but kept both his hands wrapped around Macon's neck. His eyes opened and glimmered in the sunshine.

“Wow.” Macon exhaled and glanced around. “Someone could have seen us.”

Wade laughed. “Let 'em.” He kissed him once more as if they were sharing a first kiss. It was raw and sensual, heated yet heartwarming.

Desire swirled in Macon's gut as delight made his heart race. Wade ended their kiss and backed away. Macon swayed as if drunk. “What time is this rodeo over?”

“Not soon enough.” Wade winked and walked over to his horse to untie him. “Get your horse, man. We have a competition to win.”

As they entered the arena and took their places in the boxes, a newfound sense of determination hit Macon. Where it came from, he couldn't pinpoint exactly, but he was damn glad for the rush of adrenaline that had him ready to roll.

Diablo was prepared under him, nervously pawing the earth, with his muscles contracting and releasing as he shifted his weight. Somehow Diablo knew this was more than a practice and acted as if he had something to prove as well.

Macon looked over at Wade. God, the man was even hotter on horseback. His long, muscular legs flexed in the stirrups when he pushed down and adjusted. The crowd faded away and it was just the two of them. Wade glanced over with a wide smile and mouthed *I love you*. Macon replied in the same fashion and felt his stomach quiver. Wade's gaze was intense, yet loving and warm. Something big happened in the two hours he went AWOL, but Macon decided not to ask questions. Instead, he'd thank whatever deity was responsible for the amazing reversal in Wade's attitude.

The men manning the chute loaded a calf, and the tension built. Diablo snorted, summing up Macon's feelings as well. He ran the ride through his head, nodding to himself and remembering his timing.

The announcer boomed over the loud speaker, introducing them. All Macon caught was his name. The rest couldn't be heard through the blood rushing through his veins and pounding in his ears. *Thump, thump, thump, thump*. He took a deep breath and shifted in the saddle. Everything seemed to move in slow motion, clicking by as tunnel vision took over. He peered out of the corner of his eye and waited for the tip of Wade's hat.

With Wade's nod and a click of the chute, impulse took over. Wade shot out of the box, and as if knowing when to go, Diablo followed, leaping forward, pouring his energy into his legs. Time sped up and all thoughts turned to basic instinct. Macon's rope rippled through the air, leaving his fingers just a fraction of a second after Wade's, and snagged both of the calf's back legs.

He tugged hard and shook from head to toe. He didn't know what their time was, but he could feel it was their personal best.

Wade bounded off Caesar, pulling his rope behind him. Macon dismounted and felt his legs tremble and buckle beneath him. With purposeful strides, Wade came closer. He tossed his rope to the ground and grabbed Macon, pressing his lips roughly against Macon's. The crowd roared with cheers and whistles.

"Lord, have mercy!" the announcer shouted. "Four seconds, folks. These men came with a mission. That mission was to not only set a new record at this rodeo, but win!"

Wade laughed as they broke their kiss. The usual serious man Macon always knew had disappeared, leaving behind a man that was full of life with purpose. This moment would stay etched in his mind forever.

"Come on. I'll buy you a beer, cowboy." Wade smacked him on the back before picking up his rope and getting back in the saddle.

Macon just watched, in awe of what had transpired. "I don't want to know." He spoke out loud to himself. Not that anyone could hear him over the deafening cheers of the audience.

"Give it up one more time for these men!" The announcer got the audience rowdy again.

After taking care of their horses, Macon and Wade stopped at a vendor for a beer before settling into the audience to watch the remainder of the show.

Wade held his cup up. "No regrets."

"To no regrets." Macon smiled.

As the rodeo continued on, they relaxed. The day had been emotionally draining and Macon's adrenaline had worn off, leaving him on the sleepy side. Wade scooted down in his chair and leaned his head back. He motioned for Macon to come closer and directed Macon's head to his shoulder. With his feet kicked up on the rail in front of them, Wade laid his head against Macon's

and put his hand on his leg. They shifted a little trying to get comfortable and finally found a position that worked for both of them.

Macon yawned and pulled the brim of his ball hat down to shade his eyes.

“Hell of a day, huh?” Wade whispered.

“Best day ever.” Macon grinned and closed his eyes with a contented heart.

CHAPTER 6

Back at the ranch that night, a party ensued. Wade missed most of the rodeo but understood their team won every competition. Zander was in high spirits, hooting and hollering as the beer flowed freely. Wade was glad he and Macon caught a little shut-eye earlier. It looked like the night would be long and very rowdy.

The smell of barbecue wafted through the air. When his stomach complained, it didn't take him very long to realize he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Already tipsy from the beer on an empty stomach, he meandered through the crowd with Macon to get a bite to eat. As they walked, men congratulated them and slapped them on the back. A few high-fives later, they made it to the buffet table.

"I'm so hungry I could eat the stink bag out of a skunk," Macon complained, and loaded up a plate.

"Forget the stink bag. I'd eat the whole son of a bitch," Wade replied, and they broke out in laughter.

They finally found a place to sit amongst the exuberant crowd. Dean and John came over and sat down with them, both wound up and mouthy as ever.

"Hell yeah! We came, we saw, we kicked ass!" John shouted before turning up his beer. He swallowed and sobered some, leveling his gaze toward Wade and Macon. He shook his head with disbelief and smiled. "I had my doubts, I'll have to tell you, but Zander said you two were the ones, and by God he was right."

Dean catcalled beside him and pounded the table. "We're gonna do it, boys. We're gonna do as Zander predicts. We'll win the whole fucking thing."

"Damn right, we will!" John showed his enthusiasm as well as his inebriation.

Zander strolled over and sat down next to Wade. As the other men got caught up with their bragging and carrying on, Zander nudged him. “That was one hell of a show today.”

Wade didn’t have to ask what he meant. He already knew. “Thank you.” He looked at the man who had changed his outlook on life. “Thank you.”

“You know, if I would have done things different all those years ago, I might not be here, in this moment.” He looked over at John and Dean. “And I wouldn’t have those two.” He chuckled. “Sometimes life directs us on a new path no matter how much we protest or how much it sucks at first. In the end, there is a rainbow.”

Wade nodded and understood exactly what he meant. “By the way, we’re in.”

“I’m damn glad, and proud to have you two.” Zander gave him a smack on the back and stood up. “Damn proud.”

Dean caught Zander standing and chanted, “Speech, speech.”

The words caught fire and within seconds all the men joined in. “Speech, speech.”

Zander beamed with a wide smile and looked out at all the faces. Wade could see the pride in Zander’s expression, and it warmed his heart.

“Okay, okay.” Zander motioned for them to settle down. The horde of cowboys grew quiet while waiting. Zander looked at all of them. “I must say, I’m looking at the best damn bunch of cowboys to ever assemble. Each and every one of you made this night possible. What started out as a dream has now become a reality.” He wiped his eyes. “I am so damn proud and honored to have each of you as a part of this ranch and team. May this only be the start of our happily-ever-after and the beginning of new found riches for the XYZ Ranch. I couldn’t have done it without you, any of you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.” He picked up his cup and raised it high. “To you, my friends.”

The men responded loudly, shouting and whistling.

“Music!” Zander hollered above the noise, and the band began to play an upbeat tune. John and Dean rose, making an exit with him.

“I bet I know what they’re going to do.” Macon snickered and resumed eating.

“Don’t you know it.” Wade shook his head, not understanding the threesome completely, but realizing love had no bounds. “We’ll be following them shortly.”

Macon peered up at him with a sensual smile. “Hell, yeah.”

The partying was short-lived. Macon couldn’t control his enthusiasm any longer. He and Wade made their way through the crowd and into the house not long after Zander, John, and Dean departed their company. Before they even reached the top of the stairs, their hands were already touching each other, seeking flesh.

They stumbled down the hall, boots clunking on the hardwood floor. Wade grabbed Macon at the threshold and pressed him against the wall. His eyes gazed into his. “You’re my rainbow, Macon.”

Macon felt his eyes get misty and his erection grow. “And you’re mine.”

Their mouths crashed together as their hunger grew. Wade’s hands yanked Macon’s buckle loose as they stumbled into the room. Macon tugged at Wade’s shirt. The intensity in Wade’s gaze sparked a new fire in his gut. He moved his tongue over the planes of Wade’s chest and kissed his skin.

While Wade tried to walk backward and open the fly of Macon’s jeans, he tripped and fell, pulling Macon down with him. They laughed and continued on, not letting their fall inhibit their desire.

“Son of bitch, we have too many clothes on,” Wade complained, and kicked off his boots.

“That ain’t no shit.” Macon continued to unbutton Wade’s shirt. His mouth was hungry as he opened the last button. He spread Wade’s shirt open wide

and leaned down to place kisses on Wade's chest. Wade tasted salty and sweet on his tongue.

"Oh, God," Wade moaned, and sifted his fingers through Macon's hair. "I love it when you do that."

Macon flicked his tongue over Wade's taut nipple. He moved lower, leaving a wet trail as he descended. Wade wiggled when he hit a ticklish region on his stomach. Macon's tongue dipped into his belly button, furthering the torture.

Wade laughed and gripped handfuls of Macon's hair. "You're killing me."

"I bet I can turn that laughter to moans in under five seconds." Macon smiled against Wade's stomach and pulled his fly open.

"I wish you—" Wade's words stopped as a loud moan erupted from his lungs.

"I told you so." Macon's teeth grazed over Wade's length through his gray cotton boxers. He grabbed Wade's jeans and yanked them down, leaning back to remove them completely. A sense of pride overwhelmed him. He watched Wade's chest rising and falling quickly as his anticipation built. The moonlight entered the room, highlighting their bodies and giving the room a dreamlike quality. It was a dream for Macon, a wonderful dream come true.

"Man, I love you." Wade grinned. His hand encircled his cock, working slowly. He knew Macon loved to watch him touch himself.

"Is that an invitation?" Macon teased, as he worked his belt loose and shimmied out of his jeans.

"Absolutely." A coy smile stretched across Wade's face.

Macon stood and his erection flopped out, hard and completely at attention. Wade could make him hard with little or no effort. Just being around him was enough.

“Mmm, mmm, boy. Mighty fine hardware.” Wade stood and followed him to the nightstand. “I have a better idea.” He pulled Macon close and kissed him. Then he led Macon to the bathroom, closing the door behind them.

Macon watched with curiosity as Wade turned on the water in the large shower. At one end of the long tiled unit was a bench. Steam rose in the glass-enclosed shower as they entered. Wade grinned, mischief playing in his eyes. He pushed Macon under the spray and retrieved a sponge and the soap.

Wade lathered the sponge and slid it over Macon’s chest. He gazed upon him lovingly as he took his time, gently scrubbing away the dirt and grime from the day. He took extra time, fondling Macon’s package with loving strokes. Wade worked methodically down Macon’s legs, picking up each foot to wash them as well. When he stood, he moved behind Macon and scrubbed his back. His dick slid across Macon’s ass, the suds running down his back making it a slippery surface.

“That feels great.” Macon closed his eyes and enjoyed the intimacy. Gentle hands massaged his back, moving lower to tease and squeeze his rear end. “I think it’s my turn.” He turned and pulled the sponge from Wade’s hand, and started at his chest.

Wade caressed Macon’s face and stared into his eyes as if they had been apart for weeks. Macon knew something profound had happened earlier that day and relished the new closeness and openness their relationship had gained. Today was the start of a new life, a life they would share despite all those who believed they were wrong. His heart swelled. Nothing so wrong could make him feel this alive or wonderful.

He worked around to Wade’s back, taking extra time to enjoy the view. Soapy suds outlined the rigid muscles. Pressing his chest against him, Macon wrapped his arms around Wade and allowed his fingers to drag over his defined pecs. He stopped to tease his nipples, eliciting a satisfied groan before moving south and taking Wade’s thick pole in his hand. “‘Bout ready to use this?” he whispered in Wade’s ear, and nibbled his lobe.

“I’m past ready.” Wade’s hips moved, pulling and pushing his cock through Macon’s grip.

The water washed away the remnants of soap and Wade reached for a bottle of massage oil. He pushed Macon out from under the water and against the wall. When he flipped the lid, he grinned. “I’ve always wanted to do this.”

Oil drizzled over Macon’s chest. Wade smeared it, coating every square inch. He moved lower and squirted his cock and massaged the oil in there as well.

“Mmm.” Macon purred with approval and watched Wade’s contented expression. “My turn.” He removed the bottle from Wade’s hand and coated him in the same manner. When he was satisfied, he set it aside.

Desire flourished as Wade pressed against him, his mouth seeking his lips. Their kiss was deep and tender as their oiled bodies rubbed together. The moment heated and raged into a passionate hunger. Moans erupted with the heat of the shower making the men hot. Wade’s hand touched and caressed Macon’s chest, moving lower to gather their cocks together in his large hand.

“Remember this?” He spoke against Macon’s mouth and smiled. He moved as their shafts rubbed and slid effortlessly over one another. Wade leaned back to watch. “We started with this.” He seemed to be reminiscing, a wide grin showcasing his dimpled cheeks.

“I remember,” Macon said with a raspy voice, already so overcome with emotion and desire he could barely concentrate.

“I think of that night often, of how our relationship started.” Wade looked serious for a moment. “It shocked me, but thrilled me. I remember I couldn’t breathe. If you didn’t make that bold move, we might not be here, together now.”

Macon touched Wade’s face, and adored the love that reflected back at him. They continued, sliding with oiled hands and bodies to a steady rhythm. “I’d always wanted you, but was too scared to tell you. The moment that night

seemed right and perfect. I knew I'd regret it if I never showed you how I felt for you."

"I'm so thankful you did," Wade admitted before kissing him. They swayed, lightheaded from the heat and the desire that continued to build. "I need to be inside you now, Macon." He directed him to turn around.

The cool tile of the wall felt refreshing against Macon's cheek. Warm oil trickled down his back and Wade massaged it in, moving lower to apply a liberal amount between his cheeks. Macon whimpered with the excitement coursing throughout his body. He needed Wade like he needed his next breath.

He worked to relax and calm his racing heart. Wade inched inside him, the oil making it easy and effortless. Macon cried out and grasped at the tile wall. His oily fingers bumped and glided over the slick surface. Wade grunted and wiggled his hips. The invasion burned, burned so damn good. "Oh, God, Wade." Macon took a deep breath.

"I can't get enough of you. This," Wade said with a growl, and thrust in deeper.

Their lovemaking became a series of grunts and groans. Hands slid over Macon's chest as Wade held him tight. His hips pumped with a steady rhythm, making Macon cry out over and over again with pleasure. He fisted his cock and matched the momentum. He ached to release, the pressure building to a painful level. "Wade, I'm going to come."

Wade thrust harder and faster, his hands holding Macon's hips tight. "Oh, yeah, I'm right behind you." He pulled out abruptly and turned Macon around. Their lips met and Wade held their shafts together, bucking insistently. "Come with me."

Macon's eyes rolled back as his release burst forward. "Fuck!" He hissed as a tingly sensation swept over him, come shooting out as Wade unloaded as well.

Wade trembled with his hands still holding them together. He looked down at their spent cocks and grinned before returning his gaze back to Macon's eyes. "Kiss me."

Late that night Wade held Macon in his arms, wanting for nothing more than what he already possessed. Zander's words earlier that day had prompted him to make a decision that had been a long time coming. He knew he could spend the rest of his life trying to please his father and making amends for what the man perceived as immoral, only to come up short in respect and understanding in the long run. By no means would he write his parents off, but he'd make a stand. The day had taught him so much, but the most important lesson was to follow his heart. They might be wrong in the eyes of society, but he couldn't dream of being any happier or more content than at this very moment.

"We're staying," Wade whispered to Macon, who had begun to drift off.

Macon's hand caressed his arm. "I can't imagine being anywhere else, with anyone else."

Whether or not Zander's prediction came true concerning the Nationals, Wade didn't care. He'd always love the rodeo, but he loved Macon more. No matter what came at them or what the future held for them, he knew he could face it as long as the two of them were together. He had found home in the embrace of another man, his best friend, and his lover.

THE END

Author Bio

Hennessee enjoys the journey love takes. Whether it is a heterosexual romance or an alternative romance, the heart is in control and each story to her deserves to be told. Writing has become Hennessee's passion, and she fills her days listening to the voices in her head that demand to be heard. Some view her as kooky and maybe weird with the historical facts she likes to interject into daily conversation. She may be a geek at heart, but more so a romantic, and hopes one day for people of the world to be able to love whom they choose without repercussions. In her eyes, love is a commodity that is in short supply and if someone is fortunate enough to find it, they should hang onto it. Her books can be found at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, BookStrand, Evernight Publishing, and All Romance Ebooks.

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SYNCHRONICITY

By Keira Andrews

Photo Description

An athletic young man (with a deliciously exposed thigh) sits looking away from the camera pensively.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I could look at him all day. But sometimes, when he thinks I'm not looking, he seems so sad...

Sincerely,

Kate

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sports, athletes, Olympics, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, oral sex

Word count: 9,265

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SYNCHRONICITY

By Keira Andrews

Dive 1

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Up.”

Perched backwards on the edge of the platform, heart thumping, Tyler raised his arms over his head. With the adrenaline flowing, he didn't even feel the ache in his back that had kept him awake half the night. He tried not to think about the fact that the whole world was watching, and closed his eyes.

Just another day at the pool.

“Ready?” Aiden asked again.

Their heels hung over the side, ten meters above the glistening surface of the pool as they took identical starting positions. The fear burned in Tyler's chest and what-ifs ricocheted through his mind before he could silence them. *I've done this a thousand times. It won't happen again. It was a fluke.*

“Yeah.”

“One, two, three—go.”

Tyler bent his knees and exploded up off the platform, straightening his legs and folding his body forward at the waist in the pike position. As he and Aiden fell in unison, he put his arms above his head and straightened out in plenty of time to slice into the water with as little splash as possible, his body vertical, bruised toes pointed painfully.

They plunged into the pool, and Tyler flipped upright and swam to the edge next to Aiden. He hoisted himself out and hurried over to the showers on

the wall behind the diving platform, ignoring the twinges from his toes as adrenaline flooded him. *I did it.*

His first Olympic dive was in the books.

It had felt like a good one—and the crowd certainly thought so, if their enthusiastic applause was any gauge. He chanced a smile at Aiden, who nodded, a smile briefly lifting his full lips. Aiden reached out his hand and they slapped their palms together lightly.

Eyes closed, Tyler stepped under the warm water. As he turned, his shoulder brushed against Aiden's, sending a delicious shiver up his spine. God, how he wanted to wrap his arms around him and feel his powerful body from head to toes, press their lips together and...

What else is new?

With a rueful chuckle under his breath, Tyler opened his eyes and stepped out from under the shower. *This is the Olympic Games. Focus.*

Five dives to go.

Five days earlier

“Penny for your thoughts. Or a nickel, I guess, since they don't make pennies any more.”

Aiden glanced away from the bus window, his pensive expression disappearing under the mask of a smile. “Just thinking. Aren't you sitting back there with the swimmers?”

“Nah. Too rowdy for me.” Tyler plopped down next to Aiden, jostling against him slightly as the bus turned. He knew Aiden probably wanted to be alone like usual, but Tyler wanted to share this experience. Not that Aiden ever said he wanted to be alone, but the only time Tyler saw him outside the pool was when they travelled to competitions. “But I can go back if you want.”

“No, of course not. Don't mind me. Can't shut my brain off sometimes.”

“But this is still supposed to be fun, right? Can’t we worry about the competition after the opening ceremony?”

“Yeah, of course.” Aiden shrugged. “Besides, there’s nothing to worry about. We’ll do our best and whatever happens, happens.”

Tyler pushed away a flicker of irritation. He knew they shouldn’t get their hopes up, but he still wished Aiden had more confidence in their partnership. “Yeah, but we at least have a *shot* at the podium. We’ve been diving really well. Don’t you think?”

Aiden nodded. “Yeah. Like I said, we’ll do our best.” He gazed out at the jubilant crowds.

“I guess this is old hat for you now.”

“No way.” Aiden’s smile seemed real this time. “This may be my second Olympics, but I don’t think it’ll ever get old.”

It was on the tip of Tyler’s tongue to ask why Aiden had seemed so sad a moment ago—as he often did when he thought Tyler wasn’t looking. Of course, little did Aiden know that Tyler watched him every chance he got. He knew it was a hopeless crush, but he couldn’t help himself. “Aiden—”

“Yooooooo!” Mike Grantwell had ventured up from the swimmers’ party at the back of the bus. No one would dare break training and drink before their competitions, but the energy of the Games provided a natural high.

“Hey, Mike.” Tyler raised his hand to return Mike’s high five. “I thought you guys were skipping the ceremony. Aren’t you competing tomorrow?”

“The backstrokers are, but the rest of us have a few days. Thank God. No way I’m missing this.” He motioned to the packed streets. “Look at all the hot chicks.” He winked. “You two are gonna clean up in the Village. I swear, you guys are brothers from another mother. You sure you’re not related?”

“We’re sure,” Tyler answered. They’d heard it a million times since their coaches paired them up six months earlier.

“I can barely tell you apart.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot, Mike.” Nathalie Bourbeau piped up from the seat in front, but there was no venom in the insult. “So, how many swimmers does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

Mike guffawed. “How many?”

Nathalie shrugged. “We don’t know yet. They keep getting electrocuted.”

Beside Nathalie, her partner Audrey giggled, and they all laughed. Mike waved his hand. “Yeah, yeah. You divers are just as wet as we are.”

“The difference is we’re smart enough to towel off before changing light bulbs,” Nathalie replied with a wink before she and Audrey returned to chattering in French.

As Mike was called back to rejoin the swimmers, the bus neared the stadium, winding its way through downtown Toronto. The streets teemed with people, many waving Canadian flags and wearing red. With each block closer, Tyler’s pulse increased. He was about to walk into the opening ceremony of the freaking *Olympics* as part of the home team. He took a deep breath. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous.”

“Because a billion people around the world are going to be watching?” Aiden ran a hand through his dirty-blond hair and put on his red cap. “We’re all nervous. But this is the fun part.” He nodded toward the looming dome, which was open to the balmy night. “Look, we’re here.”

Tyler put on his own cap over his light blond hair and they filed off the bus to join their other teammates in the bowels of the stadium, where the Parade of Nations would begin. As host nation, Canada went last, and some of the other countries had already taken their lap. The athletes gathered as more buses arrived, filling up the area. The din of the crowd’s cheers above them hummed in the air.

In their matching uniforms, Tyler mused that he and Aiden really could be brothers. At five nine they were both tall for divers, which made them a natural fit as synchro partners. Aiden’s shoulders were a bit broader, but they had similar body types—muscular, yet lean. Their only major physical

difference was the blue of Tyler's eyes, while Aiden's were a dark brown. They both even had dimples in their cheeks when they smiled. As Nathalie put it once, they were "très Abercrombie."

But Aiden's *real* smiles were few and far between, and once again Tyler found himself chewing over what was bothering him. Of course their partnership had been the last thing either had expected, and Tyler knew he couldn't fill Greg Lewis's shoes. He'd tried his best, but Aiden must be wishing it was Greg with him at this Olympics.

Little Nathalie nudged Tyler with her elbow, grinning. "Can you believe it? We're really here! We did it!"

Putting thoughts of Aiden aside momentarily, Tyler slung his arm over Nathalie's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. They'd trained together in Montreal for three years before Tyler had gotten the call to go to Calgary. At twenty, they were the youngest members of the team, and Tyler was very glad to have Nathalie with him.

She frowned and lowered her voice as she tucked a dark curl behind her ear. "What is it?"

Before he could answer, she raised her eyebrows. "Wait—three guesses, and the first two don't count."

"Nat."

Smiling, she shook her head and leaned in to whisper. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

Tyler knew that was true, and pressed a kiss to her cheek as officials called for attention and the athletes clustered together in groups, with the veterans and flag bearer taking the lead. When Canada was announced, the roaring in the stadium reached a fevered pitch, rolling over them like a wave. In this moment, standing next to Aiden, Tyler had never felt more proud. It took everything in him not to reach for Aiden's hand.

As the athletes ahead of them began walking up the concrete ramp, Tyler took a deep breath and touched Aiden's arm lightly. They all wore long-

sleeved red jackets over khaki pants, but Tyler swore he felt a bolt of electricity where they touched. “Thank you.”

Aiden blinked. “For what?”

For being the most incredibly smart and kind and sexy man I’ve ever met, even if you’ll never like me in the same way. “I don’t know. For everything. I’m so glad I’m here with you.”

An emotion Tyler couldn’t identify flickered across Aiden’s face. “Me, too.”

Then they were marching, and even though deep down Tyler felt Aiden was only being nice, he wanted to believe it. The crowd screamed as they entered the stadium, cheers and love echoing in the warm night air. As he grinned and waved, Tyler let himself be swept away with Aiden at his side.

Dive 2

The audience cheered for the Chinese team's high marks, but Tyler blocked it out, breathing in and out steadily. He and Aiden stood with heads high and shoulders back atop the platform, waiting to take their positions. His body ached, but he ignored that too. This was the Olympics and he just had to focus. Mind over matter.

When it was time, Aiden gave the command to walk and they turned to hang their heels over the edge of the platform.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Aiden gave the next directive in the sequence. “Up.”

Tyler raised his arms to shoulder height.

“Ready?”

He concentrated on breathing. “Yeah.”

“One, two, three—go.”

They jumped into the air for the backwards dive, pulling their legs up and reaching for their toes before unfolding and entering the water. Their coaches whistled and the audience hooted and hollered. This time they both headed for the nearby hot tub, and Tyler tried to pretend he wasn't anxiously waiting for the scores.

When the 9.0s flashed up across the board for execution and synchronicity, Tyler exhaled. As the last team, the Mexicans, performed their second dive, Tyler watched the results board from the corner of his eye. For the moment they were in third place behind the favored Chinese and Americans, but the up-and-coming Mexicans could overtake them.

Another diver climbed into the hot tub, and Tyler scooted over. His leg hit Aiden's beneath the water, and their thighs brushed together. Aiden didn't

move away, and Tyler's stomach flip-flopped. Just then, the crowd screamed its approval, and he glanced back up.

3. OXFORD Aiden / BOURNE Tyler

Still in third place. Four dives to go.

Four days earlier

“Oxford and Bourne.” The official at the front of the small meeting room called their names.

Tyler glanced at Aiden sitting beside him. “You sure you want me to draw?”

