

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 9

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Love Has No Boundaries | 3 |
| JACKSON’S LAW by Vanessa North (<i>contemporary/enemies to lovers/in the closet</i>)..... | 6 |
| EPIMELIAD by Adara O’Hare (<i>paranormal/AU/magic users/bonded</i>)..... | 32 |
| DEEP IN THE COUNT by Madison Parker (<i>contemporary/college/cryptology</i>) | 104 |
| FIRE AND WATER by Kate Pavelle (<i>urban fantasy/magic users/sweet no sex</i>) | 166 |
| THE PRICE OF SILENCE by Kate Pavelle (<i>contemporary/PTSD/sweet no sex</i>)..... | 189 |
| TEN YEAR H-ITCH by Pelaam (<i>contemporary/light BDSM/hurt/comfort</i>) | 216 |
| RESISTANCE by Joe Petty (<i>contemporary/light BDSM/hurt/comfort</i>) | 235 |
| IN THE LONELY SEA by Arielle Pierce (<i>historical fantasy/first love/merman</i>)..... | 244 |
| MIDNIGHT MUFFINS by Erica Pike (<i>contemporary/established couples/blue collar</i>) . | 261 |
| CREELING THE BRIDEGROOM by Neil S. Plakcy (<i>contemporary/first time/reunited</i>) | 289 |
| THE MISSING PIECES by Wt Prater (<i>contemporary/hurt/comfort/cliffhanger</i>) | 323 |
| LOST IN THE ECHO by Jack L. Pyke (<i>contemporary/abducted/kidnapping/HFN</i>) | 355 |
| THE MENAGERIE by Ithra Reyes (<i>contemporary/interracial/enemies to lovers</i>)..... | 414 |
| SHOOTING THE CURL by Madeleine Ribbon (<i>contemporary/gay for you/men with children</i>)..... | 432 |
| FOUR SEASONS WITH YOU by May Ridge (<i>contemporary/sweet no sex/friends to lovers</i>) | 473 |
| RADIO LOVE SONG by J. Rocci (<i>contemporary/established couples/sweet no sex</i>)..... | 508 |
| THE BRAT WHISPERER by J.A. Rock (<i>contemporary/BDSM/hurt/comfort/MMMM</i>) . | 529 |
| ROUTINE WATCH by Gina A. Rogers (<i>contemporary/voyeurism/light BDSM/HFN</i>) .. | 596 |
| FROM DON TO DOM by Naaju Rorrete (<i>contemporary/BDSM/hurt/comfort</i>) | 620 |
| Want more? | 710 |

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 9

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 9.

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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JACKSON'S LAW

By Vanessa North

Photo Description

He pulls back his jacket and shirt with one hand, revealing a rock-hard abdomen and hirsute chest. His pink bow-tie hangs to one side, and his pants are undone. A constellation of moles scatters across his body, inviting...

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've always had a thing for moles. Don't know what it is about them, they just do it for me. I've been through a bit of a dry spell, so it kind of grates that my roommate's asshole of a brother is a wet dream come true. Better to stay away and keep to myself—but then this happens, drunk and smirking, this is what he shows me.

Yes, I want him all over me, but this can only end in tears, right?

Sincerely,

Alex

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: enemies to lovers, in the closet, gay chicken, lawyer, mole fetish, piercings

Word count: 8,543

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

JACKSON'S LAW

By Vanessa North

Most guys, when they have the apartment to themselves because their roommate is skiing in Vermont with his girlfriend, would maybe have a date over, and take advantage of being able to fuck in any room of the house. But, no. Elliot was hopelessly single. So here he was on a Friday night playing video games in his boxers, and trying to keep his mind off the bombshell Tyler had dropped before leaving.

“Jackson got a job at a law firm in Boston, so he’s looking for a place nearby. If he stops by while I’m gone, could you please try not to be too much of a dick?”

Jackson. Tyler’s asshole older brother, who just happened to have the body and face of a god. The newly-barred lawyer had thick, black hair and a mole on his cheek. Elliot wasn’t sure what it was about moles, but they did it for him. Big time. And the way Jackson moved, like he owned the fucking world, all swagger and ’tude, it was hot. It made it impossible for Elliot not to imagine him in the bedroom. Of course, Jack had to be straight, and kind of a prick, in that arrogant “I’m gonna be a lawyer someday so all my little brother’s friends can kiss my ass” way. Except now he *was* a lawyer, and he was probably even more insufferable. Elliot wasn’t sure how Tyler and Jack managed to have the same parents. Tyler was cool. Jack was *too cool*, and he knew it. It was like Jack had his own gravity, and everyone was attracted. No matter how hard Elliot tried to be immune, he knew it would be all too easy to fall.

Elliot turned off the television and tossed the game controller on the table. Just thinking about Jackson had given him a semi. That was so fucking wrong; Elliot didn’t even know what to do about his ridiculous crush. He avoided Jackson at all costs. He’d managed to pick up extra shifts whenever Jackson visited, see the guy as little as possible. What was he going to do now that Jackson would be living in town? He and Tyler were close; he’d be over here all the damn time. It was hell being in the same room with the perfect specimen of manhood and not being able to touch.

Elliot reached down and rubbed his dick through his shorts. Mmmm. Nice. He couldn't help but envision Jack down there, teasing him with those full lips and scruffy-stubbed chin. Maybe he'd rub his chin on Elliot's balls and then suck them one at a time into his mouth before going all in for the blowjob. *Yes, please.* The thought pulled a whimper from Elliot's lips and a drop of precome from the tip of his now fully-hard cock. Oh what he wouldn't do to have Jack's lips wrapped around it.

A car horn sounded outside, interrupting Elliot's fantasy. Annoyed, he closed his eyes and tried to ignore it, but it came again, more insistent, longer.

What the fuck, it was almost midnight. Who the fuck would be laying on the horn at this hour?

Elliot looked out the window. A cab had pulled up outside, the driver's door was open and the driver clearly attempting to get someone out of the back seat. He watched as the driver went back to the front and pressed the horn again before returning to his passenger.

Fuck. Elliot grabbed a pair of jeans off the top of the hamper and went to the door. Down one flight of stairs, he found the cab driver hauling a very drunk Jackson to his feet. *Oh, hell.* Even drunk as fuck, Jack looked good. Grey suit, bow tie—did lawyers really think it was cool to wear bow ties? *It is. On Jackson, it totally is.*

“Here, let me.” Elliot came around to Jack's side and wrapped an arm around his waist. Jackson grinned at him.

“Hey Ellie. Tyler said I could come by anytime. S'okay right?”

“This was the address he gave me.” The cab driver shrugged. “I don't know if he's too drunk to find his wallet, but he needs to pay the fare still.”

Are you fucking kidding me? Elliot could see the outline of Jack's wallet in his back pocket. *Really, Jack? Just effing shoot me already.* Taking a deep breath, he put one of Jack's hands on the roof of the cab to steady him, and then slipped his hand into Jack's pocket.

“Don't get fresh, Ellie,” Jack whispered. Startled, Elliot looked into dark brown eyes, which appeared strangely vulnerable. A hint of a smile—or leer—flickered around Jack's lips.

“Just getting your wallet, Jackass. You gotta pay your fare.”

“Such a good friend, Ellie. S’why Tyler loves you so much. Like brothers. But you can’t be brothers with my brother because then you’d be my brother and I already got a brother.”

Elliot bit back a groan. Babysitting a drunk Jackson was pretty much the last thing on earth he wanted to do right now. But he’d promised Tyler he wouldn’t be a dick. He tried not to think about how warm Jack’s skin was, radiating through the fabric of his suit, or how firm his muscles were *right fucking there* as Elliot pulled the wallet from the pocket. He checked the meter and handed the driver enough cash to cover the fare and a pretty big tip. He could be generous with Jack’s money, especially since he’d be stuck with his ass until morning. And not the way he wanted to be.

“Thanks man. Can you get him up the stairs yourself?” The driver glanced up at the door to Elliot and Tyler’s apartment.

“Yeah, I think so. G’night.”

Elliot pulled Jack’s arm back over his shoulder and hefted him toward the stairs.

“I can walk.” Jackson pulled away a bit.

“I’m sure you can, big guy.” Elliot wrapped his arm more firmly around Jack’s waist. “But I don’t want you falling on the steps. You could sue me, it could get ugly.”

“I’m a lawyer,” Jack announced, as if Elliot didn’t know this already.

“I know. Congrats on passing the bar, dude. Too bad you didn’t pass right on by the other kind of bar.” Halfway up the stairs, Elliot had to pause to catch his breath. Jack was fucking heavy, and not bearing much of his own weight.

“Some guys from the firm took me out. I don’t normally.” He gestured at himself. “Fuck, I’m wasted, aren’t I?”

“Yeah man. Four more steps, Jack. Can you make it four more steps?”

“Yeah.”

Thankfully, he did. Elliot helped him through the door and sat him down on the couch.

“Thanks Ellie.”

God, he hated that nickname.

“Why do you call me that?” he snapped.

Jack’s eyes opened, wide and startled. “Because it’s pretty. And you’re”—Jack gestured at Elliot—“pretty. ’Cept dudes aren’t pretty. Handsome. You’re pretty... handsome.”

It should not have made him feel good to be called pretty, but it kind of did. It started out sort of soft and warm in his gut and spread a blush up his chest to his face. God, who would have expected a drunken Jackson handing out compliments? “Um, thanks, but I don’t like the nickname very much.”

“You’re welcome.” Jack looked down at his black wingtips. “I’m really drunk. But I’ll try not to do it again.”

“Yeah. Let me get you a glass of water.” Elliot poured a tall glass from the pitcher in the fridge, grabbing a beer for himself. He’d make sure Jack drank the water before he put him to bed. He popped the cap off his beer and took a swig. Surely the guy couldn’t be that far off from passing out, right?

Returning to the living room, he found Jackson struggling with his shoes. *Good grief, the man’s a mess.* He set the drinks on the coffee table and knelt at Jack’s feet. He slipped off first one shoe, then the other, and set them aside.

“Okay man?” he asked, looking up.

Jackson looked back at him, that same startled, vulnerable look in his eyes as before, when Elliot had fetched his wallet from his pocket in the parking lot. Jackson nodded, and then looked around.

“Where’s Tyler?”

“Vermont. Skiing with Ashley.”

“Oh. So, we’re alone?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, I’m not going to come on to you.” Elliot snorted and moved to sit at the far end of the couch.

“What if I want you to?”

It was bluster... It was bluster... he didn’t mean it... Oh God, did he mean it?

Elliot's gaze locked with Jack's. Jack swallowed, the motion of his Adam's apple the only movement in the room until he stood, smirking.

"Yeah. What if I want you to?" Jack's hands fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, sending one flying across the room as he revealed inch after inch of golden skin covered with hair. He unbuttoned his pants and struck a pose, holding his jacket out of the way with one hand, his other pulling his boxers just low enough to reveal a strip of un-tanned white skin and the dark hair above his cock.

"Do you like what you see, Elliot?"

Oh, damn, do I ever. A glimmer of light caught on the piercing in Jack's left nipple, but even that couldn't draw Elliot's eyes away from the constellation of moles scattered across Jack's chest. He'd died and gone to heaven. Or hell, because this was Jackson, drunk, and still, as far as Elliot knew, straight.

Spellbound and unbelievably turned on, Elliot stared, feeling heat flush up his spine and tingle along his limbs.

"C'mon, Elliot," Jackson taunted. "Come and show me what you like." He shrugged off the jacket and shirt, letting them fall to the floor, and shoved at his pants with both hands. His cock tented the front of his boxers. Straight or not, Jack was aroused. He stepped out of his pants and stepped closer to Elliot, breaking the spell.

God, why the hell did Elliot have to have fucking morals and shit? Yeah, he wanted Jack. Wanted him like a kid wants candy, craving the sweetness of him on his tongue. But not like this. Elliot wasn't about to take advantage of a straight guy looking for a walk on the gay side.

Elliot stood, taking a step closer to Jack. "You're drunk and horny. And not gay."

"Am so." Jack huffed, suddenly belligerent.

"So which? Drunk?" Elliot reached for Jack's arm. "I knew that already, c'mon buddy, let's get you to bed."

"Horny. And gay."

Elliot paused. “Jack, you don’t play gay chicken with gay dudes. That kind of misses the point.”

Jack’s chin just jutted further and he opened his mouth like he was going to protest again.

Oh, to hell with it. Elliot pushed Jack’s hard, mostly-naked body against the wall and went in for the kiss. Jack didn’t seem surprised, splaying his legs wider to catch his balance and running his hands up Elliot’s back. Elliot had expected him to back off, to duck away, but instead, Jack groaned and opened his lips to invite Elliot inside.

Jack tasted like whiskey and Coke, and not nearly enough of it to have him stumbling the way he had been. Elliot drew back, staring. Suddenly, this wasn’t about not taking advantage of Jack, but about protecting his own unguarded heart.

Elliot was adorable, staring wide-eyed, his lips all red and swollen from their kiss, opening and closing in shock like a fish. Jack had always thought Elliot’s lips were perfect, but he had no idea how much so until he saw them after a kiss. Jack had been attracted to Elliot for years, but only recently worked up the nerve to attempt to get close, only to find Elliot pulling a disappearing act every time he came around—if not giving him the cold shoulder altogether.

“Surprise,” Jack whispered. “I—” He swallowed, looking down at where their bodies pressed together. Elliot was in his arms, hot, turned on, *at last*. Moment of truth. “I’m not really drunk. I didn’t think you’d believe me if you thought I was sober. *In vino veritas*, right?”

“You had me fooled about being drunk.” Elliot’s hand ran up and down Jack’s side, fingers tickling as though he were counting the moles. It was nice, comfortable, that caress. “I’m still not convinced you’re gay.”

Fuck. Jack rocked his hips forward, pushing his dick against Elliot’s. “Need more convincing? I could blow you?”

Elliot’s blue eyes got impossibly wider, and then his shoulders started to shake. He was laughing.

“Boy, you really do like to play gay chicken.”

“I’m not playing gay chicken. I want you. I’ve wanted you for a long time. I’m sorry I was kind of a dick to you, but Elliot, I was in law school, it seemed easier to let you think I wasn’t interested than to get involved when I didn’t have time for—”

“For what? Being a decent human being to your brother’s roommate?”

“For a boyfriend.” Jack mumbled, the blush heating his face. *Okay, Jack, way to lay all your cards on the table at once.*

“What makes you think I want a boyfriend, Jackson?” Elliot crowded closer again, kissing Jackson before he could answer. His lips were somehow both firm and soft, gentle and aggressive. Elliot unlocked a need so deep in Jackson, he didn’t know how to respond except in kind. He slanted his lips over Elliot’s, bracketing his face with both hands and taking what he needed.

Elliot pulled back and arched one fine brow, as if waiting for an answer.

“What was the question?”

“What”—Elliot’s hand trailed up Jack’s thigh—“makes you”—gripped his cock and rubbed, *hard*—“think—”

“Right, what makes me think you want a boyfriend? Besides your hand on my... *oh fuck*, that feels good...” And it did. Elliot knew what he was doing with that rubbing hand. Cupping Jack’s balls, rolling them, then easing up his cock with perfect. fucking. pressure. And then it stopped and Elliot took a step back.

“Yeah. Besides that. Because I could do that with a guy who isn’t my boyfriend.”

“You aren’t that kind of guy.” Jack had been paying attention. Elliot was sweet, caring, invested. He knew all the customers at that little coffee shop he worked at, and he always took good care of Tyler. He also hadn’t, in the six months since he and Tyler had graduated and moved into this apartment, had a boyfriend, a fuck buddy, or even a random hookup.

“What kind of guy am I, Jack?”

“The kind who wouldn’t take advantage of his roommate’s drunk brother, even if he was begging for it. The kind who overtips a cab driver, the kind who

maybe—just maybe—wants a little more investment in his sex than just getting off.” Jackson reached a hand around Elliot’s waist, pulled him closer. He rubbed the soft, smooth skin he found at the base of Elliot’s spine, splaying his hand into the dimples there. “I think you’re that kind of guy. Am I right?”

Elliot nodded slowly, his hand coming back to trace over Jack’s chest again. “What makes you think that kind of guy wants to be with a guy who blew him off for two years and then came into his house under false pretenses?”

Jack’s heart sank. Then there was that. “I don’t think that. I just hoped.” He let go of Elliot. “Man, I’m sorry. You’re right. Do you mind if I crash in Tyler’s room?”

Elliot grinned, his blue eyes lighting up with an unholy fire, sending a wave of lust to Jackson’s already-hard cock. “Yeah, I mind.”

Then Elliot grabbed Jackson and kissed him, hard, deep. Hell, he tasted good, perfect. His hand trailed down to Jackson’s cock again, squeezing, rubbing. Jackson groaned, thrusting into that tempting hand. Elliot was absolutely worth waiting two years for.

“Where?” Jackson murmured against Elliot’s lips.

“Bed.” Elliot half-shoved, half-dragged Jackson through a doorway and pushed him down onto the bed.

Jackson grabbed Elliot’s jeans by the belt loops and tugged him down to the bed, the two of them a pile of thrusting, groaning need. Damn, but he got lucky that Elliot was home tonight. “What were you doing before I showed up?”

Elliot laughed. “Jerking off.” He buried his face in the hollow of Jackson’s throat, licking, biting, turning Jackson on, and on, and *on*. The world narrowed down to the wet texture of Elliot’s tongue on his skin, the suction of his lips, the teasing, tense scrape of his teeth.

“God, that’s so hot.”

Elliot looked up, a curious glint in his eyes. “That I was jerking off?”

“Well, yeah, but I meant what you do with your fucking mouth, man.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

There was something beyond exciting about having Jackson spread out on Elliot’s bed in his underwear, coming unglued at Elliot’s touch. *I can’t believe he’s really here.* Elliot skimmed his hands across the smooth expanse of Jack’s chest, tracing the path he’d soon follow with lips, teeth, and tongue. He sat up and looked down at Jackson, whose eyes were closed, his breath coming in rapid pants.

Eight. Eight moles decorated Jack’s chest. Elliot leaned down, pinning Jack’s arms above his head with both hands, and pressed his lips to the largest one. He nipped and nibbled along tanned skin to the next mole, enjoying the throaty growls Jack made. “These are so sexy,” he whispered, and then he counted them again with his lips.

“You have a thing for moles?” A flush spilled across Jack’s chest. “Oh fuck, do that again.”

“Oh yeah. Like braille for my tongue.” Elliot smiled and obeyed, flicking his tongue across Jack’s nipple ring. The noise Jack made was pure sex, something between a groan and a whine, lovely and heavy with need. Elliot took the ring between his teeth and tugged gently.

“Oh, *fuck.*” Jack’s hips pistoned, humping the air between them. “Don’t stop.”

“I have no intention of stopping.” Elliot attacked the moles with his lips again, letting go of Jack’s wrists so he could run his hands all over that perfect chest. Hair... moles... piercing. He gave each one deliberate attention, his own arousal building as Jack squirmed and whined under his hands and mouth. He reached down and tugged at Jack’s boxers, letting his knuckles brush over Jack’s erection.

“Off,” he whispered, and sat back on his heels to watch Jack comply.

As soon as Jack was naked, he turned and reached for Elliot’s jeans, taking the initiative for the first time since he’d bared his chest in the living room. No sooner had Elliot’s boxers and jeans cleared his feet, Jack was pushing *him* down to the bed and kissing, licking, biting everywhere. *Oh, fuck yes. This.*

This was what Elliot wanted. Jack to take control, Jack to make *him* groan and beg.

“Oh, God.” Jack’s voice was hoarse. “Do you have any fucking idea how long I’ve wanted to—” he broke off with a groan, fisting Elliot’s cock in one hand and leaning over to take the tip in his mouth.

Wet heat enveloped Elliot, sending a jolt of liquid desire straight up his spine and tingling along his limbs. He couldn’t help himself, he buried both hands in Jack’s hair and thrust up into his mouth. Jack’s hand around the base of Elliot’s cock kept him from thrusting too deep, and a rumbling hum which might have been a laugh sent Elliot bucking again with need.

“Fuck, Jack...” Elliot trailed off into a whine.

“Mmmm...?”

Oh, hell. Elliot pulled Jack’s hair hard, forcing him to look up. “Do you top?” he asked, breathless with want, and knowing if they were going to do *that* he wanted to save his orgasm as long as possible.

“Whoa, really?” Jack grinned, his expression every bit as excited as a kid’s on Christmas morning. “You’d let me?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Hell, *yes*.” Elliot closed his eyes for a moment as he imagined the feel of Jack’s chest hair brushing along his spine as he fucked into him. The idea was so hot it made him shudder. And then maybe later, they could do it face to face, and Elliot could count the moles again...

“I didn’t think—” Jack broke off with a rough, growly sound and lay down over Elliot, kissing rough and sweet along his jaw before seizing his lips. He pulled away, whispering, “I promise I’ll make it amazing.”

Elliot grinned up at Jack. “I believe you.” It was already amazing, just sprawling out together like this, skin upon skin. “Condoms are in the drawer.” He gestured toward the table next to the bed.

“I’ll get to those in a minute.” Jack growled. “First, roll over.”

God, who knew words could be foreplay? Elliot laughed, feeling light as air as he did what Jack told him.

“On your knees.” Another growl.

“Unnnh,” Elliot groaned as he felt Jack’s hands close on his hips, pulling his ass upward, spreading him open, exposed. He felt Jack’s stubble whisper across one cheek, not hard enough to scratch, just enough to let him know Jack was there, to raise the hairs on his body, to light every nerve ending on fire with need.

And boy, did Jackson deliver. Elliot was so shocked when he felt the tip of Jack’s tongue teasing his hole, he jumped—or he would have, if Jack hadn’t pinned him down with one hand.

“Hold still,” Jack whispered, his breath warm against all of Elliot’s happy places. Jack’s head dipped lower and he sucked one of Elliot’s balls into his mouth.

Elliot tried to hold still, he really did, but how many fucking hands did Jackson have? One reached around to jack him slowly, another teased and tickled and pressed *right fucking there* against Elliot’s taint, massaging his prostate from the outside. Then tongue and fingers slid up together to tease gently against Elliot’s entrance, softening him, opening him.

Elliot heard the drawer sliding open—no fuck, how many hands did the man have, for real? There was a muttered curse right against his ass, and then both hands and mouth disappeared for a moment.

“Don’t move.”

Move? Elliot could barely *breathe*. Had Jackson really tried to grab the condoms with his feet? Suddenly, Elliot was touched, overwhelmed by the idea that Jack had been so eager, so excited to caress *him*, that he had been loathe to take his hands away, even to retrieve the condom. It was clumsy. It was sweet. It was *hot*. And it was funny. Elliot snorted a laugh, the held breath rushing out of him in a chuckle.

Suddenly a condom dropped onto the bed, just *there* in Elliot’s line of sight, and the laugh turned into a moan.

“Something funny, Ellie-ot?” Jack sing-songed, and the lube bottle hit the bed next to the condom.

“Hmmmmmmph.” Elliot half-chuckled, half-groaned into the bed.

“Good, I like it when you laugh.” Jack leaned close over Elliot’s shoulder and kissed him, all clumsy tongue and laughter between them. When he pulled away, his smile was bright enough to light the room. He reached for the lube. “I... um. I don’t have a lot of experience with this.”

Elliot rolled onto one side and grinned up at him. “You’re doing fine. I like that bossy ‘don’t move’ stuff.”

Jack grinned. “Yeah? I like how you like it. You get harder. There is nothing that isn’t hot about that.”

“So do something about it already, Jackass.”

Jack opened the lube bottle. “Get back on your knees.”

Want rushed into Elliot’s belly. Yeah, he totally did get harder too. He rolled back onto his stomach and pushed up onto his knees. A slick fingertip at his hole, a moment of hesitation, then *oh, God*, Jack pressed inside. Elliot groaned again. Jackson leaned close, kissing along Elliot’s spine, over his shoulder.

“So sexy, Elliot.”

The words—the praise—seemed to settle into Elliot’s chest, swollen, warm. Jack worked his finger in and out, stoking that warmth into something hotter, bigger, adding a second finger when Elliot would have begged. A rough hand grabbed his cock, pulling it down and back, and then Jack’s lips closed over the tip. The combination of the rough handling, the discomfort of the angle, the mouth on his cock, and the fingers in his ass catapulted Elliot to a whole new level of arousal.

“*Please.*”

Jackson let Elliot’s cock slide out of his mouth and pulled his fingers back. The condom disappeared from Elliot’s view, a quick crackling noise and then he could feel the press of Jack’s dick at his hole.

One hand steadied his entry, the other rubbed gently along Elliot’s back. He gasped at the burn and sting as Jack stretched him, pushing deeper only when Elliot pressed back against him, his body yielding at last.

“Oh.” Jack’s voice was full of wonder and tension as he slid his hands up Elliot’s back, down his arms to grip his hands, interlacing their fingers. “You

feel so fucking good,” he groaned into Elliot’s ear, the sound hotter than anything Elliot had ever heard. Jack’s hands shook as he began to thrust into Elliot, and the idea that he, Elliot, could turn Jack on so much, brought that rush of warmth back to his belly. It was so much more than sex all of a sudden.

He turned his head to the side, angling for a kiss, and Jack obliged. It was uncoordinated and sloppy, tongues tangling on a groan, and it was all that much sexier for it.

“Fuck me harder,” he demanded, and Jack’s hands fit to Elliot’s hips, holding him in place.

“Jack yourself off.” Jack ordered, and Elliot huffed a laugh as he reached to do exactly as Jack asked. He wanted it to last but when Jackson changed his angle, it sparked a jolt of heat through him.

“Oh, that’s it, isn’t it?” Jack whispered when he saw Elliot let go of his cock to grip the sheets with both hands. He shoved back at the same angle, grinding himself against Elliot’s prostate along the way, and Elliot bit the pillow.

“Now, Elliot, put that hand on your cock and work it until you come all over your sheets.”

The bossy order, the grind, Jack’s hand wrapping Elliot’s fingers around his own dick, it all rushed through Elliot hard and fast, hot and swollen.

“I’m com—oh fuck!” Elliot’s world exploded in pleasure, his eyes slamming shut and his breath wrenched from his body. Arm too wobbly to support himself, he sank down to his elbow as shudders racked his body and his come splashed across the sheets, just like Jack had told him to do.

“Sensitive.” He grunted, not wanting to lose the contact but overwhelmed.

“Fuck.” Jack pulled out, and Elliot felt him move up, over him, shucking the condom as he grunted and then let out a low groan and came all over Elliot’s back. *Marking me.*

Jack rolled Elliot over and collapsed on top of him, two sweaty bodies sliding together, a heady, passionate kiss, fingers tangling in hair, and ragged breathing slowly leveling.

“Shower?” Elliot suggested, his back sticky with come. Jack nodded, his eyes closing. “Yeah. You go first, I’ll change your sheets if you tell me where you keep your clean linens.”

Elliot grinned, oddly charmed. “You don’t have to do that, Jack. We’re just going to mess them up again in a couple hours when you wake up with a hard-on in a strange bed. Throw a towel over the wet spot and I’ll change them tomorrow.”

Jack’s eyes flew open. “Oh, okay. I guess we’ll share that shower then.”

When Jack woke up with a hard-on in a strange bed, he was glad to find Elliot’s body close, warm and hard. He pulled Elliot even closer, rocking his erection against the cleft of Elliot’s ass.

“Mmmm.” An interested sound came from Elliot before he lifted his head from the pillow. “I will so blow you in the morning if you jerk me off while you do that.”

Holy fuck.

“Perv,” Jack teased, grabbing Elliot in one hand and starting a gentle, stroking rhythm.

“You love it.” Elliot groaned, thrusting, the motion of his hips pressing him back against Jack’s cock and then forward into his hand.

Yeah, I do, Ellie. Jack increased the pressure, squeezing a bit and collecting the precome from the tip, sliding it over the shaft as Elliot ground back against him. When Elliot gasped and shuddered, coming in Jack’s hand, the noises he made blew Jack’s mind. He let go of Elliot’s dick, grabbed his hips and pressed his ass cheeks together, increasing the friction as he rutted against Elliot. Heat, rub, tension, the drag of Elliot’s skin on Jack’s cock, and then everything went white there in the dark as his brain tried to process the overwhelming need that racked him a moment before he came.

“Sorry,” he whispered, still shuddering as he moved to kiss Elliot’s neck and wipe ineffectively at his back with the towel.

“I’m not.” Elliot sighed. “Just snuggle close enough so I don’t get cold. Fucking whole bed is a wet spot now.”

A few moments later, Elliot's breathing slowed and evened, and Jack realized he'd fallen back to sleep. Smiling, he gathered Elliot close and chased his own dreams.

He woke with empty arms. So much for the promised blowjob. He looked around, seeing no sign of Elliot anywhere. *Gotta piss.* He crossed the hallway to the bathroom where he and Elliot had showered the night before, reached into the shower and turned it on before turning to the toilet. There, taped to the lid, was a note. Jackson smiled. How very Elliot.

Jack—had to go to work, figured I'd let you get your beauty sleep. We should talk. Come by for a coffee? On me? You can raid my closet if you don't want to walk of shame it. Apartment key is on the kitchen counter. XO, E

The coffee shop was about a half mile from Elliot and Tyler's apartment, so Jackson took Elliot up on the closet-raiding offer. He found a T-shirt which fit pretty well, if a little tightly, and a pair of athletic shorts. He ended up borrowing Tyler's flip-flops though—Elliot's feet were smaller than his, and no way was he wearing his wing tips with shorts.

The morning air was cool as he walked to the coffee shop, mulling over Elliot's note. *We should talk.* Was this where Elliot would give him the "it was fun, let's be friends" speech? He did sign it XO, so there was that... Fuck it. No use worrying about it now. Easier said than done.

The coffee shop where Elliot worked had windows on two sides, and Jack could see Elliot behind the counter as he approached. Elliot was smiling at an older man, gesturing broadly with his hands as he described something. Finally the man nodded and Elliot's smile widened. Jack loved the way Elliot put everyone at ease, it was part of why he enjoyed Elliot's company. Maybe now Jack could turn off his insecurities and the bluster they brought out.

Pushing open the door, Jack waved to Elliot, who grinned back and gestured him over to the counter.

"Hey." Jack smiled.

"You look fucking *hot* in my T-shirt," Elliot whispered, leaning close. Then more loudly, "What would you like?"

Jack looked at the menu, then back at Elliot. “I don’t know, just coffee?”

Elliot studied him for a moment, serious, then nodded. “Just coffee.” Turning away from Jack, Elliot called over his shoulder, “Hey Lisa, I’m taking a break.”

Elliot poured two cups of coffee, and then walked around the counter to hand one over.

“Thanks, Ellie. Elliot.”

Elliot wrinkled his nose at the nickname, but smiled again. “Now that I know you’re not making fun, I don’t mind ‘Ellie’ so much. C’mon, let’s go sit outside.”

Once outside, they sipped their coffee, staring at each other in awkward silence.

“How come I didn’t know you were gay until last night?” Elliot asked finally. “I mean, I never saw you with a guy before, you never mentioned it, and I’ve been living with your brother for two years and *he’s* never mentioned it.”

Oh here it is. Jackson blushed.

“I wasn’t out. I’m still not really out to everyone. I mean, my family knows and my close friends know, but I’m pretty private about my personal life at work and school. Tyler would never have outed me to you without my permission. I know it was probably wrong to let you think—”

“Hey.” Elliot stopped him with a hand over his own. “It’s not wrong. Coming out is personal. I’m glad you finally told me, because now I don’t have to feel bad about my inappropriate straight-guy crush, but you shouldn’t feel bad about not doing it sooner. I’m curious, I mean, you totally knew I’m gay, so why didn’t you?”

“Elliot, I’m not like you. I don’t...” Jackson looked down at his coffee cup. “I don’t have all this self-confidence like you.”

One of Elliot’s eyebrows rose. “Jack, you’re the most confident guy I know. To a fault even. I always thought you were cocky as hell.”

Jack frowned. It would come across that way to someone who didn’t really

know him, wouldn't it? And he wanted Elliot to know him. He looked up, meeting Elliot's gentle gaze.

"Is that what it looks like? It's an act. I bluster because... because if I didn't, people might see me the way I really am."

"What are you scared of? I kind of like you this way. Not calling me names or punching my shoulder, just hanging out and talking. It's nice, Jack. *You're* nice."

"So what did you see in me when I was being cocky? You said you had an inappropriate straight-guy crush?"

"Honestly, it's kind of like gravity." Elliot laughed. "Jackson's Law. You're pretty irresistible. Pissed me right off too."

Jack tried to hold back the smile, the rush of warmth at the compliment. "Jackson's Law." He grinned. "That's gonna make me even more cocky, you know."

"Yeah." Elliot rolled his eyes. "So, your brother and Ashley will be coming home tomorrow. I would like it if you spent the weekend. But, if you don't want this to last past the weekend..."

"I do." Jack took Elliot's hand, trying not to be freaked out about the idea of holding another guy's hand in public. "I want that."

Elliot smiled again. "Okay then. Why don't you come over for dinner tonight around six?"

"Okay." Jackson agreed. "Yeah. I'd like that. Can I bring anything?"

Elliot shook his head. "Just you."

Jack felt warmth filling him from the inside out. He pulled out Elliot's apartment key. "Okay then. Here's your key back. Thanks for letting me sleep in."

A completely evil grin broke out on Elliot's face. "I wanted you to rest up for completely selfish reasons."

Jack laughed. "Well then, you're welcome."

Walking away from the coffee shop, Jack couldn't help but look back over his shoulder to watch Elliot return to work. Could it really be this simple? He

could just be himself, and Elliot would want him? After two years of avoidance, could he really make this work?

Elliot was just wiping down the counters at the end of his shift when his phone rang. He glanced at the display. Ashley?

“Hey Ash, what’s up?”

“Elliot, Tyler had an accident on his snowboard this morning. He broke his leg, we’ve been at the ER all day.”

Fuck. “What the hell? He’s okay though, just a broken leg?”

“He doesn’t have any internal injuries or a concussion or anything, but I wouldn’t say he’s ‘okay’. He’s got a full-leg cast and if he weren’t all doped up on pain killers he’d be ornery as hell.” Ashley sighed. “He’s passed out cold right now.”

Yeah, Elliot could just imagine. Poor Tyler.

“Listen, we’re on our way back to my place, maybe you can bring him some of his stuff. There’s something he needs to talk to you about anyway. And, I’m driving, can you call his mom?”

“Yeah, what time do you want me to come over?”

“We’ll be home around six. Thanks Elliot.”

Well, there went his dinner plans. He called Jackson.

“Hey. Miss me already?” Jack’s voice had a teasing edge to it, playful.

“I hate to do this, but I kind of have to bail on our plans.”

“Oh.” Jackson’s disappointment was palpable, even through the phone line. “Okay, well, we can...”

“Jack, it’s not that I don’t want to cook dinner for you, I totally do. But Ty and Ash are coming home early because Ty broke his leg.”

“Fuck. Why didn’t you tell me that part first?”

“Sorry. It’s weird, you being his brother and my—whatever you are. I’m going over to Ashley’s house to bring him some of his stuff. I gotta go, I gotta call your mom.”

"I'll call her, Ellie. What time are you going over there?"

"Six-ish."

"Okay, I'll probably drop by too. Need to make sure Ty's okay."

"See you there." Okay, that was weird. Elliot hung up the phone. One would think after they'd slept together, Jackson would be a little easier to read, but he was just as puzzling as ever. Elliot hung up his apron and clocked out, unease settling in his chest.

Ashley's apartment was in the same neighborhood as Tyler and Elliot's, a short walk away, but Elliot took the car so he could bring Ty a suitcase full of clothes. As he approached the front door, a twinge of nerves hit, an echo of the unease from earlier that afternoon. The door swung open before Elliot could knock, and Jackson pushed it wide, holding it open for him.

"Hey, Ellie!" Jackson punched his shoulder and grinned jovially in that grotesque parody of affection men used to keep each other at a distance. "C'mon in."

What the actual fuck? Elliot's stomach turned. He tried not to let the hurt show on his face as he pushed past Jack and into Ashley's apartment, dragging the suitcase behind him. A quick glance over his shoulder showed no change to Jack's expression. It was carefully blank and unemotive. "Ash ran out to get Ty's prescriptions filled. He's on the couch."

Well, fuck you too.

"Hey, Ty." He greeted his friend, who was sprawled across the couch with his leg propped on what appeared to be a million cushions. Ashley's cat sat on Ty's chest, flicking her tail and contemplating whatever evil shit cats contemplated.

Tyler looked up and gave him a dopey, if exhausted, grin. "Hey, Elliot. Best fucking weekend of my life. Worth the broken leg. Ash said yes."

Elliot stared, jaw dropping open. Was Tyler really telling him he was getting married? What about their apartment? He'd have to find a new roommate who didn't mind living with a gay-barista-grad-student.

“Um... what?” *Great, real smooth, Elliot.*

“Those two crazy kids are getting married. You know, that thing straight people do?” Jack laughed from the doorway. “Congrats again, Tyler.”

“Yeah, congrats.” Elliot tried to muster some enthusiasm, even though he could clearly read the writing on the wall. And what the fuck was that “straight people” bit supposed to mean?

“So, I have to stay with Ashley until I’m out of the cast and not on crutches anymore. I know we have six months left on the lease, but, since Ash and I are getting married, I thought maybe...” Tyler trailed off, his face flushing, before he found the resolve to ask “Well, would you mind if Jack takes over the rest of my half of the lease? It’s just six months.”

Would he mind? Of course he fucking minded. The guy had fucked him last night and given him pretty words this morning, only to blow him off completely in front of Tyler. Not that Tyler had any way to know about any of that unless Jack had... *Oh fuck, had Jack told him?*

“Well, maybe Jackson and I should discuss it before we make any decisions. I mean, it would be tight trying to swing the rent by myself, but—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ellie.” Jackson came to stand beside him. “I need a place to live, you have a spare room. You know I’m good for the money.”

Elliot whirled to face Jack, all the hurt and anger he felt collecting in two bright red spots on his face. “Maybe I don’t want your fucking money, Jackson. I actually enjoyed living with your brother, so forgive me if I am not thrilled to trade him in for someone like *you!*”

Jackson’s head rolled back as if Elliot had slapped him. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I thought—” He glanced over at his brother, who watched them both with a puzzled expression on his face. “Excuse us, Tyler.”

Jack grabbed Elliot’s arm, *hard*, and dragged him into the hallway.

“That fucking hurts, Jack.” Elliot wrenched his arm away. “Do you think you could possibly get over yourself long enough for me to say goodbye to your brother?”

“Elliot, don’t—”

The front door opened and Ashley walked in on the two of them standing in the hallway, glaring at each other. It took her no time at all to figure out what had happened.

“O-kaaaay. There is a little too much unresolved tension in this hallway.” She brushed past them, knocking Elliot into Jackson, who steadied Elliot with a hand on his shoulder. “I assume Tyler told you our news and didn’t find a tactful way to suggest Jackson take over the lease?”

Elliot nodded. “I’m really happy for you guys, Ashley.”

“Thank you, Elliot.” She smiled. “I’m sorry if the accident and our engagement have put you in a bad place, but if you two need to talk this out, I’d appreciate it if you did it elsewhere. Tyler needs his rest.” She looked pointedly at Jackson’s hand, still on Elliot’s shoulder. “And maybe you should talk about that too.”

Elliot groaned. Ashley saw too much. Always. He turned to look at Jackson again. “Home?”

Jack nodded, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “I drove here.”

“So did I.”

“I’ll follow you then.”

Elliot said his goodbyes to Tyler and Ashley and returned to his car. Living with Jackson? After the hot-and-cold routine today? This could only end badly.

Jack wasn’t sure how he’d fucked up, but clearly he had. He really wasn’t good at any of this relationship shit. When Ty had asked him to take over the lease, he’d been so excited to tell Elliot, but then... what the fuck had happened? They hadn’t had a chance to discuss how they would tell Tyler about their relationship—was it even a relationship? Fuck that word—so he’d just tried to play it like nothing had changed.

Fuck. Law school was easier than navigating an honest-to-god relationship with Elliot. Maybe they should go back to avoiding each other. Again.

He sat in his car for a moment, watching Elliot go up the stairs and into his apartment. When he’d finally collected himself enough he thought he might be

able to speak without dropping the f-bomb, Jackson took the stairs two at a time and paused outside Elliot's door—maybe their door?—his hand raised to knock.

Just as Jack's fist was about to fall against the door, Elliot ripped the door open and grunted "Come in."

Elliot walked into his own apartment, letting the door start to swing closed again. Jack pushed his way through.

"Elliot, would you just stop and tell me what I did wrong so I can apologize, suck your cock or something and move on?"

Elliot whirled around. "You want to live here, Jackson?"

Confused, Jack nodded, but halfway through the nod started shaking his head. "Only if you want me here."

"Good, problem solved, get the fuck out."

Everything awesome about the past twenty-four hours was crumbling into a pile of festering shit faster than Jack could pull it together.

"What the hell happened between this morning and now?" Desperation cracked his voice.

"You really don't know?" Elliot's face scrunched up. "Really? All you ever had to do was be nice, Jack, and I would have been yours. Jackson's Law—fucking irresistible, no matter how obnoxiously he treats me. This morning, I thought maybe you understood that, but no, here I am a punch line in whatever joke you're pulling."

Jack stared at Elliot, trying to recall what exactly he had done when Elliot arrived at Ashley's apartment. "What did I *do*, Elliot? Because, honestly, I would do anything if I could take it back."

Elliot's hands fisted in the air for a minute before he exhaled, the tension leaving his shoulders in one big slump.

"You acted like nothing had changed for you, and everything had changed for me." His voice was quiet, resigned. "I get that you aren't out, but when it's just us and family, I don't want to be a secret."

"Jesus, Elliot, you think nothing has changed for me? I wanted this to be just between us until we had talked about how we were going to tell Tyler."

You aren't a secret. You're special to me, you're *perfect* to me. I just don't know how not to hurt you." Jackson grasped at the only thing he had left—the raw, honest truth. "I want you. I want to be with you. I think living with you would make that wicked convenient, but I don't want to hurt you anymore, so you're going to have to tell me how to make this right."

Elliot moved closer, and the air seemed to grow thick and heavy between them the nearer he came. Tension mounting, Jack wasn't sure if he should reach for Elliot or stand his ground.

In the end, he reached, and Elliot met him half way. His hand curled in the softness of Elliot's hair, and Elliot's hand wrapped around his neck.

"I want..." Elliot whispered. "Promise me this is real. It's not a joke."

Jack nodded. "Never. You are not a joke."

A long desperate moment hung between them, and then Elliot's lips were pressed to Jack's, sliding, seizing, tasting. Jack gripped Elliot tighter, pulling him close enough to feel his growing arousal.

"Want," he growled.

"Your room." Elliot grinned. "I just washed the sheets in mine."

Their clothes hit the floor in the hallway as they pushed into what had been Tyler's room just that morning. *My room*. It felt right, good, to be sharing space with Elliot. Crazy good. Yeah, he'd have "his room" but he doubted he wouldn't be sharing a bed.

When they landed, naked, on the bed, gasping and reaching, Jack pushed his dick into Elliot's hand and groaned into his mouth. Elliot broke the kiss and grinned. "I think I owe you a blow job." He winked, and then slid down Jack's body, licking and nibbling as he went. He sucked a hard kiss over Jack's nipple, tugging the ring and shooting an arc of heat straight to his cock.

"Oh, god, Ellie..."

Eyes squeezed closed, Jack tried to hold back a groan as Elliot's mouth traveled across his chest, plucking a kiss over each of his moles, all the while stroking his cock. "I fucking love your mole fetish."

Elliot laughed against his chest, the sound and the softness of his breath tickling.

And then, without warning, liquid heat engulfed Jackson's cock as Elliot took him in his mouth and introduced him to the meaning of the word "longing."

"Oh, hell." Jack thrust up, against his own will, into Elliot's throat, but Elliot just relaxed the muscles and took him in, squeezing hard around the base of his cock.

And then Elliot's seduction began in earnest, a swivel of his tongue, a hard suck, a fist sliding along Jack's shaft. Heat built furiously fast and sharp, and Jackson found himself biting the heel of his hand to keep from shouting.

Elliot pulled off long enough to take a breath and demand "Give it to me, Jack. Give me your voice, you fucker."

When Elliot's mouth closed around the tip of Jack's cock, Jack's world went dark and bright at once, exploding in an intense fury behind his eyelids.

Elliot stayed with him, sucking, stroking, gently returning him to himself with every soft movement.

"Ellie..." Jack reached for him, wanting to do something, anything, to return the favor.

Elliot smiled, sheepish. "I, um..." He gestured down at his softening cock. "I kind of couldn't help jerking off while I sucked you." He crawled up into the bed, pulling blankets around both of them. "But maybe in a few hours you can wake me up and we can go make use of the condoms in my room."

Jackson smiled. "Yeah. So, this is good, we're good?"

"No, we're fucked. We're going to have to find some way for me to pass my classes and finish my degree with your distracting self in the house. But as long as you don't ever blow me off like that again? Yeah, we're cool."

"I won't, I promise."

"Hey, Jack?" Elliot's voice was hoarse from deep-throating him, and slurred from the post-orgasmic sleepiness.

"Yeah?"

"Best damn game of gay chicken ever."

THE END

Author Bio

Vanessa North was born in New England but moved to the South as a teenager. She reads voraciously, writes obsessively, and takes thousands of photos of the people she loves.

She lives in Northwest Georgia with her husband, twin boy-children, and a very, very large dog.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

EPIMELIAD

By Adara O'Hare

Photo Description

Two young men with brown hair of roughly the same age stare each other in the eyes intently. The slimmer, sweet-looking guy on the left holds the other gently around his ribs. The stockier, protective-looking guy on the right has both hands wrapped around the first's head and neck so his thumbs stroke the other's cheeks in a caress. Something important passes between them in that look.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We met at the academy, aware of the other by name and reputation but never crossing paths until now. In a place for the best of the best, those talented beyond the norm, I daresay we would stand out if only they knew... We immediately sensed a connection, a pull as if a cable stretched taut between us, made stronger by proximity. At first it was fleeting, a shivering sensation that grew over time until our very thoughts and desires were made known to each other. How is this possible? Is it our nightmare or our blessing?

Please help us find our way...

Alt Uni/UST/HEA or HFN (no insta-love, no GFY please)

Sincerely,

Elizabetta

Story Info

Genre: alternate universe, paranormal

Tags: Greek mythology-based, mythical creatures (warrior nymphs), magic users (elemental powers), bonded, masturbation, age gap

Word count: 23,480

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

EPIMELIAD

By Adara O'Hare

CHAPTER ONE – CONNECTION

May knew the instant Cyd arrived. He felt the newcomer's energy radiating toward him, even from behind. May only just managed to suppress the shiver that wanted to crawl down his spine. He kept himself from turning around to meet the stare he *knew* Cyd currently leveled at his back. May felt odd *knowing* he was the sole focus of Cyd's attention, and he felt Cyd's confusion as strong as his own.

Cyd's evaluation of the kid standing before him: way too young to be at this "Academy", no matter the reason Mach had called them together. And for some unknown reason, Cyd could feel the kid's emotions, and they distracted him. Cyd hadn't come to be tempted by some sweet young thing though, so he turned back to Mach.

"Promachus."

Cyd's voice was deep and fluid. That single word struck May like rolling thunder. May locked his elbows and dug his fingernails into the wooden fence rail in front of him, but he couldn't contain the shiver any longer. Or the curiosity.

May and Mach both turned to face Cyd at the same time. Mach didn't recognize the tension between the other two men, but May could tell Cyd did sense the strange connection as well. May had no idea how or why he could sense Cyd's emotions. Cyd *knew*, the same as May did, but it made no sense to either of them.

Cyd's eyes bored holes through the kid, who had a pretty face with pale green eyes framed by short, jet black hair. He was Cyd's type: lean but not devoid of muscle. And Cyd could sense the kid's growing interest in getting to know him and the bond connecting them. Cyd knew he needed to get away from the kid soon.

"Cydnos," Mach replied, inclining his head in greeting.

Cyd turned his intense gaze from May to Mach, offering Mach the slightest of nods in return.

May thought Cyd looked to be in his early twenties, but May *knew* Cyd was much older than he appeared. Cyd was muscular but not bulky. He had veiny arms and tanned skin with short, brown hair. Cyd's piercing, deep brown eyes truly arrested May.

"Cyd, this is Malaeus. May, this is Cyd."

"Why have you sent for me, Mach?"

Mach laughed. "Straight to the point as always, Cyd. Let's gather the others and introduce you all around."

Cyd spun around, finally noticing the other three men—well, two and a young boy—standing further away. Somehow, against his training and better judgment, Cyd had completely tuned out everyone else around him once he'd become aware of the connection to May. Cyd *never* let his guard down in front of others, so it alarmed him a great deal to realize he just had done so in front of virtual strangers. Though Cyd had a passing familiarity with the two men, he knew nothing of the bored-looking boy who didn't seem a day over eleven years old.

Cyd could still feel May behind him, confused by the unnatural pull between them but not fighting against it the way Cyd fought it. Experiencing May's emotions and vague attraction to him caused Cyd strife. He knew such a distraction would get him killed in the field. May, those green eyes, the strange sensations that flowed between them... it was all bad news. Cyd knew he should back out immediately.

"Gentlemen, if you would gather around, please, I'll tell you why you've been asked here."

The other three joined the two already standing with Promachus. Cyd faced his old friend again to tell Mach he couldn't stay, but Cyd really wanted to know why Mach had sent for them all first. Cyd tried to ignore the complication of May's presence beside him. It wasn't easy.

"Thank you for joining me here, in the shadow of Olympus. Introductions first," Mach began. "First up is Kyllini. Call him Kee, not Kyll. He's the

Oread of Mount Kyllini in Corinthia, and he has power over the rocks and ground.”

Kee nodded his head and smiled in acknowledgment. He was extremely short for a male, not even clearing one hundred fifty centimeters. His blond hair, bright blue eyes, and cheery smile gave the term “sunny disposition” a whole new meaning.

“The tall guy beside Kee is Theri, short for Phlegetherios. He is descended of the Kabeiroi and a Lampad of Hecate. He has power over heat. Theri and Kee have been friends and lovers for more than half a century and know each other very well.”

Theri was physically the opposite of Kee in many ways. Where Kee was short, Theri was nearly two hundred centimeters tall. Where Kee was light and sunny, Theri was dark and pensive. May thought his most striking feature was his eyes though; Theri’s light grey eyes saw more than anyone meant for them to. One could see the depth of intelligence in both Theri’s and Kee’s eyes and know they were older than the mid-twenties they appeared to be. May thought the same could be said for Cyd as well.

They were all impressed by Theri’s heritage. Though Cyd had heard of Kee and Theri, he’d had no idea that Theri descended from an underworld deity and an underworld nymph. No one trifled with the Lampades unless they wanted to go mad from glimpsing the light of their torches. Cyd suspected Theri would be most dangerous to tangle with if he chose to pick a fight. Fortunately, the man was more rock-like than his mountain nymph lover. Neither Theri nor Kee riled easily. Theri barely spoke most of the time, and never in anger. Kee spoke enough for both of them.

Anyone who knew Kee’s full name could guess his heritage. The whole of the world knew Mount Kyllini as the birthplace of the Pleiades and Hermes himself. In the short time May had known Kee, May had learned Kee had no qualms with what others might think of him as a short male nymph. May envied him the ability to not care about what others thought.

“The young man beside them is Argesterion—”

“Argo,” the kid interrupted.

“Argo. He is Aurai, with power over wind and air,” Mach finished.

“He is a pipsqueak. Why is he here, Mach?”

Cyd had barely finished speaking before he found himself flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him.

“I can pwn your ass any day of the week, old man.”

“Put a sock in it, Argo, and go help Cyd up,” Mach reprimanded.

Cyd leaned up on his elbows and examined Argo. He was a dark-skinned youth who looked to be around ten or eleven years old. His messy, longish blond hair looked like it needed cutting; he kept having to push it out of his blue-grey eyes. Cyd supposed it made sense for a nymph of breezes to sport a “windswept” look. Argo’s hair contrasted significantly with his skin, giving him a very uncommon and eye-catching appearance. And in Cyd’s opinion, he was too young to be here also.

Argo frowned at Mach and stood over Cyd with his hand extended to help him up. Cyd grabbed the hand and allowed Argo to assist him in standing.

“We shall test that theory sometime, Argo.” Cyd left it at that.

“The young man beside me is Malaeus. He goes by May, not Mal.”

“I’m not evil,” May added.

“That you’re not,” Mach agreed. “May is Epimeliad, with power over plants.”

“Sort of,” May muttered under his breath. Cyd heard him though. Or maybe Cyd sensed May’s shame the same way he had become aware of the kid’s confusion earlier. Cyd tried not to be influenced by the muttered comment and the distress he felt from May, but he found it hard not to be.

“I thought Epimeliades had white hair.” Cyd did not phrase it as a question on purpose.

“I’m not... a full Epimeliad. I don’t... I’ve never... seen my tree,” May responded haltingly.

The shame May felt in announcing something he considered a weakness all but knocked Cyd over again. May was a tree nymph who’d never joined with his own tree, and yet he also wasn’t insane. In all of his years, Cyd had never heard of such a thing. As a general rule, nymphs went mad without regular

transformation into their natural form. To have avoided insanity all his life, May had to be so much stronger than a normal nymph. Yet May had no idea how special he was.

The others said nothing, unsure what to say to such a confession. However, through the newly forged connection May and Cyd now shared, May caught Cyd's sense of amazement and the impression of respect for May. After such an announcement, those emotions from a total stranger confused May. Who would be so impressed with a mortal half-nymph?

After a long silence, Mach finally spoke again.

"This is Cydnos, the Potamoi of the river Cydnus in Turkey. He has power over water."

Cyd nodded and added nothing further to the introduction.

"And finally, I am Promachus, but you may all call me Mach. My mother is Amazon and my father Ares himself, but I am not a demi-god. I am, however, very good with martial arts, swords, and guns. I am here to help train you all."

"For what?" Kee asked.

"Centuries ago, the gods and goddesses locked themselves away on Mount Olympus and left the mortal world to its own end. As a result, very few in the modern world have the power of the immortals any longer. Though satyrs and nymphs are still numerous and widespread within the world, male nymphs of any kind are still relatively rare. Nymphs or mortals of power such as you each possess are one in a billion. Most nymphs also need to stay in regular contact with their home, but each of you has the ability to exist away from your home for extended periods. The five of you have the power to help the mortal world."

"Help it how?"

"However it needs help. Natural disaster recovery efforts, wildfires, diplomacy, immortal intervention. Whatever."

"Why should we?"

"As a wise man once said: 'With great power comes great responsibility.'"

Cyd snorted, “Fictional superheroes aside, you suggest we should because we can, is that it? No, thank you. I have no interest in letting someone else exploit me again.”

“Cyd, this isn’t—”

“Do not tell me it is not the same as what happened in the past. You may be my friend, but you do not know my past, Mach. Who put you up to this?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Then I am not at liberty to stay,” Cyd replied. Cyd would be nobody’s pawn, least of all that of an unknown player. He had been young and naïve once upon a time, centuries ago, and had learned the hard way not to be so trusting of the motives of others. Ever since that first betrayal, that first broken heart, Cyd had been a mercenary—one with standards, perhaps, but a mercenary nonetheless. Life was much simpler that way.

“Cyd. I need you here,” Mach said.

“I trained you. We have fought together side-by-side. There is a lot I would do for you just because it is you who asked it of me, but I will not fight battles for another when I do not know who, or why, or what the stakes are. I have other responsibilities. We all do.”

“I didn’t say anything about battles.”

“You did not need to. One does not gather together a group of elite specialists for much else,” Cyd responded.

“What do I have to do to get you to stay?”

“Tell me for what reason we are here.”

“You’re all here to train your abilities further, to learn from each other, and to become a team. I don’t know any more than that.”

“That is not good enough, Mach. I will not stay and condone being used without knowledge of the reason or at whose hand.”

As Cyd turned to go, May grabbed for Cyd’s hand. The moment they first touched felt like a circuit being completed.

[Don’t leave.]

Hearing May inside his head surprised Cyd so much that he made the mistake of looking into May's eyes. May begged Cyd not to leave with pale green eyes full of innocence and need. Cyd felt May's longing for him to stay tug at him through that infernal connection between them.

Cyd realized then that whether they were being used or not, he would stay because May chose to stay, and because May desperately wanted him to stay also. Cyd knew May was as young and naïve as he himself had once been; May still believed in the inherent goodness of everyone, including whoever had brought them all together for some nebulous—more likely nefarious—reason. Cyd had no doubt the kid had never seen a battle. Cyd's sense of honor—as well as something else he couldn't pinpoint—would not allow him to walk away when May could end up dead. Cyd had to stick around to train May to stay alive.

And the others too, Cyd supposed, though he knew he could more easily walk away from any of them, leaving them to their chosen fates. Even Argo, who was younger than May, didn't tempt Cyd to stay as much as the need to protect May did. As Cyd looked around the group, he saw in their faces the silent requests for him to stay because they knew they would be better for his knowledge and experience.

Mach, however, had the good grace to look a touch guilty. Mach knew Cyd's sense of duty and honor would trap him into helping to train these young men, just as Cyd had trained Mach himself several years before.

Cyd sighed and nodded in resignation. "Fine."

"So, who are you, exactly?" Cyd started.

"I don't understand. What do you mean?" May asked.

May and Cyd entered the one-room cabin assigned to them to get settled in before eating dinner with the others. Argo had a room with Mach, and Kee and Theri stayed together, as usual for them.

May sat on his bed as Cyd closed the door behind them.

"You are not just Epimeliad. No simple nymph can live their entire life outside of their tree, as is your case, without going insane or dying young. In

my five-hundred-and-some-odd years, I have known a lot of nymphs, and you are far stronger than any nymph I have ever heard of. So, that begs the question: who or what exactly are you?"

"I don't..." May trailed off, uncertain of how to react to Cyd's proclamation and surprised by Cyd's age. May had *known* Cyd was older, but he didn't look even remotely close to five hundred years old.

"How do you not know where your tree is?"

May flashed back momentarily to the torment of his childhood—to the father who had refused to acknowledge him and the sisters who teased and bullied him because he had no tree as they did. Cyd, whom May barely knew, had just asked May the most painful question he could have possibly asked.

"Why's it matter?" May mumbled.

"You asked me to stay to train you, kid. I did. This is part of the price."

Cyd felt as well as saw May flinch. Cyd hated to be so brutally intrusive on what seemed to be a difficult subject for May, but he needed to know what the kid was capable of, and that meant knowing more about May himself.

"Mother is Hamameliad; she can't leave her tree. She... mated with a Dionysian satyr and had my sisters, all with the beautiful white hair you mentioned they should have. But he wanted a son, even knowing not many nymph males are born. When I was born with jet black hair, he figured I must not be his son. He stole my seed from her and threw it away, hoping to kill both my tree and me. I live, so we assume my tree does too, but that's why I've never seen it. I don't have any idea where to search. He and my sisters have shunned me all my life, he because I'm not his son, and they because I have no tree and therefore I'm not full Epimeliad."

"You are better than they are. You have lived your entire life without your tree and you are sane enough to speak of it. They could not boast the same, I guarantee it."

"You're a fool. I'm nothing without my tree. I'm not nymph. I'm not mortal. I'm a half-breed. I'm..."

At that, May shut down, the pain too much to speak through. Cyd had no idea how he should react. He rubbed where May's pain echoed in his own chest. Cyd had been a warrior and alone for too long. He didn't do comfort.

“You are here, at this academy, or whatever this place is. Someone thinks very highly of you and your ability, May.”

May shrugged noncommittally.

“Nymphs generally do not have any special power beyond the ability to join with their natural form. But you, you have more than that, perhaps much more. That is why you are here.” Cyd squatted in front of May, hesitant to touch him and increase the connection between them further. “How old are you, May?”

“Twenty.”

Cyd couldn't help but think May was too young. Cyd tried not to let his uneasiness show, but May could feel it through their bond. Cyd's balking at his age upset May further. Cyd tried changing tack.

“Who is your sire, May?”

“I don't know. Mother wouldn't tell me.”

“Did she tell you why not?”

“Only that I'd learn the truth when it was time for me to know. She wouldn't tell the satyr either. He's still vexed with her over that.”

Cyd grumbled since May did not have much to go on. His sire could be anyone, and guessing would be pointless.

“Okay. Those were the easy questions.” May gazed at Cyd, upset and perplexed, wondering what harder questions Cyd had to ask. “What is the connection between us? Why does such exist when we have never before met?”

“So you feel it, too?”

“You know I do, and I do not like it. Being tethered to you like this disturbs me. Your emotional turmoil distracts me from where my focus should be. We are going to have to figure out how to get this connection under control or neither one of us is going to be fit to do anything, regardless of what abilities we have.”

May recoiled as though he'd been slapped. “I'm sorry,” he whispered.

Cyd sighed in frustration. May did not do well with Cyd's typical blunt honest approach.

“No, I am sorry. I did not mean to be rude. I do not think this is your fault, May. I do not blame you. But, in all my years, I have never felt anything like this before and I do not know how to handle it. It really is distracting, and to a warrior, distraction means death.”

May eased some with the apology, but Cyd could still feel his hurt.

“You’re a warrior?”

“I have fought in wars that ran longer than you have been alive.”

May looked away. He didn’t like the reminders that Cyd was so much older than he. Why that mattered, May didn’t know. It made him feel *wrong*.

“Ask the Moirai.”

“What?”

“You asked me why there’s a bond between us. I don’t know. Ask the Fates.”

“Not much good that would do. You cannot get a straight answer out of them if you can even get to them to ask the question.”

“That’s the best answer I’ve got. I don’t know why. I’ve never felt anything like this before either. I didn’t think it was so bad, but obviously—”

“I do,” Cyd finished.

May nodded, still not looking at Cyd.

“We will find a way to make it work.”

CHAPTER TWO – THE ACADEMY

Making it work involved touching each other as little as possible. A quick touch would strengthen the connection to the point of hearing each other's thoughts and often cause both Cyd and May to lose focus on whatever they were doing. For teaching hand-to-hand combat, Cyd found it simpler and more expedient to have May practice directly with Argo, who also had little hand-to-hand experience. When he did have to show them something, Cyd demonstrated with Mach or Argo as much as possible unless May had issues with a particular move.

When Cyd did touch him, May did his best to focus on the task at hand and not on the live wire that opened their thoughts to one another. Sometimes May managed to keep his focus, and they could work reasonably well together. But once in a while, May couldn't keep his thoughts from drifting toward how pleasurable it felt to be pinned beneath Cyd.

The time when Cyd had mounted May from behind to help him work on an escape, Cyd had leapt up like his ass was on fire and had walked away from their makeshift training ring while cursing under his breath. Though walking away dampened the intensity of their connection, it didn't keep May from being affected by how horny Cyd had become as a result of experiencing May's desire. Knowing he had aroused Cyd had incited May even further. Ultimately, they both had to call off further training that day. Cyd had gone to a nearby stream to "cool off", Argo had been whiny for the rest of the day because Cyd had stopped for no good reason, and May hadn't been able to stop blushing until he'd locked himself in his room and taken himself in hand. Of course, taking one look at Cyd later that night brought May's blush back full force. Cyd politely ignored the blush and, by unspoken agreement, they never mentioned the undercurrent running between them.

Being several decades more experienced, Kee and Theri already had basic combat training, so Cyd and Mach were more hands-on with them when showing hits, holds, take-downs, escapes, and marksmanship. Kee and Theri would repeatedly fight each other to a standstill, neither having gained the upper hand. They also began using different weapons to increase the difficulty of their matches: swords and shields, batons, throwing knives and stars. Their

battles were impressive to watch. The more difficult maneuvers they pulled off fascinated Argo. May looked—and felt, if Cyd acknowledged their connection—more than a bit uneasy with the intensity of their bouts.

All four were good students and quick studies, picking up the moves and incorporating them in practice matches. Every day they got a bit better. However, increasing the breadth and depth of their special abilities was more difficult. Kee and Theri knew each other well enough for each to push the other. They also wanted to see if they could combine their abilities into something new, so they spent most of their time together while Mach offered advice and suggestions. Much to Cyd's annoyance, Argo mostly sat off to the side, looking bored while he watched everyone else learning to further control their elements. That left Cyd to work directly with May on gaining more control over plants.

Only May did not have an easy time of using or increasing his ability. So far, May had not been able to do anything more than cause vines to grow and curl as he directed them. Cyd would have thought May was Kissiae instead of Epimeliad since his only power seemed to be over the ivy vines.

Cyd explained to May how it felt for his body to turn to water and how he thought through the process of his physical change. After a couple of days, May still had not been able to achieve anything more than opening a few flower blossoms. Cyd eventually had May hold on to his hand to see if May could feel Cyd drawing on his power through their connection. Though May could feel it, he still couldn't force his own change or channel his power into any other ability.

May began to despair of ever being useful as a nymph, much less to the purpose of this special team of theirs. Cyd became angry and frustrated instead, and decided to have it out with Mach. He pulled Mach away from the others and started hissing violently.

“By all that is divine, *why* is he here, Mach? I have done everything I can think of, and more than you know, to help this kid grow. I know he is stronger than this; he has to be. But he is useless like this. I cannot get around this block he has.”

“He's here because he's meant to be here, Cyd. The same as the rest of you.”

“And if he ends up dead because he cannot properly take care of himself...?”

“He has you to defend him,” Mach replied with neither a trace of amusement at Cyd’s expense nor any sarcasm.

“Mach. He has to be able to stand on his own, not rely on—”

“You’re frustrated. You need to blow off some steam.” The abrupt change in direction of the conversation took Cyd by surprise. Mach turned toward the group and yelled, “Play time, Argo.”

Cyd arched an eyebrow at Mach, but Mach didn’t notice. Argo bounced up off the ground.

“Yeah? Who?”

Mach returned his gaze to Cyd. Cyd turned to look at Argo. The boy’s grin settled into a slightly malicious expression.

“Oh yeah, I’m a enjoy this. Show me whatcha got, old man.”

Cyd turned back to Mach, incredulity lacing his voice.

“Really, Mach? You want me to fight the pipsqueak right now?”

“All you have to do is touch him. Lay a single finger on him, and you’re done.”

Cyd pursed his lips until a crease appeared in his brow.

“I do not see how this is going to—”

“You have to train, too, Cyd. So now it’s time to stop being the teacher and be the student for a while. Go catch Argo.”

The note of command in Mach’s voice caught Cyd by surprise. Several years past, Cyd had trained Mach; that was how they knew each other and why Cyd and Mach had the level of comfort with each other they did. But at this academy Mach was the trainer, and Mach had just given Cyd an order.

Cyd hesitated. He had not used his power to fight someone else or let anyone he fought with see the extent of his abilities since that first time. Not even Mach knew the full extent. Cyd had kept that part of himself hidden so as not to be exploited again. And now someone, a complete unknown who knew all about Cyd and the others, had brought him—them—there expressly for that

purpose: to use, refine, and augment those powers. Cyd didn't know if he could trust that unknown entity not to take advantage of him, or if he could let himself trust the others. Most of all, Cyd didn't know if he could trust himself to be what they needed.

"Cyd."

Cyd refocused his eyes on Mach. May had noted Cyd's anxiety through their connection. Cyd felt May's concern for him bloom. But Mach knew Cyd well enough without any sort of connection to know something had seized him. Mach had stepped in to rescue Cyd from his doubts without the others catching on. Mach had no doubts.

Cyd trusted Mach, and he trusted Mach's judgment. Decision made, Cyd nodded ever so slightly to Mach in thanks.

Cyd began walking toward Argo. After he'd crossed half the distance between them, he felt the wind pick up. In another few meters, the strong headwind kept Cyd from moving forward at all; it pushed him back with each step he attempted to take. Argo stood a few meters away, looking bored and insolent, not even breaking a sweat.

Cyd waited for Argo to truly become bored. Sure enough, after several minutes where Cyd made no attempt to move forward, Argo changed tactics. As he had done on the day they met, Argo pushed Cyd's feet one direction and his shoulders the other, hoping to catch Cyd off guard and push him into the dirt again. Expecting it, Cyd somersaulted forward with the wind, quickly reaching the space where Argo had stood. Only Argo wasn't there any longer. His clothes lay on the ground, but Argo had disappeared.

"He vanished into thin air," May said as he turned around and around to see if he could spot Argo.

"Quite literally," Mach replied.

A breeze swept past Cyd's face as he pondered how to catch the wind. Argo sought to taunt Cyd, but instead it gave Cyd an idea. A moment later, Cyd vanished as well, his clothes forming another pile on the ground.

"Okay, that's impressive," Kee noted.

"How'd he do that? He's not Aurai," May wondered.

“Vapor,” Theri answered.

“Or fog, perhaps,” Kee added.

May had sensed Cyd’s reticence to follow Mach’s order, though May had no idea why Cyd should be so concerned when he could pull off feats like that. May could barely feel him now, but their connection still tingled through his body, if only just. It comforted May to know he could still feel Cyd even though Cyd wasn’t visible. May only wished he could get Cyd to stop resisting their bond.

Suddenly, a rush of air formed a whirlwind right before their eyes. Dark clouds twisted angrily as if a cartoon Tasmanian Devil had spun into view. Eventually the small tornado began to slow and solidify into more recognizable shapes. When they came to a stop, Argo knelt on the ground, Cyd’s arms wrapped tightly around his chest to keep him from moving. Both panted heavily from the exertion.

Mach began clapping avidly. “I had no idea. That was spectacular, guys.” He looked them both over, but spent more time on Cyd’s naked form, which irked May. “How do you feel?”

After a moment to catch his breath, Cyd released his hold on Argo and stood up. He swayed ever so slightly before walking over to his clothes. May noticed the impressive cut of Cyd’s naked body before he knelt down to rifle through the pile. May’s overt interest in Cyd charged through their bond, followed shortly thereafter by Cyd’s irritation.

May thought Cyd intended to dress even though nymphs commonly accepted nudity amongst themselves, but instead he fished a vial hanging from a cord out of the pile, unstopped it, and guzzled the contents. Only then did he begin to dress.

“I will need to go home tonight,” Cyd replied. May’s surprise and disappointment shot through Cyd. May thought Cyd wanted to leave to escape his interest and their connection. Though those ideas appealed to Cyd, the truth was Cyd needed to heal. Cyd’s nakedness had distracted May and kept him from noticing Cyd’s fatigue, as well as other, more personal demons Cyd would rather remain hidden.

“Of course,” Mach agreed. “Argo, what did you learn?”

“Grandpa’s got some sick skills.”

Cyd snorted in amusement at the pipsqueak’s choice of words. Argo was a very modern youth for a nymph. The dichotomy interested Cyd. Most nymphs persisted in the old ways because they were over a couple of millennia old; rarely did nymphs die, therefore the world and the old gods seldom bore new nymphs any longer. Cyd and Kee were both exceptional in that respect: each had taken over his duties from a predecessor who had gone to the Underworld for some reason.

“I’m sure ‘grandpa’ is thrilled with your appreciation, but what did you learn?” Mach repeated.

“Being incorporeal doesn’t mean I can’t be caught.”

“Or necessarily give you an advantage, either, that’s right. Cyd, would you please explain how you caught Argo?”

“He has a tell,” Cyd smirked as he glanced at Argo.

“Scuse me?”

“A tell, or something I could use to find you. You are a nymph of the breeze. You cannot exist for long as still air; it is not in your nature. When I realized I could locate you by the breeze, I spread myself thin, tall, and wide. You had to pass through me eventually, and when you did, I would not let you go. The tornado was a nice touch, but I have dealt with waterspouts and whirlpools in the past. That is why you did not shake me as you thought you would. The tornado actually helped me in that it centralized your body to where I could encompass you completely and force you back into solid form.”

Argo nodded, absorbing the information.

“And you, Cyd? What did you learn?” Mach asked.

Cyd pondered Argo, who continued to frown in deep thought, and replied, “The pipsqueak is not as useless as he looks and acts. He can contribute something to this group if he wants to.”

Argo started to protest but Mach cut him off. “And...,” Mach prompted.

“And the contribution one can make might not be initially apparent. It is best not to judge prematurely.”

Mach nodded, seemingly satisfied. They both knew they were speaking of May, not Argo.

May did not catch their drift though. Cyd's desire for imminent departure dismayed May, who thought it to be his fault. May's distraction proved Cyd's point about the disastrous consequences of their connection, in fact.

"And I forgot how well you knew me," Cyd added with a quirk of his lips.

At that, Mach actually smiled in return. Cyd had paid him a very high compliment indeed.

The unexpected spike of May's jealousy resonated through the connection. Cyd needed to get away from the kid before things got truly out of hand. He knew dealing with May's hurt would be infinitely worse.

After Cyd had left them that night to return home, May sat alone at one of the lodge tables, picking at his food. May couldn't feel Cyd any longer. He guessed Cyd was too far away for the bond to work. The emptiness where the connection used to exist troubled May. He had quickly become accustomed to their bond and detested its absence. May didn't feel complete now without Cyd around.

May began to think Cyd might be right about their bond being a curse, not a blessing. He wanted to believe Cyd's absence could be a good thing because now they had an opportunity to return to normal, but he didn't feel well at all. He certainly didn't feel like he had returned to "normal".

Mach watched May stew for several minutes before he decided to intervene.

"Care to talk about it, May?"

May shrugged and continued stirring potatoes and apples with his fork.

"What's on your mind?" Mach tried again.

"Why can't I progress?"

May truly wanted to know why Cyd refused to accept their bond, but he and Cyd had agreed not to share their unique situation with the others yet. Cyd hoped that maybe the connection would go away or they could learn to control

it instead of it controlling them, and therefore they wouldn't need to share its existence with the others at all. May only wanted to make Cyd happy, so since Cyd didn't trust the others with such "delicate information", May didn't share.

"I don't know the answer for certain, but I suspect it's because you've never touched your tree. It's your body's way of preventing you from hurting yourself."

"I don't understand."

"Right. Erm, this explanation might be better coming from Kee, since I've never felt it myself."

Mach caught Kee's attention and waved him over. Kee excused himself from the other conversation and slid onto the bench beside May, swinging his feet beneath him because they didn't reach the ground. May often found it hard to remember Kee was a few years older than Mach. Kee looked like a young kid as he swung his legs that way, though May knew him to be in his sixties.

"What's up, Teach?" Kee smiled at Mach.

"Would you please tell May what it's like to be separated from your home and overextend your power?"

"Oh! Sure. I never thought about you not knowing what it feels like. Um, where to start though?" Kee pondered for a few moments, "Being home is sort of like recharging your battery when you're low on energy. Using your power too much will drain you, potentially to the point it could kill you. It'll make you really sick and unable to move. Drawing on your element will help for small bursts of power, but you have to return to your true home for real healing to occur."

"Then that's why Cyd left?"

"Uh huh," Kee nodded. "You saw him drink from the bottle he carries around his neck, right? That was water from his river. It kept him from falling over comatose, but he expended a lot more power than he usually does, so he needed more to heal. He'll be back tomorrow."

"So soon? But Turkey is well over a thousand kilometers from here."

“He travels by water. He takes the stream to the river to the Aegean Sea, and swims back to his own river that way. And he travels faster than any of us would by car or boat. He won’t need to heal for long before he’ll be on his way back here.”

The tightness in May’s chest eased, though the worry remained. May didn’t understand why he cared so much about Cyd when he barely knew the man. The bond had confused things between them considerably. If it had never existed, May knew he wouldn’t have had such feelings for Cyd so soon. But just because May knew he wouldn’t have felt that way under other circumstances didn’t mean he could just pretend it hadn’t happened the way it did. He felt how he felt, and that’s what he had to deal with.

“Are you worried, May? He’ll be fine. He knows how to take care of himself.”

The thought comforted May, and yet it didn’t. May knew he wouldn’t feel whole until Cyd stood in front of him again, their bond restored.

“So, Cyd has to travel back to the Cydnus River. Does that mean you have to go back to Mount Kyllini?”

“No, it’s not the same for me and Theri. We keep a piece of our home with us, the same as Cyd does.” Kee pulled a stone medallion on a cord out from under his shirt. “When I need to recharge, I pull the energy straight from my mountain via this medallion, so I don’t need to travel there. It’s the same for Theri, who keeps a medallion of volcanic glass with him. Argo only has to turn into a breeze again to recharge, the lucky sod.”

“You’re the sod,” Argo called over from the other table. “I’m the air. Get it right.”

Kee rolled his eyes at Argo’s bad joke.

“Anyway, Cyd being a river-god, he has to keep his river with him, like we do, but he ingests the water to draw its energy, which means he has to go replenish his supply whenever he uses a lot of power, like he did today.”

May nodded his understanding but said nothing further. Kee realized May didn’t want to talk any longer and gave him an empathetic look before he went back to the other table.

“May, you will find your tree one day. Have faith, okay?” Mach smiled gently and patted May’s hand before he left May alone with his thoughts.

May didn’t feel up to socializing, so he turned in early for the night. The empty room didn’t help May’s mood either. He missed Cyd. He missed his bond with Cyd a lot.

May thought back through all of his interactions with Cyd, from the moment their bond snapped into place. The whole sequence felt so right to him—meant to be—but Cyd always fought against it in every interaction, as though May was a leper to be avoided. May wondered what it would feel like for Cyd to stop fighting it just once, to let it happen and feel what May felt.

And though he knew he shouldn’t, May let himself drown in Cyd’s fictional acceptance, just for the one night while Cyd wasn’t there and couldn’t complain about experiencing May’s emotions. May remembered his desire and Cyd’s arousal, only instead of Cyd walking away and shutting it down, May imagined Cyd feeding his own desire back to May through their bond. May’s erection stood tall and leaking as he imagined Cyd stripping them of clothing and then jacking May with one hand as he pulled May’s hair with the other, exposing his throat.

With a sharp cry, May came all over his chest. He settled in to sleep, trying to ignore the hollowness he felt in the wake of false happiness.

May woke up as Cyd entered their cabin the next morning. Energized by the mere sight of him and thrilled by the return of their bond, May hopped out of bed and threw himself at Cyd.

“You’re back! Thank the gods and goddesses. Last night was awful without you.”

Cyd awkwardly hugged May in return, and though Cyd wouldn’t say it, May felt his relief at the restoration of their bond as well. Cyd took a step back and looked at May, and then looked away hurriedly.

“You seem to be in need of a shower.”

May glanced down to his morning erection and the dried come flaking off his chest and turned red with embarrassment. Cyd felt May’s mortification as

May ran into the bathroom and closed the door. Only slightly fazed, Cyd set down May's breakfast and left quickly.

When May opened the bathroom door fifteen minutes later, Cyd was gone. May breathed a sigh of relief. He wanted more time to think. May had felt *something* from Cyd when Cyd had noted the remains of the night's activities. Cyd's feeling of unsettlement had replaced one of... *interest*. It hadn't been outright desire, but Cyd had definitely expressed a spark of interest after noting May's indecent state. May bit his lip to keep from smiling, but his eyes lit up and his elation radiated through their bond. He soon felt Cyd's answering confusion over May's suddenly chipper mood.

As May went to put on a T-shirt, he noticed a red apple sitting on the dresser. Beside it rested a brief note that read, "For you".

May smiled and bit into the apple and then moaned with its sweetness. Its flesh was crisp and juicy. May savored the juice and licked his lips after each bite, trying to keep the nectar on his tongue. He nibbled every bit of flesh he possibly could and would have given anything for more. Never before had May tasted any apple so delicious.

May saved the seeds and took them with him. Around the side of the compound, a little ways away from their small garden, May dug five small holes and planted and watered the seeds. May thought that maybe, if he did ever get his powers to work, he might be able to help those seeds grow. He *really* wanted more of those apples.

CHAPTER THREE – POWERS AND PENALTIES

After giving Cyd a couple of days to rest, Mach called the group together again for another exercise.

“I like the idea Kee and Theri have been working on to combine their powers together. They’ve had some success with it, so I want the four of you to work on it some more today. Kee and Cyd versus Argo and Theri.”

Mach produced a matchstick from his back pocket.

“The goal for Argo and Theri is to work together to light this match. Kee and Cyd want to keep it from being lit. Ground rules: No one goes incorporeal.” Cyd looked at Argo while saying this. Argo rolled his eyes. “No one can touch the match with their hands. Powers only. And no one can go to the match. But you can bring the match to you. All agreed?”

The four of them nodded their heads. Cyd moved outside the dirt arena and May sat down in the grass to watch.

“Okay, go.”

Kee raised some fist-sized rocks around the match to keep it from being pushed by the gust of wind Argo sent toward it.

“Dirt and water makes mud. And that helps us,” Kee said.

Cyd pulled some water up from the water table, soaking the match to keep it from igniting. Then the two of them worked together to break up the ground and saturate the chunks until they were malleable enough to mash together into mud. As they worked Kee quickly explained his thinking.

“Theri doesn’t have very good point control over heat unless he’s touching whatever it is, so that rule works in our favor. If we can keep the match coated in mud, he’ll have a harder time igniting it until he can get it closer to him and dry it out.”

Theri glared at Kee. Kee stuck his tongue out at Theri in good humor and then grinned like a maniac.

Since the mud made things more difficult for Argo and Theri, they discussed their strategy also. They had tried to set some old wood on fire and

then push the lit kindling toward the match, but by the time Argo built up enough force to push the wood, the wind was so strong it smothered the flames. Argo then tried creating a small whirlwind to dig the match out from the rocks and mud, but Argo's point control was also poor. The tip of the whorl skipped from rock to rock and couldn't get in between to dig out the match.

Cyd wiped his brow. Though turning his body into water drained his power the fastest, pulling on water constantly drained Cyd nearly as quickly, particularly when he wasn't around much water to begin with. Cyd had used quite a bit of power already and didn't have much more to give. It made Cyd angry because he felt so ineffectual. Cyd didn't know how he would be of use to the team if he had to run off in the middle of a fight to regain his power. He felt useless.

May picked up on Cyd's contempt and it puzzled him. Cyd shut off that line of thought to keep from passing on more than he wanted May to know and focused again on the match.

Argo had thought up some way to push around a wall of moving flame.

"Smart kid. He's extracted gas particles from the air so the fire would have something to consume and still be mobile," Kee deduced.

The wall of flame headed for Cyd and Kee, who each dove for cover in opposite directions. To counter, Kee started flinging rocks at Theri. Argo used the wind to knock the rocks aside.

Argo and Theri turned and nodded at each other, and suddenly the wall of flame became a large firestorm, flinging woodchip cinders in all directions. It whirled over the puddle, beginning to dry up the mud.

Cyd tried to keep the mud wet, but he had depleted his power and couldn't maintain his draw on the water any longer. Just as he released the water to give up, May started yelling across the arena, hands over his ears.

"Stop it! Stop it! Theri, Argo, *stop!*"

The firestorm vanished and everyone stopped to look at May. He had hunched over and held his head in his hands.

"Can't you hear them? The trees? The shrubs? The grass? They're all in pain from fire and the lack of water. Please, make it *stop.*"

Theri concentrated and tried to pull in the heat from the woodchips which the firestorm had flung, but they were too small and spread out over too large an area. He couldn't pinpoint them well enough to draw their heat. Theri shook his head in failure.

May looked at Cyd imploringly. And though Cyd knew he shouldn't for his own safety, he did what he had to for May's sake. He turned into a cloud and rained over the arena, the cabins, the garden, and the surrounding trees, shrubs, and grass until all of the cinders were out.

May put his forehead and hands on the grass and took several deep breaths. When the plants had ceased calling out to him, May sat up and looked around for Cyd to thank him. But Cyd hadn't reappeared in the arena, and May couldn't feel their bond any longer.

"Where's Cyd?" May called out anxiously.

"He hasn't come back after he got us all wet," Argo complained.

"But I can't—" May stopped himself before he mentioned the missing connection to Cyd. "Why isn't he back? Is he okay? Where *is* he?"

"Check the stream," Mach said.

Kee ran off in the direction of the stream but returned a few minutes later, shaking his head.

"Not there either."

"Dammit. He probably already left for home then. Idiot. Stupid son-of-a-bitch," Mach cursed.

"What?" May asked, now more alarmed.

"He drained himself too low, used too much power in combat."

"And then I made him become a cloud," May whispered, horrified.

"You didn't make him do anything," Theri commented. "Cyd made a decision. He knew what it would cost."

"But he—"

"Don't," Kee said, putting a hand on May's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself. Theri's right. Cyd knew what you were asking."

“But I didn’t,” May lamented.

Kee looked over at Theri, who scowled in the direction of the stream as he rubbed the medallion around his neck.

“Don’t you start either, Theri. Next time, okay?”

Theri turned his scowl on Kee. Kee raised an eyebrow at Theri. Theri’s eyes softened and he nodded.

“Come on, then. We all need some rest. Cyd will be fine and he’ll be back tomorrow.”

Kee helped May up from the ground and the five of them trudged toward the cabins, but May didn’t feel like being cooped up inside their empty cabin. Instead, he sat in the garden near the apple seeds he had planted. In the wake of the brief rainstorm, three of the seeds had just sprouted. May could just barely hear their new voices asking for more water, so he watered the seeds until they babbled happily along with the grass.

May smiled somewhat though he still felt melancholy. He thought he would enjoy having some apple trees around, particularly since they wouldn’t be his sisters’ trees.

“May?”

May looked up from where he sat on the ground.

“How long have you been hearing the plants talk to you?” Mach asked.

May thought about it and frowned. It had felt so natural that May hadn’t considered the fact it had never happened before.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember it happening before.”

“Do you still hear them now?”

“Not as loud now that everything is peaceful again. Most of them barely whisper to me. Some of the trees are a bit bigger and louder, but it’s mostly background noise I filter out.”

Mach nodded, “Let me know if that changes, would you? And don’t forget to eat.”

May nodded, “Sure.”

But May wasn't hungry. He lay on the grass until the sky turned to starry night. May located Cygnus easily as it moved overhead. Looking beneath it, he saw Vulpecula, a lesser known constellation. She seemed to want his attention tonight, so he watched her run across the sky for a while before he finally entered the silent cabin to sleep.

That night, May dreamed of swimming, but not in a pool or lake. He swam against the current of a strong river toward a small island. May would never remember if he made it to the island in his dream or not.

Cyd sat down on his bed the next morning and looked at May as he slept. May's hair had changed color slightly; it was no longer jet black, but rather a very, very dark brown. Cyd ate an apple while he waited.

When May opened his eyes, Cyd nodded to him.

"Morning. I brought you breakfast again. It is good you do not consider eating apples an act of cannibalism. Catch."

May wasn't really awake, but Cyd tossed an apple at him anyway, and before May could think better of it, he caught it. May's eyes widened in shock, and the shockwave reverberated through their bond, which had returned again along with Cyd's proximity.

"What? It is only an apple. You do not truly consider it cannibalism, do you? I did not even pick it from the tree. It fell in my lap."

May thought Cyd must not understand the significance of tossing an apple—or catching one. May felt only his amusement.

"I thought you knew all the old stories. Tossing me an apple is tantamount to saying you love me... and... and... and I caught it. I caught the apple you tossed."

"You love me as well, then? Is that it?" Cyd asked. May couldn't speak around the catch in his throat, though. "You grew up around too many Epimeliades and not enough mortals. Tossing an apple has not meant that for a very long time, since before even I was born. I think you are safe from Aphrodite's wrath."

"I grew up in Aphrodite's sacred grove on Cyprus."

“You have met her, then?”

“Well, no. She’s been gone for centuries.”

“Then she will not know what you have done. Eat and let us join the others.”

May squeezed the apple gently and closed his eyes as he bit into it, moaning once again as the sweet flavor burst on his tongue.

“Gods and goddesses, May, turn down the erotic thoughts. It is an apple, not an orgasm.”

Cyd shuddered and forced away the rush of intense pleasure from May. May did pick up on it, but he wanted the apple more than Cyd.

“Says you. Where do you get these apples? They taste divine.”

“From a tree near home. I have never seen the tree in bloom before, but it has been recently. And it is a good place to rest, so I stop there. After a nap I saw the apples, so I grabbed them. I did not even need to ask the tree for permission; they just fell into my hands. I do not recall the apples I ate tasting especially different from any other apple I have eaten, though.”

“I grew up eating apples, but none that tasted like this,” May replied, taking another bite.

Cyd shook his head as they wandered outside to join the others for their morning routines.

After another few days of rest, Mach called them all together once again.

“I want to test May’s power with plants today,” Mach announced.

The announcement stunned everyone.

“You can’t be serious—” May started.

“He is not ready—” Cyd said at the same time.

Mach cut them both off, “We have to keep trying, and if May has to learn to deal with a handicap instead of his power, so be it. Argo, you’re up again. No tornados, though. Got it?”

Argo nodded and prepared to fight.

Cyd seethed through their bond. Though the target of Cyd's anger was Mach and not May, May still found it exceptionally difficult to focus on Argo. May now understood what Cyd meant by distraction could cause death for a warrior. May agreed and wished Cyd would stop being angry on his behalf. His anger would do neither of them any good.

Cyd stopped. May didn't take the time to figure out the significance of Cyd's calm, though. May was finally able to shift his focus to Argo.