“Go for it.” Aiden gave him a fist bump.

With a deep breath, Tyler walked to the front of the room. He pulled up the sleeve of his uniform shirt, although it wasn't necessary considering there were only a few slips of paper left in the bowl. He resisted the urge to fondle every slip, searching for the perfect one, and pulled out the first one he touched. He handed it to the official.

“Seven,” the woman said.

There was a smattering of polite applause, and Tyler returned to his seat. “I guess it's okay?”

Aiden smiled. “It's fine. There are only eight teams anyway. We're not first and we're not last. It's a good spot.”

When the draw was finished, it was time to meet with the press. Everyone on the Canadian team had attended media training, but Tyler was hoping to leave most of the talking to Aiden as they took their spots and the first reporter approached.

The woman smiled with glossy lips. “Aiden, how nice to see you again. Tyler, it's a pleasure to meet you.”

Aiden smiled mechanically. “Hi, Theresa. We're thrilled to be here.”

Theresa went right for the jugular. “Aiden, you and Greg Lewis just missed the podium four years ago and were expected to be gold medal contenders together here in Toronto. Will you be testifying at Greg’s hearing in October?”

Tyler glanced at Aiden nervously. The last thing they needed was for the media to dredge up the unpleasant details of Greg’s case and upset Aiden. But Aiden appeared as stoic as ever, his expression placid.

“If I’m called. But right now I’m concentrating on these Games and doing my best to help Team Canada.”

“As Greg’s partner for so many years, do you feel there’s still a cloud of suspicion hanging over you, even now that you’re diving with Tyler?”

Tyler blurted out, “Aiden’s passed every test in the book with flying colors. No one who’s checked the facts suspects him of any wrongdoing. If you think—”

One of the team officials stepped in and, with a tight smile on her face, put her hand on Tyler’s shoulder. She leaned in and spoke quietly with Theresa, who nodded and turned her gleaming smile on Tyler. “At only twenty years old, how does it feel to be at your first Olympics?”

With a deep breath, Tyler forced himself to smile and let his anger go. “It feels amazing. I’m so excited to be here in Toronto representing my country, especially since I grew up only an hour away.”

“Do you feel added pressure having these Games at home?”

Abso-fucking-lutely. “Not at all. We’ve gotten so much love and support from our friends and family and the whole country. The only pressure comes from ourselves.”

“But of course you’ve had to step up and fill some big shoes. You’ve only been competing at the senior level for a year. It must be nerve-wracking!”

Tyler resolutely kept smiling. “I’m going to do my best.” He knew what a disappointment it would be to Aiden and the team if they didn’t medal because of Tyler.

“Having a veteran partner must help. Aiden, at twenty-seven, how does it feel to be the old man of the team?”

Aiden chuckled. “It feels great. I know I speak for Tyler and everyone when I say we’ve all worked hard and we can’t wait to compete.”

Theresa pointed to the chain around Aiden’s neck. “Can I ask about your necklace? You wear it everywhere but in the pool.”

Aiden dutifully tugged the small, silver medallion out from beneath his shirt. “It’s a St. Sebastian medal my parents gave me years ago. He’s the patron saint of archers, athletes and soldiers. As an athlete we certainly feel a lot like soldiers sometimes.”

Theresa nodded to her photographer, who snapped a photo. Then her expression grew serious. “Tyler, after Andrea May’s terrible accident at the U.S. Olympic trials, are you nervous about diving off that platform? Ten meters is a long way up, and as we saw in Nashville, the slightest miscalculation can be catastrophic.”

Images of the American diver plummeting to the water and the blood staining the pool deck afterwards as the paramedics worked on her flickered through Tyler’s mind. He’d tried to resist watching the clip of the accident online, but a sick curiosity had gotten the better of him.

He concentrated on his rote answer. “We all know the risks. Accidents happen in every aspect of life, including diving, unfortunately. We’re here to do our jobs, and we have to put that out of our minds. But we wish Andrea all the best in her recovery. She’s a tough competitor and I’m sure she’ll be back for the next Games.”

As Aiden chimed in to echo Tyler’s statements, Tyler tried to banish the images of Andrea’s fall. He’d seen the replay, and her approach had looked totally fine. But she’d gone up too close to the platform and cracked the top of her head against the side as she rotated down. For a week he’d second guessed every move he made until realizing that would be the thing that got him hurt.

“Aiden, you’re also competing in singles in the platform competition. At the trials, you were first and Tyler, you were fourth. Is there any rivalry between you?”

“Not at all,” Tyler answered honestly. “I’ll be cheering for Aiden harder than anyone.”

Theresa leaned in conspiratorially. “All right, I just have to ask one more question. It’s something our readers have all wondered about. Do those teeny tiny Speedos ever come off during a dive?”

They laughed good-naturedly, and Tyler grinned. “Believe it or not, those suits are stuck to us like glue.”

“Don’t you feel practically naked up there? Not that you don’t have amazing bodies to show off.”

Aiden jumped in. “Thanks, Theresa. We’re used to it, so we don’t really give it any thought.”

“One more question: Do you have any waxing tips? Because it looks like you boys take it *all* off.”

They smiled stiffly because they had to, and Tyler couldn’t help but blush. Of course they did wax their entire bodies to cut down on resistance entering the water, but waxing his junk wasn’t something he wanted to talk about with the world.

Theresa’s time was up, and a parade of other journalists came by to ask similar questions. When it was over, Tyler sighed in relief and checked the time. “Are you coming to lunch with my parents?”

“Nah, I don’t want to intrude. Go catch up and have some quality time. I’ll see you at practice this afternoon.”

Tyler couldn’t help the pang of disappointment. It was true that he hadn’t seen his parents since March, but it felt like Aiden was holding Tyler at arm’s length, as usual. “When are your parents flying in?”

“Day before the competition.” Aiden pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped the screen. “Hey, is whatshisname coming?”

Tyler frowned. “Who?”

Aiden didn’t look up from his phone. “You know. Tony?”

Tyler laughed. “*Tony*? No. I haven’t seen him in ages.”

“Oh. I thought you guys were dating.” Aiden looked confused.

“Yeah, for five minutes. He was nice and all, but who has time for that?”

Aiden laughed tightly. “Tell me about it. Okay, see ya later.” With a wave, he was gone.

As Tyler made his way to the buses to catch a lift downtown, he pondered Aiden’s question. He was amazed Aiden even remembered Tony’s name. Tyler had met him during a rare trip to the bar for another diver’s birthday party. They’d gotten off furtively together in the bathroom, but Tyler hadn’t planned on seeing him again. It was sweet when Tony then surprised him by showing up at the pool to take him to dinner, but Tyler had to let him down gently that evening.

Not only did he not have the time with training and his correspondence courses from McGill in Montreal, but the only man Tyler really wanted was Aiden. When he’d groped Tony in the bathroom stall, he’d imagined it was Aiden. And of course Aiden and his firm ass starred in all of Tyler’s jerk-off fantasies. It seemed cruel that Tyler spent the majority of his days half-naked and wet with Aiden, yet their relationship was strictly platonic.

Tyler had fooled around with his fair share of guys, but never really had a boyfriend. He’d had a girlfriend in grade eight, but even then he’d known he was gay, and his parents knew it too. He laughed to himself. It hadn’t taken his girlfriend long to figure it out either, with the way Tyler had drooled over her Britpop pinups.

For his part, Aiden didn’t seem to be dating, either. Tyler was pretty sure Aiden was gay too, but Aiden kept his private life very private. Even in the

insular diving world, there was hardly any gossip about him—in terms of dating, at least. Of course, when the situation with Greg had exploded, that was all anyone could talk about.

As he took his seat on the athletes' bus, Tyler shook his head and told himself to stop obsessing over Aiden for a change. He was going to have lunch with his parents and not think about Aiden at all.

He lasted about ten seconds, but called it a victory.

Dive 3

With each step closer to the top of the platform, Tyler's palms tingled and he focused on breathing steadily. Like all the teams, their first two dives had been relatively easy, with a 2.0 degree of difficulty. The third round was where the competition really began, with dives upwards of 3.0 being the norm.

Their coaches' voices echoed in his mind, reminding him that this was just another day at the pool, and to do it like they did in training. Panic flickered through Tyler as they reached the top. He thought of the thousands of successful dives he'd done over the years without hitting the platform.

Suddenly every dive that ever went wrong in his entire life played out in his mind like a slideshow, from belly flopping into his grandparents' pool to hitting his forehead on the springboard at the junior nationals when he was twelve.

Enough!

Again, they made their approach and took their positions on the edge of the platform, this time for an inward three-and-a-half somersault. Tyler was so glad he wasn't alone. Aiden's presence beside him was a steady comfort, and he homed in on Aiden and on breathing in time with him. They readied themselves and got into position.

"One, two, three—go."

Tyler propelled himself up, getting good elevation before quickly assuming the tuck position, hugging his knees to his chest to complete the revolutions before opening up for a rip entry. It felt clean, and as always he hoped there hadn't been much splash. He bumped fists with Aiden as they hurried to the hot tub. Tyler couldn't help but wince as he walked despite the rush of adrenaline.

Aiden murmured as they sat down in the warm water. "Toes?"

"Just aching a bit. Nothing to worry about."

"Back?"

“Same.”

“You can do it.” Aiden squeezed Tyler’s knee briefly.

God, Tyler wanted to lean into Aiden’s warmth, feel the slick slide of his skin and the strength of his arms and—*focus*. Nodding, he smiled, mindful of all the eyes and cameras on them. He could do it. He *would* do it.

Three dives left.

Three days earlier

With a sigh, Tyler flipped over onto his other side and cursed himself for not bringing earplugs. Although it was after midnight, the Olympic Village pulsed with energy. Above the hum of the air conditioning, he heard snatches of laughter and the low thump of music.

Turned out that when you put thousands of young, fit people together, it was like an episode of *The Bachelor* on crack. People were hooking up left, right and center. As the Games went on and athletes completed their events, the Village was becoming a non-stop party zone. Tyler had slept well the other nights, but now, for some reason, the harder he tried, the more awake he felt.

After flipping onto his back and straightening the sheets, Tyler let his hand drift below the waist of his boxers without thinking. Usually when he couldn’t sleep, he’d jerk off to lull himself into slumber. He froze and glanced over at Aiden’s bed. Aiden was sprawled on his stomach, fast asleep with lips parted. He looked peaceful—the usual furrow between his brows smooth, the sadness gone.

The ever-present desire for Aiden flooded Tyler’s veins, and before he could think better of it he had licked his palm and was stroking himself. He knew he should at least have a modicum of decency and go to the bathroom to get off, but as he touched himself, Tyler couldn’t tear his eyes away from Aiden.

The sheet was slung low on Aiden's hips, and his boxers had slid down to expose a sliver of the pale curve of his ass. They'd closed the blinds on the window, but enough light from the bright lamps illuminating the walking path through the Village shone through. Aiden's broad shoulders and powerful arms were bare, and Tyler could imagine the light dusting of freckles on his forearms.

Beneath his own sheet, Tyler kicked off his boxers and spread his legs, bending his knees with feet flat on the mattress. As he stroked his cock steadily he caressed his nipples with the other hand, twisting and tweaking them until they were hard. Head turned on the pillow, he watched Aiden, knowing it was wrong but unable to stop.

He thought about what Aiden's mouth would taste like. He licked his lips, imagining the feel of Aiden's tongue against his. It was rare to get an opportunity to watch him uninterrupted—unseen. He drank in his bare flesh, kissing and touching it in his mind as he worked his own body, driving himself closer and closer to the edge.

Tyler sucked his fingers and pushed at his hole, biting his lip to stifle his cries as he imagined Aiden's cock inside him, driving him open and filling him. A moan escaped his lips as he squeezed in two fingers, and he held his breath, watching Aiden. But Aiden was still fast asleep.

It burned without any lube, but Tyler couldn't go to the bathroom for lotion because it would mean taking his eyes off Aiden. His dick was achingly hard and leaking, and he spread his knees wider, bracing as he thrust up into his hand. Thoughts tumbled scattershot through his mind as the pleasure built, rolling through his body.

What if he wakes up? This is wrong. Or maybe he'll want it, too. Maybe he'll let me eat his cock and then climb on top of me and fuck me raw, fill me up and make me his—

Tyler shuddered as his orgasm ripped free, splashing his chest and belly as he gasped, mouth open in silent bliss. He flopped his legs down and caught his breath, gaze still on Aiden. As the pleasure receded, guilt prickled at Tyler's

skin. What was the matter with him? Aiden was never going to return his feelings—and why should he? Tyler was a kid who was probably just going to disappoint him and the team.

Now he was a pervert to boot. He bet Greg Lewis never jerked off while watching Aiden sleep. With a shake of his head, Tyler retrieved his boxers and tiptoed to the bathroom to clean himself up. When he emerged a few minutes later, he froze in the doorway. He met Aiden's gaze and swallowed thickly. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

Aiden rubbed his face and jerked his head toward the wall. "Nope. Who would have thought British equestrians were such party animals?"

His own heart was pounding so loudly in his ears that Tyler had to focus on the new *thumpa-thumpa* resonating from the room next door. He forced a smile and was glad he'd put his boxers back on. "I bet the Ukrainian weight lifters across the hall will have something to say about it, since they're competing tomorrow."

On cue, there was a pounding and raised voices from the hallway.

"Uh-oh," Aiden whispered. "I wouldn't want to get on the bad side of the weight lifters. Did you see that one guy's neck? It's bigger than my head."

They chuckled, and Tyler climbed back into bed as their end of the hall fell silent. "Let's hope that's the end of it. But I'm making a run to the drug store tomorrow for ear plugs. I'll pick you up a pair."

"Thanks. Normally I sleep like the dead. Hope I wasn't snoring or anything. After that last World Cup event, I wouldn't have been offended if you'd wanted your own room here."

"Don't worry about it. You had a cold." An unpleasant thought occurred. "Unless you wanted your own room?"

"No. It's... this is fine." Aiden yawned widely and stretched his limbs before curling onto his side away from Tyler. "Night. Or, morning."

“Night. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.” Tyler blushed as the little rhyme his mother used to say came out.

Aiden looked over his shoulder and grinned sleepily. “Please knock on wood immediately.”

After rapping his knuckles against the table between their beds, Tyler settled back down. His earlier shame had dissipated, and this time he was asleep in minutes, thoughts of Aiden’s smile floating through his mind.

Dive 4

Breathe.

Tyler could feel the nervous tension in the crowd pulsing in the air—in his veins—like a living thing, as he and Aiden stood at the back of the platform for their running forward four-and-a-half somersault. They were still in the bronze medal spot, although the Mexicans were nipping at their heels. They couldn't afford to miss.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“One, two, three—up.”

They rose to their toes, and Tyler ignored the throbbing.

“Go.”

Their approach was a kind of skip into a powerful two-foot hurdle at the end of the platform that launched them up into the forward somersaults. Tyler clutched his knees to his chest as he rotated through the air and stretched out, pointing his battered toes before entry.

He went in at a slight angle, his heart sinking as he kicked to the surface. Yet the crowd's cheering seemed impossibly loud, so maybe it hadn't been that bad. Their coaches whistled, and Tyler pressed his lips together, ignoring the pain flaring all over his body. When the marks flashed up, he sighed in relief. Still third.

He dunked himself in the hot tub and sat back gingerly. Next to him, Aiden rested his hand on Tyler's shoulder, squeezing gently. For a moment, Tyler concentrated on the warmth of Aiden's palm and forgot about everything else. His fingers lingered, and Tyler leaned into the touch.

“Two more,” Aiden whispered.

Two days earlier

“Yes! That was your best yet!” Steve clapped on the pool deck. “You guys got this.”

When they climbed out of the water, Aiden gave Tyler a perfunctory fist bump, and Tyler’s excitement ebbed. They’d been diving better than ever, but Aiden didn’t seem to share Steve’s confidence.

“All right, hit the showers and go back to the Village. I’ll meet you in the morning. Keep your eyes on the prize.” Steve gave them both a hearty slap on the back.

It was the end of the night, and they were the last team left. Since the Olympic pool was occupied with events, they had practiced in a local pool. The shower room was empty as Tyler and Aiden padded inside.

Tyler turned on one of the showers and adjusted the temperature. “Damn, that was a great practice. I really think we can medal.”

Aiden turned on his own shower nearby. “We’ll see.”

Jaw clenching, Tyler exhaled sharply. “Fine, forget it. We’re gonna suck.”

Aiden blinked. “What? What’s wrong?”

Tyler roughly lathered shampoo into his hair. “Nothing.”

“Tyler.” Aiden watched him, brow furrowed, eyes kind. He waited.

After rinsing his hair, Tyler took a deep breath. “I know I’m not the partner you wanted to be here with. I’m not a vet like Greg. I’ve only *been* to one world championship, and he’s *won* two. But I’ve been working my ass off for the past six months to make our team a success, and I’m sick of feeling like a disappointment.”

Aiden stared, mouth open. “A *disappointment*?”

Tyler shrugged. “I know you don’t think we can medal. If Greg was still competing—”

“Greg was a liar and a cheat,” Aiden bit out. He stepped closer, gaze steady. “I beat myself up constantly because I hadn’t improved the way he did

the last year. All he talked about was winning, and how I needed to keep up and get those extra inches of elevation. He offered me the new ‘vitamins’ he was using.”

Tyler’s hatred for Greg Lewis intensified. “Son of a bitch.”

“Yeah. He would have taken me down with him if he had his way.” Aiden ran his hand through his hair and blew out a long breath. “I thought he was my friend, and he was using *steroids*. I didn’t want to believe it, but I knew deep down. That’s why I didn’t touch the pills he gave me. Jesus, Tyler. You have no idea how glad I am you’re *not* Greg.”

“I...” Tyler shook his head. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I trusted Greg, and he betrayed me. I couldn’t let that happen again. I thought if you and I just came to the pool and did our jobs without getting attached, it would be better that way.”

“So... I’m not a disappointment?”

“No!” Aiden took a step closer, eyes imploring. “The farthest thing from it. I didn’t want to pressure you. I think we can totally medal if we dive our best, but it’s easy in practice. When you’re standing up there with the whole world watching, you never know what can happen. One missed entry and it’s over—the competition is too stiff. It’s so easy to get rattled. But you’re amazing. You’ve worked so hard and done so well. You’re—” He broke off and stepped back.

“What?” Tyler snagged Aiden’s wrist, and it was as if he’d touched a light socket as tingles flowed through his body.

Aiden’s chest rose and fell. “I didn’t want to get close. I tried to keep it just professional. It’s not right. You’re young, and I shouldn’t... we shouldn’t.” He licked his lips. “Do you...?”

Body thrumming, Tyler hauled Aiden against him and they kissed, mouths opening, tongues meeting. They groaned and stumbled to the wall, Tyler’s back against the wet tiles. The hot showers filled the room with steam as they rubbed against each other, kissing desperately.

Tyler's head spun, and he gripped Aiden's hips. They were already practically naked in their Speedos, and it only took a couple of tugs to free their hardening cocks. Aiden broke their kiss and wrapped his hand around their shafts, rubbing them together as he thrust his hips.

As his groan echoed off the slick tiles, Tyler pressed his lips together and hoped no one in the changing room had heard him. Aiden teased Tyler's nipples with his free hand and rested their foreheads together as he worked their cocks. Tyler's balls were tightening already. He didn't want this to end, and he grabbed Aiden's hand. "I'm gonna..."

But Aiden kept stroking and reached down with a wet finger to caress behind Tyler's balls and circle his hole. Tyler gasped, his cock throbbing.

"Let me see you come," Aiden whispered.

He didn't need to be asked twice. With a soft cry, Tyler came over Aiden's hand and spurted onto their stomachs, pleasure shuddering through him. Aiden milked him through several intense waves until Tyler could only whimper.

"You're so beautiful." Aiden pressed kisses to Tyler's flushed face. "Wanted this for so long."

In the steamy room, the haze of Tyler's orgasm seemed thick in the air. But he shook it off and spun them around, pressing Aiden back as Tyler sank to his knees. "Do you want this, too? I've thought about how your cock would taste every day."

Nodding jerkily, Aiden breathed heavily and tangled his fingers in Tyler's short hair. His bathing suit was tight around his thighs, and Tyler peeled it down so Aiden could step out of it and spread his legs. Their Speedos left little to the imagination, and of course Tyler had seen Aiden naked in the locker room.

But not like *this*.

Aiden's engorged cock was long and thick, with a gentle curve. Tyler kissed the tip, teasing at the slit with his tongue as Aiden groaned. Licking and

sucking, Tyler worshipped Aiden's cock. He took it into his mouth, hollowing his cheeks as he sucked.

He didn't want this to be over yet, so he pulled off, grinning at Aiden's frustrated huff. Tyler caressed Aiden's smooth thighs and played with his heavy balls, rolling them together in his hands.

"Jesus, Ty." Aiden stroked Tyler's wet hair.

Tyler reached back to touch Aiden's hole, but it wasn't enough. He'd fantasized about this but had never done it with anyone, and before he could lose his nerve, he urged Aiden around to face the wall. As he spread Aiden's cheeks, he blew air over Aiden's sensitive flesh.

Moaning, Aiden opened his legs wider and pushed his ass back toward Tyler's face. "Fuck. Yes. *Please.*"

With a deep breath, Tyler dove in, swirling his tongue around Aiden's hole. Tyler worked him open with his lips and tongue until he was inside that tight passage. Aiden's legs trembled and his harsh pants seemed loud in the empty shower room, bringing Tyler's dick back to life.

He wanted to stand and thrust into Aiden, fuck him and spill deep inside him, and then get down on his hands and knees and let Aiden do the same to him. But they didn't have condoms—and shit, someone was going to come looking for them sooner rather than later.

Reluctantly leaving Aiden's red, glistening ass, Tyler spun him back around and swallowed his cock. A few moments later, Aiden gripped Tyler's hair and shot into his mouth. Eyes closed with his head tipped back, mouth open, Aiden had never been so beautiful. Tyler swallowed as much as he could, milking Aiden until he was spent.

Aiden slid down the wall and collapsed in a graceless heap, with Tyler kneeling between his splayed legs. Reaching out, Aiden swiped his thumb across Tyler's swollen bottom lip, then tugged him close for a kiss. Their tongues slid together gently, and Tyler sighed.

When they broke apart again, Tyler pressed their foreheads together. “Keep thinking I’ll wake up any second.”

Aiden rubbed their noses together briefly, an easy smile—a *real* smile—brightening his face. “I thought... God, I’m an idiot. I thought it would ruin everything if you knew how much I wanted you. After Greg I was so determined to not get close again. Then you came along.”

The question he hadn’t wanted to ask escaped Tyler’s lips. “You and Greg... were you...?”

Aiden’s unexpected laughter echoed off the tile. “Hell, no. Greg’s as straight as they come. But I thought he was my friend. I trusted him. I didn’t want to make the same mistake again. Then of course I fell for you. *Hard*.”

“You did, huh?” Tyler grinned and kissed him again. “Tell me more about that. No detail too small. Because I fell for you the day we made our first dive together.”

“Oxford and Bourne?” A loud male voice rang out. “Pool’s closing. Your transport’s waiting.”

Stifling their laughter, Tyler and Aiden scrambled to their feet, and Tyler called, “Coming!”

Of course this just made them laugh harder, and Aiden pulled him close for another kiss. “Twice, in fact,” he murmured.

Tyler wanted so much to ignore the outside world and stay in the shower room with Aiden. He groaned. “I guess we’d better go.”

“Yeah.” Aiden turned off the showers. In the silence, he whispered, “I don’t think it would go over so well if we got busted and kicked out of the Olympics for fucking in the facilities.”

Tyler chuckled. “Can you imagine the headlines? The *Sun* would have a field day.”

“Seriously. ‘Dirty Diving Duo Ditched from Games.’”

They laughed and shared one last quick kiss before they got back to business.

Dive 5

His heels hanging over the edge of the platform, Tyler raised his arms. The back two-and-a-half somersault, two-and-a-half twist in the pike position was one of his favorite dives to train. He took comfort in it now, even as his toes screamed.

“Up.” Aiden paused as they raised their arms at their sides to shoulder height. “Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“One, two, three—go.”

Knees bending, arms pumping, Tyler shoved off, twisting and rolling through the air, keeping his legs locked and straight in a pike. It felt clean as he entered the water, and the crowd seemed to agree.

As he put his hands flat on the deck to push himself up out of the pool, his back protested, and he stumbled. But Aiden was there with a strong hand on his arm, steadying him.

“I’m fine.” Tyler tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace.

Aiden kept his hand where it was as they walked slowly to the hot tub. Tyler sank down under the water, willing his aching body to relax. The audience cheered, and he glanced at the marks and standings.

3. *OXFORD Aiden / BOURNE Tyler*

The Chinese were still first and couldn’t be caught. But the Americans in second were only half a point ahead. Tyler took a deep breath, doing mental calculations to factor in the degree of difficulty of their next dive. At the thought of the remaining dive, Tyler’s stomach churned.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Tyler blinked at Aiden. “Huh?”

“It doesn’t matter where we end up.” Aiden reached down and squeezed Tyler’s hand quickly. “As long as we finish together. No disappointment.”

One more dive. The only problem was that he didn't know if he could do it.

One day earlier

“Again.” Steve called from the deck. “Tyler, your tuck is sloppy. Aiden, you’re a beat too fast on the takeoff. What’s up with you two today?”

As Steve and their coaching team muttered to each other, Tyler and Aiden shared a guilty glance and headed back up the stairs to the top of the platform. While they were still diving better than most teams in the world, Tyler knew their coaches were right. They had less than twenty-four hours until the competition, and they had to focus.

It was his fault—if he’d just bitten his tongue about how he was feeling, he and Aiden would never have talked, which of course had led to the sex.

They’d lasted all of thirty seconds, alone in their room at the Village, before they were tearing each other’s clothes off, kissing and sucking each other until they were spent. They’d forced themselves to sleep in their own beds and get some rest, but even now as they climbed the tower, Tyler had to fight the urge to touch.

Part of him was giddy with joy. He couldn’t believe it was real, that Aiden actually wanted him, too. But they had to keep their heads in the game. When they reached the top of the platform, Tyler spoke quietly. “Okay, from here on in until the competition’s over, we’re all business. Even when we’re alone. We can’t mess this up when we’re this close.”

Aiden nodded and held out his hand. “Deal.”

Tyler slapped his palm lightly in their customary way. Okay, time to focus. This was the Olympics, and everything else could wait. On Aiden’s command, they walked to the edge of the platform. Facing forward, toes at the end of the concrete, Tyler followed Aiden’s cues and they exploded into the air in unison, somersaulting backwards—

His toes were burning, the flames licking up through his body as his breath stopped. He didn't know where he was in the air—where was the water? He unfurled, falling out of control—Jesus, *where was the water?*

As Tyler plummeted into the pool, his body seized, agony searing through his back where he had hit the water. Under the surface, his brain told his limbs to kick and move, but he was frozen, his vision blacking out as he sank to the bottom.

Strong arms wrapped around him, and he tried to keep his eyes open as he was pulled upwards. Steve and the coaches were there in the water, and Tyler tried to focus on what they were saying, but he couldn't. *What happened?*

“Aiden, let go of him. We got this.” Steve's voice was too loud.

The arms around him—Aiden's arms—tightened, and Tyler leaned against him and closed his eyes. Aiden was there. Everything would be okay. Then he was out of the water and there were more hands and voices, and the fog began to lift. Blinking, Tyler realized he was lying on the pool deck. His back and toes throbbed. A light filled his eyes.

As the medic examined him, a hand took hold of Tyler's. He knew it was Aiden's, and Tyler squeezed as hard as he could. “I'm fine,” he said, although it sounded weak to his own ears. God, what had he done? He'd ruined everything after all without even having a chance to compete.

Aiden leaned over him, face pinched, eyes glistening. “You will be. It's okay. I'm right here.”

As they put Tyler in a neck brace and onto a back board, then into a waiting ambulance, Aiden gripped his hand, never letting go once. Aiden had a brief argument with Steve about riding with Tyler, and Steve agreed to meet them at the hospital. The ambulance's siren was piercing, and Tyler tried to smile. “Think they can turn that down? I have a bit of a headache.”

“Need those earplugs, huh?” Aiden's smile was shaky. He squeezed Tyler's hand and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

The hospital was a whirlwind of tests and doctors. Aiden finally had to let go of Tyler, and Tyler could hear him telling Steve outside the X-ray room that he didn't care that he was only wearing his Speedo.

When Tyler saw him again, Aiden was wearing his Olympic uniform of T-shirt and pants, and a pair of flip-flops. His hair had dried haphazardly and stuck up at odd angles. He'd never looked so gorgeous. Tyler grinned as Aiden and Steve came into the exam area. "Looks like Steve finally won a battle today."

Steve shook his head, exasperated. "It took some doing, let me tell you. How are you feeling, kid?"

Like I fell ten meters onto concrete. "I'm fine. Good to go. Right, doc?"

The doctor smiled as she pulled the curtain behind her. "You're very lucky, Tyler. No broken bones aside from the fifth toe on your right foot, which will heal on its own. Plenty of bruises though. Your back will be very sore for the next few days or longer. You grazed the tops of your toes against the concrete platform, so they'll be quite sore as well. I'd tell you to rest with your feet elevated, but somehow I doubt that's going to happen."

"I can still compete?" Tyler could hardly believe his luck.

The doctor tapped her pen on the clipboard. "It's up to you. You're going to be in pain, but your head and neck CT are clear. You're lucky that you don't have a concussion. Medically, you're able to compete if you choose. But there is still a risk you could injure yourself further.

"No, I'm good." Tyler wanted to laugh with joy, but his back twinged. "I'm competing."

"Ty, it's okay." Aiden stood with his hands jammed into his pockets, his brow furrowed as usual. "We'll see how you feel tomorrow."

The doctor signed his chart. "In the meantime take 600 milligrams of ibuprofen three times daily." She smiled. "Good luck, Tyler. We're all rooting for you."

“Thanks, Doc.” Steve nodded to her. “Tyler, we’ll reassess in the morning. I’ll go call the van.”

As soon as Steven was gone, Aiden was at Tyler’s side, reaching for him. He brushed Tyler’s hair back from his forehead. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself. We don’t need to compete.”

“The hell we don’t. I’m fine. I don’t know what the hell happened. Everything was normal and then there was just pain and I lost my bearings. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s my fault. We were both distracted.”

“I’m fine, Aiden. We’ll just keep to what we said earlier. All business until the competition is over. I can do this.” His body ached in ways he hadn’t known possible, but Tyler smiled. “I can do this,” he repeated.

“Okay. All business.” Aiden leaned down and kissed him gently, cupping Tyler’s cheek. He pulled away and traced his fingertips over Tyler’s lips. “Starting now.”

Dive 6

“Walk.”

Tyler’s breath came in short pants, his pulse racing too fast.

You’ve done this dive a million times. Nothing’s changed. It’s another day at the pool. Yet as Tyler took his position at the end of the platform, facing forward this time to launch himself into a reverse three-and-a-half somersault, panic flapped its wings. His breath hitched, and his mind filled with a jumble of images and emotions from training the day before, of falling out of control.

Beside him, Aiden hesitated as if sensing something was wrong. After a few beats, he asked, “Ready?”

His standard response died on his lips. Tyler’s throat felt like sandpaper. A murmur traveled through the crowd, and Tyler forced his lungs to expand. Pain seared his ribs and he fought the urge to turn tail and run.

Under his breath, Aiden whispered. “I’m right here.”

Tyler closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled before blowing the air out. A taut silence settled over the pool, the audience sensing something was amiss.

“Ready?”

Tyler swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

“Up.”

He raised his arms to shoulder height in unison with Aiden. Tyler wished he could close the gap between them and touch Aiden’s fingers just for a moment.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.” This was it. His nostrils flared. He could do this. He *would* do this.

“One, two, three—go.”

Bending down into his knees, Tyler thrust himself up and off the platform as far as he could and into the backwards somersault. He hugged his knees to

his chest, spinning tightly before entry. As he sliced into the water on the vertical, pride and relief swirled through him.

I did it. We did it!

The crowd was on its feet, cheering and shouting, the Canadian team screaming in joy. As he swam to the side of the pool, Tyler caught a glimpse of Nathalie and Audrey, standing on their seats and waving Maple Leafs. Then Aiden was there, his arms around Tyler, his breath warm in Tyler's ear as their legs tangled together below the surface.

"I love you."

They had to get out of the pool, and Tyler's head spun as he pushed himself up. On the deck, Steve and their coaches were there for a flurry of hugs and pats, and congratulations on a job well done.

The crowd hadn't stopped cheering, but suddenly erupted to a decibel level that shot through Tyler's body like a bolt of lightning. He grabbed Aiden's arm as they peered at the scoreboard.

2. OXFORD Aiden / BOURNE Tyler

"Silver!" Steve shouted, whooping. "*Silver!*"

Tyler was swept up into another round of hugs as the Mexicans waited atop the platform for the pandemonium to die down. They were out of medal contention after a miss on their fourth dive, so it was official.

"We won the silver medal." Tyler said it almost to himself, utterly disbelieving. The last dive had been almost perfect, with scores of 9.5 across the board for synchronicity.

Brown eyes sparkling and a grin lighting up his face, Aiden pulled Tyler into another hug. "Thank you."

They waved to their parents in the stands, and Tyler felt as though he had to be dreaming. He followed Aiden to the showers in a daze and rinsed off under the warm spray. He was an Olympic medalist. *They* were Olympic

medalists. They grinned at each other and hugged again, not caring what anyone thought.

When he and Aiden climbed the podium, Tyler didn't feel an ounce of pain.

Epilogue

Stretching gingerly, Tyler awakened. He was stiff and sore, but the memory of the day before dulled the ache. Judging by the light in the room, it was midmorning—the latest he'd slept in a long, long time. It felt strange not to have to get up and rush to the pool for practice. Of course, Aiden had to prepare for the singles competition the following week. But at least for this one day, they could relax.

Blinking, he focused on Aiden sitting on the other bed by the window. Aiden leaned back against the wall and gazed outside, wearing just an Adidas tank and his St. Sebastian medal. Stubble darkened his cheeks and his hair was rumpled. Tyler found himself smiling as he watched.

They'd spent the night in each other's arms in Tyler's bed, kissing and touching gently before giving in to their elated exhaustion. For a moment, squinting into the sunlight as he watched Aiden, Tyler was afraid he'd see the old sadness again. His voice was gravelly from sleep. "You know I love you, too."

Aiden turned, his cheeks dimpling as a beautiful smile bloomed over his face. "I know. Just took me a little while to figure it out. How are you feeling?"

"Okay. Sore. But I'll live." Tyler stifled a wince as he climbed out of bed. He was naked, and Aiden's eyes darkened as his gaze raked over Tyler's body. Their medals sat on the table between the beds, and Tyler ran his fingertips over them before putting his back on around his neck. The silver was cool against his bare chest.

"That's a good look for you." Aiden licked his lips.

"Yeah?" Tyler ran his hand down his chest, past the medal and skimming over his belly and his morning hard-on. "You like?"

Aiden nodded. "C'mere."

Tyler knelt on the bed and reached out to stroke Aiden's thigh with a teasing smile. "Ready?"

Aiden chuckled. "Yeah."

"Up." Tyler tugged at Aiden's tank top, and Aiden raised his arms.

They were kissing before either could count to three.

THE END

Author Bio

After writing for years yet never really finding the right inspiration, Keira discovered her voice in gay romance, which has become a passion. She writes contemporary, historical and fantasy fiction, and—although she loves delicious angst along the way—Keira firmly believes in happy endings. For as Oscar Wilde once said, “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.”

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LETTING GO

By C. J. Anthony

Photo Description

The photo is very crisp and detailed, shot in black and white—super zoomed-in close-up shot of a hand, palm facing the camera. The palm is scarred and rough, meant to make a statement, to show struggle. There are black words written across the palm—“*It’s time to let go... (it will be okay)*”

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This past year has not been easy for me. Every time I try to pick myself up, another setback blindsides me. I need to learn to let go and start again. I just don’t know if I can.

Sincerely,

Lynn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: hurt/comfort, grief, homophobia, suicide, depression, religion, young adults

Word count: 20,381

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LETTING GO

By C. J. Anthony

The last time I saw him he was looking at me with that big silly grin on his face, his eyes lit up and shimmering like the lights on a Christmas tree. He laughed as he tilted his head back and he looked so free. The lights from a passing car washed an ethereal glow over him and he looked like an angel, which he was. He was my angel. For that wondrous moment in our lives, he was my angel.

Two seconds later I turned my eyes back to the road and saw that the bright lights glaring at us were not from a passing car in the other lane. There were two headlights weaving and swerving in our lane and headed straight for us. Everything turned to slow motion as the light grew brighter and brighter, blinding me... Through the fog I could hear him calling me, saying my name but he sounded so far away.

That was the last moment I was conscious. Six days later I woke up to more bright lights—on the ceiling above me, in a hospital room. My vision was blurry, and I kept blinking until it cleared, and I could make out the shapes and colors around me.

My parents were there, towering above the bed, both of their faces sagging in relief. My mother's face was wet from the tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Sammy, oh Heavenly Father, thank you!" She closed her eyes momentarily and made the sign of the cross against her bosom. She had Grandma Maria's rosary beads clutched in her hand.

"Sammy, can you hear us baby?" She smiled down at me as her lip trembled.

Yes, my brain answered, but I didn't hear the sound come out. I stared at my parents as they looked down at me expectantly. Another person entered the frame, my older sister Emily—Emmy, I remembered I called her Emmy.

“Hey spaz, about time! Welcome back.”

Mom, Dad, Emily. My family. Slowly, like the rusted gears of a clock that had been sitting dormant for too long, I felt my brain starting to function, information beginning to filter through. I was lying in a bed. I was in a hospital. Something had happened... but I didn't know what. I tried to raise my arm and intense pain immediately shot through my shoulder. *Ow*.

I looked up again at my family. Mom, Dad, Emmy... someone important was missing. *He* was missing. His smiling face flashed through my brain. Where was he?

I moved my lips but no sound came out because my throat was so dry and scratchy. I licked my lips and tried again, finally getting a very raspy noise out.

“Dustin?”

With just that one word, the faces around me shifted dramatically. Mother's eyes widened and her lips came together in a firm, hard line. My Father's large bushy brows lowered, and his jaw visibly clenched as he grit his teeth. Both of them jerked away, their posture ramrod straight. A look passed between them and I didn't understand why they looked so hard and so cross. My sister leaned over the bed into my eyesight, her eyes growing wet as she placed her cool hand on mine.

“Sam—”

She didn't get to finish whatever she was about to say, because the room was invaded by a doctor and nurses and orderlies. One of the doctors—a man with distinguished gray hair—spoke to me and told me his name, Dr. Cannon. He yanked at my eyelids, one at a time, and shone a God-awful bright light into them. He asked if I knew where I was. That was easy—Yes. Hmmm... Or not so easy. I finally had to shake my head no. I tried reaching through my mind, but anything past a few minutes ago was fuzzy. I swear I saw dark

shapes of memories but when I tried to form them into coherent pictures they just seemed to be too far out of reach. It was frustrating.

The doctor spoke again. “You’re at St. Mark’s Memorial Hospital. You were in a car accident, Sam, and you’re going to be okay but we need to run some tests now that you’re awake. This is Mike and Sally and they’re going to take you—”

He kept talking but I didn’t hear anything after that, I was too busy trying to comprehend his words. A car accident?

A man and a woman, both in scrubs—Mike and Sally, I presumed—started wheeling my bed and me out of the room. A hospital bed doesn’t exactly move very fast, but the slow rolling movement, combined with the harsh, bright, blinding hallway lights above me, was enough to bring everything back, bits and images storming through my brain at warp speed. Dustin and I, in the car. It was late, very late, and very dark. But there was light, too bright. Lights of another car coming toward us.

Holy shit. We were in an accident. Dustin and me. Where was he? He wasn’t in the room with my family? Oh God no, please let him be okay, please.

My sister had wanted to tell me something in my room—it had to be about Dustin. I tried to sit up but the female nurse—Sally—gently pushed me back down and told me I had to lie still. The bed had stopped moving and we were now in some room with a big machine.

For the next millennia, it felt like, I was scanned and poked and prodded. Blood drawn, questions asked. I kept raising my head, trying to move. All I remember thinking was that I had to go find Dusty.

When they finally wheeled me back into my room, my sister was the only one there.

Once Mike and Sally had the bed settled back in place, and me all hooked back up to the machines and IVs, they left us alone.

My eyes immediately searched out my sister's. She looked tired, big dark circles under her eyes. They told me I had been out for six days. I suppose it had been trying on her and Mom and Dad, not knowing if or when I would wake up.

“Mom and Dad went to the cafeteria.” She paused to smile. “It’s so good to see you awake again.”

I was glad to be awake, too, but I only had one thing on my mind right now.

“Dustin? Is he okay? Did he—”

“He survived the accident, barely a scratch.”

I let out a huge breath and my heart jumped in relief. Except... her face was pale. And as I looked at into her sad, subdued eyes, I knew. Something wasn't right.

My head reeled at the words she spoke next, words that broke me into a million little shards of hurt.

We were hit by a drunk driver who had crossed the center line. Most of the impact was on my side of the car. I got banged around pretty bad, so much that I was out cold from the head impact for a week. There were other injuries, I had emergency surgery and lost my spleen. The drunk driver had been thrown from his car and died instantly. That left Dustin as the only survivor of the accident who was able to answer questions about what had happened. He had some whiplash and bruises and a few cuts but was otherwise okay. The ambulance let him come to the hospital with me, but once there, after they whisked me off, he was left to face everyone—the police, his parents, my parents. The police took down his statement and from the scene it was pretty evident that it wasn't our fault. But there were still routine questions—like where had we been this evening, had we been drinking—especially after he saw the stamp on Dustin's hand. We hadn't had a drop of alcohol, but he did have to confess to our fake I.D.s... and where we'd been.

Dammit, I wish I could have been there with him, that he didn't have to do that alone. The two people Dustin always feared most of finding out he was gay were his parents, his strictly devout Catholic parents. And right there, in the hospital waiting room, in front of our parents, he'd had to tell that police officer, that we were coming home from Atlantic City, from Prohibition, a bar. I didn't fault him for telling the truth; he had to be honest in front of the police. And our parents thought we were spending the night at another friend's house, so even if the officer hadn't asked, the first question from their lips once he left would have been what were we doing on Highway 30? The name Prohibition did not scream "gay bar," so in any other situation we might have been able to lie about the type of place it was, but one look at Dustin—straight-laced, boy-next-door-in-jeans-and-polo-shirts-Dustin—in his tight purple T-shirt with glitter still stuck all over it, eyes lined in eyeliner and hair gelled into messy spikes all over, not to mention the rainbow stamp on his hand, and they wouldn't have to guess we'd been to a gay club.

Our parents—God-fearing, dutiful members of St. Francis Catholic Church, friends who worked side-by-side at the Church Bingo night and prayed together in the same pews every Sunday, rain or shine—created such a ruckus in the hospital, a security guard had to be called. Dustin's father blamed me as the "gay" influence on Dustin, which got my father riled up. He blamed Dustin not only as the sinful influence on me, but heaped *all* of the fault for my lying in a hospital bed on Dustin. Had Dustin not forced me to go to that wretched place, I would be healthy and awake right now instead of fighting for my life. The security guard escorted Mr. and Mrs. McIntire and Dustin out of the hospital, while Dustin begged to see me. But no one let him.

Father Joe came to Dustin's house and performed the equivalent of some sort of exorcism—except instead of trying to drive out the demons and sin from Dusty's soul, they were trying to drive out the vile, dirty, gay parts. Which I suppose in the church's—and in our parents' eyes—were one and the same. The Catholic Church was pretty clear on homosexuality—it was unnatural and an abomination.

The McIntire's, believing in their God and Father Joe, assumed that all would now be okay with their son, that the gay was gone and Dustin would go back to being their good little son. As an added precaution, however, they forbade Dustin to ever see me again.

I bit my lip to hold back a groan. I couldn't believe we would not be allowed to see each other, but if that was how it had to be until we turned eighteen and could leave, then we would just have to work with it. There was still school, we could see each other there and maybe we could sneak in some time—

“Sam,” Emmy interrupted my thoughts. She laid a hand on my arm and squeezed gently. “He snuck into your hospital room that night. Dad came in and caught him holding your hand and kissing your forehead.” She sighed. “He made a big scene and dragged Dustin out of here and took him back to his house.

“Dustin's parents gave him an ultimatum. He could either move out of their house or go to some strict military-style boarding school out of state.”

Oh hell no. “He let his father send him to boarding school didn't he?” I rasped. Dustin had always feared his father. The man ruled his family with a heavy, tyrannical hand and no one dared challenge him.

Emmy ducked her head, casting her eyes downward as she shook her head.

When she looked me in the eyes again, hers were damp and watery. “Sammie...” She paused to swallow and my gaze was frozen on her neck, watching the movement of throat muscles. Fear flowed through me like ice water, and later I would look back and wish I could just push the pause button at that moment, and never have to hear the words she spoke next.

“They found him the next morning, in the garage. With the car still running.”

The ice water turned into solid pinpricks, shards of frozen ice slicing every piece of me. I opened my mouth to take a breath but there was a heavy weight on my chest crushing me, slamming me and keeping any air from getting in,

making me gasp and pant. No! No, no, no, no, no!! A voice was screaming the words in my head. It didn't even register that the voice was mine and I was screaming out loud. I kept trying to sit up, the bed rails clanking and rattling as I gripped them, my whole body shaking uncontrollably.

I was vaguely aware of Emmy putting the rail down and climbing into bed next to me, gathering me in her arms. She was murmuring something but I couldn't understand the words.

I don't know how long I wailed or how long she held me. If her quiet voice eventually soothed me or if my hurt and tired body just ran out of steam. I just remember waking up later to a darkened, quiet room. I was alone, but I was glad. I didn't want to see anyone. No one except Dustin—oh God please, I wanted to see Dustin again. I wanted him to walk in that door and smile at me and hold me and tell me that this was just a stupid dream, that everything was going to be okay. 'Cause he and I were together—forever, like we'd always promised. Yeah, we were young, and maybe he was my first love. But I was convinced he would be my first and only. I loved him, so fucking much, he was everything to me. He made me smile and laugh when I was sad, he settled me when I was nervous or scared, he grounded me. But best of all he loved me back just as much as I loved him.

My whole body warmed when I saw him, it was like he lit something alive inside of me. And when he touched me—oh God, when he touched me. It didn't matter if it was just a light brush of his fingers against my arm or my face, or if it was the harder grip of his hands as they roamed my body and touched my naked skin with want and need and desire. My whole body responded every time, as if I was a puppet and he controlled the strings.

Except... he wasn't here. The clock ticked, the silence stretched, but no matter how long I waited he wasn't walking in that door again. Ever.

I was a jumbled mess for days. Stuck in the hospital, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't go anywhere. Then again, where was I going to go? Dustin was gone. There wasn't even a grave to go visit. Emmy said his parents had cremated him, but I didn't know what they'd done with his ashes. Being

gay and then taking his own life, his parents refused to place him in the family plot in the Catholic cemetery. They felt he had only brought shame to their family name.

When she told me that, they almost had to sedate me again. I raged. I wanted to go over to their house and beat the crap out of Dustin's father. I knew at that moment why people killed. I know that sounds harsh, and I've never ever been that angry with any one person before or since. I just couldn't believe a parent could be so cruel to his own child. Not to mention, I blamed him for Dustin's death. It was completely his fault that Dustin was no longer here, that Dustin had felt so abandoned and unloved that he had felt it better to be dead.

I shivered and white-knuckled the sheets, the extent of the energy my body would let me expend. Otherwise, I *would* have bounded out of that hospital bed and over to Dustin's house. I just wasn't physically able to. Everything still hurt, although I was supposedly healing well. All I could do was lie there and let everything just roll through my brain: the grief—at Dustin being gone; the agony and desperation—that I was not there for Dustin, that I had been unable to help him or stand with him to face his parents, that I could not hold him and tell him how much I loved him, and that everything was going to be all right; and the anger and rage—at Dustin's parents, but horrifyingly also at Dustin himself. I was mad that he had just chosen to give up. That he didn't want to fight, for himself or for us or for me.

I was angry at him for leaving me. *Why Dustin, why? I thought you loved me?*

In all my grief over Dustin, I had almost forgotten about my own parents. My father was not the tyrant Dustin's father was, but he—and my mother—was just as religious. I had been nearly as fearful of them finding out I was gay as Dustin was with his parents. It took a couple days before the haze lifted enough for me to realize that neither of them had said anything to me about being gay.

They both visited every day. My mother was overjoyed that I was going to be okay and prayed her thanks devoutly to God and Jesus and the Virgin Mary that I was still with them. She would try to smile and talk about the weather, or fluff my pillow or lightly brush my hair out of my eyes while complaining about the hospital food they gave me and just wait 'til I got home, she would make all of my favorites. She was busy smoothing my blanket and trying to tuck it into the side of the mattress when she said this, but I noticed her smile looked tight and she wouldn't meet my eyes.

Dad never said much when they came by, it almost seemed as if my mother forced him there. He always sat in one of the hard plastic visitor chairs, looking uncomfortable. He would tug at his collar and shift his body around in the chair. He occasionally asked how I was doing, but that was about it. And he never really smiled. His eyes didn't meet mine too often either.

Finally they came to visit me one afternoon and I was able to tell them that the doctor was releasing me. I could come home tomorrow. The reactions I got were not exactly what I was expecting.

Both of their faces kind of blanched and their mouths drew tight, in fact they looked the same as they had the day I woke up, when I asked for Dustin.

They sat down, side by side in the chairs at the foot of my bed. They didn't pull the chairs up close to the side of my bed, my mother didn't smile and reach out to hold my hand and tell me how thrilled she was that I would be coming home. No, they just sat there in an eerie silence, my mother looking nervously at my father, while he turned to me and cleared his throat.

"Sam, did you know Dustin was..." His jaw clenched and his face got red and I could see the fight in him to get the next word out of his mouth. "...homosexual?"

My heart sank and I got cold.

"Son, you better answer me."

Mom leaned toward Dad and grasped his arm, "Ed," came out of her mouth in a murmur to calm him, but I still heard it.

“Yes.” The word slipped quietly from my lips into the empty air.

I saw his chest rise and fall with a deep breath, and my mother squeezed his arm tighter.

“He said you boys had gone to Atlantic City, to a... men’s bar over there.” Men’s bar—God forbid he utter the word “gay”.

“Did he force you to go with him? To drive him?”

My father stared me straight in the eye, his gaze hard. I knew what he was really asking me with that question, what he really wanted to know. And I knew what answer he wanted to hear. But Dustin’s face filled my mind and I couldn’t lie. He had had to face telling the truth all alone, I couldn’t dishonor his memory by not being just as truthful. I wouldn’t.

“No.”

Mom gasped and Dad’s knuckles turned so white, I feared he was going to break the plastic arms of the chair in two. The room was silent as he shook his head and clenched his jaw again.

The next day, though, they were there to pick me up. On the way home we passed our street and kept going, to the highway. I asked why we weren’t turning in, where were we going? My parents would only say that I needed more rehab and recuperation and was going someplace that would help me. I knew sometimes in the hospital I was a little fuzzy or distracted, but as I reviewed the last several days, I didn’t remember the doctor saying anything about needing rehab. Two hours later we pulled up in front of a drab, gray building. They walked me inside and handed me and a duffel bag that I guessed they must have brought with them, over to these two men dressed in white scrubs. Mom broke down and made the sign of the cross against her body before giving me a hug and kiss. Then Dad grabbed her hand and tugged her out the front doors as tears ran down her face.

I was taken to a very austere room that was one step above a hospital room. No, actually the hospital room was better, at least it had TV and some color—a green plastic pitcher and water cup, ice-blue curtains and a whiteboard with

blue and green and red written names of my nurse and doctor, and contact phone numbers. But this room had drab, light-gray walls. There was a small twin bed with a gray blanket folded back to reveal crisp white sheets and a white pillow. Next to it was a gray nightstand with a small white table lamp. Against one wall, directly across from the foot of the bed was a small bookshelf about three feet high. On the shelves were some books and on top of it lay some pamphlets, fanned out. The walls were empty of any decoration except for the wall clock above the doorway and one lone item hanging above the shelving unit—a large bronze-colored crucifix of Jesus in such explicit detail, it felt as if he was staring down at me.