Argo started with the same headwind he'd used against Cyd. It was a simple but effective action to keep others from touching him, and May wouldn't be harmed by it. As May attempted to move toward Argo, the headwind prevented May's forward progress and began to push him back slowly. As his feet started to slide back, May dug into the ground with his toes, halting the push backward.

Without conscious thought, May reached forward with his right hand and extended his index finger into a thin, whip-like branch. He slashed Argo across the cheek before Argo knew what happened. The wind died as Argo held a hand up to his face.

"Damn, man, that shit hurts."

"Argo," Mach warned.

"Stuff," Argo corrected, "that stuff hurts."

"I'm—I'm sorry." The fact May had touched Argo so easily dumbfounded nearly everyone. May held up his right hand and looked at his index finger. It looked completely normal again.

"May, your shoes," said Theri.

May's tennis shoes were now trash. Each shoe had five large holes in front and one large hole in the heel where his foot had begun to take root in the ground.

"May, how do you feel?" Mach had rushed over to his side as soon as the wind had died down.

"I think I need to lie down."

Mach nodded and helped May lie down on the grass.

“How’d you do it?” Mach wanted to know.

“I don’t know. I just did. I wanted to reach out and touch him, so I did.”

The others sat down on the ground in a circle around May. May gazed at Cyd, who frowned ever so slightly. Cyd’s concern washed over May. May wanted to hold Cyd’s hand in reassurance, but didn’t ask for it. Cyd hesitated, but he did rest his hand on May’s leg after a few moments. The sense of concern for May significantly intensified with Cyd’s touch. May felt Cyd’s emotions tumbling erratically.

“Argo,” Mach continued, “what did you learn?”

“Not to assume my opponent doesn’t have a new trick up his sleeve since the last time I fought him.”

“Works for me. May, what about you?”

“I can do more than curl vines and open blossoms. I might not be useless to you all anymore.”

“You were never useless, May.”

The group began to argue over the validity of May’s assumption of uselessness, but Cyd remained quiet. The change in May’s powers was a problem. Without knowing where May’s tree grew, using that power could kill him. Before, May had been relatively safe because no matter how hard he had tried, he hadn’t been able to tap into that power. Now that he could, May was in serious danger.

“You cannot use that power yet, May. Without knowing where your tree is, you could harm yourself.”

“Cyd’s right,” Mach agreed. “You may feel well enough for now, May, but you need to take it easy for the rest of today and see how you feel tomorrow.”

The news dampened May’s ebullient mood.

“We’ve been working on trying to develop May’s powers for weeks. Why did this happen now?” Argo wondered.

But no one knew the answer to the question.

CHAPTER FOUR – HEALING TOUCH

The next day, Argo suddenly stopped in the middle of a fight with Theri to listen to something none of the others could hear. His sisters had brought word of a disturbance in Anaypazari. Argo told Mach what they'd told him.

"There's been a landslide or avalanche across the surrounding plains, but it isn't naturally occurring from the Taurus Mountains, as one would expect. It appears to come from the coastline near Seleucia on the Calycadnus."

"Beautiful countryside in that area," Cyd commented.

"We need to go check this out. This is the sort of thing that you're all being trained to assist with. Argo, you scout ahead and report back."

"I never considered the possibility of making him a scout," Cyd thought aloud as Argo vanished.

"Indeed. He's an excellent scout, both for speed and for his network of spies—I mean, sisters," Mach chuckled. "I can also trust that he won't try to take things on by himself. He'll report back first."

"You are certain of that?" Cyd sounded doubtful.

Mach nodded as he picked up Argo's clothing, "I've been training Argo since he learned to transform into a mortal body. He knows exactly what I expect of him, most of which he's learned the hard way in the past."

"Why did you not tell me that before now?"

"Because you needed to get to know Argo based on his own merits, not because he's my protégé," Mach answered.

Cyd pondered the amount of truth in that statement. He would have assumed a great deal about Argo just from knowing the young man was Mach's protégé. Cyd sighed to himself; he may have trained Mach, but Mach still had things to teach him also.

Cyd turned to look at May, whose hair had lightened some more since the day before. Instead of the deep mahogany brown it had become, it was now a slightly lighter chestnut brown. Cyd had also begun to hear stray thoughts of May's when they were not touching. Cyd had not yet brought up with May the

change in their bond, but he surmised if he could hear May's thoughts, almost certainly May could hear his thoughts as well. May had definitely become stronger.

May had also taken to sitting in the grass every chance he got. May said he felt better while sitting on the grass. Given that May could draw some power from the grass and nearby trees to heal, it made sense. May had exercised with them today, but he'd needed to take more breaks than usual. He still had not recovered from the brief burst of power he'd used the day before.

May's inability to heal quickly troubled all of them. Yesterday's outburst had been too instinctual on May's part to hope that he could keep his power in check when pushed.

"When do we leave?" Cyd asked.

"If we leave now, it'll be nearly this time tomorrow before we get there by car, assuming we drive all night. The boat has already left for today," Mach answered.

"Will Argo be able to find us along the way?"

"He'll be fine."

"Should we leave May here?" Cyd asked.

Cyd felt May's heartbreak through their bond. Cyd honestly didn't want to leave May, but May would almost certainly be safer staying at the compound.

"No, I meant what I said about May learning to work around a handicap. It's just a different one than I thought he'd be working on at the time I said it," Mach replied.

Cyd nodded, "We should go then. We will eat in the car on the way."

Cyd itched to get into the water to get there faster, but he forced himself to sleep early so he could take over the night shift driving since he had more familiarity with the roads in Turkey than Mach. Mach had left one of the minivan's windows open as he drove, and at some point while Cyd slept in the passenger seat, Argo rejoined them, reforming on the seat right next to May. May jumped in alarm at the unexpected arrival.

“How does it look?” Mach asked as Argo grabbed some shorts and slipped them on.

“The countryside is completely destroyed. There’s nothing left up to the city. Then the line stops. The strange thing is the landslide has completely receded and is nowhere to be seen.”

“That is strange. Nothing dangerous now, then?”

“Not that I saw. No deaths reported among the mortals. RegCon and PolCon haven’t finished their investigations, though. It’ll take them a while based on what I saw.”

The International Bureau of Registration and Construction, or RegCon as many referred to it, kept lists of all known nymphs and the locations of their homes, especially those unable to relocate, like May’s mother. All construction permits had to be vetted and approved by RegCon before any construction could take place anywhere in the world. Nymph homes had to be relocated or built around whenever possible.

RegCon’s sister agency, the International Bureau of Pollutants and Contaminants, or PolCon, kept governments’, businesses’, and individuals’ waste management in check to keep from poisoning the environment and thus the nymphs. Most countries had outlawed poison usage except by regulated federal agencies because poisoning a nymph’s home could kill a nymph.

“That’s good news. Thanks, Argo. Cyd will take over driving in three or four hours. We should be there around mid-afternoon tomorrow. Everyone might as well try to get as much sleep as you can.”

Around midnight, Cyd took over the driving. Mach filled Cyd in on Argo’s report before he fell asleep against the passenger-side window. Argo slept on the bench beside May. Kee slept in Theri’s arms in the back.

Things would change once they reached Anaypazari. Cyd worried about May’s reaction to the scene they would find. Though no dead bodies would litter a battlefield, it would still be devastation of a sort May had never before experienced. Cyd feared May’s youthful innocence would not remain intact.

Cyd glanced up often in the rearview mirror to look at May, who slept on a pillow up against the side of the minivan. The connection between them was

tranquil as May slept. Cyd found the lack of input from the bond both soothing and frustrating.

Cyd had become accustomed to May's emotions running in the background of his mind—and to interpreting their meaning when they struck heavily. When Cyd had gone home and slowly put distance between them, it had disconcerted him to sense their connection slip away. He'd found leaving the second time difficult for that very reason. Being without that link had felt incredibly unpleasant even though it should have meant finally feeling normal once again. After the first trip, Cyd had stopped looking for ways to break their bond, though he hadn't made May aware of that fact.

Once the sun rose, they stopped for breakfast. Afterward, Mach took over driving duties again so Cyd could sleep for a few hours before they arrived.

As they neared Anaypazari, May shook Cyd to wake him. Cyd came awake, instantly alert for trouble. Mach put a steadying hand on Cyd's arm, an old response between warriors who had fought together years ago and sometimes hadn't needed to wake ready for battle. Cyd calmed instantly.

May's jealousy flared to life again. In his post-adrenaline state, Cyd found the situation annoying at first, but then he was charmed. Though Cyd and Mach shared history, they had never and would never share a bed. May didn't know Mach had an Amazon lover or a grown Amazon daughter. Cyd had met them both.

Cyd arched an eyebrow at May, his amusement at May's jealousy and the reason it was unnecessary lacing their bond. May blushed a furious red and turned away, incensed with Cyd for being diverted at his expense, but also no longer jealous.

Their bond was definitely stronger than it had been before.

They drove straight to the far side of town where the landslide had stopped before reaching the majority of the buildings. Someone had placed sawhorses across the road to prevent traffic from driving onto the broken pavement; the landslide had crumbled it like a cracker and pushed it aside. They pulled the van off to the side and walked past the sawhorses to the ravaged countryside.

They were not the only onlookers. Though the Bureaus were nowhere to be seen, other people—presumably locals, since the town was in the middle of

nowhere within the mountains—stood around taking pictures and talking amongst themselves. None of the locals set foot onto the overturned soil where trees had once abundantly grown. Only the five nymphs and their trainer crossed the threshold to further examine the damage and discern its cause.

The wide path of destruction extended as far as the eye could see down the valley. The land had been mostly hilly pine forest, but now all life beyond some lucky bugs had perished. The landslide had churned the soil, stripping the layer of grass atop it, and had easily snapped all the trees in half with its progress. Broken branches and tree trunks stuck up from the ground everywhere. Rocks cluttered the soil; their momentum had demolished the vineyards. The locals would need months to clear the ground before it would again sustain growth beyond tufts of grass, and without the viniculture, the nearby town and villages would starve without assistance.

May looked on in utter horror, unable to speak. Before Cyd could stop him, May ran forward and placed his hand to the soil, and then snatched it back quickly, crying out in anguish. He wasn't quick enough, though. He had instinctively opened himself to the voices of the dying plant life surrounding him.

The chunks of grass and wildflowers faintly wailed in thirst after being ripped out by their roots and shredded. They knew they might live if they could just find water. But the torturously slow suffering of the dying trees struck May in the heart. He couldn't unhear those voices, the tree trunks screaming in agony, exposed at their cores but still struggling to cut off nutrient supplies to exposed areas or missing extremities, all in the vain hope they might survive their mortal wounds. Once he'd heard their screams, May couldn't turn them off; they resounded in his head over and over again until tears ran freely down May's face.

Gone. It was all gone. No animals, no plants that would live, no other nymphs as there should have been, not for kilometers. Nothing but death.

For Cyd, living through May's first "battlefield" felt like reliving his own first brush with the carnage of war and the helplessness of death. After all the years between then and now, Cyd had thought himself a hardened warrior—the one who could make the necessary decisions without the burden

of emotion cluttering his judgment—but he was so very wrong. Feeling May’s grief struck Cyd like a spear to the chest. Reliving those painful emotions caused him to hesitate when May took off again, headed further into the rocky debris.

May ran over to a pulverized laurel tree and knelt beside it.

[No, no, no!]

Tears still streaming from his eyes so fast he could scarcely see, May soothed a hand over the severed trunk and a disfigured young woman appeared.

[Come back, Daphnaeae. Come back! No, no, no!]

Cyd and Kee both ran toward May.

[HELP ME!] May shrieked through the bond to Cyd.

Cyd and Kee both dropped to their knees just behind May, each touching a hand to one of May’s shoulders to offer comfort and to pull him away from the body. Instead of taking comfort, May channeled their energies and sent forth a burst of power across the overturned dirt and rock. What moments before had been the agitated remains of plant, rock, and soil suddenly became a verdant green meadow dotted with tall trees.

“May! No! You *can’t*!”

Cyd whipped May around and held his face in both hands. May stared into Cyd’s eyes, but his mind stayed on the young nymph beside him. May began to glance down at her, but Cyd shook May’s head until May looked back at him again. May’s hair had already drained to a light brown color, lighter than Cyd’s. If the changing of May’s hair color somehow indicated how much power he had used...

“*STOP*, Malaeus! You must stop! She is gone. She is already with the ferryman in the Underworld. You cannot bring her back. You will die trying.”

“She was...” May hiccupped, “Hamadaphnaeae. She couldn’t leave.” May burst into tears again as he told her story, “She was stuck there watching as the rocks and ice and dirt came toward her tree, crushing her branches, uprooting her, breaking her spine. She wanted... she couldn’t...”

Cyd pulled May into his arms and held him as May sobbed out his soul for the dead nymph he hadn't known. Then Cyd began to feel faint, nausea hitting him hard. Cyd looked up at Kee, who rubbed his medallion, the one that connected him to Mount Kyllini, the one that recharged him after he used his power. May had drawn too much power. They didn't have long before—

May slumped in Cyd's arms.

"May. May! *NO!*"

"He needs his tree," Theri stated calmly, as if Cyd hadn't already realized that fact. Cyd had no idea when the others had caught up to them.

"I do not know its location."

"Drink your water and think," Kee ordered. "Apples. Apple trees. Apple blossoms. Apple bark. He must have come into contact with his tree at some point. It is the only explanation. But when?"

"But May's been with us all along," Argo argued.

"But I have not," Cyd realized. The apples from home. The sweetest ones May had ever tasted. It all began after those apples. "I know."

The nausea cranked up another notch, so Cyd drank his bottle of water quickly. He needed to return home, only this time May would accompany him. He stood up, cradling May in his arms and walked quickly back to the edge of town, the others trailing behind him.

More people gathered at the edge of town as news of the miraculous event had spread. Cyd walked up to the oldest man he saw.

"Potamoi." The old man examined May. "Epimeliad."

"He healed your land. Now he needs to heal. Where is the nearest stream?" Cyd asked in Turkish.

The old man pointed. Cyd hoisted May into a fireman's carry and took off running in the indicated direction, doing his best not to trip over rocks and roots. When he reached the stream, Cyd set May down and began to strip them both naked. The others ran up behind him.

"What are you doing?" Argo asked in confusion.

"Taking him with me to his tree."

“Naked?”

“Easier and faster to carry him without the wet clothing dragging us down.”

When they were naked, Cyd tossed their clothing into the river.

“Why—”

“The Naiads and Nereids will make sure they get to us. We have to go now,” Cyd cut him off, answering what he thought Argo wanted to know, unconcerned whether he had guessed correctly or not.

Cyd picked up May and carried him to the water, laying him on his back. As soon as he let May go, he melted into the water himself, directly underneath May, buoying him. Cyd took off as fast as he could swim without May falling off his back.

Cyd felt so slow compared to his usual speed. He knew how much the extra time mattered to May’s recovery. The way he normally swam, their destination up the coast of the Mediterranean Sea was only a couple of hours away, but with May on his back Cyd had to keep to the surface instead of going under the waves. By car the route would have taken at least three and a half hours on partial toll roads, and that assumed no traffic issues of any kind. They might have run across more broken roads if they had taken a car.

As Cyd focused on keeping May on his back, he couldn’t shut off the “what ifs” ricocheting through his mind. If Cyd had come to the wrong conclusion, May would die without question. May might still die if Cyd didn’t swim fast enough to the tree he thought was May’s. And Cyd didn’t know if he could live with that on his conscience.

Somehow, no matter how Cyd had fought against the general attraction—and the bond in specific—May’s sweet, gentle nature had gotten under Cyd’s guard. Even though May had been shunned by most of his family, he had remained optimistic and kind. Even though May hadn’t been able to use his power until eating those apples, he had still gotten up and tried his hardest every day to improve himself in some way because someone believed in him. May genuinely wanted to help everyone. He was good. He was smart. He was beautiful inside and out. And he was far too young to die.

The silent bond disturbed Cyd as he swam. He didn't know whether May's unconsciousness caused the silence or whether their link had weakened. Cyd hoped for the former. No matter what, it couldn't end now; Cyd couldn't imagine going back to a life without May in it.

And in that moment, Cyd finally admitted that somewhere in the middle of it all, he had fallen in love with May. He also finally understood why they shared a bond, and he wanted May to know why as well.

Cyd spread word about their clothes as he passed other nymphs on his way to the Cydnus, but he didn't slow down. The downstream current parted in front of Cyd, and he speed upstream toward the apple tree standing in the middle of his river. Normally the island it stood on was visible, but the river was high right now. The high water suited Cyd just fine.

Cyd swam straight at the apple tree, splitting himself into two surges that zipped around it at the last moment and met again on the far side. Instead of slamming up against the tree's trunk, May vanished into the tree as soon as he touched it.

Cyd heaved a sigh of relief that he had been correct about the apples and May's tree. As the adrenaline slipped away in exhaustion, Cyd circled the tree and stopped on the side where the downstream current pushed him into the trunk. Then he slept.

The next day, the river had calmed considerably. The small island where May's tree grew had appeared within the middle of the river. May emerged from his tree onto the island and turned his face up to the sun.

[It feels so different in this form.]

A slosh of water caused May to look to the river. Cyd rose up from the surface of the river and hovered as if suspended in mid-air. His body, made of water, sparkled in the sunlight.

"You're beautiful," May said, meaning to compliment the beauty of Cyd's true river-god form.

Cyd, unsure of where to begin between all of the things he wanted and needed to say to May, said the first thought that came to mind.

[Your hair is white.]

“You’re—wait. What?”

Though Cyd’s features in this form were indistinct, May swore Cyd’s mouth crooked up a touch before Cyd spread his body out flat like a pane of glass, becoming almost vitreous, so May could see his own reflection and the dazzlingly white hair all over his body, not just on his head. May reached a hand out to the reflection before bringing it back to touch his hair. May looked down his body to the thatch of white pubic hair at his groin.

“I’m a real Epimeliad.”

[You always were.]

As May reached for the glassy reflection a second time, Cyd’s fingers emerged from the flat surface and meshed with May’s. And though Cyd was the one made of water, May melted into Cyd’s still-solidifying body as he stepped onto the island and became flesh once more. Cyd wrapped his muscular arms around May and held him tight.

“My tree. How did you know?” May asked with his head resting against Cyd’s shoulder.

“I remembered the best apples you had ever tasted. Do you recall?”

“They were from this tree. That’s when it all began, wasn’t it?”

“When your hair started to lighten, when your powers increased, when our bond strengthened. It all began with that first apple.”

May took a moment to consider their bond. Cyd had stopped holding back. He had finally accepted May and their bond. May could feel Cyd’s whirling emotions running end over end: fear, apprehension, uncertainty, joy, desire, trust, and love.

[Love. You love me.]

[That I do. I still fear for you—I nearly lost you—but I do not deny loving you any longer.]

Cyd pushed back gently against May’s shoulders so he would stand upright. Once May had looked into Cyd’s dark eyes and saw the truth of those words in them, Cyd cupped May’s head and pulled him into a possessive kiss.

Cyd grabbed a fistful of May's white hair and drove his tongue into May's mouth, taking ownership of the kiss and the nymph. May whimpered and a flower blossomed on the tree as he gave all of himself to Cyd in that moment. And Cyd took from May everything May offered him.

[Zeus himself will not take you from me. You are mine, Malaeus.]

Cyd used May's full name to give the statement more authority, but May needed no convincing on the matter. Cyd broke the kiss to trail his lips along May's jaw, nibbling toward a sensitive spot behind May's right ear. He pushed May up against the rough bark of the apple tree and inserted a leg between May's, rubbing against May's heated body.

The edges of the bark were slightly uncomfortable so May smoothed them with a quick thought to his tree. *His tree.*

"This? No. This is *my* tree, May. I found this seed floating in my river, ready to sprout if only it could. I caught that seed. I made this island. I planted that seed here. I watered it from my own body. I nurtured it from sprout to seedling to sapling to tree. You may belong to this tree, but this tree belongs to *me*."

May held still, wondering if Cyd really considered the tree his to do with as he saw fit, regardless of May's wishes. Cyd heaved a great sigh and backed away from May, perturbed. May knew better than to believe Cyd was so callous, and he groaned in realization. He had offended Cyd by even believing in the possibility. Cyd's annoyance buzzed through May.

"I'm sorry."

Cyd nodded. He hadn't used the right approach, again. Cyd directed his annoyance at himself more than at May, though. May had taken Cyd's words of possession literally, not figuratively. Cyd wasn't sure he'd ever learn how to speak to May without putting his foot in his mouth.

"I mean to claim your heart, May, not your freedom. The reason we have this bond is because we have fed from each other all of these years without knowing it. Your tree has resided in my waters all this time. I gave to you as it gave to me. And now you sustain me directly, May, bond or no."

Cyd stepped in toward May again, putting his hand against May's hip and rubbing in a circle until May lifted his leg and hooked it around Cyd's body,

giving Cyd better access to draw his fingernails down the underside of May's thigh. Cyd's other hand ran over May's pectoral muscle, thumbnail flicking a nipple as it stroked past. May looked up into the branches of his tree. Cyd followed his gaze as another apple blossom burst open.

May was achingly hard; Cyd could feel May's erection pressing into his hip, but he felt May's aching need in his chest. Fully erect also, Cyd sought relief from the torture of experiencing May's desire and trying to abstain from it. Cyd spun May around so May's back touched his chest. Cyd slid his left hand up May's torso to his throat, pushing his head back against Cyd's shoulder. Cyd's right hand held May's hip for the moment. Cyd's dripping cock brushed between May's legs.

"You want to watch your tree, Epimeliad? Then watch what happens when your lover pleasures you."

Cyd slid his right hand down to May's erection and gave it a firm stroke. May bucked but Cyd's hands on his jaw and cock kept him firmly in place. When May began to squirm in impatience, Cyd gave him several more firm strokes. Flowers blossomed all over the tree as May began to breathe heavily. May's bliss crackled through their bond, straining Cyd's patience.

"I don't want to come until you're inside me, Cyd."

"You will come more than once, love."

And with that, Cyd proceeded to stroke May eagerly, relishing every wiggle of his hips. With each moan that reverberated from May's throat through Cyd's hand, Cyd wanted more and more to bury his cock inside May and take him with abandon. Knowing what Cyd wanted from him aroused May even further because he wanted it too. At some point May closed his eyes while apple blossoms sprouted constantly along every branch until white cloaked the entire tree.

Bonded as they were, Cyd knew as May reached the brink of orgasm and slowed his pace to almost nothing. May groaned.

"Cyd... Please, Cyd... I need..."

"Open your eyes, love."

May forced his eyes open and gasped at the beauty of his tree.

Cyd whispered in his head, *[Ready?]*

May practically howled as Cyd sped up, working May's cock to teasingly tip him over the edge of orgasm. May closed his eyes; all he could see was white. When he opened his eyes once again, several of the blooms had dropped away and the bud of an apple had already appeared in their place.

Cyd brought his hand up to his lips to taste May's seed.

"It tastes as sweet as your apples," Cyd confirmed.

May sagged a bit in Cyd's embrace, prompting them both to kneel on the wet soil. May leaned forward to rest his forehead on his tree. He smiled, unbearably happy for the first time in his life.

"You said they didn't taste any different than other apples," May accused.

"I lied. They are better than ambrosia."

"You've never had ambrosia." Only the immortals ate ambrosia. Mortals who ate it became immortal so the immortals guarded it jealously.

"And why would I when I have tasted the sweetest fruit on the planet?"

Cyd leaned forward and covered May with his body, smearing his precome between May's thighs. May squeezed his thighs together and Cyd groaned with the friction.

"The interesting thing about sex with a river-god is he can make his cock whatever size he wants, and it will always be slick with water." Cyd rumbled in May's ear, "I hope you have recovered enough. I need inside you."

May's body still tingled from his orgasm, but he spread his legs further apart to give Cyd better access. Cyd didn't bother with any sort of preparation. His cock was thin and slick as it plunged inside May's body. May barely felt his entry until Cyd began to thrust. With each thrust Cyd's cock became fuller and opened May wider. Soon May writhed in pleasure once again, thrusting back into Cyd as Cyd drove forward into him.

Ripening quickly, the apple buds grew plump and purplish-red like May's cock. The branches began to bow lower with the weight of the apples. Cyd reached up and held his hand below one of the ripe apples. It fell immediately into his hand.

Cyd panted too heavily to speak aloud, holding his own orgasm at bay just a few moments longer. Through their fully-formed, now permanent bond, Cyd whispered, *[Ready?]*

Cyd held the apple up to May's lips. May's eyes widened at Cyd's intent.

May bit into the apple made of their love, tasting its nectar-sweet flavor upon his tongue, and came instantly, flooding them both with his pure ecstasy. Cyd hadn't even touched May's cock. Cyd grunted and groaned in May's ear as May clenched and wrung a truly spectacular orgasm from him. He thrust a few more times to spread his own seed inside May's body.

"Gods and goddesses," May heaved, breathless and sated to exhaustion. "I may need my tree again just to recover from making love to you."

Cyd chuffed in May's ear as he helped May lie down on the damp ground before lying down next to him. May immediately curled into Cyd's arms, head on Cyd's shoulder, and fell asleep with his lover under the shade of his tree.

CHAPTER FIVE – ILLUMINATION

They awoke late in the afternoon. Cyd leaned over and kissed May awake. As much as Cyd wanted to take his time enjoying May, he knew they needed to return to the others. May stretched and smiled up at Cyd.

“Are they worried?”

“I doubt it. I expect they know everything since we left, including that which we consider rather personal. That is the drawback of expressing your love in the open where every invisible nymph can watch.”

“They would...”

“Nymphs are libidinous, as you well know,” Cyd gazed archly at May, who blushed faintly and nodded.

“So, what’s next?”

“First, you need to find a way to take a piece of your tree with you.”

“Oh! Um...”

May looked at his tree, wondering how he could take a piece of it with him. Roots were too delicate. The tips of branches he could easily remove would be too brittle once dried out. May couldn’t bear to cut into the bark. Then May spied the knothole in the trunk. May placed a hand on his tree and asked it to give him a piece of itself. May helped his tree heal itself internally as it slowly shriveled around the knothole until the bulbous piece broke off into May’s hand. May smoothed his fingers over the bark, feeling the power of his tree crackling within it.

May looked up in wonder at Cyd. He had a piece of his tree he could always take with him. Life would be so much easier now. He could train properly with the others.

But Cyd couldn’t. Cyd still needed to ingest his river’s water to heal, and he couldn’t bring that much with him. The thought bothered May.

“But now Cydnos has you and your tree, Child.”

Cyd and May whipped around to discover the owner of the voice. No one stood there. Cyd stepped in front of May, pushing him back toward his tree.

“Show yourself.”

“I am everywhere, Child. I am the world mother.”

“Grandmother Gaia. It is an honor,” Cyd said with reverence.

On the closest bank of the river across from the island where May and Cyd stood, the dirt, twigs, vines, roots, and leaves rose in a heap to form a vaguely feminine shape. She was unlike any nymph May had ever seen. May emitted a strangled whimper and clutched at Cyd from behind.

“Be not afraid, Epimeliad.” Gaia’s voice sounded in their ears as if she stood in front of them. The sense of detachment from her “body” across the river caused May discomfort. “You are of my line, as are all, Child. Your mother is my great-granddaughter, descended of Oxylos and Hamadryas, children of my Oreios.”

“Grandmother, what did you mean I have May and his tree now?”

“As you are his and he is yours, so your river is his and his tree is yours, Child.”

“I can use his tree?”

Gaia indicated the wood talisman May held.

[May I?]

Cyd took the small piece of bark as May offered it and felt his own power flowing through the wood. Cyd’s eyes widened in surprise. May smiled softly at his incredulous lover.

[I can feel it, the power from my river.]

[I know. Would you like one of your own?]

[Would your tree be willing to give me a piece of its self?]

[My tree would do anything for you. As would I.]

May touched his tree once more and a few minutes later another wooden talisman dropped into his hand. May gave it to Cyd, who looked at it in fascination. Cyd rejoiced he could finally be a useful member of the team. He would no longer have to return home to his river every time he used a significant amount of power.

[I never knew you were worried about that.]

[I labored to keep my insecurities to myself.]

[It would've helped to know.]

[Helped who?] Cyd asked with a quirk of an eyebrow.

[Helped me feel less insecure to know that even you were worried. Helped you to have someone else to share with.]

[I have not shared myself like that with anyone in a very long time. I—]

“There is more to say, Children.”

Cyd and May focused their attention on the representation of Gaia once more. She had turned her “face” toward the sky but now turned it back to them. A gentle afternoon breeze ruffled the leaves of the trees, including those embedded in Gaia’s current form.

“Cydnos, you have concern over your conscription into service.”

Cyd nodded. May noted suspicion through their bond, but he didn’t know what to make of it.

“I chose the five,” Gaia revealed.

May looked at her in surprise. She had confirmed at least one of Cyd’s suspicions.

“Why, Grandmother? What do you require of us?”

“Whatsoever needs done, Child. The world is full of mortals now, but the immortal still exists. You have seen as much.”

“The landslide?” May asked?

“Correct, Child. The cause was not natural. Neither was it malicious.”

May furrowed his brows in confusion.

“How is such an attack not malicious?”

“There was no attack, Child.”

“If it was not natural and not an attack, then what was it?” May asked.

“My grandson, Adamastos.”

Cyd felt puzzlement from May, but May felt significant apprehension from Cyd.

“You have many grandsons, Grandmother. What type is he?” Cyd asked.

“He is the youngest son of Typhon and Echidna.”

“He is a *monster*?!” May jerked at Cyd’s unexpected eruption.

“You assume much, Child.”

“He is born of the Father and Mother of All Monsters. What else are we to think?”

“Evaluate from knowledge, not conjecture, Child.”

“Yes, Grandmother.”

May felt Cyd’s shame at the censure.

“Adamastos is not like his brothers and sisters, Child. He has a simpler mind. His father shunned him all his life for this reason. He lived at home with his mother, his only friend his sister, the fox of Teumessoss. They would play Tag, only he could never catch her; such was her nature until Zeus turned her to stone and placed her among the stars. After Adamastos watched the death of my daughter in Arima, he waited for his sister to return, though she never would. When he becomes lonely of waiting, he sometimes ventures out in search of a new playmate, as he did recently. He has always returned alone.”

The sun slowly descended across the sky. A brief gust of wind caused May to shiver in the chilly evening air, and he rubbed absently at the goose bumps on his arms. He really wanted to get his clothes soon. Cyd turned and wrapped his arms around May to help keep him warm.

[She means to use us to catch him.] Cyd speculated.

“And he caused the landslide?” May asked.

“No, Child. He *was* the landslide. Such is his body, when he chooses.”

“When he chooses?” May asked.

“Do you not adopt other forms when it suits you, Children?” Gaia remarked, making her point plain.

May’s heartache shot through Cyd, so Cyd tightened his hold around May to give him strength. In his life, May had yet to actively choose to become part of his tree. Gaia’s statement distressed May, but Cyd’s vexation with Gaia’s callousness distressed May further.

[Don't, Cyd.] May moved his hand up to Cyd's arm to stay his outburst. "Grandmother, why didn't you tell us when we first arrived at the academy that you brought us together?" May asked.

"The two of you had to find yourselves in each other first, Child."

"I don't understand."

"If I had known it was Grandmother, I would not have stayed to abet the scheming of immortals," Cyd explained. Gaia did not bat even a fern-made eyelash at his accusation. "To fully become the team she covets, we each had to remedy the deficiencies of the other. If she had not put us together and I had not brought back an apple from your tree, your powers would have never manifested and I would have been severely handicapped. We had to be whole before Gaia could exploit us."

"Have care, Child. Do not exhaust my patience with your umbrage. I do not suffer impertinence."

"And I do not care for pretense, Grandmother. State what you want."

"Your first task is to help my grandson live in a mortal world."

Cyd wanted to refuse, but May overrode him.

"Of course, Grandmother. We accept."

Gaia nodded her gratitude to May. Cyd scowled intensely but said nothing to contradict May's statement.

"Argesterion?"

Argo manifested next to Gaia's form, surprising May. Cyd, on the other hand, expressed no surprise at all.

[You knew he was here?]

[He has been for a while. You did not take note of the breeze?]

[I didn't assume it was Argo. I thought it was an Aurai wanting a closer look at the two naked men.]

[Perhaps it is because I previously caught him that I knew him when he blew past us. He always carries with him the unique scent of white tea.]

Cyd and May had briefly ignored the exchange between Gaia and Argo. Gaia touched Argo's face gently as she spoke quietly to him directly. Argo

nodded once. Gaia looked up at May and Cyd, then she vanished. The leaves, twigs, vines, and dirt which had formed her body dropped to the ground in a small heap.

Argo gathered up the clothing which Cyd had hung to dry by the side of the river while May healed. Argo then dissipated, but instead of falling to the ground, their clothing remained suspended in mid-air, slowly floating toward them. When the clothing floated over the tiny island where Cyd and May stood, Argo reappeared, holding it.

“You have been practicing since I left?” Cyd asked as Argo handed them their clothes. May began putting his clothes on, while Cyd did not.

“Every chance I got! That was mad loco, y’know. I didn’t know that shit was possible!”

“Mach would not like your use of that word, Argo. How far do you think you can travel while carrying May?”

“I sorta practiced on Kee once, but we didn’t go far.”

“Why not begin by going from here to the riverbank? May, would you please hold my clothes and my bark?”

May took the requested items and held them close, the tree bark especially so. Cyd disappeared before May’s eyes, but May could sense Cyd all around him.

[I will be a cloud while Argo transports us.]

[You don’t need Argo to get across the river.]

[This time, no, but Argo travels faster over straighter distances than I can travel. We will reach the others faster if he can carry us.]

“Where’s the old man? He coming?”

“Yes. Don’t worry about him,” May replied.

“Whatevs.”

Argo dissipated once again and May felt the wind push his legs up from behind, causing him to tip backwards. May stopped falling a couple of meters above the ground. He wobbled a moment and then fell the rest of the way to the ground, just inches from becoming very wet.

Argo and Cyd both reappeared.

“He’s too heavy,” Argo complained.

“No, you have yet to master the ability; that is all. Are you trying to move and lift or lift and move?”

“Lift and move.”

“If you are not harnessing your power first and foremost, you will squander your energy. You will be able to lift more and go longer distances with less expenditure if you focus primarily on drawing your power from the wind.”

Cyd worked with Argo for another fifteen minutes before Argo got the hang of it and landed May gently along the bank of the river. Cyd reformed from his misty cloud and reached for his talisman from May’s tree to test its gift. He felt the connection to his river restore his energy almost instantly. Relief rushed through Cyd and May both, though Cyd held his composure while May smiled.

“How do you feel now, Argo?”

“Amazeballs. I think I’m ready.”

“Then let us find the others. We have much to do.”

CHAPTER SIX – EXCAVATING A MONSTER

Cyd had Argo stop a couple of times along the way to check that Argo hadn't overexerted himself, but Argo promised he was able to continue each time, so they made it to Seleucia on the Calycadnus in a little over an hour. Cyd made a point of praising Argo for his quick mastery of the new ability, as well as thanking him for the ride. May agreed it had been a smooth journey.

They found the others drinking in front of a hostel, waiting for their return. Argo ran up to Mach to tell him about his improvement and the trip. Cyd and May approached more slowly. Though May wanted to grab Cyd's hand as they walked, Cyd warned him off through their bond. May didn't understand why, but he respected the decision.

When they neared the group, Mach handed Cyd two leather thongs and his pocket knife. It grated on Cyd to find out that Mach had known they would both be coming back with talismans. How much had Mach been privy to about Cyd's life before Cyd himself had discovered it? He bristled silently with May as the only witness to his ill humor.

Through their connection, May offered comfort Cyd didn't want or need. Cyd had to stop himself before he lashed out at May instead of the person most deserving. May was not the trigger, so Cyd ensured May knew his ire lay elsewhere. May hesitantly pulled back some, and that made Cyd feel guilty. Navigating their linked emotions hadn't suddenly become easier just because they had chosen to be lovers.

Cyd immediately set to work cutting a small hole through the center of his talisman. May put his hand on Cyd's arm and shook his head silently. The knotholes didn't have much green life left in them, but May used his power to tell the still living wood to form a small hole through the center, just big enough to string the leather thong through it. Cyd then threaded the holes, knotted the thong, and hung the cords around their necks, first May's and then his own.

"You both have one," Kee said with a knowing smile. Cyd nodded. It appeared Kee, Theri, and Mach needed no other confirmation on the significance of his talisman, so Cyd offered none. Argo didn't ask.

“We were visited by Grandmother Gaia. She enlightened us on a great many things,” Cyd said instead.

Cyd retold the majority of what happened from when he and May had awoken the second time until their arrival in Seleucia, leaving out the personal details and any mention of the bond between them. Cyd consciously avoided eye contact with Mach as he relayed to Kee and Theri the details Gaia had presented and her request.

“Arima will be difficult to navigate,” Theri noted.

Kee pretended to be affronted, “You have an all-powerful Oread at your disposal and you’re worried about getting into a cave?”

Theri smirked and patted Kee on the head. Kee huffed and crossed his arms as if put out, and then he grinned in good humor.

“Perhaps we can get Adamastos to come out,” May replied.

“Can we sleep first? I’m beat,” Argo asked.

“Yes. We should sleep. We’ll make plans in the morning. Arima is only a twenty to thirty minute drive from here,” Mach responded.

Mach handed a room key to Cyd. Cyd accepted it without looking Mach in the eyes and turned to go inside. Mach knew he would not win Cyd’s trust back easily, but he also knew he would be forgiven sooner rather than later.

May followed Cyd to their room. It was very small, meant only for one person though two would be staying in it that night. Cyd undressed quietly and lay down on the narrow bed on his side. Cyd held back the blanket until May undressed and climbed into the bed next to him. They both wanted to touch—to get carried away in each other until they forgot the world—but Cyd ignored their erections and kissed May only briefly to confirm his love before he shifted May to face the other direction. Cyd draped an arm over May’s torso to keep him securely against his body on the tiny bed.

Cyd was not the most demonstrative person May had ever met... but Cyd had his moments.

In the morning, after a quiet breakfast at a local café, the six hopped into the minivan to begin the drive to Arima. This time, Argo sat in the passenger seat and Cyd sat next to May.

May wanted to reach for Cyd's hand again and looked at Cyd questioningly. Cyd sighed inwardly. It made him supremely uncomfortable to demonstrate affection, even amongst those he could potentially consider friends. May looked down in his lap and wrung his hands to have something to do with them instead. He didn't want to push Cyd into doing something uncomfortable, but May didn't know what to do with himself now either. He wanted to shout to the world how he felt about Cyd. Cyd seemed to want to hide how he felt.

[I do not want to wear my emotions for you openly because I want to hide my weaknesses. You make me weak as you give me strength.]

May's confusion and hurt rolled between them. Cyd had to quickly turn his head away so he could roll his eyes at himself. Cyd had put his foot in his mouth again. May misinterpreted Cyd's annoyance, so Cyd had to backtrack quickly.

[I will never figure out how to not upset you.]

Cyd bit the bullet and took May's hand in his own.

[Someone could use my love for you against me, or against you. That is how you are my weakness. The fewer people who know I love you or you love me, the safer you are, May.]

[You mean 'we are'?]

[No, I meant 'you'. I care for your safety before my own.]

Cyd felt the confusion turn to chagrin for jumping to the wrong conclusion.

[I'm sorry, Cyd.]

[I know. What is happening between us is not like a normal relationship. Normally you would not have known about my annoyance with myself so you could not have mistaken it for annoyance with you. This is unusual. We are both learning as we go.]

[But our friends already know.]

[I do not consider them friends. All but Mach are acquaintances at most. And Mach... He and I will have words before he will again be a friend to me. He has abused my trust, and he knows it.]

[But without him, we would not have found each other. I would never have left Cyprus. I can never pay him back for that.]

[And your tree?] It astounded Cyd to think that May valued finding him more than finding his own apple tree and coming into his full power as an Epimeliad. May blushed.

[That too.] Cyd noted May's hesitation before asking the next question. *[Am I your friend?]*

[You are gentility and sweetness and innocence, traits I lost long ago. You believe the best in everyone and everything, something I have been unable to do for centuries because I have seen too much. You are the reason I stay with this group, because I will die before I see anything bad happen to you. You are my heart and my home, and I love you.]

May desperately wanted to be kissed, so Cyd leaned over, cupped May's face in his hand, and kissed him with passion. Again, it wasn't as long or as preliminary to other events as either wanted it to be, particularly not once they heard retching sounds from in front of them. Cyd pulled away slowly, smirking ever so slightly at Argo's distress as much as to show May he meant every word he'd said. Cyd stroked his thumb across May's cheek just once before he dropped his hand.

"I am happy for you, old friend," Mach said as he looked at Cyd through the rearview mirror. Cyd's small smile vanished, as did Mach's. Cyd didn't invite further commentary on his life.

"You have a plan, then?" Cyd asked.

"Straight to the point as always, Cyd," Mach replied, trying for his usual lightheartedness. Cyd saw the strain in Mach's eyes and heard it in his voice. "I'm just your trainer. You guys are the team. This is your mission, not mine."

"I'm sure they will value your opinion," Cyd responded.

[Cyd...]

[Do not interfere between me and Mach.]

[Don't punish him, Cyd. He's sorry. Can't you see that?]

Cyd sighed. May was a gentler soul than he. Cyd didn't give back trust easily once lost.

[I will think about it.]

May nodded. He squeezed Cyd's hand in understanding.

In the meantime, the others had been silent. Cyd rubbed his eyes and the bridge of his nose before looking up at Mach's eyes in the mirror.

"I do not have any ideas. I would be glad to hear if you have any."

Cyd did not feel ready to offer more of an olive branch than that.

"Honestly, no. All we know is that our first impression is wrong, according to Gaia. What that means, I don't know."

"Doesn't that mean that our anger is wrong?" Argo wondered.

"How do you figure that, Argo?" Kee asked.

"Cyd was angry when Gaia told him about Adamastos being a monster. That was his initial reaction. That's when she said not to assume. Most people would fear a monster. Maybe we shouldn't fear him? If it wasn't an intentional attack, then we shouldn't be angry with him."

"That is simple logic," Theri said.

"But is it the right answer?" Cyd asked.

"It feels right," May said.

Argo looked at May in surprise. "You think so?"

May nodded at Argo. "I wanted to believe the worst of whatever would kill innocent nymphs. But Gaia said it wasn't intentional. What if he didn't realize it would happen? What if he didn't know any better? A misunderstanding? If we approach in anger, he might become scared and lash out. So why not try being nice and just talking?"

"Walk up to his front door and knock?" Kee suggested, tongue-in-cheek.

"Why not? Maybe we want to make a mountain out of a mole hill. We understand the consequences of his actions, but if he doesn't, we have to get him to understand. Perhaps all we need to do is talk to him," May said.

“And if it’s not that easy?” Argo asked.

“We must figure out how to contain him some other way. He cannot be allowed to continue terrorizing the countryside, intentional or not,” Cyd said.

After a few moments of silence following Cyd’s unpleasant declaration—which they all agreed with though none wanted to admit it—Mach said, “It’s as good a plan as any. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Arima had changed over time. It currently existed as two large sinkholes. One had a trail leading down to the bottom of it. The other had a concave opening, making it extremely difficult to reach the bottom. They assumed that the harder to approach of the two sinkholes would more likely be Adamastos’s home. Kee altered the ground to create steps leading down under the overhanging ceiling and they began the trek downward. Theri and Kee led the way, followed by May, Cyd, Argo and Mach bringing up the rear.

As they got closer to the bottom, the darkness enveloped them and the air became more frigid. May rubbed his arms to keep warm. Theri generated a small ball of fire to light the steps ahead. When they reached what they thought was the bottom of the cave, May called out.

“Hello? Adamastos?”

A quake rumbled around the cave. They could not tell by sound which direction it came from, but Kee pointed out the way based on the vibrations through the ground.

“It came from over there.”

May turned to speak in the direction Kee pointed.

“Adamastos? Hi, we are...” May hesitated, uncertain how to introduce them.

“Cousins,” Cyd suggested.

“We are your cousins,” May called out to the darkness. “We heard about you from your Grandmother Gaia and wanted to meet you. Can you come out and talk to us?”

A long, animalistic, screeching roar reverberated from the back of the cave. The ground beneath them shook, only a little at first and then stronger, until

May, Cyd, Argo, and Mach had difficulty standing. Only Kee and Theri weathered the tremors without difficulty.

“He’s coming, and he’s big. We need to move out of his way fast. Everyone hold on to me, quick,” Kee commanded.

They grabbed on to each other to steady themselves just before a tidal wave of dirt surged toward them. Kee formed a boat of clay beneath their feet. They rode in the boat above the excess ice and rock as it filled the cave and lifted them toward the exit. May clutched at Cyd. Argo had vanished, leaving only his clothes. Mach picked them up once they surfaced from the cave and their ride stopped moving.

Dirt, rock, and ice spewed from the top of the sinkhole, overflowing the edges and spreading out around them. Kee and Cyd gripped each other’s forearms and focused intently on the rushing rubble to keep it from crushing the team. They forced it to split into two paths going around them, as water flows around a rock, but the rubble kept trying to collapse back in.

“He’s really strong. We need help,” Kee said.

May stepped toward Cyd, and Theri toward Kee. Though they had never consciously attempted it before, Kee and Cyd concentrated again upon separating the dirt and ice, this time channeling May’s and Theri’s powers along with their own, as May had done accidentally in Anaypazari. When the rubble stopped moving, the five stood in a bubble of flat land with a meter to a meter and a half of dirt and rock surrounding them on all sides.

The ear-piercing screech sounded again, this time rolling like thunder across the countryside. Kee put his hand to the clay.

“That’s his voice. He’s in there somewhere, but I can’t tell where. This is all his body.”

“Gaia said he takes on this rubble form that appears as a landslide. I think we should try to get him to shed this body and show us another form,” May suggested, “but I don’t know how.”

“Kee can show him,” Theri replied. “First, we must get out of this hole.”

Kee concentrated on separating the rubble of rock and ice within Adamastos’s body to form a passage for them to safety. The passage opened

and held. They began moving forward as quick as possible without losing contact with each other. They walked roughly another two hundred meters before they reached the edge of the rubble field.

Mach had ridden out on Argo's back. He stood a short distance away waiting for them. Except for Kee, they retreated to what they believed to be a safe distance. Kee gathered rock around him until he looked like a walking slag heap with a vaguely human shape. He walked up to the edge of the rubble line and stepped on top of it. Seconds later, Kee melted into Adamastos's body.

May cried out in alarm, but Theri put a hand on his arm to stay him.

"He's fine."

"How do you know?" May had to know for certain.

Theri pointed to his temple a couple of times but said nothing else in response.

It dawned on Cyd and May at the same time that Kee and Theri had the same special bond they did. Cyd further realized that they must have figured out May and Cyd shared a similar bond some time ago, or Theri couldn't have counted on them to understand his meaning just now. Cyd also noted Mach neither seemed surprised at Theri's lack of worry nor puzzled at what should have been a cryptic response to May's question. Yet more for which Mach needed to answer.

Argo joined them in waiting for Kee to reappear. After the first few tense minutes, Kee rose naked from the rubble and knelt down to listen to Adamastos. Theri told the group Kee still searched for a way to get Adamastos to understand they wanted him to shed this form for another, as Kee had tried to demonstrate by showing his human form.

May looked up at the sky and tried to think up another plan. He remembered the previous time he had watched the sky, the second time Cyd had gone home. He remembered watching the fox constellation running.

Suddenly May had an idea.

"Tag. He liked to play Tag with his sister."

Argo looked at May in puzzlement. "Yeah, so?"

“From what I can gather, Gaia isn’t known for giving information randomly. What do you want to bet he didn’t play Tag in this form? It would have been too clumsy to catch the uncatchable fox. Let’s try playing Tag with him.”

“Might as well,” Mach responded.

“Argo, you’re as close as we have to the uncatchable fox. You up for it? You’ll have to get his attention and give him time to figure out what you’re doing. We’re not exactly sure how they played with each other, and he might take a while to catch on that we’re playing like he used to. The only difference is this time he gets to catch you, Argo.”

Argo nodded and vanished. He materialized over the pile of rubble, landing lightly for only a moment before he vanished once again. Argo teased Adamastos by touching down upon his back repeatedly, but Argo chose to follow a vague pattern. After a half dozen or so touches by Argo, a silver hand rose up from the rubble to grab for Argo’s ankle.

Argo danced away from the hand and vanished again, reappearing once more a bit further away, still following his pattern upon Adamastos’s back. This time, a forearm rose from the rubble to grab for Argo. Argo hovered over the spot where he should have touched down, but instead of placing his feet together on that spot, he spread his feet apart to land around the location instead of where the arm would catch him. The arm swung around to where Argo had touched down, but Argo had dematerialized once more.

The final time Argo appeared, a silver head and torso burst up from the ground and pounced on Argo’s legs, wrapping around him. Argo could have dematerialized and vanished once again, but as they wanted Adamastos to catch him and come out of the rubble, Argo let himself be caught.

Argo didn’t realize Adamastos would be so cold, though.

“Okay, okay, you caught me!” Argo laughed. “Not so tight. I won’t go anywhere.”

The arms wrapped around Argo’s naked body were freezing cold, like iced metal. Argo shivered as he looked into a face unlike any he’d ever seen before. Adamastos had a hairless body made of silver. His eyes were diamonds—not

like diamonds, but real raw diamonds, smooth and opaque. He appeared to be about Argo's age, but as the youngest son of Typhon and Echidna, he was centuries older than Cyd, closer to Gaia's age. He smiled from ear to ear, about to burst with joy.

Adamastos let loose a horrific shrieking roar. Argo clapped his hands over his ears and frowned at him until he stopped screeching. Argo removed his hands from his ears and shook his head.

"Can you speak like this? Without roaring?"

Adamastos cocked his head to the side like a puppy trying to puzzle out a new command. Argo tried a different approach. He made a roar-like sound then shook his head no, and then he re-asked the question and nodded his head yes. Adamastos seemed to think about this but said nothing.

Argo waved the others over to him. Adamastos turned to look and released Argo immediately, shrinking away into himself. Argo grabbed his arm before Adamastos disappeared and smiled at him, then looked up and smiled at his friends. He tried to say "friends" to Adamastos, but Adamastos shook his head and yanked his wrist from Argo's grip. He had melted back into his other body before the rest of the team arrived.

"I couldn't tell him you were friends so he wouldn't leave."

"It's fine, Argo. I might be able to communicate with him through vibrations in the ground. We'll give it another shot."

Kee and the others walked gently across Adamastos's body, trusting the monster would not wish to hurt Argo, who walked with them. As Argo made to step off of the rubble to the ground, a silver hand reached out and grabbed his ankle to keep him from leaving.

Argo smiled and sat down cross-legged just inside the edge of the rubble so the hand could continue to hold him, even though his foot chilled rapidly. "I'll be fine. Go ahead."

Kee knelt to the ground and put his hand on it. Though he appeared to do nothing, Kee sent vibrations through the ground localized toward where the silver hand clung to Argo's ankle. He tried to express the sentiment of friends to Adamastos, but the medium of clay didn't offer much in the way of expressive communication.

After several attempts, Kee shook his head. Adamastos either didn't understand, or he did but didn't want to surface again. The only good sign was the lingering silver hand, which continued to hold Argo's foot. Adamastos apparently did not want Argo to leave. As long as Adamastos wanted Argo there, they knew they still had a chance to talk to him and convince him not to leave Arima in the rubble form again.

Argo curled his fingers around the toes of his foot to try to warm them.

"He's so cold. My foot is freezing."

Theri pulled heat from his medallion and placed his hand near Argo's foot. Heat radiated from Theri's hand to warm Argo.

Quick as lightning, Adamastos's hand shot up and gripped Theri by the wrist. The ice-cold grip around Theri's heated wrist created a searing burn, but Theri endured it. Adamastos did not grip tightly; he was curious. The pain subsided as Adamastos changed his temperature to match that of Theri.

When Adamastos's silver hand grabbed Argo's foot again, Argo vanished, his screams of agony lost into the wind. Moments later, Argo reappeared on Mach's back, arms around Mach's neck, crying in pain. A nasty burn blistered Argo's foot where Adamastos had touched him. Cyd ran over and held a bubble of cold water over the burn to numb it.

"Don't be upset, Argo. He didn't know it would hurt you," May said.

Argo nodded and stifled his tears as quickly as possible once he could bear the injury.

"Did he just learn Theri's power from having seen him use it once?" May asked.

"That's a good question. If that is what happened, we have to be careful what we show him until we can trust he won't accidentally use his abilities destructively," Kee mused.

The pile of rubble moved, taking the whole team by surprise. It moved forward to touch their feet and then retreated.

"I think he's looking for Argo," Kee supplied.

Mach looked over his shoulder at Argo, still piggyback riding. "Argo?"

Argo gulped and nodded slowly. As Argo shifted to climb down, Theri stopped him. Theri concentrated on pushing and pulling heat within Argo's body until Argo began to adapt to Theri's modulations, redistributing the heat to keep from being cold.

"Change only part of your body to dissipate any extra heat."

Theri pushed more external heat into Argo little by little until Argo had figured out how to adjust only part of his body to become wind instead of the whole. It allowed him to dissipate the extra heat instead of it burning his skin. As a final test, Theri unexpectedly grabbed Argo's neck. Argo had no problem dispersing the heat from the sudden attack.

The pile of rubble shuddered and moved forward again.

"You are ready," Theri acknowledged.

And so Argo vanished and a new game of Tag began. Argo alighted gently and more randomly this time, making it harder for Adamastos to guess where to catch him. To compensate, Adamastos raised multiple silver hands across his body to catch Argo. Watching from the sidelines, Mach thought it looked like a game of Whac-A-Mole in reverse: the moles popped up trying to catch the hammer.

Eventually one of Adamastos's hands wrapped around Argo's good ankle. Argo concentrated on venting the heat and kept himself from being burned again as he sank to the ground.

Adamastos's torso rose from the rubble and he pointed to Argo's blisters. Argo pulled his foot away to keep Adamastos from touching and making it worse.

« Hurts. »

Argo spoke in Ancient Greek, very simply, thinking Adamastos might be more likely to recognize it given his age. Adamastos canted his head to the side again. He worked his jaw and throat, making strange noises while working muscles he hadn't used in centuries. Argo watched and waited, trying not to be nervous.

« Why... hurts? »

« You did it. »

Adamastos looked up from the burn to Argo's face. It surprised Argo how expressive his eyes were; he appeared sad, almost ashamed.

« Apology. »

Argo had only a limited grasp of the ancient language, but he thought with reasonable certainty Adamastos had just apologized to him. He laid a hand on Adamastos's shoulder and noticed it was no longer hot to the touch.

"It's okay, Adam."

Adamastos smiled wide again. He pointed to himself. "Adam!"

Argo smiled and pointed to himself. "Argo."

Once Argo realized they should speak in Ancient Greek, Cyd took over communication with Adam since he had the most fluency in the language. Cyd had difficulty deciphering Adam's broken speech though. Adam had never had any formal education and hadn't actually spoken in anything but roars for a very long time. Adam's limited understanding tested Cyd's vocabulary, but they managed to find out more about Adam.

Adam's father had been ashamed of him and insisted he leave the cave only in his other form and communicate with the roar. Adam was happy to not carry around the bulk of his other form whenever he wanted to leave. Getting Adam to understand that his other form was dangerous to the mortal world was a more difficult task. The world had changed a lot since Adam had seen it.

Ultimately, the team decided they needed to keep an eye on Adam and help him understand the new world he would discover, and make sure the world would understand him. Nymphs and satyrs were one thing, but the world might not be too happy about meeting an honest to goodness monster, even one as sweet-tempered—and pretty—as Adam. They planned to take it one day at a time. First on the list, they needed to teach Adam modern language.

However, Adam didn't want to sleep away from his home. He had always lived in Arima and there he wanted to stay. After some debate, Argo suggested maybe he could fly Adam to their compound each day, if they moved it closer to Arima. Flying back and forth to Olympus each day would take too long if they wanted to see Adam daily. After riding around on Argo briefly, Adam

agreed to go with Argo to see his new friends each day. Mach suggested Rhodes might work as a location and he would look into it upon their return.

Since they had no other pressing business to attend to, May decided to visit his mother and share his good news with her. They were relatively near the island of Cyprus and Cyd could easily swim the distance with May riding along. Mach agreed they could wait a couple of days before heading back to Olympus.

Adam feared his new friends wouldn't come back for him. He tugged on Argo's hand and asked him to stay. Argo promised him they would see each other the next day. Adam made a mournful little sound and released Argo's hand. With plans made, they said good-bye to Adam.

CHAPTER SEVEN – EPIMELIADES

The next morning, Cyd swam May over to the island of Cyprus. This time, they sealed their clothing in a plastic bag and May held onto it for the not quite two hour journey. Though much of the island was full of nymphs and they could have remained nude, May was much happier to keep Cyd clothed around his sisters.

As they walked through the sacred apple grove, May's sisters approached them in droves, wondering who the two cute guys were, particularly the male Epimeliad with the gorgeous white hair and pale green eyes. Not a single one recognized May as her brother, the one they had always shunned. The nymphs fawned over them, trying to engage them in conversation and more. The more it continued, the more May boiled with anger at their fickle acceptance. Apparently white hair made him acceptable.

Cyd had to grab May's hand from behind before May noted how substantial his anger had become. May stopped so Cyd could stand next to him. Cyd had never been one for public displays of affection, but in that moment, Cyd ignored the existence of the rest of the world because May needed him. Cyd stroked his thumbs across May's cheeks and leaned in to kiss him soundly.

The nymphs around them chattered, wondering if any of them might be lucky enough to join the men.

“Leave us alone, girls. I only have eyes for your brother.”

The chattering ceased. Every nymph stared at May, now discerning their own brother. Where previously they had looked on with lust and hope, now they looked on with a mixture of astonishment, revulsion, disgust, and bitter disappointment.

[Better?]

May nodded and they left the silent women behind. They continued toward May's mother, the largest tree in the center of the grove. As old as she was, her trunk was very thick. A long grapevine snaked up her trunk, complementing a theory Cyd had formed a while back regarding May's parentage. Her branches

reached tall and wide, and beautiful white blossoms covered her. As they walked toward her, she half appeared from within her tree, clapping joyfully.

“Malaeus! You’ve found your tree, dear boy. You look simply radiant,” she said as she pulled him into a hug. “And who is this?”

“Mother, this is Cydnos.”

“The Potamoi? This is most unexpected. I have heard many tales of you.”

“Probably of my predecessor, my lady. I am not that old.”

“Old enough to have stories of your own, young warrior. And how did you come to know each other? And what of the tree, my dear? You must tell me.”

So May told his mother of the team, of meeting Cyd and their strange connection, and of the apples that led to his power fully manifesting. Finally, he described his tree.

“And has it blossomed, dear?”

May blushed and nodded.

“And borne fruit?”

May nodded again, as red as the apples from his tree.

“Wonderful. You must love him very much.” She hugged May again and looked at Cyd. “And you must love him much in return to have pollinated the flowers. Thank you for helping my youngest. Well, my youngest but for one.”

“You’re pregnant, mother?”

“With your sister. Her name will be Thysa.”

“You mean half-sister,” May said half-heartedly.

“No, dear. I mean your sister, of the same father.”

“But I don’t know who that is. Who is my father? Our father?”

“A question I would also have answered, wife,” a new voice responded. May and Cyd turned and saw May’s stepfather, a fat old satyr with a long, horse-like tail, approaching the tree.

“He is rather dense to have not answered the riddle himself before now,” Cyd said to May’s mother. She smiled back at Cyd approvingly.

“The stories are true, I see. You are very observant, unlike that one,” she said, indicating her erstwhile husband, her tone changing to become more scathing. “Of course, that would require he actually care about the one he made vows to instead of the ones conveniently at hand once he has been in his cups.” To the satyr, she added, “As you were, so I became. Once you were no longer mine, I stopped being yours. Who I take up with now is none of your concern, Ineunus.”

“I will burn you down where you stand for breaking faith with me again, wife,” Ineunus threatened.

“If you touch my mother, I will kill you,” May responded.

“You and what army, useless whelp?”

The grapevines from the trunk of her tree suddenly wrapped around the satyr’s entire body. May tightened the vines around his ex-stepfather’s throat and made sure he could see the whites of the satyr’s frightened eyes as he spoke.

“I need no army to strangle the life from your body, you vile waste of flesh. You’re no father to me and I have no love for you. If any harm comes to my mother or this grove, I guarantee they’ll find you dead the next morning.”

[May, this is not you.]

[He will not threaten to kill my mother. He will NOT. Not the one person who loved me.]

“Malaeus,” his mother called to him, “I am quite capable of defending myself. He will not harm me. He is neither worth your anger nor your incarceration.”

May released Ineunus, who rubbed his throat as he backed away from the young Epimeliad.

“You are no Epimeliad. You are a monster.”

“You are an idiot. Go back to your thiasos and leave these trees to their lives or you will find your way to the Underworld without a coin to your name. Understand?” Cyd warned.

The satyr nodded vigorously and left without another word.

“I don’t understand, Cyd. Who is my father?” May asked again.

“Dionysos,” Cyd answered.

“That’s not possible. Dionysos has been on Olympus with the rest of the gods for centuries. He can’t be my father.”

“As Ares cannot be sire to Mach? Dionysos is your sire. Have you never questioned why you had control over vines before you ever found your tree?” May shook his head in response to Cyd’s question. “What does that one,” Cyd said, indicating the departing satyr, “do on the full moon?”

“Dances in the Bacchanal.”

“Presided over by...?”

“Silenus.”

“Companion of...?” Cyd huffed.

“Dionysos, but that doesn’t mean—”

“Who is the god of...?”

“Wine, ecstasy, fertility...”

“Symbolized by...?” Cyd prompted, annoyed with May’s stubbornness.

“Lots of things: bulls, the thyrsus, wine, the grapevine—”

“Like the one clinging to your mother’s tree right now? The one you wrapped around his throat?”

May stopped and frowned. He looked over at his mother’s tree where the thick grapevine embraced her trunk once again. May touched the vine and felt it hum with power similar to his. He looked up at his mother.

“How is it possible?”

“Long ago, he drunkenly followed Ineunus one night and witnessed our union. I saw him watch us. Sometime after Ineunus began taking up with others, your father began to visit me.”

“Why did he never come to see me or say anything to me?”

“He may visit only on the full moon, when you stay away.”

“I had always hoped you might close the rift between... you know.”

“I never wanted to, dear,” she replied. “But enough of that business. You are whole and blessed now with your own mate. Will you have children?”

“Mother, we are both men. We cannot have children together.”

“Not the mortal way. But you are Epimeliad. I’m sure if you think on it, the seed of an idea will come to you.”

Cyd snorted in amusement. He rather liked May’s mother.

“We have not discussed such. Perhaps one day. Now is not the time for us,” Cyd responded.

“Now may be all the time you have, Cydnos.”

Cyd nodded his understanding.

“Mother, when will you have my sister?”

“Not for another two months. She will be born on the full moon, as you were.”

“Will he be here for you?”

“Your father? Yes, dear.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” May wondered.

“Because you were not ready to know who you were, dear boy. You needed your tree first. And now you have it and much more.” She turned to address Cyd, “Please take care of him. He is very special.”

Cyd nodded. That much he had already realized. Gaia was far more cunning than most gave her credit for. She was probably the only other being who knew the secret of May’s sire, though perhaps she had shared that information with Mach as well. Gaia had plans for their team, and Cyd would soon see to it Mach fully disclosed everything he knew.

Cyd would not risk losing May to Gaia’s whims. If Gaia thought she could control him, she had another thing coming. Cyd was now much more dangerous than he had ever been before. Now he had someone to live and die for.

May heard Cyd’s concerns and sentiments through their bond and looked over at him with love. But something niggled at the back of his mind... something he needed to remember.

Seeds.

Seeds May had planted a week ago.

Seeds from an apple from his tree, sometime after his lover had been beneath it.

Seeds May knew had already sprouted...

Cyd looked at May in concern and then narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“What did you do, May?”

“Cyd, I’m going to ask a question and I need you to be completely honest. When you went home to heal the first time and brought me back the apple from my tree, did you masturbate under my tree while it was flowering?”

Cyd looked down, but May could feel his guilt through their bond.

“Gods and goddesses, you did,” May said, amazed. May smacked his hand to his forehead. “And you knew about tossing the apple too, didn’t you?” Cyd’s guilt spiked higher. “You loved me then and you let me think it was nothing!”

“I was still trying to protect you. And myself.”

“Augh! You and your protection. Well, Mr. Protector, just keep in mind that, at the time, I only planted the seeds intending to grow more of those delicious apples like the ones you gave me.”

May waited for Cyd to connect the dots.

It didn’t take long at all.

THE END

Author Bio

Adara O'Hare is a geek in writer's clothing—a mild-mannered website designer by day and a wife, mother, reader, and sometimes writer by night. Adara is an avid reader who writes on occasion, mostly for her own enjoyment.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

DEEP IN THE COUNT

By Madison Parker

Photo Descriptions

1. A young man stands looking off to the side. His simple grey wifebeater shows his muscles, and despite his all-American appearance, his stance seems almost shy, lacking confidence, with his hands in the pockets of his jeans and his body held in a stiff manner.
2. The young boy is lying flat on his stomach, with an almost-smile adorning his lips. He's the opposite of the man pictured above, lacking visible muscles and pale where the other was tan. He's wearing thick-rimmed black glasses, and his dark brown hair appears wind-blown, or perhaps just "artfully messy."

Story Letter

See Photo 1

I may be popular, and the star "jock," but that doesn't mean I'm confident in myself. I try so hard to just make it by. I look at him, and I think I'd give anything for that confidence, those brains, 'cause brains and confidence? That's sexy.

See Photo 2

People think because I'm a "geek" that I'm missing out on life. Sure I'm not popular, but I am self-confident, I know that I will have a great life because I've got the brains to be what I want. College will be over and I'll be a success, where will all the popular people be?

Dear Author,

I would love a different take on some of the other jock/geek stories I've read. My geek is not bullied or shy, he is confident in himself, he just doesn't care about the other stuff. My jock has no problem going after our geek, he doesn't care what others will think, he wants him so bad. The popularity is not something he wants or has worked for, it just is. My geek is resistant because he doesn't need this in his life, his course is set, he doesn't need distractions.

**Would love a tutor/student type of initial relationship, have been dying for a hot scene where the geek knows the jock wants him, maybe he offers to strip or a kiss (for starters) for correct study questions. Must have HEA, prefer little to no BDSM, love some angst.*

Sincerely,

Carey

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athlete, college, cryptology, geeks/nerds, opposites attract

Word count: 17,173

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

This one's for all of you who like to get (or turn) your geek on.

DEEP IN THE COUNT

By Madison Parker

CHAPTER ONE

Brandon followed Jack down the hall.

“Sorry,” Jack said, “I thought I had it with me.”

“Don’t worry about it. You probably left it on your desk.”

“Yeah.” Jack jammed his key in the lock. “Let’s just grab it and go.”

Jack didn’t hide his irritation well. Brandon followed him into the dorm room, shrugged off his backpack, and dropped it by the door. He glanced back and forth from one side of the room to the other. “Guess I don’t have to ask which side is yours?”

Jack snorted. “You think?” he said, walking toward his desk.

The line of demarcation couldn’t have been more obvious. Jack’s side of the room was littered with dirty clothing. His baseball cleats lay on the floor next to his glove and crumpled uniform. Empty soda cans, stacked two and three cans high, covered his bedside table. It was Jack’s space all right—the poster of Carl Yastrzemski on display above the bed left no room for doubt. Jack was a die-hard Red Sox fan. Brandon liked the team too, but he was more of a Jacoby Ellsbury fan. Of course, that probably had more to do with Jacoby’s killer smile and good looks than his season stats. Jack, on the other hand, was definitely into the ladies. He had an assortment of pin-up girls in various stages of undress splattered across his wall.

In contrast, Mr. Tidy lived on the right, with all of his belongings in their proper places. The collection of posters hanging on Mr. Tidy’s wall, aligned neatly and spaced evenly apart, caught Brandon’s attention. “Yeah, you don’t strike me as the type to have a poster of”—he waved his finger toward the object in question—“*Battlestar Galactica* over your bed.”

“Frak no.”

Brandon quirked an eyebrow. “Frak?”

“It’s a joke. They say ‘frak’ instead of ‘fuck’ on the show.”

“What show?”

Jack shook his head. “Hello? *Battlestar Galactica*.”

“Oh. Right. You watch that?”

“No, man. But you hang around Corey long enough, you pick up shit. Besides, that chick in the red dress? Totally hot.”

Brandon glanced at the woman in the poster. Platinum blonde hair, big breasts, skimpy red dress. He supposed he could see the appeal. He’d never been a big fan of sci-fi though, and this looked pretty hard core: aliens, space ships, military fighters. Brandon scrutinized Corey’s things as he moved closer to the neatly made bed. “I wonder what his sheets look like.”

Jack stopped rustling through the papers on his desk and turned to look at Brandon. “Perv.”

“What? No! I’m just sayin’. He probably has Star Wars sheets or something.” The corners of the navy blue comforter were tucked in tightly, as if they were hiding some sort of secret.

“Whatever, man. Shit, I can’t find the damn flash drive.” Jack scratched his head and heaved a sigh.

Brandon figured he ought to help Jack, so he made a cursory scan of Jack’s side of the room. The bed was a mess. His sheets and blankets were twisted in a pile on top of the mattress and a pair of boxers jutted from under a lumpy pillow at the foot of the bed. “Check your bed. Maybe it fell out of your pocket.”

“What is it with you and beds?”

Brandon didn’t respond. He was never quite sure how to take Jack’s teasing. Jack was cool with the whole gay thing, as were most of the members on the team, but even so, Brandon stiffened slightly when hearing the little jabs. “Just trying to help.”

Jack let out a frustrated growl in response as he turned his attention to his desk drawers.

Brandon approached Corey’s desk, eyeing the small action figures on

display. He lifted one and studied it closely. It was some sort of goblin or troll or something. "Maybe your roommate borrowed it," he said.

"Nah, he knows better than to touch my stuff."

"Right." Brandon returned the creature to its place on the desk, but clumsily managed to knock over several neighboring figures.

"Aw hell," Jack said. "Now he's gonna think I was messing with his shit."

"No he won't," Brandon said quickly, straightening the figures. "He'll never even notice."

Jack crossed his arms and gave Brandon a stern look. "He'll notice."

"Jesus, what's the big deal? And why does he have so many of these things anyway? They all look the same."

"It's some kinda army," Jack said. "Look, I don't know. Just help me look for this damn thing before I completely lose my shit."

"Okay, okay. You want me to look in his desk? Maybe he picked it up by mistake, thinking it was his."

Jack grabbed the corner of his sheet and flapped it violently. A piece of pizza crust flipped into the air and toppled the soda can mountain. "No, he doesn't use 'em. Says they're obsolete. Tells me I should be in the clouds or some shit."

Brandon laughed. "Cloud storage?"

"Whatever." Jack got down on his hands and knees and searched under the bed.

Brandon glanced away to avoid staring at his friend's ass, which was sticking up in the air. "So, uh... it must be weird living with a—"

"Queer?" Jack said in a muffled voice. "It ain't so bad."

"What?" Brandon whipped his head around. "Shit. What? I was gonna say 'nerd'."

Jack shimmied out from under the bed empty-handed. "Yeah, that too."

Brandon stared at him, dumbfounded. "Is your roommate gay?"

"Yeah. It's cool though. It's not like I have to worry about him bringing

guys over. He's a total geek." Jack narrowed his eyes. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know. It never came up." Jack snatched his backpack and proceeded to dump the contents onto his bed.

Brandon glanced at Corey's side of the room again, hoping to see a picture of him somewhere. "Is he cute?"

"Really? You're asking me if he's cute? This conversation is getting way too gay."

Brandon rolled his eyes. "Oh come on. I can tell if a girl is hot—I'm sure you can tell if a guy is cute."

"Well he ain't Zac Efron. He wears glasses. And he's always playing with one of those Rubik's cubes. He's like, off-the-charts not cool."

"I bet he's really smart, though."

"He's a freaking brainiac, and I'm sure he thinks we're a couple of dumbass jocks. Guys like him don't hang out with guys like us." Jack suddenly jumped up with the flash drive in his hand. "Holy, shit. It was in my backpack the whole time."

Brandon sighed. "Yeah. You're probably right."

CHAPTER TWO

Corey sat hunched over his desk, pumping a stress ball while he stared at the code before him. He'd ruled out the possibility that it had been encrypted using monoalphabetic substitution—the Index of Coincidence was too low. At this stage in the competition, an affine cipher was too much to hope for. Surely the code involved one of the more complex enciphering schemes. He was fairly certain it was polyalphabetic. Vigenère perhaps? If so, the Kasiski Test suggested the keyword length was a multiple of seven.

Well, it was a start.

His laptop chimed, startling him. “Not now, Samantha,” he grumbled. Of course, she couldn't hear him because he hadn't answered the call. He enjoyed their Skype sessions, but she had a knack for calling at the worst possible times. He really needed to make some headway with this cryptology challenge. He'd managed to crack each of the other codes with relative ease, placing him further ahead in the competition. And he'd hoped to decipher this message tonight, so he could move on to the next round before any of the other competitors.

Corey opened his web browser and navigated to his favorite Vigenère cracking tool. If he were lucky, he might be able to find the keyword in under an hour. Of course, there was also the possibility that the keyword was fourteen or even twenty-one characters long, or that he wasn't dealing with a Vigenère cipher at all, in which case, he'd have to start from scratch.

His cellphone buzzed with a text message:

Answer my call, cocoa puff. I know you're there.

He chuckled at the pet name, but silenced his phone and set it face down on his desk. Now, back to the task at hand. He adjusted the frequency histogram of the letters that appeared in the message until they roughly resembled the known frequencies of the English alphabet. His best guess for the first letter in the keyword was T. There were a lot of seven-letter words beginning with T. It could also be a foreign word, or not a real word at all, but he was hoping for something recognizable.

His computer chimed again. Damn, Samantha was persistent. If he didn't answer the call, he'd end up having to make up some grand excuse about where he was and what he was doing. There was no use putting it off. Samantha refused to be ignored.

He answered the call to her usual greeting of, "What's up, buttercup?"

"Hey, Sam." He was a little taken aback at the sight of her. She didn't usually wear makeup, but tonight she was all done up, with her long, almond-brown hair loose around her shoulders instead of pulled back into her typical ponytail. He wasn't used to seeing her look so... girly.

"What are you doing?" she said. "And don't say homework."

"I'm not doing homework."

"Good. What *are* you doing?"

"Cryptology."

She groaned. "Same diff. It's Saturday night. You should be out having fun."

"I *am* having fun."

"Riiiiiiight." She shook her head. "You're sitting in your room, alone, crunching numbers. Sounds like a blast."

"Samantha..."

"I know, I know. It's your life. But you're such a cutie. I can't believe you don't have a boyfriend yet. I mean, it's *college*. You're supposed to be sowing your wild oats or whatever. There's plenty of time for all that serious stuff later."

"I've told you a hundred times. I don't want a boyfriend. What I want is to win this competition and graduate first in my class. A boyfriend would just eat up my time."

"That's not the *only* thing he'd eat."

"You're far more interested in my sex life than I am."

"That is seriously messed up, Corey. What is your *problem*?"

Corey dug around in his backpack, then lifted a paper to the webcam. "This. This is my problem."

“Okay... you got an A on your math test. What exactly is the problem?”

Corey slapped the paper onto his desk. “It’s a ninety-three! That’s completely unacceptable. I usually get over a hundred. Avani scored ten points higher and she’s been gloating for two days.” Corey ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair. “I can’t afford to slip up now, Sam.”

“Oh my God. You are *such* a nerd. Seriously? I wish I had your problems.”

“Fine. Make fun of me,” Corey huffed. “You know what? I gotta go.”

“Oh come on, don’t be mad.” She pouted momentarily. “Look, I can see you’re stressed. You need to take a break—find a way to relax, even if it’s just for a little while.”

“I’m fine, Sam.”

“Grab your cube.”

Corey shook his head in protest. Why couldn’t she just let him be?

“C’mon. Grab your cube. Just like old times. Or have you lost your touch?”

Corey gave her his best “bitch, please” look, then pulled his Rubik’s cube from the front pocket of his bag. He turned it in random directions to mix up the colors. “What song are you gonna use?”

“Gimme a sec. I’m looking for a good one.”

He knew she’d find one that would make him laugh. They’d been playing this little game for years. She’d make faces and sing an obnoxious song, and he had until the music stopped to solve the cube. If he finished before the music stopped, she had to grant him a wish. If not, he had to grant her a wish. It’d been a long time since they’d done this, but he practiced his cube daily and was confident he could beat her.

“Okay hang on, I’m cuing up the music. Lemme see your cube.”

Corey rotated the cube in front of the camera.

“All right,” she said. “Ready? Go.”

As soon as he heard the intro, he knew which song she’d picked. It was a horrendous nursery rhyme that would stick in his head for days.

“John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt!” she sang. “His name is my name too.” She bobbed her head from side to side as she belted out the lyrics. He was trying to keep his eyes on the cube and tune her out, but it wasn’t easy. “Whenever we go out, the people always shout, ‘There goes JOHN JACOB JINGLEHEIMER SCHMIDT.’ Da da da da da da da!”

He bit down on his cheek, refusing to give her the satisfaction of a smile. He needed to remain focused. She got through one more round before Corey’s door swung open and Jack walked in. Corey’s concentration was momentarily broken as he glanced at his bewildered roommate.

“JOHN JACOB JINGLEHEIMER SCHMIDT. Da da da da da da da!”

Jack raised his hands and covered his ears. “The fuck?”

Corey furiously spun the cube. His time had to be nearly up.

“Whenever we go out, the people always shout, there goes ‘JOHN JACOB JINGLEHEIMER SCHMIDT.’ Da da da da da da da!”

Corey cursed under his breath when the music stopped.

“Lemme see!” Samantha said, out of breath and laughing. He turned the cube around in front of the camera. She easily spotted the two squares that hadn’t been moved back into position.

“I win! I win!” she screeched. “Hey, Jack!” she added, waving furiously.

Corey winced. “Okay, geez. You got me. But please, be reasonable. I really am stressed out enough as it is right now.”

“You have to do whatever I say,” she gloated.

“Within reason,” he reminded her.

“You have to flirt with a boy. In person. And Jack doesn’t count.”

Jack snorted in the background. “That goes without saying.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no. C’mon, Sam. How about I do your math homework for you instead?”

She shook her head. “I’m not taking math this semester. You’re not getting out of this, Corey. I won fair and square, and it’s a reasonable request. I’m not asking you to walk up to some guy and shove your tongue down his throat.

Just a little harmless flirting. You know, make him *think* you wanna shove your tongue down his throat.”

Corey sighed in defeat. “Why are we even friends? You’re a thousand miles away. And you’re a pain in the butt, you know that?”

“I love you too. And I expect a full report by the end of the week.”

A fine mess he’d gotten himself into this time. Maybe he could make up a story about a fake encounter to appease her. Nah, she’d never buy it. Surely he’d falter when trying to answer her questions. He’d never been good at lying.

“How am I supposed to meet someone? I’m busy.”

“How about the tutoring center? New people come in there all the time, right?”

“No way. I *work* there.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” she said with a mischievous grin. “Da da da da da da!”

CHAPTER THREE

Brandon looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching before he pulled open the door to the tutoring center. A quick scan inside revealed no familiar faces. He breathed a sigh of relief, then filled out his information on the sign-in sheet. Name: Brandon Hart, Subject: Statistics, Time In: 6:05. Should he have used a fake name? Would they report to his teacher that he'd been there? That would be embarrassing. Would someone he knew see his name and make fun of him? How had he let things get so bad? When had he become a *dumb* jock?

The center was smaller than he'd imagined. There were a few rectangular tables where students could sit and work, and at the far end of the room, there were two stations where the tutors sat. Both of them were busy with other students, so Brandon took a seat at an empty table. He flipped to a blank page in his notebook and opened his textbook to the section on confidence intervals. The text may as well have been written in a foreign language for all that he understood. He would have to ask for help before he'd be able to get anything done. He wasn't sure how this worked, so he sat back and simply observed.

There were only a few other students there: two working with the tutors and two sitting at the table beside his. They looked like they were doing their homework. He'd be more than happy to sit there and work on his homework, but he didn't even know where to begin. He'd been doing okay until they got to the section on probability. All those symbols and formulas swirled in his head like alphabet soup, and it had all gone downhill from there.

The female tutor swiveled side to side in her chair and tapped her pencil on the desk. She was a pretty girl of Indian descent. She glanced at him and smiled. *Shit*. It was one of *those* smiles—the *you're-really-cute-wanna-go-out-sometime?* smiles. He frowned at his notebook. He hated the look of disappointment that usually followed those smiles. And some girls tried even harder to hook up with him when they found out he was gay. What was up with that?

He turned his attention to the other tutor. The guy looked a bit younger than Brandon, and he was cute in a nerdy sort of way. The dark frames of his

Clark Kent glasses matched his thick, dark hair, which curled a little at the ends. What really caught his eye, though, were the guy's lips. Even from a distance, Brandon could see that they were deep red with a beautifully pronounced cupid's bow. The guy had a smooth, even complexion and he was thin, all of which may have accounted for the fact that he looked a couple years younger than Brandon. Brandon hoped the guy would glance over at him so he could get a clearer view of his face, but he seemed to be engrossed in what he was doing.

Suddenly Brandon felt the urge to bolt. He didn't want to deal with the pretty Indian girl hitting on him, and he didn't want to make a fool of himself in front of the cute guy. He eyed the door, but reminded himself why he was there. If he didn't pass his math class, he'd be at risk of being placed on academic probation, which could cost him his scholarship. Without baseball, what the hell was he going to do with himself? He wasn't good at anything else.

Cute Guy leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms overhead as the student he'd been working with packed up his things and left. Cute Guy arched his back, and Brandon's mind went to dirty places, imagining the feel of that creamy, smooth skin against his fingertips. Then Cute Guy stood and looked around.

"Anyone need help?" he asked.

Brandon blinked, then averted his eyes. He hated everything about this situation. He wasn't usually this shy; he just didn't want Cute Guy to know how stupid he was.

Cute Guy left his station and walked over to the two students sitting at the other table. It looked like he was checking their work. *Shit*. Brandon flipped through the pages of his notebook. Would the guy ask to see it? God, he'd probably laugh at all the chicken scratches.

"Hi," the guy said as he approached a few moments later.

Brandon's heart thumped wildly as they made eye contact. Blue eyes. Such lovely blue eyes.

"Do you need some help?"

“Um...” Brandon looked down at his paper. “Sort of.”

“Why don’t you bring your stuff over? My name’s Corey.”

Brandon took a deep breath, then grabbed his books and followed Corey to his station. He could see now that Corey was tall, maybe an inch or two shy of his own six-foot frame.

“So what are you working on?”

Brandon pointed to his textbook. “Statistics.”

“Ah,” Corey said with a smile, “the most hated of all math classes.”

“Yeah, it’s the worst class I’ve ever taken.”

“Don’t feel bad. A lot of people have trouble with Stats.”

The guy was probably trying to make him feel better, but his insides were knotting up, and he couldn’t muster a smile in return.

“So what can I help you with?”

“Um... we’re doing confidence intervals right now.”

Corey grinned. “Confidence intervals! Ninety-five percent of the time, they work every time.”

Brandon looked at him quizzically.

“It was a joke,” Corey said, chuckling to himself. “Sorry. Math jokes never seem to fly around here.”

He was adorable, and at close range, those lips were mesmerizing.

Corey reached down into his backpack and pulled out a Rubik’s cube. He began twisting and turning the edges of the cube while he talked to Brandon. “Why don’t you tell me what you know about confidence intervals, and we’ll go from there.”

“Uh...” Brandon stared at the cube while Corey continued to fiddle with it absentmindedly. Jack had just been talking about one of those things last week. *Jack*. And *Corey*. Realization dawned on him. This was Jack’s roommate—Jack’s *gay* roommate. “Did you say your name was Corey?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know Jack Barrington?”

Corey looked at him warily. “Yeah, he’s my roommate. Why?”

Brandon began bouncing his leg under the table. “He’s a friend of mine. We play ball together.”

“Oh. Did he tell you I work here?”

“No, not exactly. I sort of pieced it together. There aren’t a lot of Coreys with Rubik’s cubes around campus.” Brandon chuckled nervously and pointed to the cube. “I never could figure those things out.”

Corey moved it into his lap, out of sight. Brandon couldn’t read his expression, but he didn’t look as happy as he had a few minutes earlier. Corey motioned to Brandon’s textbook. “Hey, we’ve only got about twenty minutes before closing. You wanna go over some of this stuff?”

Had he said something wrong? “Actually, I’ve gotta go. Sorry.”

Corey nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“Thanks.” He quickly grabbed his things and stood. “I guess I’ll see ya around.”

Brandon climbed onto the bus and slid across to the window seat. It was a long ride back to campus and he was exhausted. As one of the team’s starting pitchers, he was usually relieved after the seventh inning but Coach kept him in the entire game this time.

“You were on fucking fire tonight,” Jack said as he slipped into the seat next to Brandon.

“I don’t know, man. That last inning was rough.”

“What are you talking about? Three up, three down.”

“Yeah, but they were working me. All three were deep in the count before I struck ’em out. I wasn’t sure my arm was gonna hold out.”

“You got ’em in the end, though, right?”

“Yeah.”

Jack leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

As tired as Brandon was, he could never really sleep on the bus. Besides,

he had too much on his mind. “Hey, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

Jack cracked an eye open, then closed it again. “What’s up?”

“You know your roommate?”

“Yeah, what about him?”

Brandon paused. “What would you think if I asked him out?”

Jack stared at him with wide eyes. “You gotta be kidding me.”

“I met him the other day. He seems cool.”

“Cool?” Jack asked in disbelief. “What, were you high or something? Where did you meet him?”

“Uh...” Should he make something up? No, he was a terrible liar. Besides, Corey would probably tell him the truth anyway. “I needed some help with my statistics class, so I went to the math tutoring center. He works there.”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t have to ask him out to get him to help you. He helps me with my science stuff sometimes. No funny business.”

“It’s not about that. Look, I know I don’t need your permission—I just don’t want things to get weird between us.”

Jack shook his head. “It ain’t about me, man. I just don’t get it. There’s gotta be lots of gay guys on campus. Shit, there’s probably some on the team. Why aren’t you hooking up with hot guys?”

Brandon laughed the comment off. “So you *can* tell if a guy is hot.”

“Fuck you.”

Corey *was* hot though. Jack just didn’t see it. Brandon’s guilty pleasure during the summers was reading online fiction, and the nerd/jock romances were his favorite. For some reason, he found brainy guys sexy. Especially a cute brainy guy like Corey, who embraced his inner geek with pride. Besides, Brandon was tired of hooking up with guys who were just like him. He talked about baseball enough with his buddies. It might be fun to try something new.

“You don’t think you can do better, is that it?” Jack asked. “You don’t gotta settle for someone like Corey.”

“I like him.”

Jack shrugged. “Whatever, man. Just don’t dick him around. He’s a nice kid.”

“I won’t. But do you think he’d go out with me? You know him better than I do.”

“Dunno. I’ve never seen him with a guy before. Just... be confident. None of your wishy-washy shit.” Jack leaned back and closed his eyes again.

He was right. Guys liked confidence. Brandon stared out the bus window and imagined himself marching into the tutoring center and charming the pants off Corey.

CHAPTER FOUR

Corey was helping a girl with her algebra homework when Stat Guy walked into the tutoring center. He hadn't thought he'd see the guy again. He'd seemed pretty spooked last time they talked. To be honest, Corey had been a little spooked as well. He liked to keep his private life private, especially at work, so he'd been thrown off guard when the guy asked Corey about Jack.

Corey refrained from making eye contact. If he were lucky, Stat Guy would end up working with Avani today and there would be no confrontation. Corey had no interest in carrying on the kind of small talk that was expected of people who had mutual friends. Besides, he was still a little annoyed to learn that Jack had been talking about him and no doubt making fun of his cube (which he was pretty damn awesome at solving, thank you very much). Jack was cool, but not the most sensitive of guys.

After explaining for the third time why the quantity $(x + a)$ divided by x was not equal to a , Corey silently rejoiced when the girl said she had to go. He liked his job, and he enjoyed teaching, but some people *just didn't get it*. It was frustrating for both of them.

Corey twisted in his chair—first right, then left. He scanned the room to see who might be waiting for help and met Stat Guy's friendly smile. *Crap*. He was the only one waiting for help—no getting out of this one. At least statistics was higher-level math. It would be a welcome change from the past three hours of basic algebra. Corey waved him over. "Hey. Welcome back." He offered the guy a smile.

Stat Guy's face lit up. "Hi. I was hoping you'd be here."

"Oh. Well, most of the tutors here have taken statistics. If I'm not here, I'm sure someone else would be able to help."