Growing up with such a strong Catholic upbringing, that didn't really register as unusual with me at that moment, as we had them hanging in many different rooms of our house at home. They were all over our church and school and there were certainly many Catholic and Christian-based hospitals around the area that displayed them.

I didn't really have time to ponder the wall art, anyway, as the orderlies very swiftly patted me down and made me empty my pockets. I didn't have much on me, but they took my watch and my wallet. I yelled and grabbed for it and one of the orderlies immediately locked his big thick arms through mine, forcibly restraining me. I tried kicking to get away but I was still so frail from the hospital stay—I just didn't have enough strength against someone like him. So I used the only force I had, my voice. I bellowed louder. I didn't understand why they needed to take my wallet. And then I felt a pinprick in my arm and my vision got wavy, and my muscles grew heavy. The other voices faded fast, as I felt like I was falling into a deep, dark well.

I woke up, I don't know how much later, to a darkened room. It was déjà vu all over again, much like the night in the hospital when Emmy had told me about Dustin. For a brief moment I hoped that maybe everything since that night had been a dream and really I was waking up back in the hospital. But as my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I glanced around the strange room, reality came back and I realized every horrible thing had actually happened. I

was sprawled out on the bed, on top of the sheets and blanket, and as I remembered the men taking my wallet again, I started to cry.

I didn't care about anything in there, they could have the money, what little there was. But the wallet held the most important thing left in my life—my only picture of Dustin and I together. There were actually two small pics of us, from one of those photo booths that you squeeze into with your best friend or your boyfriend—or your best friend who was your boyfriend—and make silly faces.

We had gone to the state fair last summer and were just sauntering along slowly, letting our corn dogs and onion rings digest, when Dustin grabbed my arm and pulled me with him towards something he was very excited about. The photo booth. I was laughing as the two of us tried to climb into the tiny space. And then very quickly I wasn't laughing anymore as I felt our warm bodies pressed together. As the first click of the camera went off, he turned and captured my lips with his. It was quick and light but I felt it down to my toes. He pulled away and the shy look of adoration and love in his eyes made me smile uncontrollably.

When the machine spit the pictures out we tore them in half, two pictures for both of us. Though minutely different because of the quick camera shutter, we each had a picture of that kiss and that moment after, when we both were grinning at each other, giddy in our happiness. Those pictures captured one of the brief moments of freedom in our relationship—hidden from the rest of the world by that curtain, we could be together and kiss each other and in the time space of four quick clicks of the camera, just be ourselves.

I lay there in the dark, the occasional tear dripping down my face, and a persistent, sharp, stabbing pain in my heart.

I was still awake the next morning when two different orderlies came in to wake me—a man and a woman. They were not as mean as the ones from last night. The man carried a breakfast tray with oatmeal and the woman gave me a T-shirt and sweatpants. I had one hour to eat and shower and change before

one of them would come back to get me. Apparently I had my first appointment with the staff doctor.

Forty minutes later I had completed my assigned tasks and was stuck sitting on my bed staring at the blank walls. There wasn't even a window so that I could look outside. Alone with nothing to occupy me, my thoughts wandered to too many hurtful places—Dustin, my parents—so I shut that down immediately. I could hear noises outside in the hall. Murmured voices, hurried footsteps. I paced the room and stopped in front of the bookcase. The few books on the bookcase weren't too surprising—there was of course, a bible, and the rest were religious as well. A book of inspirational poems and essays, a biography of the Pope. I flipped through the pamphlets and there were more of the same as the books—religious themes, like “*Let God into Your Life*,” “*Jesus Walks Beside You*.” But my hand froze as I picked up the last one—“*Fighting Homosexual Temptations to Find True Truth in God*.”

My heart started pounding. Why was this here? I crouched down and started taking a better look at the book titles. The book of inspirational poems was for Gay and Lesbians and flipping through it, the words of every poem were basically about fighting those sinful urges and turning to God. The loud bang echoed in the room as I let go and gravity forced the book to the floor.

My parents said I needed rehab, and I thought that meant I wasn't physically ready to come home yet. So what kind of place was this... why were these books in my room? What—?

The nurse entered the room and said she was there to take me to the doctor now. My gut told me to plant my feet, to refuse to go with her. But somehow my body moved on autopilot to follow her.

We walked forever, down two long halls before reaching a door. *Dr. Westman* was the name on the doorplate. The nurse knocked twice, quickly, then opened the door and held it with her arm to let me pass.

“Thank you, Lucy.” The voice of the doctor was strong but warm in tone.

I paused in the hallway, not moving. An older man, graying short hair, white coat over a shirt and tie stood from behind the desk. He smiled at me and motioned with his hand.

“Come in, Sam.” When I still didn’t move he motioned again. “It’s okay, Sam, come on in and have a seat.”

Numbly I moved forward and sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

He sat back down, opened a manila folder in front of him and began scanning whatever papers were inside. He started reading some of the information out loud, basically recapping the accident and how I’d ended up in the hospital.

When he was done he closed it, picked up a yellow notepad and pen, and started writing. Then the horrible, vile interrogation began. The bile rose in my throat with every answer I had to bite out.

How long had I known Dustin, where and how did we meet, why had we gone to Atlantic City that night, why hadn’t we told anyone, when did I start feeling differently about Dustin, when did I start feeling sexual urges toward him? Did Dustin do or say anything to entice me or influence me?

“Dustin didn’t do or say anything to turn me gay! I’ve known I was gay since I was ten! I was born this way!” I finally shouted out, shaking with rage and trying to hold back the tears.

The doctor’s eyebrows knit together and I could tell he was trying to keep his face impassive but it was clear he had issues with my outburst.

“Son, that is not true. God created you in his image, he creates all of us in his image. Therefore he did not create you as a homosexual. It is not part of his natural plan for you. You have simply been led astray, allowed certain temptations to guide you more than your love of God. You were not born that way. An alcoholic is not born an alcoholic. An alcoholic is simply someone too weak to resist the temptation of the bottle.”

His demeanor changed slightly, it was almost as if he turned a dial and shifted from judge into caring, concerned doctor mode. He did it so easily, so smoothly, it was almost robotic.

“But an alcoholic can fight. They can get sober and learn to reject the temptation of drink. And you can too, Sam. There are lots of men and boys like you doing it every day. But they can’t do it alone. They need help to see the error of their ways and understand why this has happened to them, they need guidance as they find their way back. That is why we are here, to help you, Sam.”

I didn’t even know what to say, my throat was dry and no words could come out. My brain was buzzing and my body didn’t feel my own. Was I really here? Did I really hear the words he just said to me? Or was this all some kind of horrible nightmare? Please tell me I was going to wake up any second.

But I didn’t wake up. Or rather I did wake up, every day, hoping that when I opened my eyes I would be back at home, in my own bedroom. Hell, I even began to hope I’d wake up back in that hospital room. But no... every day was the same—those hideous gray walls, me still in this hideous hellhole.

The place was full of boys like me, and we had routines to follow every day—group therapy sessions, videos and testimonies from real men who “had turned away from the sin and were happily straight now.” In the afternoon there was usually a session with the good doctor. He had diplomas hanging on his wall, proclaiming he really was a doctor of medicine or some kind of therapist but I refused to believe it. I was no medical expert but I didn’t think doctors were supposed to appoint themselves judge and jury of your feelings and your heart; they weren’t supposed to tell you that you were wrong and immoral and sick. Oh, the doctor never quite said those things in so many words but that was certainly what he tried to impress upon me. He just went about it in that slick robotic way of his.

I struggled at first with the whole situation before I finally decided to say as little as possible and to seem completely compliant, the thought being if I

just played along, the sooner I would appear “cured,” and the sooner I could get out of here. So I locked my emotions away all day and then at night, in the darkness, I cried into my pillow every night. I missed my old life so much. I missed Dustin.

“Playing along” was also made a little easier because of the drugs they gave us. Morning and lunchtime, pretty blue and white pills that left a nice fog in my brain that was hard to fight off. It was much easier to just let it envelop you and comfort me. It allowed the pain of what had happened to me and why I was there to get pushed to the back corner of my brain. It was the only good thing about the whole situation, and the only thing I looked forward to every day.

But the fog couldn’t keep everything out.

In the group therapy sessions where we were supposed to “share our stories and our feelings,” I never said a word. So, one day, the therapist or counselor or whoever the fuck this person was who was in charge of the meeting, decided they would share my story for me, since I refused. This pissed me off royally, but I gritted my teeth a little more and stayed silent.

Our “group” was a motley set. There were a few of us who said little during the meetings and were hard to read. There were those who it was easy to tell were still shell-shocked that they were here. There were those who were on the fence and trying to decide if this hogwash they were feeding us was true. And then there was Jonathon and Michael. They had drunk the Kool-Aid and come out the other side, actually believing that their homosexuality was just a mistake on their parts, a shameful detour, and now with God’s help they were going to be normal, productive heterosexual men.

When the counselor got to the part of my story about Dustin’s suicide, I very nearly walked out of the room because I really didn’t want to listen to it all over again. Then that snot, Jonathon, broke in and started spouting off about how Dustin had let his sin overtake him, had given into the darkness and chosen to follow Satan rather than God. That this is how perversion takes over and destroys our mind and body and soul when we are weak.

I don't even remember anything I consciously did after that. Just the feeling of rage exploding in me and carrying me across the room, the feeling of skin hitting skin. Something—his jaw or his nose—cracking under my knuckles, as my biceps screamed with the repetitive movement. *Pound, pound, pound.* In the background I heard voices yelling, felt hands and arms grabbing for me, but nothing could stop me.

And then... there was just blackness. I don't know how long I was out. I was awakened by someone shaking my shoulder, and a faraway voice telling me I needed to wake up and something about my parents. I blinked a few times and tried to sit up but couldn't lift my arms—no matter how many times I tried, I kept meeting resistance. When I looked down I saw the problem. I wasn't in my normal room, I was in a hospital-like bed with rails, and my wrists were cuffed to the rails. They'd not only knocked me out, they'd put me in fucking restraints.

The orderly unlocked me, and I had to get up and change clothes and was then dragged down the hall. Still groggy from the shit they gave me, it was hard to do anything but shuffle along.

I ended up in Dr. Westman's office, and my parents were there, each sitting in a chair, with a third one empty and waiting for me. Mom was crying again and Dad was so angry he was red.

"Sam, after today's incident, I thought your parents needed to be called—"

But the doctor never got to finish, as my dad nearly jumped out of his chair.

"Who are you, Sam? What the hell has possessed you and taken over my son? Violence and hitting now? Rebuffing the word of God and everyone here who is trying to help you? We raised you to be a decent, moral boy. Where is this sick perversion coming from in you?"

"Ed—" My mother's voice tearfully broke in.

"No, Mary. This is it." He turned to me again and pointed his finger at me. "Enough of this, Samuel. I will not have a homosexual for a son and I will not

allow one in my home. You either start listening to these people and get yourself right with God and the law and start acting normal again or don't come home."

They stood and walked out, my mother never even looking at me. I hadn't even had a chance to say anything, not even a good-bye.

The doctor was looking at me disapprovingly. "Your actions affect others, Sam. Your selfishness is hurting your parents and destroying your family. Is that what you want? Is that what God would want you to do?"

The nurse came in again then, and walked me back. I was allowed back into my room at least. But I was not allowed to leave my room the rest of the day and night and had to take all my meals in my room. Which was fine with me; I was tired, so very tired. And it wasn't the aftereffects of whatever they'd knocked me out with. I was simply bone-weary tired. I'd always knew my parents would not react well to my being gay, but this... this was just worse than I ever could have dreamed. They didn't want me anymore. Because I knew, no matter how long I stayed in this God-forsaken place that I was not going to change. I was who I was.

And now I was completely alone. Dustin was gone and now my parents were too. I curled up on the awful bed and wept as my body shook. *Dustin, oh Dustin, I need you. I need you so bad.* As if he had heard me, his face filled my mind, his smiling, sunny face and I cried even harder.

By the time my eyes were sore and there were no tears left in me to shed, I had decided on a plan. I felt empty and numb and the more I searched I saw no reason for any other options.

For the next week I saved all of the sleeping pills they would make us take at night. I didn't know how many it would take but once I had a good handful, I took them. All.

I felt a calm come over me as I swallowed the last one. I filled my mind with Dustin's smiling face as I fell under.

Unfortunately, I hadn't saved enough of the pills and I didn't die. Instead, I woke up in another hospital room, with my sister again sitting at my bedside. But my suicide attempt did get me sprung from that awful place. Turned out my parents hadn't told my sister where I was either, they'd told her the same thing they'd told me—that I was at a rehab facility for my injuries. Once she found out what kind of “facility” it really was, she came and got me out of there.

Because of the suicide attempt, I was moved to another hospital for a required number of days for a psych evaluation. Once the doctors there talked with me and discovered what facility I had been in and why I had taken the pills, they released me. My parents never came to see me, they just sent over a letter that basically gave their permission for me to stay in my sister's care until I turned eighteen in a few months. She lived in New York City with her husband and two little girls, and took me home with her without a second thought.

Although I was grateful to my sister, I still hadn't spoken a word to her or anyone since I left the hospital.

“You don't have to worry, I'm not going to try and kill myself again.”

She stopped in place as she was setting a magazine down on the coffee table. We were only three days into the new arrangement and I couldn't take any more of her hovering. Other than at night when I slept, I was never left alone. She made sure she was constantly breezing through whatever room I was in, cleaning this or moving that or the most popular—“looking for something she'd misplaced.”

I looked over at her. “I promise.”

Her whole body sagged as she came over and sat down next to me on the couch. Her gentle but tired eyes looked into mine. Reaching over to brush the front of my hair out of my eyes, she smiled weakly.

“You scared the crap out of me, you know that?”

“I’m sorry.” My voice was flat and emotionless, but I hoped she would believe me.

She sighed. “I’m sorry that I didn’t check into that place or come to see you sooner. I should have known better than to trust Mom and Dad. Even with our history with them, I can’t believe they were capable of such a thing.” Her husband, Dave, was Jewish, so Emmy had been partially estranged from them from the moment she announced her engagement. Her eyes got misty as she shook her head sharply.

She grasped my face in her hands and forced me to look at her again. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, you got that? You forget whatever crap they tried to put in your head at that place. You are beautiful and smart and a good person. I don’t care if you’re gay or straight or blue or purple, you’re my brother and I will always love you, understand?”

I nodded as much as I could. “My cheeks hurt.”

She narrowed her eyes at me but let go with a smile, smacking me on the leg.

But she didn’t leave, she stayed there beside me for a few more minutes.

“You know, Sammy, that you need help right?” Her voice was quiet and my stomach started to churn.

“You tried to kill yourself, and I know part of it was being stuck in that awful place... but you’ve been through so much, Sam, in such a short period of time. More than most people should. The doctors from the hospital gave me some names and numbers of people they recommend. You need to talk to someone, honey.”

I closed my eyes and shuddered at the thought. My hearty, forceful “no” was ready to slip out—

“Dustin wouldn’t want to see you like this, sweetie. He would want you to go on, to live.”

I blew a big breath out and my shoulders sagged. I had no answer to give to her words.

I repeated her words to myself many times over the next six months, when things got too hard to deal with and I wanted to give up. It was those words and the thoughts of Dustin that pushed me through the rough times.

I picked one of the psychiatrists from the list the hospital had given my sister and told her to make an appointment. After my last experience, it was like moving lead balloons to get my feet moving through his door. But thankfully he was nothing like Dr. Westman. Dr. Levinson really was caring and thoughtful and smart, and came with none of the religious baggage or rhetoric. And he was also very patient, because I still had a hard time sharing my feelings. I still refused to talk much about Dustin or his death, and every time the doc tried, he was met with silence. So he would switch tactics and focus on my present. What had I done that week, had anything happened to make me sad or mad or happy? I still had to take some antidepressants too, in the beginning, but these were different than the ones I'd been given at the facility. There was no fog this time, just a little less sadness. I still felt numb most of the time, but it wasn't from the meds, and I didn't dip into any thoughts of suicide again.

I'd promised Emmy, after all. And secretly, in my heart, I promised Dustin. So I did all the things I was supposed to, went to all my doctor's appointments. Dr. Levinson gave me a new goal each week. We started slow—the first assignment was to leave the apartment once during the week for something other than a doctor's appointment. Then it was going out for a whole day to the zoo with Emily and the girls. Eventually I even got a job—just bussing tables and washing dishes at a little bistro nearby—but it was another step to regaining a normal life. Emmy made a big deal, baking me a cake.

I still hadn't talked about Dustin though, and I still thought of him all the time. But other than that, I thought things were going pretty well. And then Dr. Levinson dropped a new bomb.

He'd just asked me for the thousandth time about Dustin. When I didn't say anything he asked a few more rapid-fire questions about other subjects I didn't want to discuss—including my parents, whom I hadn't had any contact with since that "meeting" at the facility when they walked out on me.

After I remained silent, he sighed and sat up in his chair and started fishing around in his desk papers for something. Finally he held out a card to me.

"Okay, Sam, we're going to try something else. You and I will continue to meet once a week as usual, but I want you to start attending this group meeting once a week as well." I opened my mouth but he held up his hands before I could speak.

"I know, Sam, I know you had a bad experience with group therapy before, but I promise you this will be nothing like that one. This is a group of young gay men, like yourself. They're all working through some tough times too and I think it would do you some good to attend and meet others your own age. Maybe you'll feel like opening up to them. The counselor who runs the group, Nick, is a wonderful young man. I think you'll like him." He paused to look me directly in the eye as he held the card that I still hadn't taken from him. "You've made some great progress, Sam, but unless you work through your feelings about Dustin and the accident and your parents, you will never be able to move forward."

As I walked home from my appointment with that damn card in my pocket, I fought with the idea of going. *No—no way.*

Three days later I found myself standing in front of the closed door to the room where this group was supposed to meet. I still didn't want to be here. But I knew Doc Levinson would find out if I didn't show. And my sister had found the card in my jeans pocket when she did laundry. She immediately got on my case and would have walked me to the door herself if I hadn't managed to convince her I would go. So I'd decided to come with the same attitude I'd had back at the facility—I would come, I would listen, but I wasn't going to open my mouth.

"The door's unlocked, you can go in."

My whole body jerked. The voice behind me was so close I could feel the hot breath on my shoulder. As I turned, there was a guy behind me, holding his hand up and giving me a concerned look.

“Whoa, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. You were just standing there, I thought maybe you might have thought the door was locked.”

We stood there for a moment, staring at each other. He looked a little older than me, a half a head taller, brilliant blue eyes and short brown hair, with a little scruff on his face. Enough that it was hard to tell if he was trying to start a beard, or if it was purposely that way. He smiled and seemed perfectly at ease.

“I’m Nick.” He held out his hand. Great, the doc had said the group was run by someone named Nick, so this must be the guy. No getting out of it now.

I held out my hand and he clasped it firmly. His skin felt so warm, it took me a minute to let go. I suddenly realized I hadn’t been touched by anyone who wasn’t family or a doctor or nurse since... well since before the accident. I told myself that was why my hand still glowed with his heat, even though we were no longer touching.

“Are you, Sam?” When I nodded, he did too. “Dr. Levinson said he hoped you’d be joining us. Welcome.”

The door opened then and a Hispanic-looking kid poked his head out. “There you are, Nick, we been waiting!”

“I’m here, Carlos, ready to go, just give us a minute okay? Tell the others to sit tight and we’ll be in.”

Carlos disappeared again behind the closed door.

Nick flashed a small smile again. “Shall we go in?”

When I still didn’t move, Nick didn’t either. Instead, he stood there patiently with me, as if he had all the time in the world. “I know it’s probably uncomfortable joining a new group, but they’re all good guys. It’s your first

time, I promise you don't have to say a word, you can just sit and observe until you're ready."

There was something about him—from his words to his demeanor—that calmed me. I reached forward and opened the door and we walked in together.

True to his word he didn't make me speak. He did introduce me to the rest of the group by just my first name, but didn't say why I was there or give away my story.

For three weeks I went, I sat, I didn't say a word. Nick would smile at me when I came in and would watch me periodically during the meetings.

Week four, the meeting was over and everyone was leaving, as usual.

"Sam, hold up a second. Will you help me stack the chairs up?"

I nodded and started grabbing chairs. We worked for the next few minutes in silence except for the sounds of chairs scraping against the floor.

"I'm glad to see you every week, Sam. Are you enjoying the meetings?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Nick chuckled. "Well, maybe enjoy is the wrong word. I know a lot of tough things get discussed—everyone's been through some rough times."

The last chair got put in place. I figured I could finally go now, but I felt like a kid in school, like I needed to be dismissed. Nick turned to get his stuff from the desk in the corner.

"Thanks, Sam," he threw over his shoulder. "See you next week."

"Sure." That was the first word I'd spoken the entire time I'd been coming here, other than my name that first night.

The next week, Nick asked me to help with the chairs again. When we were done, I turned to go.

"Hey, Sam, I usually get a cup of coffee and walk through the park after I'm done here. Why don't you join me?"

I froze but didn't say anything. He grabbed his backpack and turned to look at me.

"Or do you have someplace else to be?" He grinned. "I guess I should have asked that first."

Shit. I looked at him, he was so... nice. Just so genuine, no agenda. Actually he was like that during the meetings too, he didn't act like any of the doctors I'd been to. Definitely not like Asshole Westman. And not even like Dr. Levinson—who was easier to talk to, but still had the stiff doctor persona going on. Nick was more like... a friend, the guy next-door. I wondered if he even had any kind of training for this. Regardless, he was good at it, good with the guys. I was still wary though, about why he was asking me.

"Sam?" Hearing his voice again made me realize I'd been standing there too long, lost in my brain. He was expecting an answer, and now I was caught off guard. I should have just told him I had to go to work. Or had to babysit the girls for Emmy. Or... any of a million excuses. But nothing was coming. So I just nodded.

"Okay, you'll come? Great. The place around the corner has the best coffee."

He continued talking as I followed him. About the coffee, the weather, insignificant stuff. I watched him as we walked. He was more filled out than me, but he looked fit, not overly muscled or anything. His height helped him be more lean than stocky, and he was wearing his usual button-down shirt tucked into khakis with a tie. And his eyes lit up as he gestured and talked. He looked so happy, so... normal. He'd obviously never had any of the problems any of us in the group had. Hell, he was probably straight, had a happy little home life with a wife and kid at home.

We each got a drink and then headed through Central Park, sitting down on an empty bench. Nick grew quiet and we drank our coffees and looked out at the park and the trees, and grass and the people walking by. The children playing, the dogs barking as their owners walked them.

I was a little surprised Nick had suddenly gotten so quiet. He loosened his tie and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. A shadow crossed his face.

“It’s been five years and sometimes it feels like yesterday.” Nick’s voice just floated out abruptly into the silence. He was looking straight ahead, staring out into space.

He turned to glance at me. “I’ve shared my story with the group before but being new, you obviously don’t know. And as hard as it is to talk about, I know sometimes it’s easier to know someone has been in your shoes.”

Fuck. I should have listened to my instincts. I knew he was being too “nice”. This was all some ruse to get me to spill my guts. I shifted on the seat, ready to jump up and walk away, when he started in again.

“I was twenty, he was eighteen.” Nick smiled, but he wasn’t here with me, he was lost in some memory. “We met my senior year of high school and everyone thought we were best friends. And we were. But we were so much more. First kisses, first boyfriends, the whole nine yards. No one knew because we weren’t out—too scared to come out to our parents.

“Things were perfect, I loved him so much.” Nick sighed and ran his hand through his short hair. “But something changed in him once I went away to college. We emailed or called every day. The more time that passed, though, the more he started to seem different. He was not the happy-go-lucky boy I’d fallen in love with. His voice was always low and sad, all he talked about was how bad school was, how much he missed me and how nothing was the same without me there. I tried to tell him he just needed to hang in there—he’d be out of school soon and he could join me at college and we could be together again. But he fell so deep and so fast, before I really realized he was in trouble. I can look back now and know that he was depressed with bipolar tendencies. I didn’t see it when we were together, he was just a really boisterously happy kid, and yeah, maybe having me around grounded him a bit, kept the bad days away. But then I left and he had no tether to hang onto. I don’t think his family knew either—it happened so fast, they probably just chalked it up to moody teenager stuff.

“It was a week ’til spring break. I had been reassuring him for weeks that I would be home soon, that we’d have a whole week together, things would be great, and that I couldn’t wait to see him. I told him all the time how much I loved him and how much I missed him. I’d been at the library with a study group finishing up a project for class the next day. A couple of the others wanted to go out to celebrate so we went to a local coffeehouse that had an open mike night. It was late when I got home and I just fell into bed without checking my phone. The next morning its loud ringing woke me. It was my mom, telling me...” His voice broke and he had to take a deep breath before continuing. “Josh had hung himself the night before. When I looked at my phone again, I saw there was a missed call from him the night before. He hadn’t even left a message.

“I skipped classes the next week; and I drove home as soon as I got off the phone with Mom. I don’t even remember the drive, I was probably lucky I didn’t get into an accident myself. By the time I got home more shit had hit the fan. His family, trying to find a reason for what he’d done, had been going through his room. They found pictures of us together, notes I’d written him. They were angry, and they blamed his whole suicide on me. I was so distraught myself I couldn’t even argue. *I* blamed myself. If I had gotten his call the night before maybe he wouldn’t have killed himself, maybe I could have stopped him. If I hadn’t left to go off to college, if—” Nick shook his head. “I was a mess for a long time, had to take a whole semester off from school. Eventually, with a lot of help, I was finally able to accept the fact that it wasn’t my fault. Josh was sick and all the things I was blaming myself for were all just big what-ifs—I could have stayed home from college, I could have been with him twenty-four seven and he still might have taken his life.”

There was pain in his eyes and his face aged ten years while he spoke. I could feel his eyes on me until I lifted my head to look at him.

“Sam, I couldn’t talk about it for months, with anyone. But once I finally did... it helped. A lot. I think if I hadn’t, I would still be stuck in that painful limbo. I still think about Josh all the time, I haven’t forgotten him and I never will. But those of us who are left behind—we can’t just stop living too. We

need to heal and live on even more than ever... live for them because they can't."

He tipped his Styrofoam cup up to let the last sip of coffee slide down his throat before he stood and swung his backpack over his shoulder. "I get why you might not want to talk in front of the group and that's okay, Sam. But if you ever do feel ready to talk, I'm usually here after the meeting every week."

And then he turned and walked away.

I don't know how long I sat on that bench. I didn't move until my phone rang with a call from my sister, looking for me because it was so late. I was shocked by his story—apparently my vision of him and the wife and kid at home was completely wrong. I felt sad for him. But I also felt angry at him. I felt angry that I'd been played, that the whole thing was just some attempt to get me to spill my feelings. I felt angry that he was another someone trying to tell me what I needed. Just because he'd been through a horrible experience and "healed" himself by talking to someone didn't mean that was what I needed. I was doing fine, I was working, I was meeting all the goals Dr. Levinson gave me. I was playing by everyone's rules, what more did they want of me?

I stopped going to the group meetings. But unfortunately I couldn't stop thinking about Nick and what he told me. The anti-depressants I took kept my mood on a pretty even keel—I could keep the bad out. Except now. Ever since that night in the park with Nick, I'd been having nightmares. Every night, I would wake up sweating, my heart pounding. It was usually the same every time—I was in the car with Dustin, he smiled, the light from the other car, horrible sounds of crunching metal and glass shattering and screaming, loud, blood-curdling screaming that never stopped. Once the screaming started I couldn't see Dustin anymore, instead the face that would appear was Nick's. And that was when I would wake up.

After two weeks of this, I felt like a zombie, my body and mind just felt beat to hell and I was exhausted. It had been almost eight months since the accident, since Dustin died and my parents threw me away. I was tired of the

weight of everything that had happened, I was tired of carrying it around day after day after day. I finally hit rock bottom and realized that something needed to change.

I felt so weary that I don't even know how I made my body move, but four days later I found myself at the park. Nick was sitting on his bench, sipping coffee and relaxing, looking out across the park.

I stopped as I reached the bench and Nick looked up at me and smiled.

"Well hello, stranger." He motioned to the empty space next to him and I sat. "I've missed seeing you in group. Carlos and Max asked where you were."

"I was the one that wanted to go to Atlantic City. I was the one that convinced Dustin to go." Blurted into the air, finally, were the words I had not told anyone, not even Emmy.

"He didn't want to, he thought it would be too much trouble to arrange, that we'd get caught. But I kept pushing him until he agreed. I should have listened to him, I shouldn't have pushed, I just wanted us to have some time alone, but if we hadn't gone we wouldn't have been in the car, we wouldn't have been in the accident, he wouldn't have..." A loud sob broke free as I finally stopped for air and my body started shaking. "He would still be here! It was my fault, everything was my fault!"

I curled in on myself, as I completely fell apart. I was barely aware of two arms wrapping around me and pulling me closer. I cried for what felt like hours until the warmth of Nick's body and the steady sound of his heartbeat and the soothing sounds of his voice finally calmed me.

"Sam, it was an accident. A misfortunate turn of events. Dustin made his own decisions—he didn't do anything he didn't want to do. He chose to get in that car with you because he wanted to be with you. And he made his own decision to end his life. There was nothing you could have done about that. It's not your fault, Sam, it's not your fault."

He kept whispering those words to me as he continued to hold me. And eventually I started to believe them. His warmth, his kindness, made me feel so safe. And saying those words finally allowed me to release the burden I felt.

I still had a lot of work to do, but that was a breakthrough moment. Instead of going back to group, I met with Nick at the bench every week. I started bringing the coffee and would be there waiting for him. He never pushed me to talk about anything in particular, in fact it was more like having a conversation with a friend. We would talk about the weather, the park, how my week had been. I'd tell him funny stories about my coworkers at the bistro or about something my nieces had done. And when I felt the urge I would talk about Dustin. Or about my parents. I hadn't even realized how much I had buried my feelings for what they'd done—how they'd treated me and the things they'd said to me.

I also realized that I hadn't had a friend, well, since Dustin. Nick was so easy to talk to. We started swapping music—he was only twenty-five so he still had some cool bands he could turn me on to. I started really looking forward to Wednesdays, the day I got to hang with him. And the rest of the week I often found him popping up in my thoughts, whenever I'd see something I thought he would like or get a laugh over. We had even swapped phone numbers and would text each other periodically during the week.

“Samuel Sebastian Morelli!” I was walking through the house listening to the latest new MP3s Nick had given me, but even over my headphones I heard the loud exclamation from my sister. I turned to find her staring at me with her mouth open and tears in her eyes. She walked over and touched my cheek with her palm.

“You smiled. Oh baby, you smiled! I've been waiting so long to see one of those on your face again.”

I wasn't even conscious that I was smiling. Or that it had been so long.

It was Wednesday evening, and I was sitting beside Nick, coffee in hand.

“I nearly had my sister in tears today.”

Concern flashed across his face.

“Apparently I smiled.” His eyebrow crooked up and he smirked. “I guess I haven’t done that in a long time,” I finished softly.

His smirk froze, then turned into a genuine smile. “Well, then I guess you’re on the road to recovery. How does it feel?”

I shrugged. “Good, I guess. I didn’t even realize I was smiling.”

“You *are* making progress. Congratulations.”

“What if... what if I forget him? What if I get so wrapped up in moving on and living life that I forget all about him?” My voice sounded small in the chilly evening air.

“You will never forget him, Sam. He will always be right there in your memories and in your heart.” Nick briefly touched my forehead and then placed his palm on my chest to emphasize his point. I felt the warmth of his hand spread across my entire chest. He glanced up from his hand to my eyes and we shared a quiet moment. My heart skipped a beat just as he drew his hand away and cleared his throat. His eyes shifted quickly back to the park.

“So what had you smiling? Did you come across another pic of Ryan Reynolds?”

I’d mentioned once I thought he was hot and Nick never let me forget it. “I was listening to one of those songs you gave me.”

His head swiveled towards me and his lips quirked upward. His eyes looked sad, though.

I was still seeing Dr. Levinson once a week and the tasks he was giving me were getting harder and more uncomfortable. He said this meant I was doing well. I wasn’t so sure and sometimes I almost wanted to go back to the time

before I had started talking to Nick. Doc was not happy that I'd stopped going to group but thrilled when I started talking to Nick. I told him about the smile and my sister's reaction and he gave me the same congratulations Nick had.

"I'm very proud of you, Sam. That's wonderful." I just squirmed in my seat, glad, but thinking one smile was being praised a little too much.

"I think it might be time for The Big Test."

"Wait a minute, I've already got my test for this week, remember? My sister and her family are going out of town this weekend and my goal was to stay home alone by myself the whole weekend."

"True, and next week we're not meeting because I'll be out of town. So for this next test you will have two weeks to accomplish it."

I scowled.

"I think it's time you get back to doing things you used to enjoy doing—things you did with Dustin. Go to places like the places you used to go to with Dustin. You can start small—maybe it's a movie you saw together, maybe it's a restaurant similar to one you both used to eat at. I think that will be enough to aim for this time."

"*This* time? How much more is there? How many more hoops do I have to jump through before I get the graduation certificate that says I passed?" My voice was loud but I was angry. I'd been seeing Dr. Levinson for months and I was tired of the shenanigans. No matter how much I knew some of them had helped me, I just wanted to know when the games would end.

His voice was equally as strong as mine when he answered my question. "You 'pass' when you can take yourself back to the last time in your life you felt joy with Dustin. Before the two of you got in that car."

The last time I'd felt joy with Dustin was dancing in that club. And there was no way in hell I would ever step foot in any place like that again.

My sister and her husband and my nieces packed the SUV and left Friday afternoon. They were going upstate to visit Dave's parents for the weekend. Emmy was waffling, and it nearly took Dave throwing her over his shoulder and buckling her in the SUV to get her to leave. She kept looking at me worriedly and asking if I was okay. I knew what she was thinking in the back of her mind, what her fear was. But I was okay now. Mostly. Definitely not contemplating suicide ever again.

I felt horrible now that I'd ever put my sister through all that; leaving her with the niggling little worry that I knew would be in the back of her mind all weekend, interrupting what should be happy family time for her.

But that was in the past and there was nothing I could do now to fix it. The only thing I could do was try to make up for it whenever I could. Nick had taught me that.

Nick. I sat down on the couch and flipped through the channels, stopping briefly to text him about something ridiculous I saw on one of the infomercial channels. Normally he texted me right back but my phone was silent.

In fact the whole house was silent. It had been a long time since I'd been in a space by myself, totally alone. I started roaming around, trying to find things to do. Trying to keep my mind occupied.

By Saturday I was going nuts. The weather was beautiful so I left and spent the day walking around the city. At one point I passed a theater that was showing an Iron Man marathon, including the new one that had just come out, *Iron Man 3*. Dustin and I had gone together to see both of the first two movies. I remembered Doctor Levinson's test and before I thought twice about it I had tickets and was in the theater looking for a seat. My breathing was fast and my palms were sweaty but I was okay.

There were a few times I almost walked out. I remembered every detail of seeing the movies with Dustin, the parts where he laughed, the parts he raved about afterwards. It hurt in my chest, and my eyes got wet but I was determined to get through this. I took some deep breaths and concentrated on the movies and eventually the pain subsided and the tears didn't fall.

My feelings were all over the place when I got out of the theater. I was a little sad but I also felt like another weight was gone from my shoulders. I had managed to relive memories and think of Dustin but not fall apart.

And then there was the part of me that said I shouldn't feel so happy about that. But the other part of me, the part that had been drowning for so long, needed to breathe.

As I rounded the corner, a poster tacked onto the building caught my eye. It was for a nearby club. A gay club, by the picture of the half-naked boy depicted on it. My heart started beating, remembering the club in Atlantic City—there had been go-go boys there who looked just like the guy on the poster. I remember one of them dancing briefly with Dustin. All the memories of that night just flooded my head as it started pounding in pain. And running over the images like some bad movie voiceover, I heard Doctor Levinson's voice, repeating his last words to me. *Take yourself back to the last time in your life you felt joy with Dustin.*

I practically ran back home. I felt like I would only feel safe and at peace once I was within the four walls of the apartment with the door shut tight behind me. Except... I was buzzing with too much energy. I paced around the empty apartment for a while. I pulled the dog-eared photo of Dustin and me out of my wallet, remembering the night I told him we should go to Atlantic City, a decision that ended up turning my entire world upside down. "I'm sorry, Dusty," I whispered to the photo. "I'm so sorry, baby." I'd told myself there was no way in hell I would go back to one of those places again. But as I sat here, alone in an empty apartment, hyperventilating and paralyzed by the past, I realized I was nearly crawling out of my skin. I was a mess. And sadly, I finally realized I couldn't continue living my life this way. Something had to give. I needed to move on. Glancing one more time at the photo, I put it away and made another decision that was going to turn my world upside-down all over again.

My mind was so focused that it wasn't until I found myself across the street from the bar, looking at the bouncer checking people's IDs, that I realized I was too young to get in. My fake ID had been confiscated the night of the accident, and although I was eighteen now, the club was twenty-one and over. Shit. I stood there for a while watching and trying to figure out what to do now. I knew if I went home now I'd lose my courage and never come back. I had to get in to that club. Eventually I noticed a side door to the club that opened into a darkened alley. Guys would come out, usually in pairs, most would head back into the deeper shadows of the alley, but some would head back to the street and off into the night.

My heart was racing and my breathing was fast, but I tried to look casual. I walked about a block down, then crossed the street and carefully made my way down to the alley-side of the bar. Making sure the bouncer wasn't looking, I ducked down the alley. I knew this could be dangerous but I tried to stay calm. Luckily I only had to hang by the door a few minutes before it opened. Two guys walked out, their hands so busy groping each other, they didn't even notice me. I quickly grabbed the door before it shut behind them and slipped in.

Just as I hoped there was no bouncer watching the door. The place was so packed I easily blended into the throngs of men.

Immediately I began to second-guess my great idea. The pounding beat felt like it shook my whole body. The heat and the claustrophobia from the crush of bodies felt like it was going to overwhelm me. I thought maybe it would just be better if I turned and ran right back out the door. But then a pathway seemed to part through the crowd, enough room for me to make it to one of the bars off to the side of the dance floor. There was a blast of air conditioning coming down from a vent above me and I took big gulps of the cold crisp air and felt my heart rate slow a bit.

I'd done it. As I looked out over the crowd I remembered that night with Dustin. He had dragged his feet about going, but once he had entered the club it was like a whole new Dustin was born. His eyes lit up and his mouth

dropped open and he stared all around—for about five seconds. And then he was pulling me on to the dance floor and we became a part of the moving mass of people. Well, not just people—they were men and boys just like us. Gay men and boys dancing with each other, touching each other, kissing and groping each other. With no fear of anyone seeing them. I remember Dustin smiling and laughing so much that night, throwing his head back as glitter rained down on us. It was easily the best night we'd ever spent together and Dustin was the happiest I had ever seen him.

He was happy.

No matter what happened later, I had made Dustin happy. For one night, he was happy.

And at that moment of clarity I felt the shackles leave me, the last of the weight of grief.

Accomplishing what I had come here to do, I took one more look around before I left. My first thought was Nick and how I couldn't wait to tell him what I'd done. He would be so proud—

I stopped and stared at the person I saw across the room. It looked like... it was! It was Nick! I couldn't believe it. He was standing with a couple of other guys, talking to them. He looked incredible, in tight dark-wash jeans and a black button-down, much like what he wore on Wednesdays, except this one had a few more buttons undone so a portion of his chest peeked out.

I was surprised to see him here, well, maybe I shouldn't be. I mean I knew he was gay and I'd never asked whether he had a boyfriend or partner. He surely didn't go home every Wednesday night and stay locked up there until the next Wednesday. I realized that as much as I considered him my friend, and we talked about so many things, he'd never really mentioned much about his personal life.

He didn't see me, so I just stood there for a while and watched him. He seemed pretty chatty with the two guys standing with him so I guessed that they must be friends of his. Then another big, beefy guy sidled up next to

Nick. This guy was *not* a friend, I surmised, as he bent down to whisper in Nick's ear. He was looking Nick up and down and practically salivating like Nick was a side of beef. One of his hands had moved out of sight, trailing down Nick's back I assumed, as he did his head-to-toe once-over of Nick's body. I felt the frown forming on my face and a surge of energy bolt through me. It was a strange sensation. I hadn't felt anything like it since some guy had approached Dustin that night at the club... *oh God. Was I jealous?*

Thank God Nick managed to fend off the big guy, apparently getting him to understand he wasn't interested. I decided I'd better stop snooping and get the heck out of here, but right at that exact moment, Nick saw me. He frowned and said something to one of his buddies before walking as fast as he could over to me.

"Sam? Sam, what are you doing here? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Really good actually."

"How did you get in here? You're not twenty-one!"

"I snuck in."

"You—" He stopped and just shook his head. Then he grabbed my arm and started pulling me outside. The din of the club faded as the door shut behind us.

"Sam, what the heck are you doing in a place like this? Are you okay? Did you drink anything?"

"I'm fine! No I didn't drink anything, I wasn't planning to, and I was actually just getting ready to leave!"

A breeze blew up and I shivered a little. The anger finally dissipated from his face. He sighed.

"How did you get here?"

"I walked. My sister's place isn't that far."

"All right. C'mon, I'll walk with you, make sure you get home okay."

As we walked I told him everything that had happened—what Dr. Levinson had suggested, how I'd gone to the movies and why I'd ended up at the bar.

By the time I finished we were in front of the door to my sister's apartment. Nick had followed me all the way into the building, and up to our floor. There was silence as we just stood there awkwardly. Suddenly I took a deep breath and found myself inviting him in. I braced myself for the "sorry I can't," figuring he'd want to get back to his friends.

"Sure I can come in for a few minutes." He looked hesitant but he followed me inside.

I locked the door and turned on lights and offered him something to drink, which he declined. As we both sat in on the sofa, Nick finally looked over at me with a slight but proud smile. "So you're really okay with everything that happened tonight? Sam, that's just wonderful." He bent his head and cast his eyes downward. "I guess we don't need to continue our private meetings then. You don't need me anymore."

His words churned something up in me so strong it was like a hurricane-force wind building in me. He was so wrong, I did need him and until that very moment even I hadn't realized how much. I had broken through so many obstacles today, might as well barrel on through another one. *Forgive me, Dusty.*

We were sitting close to each other on the sofa. Moving quickly, before I could change my mind, I reached up and cupped my fingers under his chin and tilted his head around to face mine. We were only inches apart, so close I could feel his breath. His lips started to move as if he were going to speak so I moved fast before he could protest.

I pressed my lips against his forcefully. His mouth yielded and for a brief moment we were actually kissing, before he grabbed my arms and pushed me away.

"Sam!" His voice was thick and hoarse. "What...? We can't—"

I felt so jittery and my skin was tingling like a live wire that was sparking and needed to be put out. I was buzzing so much from everything that had happened today that I couldn't hear his words. Or maybe I didn't want to.

Instead I lunged for him again, practically ending up in his lap. This time I wrapped my arms around his neck as I kissed him, brushing my fingertips through the soft short bristles of his hair. He moaned this time and moved his lips more, caressing mine. I could feel his muscles twitching, under the thin fabric of his shirt. He broke away again but less forcefully this time. His chest was heaving.

“Stop, Sam. Please.”

“I don't want to.”

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the headrest.

“Sam...” The strain was showing in his voice.

“I don't think you want me to either.”

He opened his eyes and touched my face, trailing down to my lips.

“I don't.” It was a faint whisper, as if that were all the energy he could expend.

I was teetering on the edge myself and all I wanted to do was jump.

The next kiss finally cracked the last of Nick's resolve as he finally met me with equal force. I climbed into his lap and he put his arms around me and we were clutching and grasping and panting and moving against each other.

It didn't take long for us to fumble our way to my bedroom. It felt so amazing to be touched by someone again, to feel the heat of someone against me. Every single thought of the last year was pushed out of my head as I let myself drown in heat and skin and sensation.

As we fell on the bed, clothes starting coming off. I felt Nick pause again, when I reached for the button of his jeans. He was holding himself above me

and I saw his arms shake slightly. But hearing the hiss from his lips when I reached in and touched him, and the heat in his eyes as he whimpered, emboldened me.

I was so caught up, that I didn't think about where we were heading. When he reached for my jeans he stopped. "Tell me to stop and I will, Sam."

"Don't stop, please." I could hear the whine in my voice. But I was so gone, I wasn't thinking.

Eventually Nick left the bed and I heard some cloth rustling. When he came back he tossed a condom and lube packet on the bed. My heart was beating so fast. I wanted this so much and yet I was so nervous. Dustin and I had done a lot of things together but we had never made it this far.

I grasped his wrist and he looked down at me. "I... I haven't... I've never—"

Nick's eyebrows rose. "Shit, Sam." He sat the lube back down. "We don't have to, it's okay."

"No!" My voice startled us both. "I do. I want to... with you." I picked up the foil packet and tried to control the shaking in my hand.

"You're really sure, Sam?" His voice was quiet as he looked honestly into my eyes.

I nodded.

He grabbed the lube and the next thing I felt was his slick, wet finger slowly entering me. I took a deep breath and let it out and squirmed. I had fingered myself before and was aware of how good it could feel.

Then one finger was gone and there were two, then three. I bit back a groan and tried to keep breathing. I'd never tried three fingers. The nerve endings down there were protesting and I was breaking out into a sweat. It felt mostly uncomfortable but still bearable, if I tried to make my mind concentrate on something else.

I let out a big breath when his fingers disappeared. I heard the rip of the foil packet.

“Sam.” I felt his fingertips lightly touch my hair and trail down my cheek, but I couldn’t see him. It was then I realized I was concentrating so much, I’d closed my eyes.

As I opened them and looked up at him, he traced his finger across my lips. “So beautiful,” he whispered.

“I need you to say it, Sam, tell me you’re okay with this, please.” I could see everything he was feeling in his pleading eyes—the vulnerability, the need, the hungry desire he was trying so hard to restrain. But I saw it, and at the moment I needed to feel it, I needed to feel him.

I swallowed and wet my lips. “Yes.”

“I’ll go slow,” he whispered.

I felt him, the tip of him nudged me down there, and then suddenly he was in. It felt like I was splitting in half, the pain so strong, that I couldn’t help but cry out. This was not like his fingers at all. It was sharp and intense, and it felt like I couldn’t stretch any further. My breaths were shallow and I gulped for air. Tears pricked the corners of my eyes.

“Sam. Sam... Sam, look at me. Please.”

My heart was hammering as I raised my eyes to meet his. He was leaning over me, holding up my legs with each strong arm. He had stilled and we were stuck, suspended in this moment with him unmoving inside of me, and my body screaming at the intrusion.

His chest was heaving and there was a bead of sweat trickling down the veins standing out on his neck. That desire was still restrained but I could see the effort it was taking him.

A tear finally escaped me and dripped down my temple.

Nick shook his head. “No, I’m not hurting you.” He started to pull out slowly, which was nearly as painful as it had been getting him there.

I grabbed his arms, hard, to stop him. I wondered later if I'd left bruises, I remembered gripping him so tightly.

"No! No. Please! Please..." My voice faded off, ragged and shaky, as I looked directly into his eyes, hoping he would see how much I wanted this. I had wanted to feel something again, and even if it was pain, I wanted to feel it. I needed it.

We were both breathing heavily as we paused again. Nick finally sighed.

"Okay. Okay, Sam. Look right here, keep your eyes on mine."

I darted my eyes up to his again.

"That's it, just concentrate on me." His eyes were so kind and so very blue. I imagined they were an ocean, surrounding me, calming me.

"Take deep breaths and then let them out, one at a time. That's good. You're doing great, Sam."

I guess I was breathing, I didn't know. His voice had a hypnotic, soothing effect and my body moved on autopilot as I stayed fixated on his eyes. He never took his gaze from mine. We were locked in this moment together and I knew he would catch me, no matter what happened.

"I promise it gets better, Sam. Just hold on," He spoke softly.

I don't know if it was a few seconds or minutes or hours that we waited there together. At some point Nick finally nudged forward again, slowly. I steeled myself but here was no pain anymore, just a bit of an ache from feeling stretched so tight.

"Are you okay, Sam?"

I nodded honestly. If this was the worst it got, from here on out I could handle it, for him.

And then I screamed. Some unknown sound came out of me and my hips jerked upward as another sensation exploded down there and quickly radiated throughout my whole body. This was not pain, however, no this was... indescribable. I couldn't even form words to explain how amazing it felt.

My eyes widened in wonder as I stared back at Nick. I felt him let out a large breath and he smiled down at me.

“Better, now?” he grinned cheekily.

I didn’t have time for words, I just wanted... more. Of that.

I shifted my hips, trying to get more of him inside me, deeper. He groaned and his eyes fluttered shut. When they snapped open again, I saw the raw desire with no limits this time.

“Sam,” he rasped. Moving quickly, he shifted my legs forward even further, until I was folded up in half and his face was mere inches from me. He thrust inside me, sharper, harder, and buried himself in me. All I could do is gasp as the sparks shot throughout me. I was lost and floating and on such a high. But not because of anything chemical, this was natural and so, so amazing.

Nick and I rocked together, finding a push-pull rhythm that just kept intensifying and building. We climbed higher and higher with every movement, and I didn’t know how much further we could go before we just exploded from the intensity.

And then I did. I wasn’t even touching myself. I was pressed so tightly against his body, the heat and the sweat and the friction of his skin against mine was apparently all I needed. I wanted to hold back, to keep this feeling forever, but I had no control over my body at that point. I wasn’t even sure what I was doing, I groaned and yelled and blindly clawed at Nick, just trying to hold on to him as I fell apart into a million pieces.

Eventually I became aware of Nick panting in my ear. “Oh Jesus, look at you. Oh, Sam... Sam... Sam.” He pressed his forehead against mine, and squeezed his eyes shut as I felt him thrust and thrust and jerk and until he came. Inside me.

His hips stilled but his chest was heaving, as he gasped for every breath. I reached my hand up and trailed my fingers gently up his chest, stopping over

his heart. I flattened my palm out so I could feel the pounding beat against my hand.

With my other hand, I brushed my fingertips against his eyelids. He opened his eyes and we just stared into each other's eyes silently, neither of us capable of words.

I got the best night's sleep I'd had in a very long time. No nightmares, no drug-induced fog, just peaceful, restful sleep. What finally woke me up was the missing warm weight I had been curled up next to. At first I thought maybe he'd left, until I heard sounds in the living room.

Blindly grabbing a T-shirt and boxers, I dressed awkwardly as I hurried down the hall. He was standing by the large glass windows, barefoot, jeans on, shirt on but unbuttoned. His forearm was stretched upward against the window and he was leaning his forehead against it as he stared out at the city below. It was early, still dusky outside, but with the beginning rays of the sun peeking up over the horizon. One of the rays came through the window at just the right angle to illuminate part of his face. Partially glowing in light and partially in shadow, my breath caught at how stunning he was. His face looked tired and drawn though, and the half-light only emphasized it more, the dark circles prominent under his eyes.

He moved away from the window and saw me as he turned. "Sam," he breathed as he spoke my name and it almost came out like a sigh. "I'm glad you're up," he said as he sagged down onto the sofa.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do; I didn't know what happened next after sleeping with someone, so I padded over and sat down next to him. The air in the room felt awkward and strained, completely different than the connection we'd had the night before. He'd picked up one of his shoes but hadn't made the move to put it on yet, fiddling with it in his hand instead as he stared down at the floor. My stomach started to twist as I got the impression he was going to bolt.

He looked over at me and there was concern in his eyes as he reached up and smoothed my hair before drifting to caress my cheek. “Are you okay, Sam? Do you... hurt?”

I shifted a bit on the soft cushions. “A little sore, I guess.”

The lines above his brow eased as he nodded. “That will go away soon.”

“Were you leaving?” My voice broke on the last word, even though I was trying to be calm and cool.

“Yes.” More emotion must have broken through on my face, because his hand shot out and grasped my forearm. “But not before I talked to you, Sam, I swear. I was waiting for you to wake up.”

He wanted to talk. Between him and Dr. Levinson I’d had enough talking to last a lifetime. This didn’t sound good.

“I’m so sorry, Sam, for letting things go as far as they did last night.”

Yep. Not good. I pulled my arm away, and he stared at his empty hand.

“I didn’t mean...” He let out a growl of frustration as he hung his head in his hands. He continued talking in that position. “Oh, Sam, last night... was amazing and beautiful and sexy and even better than I ever imagined with you.”