"Yeah, I know. Still, I was hoping to see you."

Corey held his smile, but was unsure how to respond.

"My name's Brandon. Sorry I left in such a hurry last time." Brandon rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess I kinda panicked. It was my first time here."

“Yeah, I figured. It’s okay.” Brandon must’ve been one of those guys who had a hard time asking for help. That was all right; he’d worked with people like that before. “Let’s get started then. You still working on confidence intervals?”

Brandon nodded and opened to the page he’d bookmarked in his textbook.

“When you’re asked to find a confidence interval, there are five things you need to do: define your parameter, check your assumptions, name the procedure, compute the interval, and state your conclusion.”

Brandon blinked a few times, then stared at him blankly. “How do you remember all that?”

“It’s easy. Whenever I hear ‘confidence interval’, I think PANIC.”

“Now that I can do.”

“It’s a mnemonic device. P-A-N-I-C: Parameter, Assumptions, Name, Interval, Conclusion.” Corey wrote down each of the steps for Brandon, then helped him work through a sample problem. He watched as Brandon tried the next one on his own. He didn’t seem to have a solid grasp of the concepts yet, but Corey assured him it would get easier with practice.

Brandon smiled at him again. “Can I carry you around in my pocket?”

“It would be a pretty tight fit.”

Brandon’s eyes sparkled. “I’d be okay with that.”

Oh. *Oh. Awkward.*

He fumbled with his papers when Corey didn’t respond.

“So, keep practicing with those problems,” Corey told him. “You seem to be getting the hang of it. But come back if you need more help. The center is open Monday through Saturday.”

“Thanks. My schedule’s kinda crazy because of baseball, but I’m sure I’ll need some more help. I gotta get a good grade on my next test.” Brandon packed up his stuff and headed out.

It was near closing time, and there weren’t any other students there, so as soon as the door clicked shut behind Brandon, Avani jumped out of her chair. “That boy has the hots for you,” she said.

“What?”

“Please. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice.” She rested her hands over her heart and said in her sweetest voice, “Can I carry you in my pocket?”

Corey rolled his eyes. “He was being friendly. He knows my roommate.”

“Mhm. And how do you explain the way he was checking you out when he first got here? He was practically salivating. He likes you. And he’s totally hot. I’m jealous.”

“Even if that’s true, I’m not interested.”

Corey grabbed his bag and headed out, leaving Avani to lock up. It was a short walk to his dorm, and when he arrived, he found Jack studying. He was sprawled across his unmade bed, reading a textbook. They exchanged cursory hellos, then Corey sat at his desk and booted up his laptop. Within five minutes, Samantha called.

“The answer is no, Samantha.”

“Corey, it’s been a week. What’s your excuse this time?”

He knew she was losing patience with him. She usually only called once a week, but since he’d lost that stupid game and had agreed to her flirting-with-boy demands, she’d been calling or texting every day to find out if he’d done the deed.

“I’ve been busy, Sam. Besides, it’s not that easy.”

She flashed him a look of disapproval. “It’s not that hard, either.”

“That’s what she said,” Jack called out in the background.

Corey glared at his roommate, who still had his nose buried in his book. “You never miss an opening, do you?”

“That’s what she said.”

Corey shook his head and turned back to Samantha. “You see what I have to put up with around here?”

“You poor thing,” she said playfully. “Don’t change the subject. Just walk up to the next guy you see, smile, and pay him a compliment.”

“Other than Jack, the next guy I see will probably be standing in the bathroom, wearing nothing but a towel. Are you trying to get me pummeled?”

“Jack!” she called. “Help me out here.”

Jack lowered his book and looked over, but made no effort to move. “What about Brandon?”

Corey made a quick back and forth motion with his hand, urging Jack to shut up.

“Who’s Brandon?” Samantha asked, her eyes wide. “Corey? Who’s Brandon?”

Great. Now he’d have to answer a zillion questions. Corey hadn’t said anything to Jack about meeting Brandon, which could only mean Jack and Brandon had been talking about him again.

“At least he’s gay,” Jack said. “Probably a safer bet than hitting on some dude in the bathroom.”

“I’m not hitting on anyone!” Corey said, throwing his hands up. “And quit eavesdropping.”

“WHO’S BRANDON?”

Corey sighed and returned his attention to Samantha. “He’s a friend of Jack’s. I met him the other day at work.”

“And he’s gay? Is he cute?”

Corey shrugged.

“Don’t hold out on me, Cor. Is he cute?”

“He’s all right.” But he was more than all right. He was tall with broad shoulders and nicely sculpted arms, and he had short blond hair and big, innocent green eyes. But he wasn’t about to tell her all that, especially not with Jack in the room.

“Sounds to me like you’ve found your guy.”

“I don’t know if I’m even gonna see him again. Besides, I don’t wanna give him the wrong impression. What if he thinks I like him?”

“Oh the horror!” she mocked. “I’m not letting you off the hook. If you don’t get your flirt on soon, I’m upping the stakes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she teased. “Streaking across campus maybe?”

“No, no, no. We’re not doing that again.”

“Again?” Jack said. “When did you go streaking?”

“High school,” Corey muttered. “She was always trying to get me out of my pants one way or another.”

“Hey,” she protested. “As I recall, you didn’t put up much of a fight. The skinny-dipping was your idea, remember? Our boy here’s a bit of an exhibitionist.”

“Dude, I never would’ve guessed,” Jack said.

“Teenage hormones, that’s all,” Corey stated in his defense.

“Well pump up some of those old hormones and flirt with that boy, Brandon. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Frak,” Corey mumbled.

“Sorry,” Jack offered in an amused tone.

What was Brandon’s deal, anyway? He could ask Jack about him, but he’d already spent too much time thinking on the matter. He needed to focus on things that were important, like cracking ciphertext for the next round of the cryptology contest.

CHAPTER FIVE

“You think he’ll be there?” Brandon asked as he and Jack waited for the elevator. He wiped his palms on the legs of his jeans. He still hadn’t worked out what he was going to say to Corey.

“Dunno. I don’t keep track of his schedule. But if he is, I’ll make myself scarce so you can talk to him.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Don’t be surprised if he shoots you down, though. He’s antisocial.”

Brandon could relate to that. Well, he could relate to *wanting* to be like that. He was tired of being around so many people all the time. People seemed to flock toward him wherever he went. In class, there were always a handful of people who sat next to him and tried to chat him up. He received countless invitations to hang out or party. He’d thought that when he came out in college, he would lose friends, perhaps even disappear into social oblivion, but that hadn’t happened at all. Sometimes he thought being gay actually made people *more* interested in being his friend, like he was a line item to be checked off on a list of things that made people cool.

Jack wasn’t like that though. They’d been friends since freshman year, largely because Jack never stopped talking about baseball and Brandon never minded listening. Besides, he knew Jack would always have his back. He’d proved it on more than one occasion when other players directed gay slurs at Brandon. Being a *pitcher* didn’t help any—he’d heard his fair share of pitcher/catcher jokes. Did people give Corey a hard time like that? He hoped not. It made him crazy just thinking about it.

Jack pushed open his door and entered the dorm room, but Brandon paused in the hallway. There was something about Corey that made his insides flip; he wanted so badly to make a good impression and to get to know him better.

Jack turned and gave him a dumbfounded look. “You coming in?”

Brandon entered the room, then immediately looked to his right to see Corey sitting cross-legged on his bed with a notebook in his lap. He had a textbook open in front of him. Brandon offered him a smile, but Corey sat motionless with a bewildered look on his face.

Jack slapped Brandon on the shoulder. “Hey, wait here a minute. I gotta use the john.”

“S-sure.” The door clicked shut behind Jack, but neither Brandon nor Corey moved. Brandon knew he had to get his act together. *Confidence is sexy!* He walked over to the edge of Jack’s bed and smoothed the blanket, then sat down. “So, how’s it going?”

Corey fidgeted with his notebook, which only drew Brandon’s attention to Corey’s bare legs. His eyes traveled up Corey’s thighs to the red boxers Corey was trying to cover, and Brandon licked his lips involuntarily.

“Fine. Just doing math homework.” Corey looked down and returned to writing in his notebook.

So much for conversation.

With Corey’s attention diverted, Brandon allowed himself to study Corey more closely. He looked as though he’d just come out of the shower. His hair was damp and pushed back as though he’d been running his fingers through it. With his left hand, Corey was absentmindedly rubbing his bare foot and flexing his toes. God, Brandon wanted to be the one touching him like that. Should he have worn one of his muscle shirts to show off the definition in his shoulders and upper arms? Maybe that would’ve held Corey’s attention. Corey was wearing a plain, loose-fitting T-shirt, but he still looked damn sexy in it. Brandon focused on the front of the shirt.

“ $1+1=10$?”

Corey looked up. “Huh?”

“Your shirt. It says one plus one equals ten.”

“Oh. Yeah, it’s a joke.” Corey smiled. “It actually says one plus one equals two. Ten would be one, one, zero.”

Brandon had no clue what Corey was talking about.

His confusion must have shown because Corey explained further, “One, zero is how you write the number two in binary.”

Yeah, that still didn’t make any sense.

“It’s complicated,” Corey said, as if to reassure him he wasn’t a complete idiot.

Brandon looked around the room, desperate to find something to talk about. “So, Jack told me you like *Battlestar Galactica*.”

Corey’s face brightened momentarily. “Yeah, do you?”

“Uh... no. I mean, I don’t know. Maybe we could hang out and watch it together sometime?”

Corey considered it a moment. “I’m pretty busy with my classes and tutoring and everything.”

That didn’t sound promising. Brandon scrambled for a recovery. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you about that. About tutoring. I could really use your help with my stats class. Outside the tutoring center, I mean.”

“Like a private tutor? But the center is free.”

“I know, but the hours don’t really work with my schedule. And I like the way you explain things. You really helped me the other day with my confidence intervals. Jack said you might be willing.”

Corey tapped his pencil against his notebook. “All right. I have some time on Sunday.”

“That would be awesome. Thank you so much.”

That would give Brandon enough time to come up with a game plan.

CHAPTER SIX

Corey sat at his desk and worked on his latest cryptology challenge—cracking a Hill cipher—while he waited for Brandon to arrive for their tutoring session. He'd just finished writing a Python program that would drag a set of likely quadgrams across the ciphertext to determine the key matrix when he heard the knock on his door.

"It's open," he yelled, then lowered his voice as Brandon walked in. "Just give me a second to save my..." Corey did a double-take when he saw Brandon. He was wearing basketball shorts and a sleeveless shirt. His shoulders and arms were as beautifully sculpted as Corey had imagined they would be. Corey bit down on the side of his cheek to keep from smiling. Brandon was clearly trying to show off his goods. Corey supposed he should be flattered that Brandon wanted to impress him. Or maybe it was an attempt to manipulate Corey into helping him study. Was Brandon genuinely attracted to him? He wondered briefly how Brandon might react if Corey were the one showing a little skin.

"Hey," Brandon said with a smile. "Where should I put my stuff?"

Corey sat on the floor in front of his bed, then patted the space beside him. "This okay?"

"Yeah." Brandon joined him on the floor. "Thanks for doing this. You're a lifesaver. I've got a test on Tuesday, and I really need to get a good grade on it."

"Okay. Well, let's get started." Corey looked over Brandon's sparse notes to see what he was supposed to be learning: hypothesis testing. He took some time to explain the purpose of conducting a hypothesis test and then went through the steps involved. Brandon seemed to follow along okay when Corey did a problem, but he struggled when he had to work one out on his own. Corey noticed that Brandon became quieter and more deflated as time went by. "Let's take a break for a minute," he suggested.

Brandon pulled his knees up and buried his head in his arms. "This is pointless," he muttered. "I'm never gonna get it. I'm just not smart enough."

“Hey.” Corey tapped him with his foot, and Brandon lifted his head. “You’re not dumb. Don’t give up.”

“I used to be good at math. But at some point, it just got ridiculously hard.”

Corey bit his lower lip. The joke was on the tip of his tongue. Should he say it? No. Oh, but Samantha would be so proud. And Jack would too. “That’s what she said,” he blurted.

Brandon looked startled but then chuckled. “I see Jack’s rubbed off on you.”

“That’s what she said,” Corey repeated, then laughed along with Brandon. Was that considered flirting? Would it satisfy Samantha’s request? It was the first time he’d ever made a “that’s what she said” joke. He liked that he was able to make Brandon laugh, especially after how miserable he’d looked for the past half hour. “Everyone’s got different talents. So you’re not a math genius. I’m sure there’s lots of other things you’re good at. Like baseball, right?”

Brandon shrugged. “I guess. Coach thinks so. But I’m not even sure I wanna play baseball after college. I love the game, but I don’t know if I want to live the lifestyle—always on the road, away from home and family, constantly worrying about injuries and being traded. And the organization isn’t exactly gay friendly. It’s a lot of pressure.”

“Wow, I never thought about it like that. I assumed all you guys dreamed of making it in the big leagues.”

“Well, yeah, I do, sometimes. But sometimes I think the reality of it would never live up to the fantasy.”

“I don’t know. I mean, you can’t really know unless you try, right?”

“Yeah, but the thing is, in order to make it, to go all the way, you gotta want it more than anything. And I’m not sure I do.”

“So what do you want to do, then?”

“That’s the problem. I have no idea. I’m not really good at anything besides baseball.”

“Hmm. Well, you have a couple years to figure it out, right?”

“Yeah, I guess. What about you? Do you know what you wanna do after you get out of here?”

Corey grinned and nodded. “Yeah, I’ve pretty much had it figured out since I was fifteen. I went to math camp that summer and learned about cryptology.”

“Math camp?” Brandon looked bewildered. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing.”

“Yep. Have you ever heard of *Kryptos*?”

Brandon shook his head.

“It’s one of the most famous unsolved codes in the world. It’s carved into a big sculpture in front of the CIA building. Three of the four sections have already been cracked, but the last one remains a mystery. I wanna be the one to solve it before the artist keels over.”

“Wow. You think you can do it?”

“I *know* I can do it.”

“So that’s like a real job? Solving puzzles?”

“Well, solving *Kryptos* would be for fun, but yeah. It’s not just about solving puzzles. Ever hear of data encryption? Every time you buy something online, thank a cryptologist for protecting you from identity theft.”

“That sounds... really important. Not like baseball.”

Corey’d never thought much of sports, but it seemed rude to say so. Even if it wasn’t his thing, other people certainly got enjoyment from it. “People need heroes, right? And athletes have been part of the human experience forever. I bet even cavemen competed in athletic events.”

“And solved puzzles too.”

“You see? We’re both on the right track. And I love games too, just not of the athletic variety. I like board games and stuff. Just be glad we’re not in ancient Greece. We’d probably have to play naked.”

The flicker of heat in Brandon’s eyes was unmistakable. When had Corey turned into such a flirt? And why did he enjoy the feeling so much? Brandon seemed incapable of speech at that moment, so Corey redirected their attention

to Brandon's notebook. "I have an idea. I want you to look over these notes while I make up a practice quiz. For every question you get right, I'll take something off."

"Huh?" Brandon's eyes widened. "You mean... clothing?"

Corey smirked. "Yep. But if you get a question wrong, I get to put something back on." It was a ballsy move. He was only wearing a T-shirt, jeans, boxers, and a pair of socks. If Brandon got the first five questions right, Corey was screwed. Then again, if he got them all wrong, Brandon would be terribly discouraged about his upcoming test. Corey really wanted to help boost his confidence. He made the first two questions really easy, then mixed up the difficulty level of the others. Bare feet weren't such a big deal.

Brandon studied his notes with renewed interest, but was it sinking in?

"Ready?" Corey said.

Brandon slapped his notebook shut, then inhaled and exhaled deeply. "Okay. First question."

Corey handed Brandon the quiz and waited with bated breath as he worked on the first problem.

It didn't take him long to arrive at an answer, but Brandon hovered over the value with his eraser. "I'm not sure if this is right."

"Let's see..." Corey scratched his chin and wrinkled his brows to build suspense. Then he grinned and nodded. "You got it." He whipped off his left sock and tossed it onto the bed. Then he flexed his foot and wriggled his toes shamelessly. "Next!"

Brandon gulped and moved on to the next question.

He was doing well so far. As much as Corey didn't want to strip down too far, he was happy to see that Brandon had remembered the steps and was on his way to finding the correct answer. It didn't take him long to finish.

"Awesome," Corey said as he removed his other sock. "You'll have me naked in no time."

Brandon attempted to say something, but only managed a squeak.

"Next?"

Brandon read the question aloud. “Explain the meaning of my T-shirt and why it’s funny.”

Corey loved his math jokes.

“Uh...” Brandon stared at Corey’s chest, attempting to decipher the symbols on the fabric. “Y zero?”

He knew Brandon wouldn’t get this one right. It wasn’t exactly a fair question, but he was in a playful mood, and besides, he wasn’t about to get completely naked. “Is that funny?”

“Dude, nothing about statistics is funny.”

“Give up?”

Brandon nodded.

“What’s this?” Corey asked, pointing to the letter y on the shirt.

“Y.”

Then he pointed to the subscript.

“Zero.”

“What’s another word for zero?” Corey asked.

“Zilch?”

Corey laughed. “Naught. N-A-U-G-H-T. So it reads ‘why not?’.”

Brandon still looked confused. “And that’s funny?”

“Yes! That’s funny. And I get to put my sock back on. Don’t feel bad, though. I’m pretty sure that one won’t be on your test.”

“You don’t like to play fair, do you?”

Corey shrugged. “They say *all’s* fair in love and war.”

Brandon waved his hand back and forth between them. “So which one is this?”

It was a good question—one Corey didn’t have an answer for. He tapped his fingers on Brandon’s paper. “Back to the quiz, Romeo.”

Three questions down. One sock off. So far, his virtue was intact.

Brandon mixed up his p and p -hat in the next problem, resulting in a faulty conclusion. Corey put his other sock on with exaggerated motion. “Gosh, it’s warm in here,” he teased. “I have so many clothes on.”

Brandon poked him with the eraser end of his pencil.

“Come on, you can do this,” Corey reassured him. He pointed out the error and walked him through the correct procedure once more.

Brandon got the next question right. And the next. Six questions down. Two socks off.

When Brandon failed to check the “nearly normal” condition for number seven, Corey reached for his sock.

“Wait, wait,” Brandon said. “I got this.” He found the mistake and proceeded to complete the problem correctly.

Corey had to decide whether he’d strip off his shirt or his pants. He’d feel more exposed without his shirt since he was wearing boxers, which were almost like shorts. Still, a rush of excitement spread through him as he stood, then unzipped his pants and slid them down his legs. Brandon wouldn’t be able to see his *equipment*, but the suggestion was a powerful one, and Corey was acutely aware of the reaction he was causing in Brandon. Those basketball shorts didn’t hide much, and Brandon hadn’t made an effort to cover himself. Corey sat back down beside Brandon, where he could feel the heat coming off his body. He feared his plan had backfired. They were both distracted now.

Corey cleared his throat. “Just a few more problems now.”

Brandon’s nostrils flared as he breathed heavily. “Corey,” he whispered roughly.

“Come on.” Corey tapped the paper insistently. “Almost done.”

Brandon attempted to solve the remaining problems but missed one after another. His concentration was shot.

Corey didn’t stand when he put on his pants, as he feared his arousal was noticeable. But by the end of the quiz, he was fully clothed again, and had regained his composure. When Brandon reached for him, Corey pulled away. He was attracted to Brandon. He seemed like a really nice guy, but Corey had

always been certain he didn't want to get involved with someone at this stage in his life.

Brandon leaned forward. "Can I kiss you?"

Corey needed more time to sort his feelings out. It was a tempting offer, but he didn't want to rush into something he'd regret. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll let you kiss me if you get at least a B on your test."

Brandon smiled at him. "Consider it done."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Test paper in hand, Brandon rapped on the door to Jack and Corey's room. The spot where he'd been clenching the paper as he raced across campus was damp, but he'd been careful not to smudge the large, red B at the top of the page. Nervous energy caused him to bounce slightly while he waited at the door.

"Open!" Jack yelled.

Brandon pushed on the door and searched for Corey.

"Hey man," Jack said. "What's up? Were we supposed to hang out this afternoon?"

Brandon exhaled loudly. "He's not here."

"Who? Corey? Nah, he's probably in class. Or working. You all right?"

"Fucking fantastic!" Brandon waved his paper in the air. "I got a B on my stat test thanks to him. I gotta find him. I'll catch you later, man." He turned on his heels and ran back out.

He jogged over to the tutoring center, hoping to find Corey there. He was out of breath and a little sweaty by the time he arrived, but he couldn't wait to see him. Brandon poked his head in the door, and his stomach flip-flopped when he saw him. He was working with a student while fiddling with his cube under the table. The sight was so quintessentially Corey, it made Brandon's heart flutter.

He took a seat and waited for Corey to finish with his pupil. Corey glanced over briefly and smiled. They hadn't seen each other since their tutoring session four days ago. God, Brandon had hardly been able to focus on anything the past few days other than thoughts of Corey stripping out of his pants. He'd never gotten so aroused so quickly as he had that moment Corey tugged down his zipper. And now Brandon was here to collect his kiss. He would actually get to touch Corey. If only that bunghole sitting at his station would leave!

Brandon got his wish ten minutes later. As soon as the guy stepped away from Corey's station, Brandon walked up and slapped his test on the table.

“So that explains the cheesy grin. Congratulations.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?”

Corey tried to hide his smile, but didn’t quite succeed. “That you’ll no longer be needing my services?”

Brandon shook his head. “Try again.”

Corey leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Let me tell Avani I’m taking my break. Then we can go outside.”

Brandon’s body hummed with anticipation as he followed Corey out the door. Corey seemed to be in a good mood. Had he been looking forward to the kiss as much as Brandon had?

“So...” Corey said. “You’re happy about your test?”

Brandon smiled and nodded. “More than you know.”

“And you’re here to hold me to my promise?”

“Yeah. If you’re still willing.”

Corey rested his back against the wall. “Go for it.”

“What, here?” Brandon looked down the hall in both directions, noting a few students milling about. “I was hoping for a little more privacy.”

“All right.” Corey pushed off the wall. “Lead the way. I only have a few minutes though, then I have to get back.”

“Would you rather meet up tonight instead? When we have more time?”

Corey shook his head. “No, I’ve got a lot of stuff to do later.”

“Okay, let’s go in there,” Brandon said, nodding toward the restroom.

Corey took off toward the bathroom, leaving Brandon to follow like a lost puppy. Once inside, Corey opened the door to one of the stalls and ushered Brandon inside. It wasn’t a romantic setting by any stretch of the imagination, but at least they were alone. And standing very close to one another.

Corey stared up at Brandon expectantly. Would it be okay for Brandon to touch him? He wanted to, but didn’t know what the boundaries were, so he merely bent down and pressed his lips to Corey’s. A dizzying heat spread through his insides, and he grabbed Corey’s waist to steady himself. Corey’s

hands ran up and down his biceps, then squeezed his arms gently. So maybe Corey *did* like his muscles after all. God, he wanted to press his body against Corey's. He wanted to feel those hands on every part of him. But it wouldn't be right to take more without asking. It felt like Corey was enjoying it too, though. His lips moved softly but surely against Brandon's. More. He wanted more.

Corey broke the kiss and pulled back. "That was..." he said in a rough whisper.

"Good?"

Corey smiled and nodded.

"Can I see you later?"

Corey averted his eyes and licked his lips. "Brandon... I don't think that's a good idea. You're a nice guy and everything, but... I don't think it would work out. I don't really have time to get involved with someone and... you and I are so different."

"You mean I'm not smart enough."

"No. That's not what I mean. I mean you play baseball and I play *Warhammer*. You like to go out. I like to stay in. I've got the next five years of my life mapped out in detail, and you're still trying to figure things out."

There had to be something Brandon could say in response, but what?

"I'm sorry. I have to go." Corey unlocked the stall and walked away.

Brandon swallowed the lump in his throat, closed his eyes, and rested his head against the wall. What had just happened? He'd been so sure Corey was into him. That kiss had meant something, for both of them. He was certain of it. So they liked different things? That didn't mean they couldn't like *each other*. But how could he get that message across to Corey? Brandon straightened his slumped shoulders as an idea formed in his mind. A *secret message* just might do the trick.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s this?” Corey said aloud, even though he was alone in his room. He’d just returned from taking a shower to find a small, folded card sitting in the middle of his desk. Jack must have left it for him before heading out to class. The front of the card was blank, but inside he found a message: HCC CFG PXN ECDP BHGA JP KDCCZ HM PXN CFG JF ECDP BHGA PXNS BDS ADJJFS.

No signature. *Weird*. He glanced over his shoulder and looked around the room to see if anything else seemed out of the ordinary. No, nothing unusual except the card. But who could have left it? And why? Jack didn’t know the first thing about cryptology. It couldn’t be from him. Was this part of the cryptology competition? Would they deliver random notes to the participants? That didn’t seem likely either, not unless it was hand delivered. How else could they be certain he’d received it?

He checked his watch. *Damn*. He only had a few minutes before he had to leave for class. The message would have to wait. No, he’d take it with him. If the lecture was slow, he could play around with the code. He probably wouldn’t be able to crack it by hand, but who knew? He could get lucky. He couldn’t wait to figure it out. Once he knew what it said, he might be able to determine who’d sent it.

He sat in class, half listening to the lecture and half scribbling notes about character frequencies. He first tried swapping C for E, P for T, D for A, F for O, and G for I, which gave the result: HEE EOI TXN CEAT BHID JT KAEEZ HM TXN EOI JO CEAT BHID TXNS BAS DAJJOS. He sighed, knowing that the message was too short for him to be able to expect the frequencies to behave in any predictable way. What he wouldn’t give for ten minutes alone with his laptop! One of the three-letter words was likely “the” and another “and”. And he noticed that there were some repeated words too.

His physics professor droned on as Corey continued to work on deciphering the message, hoping the cryptographer used monoalphabetic substitution. Without knowing the key and ciphering scheme, however, his attempts were futile. As soon as class ended, Corey speed-walked to the

library, where he found an empty table and set up his laptop. He launched Python and ran the ciphertext through his cracking programs. Bingo! The cryptographer used an affine cipher with a multiplicative key of seven and an additive key of three. The deciphered message read: ILL LET YOU PLAY WITH MY BALLS IF YOU LET ME PLAY WITH YOUR WAR HAMMER.

Corey laughed out loud, then clapped his hand over his mouth as he realized he was in the library. Holy shit, it was from Brandon! But how had he learned to encrypt a message? And why? Okay, it was obvious *why*. Corey sighed and thought about their conversation in the bathroom last week. He'd told Brandon things between them would never work. He remembered his exact words: *you play baseball and I play Warhammer*. Did Brandon even know what *Warhammer* was?

A smile crept over his face as he reread Brandon's message. So it wasn't the most romantic of sentiments, but it was funny and clever. Still, he didn't need this kind of distraction. He'd barely paid attention in class this morning. He sighed, then pulled out his physics book to read over the material he'd missed from the lecture.

He found a new message waiting for him on his desk later that night. Once again, Jack was nowhere to be found. He and Brandon must be working in cahoots to deliver them. Corey's pulse quickened as he opened the card and read the message within: PSS SLA FVB ZAHF PUZPKL MVY HZ SVUN HZ FVB SPRL. As tempting as it was to sit down and crack the code, he folded the card, then stuffed it in his desk drawer instead. He had far more important things to do with his time than decipher secret love notes!

Corey kicked off his shoes and settled on his bed with his philosophy textbook. He glanced briefly at his desk drawer, where the secret message lay safely hidden. *No. Focus*. Schoolwork was more important.

He flipped through his text until he found the chapter he needed to read for homework: *Freedom and Determinism*. The title mocked him from its conspicuous location on the page. Corey uncapped his yellow highlighter, ready to mark key points as he read.

Every so often, his thoughts traveled back to the message in the drawer.

Would this one be a dirty joke too? Maybe, if he finished his homework early, he'd allow himself to decipher the note. *Focus!*

Corey returned his attention to his text. Did he believe in fate or free will? Free will, of course. He was master of his own destiny! All this talk of determinism was silly. All his life, he set his own goals and achieved them through hard work and perseverance. He did what he did because it was what he decided to do. Like this homework assignment, for example. Even though it wasn't due until Friday, he'd decided to finish the reading and work on the essay tonight.

He sat at his desk and booted up his laptop so he could work on the essay. The Python program window was still open from when he'd used it earlier that day. Corey moved the mouse cursor over the button to close the program, then hesitated. The last message had been relatively easy to crack. This new one probably would be too. Brandon wouldn't know how to use advanced encryption techniques, would he? Most likely, Corey would be able to decipher the message in a matter of minutes, then he could focus on his essay. Or he could let the cracking tools run in the background while he worked on the essay. That would be more efficient.

He slid the desk drawer open and retrieved the message, then entered the code into one of the programs. He rummaged through his backpack for his philosophy notebook and pulled out the assignment sheet with the essay question on it.

Ding! The program had deciphered the message. A simple Caesar shift. A wave of excitement coursed through him as he focused on the screen. The message read: ILL LET YOU STAY INSIDE FOR AS LONG AS YOU LIKE. He thought back to their last conversation. What was it he'd said? *You play baseball and I play Warhammer. You like to go out. I like to stay in. I've got the next five years of my life mapped out in detail, and you're still trying to figure things out.* Heat rushed to his face as he realized the double meaning in the message. The image of a naked Brandon sitting on top of him popped into his head. *Fuck.* It was an image he would certainly revisit later.

For now, he had homework to finish. He picked up his philosophy handout and read the essay prompt for the chapter on freedom versus determinism: *If I*

can get someone to do something by “pushing” the right “buttons”, does that constitute evidence that humans are not free but are conditioned animals and not much different from a mouse, pigeon or monkey?

“Aw hell,” he muttered.

No new message came the next morning. He’d had his chance to ask Jack about them before leaving for work that afternoon, but Corey had avoided the subject. He couldn’t risk seeming too eager. Jack might get the wrong idea and encourage Brandon to continue his pursuit. No, if the messages stopped, it would be for the best. Besides, the messages weren’t exactly sentimental. Was Brandon simply looking for a hookup? While that would certainly be fun, it wasn’t worth the headache. Corey had never been good at detaching his feelings when it came to sex.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. Another half hour until he could pack up and go home. This was the time Brandon usually stopped by for help, but there had been no sign of him this evening. Was he doing all right in his Stat class? Would he come back for more help? The minutes dragged on as the questions persisted. Would there be a new message waiting for him when he got back to his dorm? He grabbed his cube, then twisted and turned the rows and columns in a futile attempt to distract himself from his thoughts.

After work, he stopped by the cafeteria to get a quick bite to go before returning to his dorm. A brief scan of the room confirmed there were no new messages. Jack was gone too. *Damn*. He felt stupid for having rushed back. His only reward for his efforts was a lukewarm burger and a bag of soggy fries.

He’d just finished eating when his laptop rang, indicating an incoming call from Samantha. “What’s up, buttercup?”

“Hi, Sam. How’s it going?”

“Just calling to say ‘hey’. What’re you up to?”

“Not much. Getting ready to do some homework.”

“Fuuuuuuun. So how’s Brandon?”

“I told you—there’s nothing going on between me and Brandon.”

“You’re so stubborn. Seriously, Corey, I don’t get you. You have the balls to halfway strip in front of the guy, but not to go on a date with him?”

Balls. He thought of yesterday’s message and chuckled.

“It’s not funny. You’re gonna be a thirty-year-old virgin before you know it.”

“I’m not a virgin,” he reminded her.

“Scott Migley doesn’t count. He was a jerk.”

“Uh... I’m pretty sure that still counts.”

“Whatever,” she said with a wave of dismissal. “This Brandon guy sounds nice. And he’s a friend of Jack’s so he can’t be that bad. Aren’t you even a little bit tempted?”

Corey bit his lower lip. Should he tell her? Nah, what was the point? He wasn’t interested in a hookup.

When Corey woke the next morning, he found a new card waiting for him on his desk. Jack was still asleep and snoring softly. He’d come in late last night after playing an away game. He must’ve set the card up while Corey was asleep. They sure were going to a lot of trouble to deliver these messages.

Corey opened the card and examined the message: TEE DLIEZ PAV FSKUIXK TLT SW TYTA N CIUI YFN HSU OXI SYHBQU NOZEI MYFMEV XO WHYJZGX TLRVLX RLYRE. He didn’t have anywhere to be today, so he had time to work on deciphering the message right then. Did he want to do it in front of Jack though? He glanced at his sleeping roommate, then set about the task. If he was quiet, Jack would probably sleep for another hour or so.

Corey ran the code through several of his programs before deciding it wasn’t monoalphabetic. Brandon had upped his game. Corey opened his web browser and navigated to his Vigenère cracking tool. He was just about to enter the ciphertext, when he heard Jack stir. Corey quickly minimized the window before turning to see Jack stumble out of bed.

Jack stretched his arms overheard, then yawned and scratched his balls. He grunted something incomprehensible before leaving the room.

Whew! Corey let out the breath he'd been holding. Why was he so nervous? He was more worried about Jack catching him decipher Brandon's message than he was about Jack catching him jerk off in their room. He only had a couple minutes before Jack would be back from the bathroom. He needed a decoy. He could always say he was working on the cryptology competition. Jack wouldn't know Corey had submitted the solution for the last round and was waiting for the next set of code. Even so, Jack wasn't stupid. He'd see through the lie in a heartbeat.

Corey jumped when the door swung open and Jack reentered the room.

Jack looked over and cocked his head. "You look guilty."

"Huh?"

"You watching porn or something?"

"Me? I'm not doing anything." Corey's voice was an octave too high.

"Riiight. Just keep the volume down." Jack crawled under his covers and closed his eyes.

Corey scooted his chair to block Jack's line of sight to the laptop screen. He muted the volume, then got back to work cracking the code. Although the message was longer than the previous ones, it was still too short to make cracking easy. After half an hour of trial and error, the closest he got was: ONE KHIKW VVE FZGUOUQ OUT ZS TEQG I LIBE YLK NND OEE SEEHLD NVVEO JEAVEC TO CEEEIGE PLXSRS ALFNE, using keyword FRATEAUDU. If the first word was "one", then the fourth or fifth letter in the keyword was wrong. He shifted the "T" one letter at a time, checking the frequency histogram, the keyword, and the plaintext message. When he set the keyword to FRAKEAUDU, he paused. He recognized a few words in the plaintext: ONE THIKW VVE FIGUOUQ OUT IS TEQG I LIKE YLK NND ONE SEEHLD NEVEO JEAVEL TO CEEEIGN PLXSRS ALONE. He stared at the key word until it suddenly clicked. Frak Earth!

"Oh my God!"

Jack shot up in bed. "What? What's happening?"

"Frak Earth! It's Frak Earth!"

“The hell?” Jack glared at him.

“The keyword! It’s...” His voice trailed off. “Sorry. I guess I got a little overly excited.”

“Are you watching *Battlestar Galactica* again?”

“No, I’m... uh... nothing. Sorry. Go back to sleep.”

Jack crawled out of bed and crossed to Corey’s desk. He glanced at the computer screen, and then at Corey. “Let me guess. You got Brandon’s message.”

“Well... I haven’t read it yet, but I think I just cracked it.”

Jack lifted an eyebrow. “Well go on.”

“Um... are you just gonna stand there? It’s private.”

“Yep. Now read the fucking message.”

Damn, he was grumpy when he woke up. Corey turned around and focused on the screen. The decoded message read: ONE THING IVE FIGURED OUT IS THAT I LIKE YOU AND ONE SHOULD NEVER TRAVEL TO FOREIGN PLACES ALONE. Corey smiled as he read it aloud for Jack.

“That’s it? *That’s* the super-secret message? What the fuck does it even mean? Are you going on a trip?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Where to?”

Corey chewed on his bottom lip. “I thought I knew, but now I’m not so sure.”

“He really likes you, you know. We’ve been friends for two years, and I’ve never seen him go after someone like this.”

Corey nodded but said nothing. He had some thinking to do.

CHAPTER NINE

“Step, behind, throw!” Coach called out. “Keep those hands centered.”

Coach had Brandon doing long toss drills every two to three days to stretch and strengthen his pitching arm.

“Good follow through. Again.”

Brandon concentrated on keeping his movements smooth and maintaining a consistent release point.

“Good. Now back it up ten feet. Let’s do another five throws.”

As Brandon shuffled backward, a figure walking along the opposite side of the chain link fence caught his attention. *Corey?* What was Corey doing there?

“Let’s go!” Coach barked.

“Yes, Coach.” Brandon looked down at his feet and lined them up, shoulder width apart. *Step, behind, throw!* The movements were automatic at this point.

He snuck a quick glance in Corey’s direction. Was he here to see Brandon? Would Corey be able to pick him out of the dozens of people on the field? Brandon could wave to him, but Coach wouldn’t take kindly to the loss of focus. No, better to just power through and hope Corey didn’t leave. He must be here to talk to Brandon about the messages. Was he upset about the sex jokes? They’d seemed funny at the time, but now... *Shit.* He wouldn’t dump him here—in front of all the guys—would he? Brandon’s stomach twisted in a knot.

“Hart! Keep that center of balance.”

Brandon worked on the long toss for another ten minutes before Coach let him take a break. Brandon jogged over to the fence to where Corey sat on the bleachers. Corey, who appeared to be talking on his phone, hopped down to meet him.

“Hey,” Brandon said, slightly out of breath.

Corey shielded his eyes from the sunlight with his hand and smiled at him. “Hi. Hope you don’t mind me coming by.”

“No, of course not. I can only talk for a minute though.”

“Hello? Hello!” A girl’s voice called from the phone in Corey’s hand.

“Oh, sorry,” Corey said. He held up the phone to reveal a girl smiling and waving. “Say hi to my friend, Sam.”

Brandon chuckled. “Uh, hi.”

Corey turned his back on Brandon, then lifted the phone and muttered, “Happy now?” before turning back to Brandon.

Brandon lifted his baseball cap and wiped his brow with his sleeve. “Friend of yours?”

“Yeah, she wanted to say hi. Sorry.”

“Okay...”

“Um... I stopped by to give you this.” Corey handed him a small slip of folded paper.

Brandon opened it to find a garbled message: QHSTPEHY IBIR KG GY PJJG WRHP YJTP OHQDRSOHFF QAJPSQ. Corey had written to him in code? *Fuck*. He had no idea how to unscramble these things. “Oh, uh...”

Corey chuckled. “You know, generally, when you *want* someone to decipher your message, you give ’em the key.”

“Oh. So you didn’t—”

“I figured them out. Now this one’s for you. It’s a simple keyword cipher. The keyword is *homerun*.”

“Homerun,” he repeated. “Okay.” It sounded promising.

“Make sure you read it before Saturday.”

“Number Seven! Let’s go!” one of the coaches yelled.

“I will. I gotta go.”

Corey waved, but stayed on the bleachers and watched Brandon as he returned to the field. That had to be a good sign. If only Brandon knew what the note said.

Brandon checked his watch: quarter to nine. He didn't want to show up early. He could hang here in the lobby for a few minutes. Or he could take the stairs. Yeah, that would kill a little extra time. The seventh floor—that wouldn't be too bad. He would take it slow to avoid breaking a sweat. His nerves were already shot, making that likely.

When he got to the seventh floor, he paused in the stairwell and pulled Corey's note from his pocket. He had read it a hundred times over the past three days. He'd printed the decoded letters above the ones Corey had written: SATURDAY NINE PM MY ROOM WEAR YOUR BASKETBALL SHORTS.

It was an unusual request, but he was wearing his basketball shorts, just as Corey had asked. Brandon took a deep breath, then pulled open the door and made his way to room 714.

Corey answered moments after Brandon knocked. "You made it!"

God, he was beautiful when he smiled.

"Come on in." Corey motioned at his bed, then took a seat on Jack's mattress, facing Brandon, and looking him up and down. "You can take your shoes off if you want."

"Okay." So, they weren't going out. And he was gonna be here for a while. "Did you... wanna do something? Watch a movie or something?"

"Actually, I thought we could study."

"Oh." Study? Corey invited him over on a Saturday night to *study*? Of all the things Brandon had imagined they might do tonight, studying hadn't been on the list.

"Like last time, you know? If you get a question right, I take something off. If you get it wrong, I put something back on."

Brandon's pulse quickened. He made a swift assessment of Corey's outfit: T-shirt, jeans, socks, boxers? He could have him completely naked in five questions. Assuming he could answer the questions. More likely than not, Corey would be completely clothed the entire time and Brandon would leave humiliated. Was it a trick? Was Corey trying to make him look stupid? "I

didn't know I was gonna be taking a quiz," he said weakly. "I would've looked over my notes."

"It's okay. Just do your best." Corey got up and handed Brandon a pencil, paper, and calculator from his desk, then remained standing a few feet in front of him. He nodded and pointed to the paper. "Question one..."

Brandon held the paper with sweaty palms. He really wasn't up for this. "Okay. Question one. A baseball player gets seventy-two hits after one hundred eighty times at bat. What is his batting average?" Brandon searched Corey's eyes to see if this was some kind of joke.

Corey responded with a raised eyebrow. "Well?"

"That's a really easy question." He punched the numbers into the calculator, then computed the ratio one more time to be sure he hadn't made a mistake. "His batting average would be four hundred."

Corey lifted a leg and stripped off his sock. "Well done. Question two?"

"A smoking hot pitcher—" Brandon glanced at Corey, and the room suddenly felt much warmer. "—allows four runs in forty-eight innings pitched. What is his Earned Run Average?" Another easy one. He took a few seconds to compute the answer. "Point seven five."

Another sock flew off. "Next?"

Brandon swallowed. "A player gets three home runs, five triples, twelve doubles, twenty singles, and forty outs. What's his slugging percentage?" Didn't Corey know how easy these questions were? It was a simple calculation. "0.888."

"You're really on a roll," Corey said as he peeled off his shirt.

Brandon's heart pounded at the sight of Corey's small, dark nipples, at the way they contrasted with his smooth white skin. He was almost within arm's reach. "Jesus," he whispered.

"Next question?"

He wasn't ready to look at the next question. Surely they'd get harder now, and the clothes would go back on. Couldn't he have a few more minutes to admire the view?

Corey cleared his throat.

“Okay. Number four,” Brandon said. “How many outs are there in one inning?” Now that was just ridic—Brandon looked up and met Corey’s eager gaze. His hand was already on his zipper, waiting for Brandon’s answer. *Holy shit*. This was gonna happen. Brandon’s breath quickened. “S-six. Six outs in an inning.”

Corey tugged down his zipper, pushed his pants down his thighs and stepped out of them.

Brandon let out a moan at the unmistakable bulge in the tight, blue briefs. What was that design on the front? *Oh fuck*. Baseballs and mitts. “So hot,” he whispered.

Corey hugged his chest and shrugged. “You like them?”

“C’mere.” Brandon reached for Corey’s hand, then reeled him in close.

Standing between Brandon’s legs, Corey leaned down and captured Brandon’s mouth in a heated kiss. Those lips Brandon had fantasized about so often were now locked onto his.

Yes, his entire body hummed. Did he have permission to touch? No, he should let Corey set the pace. Holding back would be a lot easier, though, if Corey weren’t practically naked. Maybe a little touch would be okay.

Brandon gently gripped the outside of Corey’s thigh. Corey responded by running his tongue along Brandon’s bottom lip. Brandon opened his mouth and their tongues brushed, softly at first, and then more urgently. God, Corey was a good kisser. Brandon had never been so turned on in his life.

He ran his hand across the front of Corey’s briefs, and Corey softly gasped and pulled away.

“Sorry,” Brandon whispered, moving his hand away. “You’ve got me so worked up.” He didn’t need to say it. The tent in his shorts had signaled his interest at question two.

“You’ve got one more question,” Corey said, practically panting.

And Corey had one more piece of clothing. Brandon trembled with anticipation as he gripped the quiz paper. “Question five: If bases are loaded, how many runs are scored for a homerun?” *Sweet Jesus*. “Four runs.”

“You,” Corey said, resting his hands on hips, “get an A-plus.” He slipped his thumbs under the elastic band of his briefs, then slid them down part way, just far enough to reveal his hip bones and a patch of dark pubic hair. His eyes seemed to be asking if this was what Brandon wanted.

Brandon responded by stripping off his shirt.

Corey licked his lips at the sight of Brandon’s chest and took a step closer. The front of Corey’s briefs revealed a small, wet patch that was too tempting to ignore. Brandon placed his hands over Corey’s, and together they pushed Corey’s briefs down until they fell to his ankles and he kicked them off. Brandon barely had time to shimmy out of his own briefs before Corey jumped onto his lap and wrapped his legs around him.

“Touch me,” Corey whispered roughly, then seized Brandon in a hungry kiss.

Their lips locked together as their hands explored each other’s bodies. Brandon tried to hold back, wanting the pleasure to last as long as possible, but his body was no longer under his control. He stuttered a few incomprehensible syllables as he climaxed, spilling onto Corey’s hand. He continued stroking Corey until he followed moments later.

Corey rested his forehead on Brandon’s shoulder for a minute before getting up and grabbing his T-shirt. He wiped Brandon’s torso, then his own, and tossed the shirt onto the floor.

This was the awkward part of sex, the moments after. They hadn’t talked about it before they’d jumped on in. Was this just a casual hookup? Should he lie down? Would Corey want to cuddle? Would he want Brandon to stay?

Corey turned off the lamp, climbed onto his bed, and scooted towards the wall, where he stretched out on his back. He was so beautiful.

Brandon followed his lead and rested beside him. He should say something. Jack always called him out when he was being “wishy-washy”. *Be confident*. Brandon slid his leg over and rubbed the underside of Corey’s foot with the top of his own. He held his breath, waiting to see how Corey would respond.

Corey threaded his fingers into Brandon’s, then turned on his side and smiled at him.

It was exactly the reassurance Brandon needed. He scooted a little closer and allowed Corey to settle on his chest. Then he ran his fingers through Corey's soft curls until they both fell asleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Corey stirred as his internal alarm clock roused him. Brandon tightened his grip around Corey's waist and pulled him closer. At some point in the night, their bodies had shaped themselves into a comfortable sleeping position, with Brandon spooning Corey from behind. Corey carefully flipped around to face Brandon, who was apparently a heavy sleeper. So this was what it was like waking up with someone in his bed. He studied Brandon's face as he slept. So peaceful. Corey ran his finger along Brandon's jawline. He'd never felt another guy's whiskers before. How often did Brandon have to shave? What was his morning routine like? Was he grumpy in the mornings? What did he like to eat for breakfast? Corey wanted to know everything.

He rubbed his fingers in small circles over Brandon's chest. Brandon murmured softly, rocked his hips against Corey, then sighed contentedly. Corey was aroused, but didn't want to wake Brandon yet. Instead, he nuzzled against Brandon's warm chest and closed his eyes, soaking in the scent of him and enjoying the feel of skin against skin.

Thoughts of last night came to him. Had Brandon sensed how nervous he'd been, or had Corey done a good job of concealing it? He knew Brandon wanted him. He'd never doubted that. The question was, where was this going, and was it going too fast? Did Corey have room in his life for a relationship? He'd never seriously considered it before. Not after the disastrous fling he'd had a year ago. But now... Did Brandon mean what he'd implied in that last message—that he'd be there for Corey, *with* Corey, that Corey wouldn't have to go it alone?

If it hadn't been for those messages... or rather, the *absence* of those messages... It was only after they'd stopped coming that Corey realized how much he missed having that special connection with someone. It was the sweetest, most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for him. Especially since Brandon wasn't into cryptology. How had he pulled it off? He'd have to remember to ask. Or maybe not. The mystery added to the allure. Would the messages end now that they were together? *If* they were together. They hadn't really talked about it. But if last night was anything to go by...

Last night. So hot. Corey inched his hand downward, tracing his fingers in a spiral motion along Brandon's happy trail until they reached his semi-hard dick. He grasped it firmly, then used his thumb to rub a small circle just below the head, which, for Corey at least, was his most sensitive spot.

"Mmmmmm," Brandon moaned.

"Oh, my fucking eyes! Blanket, dude. Blanket! For fuck's sake." Corey jerked his head to see Jack turn and scamper out of the room.

"Oh God. I forgot about him," Corey said, climbing over Brandon. Jack had kindly agreed to spend the night elsewhere so Corey could be alone with Brandon, but they hadn't discussed the possibility of Brandon staying the night. Corey quickly stepped into his briefs and tossed a still-sleepy Brandon his clothes. "Do you think he's pissed?"

Brandon rubbed his eyes. "Nah, he's cool."

"I guess he got an eyeful," Corey said.

"Could've been worse. A few minutes later, who knows what acts of depravity he'd have walked in on."

A loud knock drew their attention to the door. Jack reentered the room, using his baseball cap to shield his eyes.

"It's safe to look now," Brandon said.

Jack lowered the hat. "So? You finally got your heads out of your asses?"

"That's what she said!" Corey blurted, which made Jack laugh, and the tension in the room dissipated.

"Hey, I'm gonna run to the bathroom," Brandon said. "You wanna go get breakfast?"

Corey nodded. "Yeah, right behind you."

"That's what *he* said," Jack added.

Corey chose an empty table near a large window, and Brandon joined him moments later. Corey's eyes bulged when he saw the amount of food on Brandon's tray. So that answered the question about what Brandon liked to eat

for breakfast. *Everything*. Eggs, toast, bacon, hash browns, pancakes, fruit, milk, orange juice. He looked down at his measly bowl of cereal and laughed. “Geez, do we have *anything* in common?”

Brandon smiled. “We both like dick.”

Corey snorted, spraying milk all over his tray.

“Niiice. Food all over your face and a wicked case of bedhead. Adorable. I should take a picture.”

Corey glared at him. “Don’t you dare.”

Brandon fished his phone out of his pocket.

“No!”

“I won’t,” Brandon said, laughing. “I just wanna show you something.”

Corey eyed Brandon suspiciously as he tapped his phone.

“It’s this really cool app called Cryptology. I found it a couple days ago, after you gave me that message to decode. Look, I can type in a message and it’ll code it and send it to you over my phone. Isn’t that awesome?”

Corey fought the urge to jump across the table and kiss him. “That’s... that’s...”

“Cryptastic?”

He and Brandon might not have much in common, but Brandon sure knew how to make him feel good. “Yeah,” Corey said with a goofy grin. “I’ll download it right now.”

Brandon stuffed a forkful of pancakes into his mouth. “Your cereal’s getting soggy.”

“I’ll multitask.” Corey installed the app while he finished eating breakfast. “Should we keep *homerun* as our keyword?”

“I like it. I know I hit a *home run* with you.”

Corey shook his head. “That was super cheesy. But I like it too.”

“Baseball’s full of all kinds of fun phrases.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Well, just off the top of my head there’s a blowout, eat the ball, barehand it, ding dong, doubleheader, four-bagger, grand slam, hardball, in the hole, power stroke, salami, shagging flies, squeeze play, sweet spot, up the elevator shaft—”

“Jesus.”

“And then there’s terms specific to pitching, like cockshot—”

Corey’s eyes bulged. “Cockshot? Seriously?”

Brandon nodded. “Yeah, that’s when you throw a fastball down the middle of home plate at belt level. You don’t want ’em to hit that one. There’s also a comebacker, screwball, spitter, herky-jerky, high and tight, knee-buckler, nibble, pound the batter inside, pound the strike zone, stick it in his ear—”

“Holy crap. Jack must be in that’s-what-she-said heaven. No wonder he loves baseball.”

“Yeah, he gets a lot of zingers in there. And he doesn’t let anyone give me shit, either. He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he’s a good roommate too. I don’t even mind the mess that much. You think he’ll let us have sleepovers again? I mean, if he ever had a girl over, I think I’d freak. That’d just be... weird.”

“We’ll bribe him with cookies.” Brandon reached across the table and took Corey’s hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to him after our game today. And we don’t have to rush things.”

“Thanks.” He squeezed Brandon’s hand. This was all new to him. Slow sounded good. He still needed to learn how to fit having a boyfriend into his busy schedule. But Brandon was busy too, with baseball, so if Corey managed to do the bulk of his schoolwork during those times, they should be able to work in spending time together.

“You look worried.”

“No.” Corey smiled. “For the first time in a long time, I’m *not* worried.”

“Okay. Well I should probably get going. I’ve got a couple things to do before I head to the field. Can I walk you back?”

“No, it’s okay. I’m gonna get a coffee then head back.”

“I really wanna kiss you before I go.”

Corey nodded at the exit. They dropped off their trays and found a semi-secluded spot outside behind a large oak tree. Brandon’s kiss tasted like maple syrup and made Corey tingle from head to toe.

“Can I call you later?” Brandon said.

“Yeah. Good luck with your game. Let me know when the next one is and I’ll try and make it.”

Brandon beamed. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. If you wanna come over tonight, I’ll introduce you to your first Cylon.”

“What’s a Cylon?”

Corey shook his head. “You’ve got a lot to learn.”

“Ready and willing, as long as you’re my tutor.” Brandon gave him one more quick kiss, then said good-bye.

Corey went back inside and got a coffee to go. He was halfway back to his dorm when he got a notification from Brandon: B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS IJS CTQS MHTQR JU WAHS WR EBE OTS MHTQR B WHQ WBSA YJT.

It was quickly followed by another: KQ GHYOR FHSRP YJT MHI ARFK GR WJPD JI GY MJMDQAJS ;-)

Corey smiled and ran up to his room to decipher the message. He could’ve used the app, but he wanted to solve this one by hand. It was more exciting that way.

Three minutes later he had:

i had a _rea_ _i_e _a_ _i_h_ _o_ ____ ca__e o_
ha _e did

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS IJS CTQS MHTQR JU
WAHS WR EBE

____ ca__e i _a_ _i_h_ _o_.

OTS MHTQR B WHQ WBSA YJT.

Followed by:

__ _a__e _a_er _o_ ca_ he__ __ _ork o_ __ cock_ho_
;-)

KQ GHYOR FHSRP YJT MHI ARFK GR WJPD JI GY MJMDQAJS
;-)

He laughed as he filled in the final letters of the message. Brandon Hart was a keeper.

THE END

Author's Note

I considered deciphering Brandon's last message for you in its entirety, but Corey wouldn't let me. He wanted you to experience the thrill of decoding the message—that moment when you're three-quarters of the way there and everything suddenly falls into place. Although he insisted that I make you work for it, he did allow me to give you a few hints. The message was encrypted using a keyword cipher. To crack the code, first write out the alphabet.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstu vwxyz

Then write the keyword, one letter at a time, below the alphabet, omitting any duplicate letters if necessary.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstu vwxyz

HOMERUN

Next, add the remaining letters of the alphabet, taking care not to duplicate any letters that have already been placed.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstu vwxyz

HOMERUNABCDEFGHIJKLPQSTVWXYZ

Now, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the ciphertext (coded) characters and plaintext (English) characters.

a=H

b=O

c=M

d=E

e=R

f=U

g=N

h=A

i=B

j=C

k=D

l=F

m=G

n=I

o=J

p=K

q=L

r=P

s=Q

t=S

u=T

v=V

w=W

x=X

y=Y

z=Z

To solve the cryptogram, replace the ciphertext (UPPERCASE) characters in the coded message with their corresponding plaintext (lowercase) characters. So, for example, everywhere you see the letter B in the code, replace it with the letter i, like so:

i ____ _ ____ _i__ ____ _i____

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS

Then replace every instance of the letter A with the letter h, like so:

i h__ _ ____ _i__ ____ _i_h_

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS

Next, replace every instance of the letter H with the letter a, etc.

i ha_ a ___a_ _i___ _a___ _i_h_

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS

Good luck cracking Brandon's code! (Or, if you're really not up for the paper and pencil method, you can search online for a "keyword cipher tool" like the one at secretcodebreaker.com and let the computer crack it for you.)

Once again, here is Brandon's last message:

B AHE H NPRHS SBGR FHQS IBNAS IJS CTQS MHTQR JU
WAHS WR EBE OTS MHTQR B WHQ WBSA YJT.

KQ GHYOR FHSRP YJT MHI ARFK GR WJPD JI GY MJMDQAJJS
;-)

Glossary of Baseball Terms

barehand it: when a fielder catches a ball with the hand not covered by his glove

blowout: a game in which one team wins by a large lead

cockshot: a fastball thrown just above the belt and down the middle of the plate

comebacker: a ball batted directly back to the pitcher

deep in the count: when a pitcher gets to three balls and zero, one, or two strikes in the count, a situation that favors the batter rather than the pitcher

ding dong: a home run

doubleheader: when two games are played by the same two teams on the same day

eat the ball: The act of fielding but holding on to a batted ball rather than attempting to make a throw to a base to retire a runner

four-bagger: a home run

grand slam: a home run hit with the bases loaded

hardball: type of ball used in baseball (as opposed to softball)

herky-jerky: an unusual or awkward wind-up or motion by the pitcher

high and tight: a pitch thrown above the strike zone and close to the batter

home run: a base hit in which the batter is able to circle all the bases, ending at home plate and scoring a run himself

in the hole: the spaces between the first baseman and second baseman and between the shortstop and the third baseman, one of the usual places where a ground ball must go for a hit

knee-buckler: a ball (usually a curveball) that breaks very sharply, so much so that it freezes the hitter

nibble: pitching just at the left or right edges of home plate rather than over the heart of the plate where a batter can get the meat of the bat on the ball

pound the batter inside: pitch the ball over the inside of the plate (typically with a fastball)

pound the strike zone: pitching aggressively by throwing strikes, not by trying to trick hitters into swinging at pitches out of the strike zone or trying to nibble at the corners of the plate

power stroke: a hitter with a good power stroke is one who is capable of hitting for extra bases

salami: a grand slam home run

screwball: a pitch that curves to the same side as the side it was thrown from

shagging flies: catching fly balls in the outfield when not involved in actual baseball games

spitter: a spitball pitch in which the ball has been altered by the application of spit, petroleum jelly, or some other foreign substance

squeeze play: a tactic used to attempt to score a runner from third on a bunt

starting pitcher: the first pitcher in the game for each team; a starter is expected to pitch at least five innings, in contrast with relievers who often pitch just three, two or one or even fractional innings

stick it in his ear: a cry that that may come from fans in the stands, appealing to the home team pitcher to be aggressive (throw the ball at the opposing batter)

sweet spot: a location that's perfect for the batter to swing at and hit a pitch very hard on the meat of the bat

three up, three down: to face just three batters in an inning; having a "three up, three down inning" is the goal of any pitcher

up the elevator shaft: a pop-up that travels straight upwards off the bat, very easy to catch

Author Bio

Madison Parker grew up in Germany where she feasted on Gummibärchen, wandered through the woods on many a Volksmarch, and dreamed of one day living in a castle on a mountain with a boy who knew how to rock a pair of lederhosen. The Fates had other plans for her, but she's not complaining. Although she aspired to be an author at an early age and often wrote for fun, she pursued a career in teaching instead. Madison has a Bachelor's Degree and two Master's Degrees in Mathematics and Education. She has taught both middle and high school and enjoys working with young adults.

Madison has a passion for math and art, and likes to dabble a bit with web and graphic design. She also has an affinity for all things geeky (read: Star Trek and TRON). Although she is extremely left-brained (logical, rational, orderly), her artistic, creative side never ceases to flail around in a desperate attempt to be noticed. Madison now spends her days reading, writing, solving math problems, and playing with her feisty German Pinscher. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, her pup, and her troop of sock monkeys.

Madison began writing LGBTQ fiction to help address issues of bullying and low self-esteem among young adults. Her short story, Sock It To Me, Santa!, explores one boy's struggle to come out in a hostile school environment. Her debut novel, Play Me, I'm Yours, takes the reader on an emotional journey in search of love and self-acceptance. Learn more about Madison and her writing at her website.

Contact & Media Info

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

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

FIRE AND WATER

By Kate Pavelle

Photo Description

A mostly black and white photo of a man partially obscured in shadow. The collar of his pinstriped shirt is turned up and his hand is in front of his face with orange flames flowing from his index finger and thumb. Those flames are reflected in his eye.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I met him at a magic show in Vegas. I'd won a free meet and greet and he was the main act. He was beautiful and mysterious and how the hell had I never known how sexy eyeliner could be on a guy. In other words, he's way out of my league.

To my surprise, he asked me out, then we went on one "date". It was just a simple dinner, a kiss on the cheek at the door, and "poof" he was gone. He texted me later and said our connection was almost too much for him to control himself and he'd really like to see me again, but... there were some things he needed to tell me and show me about himself before we could proceed. I'm scared to death to go... but even more scared not to.

What do you think he's hiding? Should I take the chance or let this beautiful man disappear from my life?

Sincerely,

K-lee

Story Info

Genre: urban fantasy, contemporary

Tags: magic users, mermen, entertainers, masseuse, sweet no sex, elementals, Las Vegas, paranormal

Word count: 7,778

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

FIRE AND WATER

By Kate Pavelle

The stage glowed with the light of his own making, and the music drowned out the *ooohs* and *ahhhs* of the audience. Eldrid released another fireball from his hand—yet this one was larger than he anticipated. Instead of rolling off his hand like it should have, it almost exploded into the air. He quickly forced the fireball to split into five, with residual flames dancing on his fingertips.

His ballet background made easy work of the showmanship needed to simulate what the audience knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, to be just another illusion—he even added imperfections to make his fire seem “real.”

Almost too real. Eldrid suppressed a concerned frown, and focused on the pressure that kept building within him instead. He felt fire press out of his skin, through his very eyes—and the only safe way to release all that destructive force was one fire sculpture at a time. His sister Syf, the lovely assistant, circled around him in her long gown, handing him props, giving quiet, verbal feedback in her ventriloquist’s voice.

“Too high up,” she said. “Ceiling.”

He gave her a nod. Better drain off his excess energy some other way. Eldrid directed a look laden with mystery and foreboding at his audience, swirled his cape, and disappeared. Only a tower of fire remained on the stage. As soon as he slipped through the hidden trap door in the floorboards, he let out a deep exhale of physical relief. He could maintain the fire pillar from under the open trap door and not burn the stage down. His black hair almost rose on his head as he let the barely contained, elemental power pour out his raised fingertips. The pressure in his head subsided, and after a minute or so, his skin tingled a lot less. When the grand finale was done, he walked back on the stage from the wings and took his bow. Tonight he could rest well, secure in the knowledge that he wouldn’t let his control slip and incinerate the hotel in his sleep.

Vodun Novak was an ordinary man. He sat in the audience, surrounded by couples and tourist groups, and he did not appear remarkable whatsoever with his light brown hair and hazel eyes. The sense of fatigue that had plagued him ever since he could remember did not dissipate as he sat in the padded seat and watched the amazing, one and only Eldrid Thorsen ply his craft of illusion and fire-play. Vodun got the ticket in lieu of a tip from one of his massage clients. Normally he would have preferred cash, but this ticket included a meet-and-greet after the show. Vodun was thrilled for the opportunity to spice up his boring and ordinary life by shaking the hands of the world-class jugglers that performed earlier. He planned to pay special compliments to the contortionist, a slight woman who managed to defy the laws of both physics and physiology. If he was any judge of what she put her body through, he might even have a steady massage client down the line.

Las Vegas was loud and boring. Vodun's unassuming, low-energy personality was under constant assault from the flashing lights, the pinging slot machines, the traffic, and the heat. He still recalled his shock when he deplaned at the airport just a year ago, only to find slot machines right outside the gate. Yet, the money was good, a lot better than it would have been in Cleveland. He missed the friendly rivers and streams, the storms off the lake, the seasonal downpours of sweet rain. Too much water never bothered him. Here in Vegas, when he wanted to go swimming, Hoover Dam held back the only body of open water that could tackle his thirst with its smooth and peaceful touch. And he did go on his days off, and swam for hours in his easy, long-distance style that didn't splash and didn't wear the body down. Had it not been for Lake Meade, Vodun would have left Las Vegas within a month due to the sensory onslaught that so many others were willing to pay for.

Now he sat in the audience and the illusionist disappeared, causing a holographic image of a fire pillar to take his place. He wondered how that was accomplished. The trick was without a flaw—seamless—as though it were real. Then the show was over, and Vodun stood with the rest of the audience in an enthusiastic ovation. The backstage ticket was in his pocket. He'd meet the artist, have a complimentary drink, and go to his small apartment on the east side of town.

Syf was Eldrid's front, his protector. His older sister didn't understand where all that fire came from, but she accepted it and did her best to shelter her brother from the masses. So many people wanted to shake his hand. Eldrid appreciated that she offered her slender hand in his stead. He wore his black, fire-retardant gloves now, lest a flicker of a flame escape and hurt someone while giving his true nature away. He had a bottle of water in one hand and a tumbler of whiskey in the other. There was no ice—there was never any ice. It would have melted in his proximity even now, despite the massive release of raw power during the show. He nodded and answered questions, fending off proffered hands with an apologetic shrug and an infectious grin.

"I'm parched and exhausted—if you'll excuse me..." And they always excused him, especially when Syf offered a pre-autographed poster or program. He was almost done. One more guy to go, and he could take a shower as cold as the water tank provided, and catch some sleep.

The closer Vodun approached the illusionist, the less tired he felt. The countless massages that he gave to his eager clients in the spas of various hotels drained the mind, the body, and especially the spirit. He walked into the green room backstage tired, almost shuffling, yet now that he was in the proximity of the fire illusionist, he felt energized. The petite blonde offered him a glass of red wine. Behind her stood her partner.

He wore the same fitted black trousers and the same dark shirt he'd worn on stage, but his hands were now sheathed in black gloves. Vodun approached him to offer his words of appreciation. He wouldn't get to shake his hand, as the illusionist's hands were full. Conveniently so. Vodun smirked, recognizing the trick for what it was. So the illusionist, an extrovert onstage, liked to keep people at an arm's length.

"Nice show," Vodun said, nodding at Eldrid.

"Thanks," Eldrid replied and raised his eyes to Vodun, ready to reward his compliment with an easy grin.

Vodun's calm hazel eyes met Eldrid's dark ones. He noticed the way Eldrid stilled, as though they were the only two people in the room. At that moment, Vodun was seized with a desire to take this man in and understand

him, the way he understood the desert, or the sun, or the water in the deep and vast lake not too far away. Eldrid was shorter by half a hand, but Vodun felt the man was barely contained within the confines of his skin. He was the dark and handsome type. Black hair, a heavy five-o'clock shadow, kohl around his eyes. Vodun had always thought that kohl on men was only stage makeup, but now he felt himself stir at the sight. Far beyond just attractive, the man looked sexy. Hot, even. He was fascinated by Eldrid's eyes.

Black eyes.

Vodun felt as though the illusion of flames, extant from the stage, licked the outline of the other man's irises.

Impossible.

Vodun blinked. There was a sense of gentle heat that spanned the space between the dark illusionist and himself, the sort of heat that he was eager to soak up like a cat sprawling in the sun. He shook his head, not knowing what came over him. "Why the gloves?" Vodun asked instead in an effort to banish his tongue-tied feeling.

"So you don't get burned," Eldrid said with a smile that was supposed to convey a faux sense of mystery. Except this time, when it was directed at Vodun, it failed to mask an undercurrent of fear.

"I am willing to chance it," Vodun said, his words slow and deliberate. Never had he been as intrigued by another man's presence, and Eldrid's physical beauty had little to do with it. As a masseuse, Vodun had seen it all: young and old, fat and trim, ugly and gorgeous and everything in between. He was inured to the physical, but this—this was different. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he felt something extra, something unusual, an... aura? He realized he felt as though he was looking at a raging torrent of water, assessing its strengths and patterns, before he plunged in to merge with it and enjoy its tender mercies. Yet this was different, too, because his sense-memory impressions were different. Other. He could not explain it, but it intrigued him. Buoyed by an excitement and enthusiasm he rarely displayed, he flashed the performer an inviting smile. "I would like to take you out. Just a drink. Or... are you too tired to socialize?"

What began as a harmless interaction with the last member of his adoring audience turned his world upside down. As soon as Eldrid met the other man's eyes, he couldn't look away. There was such acceptance, such calm compassion. He was beautiful. *Did he just ask me out?*

"What's your name?" Eldrid said, trying to buy some time and regain his equilibrium.

"Vodun Novak. And I already know who you are." Eldrid startled at the words, because Vodun spoke them as though he really knew who, and what, Eldrid was. Yet Syf stood by the drinks tray on the other side of the room, and failed to interfere. He looked at the other man—really looked—and found a sandy-haired specimen of an average height and build. His shoulders were wide, like a swimmer's rather than a weightlifter's, and his eyes were pools of calm. The more Eldrid met that hazel gaze, the more at peace he felt. There was something going on, something other and uncanny and unprecedented. He realized Vodun was waiting for his answer.

"Yeah," he whispered on an exhale. "I could have a drink. Sure." He flashed a glance toward his sister, surprised to see her hiding a small smile.

"Oh, go ahead. I'll tidy up," she said. "See you at breakfast!"

Eldrid nodded at the door and Vodun led the way. He held the door for him and they headed out of the theater complex of the casino and toward the bar.

"I hate the way they make you walk through the gambling parts all the time," Vodun said, shying away from the flashing lights and gaudy colors.

"It's good for business," Eldrid said. "Annoying, but it pays the bills for the likes of us. Speaking of which, what do you do?"

"I'm a masseuse."

"Really?" Eldrid was intrigued. "Does it feel weird, touching people all the time?"

"Not really," Vodun said. "It's all very professional. Lots of people like to leave some clothes on. It... I... I like to help them with their knotted muscles and such. It's like an energy exchange. Tiring for me, but it's good for business. Pays the bills for the likes of me." He echoed Eldrid's earlier words with a quiet smile, and Eldrid felt a jolt of desire to please this man and do for

him what Vodun did for others. Not massage—he didn't dare touch another person—but he wanted to help him relax. His company was, after all, pleasant. Almost peaceful enough not to worry about the fires banked within the core of his being.

“I know of a little place, it's nice and quiet,” Eldrid said. “Better than this. Would you like to try it?”

“I'd love to,” Vodun said with a relief so obvious Eldrid felt like he'd done a good deed right then and there.

They got a booth in a small bar that was tucked into a corridor between the casino floor and the hotel. The theme was global and the Asian décor included a tall slab of slate with water sheeting over it, all the way from the ceiling to the small basin on the floor. Vodun homed in right toward it as they entered.

“Do you always drink your scotch neat?” Vodun asked, eyeing Eldrid's drink.

“Yes, with water on the side.” Eldrid gazed at Vodun's frozen margarita with obvious longing. A frozen drink would melt in his hand within minutes, even with his gloves on.

“Here, have some,” Vodun smiled and pushed the straw in Eldrid's direction.

“Thanks.” Eldrid wrapped his lips around the straw and sucked some of the frozen slush into his mouth. He never got “brain freeze” from ice cream and slushies. It all melted upon contact. The margarita did, too, but it was cool and soothing, just like Vodun's eyes. He took care not to touch the glass itself. “That was nice. Thank you.”

They talked of little things, and the ebb and flow of the conversation felt natural, almost effortless. They covered the realities of living in Las Vegas. They talked about the desert, the heat and the throngs they serviced and entertained. Eldrid realized he had never felt as comfortable in a stranger's company as he had with this man.

He sipped his scotch, noting the way its heat felt different after the soothing touch of Vodun's frozen drink. Watching the other man was

fascinating, almost hypnotizing. The bright green of the margarita brought out the green highlights of his hazel eyes, and the touch of those eyes felt soothing and cool. His lips looked moist and cool, and the olive and navy stripes of his shirt looked cool as well.

Eldrid was torn. He wanted to touch the other man. Yet he wore his gloves, and he wore them for a good reason.

As though he could read his mind, Vodun broke the silence. “Your gloves. If they were off, would you let me touch your hand?”

Suddenly bold, Eldrid ripped the black glove off his right hand. “Well then.” His voice rasped with tension. “If you wish. But... you may not like what you find.”

Vodun held his breath as he reached his fingers out toward the fine-boned, bare hand of the illusionist. His own hands were broader and strengthened by the work they did, and they were tired. Always ever so tired, like the rest of him.

When their fingertips touched, he jolted upright as though a spark jumped between them. Vodun took a sharp inhale, but didn’t pull away. There was warmth, and strength, and—he observed this with an almost clinical and detached interest—the fatigue in his hand was being slowly replaced by a warm glow that spread up his arm, toward his elbow, and into his shoulder.

“I like this just fine,” Vodun whispered.

Their eyes met again, intrigued, assessing. Eldrid was entering uncharted waters. The other man did not flinch—on the contrary, by now their palms were pressed together and their fingers were aligned. He watched Vodun sit across the table from him, eyes closed and his drink forgotten.

“Vodun.” Eldrid felt a stab of sudden anxiety. The man was not burned, his intense heat did not repel him, he showed no sense of alarm—yet Eldrid feared hurting him with a power he himself understood but poorly. As good as that touch felt, full of peace and calm with his internal pressure receding, he felt he could not allow this unscheduled experiment to continue. “Are you all right?”

Vodun opened his eyes. They seemed greener than before, warm and happy. Before Eldrid could force himself to draw his hand away, Vodun stood and leaned toward him. His light brown hair fell into his eyes in unruly waves as he bent forward and pressed his lips against Eldrid's.

The contact was electrifying. A sudden vertigo made Eldrid feel like his stomach was full of butterflies and he felt his energy pour out of him, hot and eager. Happy. Uncontrollable. The other man couldn't possibly bear it—there was no way he could survive the onslaught of elemental fire—Eldrid broke the kiss, his breath rasping and his chest heaving.

“You okay?” He asked.

There was no answer for a while. It looked like Vodun was taking an internal inventory of some kind. “Never better,” he said.

“Look, you don't understand. I can't do this. I... I cannot.”

I can't hurt you. I'd rather die, if I knew how, than to hurt anyone.

“Sorry. I am so very sorry.” Eldrid whispered his apology before he shimmied from behind the table in the booth. He threw a twenty on the table, and ran out.

Vodun succeeded in scheduling the contortionist from the previous night for an introductory special. It should have felt like a victory: a good, professional client who might become a repeat customer. Yet his mind kept returning to the way Eldrid ran out the night before. It stung. His pride was injured more than anything. The kiss had been amazing. Better than any he had ever experienced before.

He was flooded with a feeling of an instant connection and a fated meeting all at once, like they were meant to be. His heart soared, his eyes were shut. He focused on the incredible contact with Eldrid's thin, firm lips, the rasp of his scruffy cheeks, the tickle of his black curls, and the touch of his warm, kind palm against the paw of Vodun's hand. It was perfect for Vodun, but not so for Eldrid, apparently, or else he wouldn't have left. They had exchanged phone numbers earlier that evening, though, and knowing that he could call Eldrid remained his consolation.

Had Vodun been feeling tired that day, he could have ascribed his downcast emotions to a hard work schedule, except his energy level was uncommonly high. Gone was the chronic fatigue and the feeling of borderline chill that came from the constant switching between the desert heat and the air-conditioned spaces inside all buildings. He felt like he could swim across Lake Meade, if he chose to do so, and back again. He felt great. Except, of course, for the fact that the handsome illusionist walked out on him. He told himself that there were many fish in the sea, but the words felt like cold comfort that day, and Vodun focused on his work instead.

Zephira came into the spa tired, sore, and her joints ached from repetitive abuse. Her tendons were chronically overstretched, and her age was such that healing didn't occur as fast as in her early twenties.

"Even massages don't work really well," the contortionist sighed. "I tried all kinds of stuff, supplements, juicing, acupuncture—but you know how it is."

He knew how it was, and he focused on his work thoroughly and gave it his all. He did the same with the next client, and the next, and the one after that. By the end of the day, the feeling of ebullient energy waned somewhat, replaced by a feeling of quiet satisfaction that came with a job well done. He helped several people feel a lot better. If that was a measure of any kind, today was a good day.

He tried not to think about Eldrid, but his thoughts drifted in that general direction every so often. Vodun was attracted, interested, and confused all at once. He didn't know what he'd done wrong to chase the man away. Despite his best intentions of not dwelling on what could have been, his thoughts would drift to Eldrid's warmth, and the mischievous, almost incredible hint of playful fire in his eyes. That, surely, had been an illusion as well.

Only a good swim could relax him after a day full of massage. Just before Vodun packed up his swim bag and headed up to the lake, his cell phone rang. The number was unlisted. Figuring it was just an out-of-town tourist in need of fluffing up, Vodun considered letting the call go to his voice mail, but long-ingrained habit of not letting a client slip by forced him to take the call after all.

"Vodun?"

He recognized Eldrid's voice immediately. The uncertainty in the other man's voice bordered on shyness, something that Vodun found difficult to imagine in a seasoned entertainer.

"Yes, this is he."

"Listen, I am sorry for leaving so rapidly, but... I can't explain. I can only show you." Eldrid's pleading tone of voice stopped Vodun in his tracks. He set his swim bag back on the floor again.

"Show me?" he asked.

"Well. There is this thing about me. I think you and I... we could work out, but first, I... there is this thing you need to know." The words sounded as though Eldrid had to force them out of his mouth by sheer power of will. This was important, then.

Vodun paused to consider that perhaps there was an issue on Eldrid's part, and maybe he didn't do anything wrong after all. "Okay," he said. "Give me your address."

Vodun drove to a small by-the-week hotel that sat alone in the middle of a large parking lot. Eldrid was standing out in the sun of the early evening, not seeming to mind the heat that rose from the pavement. Vodun pulled his Jeep over and leaned to open the door.

"Hey... so, what's the plan? Would you like to join me?"

Eldrid approached the vehicle. "That depends. Where are you going?"

"The lake. I brought my swimming gear."

Eldrid nodded. "All right. As long as we're going somewhere with a bit of privacy. I don't swim, though."

"There's this rocky beach where nobody seems to go," Vodun said with a faint smile. "It may not have the sand people expect, but it's nice all the same. Hop in!" He saw Eldrid hesitate before he seated himself in the passenger seat.

"Hey... if I say I need to get out of the car, I need you to pull over and let me out, okay?" Eldrid's tone of voice was serious, and the edge of apprehension prompted Vodun to turn and face him. There was fear in Eldrid's

eyes—those enchanting, dark eyes—and there was just a hint of a flame that licked around the edge of the iris. Yesterday, Vodun dismissed it as mere imagination. It might have been just a reflection from the candles that decorated the green room behind the stage. Now, though, he had no such explanation. He nodded acknowledgment, however, and put the car in gear.

Their drive was quiet and uneventful, and the setting sun was at their back, which made the trip easier on Vodun's eyes. He navigated up the service road, entering an area Las Vegas natives seldom visited. It was dry and rocky, lacking obvious signs of vegetation. Yet Vodun felt water underfoot. He knew that he only had to dig ten feet down in order to find moist sand. He had always had this water sense. His uncle and his grandfather were both dowzers, and although Vodun knew how to dowse, he had no interest making his living that way. He was more citified and wanted to be closer to people and music.

“Our kind is always close to water,” his grandmother had said years ago. She used to be a fisherwoman before she died, guiding tourists to good places on the river where she knew they would catch their fill. Vodun's grandfather worked for the local sewage cleaning station, taking the filth out and making water clean again. His dad volunteered with the river police. Vodun was the only holdout. He only knew that the element had a certain affinity for him. Or was it vice versa?

“So this is where you swim?” Eldrid said. His voice pulled Vodun out of his musings.

“Yeah.” He heard the taller man reply. “Every so often I have to get in.” As he looked at Vodun, his own shoulders got so tight he feared they would end up hunched up by his ears.

Vodun flashed him a smile as he replied. “But we didn't come here to discuss where I swim. We came here because we needed privacy. What did you need to tell me?”

Eldrid tightened his jaw. His eyes reflected the brilliant sunset as though they had flames of their own. “That kiss... It should have never happened and I am sorry.”

“Did I object?” Vodun quipped.

Eldrid was relieved to see a hint of a grin on his face, and forged on. “No. But there is this thing you don’t know about me. I don’t know where it comes from or what to do about it, but that’s just who I am, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He saw Vodun stop digging in his swim bag. He set it down and sat on one of the bigger rocks. “What is it, then?” he asked, as dug his toes into the pebbles of the rocky beach.

“I can’t tell you. I can only show you.” Eldrid looked around once more. “We are alone, so it’s okay. If anyone shows up, I need you to cover for me. We’ll tell them I’m just practicing.”

“Practicing what?”

“This.” Eldrid took five steps back from where Vodun was perched on his rock, removed his gloves, and stuffed them in the pockets of his jeans. He stretched his hands far to the sides, palms up, and let go of the iron control that had taken him a lifetime to attain. Flames sprang from his hands with a violent outburst of energy. They shot up a foot, then increased in height. Eldrid raised his hands above his head and touched his wrists together. His palms now formed a platform, and the two flames joined into one. He glanced at Vodun. The other man sat still, with his eyes wide and incredulous. Eldrid looked for a sign of fear, but there was no judgment whatsoever in Vodun’s stunned face. With great effort, Eldrid stopped the energy from flowing out. It felt so good, letting it go, not having to control it for just a little while. That was all he could afford to do for now. Time has come to face his critical audience.

Vodun saw what happened. He knew he did, he was right there and he wasn’t delusional or crazy. He knew that Eldrid had no props on him. The white T-shirt and jeans could hardly hide a hologram setup, or a fire source akin to a welding torch. It was impossible, yet he saw what Eldrid did with his very own eyes.

The silence between them stretched, until Eldrid looked down at the rocks under his leather boots. He put his gloves back on. Then he looked around, found another rock big enough, and sat on it. His shoulders slumped and he ran a gloved hand over his face.

“Can you do it again?” Vodun blurted out.

Eldrid lifted his head in slow motion. “Yeah. Unfortunately.” He ripped his right glove off, and hurled a massive fireball away from them. Its light reflected off the smooth water surface before it fizzled and dissipated into a shower of sparks.

“So that show you did,” Vodun said, keeping his words slow and deliberate, as though he had to think extra hard about every one. “All that wasn’t just a show. It was for real.” He looked at Eldrid, and was surprised to see a wan smile tug at the man’s mouth.

“Every show is a real show. It all depends on what the illusionist is hiding.”

Vodun nodded. “Okay, good point. But you can do this by summoning fire with your hands?” Again, the words were slow, as though Vodun had trouble articulating the concept of what he had just seen.

“Not just my hands. The hands are the easiest to control, and that way I don’t burn the hair off my head.”

“What do you mean?” Vodun asked.

“I can envelop my whole body in flames.”

Vodun rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles in a habitual gesture. “That’s neat, although I can see how it would be... dangerous.”

“Yeah. So, even though I like you a lot, now you understand why I can’t date anyone. Not anyone, not ever.”

Vodun gave him an odd look. “So if someone tries to take you out on a date, you take them to a remote location and scare the shit out of them?”

Eldrid lifted his eyes and met Vodun’s gaze. “You look amused,” he said, surprised. “I didn’t expect that. And no. I have never been on a date in my life. Only my sister Syf knows. And my parents—but they can’t do what I do. I had to start sleeping outside when I was fourteen. I set my bed on fire twice. It got excused as smoking in bed, but we had to move. And when Syf was eighteen and I was sixteen, we decided to start the show circuit, and ended up here.”

“Can she do what you do?” Vodun asked.

“No—but she can feel when I’m about to blow up. Like, if I don’t make fire for a while, my whole body will burst into flames, and burn off my clothes and hair. Apparently, it looks pretty damn scary. I pulled that trick on Halloween once. The fire department showed up and kept looking for the body for days, but... I couldn’t just tell them what really happened. I’m a freak. They would lock me up, or worse. As long as I can control it so I don’t hurt anyone, I’m fine.”

“And the gloves?” Vodun asked.

“They are fireproof. They protect others. And I don’t scorch papers, and shit.”

“Fascinating.” Vodun looked Eldrid up and down once again. “Let me try and touch your hand again, okay? It felt really awesome last time.”

“You are playing with fire,” Eldrid said, but there was a smile on his face.

“I know I am. I have a theory and I need to test it out.”

It got dark. Las Vegas gleamed in the distance like a jewel in the desert and the water was a contrasting void, gaping black to Vodun’s left. He sat opposite Eldrid, who took his gloves off and amused him by making flickering flames dance at the ends of his fingertips. It looked eerie in the darkness, the way Eldrid’s fire swirled and merged into one large flame only to separate again, the way the tongues of tiny flames licked Vodun’s hands. They were no hotter than a flame of a candle, and Vodun could bear their warmth easily.

“Let me touch your hand,” Vodun said. The flames disappeared. Eldrid fumbled a bit, trying to position his hand this way and that and it occurred to Vodun that he acted nothing like the graceful fire dancer he saw on the stage only two nights ago. Eldrid didn’t know how to touch. “Like this,” Vodun said, and put his hand out, palm facing Eldrid. “Let’s touch palms like that. I want to try something.”

The warmth of Eldrid’s skin soaked into Vodun’s hand as soon as their skin made contact. He felt heat, but there was more than just that. He set out his left hand. “Do the same thing on the other side.”

Eldrid hesitated. “I can feel my power pouring into you. I don’t want to hurt you. I’ve never done this before.”

“I know. I have... in yoga. I think this will be pretty awesome,” Vodun said in the most confident voice he could summon, and kept his other palm up and out, waiting.

It took a while for Eldrid to overcome his misgivings. Yet he did lift his hand, palm out, and he allowed for the briefest of contact before he pulled back again.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes.” Vodun nodded. “Do it again.”

Eldrid’s small, hot palm touched Vodun’s larger one and stayed there. Vodun held Eldrid’s questioning gaze.

“Yes, I feel your heat,” Vodun said. “It feels good.”

Eldrid lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

“Oh yeah,” Vodun chuckled. “You’re like a little power plant.” He closed his eyes and centered his attention to right below his navel.

“I want you to push power with one hand, and take it back with the other. I’ll do the same. It will be like a circuit, see?” Vodun used his quiet, meditative voice, trying not to scare Eldrid away.

“Which hand should I push with?” Eldrid asked. His voice sounded tremulous.

“Use the side that feels more comfortable. I’ll adapt.” Vodun remained calm. He suppressed how excited he was that Eldrid was actually willing to try this simple thing. Sure enough, Vodun felt a surge of power enter his left hand and flow like water up his arm. He allowed it in, transmuting the orange-hot energy into the calmer yellows and greens. Right before his body felt entirely full, he pushed the quieted force out his right hand and into Eldrid’s open palm.

He heard Eldrid sigh. It was a low sound that spoke of relief, as though a long thirst was being quenched. As power flowed through Vodun, and as he changed its frequency from the one of vibrant fire to soothing water and air, he felt his own energy centers swell. Fatigue fell from him, as though he just woke up after a good night’s sleep. When he opened his eyes, he was surprised

to find Eldrid's eyelids shut. The other man's brow was furrowed in concentration.

"Are you okay?" Vodun whispered.

"Yeah." Eldrid's voice was a dry croak.

"I want you to stop pushing power with your left, and stop taking with your right. Yeah... like that. And now we put our hands down."

Eldrid let his hands drop onto his knees. He opened his eyes, not looking at anything specific. He had that easy, peaceful feeling within him again. He felt different. Not as out of control, not prone to incinerate his companion by sheer accident.

"How does it feel?" He heard Vodun's words as though from far away.

"Different," he said. "Calmer. A lot calmer. What did you do?"

Vodun gave a deferential shrug. "Oh, it's nothing special. Just a little exercise. Your chakras are seriously out of whack. If you want, I can teach you to rebalance your own energy... but a lot of people don't believe in it working."

"I just felt it work," Eldrid said, anchoring himself in the present. "I felt it, whatever you did. You took my fire and you cooled it. It was amazing. Here, let me see."

Eldrid stood up and faced the lake. "Let's see the size of my fireball now," he said. Small flames danced on his fingertips, coalescing into a tight ball of energy. Yet, there wasn't the wild, explosive increase in its size and ferocity he always expected. Eldrid threw it away, over the water, and it looked much like a fiery softball before it touched the lake surface and disappeared.

Eldrid whirled at Vodun. "That's all? That's all I can do? That little fireball actually took work on my part. It was... shit, man, it was hard to do!"

Vodun gave him an uncertain glance. "So is that good or bad?"

Eldrid sat back down with his legs outstretched. He made a few lazy flames lick his fingertips. "It's good in that I feel like my control is better than before. Like, I could go back and visit Mom and Dad and not be scared that I'll kill them by accident."

“I hear a ‘but’ in the tone of your voice,” Vodun said.

“But my living is doing awesome fire shows. I’ll have to change everything. I’ll have to do illusions, like other people do, instead of making it all easy.” He grinned. “I’m so spoiled!”

“Your wild energy level will come back,” Vodun cautioned. “This is just a quick fix. I feel all energized right now, but that excess energy came from you. Do you know, after last time, when we touched our fingers together and there was that kiss...” he let his voice trail off. “Anyway, I always used to be tired. Like, totally wiped out. I’m a masseuse, so I figured it was the physical aspect of my job. Except when I do massage, I also use this invisible power. People call it prana or ki or chi, but they mostly figure it’s make-believe. Well, I use that during massage, and after last time, I was really able to help people. I had lame clients walk away like they were healthy again. I have more appointments booked than I know what to do with. And it’s all because of you.” Vodun gave Eldrid a sly look, his features illuminated only by the dancing flickers on Eldrid’s fingertips. “You recharged me.”