Finally he turned to look at me with watery eyes. “I’ve wanted to be with you, Sam, practically since the day you came to the first group meeting. There was just something that drew me to you, and little by little, it just got stronger every time we met. I was handling it, I was proud of how professional I had stayed... until you kissed me last night. I should have left immediately, I should have gotten up and walked out that door—but I didn’t. I couldn’t.”

“This is just all kinds of wrong, Sam, I’m a trained counselor—I’m supposed to *help* you, not take advantage of you.”

“But you’re not my counselor, I quit your group months ago! And you didn’t take advantage of me, I kissed you first.”

He smiled sadly. “I know, that’s how I gave myself permission. I kept telling myself if you wanted it too, it was okay. But it’s still wrong, Sam. Or at least our timing is wrong. You’re just starting to get your life back in order. Your emotions are all over the place. What you think you need now might not be what you want a month from now.

“And the last thing I want to do is hurt you or complicate your life even more.”

My first instinct was to argue with him. I didn’t need anyone telling me what I was or wasn’t ready for, or what I did or didn’t want. But... a lot *had* happened in the last twenty-four hours and I *was* buzzing with all kinds of frenetic energy last night. So instead I sat there, silent.

“I’m quitting the counseling center. I broke a major rule of the job last night and it wouldn’t be right of me to stay. I know you weren’t part of the group anymore, but I just think it’s best. Just in case anyone finds out. But I’m not going anywhere, I promise. When you’re ready, if you still want this, just say the word and I’ll be there. No matter if it’s next month or next year.”

He slipped his shoes on and stood. Our eyes locked as he looked down at me, and his leg twitched, like his body didn’t know what to do next.

Finally he crouched down in front of me, wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled me forward for a kiss. It was quick, just a brief touch, and yet it lit up every nerve ending I had. I strained forward to deepen the kiss, but he pulled his lips away, just enough to sever the connection. His forehead leaned into mine and his eyes fluttered shut briefly as we breathed in and out.

And then he stood up quickly and was gone, the click of the door latching behind him echoing in the stillness.

I sat there, unmoving, for I don’t know how long. The sun was already well up and starting its day. I tried to process all that had just happened since I sat here on this same couch yesterday morning. When exactly had my feelings changed toward Nick? I didn’t know. What had possessed me to kiss him like

that last night? I remembered that in the moment... it just seemed right, natural. But why was I so pushy with him? Oh my God, just like Dustin, again, this was all my fault. Now he was losing his job and I was losing the only friend I had. Again.

I went back to bed and curled up under the blankets. I could still smell him on the pillow and I fell asleep with it next to me.

I slept for hours. When I woke up, I showered and dressed, got something to eat. I felt calmer than I did earlier. I kept waiting for the breakdown, kept waiting to fall down into that deep dark hole again but I never really did. The truth was, as I ran through Nick's words with a clearer head now, I could understand where he was coming from. Didn't mean I liked it, because I missed Nick. But I also still missed Dustin, and I had been trying to ignore the little ache in my chest and the voice in my head that was telling me I had betrayed Dustin by sleeping with someone else. I broke out into a cold sweat every time I heard that voice and I knew if I listened to it, if I allowed it to get louder, I would fall into that black hole of depression again.

I felt like I was stuck in limbo, a kind of purgatory—Dustin was the one who had died but I was the one who couldn't move on. I don't know how many times I pulled those tiny pictures out of my wallet and stared at the two of us. And then two minutes later I'd be thinking of Nick again, wondering what he was doing. The voice from the other side of my brain would speak up and all the guilt would pour out—*how could you do this to him, he was the most honest, upstanding person you knew and you made him break rules and quit his job. Because of one kiss? Because you couldn't control yourself?*

To avoid all of these thoughts and feelings overwhelming me, I did what Doc Levinson had taught me—I focused on simple day-to-day things. I got up, got dressed, went to work. Came home, played with my nieces or helped my sister. I got a few strange looks from her and I know she wanted to ask what was up with me—it wasn't every day I offered to do the laundry or run the vacuum. Heck, I even cleaned my room. But I think she figured cleaning and

doing chores was better than other activities I could be doing. I just wanted to keep busy.

I knew when the doc got back from his vacation, though, that I was going to have to face the music. Well, most of the music. I told him I'd met someone, but I sure as hell didn't say it was Nick.

"So how have you been, Sam?"

By the time I finished recounting all that had happened in just that one weekend, he had stopped writing on his pad and was looking at me over the rim of his glasses, with eyebrows raised. If he wasn't in professional mode, I could imagine a "holy shit," escaping his mouth right about now.

"Good God, Sam, I suggested the movie as a baby step, I never expected you to jump in the deep end of the pool, clothes and all."

I just stared back at him as he turned his attention back to his pad and tried to resume his scribbling. "I think I'll need a whole page for this." Then he changed his mind and stopped, putting the pen down and leaning back in his chair instead.

"So how did you feel about all of this?"

Ugh, these doctors, always with the "how did you feel?" But my mouth opened and I found myself relaying everything that had been bouncing around in my brain for the past two weeks. When I was done, I couldn't believe how good it felt to get all of that out.

"Sam, all of those feelings you're having are normal. Dustin will always be in your thoughts, and in your memories. It's natural to miss him and be sad and regretful. You're the one left behind and you can either choose to bury yourself in a grave of your own making by suspending your life in grief and loneliness, or you can choose to get up and go on and live your life. All the sessions we've had? All the tests I've been giving you? Have all been one more step up and out of that grave. I've done this a long time, Sam, and trust me, if you wanted to stay stuck in that grave of grief you would have done it. I cannot pull someone out by my will alone, they need to do it all on their own.

And believe me, I have had patients who just can't or won't do it. You may think you're still in limbo, but you're not."

He smiled gently at me. "Do you like this new man? Do you want to be with him?"

At the question, visions of Nick flooded my brain—of him smiling at me in the sunshine, of the fire in his eyes as he moved inside me, of the gentle look of adoration that shone from him after we made love. I could feel his skin and his touch and smell his scent. And I remembered how warm and safe I felt in his arms. Even that very second time we met at our bench, when I broke down and he wrapped me up in him and held me.

"Yes," slipped quietly out of my mouth before I even contemplated it.

Doc Levinson was quiet, letting me process what I had just said.

"Will Dusty ever forgive me?" I croaked around the lump in my throat, blinking my eyes to hold in the wetness.

Doc leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "If the tables were turned, Sam, if you were the one who was gone and Dustin was the one who was left behind and you knew you could never be with him again, would you want him to be alone forever? Or would you want him to find someone else who could love him as much as you had?"

I frowned for a minute, trying to envision Dustin in my place. I'd always hated seeing him sad, and would try anything to cheer him up. I couldn't imagine seeing him that way forever, it would crush me. I would want him to be happy. It would hurt, but if it couldn't be me, then I would want him to find someone who could make him smile again.

I couldn't speak so I nodded.

Doc smiled and tipped his head towards me. "There's your answer," he said quietly.

Two days later I came home after work to a sea of large cardboard boxes in the living room.

“What is all this?”

My sister whispered something to my nieces and they ran off to their rooms. Emmy walked over to me, as I checked out the return address. They were from Mom and Dad. To me.

She draped an arm on top of a box and sighed. “I’m sorry, Sam. I’ve been trying for months to talk to Mom and Dad, to change their warped views, but they won’t budge. I think Mom wants to, I really do think she misses you... but between Dad and their priest influencing her, she is just as immovable as they are.

“Every time I call, they ask if you have gone to confession yet and I always argue that you have done nothing to warrant confession. Last week they called me and when I said the same thing, they said they were done, they were cleaning out your room and sending your stuff.”

She came over and put her arm around me and squeezed. I couldn’t really say I felt any emotion as I numbly stared at the boxes. I always knew how they felt about homosexuality, so even when I lived at home I think I always knew something like this was going to happen someday.

“Well... at least they didn’t just throw it all out, I guess.”

I spent the whole next day unpacking the remains of who I used to be. That’s exactly how I looked at it—I felt like I was a different person than the one I was a year ago. I pitched a lot of stuff I had no more use for, or felt no connection with anymore. The clothes I kept. I almost threw away the rosary I’d been given at my confirmation, but at the last minute kept it. I can’t really say I felt very strong in my Catholic faith these days, but maybe someday I’d change my mind.

I kept my school yearbooks and some other mementos, notes and pictures of school friends. I kept all my CD's and as I flipped through them I realized I was making a mental list of ones to share with Nick.

My laptop was also included in the sea of boxes. I wondered if my parents had looked through any of my computer files. Specifically, if they'd found my porn stash. Probably not, or else they would have burned the whole machine.

I sat down that night and plugged the laptop in and started it up. It chimed and the screen lit up. It still worked. Everything on the desktop seemed in order. I clicked on the hard drive icon, flipped through the list of files... yep, porn was still there. All my MP3s. Searching through all of the files on the computer—even the games I'd loved to play—felt like looking at someone else's files. Everything felt like a lifetime ago, and I felt like I'd aged a hundred years since. There was a folder labeled “school”, and I opened it and scrolled through all of the files—reports and papers for classes long over. It suddenly hit me that I hadn't graduated high school. I had been stuck in that stupid asylum my parents put me in. I almost freaked out for a minute but calmed myself down. My parents made me miss my own graduation. And how had I not even thought about it until now? I guess having to rebuild my life was a little more pressing. I guess I'd have to look into getting my GED. Especially so I could start applying to college.

That word—college—stopped me in my tracks. It just popped up in my head without any thought, just as I came across the folder of files labeled “college”. All my essays and applications I'd sent in. I didn't even know if I'd been accepted at any of them. My parents didn't send any of my mail in the boxes. I suppose I'd have to start all over again, beginning with the GED. I was just surprised that I didn't even agonize over the decision; I just assumed I would go to college. Another step forward in moving on, I guess.

I closed out the computer window and decided to open my Internet browser. It took a few seconds—all the tabs I had open the last time I'd been on this computer were still open and it took a while to load. Suddenly my heart stopped at the page that popped up on the screen. I swallowed hard and took a

breath. It was Dusty's Tumblr page. He used a screen name and it was his one private place he said that he could post anything he wanted, where no one knew it was him. He posted a lot of funny and serious quotes and funny GIFS, but there were also lots of gay-themed items too—photos of men kissing, posts by other LGBT teens about coming out from a Tumblr he followed. I remember many nights he'd call me to tell me to read what he'd just reposted from that Tumblr—usually a post about a girl or boy who had struggled in the closet for so long and then finally moved out or went to college or whatever and now they were out and proud and so happy. He always re-blogged those the most often, because they were his inspirations. He was just counting the days until he too could do that—be himself and be out. My chest hurt, knowing that Dustin would never get a chance to live that life he had been waiting so desperately for.

I couldn't look anymore and was just hovering over the button to close the whole browser down, when I glanced at the top image on the page. I stopped. I leaned closer to look at the date and time of the posting. I hadn't seen this post before—the time and date showed that he had apparently posted it a few minutes before I'd picked him up that last night.

It was an artsy photograph, shot in black and white. A super zoomed-in close-up shot of a hand, palm facing the camera. The palm looked scarred and rough, meant to make a statement, to show struggle maybe? There were black words written across the palm—*"It's time to let go... (it will be okay)"*

The screen blurred and eventually I realized it was because of the tears in my eyes. A sharp chill trickled over my whole body. I gently closed the screen of the laptop and sat there in the semidarkness on my bed, lost in my brain again. It felt like he was speaking to me from the grave and I shivered again. I knew that was silly, that couldn't happen, right? But to find this from him... a year later, right when I needed it the most? I wondered what part of this picture had spoken to him, what had made him click the button to post it to his own page? What was going through his mind when he saw this? *Did you know Dusty? Did you know any of this year would happen when you posted it?*

Eventually I wiped my hand over my wet face and crawled into bed, exhausted but still not finding sleep. My mind was still overloaded and I was awake for hours. Until, finally, everything cleared and I knew what I would do tomorrow. What I *could* do now. *Thank you Dusty, I will always love you*, I sent silently out into the universe, hoping maybe he heard me wherever he was.

The next day I was surprisingly calm. I forced myself to shower and get dressed and eat breakfast. I should have been too nervous to eat anything, but instead I found that I was ravenous, eating seconds of everything.

Finally, when I felt it was an appropriate hour and not too early, I sent a text.

I'm ready. Meet me at noon.

I didn't think I needed to say where, he would know. I spent the remaining hours carting all the empty boxes and trash bags to the trash room downstairs. I felt lighter and freer with each bag and pile of cardboard that I left there.

I got back on the computer and when Dusty's page came up, I just smiled, bookmarked it, and then clicked on the corner and it disappeared. Then I went along and closed or bookmarked all the tabs I had open, until I was left with a clean browser page. I typed "How to get your GED" into the search field and hit the Go button.

When it was time, I forced myself to walk steadily and slowly to my destination, even though I wanted to run. With each step my heart got a little faster, hoping he would show. Hoping that he hadn't changed his mind or given up on me.

But as I turned the corner, I saw him from behind, already waiting at our bench. Restraint disappeared as my legs took off on their own.

When I came to a stop in front of him, Nick's eyes flicked up to me. There was a subdued hope in them as he looked at me with a slow, hesitant smile. The smile on my face pulled at my muscles so much I feared I was stretching them beyond their limits. But I couldn't help it. He stood up and I didn't waste any more time, I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him down just enough so my lips could meet his. It only took a second before I felt those strong arms wrap tightly around me. I was safe again and I knew Dusty was right—everything was going to be okay.

THE END

Author Bio

C. J. Anthony started reading and writing at an early age. She attributes her love of reading and romance to her mother who not only taught her to read but also made countless trips to the library lugging piles of books home for her to read. She loved getting lost in the people and places and adventures she found in books like the Little House on the Prairie™ series, Nancy Drew™, Trixie Belden™, just to name a few. It wasn't a far jump to start writing her own stories, early childhood tales about flower families and travelling to the moon with her best friend.

Writing, however, quickly fell by the wayside as she grew up and turned to other creative pursuits. Recently she was inspired to try writing again, this time with beautiful men in love speaking to her and wanting their stories to be told. C. J. has always been a hopeless romantic, believing in true love and soul mates, and HEAs, even if there is a little angst and pain along the way—life is never perfect, after all, but everyone deserves a happy ending and someone there to catch them when they fall.

When she's not writing—or trying to find time to write—she spends most of her time juggling a day job and freelance design work on the side, enjoying music, movies, spending time with friends and, of course, reading.

Contact & Media Info

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TAKING THE PLUNGE

By Lacie J. Archer

Photo Description

A naked, tattooed man stands under a shower head, looking over his shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Oh shit... he must have heard me! But can you blame me for perving a little here? Who'd have thought that my boss was hiding that ink and perfect ass under his tight buttoned, prim and proper suit! Talk about a dream come true. Now if only the other vibes I've been getting from him are true...

Sincerely,

Shaz

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: lust, boss/employee, mutual masturbation, fluff, men with children, tattoos, piercings

Word count: 5,362

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TAKING THE PLUNGE

By Lacie J. Archer

A dunk tank? Whose genius idea was it to have a dunk tank at the charity carnival in a few weeks? Especially one with a sign-up sheet posted for willing volunteer dunkees, my boss's name written boldly at the top. Note to self: stay as far away from said dunk tank as feasibly possible. No need to add the sight of Jonathan soaking wet, all that bronzed skin visible through the transparency of his plastered-to-him shirt, to my mental photo album.

It's bad enough that he looks hot as hell when he's all prim and proper in the office—now I would have to contend with the sight of him in something less professional? I sigh and glance at the layout of the carnival, scouring my options for something far, far away from the temptation. Finger stalling on the cotton candy booth on the opposite end of the cafeteria, I shrug and grab a pen.

“Mr. Kols, have you already decided which attraction you will be volunteering with for your four hours?”

I draw a deep breath, mouth suddenly dry, and turn to face the object of my errant thoughts. Suit a dove gray today, Jonathan lifts his coffee mug to his lips. Following the line of his lavender tie down to his belt, I am unable to stop the way my eyes demand I drink him in. Jonathan cocks his hip, pants tight across his thighs, leaning into the table's edge. Licking my lips, I say, “I was thinking of helping out with the kids at the cotton candy booth.”

Quirk lifting one side of his mouth, he asks, “Do you like cotton candy, Mr. Kols?”

I swallow at the lilt in his question, mind in an immediate tizzy over whether or not he is flirting with me. Twisting away from him before I embarrass myself, I lift the pen to the sign-up sheet. “It was one of my favorite parts back when I attended carnivals and fairs as a kid, so I figured it'd be nostalgic to work with it. Plus, there's nothing better than a bunch of kids spinning colored sugar, right?”

Except watching you fall into the pool of water, shirt riding up to reveal the physique I'm assuming you've got hidden under all of those buttons. Oh yes, that would be much better—but, much, much worse for my ability to work with you without mauling you. Placing the pen back in the holder, I brace myself, knowing I can no longer keep my back to him without being considered rude.

Chuckling warm, Jonathan shifts away from the table. "I've long thought so," he says. Lashes dip to brush the sweep of his cheekbones as he lifts his cup to his lips, and my teeth sinking into my tongue is the only thing that keeps me from whimpering.

It isn't fair. He is so far out of my league, even if he does play for the same team—which I don't know for certain because it isn't exactly something I can walk up to him and ask—but even if he is gay, there's no way anything would ever happen. He's my boss, for god's sake. But oh, how I love having the perpetual eye candy, thought-derailment and all.

I motion back at the board and ask, "What made you pick the dunk tank? It's certainly not what I would have guessed you opting for."

"I wanted to do something out of the norm, something that would hopefully create a tighter working camaraderie in the department." Nose scrunching up in the most adorable fashion, he adds, "Besides, what employee doesn't enjoy seeing their boss brought down by a bunch of kids with softballs?"

Shifting from foot to foot, I attempt to hide the reaction his words and my thoughts are creating. "You're not planning to wear one of your ridiculously expensive suits, are you? I can only imagine they're dry clean only, and the water they put in those tanks has got to be bad for any type of clothing."

"What, you don't like my suits?" Jonathan asks with a subtle pout, pulling his jacket out to the side and giving me a clear look at the way his shirt fits almost like a glove. Heart rate quadrupling, I flounder for the right words, a slew of half-formed gibberish all I can manage. Smile taking on a slightly

predatory gleam, he shrugs. “Figured I’d go with something more casual and durable for my employee-boss bonding attempt.”

My mind telling me, in no uncertain terms, exactly what type of bonding it’d like to do with him, I cough nervously. His gaze drops from my face and I stammer, “I-I might have to swing by, if only to take a chance at being able to add ‘dunked my boss’ to my resume.”

Good god, why did I say that? *You don’t want to be anywhere near that dunk tank, remember, idiot? What the hell happened to our brain-to-mouth filter? We don’t need a live visual of Jonathan falling into the water to replay every single time we’re horny.* It’s bad enough that I’m now almost positive Jonathan is gay, and apparently isn’t above a little tit-for-tat when it can’t be construed as actual flirting, but then my stupid mouth has to go and tell him we want to be one of the people to dunk him. Fucking hell, I was practically begging for a sexual harassment suit.

“I’m sure you won’t have too much trouble accomplishing that goal, if you do decide to try your hand at it,” he drawls. Placing his cup on the table he was previously leaning against, he licks his lips.

Stomach in my throat, I stare at the glistening sheen on the mouth I’ve spent a good number of months fantasizing about. With an unconscious step forward, matched by him, I lift my gaze to meet his. A faint light of promise steadily growing brighter and more recognizable in his hazel eyes, he gives me a smirk.

The jangle of his cell phone jerks me out of my reverie and I step back, the openness of his expression gone before he finishes pulling the offending piece of technology out of his coat’s inner pocket. Mug back in hand, he walks out of the cafeteria without a backwards glance.

I scrub my hands over my face with a sigh. What the hell was that all about? Had we seriously had a moment going? And if so, what the fuck? We weren’t supposed to have moments; I was supposed to pine all unrequited like for him, and he was supposed to be completely oblivious to said pining.

Reclaiming my tepid coffee, I make my way up to my cubicle. Probably for the best that his phone interrupted whatever had been happening, bad things always came from starting anything with your boss. It's why I'd made a point of never moving beyond some good-natured ogling in previous jobs. Because ogling didn't hurt anyone, and if the eye candy was universally admired it made for amusing banter during the slow times.

Smoothly-coiffed head of hair poking out of the cubicle beside mine, another of Jonathan's admirers whisper-growls, "What did you do to deserve being called to his office, Morgan?"

My curse loud in the stillness of the early morning, I flush at her scandalized arch of a brow. "Hell if I know, we were talking about the carnival down in the caf and he was interrupted by a phone call. Maybe he just wants to apologize for walking away mid-conversation?"

Stabbing her pen into her bun, Kadie snorts. "Sure, and I'm the Virgin Mary." Waving me in the direction of Jonathan's closed door, she adds, "Better go and answer his summons before he grows impatient. Although, if you dither here, he might come back out to get you, and give me another opportunity to stare at that fine ass."

Cheeks on fire I swallow, eyes flitting between that door and her devilish smirk. This couldn't be happening to me, it's almost as if I had woke up in a parallel version of my life. Jonathan has never given any indication that he's noticed me beyond my ability to get tasks completed on time. I slug back the remainder of my caffeine and shove my mug at Kadie. "Shove off you leech, and ogle on your own time. Pretty sure he bats for my team, anyway."

"Doesn't mean I can't look," she retorts, her fingers deftly straightening my tie. After a peck on my cheek she jabs a finger at the door.

I weave a path through the cubicle forest, heart rate mounting with each step I take, rap my knuckles against the wood just beneath the nameplate and wait. A muffled "come in" is my answer, so I take a deep breath and twist the doorknob. Closing the door behind me, I turn to find Jonathan still on the phone.

I track his fidgety path across the sunshine-filled office silently, wondering what the call is about. Must be something big to eat away at the poise he normally presents. His hand rakes through his hair, tousling the sandy brown mass too much for my sanity, and then he motions for me to take a seat in front of his desk, holding up a finger to indicate he'd be with me in a minute.

"No, no, I'll be there to pick her up from her appointment this afternoon, Wes." Lips white with pressure, he listens to the other end of the line. Hazel gaze flicks my way as he shakes his head and mutters, "I promised her I'd be the one to get her this time, and dammit if I won't be, even if I have to leave the office in the hands of one of my cubicle minions. Yes, Wes, go on your date night and tell my little butterfly I'll see her later today." Wandering behind the desk, he slides down into his leather chair with a sigh. "Uh-huh, love you too."

Letting the phone clatter onto a pile of paperwork, Jonathan grimaces and says, "My apologies Mr. Kols, I had hoped to be finished before you arrive. However, my brother seems to think I can't manage my niece without a three-hour-long dissertation on her needs and wants. But enough of that, I actually had planned on calling you in to see me today."

"Am I in trouble, sir?"

Laugh bright, and going straight to my groin, he plants his hands on the desktop. "Far from it Mr. Kols. I called you in to let you know that you have been recommended for a promotion."

I blink dumbly at him, echoing, "A promotion?"

A flash of teeth. He nods. "Indeed, one effective after the carnival, if you choose to accept it. Of course, it does move you out of my division and into Rosalin's upstairs, but it will allow you to utilize more of your graphic arts degree than working in Finance is currently doing."

Out of his division? Had he known this morning—of course he had, he said he'd been planning on calling me in today. Was that why he had suddenly started pseudo-flirting with me, because he knew what was on the table?

“I’ll be sorry to see you go, since you are one of my best. However, I do recognize that your skills can be a great asset to Visual Marketing. And the move includes a nice pay increase as well.” Leaning forward, he plants his chin in his palm, grinning at me. “So, what do you say? Shall I tell Rosalin she’s stealing you away?”

In a daze I make my way back to my desk. Two more weeks and I will see the increase in my checks, three and I’ll find myself breaking out my ink and pencils upstairs, or so Jonathan assured me. Kadie pops free of her cubicle as soon as I round the corner to our aisle, and she wiggles a thumb between up and down.

I shrug and plunk myself in my chair, a kick of my heel sending me wheeling back to meet her. “I’m being promoted to Visual Marketing after the carnival,” I say.

“So, you’ll no longer be working under Mr. Sexy Ass, or even in the same division?”

I shake my head mutely, lips twitching at the office’s too true nickname for Jonathan.

“That sucks Morgan, but hey, on the flip side, asking him out on a date won’t be on the ‘no-no’ list anymore since he’ll no longer be your boss.” Wriggling her nose, Kadie scoots herself back into her cubicle as her phone begins to ring. “Think of the bright side. Plus, we can always get together for lunches and dish about the eye candy, just like we do now.”

I glance up at the sound of a stifled cough, heart suddenly lodged in my throat at the amused pair of hazel eyes much closer than is comfortable. Considering Kadie’s and my conversation, I swallow convulsively.

Mouth curled up in a decidedly dangerous smile, Jonathan gives me a wink before continuing his walk towards the elevators.

I swirl the paper cone inside the machine, vibrant blue candy-floss forming up after just a couple of rounds, then hand it over to the smiling little boy with a flourish, grinning at his joyful giggle. I wave to his parents as they walk away before turning to the three teenage girls manning the booth with me. “You do know my shift officially ended ten minutes ago, right?”

“Yup, but you’re still here,” one of them says with a snap of her gum. “Besides, watching you interact with the munchkins is almost too cute for words.”

I make a face at the truth in her comment. I hadn’t left when my four hours were up, choosing to stick around and make more kids smile with the offer of candy. And maybe, just maybe hoping Jonathan would bring his niece by. *Right, you’re just hoping for an opportunity to ogle his ass in whatever he’s wearing, and in front of these impressionable girls too. You are pathetic.*

Jerking my wandering thoughts back under control, I stick my tongue out at them. “Well excuse me for taking pleasure in making children smile.”

Laughing, the girl wearing a purple wig throws her arms around my shoulders. I roll my eyes and grab her hips, swinging her around in a circle. This was what I had hoped for when I’d signed up for this booth. Well, this and the ability to avoid watching the object of my lust plunge into water. Setting her back on her feet, I plant a kiss on her cheek.

“Uncle Jon, can we get some cotton candy?” a bright voice chirps from behind me.