“So now what?” Eldrid asked. “You have this amazing skill to take what I can’t use and turn it to good. What would you like to do with it?”

“First, I want to go for a swim. I suggest you come in the water with me. It won’t evaporate from you right now, I don’t think.”

“I don’t want to get my clothes wet,” Eldrid said.

“Let’s skinny dip,” Vodun suggested. “I’ll share my towel. Or, wait, you’ll probably dry on your own, anyway.”

They entered the water, step-by-step, feeling their way over the rocks in the still darkness. Eldrid grinned; the water felt much like Vodun’s energy did as it had poured into him, except it was on the outside of his body now. He said as much.

“I’ve always been a water baby,” Vodun said, but he sounded a bit wistful. “Not as much as the rest of my family, though.”

“Why not?”

Eldrid’s question stopped him where he stood, hip-deep in the water.

“Hold my hands,” Vodun requested, and Eldrid didn’t hesitate. Yet this time, he didn’t feel the amazing power exchange from before. Now he felt the cool slickness of Vodun’s wet skin. He heard Vodun breathe hard in the dark, as though he was attempting a feat of great strength, and Eldrid felt the large, strong hands of the masseuse tighten in his grip. He braced himself, ready to support Vodun in whatever new exercise he was about to attempt. Then he heard the water part with a gentle splash, and felt his hands being dragged under the cool surface.

Eldrid knew that people did bathe in water, even though he had never attempted it before tonight. He knew that they did go under, holding their breath. There were people on the Las Vegas show circuit who specialized in wild escape acts. Knowing that Vodun probably couldn’t last longer than a minute or two, Eldrid began to count seconds.

Thirty... Sixty... Ninety... Minute and a half.

Concerned, Eldrid pulled on Vodun’s hands and yanked him up to the surface. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Vodun’s voice sounded different, as though his sinuses were full.

Eldrid tried to help him stand up, but found himself being almost dragged down. A large, soft fin slithered against his shin.

“I felt a fish!” Eldrid cried out in alarm.

“No. That was just my leg.”

Eldrid frowned. He let go of one of Vodun’s hands and focused. Soon, the flames on his hand gave off as much fire as a torch. The flickering light reflected off the water surface and illuminated Vodun’s face. He looked pale and his face seemed distorted. Eldrid lowered the light to take a closer look. Vodun’s mouth was stretched wide, from side to side, resembling a large catfish. His ears were gone, showing gills instead. He still had hands, and a body, and his eyes were human. Eldrid saw fear reflect in the flickers of his firelight.

“Show me your legs,” he said, keeping his voice low and free of judgment. Vodun did, letting his trunk and legs float up to the surface. He looked all man down to his knees, but under his knees, his legs and feet were gone. Eldrid saw

two graceful fins instead. Like a split tail of a fish. He extinguished his flame and reached down to touch the thin membranes. The fins felt soft, covered with fish slime.

“That’s so cool,” Eldrid said. “That was just you.”

“Just me,” Vodun said in that nasal voice of his. “I’ll go swim a bit, try my gills out. I’ll be back soon. Can you, um, get out of the water?”

“Why?” Eldrid said.

“You don’t know how to swim. It’s dark. You could drown.” The concern in Vodun’s face was real.

“I’ll be okay.”

“Please, go. I don’t know if I can trust my own nature.”

The note of desperation in Vodun’s voice reminded Eldrid of his own fear. He feared hurting others with who he was. He didn’t know why Vodun thought that Eldrid could get hurt by his transformation, but he relented. “Okay,” he said. “I’m getting out. Be back soon.”

Soon was a relative term. Two hours later, Vodun splashed his way out of the lake. He was fully human and entirely exhausted.

“Are you okay?” Eldrid asked as he made his way down the rocks to meet his new friend. He would have paced back and forth while waiting had the terrain allowed for it.

“Yeah.” Vodun gasped. “Shit, man. I was two miles out and thirty feet under when my transformation gave out.”

“What happened?” Eldrid asked, rubbing Vodun’s wet shoulders.

“Ran out of power. I’ve always been weak. My family just about gave up on me. I have enough mojo to do awesome healing massages, but I haven’t been able to do a transformation in years. Hell, I’m the only waterman that almost drowned when I was a kid.”

“Waterman?”

“Yeah. ‘Vodnik’, in Czech. My kind keeps the rivers and lakes healthy. It also drowns the unwary and feasts on the power of their souls, so... well...”

“So you wanted me out of reach when you were in your waterman form?” Eldrid hazarded a guess.

“Yeah. Especially since you have power to spare. I’d never want to hurt you.”

Eldrid was quiet while they got dressed again. They walked up to the car. “I’d offer to drive, since you’re so tired, but I don’t know how,” he said with a note of embarrassment. “With my fire control issues, I’ve always stayed away from anything with a gasoline tank.”

“But now you can learn, because you and I can help each other out,” Vodun said as he slid behind the wheel. “Give me your hand, please,” he requested.

Eldrid reached his hand out, and felt Vodun interlace his fingers with his. Their touch felt smooth and comforting, and Eldrid realized that his gloves were still in his pockets. Then he felt Vodun bring their hands toward his mouth, and he felt the dry brush of fully human lips excite the nerves of his fingertips.

“I don’t want to tap you out too much,” Vodun said with a note of apology. “If you could give me a wee little energy boost, though, it would make me a safer driver.”

“I think I can do that,” Eldrid said. He turned in his seat and leaned into Vodun’s space, bringing their lips together.

They both gasped. There was the delicious brush and slide of lips and tongues, sure, but once again they were taken aback by the intimate flow of energy between them.

This time, Vodun broke the kiss. “I... wow.”

“Better?” Eldrid teased.

“Yeah. Thank you. I don’t want to drain you, though.”

“You won’t,” Eldrid said with confidence. “If I get to kiss you like this, and if I get to act like a normal person around other people, having to learn ordinary illusions is a small price to pay. You can have all the power you want.”

The city sparkled like a jewel far in the distance. Its glow blotted out the stars overhead, but both men's attention was turned to the constellations that glowed within their own beings, meshing their disparate energies together into a stronger whole.

THE END

Author Bio

Kate Pavelle writes m/m romance (along with spy thrillers and family stories) and you can catch up with her on her blog via Twitter. Her first novel-length book, Wild Horses, is the first in the Steel City Stories and came out on July 1st with Dreamspinner Press. The second book of the series, Zipper Fall, is scheduled for release in late August.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

By Kate Pavelle

Photo Description

Wearing only a cowboy hat, boots, a sleeveless plaid shirt and pair of light blue briefs, a dark-haired young man lies on his back, giving a flirty look to the viewer. The shirt is open, showing off his chiseled body. His head is propped on a bale of hay and his feet are braced on the rungs of a wooden ladder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love for you to give this guy a story (take the reins). I'd be glad if it had a lot of first-times, coming out and definitely a HEA.

Sincerely,

Patrick

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: healing, PTSD, perseverance, horses, ex-military, blue collar/mechanic, college student, sweet no sex

Word count: 9,616

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

By Kate Pavelle

Tim's whole body shook from the rumbling of the semi's big wheels on the old brick pavement. He tried not to press his curious face against the window as he soaked up the sight of pristine white houses with their black doors and black shutters and shy pansies in planters by their stoops.

"I shouldn't even be here," the trucker said. His name was Joe, and he was making a delivery of reproduction period furniture to an address in a historical part of Watertown, Connecticut. Thus the old road. "The vibrations from the truck will turn these roads to shit if everyone just drives up like we do."

"Not much we can do," Tim said in his slow, even voice. "Not unless you want to hump the dressers over the stone road on a dolly." He adjusted his cowboy hat and narrowed his eyes as he looked around some more. The trees in the yards indicated a verdant spring was under way and the air's bright, clean luminescence threatened to blind him.

"You sure you won't ride with me after we unload?" Joe asked as he navigated the large truck down the road, bumping over pavement buckled by old sycamore roots.

"I saw some stables off Route 8," Tim said, his voice wistful. "I can get work in these parts, I figure. And the city's right nearby."

"Whatever you say, cowboy." There was a smile in Joe's voice, a smile disguised by his bushy beard and the bill of his Harley Davidson baseball cap. "Just, this ain't Wyoming. People here might have different expectations. Just sayin', us army types do pretty well at truckin' and shit. You might come to like it."

Tim shrugged. He didn't think of himself as an *army type* anymore—no more than he thought of himself as *gay*. Those were just words, semantic designations used to keep people in their little pigeon holes. He still would have been fixing army trucks, had it not been for an unfortunate encounter with an IED. If he were an "army type", like Joe suggested he was, Tim wouldn't flinch at slamming doors or the occasional backfire of an engine. The

concussive force of the explosion forced all kinds of issues into his unwilling mind: insomnia, poor concentration, short temper. He was diagnosed with PTSD and a traumatic head injury, declared unfit for duty, and sent home.

His eardrums grew back eventually, but the army's doctors and shrinks could do only so much to fix what was wrong with him otherwise. Tim's family drove him crazy by treating him like a cracked spun glass figurine, and it got to where he couldn't take being protected and coddled anymore. The open road called his name. Wyoming had been home once, but Tim had learned that the low population density and conservative culture kept both his employment and his dating opportunities to a minimum. He hit the road, drifting from job to job for almost two years now. His skill with horses and engines kept him in gas and food money, but no place on the face of this earth had called his name. Until now.

Sweat ran down Tim's face and he felt all prickly and knew he smelled bad. Unloading a truck full of furniture in the heat of the day tended to do that. He wiped his face with a red bandanna and grinned at Joe.

"All done?" Tim asked.

"Yeah, delivered and signed for. You sure you want to stay in this Yankee town?" Joe scratched the hair that was plastered under his baseball cap. It was black with sweat and made a contrast with his greying beard. The sleeve of his rolled-up shirt slipped some, exposing an old tattoo.

"I like it here," Tim said. "I don't know why. It just... it's old. Older than the West. The stones are old, the trees are old. The cemetery we passed looked like it had been there forever. I'll be fine." The air of stability intrigued him, enticed him. There was a soothing, calm quality to the air itself and he thought that this would be a right fine place to settle down and stay forever. This was the *somewhere special* he'd been carefully not looking for, just as he'd been carefully not looking for someone special to spend his time with. Tim squished the latter thought like a bug as soon as he realized it was there.

One thing at a time.

"Well then, take care." Joe clapped Tim on the shoulder with his left hand and extended his right. Tim took it, shook it, and smiled. He had been running

from himself ever since the army disgorged him, and he had been running away from home ever since his family started acting awkward. He didn't want to pretend and hide, and he didn't want to jump at every little thing either. So far, no place until this one resonated with him in a way that would not make an issue of his issues. This quiet little town might allow him to take a stand on his own behalf. Drifting wasn't so terrible; there was adventure, occasional money and the occasional hook-up.

Yet here, in the luminous air of this little town on the East Coast he could see a bit clearer than before. The old cobblestone streets whispered to him, and the ancient sycamore trees opened their branches in a wide welcome.

Tim kept to the berm of the road, being mindful of cars. Route 63 North was a busy, thoroughfare, and he basked in the comforting ebb and flow of its Thursday traffic and the travel patterns of the small town's inhabitants. At a quarter past one, the last stragglers hustled from their business lunches to assume battle stations behind computer screens, all serious and diligent. Suburban moms rushed to the gym or the store, finishing their errands before the yellow school bus that ferried their progeny pulled up to the neighborhood bus stop.

Ornamental trees were done blooming with the exception of the odd white dogwood. The early May temperatures didn't make it safe to set out plants yet, not for another two weeks at the very least, but Tim felt the sun on his shoulders and the resultant trickle of sweat down the back of his neck. He was grateful for his hat, and for the canopy of thin, chartreuse leaves that sheltered patches of the asphalt road.

By the time four o'clock rolled around, he had visited three stables north of Watertown. He was told he was in *horse country*, yet the white-fenced plots seemed small compared to the open expanses of Wyoming. The people in the barns certainly didn't wear cowboy hats, and the saddles they rode in were different and smaller than what he was used to. Only the horses were the same as out West; running together, curious and social with their tails and manes fluttering in the wind. Tim smiled and his heart leapt every time one of the animals came to the white railing to check him out. The horses were as friendly as ever, the owners, less so.

They did not need an itinerant stable hand.

Their eyes glanced at his cowboy hat.

They seemed mistrustful, cautious. Not many drifters decide to settle in Watertown, Connecticut. Their clients at the fancy farms consisted of young girls, mostly, and nobody wanted a twenty-five-year-old stranger near their operation without personal references. The army was slow to give those, and Tim didn't want to bother his family back in Wyoming before he was positive that he was dying to get the job. There was no need to alarm them in his weekly phone calls. He edited his adventures appropriately, just so he didn't need to hear an undertone of concern in their voices.

After one more rejection, he had begun to wonder whether the old trucker, Joe, had been right about his prospects here out East, with all these Yankees and their staid expectations. Out West, he would have been hired as a ranch hand already. Tim considered approaching a garage or two, see if they needed a mechanic, but he hesitated. Horses were so quiet and comforting. He had missed the sweet smell of horse sweat while in the army, and he missed it whenever his hands were covered with grime and oil, earning a few hundred bucks to tide him over. He would keep trying for a horse job.

The fifth and the sixth establishments were pretty much the same, and Tim got the same negative reply; those two were off Route 8 and a bit larger than the ones closer to town. Shadows lengthened and the trickle of sweat on Tim's neck cooled as temperatures dropped off, reminding him that early May was still a bit too cold to sleep outside without a sleeping bag.

He assessed his situation and decided to strike out for the nearest supermarket. The ready-to-eat section was usually full of hot food, and the value was better than relying on a diner. With enough provisions to restock his backpack, a new razor and a small bottle of shampoo, Tim asked around before he set out on Route 8 North. He was told the Breezeview Motel was right outside of town, cheap and reasonably clean. An hour hike would get him within forty bucks of a bed and a shower. Once he washed his clothes and cleaned up his image, he would visit the local library to better investigate his employment options.

Two miles out of town, everything changed. The houses became sparse and less polished and dandelions nodded their yellow heads by the road, almost closed in the crepuscular light. Tim adjusted the straps of his backpack and tilted his cowboy hat back to see better. He figured he was more than two-thirds of the way to the motel when he heard sound of an engine from behind. A loud pop split the air; Tim jumped across a ditch and hit the ground. He covered his head by instinct and, gasping for breath, he fought against the onslaught of old images and emotions.

The weedy grass scratched his face. Worn-out feelings flooded his mind as his body readied itself for a fight. Adrenaline spiked; blood roared in his ears. He breathed in and out, slowly, until he convinced his mind that the moist growth under his cheek smelled nothing like the dry dust of the faraway desert. He was in the present, right here, right now, and the soil under his hands was moist and loamy—there wasn't even a hint of the dry, scratchy sand that he'd have to clean out of the engines and shake out of his socks. When his breathing settled down and he decided he knew where he was, he lifted his head and looked down the road. A white pickup truck stood by the side of the road. Its hazards were turned on, and Tim thought he could make out a logo on its passenger side door.

He let out a pent-up exhale. Tim was used to being passed on the road, but walking after dark carried its risks. An accidental tire blowout and a subsequent loss of control of a passing vehicle was one of them. The truck ahead of him was almost new. The dent in its rear right fender said much about the owner's driving habits. Tim felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth, and realized that the thought of a haphazard driver in a new truck amused him. He rose to his feet and stood up slowly, making sure his balance was all there, before he jumped back across the ditch.

He was almost behind the liftgate of the white pickup truck when the driver's door cracked open. The driver tried to push it ajar, but the heavy door stayed closed. The vehicle's shredded tire made it list to the side as though it were a wounded bird. The driver tried again, and Tim watched with interest as a sneakered foot pushed the door all the way open. After another try, a short, stout woman rolled out of the cab.

"Hey, are you okay?" Tim stayed by the liftgate, giving her space. His two years of drifting had taught him that drivers didn't like being surprised,

especially not while exiting their vehicles on a remote stretch of a road. Sure enough, the woman turned on a dime. Her eyes were startled as she sucked in a lungful of air. Tim remained still, his hands visible. He tipped his cowboy hat in greeting, and smiled.

“Looks like you blew a tire, ma’am,” he said.

“Looks like I did,” she replied. “I hope I didn’t hit you back there. I didn’t, did I?”

“No, I’m fine, ma’am.”

“Oh, good,” she said with a relieved exhale. “Let me call the triple A. I can never get the lug nuts off these wheels, the way they get tightened in the shop.”

She had a calm, disarming air and Tim spoke up before thinking first.

“Could be, I could help,” he offered. “It’s worth tryin’.” He felt her eyes on him, assessing him from head to toe and back. She must have been around fifty, and her brown hair was pulled back into a practical ponytail. She wore jeans, sneakers, and a padded corduroy barn shirt.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m Amy. And you are?”

“I’m Tim Sherman, ma’am,” he said.

“You don’t seem local, Tim,” Amy said as she aimed a flashlight at the toolbox mounted in the back of the truck bed.

“No, ma’am. Here, let me get it.” Tim climbed into the truck and opened the toolbox. It took some digging before he unearthed a jack and a wrench.

“You don’t have to call me ma’am,” Amy said, and Tim thought he heard a bit of a smile in her voice.

“Yes, ma’am.” He cracked a grin at her exasperated sigh.

The lug nuts were every bit as stubborn as Amy had feared, and her one hundred and eighty pounds did nothing to budge the stubborn treads. Tim added his own one hundred and fifty-eight, and when they both stood on the arm of the long wrench while holding onto the truck’s sides and bounced up and down, there was a creak.

“Watch out!” Tim yelled, but Amy bounced again, all excited, and the lug

nut gave. The arm of the wrench followed the law of gravitational attraction, dumping both of them into the ditch by the road.

Tim stiffened, expecting another flashback. Nothing happened; only the woman's warm, soft body kept him from getting soaked by the cold water of the ditch runoff. "Are you okay?" he asked as he got off Amy and scrambled to his feet.

A wry chuckle was his only reply. He bent over and grasped her small hand and heaved Amy to her feet, and then they scrambled up the muddy slope back to the truck.

"Looks like we did it!" she crowed, brushing her dirty hands down the back of her soaked jeans, as though she could get her garments dry again. "Let's do another one!"

And they did—in fact, they removed all the stubborn lug nuts and Tim replaced the wheel with a spare.

"See? We did good. It took us only twenty minutes," Amy said, smiling in the dark. "So where were you going, anyway, since you're not local?"

"Uh..." Tim hesitated. "There's a motel up the road. I figured I'd sleep there tonight, and then figure out what to do next."

"I see." Amy put away the tools and locked the toolbox in the back of the pickup truck. "How about you come with me, then. The guest bedroom is already taken, but there is a pull-out sofa. You can stay with us tonight, and we'll get the ditch mud off you at the same time."

Tim's heart leapt at the offer, but he didn't want to seem too eager. "I wouldn't want to impose, ma'am."

"Bullshit," Amy said. "And stop calling me ma'am. It makes me feel like an old lady."

Tim took a survey of the family scene inside the old farmhouse. Amy worked on her laptop, Amy's older daughter Janice was looking through the local movie listings with her boyfriend Jeff, and sixteen-year-old DeeDee was doing her homework in the kitchen. He suppressed a sigh. It felt domestic.

Normal. It almost reminded him of his family on the horse ranch out West. Nobody here knew who he was, though, and that was a comforting thought because it felt like a chance at a fresh start.

Amy had a son, too. His sister Janice grumbled about her brother being late again; something about having to hold his dinner in the oven. Tim tuned her out, thinking hard. There were horses on the property; he could see two low buildings further back from the house, illuminated by outdoor lighting. The long driveway was cordoned from the road by tall trees and outlined in thin lines of telltale white fences gleaming in the dark. He noticed the mud tray with boots by the back door and sighed in satisfaction. Tim had landed at a place with horses. It seemed too small an operation to promise a job, but maybe he could socialize with the animals in the morning. If he helped with the morning chores, he could at least smell their comforting scent and feel their soft noses. Tim closed his eyes in recollection of the warm whuff of an equine exhale against his hair, something that he used to take for granted when a horse would say *hello* in exchange for a carrot or a piece of peppermint candy.

At eleven o'clock, Amy helped Tim pull out the sleeper sofa and gave him the bedding for it. Janice and Jeff were out at the movies and DeeDee was glued to the computer screen, earphones on, absorbed in YouTube videos. Just as Tim finished making his bed, a car roared up the driveway. Judging by sound alone, Tim guessed that its engine was older and probably domestic. Moments later, a guy in his early twenties sauntered through the front door. He carried a backpack and he called out a hello as he came in, suppressing a yawn.

"About bloody time you showed up, Ari," Amy called from the kitchen. "What kept you this time? Your dinner's in the oven!"

Ari didn't answer his mother. Instead he stood still, his eyes on the stranger in the family room. Tim felt the man's eyes give him the once-over and scrutinized him right back. Ari's hair was straight and silky, a bit darker than Amy's. He seemed about three inches taller than Tim's five ten, but skinnier. Where Tim's upper body packed muscle worthy of a welterweight boxing

champion, six-pack included, Ari was tall and slender, with shoulders that were straight but narrow. He wore navy chinos and a button-down with an air of self-assured competence despite the white-and-pink stripe of his shirt. It coordinated with the purple frames of his glasses.

Tim stood still, observing him, fascinated. He had never met a man who would wear a pink shirt and purple glasses before. He was... pretty. Not just pretty—Ari was downright gorgeous, with the bow of his upper lip just plump enough to keep his lips from being strict and narrow. His eyes seemed dark and deep and mysterious behind the severe frames of his purple glasses, and Tim was beset by a desire to strip the stupid, pink shirt off the guy and see him topless, with just the purple frames and the kissable mouth. He was wondering if the pale skin of his body ever flushed pink, when the newcomer broke the silence. “Who are you?”

It took Tim a moment or two to find his words. “My name’s Tim Sherman. I helped your mom change a blown tire, and she let me sleep over.”

Ari rolled his eyes. “Not another accident, I hope. Is she okay? I’m Ari,” he said and extended his hand.

Just about that time, Amy walked into the room. “Oh you two just met, good! Be nice, Ari. Tim was very kind to help me out. He’ll sleep here since Jeff has the guest room.”

“Mom, if you let Jeff bunk with Janice, Tim could take the guest room,” Ari said in a voice that hinted of a well-worn argument. His mother didn’t even bother giving him a look.

“Not in my house,” she said. Her voice sounded like a broken record.

Tim had set his phone to wake him up at six. He slipped into yesterday’s clothing, still muddy from the ditch, and brushed his teeth. His timing was good; he heard a shower running upstairs, and Ari was already in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Tim said as he turned his chin in Ari’s direction. Ari stood against the counter with an air of infinite patience, watching the toaster glow red on the inside.

“Hey,” Ari said, his voice barely audible. “You want any toast?”

“Sure,” Tim said, and watched Ari extract two white slices of bread from a bag, drop them into the other two slots, and press the toaster’s lever down. He did all of that so slowly, it was like watching grass grow. Ari didn’t appear to be a morning person. “There’s herbed cream cheese, and I nuked some sausage patties. You want any?” Ari’s voice was as slow as his actions, and as soft as a vernal breeze. He gave the impression of a man struggling through a thick fog.

“Sure,” Tim said, and watched Ari walk over to the refrigerator and pull out a box of pre-cooked turkey sausage from the freezer drawer. Ari unwrapped two sausage patties, put them on a plate, and microwaved them on high for one minute.

“You want any coffee or juice?” Ari asked, almost whispering.

“Sure. Coffee. Black. I’ll get it myself.” Tim stepped around Ari and reached up for a mug, taking it off an open shelf.

“I can do that for you.” Ari’s voice was still just a whisper, but his handsome face had a stubborn set to it. “Here’s the cream cheese. Here’s your toast. I always make a sandwich out of it and eat on the go.”

Tim followed Ari’s example, feeling awkward at the man’s helpful demeanor. “I can do stuff for myself,” he growled. “Really, you don’t have to do everything.”

Ari shrugged and lifted his glasses to rub his eyes before he broke the silence again. “How come you’re up so early?”

“I figured I’d help with the chores. I grew up on a horse ranch.”

Ari nodded. “Okay.” He ate with deliberation, consuming his sandwich in heavy silence and finishing his coffee. He waited for Tim to finish as well before he moved toward the back door, and as he sat there, the coffee must have started kicking in, because Ari’s movements got faster and faster, and his speech became louder and more animated.

“You got shoes?” Ari said, now all wired with caffeine and excitement.

“Hiking boots.” Tim pointed to the only pair of footwear that he currently owned.

“Okay! That will do. Although we have all kinds of spare boots in the basement.” Ari was definitely excited now. He adjusted the purple frames of his glasses, and slipped into his leather boots.

When Tim reached for his cowboy hat and put it on, Ari pressed his lips together and looked like he really wanted to say something, but then he bit it back. His animated manner made it almost impossible to suppress his reservations and Tim expected a comment on his hat, because everyone seemed to have commented on it. In the end, Ari only smiled.

They bounded two hundred feet across a yard that was mostly grass and muddy tracks, with a graveled parking area where Amy parked her horse trailer. An assortment of farming equipment was lashed down under a green tarp right next to it. The land was flat, and the pastures surrounded the house and the barn like a big horseshoe. The barn itself was an old structure with a fieldstone base and small, glazed windows for each stall, above which rose a wooden clapboard barn stained dark brown. The roof was old and the grey slate shingles looked a bit chewed up.

Ari slid the barn door open, letting the sun in. A brown Labrador ran out to give Ari a perfunctory greeting before he turned to Tim and nosed him right in the crotch.

“Ow,” Tim said with a *whoosh*, covering his groin. “Does he always do that?”

A smile split Ari’s animated face. “Oh yes. Don’t take it personally. Her name’s Hershey, and if you feed her, she’ll never stop bugging you.”

There were six stalls on the left side of the barn, and all were occupied. The right side had a tack area, feed bins, and a workshop full of aging tools.

“First we give them grain,” Ari said. “Once they eat, we turn them out and clean the stalls, water their buckets and fill mangers with hay for later.”

“Okay,” Tim said. “That shouldn’t take long. When we’re done, if you go out, do you think you could give me a ride to the library?”

Ari spun toward Tim with an air of unabashed curiosity, letting the empty grain scoop dangle off his fingertips. “What do you want at the library?”

“Job hunting. I don’t figure your Ma will want me around forever.”

“No, probably not. Although she won’t kick you out, if you help around the place. We’re all too busy holding down jobs that keep the horses in hay, or going to school.”

Tim put the handles of a wheelbarrow down and crossed his arms. “That’s good to know. Although I wouldn’t want to impose.” Tim became distinctly uncomfortable with Ari’s attention on him and his plans, and decided to change tack. “What are you studying?”

“Accounting,” Ari fired off as he poured grain into a bay horse’s feed bucket.

“Why accounting?”

“If I want to keep riding hunters, I need a flexible day job,” Ari said. He spoke fast and gesticulated as much as work permitted, and Tim wondered whether Ari’s movements would slow down to his earlier snail’s pace once the caffeine wore off. “The business needs an accountant, too, but I can also build a customer base and do the books for other small businesses, and still take care of this place and train the horses and ride.” He went on in that vein for a while, and when he came up for air, Tim had a chance to chime in.

“Horses are expensive,” he said as he nodded in agreement with Ari. “My family still has a ranch out West—they breed them and sell the young ones. The vet bill was always enormous.”

“The vet and the farrier, the feed, and liability insurance,” Ari clicked off the main items. Then he paused and eyed Tim up and down. “So you can ride?”

“Yeah. Ranch stuff—roping, cutting, a little barrel racing. None of this fancy stuff you do, though. At other places around here, the owners sounded like they didn’t think I was up to snuff.”

Ari shrugged. “Their loss. The horses need to be exercised. Do you think—”

“Shit yeah!” Tim grinned from ear to ear. “I would absolutely love to ride them for you. Just understand that it will be a bit rocky to start with, yeah? I

haven't been riding regular for a while now, and..." Tim looked uncertain before he spoke again. "And I've never used one of these little saddles before."

DeeDee was at school, Janice and Jeff were up getting their breakfasts, and Amy was poring over the week's schedules.

"You can't maintain your riding schedule until your finals are over, right Ari?" she said. Her reading glasses threatened to fall off the tip of her nose as she checked the calendar. "I'll take your two lessons today—the Ternam sisters—and you have the Intermediate class. I have the Beginners class, and two private lessons. Denine will be using the arena to work on her dressage routine between noon and two o'clock..." Amy's tone of voice indicated that she did not expect to see Ari around horses that day.

"That's right," Ari said as he stuffed notebooks into his backpack.

"I know my way around a barn," Tim offered.

"I heard." Amy sighed. "Look Tim, I love what you're offering here, but please understand I can't pay you. I can trade you room and board for a while in exchange for doing some chores, and Jeff is leaving tomorrow so you can have the guest room. It's just, some of the maintenance has been neglected since my husband—" She paused as a cloud passed over her brow. "Well, for a while now."

"I'll do it if I can, no problem," Tim said. The lure of riding and the prospect of staying in the established old town with its sleepy streets and wide sycamore trees would have made him agree to just about anything.

"It's secure. Mom's almost your size and she uses this saddle all the time," Ari said later that day.

Tim knew Ari did his best to sound calm and reassuring, as though Tim was a brand new student, but Tim didn't think much of the small, slick-looking English saddle. He checked the girth again.

"Okay," Tim said, and used the mounting block, settling uneasily in the strange saddle. He cautiously straightened up, and found that it helped his seat.

The ground looked a lot further down than he remembered and he wondered if falling would make him think of concussive blasts and gritty desert sand. He banished the thought and forced himself to inhale, then exhale. He pressed his heels down. "Okay, I'm ready," he said, sounding a lot more confident than he let on.

"We'll walk for a bit just to warm up." Tim saw Ari nod, and gently squeezed Blossom with his calves. They rode around the large oval in silence.

"I'm glad the weather's holding up," Ari said. "I ride even when it rains. When I start working, I'll be setting money aside to build a covered arena."

"Oh yeah?" Tim fell into a comfortable warm-up rhythm, feeling the six years of hiatus fall away from him bit by bit. "Do people here ride inside a lot?"

"The larger stables have indoor arenas," Ari said. "Since my dad died, his benefits cover mine and DeeDee's entry fees and college tuition— if we're careful. We all have jobs."

"Even DeeDee?" Tim asked. The girl he saw the night before seemed young to his eyes.

"She works two shifts a week in a grocery store."

Tim didn't mind the silence. He was busy absorbing the sensation of being astride a horse again. It was old and familiar, yet new again because he didn't know the horse or the equipment. The helmet irritated him and made his head feel heavier than his hat would have, possibly because the strap rubbed under his chin.

He realized he hadn't worn a helmet since Iraq. The thought would have made him freak out if he were on the ground, but the rocking motion of the horse under him was soothing. He focused on keeping centered and upright, and his worries over a flashback resulting from a possible fall were pushed out by his single minded focus on following Ari's directions. Ari proved to be a pleasant teacher, even though he nixed the idea of wearing just the hat, and Tim found that he didn't mind that Ari was in charge.

"Let's trot for a while, see how you feel." Ari broke their silence ahead of him. He didn't tell him how to make Blossom trot. It was a test, then. Ari

wanted to assess Tim's riding skills, and Tim was happy to oblige. It took him two tries before Blossom moved faster. He felt a bit less attached to the saddle, as though the horse's gait threatened to bounce his butt right up. Yet, it wasn't long before Tim found his seat and moved with Blossom, straight and fairly secure.

"Watch me post," Ari called back, and Tim watched the taller man rise and fall in the saddle in rhythm with the horse's trot, using the natural bounce to his advantage. Tim tried it and found that it wasn't hard, and it sure beat busting his balls against the pommel. As he made his way around, he felt the familiar wind in his face and could not help but grin. He picked up the way Ari rode his horse to the middle of the oval and halted, keeping an eye on him.

"You're doing well," Ari called out. "Go around a few times and when you're ready, slow down to a walk."

When Tim spared a glance in Ari's direction, he was surprised at how the other man was transformed. He looked taller and stronger, yet at the same time he condensed his very being into a power pack of commanding presence. The horse beneath him knew it and showed him full deference. Heat began to coalesce in the pit of Tim's belly. Ari's confident air filled him with heady want. The timing for getting hard was far from ideal, since Tim felt the horse's every move under him, every undulation. Arousal warred with pain, and he wished he could find an excuse to dismount and disappear somewhere private to compose himself. He never expected this sudden assault upon his senses, never on horseback, and never from the Ari of the pink-striped shirt and purple glasses.

Half an hour later, they untacked their two horses, brushed them, and turned them out into the pasture by the road. Then they tacked up the next two and rode those for an hour, and by the time they were done with all six, Tim's legs felt bowed, his quads trembled like jelly, and his unwelcome state of arousal was but a memory.

"How are you doing there, cowboy?" Ari asked with a grin.

"Dandy," Tim groaned. "I haven't ridden in a while. I used to do full-day rides, but that's some years ago. And I never had to do this posting shit."

Ari shrugged as they both walked toward the fence to watch the horses socialize. “Some people say Western’s easier, but I don’t think so. To be a good rider takes practice, and the saddle doesn’t change that one way or the other.” His tone was surprisingly free of prejudice, and took Tim by surprise.

“I thought you’d be more invested in promoting English,” Tim said. “I know that my cowboy hat turned some prospective employers off.”

“Probably,” Ari agreed. He leaned his elbows against the fence and stretched his back until it cracked. He cast a sly look at Tim, who was just then observing the graceful curve of Ari’s lower back and ass. Their eyes met and Tim knew he had been caught looking. This could go either way, now. Ari could get mad and stalk away, and Tim would end up sleeping in that little motel north of the town. Or... it was all so very far-fetched. Yet Tim watched Ari watch him. The weight of Ari’s look across Tim’s broad shoulders felt like a caress. He flexed. Ari grinned.

“Will you just lean against the fence on display like that all day, or will you help me clean the stalls?” Ari said with a grin full of mischief and promise.

Tim straightened. “Lead on.”

Ari was interesting. He was quiet and gentle, and he seemed entirely dead to the world in the morning. As soon as the coffee hit, though, the morning fog was torn away in a hurricane of activity. Ari became animated and talkative, and the smooth-shaven skin under his jawline presented an enticing area that Tim wanted to explore with his mouth. He wondered whether Ari would taste sweet, like pink-striped shirts and purple glasses, or whether he’d have a salty, musky bite to him like every guy that ever worked with horses. The only way to find out was to follow Ari into the barn and grab a pick, and follow his lead at cleaning the stalls.

They were done in less than an hour, and Ari looked around before he pulled the phone out of his pocket and checked the time.

“I have a class in not too long,” he said, eyeing Tim with a look that was half hope and half challenge. “I can drop you off at the library on my way, and pick you up on the way back.”

“Sounds good.” Tim voice came out harsh and gravelly, struggling under the weight of Ari’s scrutiny.

“We still have a bit of time to go up and get some hay. You know, for later,” Ari said and his smile was knowing, full of mystery and spice and just a hint of intrigue. “If you’d care to follow me?”

Tim watched Ari climb up the ladder to the hayloft above the empty stalls, pulling himself up with lanky arms that were whipcord strong. His whole body was thin and tall, solid and lean. Slim hips gave way to long, strong legs, and Tim unglued himself from his spot, suddenly propelled forward by a yearning to know how pale Ari’s skin was with his jeans pulled down to his knees. Oh yeah, he was definitely following Ari up to the hayloft.

They tossed down a single bale of hay—the six horses wouldn’t need more than that for the moment. The hayloft was small and warm under the roof, and pleasant despite the inevitable dust.

“I used to come here when I was in trouble and was hiding,” Ari said. “Then after Dad died, I’d come here because he always used to find me here. I was hoping he’d find me again.”

Tim leaned against the wall of bales that were stacked up behind him. “I’m sorry.” There was little else to say. “Was he sick?”

“Nah. He died in Iraq. His helo crashed in a dust storm.” Ari was staring at the floor through his purple framed glasses, the lenses of which were now speckled with dust. “I didn’t mean to bring this up and change the mood, y’know. I... sorry. That’s just dumb. It’s been six years. You’d think we’d all be over it.”

Tim crossed the short space between them and put his hands on Ari’s shoulders. He squeezed gently and waited until Ari looked him in the eyes. “You don’t get over the people you love. You’re not supposed to forget your dad, just like I’m not going to forget my buddy who died right next to me.”

“Died?” Ari asked, confused.

“I was there, too,” Tim said as he ran his fingers through his hair. He wanted to push his hat back in a habitual, nervous gesture, but he never put it

back on after he removed his riding helmet, and now he missed its familiar weight.

“But you made it back all right,” Ari said, and Tim felt Ari’s curious eyes on him again, scanning him from head to toe. This time, Ari’s eyes were empty of the previous heat and sultry promise. It was cold and calculating, assessing damage. Looking for injuries.

“No big scars, if that’s what’s bugging you,” Tim said. “My head got knocked about in an explosion a bit, and I was sent back. I’m okay... mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Yeah.”

Tim wasn’t going to explain that the pressure wave of the explosion burst his eardrums and scrambled his brains for awhile, nor that it had turned him into a coward. He was supposed to be with his unit right now, out there somewhere, he was supposed to be back with the guys as soon as his eardrums grew back and his hearing returned. He was supposed to be driving with his caravan and fixing the trucks that broke under the brunt of the heat and the cold and the uneven roads, meticulously removing sand from all their moving parts. He’d been willing to try, but when the army doctor dropped a dictionary behind Tim’s chair, and Tim jumped and turned in sheer panic, eyes wild and unseeing, the older man just nodded and patted Tim on the shoulder.

“You’ll take some time to heal up, son,” he had said to him back then. That had been well over two years ago, and it had been almost two years since Tim had left his family’s ranch out West to escape their pained concern, his feeling like he was moving through molasses, and a sense of constant and impending doom.

Ari’s arm settled around his shoulders and he felt the bales of hay prick his back. Ari ran his hand up his shoulder and cupped it around the nape of his neck.

“Tim.” Ari was very close now, and Tim’s wide, unfocused eyes caught a flash of purple frames and pale skin. “Tim, I’m going to kiss you now, and if you don’t want to be kissed, you need to let me know, all right?”

Tim let his hands drift up Ari’s slender hips and anchored them at his belt. This was an open invitation—almost right away he felt Ari’s body press into

him, thigh against thigh and groin against groin, chest against chest. Ari wrapped his long, slender fingers in the curl of hair in the nape of Tim's neck. He couldn't rightly see Ari's lips, but he felt the dry softness brush against his shut mouth. Ari kissed him, nice and gentle, and then leaned away and scrutinized Tim's expression.

"Was that okay?"

"Yeah," Tim rasped, barely able to produce a sound. "Again?"

The corners of Ari's mouth tugged up in a hint of a smile as he neared him again, and their lips made contact, and stayed. Tim kissed back then, feeling Ari's lush cupid bow, tasting the corner of his mouth, feeling the way Ari parted his lips in a silent invitation. Tim reciprocated, eyes shut, feeling his way with his tongue along the contours of Ari's mouth. Their tongues touched in a delicious, electrifying contact and Tim pulled Ari against him, running his hands up Ari's long, whipcord back. Ari tasted of cotton-candy shirts and honest sweat, of blossoming trees and Christmas cookies and of a solid ground under his feet.

"Stay," he heard Ari whisper into his mouth. "Don't leave, okay? Just stay here with us."

And Tim wanted to stay. The trees still held their branches open wide in a generous welcome, and the streets still breathed an old, solid air of stability and home. He wanted to know Ari, to learn everything about him and make it his. Make Ari his.

"I think I can," Tim whispered, and the dry smell of desert sand was suddenly very far away.

"If you weren't my sister, I'd shut you up for being nosy," Tim sniffed into his cell phone, trying to act all hurt and offended, but failing miserably. The air was still crisp and luminous despite the few stratus clouds up above. He felt a gentle breeze stir the hair on his forearms. The wind current cooled him off, and he pressed his back into the sun-drenched stone façade of the Watertown Public Library.

"So is there a guy involved?" Cassie asked again. "Or, is it just because you like the place, or what?"

“I like the place even without the guy,” Tim said, enunciating every word in a way which let his sister know that this is not as random and half-assed a decision as it might have seemed a few minutes ago. “The guy’s nice. Real nice. Like, I want to keep him nice.” He was going to elaborate on the softness of Ari’s lips, on the mischievous glint in his eyes, on the graceful figure he cut on horseback as he jumped over obstacles, but thought better of it.

“What are you going to do for money?” Cassie sounded concerned. Even a child could calculate that a man could not survive on partial disability benefits.

“I have two interviews lined up. In fact, after I hang up, I’ll walk over to the auto shop and see if they like me enough.”

“I thought you wanted to work with horses.”

“Cass, I do. I get to work with horses, but not for money. This place is so horse crazy, every teenage girl wants to shovel shit in exchange for free lessons, or for reduced boarding fees. It’s not like out on a ranch.”

“So you’re willing to fix cars just so you can stay with this really nice guy and play with his horses.” Cassie summarized the situation well enough, and Tim grinned as he imagined her arching her eyebrows all the way up to her hairline and the dubious smirk on her face.

“Pretty much,” he admitted. “Hey, I’ll call you next week, okay?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow or the day after,” Cassie said. “I want to know all the latest developments. So does the whole family.”

Hancock Auto Service was just few blocks over from the library, and they were one of two garages in town. Will Hancock was a dry, wizened man with huge hands and black grease under his fingernails. He cleared his throat, and said, “You must be Tim Sherman, the guy that called.”

“Yes, sir,” Tim said and when they shook hands, Tim thought he’d lose his limb all the way up to his elbow.

“Call me Will, everybody does.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Will.” Tim felt all self-conscious, because this wasn’t just going to be some short-term job he planned to leave as soon as he

had five hundred bucks in his pocket. He wanted to stay here for a lot longer than that. The older man looked him straight in the eye. The no-bullshit glare seemed to strip Tim's usual defenses and he blinked, trying hard to maintain eye contact.

"So tell me what you can do and where you've been," Will said as he led the way into the shady recesses of the three-bay garage. "And tell me what your plans are. I have no use for a fly-by-night who'll up and disappear as soon as I get him trained."

Tim never made it to his second interview. He cancelled by phone and then returned to his work, putting a new alternator into an old Honda. He felt Will Hancock's watchful presence from afar, and the other two mechanics were keeping an eye on him on the sly. It didn't bother him as much as he thought it would have, because a three-week probationary period sounded like a fair deal for both sides. By then Tim would know whether he could stand being in a garage again, whether he could bear the loud hiss of pneumatic wrenches and the clanging of metal that came with taking cars apart and putting them together again. By the end of the day, his back was stiff with the ache that came from bending over an engine for too long a stretch at a time, and his mind was ready to buckle under a stimulus overload. Yet he persevered, thinking of the horses in the pasture, of the warmth of the quiet hayloft and of the soft brush of Ari's lips against his own. He would endure all this clamor and noise of the engines and tools, the occasional shouts by the other men, and the ringing of the telephone if it meant he got to stay and have at least a chance to taste those lips every day.

When Ari picked him up a little after five, Tim's hands were black with engine grease. He scrubbed down with orange soap and said good night to Will, who was closing down for the day. He sank into the old passenger seat and sighed, breathing the air that Ari had just exhaled.

"Hey," Tim said, cracking an involuntary smile. "Thanks for picking me up."

"No problem." Ari's informal reply was accompanied by a shy smile. As soon as they were out of sight of the garage, Ari took his right hand and cupped it over Tim's knee. The gesture was slow and hesitant, as though Ari

was unsure of Tim's reaction, and Tim found this unexpected shy streak incredibly endearing. He covered Ari's pale, long-fingered hand with his own. The black fingernails of a mechanic stood in direct contrast with the clean hands of an accounting student and Tim felt a pang of anxiety. Suppose Ari didn't like the dirt, the grime. Suppose it widened the chasm between a blue-collar army washout and an up-and-coming professional who rode horses in competitions. Suppose...

Tim's line of thought was interrupted when Ari lifted his hand to his lips and brushed a dry kiss onto Tim's rough, grimy skin. "Congratulations on the job," he said. "Does that mean you're staying?"

Amy was back from her shift at the hospital and had dinner on the stove by the time they got back. "Set the table, boys," she called out. Chore by chore, Tim was integrating himself into the rhythm of the household. Halfway through dinner, she looked at Tim and said, "You look a bit worse for the wear."

Tim stilled and swallowed his bite, trying to disguise his discomfort. It wasn't the physical labor that bothered him. "The work isn't that hard. How was your day?" he said, hoping to divert attention from himself.

Amy frowned. "Nicely played. You look like there's a stone mask over your face and something's bothering you."

Tim shrugged. "It's a good job. Will Hancock seems like a fair man."

"But?" she persisted.

"It's loud in there. It's not like being in a quiet barn full of horses."

"And loud is a problem?" she asked.

"Is it because of that explosion you were in?" Ari cut in. His voice was soft, as though he hoped the tone would blunt the inquiry.

Tim closed his eyes. When he was ready to speak again, he opened them. "If you don't mind, I'll go check on the horses."

It was dark already, but Tim had no desire to abandon the hayloft. It was nice to hear just the shifting of horses and the occasional whicker. Their smell was peaceful, too. Nice and comforting and nothing like the garage with its grease and oil and gasoline. The garage smells reminded him of the caravan, and the cacophony of unpredictable noises had made him jump and twitch over and over earlier in the day. The stress of the extra sensory stimulus set him on edge. He wondered how the next day would go. He'd have to stick it out. He was here to stay, and in order to stay with Ari, he had to pull his weight. Maybe get an apartment so they could have privacy. The mask born of stress and pain began to crack into a smile at the thought, and suddenly he really wanted to feel the warmth of Ari's hand on his own, like in the car.

Tim was about to sit up and get going when the small door in the side of the barn creaked open.

"Tim?" Ari's voice carried through the darkness. "You up there?"

"I'm coming down." A fuzzy warmth blossomed in Tim's chest at the thought of Ari actually caring enough to look him up. The last two years played out according to Tim's rules, true, but it had been a lonely time.

"No, don't. I'll come up." Ari's head appeared as he climbed the ladder only moments later. It was dark in the barn, but Tim could still discern Ari's contours against the night.

They settled on the dusty wooden floor. Ari draped his long arm across Tim's shoulders and pulled him in until they felt each other's body heat. They listened to the horses shifting underneath the hayloft. An occasional car passed by the house out on the road, and few strains of music made their way from the house.

"That's DeeDee, playing her violin," Ari said. His words broke the silence like a glass and the fragments scattered, sharp, unwelcome. Tim recoiled at having to explain. He didn't want to talk about it. Ari was sweet, but Ari would not understand, his well-meaning mom would never get it, and his boss would figure he was a coward to jump at every loud noise behind his back.

"My mom is a nurse," Ari said. "She works with a lot of military types who are coming back with invisible injuries."

Invisible injuries.

Is that what Tim had? People around him could understand a poked-out eye, or a missing leg, but could they ever understand how he felt inside? There was anxiety and fear, and a sense of loss, and a bone-deep sadness that came from fighting not to jump at every sound of a dropped book, or a sound of metal shearing. Tim laughed, forcing the air out of his lungs.

“I’m just scared of loud noises, is all. I’ve turned into a coward, I guess. And once my hearing came back weeks later, everything was so loud. I just couldn’t stand it.” He draped his arms over his bent knees, and set his head down on them in the dark. “I guess I failed.”

“You were hurt. My mom knows people who were hurt like you, and the place where she works, they can help.” Ari’s voice was soft, like talking to a spooked horse.

“I don’t wanna talk to shrinks. That just makes it worse.”

“You don’t have to. There is this thing called Rapid Eye Movement Therapy. My dad’s buddy said it helped him a lot.” Ari stirred next to him, and his warm hand traced soothing circles over Tim’s shoulder blades. “Mom says she can help you just check it out, so you don’t have to...” Ari searched for words for a moment. “So you don’t have to be in pain. Invisible injuries can hurt as much as anything that’s obvious to the rest of us.”

They sat in tense silence for a while.

“You don’t have to do it,” Ari amended. “Not unless you want to.”

Tim straightened his back up, inadvertently shaking Ari’s hand off. He missed the contact right away.

“I want to stay,” Tim whispered. “I want to have a job, and I can’t just stay here and not pull my weight.” He paused. “Do you want me to stay, Ari?”

“Yeah,” Ari said. “I thought that was obvious.”

Tim reached out in the dark, until he felt Ari next to him. He slid his hand up to Ari’s neck and fingered his dark, slightly overgrown hair. “I want to stay,” he whispered. He felt like he was shouting. He cupped his hand around the nape of Ari’s neck and pulled him closer. His intent was obvious, and Ari

cooperated by melting halfway into a breathless kiss. Tim pressed harder, and Ari yielded, leaning into the wall of prickly hay behind them and inviting Tim into his embrace. Limbs tangled, they shared air and gasped their pleasure. Tim felt Ari's glasses press into his cheekbone. They were purple, and Ari still wore one of his pastel, pinstripe shirts. Even in the dark, Tim could feel their colors through the way Ari tasted and smelled. Like cookies, like horses. Like home.

“Okay,” Tim said once they came up for air. “I’ll talk to your mom. Since I’m stayin’.”

THE END

Author Bio

Kate Pavelle was born in Prague and has lived in the United States since her teens. When she came to America, she was told she could become whatever she wanted to be, so she decided to become an Apache Indian. When that didn't work out, she turned to writing. Her family's defection from behind the Iron Curtain, a short stint as a homeless political refugee, and the process of immigration and assimilation has provided her with many a story to share in both written form and oral storytelling format. Kate's writing is sustained by the love of her husband and children. Despite his devotion to her dreams, her husband will not allow her to brain-tan deer hide in the driveway anymore.

Kate's first novel, Wild Horses, came out with Dreamspinner Press on July 1st, 2013. The second book in the Steel City Series, "Zipper Fall," is scheduled for release in late August.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TEN YEAR H-ITCH

By Pelaam

Photo Descriptions

The black and white photo shows two men, but only the man closest to the camera is in focus. He sits in bed, propped up on pillows, staring pensively at the camera. In the background, his partner reclines on the far edge of the same bed. His hand reaches for his lover's nipple as he watches the other man intently.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been together for ten years now and love each other very much. The stresses of daily life have gotten in the way and put a strain on our relationship. We don't seem to spend the time or energy on our relationship like we should. Help us to find the spark we once had.

Sincerely,

Breann

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: established couple, light BDSM, teacher, medical personnel, hurt/comfort

Word count: 6,313

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

TEN YEAR H-ITCH

By Pelaam

“That’s me. Gotta dash. Catch you later, Danny. Don’t forget I’ll be late tonight.”

Lips briefly brushed his cheek, but Josh was already out of the kitchen before Danny could try for something of more substance. He sighed as he looked at his unfinished coffee. He grimaced. He stood, threw the rest of the coffee in the sink and stacked the breakfast dishes in the washer. Setting the machine to wash, Danny jogged up to the bathroom.

He shrugged off his robe, and caught a glance of himself in the mirror as he headed to the shower. He stopped, moved closer, and peered critically at his reflection.

He still looked good for a guy heading towards his mid-thirties. He turned left and right. He’d only ever had a light-blond patch of fur down between his pecs, then nothing until the sandy-brown fur that he kept well-trimmed at his groin. He didn’t have a six-pack, or even a three-pack for that matter. But there was no paunch either. He stood closer and stared into his reflection’s eyes. There were a few more lines around them now, but it was the lack of sparkle that drew Danny’s attention. They looked sad and tired. *Hell, I am sad and tired.*

He brought the naked body of his lover to mind. Josh was still as drop-dead gorgeous as he was when they met and fell in love ten years previously. Not a hint of silver in his dark hair, beautiful ocean-blue eyes, the lush fur between his pecs narrowing into a distinct line that ran from a couple of inches above his navel to the thick dark bush that surrounded his dick. Danny groaned as his cock began to fill.

Just the thought of him, and I behave like a horny teenager. But when was the last time I tasted him, really tasted him? When was the last time I took him inside me? We still love each other, we’re still in love, but the real world is coming between us. Josh does all these after-school activities, and my job in operating theatres has me working odd hours. Sometimes we’re like ships that pass in the night. There has to be something I can do to reignite our spark.

Danny shook his head. He didn't have time to think right now. He had to be in work in an hour. He'd be working into the evening, but Josh was going to be late anyway, so that didn't matter. There were frozen meals to grab, nuke and eat, and then they'd both just fall into bed. They probably wouldn't even have time to relax and unwind properly, much less spend time re-learning one another's bodies.

He stepped into the shower and let the hot water run over him, and wished it was Josh's hands. *There has to be something.*

"Hey, Danny. Wazzup, bud? You look like you dropped ten dollars and found a dime."

Danny looked up at his friend. He and Charles Bowen-Browne, better known as Charlie, had been friends for most of the eight years he'd worked at this hospital. Charlie was now a respected surgeon, just as Danny was as one of the lead anaesthetic technicians. Charlie flopped into a chair on the opposite side of the table and looked with concern in his eyes. Danny gave him a wry smile.

"Charlie, you've been married ten years, and have three kids. How do you keep the spark alive?"

"Hey, there aren't any problems in paradise are there? Man, you and Josh are just so... so married it's unreal. I envied your relationship before I married Yvette."

"No. No, nothing like that," Danny said hastily. "It's just... I don't know... something's missing. We still love one another, but we're almost flitting in and out of each other's lives. Things are busy here. Josh took on more responsibility at school to work towards being a deputy principal."

"Romance, my friend," Charlie said, his voice dropping to a hushed, conspiratorial tone. "Yvette and I snatch intimacy when we can with the kids. So to keep the romance alive, we get the kids babysat, and we do different things. Last month I took her to a show in Wellington. Spent the weekend there in a swanky hotel, did some shops, ate out. No worries, no distractions, just her and me... and a great big bed at night."

Danny looked close at Charlie. His friend's tone had gone wistful, and he had a dreamy look in his eyes. *He's reliving the memories.*

"We had a really sumptuous bedroom. I pretended I was a Sultan, and Yvette my concubine." He laughed. "Then she told me that I could think again. She was a Queen and I was her sex slave."

Danny's cheeks heated. *Something different, somewhere romantic, just the two of us*—He shifted in his chair. His thoughts were getting increasingly erotic, and he still had several hours to work. "Sounds like you had a great time," he said.

"Yvette has a great idea for home, too." Charlie leaned forward, and dropped his voice to a whisper. "She cleans out a coffee jar, and in it she puts a piece of paper with the name of the hotel, and a cryptic reminder of what we did. She'll leave it on the bed for me to see, so I know what to expect that day. Man, I get all hot and bothered, so does she. Then that night, we relive the memories. You and Josh haven't got kids to worry about. So make the most of it. Whisk him away somewhere, and have your wicked way with him, my friend."

At home, Danny stretched out naked on the bed and gazed at his laptop. He swallowed hard. He and Josh had really only ever been vanilla. But he did have fantasies. *It's not like I want to do anything extreme. Just a little spice.* He licked his lips. He gazed at a leather and steel harness, and pictured Josh wearing it and couldn't suppress a low, deep groan. He scrolled down further, looking intently. So intently, he didn't hear Josh until his lover came into the room.

"Josh!" Danny winced at the strangled squeak he made, and he scrambled madly to get out of the site he'd been looking at. *It'll ruin everything if he sees it.*

"Interrupting something?" Josh asked, an amused smirk on his lips as he began to undress.

"No. No nothing," Danny replied as he hastily shut down the laptop and shoved it in his bedside table's drawer. "Just random surfing on the net."

Josh snorted, and Danny winced, uncertain Josh believed him. However, his lover disappeared into their bathroom, and Danny heard the sounds of Josh showering. He glanced at the drawer, opened it, and made a move to put his laptop into his briefcase. He dashed back to bed, and waited for Josh.

The sight of his lover coming through from the bathroom made Danny forget about his laptop. Josh's chestnut hair, normally gelled back, curled around his face, and the dark fur on his chest was a riot of damp whorls. Danny licked his lips, but he also saw how exhausted Josh looked. "You're beautiful," he whispered.

Josh smiled as he came to bed, and slid in alongside Danny. "You're biased," he murmured.

Danny wrapped his arms around Josh. "Nope. It's true. I know you're tired, but in the morning, I'm going to show you just how beautiful you are."

"Maybe I'll show you," Josh whispered before kissing Danny.

Danny grinned as he snuggled into Josh's broader frame. *In a couple of weeks' time, I'll really show you.*

With a deep sigh, Danny headed along the hallway. After two weeks of clandestine viewing on his laptop when at home, all the bookings were done. He'd requested his orders be delivered care of Charlie. He didn't want to explain mysterious packages to Josh, and couldn't have them come to work. Charlie and his wife thought the whole thing was incredibly romantic, and Danny just hoped and prayed that when the day came, Josh felt the same way.

He turned to go into the lounge and stopped. Josh sat there. Only a small table lamp illuminated the room. Danny's heart started to hammer against his ribs, so hard that he thought Josh would hear it. His lover looked devastated, his eyes full of sorrow as he looked up to meet Danny's gaze. "Josh? What is it?" Danny asked.

"Is it over between us, Danny? Is there someone else?"

Josh's voice cracked as he spoke, and Danny ran forward to drop to his knees in front of his lover. He grasped tightly to Josh's hands.

“No!” he said. “No it’s not over, and no there’s no one else. Why would you even think that?”

“I just—you’ve been so secretive. You never used to care about me seeing what was on your laptop. We don’t seem to spend time together like we used to. I didn’t realise. But I started thinking, I love you, Danny, and I feel you’re slipping away from me.”

Danny pushed his body between Josh’s legs and wrapped his arms around his lover. “I love you, too. I’m sorry, so sorry. There isn’t anyone else. There never will be. I wanted to surprise you. I booked us a weekend away, and I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Josh squeezed Danny so hard, he was sure his ribs creaked, but he returned Josh’s embrace. Slowly the pressure eased, and Josh sat back, to gaze at Danny.

“A weekend away? Just the two of us?” he asked. “Really?” A glimmer of hope replaced the sadness in his eyes as Josh searched Danny’s face.

“Just the two of us.” Danny nodded, and framed Josh’s face in his hands. “I wanted to reignite the romance.”

“I let work come first. As much as I want this promotion, you should always be first. I should have made sure there was time for you. I won’t make the same mistake twice.” Josh leaned forward and captured Danny’s mouth in a fiery kiss.

Danny moaned softly as Josh’s tongue pushed past his lips. He didn’t resist as he was pulled up to sit astride Josh’s thighs.

“Make love with me,” Josh whispered into Danny ear, his breath hot, and his voice low and husky.

“Yes.” Danny eased from Josh’s lap and held out his hands. Josh took them, and as he stood pulled Danny into a tight hug.

They moved as one to the bedroom, and touched and kissed as they threw their clothes aside. Finally they tumbled onto the bed, Danny’s back to Josh’s chest, and Josh spooned tightly against him. Danny moaned and wriggled as he felt Josh’s hard cock press up against his ass.

Josh mouthed at the back of Danny's neck, and slid his hand around to wrap around Danny's eager dick. With a deep moan, Danny tried to buck into the strong grip.

"Not that way, babe. Not tonight. I wanna be inside you." Josh's voice was dark, silky, and possessive, and Danny made a sound that was halfway between a moan and a whimper. He scrambled to get up onto his hands and knees, and offered himself to Josh.

"Yes. Do it, do it. Want you, want you so much." Danny heard Josh get their lube out and pushed back eagerly as a slick finger pressed inside him. As Josh eased his finger in deeper, he nipped at Danny's neck, and then laved the abused flesh with his tongue. Danny bucked back into Josh as his lover added another finger, and then twisted and spread them to stretch him.

"I'm good, Josh, I'm good. Just—now, please?"

Josh sucked at the nape of Danny's neck and pushed inside with tantalising slowness. Danny knew better than to push back. Instead he savoured each shallow thrust that took Josh deeper inside him. He openly groaned when Josh was finally buried to the hilt and ground against him. He panted rapidly as Josh reached under him and began to stroke with just the pads of his fingertips along Danny's aching length.

"Move." Danny added a wriggle of his hip to his plea, and Josh complied.

The first thrust was shallow, the second deeper and a bit harder. Slowly, Josh built up his rhythm. Although still slow, Josh thrust deeply, and Danny thrilled from the passion and intensity. *This is what we were missing. Oh, so good, so good.*

"Yesss." Danny moaned aloud as Josh wrapped his hand around Danny's shaft. Slow strokes matched slow thrusts, and Danny focused on the feel of his lover's cock deep inside him. The way Josh brushed over his prostate sent jolts of pleasure that made him sigh and murmur Josh's name.

As Josh's speed increased, shocks of arousal zipped along Danny's spine. Thinking was impossible, only feeling. Danny's toes curled as pleasure built low in his stomach and slowly expanded outwards. He began to shake and shudder.

“So sweet, my Danny, so good. Feels so good.” Josh’s low, sexy voice crooned in his ear, his breath hot against Danny’s skin.

His orgasm hit Danny full force. His spine arched, and he thrust his ass back. Josh gave a deep, guttural groan, and bucked hard in response. Danny shook as he spilled over Josh’s insistent hand, and panted harshly as Josh increased the speed of his thrusts. Danny rotated his hips, silently encouraging his lover, and Josh moved harder and faster until he suddenly stopped, and Danny’s voice joined Josh’s as jets of his lover’s release pulsed deep inside him.

Josh went boneless, draped over Danny, and Danny collapsed, unable to support his satiated lover’s weight. Josh’s deep, sated sigh wafted across Danny’s shoulder, and he smiled. It took a few minutes before Josh roused enough to ease from Danny’s body and gather him in his arms.

“I love you, Danny,” Josh whispered against Danny’s lips before kissing him.

Danny wrapped his arms around Josh, and snuggled close. “I love you, too.”

By the time the weekend away came around, Danny was nervous and excited, and, despite his anxiety, very aroused. Fortunately Josh was far too busy packing their car, making sure it was ready for the drive, and securing the house to notice.

When they arrived at their hotel, Danny basked in Josh’s sexy-as-sin smile. “This is our hotel? Wow, Danny, I can’t wait to see inside.”

Josh sounded like an excited kid, and Danny allowed himself to relax a little, given his lover liked the hotel. But his nervousness grew again as they went up to their room. He took a deep breath and opened the door. The lounge was beautiful and spacious, but in truth, Danny barely saw it. He headed towards the bedroom. He’d seen it all when reviewing the hotel. He put down his case and opened the door.

Danny stood back and allowed Josh to precede him into the bedroom. He grinned with delight at his lover’s soft gasp of appreciation. Danny had fallen

in love with the bed, and been relieved to find the suite available for their weekend. The dark four poster was not only beautiful, but perfect for what Danny had in mind.

“I’ve never slept in a bed like this,” Josh said as he turned to smile at Danny.

“Good. I wanted this to be an experience you won’t forget.”

“No chance of that, lover.” Josh enfolded Danny in a tight embrace, and nibbled at his neck. “Wanna try it out now?”

Danny groaned as Josh reached to rub him through his pants. “I booked some food and drinks at the cocktail bar. We have forty minutes.”

“Okay, save the bed for later. Let’s hit the shower instead.”

Danny laughed as Josh waggled his eyebrows and gave him a lecherous look. *This is what we missed. Being playful, being spontaneous.*

The clothes they’d worn for the drive were unceremoniously dumped on the floor as they hurried to get naked. The bathroom earned another murmur of appreciation from Josh. There wasn’t a shower, but there was a large Jacuzzi bathtub, set in marble. He turned the taps on quickly. “I haven’t made love in a bath before either,” he said.

He returned to the bedroom, and when he came back into the bathroom, he set their lube on the marble, and took Danny in his arms. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, and I’m going to show you just how much,” Danny promised.

Danny laid a towel on the marble, and leaned forward, his legs spread wide, as Josh swiftly, but lovingly prepared him while the bathtub filled with water. He sighed and gasped as his lover’s talented fingers brushed his prostate. “Enough.” He turned and kissed Josh. “I want more than your fingers in me.”

Josh grinned. His cock was hard and glistening, and Danny was eager to take it inside him. Josh tested the water, and added some cold as Danny grumbled his impatience. Finally satisfied, Josh got into the bath first, and Danny followed. He straddled Josh carefully, and settled with his knees either

side of his lover's thighs. Danny rested his hands on Josh's shoulders, while Josh cupped Danny's ass cheeks, and helped him rise and fall.

As they kissed, Danny clenched and released his inner muscles. He relished each soft groan the act elicited from Josh. Their movements became more erratic, more impassioned, and the water splashed around them.

A low moan of his name came seconds before Josh climaxed. Danny panted harshly, and reached to stroke his own neglected erection, but Josh moved faster, and slapped Danny's hand away. "Mine," he grunted in Danny's ear. A few fast strokes, and Danny shuddered through his orgasm, clinging to Josh in the aftermath.

"I love you," Danny whispered.

Josh kissed him gently. "I love you. I'm going to enjoy this weekend."

Danny grinned, but his heart thundered so loudly, he was sure Josh would hear it. "Me, too." *I hope you love all the surprises I have for you.*

The next morning they went into the restaurant for breakfast. Josh chose the lobster omelette, and Danny opted for the eggs Benedict. They took their time over coffee, just savouring a relaxed morning, and being able to sit and chat.

"I have a spa and massage booked for lunch," Danny said. "I thought we could just have a light lunch, they'll serve a platter of cheese, fruit and crackers. I've reserved a table here for tonight."

"Sounds perfect. So we can just wander around for the morning?"

Josh already looked more relaxed than Danny had seen him for a while, and he reached to cover one of Josh's hands with his own. "Absolutely. I'll even go to the art gallery with you with a smile on my face."

Josh almost choked on his coffee as he burst into laughter. "I never thought I'd see the day," he said when recovered. "In that case, we can hit the shops for an hour, too."

By lunchtime, Danny was more than ready for his massage. He'd booked a spa suite so they could be together. As he lay and enjoyed his own pampering,

Danny glanced across at Josh. His lover lay relaxed as the masseur worked his magic, and a small smile curved his lips. Danny smiled too, happy that his lover was happy. *I owe Charlie a bottle of his favourite wine for this. Two.*

By the time they'd completed the spa ritual, Danny felt like he was walking on air. There were only a couple of hours before dinner. He'd reserved an early table to allow time before giving Josh his final surprises. They lounged for an hour or so, and then went for a cocktail.

Danny had booked a tasting menu complete with matching wines from around the country. So they indulged in oysters and pressed pork belly as appetisers, served with a Pinot Gris and a Pinot Noir. For their mains there were seared salmon and tea smoked duck breast accompanied by a Chardonnay and a Cabernet Sauvignon, and to round off the meal was the hotel's own bread pudding served with a late harvest Riesling.

The food was fantastic, the wine matched perfectly, and the service was excellent. Danny basked in Josh's praises. At the conclusion of their meal, Danny ordered brandies. When the drinks arrived, he lifted his brandy balloon in a toast. "To us. I love you."

Josh mirrored the action and echoed the salute. "This has been wonderful, but you said earlier, that you'd saved the best until last. Somehow I don't think you meant the meal, as excellent as it was."

"No. There is still a surprise, or two, to come. We need dinner to digest a little first," Danny said. He gazed into Josh's blue eyes. They'd darkened to the sultry azure that spoke silently, but eloquently, of the level of Josh's arousal.

"You've put a lot of thought into this," Josh whispered as he took another sip of brandy. "Makes me wonder how I'll match it, or exceed it."

Danny shivered pleasurably at Josh's low, husky tones, and the implied promise. "I want this to be memorable. I want it to be enjoyable, for both of us. I want to show you just how much I love you, and how desirable you are to me."

"I don't doubt it, lover," Josh said. "I think this is something we should do more often. Just the two of us, no work, no worries, just pushing real life aside to indulge us."

“I’ll drink to that.”

When they finally retired for the evening, and made their way to their room, Danny was so nervous his hand shook as he pressed the button for their floor. Once in the suite, he took Josh’s hand and led him through to the bedroom. He turned, framed Josh’s face in his hands, and kissed him tenderly. “I want you to get naked and wait for me. There are a couple of things I need to do, okay?”

“Whatever you want, love,” Josh whispered. “I’m in your hands.”

Danny took out a small bag he’d put at the bottom of his case, and hurried into the bathroom. He leant on the marble surrounding the bath, and took several deep, calming breaths. He undressed quickly, before his courage could desert him, and then pulled out a black butt plug. It took a moment or two before Danny could insert it comfortably. Then he reached for the next things.

He pulled out a sleeveless black mesh top. Strips of studded leather accented the shoulders, and the centre of the top. Danny put it on, and licked his lips. *One more thing for me.* The matching mesh briefs had a central leather panel, and Danny was already half hard as he tucked himself inside. He twisted back and forth in front of the mirror. Then his gaze moved to the bag. He pulled out what he’d bought Josh to wear.

The black leather harness was just a basic model that would bisect Josh’s chest. He also had a matching black leather cock ring. The erotic daydreams they’d given him came flooding back, and Danny hardened quickly. He pushed them back in the bag, and went into the bedroom.

“Omigod, Danny! Danny—omigod.” Josh’s cock surged upwards, the reaction from his lover all Danny could have hoped for *and then some*.

“I have a couple of things for you, Josh.” Danny had to clear his throat to speak, but Josh just nodded eagerly.

“What? Let me see. Omigod, a *harness*! Help me get it on.” Danny stepped back as Josh preened in front of the mirror. “I love it, Danny. Anything else?”

“I got you this because I don’t want you coming too soon,” Danny whispered, holding out the cock ring.

“You put it on for me,” Josh whispered. His voice, low and sultry, sent a jolt direct to Danny’s cock. “Is that all?”

“Just these.” Danny pulled out the red fleece-lined, black leather ankle and wrist restraints. “If you’re happy—”

“Do it. I want you to. Do it, Danny.” Josh interrupted Danny and lay on the bed, reaching towards the four posts.

With a barely suppressed whimper, Danny stroked Josh’s dick, before securing the ring in place, and then fastened each restraint to his lover and the bed. The sight of Josh in his harness, spread eagle on the bed, his hard cock, flushed, wet, and restrained by the studded ring, almost made Danny lose control. He squeezed the base of his own rampant erection. This was all about Josh. He ran a finger lightly down one furred calf, and then bent forward and trailed his tongue over the sole of Josh’s foot.

With a groan, Josh tried to arch away as Danny licked across and nibbled at the ball of Josh’s foot. He looked up and grinned. He kept his gaze locked with Josh’s and slowly took the big toe into his mouth. Josh’s eyes closed as Danny sucked.

Danny relished the deep groans, and soft moans from Josh. He’d missed hearing those sounds, the sounds of mindless arousal and passion. He had no intention of losing them again. He occasionally scraped his finger over the foot’s arch, just to make sure Josh was paying enough attention.

Josh’s breaths came in harsh pants. Danny sat on the bed, and smoothed his lover’s hair away from his damp brow. “Are you all right?” he asked softly.

“I’m fine. Really. This is just—wow. And that top, those briefs, dammit. I want to touch.”

Danny grinned, while letting out a silent sigh of relief. “Not yet.” He laughed softly as Josh tugged at the cuffs, but although Danny had allowed for a little give, there was no way Josh could get free of them.

“So what now?” Josh asked softly.

“Wait here.” Danny laughed at the indignant snort from Josh.

“Like—where would I go? I’m a little tied up here.”

Laughing harder, Danny headed through to the kitchen, and opened a bottle of champagne he’d left in the fridge. He took just one glass though, and winked at Josh as he set the bottle and glass down on the bedside table. He sat

next to Josh, kissed his helpless lover passionately, and then poured a glass of the champagne.

He saluted Josh and took a couple of mouthfuls. The drink was cold and crisp. *Perfect*. He carefully held it for Josh, who ran his tongue over his lips teasingly as Danny moved the glass away. Danny covered Josh's mouth with his own, and slid his tongue past Josh's lips. Danny drew out the kiss, darting his tongue around Josh's mouth, and sliding it against his lover's.

Panting as he broke the kiss, Danny picked up the glass that still held some champagne, and poured it over Josh's chest. Josh gasped and jerked. Danny eagerly chased the rivulets of champagne across Josh's chest, over his nipples, and down towards his navel. Then he slowed down his movements. He nibbled over Josh's ribs, and then began to suck on one nipple as he gently squeezed and tugged on the other.

Josh's breathing was ragged by the time Danny abandoned his exploration of Josh's chest. He stood up and hurried over to his bag, and pulled on a single, black velvet glove. He returned to his lover, and ran his gloved hand up the inside of Josh's thighs. He smiled as his lover arched into the caress. Josh loved to be touched.

He then ran the hand across Josh's cheek, along his collar bone, and in between the leather that bisected his pecs. His lover murmured wordlessly, twisting and arching to get better contact with the velvet. Danny knelt between Josh's spread legs, and thumbed Josh's nipple while he licked at the head of his lover's leaking cock.

Danny swept his hand over Josh's chest and stomach, and teased his lover's nipples as he worked hard, hot flesh with his lips and tongue. He ran his tongue up and down the rigid length, over the head where he lapped up the leaking pre-come, and then sealed his lips around the shaft before sucking hard.

A soft cry of his name escaped Josh's lips, and his lover's hips jerked. Danny flung one arm across Josh to keep him in place, and cupped Josh's balls in his gloved hand. Josh's whine of pleasure vibrated through Danny, making his own dick leak more heavily. He wondered if he should have ringed his own cock.

Instead he refocused on bringing pleasure to Josh, sucking, licking, and nibbling the flushed, proud flesh until Josh begged for more. *For me.* Danny slowly eased from between Josh's thighs. His lover's face and body glistened with sweat. Danny swayed his hips as he pushed down the briefs he wore so his cock sprang free. He slowly pulled off the glove, and dropped it on the floor.

He sashayed forward, his cock bobbing with his movements, and knelt so that he could feed his dick to his eager lover. Josh quickly matched Danny's tempo as he rocked his hips gently back and forth. He held Josh's head to make it easier for his restrained love.

Josh made a sound of disappointment as Danny eased away, but he was getting too close and there was so much more Danny still wanted to do. He pushed the briefs all the way down, and half turned so that Josh could see the butt plug he wore.

"So that's what took you so long in the bathroom," Josh murmured, his voice deep and husky.

"Ready for a ride, lover?" Danny whispered. The way Josh's eyes darkened further gave him the answer before his love could form coherent words.

"Oh, yeah. Ride me good."

Danny grinned, eased the plug from his body and stalked on his hands and knees up the bed. Finally, he straddled Josh's hips. He snugged Josh's cock against his slick entrance, and eased down. He didn't stop until his ass cheeks felt the tickle of the lush fur at Josh's groin. He leaned forward, braced his hands on Josh's broad shoulders, and began to rock gently.

Gradually he increased his speed, and Danny soon lifted up and dropped down on Josh's cock over and over. Helpless beneath him, Josh moaned his encouragement as Danny rose and fell, squeezed and released his inner muscles, and squirmed to ensure solid flesh rubbed against his prostate. Almost lost in his own pleasure, it took a moment for Danny to make sense of Josh's words.

"Danny, please. I want to touch you. Please, love, let me touch you."

Lowering his head, Danny kissed Josh, and slowly eased off his lover's shaft. He undid the restraints, and smiled at Josh who held out his arms. Danny sighed as he lay on top of Josh. He was quickly enfolded in a tight embrace. "I love you," he whispered against Josh's chest.

"I love you. My turn, lover."

Josh rolled their bodies so he was on top, and urged Danny to wrap his legs around his waist. He pushed back halfway inside, and Danny moaned his appreciation. He pressed his heels into Josh's ass, trying to incite his lover to move deeper.

"In my time, babe," Josh whispered against Danny's cheek. He leaned down and nibbled on Danny's nipple through the top Danny still wore.

Danny shifted his hips as best he could, and tried to pull Josh deeper inside. Josh nipped at Danny's earlobe, and then thrust fully inside.

"Josh!" Danny cried out as his lover's cock nudged against his prostate. Pleasure swept through his body, and rolled in continuous waves around him as Josh withdrew and pushed in a little harder. Josh repeated his actions over and over, slow, deep, and deliberate.

"You like this?" Josh whispered in Danny's ear before he licked along Danny's neck.

"Oh, yeah. More. Please more." Danny panted out the plea. Desperate for Josh to move faster, to make him come.

Josh increased his speed, and Danny panted, gasped, and moaned his encouragement. He teetered on the edge of his orgasm, and tried to rub his cock against Josh's belly to tip himself over the edge. "Please," he gasped, "Please touch me."

In response, Josh worked his hand between their sweating bodies and wrapped it around Danny's cock. Josh continued to strike his prostate over and over, and Danny's world began to grey. Every touch, every sensation began to coalesce into a maelstrom of ecstasy that threatened to overwhelm him.

With a grunt, Josh shifted, removed the cock ring and urged Danny to move so that his legs draped over Josh's shoulders. Then Josh increased the

speed of his thrusts to an almost feral speed. Danny's body shook, and Josh stroked him with the same hard, fast tempo.

"Come with me." Josh's voice was a dry rasp of sound in Danny's ear, and Danny keened as Josh's hips jerked erratically and his rhythm faltered. Josh gave one more twist to his wrist as he worked Danny's cock, and Danny's orgasm rose to a sudden crescendo. He came hard, his climax shattering around him. His body shook and shuddered in the throes of his powerful release.

As Danny started to come down from his high, Josh climaxed, and his lover's semen rushing inside him made Danny tremble again. Josh murmured Danny's name over and over, until they both lay panting, sweat-soaked, and satiated. Danny was too drained to do anything more than hold onto Josh and try to breathe.

Slowly but surely Danny recovered his wits. He eased open his eyes, just enough to see Josh. The sight of his lover, face flushed, lips still kiss-swollen, and eyes filled with love and satiation made Danny feel warm all over.

"Oh, love," Josh murmured. "That was incredible."

Danny complained in a wordless mumble as Josh carefully eased away from him, but then sighed his appreciation when his lover returned with a warm washcloth and towel to clean him. "Just leave them, and come back to bed," he urged.

"I have a surprise, too."

The seriousness of Josh's tone made Danny instantly alert. He sat up, suddenly anxious that Josh hadn't enjoyed himself, but the look of love in Josh's beautiful eyes helped him relax a little.

"What is it?" Danny asked, and nibbled at his bottom lip.

"This has been marvellous," Josh said. "More than I could ever have asked or expected. And you are so wearing that top and briefs again, you looked incredibly sexy in them. But, when you were planning this, and I got worried I was losing you, I realised that I couldn't imagine my life without you. I didn't want to say or do anything to take away from what you'd organised, and I'm so glad I didn't. But now it's my turn."

Danny stared at the small red box that Josh offered him. His hands shook as he opened it. The rings nestled safely inside began to blur as tears burned Danny's eyes.

"Marry me, Danny?" Josh whispered.

Danny tried to see Josh through the haze of tears, and nodded frantically, unable to speak. "Yes," he finally croaked. "Yes." Josh took one of the rings and slid it onto Danny's finger. Despite Danny's shakes, he immediately reciprocated.

"We can wear them here, for tonight, and then they go back in the box until the wedding. I was thinking we could come back here as part of the honeymoon. If you'd like it?"

Josh tried to keep his voice casual, but Danny saw the glint in his lover's eyes, and Josh's sexy grin said everything. Danny answered by wrapping his arms around Josh's neck and kissed him until they both panted for breath.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'." Josh grinned at Danny before settling to lie alongside him on the bed. Danny snuggled close, and smiled against Josh's chest as he was enveloped in a possessive embrace. "We owe Charlie a case of wine," he murmured against warm skin.

"Whatever you say, love." Josh kissed the top of Danny's head.

Danny sighed contentedly. *Since I had to buy a pair of velvet gloves, I'll leave one in a jar just like Charlie said.* He nuzzled closer to Josh, and kissed the furred chest beneath his lips. *Now I need to come up with something really special for our honeymoon.*

THE END

Author Bio

I am a New Zealander and live with my partner in a very beautiful clean, green country. I am a foodie, a wine buff, and an Art Historian. I'm an avid reader, especially sci-fi, paranormal and fantasy. I consider myself a writer of m/m romance across time and space. I have been a published author for several years.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

RESISTANCE

By Joe Petty

Photo Description

The sepia-toned photograph of two young men sitting on a rock kissing.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

One day I was holding him close, kissing him and loving him; that's before they came and took him away.

And I've never seen him since then. My dad is an important, dangerous man and I have to marry the girl he chose for me and be a straight man to the last day in my life or he'll kill every man I fall in love with.

And again after years, he comes to me. He is changed, his hair is blond and his nose is different, but it is him. He tells me I've to make things right, I have to fix the things my father ruined; he tells me I had betrayed him and stopped looking for him. He shouts at me and cries, "Fix my life. You owe me that much," saying it was my father who told his dad that men will enjoy him and he ended up being a whore and now he is forced to marry a man he doesn't want, because that man had bought him.

I have no idea what to do. I've got to protect him but I am afraid of my father and what he could do to me and to him.

And then I am in bed with him, kissing him and touching him AND loving every second of it with him. Everything is perfect. Yet they come, taking his naked body from between my arms. I feel the touch of his fingers on my fingertips and suddenly the sweet sensation is gone.

I would love the lover to have tattoos and piercings. I love light BDSM, hurt/comfort.

Please author, help him find his lover and save him from his father. Let them find peace and live happily ever after.

It is my first post. I hope I did well...

Sincerely,

Lolita H :)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: light BDSM, coming of age, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort

Content warnings: violence, dark

Word count: 2,831

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

RESISTANCE

By Joe Petty

We came back for Father's funeral. Walking along these stone steps brought back a million memories, the laughter of my childhood before all this death. As we descended the steps to the crystal blue waters of the Adriatic Sea, I felt as though I saw the ghosts of two boys playing hide-and-seek. My fingers slid down the bark of the tree in the main garden, and I could see traces of rope burns from the first time I'd tied Ulfo to the tree. His fingers traced the bark behind me.

I slipped my hand into his and we walked down the steps to the dock. This place I called my home, growing up—how unfamiliar and closed off from the rest of the world it seemed to me now. I would learn in my college days that the locals had called it *kuća smrti*. Death house. We aimed to change that moniker.

We walked hand in hand to the top of the rocks, to the place where Ulfo had been ripped from my arms, where Lugo had done the one thing that saved my lover. We climbed to the top of the jagged rocks and I took him in my arms, kissing not our last kiss, but the first of many.

I have had feelings, feelings that were hard to understand at first. When I watched Father wrestling with his goons, my eyes always got wide as they grasped each other's shoulders. Father insisted his men be strong, be ready to do anything—and to wrestle. He'd been to Turkey in his youth and had taken a fondness for their national sport, oil wrestling. I looked back on my childhood, back to that small square plot of grass that Father tended with such care, to the place where I wrestled with Ulfo. I thought it was normal to slide my hands into his pants, because Lugo did it, because Stedko did it.

Father made certain his men wore the traditional water buffalo pants, tied at the ankle, and then ordered the cooks out of the kitchen to pour large cans of olive oil down their strong muscular chests. Lugo, the first of many men I fell in love with, was Father's best and favored man. His chest rippled with

muscles. He'd flip every man on his back as though his rough hands were stitched with leather on the palms. His hand slid into the backside, to slip around to the front. It was not a prelude to anything other than a means to winning.

I walked up to Father one afternoon. "When do I get my pants?"

He laughed and tousled my hair. "Boy, when you are old enough to hold up a pair."

I would sit with my knees pulled to my chest, watching and yearning for Lugo's hands to move slowly past my waistband, feeling around for the perfect grip. Father thought I'd taken an interest in sports; at that early age he hadn't suspected it was my love of his men. I grew up learning how to hold, how to grip, how to grab and how to flip my opponent. As I got older it was hard to hide my passions from Lugo. In one moment of foolishness, he slid his hand into my pants and felt my throbbing cock. Our eyes met, and I leaned in to leave a kiss on his lip; he threw me down on the floor, holding me in place. "Your father will not stand for this, this is not acceptable behavior."

I always tested Father's rules. One spring, he decided he wanted to go sailing, and he caught me pulling down the skipper's pants, my lips trailing kisses down to his toes. I felt Father's hands grasp my shoulders, and I was flung into the water. Moments later, Lugo's strong, warm arms held me close. I fought with Lugo, my feet slipping on the stones in the water, but eventually I was turned to face my father as he swished the batten through the air to land a multitude of smacks against Goren's chest.

I tried to hide my eyes, but Lugo held me tightly to his chest. In that instant, I felt myself grow tightly in my pants. I moved awkwardly to relieve pressure, but then I felt the length of Lugo grow behind me. Lugo no longer had to lean down to whisper to me. He said quietly, for only my ears, "This is foolhardy. Nothing good will come of your passions, boy."

"Take him from my sight, Lugo. Take him to his mother." And with that I was swept from the dock, hearing the echoing screams from Goren's mouth, till I no longer wanted to hear. My fear slowly slipped away as Lugo dragged me to the back of the house. It happened so fast, I wanted it to last. His lips caressed my lips, his hand slid down my pants and mine down his before he

pulled away. I saw a tear in his eye. “This is it. We cannot do this, I will be murdered in my bed if he ever finds out. You need to stuff your passions down, and you need to know that he will kill any boy—or man—you ever love. He told me as much. Please do not think of me this way, ever again. I will do the same with you.”

While I was preparing to leave for college, I watched my father murder my lover. I watched him as he spoke gently to Vlad, the young man who had been leaving kisses dotted upon my eyebrows when Father walked into the room. The look on his face was stern. “I am sorry, am I interrupting?”

I stood to explain what had just happened, but Father’s hand upon my chest propelled me back into the chair. He moved towards Vlad, lovingly placed a hand upon his shoulder and walked with him across the room. “What plans are you making with my son?”

Vlad smiled, pleased that a father cared so much for his boy. “We were planning our holiday in Turkey.” He looked lovingly at me, then back to my father, whose hand was stretched out. He had no words, just a simple intake of breath as my father threw him out of my third story window. The sound was piercing and went on forever, though whether the noise came from outside or within my own chest I was not sure. It ended in one final thud on the sidewalk below.

I ran to the window, and looked down, stunned. Stedko motioned for a car, Vlad was placed in the trunk, and the blood swirled into the gutter with the gardener’s spray nozzle. I looked back to Father.

“Why...?”

He slapped me hard across the face. “You will not live this sin. I have a woman waiting for your hand in marriage. I will kill every boy you fall in love with—it is a measure of my love for you.” With those words, he left my room. I sat on the windowsill and watched as every trace of Vlad was washed from my memory. And I thought back on my childhood up to that point. All those boys and men killed or missing, because I had kissed or been kissed or had asked to be taught how to sail a boat.

Ulfo and I had grown up together, ran circles around each other. He was the son of my mother's best friend and we'd played everything imaginable. Games of cops and robbers, bodyguard and assassins, cowboys and Indians; you name it, we played it. The gardens around our villa had so many bushes, pine trees and wildflowers through which we'd run and hide. We'd go out on the boat with Marco and lay on the deck, sunning ourselves and retelling sailing stories, dreaming of escaping the island and running away together.

I'd never known what it was to want something; it was always given to me. I had private sailing lessons; as I got older, I would sit cradled in Marco's lap, my hands on his strong arms pulling the lines that moved the sail. I enjoyed the way the rope would rest tightly against our arms as we pulled it in or let it out. Marco taught me all the knots needed to tie off and how to wrap lines around the winch.

The games got interesting as we'd gotten older. There was one afternoon where I tied Ulfo up to a post at the dock, the water lapping at his feet.

"Niko, I don't like this game," he pleaded.

I jumped into the water, flexing my muscles, and slapped him across the face. "I am not Niko, my name is Stedko, and I will question you the only way I know." I fell back into the water laughing, because I couldn't keep up the deep-throated sound of my father's bodyguard. When I looked up, Ulfo had tears in his eyes.

"You slapped me..."

I rose and began untying him, moving my fingertips to his cheek where my handprint was just beginning to redden his face. It was at that moment that I realized I wanted more of him. "I'm sorry, my friend, it was just play."

I led him up the white stone steps, through my mother's garden, past the yellow and blue flowers, into the woods. We hiked all day up the small rocks that littered our property, finally sitting in our secret place. At least I believed it to be secret. It had been secret when we were boys, just fresh with the discovery, but now I was headed off to marriage. I knew the evils my father was capable of. I'd witnessed the destruction of so many, of men who made the mistake of letting my hands roam their shoulders or my lips caress their necks and mouths.

But this—this was different. This was family, this was secret, and this was sacred. In my heart, I knew this one would be different. It had to be. Was I as evil as my father, willing to destroy the one man I've loved since I could feel his hands pressed in mine? I was willing to find out, and thinking back on it, I wish I had informed him of everything that I'd known, but passion got the better of me.

His lips were succulent upon my own; we clutched and held each other for what seemed like days, but could only have been minutes. If my father found me—and he always did, or his goons did—we had no time. I slid my hands down his chest, held him close in my arms and said I'd protect him forever. This time would be different, this time we'd escape together. Even now with this stolen kiss, on a rock overlooking the city below, high above any cameras or cell towers, this kiss—this secret kiss... and then our lips were separated and he was ripped from my grasp.