Straightening herself, the girl in my arms glances over my shoulder. Eyes bugging out, she gapes at whoever is waiting. Breath short, she whispers, “Lord have mercy, he is gorgeous.”

Heart giving a leap, I release her and twist around to find Jonathan on the other side of the booth, a sprite of a girl wearing wings perched on his shoulders. Hair artlessly tousled, he gives me a slow smile. “I don’t know Butterfly, it looks like the workers may have been eating all of the candy.”

Planting my hands on my hips, I tear my gaze from him to meet his niece's look of concern. "Don't you listen to your naughty uncle, we've got plenty left for you, sugar."

An over-dramatic look of hurt coloring his face and hazel eyes dancing, he says, "Well, I stand corrected." Lifted over his head with a shriek of joy, the girl loops her arms around his neck as he settles her on his hip. "So, Butterfly, want some? Just don't tell your parents I was the one that gave it to you."

Her small hand smacking his chest, she gives me a brilliant, gap-toothed grin, "Course you didn't, Uncle Jon. The nice man at the booth is going to."

Giving her a wide grin, I grab an empty paper cone. "What's your name, sugar? And how did you get stuck with such a tease of an uncle?" *Fuck, what was I thinking, asking that? Think the candy's fried my filter.*

Leaning as far forward as Jonathan's grip on her will allow, she says, "He only teases the people he likes." Eyes bright, she glances up at her uncle's flushed face. "You like the candy man, don't you Uncle Jon? I think he's pretty too"—slight huff and pout—"but I think he's much too old for me. Just right for you, though."

Cheeks a matching shade of red, Jonathan and I meet each other's gaze, time seeming to slow until I blink. Heaven help us, his niece is trying to set us up with all the heavy-handed skill of a child. She must really adore him. Blue floss now wrapped up in a fluffy ball, I hand it over to her. "Here you go, you pint-sized terror."

Mouth full of dissolving sugar, she mumbles, "My name's Nadalie, pretty candy man."

"Right. Nadalie, pint-sized terror—same thing, right?"

Wide smile her only answer, she squirms free of Jonathan's hold and skips off to answer the call of her name from a man who looks vaguely like Jonathan.

Fingers pinching a bit of cotton candy off of my cone, Jonathan gives my growl of discontent a smirk. “What? Can’t share your treat like a big boy?”

I flush, and glare at him. “No, it’s mine, and I don’t have to share if I don’t want to.”

Giving me a pout, he glances up ahead as his niece shrieks with laughter at something. The man is an absolute menace to my sanity. Not that he hasn’t been before this, but gods, now that I am apparently fair game it seems as though every other comment out of his mouth is heavily laced with flirtatiousness. I shake my head as we wander along behind Nadalie and her parents. I want to respond to him, want to take the chance he knows exactly what he is doing; but what if this is merely how he behaves outside of business, and he isn’t coming on to me?

I chance a look in his direction to find him watching me with an arched brow, so I roll my eyes and tilt the candy in his direction without comment. *Like I’m going to pass up the opportunity to share something with him, even in a purely platonic fashion. He was way too hot to be denied a request for more than a few teasing minutes.*

“So Mr. Kols—”

“Morgan. My name is Morgan, and I’d rather like it if you could manage to use it,” I say, cutting him off. *Oh yes, I would definitely like to hear him say my name. Especially if he were saying it as he came.* A burn of heat crawls up my neck and I groan. *Goddammit, why the hell did I have to go and think that?*

His laughter as warm as the pair of fingers that tweak my nose, he murmurs, “All right, Morgan. If you don’t think it’s too inappropriate for me to address you as such.”

I huff, making a face as my ears continue to burn. It really isn’t fair, the unspoken game Jonathan seems to be playing with me. “I wouldn’t have asked you to lay off the formalities if I thought it was too inappropriate.” *Lies, all lies. You totally would. You’d love for him to treat you inappropriately.*

“Right. Morgan it is,” he drawls with a smirk. I switch the cotton candy to my other hand, holding it just out of his reach with a look. Hazel eyes wide, he makes grabby hands at the fluffy ball. “Oh come on Morgan, please? Why do you keep taking the sugar away from me?”

Ball in hand, I force myself to focus on the brightly-painted bull’s-eye to the left of Jonathan’s perch. If I allow my eyes to drift, there is absolutely no way I am going to be able to hit the target and knock him into the water. Hell, even just knowing he was sitting there, cotton T-shirt clinging to his skin and a bright smile lighting his face, was almost enough to throw my concentration off. I flick my eyes up absently.

“Come on, Morgan, you can’t add dunking your boss to your resume if you don’t throw the ball.”

I stick my tongue out at the glorious eye candy Jonathan makes, his bare feet dangling just above the water’s surface. *Just look at the way the soaked fabric molds to the body he’s been hiding under all those button-ups and jackets—isn’t he the sexiest thing you’ve ever seen? And those khakis, all tight across his thighs... I can almost make out what looks to be an impressive package between legs I want nothing more than to have wrapped around me.*

Swallowing, throat dry as a desert, I tear my eyes away from their perusal of him. I lob the first of three softballs at the target, and growl when it misses its mark. Second following in an almost identical path, I grimace at the good-natured jeering from the crowd. I toss the final ball in the air, contemplating my final throw. I have to hit the target, otherwise Jonathan is going to be hell to put up with for the remainder of the day.

A small hand tugs on my jeans, and I sink into a crouch to be more at Nadalie’s level. “You’ve gotta throw like Uncle Jon’s already in the water Mister Candy Man.” Pressing a kiss sticky with cotton candy to my cheek, she grins. “I know you can do it.”

Throw like he's already in the water. I rise from my crouch, giving her head a pat. I close my eyes and suck in a breath, chest tight with the mental image of him hitting the water, T-shirt riding up to reveal the set of abs I always dreamed he had. Cock twitching against my zipper, I open my eyes to find Jonathan's hazel eyes watching me with definite interest. I give him a smirk as the ball leaves my hand and sails directly into the center of the bull's-eye.

Seat collapsing from beneath him, Jonathan hits the water with a laugh. As the hemline rises up over his face, I drink in the sight of all the revealed skin. A glint of metal catches my eye, and I goggle at the slim silver ring in one of his nipples. How the fuck had I not seen that while watching his earlier dunking? God, I can almost taste the salty-sweet of his skin on my tongue. A whimper escapes from me as I struggle to compose myself when he pops up.

One hand tugs his shirt back down, hiding the expanse of flesh from sight, while the other shoves the bench back into a locked position. Hazel eyes turning my direction, he brushes dripping hair out of his face. "Well, Morgan, I guess I'll have to concede and let you put 'dunking your boss' on your resume, though I think Nadalie helped you cheat."

Hands shoved in my pockets to ease the pressure on my arousal, I wander toward the locker room the carnival has commandeered for the weekend. I left the dunking booth shortly after my success to avoid the embarrassment of storming up to the tank and dragging Jonathan out so I could beg him to fuck me—and of course, I've lost track of time and still have his phone and wallet in my pocket. *That fucking man is going to be the death of me. Especially with that stupid damn piercing in his nipple. God, just the thought of it is making me all hot and bothered.*

I use my shoulder to open the door to the room, nose wrinkling at the hanging scent of chlorine and sweat. I wend my way deeper into the echo-filled space, debating whether I should call out to see if he's even in here. *Fuck it, I'll do a circuit and if I don't see him, I can just head for the parking lot and*

haunt his car like the stalker I am. Almost at the back, I pause at the sound of a shower running. Oh hell no. I am not going back there to find him butt-ass-naked in the shower. No way, no how.

Feet moving on their own accord, I grit my teeth as I near the showers. *Brilliant idea, Morgan, let's just waltz right up to him while he's possibly naked and try to hand him back his things. Like I'm going to be doing anything but staring at his—fucking hell.*

His back to me, Jonathan scrubs his hands through his hair, sending a cascade of soapy water down his bare skin and over the most perfect ass I've seen in years. Eyes glued to the sight of the wicked tattoo work covering most of his back, I place the contents of my pocket on a bench out of the water's spray.

I inch forward to get a closer look at the ink he's been hiding from the world. It is quite the masterpiece, and must have taken a number of months to get all of the work done. My lips twitch in amusement when I spot a little butterfly intermixed with the other, more "manly" images. *Nadalie. Even on your skin you show the love and adoration you feel for your niece.*

When my sneaker squeaks on the tile, I freeze, cursing under my breath when he stiffens. *Brilliant move genius, now he knows we're here and our carefree ogling is at an end.*

Twisting under the water, his hip just barely blocking my dangerous line of sight, Jonathan gives me a slow grin. Crooking his finger at me, he drawls, "Come here, pretty Morgan, and give in to what you're fighting against."

Bad idea, very, very bad idea, even he's practically begging for you to—

I yelp and stumble forward when his wet hand fists the front of my shirt. His lips slam over mine and he snakes an arm around my waist. Pulled flush along the hard lines of the body I'd spent months fantasizing about, I moan into the hungry kiss. Slippery, wet skin under my fingers, I grip his biceps.

Oxygen becoming necessary, I rip my mouth free. “Not that I’m complaining, because fuck, I have wanted to kiss you since I first saw you, but what the hell, Jonathan?”

Releasing his hold on my now-soaked shirt, he tweaks my nose. “Been watching you watching me, and now that you’re officially not my employee I can molest you to my heart’s content,” he says. Hands sliding down to grab my ass, hauling me even closer to himself, he nips my bottom lip.

I walk my fingers up to cup the back of his head and hold him close, delving in to taste his mouth.

Moan caught in the back of my throat, I arch into the hand Jonathan has curled around my length. “Fucking hell, we’re going to get in so much trouble if we get caught.”

Smirking he rubs his thumb over the crown. I hiss and twitch, fingers digging at his shoulders.

“Live on the wild side a bit, Morgan,” Jonathan purrs as he continues stroking my cock.

I smack him on the shoulder, squirming in his grip. “Wild side? Jonathan—fuck—you’ve got your hand—ah—in my pants, we’re in a public-i-c shower, and you’re n-naked. How much—oh god—wilder do you want me?”

Breath hot on my skin, he orders me to touch him. Mouth over mine, tongue slithering past my lips, he rocks against me. I shiver and drag my nails down his sides. Groan filling my mouth, Jonathan’s hand stutters on my flesh. I wonder what sort of response I’ll get from him if I give that ring in his nipple a tug. Pinky curled through it, I pull. His cry bounces around the tiled showers, fading out into the rest of the locker room, and I lick my lips, filing his reaction in my mind for later.

I muffle my cry of release in the crook of his throat, not wanting to send it echoing through the locker room. Teeth sink into my shoulder as Jonathan spills over my fingers. I continue to stroke the twitching cock in my grip until he lets out a shaky hiss, and lift my messy hand to my lips with a pleased leer. Twisting the cum-covered digits before my face, water from the still running shower begins to clean them. When I pop my index finger into my mouth, a shudder runs through Jonathan. Mimicking my move, he loops his other arm around my hips.

I peck the corner of his mouth, and accept the deeper kiss he turns to press on me. *Morgan, Morgan, Morgan, you are well and truly fucked now, there will be no recovering from the spell Jonathan's cast on you. Not that you care.* There is a tease of teeth on my lip; I blink at his look. "What? Do I have cum on my face?" I ask with a grin.

Laughing, he kisses me again, and I taste myself on his lips. Hands fixing my pants, he murmurs, "Morgan, my Morgan, will you join me for dinner tonight?"

His Morgan? "Of course, I'd love to," I say, tugging gently on his piercing.

Wet clothes clinging to me, I laugh and twine my fingers with his as we wander back into the sunny afternoon. "You do realize we're going to look completely ridiculous when we rejoin your brother? You, freshly showered, and me, soaking wet, as though I just went through a round with the dunk tank. He's bound to wonder."

He lifts my knuckles to his lips and asks, "Does it bother you that he'll probably be able to figure out what happened?"

"With the imprint of your teeth on my shoulder? Not a bit." I nudge his hip with mine. "Come on, the faster we get through dinner, the sooner we can make our way to somewhere more private."

Speculation lighting his eyes, Jonathan gives my hand a squeeze. "Oh?"

“Yeah, I’m hoping you might be coerced to take me home and fuck me hard enough that I walk funny.”

Cheeks red, he splutters as I grin and lift my hand to wave at the winged Nadalie, forcing him to keep his comments to himself.

THE END

Author Bio

Lacie J. Archer lives in the sunny part of California ruled by a Mouse, and has always loved writing. When not immersed in the lives and worlds of her imaginary friends, Lacie is a full time book minion, and kid wrangler, for that big name bookstore; you know the one. On the few days she's not busy trying to build book pyramids, or rescuing misplaced children, she enjoys working a myriad of odd jobs; which include night club door girl and cuddler of cats. Be sure to visit her at her numerous haunts online; Lacie promises she doesn't bite, hard.

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OLD STONES

By Elin Austen

Photo Description

A priest holds an axe over the chains of a second man... a prisoner, preparing to strike. Do these two men know each other, maybe from childhood? Why did they go down separate paths and how did they end up here?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

As you see, one of these men is a priest, the other, an escaped prisoner. I feel they knew each other since boyhood. How could they end on such different paths? What was it that broke their friendship?

Please no BDSM, D/s, poly, no evil females.

I don't mind if there is no sex or if the story is not HEA—write as your muse dictates you.

Bonus for historical fic, amateur detective work, revenge.

Thank you

Sincerely,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: 20th century historical

Tags: captivity, in the closet, men with pets, priest, researcher, religion, postwar-WWII

Word Count: 8,868

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OLD STONES

By Elin Austen

CHAPTER 1

Russian Zone, Allied-occupied Germany, Spring 1946

Father Anton walked along the riverbank with his dog in the quiet evening, praying to God for help in understanding the feelings of anger and futility that had plagued him the last four days. Saying a funeral Mass for one of his parishioners was part of the job, and he knew that saying the words of life everlasting eased the sense of loss for those who believed. Sometimes death was a comfort, a final end to the long-suffering of illness or old age; sometimes it was a surprise, coming too soon and shrouded in sudden tragedy. Sometimes it was massive and unimaginable. Anton was struggling with one more senseless death, on top of all the others that had come to light.

Anton and the rest of the people in his village had at first not believed the news that started to filter out in the Allied-controlled newspapers last summer, describing the liberation of work camps filled with starving people in Germany and Poland and other places overrun by the Third Reich. Then photos of opened mass graves were printed, and the count of the dead kept rising as summer turned to fall and then to winter. Millions of people gone from the earth in a monstrous act of utter insanity. Father Anton still wondered where God had been the last several years, and his faith had faltered. All through the harsh winter, one of the coldest on record, Anton wondered just what the fuck God's plan was. Now that spring had finally come to a land stripped lean by the war, Anton had felt his spirit rising along with the warming breeze, and allowed himself to hope that a reason would be made clear to him and that he would once again find comfort in God's word. And then four days ago he had been called to young Tabbart's home late in the night.

“A queer beating,” the constable had told him privately out of hearing of the grieving parents. “He tried to kiss a boy,” the outraged constable fumed. “Don’t know what he was thinking. He was attacked by persons unknown and left by the side of the road. No one’s saying anything. Nothing more I can do.” The constable snapped his notepad closed and stalked out of the house. Anton knew the constable did not consider the beating of a homosexual a crime, and the thugs would likely never face punishment. Tabbart breathed his last breath and slipped away early the next morning without ever waking.

Anton’s shoulders slumped as his thoughts returned to earlier this day, when he had led a small group of mourners in a Mass of the Angels, asking God’s blessing for the teenager buried today. Anton had been especially aware of young Tabbart, ever since the day the ten-year-old was brought to church by his proud parents to serve as an altar boy for a brand new Father Anton, fresh out of seminary and newly ordained. Tabbart served at every Mass said by Anton and as such held a special place in his heart. A sweet and happy child, Tabbart had grown into a confused and depressed teen. It was only in the confessional that Father Anton learned what bothered Tabbart. He had come to realize that he liked boys and believed he was damned to hell because of it. Anton had counseled Tabbart to accept himself, for who was he to question how God made him? Anton had gently spoken from the heart, echoing the words he had privately told himself through the years. Tabbart had seemed calmer in the weeks following that guilt-ridden confession, and Anton had believed the teen had benefited from the kind words of acceptance and absolution he had granted him. Then Tabbart had been beaten and died.

On this evening after laying Tabbart to rest in the church graveyard, Anton wondered again if he should have strongly counseled Tabbart to not act on his feelings, to harshly condemn him and perhaps save his life by doing so. Now he would never know. He bowed his head and stared down into the churning grey water of the river, rising with snowmelt and close to overrunning its banks. One more senseless death seemed to be pushing Anton over a line, a line he had drawn six years ago when he entered the seminary and had a heartfelt one-sided conversation with God.

Anton wasn't sure how long he had stood in silent contemplation when his dog Duzzi caught his attention. Duzzi snuffled excitedly under the copse of trees by the riverbank, probably searching for hares. Anton pulled the small throw net from his pocket and waited for a hare to come bounding out of the brush, not wanting to miss an opportunity to capture fresh meat. Anton could stretch a single hare to several days' worth of meals. He was so tired of boiled turnips and dried apples from the root cellar, with an occasional fish if he was lucky enough to catch one. Duzzi backed out of the tangle by the trees, dragging something. Anton peered closer and bent down to inspect the dark object Duzzi proudly held in his mouth. A shoe? Thoroughly soaked but in good repair, he noted. Perhaps its mate was in the tangle, too? Good shoes were hard to come by these days, and the Allied occupiers weren't keen on providing such items to the defeated citizenry. Anton pushed his way into the brush, pulling low branches aside as he searched the ground. There! That dark lump resembled a shoe, even covered with a good layer of river mud. Anton grasped it and pulled, and it came loose with a sucking sound.

He sat down hard and stared at a newly uncovered bare foot. The skin was white and wrinkled, not bloated or purpled with decay. Anton lightly sniffed the air and did not detect any scent of rot. He pushed more branches aside, uncovering legs and then the torso of a thin man lying on his belly in the mud and partially submerged in the chill river. Anton reached over and laid a hand on the man's neck, and felt a faint pulse. Not dead yet. Anton didn't wait for the man to wake up, knowing the cold water would probably kill him if he didn't get him warmed up and quickly. He tugged, trying to get him free of the mud and tree limbs but he seemed stuck on something. He reached around and felt the man's sides, moving up to his chest. He found a leather strap looped diagonally across the man's back and tightly knotted to one of the tree branches hanging over the riverbank. The knotted leather was hopelessly swollen. Anton pulled a penknife from his pocket and began to saw at the strap while Duzzi nudged the man's face and licked him. The knife did its job and the leather strap finally came free, and a leather satchel dropped from the strap onto the mud. Anton idly wondered if he had tied himself to the low branch or

if someone else had knotted the leather around the branch and left him to drown when the water level reached the branches.

Anton was relieved the darkening evening provided some cover for moving the man to his nearby parish cottage. He pulled the man up from the mud and for the first time saw the chain linking his wrists. Anton dropped him back in the mud and stepped back, not wanting anything to do with a prisoner. He thought the man was either an escaped Allied prisoner, or perhaps he had escaped from a regular German prison. He couldn't have come from one of those wretched camps; they had all been emptied before winter and the man didn't look as deathly thin as those men had. If he was a prisoner of the Allies, then he might be a war criminal. Anton didn't want to help one of those. Then again the man may have simply been a common criminal in which case Anton thought he should just be returned to jail. He frowned as Duzzi curled up in the mud next to the prone body and placed his furry face on the man's shoulder. Anton sighed. The dog's approval settled the matter. He grabbed the man under his arms and pulled him free of the branches and tangle, then hauled him up and threw him over his shoulder.

He carried him back to his cottage behind the church, thankful that the funeral participants had left hours ago. Anton placed him on the rug in front of the hearth in the old stone kitchen, the warmest place in the old cottage, and turned to put water on to heat. Duzzi trotted in behind him and dropped the leather satchel at his feet, then went back outside. Anton once again lamented the lack of a village doctor, but they hadn't had one since Dr. Stein disappeared five years ago. Anton didn't think the midwife could help the man on his hearth, and decided to simply get him warm and feed him if he woke up. When he heard the man's story, he would decide whether to fetch the constable. He stepped outside to the woodpile on the porch and grabbed an armful of firewood, noticing the chill in the air as night came. His mood lightened somewhat as he realized he didn't want this man's death on his conscience, and he immediately felt better about bringing the man in from the cold riverbank.

Duzzi returned with the shoes and dropped them by the hearth and sat down next to the unconscious man. Anton added wood to the fire and coaxed it into a fine blaze, then set a basin of warm water down and proceeded to wipe away the mud from the prone man's face. As he cleaned away the grime, the man's swollen features emerged. A firm jaw and a once-fine nose, broken numerous times and never set correctly. Raised scars on his face, probably from repeated beatings. Fresh bumps and scrapes from contact with tree limbs and debris in the water. Dark hair. The man looked vaguely familiar, but it was hard to be sure of anything until the swelling went down. His clothes had started to dry in the heat from the fire, and Anton went to retrieve some bedding to make a pallet. The man needed a good soaking in a hot bath, but Anton wasn't trying that until he woke. He checked the man's pulse again and breathed with relief as he noted it was stronger and his skin had pinked up a bit. Anton settled him close to the hearth and turned to survey his available food. Tabbart's family had gifted him with some sausage, and without a hare tonight that would be his dinner. Or rather his and his guest's dinner, he corrected himself as he set to peeling and slicing turnips. His mind continued to work at the niggling thought that he might know the man as he fried the sliced sausage and turnips and stirred potato starch into the drippings. He ladled the last of the milk into the pan and stirred the thickening gravy. He jumped and dropped the spoon when a tired voice croaked, "That smells good, Anton."

CHAPTER 2

Anton turned his head and looked into deep blue eyes and his breath caught. “Karl?” he murmured in disbelief, finally recognizing the face of the man he had loved years before.

“Yes, it’s me.” He coughed and grabbed his side, grimacing in pain. “Where am I?”

Speechless, Anton knelt by the pallet. “What happened?” he finally asked, trying to stay calm as his heart pounded and his gut churned.

“Fucking rocks in the river. Fucking Russians. Fucking Nazis,” gasped Karl, as he attempted to get up. Anton gently eased him into a sitting position and draped the blanket over his thin shoulders, then handed him a mug of hot tea. “Where am I?” he repeated as he glanced at the leather satchel.

“At my church, in Schelekberg. How badly are you hurt?”

“I’ll live.” He shivered and rattled the chain linking the manacles on his wrists. He stared down at them, turning his forearms and inspecting the reddened skin under the metal. “These need to come off.”

Anton held a wrist in his hands and examined the rusting manacle. “I suppose I could try to pick the lock,” he said dubiously.

“No time.” He glanced around the worn room and his eyes landed on the firewood piled by the hearth. “Get your axe,” he urged. “The chain is rusted. If you manage to break it, I can tie the ends out of sight. For both our sakes, no one can see me like this.”

Anton grabbed his axe from the porch and after glancing into the night, came back to the kitchen. His eyes narrowed. “Maybe you should explain first why you’re in chains. I might be setting a murderer free.”

“I didn’t kill anyone!” he hissed. “All I did was love men. This is the first time in six years that I’ve been free. You know what happened to me in Berlin?”

“I heard. You got yourself arrested for depraved acts. You idiot. I warned you not to look for those clubs. You put all of us at risk,” Anton said bitterly. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, willing the harsh feelings back down. “What happened to Otto and Klaus?” he asked with a steady voice.

“Arrested. Sentenced to a work camp and to wear a pink triangle like the rest of us queers. Otto died the first winter. I don’t know what happened to Klaus. He was alive the last time I saw him, but that was five years ago.” He was silent for a few moments as they both remembered their absent friends. “After the first year they moved me to a private estate to assess and catalog items liberated from their former owners. You remember I studied antiquities at University, right?” Karl asked. Anton nodded, and Karl continued. “Paintings, sculptures, jewelry, rare books and maps, and oddities from all the museums they raided from as far away as Africa. They had so much plunder coming in they needed help figuring out what they had. Work was easier at the estate than in the camps so I did what they ordered. When the Russians pushed into Germany they overran the estate and liberated it.” He looked Anton in the eye. “You were the smartest of all of us, going home instead of coming with us to Berlin. No one there ever knew of you and we never told them when they interrogated us, looking for associates. We kept your secret, Anton.”

“The Allies cleared the camps almost a year ago. Why are you still chained?” asked Anton, not feeling particularly grateful. The fools should never have gone to Berlin.

“The Russians didn’t feel obligated to free me, and kept me at the estate to explain the catalog of items they had just taken from the Germans. They don’t trust anyone and they don’t want the other Allies to know what they found, so not many people knew I was there. I was almost finished with the task and the last shipment was due out to Russia in a few days. I don’t think they would have let me live. I had to liberate myself.” He pulled the leather satchel closer and looked intently at Anton. “They’ll come looking for me... with dogs.” He shuddered involuntarily. “Please help me.”

Anton had no argument for that. “Come over here next to the block,” he told him, helping him move into position. He settled the chain across the old chopping block and inspected the links. He took a few practice swings. “Close your eyes,” he ordered, and swung the axe hard. It took three hard swings of the axe to break one link, but that was all that was needed. “I can still try to pick these,” Anton said, almost to himself as he lifted Karl’s manacled wrist. “How long before they come looking for you?”

“Maybe daybreak. Is that food ready yet?” Karl sniffed the air appreciatively. “And do you have a washtub and soap?” he asked hopefully. Anton helped him to stand and pointed to the sink. Karl washed his hands and face while Anton ladled the hot sausage and gravy into bowls.

“Sorry. No bread. No garden vegetables either. Just turnip. It was a long winter.” Anton bowed his head and clasped his hands together, murmuring a prayer of thanks for the food he did have. Karl stopped shoveling food into his mouth until the prayer was finished. His bowl was empty a few moments later. “I hope that sausage doesn’t come back up. There isn’t any more,” Anton remarked as he watched Karl lick gravy from his fingers. “The Russians take most of the food. Sometimes the parishioners bring some to me, sharing what they have. There are still a few dairy cows hidden outside the village, and a few hogs. I can trap hares.”

“Don’t they put money in the collection plate?”