“Please no, not him. Please let this one live.” I looked up into the eyes of the man who wrenched Ulfo from my arms.

There was no one else around. Lugo looked at me and shook his head. “What did I tell you?”

“But this one... this one is different, please.” I couldn't stop the tears falling down my face; I tried so hard.

Lugo looked hurt, and he sighed. “This is the last time I rescue you from your pleasures. I know you have grown up with Ulfo, I've seen you wrestle and sail the boats...” The smile that rose on Lugo's face took me by surprise, and he began running, pulling Ulfo along with him. We slid down the rocks, over paved stones and rubble, to end up at the edge of the water.

“Go to the dock and wait for me there, get the boat ready for sailing out tonight.”

Lugo was off again, running towards the house. I turned to my friend, took him by the arm and shepherded him towards the dock.

The look on Ulfo's face was something I didn't want to remember. The fear, the pain as Lugo had gripped him tight around the arm. At the same time, I knew it would also be the last time I'd see Lugo, my father's best man, my

first real passion, the man who told me he'd protect me at all costs. Had my passion for Ulfo destroyed even this man, who I yearned to be like?

I could see Lugo running down from the main house, he was jumping steps and plants as he raced down to the dock. A green duffel bag swung around his shoulder, hitting his thigh as he ran.

He stopped on the deck and tossed the bag to me. "Get on that boat and you'll both survive. I can't protect you anymore, Niko." Lugo stood with his hands on his hips, the small smile reappearing.

"Ulfo, untie the rope from the cleat and let's get out of here." I slung the duffel bag over my own shoulder, and before jumping in the boat, I hugged Lugo and gave him a long grateful kiss on his rugged lips. "Thank you, I'll never forget this."

He hugged me back. "Just be happy."

I turned and jumped into the boat. I opened the blocks for the sheets and hoisted the main halyard, waiting for the wind to catch the sails. We slid silently through the water, until we hit the open sea and heard that small thunderclap of the sails catching the full wind.

We only turned around once to wave good-bye, but Lugo was nowhere to be seen. Hours later, Ulfo opened the duffel bag, hoping Lugo had packed a jacket for us. He sat back, crying. When I squatted beside him, I saw that the bag was filled with money. We would make it, Ulfo and I, and I vowed to only return when the beast was dead.

It was a long road to get here, not merely schoolboys flirting with games, but a love that never died. Even in the face of so much misery, we finally had each other. This would become known as our villa, where love could grow and prosper and not wither and die, like everything my father had touched.

THE END

Author Bio

I have dabbled and written for myself. I made a deal with my partner that I would finish a short story and share it instead of leaving it lost on a hard drive. I have been a procrastinator for as long as I can remember and do hope that this short story will not be my last.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

IN THE LONELY SEA

By Arielle Pierce

Photo Description

A drowned man is held in the arms of a merman. The man looks as though he could be dead, or he could be asleep. The merman is kissing him on the lips. The man's hands drift in the sea, and his clothes are in tatters.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Holding on to this wreck is all I can do. The light of the sun is as unbearable as the chill of the night. No land in sight. I'm hungry, thirsty, and I'm tired.

The sweet song I heard all night is luring me under. I must be losing my mind, because I believe it. And I let go.

No BDSM possibly and I like my protagonists BOTH with strong personalities. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Emmanuela Plastic Duck

Story Info

Genre: historical fantasy

Tags: Welsh, merman, Victorian/1880's, first love, sailor

Content warnings: HFN?

Word count: 5,942

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

IN THE LONELY SEA

By Arielle Pierce

Giving up would be so easy. All he had to do was let go. After all, Cian was the last. All his shipmates had given in to the lure of the sea and gone down. The only ones who bitterly hung on were the boat and Cian himself. And even the boat wasn't long for this world.

It felt an age ago, when the storm had swept upon them and plunged their fragile ketch into the viciousness that was the Irish Sea in winter. Cian could still hear the terrible crack of her keel breaking and the shudder she had given, before listing and plunging her crew into the water.

The six men had hung to her sides as the storm played itself out. With the bitter cold, Cian had known they weren't long for this world. Even with that knowledge they had all clung on, spiring one another as the night descended. Perhaps all would have been well. They might have survived and been saved by another fishing vessel.

But there was the song.

It was no more than a whisper in the ear at first, no more than the faint cry of a gull. As the light faded it carried as a scream upon the wind, this sound from deep in the sea. Fear became panic in the men's eyes as they recognized it as the song of a siren, the lure into deep waters from which there was no return.

Cian had only been to sea in the past year. He was young and naive enough to have scoffed at the tales of the *gwenhidwy*, the faerie folk of the sea. Though his mother had put out fresh milk to ask for good fortune from the *tylwyth teg*, he had gone the way of what he thought was an enlightened man, a proper man. Proper men dressed well, were educated, aspired to live in a place like London, spoke English. Proper men believed in science, not old Celtic fables.

He snorted at his delusions. Proper men clung to the side of a dying ketch, wore strips of rags fashioned by the ragged wood of the ship, prayed to the heavens in Welsh. Proper men knew the truth of the mer-people. Proper men

knew there was death in the sweetness of their song. The shivers Cian felt were only partly from the bitter cold.

And then the men began to slip under the waters.

The song knew of its triumph. It rose in pitch, no longer a mere whisper. It became sweet in tone, like wild honey slipping down the throat on a hot summer day. Or the taste of a kiss. Or Rhodri, beautiful Rhodri, dancing the May dance last spring. Rhodri, who Cian could never have, Rhodri who was married now with a babe on the way, as all young men in the village were expected to do.

The song, it promised him that, if only he let go, he would have the kiss of the beautiful lad. If he only let go he would have more, so much more. All that he dreamt of all those nights, when his skin sweated and his body hardened with longing, all that he could have.

And still Cian clung onto the broken keel.

He clung on as the song promised him caresses more gentle than the pounding of the waves against his body, as it promised him warmth greater than the cold of the bitter seawater. He clung on as it promised him bliss, like death, a small death it said. Let go.

And still Cian clung on.

The night deepened and yet he hung to the boat until, in the harsh light of the morning, he was the only man left. Six had gone out in the ketch, five brave lads lay in Davy Jones' locker now. But they wouldn't have Cian. That he promised himself.

The song didn't leave as the sun beat down. It changed, the pitch becoming higher, more strident. It wailed, it demanded he let go. Though his arms were cramped and cold, still he hung on. The song became a lament, it became a howl. The waves rose, the crippled boat listed and turned on her side. And still Cian clung on. The skies darkened and the wind rose, but still Cian clung to his boat. And then it promised him not just lust.

It promised him love.

Just let go, it said, I will love you. I will hold you to me. I will never let go. And so Cian did.

He let go.

The rough wood of the boat was replaced with the soft submission of the sea. Cian slipped deeper into it, the boat no more than a shadow and then she was gone. As too was the voice and all it had promised. Too late Cian realised he had been tricked, just like the other five. Too late he knew he couldn't get back to the surface.

He thrashed against the pressure of the seawater. He struggled to swim, moving arms and legs too tired to make it back. The more he fought the deeper he fell. The pain in his lungs, the pain in his head was too much to take. Though he knew he shouldn't, he took in a deep breath. The salt water rushed into his lungs. He coughed, he vomited it out, but the instinct to take another breath was too much.

And so Cian drowned.

Dylan was of the sea.

Beautiful. Powerful. Cruel.

He hadn't started the storm, that much was true. But he did drink of it, and drink deeply. One sailor, then two. The third went as the moon reached her height, the sea arching up as though a lover's body to be with her. The fourth was as the stars came out, the last of the storm having reached the shores of Wales. The fifth lasted until the light of the morning could just be glimpsed. That left the sixth.

He sang his sweetest. He sang his cruellest. But still the silly boy ignored him, ignored his empty promises. He caressed the boy's body, traced sea fingers over his chest, along long legs. He promised him release but still he was ignored. He called up the waves, he called down the new storm, but still the boy hung onto his boat.

And then he promised him love.

Under the waves he wouldn't have to be afraid. He would be loved, it would be okay.

And the fool believed him.

With a powerful stroke of his tail, Dylan followed him as the boy struggled under the waves, realising in his last breath that it had been lies, that the *gwenhidwy* had tricked him.

Once the boy stilled, Dylan swam up to him. The boy's eyes were shut as in sleep, his arms trailing above his head as he sank into the deepest blue. Dylan watched the way his fingers danced in the current, the way his long black hair trailed about his face before drifting free.

It was a stunning face. Dylan peered closer at the way the thick eyelashes lay against the white skin as if painted on. And the way his lips partly opened, as a tease for Dylan. They were beautiful lips, full and curved. Smiling would have come naturally to those lips. They pulled Dylan in. For the moment he forgot who was victim, who was trickster.

Leaning in through the cloud of black hair, he kissed Cian.

Air, beautiful blessed air, rushed into Cian's lungs. He coughed, he breathed in. And again, and again. And that's when he felt it, lips around his, breathing into his lungs. Lips surrounding his, lips soft as promises kissing him. Life coming back into his body, he returned the kiss. The skin brushing against his was soft, the hair tickling his face was as silk. Cian wrapped his legs around the firm body between his legs, the body that went far longer than a human's. What was it? Still in a sleep haze, he reached down to touch it, that hard thing that was gently agitating his loins. Under his fingers were scales.

He opened his eyes in surprise.

Blinking hard, he stared into the face of the person holding him. A man, a beautiful man, with features so delicate he could have been a woman. Was his hair black? Or was it a green so dark it could blend into the colour of the sea? And his skin so pale he could be dead. And eyes as dark and cold as a shark's.

And that's when Cian realised he was under the water.

Panicking, he pushed away from the merman, his mind refusing to take in exactly what his saviour was. He only knew he had to get away, he had to get to the surface. Holding his breath, he swam for the surface, not knowing what was up, what was down. A part of him knew it was all in vain, but still he tried.

The monster swam next to him, watching every clumsy movement he made. Those shark eyes took it all in, never mocking but never kind. Cian could feel the pain once again in his lungs, the blinding white light in his brain. Desperately he swam on, his movements slowing.

And then he stopped, and all was still.

The boy looked as though he was dancing. His arms waved over his head, his legs kicked faster than a clogger's. A dance with no music. A dance in a dream. And then a dance stilled.

Dylan peered into the boy's face but he was once more asleep, his lungs filled with water. His eyes were half opened and Dylan could see the blue of the summer sky in them.

And he wondered. Did the boy have a family? Did he have a mother who had tucked him in at night and sung him to sleep, when he had been but a child? Had he had a little sister who had followed him everywhere? Did he have a father who had been torn between doting on him and demanding he take his place upon the waters? Had he wanted to go to sea? Had he wanted to be a fisherman?

In that moment Dylan found himself thinking of his own family, now lost. The family who had taken him in as a mere babe, left for dead after being abandoned by his birth mother. His adopted elderly father and mother who had no children of their own, who had loved and doted upon him with more love than many a child would know. His parents who had died of heartbreak when he had fled back to the sea after being unable to ignore her call any longer.

Gently grasping the boy, he swam upwards, out from the depths of the sea. He swam away from the silence, away from the crushing water pressing down. As he swam he studied the boy closer.

His eyes lingered over the way the boy's neck curved gracefully into his shoulder, with none of the bulk men who had sailed for years held. He lightly traced his fingers over the smooth chest that narrowed into small hips. His eyes drank in the pebble of dark nipples and the arc of erect muscle that pressed against his own hips. A lad like this deserved life.

A lad like this deserved another kiss.

And so he brought Cian back to life.

The sea was lapping at Cian's feet as he drew in breath. The first lungful hurt with a pain like shattered glass, the second not so much. The third was a blessing, the fourth a prayer to God. The fifth brought him back to life. He opened his eyes.

The creature—the merman—was staring down at him. And that's when Cian realised the man was lying upon him.

"You were cold," the creature said to his unspoken question.

At least he had the grace to get off him. And Cian was cold, he could feel it once the warmth of the other body was gone. Bitterly, horribly cold. Cold as the dead are cold. He turned fearful eyes to the merman as it dawned on him that he had drowned.

"You're okay." The creature fully stood and only then did Cian notice that he had legs.

"But I thought you..." His voice was harsh from the salt water.

"Had a tail?" The creature laughed. Cian couldn't help but notice that his voice sounded smooth, despite a life under the sea waves. "I'm Dylan."

Cian stared at the offering hand as if it were poison. Beautiful poison, but deadly all the same. He was one of the faerie folk, after all. They were all tricksters, cruel in their non-human ways.

And the man was naked.

Noticeably gulping—and feeling a flush of shame from that act—Cian tried hard not to look. Not looking meant that he could pretend to be like all the other lads in the village. Not looking meant he couldn't remember the way the merman's soft lips had felt on his, after that first kiss. And the way it had made him feel. From the sly glance the merman gave him, Cian knew that he knew.

Trying to sit up—and failing miserably—Cian curled on his side and watched the man. "W-what happened?"

Dylan ignored him for a moment as he crouched beside the small fire, adding heavier logs to the driftwood. After poking it for a moment he turned and studied Cian. “You drowned, I saved you.” A half smile played on his lips.

“But what are you? I thought...”

“I was mer-folk?” The half smile turned into a proper grin. “I am... but once upon a time I was a village lad like you.”

Cian tried once more to get up. This time he was more successful. That was one victory, at least. He shook his head, miserable in the knowledge that he didn’t know what had happened, what was to happen. He wasn’t even sure if he was dead and this was some terrible purgatory, here in this sea cave with the water lapping at the opening. Though if indeed this was neither heaven nor hell, at least he had the merman. And he was easy on the eye. Cian chided himself, it would never pay to let his thoughts drift in that direction.

It was hard to take his eyes off the man. He liked to tell himself it was because—as a *gwenhidwy*—it was an unsafe thing to do. He could convince himself of that, almost. It had nothing to do with the way the shadows danced across his high cheekbones, or the full lips soft despite belonging to this creature of the sea, or the way his dark hair shone in the light of the fire. It certainly wasn’t because of the fine, lean lines of the man’s body or the naked shaft that tucked neatly almost out of sight in the bend of his narrow waist and his long legs. Though Cian noticed that if he looked carefully, he could just make out the soft roundness of his bollocks from just under the tuck of legs. Looking closer, despite himself, Cian couldn’t help but see that he was hairless there. It looked almost like a silken purse. He could feel his fingers itching to touch Dylan, there.

“Like what you see?”

The sound of Dylan’s voice made Cian startle. He could feel his face go completely red at being caught looking. The merman must have been thinking along the same lines. He raised a perfectly arched eyebrow and leaned forward. Backing away as he came close enough to tempt him with his full lips, Cian flushed anew.

Dylan’s next words came out in a purr. “Are you a catamite? Someone’s Ganymede?”

“W-what do you mean?” Cian perfectly well knew what he was implying. He could feel his mouth go dry at the thought of being found out. While the death penalty for being found in another man’s bed was no longer British law, he was sure the reality of that would only be in cosmopolitan places like London, or Bath. English compassion might not stretch all the way to a Welsh village. Cian couldn’t see how the love of a man towards another man would be tolerated here, and he hadn’t wanted to test that either.

Dylan didn’t leave him to suffer his fears. The slender creature leaned in further and brushed his lips against Cian’s. They were every bit as soft above water as they had been under. The warmth of his naked body radiated towards Cian. He found himself falling into that warmth, falling into that kiss.

Dylan’s lips parted and his tongue stroked against Cian’s own, asking entry. He opened his mouth, torn between being confused and scared, and longing. He couldn’t stop his trembling as the kiss deepened, Dylan’s tongue catching Cian’s own, and caressing it.

It felt as though all the air that Cian needed to breathe was gone. All that mattered was the softness of Dylan’s mouth, the heat of it as he urged him to arousal. In that moment he forgot all of it, all those terrible fears trying to suppress his longings. All that mattered was Dylan and what he was doing. He remembered the promises made to him as he had clung to the boat and, in that moment, he believed every one of them. Here was a creature that could love him as he desired.

When Dylan placed his hand over Cian’s chest, Cian thought his heart would leap out. Certainly the *gwenhidwy* could feel it just under his skin, pounding away in uncertainty and longing. He reached up to touch Dylan’s face. The skin under his water-shrunken fingertips was softer than he expected. He shook as he leaned into Dylan’s body again.

The kiss deepened as the two pressed to one another. Cian could feel his own blood racing and his shaft growing hard, painfully hard. Release would be a blessing. He fell back into the sand, his arms loosely wrapped around Dylan.

But Dylan stiffened and refused to follow him.

“You really should get your strength back up.” The beautiful creature watched him, an unreadable expression on his face.

Though he said that, Cian couldn't help but note that his hips were still pressed up against Cian's own. Dylan placed his hand to Cian's chest, silently warning the boy off and stood up.

The boy was more than willing. Dylan withdrew into himself as he built the fire higher. The cave he had found to rest Cian in wasn't small enough to get warm, not without a blazing fire. He didn't have the proper skills to build it up other than with firewood. Had they been underwater it would have been a different story but he knew Cian had had enough terrors for one day.

Glancing over, he studied the lad. Cian was sitting away from the fire, his face illuminated by the blaze. He reminded Dylan of a boy back in the village of his childhood. Rhys, his name had been. Like Cian, he had been tall and fit, every bit a fisherman, nothing like himself.

Even though Dylan's father had made his living upon the waters of the Irish Sea, Dylan had been deemed too frail as a child to join him in that life. They had encouraged him to be a hilltop farmer, not really knowing what he was.

Or perhaps they had, in their own way. Dylan recalled the way his mother had turned wide eyes to him every time he had been close to the shoreline. Like she was fearful that his rightful mother would come and claim her babe. But mermaids weren't like that, Dylan knew now. They were cruel, heartless. Like he was.

If his human mother could see him now, what he had become, her heart would break all over again. As if he hadn't already put her in her grave, with his leaving all those years ago. He closed his eyes, painfully remembering those times when the sea had called, when he had been taken back to his rightful home. And the weeks and months after, watching his family from afar, watching them die a little more every day that he was no longer with them. His mother had lasted only a few months, his father joined her a year after.

With this boy here, perhaps he had a chance to right at least one wrong. He could make sure the lad got safely back to his family, so at least it would be one less person's death to grieve over. He sighed again. The ways of the water

people were so much easier. No feeling, no soul involved. There was no chance of being hurt that way, no chance of feeling the rush of love. Perhaps there had been exceptions in the past. After all, he did hear of them whispered amongst his fellow mer-folk. Girls who had taken on a human lover, other maidens who had been captured in nets and watched over the one who had set them free, protecting him and his children. And there had been others like him, of course. Mer-children abandoned on out-going tides, left to die or be taken in by a kind-hearted human family.

Making up his mind, he turned to Cian. Using muscles long unused to smiling, he thought to reassure the lad, though he probably more looked terrifying. "I'm going to get you warmed up and then you can walk home. There's a village only two miles along the shore, I'm assuming it's yours. Just... don't go back to the sea, it's no place for a lad like you."

Cian just looked puzzled. "Oh," was all he said as he studied the fire.

"Just 'oh'?"

"I'm confused."

"Well, that's an easy state for a human." Despite the words, Dylan's second attempt at a smile was warmer. He motioned the lad over to the fire. It was being built for him, after all.

Cian studied him. "Are you just here to mock me? If you are I think I'll try for that village now."

"Oh, don't be such a child." Dylan sat back on his heels and sighed. "It's been a long time... a very long time since I had human company, I apologize for my behaviour."

If the boy wasn't going to come to the fire under his own propulsion then Dylan was left with no choice but to grasp him by the upper arm and bring him over himself. And he wouldn't have said he was rough about it, despite the look on the lad's face.

"So why...?" Cian jerked his arm out of Dylan's grasp and stopped, though the warmth of the fire did feel good.

Dylan dropped his hand and suppressed a smirk over Cian's behaviour. In a neutral voice, he asked, "Why what?"

“Why did you kiss me and then pull away?” Cian gulped at his own boldness in asking. “When you know what I’ll be going back to?”

“Because I like you.” Dylan’s smile finally reached his eyes. “And I remembered what you were longing for, back in the sea.”

“So why did you stop then?”

“You’ve almost drowned. And not just once but several times. Don’t you think you need to get your strength back up?” Dylan watched Cian out of the corner of his eye, a half smile still playing on his lips.

Cian crossed his arms over his chest. “No. Actually, no I don’t.”

“Well, I do.”

“So says the thing that murdered all my friends and tried to take me too.”

That stung Dylan. “I didn’t!”

“So where are they?”

“Sleeping.”

“Right. And I’m the bloody Queen of England.”

“Well, Your Highness, if you don’t get closer to this fire soon it won’t matter what you think because you’ll be dead of the cold. Now, what is it to be?”

With that, Cian had enough. No more mocking, no more teases. He’d had enough of the way he was supposed to act, the way that was proper. He’d had enough of being proper. Grabbing Dylan roughly by the arms, he pushed him to the sandy ground.

Dylan let himself go, momentarily catching Cian out, causing him to fall on top of him. Pushing the slender man into the ground with the weight of his body, Cian laid on top of him, forcing his legs open with his knees.

“You don’t have to be so rough.” Dylan panted, pinned as he was under Cian, his arms above his head, though he wasn’t trying to get free.

Cian didn’t answer him, he couldn’t answer him. He was lost to the rising lust that said he had to claim this man. He took a deep breath, and then

another, savouring the salty taste it left in the back of his throat. This would never do, taking Dylan in such a manner. He had to get in control of his body, if not his emotions. It didn't help that he could feel the merman's erection pressing against his own.

When he glanced down at Dylan, the man looked not at all upset about the rough way that he was being handled. His long hair fanned out around his head, more black in the soft light than the dark green Cian had first thought it was. His eyes were half-closed, his thoughts seemed far away.

“What are you thinking?”

Dylan blinked and gave him a slow smile. “I was wondering if you were actually going to have me or just lie there using me as a mattress.”

“You don't mind?”

“Being used as a mattress? Yes, I do. I'm just a touch too slender to make an efficient one, don't you think?”

Cian snorted, a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “No, I meant... this...” Rather self-consciously he pushed his hips against Dylan's.

The merman raised an eyebrow. “Like I said, I'm waiting.”

That was all Cian needed to hear. Settling onto his elbows, he leaned over Dylan's face. His breath was sweet on Cian's lips, his kiss was that much sweeter. Feeling confident, he edged his tongue along the corner of Dylan's mouth. His reward was a gentle opening, a caress of soft tongue against his.

He drew his lips along the curve of Dylan's neck, touching the soft skin along his chest. With a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold, he moved down Dylan's body, tracing over the lean muscles of his stomach until he reached his shaft. As he admired the merman's body, Dylan worked on Cian's trousers, loosening them so that they fell around his hips.

Dylan was beautiful. In all his daydreams and all his longings, Cian couldn't have dared hoped for such a man. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at his erection. The tip of it was deeply red, the rest a muted golden tan, just a shade darker than the rest of the merman's complexion. Dylan smelled of spicy musk as Cian touched his lips to the shaft, kissing then licking it.

Dylan sighed and ever so slightly pushed his hips up. His hand curved around the back of Cian's head, encouraging him to envelop him within his mouth.

This moment was all Cian had dreamt about, all those lonely nights. With more vigour than skill, he worked his mouth, hoping to satisfy Dylan. The merman kept his hand entangled in Cian's hair, working the long strands into knots.

"Come here."

Cian blinked and looked up at Dylan. The merman's hands slid from his hair and settled onto his broad shoulders. Cian needed no more urging. Straightening up, he lay fully over the smaller man, his trousers slipping down with the movement to settle along his thighs. His eager shaft rubbed against Dylan's own. He moaned and arched his head back, just that touch was almost too much.

"No... no, wait." Dylan's soft voice brought him back from the edge. The merman bent his knees up so that Cian had full access to his body. "Take me."

Dylan smiled and guided his hand to his bud. Cian's fingers brushed against the tightened opening, causing Dylan to sigh softly. Pressing, Cian pushed his index finger in, causing Dylan to moan louder. The merman spread his legs further, encouraging Cian. He arched his hips into Cian's as the lad pushed another finger in.

With a look in his eyes that said he needed Cian at this moment, Dylan guided Cian to him, encouraging him to push into him. With a shaking that had nothing to do with the cold winds outside the cave and everything to do with the beautiful man under him, Cian complied. Almost as though he were underwater once again, he ground his hips to Dylan, penetrating him in one slowly exquisite thrust.

Dylan arched his back, and cried out as he was taken. With his hands he encouraged Cian to command his body. His dark eyes were shut, his mouth slightly open, exposing the white tips of his front teeth. Nothing in his face showed the strain of the way in which he was being taken. Cian, for his part, simply couldn't stop once he began. The heat, the tightness surrounding his shaft, luring him in, was more than he could take. This being as one with another man was so very much more than he had thought it would be. A

beautiful man under him, open to him, letting him be as inexpertly brutal as he was. That warmth enveloping him pulsed and massaged his shaft. Giving up what little control he had, Cian lost himself to the melting pleasure of coming deep inside Dylan.

Spent, Cian collapsed onto the smaller man. His heart pounded in his ears and it took him moments to begin to hear or feel anything else. Dylan's own heartbeat was almost in time to the faint sound of the surf.

"Are you okay?" Dylan's voice sounded as faint as everything else.

It took Cian long moments before he could answer. "I... think so." It was then that he noted that his body was dead weight on top of Dylan. "Sorry about that." He propped himself up on shaking arms.

"There's nothing to be sorry for." Dylan smiled and cupped Cian's cheek in his hand, before leaning up and kissing the lad.

Nothing more mattered.

Dylan watched Cian as he slept. His eyes traced over the rangy body that promised heavy muscle if he stayed at sea. They lingered over the erect shaft that had so recently been inside him.

It had been a long time, too long since he had been loved. His surrender to the sea had been so long ago, and his love of the merman who had found him and lured him back into the surf, into the world of coldness and dark. That too seemed to have happened to someone else, someone who had been able to be loved, who had been happy. Life under the waves had seemed a shadow of what he had once known. But now...

He reached over to lightly trace his fingers over Cian's bare chest. He rested them just over one dark nipple, its skin wrinkled. Under his palm he could feel the lad's heartbeat. Cian sighed ever so slightly at the touch of his lover. It wouldn't take much to wake him.

Cian's shaft lay hard against his belly, ever so slightly darker than the rest of his complexion. Dylan ran his fingers over the head, tracing along the edge of the flared hood. He smiled to himself, remembered each thrust, each frenzied movement from the lad.

They were well matched, an innocent and one as cold as the fish he swam with. Or perhaps once as cold as that. Now? Now he felt a spark of humanity within his heart. Just in time to leave. He sighed to himself as he traced his fingers on the sand close to Cian.

And then he was gone.

Cian shouldn't have been surprised when he woke, cold. The fire had gone out, the *gwenhidwy* had long fled back to the sea. His first response was to throw some unused driftwood against the side of the cave, hard. His second response was to cry, a little.

What had he done wrong? Why hadn't Dylan stayed? He searched about for the tatters of his clothes. It wouldn't do to go into the village naked, after all. He just hoped it wasn't a long walk, he had no boots and the state of his clothing were poor, to put it politely. It was as he was at the edge of the cave that he spotted it, the trace of words in the sand.

Dylan's words.

Meet me here in one week, evening time. Your shipmates are waiting in the village for you.

Deep within, something burst in Cian. He might have called it joy, maybe hope or perhaps even love. It could have been all those, and more.

It would be the light in the darkest days ahead. It would be a holding hand, a gentle caress, a tender kiss.

It would be a journey, the beginning of a long journey he little knew he was about to embark upon.

Never looking back, he walked to the village. He never should have doubted his lover. Waiting were all five lads from the ketch, all full of cheer and ready with a pint for him. Waiting were his mother and baby sister with tears in their eyes. And his father and brothers, all with smiles on their faces.

And waiting in the lonely sea was another, that he knew.

One who would love him.

THE END

Author Bio

Arielle Pierce currently resides in both southern Spain and in Wales, ensuring that she doesn't miss the worst of the rains and gales of one country, nor the blazing heat and droughts of the other. When not merrily scribbling away about the adventures of two men in love (or lust, more likely) she can be found sewing sock kitty cats for her small son or gardening in her back yard, where she is locked into a losing battle with the weeds (and with the sock cats, for that matter).

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

MIDNIGHT MUFFINS

(Caster Springs #2)

By Erica Pike

Photo Description

A close up of a deep-looking, handsome man lying on a white floorboard. The back of his wrist lies over his forehead and he's looking into the camera with beautiful brown eyes under thick black eyebrows. His lips are full and luscious and his stubble is black.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am kind of a quiet guy. I've never had any luck meeting people or anyone who could really pull me out of my shell. Please help me find someone strong enough and willing to take a chance on me.

Sincerely,

JustJen

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: culinary, blue collar, established couples, men with pets, reunited

Word count: 9,333

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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MIDNIGHT MUFFINS

By Erica Pike

One more second, that's all he needed. One more second to finish the calculation for the cabinets and then head out for lunch. Figures that the idiot in the next room chose that crucial moment to hammer on the pipes. For four minutes there had been nothing but the constant banging. Not a soft *thump-thump* of hammer on wood, but a loud *clank-clank-clank* of steel against steel. How was a man supposed to concentrate in all that noise? Now he had to start all over again.

Liam was beginning to understand how his boyfriend, Kevin, had felt a month ago when Liam was drilling the pavement outside the house Kevin was renting. However, if Liam was to be honest with himself, his frustration really had nothing to do with Charlie's banging...

What the hell am I doing?

Building a bakery for Kevin, that's what he was doing. He was building it without Kevin's knowledge. Without even knowing if Kevin was staying in Castor Springs for good, or if he was going back to L.A. to his hot-shot taxman job. For now, Kevin was only staying on an extended leave from work and had only hinted a couple of times that he might want to stay permanently. It wasn't enough for Liam to get his hopes up, but at the same time Liam was getting his hopes up...

Liam didn't know if Kevin had fancy party friends back in L.A., or if he'd had rich boyfriends. Maybe Kevin was in the habit of having lunch in fancy restaurants with his posh colleagues every day. Liam knew hardly anything about Kevin's life. He was afraid to ask, in case Kevin would start to miss L.A., and Kevin wasn't offering any information. Why would Kevin want to stay with some hick of a Texan carpenter?

It was getting harder to ignore the topic of Kevin leaving. It hovered in the air like a swarm of flies. You could swat at it all you wanted, but the only way you could escape it was by running.

One fucking second.

“Hello?” a voice called from the doorway. Although Kevin was thirty now, his voice still sounded the same as it did at eighteen, back when he left Castor Springs in a cloud of dust. The very clear, medium high tone had the exact same effect on Liam as it did back then, getting him all hot and bothered and making his stomach flutter. “Anyone in here?”

If the sound of Kevin’s voice didn’t finish Liam off, the sight of him certainly did. The way the white light shone on Kevin’s black hair as he stepped through the door was enough to make Liam go all weak in the knees. Kevin’s blue eyes shone bright as beams in the sunlight against his white skin. Whether in L.A. or Texas, the guy just didn’t get any tan and it looked sexy as hell to Liam.

The banging in the back continued.

“Obviously,” Liam answered, smiling wider as Kevin looked at him. Kevin smiled back.

Okay, so maybe Liam still viewed Kevin as a god, and it was unfair to Kevin, but the guy just did things to him that no one else ever did. No guy ever held a candle to Kevin. The fact that the two of them couldn’t be any more different was a cause for worry though. Kevin always acted like his ass was on fire, constantly up to something without being able to stay still for very long. It was so unlike Liam who was not only quiet, but also very private. The social butterfly versus the common clothes moth.

Kevin scuffed his sneaker against the rubble of concrete and looked up with a shy smile. “What? I just thought I’d bring over a couple of sandwiches.”

Liam was well aware that the dreamy haze that sometimes over took him around Kevin looked very dumb, but he couldn’t help it. It usually made Kevin fidget, like now, so Liam shook it off and strode over. He picked up the five-foot-seven skinny frame of his boyfriend and mashed him against a wall. Kevin’s feet circled Liam’s waist and they met in a kiss so intense the world tilted on its axis.

Damn, he was never going to get used to kissing Kevin Lewis, always turning into teenage goo whenever their lips met.

“Mmmm...” Liam rumbled against Kevin’s neck in their embrace. “You came to see me.”

“Well, yeah.” Kevin laughed and squirmed away when Liam nuzzled his ear. “I always want to see you. Besides, there’s not much else to do. Your company’s books are now in order, I’ve cleaned your house, cooked your lunch and fed your chickens. I swear, if I spend one more second in that cabin of yours without a project, I’ll take up knitting.”

“What’s wrong with knittin’?” asked Liam, arching his back to look Kevin in the face. Fuck, did Kevin find the knitting needles? Did he find the half-finished gloves hidden under the bed? Or maybe he didn’t find them, maybe he just saw all the knitted blankets, sweaters and hats and put two and two together. Liam didn’t have a momma or a granny who could’ve knitted those.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Kevin said, his body shaking in quiet laughter as he smoothed Liam’s brow with his thumbs. “I find knitting very manly.”

“You’ve been snooping”

“No, I’ve been cleaning,” Kevin corrected.

Liam raised his brow. “Under the bed?”

“Uh huh.” Kevin leaned in for another kiss. “I spotted the mess under there after we fell from the bed last night.”

Liam squared his shoulders to see if his back still ached from hitting the ground with his naked boyfriend on top. At least it wasn’t Kevin who fell first or he would’ve been squished like a bug under Liam’s larger bulk.

“Liam, do you think he’d like white on the walls?” asked Charlie, Liam’s business partner, as the automated glass doors rolled open. His face flushed purple at the sight of Kevin’s feet wrapped around Liam’s middle. “Oh, I’m interrupting again. Hi, Kevin.”

“Hi, Charlie,” said Kevin, slowly unwrapping himself. With a blush in his cheeks and a twinge in his stomach, Liam let him go. “Are you finishing up the kitchen?”

“Yup.” Charlie strategically blocked the view to the back by planting his wide body in front of the glass doors. He’d developed a large debt of favors

through the years, from Liam bailing him out of jail for drunken brawling to Liam driving all the way to El Paso to pick up his adult daughter after a nasty break-up. Liam had called in all favors to get this bakery built.

“Who’d you say the client was?” Kevin asked, eyes narrowing.

Damn, was he onto them? If there was one thing Liam was dreading more than Kevin’s leaving, it was explaining to Kevin about the bakery. A bakery was a gigantic commitment to Castor Springs. It was also a gigantic commitment to Liam.

“Um...” Charlie scratched the back of his balding head. “This guy from San Antonio.”

“You said a woman from Houston last time.”

“Uh... they’re siblings?” said Charlie.

Of course, Kevin was way too smart to buy that. How a busy bee like Kevin came to become an accountant was something Liam would never understand. Maybe it was because Kevin excelled at snooping.

“Why aren’t there any invoices? I’ve been digging around your office, Charlie, but I can’t find anything. You’re not doing this under the table are you? ’Cause with my job, I can’t be a part of that.”

“No,” Charlie exclaimed, baring his palms in front of him. “No, er...”

“It’s nothin’ like that,” Liam said. As much as he enjoyed watching his old friend squirm, there was too much at stake. Charlie, being an honest man, was a terrible liar whereas Liam was more able to bend the truth. It had fished Charlie out of the pickle jar more than once. “These people want to keep this under the radar for now. We have the invoices.”

Kevin furrowed his brow. “Yeah, but why? I mean, this is Castor Springs. Nothing exciting ever happens here, so why all the secrecy?”

Liam’s stomach dropped. Kevin was right: nothing exciting ever happened in this tiny little hole of a town. They even stopped printing the small gazette because the only news was the weather forecast, the occasional farmers market announcement, and a false report on a coyote attack on Mrs. Alpert’s goats. No, you got all the news you needed from Dinah’s Diner, or just by sitting out on the lawn and chatting with a neighbor. Not that Liam had any neighbors.

It was small town nosiness that drove Liam out of town. The common knowledge that Liam was gay made people eye him in a weird way whenever he so much as talked to a guy. It didn't matter if the guy was straight; people always wondered. No, he chose to build his two story cabin at the very outskirts of town. It took three years to build it, and last month he finished putting in the railing for the front porch. Maybe it was the fact that he was officially out of projects at home that he'd started building this bakery.

Kevin changed his focus from Charlie to Liam. His puzzled face relaxed into a smile as he took Liam's hand.

"Ready for lunch?" He picked up a small basket by the doorway. "I didn't go all out for a picnic, just made a couple of sandwiches. Wanna eat at the park?"

"The park?" Liam heard the trepidation in his own voice. The park was a wide open space around a pond, with not many nooks for privacy. "Why don't we just eat in here?"

Kevin's smile flashed for a second before he pulled on Liam's arm. "Come on, it's not like we're gonna be smooching under a tree or anything. We can come back here for *that*."

It was with heavy steps that Liam exited the small bakery and walked hand-in-hand with Kevin to Lankford Park. Apart from a couple of not-so-discrete looks, they didn't really generate much attention on their way. The park wasn't as heavily occupied as Liam had thought, it being Thursday, and they managed to snag one of the few hedged-in spots. Kevin spread out the thin blanket that was attached under the basket and started setting out the food. His "couple of sandwiches" were packed with olives, Frisée lettuce, cherry tomatoes, thin slices of brie, and this gorgeous white vegetable dressing between pieces of freshly baked French whole-grains, still crispy on the outside and so soft on the inside. Liam groaned deeply at the first bite, leaned back against a tree, and chewed with his eyes closed. After a couple of more bites, he opened his eyes and saw Kevin just watching him with a small smile on his face, his sandwich untouched.

"What?" Liam asked around a bite, grabbing one of the freshly squeezed juice bottles to wash down the scrumptious food. Kevin had mixed oranges

and lemons this time, with a hint of something else Liam couldn't put a finger on.

"Nothing." Kevin looked away and opened a bottle of his own. "I just like seeing you eat my food." He adjusted himself on the blanket, placing his plate over his crotch. The beginning of stiffness didn't escape Liam. It wasn't the first time he'd caught Kevin sprouting wood while they were eating.

"Your food is the best. Gonna make me fat," said Liam, pulling Kevin closer for a chaste kiss.

Kevin grazed his teeth over his lower lip and looked up at Liam, eyes half-hooded with long, black eyelashes. "We're just gonna have to increase our workout then."

Liam glanced around, but the hedges were too high for anyone to see, so he traced his fingers along Kevin's freshly-shaved jaw and gave him a deep kiss that seemed to drag on forever.

"Oh, sorry!" a woman said, making Liam jump, but Kevin refused to let him break the kiss. With a tiny pang in his gut, Liam tried to ignore whoever was there, but he couldn't help listening.

"Should they be doin' that when the kids could run in and see 'em?" a guy asked in a hushed voice from the other side of the hedge.

"They're just kissin'," said the woman. "We do it all the time." She sounded like that blonde one from Dinah's posse—a group that must have sparked the inspiration of the Gossip Girl.

The conversation faded away into the distant sounds of people talking.

Kevin broke the kiss and studied Liam's face hard for a long time. Then he looked down at his food and started to eat. The shift of mood was almost palpable and Liam couldn't help feeling he'd done something wrong.

"What?" Liam asked, taking another swig of juice.

Kevin chewed in silence.

"What?" he repeated. He put down the little bit of uneaten sandwich and pulled Kevin's face toward him.

"Nothing." Kevin freed himself to take a drink. "I just didn't think you were in the closet. I mean, everybody already knows you're gay and you did

ask me out to a restaurant that first day I came here... But it kind of makes sense now. We always stay at your place and never go anywhere together. You're in the closet."

Liam furrowed his brow. They never went anywhere together? Now that he thought about it, Kevin was right, but it wasn't because Liam didn't want to be seen together. Kevin was being unfair. They'd been so wrapped up in each other this past month that they'd barely made it out of the house in their spare time.

"I'm not in the closet," Liam said, waiting for Kevin to meet his eyes. "I'm not. I just don't like everyone knowing my business. You know how it is around here."

Kevin looked down at his lap. "It's just that I'm not sure I'm okay with hiding. I mean, I *really* want to be with you, Liam, but I want to be able to go places with you without you tensing up every time." He glanced up with a sad look in his beautiful eyes, and it just about tore Liam's heart out.

Was Kevin breaking up with him?

Liam shifted away, disbelief shredding through his body. Where the hell did this come from all of a sudden? Things had been perfect so far. Kevin had flourished since he came to live with Liam. He'd looked exhausted a month ago, but now he was more vibrant than a bucket full of rainbows. He seemed to love life at the house: chatting with the chickens; patting Tabby the cat when all three of them were curled up on the sofa in front of the TV; watching Liam take care of Priest, the black stallion; starting that small patch of a vegetable garden behind the house; cooking and baking in the kitchen. Oh, how he loved to cook and bake. Kevin's folks ran a bakery in town before they moved away. Kevin had toyed with the idea of starting up a bakery of his own, which was why Liam had taken the initiative and started building it in the hope that Kevin would stay. Where was all this coming from?

"Are you breakin' up with me?" Liam asked with a hint of anger in his voice. Kevin was *not* just taking off like he did the last time. Not if Liam had a say.

Kevin shook his head. "No. I mean, I don't want to, but sometimes I wonder if you even want me to stay."

“You don’t think I want you to *stay*?” Liam said loudly. He couldn’t help it; this whole conversation had popped out of nowhere.

Kevin lifted his shoulder in a half-shrug. “I don’t know. When we’re together at the house, things are *great*, but you won’t ever go with me to Dinah’s Diner, or to that restaurant you *invited* me to go to that first time. We don’t go to the bar, or the market, or the park.”

“We’re at the park now,” Liam pointed out.

“Yeah, but this is the first time I’ve managed to drag you here and we’re sitting behind some Goddamned bushes. You don’t want to be seen with me. You even ask me to wait in the car when you go to the hardware store.” Kevin shouted the last bit. His words echoed through Liam’s ears, and then Liam noticed that the people in the park seemed to have gone quiet.

Great, the gay couple is arguing in public. Let’s all listen so we can spread the word.

Kevin sprang up and paced the small clearing. He let out a cold laugh, but kept his voice quiet for his next words, “You don’t feel comfortable with me in public. You’re in the closet even though everyone knows you’re gay. How messed up is that?”

Liam stood up, but stayed by the tree. He’d worked hard to get Kevin out on a date and he would die before he let him slip away. He’d do the long distance relationship thing if that’s what it took. Hell, he’d even move to L.A. if Kevin wanted him to. What he absolutely would not do was to let Kevin continue to think Liam was ashamed of their relationship.

He walked over, took Kevin’s hands in his and waited for him to meet his gaze.

“I’m not in the closet; I just don’t feel comfortable around people. I never have. You know what I was like when I was a kid. I haven’t changed much.

“It’s not that I don’t want to be with you in public; people notice me more when you’re with me. I don’t like them staring.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “News flash, hot stuff—they stare at you even if I’m not with you. You’re the hottest guy in town. Hell, you’re the hottest guy in

the whole of Texas. Even Dinah and her friends drool all over you. She told me so herself.”

Liam let out an exasperated laugh. This again... “*You* are the hottest guy in town.”

“Well then they’re looking at us extra because apparently together we’re supernova. Big deal,” Kevin said, his face now relaxed in a smile. “They’re just wishing they were one of us.”

“Or they’re wondering about what we do when we’re alone.”

“Yeah,” said Kevin, with a shrug. “And they’re getting turned on by it.”

Liam let out another laugh. “Doubt that.”

Kevin’s smirk was contagious, and before Liam knew it, they were kissing again.

The workday felt like it would never end. He and Charlie had to abandon the bakery to do an emergency fencing job for old man Jacob, repair a section of a roof that caved in on one of Mr. Gilmore’s stables, and then prevent further damage from a leaked pipe in Mrs. Martin’s bathroom. Jobs were often like that around Castor Springs: short notice and diverse. By the time Liam made it back to the house it was dark and late.

Tabby sat on the porch as Liam stepped out of the car. The light from the overhead shone down on the cat’s white and ginger fur. Tabby mewed a greeting as Liam dipped down to pat him. From the large window, Liam could see Kevin in a white apron moving about in the kitchen. He looked serene as he stirred a large bowl and added a handful of ingredients into the mix. His fingers ran nimbly over the dough as he tipped the bowl over and started kneading, putting his whole body into it.

They hadn’t really finished their conversation at the park, but watching Kevin all warm and homey in Liam’s house, Liam re-established his resolve: he would not let Kevin leave. Kevin seemed in no hurry to return to L.A. and Liam was in no hurry to see him leave. They needed to talk about it, but Liam wasn’t so great at talking. He always ended up saying something juvenile

when he was around Kevin. Maybe it was because he sometimes felt like that little kid with the big crush around him.

Tabby mewled again and snaked his body around Liam's feet. With a deep sigh, and one last look at Kevin's strong hands working the dough, Liam opened the door and was greeted by a low volume of rock music and the mouth watering scent of baking. His house had never smelled as good as it did after Kevin had decided to stay on vacation.

Liam removed his dirty shoes and stripped down to his boxer briefs. He never used to care if he brought the dirt into the house, but now that Kevin insisted on cleaning during his stay, Liam didn't want to make the job hard on him. He meant to sneak upstairs for a shower, but was caught with his foot on the bottom step when Kevin suddenly looked up from his baking.

"Hey there," Kevin said with a small smile on his face. Not the beaming welcome with hugs and kisses Liam usually got. Things were still awkward and it made Liam's stomach twist in all sorts of ways.

"Hey," said Liam, going for a light tone that sounded as forced as it was. He abandoned his trip to the bathroom and walked to the open kitchen instead. "You makin' midnight muffins again?"

"It wasn't midnight," said Kevin, turning his eyes up at the ceiling in mock exasperation. "It was ten o'clock."

Liam skirted the wooden island and put his arms around his lover. Kevin relaxed against him with a satisfied sigh.

"I'm just making the dough for tomorrow. The same recipe I used last night and meant to bake this morning, only I found your damned cat curled up in the bowl and had to throw it out; the dough *and* the cat."

Liam chuckled as he hugged Kevin closer.

"Are we okay?" he asked and placed a slow kiss on Kevin's neck.

"Mmm, yeah," Kevin whispered. "We still need to talk, but let's try not to shout this time, okay?"

"Sorry," said Liam. "I usually don't get angry like that."

"Just when you're around me," Kevin said.

He was right. The only times Liam was ever truly emotional were because of Kevin. He got hurt when Kevin made those off-hand promises back in the day; he got sad when Kevin left; he got angry when his dad wouldn't allow Liam to go after Kevin; he got exasperated when he couldn't locate Kevin; he got angry that Kevin didn't remember him a few weeks ago when Kevin finally came back to town; he got furious that Kevin said he'd go out on a date but then didn't; and now he felt like he wanted to cry when he thought about Kevin leaving again. At the same time, Kevin stirred the best kinds of feelings within Liam. If anyone could make him feel alive, it was Kevin.

"That's because you're annoying," Liam said, digging his finger into Kevin's side.

"Ouch!" Kevin laughed and twisted away. Then he picked up a handful of flour and tossed it at Liam's chest.

"Hey," Liam yelped as the soft ingredient landed on his chest and snowed down to the light brown tiles. He made a grab for Kevin, but Kevin was already running up the stairs, laughing.

Liam took two steps at a time and just managed to grab the tail of Kevin's apron before Kevin could reach the bed.

"My boyfriend's gonna be very upset if you get flour all over the sheets," Liam murmured as he started to strip Kevin.

"Boyfriend?" asked Kevin, short of breath.

Hands on the bottom of Kevin's shirt, Liam looked up. That's right, they hadn't really discussed that. Somewhere during the month of being together, Liam had starting to think of Kevin as his boyfriend. Was Liam less to Kevin?

Before Liam could panic, Kevin grabbed his head and mashed their mouths together in a mind-numbing kiss. Kevin's shirt, pants, socks, and underwear flew off in a flurry of hands and feet before Liam's knees hit the bed and he fell on it. Kevin worked Liam's underwear off and then let himself fall on top, forcing an *oof* from Liam's lungs.

"There's a day's worth of sweat on my body," Liam warned as they rolled on the bed, trying to get under the sheets.

"It's okay. I like it," said Kevin, with a big smile on his face as he buried his nose in Liam's neck and inhaled deeply. "Mmmm..."

The mere feel of Kevin's warm skin made Liam shudder. Under the sheets, Kevin took Liam's erection in hand and started stroking in a slow rhythm. Liam sucked in a breath and trembled from the small, wet kisses on his neck and chest. A nip on his pectoral had him moaning and the suction on his nipple made him cry out with his bottomless need for Kevin.

Spreading his legs, Liam laid back and let Kevin work him open. It was something Kevin excelled at and always made Liam a very eager bottom. Kevin had small fingers, and he was so very gentle, massaging his way in like they had all the time in the world. It didn't even begin to compare to the hurried sex Liam had had in back alleys.

When Kevin carefully pushed his length inside, Liam let out a deep breath mingled with a rumbling groan. Kevin maneuvered himself closer and looked Liam deep in the eyes as he started rolling his hips. The moon shone through the window and cast rays of white on the bed, making Kevin look unearthly with the milky white skin and wild, black hair. His muscles bunched and relaxed as he moved inside Liam, his blue eyes intent. When Kevin increased the speed, he hit Liam's prostate and Liam threw his head back with a deep grunt.

For a moment, all Liam sensed was the slapping of skin, the firm grip of hands on his hips, Kevin's rough grunting and breathing, his own groaning and gasping. Then the intense need to come started to overwhelm him whenever Kevin moved an inch. When Kevin wrapped his fingers around Liam's erection and stroked, it felt like he was being molded into a ball of bright hot existence, hurtling fast toward the sky. As he floated back down, he found himself in the arms of his lover, exhausted, sated, and happy. No one made him feel more alive...

The next morning, Liam woke up with a cat in his face. They were both lying on Kevin's pillow, but Kevin was nowhere in sight. It was... unusual. With this one exception, Liam was always the one to drag Kevin out of bed in the morning. This was different, unfamiliar, and Liam didn't like it.

The smell of freshly baked bread hit his nostrils when he walked down the stairs. Kevin was busying himself with a coffee pot, pouring the black liquid

into two cups. The breakfast table was decked in muffins, bread rolls, and all sorts of spread, and on the plates were scrambled eggs with mushrooms and ground pine nuts, just how Liam liked them.

Kevin often made Liam lunch, and always dinner, but this was the first time he'd woken up early enough to make breakfast. It warmed Liam down to his toes.

"What's all this?" Liam asked, and took a seat on his usual chair by the bay window.

"Just thought I'd make breakfast for my *boyfriend*," Kevin said with a grin, his hair adorably ruffled.

Liam smiled back and dug in, shoveling fork after fork of eggs into his mouth. Hearing Kevin call him that was unreal, but Liam couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more.

"So," Kevin said as he sawed open a roll and buttered it up. "Max at the fertilizer factory called yesterday while you were out."

"Yeah?" Liam asked through a mouthful of eggs. "What'd he want? The north side windows need repainting?"

Kevin focused very hard on putting a piece of ham inside his roll. "Actually, he wanted to talk to me."

"You?" Liam asked, internally annoyed with himself for sounding so surprised. Why wouldn't people want to talk to Kevin?

"He wanted to see if I'd take on the books for his company, you know, like I've done with yours."

Kevin put cheese in his roll, a long slice of cucumber and red peppers. With careful precision, he placed it on his plate and stirred a spoon of sugar into his coffee. When there was nothing more to be prepared, he finally looked up.

Liam lifted his eyebrows in question.

Kevin concentrated back on his plate and continued stirring. "Would you be okay with that?"

Liam stared. Why wouldn't he be okay with that? It's not like Max was competition or anything.

Kevin dropped the spoon and looked back up at Liam. "Will you please say something? If you're not okay with it, just say it."

"Why wouldn't I be okay with it?" asked Liam, putting down his cutlery.

"I don't know, maybe because whenever I talk about staying in Castor Springs you never say anything?"

"You never talk about staying."

"Yes I do," Kevin said, looking at Liam with a hurtful expression. "Not often, because I don't want you to think I'm pushing, but whenever I mention it you just go quiet."

Mind still not working without that cup of coffee, Liam tried to think back to when Kevin might have talked about staying. The only two times he could remember had been said in a joke, once while gathering eggs from the chickens and once when Liam had finally managed to convince Kevin to go riding on Priest, even though it was more like Kevin gluing himself to Liam's back to hang on for dear life. Had he talked about it more? Now that Liam thought about it, he had said small things. Once when they were curled up on the sofa watching TV, Kevin had said that he could just stay like this forever. When Liam was filling up the truck at the gas station Kevin commented on how if he lived in Castor Springs, he'd have to get a car of his own. Then there was that time when they took a bath together and Kevin said that if he was moving in permanently, they'd need a bigger tub... But that was just stuff you said, right? Not a sure thing, like if Kevin had said "I'm going to move to Castor Springs." Or maybe Kevin had been hinting that he wanted to move to Castor Springs, but Liam was too afraid to hope because of similar comments in the past...

Liam didn't notice that time had passed until Kevin scraped his chair back. He stood up with an irritated huff and walked to the island. There, he started scrubbing the counter with a damp rag and continued talking.

"I extended my leave because I wanted to see if you wanted me to move in with you. I make you lunches and dinners. I clean the house and milk your goddamn goat to see if it'll make any difference, but you never say a goddamn thing. Whenever I talk about leaving my job in L.A. or staying in Castor

Springs, you just lock up. Now my boss is hounding me to come back, but I don't know what to tell him, so I'm just going to come out and ask you: do you want me to stay?"

"Yes," Liam said, still catching up to Kevin's speech. All that really mattered though were those last few words. "Of course I do. You've already moved in, haven't you?"

Kevin stopped in mid scrub. His shoulders slumped and he sighed.

"Most of my stuff is still back in L.A., so no, I haven't moved in."

Liam didn't know if Kevin was excited by the idea of staying in Castor Springs. It was no secret that he didn't like the place and city life seemed to suit him so much better, so it seemed that Kevin wanted to stay because of Liam. That, in itself, was enough to make Liam's heart swell. Kevin, however, didn't look happy at all as he turned on his heel and started doing the dishes.

Not sure what to do with himself, Liam got up and walked over. He placed a hand on Kevin's to stop him from cleaning. Kevin released another sigh and closed his eyes.

"Baby," Liam said quietly, "I really do want you to stay; I *need* you to stay. There's no way I'm lettin' you leave again. Haven't I ever told you that? I must have, because I'm always thinking it."

"Really?" Kevin turned his head to nuzzle Liam's chest. Liam put his arms around him and squeezed tightly.

"Yeah, I probably never say anything when you talk about stayin' because I'm afraid to hope..."

Kevin let out a quick snuffle. Liam tilted his head up and met rapidly blinking eyes. "That's my fault, isn't it? I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault that I'm too much of a chicken to ask," Liam said and kissed Kevin's forehead. "Didn't wanna bring up the issue in case you'd start to talk about leavin'."

"We're both chickens then," Kevin said with a small smile. "I was afraid you'd feel we were going too fast if I asked to move in with you. I mean, you've never been in a relationship before."

“That’s because none of those other guys were you.”

Kevin stared at him for a while, deep blue eyes shining with unshed tears. Then he smiled and reached up for a kiss. Liam groaned against the soft lips.

“I’ll go reserve us a spot in the chicken coop,” Kevin said with a laugh as they embraced. Liam laughed into Kevin’s hair and squeezed him harder. They stayed locked to each other until Kevin’s stomach started growling. With a laugh, Liam led them back to the breakfast table and they continued eating.

“This mean you’re gonna stop cooking me good food?” Liam teased between bites.

“No. I like the cooking,” Kevin said around a mouthful of blueberry muffin.

“And the cleaning?”

“And the cleaning,” Kevin said with half a smile.

“I’ll milk the goat then.” Liam gave Kevin a wink.

“No,” Kevin said with a laugh, “I like that too. I like all of it, even when Billy kicks over the bucket or when the cat steals an egg and rolls it off the counter. I *love* being here, but I’ll need a new job to help keep us going.”

“I do okay with money. You don’t really have to work.”

“Oh, no,” Kevin said, putting up a finger. “I’m not some frilly little housewife waiting for you to come home. I’m getting a job. I can advertise as an accountant. I just...”

“What?” Liam prompted when Kevin stared at his coffee cup.

“I just wish you’d have told me about the bakery.”

Liam looked up from his second bread roll. “The bakery?”

It had occurred to him that now might be the best time to bring up the bakery, but he’d hoped it would be ready before telling Kevin. It was only a couple of more weeks if there weren’t many other jobs.

“Yeah, I know you’re building a bakery,” Kevin said. “I know one when I see one. It looks very nice.”

“Oh,” Liam said. It was a bit of a relief that he didn’t have to tell Kevin in words. Giving him a bakery was practically giving him a wedding ring and he

didn't know if Kevin was ready for that. After this morning, though, it didn't seem like Kevin minded at all. "I'm glad you like it."

Kevin wiped his fingers and dropped the napkin on his empty plate. "Yeah, but there's no room for a second bakery in a town this small. Maybe they'll let me work there. Hey, have you been hiding the inventories from me so I won't get disappointed?"

Liam took Kevin's hand in his. Oh the choices: To wait a couple of more weeks and see the look on Kevin's face when Liam gave him the keys, or to see that look right now. It would be much more practical to do it now; Liam didn't want Kevin to take on too many accounting jobs. Besides, Kevin might need to prepare and buy whatever one needs to run a bakery. Liam really only knew how to build one, but he assumed there'd be sacks of flour, some milk and sugar, and maybe a couple of bowls.

Kevin shrugged and smiled. "Well, I'm happy as long as I can move in with you. Hell, maybe we'll add more livestock and grow an orchard and I can start up a small shop with preserved goods. That sounds like fun, yeah?"

"Baby, the bakery's for you."

"Hm?" Kevin's whole demeanor was still focused on his new train of thought.

"I'm building it for you. The bakery."

Kevin turned his gaze on Liam. "Did you just say you're building the bakery for *me*?"

Liam rubbed the back of his neck. "Figured I could sell it if you didn't want it."

Kevin stared for a few more seconds and then launched himself from his seat and landed in Liam's lap. He smothered Liam's face in kisses. "You really *do* want me here!" he said with a cheerful laugh.

"Yeah," Liam replied with a content sigh as Kevin's hands stroked him all over. It was making Liam hard. "I really, *really* want you here."

Suddenly Kevin jumped off. "Okay, let's go!"

"Go?" Liam asked, his boxers now straining with a hard-on.

“Well yeah.” Kevin’s face was exuberant. “I’ve got a million and two things to do: gotta have things packed up back in L.A., moved over here, and make room for my stuff. Then I’m going to shop for the bakery. Oh, this is so exciting. Thank you so much, Liam.” Kevin jumped back into Liam’s lap and gave him a long, heartfelt kiss. “Keep all the invoices safe. I’ll need them for the books and to know how much to pay you back. How’d you get the money anyway?”

“Told you, I do okay with money,” Liam said, his cock pushing against Kevin’s jeaned butt. “And I dipped a little into the money Dad left me.”

“Oh baby,” Kevin said and gave Liam another long kiss. “I’m sorry. I’ll pay you back every cent. For the work, too.”

Liam stroked Kevin’s back as they looked at each other.

He swallowed hard before he voiced aloud what he’d been almost too afraid to even consider. “How about you don’t pay me back and we become partners instead?”

Kevin’s eyebrows shot up. “You want to be a partner in a bakery?”

This was the part that really made it look more like a ring instead of a business. It would be theirs and it would be a long term commitment. Encouraged by Kevin’s earlier enthusiasm about their relationship, Liam continued.

“It’s just an idea,” said Liam, suddenly feeling insecure all over again. Maybe Kevin wanted the bakery for himself. It was *his* dream, after all. “My part would be building and maintenance, and yours would be baking and running things?”

Kevin’s eyes on Liam’s face seemed miles away as he thought about it. Then he broke out in a smile. “Like a silent partner?” he asked, kissing Liam yet again.

“Mmm,” Liam hummed through the kiss. “With benefits.”

“I love it,” Kevin said against Liam’s lips, his body wound like a bow with the need to get going. Liam held onto him, not ready to leave just yet. “Will people know that we’re partners?”

“Yes.” Liam stroked his thumb on Kevin’s lower back. “I thought about what you said yesterday. I’m gonna try to be more open in public; I’m not gonna hide us. Didn’t realize I was doing it until you said it.”

That earned him another kiss, deeper, with added tongue. They kissed for a while, touched each other, and before Liam knew it, he was pulling off Kevin’s T-shirt.

“And we’ll go out sometimes?” Kevin asked on a short breath. He fished Liam’s cock from his boxers and gave it a few strokes.

“Yeah,” Liam promised, really ready to accept just about anything at the moment, and pushed his hands under Kevin’s jeans to cup his cheeks. “But we’ll stay at home as well, right?”

“Yeah,” Kevin agreed as he lowered himself from Liam’s lap to the floor. “Just a night out now and then. Maybe up in Floresville or San Antonio. Not much happens around here.”

“Okay,” Liam said, spreading his knees to make room.

Kevin slid Liam’s erection between his lips and sucked hard. Liam threw his head back on a whimper as Kevin groaned.

As it turned out, it was a good idea to tell Kevin about the bakery sooner rather than later. Since that morning in the kitchen, Kevin had bought a couple of freezers, three huge ovens, a long worktop, a stove, display cases, tons of raw material and just about everything a bakery needs. It must have cost him a fortune, but Kevin said he had money saved up and now that he was no longer paying rent, he could afford it. Plus, he sold most of his fancy furniture to a friend back in L.A.

On top of that, Kevin had spent days and nights busying himself with baking things to put in the freezers, testing out recipes (from which Liam benefitted), learning the heat levels of the ovens, testing and deciding on what kinds of non-baked foods to sell (from which Liam also benefitted), and haggling with sellers. He even hired and trained a kid to work the register and clear the tables for the first couple of weeks, thinking he’d maybe hire the boy permanently if things stayed busy.

Kevin had been so busy that Liam hardly saw him at home anymore, but instead of fretting, Liam spent the time building tables and chairs; varnishing the mahogany walls outside; painting the inside walls antique white; bolting down the big, swirly *Midnight Muffins* sign atop the door; doing a lot of heavy lifting; plugging equipment; and basically doing whatever manual work needed to be done. For a while, Liam regretted building the bakery so small. Kevin was made for bigger things, but then this was tiny little Castor Springs. It was nice to have a bakery again, and if the buzz around town was anything to go by, people agreed.

“Baby, could you put those cloths on the tables?” Kevin asked, shoving a small stack of blue and white checkered linens in Liam’s arms. It was still dark outside and everything was peaceful. Even the low volume of rock music added to the peace.

Liam stood still and watched Kevin skirt the worktop and start drizzling dressing on the rows of roll-halves, readying them for the lettuce, bologna, fried bacon, and cheese. He looked paler than usual with deep half-moons under his eyes, but even though he hadn’t slept all night and it was six o’clock in the morning, he still looked energetic.

A knock sounded on the back door. Tucking the cloths under his arm, Liam went to open the door for Beck, the seventeen year old kid who had to drop out of school at sixteen to take care of his momma. Liam knew him to be a hard worker, so Kevin got a great find there.

“Oh, hi,” said Beck, not looking Liam in the eye as he stalked past and put away his jacket.

Liam blushed as well. He hadn’t known the kid was helping out a couple of days ago when Liam’s sexual frustration won out. From outside, he’d looked through the small paned windows in the back and seen his boyfriend bustling about. Kevin had looked too scrumptious in his apron and the tall, white toque on his head. Liam barged in, pushed Kevin into a corner and went down on his knees. He thought Kevin’s protests were a game as he yanked down his pants and was about to put his dick in his mouth when the automatic doors slid open and a flushed face Beck dropped a tray of cutlery with a loud clang. Kevin had pulled his pants up, stifling his laughter, and shot Liam a sultry I’ll-deal-with-

you-later look, but all Liam could focus on was the fierce pang in his gut for having been caught in the act. Kevin firmly established a never-in-the-bakery rule after that, for hygiene he said, but things had been awkward between Liam and Beck ever since.

Liam hurried to the front and spread out the cloths over the circular tables. In the middle, he placed the small blue mats he'd secretly crocheted and given to Kevin the night before. In the very center, he placed bowls of sugar and other niceties Kevin wanted on every table.

There were only five tables, but there was plenty of space next to the shop to expand, if Kevin needed to later. That's how things were in Castor Springs: cheap land and building permits (the Mayor was just happy that someone was building) and lots of available space, even on the "high street". Liam had reserved the land next to the bakery, just in case.

Beck came through and started stacking the shelves with freshly baked loaves of bread while Kevin carefully cut some of his pies and cakes into pieces, placing each one on a small paper tray to put in the display case. Mornings started late in Castor Springs, so it wasn't until seven thirty when Kevin finally unlocked the front doors and greeted his first customers. Among them was Dinah.

"You little rascal," she drawled. "I'm right across the street and you're already takin' away some of my business."

"You'll just have to stay competitive," said Kevin with a cheeky grin.

Dinah laughed and nudged him in the shoulder.

"You sellin' those cherry pies your momma used to make?"

"Of course." Kevin hurried behind the counter and pointed out the selection of baked goods with a flourish. Dinah's eyes bugged out at the delicious looking pies and cakes. "I'm also selling a variety of sandwiches and might offer jams and other preserves in the future. I do love to cook and I find that having diversity is fiscally sound."

"Well, I'll be damned," she said and eyed the cherry pies for a long time. She ended up buying two, along with three loaves of bread and a couple of sandwiches. Kevin rang her order up and threw in a couple of chocolate chip muffins for good measure.

At the second register, Beck somewhat clumsily rang in the totals for a couple while trying to bag up the goods at the same time. His eyes widened when another burst of people walked through the door. The muffins were running out fast. Dinah didn't seem in any hurry to leave Kevin, so Liam went into the back to get more. When he returned with a tray of blueberry and apple muffins, Dinah shot him a curious look.

"You guys are comin' over tomorrow night, ain't ya?" she asked when Kevin handed over her bag.

"Ah, darn," said Kevin, casting Liam a quick look. "I'm sorry, Dinah, I forgot all about it. Things have been so busy."

"Don't mean y'all can't come over. Come on, Liam, it's time to show off your boyfriend. You can't keep him to yourself all the time. My girlfriends are all curious about you two."

To gossip, no doubt.

"Uh, can we have some time to talk about it?" Kevin asked, well aware what a blabbermouth Dinah was. Just then, a couple of more people walked in and things got really busy. Dinah stood to the side, but didn't look like she was leaving without an answer.

She was half a generation older, and although Liam couldn't exactly call her a friend, she'd never been anything but friendly toward him. She even used to babysit him when he was in diapers. She'd developed some kind of no-bullshit big-sister syndrome and he knew she gave people hell if they ever said anything negative about him being gay. In fact, he was pretty sure that Dinah's common sense and her ready comebacks were partly why people didn't give Liam as much trouble about his sexuality as they would have. Dinah was in the very center of the gossiping circle and her opinions held much weight in town. People knew that what you saw was what you got.

If Liam and Kevin were going to be socializing around town, Dinah would be their best ally as her no-bullshit policy applied to all other people as well.

"We'll come." The words came out of Liam's mouth before he knew he was going to say them. It surprised him as much as it did the other two. Then there was no more time because the place filled with curious people who

ended up almost cleaning out the shop. It was a good thing Liam had taken a week off to help until Kevin and Beck got the hang of things.

They arrived at the cabin in darkness. Liam went to check on the animals while Kevin carried in covered trays and other items he'd loaded in the back of the pickup. Billy the Goat and Priest were fed fresh hay; the chickens happily squabbled when he poured fresh feed into their coop; and the rabbits rolled over one another in their excitement to get the leftover vegetables from the bakery.

When Liam came back to the house, Kevin sat on the porch on a red blanket, food strewn about among a number of candles. Tabby was noisily wolfing down food on the other side of the porch.

"Hi," Kevin said with a sweet smile.

"Hi," Liam said with a laugh. "We havin' a picnic?"

"Yeah, I thought it'd be a good way to wind down."

Liam walked up the couple of steps and made himself comfortable next to his lover. Kevin had flour on his chin and a streak of pink icing on his neck, but otherwise he looked clean and happy and sated despite the exhaustion he no doubt felt.

Liam picked up a piece of cherry pie to feed Kevin. "Thought you'd head straight to bed after today."

"Too amped up," said Kevin as he took a bite. "Mmmm," he groaned just like Liam did when he too took a bite. "Don't think I've eaten since noon."

"I know." Apart from a hurried lunch, Liam had forgotten to eat as well. "You're gonna have to eat more though. No one's gonna trust a skinny baker." He pinched Kevin's side and received a squeal in turn as Kevin wriggled out of it.

They fed each other and ate in silence, exchanging small kisses in between. Then they cleaned up and Liam practically had to carry Kevin up the stairs as the fatigue finally overwhelmed him.

"You sure you want to go to Dinah's tomorrow?" Kevin asked as Liam sat him down on the bed and started removing his clothes.

“Not if you’re gonna be this tired.” Liam reached up for a slow kiss. Kevin’s forehead rested against his for a moment and Liam thought he’d nodded off until Kevin raised himself up.

“I’ll be fine, but we really don’t have to go if you’re not okay with it. We’re basically walking into the belly of the beast here. You know who her friends are.”

“Yeah.” Liam smiled, ran his fingers through Kevin’s hair, and cupped his face. Kevin leaned into the touch with eyes closed. “But they’re on our side, so it’s okay. You just stay your chatty self and I won’t have to do a lot of talkin’.”

“What are you saying?” Kevin asked with a laugh as Liam pulled his T-shirt over Kevin’s head and pushed his pants down the rest of the way.

“Just sayin’ that you’re a social butterfly. That works great for me because you’ll be the center of attention and no one will even know I’m there. Dinah said the girls are bringin’ their husbands, so I’ll just watch TV with them or something.”

“Fat chance,” Kevin said as he laid back and pulled Liam to lie on top. “I’m gonna make you wear a pink tiara and you’re going to join our tea party like all the other good little boys and girls.”

Liam snorted into the kiss and Kevin laughed back, rolling them over to undress Liam. He got halfway done with the pants when he simply fell asleep, his head on Liam’s stomach and hands down along Liam’s thighs. Liam pulled him up and put him under the covers.

Tabby darted into the room and jumped up on the bed to snuggle against Kevin. As much as the two might bicker—Kevin vocally and Tabby with mewls and resentful glares—they really did make a great match. Sort of like Liam and Kevin, who were opposites in so many ways, but at the end of the day they made up for each other’s shortcomings in a way that made them a perfect whole.

THE END

Author Bio

Erica lives in Iceland with her adorable little twin boys. She often says that her real name sounds like Klingon to foreigners. Seriously, if “Eyjafjallajökull” (you know, the volcano that stopped international air travel in 2010) looks like someone fell asleep at the keyboard, Erica’s real name could leave a non-Icelander in a zombie-like stupor for days.

*She’s been writing for several years, or ever since reading became an obsession. Aside from a business degree, Erica has taken English courses at the University of Iceland and gulped down anything that might help her in her career as an author. She takes great interest in English, but will break every single grammar rule for the sake of *The Voice*.*

Erica loves hearing from her readers. She’s a friendly, easy-going (if a bit silly) person who doesn’t mind talking about herself in third person.

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Published Work by Erica Pike

Castor Springs Series:

Half-Baked Promises

Midnight Muffins

Boston Boys Series:

A Life Without You

Absolutely Eric

College Fun and Gays Series:

Hot Hands

Grade-A-Sex Deal

The Walls Have Ears

Little Stalker

Welcome, Brother

Cold Hands

Other:

In His Pocket

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

CREELING THE BRIDEGROOM

By Neil S. Plakcy

Photo Description

The photo I chose showed two handsome young men—one in a suit, the other in a kilt. They both have rosebuds in their lapels, and they're kissing as well as clasping their hands together. The background looks like a garden, and all these elements together made me think of a wedding.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been through a lot over the years. We've known each other since we were young and though we've had our troubles we've managed to stay together. My parents never approved of him because my dad was rich and famous and he wasn't. Please tell me how we got to this moment and what's happened in our lives.

**With this prompt you can pretty much do what you like, angst is welcome (even encouraged) and so on. If you want to do BDSM or something kinky, that's fine but please don't make it the central focus of the story. I just want to know how these two got together.*

Sincerely,

Mackenzie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: Scottish men with kilts, Florida, first time, angst, reunited, weddings

Word count: 11,786

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

CREELING THE BRIDEGROOM

By Neil S. Plakcy

Alistair was my first boyfriend, and I was his, which makes it pretty weird that in about an hour, he's going to be my husband. I doubt there are many gay couples who can make that boast.

Not that it was an easy road to get here though. We met seven years ago, at the Scottish Festival in Miami when we were both seventeen. It was a sunny day in February, the sky a bright blue with just a scattering of flat cirrus clouds in the sky. I was hanging around with my dad, as he rubbed ointment into his palms in preparation for competing in the caber toss event.

A guy in a Campbell plaid kilt passed us with what looked like a fishing creel filled with stones strapped to his back. "What event is he competing in?" I asked

My dad is a huge guy, six foot six, broad shoulders, close to three hundred pounds of muscle—not counting the curling blond hair that streams down to his shoulders. I took after my mom's side of the family, the Cuban immigrants. Like her, I was slim and dark-haired, and barely weighed one seventy-five.

He looked where I was pointing. "Ah, Kirk my lad, who knew they did that anymore?" he said. His Scots brogue had gotten so much stronger since we arrived at the festival. "It's called creeling the bridegroom."

"What's that?"

"It's a very ancient custom. A young lad who wants to marry a lass fills a creel with stones, and carries it on his back from one end of the village to the other, ending at her house, where he waits for her to come out and kiss him. Then the whole village knows they're to be wed."

"So this is our village?" I asked, looking around at the tents full of Scottish crafts, the cluster of bagpipers in one corner, the families wandering around swathed in plaid.

"Aye, laddie." He clapped his hand on my shoulder. "I'm proud you're here with me, Kirk," he said. "It's time you got a wee bit of Scottish culture, no matter how it is you're going to grow up."

I was born and raised in Florida, in a boondock part of Broward County west of Fort Lauderdale, at the edge of the Everglades. My dad had immigrated to the States in his early twenties, knocked around the country for a while, then landed in Florida, where he met my mom, who came from a big Cuban family. He got a job with a company building roads through the swamps, built our house, then spawned me and my siblings. I was the oldest, and the lucky one chosen to accompany him to this festival.

“I’ve got to get my place,” my dad said. “You go enjoy yourself.”

Easy for him to say. I was a weird immigrant hybrid, not completely comfortable in either the Anglo or the Latin world. Being gay only heightened my isolation.

I wandered past a display of clan tartans. Ours, the Strathspey, is a typical plaid in shades of blue, green and black. Ugly, if you ask me. But my dad loved it, and he wore a huge kilt in that pattern. I was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a short-sleeved shirt in a plaid that almost matched my dad’s. Just another way I didn’t quite make the mark. I wasn’t as tall as he was, or as tough; I didn’t have his self-confidence or his brogue.

I circled around the fairgrounds and ended up back at the games, where the stone put had just finished and the field was being readied for the caber toss. The caber is a pole, about twenty feet long and a hundred seventy-five pounds, and big guys like my dad pick them up and toss them end over end through the air. A perfect try ends with the top of the caber facing the thrower.

All the contestants were built like my dad, tall and stocky, with work-hardened muscles. After I came out to my dad the year before, he’d said, “At least you have a brain, Kirk laddie. So you can work with your head, not your hands.”

It had taken a hurricane to drag me out of the closet. Usually, our tropical storms come in off the Atlantic, smash into the beachfront houses and high-rise condos of the rich, and run out of steam before they reach where we live. But this hurricane was weird; it came ashore on the west coast and swept across the state with nothing but the hardwood hammocks of the Everglades to slow it down. It smashed into our neighborhood, knocking the roof off our

house. When my dad went back to see what he could salvage, he found my stash of gay porn littered around my room.

He was pretty calm about it; I guess the destruction of our house made more of an impact. We were back in the house within a month, and by then it was an accepted fact that I was a boy who liked boys.

I hadn't done anything about that attraction, though. I had crushes on a couple of my classmates, but I was too much of a weenie to make a move on some guy who'd turn out to be straight—and probably punch my lights out.

As I waited for the caber toss to start, a guy about my age came up next to me, a clean-cut all-American type, with short blond hair, a Brooks Brothers polo shirt, and Bermuda shorts in a tartan plaid I didn't recognize.

“Ah, the caber toss,” he said in an affected Scottish accent I recognized as completely phony. “A very manly sport. That is, if you equate manliness with stupidity.”

“My dad's competing,” I said.

“Oh, shit, sorry,” he said, all trace of his phony accent gone. “I didn't mean to be obnoxious.”

“Really? So you can be a jerk without even trying?” I smiled, hoping he'd catch the note of sarcasm. When he didn't respond immediately, I reached out to shake his hand. “I'm Kirk,” I said.

“Alistair.” His hand was strong and warm in mine, sending a tingle of sexual energy direct to my dick, which was all too eager to prong up at the slightest prompt.

“A proper Scots name,” I said, showing him I could do the accent much better than he could. “What's your clan?”

“McGregor. Yours?”

“Strathspey.”

“A Highlander.”

We relapsed back into our normal voices. “Yeah, my dad's from there,” I said. “The home of single malt scotch, he says.”

Alistair made a face. “An acquired taste. My father loves the stuff but I can’t get down more than a mouthful before it burns my stomach.”

“I grew up getting a thimbleful of whatever my dad was drinking. I’m not even legal age yet but I can tell the difference between five different kinds of single malt.”

“Impressive.”

I’d never flirted with a guy before, but it felt like that’s what I was doing with Alistair. Our eyes kept meeting and we’d smile at each other, and I’d feel that same tingling in my groin. I was glad I’d resisted my dad’s entreaty to wear a kilt myself; I didn’t want it blowing up in the breeze and showing what I had to offer.

“Look, they’re starting,” Alistair said.

We watched a couple of guys make some lame attempts, hardly even hoisting the heavy pole off the ground. Then my dad stepped up. “There’s a fine-looking man,” Alistair said. “And I’ll bet he’s got a very fine caber of his own under that kilt.”

“That’s my dad!” I said, elbowing him.

“Oh, shit,” Alistair said. “I did it again.”

I looked him directly in the eye and said, “No harm, no foul. I’ve seen him naked, and he does have a pretty impressive caber.” I watched Alistair’s eyebrows raise and added, “It’s the kind of thing that’s hereditary, you know.”

Alistair didn’t say anything, and I worried I’d gone too far. My dad picked up the caber, and his back muscles strained as he heaved the pole forward. It flipped up and then banged to the ground, pointing back at him in a straight line.

“Sweet Jesus,” Alistair said. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Just a normal day at our house,” I said, with affected casualness.

He looked at me and licked his lips, and my dick hardened again. Then he saw something over my shoulder and his expression changed. “Do you want to get together sometime?” he asked. “I don’t know, see a movie or something?”

I shook my head. “I live out in the boonies, and I don’t have a car.”

“I can pick you up.” He pulled out his wallet and extracted a printed business card, which he handed to me. “I’ve got to go. Call me, all right?”

What kind of kid has a business card, I wondered, as Alistair handed his to me, then shook my hand.

“I mean it. Call me, or text me. Like, tonight?”

I nodded, and he turned and walked away quickly. I watched him walk up to an older guy in a business suit. Must be his dad, I thought. But a business suit? To an outdoor festival? At least the man wore a tartan tie.

My dad was exuberant after winning the caber toss, and we celebrated with shots of Glenfiddich, his favorite single malt, bottled only a mile or two from where he’d grown up. Across from us, I saw the guy who’d been carrying the creel full of rocks, his arm around a pretty, dark-haired girl.

“Ah, so he got his lassie,” my father said. Then he looked at me. “I hope you’ll find a love of your own someday, Kirk lad. Won’t be easy for you, I know. But you’ve always got your mother and me.”

Lots of men came up to congratulate my dad, but Alistair’s dad wasn’t among them. As we walked back to the truck, my dad swayed on his feet, and grabbed a nearby car for support. “You’d better drive us home, Kirk laddie,” he said.

He pulled his keys out and tossed them to me. I caught them one-handed, and he applauded. I blushed and hurried to the truck.

After dinner, back in my room, I looked at the card Alistair had given me. In fancy script, his name, Alistair McGregor, was centered at the top. Below it read “Student, Ransom Everglades School,” along with his cellular number and his email address.

I had a basic cell, paid for out of my after-school earnings at the greenhouses down the street from our house. I’d never sent a text message, and didn’t think my phone could do it. So I called Alistair.

“Hello?”

“Um, it’s Kirk. Kirk McGowan. We met at the...”

“I’m glad you called,” he said. “Sorry I had to run off like that, but when my dad is ready to leave someplace, it’s either get on the train or get lost.”

I flopped onto my bed, leaning back against the study pillow, and started to talk to Alistair. Fortunately it was a Saturday, and I had unlimited weekend minutes, because we talked for an hour before my phone started beeping that the battery was low.

I plugged it into the charger and we talked for another hour. I'd never had such an intimate conversation with a stranger before—we talked about movie stars we thought were handsome, a couple we thought were gay. We drifted into the personal, about a straight guy at his school he was crushing on, and I told him about the guys I liked, and we both admitted that we hadn't done anything more than look and lust.

My dick was hard the whole time, and while half of me never wanted the conversation to end, the other half wanted to get off the phone and beat my meat.

"It's getting late," I said, when I noticed that the clock read a few minutes after ten. "I should hang up."

"Yeah, I should too," he said. "Um, so, you want to get together? Maybe tomorrow? You don't go to church or anything, do you?"

"Only on the big holidays," I said. "But like I said, I live way out in the boonies." I gave him my address, told him roughly where it was.

"That's no big deal," Alistair said. "I can shoot right up I-75."

We arranged for him to pick me up the next afternoon around two. "I'll call you when I get close," he said.

"Sounds great. I'm looking forward to it."

"I am, too, Kirk." The way he said my name gave me twinges that went right from my ears to my groin.

I could hardly sleep that night, thinking about Alistair. In my mind, I went back over every detail of how he looked, what he wore, what he said. I jerked myself off twice just thinking about what it would be like to kiss him. I'd never kissed anyone on the lips before, but I'd sure read enough about how it was supposed to feel.

I was being stupid, I counseled myself, lying in my bed after I'd wiped up the mess from my second ejaculation—a lot less fluid than the first time, but

rubbing my dick was almost painful, and the orgasm that racked my body was pretty amazing. Alistair might not even want to kiss me. Maybe he just wanted a gay friend.

After all, I didn't look like one of the movie stars or athletes who'd come out. I was just a skinny kid, though my biceps were responding to the work I did in the greenhouse. My mom's mother and sisters thought I was pretty; they were always pinching my cheek and saying, "*Ay, que lindo!*" when they saw me because of my thick wavy hair and long eyelashes. Girls liked that kind of thing—but did guys?

I finally slept, but all Sunday morning I was as nervous as a cat. "What's wrong with you, *niño?*" my mother asked as we were finishing breakfast."

"Nothing. I just didn't sleep well."

"Go take a nap then," she said. "You have all your homework done for Monday, right?"

"I'm fine, *Mami.*" I put on a tank top and a pair of nylon shorts and went for a long run around the neighborhood, and by the time I got back, sweaty and exhausted, I'd managed to wipe out most of my nerves. They all came back, though, as soon as Alistair called to tell me he was getting off the highway and he'd be at my house soon.

I didn't own any fancy clothes; my best piece of clothing was an Armani Exchange T-shirt I bought at the outlet store, marked down from fifty bucks to ten. I put it on, with a pair of decent khakis.

I waited for him outside, surprised when he pulled up in a new-looking BMW sedan. I hopped in quickly, awed by the leather interior and the confident hum of the air conditioning.

He seemed to know that I wanted him to pull away quickly, and he did. "So," he said when we'd turned the corner of my street and were out of sight of my house. "I don't know this area. Where do you go for fun?"

I didn't want to admit my life wasn't that much fun. "Um... the mall?" I asked. "Sawgrass Mills isn't that far, and they've got restaurants and a movie theater."

Then I realized I didn't have much cash—certainly not enough for a movie and a meal. And would he expect me to pay for him, since he'd driven all this

way? Gas was expensive. I'd never gone on an actual date before, with either a girl or a guy, and I was completely at a loss.

"Sounds cool," he said. "I have my dad's credit card, and we could do some damage."

I was fast realizing I was way out of my league, as Alistair navigated the Beemer back to the highway which would take us to the mall. I knew, from overhearing my parents talk late at night, that money was tight for them. I made a few bucks working at the greenhouse, but I used that to buy my own clothes. We had a family computer I shared with my parents and my siblings.

"You okay?" he asked, as we merged onto the highway. "You look, I don't know, nervous."

"Aren't you?" I blurted out.

He laughed. "It's not like this is my first date ever." Then he looked at me. "Is it for you?"

I nodded.

"No girls either?"

"Nope. Like I said, we're pretty far out here. I've gone out with groups, you know, a bunch of friends. But even that, not so much."

"I don't know, Kirk," he said, and my heart took a swan dive.

Was he just going to turn around and take me home?

"You're putting a lot of pressure on me to make your first date terrific." He looked over at me and smiled, and my heart popped back up and my dick started to swell. "Don't worry, though. I can do terrific."

After that, everything seemed to move so fast. We walked through the mall, and Alistair tried to buy me a shirt at the first store, but I refused. "My parents know I don't have cash," I said, "so I can't just show up with shopping bags."

He nodded. "Well, I'll just have to find different ways to spoil you."

We ate a late lunch at the Cheesecake Factory, appetizers and entrees and cheesecake and fancy coffee drinks. I was scared to look at the check but

Alistair handed his dad's credit card to the server without even checking it. "You're sure he won't mind?" I asked.

"I have a thousand-dollar limit," he said. "As long as I don't go over that any month, he doesn't even notice."

A thousand dollars, I thought. A month. For stuff. I took a deep breath, but I resolved to enjoy myself.

"This has been a pretty awesome first date," I said, as we walked back through the mall to where we'd parked. "You were right, you do terrific."

He looked over at me, and there was a sly grin on his face and his eyes danced. "You haven't even seen terrific yet," he said.

What did that mean? I worried, as we got into the car. Did he want to have sex with me? I wasn't exactly sure what two guys did. I'd seen some porn, of course, but it was all so fake. I couldn't imagine that real guys did all those things.

"You're shaking again," Alistair said, as we pulled out of the parking lot. "Don't worry. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"I don't know what I want," I said, barely able to form the words.

"Think of it as a meal," he said. "We'll start out with an appetizer—an *amuse bouche*, they call it in fancy restaurants. Something to please the mouth. And then we'll see what else we both want to order."

I was kind of confused, but I nodded and said that was fine.

"As I was driving toward your house I saw this little shopping center, looked abandoned," he said.

"Yeah, I know it," I said.

"Any parking there that's private?"

My heart skipped a beat. "Um, yeah. There are some spots around the back, by the canal. Nobody can see your car back there."

"Then that's where we'll go."

I was so excited I could barely focus. I was scared shitless, but I was horny, too, and I finally understood what guys said about wanting to have sex so bad you'd do almost anything for it.

Alistair pulled the BMW into the lot for the three-store center, all of it shut down, and then circled around the back. “Perfect,” he said, as he parked under the spreading branches of a willow. He rolled down the windows and shut the car off.

It was late afternoon, and the air was cool but humid. The sun was starting to set in the west, and we could hear faint splashes from the canal and the sound of the occasional bird.

Alistair turned to me. “So. If this was your first real date, I’m guessing you’ve never kissed another guy.”

I nodded and swallowed hard.

“It’s easy,” he said. “Let me show you.” He leaned over and gently placed his lips on mine. It was the most amazing feeling, the warmth, the moisture, the closeness. I pressed my mouth against his, sucking on his lips, and he pulled off. “Whoa, cowboy,” he said, laughing. “Let’s take it nice and slow.”

He leaned back into me, gently kissing my lips, then my chin, and my throat. I started making these noises I’d never heard come out of my mouth, almost a purring. Then he kissed my lips again, and his tongue slid forward. So this was French kissing, I thought. *Merci, mes amis Français*. Awesome!

We kissed for a long time, gradually adding our hands into the mix. He stroked my cheek and his index finger made its way down to my nipple. Oh, God! I’d never known my nipples could feel like that! And that touching them was almost as good as touching my dick.

By the time Alistair pulled back, his lips red and bee-stung, panting for breath, I was so hard, so stimulated, I was ready to cum in my pants. “I think that’s enough for your first lesson,” he said. “I should get you home. We both have school tomorrow, right?”

“Right.”

I leaned back against the seat. “So we don’t... I mean, go any further?”

“Not on a first date, cowboy,” he said. “Got to save something for the next one.”

There was going to be a next date! I was so thrilled I felt like my mouth couldn’t resolve itself from the broadest smile ever.

“Is your email password protected?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Yeah, but my whole family shares the computer. Why?”

“We probably don’t want to get too graphic if there’s a chance somebody else can read,” he said. “I guess we’ll just have to talk to each other. You have unlimited nights and weekends on your cell?”

“Uh-huh.”

“So tomorrow night, nine o’clock. I suggest you find somewhere private.” He had that devilish grin again.

When we pulled up in front of my house, he reached out to shake my hand. “You never know who’s watching,” he said.

I shook his hand, and adjusted myself in my pants before I got out of the car. My hard-on didn’t want to go down, and I had to get past whatever family members were hanging around in the living room before I could get to my bedroom and take care of business.

My parents were watching some round-the-world reality show, and they waved as I walked past. I scrambled up to my room, locked the door, and pulled out my dick. It took only a few strokes before I shot a geyser of cum on my chest.

Once again, I had trouble falling asleep, dreaming of Alistair and what we’d do on our next date, but once I did I slept all through the night, waking up happy, with morning wood. I closed my eyes and remembered what it was like to kiss Alistair as I stroked myself.

Then my mother called from downstairs. “Kirk, Fiona, Ewan, Jean, you’re going to miss the bus!” I joined my brother and my sisters in a scramble to the bus.

I daydreamed through the whole school day, focused on nine o’clock that night when Alistair would call. That set a pattern for the week; I lived for those late-night calls, when we shared details of our days, and then eventually strayed into sexy talk. He described the things he wanted to do to me, and after some initial hesitation on my part, I began to tell him the same things.

I signed up for a free email address from Gmail, and used the computer at school to send messages to Alistair and read the ones he sent me.

“I don’t want to wait until Sunday to see you,” he said on Wednesday night. “Can we go out Friday night? Maybe a movie?”

I agreed, and we decided on the latest James Bond flick, playing at a massive Egyptian-motif theater right off I-75. Alistair bought the tickets and then led me into the theater, climbing the stairs right up to the back row.

We paid attention whenever Daniel Craig took his shirt off, and made out the rest of the time. He touched my dick, through my pants, and I had to pull his hand off, afraid I’d cum in my shorts.

The lot behind the foreclosed shopping center became our special place. It wasn’t much, but Alistair could recline the seats of the Beemer and we could cuddle together, avoiding the gear shift. We went there after the movie, and we kissed a lot, and then took our shirts off.

When he took my nipple in his mouth and sucked, and then nibbled lightly, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I couldn’t imagine anything feeling better. Then he opened my pants and stroked my dick through my briefs.

“Oh God oh God oh God,” I said. He pressed his lips against mine and we kissed while he touched me, ever so lightly. Then he reached in the slit of my jockeys and pulled my dick out.

“That is a fine caber you have there, laddie,” he said, in that awful fake Scottish accent he had. But I didn’t care, because I was realizing how awesome it was to have someone else’s hand on my dick. It was so much better than touching myself.

With his other hand he reached behind the seat and tugged out a roll of paper towels. “Can’t get the car too messy,” he said, panting. He stuck a towel beneath my dick and pressed hard, right below the tip, and I spurted, soaking the paper.

He kissed me again, and I was so excited I think I forgot to breathe for a minute. Then he leaned back against his seat and opened his own pants. I jumped right in, trying to do everything to him that he’d done to me. Stroking him was so erotic that it blew my mind—I was really having sex! With another guy! And not just any guy—with Alistair!

He shot off almost as quickly as I did, and we both sat back in our seats, catching our breath. “That was,” he said, and then paused to take a breath.

“Awesome,” I said.

“My first time,” he said.

I turned to him. “Really? I thought you were so... experienced.”

“It’s all a façade,” he said. “But there’s nobody I’d rather have given my virginity to than you, Kirk.”

“Oh, me too,” I said, and we kissed again.

We saw each other Saturday and Sunday, too, each time ending up in the lot behind the shopping center. And in between kissing and licking and rubbing, we talked.

One of the many things we talked about was college. I had already gotten into the University of Florida in Gainesville, and I had gotten a Bright Futures scholarship based on my grades. Between that and a financial aid package of loans, scholarships and a work-study job, I was set.

Alistair knew where he was going, too. “Harvard has this Single Choice Early Action plan,” he said. “I heard back in December that I got in. My dad sent away the deposit right away so I’m locked in.”

“So no chance you could switch to UF?”

He shook his head. “My father would have a cow if I wanted to go to a state school. Especially since I got into Harvard.”

“That makes sense,” I said, though I hated myself for having to say it. “You should go to the place where you get the best education.”

“You could apply for a transfer,” he said. “You’re smart. Do well in your first year at UF and then you could come to Harvard, too.”

I just smiled and nodded. I was smart, but not Harvard smart, and my family was going to scrape just to send me to UF.

It took a couple of weeks for Alistair’s father to figure out that he was seeing someone. I guess he was paying attention to those credit card bills after all. One day he confronted Alistair and asked who he was taking out to all those restaurants and movies.

Alistair told me about it that night in the parking lot. “I told him about you,” he said. “He says you aren’t the right kind of person for me to date.”

“Why? Because I’m a boy?”

Alistair shook his head. “He accepts that I’m gay. He’s not happy about it, but he’s smart enough to know he can’t change me.”

“Then what?”

“Because you go to public school, and your family doesn’t have money. He has this idea that I should find some rich guy to support me, the way he does.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re going to college in the fall. You’ll have a degree, and you can get a good job and support yourself.”

He looked down. “There’s another thing.”

“What?”

“He signed me up for this summer program at the University of Edinburgh. I leave right after graduation, and when it’s over I fly right to Boston.”

My heart sank. “So we won’t even have the summer together?”

“I hate it, Kirk. But it’s a great opportunity, to go study overseas. Hey, maybe you could come and visit me there.”

I shook my head. “I have to work all summer to make the money for UF,” I said. “My dad says he can get me a job on his landscaping crew, so I can drive back and forth with him.”

Alistair was so excited about all the opportunities ahead of him that I couldn’t tell him how much it was going to break my heart to lose him. And I was sure that I would—after he got to Harvard and met other guys of the same background, with the same kind of future, that would be that.

The day before he was supposed to leave for Edinburgh, Alistair picked me up at my house. “Where are we going?” I asked.

“It’s a surprise,” he said.

“I don’t like surprises.”

“Trust me, you’ll like this one.”

He drove back to the highway, and then toward Sawgrass Mills. “You don’t need to buy me anything, Alistair,” I said. “Having clothes you bought for me won’t make me miss you any less when you’re in Scotland.”

“We’re not going to the mall.”

It sure looked like we were, though. We got off at that exit and drove toward it. But at the last minute he turned into the driveway for the La Quinta hotel. “It’s not much,” he said. “But at least it’ll be clean. I had to pick some place I could pay cash for, because I can’t put the charge on my dad’s credit card.”

I didn’t understand. “Why are we here?”

“Don’t you want this, too?” he asked. “To go all the way?”

At last I understood. We had done all the things you could do without a great deal of privacy—making out in theaters, kissing in the car, using our hands, and then our mouths, on each other. But we’d never been fully naked together, never shared a bed, and never most of those things I’d seen in porno movies online.

“Oh, you mean...”

“It’s all right with you, isn’t it?” he asked anxiously. “I don’t want to pressure you or anything. But I’m leaving tomorrow, and I don’t know when I’ll be back to see you. And I want my first time to be with someone I really love.”

“I want that too,” I said. “But I don’t...”

“Don’t what? Be honest with me, Kirk.”

“I don’t have any condoms or anything.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ve got that covered. We had a safe-sex event at our school a few weeks ago and I stocked up.”

“You’ve been thinking about this,” I said.

“Haven’t you?”

I was too caught up in losing Alistair that I hadn’t thought of it. And it wasn’t like our sex ed classes dealt with it. “Going all the way” meant sticking your dick into a girl’s pussy, not into a guy’s ass. And though I’d seen a couple of videos of guys going at it I had never made the connection that this was something Alistair and I would do.

“Your hands are shaking,” Alistair said, as he pulled into the parking lot.

I was nervous as hell, but I said, “I’m fine.”

“You want to wait here while I check in?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s no big deal. I’ll come in with you.”

I was sure the clerk knew exactly what we were doing. “Yes, Mr. McGregor,” he said. “I have you in a king non-smoking room. Or would you rather have two queens?”

“The king is fine,” Alistair said, and I wondered if I was the only one who heard the shakiness in his voice.

He asked for Alistair’s ID and method of payment. “Cash,” Alistair said, handing over his driver’s license.

The clerk scanned it and frowned. “It’s hotel policy that the guest renting a room must be at least eighteen,” he said.

Oh, fuck. We were both seventeen.

“But since you’re paying cash...” the clerk hesitated. “I guess I can break the rules. Wouldn’t want you guys to end up on the street.” He smiled. “Here you go. Two keys.” He gave us each a plastic card the size of a credit card. “The elevator is to the left. You can bring your bags in from the car whenever it’s convenient.”

Was that a dig? I wondered. We didn’t have any bags, just Alistair’s backpack. I kept worrying that his pack would come open and spill whatever sex toys he had brought with him onto the marble floor.

Once the elevator doors closed behind us, Alistair sagged against the wall. “I nearly crapped my pants when he said one of us had to be eighteen,” he said. “Thank God he was gay and he knew what we were doing.”

“He was gay?” I asked.

“Couldn’t you tell? From the way he looked at us, especially when he asked about the king-size bed?”

“I live in the middle of nowhere,” I said. “The only other gay people I know besides you are actors on TV, and one teacher at my high school.”

“You’ve got a lot to learn, my laddie,” he said, and that fake accent made me laugh again.

“Are you a good teacher?” I asked, as the doors opened to our floor.

“You can tell me after the lesson,” he said.

I figured out pretty quickly that Alistair and I were about on the same level when it came to full-on sex. We stood on opposite sides of the big bed and quickly took our clothes off. Alistair was naked before I was, and he stared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen all of you before,” he said. “Your skin is so smooth, but you’ve got hair in all the right places. I never noticed what great pecs you have. You’re always wearing such baggy shirts.” He sighed. “You’re beautiful.”

I blushed. “You don’t say that to guys,” I said.

“Sure you do. Turn around.”

My face was burning, but I did. And then out of nowhere, I remembered a move one of my *tios* had taught me, at a big Cuban family party, and I put one hand on my stomach, raised the other, and swiveled my hips.

I heard Alistair take a deep breath behind me, and when I turned back to him he was fully hard, his dick standing up almost parallel to his belly. He started to get onto the bed but I stopped him. “Wait,” I said. “Let me look at you.”

His blond hair had been bleached by the Florida sun, and he had a ruddy tan. He was slim, like me, but hairier—reddish gold hair sprouted between his pecs and trailed down to his belly button, then met up with a thatch around the base of his dick.

I twirled my index finger. “Go on, turn around.”

His back was breathtaking—a light furring on his shoulders, and smooth sides that tapered to a narrow waist over a high, tight butt. He bent forward and spread his ass cheeks, and his hole winked at me, pink, and surrounded by a circle of hair. My dick spasmed at the sight.

Then he flopped down on the bed, and I jumped in next to him, and we began kissing and hugging each other and touching our bodies together in a

hundred different places. We rubbed against each other, and suddenly Alistair yelped and squirmed, and I felt his jism shoot against my thigh. “Crap,” he said. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“I’ll have to keep up with you,” I said. I pressed down against him and rubbed my dick against his belly, fast and hard. It hurt, but I couldn’t stop until my whole body shuddered and I came in a hot spurt.

“Man,” I whispered, when I had slumped beside Alistair. “We wasted so much time just jerking each other off when we could have been doing this.”

“It’s better because we waited,” he said. “I love you, Kirk.”

I had been holding back my own feelings because I was afraid Alistair didn’t feel the same way, but I didn’t have to do that anymore. “I love you too, Alistair. I love you so much.”

We kissed, and rubbed our bodies together again, until we were sweaty and scummy. “We should take a shower together,” Alistair said.

“Really?”

“Why not? We paid for the room.”

We jumped up and raced each other to the tiled bathroom. My fumbling fingers ripped open a bar of soap while Alistair turned the water on. When it was warm, he stepped in and looked at me through the open shower door.

He was so gorgeous, and I loved him so much. I didn’t want to move—I wanted this moment to last forever. “Come on,” he said. I stepped in with him, immediately enveloped by the steamy heat.

We kissed under the spray again, and then we washed each other’s bodies lovingly and carefully. He stuck a soapy finger up my ass and I shivered into him. “Does that feel good?” he asked into my ear.

“Yeah,” I breathed.

“Do you want to...”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. We were both hard again by then. Alistair turned off the water and we stepped out, drying each other with the skimpy bath towels. Then he took my hand and led me back to the bed.

“Get up on all fours,” he said.

I climbed up on the bed, and I felt him spreading my ass cheeks. Then something warm and moist. “Is that your tongue?” I gasped.

“Do you like it?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. I understood why he wanted to make sure I was clean back there. The licking and slurping was so sensual—I had never felt anything like it.

“I’m going to try a finger,” he said. He grabbed for a bottle of lube, and I heard him squirt some out, then felt the cool gel around my hole as he rubbed it in. Then he had a finger in me, and it felt so weird, but in a good way.

It took us some scrambling around to get into the right position for him to get his dick into me, though. On all fours like that I was too high for him to reach. Leaning on the bed put me too low. “They don’t teach this in sex ed,” he grumbled, as we twisted around.

“Could you imagine?” I asked, laughing. “They could show movies.”

“We saw an animation of how to put a condom on,” Alistair said. “That was about it, though.”

“More than I got,” I said.

I ended up lying on the bed on my side, with my legs spread open. I watched as Alistair ripped the condom packet open and rolled it down. His dick looked so weird encased in latex like that, like some kind of alien penis. He caught my eye, and then smiled lasciviously and squirted more lube into his hand.

He stroked his dick a couple of times to get it covered, and then he knelt down above me. “Take a deep breath,” he said, and he spread my ass cheeks wide and positioned himself.

I yelped the first time his dick head got into me, and he said, “Are you all right, Kirk?”

“I’m good,” I grunted. It was that same pleasure/pain thing again—it hurt, but I didn’t want it to stop.

He pushed forward, a millimeter at a time, and I took lots of deep breaths and wiped my tears on the pillowcase so Alistair couldn’t see them.

And then the pleasure half of the equation took over, and I found myself pushing back on Alistair, contracting my ass muscles around his cock, and he began pushing into me and then pulling back, and when I closed my eyes I saw stars.

He began yipping like some kind of dog in heat, and he pushed his hips against my ass, forcing his dick even farther into me, and then he cried out and I felt his dick spasm inside me. He pulled out fast, and flopped back on the bed next to me.

I turned to face him. “Are you all right?” I asked anxiously.

He gave me a goofy grin. “Never better. Let me catch my breath, and then I want to give you the same pleasure you just gave me.”

My dick was so hard it was leaking precum. Alistair rolled the condom down on me, and then rubbed my dick with lube, and then turned on his side.

I was so horny but so nervous. I pried open his ass cheeks and applied the lube, and it was almost like the lips down there were opening for me. Before I could over-think things, I positioned myself behind him and pressed against his hole.

Nothing happened.

“Is it in yet?” he asked.

“No. I can’t get it to go.”

“Push, Kirk. Don’t worry about hurting me.”

“Maybe I’m just not cut out for this,” I said. “I’m like, only a bottom, not a top.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “Come on, Kirk. Stop fooling around and fuck me.”

I realized that he wanted this just as much as I did, and I had to do it. I took a deep breath and grabbed my dick. I positioned it at his hole and pressed forward. It hurt at first, but then I slipped past some kind of barrier and I was inside.

Alistair groaned beneath me. “Oh, yeah, Kirk,” he said. “Your dick is inside me.”

I tried to do what he had done to me—inch forward. But I ended up just plowing forward, and he yelped, but I couldn't help myself. I started pressing forward with my hips as if I was dancing, and Alistair squirmed beneath me, and my dick felt so good, it was sending waves of pleasure through my whole body, until I came in a big, shuddering orgasm.

I slumped beside Alistair. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"I may not be able to sit for a week," he said, turning to face me. "But it was worth it."

We cuddled for a while, and my ass started to feel uncomfortable, from the stretching and the slippery lube still there. Alistair had dozed off, so I crept out of the bed and went into the bathroom, where I showered a second time.

I came back out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my waist. Alistair was still asleep, looking like some kind of fallen angel, his hair tousled and his lips bee-stung. He stirred and looked up at me and my heart broke because I knew he was going to leave me forever.

I didn't go to the airport to see Alistair off to Edinburgh. I didn't have a way to get there, and I'd already decided that there was no future for us. Seeing him one last time would be too painful. I shut down the Gmail account, and just to be certain, I changed my cell phone number. I didn't want to get any desperate messages from Alistair professing his love for me when I knew there was no future for us.

I worked hard all summer. I got up before sunrise, ate breakfast, and drove with my dad to work. By the time we got home, I was exhausted. I ate dinner and went to bed. And so I managed to keep most thoughts of Alistair out of my head.

I drove up to Gainesville to start at UF in August, and I was so busy with classes and roommates and making new friends that I didn't spare many thoughts for my first real boyfriend. I started without a clear idea of what I'd major in, but very quickly I found I had a talent for my computer science classes. I'd had so little exposure to computers back home that it was like a whole new world opened up for me. My work-study job was in the computer

lab, helping other students with their assignments, and I ate up everything I could find about hardware, software and emerging trends.

I spent much of the spring term of my senior year going to job fairs and on-campus interviews and filing online applications. Everywhere I went, people were positive about my credentials but negative about opportunities. The economy was contracting, and nobody was hiring. I'd entertained some hopes of moving to Silicon Valley or one of its offshoots in Chicago, Austin or North Carolina, but the only offer I got was from a small company in Sunrise, Florida, not too far from my parents.

They were doing localizations for South America—adapting existing software to be usable in Spanish. It wasn't as easy as just translating the manuals; you needed to understand the language and how people operated, as well as adding in all the special characters. Because I'd grown up speaking Spanish to my mom and her family, I was able to snag the job.

The work wasn't hard, and I spent a lot of time sitting around waiting for approvals or contracts from places like Caracas and Quito. I kept myself busy by writing my own software.

It was the dawn of the app movement back then. More and more people had smart phones, and they were looking for ways to make them work harder. I taught myself how to use the open source software and then started looking around for something I could do. Around that time, I was talking to a college friend who had graduated and moved back home to Sarasota. He complained about the limited pool of girls there—he kept running into some of the same women in bars. Sometimes they were all over him, and other times treated him like he was made of dog poop, and he was always unclear why. "I can't keep track of which ones I know and which ones I don't," he said.

"You need an app on your phone," I said. "You type in the name and up comes a picture, a record of where you went out, and what her problems were."

"That sounds great," he said. "Where can I get it?"

I scouted around and couldn't find something like I was thinking of, so I created it myself. I used a basic database with search capability, but added the

ability to upload photos and links as well. You could choose the girl's characteristics by a drop-down menu—hair color, eye color, etc. Or you could type in your own description or comments.

If I had ideas about the app while I was at work, I wrote them out in longhand on a lined legal pad. I did all the actual work at home, on my own computer. I knew how easy it would be for someone to audit my computer and then accuse me of using company resources for my own benefit.

My buddy agreed to beta-test it for me, and I emailed him the software at the end of a long weekend spent bug testing. During the week, he input as much of the data from his past girlfriends as he could remember. The next Monday evening he called me as I was on my way home from work.

“Dude, the app is awesome!” he said. “I saw this blonde who looked so familiar but I couldn't place her 'til I overheard one of her friends call her Monica. I pulled up your app and punched her name in.”

“And you saw why you dumped her?”

“Actually, she broke up with me. She said I was cute and funny but she couldn't date a guy who didn't have a decent job. That was back when I was still working at the call center. So I figured with my new gig I could give her another try.”

“What did she say?”

I could hear the pride coming through in his voice. “That she was sorry she'd broken up with me over something so shallow, and she missed the fun we had. I didn't even tell her about my new job until the second round of drinks.”

“Sounds great,” I said.

“Dude, you've got to sell this app. Tons of guys can use it.”

“I'll think about it.” I ended the call and kept driving toward home, passing Sawgrass Mills and the La Quinta hotel.

I thought I'd stopped thinking about Alistair by then. I regretted the lost chance, but since then I'd had a couple of boyfriends and lots of sex, and my head knew that breaking off with him back then had been the right decision.

But driving past the place where we'd both lost our virginity, I wondered if I really had done the right thing.

Over the next couple of weeks, as I kept testing and improving the app, I thought of Alistair more and more. I wondered what he'd been up to. I was sure he'd graduated from Harvard, probably gone on to graduate school. He was probably very successful, with a boyfriend who matched him in wealth and background.

One afternoon, when all my projects were either finished or on hold for some reason, I googled his name. There wasn't much to find; but I did discover that as I'd expected, he graduated from Harvard and then enrolled in the MBA program there.

I closed the browser quickly, as if I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't, like surfing porn at the office. That was it; Alistair was set on his career, and there was no reason for a guy with such bona fides to ever come back to Florida.

I posted the app on a website, and within a couple of weeks, sales were very strong, as more and more people—men and women—downloaded it and then reviewed it.

Then one day my boss called me into his office and turned his monitor to face me. "This is your app, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yup. Just something I fiddled around with in my spare time."

He opened a manila folder on his desktop and pulled out a piece of paper. "Recognize this?" he asked, sliding it across to me.

It was the non-compete agreement I'd signed when I was hired. "Sure. But I haven't broken the agreement. I did all the work on my own time, and it doesn't compete with any of your products."

"I assumed you'd say that," he said. "So I had your computer audited."

My heart skipped a couple of beats. I thought I'd been careful—but what if I'd slipped up? I decided to go on the offensive. "I never used any company resources."

"No, but you did surf to some inappropriate websites." He gave me another piece of paper, a copy of the employment contract I'd signed, and pointed at a

clause. It allowed for termination of any employee who visited any website the company considered “inappropriate”.

He showed me one last piece of paper, a printout of websites I had visited. Most of them were innocuous—news sources, hurricane information, that kind of thing. But there were a couple of general interest gay sites as well. “We can’t have you looking at pornography at work,” he said.

“These aren’t porn sites. See the article title?” I pointed. “It’s about the ruling on the military’s don’t ask, don’t tell policy. News, not porn.”

He shook his head. “You don’t understand.” Then he buzzed his secretary and told her to send in Armando, the security guard who sat at the front door, signing visitors in.

“You are terminated effective immediately, without severance. Within two weeks you will receive your last paycheck, including compensation for any sick time you have accrued. Armando will escort you to your desk, where you can remove your personal effects. Your access to our network has been deleted. You are prohibited from returning here.”

Armando came in then. I was so astonished I couldn’t say anything. I just stood up and followed him out.

I had always been out at work, and I knew I hadn’t broken any rules about forbidden sites. So the only reason I could see that I was being fired was for creating the app. How stupid was that? You get an employee who shows some talent and some initiative, and you fire him? Why would I want to work for a company that treated people that way?

I packed up my stuff in record time; in the two years I’d been there I’d never done much to personalize my cubicle anyway. Then I drove back to my parents’ house.

I’d been saving up, and I was almost ready to move out and get my own place. Now I figured my savings would have to go toward survival instead.

I was angry, sad and confused. The world just didn’t make sense. I moped around for a couple of days then got up the gumption to revise my resume and start posting it.

One of the first responses I got was from an entrepreneur who was starting an app development company on South Beach. I drove down there one day to

meet with him, and as I approached Miami Beach on the MacArthur Causeway, the condo towers glowed in the sun and the water in the ocean and the bay sparkled. It was like driving toward the Emerald City. When I passed an electric signboard that invited me to “friend” the Miami Beach Police Department on Twitter and Facebook I knew I was heading into a strange new world.

The guy was a Russian-American named Boris, and this was his third start-up. “I want to create custom apps for corporations and non-profits,” he said, his English strong but coming out from under a heavy Russian accent. “There’s real money to be made there. But I need good staff with track records.”

There was a catch, of course. He wanted me to work for free for two weeks, until he had a meeting with a venture capital firm he hoped would fund his operations. If the deal went through, he’d hire me, with a generous salary and benefit package.

I had nothing else in the works, and though South Beach was a real hike from my parents’ house, if he did hire me I’d be able to move down to the beach almost immediately.

I worked my butt off for the next two weeks. I didn’t even drive back to my parents’ place each night; instead I crashed on the couch of one of the other guys. The evening before the presentation, Boris let us go early. “Go home. Sleep. Eat. Shower. Come back tomorrow looking like human beings, all right?”

We all agreed. The next morning I was at my desk in the programmers’ room when the receptionist, a Goth-looking Russian girl called Mila, came in to summon us to the meeting. I was already nervous, knowing how important this meeting was to Boris, and to me personally. But my heart did a series of back-flips when I saw that one of the dark-suited guys on the other side of the table was Alistair McGregor.

Boris introduced me and the other programmers to the investors, but didn’t introduce them to us. When I finally made eye contact with Alistair I saw he was staring at me and that made me feel like I had to throw up.

We each had to talk about our backgrounds, and what we could bring to the company. I managed to get through my speech without barfing and then

followed the rest of the guys out. “What’s the matter with you, dude?” gloomy, heavyset Dominic asked. I’d been crashing on his couch. “You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I did. Ghost of a past relationship.”

“Seriously? You dated one of the money dudes?”

“Back before he was a money dude,” I said. “Then he was just the son of a rich dad.”

“Don’t tell Boris,” Dom said. “He’ll pimp you out.”

“Don’t tell Boris what?”

We turned around to see our boss standing there. “I just came out to tell you guys that you did a good job. But what is it you don’t want to tell me?”

Damn, I needed that job. I loved the environment and the work, and I hated still having to live with my parents. “It won’t matter,” I said. “I used to date one of the money guys, that’s all. I haven’t seen him in years.”

“Hmm,” Boris said. “Go back to work. They discuss deal right now. With good luck they say yes this afternoon. They have the financials for a week already.”

None of us could concentrate on work. Dom put on his headphones and listened to death metal. The other guys stared into space.

I looked at my computer and thought about Alistair. What did he think about seeing me, after all this time? Was his world as rattled as mine?

Probably not. He was a successful Harvard MBA in a perfectly tailored suit. He probably already had a boyfriend, a model or actor or even some older dude with tons of cash. That was what his father wanted for him wasn’t it? And Alistair was probably still dancing to Daddy’s tune.

We heard a clamor in the reception area and all of us swiveled our chairs close to the partly-open door. Boris was effusively thanking each of the potential investors. I saw Alistair hand a piece of paper to Mila, who put it on her desk.

What was it? A warning to me? Don’t bother me, Kirk? As if I was some kind of stalker. I was building up a righteous indignation when they all walked out, and Mila called me to her desk.

“Your boyfriend left this,” she said, handing me the note.

“Ex-boyfriend,” I said. “I haven’t seen him in six years. And how did you know he knew me at all?”

“I read the note, dummy,” she said.

I opened the piece of paper. “Kirk. I have to see you again. Call me.” At the bottom he’d written a phone number.

My first instinct was to run back to my cube, grab my phone, and call Alistair immediately. Then I took a couple of deep breaths.

It had been six years. We could both wait a few more hours. And I had to be careful of jumping ahead too much—Alistair’s note could have meant that he was closeted at work, for example, and didn’t want me to out him. The men with him had all been wearing very conservative suits; maybe it wasn’t cool to be gay in such an environment.

I was puzzling over the possibilities when Boris came to the door of the programmers’ room. “Kirk? I can talk to you in my office, please?”

Dom gave me a thumbs up. “If you have to take one for the team, pal...” he said.

I frowned at him and followed Boris to his office, where I sat down across from him.

“We need this money, Kirk,” he said. He leaned across the desk to me. “Is very confidential, all right? I don’t want nobody else, especially not big-mouth Mila, to hear.”

Fuck. Good conversations never start that way.

“I talk to every investment banker and every angel investor in town,” he said. “All are agreeing app business will take off in big way, but none have capital now. These guys are last chance. You can talk to your friend, help convince him?”

“Boris. I haven’t seen the guy for six years. The truth is that we dated, and I broke up with him. I don’t think he has very fond memories of me.”

“But he wants to see you,” Boris said.

Nosy Mila. She not only read Alistair’s note but told Boris about it.

I looked around the office. I liked working there, and if Boris folded I'd be back on unemployment, programming for my own enjoyment. Living with my parents and hating the wreck my life had become.

How could it hurt to be nice to Alistair? "All right. I'll call him." I glared at Boris. "Tonight."

"*Ochen chorosho!*" he said, which I had already figured out meant very good in Russian. Yeah, *chorosho* for him, I thought, as I walked back to the programmers' room. Maybe not so much for Alistair and me.

I was going to wait until I got home and had dinner to call. But the drive from South Beach back to my parents' was so long and I was so antsy that I couldn't resist. I turned on the Bluetooth and dialed the number on the paper, my fingers shaking.

"Hello?"

His voice sounded older, more mature than it had during all those late-night conversations we'd had. "Alistair? It's Kirk."

The next move was his. But the phone was so quiet I worried the call had dropped.

"Sorry," he said finally. "I'm still at work. I wanted to get somewhere quiet so we could talk."

Okay, the ball was back in my court. "You look good," I said. "Prosperous. Congratulations on the job."

"Don't congratulate me so quickly," he said. "This is the first deal they let me sit in on. So far I've just been a flunky and a gofer."

"How does it look?" Might as well get right to the point. "Are we going to get the money?"

"Kirk. I can't tell you that. Besides, there's still a lot of due diligence to finish."

"Do what?"

He explained due diligence to me—the process of checking all of Boris's bona fides, dotting the i's and crossing the t's. And then it was like we ran out of things to say, and we were both quiet for a moment. Until he asked, "Are you seeing anyone?"

I had to slam on my brakes to avoid hitting an eighteen-wheeler that merged into my lane without notice. “What does that mean?” I asked.

“It’s a simple question. You can say yes, no, or none of my business.”

“I work like twelve hours a day, and I alternate between living with my parents and sleeping on my co-worker Dom’s couch. So, no, I’m not seeing anyone.” I took a deep breath. “How about you?”

“Not since I left Boston.”

“But there was someone there?” I asked.

“I haven’t been celibate since the last time I saw you,” he said. “It was six years.”

“I was in love with you,” I said, blinking at the way the setting sun glared in through my windshield as I drove west. “I’ve gone on dates, I’ve gotten laid. But I haven’t met anyone else who made me feel the way you did.”

Fuck. I didn’t know where that had come from, somewhere deep in my soul. If you’d asked me about Alistair the day before, I’d have said he was just a guy I used to date. If pressed, I’d have admitted he was my first. But that was it.

“I’ve been a serial monogamist,” Alistair said, his disembodied voice floating around me in the cocoon of my car. “I’ve had a couple of boyfriends, in college, and then in business school. But it’s the same for me. Nobody made me feel the way you did.”

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I told you, at the office.”

“But where’s that?”

“Coral Gables.”

I accelerated and swerved across two lanes of traffic to make it into the LeJeune Road exit. “Give me the address,” I said. “I’m on my way.”

Alistair was waiting outside his building, his jacket over his shoulder and his red power tie loosened around his neck. He was even more handsome than he’d been the first time I saw him, at the Scottish Festival. I pulled up at the

curb in my crappy ten-year-old Toyota sedan, put it in park and leaned over to open the door.

Alistair slid in beside me and closed the door. Then he looked at me, and before I knew what was happening our lips were locked together. I felt like a teenager all over again, making out in a parked car with my boyfriend, although we were in the middle of a crowded business district and certainly old enough to know better.

Over the next few weeks, Boris got his funding, and I got a full-time job creating apps for his company. Alistair and I moved into a one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise with a view of Biscayne Bay. The Scottish Festival had moved from Key Biscayne to Fort Lauderdale by then, and we drove up there to see my brother Ewan compete in the caber toss. I insisted on wearing my family kilt in the Strathspey tartan.

“If you’re doing that just to impress my father,” Alistair said.

“No.”

“Well, he’ll be impressed anyway.”

We met up with Alistair’s parents near the entrance, and then introduced them to my whole family, including my *abuela*, a stooped little Cuban lady who didn’t speak much English.

My dad pulled me aside. “I brought the creel you asked for, Kirk laddie. It’s in the car.” He handed me the keys. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I leaned over and kissed his grizzled cheek. “But I’ve had all the luck I need to last a lifetime, meeting up with Alistair again after all this time. Now he’s all I need.”

I retrieved the creel from the car’s trunk. It was pretty damn heavy, but I didn’t mind. I slung it over my shoulder and began a careful circuit of the fairgrounds, planning my route so I would end up at the caber toss.

Alistair watched me approaching. The creel was beginning to weigh me down, and I was sweating in the warm breeze, but I was determined. He and his family stared as I approached. When I reached them I dropped it, and got down to one knee. I looked up at Alistair and said, “Alistair McGregor, I love you with all my heart and soul. Will you marry me?”

Tears streamed out of his eyes. “Of course,” he said, and he pulled me to my feet and we kissed.

“It’s an old Scottish tradition,” my father said. “We call it creeling the bridegroom.”

“I know the tradition,” Alistair’s father said. “Never thought my son would be on the receiving end, but...” He stuck his hand out to me. “Welcome to the family, son.”

And now here we are, at St. Margaret’s, the Scottish church in Fort Lauderdale. Ewan is my best man, and he’s right outside waiting for me. Alistair and his best friend from college will enter the church from the left, and my brother and I from the right. Alistair opted for a black morning coat with tails, but my brother and I are in our clan kilts. We have matching red rosebud boutonnieres.

I can hear the skirl of the bagpipes beginning, and it’s time now to step forward into the life I dreamed of, with the only man I’ve ever loved.

THE END

Author Bio

Neil S. Plakcy is the author of the Mahu Investigations, about openly gay Honolulu homicide detective Kimo Kanapa'aka, as well as the Have Body, Will Guard adventure romance series and the Golden Retriever Mysteries.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE MISSING PIECES

By Wt Prater

Photo Description

The photo appears to be a posed studio portrait. The man on the left wears a suit and tie, and has dark curly hair. His smile is slightly goofy and a little wistful. The smiling man on the right has on a patterned casual shirt and his arm is draped across the other man's shoulders. He is dark blond, with a narrow moustache and trimmed beard. In front of them, a young teenage girl smiles widely, her long reddish-brown hair pulled up and allowed to fall around her shoulders.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We've been friends for as long as we can remember, but time and misunderstandings have meant that it's been almost a decade since we last spoke. It wasn't until our other best friend, our third Musketeer died and left her daughter to us to raise, together, that we saw each other again. What separated us and where do we go from here? I'm not looking for a fanfic, I want something original. I would like a HEA and if possible at least one sex scene. Otherwise I'm pretty much open to anything.

Sincerely,

Shanna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: grief, hurt/comfort, homophobia, transphobia, men with children, high school, family drama, cliffhanger ending

Content warnings: This story is an emotional rollercoaster.

Word count: 9,218

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE MISSING PIECES

By Wt Prater

Prologue – Midnight, October 28, 2013

Death. Kicking the bucket. The Great After After. Whatever it was called, Joanne Dragoste wasn't going. Joanne had no memory of dying, but she felt gone. It may have been because she was in a forced sleep when it happened. All she knew was that she could see herself floating over the table looking down at the people rushing about, trying to save her. But she knew it was useless.

And overall, she felt happy and peaceful. Sure, she was a little pissed that even in the afterlife, she still hadn't shed her extra pounds, but she had to admit... she looked good, even perfect. She saw herself in the mirror, floating there with her multi-colored hair, her pale skin, and long white gown. She felt almost ready to continue her journey into the next realm. But something nagged at her. Everything had happened so suddenly. She had told everyone she loved them, but she didn't want to leave without saying good-bye, without making sure that both Shannon and Nicole were taken care of. She needed this, and even as the light formed before her eyes, she fought. She absolutely refused to go without this. She dug her nails into the fabric of life and held on. And even against death and the order of the universe, her stubbornness won.

She heard the whisper, "Four days." So she floated down the hallway and into the waiting room to begin the process of making sure all of her loved ones were taken care of.

Piece One – October 31, 2000

Joanne had never been a popular girl. She knew it. But what was more was that she had no desire to be one. She had seen how the popular girls in her school acted and she would be damned if she ever wanted that. She felt that her outcast status was by choice, not by decree. As she got ready for school, she stood fixing her hair in front of the mirror. She had been dyeing her curly, naturally reddish-brown hair black since she was twelve because she felt that looked more natural on her. And the blue streaks she had redone last night brought out the blue in her eyes. Her red shirt was tight in all the right places, reading “Kiss me” across her breasts and underneath, slightly hidden, it continued with “and die”. She didn’t care that other girls called her fat, she was curvalicious.

Within the last few years, she had learned that she didn’t care what anyone thought of her. By the time she had gotten into high school, all of the boys in her class were either afraid of her or hated her, which suited her just fine. She had never found a need or want for the lot of them. All of the boys she had dated had dumped her when she wouldn’t let them get into her pants. So to ease her heartache and keep loneliness at bay, she decided all of them were worthless.

She had decided that she needed to keep her friendship circle small. She had only found a few males who she trusted enough to even let become her friends. Martin Freeman, one of that few, was a boy who had been endlessly tormented by the other guys because they thought he was gay. That was how Jo and he had met.

One day, trying to escape the masses of people heading to a pep rally, Jo had entered what she had thought was an empty science room to find that Tony Pine and his jock friends had decided to torment a boy. She watched as Tony took the Teen Bop magazine and began to rip it into shreds while the other two football players held the boy.

“Hey Martin, need some fiber?” sneered Tony as he tried to force-feed the pieces to the boy.

So, this was the kid she had heard about, she thought as she looked around for something to use. Joanne picked up the broom in the corner and ran at the boys, swinging the broom and hitting both of the boys who were holding Martin with it. Martin took the opportunity and kicked out, hitting Tony in the crotch. The two kids who had been holding him tried to shield themselves from the hits, looking to Tony for direction. Getting nothing back because he was bent over holding himself, they quickly fled when they couldn't figure out what else to do. As Tony collapsed to the floor in pain, Joanne started to walk away herself. Martin chased after her, asking her why she stopped to help. He stopped in the hallway as she called over her shoulder, "I had some aggression to get out."

The next day Jo was sitting in the library at a table by herself. She was reading a Sherrilyn Kenyon novel when she heard the boy behind her bragging to his friends about "the queer he had tortured", and how he couldn't believe that that sicko was even allowed on school property.

"You little asshole!" Joanne said as she stood up and turned around. The boy's face turned pale when he saw who it was. "The next time you decide to pick on someone, why don't you even the odds instead of three to one? Ya think you're so big and bad, picking on a kid half your size? You know what you are? A judgmental jerkwad who's never gonna get laid by anything other than Rosie Palm and her five sisters. And if I hear of you laying another hand on that kid, I will personally hit you so hard your daddy will feel it."

With each sentence, she stepped a little closer. And as he tried to sit there and act brave, she continued until she was in his face. "If there's a next time—" She paused for dramatic effect, and the aggression seemed to roll off of her in waves. "You'll wish there wasn't. Got me?" she said, glaring into his eyes as the other kids backed away, showing that he was on his own with this girl. He nodded yes, his eyes showing his fear as the yellow puddle collected around his shoes.

Piece Two

As she exited the room, she glanced over to where Martin was hiding down the aisle, and Martin could swear that she winked at him. The other kids were so busy noticing the puddle and laughing at the boy, that no one noticed Martin watching. He hoped the shelves and the books blocked them from seeing him. When his best friend, Shannon Krieger, came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder, he almost screamed.

“What are you doing?” Shannon asked, glancing over Martin’s shoulder. Martin put his index finger to his lips, and led Shannon in the opposite direction, down the aisle away from the rest of the kids. Shannon followed him, continually looking over his shoulder trying to figure out what all the fuss was about. As Martin retold the story, Shannon nodded, looking excited and more than a little happy, probably because Tony had gotten a bit of his own. As he finished talking, Martin dabbed his eyes, obviously fighting the urge to cry.

“I’m so sick of this school. Every time I turn around there is someone who wants to beat the hell out of me. The only one who will stick up for me is Mr. Cobain, and he can’t follow me around all day. I just want out of this crappy-ass town,” Martin said, turning his head a bit and wiping his face. Shannon reached out to try and hug him. But Martin pushed him away, knowing that being hugged would just make him cry harder.

“Well, at least you got a couple guardian angels. Even if they ain’t all hot guys, which I know you would prefer,” Shannon said, finishing the statement with a little chuckle before continuing, “I want to meet this golden goddess. I’ve been back three weeks, and everyone else has told me to steer clear of the girl, and now you’re making her sound like a saint. I need to know for myself what to make of her.”

“Well, I know where she’ll be tonight. She runs with the Wiccan crowd, and they have a gathering of some kind for All Hallows Eve. My mom told me I’m absolutely forbidden, so of course, I’m going.”

“Correction... we’re going,” Shannon said.

Piece Three

As Shannon and Martin approached the clearing out in the middle of nowhere, they could see lots of people in various states of undress. Martin nudged Shannon, and pointed as he spotted Joanne standing naked before a small bonfire with the full moon shining down upon her. Her large breasts bounced as she moved around the circle, and he could hear her giggling, sounding as if she were drugged with the freedom of comfort and the power of her circle. He asked Martin to make sure he was looking at the right girl, and Martin responded, “Yup, that’s the untamed horse that will never settle down.”

Shannon stared at her as she moved around the fire and whispered, “Even her silhouette is beautiful.”

Jo glanced over, noticing the two of them. And she grinned. She made no attempt to cover herself nor did she act even a little uncomfortable with the fact that both of them were staring at her. She smiled a little more and continued to move around the fire, her black hair with its blue highlights floating and landing as if she moved in slow motion.

Shannon’s face changed as though a decision had been made. He proclaimed to Martin, “That is my soul mate. And I will do anything to get her. And keep her.”

Piece Four – October 31, 2013

Shannon felt a shiver crawl down his spine and he couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching him. He had been in the waiting room of the hospital for over two hours trying not to jump out of his skin. He tried pacing a path in the floor but that hadn't helped. He had been assured many times that procedures like this were not generally risky, but for some reason, crazy negative thoughts kept popping into his mind. He had fought them off fairly successfully for the first hour. Unfortunately, they were coming more frequently and he was getting weaker trying to fight them.

As the doctor came out the double doors and crossed the floor to him still dressed in his surgical gown, Shannon had watched enough *Grey's Anatomy* to know by his face the news was not good. He stood as the doctor approached him and the man in the puke green gown and matching paper shoes stood there telling him things like "we did all we could" and "these situations are one in a million chances." Everything sounded like a generic excuse. The doctor continued babbling, but Shannon heard very little of what he said. Time seemed to slow down and speed up simultaneously, and as every muscle in his body tightened in pain, Shannon found it hard not to collapse to the floor. He wanted to scream at the gods for taking the only person he had truly ever loved.

"Mr. Krieger, we have grief counselors on hand if you would like me to set up an—" the surgeon was saying even as Shannon got up and walked out the giant glass doors that led to fresh air. Sadly, it also led to the beginning of a world without his best friend and partner. Having not brought an umbrella, he walked to his green Nissan Leaf in the pouring rain. What amounted to a few hundred feet seemed to take an eternity to cross, mostly because his mind was lost in memories of the past. How perfect it was that the water showering down was cold and uncaring, as if helping him to understand the ways of the universe. He controlled nothing, and everything—including love, even true love—washes away. This glass was not half empty or half full. This glass was shattered, smashed to bits, and ground into every part of him.

Part of him wanted to rebuke himself for focusing on all the negatives. He wanted to tell himself to break out of the funk and stop being so morose right

now. Alas, he felt justified in being upset, enraged even. At least for a little while. He couldn't believe that life could change so quickly with a look, a few words, and such little actions.

He felt himself getting violent again. He wanted to hurt someone, even if it was himself. He wasn't paying attention when a hand reached out and grabbed his shoulder. He swung out, punching the person in the chest before he even knew who he was hitting.

"Ouch!" his friend Easy exclaimed, his eyes expressing surprise but also incredible pain. "I just left long enough to go to the bathroom but when I came back, you were gone. Everything ohh—" he stopped as he looked at Shannon's worn-out face. Without words, Easy seemed to understand things were not as they should be and he wisely chose not to press for information. He handed over Shannon's cell phone, saying, "The Dragostes called your phone just as you were walking out. I didn't tell them anything. They were just calling to let you know that Nic is sleeping, and they asked that you or Jo call them before you come by to get her."

Oh dear Gods! Shannon screamed out in his mind. *I was so caught up in thinking about myself and how her*—he stopped because he couldn't say it yet, not even to himself in his mind. He hadn't thought about how her parents—or much more importantly, their daughter, Nicole—was going to respond to this.

Universe, please grind a little more of that glass into my heart. I'm not hurting near enough, he thought, cursing out loud. Even during the eight years they hadn't talked, Shannon knew he loved Jo, and Jo loved him. Sure, the last three years had been wonderful, but it wasn't enough. He just wished he could go back and save some of that lost time. If only Joanne hadn't been so stubborn. And closed-minded. For some reason *that* night flashed through his mind. The night of the party.

Piece Five – March 2002

For a year and a half, the two of them, Shannon and Jo, were best friends. They shared everything—secrets, crushes, and hopes. They spent so much time together, many people assumed they were a couple, which didn't bother either of them. But it had caused some stress for Joanne and her relationship with her parents. They even tried to forbid the two from having sleepovers or even hanging out. But they remained Super Glue-bonded to each other. Joanne tried to explain that they were just friends, but the Dragoste's made it clear that they didn't believe it. But Shannon and Joanne found ways to spend all the time they wanted with each other. Even if that meant using dates and other people as distractions. Ultimately, her parents told her that they wanted her to be happy, so if she wanted to be with Shannon, they understood.

Until Shannon's secret came out one night, during a secret sleepover at Jo's while her parents were out of town. Jo invited her two closest friends and the boy she had been crushing on, and the four of them were playing Truth or Dare. Joanne was sitting on her bed having Martin braid her hair, and Clifton Prescott was in the hot seat after having chosen Truth rather than Dare. Martin, who was also crushing on Clifton, had asked if Clifton was a virgin.

Even with his tanned skin, Clifton blushed bright red as he nodded his head yes. He glanced at all of them through the shaggy brown hair that covered half his face and smiled, showing his gleaming white teeth. Two of them were just slightly crooked, making him look even more natural, and adorable to Jo and Martin.

"Martin, your turn." Joanne exclaimed, leaning in to whisper something in his ear.

"I take Dare," he said proudly.

Jo grinned, "I dare you to take Clifton in the bathroom and find out who's bigger, you or him." Martin glowed and jumped up, ready for the challenge. He reached out for Clifton, offering to help pull him up as well.

"Wait a minute. I didn't agree to this Dare," Clifton answered, crossing his arms in defiance.

“So when we started this game, you said there was nothing you were afraid of. But now, now your true colors are showing,” Shannon said, looking at Jo and grinning mischievously.

“Fine, whatever,” Clifton said, grabbing Martin’s still extended hand and allowing the boy to pull him to his feet and toward the bathroom.

As the boys disappeared, Joanne looked to Shannon. “Okay, truth or dare?”

Shannon declared, “Truth.”

“Is there anything you ever wanted to tell me, but you couldn’t? And if so, what is it?” Joanne asked, looking intensely at Shannon.

And after a minute of silence, Shannon began to talk and reveal his darkest, most confusing secret. Trying to be brief, but babbling for what felt like forever, Shannon glanced at Joanne, who sat silently staring at her bed. She did not curse, much. But the only words that came out of Jo’s mouth for the next few minutes seemed to be expletives.

“What the hell does that mean, transgendered? Like you’re a boy trapped in a girl’s body? Bullshit,” Joanne said, waiting for Shannon to tell her it was all a joke. After a few moments of silence, Joanne continued. “You’re kidding me, right? I mean, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she said, staring at Shannon. Joanne pointed to the door and said, “Get your shit and get out of my house.”

Shannon grabbed the sleeping bag by the door and walked out, head hung low. Joanne slammed the door so hard that everything in her bedroom shook. She could not remember a time when she had been so furious. Being gay was one thing, but this, this was too far. She was worried about Shannon’s soul and eternal damnation, but at this moment all she could feel was anger. She could almost feel Shannon standing outside the door, waiting, hoping that the door would open. But Joanne couldn’t bring herself to open the door. Or accept this “revelation”.

Piece Six

In the bathroom down the hall, what had started as a “measuring challenge” became something more. Martin and Clifton agreed that they both should be hard if they wanted to truly see who was the biggest. But as the boys stood there masturbating, they were both so nervous that neither of them could get hard.

Martin looked at Clifton, trying to concentrate, and then asked, “So, Clifton, ummm, you said you were a virgin. But have you ever had a blow job?”

Clifton looked at him, puzzled and slightly scared. Martin was sure that Clifton had heard he was gay, so the fact that Clifton was here was a step in the right direction. Without another word, Martin got on his knees, penning the other boy in between him and the vanity. Clifton placed his hands on the counter behind him as Martin licked his lips and then began to play with Clifton’s cock using his tongue. Martin licked his body, creating sensations Clifton had never felt before. The tongue against his crotch, his sack, caused his dick to stiffen, giving Martin more to lick. Next, using one hand to hold Clift’s sack and the other at the base of his cock, Martin slid just the head in and out of his mouth.

Clifton had no doubt Martin had experience. Either that or he was just really fucking gifted.

As Martin’s throat relaxed, he took more and more of the other boy’s cock until his face was buried in the brown hair that sparsely covered Clift’s crotch. Then he backed off, and using the saliva that covered the shaft as lube, Martin wrapped his fingers around Clifton’s cock and moved his hand up and down, up and down. And with his mouth covering the rest of Clifton’s dick, the two worked together to titillate every sensitive spot he could find.

Clifton had never thought of himself as gay, but at this moment he didn’t care who was doing it. He was enjoying every movement made. Martin sucked harder and used his tongue on the underside of the head, and Clifton breathed even harder. Clifton knew he was close, so he urged Martin to speed up,

driving him over the edge. Clifton felt every muscle in his body seize and then relax as he came so hard he could see stars.

The door to the bathroom opened and Shannon stood in the doorway, seeming to be paralyzed by the sight. Clifton pushed Martin away hurriedly, and pulled up his pants.

“Please don’t tell Joanne. Please. I really want to ask her out, and I’m afraid she’ll never—” Clifton said, rushing all his words together.

“I doubt Jo will ever speak to me again,” Shannon said, trying to keep the tears from falling. “Martin, can you give me a ride?”

Piece Seven

“Shannon, do you need a ride?” Easy asked, snapping his fingers in front of Shannon’s face, waking him from the memory. Shannon slowly shook his head, trying to clear it of the cobwebs of memories. Easy stood there, with the umbrella slightly covering both of them.

“Hey, you okay?” Easy paused, his face showing that he realized the stupidity of his question. “Okay, I know you’re not... *okay*, but can I do anything for you?”

Shannon knew that if he opened his mouth, it would signal the opening of his tear ducts, so he simply shook his head again. He looked at Easy as he leaned in to hug him before Easy left, and he thought that Martin would have really liked him.

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride?” Easy asked once again. Shannon shook his head no. Handing him the umbrella and leaving him to his thoughts, Easy shook his head in sadness and walked to his vehicle. He glanced back at Shannon who stood lost in thought as Easy got in his big truck and slowly drove away.

Shannon stood there a few minutes before he noticed the breeze had shifted again. Shannon realized the rain had stopped and the moon shone down on him brightly. He could feel the air move, and the energy around him became very comforting, as if magical.

He could swear he heard his name being whispered on the wind.

“Jo... Jo, are you here?” Silence. Nothing. Then the car beside him went wild, lights flashing and signals going off. “Jo, I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t leave me like this.”

“Sorry, bud. Didn’t mean to scare you,” a man in a brown hat and large glasses said, as he got into the car he had just unlocked with his “magical” clicker.

Shannon stood there as the man reversed out of the space, and drove away. He felt stupid for thinking that—He stopped. Jo’s necklace, which had hung

over his rearview mirror for the last five years, was gone. Shannon quickly unlocked his door and saw the necklace with its silver cross was now hanging around the passenger seat headrest. He knew he hadn't moved it, and no one else but Jo had a key to his car. Shannon walked around the car, and written on the dirty passenger side door was a name: Clifton.

Outside of the last few minutes, Shannon had barely thought of him, or his relationship to their little group, during the last three years. Jo had never broken off her relationship with Clifton, even after the two of them divorced. Even after Shannon and Jo had gotten married, she had stayed close friends with Clifton. And most of the time, Shannon hadn't cared. But this, this pissed him off. Of all things she could "say" to him, he couldn't understand why Clifton was the one word she would choose to use. As he got into his vehicle and headed toward the shop that Clifton owned, he hoped he would find out for sure.

Piece Eight

The next time Shannon saw Clifton Prescott's face, it was covered in blood. He lay on the floor bleeding by the time the principal broke up the fight. His tormentor, Tony Pines, stood over him, kicking the boy he had defeated before the first punch was thrown.

"What did I tell you about talking to my girl? Huh, faggot? I told you, one more time and I was gonna whoop your ass, didn't I?" Tony said, with an evil gleam in his eyes that announced to the world he was ready to go the distance in terrorizing anyone he could. His girlfriend, Mitzi, stood on the sidelines, looking like she felt a little bad that she had instigated a conversation, but not really.

Shannon tried to get through the crowd, but it seemed everyone was locked in place, watching Tony go crazy on the kid. Trying to get Tony's attention, Shannon shouted, "Leave him alone, you jerk!"

"Yeah, you coward, pick on someone your own size!" Joanne added, standing on the other side of crowd. The two watched each other and Tony as he picked Clifton up to punch him again.

"All right, all right. Break it up," the principal said as he pushed through the crowd. Tony immediately released the boy and stepped away. Clifton crumbled to the ground. Mr. Cobain grabbed Tony just as he started to leave with the rest of the crowd. "What is going on here, Mr. Pines?"

"Nothing," Tony said as he glared at Clifton and dared him to deny this.

Clifton scrambled up and off the floor, looking like he had been caught in a paper shredder and then put back together. He tried to control his body as it shook in a mixture of fear, humiliation, and anger. It looked, for a moment, like he was going to blurt out everything that had happened, but when he opened his mouth to speak, all he mumbled was, "Nothing. I just tripped."

"Mr. Prescott, are you sure?" Mr. Cobain asked, looking suspiciously at everyone. Clifton nodded. "Well, do try to be more careful. I swear, you kids think everything is a spectacle. Instead of watching, why don't you try helping

once in a while?” Mr. Cobain asked no one in particular as the kids continued to drift away, knowing that the entertainment was over, at least for now.

“This ain’t over, pretty-boy,” Tony hissed as he walked past Clifton, glancing back to see that Mr. Cobain was watching him very carefully.

When he had gotten farther down the hall, Clifton, Joanne, Shannon, and Mr. Cobain worked together to collect all of Clifton’s papers and books, which were all over the hallway.

“I don’t understand, for the life of me, why you kids don’t confront him. Or at the very least, tell the truth so I can suspend that little punk,” Mr. Cobain said, looking directly at Clifton. “One day, you will look back and see that a bully can’t bully those who do not give him power.”

“You’re right, Mr. Cobain. The only problem is that I would really like to live long enough to have that reflection on my past,” Clifton said, as he sat down on the floor and tried to reorganize one of his reports that was due next period.

“So, what was this one about?” Mr. Cobain asked, handing Clifton the rest of his papers.

“It was another stupid rumor about me and Martin. I swear, sometimes I feel like I’m gay by association.”

Shannon handed him his history book and then placed a hand on his shoulder. Joanne passed him his geography textbook and sat down, trying to help him organize his papers. They both looked like they understood, but neither spoke a word.

“What the hell?” Martin asked as he ran up to his friends.

“It was nothing, Mr. Freeman. Now, I suggest all of you head to class as you are already late.” Mr. Cobain reached in his pocket and pulled out a small pad. “Here are hall passes, as well as a tardy slip so that you don’t get in trouble with your next teachers,” he said, handing slips to all four of them. They all looked at him, wondering why this generally cranky man, who delighted in punishing the kids, was being so nice. As they stared at him, he looked back and that familiar “about to be in trouble” look returned to his face, as he pointed and shouted, “Go! Now!”

The four teenagers hurried down the hallway, talking quickly about what had happened. Because Jo and Shannon were in class together, Clifton and Martin went down one hallway and the other two down another.

“Can I talk to you?” Shannon whispered to Joanne as they walked. She acted as if she hadn’t heard anything.

“Hey, wait,” Clifton said, pointing at Jo, whom he had just started dating. She stopped, and he ran up to her and kissed her gently, but passionately, on the lips.

“Can you give us a minute, Clifton?” Shannon asked.

“You don’t need a minute. You don’t need anything, except to stay away from me,” Jo said, not looking at Shannon. Shannon looked shocked and backed away from Joanne.

Clifton turned to Martin and said, “Go ahead to class. I’ll catch up with you. I gotta clean up first. You wanna help?” he asked Jo suggestively. She nodded, and giggled. They headed off together to the nurse’s office.

“What was that all about?” Martin asked, looking at Shannon.

Shannon shrugged and walked away, not knowing that was the last interaction he would have with them for the next eight years.

Piece Nine

“What do you need?” Clifton asked as Shannon entered the store. In the last five years, the two of them barely spoke. Of course, being dumped for another guy rarely helped two people get closer. In some ways, Shannon could understand why Clifton was upset: after eight years of marriage, Clifton’s wife had left him for another man. *But he had to have known that Joanne wasn’t in love with him, right?* Sure, Clifton was in love with *her*, but from what Jo had told Shannon, she had never been in love with *him*.

So when Shannon re-entered the picture, it shouldn’t have been a total shock—it was only a matter of time before they would get together. And they had tried to be patient. They hadn’t even started dating until after the divorce was finalized. But all that didn’t seem to matter to Clifton, he had still lost his wife to the person he referred to “as the trans freak”.

Shannon stood in the doorway, unsure of how to even begin to tell Clifton that Jo was dead. Sure, they weren’t best friends, but Shannon knew Clifton considered Jo the love of his life.

“What do you want?” Clifton asked, feeling even more annoyed than usual.

“Umm... I... uh...,” Shannon stammered.

Clifton looked up from his books, and could tell from Shannon’s face that something was wrong. “What is it? Is it Jo? Is something wrong with Nicole?” Clifton asked, swallowing hard.

Shannon whispered, “It’s Jo. She’s gone.”

“What? What do you mean, she’s gone? Where did she go?” Clifton asked, trying to remain calm and failing.

“She was in the hospital, and the doctor came out. And...”

He kept rambling, but Clifton grabbed his chest and whispered “How is it that I wasn’t even told she was even in the hospital?”

He glared at Shannon, looking as if he were ready to kill him, but as he saw Shannon’s transformation into a crumpled mess, his eyes and his heart melted. Shannon leaned against the window for support, as his face completely

distorted into a blubbered mass, mumbling through the tears and heaves about the doctor and everything he said. Clifton crossed the room still unsure of whether he wanted to punch Shannon or hug him. But as he reached the sobbing puddle of a man, he grabbed Shannon and pulled him into a tight embrace.

With his other hand, Clifton reached out and locked the door and flipped the open sign to closed, because he knew Shannon would not want anyone to see him like this. The two men held each other and cried for their loss of the woman both of them loved more than life itself.

As Clifton continued to hold Shannon, he asked softly, “What about Nicole? Does she know yet?”

Piece Ten

“Fuck you, life,” Joanne Dragoste said as she watched the plus sign appear on the stick. She had a week left of high school, and apparently now a baby on the way. She knew instantly whose baby it was, but she also knew she couldn’t tell him. He had already accepted a full scholarship to a college four states away, and if she told him, he would do “the honorable thing” and stay there with her. There was a small part of her that wanted that, but she knew neither of them would be happy after a while.

She had a brief conversation with herself in the mirror.

“One time, one lousy, drunken time and you get this.” She paused. “You know you can’t raise this child by yourself. It’s not even a question. And there is a good likelihood that Mom and Dad will be willing to help, as long as you do everything they tell you to, exactly as they tell you to. So that leaves you with one option. Sell it to the highest bidder,” she said, trying to make herself laugh, but failing. “He’d marry you. You know he would. Despite, or even because of this. His parents are scared to death that he’s gay. So if you offered to lie and say the kid’s his, I’m sure he would love that. Not to mention his parents. The guy’s barely eighteen, and they are already pressuring him to have kids. So it’s your call, Cinderella. Who are you taking to the ball?”

As she stared at herself in the mirror, at her bright blue hair and deep blue eyes, she noticed that her acne was getting smaller. Yippee, I’m growing up, she thought. She noticed the circles under her eyes and wondered how long those had been there. She pulled her cheeks down, trying to figure what she could do to make her skin flattering and more lifelike. “Shouldn’t I be, like, forty or something before I start worrying about bags and sags?” she wondered.

“Fuck you, life,” she said again as she started to pack things into her purse and figure out who she was going to tell first.

Piece Eleven

Shannon was standing outside smoking when he saw Martin's car pull into the funeral home parking lot. He had been dreading this moment, not because of Martin, but because this made it all real. He had been praying the earth would end in a giant explosion, anything that would get them out of having to walk into that building and see her in the coffin. As Martin got out of his car, Shannon put out his cigarette and checked his hair in the mirror of a nearby car. He tried to position his short dark-blond hair so it looked styled instead of unkempt. He was still working on it when Martin approached. They awkwardly hugged and walked inside together.

The first thing to greet them was a giant picture of Jo smiling, with her almost-straight teeth shining against the deep red lipstick she had worn especially for that picture. Her hair was pulled back, but the blue streaks accentuated her face as she had purposely left those parts down. As the men walked into the building, both of them seemed to relax as they felt her spirit surround them. Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You" played softly in the background. It had been one of her favorite songs.

As they moved farther down the hall, a man stood greeting people, an employee of the funeral home. Shannon didn't recognize him at first, but then he saw his name tag, *Tony Pine*. When he saw them, his face lit up, and he walked quickly toward them.

"Hey, guys. How are you? Doing okay?" he asked as he pulled Martin into a hug.

"I'm fine. Thanks," Martin answered, his voice muffled by Tony's jacket.

"The family is already inside. They asked me to bring you guys in when you got here," he quietly told them as he released Martin and put his arm around Shannon, guiding them to the door of the room where Jo lay. "If you need anything, anything at all, let me know," he whispered as he ushered them inside and closed the door behind them.

Shannon stood next to the door, afraid. Afraid to run. Afraid to move forward. But mostly, afraid of interrupting. Sitting on one of the benches along

the far side of the room, Martha and Patrick Dragoste, Jo's parents, noticed them standing awkwardly by the door. Martha got up slowly, as if every part of her body was mourning, and she needed to move slowly to accommodate it. When she reached them, she pulled Martin into a hug and cried softly on his shoulder. He rubbed her back while Shannon tried to identify how to feel.

He felt like Data or Spock trying to analyze and understand human emotion. He had always seen dying as a celebration of life. The next step. He had studied many religions, and found that cannibalizing them all and taking small parts of each was his path. While he waited to be acknowledged, Shannon looked around the room and saw Patrick and Nicole sitting on one bench, and Clifton sitting a few feet away on another. Martin looked to Shannon, but all Shannon seemed to notice was Nicole, who seemed to be crying or sleeping on her grandpa's shoulder.

Martha finally released Martin, but she continued to ignore Shannon. She grabbed Martin's hand and led him up to the coffin. Unsure of what to do, Shannon followed them. Although he believed death was a celebration, looking down at Jo's body he felt a flood of sadness unlike anything he had ever felt in his life. Her face was lightly painted with make-up, and her hair was curled up as if it had been done by a professional. She wore a beautiful black gown with sparkles gathered in various designs. She had never looked more like a beauty queen than she did just then.

Shannon didn't know where it came from, but that was the thought that broke him. A sob poured out of his throat, and he began crying uncontrollably. He didn't want to, but this was the death of his first true friend. The first person who ever really knew him. His soul mate. She had meant so much to him, and he wasn't sure she knew.

As Shannon bent over and kissed her cold cheek, he heard Martin kissing her hand and whispering, "I'm so sorry I left you. I should have stayed in contact. I should have been here for you. I'm sorry."

Martha handed Martin some tissues, and he, in turn, gave some to Shannon. They stood, looking down at Jo's body again, when Shannon noticed toward the back of her head, almost hidden, was a clip of blue hair strung in with the rest. He nudged Martin, and pointed discreetly. Shannon smiled. *Still a rebel even in death*, he thought, and kissed her on the cheek again.

As they walked toward the benches where Patrick, Nicole, and Clifton were sitting, other people started to enter the room. Clifton nodded at Shannon, acknowledging him, but Shannon sat down on a bench by himself. The service was short and led by a preacher who obviously did not know Jo, or Shannon assumed so, by the way he kept referring to his notes and mispronouncing her last name. When he asked if anyone wanted to share, Martha went up, but barely made it through a full sentence before breaking down again. Patrick went to her, finishing her short speech.

Shannon watched Nicole, wishing he could be there for her. But he had agreed to let her spend some time with her grandparents. As he watched her bond with Martin while the Dragostes spoke, he found himself getting jealous. He just sat watching, fearing that he had lost his daughter, his last link to Joanne. Shannon was so lost in studying them together he didn't notice Clifton walked past him until he heard the voice coming through the microphone.

"I'll keep it short and sweet, sorta like Jo was. This was her favorite poem, it's actually a song, but I'm not gonna sing cuz I want to have mercy on y'all's ears. So..." he said, pausing for a moment, breathing, and holding back his emotions as best he could as he read "I Sing the Body Electric" from Fame.

He finished reading the lyrics, and he folded up the piece of paper he had been reading from, and walked back toward his seat. As he walked by, he handed the paper and an envelope to Shannon. The service ended, and Shannon, Martin, and Clifton all smiled, knowing that Jo was with them in her own way.

Piece Twelve

Joanne looked at herself in the mirror and cursed. More than anything, she hated her dress. It was beautiful with its frills, ribbon, and pearls, but she didn't want to wear a white wedding dress. It just wasn't her. Her mother stood behind her in the mirror, her smile almost as bright as the dress. Joanne twirled around looking for any flaw, any reason at all she could give her mother that she couldn't wear it. But she had to admit it was gorgeous. Unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that she felt it was not for her, and to wear this particular garment on a day that was supposed to be her special day would be wrong. She decided to try the honest approach, but she had a feeling an argument was in the very near future.

"Mom, this dress is gorgeous. Really, it is, but it's not me. I don't think I should wear this for my wedding," she said, as she looked her mother in the face and tried to see how she was reacting.

Her mother looked into her eyes for a moment before turning away and collapsing into the nearest chair in true "drama queen" fashion.

"Three generations of Dragostes have gotten married in this gown," Martha said, sobbing into the soft red fabric of the chair.

"Mom, please stop it. You forget that I was with you when you bought this dress for when you renewed your vows to Dad."

Miraculously, tears gone and makeup perfect, her mother sat up and looked at her. She blinked a couple of times and sat there silently for a few seconds. And then, patting her dress down flat against her legs, she looked to Joanne and smiled. "I was just kidding," she said, adding a weak laugh afterward.

The door vibrated as her father knocked on it. "How are my girls doing?" he asked as he cracked the door. "Everyone decent in here?" He pushed the door farther open. Martha pulled him into the room and pointed toward Jo, asking "Doesn't she look marvelous?"

"Wow, honey, you do. It's still a beautiful dress. But, umm, are you sure that dress is you, Josie?" He asked, looking to both women for some kind of

response. Martha's face went to various shades of angry, while Jo just breathed out and looked relieved.

Piece Thirteen

The Dragostes had insisted on a second ceremony, a second funeral, in their church, the one Jo and Shannon had refused to get married in. Shannon couldn't understand why they needed a second funeral. Except they wanted to control everything. As he sat in the pew, he glanced at Nicole sitting with them, and then at Clifton and Martin, who were sitting together. For the first time in days he was alone with his thoughts, and for the first time it hit hard—he was going to lose Nicole. That thought tore him to shreds.

Shannon had never considered himself a Christian, but he believed he had seen Satan in his truest form. His name was Patrick Dragoste, a man completely hell-bent on his destruction, and that was before Jo had died. Now that she was no longer around to be a calming influence on him, Patrick seemed to have gone completely crazy in his attempts to get Shannon out of his life, their lives. In the last few days, he had locked Shannon out of the house he and Jo shared, using the fact that Shannon's name was not on the mortgage. He had also tried to take Shannon's car, but luckily that at least was registered in his name.

Shannon would have walked away, mourning on his own time and finding a new space, but there was one huge issue—Nicole, the eleven-year-old girl that was tied to both of them. Nicole had called him “daddy” for years, but Patrick refused to acknowledge their connection. Nicole was related to them by blood, what chance did he have?

Shannon sat watching her interact with the Dragostes from across the church. It was obvious she loved them very much, and they loved her. He just wished that love, or at least that mercy, was extended to him. As Patrick and Martha in turn glanced his way, he could see in their eyes that nothing he could do would ever be enough for them. Even as he smiled in their direction, Shannon thought about Jo and wished she were here to calm the storm.

He held the envelope that Clifton gave him in his hands. And in his nervousness, he flipped it over and over. He was scared to open it, but finally curiosity got the best of him. He tried to open it as quietly as possible. He

unfolded the document that was inside, and read it as quickly as he could. He didn't understand a lot of the legalese, but toward the bottom of the second page, he saw something that made him want to start dancing, even though they were at Jo's funeral. He continued to keep his composure and waited for the ritualistic, boring funeral (that Jo would have hated) to be over. He understood that this was the same church Nicole had been baptized in, but neither he nor Jo had been here in years.

Piece Fourteen

Joanne lay screaming on the table. Her mother was holding her hand, and trying to get her to breathe. They had taken Lamaze together and while her mother tried to hold to the teachings, Joanne just wanted to strike her mother repeatedly as Martha repeated instructions over and over again. Everything sounded like babble as another wave of pain kicked in, and she found herself regretting refusing all the drugs they had offered until the last few minutes. She wanted to believe it would be worth all this, but right now as she felt crushed by overwhelming pain, she just wanted it over with.

“We are almost there. Keep pushing,” the doctor said, his head disappearing into her crotch again.

“Almost?” she tried to say through gritted teeth, and set her head back down on the sweat-drenched pillows.

Her mother, obviously taking advantage of the break in the waves of pain, tried to distract her by asking, “Have you decided on a name, honey? I still think Elizabeth is a wonderful name. So is Barbara.”

“Mom, I already told you I am not naming my kid after Barbra Streisand. I can’t stand her music,” Jo said, ready to snap. “Or her face.”

“Okay. So what are you leaning toward?”

“I’m thinking Satine from Moulin Rouge. I think it has a very exotic feel to it.”

“You want to name your child after a prostitute? You think that sends a positive message to her?” Martha asked, frowning down at her.

“Ok, how about Nicole? After Nicole Kidman?”

“Well, aside from marrying that psycho in the cult, I think she is a very strong woman. So I guess that would be fine.”

Jo rolled her eyes, and laughed for a moment before it turned into another moan and then a scream.

“Push, Joanne. Push,” the doctor said urgently, looking very intently at her.

And then it happened... She felt the pain subside as the sweat rolled down her forehead and her mother rushed to wipe it away. The doctor held the baby up, and even with her eyes closed and her skin covered with the various birth liquids, Nicole was the most beautiful thing that Jo had ever seen. Ever.

The doctor handed her to Jo, and Jo looked down on this tiny life that she was now responsible for. She was in love as she had never been before in her life. She looked to her mother, so grateful she had been there. But that did not change her mind about her decision.

“Mom, I need you to make me a promise. I need you to swear that you will never tell Martin that this is his baby. I need you to swear, or you can’t be a part of Nicole’s life. Even a little. Promise me, Mom.”

Her mother looked at her with tears forming in her eyes. Jo knew her mother adored Martin, and wanted him involved in the picture regardless of his... preference. She could see her mother waffling back and forth on this decision. So she spoke again, “I know you. You can’t imagine not helping raise this child.”

“You’re right, but I can’t help to hope that you change your mind,” her mother said, looking as if she was resigning herself, but then she added, “I promise. I promise as long as you promise to marry Clifton Prescott. I don’t want to think about you as a single mother. And I know he will be happy to support you. Deal?”

When Joanne said nothing, her mother spoke again. “You and I both know this is a difficult decision to agree to and I sincerely hope one day you would feel differently. But until then, I will hold up my end of the agreement as long as you do. So do we have a deal?” Sticking out her hand as if this were a business arrangement, she waited for Jo to take it.

Not seeing any other options, Jo took her hand, nodded her head, and said, “Deal.”

Piece Fifteen

Shannon beckoned to Nicole that it was time to go. As she started to run to him, Patrick stopped her, and for a moment Shannon thought he was going to start a scene right there in the church. Instead Patrick walked over to him, reached forward, and surprisingly pulled Shannon into a hug.

In the eyes of everyone watching, it looked heartfelt. It looked like a family together still grieving the loss of one of their own. In reality, Patrick pulled Shannon forward to whisper in his ear. “I know you are just a giant freak of nature. I also know all your little dark secrets, and if you fight me for custody of Nicki, the light will shine on all of them. All your shadows will consume you and I will watch you be devoured by it.” Patrick finished speaking and stepped back; giving Shannon a maniacal grin that only he could see. He patted Shannon on the back while shaking his hand to finish “the show”.

Shannon stood there enraged, trying to decide what he should say or do. As Patrick walked away, Nicole walked forward and reached out for Shannon. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. Shannon found that Nicole had that same effect on him that her mother once had. He held Jo’s will, in which she had left the guardianship of Nicole to Martin and him, in one hand, and Nicole’s hand in the other. And as he walked out of the church, he smiled. He felt focused, and righteously angered as he whispered “Game on,” and prepared himself for war. For his daughter.

THE END

Author's Note

This puzzle is not fully assembled. When I began this story, I plotted everything out and planned to do it all in five thousand words. However, there is a lot more that Shannon, Clifton, Jo, the Dragostes, and, of course, Martin, want to say, so I decided to stop here for this part and continue this story as other projects. So this is not the end for these characters, this is merely the beginning. Stay tuned for more!

Author Bio

Wt Prater is a writer who spends most of his time either on Facebook or updating the Just Write and SO Gay blog. He is a host with Blog Talk Radio, partnering with Writers Online Network and WON Radio. He is also the organizer of the GLBT Blog Hop and Mini-magazine for Marketing For Romance Writers and an Assistant Organizer with Nashville Writers Group

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

LOST IN THE ECHO

By Jack L. Pyke

Photo Description

Black and white photo of a young man bound to the bed. His white shirt is torn open, revealing toned abs; arms are bound wide, hands gripping at the rope and raised off the bed. A blindfold covers his eyes, and his head is turned slightly to the right. Mouth is open slightly, showing a need to speak, be heard, yet it looks like an internal conflict is keeping the man bound, hidden, and silent.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The bed was soft, the sheets cool. That was all William could sense. Until fingers touched his face. A stranger's touch and he shuddered, listening for a voice, an explanation, some reason for this. Why was he here? Why were they doing this? And what did they want with him?

Sex is an option, not a must. If sex, please no twee or raunchy sex. HFN is enough, no HEA needed. Please try for something like abduction rather than BDSM. Set somewhere in Europe and please avoid the usual kind of crime plots, like the mafia.

Thank you,

Joan

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: professors, abducted/kidnapping, grief, enemies to lovers, captivity, HFN

Content warnings: mild violence, psych torment, mild torture, description of death of a loved one

Word Count: 20,563

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

To the lady who gave me William. And to the LHNB editorial and production volunteers: huge, huge, thanks.

LOST IN THE ECHO

By Jack L. Pyke

CHAPTER ONE

William took a left off the A6 and pulled his Rover onto a long stretch of road, the suspension making it a smooth ride, just barely massaging the tension in his arms. A suit jacket slept on his front passenger seat, threatening to slip onto the floor, and the occasional glare didn't keep it in check. In fact, the jacket seemed to sit there chuckling with loose change as it inched closer to the floor, goading every look Will could give it, as he flicked off his stereo. White sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, the sun tanning Will's arms through the tinted windows, and the cool breeze from the air conditioning shifted hair into his eyes. It made the late summer heat of a Friday afternoon almost bearable. Almost. He was running late. Although you wouldn't have guessed it with how the heat seemed to melt his tyres to the concrete, making the Rover slow, and the road ahead shimmer as it stretched and thinned, almost like some twisted backdrop in a Hitchcock-like nightmare.

Among the wings of the forest taking flight on either side of the road, ancient oak trees arched over the drive up to the old Lancaster University, offering the perfect group-huddle respite from the sights and sounds of the rush-hour traffic. Eventually the tree lines eased, and like quick flashes of life on fast forward through forest, here and there groups of youth lay sprawled out on the freshly cut grass. All smiles, chuckles, and small, secret kisses passed onto blushing cheeks that would have the Chancellor and all of his Vices raising a brow. Will snorted. Life and light—all there beyond the restraint of his windows.

Will's grip on the wheel tightened as he kept his gaze fixed on the run up to the County South Language Department.

His usual car parking space was taken, setting his mood a little darker, and he pulled into the next one, maybe fighting the need to pull in close enough to the offending car, block the driver's side door off—state his claim of *don't do*

it again. But he left being a jerk for the up-and-coming who thought acting like one would get them wherever they needed to go a little faster. Will was too tired for ego wars.

“You been at the pub for a pint, teach?” a voice called over, amongst the chatter and chuckles going on back there. Caught locking his car, William glanced back. “Ryan. You’ve got five minutes to finish your meet and greet and get into the lecture hall,” he said, realising he’d left his jacket on the passenger side. Ignoring the group of undergraduates, he reached back in and pulled it free. “And do you think the Chancellor would allow us a break time for anything longer than half a pint?”

“Well,” said Ryan, all roughed up hair and cheek to boot, “considering I’m shorter than you, a half’s good enough for me, if you feel your wealth spreads far enough to buy me one, Mr. Chambers.”

William looked at him and Ryan’s smile failed a touch. All of the defiance that was usually there in those younger eyes slipped into a distance that almost had William easing off; the cheeky offer of a drink had only ever been used as a tactic to get close to someone who should have been walking right there beside Ryan, they both knew that, and Ryan seemed to recognise it now. Seeing him lose all of his usual spark, Will’s instinct was there to ask if he was okay, to make sure he was, except he fell back on his silence, not yet willing, or able to cross any distance. Ryan mumbled a sorry, looked away, and moved off toward the main reception doors. William followed a few moments later, rubbing at the light sweat dampening the nape of his neck, yet shivering despite the heat. A few mumbled “hellos” and “afternoons” from people he knew went with him as he made it up into his study on the second floor; he greeted each colleague with the politeness of a small smile, politeness he could manage, conversation was the hard part.

The two lectures scheduled for this afternoon were mostly for his fulltime students, but twenty or so part-timers who studied the distance PhD in Applied Linguistics needed their theses marked, too, and it was something he should have done by now. Slipping his USB from his pocket, William gave a sigh. Long gone were the days of carrying ream after ream of paper, now E-theses were subbed through the university online language forum, and it eased the

load. Less time carrying, more time marking. *Or so the theory went*, mused Will.

Just as he brought the computer online, a tap came at his door. “Will.” Kate inched the door open and offered a smile. “Your lecture was due to start five minutes ago.”

“Yeah. I know,” he said, multitasking by inserting the USB and pulling his jacket on.

Kate came over and gave a wince. “And you know you should have done that well before your holiday next week.”

“Yeah,” he said again, a little tired even for his liking. “I know.”

Giving a sigh, Kate offered a smile and rubbed at his arm. “How about I download all your E’s and I’ll bring them to you during break? That way you can get off on time.”

Will slipped into a relieved thank-you smile. “You don’t mind?”

“No,” said Kate, “I don’t mind.”

Some of the pressure twisting his insides uncurled a touch. “You know my passwords, right?”

She nodded. Of course she did. Kate had been secretary to six language tutors for over ten years now and could ferret her way into any situation and disappear; leaving no linguistic fingerprint to say her devious side had been at play. Elliot had taught her well.

“You know he’s leaving next week?”

Will fought a knot that tightened in his stomach. “Who?”

Kate sighed. “Elliot.”

“He got his Oxford post?”

“Yeah. I’ll miss him. He’s been really good as Head of Department.” She was quiet for a moment. “What about you? Will you miss him?”

“I’ll miss Ryan.” Will looked at the door. He didn’t want to be here. “Although I would have appreciated being notified I was losing a student.”

Kate set to work on the computer. “Ryan’s not going.” Will looked back

and Kate caught his eyes. “I wish the dad wasn’t either,” she added, now avoiding his gaze.

“His choice,” said Will, and he left Kate to it, making it down into his lecture hall. The groan of the door barely disturbed the chatter going on inside, and Will breathed a sigh.

“I hope all that row you’re all making surrounds the heated debate on how even objective analysis of Corpora data will rely on some form of subjective interpretation. Otherwise you can all leave.”

A chair was pushed back.

“Sit down, Ryan. Some of you need the extra study time.”

Chuckles hit the lecture hall as Will took off his jacket and placed it over the back of his chair, his gaze for a moment on his desk. A fresh coffee sat steaming in tune to the afternoon. There was a temptation to look at Ryan, say thank you for the peace offering, or at least acknowledge the fact that the son sitting over there was nothing like the hard-nosed bastard father, but that would mean looking up, that would mean looking at Ryan and facing the empty seat next to the young man.

“Right,” said Will, facing the board. “Just for a change, let’s go wild and throw something else into the linguistic mix. Let’s run with a little stylistics.”

“Oh, man,” called out Ryan from behind, “I only went to the barbers yesterday. You saying I’m going all” —there was a deliberate tousle of long locks and, Will guessed, a slow smile off Ryan too—“shaggy dog, Mr. Chambers?”

Despite not being able to look back, William managed a smile. But then came the sound of pages being turned, minds settling into concentration, and it forced Will to stare for a little longer at his whiteboard. He needed out now too.

After a lousy night’s sleep, Will fought off tiredness and pulled open the door to his Rover. Bags now packed neatly into his boot, his USB in his pocket, and laptop sleeping safely in the back somewhere, Will refused to look

back at his detached cottage as he got in and gave a tired sigh. Every home was a cottage, barn, or old farm in Burrow Heights. The house and location not really being Will's ideal choice. But it was close to the university, and, at least for a while, it had also given him the opportunity to look beyond just a career. And just for that reason, it still had its lure as Will did exactly what he'd tried not to do; he looked in his rear-view mirror.

The motorbike still sat outside the garage, a late-teen's parallel twin engine, must-have Kawasaki Ninja 300, and all night-black with flecks of red. Now the machine was less "mean", more just old and crumbling under its own weight as it tilted to the side. After everything else that had gone, Will hadn't found the heart to sell that. The Kawasaki sat in the same defiant *I'll wait right here, he'll be back for me soon* pose, and it nearly tore out Will's heart under the pressure.

"I could take her off your hands."

Sat in his car, William just about caught the soft voice as he turned the Rover's engine over. Jake from a few doors down was out for his mid-morning run, and he offered Will a shy smile as he glanced at the motorbike on Will's drive. He stood just a few feet away from the car, moving slightly from foot to foot as if ready to bolt at the slightest word from Will. "She'd get a good home," said Jake, nodding at the motorbike as Will let the window fall all the way down.

"*Humph*, well, I'll..." Jake always offered; Will always promised to get back to him. Will never did, and something in Jake's kind eyes said he didn't mind. He understood. Will hated how everyone understood, especially when he couldn't figure a thing out of this whole mess for himself. "Can... would you just keep an eye on her for me whilst I'm away, please?" he asked instead, burying the need to move the gears, as the instinct to get away ate at his insides.

"Always," said Jake. He looked like he'd say something else; he'd looked like he'd been on the verge of saying something else for the past year, but Will fell back into the security of a safe distance, giving just a quiet thanks, this time adding a promise to pick Jake something up for all of his troubles. "You know where I am if there's any, y'know, problems. I slipped a note in at yours with the details."

“Yeah,” said Jake, avoiding any eye contact now. “How’s Ryan?”

“Ryan’s okay.”

“And Elliot?”

Will’s brow darkened. “Elliot’s... Elliot: a twisted, homophobic psychopath who just happened to be head of my department for a while.”

Giving a frown, Jake glanced back towards Will’s house. “Listen, you take care, okay, Will?”

Will nodded. Dorset offered a whole week of running; no motorbikes, no houses that should have been homes, and no sweet men from a few doors down wanting a little more than just friendship, when all Will needed now was to disappear into the background, maybe be forgotten, become lost in the echo of a wild heath and harbour.

Already feeling the promise of another summer’s day, Will made a point of pulling up outside the local corner shop for some essentials: energy drinks, bread, milk, ham, mustard—a pack of Turkish Delight bars. Some vices he couldn’t—wouldn’t leave behind. But in between the carrier bags, he didn’t realise he’d picked up two deep-red, cinnamon-scented candles until it came to packing them in the boot of his Rover.

A gentle touch ran over the thin film covering to one of the candles, and Will rested his head against the boot lid. He’d almost forgotten.... How the hell could he have almost forgotten? Will glanced around, knowing there was one last stop to make.

The caretaker of the crematorium insisted on taking him up to a plot Will now knew how to find in the dark. Will waited for the man to move off, watching him duck and dive from headstone to headstone, coming up with the odd handful of weed or dead flower. A gentle breeze carried a flurry of blossom petals and a rich rose scent, and Will sighed deeply. The view from up here was stunning: one of the highest hills looking out over fresh fields to the left. But it was the view to the right that always caught Will’s attention. The dirt track was already busy with kids on their bikes, the sound of tyre on dirt lost to the distance. Not the most tactful of venues to see from a crematorium, but it was why Will had chosen this particular place. An echo of

laughter always seemed to play around him up here, one that said a Kawasaki wouldn't fit on the playground below *and* would most probably terrorise the hell out of the younger kids playing there now.

He managed a smile, knowing his offer of one would have been returned. Eventually.

“Good-looking young man.”

A little startled, Will glanced off to his left to the caretaker still picking up weeds from a few graves down. A photo slept on the headstone at Will's feet, a picture of youth at its seventeen-year wildest; all black hair, black eyes, a slight smile that always left you guessing whether a joke or the need to run was coming. Will was always left chasing after either one.

“Looks as troubled as his dad,” said the man.

Unwrapping the candles, Will crouched. The petals that had blown over mimicked how a bedroom had never been kept clean for more than an hour, and Will never thought he'd regret missing the arguments that carried every touch of normality. He let the candles rest by the grave. Matches were in his pocket, and his hand hovered there for a moment, prepared to cause a flare that would let cinnamon and the undercurrent of rose calm everything that the day was throwing at him. But instead his hand slipped across his knee, the candles now, as well as always, remaining unlit.

“He wasn't mine,” said Will, quietly.

“Hmmm?” said the caretaker.

“The boy.” Will forced an angry sigh through his nose. He'd have given anything for this lad to carry his surname on something other than a piece of Government foster-carer paper. Will glanced down in time to catch the blossom dance across the grave, and his jaw was set tensing over thoughts on how funny it was how the people responsible were always the ones that got to walk away unharmed. “Happy eighteenth, kid.”

He stood, offering a polite thank you to the caretaker, then headed back down the hill to his Rover.

CHAPTER TWO

On the eastern side of Poole Harbour, a run of soft sea and sand held hands with a mass of forest and heath. They offered everything William loved about seclusion: a harbour only most locals knew about, a forest wrapped like a comic vampire cloak around it, all waggling eyebrows and scary music and creaking noises to boot, and all to ensure it stayed masked in mystery. He had Dorset shores running through his veins and had grown up living next to the Arne Nature Reserve. It's where he'd picked up his love of running, later his love of language.

Give a boy a backyard that led from harbour to forest, Will would have thought that most kids would no doubt either grow up following a family heritage of fishing or at least venture out into the wilds of botany. But with spending many a time with dirt on his hands and knees as he picked up bugs, feeling them wiggle under his touch, Will had always carried a fascination with how animals signalled stress, love, and life, all through colours, codes, and wriggling bodies. Arne had given him his first steps into linguistics at a young age; most of his projects earning him a frown off his father as he'd watched Will from his fishing boat on the harbour. That distance seemed to grow with Will. His studies had given him all of the conversational turn-taking tricks he'd ever need, yet when it came to actual conversation between two living and breathing bodies, between him and his father, between the loves and losses in his life, *safety in silence* always seemed the easiest option. He had a lot to thank Elliot for on that score.

Will frowned.

Strange how the one time he'd found his voice, he'd helped cause so much damage.

The drive had been long: four hours, making it close to two in the afternoon before he pulled his Rover alongside his log cabin. No boats were in the small harbour, no doubt most out already to catch their daily hold of cod. The cabin was set far enough away from the little home-from-home collection of holiday homes, from his father and the critical sneer of some of his old neighbours, and that suited him just fine. He was close enough to keep his Wi-

Fi connection, but not close enough for anyone to pop over and borrow a cup of sugar, or ask why he hadn't called in a while.