“There hasn’t been money in the collection plate for a long time. Not much to buy with it, anyway. Last week someone left me a few bars of homemade soap and some tea in the collection plate. Not many churchgoers left in the village, I’m afraid. Folks have been leaving, most just before the Russians came.” Anton sighed. “I expect a letter from the Bishop anytime now, closing this little church.” He looked wistfully at the water-stained whitewashed stone walls with the ancient crucifix hanging in silent watch over the kitchen. “I wonder what will happen to these old stones when I leave.” He sighed heavily and his gaze landed on Karl. “You want a bath?” Karl nodded. “This way.”

Anton helped him into an alcove in the cottage and showed him a copper tub plumbed with running water. “Can you manage on your own?” he asked as he opened the tap. Warm water from the cistern splashed into the tub.

“No. Ribs hurt like hell,” Karl answered as he fumbled with the threadbare linen shirt he wore. Anton eased the shirt off Karl’s shoulders and growled when he saw the bruises over his ribs and the scars covering his back. He worked the sleeves over each manacled wrist and tossed the shirt aside. Karl unbuttoned his still-damp muddy trousers and pushed them down his hips, not getting them very far. Anton stepped closer and yanked them down further to peel them off of Karl’s legs. He stepped out of them and stood nude by the tub.

Anton found himself unexpectedly remembering a similar scene. Years ago, he and Karl had spent a cold and rainy afternoon soaking in a steaming tub after getting caught in a fall rainstorm while running across the university campus. They had sat facing each other, Karl straddling Anton’s lap in the small tub intended for just one person. Their kissing and mutual cockstroking had led to their first penetration. The hot water and Anton’s oiled fingers had relaxed Karl’s back entrance so much he had simply sat down straight onto Anton’s thick cock as it jutted above the surface of the water, with just a smear of oil to ease the way. The thunder and sleet beating hard against the windows masked their groans of pleasure as Anton pushed in deeper, inch by inch. Half the water splashed out onto the floor as Karl worked up and down on Anton’s cock and howled his release. The intimate contact between them had been a turning point in their friendship, and afterwards the two had spent what free time they had, for the remainder of the university term, together in bed. They touched and stroked, rubbed warm skin against warm skin, learned each other’s sensitive spots and how to interpret whimpered responses. And they fucked. Jesus, did they fuck.

Anton shook his head to dispel his thoughts of the past. The reminder of what he had given up for the priesthood knocked him breathless, and deepened the sadness he felt.

Karl held onto Anton's strong arm as he gingerly stepped into the tub and settled into the warm water. Anton handed him the soap and a washcloth, then he left and returned with a bucket of steaming water from the stove. He carefully poured it in the tub as Karl pulled his knees up to avoid the hot water, then settled back with an exhausted sigh as the heat worked its way into sore muscles. Anton frowned when he saw Karl's groin through the water, sensing something was off. Without speaking, he stepped back and removed his black long-sleeved cassock. He wore a thin undershirt and wool trousers underneath. Anton scooped water from the tub and poured it over Karl's head, then soaped up his hair. He gently worked his fingers through the grimy dark locks, working the soap close to his scalp. Karl winced.

"Sorry," said Anton as he feathered his fingers over the lumps he had discovered on Karl's head. He poured more water to rinse his hair, then washed Karl's back. Anton felt himself stirring to life as he started on Karl's arms, working the soaped cloth around the manacles. He hadn't had a man in over six years. He leaned across to reach Karl's other arm, and felt Karl's soft breath on his neck. He turned and looked into those deep blue eyes. Karl watched him with half-closed eyes and a slight smile on his lips. "Feeling better?" asked Anton.

"Much. A hot meal, a warm bath, my favorite man's hands on my naked body... and no fucking Nazis or Russians." He eyed Anton speculatively. "Miss me?"

Anton snorted, marveling as Karl's innate exuberance surfaced even as he slumped, exhausted and injured. "Priest, vows of celibacy, debauchery forbidden," he stated succinctly as he pointed to himself. "Don't try to start anything with me," he warned. "That part of my life is over." He stood up. "Soak a while longer. I'll find you some clothes. How well did you cover your tracks?"

Karl closed his eyes. "The dogs would have tracked me to the western road towards Berlin. They would have searched the towns along the road first. But I hid in an eastbound truck and when it stopped on a bridge I dropped into the

river. It was night and no one saw me. I sort of swam to a barge... do you know how hard that is with chained wrists? I managed to climb aboard and hid under a canvas cargo cover. I stayed hidden while it moved south. When I saw the tower at Riverpoint, I slipped overboard and held onto a log and kicked my way to the mouth of the tributary. The current brought me further southwest but it was strong and I got banged up. Fucking rocks. At the bend, I grabbed some tree branches hanging over the water and tied myself there before I got swept downstream. And that's where you found me. Thank you, by the way."

Anton rolled the scenarios through his head, and decided that if the Russians figured out to search the east road, the dogs might find Karl's scent on the bridge, and start looking at towns along the river. If the Russians came this far south with the dogs, they might find him. At his church. It was a stretch, but it was possible. "Would they go to that much trouble to find you?"

Karl pointed to his head. "Yes. For the knowledge in my head... or rather to keep the knowledge from getting out. They'll shoot me, and arrest you for helping me. Or possibly shoot you, too. Sorry."

Anton grimaced and left to find some clothing for him. As he rummaged through his own meager wardrobe, Anton decided to get Karl into the American zone and away from the Russians as soon as possible. But the closest American-controlled territory was in divided Berlin, and Karl had sent the Russians in that direction. Perhaps they could circle around Berlin and enter from the west side. From there, eventually Karl could travel to Frankfurt or Munich. Anton knew people there from the seminary. At least his old lover would be away from the Russians. But first he had to get him out of the Russian zone. Relieved to have a plan, Anton brought some loose sleeping pants and a long sleeved undershirt to Karl.

The chains clanked against the tub as Karl awkwardly washed his leg. "I'll get that," said Anton as he again knelt by the tub. He gently lifted each leg and ran the soapy cloth over bony feet and thin limbs, following Karl's thigh under the water. Anton stopped in confusion. Karl watched him.

"What...?"

Karl exhaled heavily. “Help me up.” Anton put his arms behind Karl’s shoulders and helped him to stand and step from the tub. He looked at the flaccid penis as Karl lifted it. Anton saw thin red scars where testicles should have been. “Nazis cut them off. Thought it would stop me from being a queer. Didn’t work. I still like cock.”

Anton closed his eyes, anger rising to the surface and outweighing sympathy. He breathed through it and opened his eyes when he calmed some. “Jesus!” he blasphemed.

“He wasn’t around when we needed Him,” replied Karl. He bowed his head. “We all could have used a miracle,” he murmured.

Anton silently handed a towel to Karl and left the clothes for him. He turned on his way out. “Get into my bed and rest, I have some arrangements to make,” he ordered, and left.

CHAPTER 3

Anton walked into the uncrowded *bierhaus*, looking for Stanis. He had only a small amount of petrol for his motorbike and needed more. He hoped to talk the Catholic into donating some. He sat at the long common table and surreptitiously looked for any strangers wearing a Russian uniform. As he finished his scan of the room, Ruland sat down across from him.

“Got a letter for you, Father. Came in the post yesterday.” He handed a letter to Anton and swallowed some beer. Anton was puzzled how beer was always available here, when most people were struggling to get enough to eat. “Look at those fools.” Ruland slopped beer onto the table as he gestured with his stein to a table in the corner. “Those three been drinkin’ all afternoon. Said they’re celebratin’,” explained Ruland. Anton murmured something appropriate and examined the postmark on his letter. Ruland kept chatting. “Said they got one put in the ground today, and they know where to find more. You think they’re talkin’ ’bout seed? ’Cause seed is hard to come by this season.”

Anton froze. The hairs rose on the back of his neck and his heart beat so hard he thought Ruland might actually hear it. He looked over at the three drinkers and knew they weren’t discussing seed. None of them were known for any type of hard work... like farming. Anton knew those three were used to getting what they wanted with their fists. They were suspected of burning down Dr. Stein’s place, but no one could prove it. It all clicked into place in Anton’s mind. He was looking at Tabbart’s killers. He thought about getting the constable, then changed his mind. That man wouldn’t lift a finger on behalf of justice for Tabbart. Anton swallowed hard and sat still, pushing his anger away. He focused on his task. Get more petrol. Where the hell was Stanis? “Ruland, where is Stanis tonight?”

“Left town last week. Went to the west.”

Anton slumped. It was common these days to hear of whole families leaving behind farms they had worked for generations, and settling in the west of the country. He quickly ran names through his mind, pondering who else

might have petrol. He sighed and quickly left the *bierhaus* and returned to the cottage behind the church, dropping the letter on the kitchen table and going to check on Karl.

He found Karl resting in bed as ordered. “Not sleepy?” he asked.

“I’m tired as hell. Hurt too much to sleep. Find what you were looking for?”

“In a way.” He glanced at Karl’s wrist, and then reached for a small leather case from a shelf in the armoire and sat on the bed. “I don’t know if this will work...” He pulled the coal oil lamp closer and lifted one of Karl’s manacled wrists, peering closely at the locking mechanism. He opened the case and pulled out several thin metal picks. Inserting one, then another, he turned and twisted them in a methodical pattern. He sat back and rubbed his eyes after ten minutes, and tried again. “This is harder than I thought. I wonder how Horst managed it so easily.”

“Your brother was a scoundrel, that’s how,” answered Karl. “Give it here.” He held out his hand. Anton lifted an eyebrow, then shrugged and handed him the picks. Karl inserted one into the manacle lock. He closed his eyes and softly counted to himself, “One, two... there are two,” he announced. He positioned the pick, then another. “Hold these just like this,” he ordered Anton. Anton complied and Karl picked up a third pick and carefully inserted it. With a gentle push, the lock snicked open and the manacle dropped off Karl’s wrist. They looked at each other and grinned. They had the second manacle off in short order. Karl lay back on the pillow and sighed. “You should throw those things in the river.”

“I have a better use for them,” Anton told him. “Get some rest.”

CHAPTER 4

Anton rose at dawn and went to start tea, wondering what he could feed Karl for breakfast. He found his letter forgotten on the kitchen table. He pulled the letter out of the envelope and a small piece of colored cardboard fell out. He read the letter from the Bishop in Berlin. As expected, he was summoned back to his order for reassignment... it wasn't safe in the east anymore—train ticket enclosed—leave as soon as possible. Anton looked at the train ticket and realized he had another option to help Karl.

Anton packed his belongings in a battered black valise. He dressed in his cassock and roman collar, and set out an older, smaller one from his days as a skinny seminarian for Karl. Today, Karl would be a priest. Anton carefully removed the crucifix from the old stone kitchen and wrapped it in a faded cloth. He set it inside his valise. He would not leave it for vandals. He picked up the manacles and Karl's dirty linen shirt. Leaving the cottage, he walked up the street in the early grey light. He stopped at the intersection and dropped part of the shirt so it lay in the dirt. He casually dragged the shirt as he walked to the house shared by the three thugs he knew had killed Tabbart. The door was unlocked and as expected, they were out cold, snoring off their drunken evening. He dragged the shirt along the floor, into the kitchen and out onto the porch. He looked around and stuffed the shirt and manacles under the porch, out of sight. Satisfied, he walked back to the church and woke up Karl.

"You look better, even with the swelling. If anyone asks, you fell off a horse while traveling to perform a wedding, got it?" Anton asked as he adjusted the roman collar at Karl's neck, then lightly ran his fingers along Karl's chin. Anton felt his trousers getting tight, and was glad he wore the long roomy cassock over them.

"I fucking hate horses. They stink and they bite, and do you *know* how much dung they produce on a daily basis?" complained Karl. "They chained me in the stable every night, you know. The horses got treated better than I did, and I had to clean their stalls."

“Don’t say fuck. You’re a priest now and no one should hear us swear,” Anton smiled, picked up their shared luggage and whistled for Duzzi. He settled them somewhat precariously on the motorbike and after one last look at the old stone church, they took off for the larger town further west. The petrol in the tank would just get them there, where a better selection of departing trains was available. He traded in his first class ticket to Heidelberg for two third class tickets to Frankfurt. There was just enough left over to pay for cargo space for Duzzi and the motorbike, and buy hot oat cakes and tea for breakfast. Their train left on time and they sat on a padded wooden bench in the crowded third class car.

Anton felt Karl tense up as they entered Berlin several hours later. It was a major hub and most trains from the east stopped there. Anton could only pray that the Russians wouldn’t think to search a train for an escaped prisoner on foot. Russian soldiers walked the platform, their very presence intimidating passengers. Anton had his papers ready, and his dead brother Horst’s as well. He rested his arm along Karl’s and he could feel Karl’s thundering heartbeat as he sat calmly on the bench waiting their turn to be scrutinized by the Russian guards. Several families were told to get off, and Anton closed his eyes and prayed. Karl heard him and did the same. They were both whispering a Hail Mary when the guard demanded their identity papers and tickets. The guard took an interminable amount of time inspecting the papers. He gave Horst’s papers back to Karl, and frowned at Anton’s. He hadn’t registered himself with the Russian occupiers and his papers were out of date. Horst had lived in Frankfurt, now in the American zone, and his papers had been in the package of his belongings that was sent to Anton three years ago after his death. Karl didn’t resemble Horst much beyond dark hair and blue eyes, but Karl’s beaten face wouldn’t have resembled his own photo from three years ago, let alone anyone else’s.

“What is the purpose of your travel?” demanded the guard.

“My brother and I are traveling home for our mother’s funeral,” lied Karl. “It was unexpected and we did not have time for new papers.” The guard must have been a Catholic, because he crossed himself and handed the papers back

to Anton. They both held their breath until the guard moved further down the car and finally exited. The entire carload exhaled in relief, and shortly the train started moving again. It traveled down the track and stopped at another station, and this time the guards who boarded spoke English. An American soldier looked at their papers and shook his head.

“Come with me,” he ordered. Anton and Karl retrieved their valise and left the train. They sat in an office while two soldiers argued back and forth. “At least we made it to the American section,” muttered Karl. Anton agreed and smiled nervously. The soldier sat down in front of him and spoke to him in flawless German.

“Do you plan on returning to the east?”

“No. My bishop ordered me to leave, said it’s too dangerous in the east,” replied Anton.

“He’s correct. Catholic priests are being imprisoned farther east and your bishop has requested assistance for any of you who make it this far. This qualifies both of you for emergency identity papers issued by the American occupation authority. You’ll miss your train, but there’s another one leaving every day. I’ll call the local parish so you have a place to spend the night, and Father Horst looks like he needs a doctor.”

Once Duzzi and the motorbike were removed, the train left as scheduled without them. They spent a restful evening with Father Henri, the local priest who cheerfully fed them and asked about conditions in the east. Anton told him and he didn’t smile very much after that. An American military doctor stopped by and examined Karl. He taped up his ribs, ordered him to eat more, treated him for parasites and gave him some pain pills to help him sleep. Anton curled up on the one spare bed they shared and watched him sleep, feeling a sense of rightness that had eluded him lately. He slowly reached over and wrapped his arm around Karl’s waist and pulled him close, then finally drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, an American came by and interviewed them and took new photographs. They had eggs and buttered toast for breakfast and Karl closed

his eyes as he savored the simple meal. Karl rested some more while Anton walked around the neighborhood in deep thought, Duzzi at his side. In the afternoon Father Henri left to attend to church business, leaving Anton and a rested Karl alone in the house.

Karl looked up as Anton walked into the sitting room. He put aside the newspaper he was reading and watched Anton pace across the room. “What’s wrong?”

Anton stared at him. “I’m a bad priest,” he announced.

“So maybe you shouldn’t be one,” replied Karl.

Anton stopped, considering. That was so like Karl, he thought, always able to instantly get to the heart of the matter.

“But you look like you want to talk, so go ahead. I’ll listen. Why are you a bad priest?”

“I anger quickly. I think first of vengeance instead of forgiveness. I don’t want people to burden me with their problems. I don’t want to console someone when what I really want to do is tell them to stop doing stupid things,” he burst out and paced some more. “And you make my cock hard. But that’s supposed to be a bad thing. I don’t think it’s bad. I damn well *need* to feel the love of another human and know someone cares about me that strongly.”

Karl cleared his throat. “I make your cock hard?”

“*That’s* what you got out of all that?”

“Well... yes. Everything you said is normal, especially the bit about telling people they’re stupid. We all feel those things. Why should a priest be any different? But I usually don’t make anyone hard. For what it’s worth, you make my cock hard, too.”

Anton glanced in surprise at Karl’s crotch. “Your cock gets hard... without balls?”

“It helps to have the right inspiration, but yes, my cock can briefly rise to the occasion if needed. With increased stimulation, a castrated man can get an erection and have sex, and even climax. My cum is not what it used to be, though.”

Anton mulled that over in silence, then turned and paced back. “I don’t believe God listens anymore,” he whispered, finally stating his greatest fear out loud for the first time. He stopped next to Karl and frowned. “I need to reconcile this before I go to Heidelberg. I shouldn’t be reassigned to a new church when I feel these things.” He walked to the window and stared out into the street.

Karl considered for a few moments, choosing what words might ease his friend’s agitation. “You’re only human, Anton. Your vocation has put constraints on what is normal for you, and you don’t seem to be getting what you need back to balance that, from God or anyone else. When you figure out what that is, you’ll know what path to take next,” Karl told him. “Just know that I am here for you, my friend,” he added quietly.

They shared another friendly dinner with Father Henri, and after a quiet evening they went to bed. Anton didn’t wait until Karl was asleep. He stripped to his underwear, crawled into bed, and curled himself around Karl. Karl nestled back into Anton’s arms and they stayed that way, just feeling. Anton fell asleep with Karl filling his senses.

The next morning after breakfast, Father Henri pressed a small box of sandwiches and fruit into Anton’s hand and sent them off with a quiet blessing for a safe journey. An American soldier picked them up in a Jeep and brought them back to the train station, then handed them their new papers and two upgraded tickets to Frankfurt. Karl was almost humming with excitement as they waited for their train. They finally boarded, and Duzzi was allowed to stay with them on the floor between their feet. Anton finally let himself relax as the train left Berlin.

Karl leaned on Anton’s shoulder as he dozed, waking only when Anton gently nudged him and gave him his meal. He bit into an apple, juice running

down his chin. “The horse in the stall next to mine used to chew his daily apple while he looked at me over the half-wall between our stalls. Those bits of apple he dropped were the only fresh fruit I ate these last years. He was the only horse I missed when the Russians took them away,” Karl chatted. “Apples are my favorite fruit now.”

Anton smiled warmly. “I’m happy to see you looking back with such cheer. I admire you for that. I don’t believe I could be so... unburdened.”

“The past is over and I can’t relive it differently. I can only decide what I want my life to be, and then do my best to make it so. These years have taught me that life is short and heartbreak is never far away...” Karl exhaled and looked straight into Anton’s eyes. “I want you in my future, and I hope you want that as well,” he said softly. “Just remember that you can always change the path you’re on, if you want to badly enough.”

Karl dozed off again, and Anton found comfort in his warmth as his body rested against his. For the first time since he entered the seminary, Anton wondered what life with Karl would be like, and he was smiling as he fell asleep.

Their train stopped once during the evening at the far western edge of the Russian zone, and the guards barely looked at their new identity papers. Their train arrived uneventfully in Frankfurt early the next morning.

CHAPTER 5

“Just stay here and rest, will you?” argued Anton. “I’ve been ordered to Heidelberg, but there’s no reason you need to go there. My mind will rest easier if I know you are sleeping, eating, and getting your strength back.”

“What if they send you somewhere else right away?” Karl chewed his lip. “I thought of you so often during the last years. Sometimes those memories were the only thing that let me forget the day; and the thought that I might one day see you again let me face the morning. I’m not willing to watch you walk away again.” He shuddered. “The last time you left me, awful things happened,” he said in a haunted voice.

“I promise I’ll return, or at least send word.” Anton’s face softened. “I had memories, too,” he whispered as he brushed his hand along Karl’s cheek. “You’ll be safe here with my friends. Think about what you want to do next. I’ll be back soon. And PLEASE stay out of trouble. Don’t give my brother a bad name.” Anton gently pulled Karl’s hands off his cassock and before he could push him away, Karl leaned forward impulsively and kissed him on the mouth. That kiss shot straight to his cock. Anton glanced around them and breathed with relief when he saw no one else was in the room. He placed his hands on Karl’s shoulders, prepared to ask him to wait for his return. He changed his mind and just nodded good-bye and left. If Karl wanted to move on while he was gone, Anton wouldn’t hold him back.

The train to Heidelberg was tedious and Anton was relieved to finally be in the beautiful city once again, happy the Allies hadn’t bombed it like so many other German cities. He arrived at his order’s regional headquarters in time for evening prayers, and afterwards he retired to his assigned cell for contemplation and sleep.

After a simple breakfast of porridge and tea, Anton met the regional head of his order in the priest’s study. “Good morning, Monsignor Mathias,” he murmured, ever mindful of the quiet grace of the old complex.

“God be with you my son,” replied Father Mathias with a heartfelt grasp on his arm. “I feared we might not see you again. I hope you can spend some time with us. I have always found this to be a healing place. God knows a lot of us need it these days.”

Anton took a seat on the faded sofa and clasped his hands between his knees. “Father, my faith is no longer as strong as it was. I have doubts,” confessed Anton. The Monsignor listened attentively as Anton described his feelings after learning of the death camps, and how he openly wondered now if God was really listening to anyone at all. He ended by talking about Tabbart’s death, and how angry he felt. “I found myself plotting vengeance instead of forgiving them,” he said quietly.

Father Mathias nodded his head occasionally and finally spoke after a period of silence. “Evil sometimes wins, but you must pick yourself up and keep going, because what is the alternative?” He counseled. “And do something good in Tabbart’s memory. I’ve always believed that if every act of evil is met with two acts of good, then evil will never win. And look for God in small things... He is still with us. In time, perhaps your faith will return.”

Anton spent several days in contemplation while enjoying the serenity of the old church. He found he missed Karl fiercely, and to quiet certain images in his head he did what he always had as a boy. He sought out old stones. Proximity to old stones always left him with a feeling of calm acceptance. Anton smiled to himself at his personal quirk, and let his mind wander down paths he had not examined before. He came to a disturbing discovery. Anton realized that when he was younger, he associated that feeling of calmness with a calling to serve God because he always felt it while sitting in the old stone church attending Mass with his family. That sense of peace led him towards the priesthood.

And how many hours had he spent sitting on a pew and silently talking to God about his feelings for Karl? It’s what led him to privately accept his own preference for men, although he was never brave enough to live openly with the man he had loved since his teens. While at university, Anton became a

worse coward than that. He had known Karl wouldn't be contained, and Anton had been frightened by the Nazi's policies and tactics regarding homosexuals. He hid his nature and backed away from his flamboyant lover, claiming a calling to serve God. He knew the forced celibacy of the priesthood would excuse him from ever touching Karl again. Anton suddenly stopped midstride, astounded at the clarity of his revelation. Had he become a priest for all the wrong reasons?

He sat down on a low stone wall and rubbed his hair. Where did he go from here? He knew he could ask permission to leave the priesthood, and this wasn't the first time he had considered it. Was he brave enough to accept Karl's love, and return it? Jesus, they could still get arrested for that in this country. The Allies had validated Nazi prison sentences for queers and were enforcing some of them, although they used regular prisons now instead of the work camps.

Anton met again with Father Mathias, and shared his thoughts. "I can forward your request to be released from your vows to the Vatican, but before you take that last step I have someone I want you to meet," said Father Mathias. "But bear in mind that whatever you decide, you can still perform acts of good... help us start to balance the scales."

Anton believed he could do that... wanted to do that, and the first two acts would be in memory of Tabbart. Anton met with Father Mathias's friend and talked long into the evening. His future path solidified in his mind, and he knew where he was going now. He trembled with new purpose and couldn't wait until he returned to Karl and told him of his plans. He made arrangements to be on the next train back to Frankfurt. Anton felt in his heart that he had been in exile these last several years and was now going home... to Karl.

CHAPTER 6

Kibbutz Chaver, Palestine, Spring 1948

“A new country soon, and we’re part of it.” Karl lifted his glass of imported apple juice in a toast. “And we don’t have to convert unless we want to.”

“Maybe they’ll make you an honorary Jew in recognition of all the kids you brought here for resettlement, if you ask them to, Father Horst,” laughed Anton.

Karl snorted. “No such thing, and I’m as much a priest as you are these days, *ex-Father Anton*.” Karl reached out and grabbed his lover’s hand. He leaned back onto the lounge chair set up on their patio and squinted as he looked at the bright blue sky. “How many times did we take groups of good little ‘Catholic’ kids on trips to the Holy Land?”

“One group about every two months for two years, as long as we kept finding Jewish kids hidden in Catholic orphanages and not claimed by a family member after the war ended. It was good of Father Mathias to suggest it, and I know the old Rabbi he hid during the war masterminded the whole thing. Many acts of good, don’t you think?”

“Yes. Too bad we’ve been made by every border patrol in Europe. I think I need to retire Father Horst. Now aren’t you glad I got another set of identity papers in my real name while you were in Heidelberg searching your soul?”

Anton sighed. “You still had a legally-imposed sentence in Germany that the Allies could have made you serve, you debauched pervert,” he said fondly. “You risked going to jail for I don’t know how many years. I hope you’ve gotten that out of your system. I’d hate to be thrown out of the new State of Israel because you misbehaved spectacularly.”

He squeezed Anton’s hand. “They don’t care what we do in private. And as long as I have Dr. Stein’s testosterone injections and you, I don’t think I’ll want to leave our bedroom often.” He swung their clasped hands. “By the way, did you know the university in Jerusalem will honor my degree in antiquities,

even though the Nazi's nullified it? I can teach there if I want. Or I can make a career of helping all those museums locate items looted by the Germans during the war. Several are offering finder's fees. I still have the lists I took when I escaped, you know. I am eternally grateful your dog rescued my satchel from the mud that day." He gave Duzzi a pat on the head as he snoozed under the chair. "How about you? Any plans for the real ex-priest? Maybe become an apple farmer?" he suggested hopefully.

"Wrong climate," Anton laughed. "Maybe I'll try importing, starting with apples. It'd be a shame to waste all those contacts we established." He looked out at the neat green rows of vegetables thriving in the desert with the aid of an innovative irrigation system, and at the dry bone-colored rock cliffs in the distance. "I can see staying here," he murmured. "Lots of old stones."

THE END

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