Grabbing his bags and his laptop from the boot, Will pushed on through to the coolness of the cabin, the musty smell of disuse not matching the white-sculpted interior design of the open-plan layout. His laptop was plugged in and turned on first, then food stored in hidden cupboards; pans and potatoes put on the hob for later, before Will made his way up to his en suite. After a quick shower to wash away the heat, Will padded his nakedness through to the bedroom. An array of casual clothing was already lined up inside his wardrobes, and he opted for just jogging bottoms. After a light sandwich and drink downstairs, Will settled into his assignments, determined to get as much out of the way so he had little to think about over the next week.

Will woke a few hours later, cuddled around his laptop, and he focused sleepy eyes on the darkness outside his patio windows. Giving a chuckle, he checked his watch, stretched long legs under the table, and yawned. It was touching two in the morning and he'd only read one thesis. After shutting things down for the night, he cleared away his plate and coffee cup, then headed on up to bed. It seemed the better option. The covers were cool against his skin after he'd stripped down, the feel of almost silk-like material shaping his body like cling film, and Will stretched, for the first time allowing himself to relax into the soft comfort.

"Hmmm." Will's hand brushed the flat of his stomach, just by accident at first as he shifted the sheet to get comfortable, but then, as his body reacted, a run of happy goose bumps chased a second, more deliberate touch.

One arm covering his eyes, almost hiding him from loving the touch he played on his body, Will dug the flat of his feet a little harder into the mattress. The shy covering of sheet only added to the slow tease of the back of his hand brushing the length and thickness between his thighs. So easy... so easy just to slip between material and skin, maybe just to feather-play those fingers between navel and the vulnerability of everything that hid beneath the thin safety of the covers, to stroke, to please.

Will arched his back slightly, letting a soft murmur escape his lips. How long had it been? Maybe—maybe he needed to be feather-played, to be stroked, to—

Giving a cry, he twisted to his side; head now buried in his pillow, legs curled up in almost a defensive position as he gripped at the sheet, trying to stop the heat he could feel between his thighs.

Wrong. Today of all days, it was *wrong*.

For a long time, he lay there with his eyes screwed shut, denying everything natural by touching his body, but like so many nights before, he buried the need to let go, each time becoming easier than the last. Scarily so.

The morning offered a lovely coolness, all low mist lying over harbour and heath. Will stood on his porch, slipping on his running shoes. Despite the brisk bite to the early hours, the promise was there of another heat-fuelled day. Usually he'd run with no T-shirt around here, but the heat demanded otherwise, the last thing he needed now was burning beyond repair. Clean jogging bottoms and a loose, white short-sleeved T-shirt were the safer option. Doors now all locked, and with enough water to last well into the day, Will let the branch and bracken crunch under foot as he sort out the freedom of familiar tracks past the heath.

A run of stepping stones took him over a little stream. He knew once he passed the moss-covered boards lining the forest floor, he'd be well into the tall trees and occasional offer of waterfall that even most locals rarely found. Out there, the roots of the trees pulled free from the ground, making it feel like the forest itself was caught trying to uproot and run right along with him. Will could race under some, had hidden under most, and as soon as the first one came into view, all life melted away into the old feeling of running shoes breaking dry bracken and twig.

A few hours into Will's run, the halfway point came up close to lunch, and Will let himself rest against a huge stone as he took another sip of water. Off to the left, the old, disused mill with its rustic wheel had been given an island all to itself, or at least a decent river that ran almost like a moat around it. A small waterfall nudged at the millwheel, trying to give it some life, but the wheel only whimpered a protest that barely carried on the breeze. Air and water would only move it so far before the wheel gave up, creaking back into its slow drowning. Will and the mill had stared at each other a few times over

the years, sometimes leaving Will with a slight chill, that feeling of not being as far away from life as he'd like. The blackness of the windows glistened like a widow refusing to let her grief fall, mouth quivering against the loss of life, of love, of history. He'd hated this place as a kid, mostly because of Elliot, now it just reflected how tired he felt, how, like the millwheel, life seemed to want to push him around despite his will to just fade into the background.

Flicking the lid back on his water bottle and then clipping it to his jogging bottoms, Will pushed away from the stone, then from the mill. A few blackbirds flew from the trees, crying disgust at his interruption, and Will nodded an apology. "Sorry, lads. Your turf, right? Not mine so—*humph*."

Will hit the forest floor, tasting nothing but dirt and grunting away the leaves from his face. A curved root jutted from the ground, and it sat there grinning a little too proudly with Will's running shoe jammed there in its mouth. Will sat up and grabbed at his shoe. Wincing at the ache in his ankle, he rubbed at his foot first, not liking how the deep throb called *cut* to his running day. "Just like you to fall and have no one around to fall for, Will," he mumbled. Managing to wiggle his running shoe back on, Will sighed and pushed up off the forest floor.

Barely even managing to straighten to his feet, Will grunted as an arm slipped around his waist, forcing him to hit the floor again, this time his shoulder and hip taking the brunt of the ground as he landed on his side. Legs came around his, holding him still, just as arms crushed a bear hug around his ribcage. Will cried out, and a crunch of twig was heard above his head just before a blindfold was roughly pulled into place, turning Will's world black. The man crushing his ribs, he came with a friend, and one who was content enough to kick at Will's shoulder and force him face-first into the roughage. Will's arms were wrestled behind his back, tied, then as dirt-filled fingers dug into the side of his mouth, Will's lips and jaw were forced open and a gag pinched into the corners of his mouth. Will grunted, and a hard breath roughed his ear as something sharp, cool, and very dangerous pressed against his cheek.

"Keep real still, beauty, and real quiet." The knife twisted slightly, now scratching a path down Will's jaw, to trace the curve of his throat. "Or struggle," whispered a voice. "But I guarantee you won't like me by morning if you do."

Will stilled, his hard breathing the only stress-release point he allowed himself.

“Oh, I like you like that.” Will was dragged to his feet and pulled back into someone as an arm went around his throat. The knife was kept by his cheek, but as Will was pushed forwards, he dug in with his heels, grunting out his fear with not being able to see where he was going.

“The hard way, then.”

A push up of his sleeve, Will felt something sharp dig into his skin, then cool liquid entered his blood stream, sending his arm cold right down to the fingertips. Life started to spin, then numb at the edges, even the warm summer breeze brushing against his cheek disappeared, taking with it his will to stand.

CHAPTER THREE

That constant creak, creak-creak came again. Will lay there on his back, licking across dry lips as he tried to shuffle through images that explained the noise. Again, just that constant creak, creak-creak, like an unhinged door pushed gently by a breeze. A draft shifted his hair against his face, then swept down his chest, over his abs, his legs—his feet, all to sweep back up. It eased the sweat he could feel lining his body and brow, and helped focus how muggy his mind felt. A gentle lapping added a soft beat to the breeze, and a shift of sheet came at Will's side. Somewhere deep down it made perfect sense to him that the cool sheet covering him would ruffle if a fan was placed close to the bed, but the images didn't quite connect yet, nothing connected yet but the heavy tiredness still trying to pull him down. The comfortable feel of the bed beneath his body offered a place to ground reality, but his arms were held wide, slightly raised, almost as if he was caught mid-fall into some strange, screwed-up dream, the likes of which he hadn't tasted since his college days and the rare few lines of coke.

Dark. This dream was dark. Eyelashes brushed against a silk that was pulled tight against his eyes, making his head hurt from the crushing pressure of the knot caught between pillows and skull. The need was there to rub fingers against the ache, but his hands refused, seeming to want to keep his arms held wide open, welcoming whatever sacrifice he was being offered for. The shift of sheet would brush against his nakedness, and part of him wanted to laugh, maybe cry out at why he'd be naked mid-run, but his throat was too dry, and a run of choking was all he could manage.

That soft creak, creak-creak came to a stop, forcing Will to control his coughing and tilt his ear towards the sound, trying to gauge, to understand why the noise would react to his. But then the creak, creak-creak started again, just at the foot of the bed, off to the left, and it added to the gentle sweep of the fan, the soft lap of the sheet.

A groan, Will relaxed his body completely, giving in to the sounds, how it sang a tripped-out lullaby that pushed him back into the land of dark dreams and naked bodies.

Images shifted in the darkness: black eyes hidden in a curtain of black hair that made life worth living, if only for four short years. But upset... those eyes had always held that shimmer of water, never quite managing to let go of emotion, yet somehow needing to. It had come once, and no foster-parent manual could have warned Will about the fallout. The fight of a thirteen-year-old boy, twisting beneath the covers, calling out the terrors of being left on his own as a toddler. Nothing had broken those tears. Nothing had let Will get close and just hold, just catch him before he fell—

Will cried out, digging his heels into the bed, stretching his head back as he arched his body. Fading dreams nearly had him calling out a name he rarely spoke, and he stopped it before it escaped. As much as the hurt needed a name, he couldn't risk crying it out for fear of losing the memories of all the good that came with the call of it.

The creak, creak-creak came to a stop, and life slipped into sharp focus for Will. Rope bit into his wrists, bringing with it the deep ache of constantly having his arms held wide and raised slightly off the pillows. That same burn was around his ankles as he lay there spread wide. Life was kept in nothing but shadow as a blindfold sent his world into nothing but one huge deprivation tank of sense and sensation.

Move. Will's first tug and kick against the rope was to test the tension, his second and third to test whatever strength it would take to get free, his fourth—cried desperation when he found it didn't matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't move. "Let me fucking *move*."

"Move?" said a voice. "Curious."

"*Humph?*" Will went still hearing the male voice.

"You didn't ask to be let go and—"

"*Let me fucking go.*" Will slammed his head into the mattress. "Let me fucking g—" A heavy creak of bedsprings, Will choked as someone grabbed him by the throat, straining the muscles in his neck. A body and breath pressed in close, coating Will with a threat to never let go if he carried on.

"Watch your mouth, Mr. Chambers. My friend here isn't keen on foul language." Finding it hard to breathe, Will frowned. The male voice had come

from the bottom left of the bed, but someone else, some *friend*, held him down. Friend's breath brushed his face, and Will blinked almost instinctively even though the blindfold blackened out the view. He caught a slight hint of coffee, a stronger scent that echoed the freshness of the forest, or Friend had just been outside and carried it back in with him. It wasn't the type to be bought as a cologne, just a natural scent of life lived in the outdoors. The grip around his throat was hard, vice-like, and more than enough to still Will's mouth. "Good boy." The same male voice from the bottom of the bed, and that creaking started again. The fan had stopped, everything carrying its own fresh chill, but that creak. That damn creak, creak-creak, it came again and Will forced air through his nostrils, making them flare in frustration as Friend's hand patted his cheek. Then the bed took a natural shape as he was left alone.

Will thought about his wallet, his car, but if these two men were local, and they had to be to have gone so far into the forest, they would have taken his things by now and left him alone. A glance through his log cabin patio windows would have given away everything he owned: Will knew he'd forgotten to draw the blinds last night. He bit back a groan. The windows. Were these two opportunists or had they been watching since he'd arrived? When he'd wandered around naked, when he'd....

"Get an eyeful?" he snarled, and the creaking came to a stop again. "You like what you see, you sick—"

A touch brushed Will's outer thigh, causing him to hiss and try to move to the side, away from the onslaught. But the sheet was gathered and Will felt heat touch his cheeks when it was pulled down over his hips, exposing everything he had to the cool air.

"Oh right," said Will. "All about sex, is it?" He snorted coldly, although he was shaking like hell and trying not to show it. "What a disappointment. Trust me to get the fucks who can't think beyond their dicks an—"

"*You wanna see a dick?*" Friend's voice was nothing but heat and hiss against Will's face as his hand crushed between Will's legs, encasing his balls and squeezing until colours exploded behind Will's blindfold. "I'll show you a—" Friend cut his words, but didn't loosen his grip. Will squirmed there, trying to close his legs to ease the intense grip-release-grip agony hitting his body.

“Ease off.” That came from the Voice, now sounding a little tense and close by the bed. Will felt a jolt, almost like a shove, and the grip tore free. Will whimpered release, although the loss of hand and new grip of cold air only seemed to make his balls swell and throb that little worse.

“Right.” That was Mr. Voice again. “If you learn to be a good lad” —The sound came from the bottom of the bed—“you earn the right to do this next trick away from the bed, until then...”

Earn what? “What the hell do you want from me?”

A bottle was pressed against his groin and Will jerked from the cold assault.

“I don’t *want* to have to clean those sheets just yet, Mr. Chambers. I want you to do what’s natural when you awaken in a morning.”

Will tried to shift away, hide from the coldness between his thighs that demanded he react. “It fuh—” He stopped himself swearing, knowing it was Friend who held the bottle against his groin. Will pulled hard on his stomach muscles and heard the rope creak as he did the same to his binds. Half in fear, half in just the need to lie still and disappear buried everything else. He was exposed to the room, to a Friend who was anything but.

“We don’t have all day, Mr. Chambers.”

“Why... what the hell are you doing? *Why* are you doing this?” The need was there to try and grab the sheet, or just curl up and hide what the bottle touched. “Just fuh-tell me.”

“The bottle?” said Voice. “So you don’t make a mess of yourself. Aren’t we good to you?” The creak of a rocking chair started again as Will just groaned his reply. The ache was easing between his thighs, but the insistent need to relieve himself pressed into his groin, followed by a further press of a cold bottle against his tip.

“C’mon, I know you like to mess around with both sides,” said Voice, “so having a guy touch you there should be nothing new for a bi, right? You should enjoy it, really.”

Will reddened. “Elliot,” he spat. “You stink of Elliot and—”

“Now, Mr. Chambers. *I* don’t actually like this, nor does my friend, so can you hurry up, please?”

Bastard. A rough touch forced his tip into the bottle and Will blushed as he started to do what came naturally. The sound grated, hearing his body react and trickle into a container. It was nothing new walking into a restroom and doing what he needed to do; he’d thought nothing of it in the past. Being naked and bound to a bed? Knowing men watched without trying to ignore what was going on? Will finished and twisted his head into the pillow, to try and hide.

“Not so difficult, now was it?”

The blindfold helped. They could see him, but at least he couldn’t see them.

The sound of a cloth being rinsed out came from Will’s right, then the bed depressed at his side. The touch of cool water played havoc with his abs, forcing him to draw on a sharp breath, more from the cold shock over the rough wipes at his stomach, his chest, up, then down his arms. The damp cloth touched his face, forcing Will to twist away for fear of suffocation. But the cloth roughly cleaned despite his protests, leaving fringe, cheeks, and lips slightly damp. His neck now arched slightly, head tilted back, Will chased a bead of water from one corner of his lips to the other as dehydration nibbled at the back of his mind, and as he did, the cloth shifted down his throat, drew dampness over his chest, following the dips and curves to his abs, all to inch towards his thighs.

“Don’t.” He screwed his eyes shut despite being caught in the blackness of the blindfold. “Please.”

“*Beg me again,*” snarled a voice in his ear. Will didn’t, and a rough touch cleaned between his thighs. He received the same coolness with a towel before having the sheet pulled up. Just to his hips, no higher.

The bed took a natural shape as Friend stood, and Will forced relaxation through his body at the thought of being left alone, of not being touched. He hadn’t let anyone touch for such a long time.

A hand slipped under his head, encouraging him to lift up as a bottle went to his lips. Will instantly tried to turn away, in no way trusting the holder, in

no way trusting the contents. An angered sigh was given, then the bottle touched his lips again. A little wetness spilt over his lips, and Will caught the scent and taste of orange juice, not to mention the stickiness as it spilt down his throat. His run had been topped with the basic fluids, nothing more, and the need to drink was there. But trust... there was no trust.

“Drink, Mr. Chambers. My friend here doesn’t seem to have much patience where you’re concerned.”

“Why me?” Will twisted away from the drink as the grip tightened in his hair. “Answer me and I’ll take your sodding drink.”

“Take a drink, and I’ll answer your question,” said Voice, still rocking his way through life on the chair.

A snarl, Will took one swig, and a hand pressed over his mouth and nose to make sure he swallowed. Will choked, struggled, then snarled, “I’d have done it without you doing that,” as the hand moved. He got another pat to his cheek for his effort. “Leave me the hell alone.”

Footsteps moved towards the door, two sets on a hard wood floor. “Wait,” he said, a little puzzled, now forced to raise his head off the bed. “I drank. You said you’d answer my question.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And?”

A sigh. “I didn’t say when, Mr. Chambers.” A door opened. “Get some rest and learn from the lesson. From here on in, if I ask you a question, you answer it.”

“Why... What the hell am I supposed to know?” Will snarled in frustration. “I’m just a bloody linguistics tutor, not even head of my department.”

Quiet, then, “You have time to think about that, Mr. Chambers. You think real hard whilst we’re away.”

The sound of the door closing only added to Will’s frustrated confusion as he pulled at his bonds. Feeling nothing but a sting from the burn of rope around his wrists and the heavy ache in his arms and balls, he let his head drop back onto the pillows.

“*What the hell am I supposed to know?*” he shouted out. Throughout his life, Will hadn’t so much as picked up a speeding ticket. Coke. He’d done a little coke in college, messed around with a few lads, but they’d parted on good terms despite Elliot’s vicious games. Then he’d met Erin, settled, got married as Will’s career had taken off, and he’d moved from Dorset to Lancaster. Even after the split from his wife, there’d only been—

Will cried out. “*Let me fucking go.*” Then groaned. “Just let me fucking move.”

Left with nothing more but to lie there, Will closed his eyes, willing sleep on, anything to blackout the tumbling questions fogging up his head.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Come on, you know you love me.” A hand patted the Kawasaki and Will was transfixed on the bright colours, fixed in a moment where he saw every event unfold in those flecks of red cutting across a black sky, but he was still compelled to answer with the same words: “Enough not to let you kill yourself.”

Standing there with a thousand and one motorbikes, jet skis, and all the other possible mechanical wet dreams a company could throw at a seventeen-year-old (and his foster dad’s seemingly bottomless wallet), Will again questioned why he’d been talked into the Kawasaki Event here at Silverstone. He ran a touch over the leather seat, squeezing gently to hear the creak under his grip. Bikes had never been his “thing.” There’d been a friend back at college who’d lost his leg on one of these beauties, some bad luck over black ice, a brick wall, and a car behind that had also decided to crash the party. Giving a look back at the big goof of a kid that had moved aside to let him get close, Will couldn’t stomach the thought of seeing *him* limp for the rest of his life on a prosthetic leg either. Although, and Will fought a grin here, it would slow the quick little sod down.

“So?” Eyebrows were waggled at him, and a shoulder gently shoved at Will’s. Hands went in pockets, and the coyness was all followed up with a cheeky grin. “Whatd’ya say?” Puppy-dog eyes came next and Will buried a grin seeing all the tricks coming out to play. “Don’t make me pull the *‘kid-who-never-got-anything-because-he-was-left-on-his-own-whilest-his-parents-went-for-a-drink,’*” he took a deep breath, “*‘because-they-were-alcoholics’* card.”

“You finished? Maybe need an oxygen mask after that little speech?” said Will, managing a chuckle as someone buffeted past. Will glanced to his left to try and apologise, but whoever it was had already passed him. A look back, he was a little surprised to see Ryan. Ryan said nothing, never even acknowledged Will, his look solely on—for—black eyes. And those black eyes returned Ryan’s glance, one that lasted no longer than a second, yet also seemed to last a lifetime between the two young men it concerned.

Then it was gone; Ryan walking off into the crowd, a black gaze and a slight blush finding Will. Will's world had just crashed around him, and the catalyst was right there in that young lover's look. Anybody else *but* Elliot's kid.

"Actually, no. Not finished." Another shove made Will stumble a touch. "There was that time last year when you gave me food poisoning."

Will groaned, knowing exactly what was coming out now.

"Oh yeah." Black eyes were so alive. "In bed for days, I was. Couldn't even lift my head off the pillow. All thin, weak, and left whimpering just for some loving an—"

"Hey." Four slaps hit Will's face, stopping a cry he didn't even know he was making. "Up."

No choice was given as a cold, wet cloth rubbed into his face, making him splutter. At the foot of his bed, that rocking started up again, also a gentle tapping, like fingers keeping a gentle beat on wood.

"You've been gone for a few hours, Mr. Chambers. Lunch time. You're going to eat now. And if you do it without giving my friend here any hassle, next time you will be allowed to sit up."

A hand crushed into Will's scrotum, just threatening with the crushing weight.

"Are we clear?" said the Voice.

Will stilled, thinking things over quickly. Being allowed to sit up and eat might mean losing the rope around his wrists so... *Yeah, I can play good.* He nodded, just once, and his scrotum was released.

A touch went to the back of his head, lifting him up a touch, but Will still found he jerked away when something warm and wet touched his lips. The grip tightened in his hair. "I..." said Will, hearing how croaky his voice was. "I... What is it? Please?"

There was quiet, then, "Soup," said Voice. "Tomato." The creaking started again and he was back to rocking in his chair. "I know you don't like any other kind."

Will tried a frown, but it had little effect in the confines of the blindfold. Then the warm spoon demanded access to his mouth again, and Will parted his lips politely even though the need was there to head butt this so-called Friend. The soup was hot, but not enough to burn his mouth. He swallowed fast, wanting to get this out of the way, get Friend's touch off him. The same went for the second and third demand into his mouth, but by the fourth, Will was swallowing fast to ease the hunger pains that cramped stomach muscles.

"Good," said Voice. He sounded older than Friend, and yet both men had patience. The heavy creak gave an impression of weight and it was contrasted with Friend's ability to ghost around and barely stain the room. There was a heavy sting of sweat too. Not from Friend, but from someone who carried extra pounds and cooked a little faster in the midday heat. "Drink, Mr. Chambers."

A sound of spoon going into an empty bowl, Will found his lips were wiped, then a bottle touched his lips. He drank, this time even lifting his head to drink hard and fast. He was thirsty enough to feel as though his throat had glued itself together.

"Good, good," said Voice. Everything went quiet for a moment, and then the bed was given its natural shape as Friend got to his feet.

"Right, Mr. Chambers. Let's make this easy."

"Humph?"

"Three days. Three questions. Three answers."

Will tried to lift his head. "What?"

"Over the next three days, you will be asked three questions. You are to supply an answer for each one."

Will gave a hard sigh and dropped his head back down. "What the hell do you think I know?" He wasn't rich; he had no wealthy family members. The closest to any money was Erin's father, but he'd died and Erin had long-since created a distance of her own between her and Will.

A light tap of finger came on wood, not hurried, showing no impatience. "First day, first question..."

Will waited.

“Tell me the name of the boy you cry out for in your sleep.”

“*Humph.*” It was all that Will had.

Will had never been so nervous, not even since he'd sat looking at the Vice-Chancellor, back at Will's job interview, and feeling more like he was facing expulsion for being caught smoking pot again. If he'd known Elliot was taking the same interview that day, but for a higher job, he'd have deliberately smoked some pot to get thrown out. But today he was dressed for another interview, probably the *only* interview that really mattered, only this time a woman sat opposite, thick black diary weighing her knees down, her handbag resting against her feet as if it sighed relief from not carrying the diary. Maybe he was overdressed, it certainly seemed odd to Will to be suited up in his own living room. But today...

Will gave a deep breath and tried not to mess with his tie.

“Nervous?” Jill smiled over at him, taking a break from filling in her notes.

“Some,” he said, rubbing at his eyes. “First times and all that.”

Jill chuckled, jerking him up from his mumble and forcing him to fight a blush. “I-I didn't mean, *humph.*”

“Take it easy,” laughed Jill, now content to close her diary, then reach down and slip it into her bag. Will swore he heard the thing groan in protest from where he sat. “We could have delayed this until your wife was back, y'know.”

Will shook his head. He'd married Erin just after leaving uni, some seven years ago. Although he'd messed around with both sides, Erin had just felt right, when they'd met in that summer before final exams. They'd settled pretty well, today just seeming a natural progression in their relationship. Erin had taken it hard with not being able to have kids. It was a little unfair now that after all the hard work and jumping through hoops had been done, she'd be half a country away looking after her dad.

Will had worked with social workers through Lancaster University, having been through a number of Child Protection courses more to do with work. Will

usually felt at ease around anyone. Only this social worker, and the panel she came from, had him nearly ready to drop to his knees and beg mercy for whatever sins she wanted to say he'd committed.

"Okay," said Jill, craning her neck to look out of the window, then getting to her feet. "Remember this is just for a few days to start off with, to see how you get along."

Palms a little damp now that he'd eased to his feet too, Will found he was constantly wiping them on the material covering his ass as the doorbell rang. He never shifted, even though this was his house, Jill still seemed to command that air of control. Giving an easy smile, she disappeared into the hall, and the sound of a hatch being flicked, then the front door opening, had Will craning his neck to get a better look.

Jill came back in first, followed by the whole grunge scene: ripped jeans, black hair shaped around an oval face, all the kid was missing was a few piercings.

"Will," said Jill, standing aside, "you already know—"

Will held out his hand and breathed a smile. "James."

A sniff, James looked at Will's outstretched hand, more down at it, then quirked an eyebrow up at Will. "First time nerves, huh?"

Will choked a chuckle. "Something like that."

James took his hand. "Yeah, well, get over yourself, 'cause I'm bloody starving here and in need of a decent *not social care home* meal."

"See, wasn't so hard, was it?" The creaking of a rocking chair had started up again, and with the sound grating on his every nerve, Will found he was already pulling against the ropes, all drenched in sweat, body aching, throat hurting. He'd called it out without realising, and his whole world turned blood red.

"My life—my fucking kid is nothing to do with—" Will struggled to swallow as that same Friendly grip found his throat, slicing his anger in two.

"*Your* kid, Mr. Chambers?" said Voice. Will felt every muscle stretch and protest as his jaw was forced up, his breathing now coming in short, sharp

intakes through his nose. "From what I hear, he wasn't *your* anything," said Voice.

Will flared his nostrils, wanting so much to get his hands free and punch someone. He didn't really care who, just so long as his fist connected with something. But he controlled his breathing, as best he could with the choking hold on his throat. "He was mine," he said flatly. "If you want a father that personifies dick, go look at Ryan's dad."

The grip released his neck, and Will swallowed, the ache from the roughness telling him he'd have bruises there.

"Hmmm. Mr. Mathews. You have issues with Ryan's father?"

Will laughed, and then it turned into a serious sobering up. "Oh-no. One question, three days," he managed to choke out. "Can't change the rules."

"But you're forgetting one thing," said Voice, "and I thought the ball twisting you had already would have been enough to convince you to follow the simple: I say, you do, game."

"Like fuh—" A leg was suddenly between his, pressing into the mattress just a few inches from his scrotum, then Will winced as a fistful of blindfold was grabbed, forcing his head off the pillow with how it caught his hair too.

"There's safety in not seeing," said Voice, although he spoke from the bottom of the bed. Friend's touch teased the blindfold, threatening to pull it off and show Will just what he was missing out on. "Do you want to see, *William*? I mean, really see and risk knowing who we are? Because if you carry on using your mouth..."

The shift in Will was instant, and he quickly tried to turn his head, twist away from the threat of exposure. No. He liked the safety in not seeing. He wasn't a fighter, never had been, and Friend's pat at his face again after his hair was released seemed to acknowledge that.

"Good man, Mr. Chambers." The rocking chair stopped, then gave a last sigh as Voice got to his feet along with Friend. Will was beginning to recognise the length of the creaks, what each one meant. Then he was listening as Friend's footfalls fell away from the bed. That left Voice standing and watching at the bottom there.

“You answered the first question,” he said. “Thank you. Now, do you remember what we said this morning? That if you eat you would be allowed to sit up?”

Will let his head rest back down. “Yeah.”

“Let’s take it one step further.”

A door creaked open, Will knew the sound by how long it lasted, and again polished shoes on wood came back over to the bed. Friend. Something slid onto a surface close by: a unit, then the bed at his side depressed.

“If you eat and drink, my friend here will take you to the bathroom this time.”

That meant this had to be a house of some sort. Will went still. And it also meant having his legs untied, his hands. He couldn’t fight, but he could run. He’d been running most of his life. That sounded really damn good to him. A *shuuush* hit the silence, sounding like it came from the unscrewing of a lid, and true to form, liquid being poured into a glass came next. Friend’s hand came under Will’s head, offering Will up for what was to come, and this time a straw tempted his lips. Sparkling water fizzed Will’s senses, making him choke a little as he drank, but he stored away the knowledge that they seemed to be learning from past mistakes over not using a straw.

“Very good,” said Voice. The man was pacing at the bottom of the bed, his steps not hurried, just stretching stiff muscles. “Can we go for two in a row?”

Softness pressed against Will’s lips and a few crumbs fell onto his neck. A strong scent of mustard cleared his nose, and again Will frowned. Like the soup had been, mustard was one of his favourites. With another nudge to encourage him to eat, Will took the bread, tempted to bite down on the thumb that briefly touched his lips. But ham? Mixed with mustard on soft bread? He nearly groaned his hunger, his need to eat, and after a few moments, Will knew there was nothing left but the brush of hand that wiped away the crumbs.

A sniff, Friend’s weight was gone from Will’s side. Will tried to relax, then failed miserably when a light touch of material brushed his face. At first he panicked, thinking Friend was going completely foe in his attempt to suffocate the hell out of him. But tugs came at Will’s left wrist and Will

caught on that it was the tail of Friend's shirt brushing over his face as he leaned over to untie him.

"Trust is low," said Voice, and a strong hand, bigger than Friend's, pinned Will's free hand back to the bed as Friend untied his other. The need was there to rub at his wrists, just get some feeling back into them, but that relief was denied as a shove at Will's shoulder pushed him awkwardly onto his side, now facing Voice. It was awkward. His legs were still tied, the tendons and muscles in his right one now stretched to hurting, the rope acting like the perfect rack as the pressure of a knee was pushed into Will's back.

A grip under Will's shoulder lifted Will up slightly, then a slight push forward from Friend tipped him forward so Friend could tie Will's arms behind his back. More rope circled Will's wrists, wrapping around the left one once, twice, four times, then the right wrist taking the same treatment before they were knotted together. Will's heart sank a little. Use of his hands was out of the question. Feeling the release of his feet, Will pulled his body up into a tight ball, the sheet slipping free and leaving Will blushing.

"C'mon," said Voice, and a grip under Will had him sitting up, his legs still near enough pulled under him on the bed. "Up." A tap at his legs encouraged him to uncoil and let his feet find the floor. Will toed it first and felt a mix of dust and wood grind against his pads. Then he just sat there for a minute, feeling the ache that spread from his feet, up his legs. Moving made things worse, disturbing muscles that almost seemed happy to sleep the days away. Will screwed his face, wondering how long he'd been here. Two nights? Three?

"Not got the time for this," mumbled a voice, but it wasn't *the* Voice. Seemed Friend could string together more than two words, albeit only all one syllable. An arm slipped underneath Will's, using his bound arms as leverage and forcing him up. Will stumbled forward into a body the size and shape of his, maybe one size up, but not much.

"Off."

Will was pushed to arm's length before an arm slipped under his again, his bound hands making it easy for Friend to take Will's weight and encourage him forward. Will half limped, half walked, dragging his right foot slightly

with the stretching the muscles had taken. The movement was awkward, and frustrated Will hated how he relied on someone else for such basics steps. Brought to a stop, Will was forced to wait as a door was pushed open. This one had a different sound to it, a little lighter as its creak spread out into an echo. Pulled forward again, he found wood floor gave way to cool tile. It could have been an en suite; Will couldn't really tell. For all he knew, Friend could have led him into a corner of a disused building to take care of business. He couldn't remember anything after being knocked out: if they'd driven, walked. Maybe he was back at the Mill. Will nodded privately to himself. That would make sense. It wouldn't take much to get this place set up, add a generator, bring a bed in. He felt a little sick. That meant a hell of a lot of pre-planning here, and personal information... they knew what flavour of soup he liked, how he loved the sting of a little heavier spread of mustard on his sandwich—that he wasn't James's dad.

He groaned, or at least recognised that the groan hitting the silence was his as Friend stopped him and twisted him around. Will grunted as a foot kicked at his ankle, forcing his legs apart, then a body shaped his from behind. Will looked away. Despite being blind, he still looked away as his dick was taken in hand.

“Andy Morgan,” he mumbled.

A snarl hit the silence as Will was pushed forward by a strong grip in his hair, the hand on his dick now playing hell with his scalp. “Who the fuck's Andy Morgan?” Friend couldn't have sounded any rougher, and Will winced as the grip in his hair forced his head up.

“James's dad,” said Will, hoping it sounded calm, even though he wanted to blurt it out on a startled cry. “That's you.” It made sense. Although the bastard had never been there for James, it would make perfect sense for him to want revenge. James *had* been in Will's care.

Friend gave a snort, and Will found he could move again as he was pulled back to mould the man behind. “Try again,” came the whispered snarl against his ear. An arm had slipped around Will's waist, fingers now holding onto his hip. Will could feel Friend's body digging into his, lower back to flat stomach, soft curve of ass to the press of a groin that had Will fighting the need to shake him off.

A breath kept brushing his left shoulder blade, but it seemed very deep, very carefully controlled. Maybe too controlled. Friend's hand drifted down Will's abs, tracing almost absently through the wiry offering of pubic hair, all to drift down his shaft. Nose and lip replaced the brush of breath, just easing over the curve of Will's neck, taking, tasting his scent. Lip turned to nip, but the strong brush of fingers down his dick still had that distracted feel as Friend played him root to tip.

"Please." said Will. The beginnings of a long and heavy hard-on pressed into his hip. "Stop."

"*Humph.*" The contact was gone and Will was pushed forward slightly, the grip on his hips keeping him steady. Nature's call came next, more through fear of being on such unsteady ground and chasing that teetering over a cliff feeling. The sound was unmistakable, though, the filling up of a toilet, and then the tug on a lever added the final confirmation that a toilet was flushed.

"Anything else?"

Will swallowed—hard. "No." His voice sounded a little high.

"Sure?"

"Absolutely fuh—"

The swear word was cut short as Will was pushed to the side. Friend really didn't like swearing. Will wondered how he'd get on with Ryan's dad. Elliot—

Will stumbled, nearly fell, but the security of a wall saved him, and he quickly huddled into it, needing its comfort as he clawed his nakedness into it.

"Shower."

Will groaned. "What?" he said in a ghost of a voice.

"You need one."

Buffeted slightly, cold metal slipped over Will's head, and he panicked as a choker chain settled at the base of his throat. A tug tightened it, then a light clink was heard in time with a chain's rattle just a few inches above his head. Will instinctively tried to shift back, down—anything to pull away, but he came to a choking stop as the tether to the chain kept him still, almost forcing him onto the front pads of his feet

Will's world became a whole lot smaller as water blasted his head. He cried out, not that the water was hot or scalding, but he'd been chained up like a wild animal in desperate need of a wash, and he was better than that—better than this.

“Why me? I’ve done nothing to you.”

Nothing came, and Will tried to twist away from the water, curl up in the corner somewhere and be allowed to find some dignity with covering himself up. The ropes bit into his arms, the chain choked his throat, and part of him welcomed the hurt, welcomed the anger. If he had the will to fight, then he wasn't an animal to be trained.

A body came in quick behind his, shaping him again, all naked, all toned, touching his, and he cried out again, mostly in fear, the rest in anguish with how his own body cried a sudden *hell yes* to the contact.

Hair gripped, Will was forced to press his forehead against the wall, and he was held there until he got the hint not to move, not to struggle. “I’ve never fucked anyone against their will.”

Will forced his breathing to calm. The heat off Friend's hard-on was there, but it was contrasted coolly with the calmness of his control. “Stay that way. Please.”

Giving a grunt, Friend shoved him forward, and Will turned his face at the last moment to stop himself smacking into the tile. Friend seemed to take a step back, then a rough sponge with rougher handling had Will trying to cower into the wall, just to slot himself in somewhere and not have part of his body on display. Strokes came at his shoulder blades, rough at first, then gentler as Will forced calmness. The touch moved down to his lower back, then spent time stroking the curves of his ass. Attention was paid to his legs, but there was no lingering, nor when it came to Will's groin. He was left alone for a moment and water was allowed to wash the assault away. But then shampoo rubbed into his scalp, sending foaming bubbles over his chest and back, and it soon made him feel dirty again. The most humiliating part came when the water was turned off and a toothbrush demanded access to his mouth. Will complied, to get this hell over with—he complied.

Grateful for small mercies, Will was left alone to drip-dry in the corner. Shuffling came from close by, like Friend was towelling himself dry.

“Good boy.” That was bitten out sarcastically as the chain to Will’s throat was unfastened and allowed to clank back against the wall. A towel finished what the air-drying hadn’t, but it was brief, clinical—just to get the job done.

The draft from the open door caused a shiver from Will, and he gave a groan as he was pulled towards the draught. “Clothes,” he managed to choke out against his own nakedness. Only a snort was his reply, and panic took full control for the first time, enough to cause Will’s breathing to rattle and gasp, now knowing he was nothing more than a hamster on a wheel forced to constantly run for a vicious crowd. Will was suddenly struggling away from the grip on his arm, shoulder shoving Friend once, twice, then giving a cry as Will managed to make a break for the door.

He hit the frame first, feeling his nose and top lip split under the run and hit; then Will landed on the floor, the wind forced out of his lungs as he went down hard. The blind stumble into the door frame had only half-caused his screw-up, the weight from Friend, all shouts and cries joining the riot, did the rest as Will was slammed into from behind.

“Bloody idiot,” shouted someone. Voice. And then Will found he was somehow back on the bed, being dumped down, not really understanding how or why he got there.

“Breathe.” A body straddled Will’s, and Will caught Friend’s woodland cologne as a hand under Will’s jaw forced him to keep still. “Slow your *fucking* breathing.”

That wasn’t really a problem for Will. His head, and the taste of blood in the back of his mouth, they all came on a cloud of almost drug-induced sleep. Will didn’t mind that so much. He wanted to sleep now.

CHAPTER FIVE

Twice he was woken throughout the afternoon, leaving Will feeling like a teen fighting his father's strong grip as he tried to stir him into life. A rougher tone to "wake up" came this time around, but Will's answer was the same, just a grunt, a wish to cover his eyes and curl to his side. He never quite managed either, his hands and feet stuck in some kind of cement that only allowed knee and elbow joints to move. It didn't seem to matter that much, he needed his sleep. Eventually no one had come to shake him away from the night, not even the raised voices that sometimes filtered through from behind closed doors.

If Will could have stayed like this, mind numb and hidden in blackness, he would have done, but now the insistent chirp of a bird and the warm breeze blowing the sheet over his body eased him back into reality. That creak, creak-creak was there, and Will let a sigh escape, for the first time actually finding comfort in the rhythm. The sound continued, never breaking pace, almost seeming to understand it was calming life down for Will.

A dull thud, thud-thud, started to creep in with the gentle creak, creak-creak, and Will tried to frown at the pain in his head. The side of his lip felt thick, and a swipe of his tongue caught a coppery taste, then a fine line of a cut. He winced, but mostly from the hint of disinfectant that left a bitter aftertaste on his tongue and in his throat.

"How's your head, Mr. Chambers?"

Will tried to lift the offending body part off the bed, but gave up as life spun a touch. The blindfold still blocked out the world and the rope was back, holding him out for sacrifice, keeping feet and arms out wide. Will groaned and gave another lick of his lips. "Hurts."

As the gentle creak, creak-creak kept pace to the chorus of birds outside, Will found a hand slip under his head and lift him from the pillow. Something pressed against his lips, but Will was too tired to question anything any more. He opened his mouth slightly and a tablet slipped onto his tongue. The coolness of a glass came next, and Will took a swallow of water to wash the tablet down before another was put on his tongue.

“And here was me thinking we were making progress,” said Voice as Will drank some more water, for a brief moment choking on the bitter and gritty aftertaste of paracetamol as he was allowed to rest back down. “Looks like we’re back to square one.”

Will felt the sheet slip off his body and he made a half-hearted attempt to pull his leg up and into his body, cover himself up. He felt cold despite a heat running through him, and a hand dusted his outside thigh, stroking there, as he shivered without the covers.

“Temperature is up. You’ve not been taking care of yourself too well lately,” said Voice, his tone hard. “The paracetamol will help with that. I need you focused and compos mentis for today. Please concentrate and all of this will be over with soon.”

Will didn’t bother with an answer. A damp cloth started to brush between his thighs, over his hips, the flat of his stomach—the coldness of the water now more room tempered. Either that, or the heat off his body warmed it, and the feel of cloth skating his skin now offered a more calming feeling than sense could explain. Left there, his body all damp in an almost morning chorus heat, Will tilted his ear as something was placed to the floor, then came water being poured. The weight on the bed changed slightly as Friend came in close. The tail of a shirt tickled at Will’s abs, then a leg drew between his as a hand went next to Will’s head, taking the weight of the man above him. A breath brushed Will’s face, then that same woodland scent drifted over his senses. A moment later, a softer, more tentative brush of cloth came at Will’s face. It cooled the heat on his cheeks and dampened the hair to his fringe as it claimed his forehead. Then, in the wake of the damp cloth, a thumb swept his lips, tracing the contours of his mouth as if chasing the echo of a past smile.

Everything about Will whispered into life, throwing him headlong into one hell of a mixed-up mess. His moan was soft, the slight arch of his back welcoming the ride of a different heat. And the touch stroking gently at the corner of his mouth followed it, everything coming full circle. Whatever crazed infection Will had, it seemed to seep naturally into Friend, the swell against Will’s own hip matching his, as if souls had already long since mated and now simply sighed into coming back together.

“Please,” said Will, confused, and knowing his need was on full display. “Let me go.”

The thumb stilled on Will’s lips. Friend’s breath was held close; then giving a snort, he was tugging the sheet back up over Will, pushing away—off. He even took two steps from the bed, putting a distance between them with a hard escape of air that measured the safety.

The creaking started again, or maybe it had never stopped, Will didn’t know; even the birds seemed to still for a moment back there. But this time that patient tap of fingers came on the wood of an armrest, and it counted the seconds.

“Second day, Mr. Chambers.”

Will groaned out loud. “Please. No.”

The soft slide of a drawer opening came from Will’s left, the creaking of the chair continuing at the bottom of the bed, and then there was a rummaging around for something. Wrapping was removed, then a dull thud came as Friend placed the item on the bedside unit. The strike of a match registered somewhere—then was lost as the scent of a candle drifted under Will’s senses.

He cried out, hating the winter warm cinnamon flavour that seemed to rush like a thick wave of blood over him. “Don’t.” It was all he could manage. Tears dampened his blindfold, but even they were held captive, not given permission to fall properly as he arched his back, crying out again. “Fucking don’t.”

“Second question. And it’s the simplest one.” The creaking of the rocking chair stopped. “What went wrong?”

“Fuck you—fuck you, fuh—”

Under cover of darkness, Will pulled his Rover onto his drive, wincing as the tyres skidded under the fresh cover of snow. His teaching skills must have been slipping, forcing him to spend a few hours with an undergraduate until well after sundown. The lady, a more mature student, had been bright, but she’d googled Chomsky and had stood there trying to debate how

prescriptivism should be banned for stifling creativity. Will had resigned himself to the inevitable, knowing that even the best minds in linguistics get bloody when it came to prescriptive versus descriptive approaches. The sanest option was Halliday's functional approach: use both when the need arises, but the lady hadn't googled Halliday yet. And as it was only the fourth day of the course, she hadn't exactly been introduced properly to the functional approach yet either.

It had been a long few hours, ended by how he'd seen no wedding ring on her fingers although there was a tan line there. Wiping at his eyes, Will sat there in the car and groaned. He was getting slow, and certainly well past being available. Erin had left nearly two years ago, the pressure over losing her father wearing her memories down. Things had ended... frighteningly well, with James still visiting her every other weekend. Although that had eased off over the past few weeks.

Giving a sigh, Will pushed out of the Rover and locked up. The black scarf tucked neatly into his long overcoat didn't exactly do much to protect him against the chill of the thick, falling snow, and he quickly turned his collar up to the cold as he made a careful track over to the house. At least James's motorbike was tucked up on the driveway, no tracks visible anywhere to say he'd risked breaking the law by riding it. He wasn't old enough, not yet. James had been off from university with flu, missing the first few days back, which had only added to Will's concerns over James riding the motorbike. At seventeen, he'd picked up a natural flair for language, taking his A-levels at 15 when most weren't even settling down for their GCSEs. Excelling skills had gotten him into university early, right next to Ryan in Elliot's class, and Will wanted to keep him safe enough in order to get through it.

After managing to work cold fingers and get his key into the lock, Will scowled at the door before pushing it open. Will had said nothing to James about Ryan after the bike show a few days back, mostly hoping that James had worked Ryan out of his system. James certainly hadn't mentioned anything, and Will, his selfish side, really needed Ryan to stay away from James's radar. It had been a shock, discovering James was gay, but Will didn't have a problem with that, he understood. But... Ryan. Anybody else *but* Ryan and his head case of a father.

Letting the door close behind him, Will unwrapped his scarf and threw it over the coat stand keeping watch by the door. The heat was on, already warming his cheeks, but it was the scent wafting through from the living room that had Will frowning a smile. After shaking himself free of his coat and giving that a home, Will gave a good stretch, then followed the mix of hot jacket potato and cinnamon as he headed on through to the living room. “Aw, kid, all this effort just for—”

Candles. Will should have noticed the candles first: about half a dozen set at various heights around his living room. Maybe a small part of him did: the scent certainly gave everything away, but nothing mattered, only James. Bare-chested, hands diving beneath jeans as tongues fought a battle of heat and need that bested any starving man, James lay beneath Ryan.

Breathing became hard, everything that mattered in life became hard, all blurred at the edges but for the two young men tentatively testing each other out on the settee.

“Stop.” At first it was a whisper, just a rush of air that passed his lips, maybe followed by a groan, then, loud enough to cause both Ryan and James to jerk their glances over in Will’s direction, he shouted, “For godssake stop.”

Ryan was the first to react. A scramble to his feet saw him grab his T-shirt off the floor and quickly tug it down his body. “Will—”

“*Chambers*,” shouted Will, taking a step back, “My name’s Mr. Chambers to you.”

Where Ryan had stilled at the cry, James was busy coming over, grabbing Will’s arms and trying to push him back, out of the living room. Will wouldn’t take his gaze off Ryan, who was now fumbling around for his phone.

“Please, for godssake, Will,” hushed James, and the look in his eyes pleaded just that, for some calm, some order, maybe understanding. “I’m sorry. I’ve been trying to find a way to tell you. I’ve—”

Will’s cold laugh stopped everything, even James took a step back as Will ran his hands through his hair. “Oh you... You stupid boy.” Will tried to bury the sickness churning his stomach. “You’ve got no idea what you’re doing.”

James looked at Ryan. Will thought it was for support from the older boy, but when James looked back, that old head of his seemed to take control.

Maybe it was due to being forced to hunt through black bags and find his own food, sit there eating in a corner on his own, but the look in black eyes took control of the situation so very easily.

“I like Ryan,” he said quietly, “more than a lot. I love everything that you’ve done for me, but this,” he pointed back at Ryan, who had finished whispering in to the phone, “us. We’re good, so bloody good together. You—”

“Ryan,” said Will, trying his best to sound calm. “You need to go.”

“Will,” said James. “Just listen, please.”

“Now.” Will never even looked at James. “I need, I need some time alone to talk to James, and you...” Will closed his eyes briefly. “You need to go home.”

“Mr. Chambers—”

“Fucking go.”

James grabbed hold of Will’s arms, but all Will wanted, all he needed was for Ryan to leave them alone for five minutes. This needed to be sorted now. Part of Will knew he shouldn’t have left it this long, but he’d hoped.... Yet James was there, pushing him back like Will wanted to tear Ryan apart, when that wasn’t it, not at all. He just needed Ryan to go.

“Get out, Ryan, or I swear I’ll—”

“What?” The Voice brought Will’s thoughts to a cold halt. Will hadn’t spoken, not said a word, and yet the Voice knew—he bloody well knew. “What would you have done, Mr. Chambers?”

“Not what his fucking father thought.” Neck stretched back, Will gave a cry and then fought heart and soul against the bindings. *“I wouldn’t have ever hurt him.”*

Someone buffeted Will, then another pair of hands grabbed him by the collar and sent him back against the wall. “What the fuck is your problem with my kid?”

Elliot. Will stifled a groan as dark brown eyes called out every ounce of fight in Will, yet at the same time the hands roughing up his jacket threatened

to strangle every ounce of fight out of him. “*Dad.*” Ryan was there, grabbing at Elliot’s arm, or trying to at least, but Elliot pushed him away.

“I asked a question.”

Will laughed again, let his hands find his hair, then gave a violent shove at Elliot’s shoulders. “Get him out.” Will was there in Elliot’s face now. “Get him the fuck out of here.”

“Got a problem, have we, Will?” Elliot’s lip curled in a sneer, one Will wanted to knock off his face. “A little worried what people are gonna say about the fag of a foster dad who turned his foster son into a fag too?”

“Fuck you.” Will pushed Elliot again. “*Fuck you, Matthews.*”

“All right—all right. Stop,” said James, pushing between them, “just stop. Please—please.”

Will should have listened, just took a step back and saw what was going on with James, how grief had started to fall so easily. After so many years of keeping it back, it fell so easily now. But Elliot still had that same goddamn sneer to his face.

“Gay?” James’s voice had been nothing but a whisper, but Elliot was all that Will saw. Elliot. They’d grown up together, mostly on the opposite side of the road with Elliot throwing stones in Will’s direction. They’d gone to the same primary school, then secondary, followed by college, and Elliot had played the same vicious game every time, chasing every kiss Will gave to a girl with whispers in the girl’s ear over how Will played around with men. Then he’d chase each of Will’s kisses to a guy with a call of fag—always followed by that goddamn sneer. For someone who had the intelligence to get to the head of the linguistic department in the same university as Will, Elliot came with every stain of foul going.

“Out.” Will calmed everything about him. “Take your kid and keep him the fuck away from mine.”

“Reputation?” said James quietly, and Will looked at him. “You?” James seemed to search for something. “Your fucking reputation? That’s what all this is about?” His eyes widened a touch. “Oh, what? It isn’t bad enough you’ve already got a wreck of a kid with alcoholics for parents who used to beat the

shit out of him? You...” Another tear fell, “adding gay to your closet shit-list is just a little too much, is it? Did you even tell Social Services that you’re bi, or did you miss that minor detail off just so you could try and play happy family?”

“No.” *Christ.* Will took one step towards him; James took two steps back. “For godssake, James,” he said quietly, arms falling in defeat to his sides, “this I... you don’t understand. Elliot—”

“Yeah? All the shit over him playing big-guy bully with you? I do. And you know what?” James’s arms had taken a slight shift from his sides, the normal pose of a bird just getting ready to take flight. “Fuck you, Will.” And he was pushing past, with Will crying hurt and trying to catch hold of James’s wing to stop him from leaving. As Will tried to follow, Elliot pushed Will against the wall, holding him still. “You let them sort this,” snarled Elliot as Ryan took off after James. “You back off an—”

A dull thud followed by the sound of kicked over milk bottles forced Will’s gaze towards the door, followed automatically by Elliot’s. There was such a quiet to the night then, that knowing that something’s happened in the distance and you can’t see it. All you can do is turn your ear towards the noise.

And then it came. Ryan cried his dad’s name and Elliot was suddenly shifting for the front door. Will stayed there, breathing hard, heavy, just listening, watching the flicker of cinnamon candles in the winter breeze.

“Will.”

It should have jerked him into gear. There was a lot of anguish and urgency to Elliot’s call of his name, but Will refused to move. “Will.”

The second cry had the desired effect, and Will was out of the living room, pushing past Ryan as he stood trying miserably to thumb the buttons on his mobile, then Will was crumpling down next to James.

“Slipped.” Ryan was sobbing, trying to wipe away his tears so he could see the phone. “He ran and I couldn’t stop him. Slipped.” Ryan nodded as Elliot was there, pulling the phone from his son’s hand, grabbing him hard into a hold yet still managing to use the phone. “Dad, he just slipped and...”

Will had removed his jacket, and now lifted James’s head off the corner of the concrete step that had taken on a deep shade of cinnamon crimson. One of

the empty milk bottles put out earlier had skidded a little way down the pathway. That wasn't the problem. Another, looking like it had bounced off the first and stayed where James had fallen, was broken in pieces around James's head, leaving this strange swirl of milk mixing with blood, snow, and a mosaic of shattered glass. "S'okay, kid." Will kissed at James's forehead. "S'okay."

Will lay there, not moving, breathing now so completely controlled. "You need to let me go."

That creak, creak-creak started again, the pace a little quicker. "Why, Mr. Chambers? Your boy lasted what? One week in intensive care with a shattered skull? Do you think he had the option to get up and walk away?"

"Let me go."

"I didn't catch that, Mr. Chambers."

"Let me fucking go an—"

A body pressed down on Will's as a hand gripped his throat. "*Mouth.*" The grip shifted slightly, so did the weight on top of Will, almost doubly making sure that he got the hint to keep oh so still. "*Third question, fuck the days.*"

Will couldn't breathe, and it wasn't because of the grip choking his throat—he knew what was coming now.

"What," was spat against Will's face, "what didn't you tell James?"

CHAPTER SIX

“Have I convinced you yet?” Ignoring all other bikes on display at the bike show, yet maybe keeping an extra eye out for Ryan, James started to pace the motorbike as Will forced himself to focus on the leather that creaked under his own touch. “Come on.” James was almost dancing. Will knew if he left the kid hanging on any longer, James would swing into full mosh-pit mode: all energy and a will to get noticed and not lost in the crowd kicking in.

“You never even cleaned your room this morning.”

“Uh-huh, like that is it?” James gave a sniff to his nose, then giving a cry—he fell to his knees and gripped at Will’s leg, his head hugging close to Will’s hip. “Don’t leave me, please, Dad,” he cried at the top of his voice, and Will instantly tried to shove him off as he grimaced a smile at the people who turned heads in their direction. “Dad, I love you. And, my room—I’ll promise to pick up that one lone sock up off my cold—*damp*—”

“Get up—”

“—carpetless, cell of a windowless room—”

“Get *up*,” Will forced through his teeth, not knowing whether to laugh or run and hide underneath several thousand rocks with how people were staring.

But James wasn’t finished. “Even though I share that small room with five, like—eight, eight other of your shirtless, shoeless off-springs. We all love you, Dad, s—”

“For godssake, Jay, *pleeeeeease*.”

Giving a grin up at Will, James pushed to his feet and started to dust down Will’s jacket, then he looked at the onlookers. “Okay, move on. Nothing to see here.” He waved the bewildered bunch away, and they carried on with a few shoulder shrugs and wide-eyed glances back at them. “Mmmm,” said James, now patting his own jeans down. “Don’t do the whole ‘look at me, I’m gorgeous’ thing too much, do you, Will?”

“You’ve got enough showmanship for both of us,” said Will, fighting off the burns on his cheeks as the sales rep finally came over, now the man had stopped wetting himself with laughter over in the distance.

“So.” The salesman grinned at Will. “I take it that this young chap’s got his eye on this bike?”

Will rolled his eyes. “The whole pleading thing a usual around here, is it?”

The salesman nodded. “You’d be surprised.”

“At what?”

Will stilled hearing the voice and turned to see Elliot Matthews just about manage to stop someone bumping into him. “Mr. Matthews.” James dug his hands in his pockets and literally beamed at Elliot. “I’ve just seen Ryan.” He thumbed behind him. “That way.”

Elliot glanced past James. He was messing with his mobile and didn’t look happy about something. “I told him to keep his ass close,” he mumbled distractedly.

James’s blush turned a few shades deeper, X-rating his thoughts, no doubt with thoughts on what could happen if Ryan brought his ass back close. “You like the bike?” said James to Elliot, and as Elliot looked it over, his eyes lit up a touch. “Bloody gorgeous, lad.”

Will was pushed aside as Elliot came between them, his back now to Will.

“Ryan said, hmm. I heard you used to own a Kawasaki,” said James, crouching down next to Elliot as Elliot inspected some biker thing Will had no clue about. “Yeah,” said Elliot, and he cocked James a smile. “You chose this one, huh?”

James nodded, then his smile slipped. “Is it okay?”

Elliot gave a Hmmm. “A bit much for a first ride. Have you had lessons?”

“Yeah, Will’s made sure of it. He thinks I should go safer with smaller.”

Elliot snorted but Will ignored it. “It might be the safer option, yes.” Elliot looked James over. “But you look like you’ve got the body type to handle her.”

“Yeah?”

Will nearly groaned out loud at the pitch of excitement from James.

“Yeah,” said Elliot, getting to his feet, then stepping aside to let James climb on. “You take after Will more than you think with riding the wild.”

Elliot was gone then, off into the crowd, leaving James testing the motorbike out, and Will frowning down at his feet. “James, I’m just going for a,” Will shifted his head towards the toilets, “y’know.”

James was peering down at the opposite side of the bike. “Hmm. Sure. Whatever. Just don’t run off.” James waggled his eyebrows. “Dude, I know where you live.”

One last warning look for James to grow up, Will made his way through the crowds of people and headed on over to the restrooms. There was a throng of men inside, vying for space, and Will got a sympathetic tap on the elbow off a guy in a wheelchair. The man had just come out of the disabled toilets and he thumbed behind him. “If you’re quick, you can catch the door before it closes and go in there.”

Will looked back into the men’s room, then at the closing door. Hating himself for it, Will slipped over by the disabled toilets and winked his thanks to the guy in the wheelchair. He took care of business and washed up, resigning himself to the fact that he was going to have to dip into his savings as soon as he walked out the door. But James wasn’t spoilt, as a matter of fact, this was the first time he’d set his heart on something and asked. Most of it stemming back to his days with his parents and getting more than the odd bruise for his troubles. Will couldn’t stop the sadness in his smile. It was good that he was asking, or trusted enough to ask. Will would have given him anything he called for just to get him to ask.

After giving his hands a good wipe, Will grabbed his wallet and pulled open the door.

The wallet was pinched from his hands, and Will was forced to back up a few paces as Elliot came into the disabled toilet and closed the door behind him. He wore black jeans, boots, a shirt that was always pulled out in a throwback to his school bully days.

Elliot started looking through Will’s wallet, and he offered a smile. “See your dinner money’s improved over the years, Chambers.”

Will held his hand out, and Elliot, cocking a brow, flipped the wallet shut and slipped it in his back pocket.

Will eased into a smile. “Think you’re funny?”

Elliot stepped closer, slipped his arms around Will’s waist, and then gave a hard sigh as he rested his head against Will’s. “I’m pissed off, and that makes me cranky.” He pulled back, and Will found he was looking up into a gaze that said “pissed” didn’t even come close. Elliot shifted and pulled his mobile from his pocket before holding it up for Will to look at. “Switched yours off, hmm?” he said, and Will held the steady gaze. His phone wasn’t exactly off, but it was in the glove box to his Rover. “I thought you told me you had private tutoring booked for today?” said Elliot quietly, throwing his mobile on the side, then letting his hands find Will’s ass. With a gentle tug, Will’s hips dug into Elliot’s, causing friction. Giving an uneasy sigh, Will slid his hands up Elliot’s arms, feeling all the stress and tension as Will rested his head against Elliot’s.

“Will, just be straight with me when you want time out with just you and James, yeah?” Elliot breathed quietly, then a kiss brushed Will’s cheek. “I’m a dad too, y’know. I understand.”

“A pissed off and cranky one, and one that used to pinch my dinner money, lock me inside the stationary cupboard, then throw stones at me when you let me out.” Will offered a frown topped off with a smile. “I’ve grown up with your twisted version of understanding, Matthews.”

Elliot chuckled softly, and Will found it naturally spread to him as he smiled. “Yeah, well. You dodged most and spent the rest of your time running away from me.”

“You can be scary when you’re pissed off.” Will slipped his arms around Elliot’s neck and Elliot stole a kiss. This guy wasn’t so tough. They played for a moment, bodies that had been on slow burn since they’d untangled from each other last night now didn’t take long to run into the danger of throwing any sense of control right out of the restroom window. Thoughts of bare skin on bare skin, hardness on hardness—it took Will every ounce of his soul to not strip Elliot bare and take him up against the wall.

“You stole my dinner money,” breathed Will in between his kiss, and Elliot choked a chuckle that seemed to rattle down into Will’s bones.

“You stole my soul first,” whispered Elliot, then pulling back, an edge came to his eyes, and he slipped his hands into Will’s jeans to feel his ass. “Beg me nicely, I might—might let you have your money back. I get to keep your soul, though.”

“Hmmm?” Will kissed at the nape of a soft neck, nipping, marking, but he’d started to shake and Will found he was pushed away to allow Elliot’s gaze to search his.

“What the hell’s this, Will?” Elliot brushed at Will’s cheek, taking away a runaway tear.

“This needs to stop.”

“Huh? What—us?” Elliot frowned. “Where the hell has this come from?” He took his hands off Will’s ass, but traced down to one of Will’s hands and held it.

“Christ, Elliot.” Will went in close again, his forehead resting hard against Elliot’s, their lips almost touching. “I can’t lose him.”

“Who?”

“James. Him and Ryan,” said Will quietly, “they’re seeing each other.”

Elliot pushed him away a touch. “They’re what?”

Will wiped a hand over his face. “Elliot, you should see how they look at each other.”

“*Humph*, okay.” Elliot gave a deep, hard sigh. “We can work this. It’s not *unworkable*.”

Will let out a laugh, but it was cold and a little horrified. “Make it work?”

“Will—”

“Do you... ah.” Will turned away and ran a hand through his hair, wanting so bad to cry out what he was feeling. “Social Services.”

“Wait, what?” Elliot screwed his face. “James is seventeen. Social services—”

“*He’s in full time education, Elliot.*” Will tried to force control, but he was close to losing it. “They’re involved until he turns eighteen. *I could lose him if they find out about this, this—*”

“This what?” said Elliot, his voice now flat.

“This whole fucked up mess.”

“So little Will Chambers does what he always does, huh?” Elliot was over by him, in Will’s face. “He runs, so far lost in his own world he doesn’t give a fuck about anyone else.”

“I care about James.”

“I fucking *love* you.”

“Stop.” Will knew the natural fit of the body against his now. “Elliot, for godssake, what the hell are you doing to me?” he cried, fighting his grief and failing miserably. “I lost him. I still lost him—”

The blindfold was pulled roughly off, forcing Will to blink against the onslaught of light, then hands gripped either side of his face as Elliot cried out and rested his head against Will’s. There was a year’s full of grief in those brown eyes, but also so many more years of not loving, of not allowing himself to love. “Christ, Will, you never even recognised my voice; you’re that fucking lost in his echo.”

Elliot forced Will’s head back, stretching his throat, kissing along it and digging his hips into Will’s. His touch was so familiar and honest, Will’s body reacted with natural ease, back arching and a sudden relaxing, an opening up of his throat to give Elliot access.

“So tonight,” snarled Elliot against the bites, “this one night, I’m taking what belongs to me and making sure the father walks away having felt something other than hurt.”

Will groaned out loud as Elliot traced a rough path down between Will’s thighs and stroked along the heat and hardness he found.

“Christ, when was the last time you came, Will?”

“Elliot.” That was less of a cry, more a murmur as Will tested the rope at his feet and dug his heels into the bed, lifting his hips with a need to feel every inch of Elliot’s touch. Elliot shifted quickly, swamping Will’s body with his own, hands slipping underneath Will’s bound arms to pull him into a hard

hold. Fingers dug into Will's shoulders, claiming, digging; lip and nip chased Elliot's jaw, stirring shivers down the length of Will's body, and Elliot's own clothed bump and grind of his hips into Will's naked body had Will high on everything that was Elliot.

"Would it be so bad?" breathed Elliot into his ear, and he followed it with a bite to the tender lobe. "If I took you now, like this," Elliot's hands traced along the ropes, then found Will's bound hands, "would it really be so bad if I took you bound down like this, Will?"

Almost hiding in the curve of Elliot's neck, Will ignored the dampness from his eyes, and gave a gentle shake of head. There had never been anything wrong with having Elliot take anything from him.

Will threw his head back as Elliot kissed his way down over Will's chest, nipping at a bud, then teasing a slower kiss down Will's abs all to kiss just below Will's navel. Feeling Elliot kiss lower, then take him in his mouth, Will cried to have his hands and feet free. He wanted to run this time too, but with Elliot, not against him, just cry yes to every scar Elliot kissed open, make contact himself, and let him know he wasn't alone. Elliot seemed so alone.

Will cried frustration. Elliot had always seemed so alone.

But he was right there now, shifting up and kissing Will roughly, taking a breather at times to whisper how everything was okay. It wasn't, but it didn't seem wrong to pretend just for a few moments. Will returned the heat, drawing on Elliot like a lifeline to the living, and he moaned at how good Elliot felt.

"Christ, Will." Elliot settled into the curve of Will's throat. "The things you do to me." There was a slight lift of Elliot's hips, then Elliot freed himself and Will caught his breath feeling the trace of wetness Elliot's tip made as he crushed their hips together.

"Missed this so much." Elliot bit at Will's throat. "So bloody much, baby."

There was no pain as Elliot pushed inside, but Will bit into Elliot's shoulder to bury everything else that slammed into his body. Elliot's arms were back around him, holding him tight, and despite how his fingers were marking, threatening to tear Will apart with the need to take, maybe hurt for being hurt, Elliot's pace inside of him was so first-time tentative.

“Love you, Will Chambers,” breathed Elliot, and Will dug his heels in, using whatever freedom he had to arch up into each thrust into his body. Elliot became wilder, jerking Will beneath him as Elliot cried out his need to come. Will beat him to it, stretching his head back and gripping onto the ropes as he came. His pace still hard, Elliot cried release a few seconds later, then hearts were left to pound against each other in the come-down as Elliot relaxed everything he had into Will.

Arms aching from the ropes, and his head thumping its own beat with the release his body had been allowed, Will frowned feeling dampness against his throat. Elliot was still cuddled in, but now it was more in defeat.

“Elliot?”

Giving a sniff, Elliot lifted his head only to press their foreheads together. “You kill me, Will. Every fucking time.” Will went to speak but a hand pressed against his mouth. “My transfer over to Oxford starts next week, and...” He shrugged and a tear fell. “And I need to leave all this—” The hand was replaced with a brief kiss. “—all this behind.” He gave an angered sigh. “I’m sorry, for everything: for the past few days, for not stopping Jay walking out that door.” His frown hurt. “The stones.” He nodded. “I’m sorry for the stones too. But for twelve months, although we hid from the two people we most cared about and tore them apart through it, for twelve months, I got to taste you.” His eyes hardened. “And I won’t ever fucking apologise for that.”

Elliot shifted and pulled something from the drawer. “But you haven’t answered my question, and you need to think long and hard, Will,” he said, and Will’s hold body stiffened seeing a syringe, “what didn’t you tell James?”

Will frowned.

“The university will have my details for the police if you go down that path.” He looked so angry. “I’m hoping you won’t, but then after this—” Will whimpered as the needle was pushed into his arm. “I wouldn’t blame you, baby.”

Life went very heavy, his arms now more like a dead weight, and Will fought the drag down into the murky depths. “Elli....”

A kiss feathered his cheek. “Get some decent sleep, Will. You look like you haven’t slept properly in months and...”

Whatever was said, Will didn't catch it; he'd never even noticed when the chair had stopped creaking and the Voice had left them alone, only how cold everywhere felt without having Elliot there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Everywhere was shadowed in darkness, and for a moment, Will lay there, feeling the dread of shifting his body and testing out his muscles. He wasn't quite sure why he needed to test his muscles out and see if he could move without wincing from any stiffness, his head sat in the middle of a fog that refused to shift with the breeze playing on his body, but a deep part of him knew he should be trying to move. Elliot—

Will stilled.

Elliot.

He tugged at the rope, and it took him a few seconds to register that the feel of it around his wrists and feet were purely locked in his head, like the feel of a wedding ring he'd had on for years yet still felt the presence of it even when it was removed. The contents on the bedside unit spilled on the floor as Will struggled to twist up and out of bed, then blindly fumble for a light source. He needed to know where he was, to ground himself in a visible place. His fingers brushed a switch just close to the unit, and he flicked it on, blinking against the soft onslaught of light that came from the wall mounted lights. *His* wall mounted lights.

Hand running through his hair, Will did a slow intake of his bedroom. The ropes were still tied to the silver frame of the headboard, the foot restraints there at the bottom. The black rocking chair was new and—

Will groaned, nearly doubling with how sick he felt. Two things. It had only taken two new additions into his home for Elliot to displace and disrupt his perception of his own home: a blindfold and a rocking chair: a constant moving, creaking chair. Will stared long and hard at that chair, hating everything it represented. All his shame, his gullibility, his fears.

It took him all of a few seconds to cross the distance and hurl it at his balcony doors. At first all it did was thud against the glass, but two more gave the glass a single crack, then fourth—fifth? Breathing heavy, Will stood watching glass settle as the chair lay trying to crawl out onto the decking, away from him.

Clothes came first: jeans, shirt—shoes, then Will was limping downstairs. In the grunted hunt for his keys, Will went quiet when his laptop caught his attention. The screen had gone to standby, leaving an eerie wave of aurora light sweeping the darkness of his kitchen. Seeing his car keys on the tabletop, Will made his way over, his grab at them distracted by the laptop. His touch to the mouse shifted things into life, but it wasn't his usual desktop background that he saw. The simple words "You're welcome," blinked back at him, followed by an arrow that pointed to the left hand corner of the screen. Will followed it down to see that his USB still slept in the port. Clicking on the folder, Will set the muscles tensing in his jaw.

"You fuck, Elliot."

All of his paperwork was marked; he'd been bound and blindfolded upstairs, and Elliot had sat here, marking papers.

"You fucking fuck, Elliot."

Will gave a violent shove at the table, scraping it over tile, and nearly sending the laptop over the edge. He didn't even waste time waiting to see if it hit the floor. Car keys digging into his palm, Will pushed outside, taking the small steps two at a time and getting into his Rover. The ignition was easy enough to find, even in the dark, but the note attached to the steering wheel? Will almost missed it, his hand sweeping over and nearly knocking the yellow sticky off. Peeling it off his fingers, Will then switched on the interior light and narrowed his eyes.

Clear your head before you drive back home. Stay safe. Please.

Love, Elliot. Always.

A snarl, Will screwed the paper up, set down his window, and tossed it. After shifting his gears into reverse, Will backed out, then home became the furthest destination on his mind.

For the hours it took Will to find Elliot's home, life became surreal beyond the blackness of his windows. He shouldn't have been driving, he knew that much. The street lights blended into single lines, making them more like death orbs running alongside of him, all life and malicious intent in the innocence of

colour. Cat's eyes and the occasional thud, thud-thud as he ran over them put him back in his bed, but the lack of life tied him back to it, and every now and again it would take his slam of fist into the steering wheel to drag him into reality again.

It was well into dawn by the time Will pulled up outside Elliot's home, and just a few doors down from his. The heat warmed tarmac, already promising another gorgeous day, and a moving van sat there sunbathing, not showing any impatience with being made to wait on the drive way. A few boxes were already piled high inside, but nobody was on Elliot's drive. The offer of movement came from inside the house, or more the lounge as Elliot's front door stood open.

After parking the Rover so the van couldn't pull off the drive, Will let the engine die, then grabbed at his keys before pushing out. He followed the sound of voices moving from the living room to the kitchen, and he made a mental note that two people were opening cupboard doors and shuffling things about.

Elliot caught sight of him before Will saw Elliot. Having just unplumbed the washer, Elliot pushed to his feet. There was a moment he went to say something, then Will was going for him with every intent of making sure he never said another word.

"No you don't."

Will had no idea where he came from, but the biggest mother of all men grabbed his arms, pulling him back and stopping him going for Elliot.

"Will—"

"*You don't*," shouted Will at Elliot. "You." He cried out, mostly in anger as he tried to get free. "What gave you the fucking right to—"

"Oh-kay," said the man behind, and Will found he was pulled away, out of the kitchen and into the living room. Pushed inside, Will skidded to a halt. It took only a moment for him to be back by whatever freak of nature was there trying to stop him getting at Elliot.

"How about you calm it down, Mr, Chambers. You just—"

Will stopped and closed his eyes, now tilting his ear. At first heat filled his cheeks, the knowledge that this man had seen him naked, that he had been there when Elliot—

Will groaned out loud just as Elliot eased passed the Voice and rested back against the doorframe.

“Will—”

“*Don’t.*” Will held a finger up to silence Elliot. “Your friend there is going to give me his name,” he said, now so cold in his calmness. “His going to give me his name, and then he’s going to tell me what gave him the goddamn right to help tie me down to a fucking bed.”

The Voice held out his hand. “Colm Ryans.” Will just stared at the offering. “And the fact you’ve hurt a very good friend of mine gives me every right.”

Will couldn’t get his head around that reply. “Shall we see how far that friendship goes when you’ve been sharing a cell with him for a few years?”

Colm shrugged and dug big hands in his pockets. “Yet you’re here on your own, Will.” He leant back against the wall. “Where are the police?”

“Fuck you.” Will looked from Elliot, back to Colm. “Fuck you both.”

Colm sighed, then looked at Elliot. “See what you mean about the language. It doesn’t suit him.”

“You don’t know me. You know *nothing* about me and—”

There was more noise behind the door, someone coming downstairs, maybe juggling a box. “Elliot, where do you want this one—”

“Oh fuh—” Will laughed, then his hands went to his head. “Jake?” Sweet Jake, always looking as though he’d been on the verge of saying something, standing there at the bottom of Will’s drive with an eye for James’s motorbike. Sweet *sweet* Jake. Will threw his hands out, things clicking together a little now. “You—you too?”

Jake stopped there in the doorway, his eyes a little startled at first, then almost instantly softening. “You okay? You look rough.”

“Rough?” Will spat it out, not believing any of this shit. “You...?” He frowned, some in anger, mostly just hurt now. “What the hell did I do to you?” Will had given Jake the address of the log cabin, where he’d been going, how long he’d be there, when he’d get back. And with Elliot’s local knowledge of Dorset. “You?”

“I watched Elliot come and go from yours whilst James was with Ryan away from your house,” said Jake. “I also watched what happened to you when you stopped letting Elliot in.” He offered a sad smile. “So yeah. Me too.”

“Leave us alone, yeah?” said Elliot to Colm and Jake as he took a few steps towards Will. Will growled, then spun away. “You’re problem is with me, Will.”

Choking a laugh, Will glared back at Elliot. “My problem?” Will pushed him back, then pushed him again until Elliot was up against the wall. “You tied *me* up, not the other way around.”

“What didn’t you tell James, Will?”

“Huh?” That cut him short.

“What didn’t you tell James?”

Will jerked at the shout. “*About us,*” he shouted back. “*I didn’t tell him about us.*”

Elliot snorted coldly. “Ryan hasn’t spoken to me since that night. Do you know why?” Elliot’s eyes flared. “He hated me for my anger that night, saying it was nothing unusual for me to lose it and cause all the shit. But you...?” Elliot smiled, but he wasn’t happy. “Ryan said he understood your reaction. He said everything was a shock, you finding him there. And little Will Chambers: he never loses his temper or resorts to foul language, now does he?” Elliot folded his arms and sneered. “Only little Will knew about them already. He stood there at the bike show that day and swore that we were over, that he was going to tell James about us.”

Elliot pushed Will back. “*Why didn’t you tell James about us, Will?*”

“Because I loved you too much,” he shouted at him. “Because I went home that night and kept my mouth shut thinking James would get it out of his system—*because for the first time, the very first fucking time, the father lost out to the lover in me, and I wanted both of you.*”

Elliot came in hard, fast, cupping Will’s face, but forcing him back with the violence of it, the grip nearly threatening to break bone. “You needed to

say it—I needed to *hear* you say it,” he snarled, “because for the past twelve months, you’ve been stuck in the same place, repeating the same moments over and over again like a needle jumping on a record, and you’ve kept me right there with you. Everyone—I’ve had everyone look at me like the bully you put me back into. I lost my son, and you—” Will was forced back a step. “You had a grave to grieve beside; me—I’m caught in some screwed-up limbo land where I see my son—you—but you both don’t hear me no matter how loud I cry. Not as a father—not as a lover.”

Will felt a tear slip free. “Why didn’t you tell Ryan that you were reacting as a lover that night, not the box he slotted you into?”

Will’s grief ignited Elliot’s and this time the tear that fell was his. “Because it was bad enough that he hated me, Will,” he said quietly, “I couldn’t let him hate you too. He needed someone, and so did you. If you had each other, at least you had something to hold onto.”

Knocking Elliot’s hands away, Will grabbed Elliot to him. “For godssake, Elliot. I didn’t know. I didn’t know he’d blamed yo—” Will cried out and held on tight. Then he pushed him back. “But James. He was mine to let go of when I chose, you bastard—not you.” Will fought so hard not to let his grief spill, and failed miserably. “For godssake. Here.” He tapped his head. “It’s all I’ve got left of him. You—”

“What?” said Elliot, just standing there and taking it. “I what?”

Will went back into Elliot and wrapped his arms around his neck, his head now resting against Elliot’s. “You arranged to have me kidnapped; you risked your career, your friends, our neighbour; and me...” Will screwed his eyes shut and shifted slightly, pressing his head harder against Elliot’s to stop the hurt. “I couldn’t even reach out and catch a scared boy when he fell.”

“Hey, it was—”

“Worst kind of hurt I’ve known, Elliot.” Will kissed at his neck, trying to bury the grief that tore at his body then. “Losing James—you... Christ. I never meant to lose you in the echo of everything, lose what we had.”

He pushed away a touch and ran a thumb along the stubble on Elliot’s jaw. “For Ryan’s sake, but mostly for me,” Will screwed his eyes shut, “stay with me, please.”

Elliot tried to pull away. “We’ll tear each other apart, Will.”

Will nodded. “Yeah.” He felt a tear fall. “Fucking tear me apart, Elliot.” He kissed gently at his lips. “Then when you’ve taken everything you need, lie still with me. Because I swear, I’ll test your heart, take your soul, then lie still with you in the aftermath, just loving watching your mind and body recover from the heat that’s always been us.”

Elliot’s kiss was hard, so lost for a moment; then he sighed angrily. “Can I bring the rope for when you really piss me off?”

Will choked a chuckle. “Only if you drop the scary guy in the rocking chair.”

Giving a grunt, Elliot crushed a hold around Will. “Didn’t hear much protest against the use of a blindfold in there, baby.”

Will returned the roughness of the cuddle. “We’ll talk to Ryan,” he said quietly. “He needs to know his dad didn’t cause this, that he’s a lover, one who sacrificed his own soul to try and protect the people he loved.”

Elliot started to shake. Grief, worry, release—they changed with each shiver like the changing of colours in a constantly rotating kaleidoscope, now all exposed at their fullest. “Just leave the kidnapping and everything out, though, yeah? I don’t think mentioning that would help my case much.”

Will chuckled; then it slipped into nothing feeling Elliot’s grief rack his body. “Got you, baby. I fucking hear you now. I hear you now.”

THE END

Author Bio

Jack L. Pyke blames her dark writing influences on living close to one of England's finest forests. Having grown up hearing a history of kidnappings, murders, strange sightings, and sexual exploits her neck of the woods is renowned for, Jack takes that into her writing, having also learned that human coping strategies for intense situations can sometimes make the best of people have disastrously bad moments. Redeeming those flaws is Jack's drive, and if that drive just happens to lead to sexual tension between two or more guys, Jack's the first to let nature take its course

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE MENAGERIE

By Ithra Reyes

Photo Description

A young green-eyed man in an oversized brown sweater holds a small tiger cub.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

A big thank you to Kim Alan for all her help, you are very kind.

He'd spent the day at the crappy little traveling zoo, but he'd spent it with his little brother, which got the little guy out from under "Uncle Larry's" thumb for the day, so it was totally worth it. Plus, he'd really been hung up on those cats. He loved cats. Not exactly one of his more manly attributes according to Larry, but whatever. He was drawn to them. Understood them, with their solitude and quiet strength.

However, he was not expecting to return to his car, after dropping his brother at home, to find a tiger cub sitting on his front seat. Stunned, he just stared at the little guy who just stared right back at him. He remembered seeing him scampering around the cages, trying to catch the interest of the big cats, but how in the hell had he gotten into his car? And what the hell was he supposed to do with him now? That traveling zoo had been packing up even as they left. Besides, something about that place had felt... off.

He did the only thing he could think of, at least once the cat nudged his hand towards the steering wheel, snapping him out of his stupor. He took him home, to his little studio apartment over the hardware store. He pulled into the parking lot and the cat climbed right into his lap to be carried inside. He was purring so loud, looking at him so adoringly, like he was his hero, or something. Taking the little one inside, he plopped into his thirdhand recliner, and petted, cooed, and soothed the cub until they both relaxed. He was thinking that this was maybe the strangest night of his life. And then, things got really weird.

The prompt can be changed around, no BDSM, M/F and preferably no shifter please, but I will accept it, if there is no other choice. Also can the kitty cat have a major role. HEA is a must, thank you.

Sincerely,

Vio

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: enemies to lovers, interracial, flamboyant character, workplace, non-explicit

Content warnings: HFN

Word count: 5,688

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Dedication

Thanks to Jen for having patience with me, to my wonderful event editors for making the story legible, to Vio for the inspiring prompt, and everyone who helped make this awesome event happen.

THE MENAGERIE

By Ithra Reyes

I was in the middle of a staring contest with the tiger in my kitchen when my alarm went off. The loud blaring *beeeeeep* announced it was time to go to work. Still, there was the small problem of the tiger currently sitting on my kitchen counter. Now granted, it was only a cub, but it was still a tiger. A tiger I had just cat-napped from the traveling zoo. I hadn't *meant* to do it.

Honest.

See, I had taken my little brother, Cody, to the crappy little traveling zoo earlier that day and this little fur-ball had been there, stuck in a tiny filthy cage, whining and crying until I started talking to her. She had pushed herself against the bars, her big blue eyes looking up at me sadly. She broke my heart. I had always had a soft spot for cats. She had begun to cry again as soon as Cody managed to pull me away to go look at the monkeys. We left the traveling zoo just as they had closed. They had already begun to take the whole tent down. I couldn't stop thinking about the little tiger cub.

When I came back to my car after dropping Cody off, there she was with her furry paws on my steering wheel. I had no idea how she had managed to escape and hide in my car that whole time but there she was. So I did the only thing I could do. I took her home with me. (In my defense, I've never claimed to have common sense.)

Thus my current dilemma. I knew I should call the traveling zoo and let them know I had their cub. Their phone number was on their flyer so I had no excuse, and if they found out I had taken her I could end up in jail. But watching the little fluff-ball happily explore my tiny counter made me hesitate. She had looked so sad in her cage that maybe it was better if they just never found her. Still, I couldn't just keep a tiger in my shitty little studio. My alarm kept ringing. I looked back at the fluffy tiger cub. "Want to come with me to work, Fluffy?"

She whined, crouched and before I could react, she pounced on my poor phone. I'd take that as a yes.

The scene at The Menagerie was the same as any other night. The hypnotic pulse of the music reverberated across the entire building, moving sweaty bodies against each other on the dance floor. Strobe lights slid across the sea of bodies, briefly illuminating the swinging vines from the roof and the dancers dressed in skimpy animal costumes wiggling suggestively in decorative gilt cages. It wasn't as packed as, say, a Friday night, but still enough bodies to get your grind on, if that's your thing.

Standing guard at the door, dressed in cargo pants and a jersey that showed off his impressive bulk, was a dark-skinned man with short buzzed hair and a five-o'clock shadow. That would be Oz. He's kind of scary, in a voodoo-man sort of way, but I guess scary is a requirement if you're a bouncer. He was currently glaring deep into the club where a similarly dressed, but sadly nowhere near as impressively muscled guy was shaking his moneymaker on top of the bar. That would be me. No, I'm not one of the club's dancers. I'm the bartender. The broke bartender that is not above shaking his junk for a larger tip.

It works. Sometimes. Okay, don't tell anyone, but I might also just be an exhibitionist at heart.

I did a quick twirl of the bottle and poured the clear liquid into the shaker. I had a good sized audience by then. I made eye contact with Ethan, my oh-so-delicious boss, and he shook his head in that exasperated way of his. I sent him my sultriest pout, before signaling to Ana in the pit. She rolled her eyes at my antics but placed the glass behind me.

Shaker in hand and feet placed firmly apart, I started lowering my body backwards to the pulsating beat until I could see the glass behind me. My audience cheered as I poured the drink into the glass.

"Get down here and start pouring, you little *puto*," Ana shouted over the thud-a-thud of the music. I quickly scampered down to help with the crowd of demanding drunks overtaking the bar like a pack of rabid zombies. I've learned many a hard lesson since I started working here, but the most important one has been: don't mess with the Santos twins. That'd be Ana and Oz. Yes, they're twins, and, yes, that's terrifying. Oz may be big and muscle-y, but it's the Amazonian Ana you really have to watch out for. I'd managed to

crack her kick-ass Mexican Wonder Woman exterior, but I knew better than to get on her bad side.

We were working on getting the zombies their drinks, when Ana not so quietly whispered in my ear, “I keep telling you, no matter how much you wiggle your little *culo*, Ethan’s still not going to want it.”

I shrugged, faking nonchalance. “You never know, I might be the one to change his mind about the whole vagina-yum thing.” Truth is, I’d had a crazy unrequited crush on Ethan since the day I met him. He was just so nice to me no matter how much I screwed up, and he put up with all my flirty bullshit. I just wished he would return the shit, at least sometimes. Still, it was nice to keep hope alive.

“Look I just don’t want you to get hurt. Ethan adores you, we all do,” she continued, suddenly serious, “but he’s not gay, Noah.” The bar line was finally slowing down, and I turned to look at her.

“You know—” She hesitated. “Oz is single.”

I frowned, wondering where she was going with this, when I saw a little black-striped golden fur-ball zip out of the back office.

Fuck.

I’d hidden Fluffy in the broom closet earlier that night. I’d felt horribly guilty about it, but she seemed happy enough with the old zebra plushy I’d found from one of our more kinky theme nights. Now she could be anywhere. I had to find her before anyone realized she wasn’t part of the decorations.

“Uhm, Ana I’d love to stay and discuss the pathetic-ness of my love life, but I really need a smoke break,” I quickly muttered before running out of the pit toward where I’d seen Fluffy disappear. I heard Ana shout, “But you don’t smoke!” before the monster that is the dance floor swallowed me whole.

I shimmied and shammied my way across the dance floor to no avail. It was too dark and chaotic to see the little gal among so many animal prints. At one point, I’d thought I’d caught the cat by its tail, only to discover the tail was attached to a very human cat-girl. Her very human boyfriend had not been happy. He was revving up to pummel me into the ground, while I chanted a mantra of “I’m gay, don’t hurt me,” when I felt a strong hand pull me back from cat-girl’s boyfriend.

“What the hell are you doing, *pendejo*,” asked Oz as he dragged me off the dance floor and into the back office. I flailed gracefully trying to escape. I had to find Fluffy. She was so little; she could get seriously hurt out there.

“Let me go,” I grumbled, “I have to find Fluffy.”

Oz just gave me one of his exasperated looks. I get those a lot. “Hasn’t Ethan told you you’re not allowed to drink on the job?”

“I’m not drunk. Fluffy is my pet tiger cub. I put her in the broom closet but she escaped and now I’ve lost her.” I was shouting now.

I really hadn’t meant to say that much, but Oz just had a way of riling me up. He looked at me as if trying to judge whether I was telling the truth or if I’d finally gone off the deep end. He let go of where he’d been holding my arm and I rubbed the tingly spot where his hand had been.

“You’re not kidding,” he said finally.

“No. I’m not. Now if you’ll just let me out, I need to go find her.”

“How do you even have a tiger cub? If there is a tiger cub out there we’ll have to shut down the club and call animal control. And why the fuck you name a tiger Fluffy?”

“It’s a long story. See, I may or may not have cat-napped her, but she wasn’t safe where she was. If they find out I have her I’ll end up in jail, so you can’t tell anyone, okay? And there’s nothing wrong with the name Fluffy. Now let me back out there.”

With a heaving sigh, he dragged a hand over his buzzed head. “Fine. Where’d you last see it? I’ll help you find the cub, but if you’re fucking with me I’ll kill you, *vale*?”

I nodded vigorously.

“She ran onto the dance floor,” I pointed behind him, “and I would never fuck with you. I swear.”

Oz gave me another of his long brooding looks before turning and going back out into the club. I scrambled to catch up with him.

As Oz channeled Moses parting the sea, I searched every nook and cranny for my little fur-ball. I was starting to think I would have to ask Ethan to close

the club and call animal control if we couldn't find her. She had to be terrified and what if she'd left the club? I'd never find her. She could get hit by a car. I was about to start hyperventilating when I spotted movement under one of the empty dance cage platforms. I dropped to the floor immediately, my ass sticking up in the air as I called out, "Fluffy, darling, it's okay now. Please come out, honey."

I felt Oz standing behind my ass. "Just grab it, *pendejo*," he growled.

I ignored him as best I could, suddenly very aware of how close his cock was to my ass and how wrong it was to be turned on by Oz Santos of all people. Instead, I concentrated on coaxing Fluffy from her hiding spot. I reached my hand in for her to sniff. Was it only dogs that did the sniffing thing? I felt her wet little nose bump against my hand followed by a rough tongue scrape against my skin. Dear lord, I hoped this was Fluffy and not one of the giant mutant rats that sometimes snuck into the club. The thought made me jerk back my hand involuntarily. Then I saw a furry little face peek out from under the platform, old zebra plushy gripped tightly in its mouth.

Definitely a tiger cub and not a mutant rat.

I held my arms out and she quickly scurried into my embrace. I held her close, relief washing over me.

"*Mierda*," I heard Oz mutter behind me as he looked down at the happily chuffing tiger cub in my arms. I turned my head to look back up at him, a silly grin on my face. It was hard to make out his expression in the dimness of the club, but then a strobe light slid across his face illuminating an unexpectedly tender expression. I opened my mouth to say something when I saw his eyes look past me and into the crowd. A frown appeared between his thick eyebrows and I could see his body tense, immediately alert.

I followed his gaze to where two men were shoving their way through the crowd, obviously looking for someone. I recognized them immediately. They worked for the traveling zoo. The two thugs had hovered around the little tent as Cody and I looked at the animals. How did they know I had Fluffy? How had they tracked us to The Menagerie? My heart started racing when I saw the silver glint of a gun peek out of one of their jackets. I clutched Fluffy harder to me until I heard her squeak with indignation. I relaxed my grip. Oz leaned

down, grabbed my arm and pulled me up. For once, I was not annoyed at being pulled around; instead, his large firm grip felt comforting. He held me close in front of him, using his body to shield me from the thugs' view.

"Forget jail, you're gonna get yourself killed, *pendejo*. Keep walking straight and don't look back," he whispered into my ear.

I did not shudder, that was just the adrenaline.

We made our way back to the office as fast as we could without calling attention to ourselves. Once inside the office I felt myself being shoved in the direction of the closet. I struggled with a squirming Fluffy, while trying to keep calm. And failing.

"Oh my god, I have no idea how they found us. I mean unless they followed me home. Do you think they've been following us? And they have guns. What are we going to do now? We can't let them take Fluffy!"

I was rambling. I knew I was rambling, but I was not properly prepared to deal with this type of situation. The only thing I knew was that I was not giving Fluffy back to those goons, even if I had to go to jail for cat-napping her.

"We are not going to do anything," Oz said, after a final push into the closet. He stood outside holding the door open. I did not like where this was heading.

"You are going to stay here with the cat. I am going to go deal with your mess."

I opened my mouth to protest, and Oz's hand covered my mouth. "*Mmmgrmm*," I mumbled, annoyed. Sure, I had no idea how to deal with two armed thugs, but I did not appreciate being treated like the village idiot. I bit down. The hand disappeared.

"*Fucking pendejo*," was all I registered before the door slammed in my face.

I heard the door lock and I fell to the floor, gently placing Fluffy on the ground. I was starting to think *pendejo* did not mean something very nice. I tried the door, no luck.

"Looks like we're in here for a while, Fluff." I felt her cold little nose

nudge my hand as she whined. “It’s okay, sweetie, nobody’s going to take you away,” I reassured her, although I wasn’t that sure myself.

This whole situation was quickly getting out of hand. Those guys out there had guns and I didn’t doubt they would use them. As much as Oz annoyed me, I didn’t want him getting hurt. I dug my phone out of my pocket and turned on its dinky little flashlight. I aimed it at Fluffy who by now was happily dozing, wrapped around her zebra plushy. Poor thing, all the excitement had worn her out. Now, if I could just find something to pick the lock with.

There.

I quickly got to work on the lock with the pin I found in a dusty corner of the closet. I knew all those hours of studying lock-picking on YouTube would pay off someday. I was almost there when I heard the door to the office open.

I fumbled to turn the light off my phone, trying to be as silent as possible. Could the thugs have gotten past Oz? What if they had shot him? Surely someone would have called the cops by now. Ethan would never let anything happen to any of us. As soon as I got out of this closet and I made sure Oz was still okay, I’d go tell Ethan everything. Ethan would make it all better.

Well maybe I didn’t have to go too far, as I heard Ethan’s laugh as he entered the room. I was about to call out for him, when I heard a female voice.

“What you gonna do about it, boss man?”

I knew that voice. It was Ana’s version of a flirty voice. Why would she be using her flirty voice on Ethan? My stomach started to turn in an uncomfortable way. I put my eye to the keyhole. I couldn’t see very clearly but it was enough for me to confirm it was Ethan and Ana, and they were standing incredibly close.

“What do you want me to do about it?” answered Ethan in a sultry voice that would have made me instantly hard if it weren’t being directed at one of my best friends.

I saw him put his hands around Ana’s waist. I couldn’t see from the way they were standing, but I could tell from their muffled moans there was some heavy kissing going on. I stumbled back from the keyhole. I had no desire to see any more than I already had.

Ethan and Ana.

Ana and Ethan.

When had that happened and why had nobody told me? Suddenly I couldn't breathe. I had to get out of that closet, but I couldn't bring myself to go out there and face them.

I covered my ears with my hands to drone out their sex sounds. Shame and frustration flushed through my body. Tears stung my eyes as I curled up on around Fluffy and I buried my face in her soft fur. I wasn't stupid, no matter what Oz said. I knew I had no chance with Ethan. It was the betrayal that really hurt. I knew I was a goof sometimes, and strangers never take me seriously, but these were my *friends*. At least I'd thought they were my friends. More than friends, I had considered them my family. Aside from Cody, my real family sucked big time. Ethan and Ana had taken me in with open arms and I had trusted them with all my secrets. It crushed me to know they had been hooking up behind my back for years, probably laughing at silly Noah and his hopeless crush.

I don't know how much time passed before I heard the door slam. The silence they left behind was deafening. I needed to get out. I dragged myself off the floor and finished fiddling with the lock. It was harder this time, my hands shaking the whole time, but finally I heard the telltale click. I took a deep breath and looked back at the slumbering Fluff. I had to remind myself she was more important than my need to run as far away from my so-called friends. So I leaned over and gave her little forehead a quick kiss before leaving her safe in the closet and making my way back out to the office. I paced back and forth trying to decide on the best course of action.

There were two scary men with guns trying to take Fluffy away, except technically she was theirs to take. They hadn't been taking good care of her, though—she hadn't been happy locked up alone in that tiny cage. I knew what I had to do. I didn't need Oz, or anybody else, to solve my problems for me. Plus, who knew, with my luck Oz would live up to his scary voodoo-man persona and then we'd both end up in jail. I had to find him before things got out of hand. Not that they weren't already.

But first, I had a phone call to make.

Once I'd convinced an incredulous nine-one-one dispatcher that I was, in fact, in a nightclub called The Menagerie with a tiger cub whom I had accidentally stolen from a traveling zoo, and that two thugs from said zoo were trying to kill me, I quickly hung up on her and ran back into the club to let Oz know not to do anything incriminating in front of the cops. It was later now, and the club was packed with people doing the same old mating dance that went on every night as if the shit hadn't just hit the proverbial fan.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ana at the bar furiously mixing drinks, her eyes searching the club, undoubtedly wondering where the fuck I'd gone. I didn't give a shit at this point. I scanned the club, but couldn't spot the bad guys—or Oz. Where had they gone? If nothing seemed out of the ordinary, that meant there hadn't been some sort of big showdown. Maybe Oz had just voodoo-ed them away. Hopefully.

Not likely.

I walked to the front of the club to wait for the cops. That's when I saw Ethan. He was walking right towards me, a small frown marring his beautiful face. The club was too loud to hear what he was saying but he was gesturing to the bar where I was supposed to be. I couldn't deal with him right now. It hurt too much. I turned and headed toward the back exit, quickly losing him in the press of dancers. I pushed through sweaty grasping hands until the cool breeze of the alley hit my skin. I took a deep breath, instantly regretting it. I was standing downwind of the Dumpster.

Fuck my life.

"Where do you think you're going?" Oz came out of the club after me, grabbing my shoulder.

"Let me go, Oz."

I couldn't deal with Oz right now either. Had he known all along? Of course he had known. Nothing happened in The Menagerie without Oz knowing about it. Plus, Ana was his sister. They were real family; of course Ana would tell him. I felt the familiar stinging in my eyes and I blinked furiously, hoping the darkness of the alley would hide my glistening eyes. All I wanted was for this night to be over and for Fluffy to be safe.

“Crying?”

I could hear the fake amusement in Oz’s voice.

“What’s your problem?” I couldn’t stop the words from coming out. I was so hurt and angry and my life was turned upside down and I just couldn’t take it anymore.

“Watch it, *pendejo*,” growled Oz as he hovered in the shadows of the alley.

“Or what?” My voice sounded more hurt than I intended. “I’m so tired of your shit. I mean, I get that you don’t like me, but do you have to be such a dick all the time?”

Oz cocked his head and mirrored my step forward. “What? You want me to give you a hug because the love of your life is off fucking my sister?”

“Fuck you.” I clenched my fists by my sides.

“Oh, did I hurt your feelings?” Oz wasn’t smiling anymore. I could have sworn he looked hurt for a second, but it was quickly covered by his usual scowl. “It’s time to grow up, Noah. Ethan doesn’t want you. He’s never going to want you. He and Ana have been going at it like bunnies for months now.”

The words hit me harder than a physical blow.

“Just let me go, Oz,” I whispered angrily and tried to push Oz out of my way, my hands barely moving the solid muscles beneath his shirt.

Oz grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me hard against the wall, leaning close to my ear. His breath was hot and quick against my ear. “Not so fast.”

My mouth opened on a gasp as I felt Oz’s teeth capture my bottom lip. All my anger and frustration suddenly redirected toward where our bodies touched. I stopped pushing, dug my nails into the skin beneath his thin muscle shirt and dragged down. I felt the muscles beneath my fingers twitch and he drew back, only to smash his lips down in more of a maul than a kiss. His leg slid between mine, and my hips bucked against his thigh. His lips slid from my mouth down my neck, biting their way along my collarbone. My head fell back against the wall and I arched my body closer. I could feel his hardness against my stomach.

“*Bello*,” I heard him whisper against my throat. I pulled his lips back to mine. He tasted earthy, lemony, and oh so good. I was so lost in his taste and the feeling of his hard body against mine, that I never heard the door open.

“Fucking faggots,” came a faraway voice.

Oz was much faster to register what was happening. Instantly untangling us, he pushed me behind him and turned to the two thugs who stood a few feet from us, guns glinting in the shallow light of the streetlamp. I felt his body tighten in a much different way than it had been just seconds before.

“Oz, don’t do anything stupid,” I whispered into his ear. “They have guns. And anyway, the cops will be here any minute.”

“Just tell us where the tiger is,” Thug One shouted, agitated. Had he heard me say the cops were coming? Would that make him more likely to leave and cut his losses, or would it make him more desperate? Best not to risk it.

“I know the skinny one has it somewhere in there.”

He pointed to the club with his free hand; except, it wasn’t free. He had a small black machine in his hand. He turned it toward us so we could see the screen. A GPS tracker. That’s how they had been tracking Fluffy.

The tension in the alley was starting to nauseate me. I felt Oz begin to chant something under his breath. Oh my god, he really was a voodoo man.

“What the fuck are you trying to do man? Your little chanting don’t scare us,” said Thug One. “Now quit stalling and hand over the tiger, or lover-boy there gets it between those pretty green eyes.”

He thought my eyes were pretty? Never mind.

Thug Two looked seriously creeped out by Oz’s increased chanting, and even Thug One didn’t seem as sure of himself. I didn’t blame them. The chanting was starting to freak me out. What language was he even speaking? It sounded like gibberish.

His chanting got louder, but not loud enough to cover the sirens of the cops finally getting their asses to the club. Wait. It *was* gibberish. He was stalling, throwing the thugs off long enough for the cops to get there.

I’d known that.

The thugs must have heard the cops, too, because they seemed to snap out of their chant-induced daze. And that was when Thug Two decided to shoot us.

Oz pushed both our bodies to the ground. I swear the bullet missed us by less than an inch. I almost wet my pants. Thug One then surged toward Oz, who pushed me back against one of the Dumpsters and then ran forward, kicking the gun out his hand. I heard a sickening crack. Thug One fell to the ground with a howl of pain while cradling his broken arm. Oz and Thug Two were both aiming their guns at each other. Thug One grinned while holding his floppy arm.

What was he grinning about?

Then I felt an arm grab me around the waist. I let out a yelp.

Oh.

It was a third thug whom we hadn't seen. He must have been waiting outside and had come back to the alley when he heard the gunshot. I struggled against his grip, biting and kicking as hard as I could, but was no challenge for the burly guy who must have been as big as—or bigger than—Oz. He definitely didn't taste as good as Oz, though.

"Stop struggling, you little faggot," he growled.

I ignored him.

I saw Oz hesitate, his gun still pointing toward Thug Two, while Thug One struggled to his feet. Oz looked over to where Thug Three was holding me. His dark eyes seemed to burn into mine. How had I never noticed that look in his eyes? It was an epically bad time to have an epiphany but better late than never, right? He still annoyed me, and I still thought he hated me. but maybe, *maybe* there was more to it. And Ana had said he was single. His look intensified, and somehow I knew he was about to do something stupid.

"Don't!" I screamed, closing my eyes, but it was too late.

I heard Thug Three cry out in pain, and his grip loosened. I stumbled forward.

"Grab the gun," I heard Oz yell. I scrambled to snatch his gun from the ground and turned it on him.

Wait.

If Oz hadn't taken Thug Three out, who had?

I scanned my eyes down his body, only to see him struggling to dislodge a fluffy fur-ball that was biting down on his ass. Fluffy!

"This is the police. Drop your weapons. Everyone on the ground, hands where we can see them!"

About fucking time.

I dropped to the ground.

The others were slower to follow, but with some more shouting from the slowest cops ever, everyone was on the ground. Fluffy had finally let go of Thug Three's ass, and he was rolling on the ground crying out in pain. The back door to the club opened, and Ethan and Ana, along with even more cops, burst into the alley. Ana started yelling at the cops to let us off the ground or else, while Ethan tried to calm her down.

Meanwhile, Fluffy happily made her way to my side, oblivious to all the commotion. She came over to my face and licked my nose with her scratchy little tongue.

"Good job, Fluffy," I told her, but she had already turned and was making her way over to where Oz was lying on the ground looking toward me with his dark voodoo eyes. She nuzzled his stubbled jaw and I saw the corner of his lips curl up. I smiled back.

I wish I could say I got to keep Fluffy and that her, Oz, and I lived happily ever after, but this isn't one of those sappy online romance stories with the prerequisite cute little animal. After days of interrogation, and more than one court trial, Fluffy finally found a home at an animal sanctuary just outside of town. I started volunteering at the animal sanctuary, and I spend as much time with her and the other animals as I can. I even took Cody to visit her. It was love at first sight.

Speaking of love, I tried to stay angry at Ethan and Ana, but Ethan's constant groveling and Ana's threats finally wore me down. There was also Oz. Months later, we still drive each other crazy and we're as likely to be

fighting as not, but when I showed up to visit Fluffy and found him chatting with her, a giant zebra plushy in hand, I knew I loved him.

Huh, I guess this is one of those sappy online romance stories after all.

THE END

Author Bio

Although Ithra is an avid reader of the genre, this is her first attempt at an M/M story. An erudite writer by trade, Ithra hopes to continue writing more M/M stories in the future.

Contact & Media Info

[Goodreads](#)

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SHOOTING THE CURL

By Madeleine Ribbon

Photo Description

A fit young man with blond curly hair lifts a little boy up into the air with one arm. They're dressed for the beach and wearing matching sunglasses.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm not sure what to do. For three years, Little Dude has been my whole life. I made the choice to adopt as a single father, and I'm darn good at being a dad. Except, well, there's this person I can't get out of my mind, which is weird because I haven't given a thought to sex and relationships since Little Dude and I became Team One. The other weird thing? He's a guy. Yeah. And seems the total opposite of me. Plus, I think he's straight, but I swear sometimes he looks at me and is thinking about how good we'd be together. It makes me a little nervous. And a little hot.

Whatever I do, I have to put Little Dude first. Hey, I don't even know if this guy likes kids!

Requests: Caleb calls his kid Little Dude.

Caleb's job involves surfing. (LAPD undercover beach beat/pro surfer/surf teacher/board maker...?)

Gay-for-you for both parties

Bonus if other guy is a little chubby (10-20 lbs. overweight)

Please no super buff muscle-bound overconfident men.

Other guy is not the nanny.

No evil ex-wives/girlfriends.

Sincerely,

Caleb

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gay for you, men with children, surfer, IT

Word count: 13,242

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

SHOOTING THE CURL

By Madeleine Ribbon

I'd been trying to catch the perfect wave for two days, but my surfing skills had definitely deteriorated a little since I'd moved away from Oahu. That, and the crowds were horrendous. Lucky for me, my dodging skills hadn't disappeared over the years. I was still a pro at swerving through the other surfers as they sat on their boards and waited for the next wave.

This time, I finally got a turn on the pipeline. I managed to lock in right where the wave curled over and broke, and I rode there for what felt like ages. The spray slammed me in the face, prickling like needles. The crashing wave rumbled and roared behind me.

It was awesome.

I eased back until the water arced over me and crashed down on the other side, a glassy green tunnel I hadn't experienced in years. The wave roared in my ears, echoing fiercely in the little room made of water. I laughed at the freedom, the rush, the intensity that shooting the curl had always given me. This used to be normal. God, how I'd taken it for granted. It had been so long since—

My board lifted. I knew I was a goner.

The water picked me up, pushed me over the lip of the wave, and dashed me down. Hard. The water hit me like a ton of rocks. Searing pain shot through my side, and the sleek, waxed surface of my board shot past me. Then there was water rushing into my lungs, up my nose, smothering me until the green-tinged light of the sky above darkened into near black.

The water pushed me down until I smashed into the sand, then bounced me around like a giant pinball machine. I clenched my eyes and waited for the rough ride to end.

My panic was muffled, waiting at the edges of my consciousness as I kicked for the surface. I had to come up soon, or Leo would freak. On the beach, he probably expected world-class surfing from me, not a total wipeout.

He'd never seen me go down so hard before. Granted, he'd never seen me ride the pipeline in person, either.

I popped up just in time to miss another killer wave. I grabbed the leash still tied to my ankle and hauled my board back to me. It was time to head in. I was no longer used to sand facials, and I wanted to get the burn of saltwater out of my nose and check out the bruises I could already feel forming all up and down my side and hip.

"Daddy!" I heard Leo screaming from the beach, where he sat with the woman I'd gone to Hawaii to visit. Sheila had been one of my best surfer buddies and my on-and-off girlfriend, but that was six years ago, before my motorcycle accident, before leaving Hawaii, before Leo came into my life. She'd invited me back to Hawaii for a surfing vacation, and since she'd provided plane tickets for both Leo and me, I could hardly say no.

I think she'd expected at least a little romance from my visit, even with my four-year-old along. Frankly, so had I, but it hadn't happened that way. I didn't have the hots for her anymore. Not like I used to. Thankfully, the romance seemed to have died on her end, too, so I didn't feel too guilty.

It was too bad, though. I'd been hoping she'd be able to fix the niggling feeling of incompleteness that had lodged itself in the dark corners of my mind. She'd kissed me just once when I first arrived, and the entire time I thought of my neighbor. Trevor. A dude.

I'd been thinking of him a lot since he'd first moved in six months ago, but I thought a little time with a girl would make the racier thoughts disappear.

Nope. No such luck. Apparently, my body had turned traitor and entirely given up on tits. I wasn't terribly alarmed about the change in my sexuality, but I did have to wonder what it could mean for Leo and me in the future. Leo was my everything.

I hauled my board out of the water and struggled against the fierce undertow as I waded toward dry sand. Leo ran toward me as I got close to the beach. Sheila grabbed him before he reached the surf. He pushed at Sheila's arms and jabbed one elbows hard into her ribs when she picked him up. He needed reassurance that I was okay.

“I’m fine, Little Dude. Wasn’t that so cool?”

Leo stopped wriggling quite so fiercely. Sheila gave me a small, tight-lipped smile. The poor girl was going to have bruises. They wouldn’t be as impressive as mine, though. I swept Leo out of her arms and threw him up into the air before putting him back on his feet.

“Your turn, Sheila. I’m done for the day. I think I hit the fin.”

“Nice, Caleb. Very artistic.” She touched my side, right over the forming bruise. My side burned, but it wasn’t horrible. I’d had worse. The bruises were going to be annoying, but that was all. “You aren’t going to start pissing blood, right?”

“Shh. Little ears.” I glanced down at Leo, who was watching me carefully with his owlish stare.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. I don’t think it’s bad. I’ll be fine. Go surf.”

“Are you sure you’ll be content building sandcastles for a few hours?” Sheila grabbed her own board from the sand.

“More content than you’ve been.” I grinned. She was practically twitching; she was so desperate to get into the water.

“I really don’t have the patience for kids like you do,” she said. “Good thing I wasn’t relying on you to sweep me off my feet when I invited you out here.”

“Your first love will always be the ocean, won’t it?”

“Probably. And yours is that little gremlin.” She winked at Leo and took off toward the water.

Leo yanked my arm until I knelt down next to him. He chewed on his lip a little as he looked me in the eye. This was Leo’s serious face, and I knew I’d be scowled at if I dared laugh at the sheer adorableness of it all.

“You got ouchies.”

“I did. But I had a lot of fun, too.”

Leo considered that for a moment before breaking into a huge grin.

“That was awesome, Daddy.”

“Thanks, Little Dude.” I grabbed a towel from the bags under our umbrella and ran it through my curly hair, making the blond twists stick out all over the place. I pushed the mess out of my eyes, and then snapped the towel in Leo’s direction.

“What do you say? Should we make sand castles? Or should we watch the other surfers for a little while?”

“Watch them.”

Now that his panic died down, his eyes were half closing. He’d tired himself out riding with me earlier this morning. We’d tandem surfed the first decent-sized waves of his life, though none were quite as insane as the pipeline. I wouldn’t let him near that, not until he was a lot older than four. He’d long ago mastered the waves back home in Ocean City, Maryland—I didn’t ride with him often anymore, though I still had to help him paddle out—but even the tame waves of the morning were far bigger than what he was used to.

He fell asleep in my arms as we sat beneath the umbrella. I wondered if I’d ever figure out what I was missing to make our family perfect. Sheila wasn’t it. Neither were the big waves, though it felt incredibly good getting back here.

I’d just have to keep looking.

My hand shook a little as I dabbed bright-yellow paint into the outline of a stylized marigold. We’d only gotten back from Hawaii two days before, and I hadn’t had the chance to catch up on sleep yet. The rush that kept me going all through our week-long vacation was finally fading. I still hurt, but the ache made me think of how awesome our trip had been. My arms ached, my shoulders ached, my sides ached, my legs ached, and I had green and yellow bruises all down my left side. But the pain was totally worth it.

After staying with Sheila for a few days, we’d hung out with more of my old surfing buddies. I introduced them to Leo, the reason that I was no longer in the surfing world despite regaining my range of motion after the accident. They’d all fallen in love with the little dude the moment he got up on my

board with me and we caught a respectable wave. He became their mascot when he made fun of me for yet another totally unnecessary wipeout.

I may have been showing off for him. Just a little. Talent-wise, Leo would be catching up to me soon enough. He was already better than most of the kids I gave lessons to during the tourist season. Thankfully, that was over now.

For the rest of the year, instead of giving surfing lessons and managing my dad's surf shop until too late at night, I got to spend time working on the boards. Custom paint jobs. Art and surfing, my two greatest talents, had somehow mashed together into one decent-paying job. I loved it. I still had to manage the shop on occasion, but the business would be so slow for the next seven months that I'd be able to paint there, too.

Movement from the house across the street jerked me right out of the zone, and I dropped my brush. I winced at the smear of yellow on a flower that shouldn't have been yellow at all and put the paintbrush away with a sigh.

Trevor must have just gotten home from work. I hadn't realized it had gotten so late in the afternoon.

The dark-haired man slammed the door of his sedan, his ever-present laptop bag slung over one shoulder. I waved at the first and only man I'd ever found attractive. Trevor waved back and smiled, his deep dimples showing from all the way across the street.

Oh, God, I wanted to jump him. He was cute. Huggable. Adorable. And maybe I had been spending too much time with my preschooler son, to be thinking in those terms.

Nah. No such thing. But still, I'd never thought this much about anyone since I'd adopted Leo. My little dude had turned my life upside-down, and I'd spent the last four years laughing and joking and hugging and doing my best to make Leo's life perfect. Girls just didn't rate anymore. Sure, they were pretty and soft and curvy and fun to look at, but my hand didn't require well-thought-out dates and hours and hours of attention. It sure as hell gave a whole lot less drama.

Especially since I had a kid. I never, ever wanted Leo to be seen as baggage, and most girls I'd met balked at the thought of dating a guy with a kid. Sure, they thought I was a cute dad, but that was about as far as it went.

I'd been meaning to invite Trevor to dinner ever since he moved in six months before, but I always forgot to actually go over and ask. Leo would do something, or say something, or show up just at the right moment and distract me. And I'd let him. Leo would always come first.

Always.

But maybe it was time to get to know Trevor better. If we became friends, I wouldn't keep wondering what it'd be like to kiss him. I hoped.

I'd try to work something out next week. With that decision made, I tried to push my focus back on work. I looked around for the right color paint to touch up my mistake.

I wouldn't go ask him now. My fingers were covered in bright speckles, my son was due back from his first day of preschool any minute, and this shortboard needed just a bit more work and a coat of sealant before I brought it to Dad's surf shop for the customer to pick up.

Besides, Trevor had already disappeared inside his run-down little beach house.

I finished covering up my mistake and stepped back to look at the brightly colored design. It was a *Día de los Muertos* themed piece, a white skull on a background of Technicolor flowers, and all I needed to do was outline everything in black and seal the sucker.

It didn't take long. A little black paint pen went a long way. I'd just started washing out my brushes when a car pulled into my driveway. I waved as Dad cut the ignition and got out.

"Thanks again for picking him up and entertaining him for a few hours. I'd never have been done in time to get him."

"I'm always looking to spend time with my favorite grandson. Especially since you two abandoned us for the wild waves for so long. It's all he's been able to talk about, according to his teacher. How's the board?"

"Almost done, take a look." I braced myself as Dad opened the rear door and my blond, blue-eyed little gremlin burst out of the car.

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! Beach! Beach, beach, beach!"

Leo ran straight into my legs, nearly knocking us both into the table of paint containers I hadn't quite found all the lids for yet. I reached out, snagged my destructively adorable son around the waist, and lifted him up in my arms before the paint could fly. Leo squealed and laughed and kicked, narrowly missing the surfboard I had just spent the last four hours painstakingly painting.

"Settle, Little Dude, settle! How was school?"

"Good, Daddy. Beach."

I hoisted Leo up on my shoulder and walked out the open garage door to the driveway. Dad slammed the car doors shut and slung Leo's tiny backpack over one shoulder. The strap barely fit around his arm. Dad poked his head into the garage to take a look at the shortboard's paint job.

"Not bad. It just needs sealant?"

"Yeah, and it won't take long. I can bring it to the shop this evening when I inevitably give in to the little dude."

"Not a problem. The customer can't use it until the weekend anyway. I'll give her a call and let her know," Dad said, handing over the backpack. "Beware. I don't know what they fed Leo for snack time, but I'm pretty sure it was spiked. He was bouncing off the board racks the whole time I had him at the shop."

"I'll take him to the B-E-A-C-H for a while and let him run it off."

Leo perked up at the spelling. The kid was getting smarter.

"Beach now!" Leo wriggled around and I set him down on the lawn as Dad took off.

"We'll go after we poke a little dinner into your tummy and change you into your shorts, okay? Don't go in the garage, please. I've got a board drying."

Leo squeezed past me as I opened our green bungalow's front door. I couldn't help but glance at the house across the street before I went inside. Trevor had never put up curtains, and the blinds were always open if he was home. I had a clear view of him as he sat in the living room, hunched over his computer.

He was such a nerd. An adorable nerd.

Next week. I would ask him to the shop's end-of-season cookout next week. And then I'd make more of an effort to get to know him. He made my heart race. It had been a long time since another person had done that to me.

The surface of the white sand still held the heat of the afternoon sun. I dug my toes deeper into it, searching for the cooler layers, as I sat on one of the folding chairs and enjoyed the surf shop's end-of-year barbecue. Leo ran around screaming with his cousin Anna and a pair of twins who belonged to the store's weekday manager. I spent most of my time alternating between tracking the little terrors as they ran around squealing and watching the long, sandy path that led from the beach house where the grill was running full-steam, over the dunes, and to the shore where we had all congregated after we finished our burgers and beer.

"I thought you said you were going to bring your neighbor," Dad said as he sat down.

"I put the flier and a note in his mailbox. I knew I'd forget to tell him when he was actually home and didn't have his number, so I went the easy route."

"Bullshit." Dad shook his head. "You were nervous, weren't you?"

I shook my head and pushed my feet farther into the sand. Dad studied me intently for a few minutes before patting me on the shoulder and walking off.

He always saw right through me.

I had never been able to keep a secret from my dad. He probably already knew that I was freaking out over having dirty thoughts about men. Well, only one man. Not that it made me feel much better. My hand-led fantasies had of late focused entirely on Trevor, the penis-endowed, and it still weirded me out a little if I thought about it too much. Though it didn't scare me quite as much as it used to.

I'd just started building a sand castle with Leo when a shadow fell over me.

"Hey there, Caleb." Trevor's smooth, slow voice was barely noticeable over the waves.

I looked up from the castle and grinned. Trevor stood a few feet away, wearing khakis and a button-down like usual. Work clothes on a Saturday. Oh well. He'd showed up.

"Hi. I'm glad you showed. This is Leo, my little dude."

"I remember. Hi there, Leo. I wasn't planning on coming, really, but things actually went my way at work today and I didn't have to bring anything home. So here I am." Trevor's dimples made an appearance, and I got to my feet. Leo ignored us grown-ups and kept moving sand from one spot to another with all the intensity a child could give.

"Nice. I would have come over and asked in person instead of leaving the invite in your mailbox, but I'm usually running after Leo when you get home from work."

Trevor glanced down at Leo and nodded.

"Yeah, I get that."

"Hey, Little Dude?" I crouched down and tickled Leo's sides to get his attention. "I'm going to go sit and have some grown-up talk with our neighbor, Mr.—" What was his last name? I wasn't sure I'd ever heard it. "Mr. Trevor."

Leo wiggled away from the tickling fingers and waved his shovel at us.

"Mr. Trevor, build a castle with me and Daddy!"

"Um." Trevor glanced down at his khakis and cringed a little.

"Yeah, we need to do something about that. In a while. Hey Leo, I think Anna wants to kick the beach ball around." I pointed over at my sister's six-year-old girl, who was hugging a colorful ball twice as big as Leo.

Leo dashed toward his cousin, sand flying behind him.

"Impressive," Trevor said.

"Let's go grab a drink and sit while we can. I just bought us ten minutes, but that might be it."

We made our way back to the row of chairs just before the dunes. Dad brought us both sodas and patted Trevor on the shoulder.

"It was nice meeting you. Thanks again on the advertising advice," he said before heading back to his own beach chair at the end of the row.

“You got caught in Dad’s social web?”

“He introduced himself as soon as I parked. Force-fed me a burger and everything. Your dad is nice.”

“The best, most of the time.” I would have a word with Dad about delaying my guest later.

“He said you used to surf for a living. How does that work? How did you end up here?”

“I guess the short story is that I was pretty good. I picked up sponsors and everything for my last year. Then a drunken idiot nudged my motorcycle in the middle of a busy highway and I ended up pretty much immovable for a few months. He crushed my knee. I moved back home for rehab and never left.”

“Really? I’d never have guessed.” Trevor glanced down at my legs. The spiderweb of scars across my knee looked white against my tan skin.

“I’m back to where I was six years ago, mobility-wise, but I knew after a year that I wouldn’t go back to surfing as a money maker. Not like I had.”

“Why not?” Trevor leaned back and took a swig from his soda.

“Because I knew I wanted a family of my own, and I didn’t want to wait. I ended up babysitting for Anna—the little pip-squeak over there—a lot while my leg was healing up. I realized that I wanted someone to love like that more than I wanted to ride the waves.”

“You can’t surf and have a family at the same time?”

“If I’d gone the natural way and knocked some girl up, maybe, but I wouldn’t have been able to adopt. Well, I might have been able to, but it’d have been even less likely. I mean I was a single guy. That put me at the bottom of most adoption agencies’ lists of potential families on its own. So I went and got myself a respectable job teaching surfing lessons and managing Dad’s shop.”

“And painting boards. You’re always painting.”

I was flattered that he’d noticed. “It’s my favorite part of the job.”

Trevor looked over at Leo, who was now screaming like a banshee as he chased Anna around and tried to grab the ball.

“So you adopted? I didn’t even know single men could do that.”

“I lucked out, hardcore. I put in my resume with one of those independent open adoption places. May, this tiny little fifteen-year-old girl, looked me up right away. She thought I’d be a cool dad. Over four years later, she still hasn’t regretted the decision. Thankfully.”

Trevor leaned a little closer, and I grinned from ear to ear. I loved talking about Leo. Leo was my everything. Trevor was acting genuinely interested, even if he hadn’t known what to do when Leo wanted to play. I looked over at Leo, just to make sure he hadn’t tried to drown his poor cousin. He kicked the beach ball he’d stolen away from Anna. Sand flew through the air every time his foot made contact with the colorful plastic.

“Does she see him?”

“Huh?” I looked back at Trevor, startled.

“The birth mom. You said it was an open adoption.”

“I mostly send her pictures. I can’t imagine not getting to see your baby at all, just because you couldn’t support him when you had him, you know? May has an open invitation at our house. She’s only met Leo once, for his first birthday. I think she felt a little overwhelmed and guilty, because she hasn’t come since. She’s a sweetheart, though. Sometimes they talk on the phone. Leo calls her Auntie May, and she’s happy with that. We’ll tell him the truth when he gets older and starts asking questions.”

“That’s wild.” Trevor shook his head. “I can’t imagine raising a kid like that. Then again, I’ve never really considered having kids at all.”

I held back a sigh. Talking to Trevor felt natural, like I’d known him for years. But if he didn’t like kids, maybe I didn’t have to worry about how this attraction I had for him would play out.

“You never thought about a family?”

“Not really. I never met the right girl, and my job now isn’t particularly conducive to dating. Sometimes I work weird hours. I never imagined trying to have a family without a wife. I don’t think I’m good with kids. I’ve never been around them much.”

Leo came running back to them, sand flying across our chairs.

“He’s a handful, but I wouldn’t give him up for the world.” I picked Leo up and cuddled him until the squirmy little boy couldn’t take it anymore and wiggled his way out of the hug. I held out a hand. “We’re a pair. Aren’t we, Little Dude?”

“Team One!” Leo high-fived me as hard as he could and ran off toward the water. Dad had wandered back to the wet sand with the twins, so I wouldn’t have to take off after Leo. For all his surfing abilities, I still got nervous if he went near the water alone.

“Team One? That’s cute.” Trevor brushed the sand off his khakis and smiled.

“He was kind of going through a phase last year and needed some assurance that he was the most important thing to me. He saw how much I loved surfing, and he wanted to know if I loved him more than I loved riding waves. So, I told him we’d always be a team and we’d always stick together. The name stuck. Though he’s already told me he loves surfing more than he loves his daddy.” I grinned. My boy had been born a fish. I’d put him on the board with me at just over a year old, just like my dad had done for me.

“You’re a good dad,” Trevor said softly. I nodded. Yeah, I was. That was something I didn’t doubt. I’d do anything for Leo.

“We ought to hang out and do dinner sometime soon,” I said. “Since you’re right across the street and I always make too much anyway. Leo is such a picky eater. He nibbles like a mouse.”

“Sure. I like to grill. I can have you over, too.” Trevor smiled, dimples deep in his cheeks.

“Let me have your cell number, so I won’t have to resort to leaving notes in your mailbox again.”

“That’d be good. I rarely check my mail these days. Once a week, tops.”

“Trevor!” Dad came marching over with Mom in tow. “Let me introduce you to my wife, Emily.” Mom gave me a wink and smoothed out her sundress before falling into the chair on the other side of Trevor.

“I think that’s my cue to run screaming,” I whispered.

Trevor laughed and shooed me off. “Call me when you’re willing to feed me.”

“Will do.” I got to my feet and went over to where Leo chased the waves as they rolled in. Every time water lapped at his little feet, he squealed and laughed.

“Daddy! Take me surfing!” Leo hurled himself at my legs and tugged on my T-shirt.

The waves were fairly tame, the perfect size for paddling out and riding back in without worrying about Leo getting battered around too badly if he wiped out on his own.

“Surfing it is. Let me grab a longboard.”

Leo ran over to where we’d left the surfboards and pulled his favorite one, with a clownfish painted on the top, over to me. I stripped out of my shirt—thankfully my bruises had faded to a tasteful yellow. I hoisted Leo up onto my shoulder, snagged the board, and took off for the surf.

I could feel Trevor’s gaze on me as I got waist-deep in the water. I looked over and waved once, grinning like a madman. Even if we’d never be more than friends, I got to show Trevor all the things I loved today: Leo, the ocean, and surfing.

I sat Leo on the longboard, and my little boy knelt up near the nose of the board right away. Leo squealed happily as each new wave made the board rock and bob. He’d been surfing solo for almost a year now, and he still thought the first moment on the board was the greatest moment of his life each time we went out.

“Want me to ride with you this time, or do you want to do it yourself?” Leo was getting to be good on his own, though he still needed help paddling out.

“With you first, Daddy.”

“You ready?”

“Yeah!” Leo patted the board and laughed as I hoisted myself onto my stomach on the back end. I paddled us out just past where the waves broke and turned the board around.

“Here we go!” I started paddling back toward the beach in front of a good-sized wave. When the water caught us, I got up on my feet. Leo got up and found his balance right away.

We rolled in, nice and easy. Leo dropped to his knees and backed up into my legs when we neared the beach. I turned the board around and paddled us back out. This time, I slid off the board and let Leo ride in by himself.

After the seventh or eighth go, I glanced up to see if Trevor was watching.

He was, and his stare felt intensely focused. It sizzled through me. For a straight man, Trevor sure could pull out a scorching hot gaze. He probably didn’t mean to, but it made me want to go over and kiss him in front of everyone I worked with.

I slipped further down into the water, just to try and cool off a little.

Then Trevor smiled and waved, and the heat in his eyes disappeared.

“Daddy!” Leo splashed water at my face, and my attention turned once again to my son. “Does Mr. Trevor surf?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” I’d never seen any equipment across the street, anyway.

“We should teach him.”

“He’s not dressed for it, kiddo.” Though the idea definitely had its merits.

“Please? Please? Let’s do it!”

“I suppose I could see if Pop-Pop has some extra trunks around...”

How could I resist the opportunity to get Trevor out of those ugly khakis? I couldn’t. Especially if Leo was instigating the whole thing. My little boy always ended up getting what he wanted.

Leo giggled as he pulled my arm. “Let’s go ask, Daddy.”

I hoisted myself on the back and paddled us in until a wave came and hurtled us toward the beach. Leo slid off the board as soon as he was in the shallows, and he struggled forward against the undertow. He hurtled himself straight at Trevor as I picked up the board. I had the sickening feeling I knew exactly what was about to happen. Leo did it enough with me, but I’d never been dressed for work at an *office* before.

“Leo, Leo, slow down. No jumping on Mr. Trevor’s lap.”

Too late.

“What? Whoa there, kid—” Trevor had a wet, sandy, squirmy little boy in his lap, dripping all over his clean khakis. “Ow. Watch the nuts.”

“Sorry,” Leo said, sounding entirely not sorry at all.

“It’s okay. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Come surfing with us!”

I got there and hoisted Leo from Trevor’s lap.

“Sorry about that. Leo, do you remember that talk we had about personal space the other day?”

Leo looked up at me like I was crazy. He’d climbed all over my friends down in Hawaii, and I’d had to give him a lecture on not using everyone he met as a human jungle gym. “Okay, I guess we’ll revisit that later on. Um, Trevor, do you surf?”

Trevor shook his head.

“Leo wondered if you wanted to learn with us.”

“I always kind of wanted to, but I’m not dressed for it,” Trevor said with an amused glance down at his now-ruined pants.

“Well, we can find you some board shorts. That won’t be a problem. My dad always has some around, just in case.”

“I’ll go ask!” Leo wriggled down and sprinted to the other end of the chairs. Trevor stared rather intently at my bruised side, and then looked away.

“Um.”

“You don’t have to, if you don’t want to, but I’ll warn you now. Leo’s got the idea in his head and you won’t hear the end of it until you come out with us. Besides, there’s a washer and dryer up in the beach house. We can toss your pants in so they’ll be clean for your drive home.”

“How’d you get the bruises?”

“Surfing in Hawaii, of course.” I laughed. “Don’t worry, this was from my own stupidity. I tried showing off for Leo, and I ended up wiping out and

landing hard on my board when I went down. These are well earned. You won't have that kind of experience on mushy waves like these."

"Mushy?" Trevor frowned.

"Slow rolling. They're easy to learn on and softer if you fall."

"Mmhmm." Trevor didn't look terribly reassured.

"You want to surf? I should have a pair of board shorts back in the truck that'll fit you," my dad said as he brought Leo back over to us. "Brand new, never been worn."

"If that's the case, I can pay for them—"

"Season's over, son. They'd go on the clearance rack anyway. They're yours. Besides, I never said they were pretty. Come on, we'll get you fixed up."

Dad hauled Trevor to his feet and headed back over the dunes. Trevor trailed along, giving me one mildly amused glance before rushing to keep up.

Trevor bobbed in the water next to me, board held like a shield in front of his pale chest. His discomfort of being shirtless practically oozed out of him. Not that he had much to worry about. He didn't have a six-pack, not by any stretch of the imagination, but his weight didn't look bad on him.

He was just right for cuddling, really.

I really had to stop thinking like that. Especially in my board shorts.

I'd shown him the basics on the sand—how to pop up once he got moving, how to paddle out, and how to protect his head in a wipeout. He'd done a few practice rounds in the water, paddling out and riding back in either lying prone or kneeling, just to get the feel of the water under the board.

"Okay, this time try and stand up."

"Right. I'll do my best."

"Remember how I told you to protect your head if you fell?"

He nodded.

"Good. Try to fall backwards or bail to one side if you feel yourself going.

If you fall off the front of the board, stay down under the water for a little bit so the board doesn't slam into your head when the wave grabs it."

"Right." He took a deep breath, slithered onto the board, and paddled out. I watched him stop and turn himself around. A series of good-sized waves were coming in from behind him, quite a bit bigger than the short ones he'd been practicing on.

"Come on! Paddle in! Faster!" I cheered as the first wave caught him and brought him forward. He managed to get to his feet, hung there for a few seconds with a huge grin on his face, and then tipped and went flying off the side of the board. I swam out after him, hoping he hadn't hit his head on the sand. That was disorienting as hell. Especially the first time. Poor Leo had come up sobbing when he had his first big fall.

Trevor came to the surface spluttering and laughing before I got halfway to him.

"Did you see that?" He was smiling so hard his nose wrinkled. I wanted to poke his dimples.

"I saw. You made it up! That was an awesome first run."

"Is that what it's like every time?" Trevor rooted around in the water, found the leash still attached to his ankle, and reeled the surfboard in.

"I hate to say it, but probably not. You'll get used to the rush. Eventually. Then you'll start chasing bigger and bigger thrills. Leo is the only person I know that still gets totally psyched every time he gets on a board. Then again, he's four. He gets totally psyched every time SpongeBob is on TV."

"So what gives you the rush? Getting bruises?" Trevor's gaze drifted downward again, toward my yellow- and green-spotted chest.

"Not so much, though that's a hell of an adrenaline rush. For me, the best part of surfing is when I find a wave big enough to curl over, and I ride right there, in that space where the top of the wave starts to spill. Getting surrounded by water, top, sides, and bottom, and I'm still moving, still soaring across the surface—that's my rush."

"I take it these waves are too small for that." Trevor looked at the incoming surf.

“Most of the time? Yes. Waves here are better when it isn’t summer. Hurricane season is the best, if they haven’t all blown out and gotten choppy.”

“That sounds cold.”

“I have a decent wetsuit, and it’s totally worth it. I’ll also travel to hit the waves I really want when things are a little too tame here. Thus the Hawaii trip.”

“Do you do that often?”

“No. I’ll travel a few times a year, and I usually head down to the Florida beaches or the Outer Banks or up to the New England states. Everything else is too expensive. I hadn’t gone to Hawaii since the accident. Tickets were a birthday treat from one of my old surf buddies.”

Trevor just nodded.

“Ready to try again? The waves are decent today, so you should get in as much practice as possible.”

He got the board situated again, and I tried not to drool over him as he paddled away from me.

We definitely needed to hang out more often. I made a mental note to invite him to dinner the next night. If he said no, I could always sic Leo on him. That kid had the best beg-and-plead routine I’d ever seen. Then again, I could be biased.

I’d been hoping for a nice, relaxing evening at Trevor’s place. We’d been cooking for each other at least three times a week for the last month. We might not have had much in common, but we enjoyed each other’s company. My attraction for him still hadn’t gone away, not by any stretch of the imagination.

But my hope for a peaceful dinner was as good as shot. Leo was in a bad mood, and when he got grumpy, the best cure was a good night’s sleep.

Leo had gone red-faced, and the first glimmer of angry tears welled up in the corners of his eyes. I crouched down in front of him as Dad locked the shop’s front door. It had been our last long-hours Saturday, and it had been filled with hours without a single customer—hours where I could work on

painting boards behind the counter—interspersed by bursts of last-minute vacationers taking advantage of the good early-October weather and off-season hotel specials. My mother had dropped Leo off before her weekly bingo game, and he'd played around in the store until closing time. We would walk the four blocks to our little house on the bayside half of the island together.

“No, Little Dude. We can't go surfing tonight. It's getting dark and we never, ever surf in the dark. Besides, it'll be dinner and bedtime by the time we get home. We're eating with Mr. Trevor tonight.”

“Tomorrow.”

“The storm is coming in. The waves are going to be too big, and the wind will make them choppy. Besides, we haven't gotten you a wetsuit yet.”

“I can surf big waves now.”

“I know, but just because they'll be big doesn't mean they'll be good for surfing.”

“I wanna surf!” He stamped his bare foot.

I sighed and looked out the shop window. Dad's shop was half a block down from the boardwalk, and we had a pretty clear view of the ocean from the front display windows. Hurricane season was slowly picking up, and with the storms came storm surges that brought the best waves. Too bad the light was almost already gone. “I'm sorry, Little Dude. It's a no-go today. Even for your daddy.” I wanted to be out there too. Unfortunately, I had to set a good example.

Leo stormed off toward the back door of the shop, bare feet slapping loud against the tile floor and lower lip jutting out like a shelf.

My cell phone buzzed. I pulled it out of my pocket and checked my texts. Trevor wanted to know when I was done with work. I shot off a quick estimate of when we'd get home.

“I'll finish the register. It's been a long day.” Dad shooed me off toward the back storeroom.

“Thanks, Dad. See you Monday.” I headed into the back, grabbing the bag containing my paint kit. “Leo? Get your shoes on and grab your backpack.”

Silence.

“Leo? Little Dude?”

The little kid-sized table Leo usually used for coloring sat abandoned, Leo’s little backpack lying on top. He wasn’t back by the overstock shelves. The bathroom door stood open, light off.

Breathe. Breathe. He’d probably just gone back into the front of the store.

“Dad?”

“What is it?” Dad stuck his head into the storeroom.

“Is Leo up there?”

He shook his head.

“He’s not back here, either.”

“I’ll check the front again.”

I looked in all the corners, peeked at the empty shelves, and went to check the back door. Leo’s shoes were missing. Yeah. It was time to freak out.

“*Dad!* Leo’s shoes are gone.”

“His what?”

“His shoes! I can’t find him!” I ran around the back room again, just in case I’d missed Leo hiding in plain sight. Nothing. I felt the panic rise up, the kind of fear I didn’t get unless Leo wiped out on a big wave without me right next to him.

“He was here five minutes ago,” Dad said.

“And he’s not here now!”

“Well then get your ass out that door and look for him. If he isn’t in here, he’s out there. I’ll be right behind you. He wanted to surf, so check the beach.”

“Right. Right.” I flew out the back door and looked around for Leo’s messy blond hair. I saw nothing but the trash enclosure and an empty parking lot.

I took off toward the beach, looking both ways down the alley behind the boardwalk shops. Nothing. I scrambled over the mostly-deserted wooden

walkway and down into the sand. The sun was setting behind me, and the line of surf looked dark and ominous as the light seeped from the sky. A few people were walking along the beach, and there—up a few blocks already—was the only child I could see. I took off in the kid's direction, booking it hard for a couple hundred feet.

“Leo!”

Not Leo. Wrong clothes, shorter stature.

Shit. There were no other kids on the beach. My stomach rolled. I had to check the water next. I ran down into the surf and scanned the waves. I thought the swells were too big, for the first time in my life, and I kept seeing the breakwater and thinking I caught a glimpse of Leo's blond curls in the froth.

If Leo had gone in the water, if I couldn't find my son, I'd die. No question about it. My heart was already tearing itself apart with fear.

I kept yelling his name as I ran along the water, but the crashing surf muted my shouts.

My shorts vibrated. I yanked out my cell phone and answered, desperately hoping for good news.

“Dad? Did you find him?”

“You sound terrible, Caleb. Your voice is in shreds.”

Trevor. Right. I had completely forgotten about our dinner date. Not that it mattered. I had to find Leo.

“Leo's missing.”

“Your son seems to have found his way home,” Trevor said. “Your dad called to tell me what was going on, so I started walking around. I just found him about half a block down the street looking absolutely terrified. We're sitting on my front steps right now.”

“What?” If Leo found his way home, that meant he'd crossed the highway on his own. I shuddered as I turned away from the waves.

Rustling sounded from the other end.

“I'm sorry, Daddy.” Leo's teary voice made me weak in the knees. “I'm sorry, don't be mad!”

“Little Dude, I’m not mad, but you made me worry a lot. I was really scared something happened to you.”

“I went home all by myself.” Leo sounded so proud, even through his sniffles.

“I know you did, but please don’t do it again. You scared me, and you scared Pop-Pop. We don’t like to be scared.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’ll be home in a little bit, but listen to Mr. Trevor until then, okay?”

“Kay.”

There was more rustling, and Trevor’s voice came back over the line.

“Your dad is jogging up the road as we speak. I’ll let him know you’re on your way.”

“Thanks. Seriously. I’ll be there soon—I’m down on the beach. I have to check the shop, make sure we locked up before we went looking for Leo.”

“The grill is going. I’ll keep the munchkin entertained and start up the steaks and hotdogs, so we can eat when you get home. Leo can help me with dinner. Is it okay if I feed him now? He’s tuckered and I don’t know how long he’ll stay awake.”

“Sure. Thanks, Trevor.”

“No problem. Get home. Leo looks like he could use a hug.”

I probably needed it more than Leo did.

Half an hour later, I staggered up the front steps to Trevor’s run-down little bungalow and knocked.

“It’s open,” Trevor called from inside.

I shoved the door open and looked around for my little troublemaker. I needed to see Leo, to hug him and make sure he was okay. The phone call hadn’t been quite enough to dissipate all of my fear.

Trevor’s living room was taken over by his office and at-home workstation. A single armchair sat in the corner. Trevor lay there with the footrest raised. Leo had cuddled against his side and zonked out like a light.

I knelt by the chair and brushed Leo's hair off his forehead. Relief hit me square in the chest as I inspected Leo from top to bottom.

My little boy was okay.

I sat down on the floor and leaned back against the wall for support. Leo was fine. Leo was perfectly okay. He hadn't died or gotten stolen off the street corner or drowned.

Leo was fine, and my incredibly attractive neighbor was a lot better with kids than he'd claimed to be. Maybe there was hope for Trevor yet. I could get used to seeing Leo and Trevor all curled up together. I really could.

"He fell asleep a few minutes ago," Trevor said. "Our dinner is keeping warm in the oven, but I fed him a hotdog and some green beans."

"You got him to eat something green?" That never happened. Never. I had started hiding spinach in everything I could, just to get more veggies into the boy. Pancakes, so far, had been my greatest spinach success, though it was only a matter of time before Leo asked what the little green flecks were.

"Put enough bacon in the beans, and just about anyone will eat them."

"Yeah, true. Bacon is a big hit with him."

"Caleb? You're shaking."

I was? I looked down at where my hands rested on the wood floor. They trembled a little.

"It's just—I'm just—he's okay. He ate beans. He's alive. He's here with you, and not drowned or run over or stolen or lost..."

Trevor gathered Leo up in his arms and got up off the recliner.

"Here. Sit. Hold him. I can't imagine what you went through, worrying about him."

I climbed into the chair and took Leo from Trevor. That little furnace of a body warmed me through and calmed me down.

"I kept thinking I saw him every time a wave broke. I've never been that terrified in my life." I ran my fingers through Leo's blond curls. My son was here. Real. Safe. Just fine.

“I’ll go get your dinner.”

“I don’t think I can eat yet.”

“Not hungry?”

“No, just... steak takes two hands, you know? I don’t want to move him yet.”

Trevor tilted his head as he looked down at Leo. His dark hair shifted and fell down in front of his eyes, veiling them from me.

“I think I’ve got a solution. Just stay put. What would you like to drink? I’ve got a six-pack of beer and some diet soda, and there’s always water. Leo drank the last of my milk,” he said as he pulled the TV tray closer to the side of the armchair.

“Water is fine,” I said.

“You sure you don’t want a beer? It’ll be good for your nerves.”

I wasn’t out on the beach, with its no-alcohol policy. Leo was already sleeping, and I didn’t have to drive anywhere. Trevor, who always seemed to act intensely responsible, had probably already weighed the pros and cons for me before he even offered.

“Okay then. Why not?”

Trevor disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wheat beer and a bowl of green beans.

“Here. You need something to munch on. I can hear your stomach complaining from the other side of the room. Beans shouldn’t be too hard one-handed, right?”

“I guess. Thanks.” I speared a couple beans and popped the fork into my mouth. Yup. Good, bacony beans. I needed the recipe. Especially if Leo had willingly eaten it.

“I’ll be back in a second,” Trevor said, leaving me to my food.

I ate the whole bowl and drank down half the beer in under a minute.

“Good thing I made a bunch of food, huh?” Trevor laughed as he came back into the room with two plates, one full of bite-sized pieces of steak.

“You didn’t have to do all that, dude. Really.” I marveled at the pile of little squares of meat, seared brown on the tops and bottoms and pinkish in the middle. I popped one into my mouth and groaned. Good. So good. I didn’t realize I’d gotten so hungry running all over the beachfront. “You’re my hero right now. This is awesome.”

Trevor sat in his work chair and set his own plate on his knees. His cheeks turned pink. “Want any salt? Pepper? Steak sauce?”

“No, it’s perfect the way it is.”

Trevor’s whole face lit up with a smile. I had to tip my proverbial hat to the man. He sure knew how to calm me down with just a beer, some good steak, and company. I wanted to drag him out of his run-down bungalow and across the street permanently.

I focused on my bite-sized steak as Trevor began telling me about his latest computer project.

“Daddy?” Leo yawned and stretched in my lap. Trevor stopped talking and chuckled at the squeaky little voice.

“I’m here, Little Dude. I got you.”

“Sorry, Daddy. I had fun with Mr. Trevor. Can I do it again?”

“No more running away from me, okay? You’ll have to very politely ask Mr. Trevor if he wants to hang out with you before you come over.”

Leo looked over at Trevor and batted his eyelashes. The kid knew exactly how to get what he wanted. Most of the time.

“I don’t mind, munchkin.” Trevor smiled. “You’re pretty cool, to eat those green beans the way you did.”

I tried not to snort. If there was a surefire way to get Leo to eat his veggies, it was to flatter him into it. The man learned fast.

Now it was time for the worst part of parenting. I sighed and brushed Leo’s hair out of his face. “You know I’m going to have to give you a punishment for running away, right?”

Leo nodded, frowning.

“Your punishment is no surfing or beach time for the next two weeks,” I said. Leo’s eyes went wide as I held up two fingers. “I don’t want you to ever

run away from me again. You scared me a lot. When I say the waves aren't good for surfing, I'm not lying to you just so we don't go surf. I say so because it really is dangerous. You shouldn't run away because you don't like my answer. Do you think that's fair?"

Two big fat tears rolled down his cheeks. But he didn't argue.

"Good. I'll mark the calendar when we get home, and you can count down the days until we can go to the beach again."

"Daddy? Can I go to bed now?"

"Sure. Let's go across the street and get you settled."

"Mr. Trevor? Tuck me in, too?"

Trevor looked over at me and shrugged.

"I have more beer in the fridge and a fresh batch of my mom's homemade cookies for dessert, if you want to come hang out for a few hours. We can always pop in a movie."

Trevor nodded and whisked the plates away into the dishwasher before slipping his shoes on.

"Can I have a cookie, Daddy?"

"Just one, and you have to eat it before we crawl into bed. You don't want to get crumbs all over your sheets, do you? They might get itchy."

Leo shook his head. "Table."

"Good idea. I'll eat mine at the table, too," I said.

"Mr. Trevor?" Leo looked over as Trevor opened the front door for us. "Will you eat cookies at the table with me and Daddy?"

"You bet." Trevor grinned and pulled the door closed behind us. I jogged across the empty street and unlocked my front door after setting Leo down on the welcome mat. As soon as the door opened, Leo beelined into the kitchen and went for plastic container full of cookies on the counter.

"I don't know if I ever told you, but it really is nice in here," Trevor said as he followed me inside. "I keep thinking about how I need to paint and get new carpet, but I never have the time."

“Let me know if you want help. I spent a lot of time working on this place when I was a kid. This whole block of beach houses here were falling apart about twenty years ago. Dad bought up a few to restore during the off-season, just to give him something to do. He and mom lived in this house until I moved to Hawaii to surf. They got sick of boarding windows up and moving all their earthly belongings every time there was a threat of a hurricane, so they moved to the mainland and used this place for guests. I’m buying it off them.”

“Daddy, open.” Leo brought the cookie container over to me. “Please.”

I pried off the lid and handed my son a cookie. Trevor pulled out a chair and helped Leo up onto it.

“I must have gotten the single unrenovated house on the block, huh?”

“There are a few others that haven’t been updated, mostly because the owners ignore them entirely. How did you end up on the island, anyway? This place is almost entirely populated by tourists in the summer and gets pretty desolate in the winter.”

“My grandmother left me the house and I moved down here when I decided I needed a change of pace. I grew up in New York and we rarely visited her, but I was her only grandchild, and she was my only living grandparent. We talked on the phone every week.”

Trevor took his own cookie and sat down next to Leo. The little boy was focused single-mindedly on picking the chocolate chips out and eating them first. Bits of cookie went rolling across the table.

“Classy, Little Dude. Are you showing off your destructive side?” I popped the top back on the container and put it back on the counter.

Leo folded his arms on the table and laid his head down on top of them.

“Bedtime?” Trevor grinned.

“Bedtime. Come on, Leo, let’s get you into jammies and into bed.”

Trevor followed us back to Leo’s bedroom and leaned against the doorframe as Leo tugged on his pirate-themed pajamas and crawled into bed. I slid open the bedroom window to let the nighttime breeze come swirling in, the faint scent of an incoming storm already permeating the salty air.

“Daddy?” Leo snuggled with the stuffed dog his birth mom had sent for his birthday last year.

“Yeah, Leo?”

“Do you think we can make Team One bigger than just you and me?”

I frowned. Leo had always insisted that Team One was just us. Just my little dude and me.

“Did you want to add Pop-Pop and Nana?”

Leo shook his head, then looked over at Trevor.

Trevor’s smile flared brightly for one brief moment. Then he met my gaze. His face fell, and he looked more like a deer caught in the headlights of a speeding semi.

Granted, I probably wore the same expression.

Trevor turned away and pretended to study a picture of Leo and me on the beach, one we’d taken the first day I’d gotten Leo on a surfboard. I wanted to reach out and pull Trevor into a hug, but Leo came first. I ran my fingers through Leo’s curls. How did I approach this?

“I’m not going to say no, but I think you need to think very carefully about what it means to add to Team One.”

“It means forever. Mr. Trevor can’t stay forever?” Leo looked positively heartbroken at the thought.

I know Leo had been getting rather attached to Trevor over the last month, but I didn’t think it had gone quite this far.

“That’s up to Mr. Trevor. We can invite him to join, but the decision to stay is his. He might want to move away some day, or get married or something.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow, okay? For now, sweet dreams.” Leo nodded, eyes drifting shut as I kissed him on the forehead.

I followed Trevor out of the room, pulled the door half shut, and left Leo to fall asleep to the soundtrack of Ocean City in the background—car engines and sea gulls and the faint lapping of waves.

Trevor stood by the side of the couch, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“I’ll grab you a beer and bring the cookies in here.” I smiled.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why he—”

“Trevor? Relax. My little boy has a good sense of character, and if he wants you around forever, you’re definitely worth cultivating a long-lasting friendship with.”

“Friendship.” Trevor muttered the word, as if the mention was unnerving. “I don’t know if I can, Caleb. I don’t want to disappoint Leo but...”

“What do you mean?” I went over to Trevor and touched his shoulder. Trevor tensed. Something in my chest squeezed tight as I pulled my hand away. I didn’t want to lose Trevor yet. I’d barely started to get to know the man. Had he picked up on the feelings I’d tried to keep quiet?

“I don’t think I could keep this up without doing something stupid to ruin it.” Trevor’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“What sort of stupid thing do you think will happen?”

Trevor looked at me, and for a moment I didn’t think he’d answer the question. Then he reached out and grabbed me by the back of the neck. His lips smashed into mine, the kiss hard and needy.

I barely had time to realize what was happening before Trevor pulled back, threw open the front door, and fled. I touched my lips and stared at Trevor’s back as he ran across the street and disappeared into his own house.

“Daddy?”

Oh hell. This was going to be fun.

“Yeah, Little Dude?” I turned around to find Leo staring at me with his big blue eyes.

“Did Mr. Trevor just kiss you?”

I really didn’t want to do this yet, but I certainly wasn’t going to lie.

“Yes, he did. What are you doing out of bed?”

“I want a drink. Are boys allowed to kiss other boys?” Leo tilted his head

to one side like a little bird. He always did that when he was thinking really, really hard about something.

“Sometimes they can, if they really like each other.”

“Do you like Mr. Trevor?”

“I do.”

“Okay.” Leo nodded, as if that settled everything. And maybe, for both of us, it did. I just had to figure out how to get Trevor not to run away from me the next time we saw each other.

I picked up the phone for a little plotting.

The hard rain soaked into my shirt as I left the safety of my front porch. Leo followed behind me, his little army-green umbrella keeping the worst off of him. Dad opened the car door for Leo and helped him climb in the back seat.

“Thanks, Dad. I know it was last-minute.”

“Are you going to tell me what this is about? I know you. You’ve got something up that sleeve of yours.”

I squeezed past Dad and buckled Leo into the car seat.

“You’ll get Mr. Trevor to be happy, right?”

“I’m going to try, Little Dude.”

“Trevor’s the one to get you all mixed up, huh?” Dad chuckled. “That explains things. You know dating a boy won’t bother me, Caleb.”

I backed out of the car and looked him in the eye.

“I never ever thought I’d fall for a guy, Dad. I never looked at one twice before.”

“I didn’t think you would either, kiddo, but love is love. Sometimes you can’t help what happens. I never expected to go after your mother.”

“That isn’t quite the same thing and you know it. I know you see yourself as a laid-back surfer hippie, but are you really okay if I do date Trevor? Because I think he’d be good for Leo and me both.”

“Oh, I agree. He might actually get you to be on time for things. You’re my son, and I’ll be happy with whomever you choose. Just remember that I’m not the only one you’ll have to have a discussion with. Your mother wants more grandchildren, you know. You’ll just have to explain to her that you can always adopt again.”

“And Leo’s birth mom might not like it, either.”

“May will probably think it’s totally awesome. You know her. Though you may want to tell her right away, instead of having Leo drop the bomb next time she calls.”

I nodded.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Anytime. Now we need to go get Leo to his Nana’s. She’s making bread today and needs a little helper.” He closed the car door and slid into the driver’s seat.

I stepped back and waved as they pulled out of the driveway. Then I set off down the driveway and across the street to Trevor’s house. Trevor’s car sat in the driveway. He had to be home. I marched up the front steps and knocked.

The door opened a crack, and one of Trevor’s warm brown eyes peered out.

“Are you here to punch me?”

Punch him? Was that what he’d been afraid of when he took off running? I shook my head.

“No. Let me in, Trevor. I think we need to talk.”

Trevor backed up a little, and the door swung open a few inches.

“I really don’t want to.” He looked down at the stained living room carpet. I pushed my way inside and closed the door behind me. I stepped up to Trevor and tilted his chin up until our eyes met.

I leaned forward and kissed his plump lips. I put all my confused emotions into the kiss, hoping Trevor would get the picture. When Trevor didn’t respond right away, I stepped back and closed my eyes.

“Did I get this wrong? Do you want to punch *me* now?”

Silence. My gut clenched.

“Please tell me I wasn’t wrong.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Trevor whispered. I opened my eyes to find Trevor standing still, one hand resting against his lips. “I thought you were straight.”

“I am. Was. I guess I was more asexual than anything, lately. I could have sworn you were straight, too.”

“I kind of was.” Trevor’s lips twitched and pulled into a reluctant smile. “I beat myself up over you. I thought my celibacy over the last few years had driven me crazy. I tried finding a girl, in the beginning, just to prove to myself I hadn’t turned gay. But I couldn’t do it.”

“It’s going to be weird, isn’t it?” I grinned.

“What?”

“Kissing the hell out of each other. I’m completely weirded out by the idea, but yet not, you know?”

“Are you okay with this? Really? I waited all night for you to come over here and beat the shit out of me with one of your surfboards.”

“Hell yes, I’m okay. Leo’s the one who put it into perspective for me. He saw you kiss me.”

“Shit.” Trevor shook his head. “That’s not good.”

“It’s fine. He’ll have to get used to it, if we do start dating.” I pulled Trevor’s body to my own and held him close, relishing the feel of his body against mine—not hard and lean and unforgiving, but just soft enough to be comfortable. Snuggly. Nice. “That’s where this is all going, right? This isn’t just a one-time thing?”

“I don’t know.” Trevor’s arms slid around me and pulled us tight together.

I sighed. “I don’t want to chase this thing unless I know it’s going to last.” The contact felt so nice, though. I didn’t want to think about losing it now. “Leo needs stability. He always, always comes first for me.”

“I get it,” Trevor said. “I really do. I want you, Caleb, and I want Leo in my life too. Just... I need to think the decision through completely. When we

date, I'm going to want to tell people, and I need to make sure I don't get any backlash that'll seriously affect us. I have no idea if my mother will be okay with it. My biggest customer is a notorious homophobe and I have to prep for the loss of his business. I need to get my finances in order, if I'm going to be responsible for more than just myself."

That was a little more serious than I'd been thinking when I'd said Leo needed stability. I just didn't want Trevor running off the first time he got overwhelmed.

"We aren't getting married or anything, just dating with an eye out for making it long-term. Money isn't an issue. I make enough. Your customer doesn't need to know, if you think it'll be bad for business, right? Does he ask about your personal life? Are you going to put pictures of us together where he can see them?"

"No. True. We communicate via email most of the time, and it's all business."

"Then don't worry so much. I think you're reading too much into what could happen. But about the mother thing? I can kind of relate. My dad guessed what was going on earlier."

"How'd it go?" Trevor hugged me just a little bit tighter.

"He just smiled and nodded and said it was fine."

"That's a relief. I really don't want him punching me in the face either."

"Like my dad would ever do that. He likes you. But if you really want time to think this through, I can give you time. Not much, though. Hugging feels too good."

"I don't really want time." Trevor chuckled. "I already know it's what I want. You talked me into it."

"So my parents have Leo until five. Got any plans for your afternoon?"

"Maybe we should try out what we'd be like together. See if things work, or if we just get grossed out." Trevor licked his way down my neck.

"You mean in bed?" Parts of me were definitely getting interested in that idea.

“Mmhhh.” Trevor placed a hot, sucking kiss along my collarbone. He pressed his body against mine. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one excited.

“I can handle that. A nice, long round of experimentation sounds just right.”

“Good. Bed.” Trevor pulled me through the living room and down the hall to the bedroom. I barely got a glimpse of the small room before Trevor pushed me down onto the mattress. I bounced as Trevor hurled himself down next to me.

“Kiss me again. Please, kiss me again,” I said, reaching for him.

“Hang on. Stop. Back up.” Trevor laughed. “You’re soaked to the bone. Take that shirt off.”

“You just want to get me naked.” I sat up and plucked at my polo, the pale-blue splotted dark around my shoulders and down my back.

“True. Now strip.” Trevor laughed. “You made me go shirtless to surf, you can do it for a make-out session.”

“I didn’t make you do anything then, you did that yourself. With a little encouragement from my dad.” I pulled the shirt over my head and tossed it to the ground. “I’m willing to take off more than that, if you want me to.”

“Ooh.” Trevor’s eyes ran over me, his gaze hot and hungry. “This might actually be easier than I thought.”

“Come here, you.” I laughed and pulled Trevor on top of me. Trevor dove down for another kiss, and I opened up to him. The slick heat of his tongue slipping between my lips made me groan. His kisses felt like everything I’d been missing in the last few years. All the memories of passion I’d had with others, long before Leo came along, paled in comparison to what Trevor drew out of me.

Trevor pulled away and grinned. “This is good.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it is. Your turn to remove clothing.” I wanted to see more of him.

Trevor got up and yanked his shirt off. He tossed it into the hamper and started fumbling with his belt. I hadn’t expected him to go that far, but I

wasn't about to stop him, either. I'd hoped we go that far eventually, but with as self-conscious as he'd been during our surfing lesson, I expected more of a fight.

He whipped his belt from his pants and tossed it to the floor. He undid the top button of his pants, and then looked up at me. He froze with his fingers on the zipper.

"Um. This is weird."

"What is?" I didn't want to stop, not now that I had Trevor where I wanted him.

"I'm not freaking, and that's making me feel weird."

"So you're weirded out over the fact that you're not weirded out?" I grinned. "I guess I can kind of relate. If we really were good little straight boys, we'd be running for our lives now, wouldn't we?"

Trevor nodded.

"Well, feel free to keep going with the striptease," I said. "Or is it my turn?"

"Your turn." He sat down on the edge of the bed.

Fair enough. I popped the buttons of my jeans and slithered out of them. All I had left were the nicest pair of boxers I owned. I'd definitely been dreaming when I got dressed for the day.

Trevor stared at me for a long time. His gaze dropped from my face to my chest and down my legs, then returned to my face, just to do the whole circuit all over again. And again.

He swallowed.

"Is it too much?" I grabbed my jeans from where they'd landed. "We can always go back a few steps."

He grunted and tugged his zipper down. He kicked off his khakis and—

Tighty-whities. I should have guessed. They were so very Trevor-like. He filled the front out quite nicely, and I had to stare at the obvious outline of his cock. I gave him the same up-and-down look he'd given me. He bit his lip and watched me check him out.

He made no move to cover himself.

“More?” I grinned and ran a finger under the waistband of my boxers.

“God, yes.”

I pulled my underwear off and spread out on his bed so he could look his fill.

“I don’t think I’m going to have a problem with this,” Trevor said with a short laugh. “Even my freak-out over not freaking out is over.”

“Good. Now take ’em off.” I snuck a look down his body again. The bulge in his briefs had definitely grown.

Trevor slowly slid the white cotton down. Oh. Wow. He was beautiful. I hadn’t expected to find him so beautiful. I’d never considered a man’s body before, not like this. I’d had plenty of heated dreams about what Trevor might be like without his clothing, but nothing compared to reality. Heat spiked through me, and I knew there wouldn’t be any problems on my end, either. I beckoned him to me, catching his hand in mine as he stepped back over to the bed.

“Come on. Naked make-out time.”

“Fuck,” he said. “Please tell me we’ll come at the end of it.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Nothing... internal.”

“Internal?” God, that was such a Trevor-like word, wasn’t it?

“I want a proper discussion about boundaries and safety and everything, before we make an even bigger leap into whatever this is going to be.”

Even now, Trevor was being the responsible one. Good. I certainly hadn’t thought of potential safety hazards. I definitely didn’t have condoms back home, and I seriously doubted if Trevor had any here.

“Dry humping sounds awesome to me, man.” I pulled him down. He collapsed half over me, but tried to move off right away. I held him tightly. “You’re fine right there. More than fine.”

He felt warm. Perfect. Hard and soft in all the right places. How did I ever

get so lucky? First I got the best little boy in the world, and then I found Trevor.

My cock pushed up against his and hardened further. Our mouths crashed together again, and this time the kiss was fierce and demanding. We devoured each other. He wrapped one arm around the back of my neck, and I grabbed a fistful of his hair as our teeth mashed together.

Trevor pushed his hips against mine, and I groaned and thrust back.

I nearly saw sparks as we rubbed up against each other. The kiss and our frantic thrusts couldn't have lasted more than five minutes before I lost it. My whole body tight, as if my skin shrank over my bones. The rush was far better than shooting the curl and having a perfect ride.

I came all over both our stomachs. Trevor's cock pushed through the slick mess a few more times, and then he grunted as more heat and wetness splashed between us.

"Holy hell," he said, gasping.

I started laughing. Hysterically. I had no idea why, but it was all I could do to keep it to a regular laugh and not fly into the psychotic crazy cackle I could feel my brain trying for. Trevor looked at me for a few seconds, and I wasn't sure if he was going to push me away. Then he started laughing, too. We laughed until tears squeezed from our eyes and dried on our cheeks. It slowly died down, and we stared at each other while we gasped for breath.

"Sorry. I don't know what got into me. I think I'm relieved," I said.

"That we work?" Trevor nodded. "Me too."

"I made a mess."

"So did I," Trevor said. "I'm kind of afraid to look down. We should probably peel ourselves apart and take a shower."

"You're definitely going to be the responsible one in this relationship." I grinned as we both got up off the bed.

"And you're going to get me to do things I'd never agree to do on my own. You already got me on a surfboard. What's next? Skydiving?"

"No, I'm not the sort to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. Surfing can get crazy enough."

Trevor led me to the bathroom and started the shower.

“One at a time would probably be best if we want to be presentable by the time your parents bring Leo back. We should also probably have that awkward conversation about physical limits,” Trevor said.

“After the shower.” I kissed Trevor once before darting under the spray. “I’ll save you some hot water, I promise.”

“Good. Then we can plan dinner. I have some asparagus I was thinking of wrapping in bacon, Leo might be willing to try that tonight...”

That was it.

I was never letting this man go.

THE END

Author Bio

Madeleine Ribbon lives on the outskirts of Baltimore, Maryland, but was born and raised in Iowa. She still gets claustrophobic in forests and prefers to see her tornados coming. When she isn't writing, she spends much of her time playing video games, brewing beer and mead, and trying not to blow up the kitchen while trying new recipes.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

FOUR SEASONS WITH YOU

By May Ridge

Photo Description

A photo depicts two men: their faces close together, eyes closed, radiating contentment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This peaceful moment reflects the love and compassion that these two have for each other. How did they meet and find one another? What stage is their relationship, and what sorts of experiences and emotional growth have they had together? (Possible friends-to-lovers, if the muse takes you there.) Any genre (fantasy, contemporary, historical, etc.) is fine if it helps the story flow for you.

P.S. If possible, I'd prefer something without extreme amounts of angst. Also, no non-con/dub-con/threesome/infidelity/cheating, please. Slow burn and romance would be great to read. Please give them an HEA. Thank you so much!

Sincerely,

Marie

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, slow burn/unresolved sexual tension, roommates, long time crush, sweet no sex

Word count: 10,285

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

FOUR SEASONS WITH YOU

By May Ridge

AUTUMN

I – September

“Thanks so much for letting me stay with you while everything gets settled. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

Sebastian smiled at him, his green eyes warm with understanding. “It’s not a problem. It’s been a bit hectic for you this past year, hasn’t it?”

It wasn’t a question; they both knew the truth of the statement. First it had been the new job offer: a decent salary, amazing benefits, and pretty good vacation time, complete with a move across the country in order to get it. His mother’s sickness hadn’t made the decision to accept the offer any easier—but his previous job had been dead-ended with no hope of furthering his career and Dallas wanted more in life than a Tech 2 position.

The main deciding factor, of course, had been Joshua. It hadn’t been a particularly messy breakup; amicable for the most part on both sides, but it wasn’t easy to let go of a six-year relationship, regardless of a mutual decision and differing desires as to where the relationship was headed. Dallas had wanted a broader commitment, more long term and official. Joshua had been happy without the husband label, and had no desire to make it official in the eyes of the law.

He missed him, though, even now, even two months later, he still missed Joshua: the way he made coffee for both of them before he left for work, the way the corners of his eyes crinkled when he laughed and meant it—Dallas shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts out. He didn’t want to think about Joshua right then. It was supposed to be a new start—a whole new change.

“It’s a nice place you found out here,” Dallas told Seb, slipping his shoes off in the foyer and looking around. The house was a mid-sized townhouse; the front door opened straight into the living room and the dining room was

attached, with a kitchen and half bath in the back. The stairs led straight out of the entryway, with the bedrooms and another bathroom upstairs. Seb had sent photos when Dallas had confirmed he'd be moving in.

Thank God for Seb.

He and Seb hadn't really kept in touch since high school, although their mothers still met weekly and passed enough information around to keep both Dallas and Seb up-to-date with each other's lives—whether they wanted to know or not. Dallas had been fine with that way of doing things for a long while; Joshua had been a little bit jealous of his high school friends, memories in a past he couldn't possibly be a part of or share. Seb had been Dallas' best friend from the time he was three to the time he was eighteen, and Joshua had been the most threatened by that, even though he'd never actually met Seb in person. Seb had moved out to Calgary after graduating high school, following a career in the lucrative field of oil and gas. It enabled him to buy a house, so when Dallas' mother heard he was looking into a job in Calgary, she'd immediately brought it up.

"Yeah," Seb replied, and picked up Dallas' last bag, jerking his chin to the stairs. "Let me show you your room, and you can get cleaned up while I finish off dinner."

"You're the greatest," Dallas told him promptly, falling into the natural pattern of being around Seb. Even after a decade, the easiness hadn't changed and he was grateful for that. He was also rather relieved that he wouldn't be expected to help cook today, not after driving the six-day journey from their hometown.

Seb laughed. "You must be absolutely shattered. Don't worry; I won't keep you up too late. Dinner, and then you can relax or whatever you want. You have a few days before the job starts, right?"

"Four days," Dallas replied, and followed Seb through one of the doors upstairs. "Enough time to adjust and settle in, I hope. I'll handle supper tomorrow, if you want."

"Sure, I'll leave you directions to the nearest store. You'll need the bank too, right?"

“Yeah,” Dallas said, and dropped his bags on the bottom of his bed. Seb put the one he was carrying down in front of the dresser as Dallas looked around.

“It’s not much,” Seb started, looking around as well. The bed was a double, with several fleece blankets covering the sheets, and the dresser wood was scraped and roughened, giving it a slightly battered but altogether homey look. The carpet was a little threadbare, but the blinds were clean and the room looked neat and smelled fresh, not dusty as Dallas had half feared when his mother had told him that Seb had a disused second bedroom.

“It’s almost perfect,” Dallas told him, and grinned when Seb shot him a narrow look, one eyebrow raised.

“Almost perfect?”

Dallas shrugged, once again falling into that old, easy habit of teasing Seb. It was as if he’d never moved away, as if the years between them could fall away with just a look. “Well, there’s no Wonder Woman poster on the wall this time.”

Seb laughed at that; the same sudden, half-surprised laugh that Dallas had always managed to draw out, sometimes in spite of Seb’s best efforts. “Sorry, there was no time to shop for one. I’ll get you one tomorrow.”

He turned to go, but Dallas stopped him before he could take more than a few steps out the door. “Thanks, Seb.”

Sebastian turned to shoot him a crooked smile. “It’s my pleasure, Dallas. It’s good to have you here.” He paused, his expression considering something, before he shook his head slightly. “Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.”

II – October

“Not even just one?”

“Nope.”

“You are *so* harsh. It’s not like they’re going to miss it.”

“And the one kid that doesn’t get candy this year is going to be the *one* child who is vengeful enough to spray paint my front door and toilet paper my garden,” Seb told him, and then continued ruthlessly. “If you’d really wanted candy that badly, you would have bought some yourself; you’ve got no one else to blame.”

“Buying the candy *before* Halloween is for suckers,” Dallas argued, and sighed, resting his chin on his hand to watch Seb separate the candies from the chocolates. “Buying *after* Halloween is the smart thing to do. The *best* thing to do.”

Seb scoffed, and lifted his eyes from the little piles he was making. “Yeah, and I thought you had learned your lesson back in freshman year. *How* many candies did you buy after Halloween? You were *so* sick—”

“—and my mom wouldn’t even write me a note excusing me from class,” Dallas finished, and laughed, enjoying the memory before he furrowed his brow and shook his head. “No, why am I laughing? I don’t think I’ve ever felt so sick in my life, before or since.”

“Not even hung over?”

“Not even then.”

Seb stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and continued dividing, the corners of his mouth tilting up in a tiny, secretive smile. “It didn’t stop you from a candy run the next year,” he pointed out, and Dallas laughed again.

“No,” he replied, and he folded his arms on the table so he could rest his cheek on them, watching Seb through his lashes. “But I didn’t eat them as quickly that time. It took me weeks to finish them all, actually.”

“Ass,” Seb said, and threw a mini-Mars bar at his head. “I distinctly remember asking you if you had any, and you always said you never did.”

Dallas lifted his head, and opened the Mars bar, eating it unabashedly before he gave Seb a cocky grin. “Well, *I* can’t remember those instances; you must be making it up. Anyway,” he continued quickly, before Seb could form a reply, “it’s been a while since I did a post-Halloween run; maybe I’ll do it again this year.”

“Oh?”

“Joshua thought it was a little bit childish. He didn’t put candy out either until I started. He didn’t grow up with it, you know. Halloween, I mean.”

Seb looked up at that, his brow furrowing as he frowned, and Dallas realised too late that his own voice had betrayed him and lowered the mood to a more sombre one.

“All the more reason to go out this year and do it,” Dallas added quickly, and grinned at Seb to prove he was doing all right. He still missed Joshua; it still ached to think about him and what they’d had, but Seb didn’t need to know that. Sebastian just stared at him and Dallas sighed and looked away, trying not to deflate too obviously. “It’s okay, Seb, I just...”

“You know what we could do?” Seb asked before the faltering sentence could trail into a silence that embarrassed both of them. “We could just put the bowl out—with a sign saying ‘*Take just one please*’—and then put nothing in the bowl.”

Dallas arched his eyebrows at Seb. “You sly devil.”

He only got an innocent look in return. He remembered the look quite well; it was a look that Seb used to get away with deeds and pranks since elementary school. It had worked through junior high and high school as well, and had lost none of its potency with age. It smoothed Seb’s features: a quizzical expression, wide green eyes that looked a little hurt... The face was a golden opportunity, and it always made Dallas laugh to see it.

It was no exception this time either.

Dallas broke first, laughing as he shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. “Sneaky jerk,” he added fondly, and the wounded innocence in Seb’s expression increased exponentially. “Yeah, I’m talking to you,” Dallas continued. “You deserve to have your yard toilet papered if that’s the kind of dirty deed you deal out. You can dish it but you can’t take it?”

“You must be a terrible influence,” Seb replied blandly. “Most of my Halloweens proceed like this.” He gestured to the piles of candy, a trick learned from his mother to separate the allergy free candy from the ones that contained peanuts and other potential dangers. Then he looked around and nudged one of the piles towards Dallas, who grinned broadly and scooped it up in his palm. He offered one to Seb as a peace treaty, giving him first choice.

Seb smiled and took a mini-Caramilk bar, his fingertips brushing against Dallas’ palm.

Dallas blinked, and his brow furrowed; Seb looked down quickly and continued his dedicated separating, purposely avoiding Dallas’ gaze.

Dallas ate one of the candies slowly, considering Seb as he sucked on it for a long minute before he looked away, resting his chin on his hand again. He’d surely been imagining things. For a moment, he could have sworn that there had been heightened colour in Seb’s cheeks when he’d looked down again.

But whatever for?

He must have imagined it.

III – November

“I’m just asking how it’s possible to go on a road trip with only one CD in the car.”

“I already told you; my iPod is broken, and anyway, it’s not like we’re going very far.”

“A few hours *is* very far.”

“Banff is closer than you think—and besides, what’s wrong with Frankie Valli? I quite like him. *And* his music.”

Dallas sighed and dropped his head back against the headrest. “It makes you seem even more of an old man, to be honest. Old man music tastes. That would be you.”

Seb’s sudden huff of laughter made Dallas grin, although he kept his face turned towards the window to see how long he could make Seb believe he was genuinely put out by the music choice. He didn’t actually mind Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons; Seb usually listened to them when it was his turn to clean the house. He said the songs put him in a good mood, and they were usually upbeat enough to keep him distracted while he polished and vacuumed. It didn’t matter to Dallas, honestly, but it was still fun to tease him.

“I think you’re just jealous you can’t hit those notes,” Seb told him after a few minutes.

Dallas could hear the smile in his voice and rolled his eyes in response to it, although he was unable to help his own reflexive grin at the sound. “Yeah, that’s right. You caught me. It has nothing to do with the fact that this is the third time we’re listening to this particular song.”

“All right,” Seb said, and Dallas blinked when the music shut off, the sudden hum of the car’s motor sounding much louder. Dallas turned to look at Seb; the corner of Seb’s mouth was curled up in a superior sort of smirk that had Dallas arching an eyebrow curiously. “Well?” Seb asked, shooting Dallas a quick look. “Aren’t you going to entertain me now?”

“Is this your way of asking me to hit those notes?” Dallas teased, and laughed when Seb mock shuddered. “Fine, fine. How shall I entertain you?”

“I’m not the one who needed to turn the music off.”

“Yeah, it’s a pity the radio doesn’t work out here. The scenery’s almost worth it though,” Dallas mused, reaching forward to fiddle pointlessly with the radio before he sat back again, looking out the window again. The mountains rose up high on either side of them, the tall pine trees helping to block out most of the sun. The lakes were something to behold whenever they passed them; Dallas had made Seb stop by each and every one so far. The long stretch of white ice, surrounded by mountains, the marks of the ice skaters on the surface—it was unlike anything Dallas had ever seen before.

“I’ll bring you out here in summer time,” Seb replied, and stifled a yawn. “The lakes look even better when there’s no ice. *Such* a colour, and the clarity of the water... They’re something stunning to behold.”

“Joshua always wanted to see the lakes in summer,” Dallas said, quite without thinking. He regretted it immediately. Seb had a tendency to go quiet whenever Joshua was brought up, not that Dallas blamed him. It had to be awkward to hear about somebody that he didn’t know, and never had known, and somebody who had been such an important part of Dallas’ life for so long.

Joshua, as a boyfriend, had been jealous of Seb’s memory as Dallas’ best friend; Dallas had to wonder if Seb, as a best friend, was a little jealous of Joshua’s ghost as an ex. He was about to say something, to ask, or to reassure, even Dallas wasn’t certain which, when Seb cleared his throat and turned his head to smile at Dallas.

“So you ready to face the Western Canadian winter?”

“It’s definitely not going to be as bad as the Eastern Canadian kind,” Dallas retorted, and looked out the window again, idly marvelling at the inborn Canadian trait of talking about the weather in uncomfortable moments. Sometimes he thought he should talk to Seb about Joshua, try to erase this awkwardness surrounding the topic, but he didn’t know how to bring it up. He didn’t think Seb would be remotely interested. It would have been easier if Seb had had a similar story, so that they could at least mention their own problems before moving to another topic, but as far as Dallas could tell, Seb hadn’t had a serious relationship for years.

Not since college, in fact.

“Toll gate coming up,” Seb said after a few minutes of silence that had grown increasingly awkward. “Once we pass through, we’ll be in the National Park. Keep an eye out for animals, you might get lucky and see something wild.”

“Bears?” Dallas asked easily, perking right up.

Seb laughed. “No, unfortunately they’re not likely this late in the season. I promise,” he added quickly, obviously seeing Dallas’ disappointed expression. “I will bring you back this summer, and we’ll see if we can find you a bear—and maybe even a moose.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Dallas replied cheerfully, grinning at Seb. Sebastian’s return grin had an odd quality to it, but before Dallas could think to ask if anything was wrong, they were pulling in to the tollgate, and he forgot about the expression during the search for the cash.

WINTER

IV – December

“Yeah, Mom... mmmm. No, I know. *Yes*, your present should arrive in time. I know. I know, it sucks, but—well, yeah. Okay. Okay. I love you too. Bye.”

Sebastian looked up as Dallas hung up and sighed, flopping back down on the couch and reaching for the remote on Seb’s lap. “Good conversation?”

“It’s only the fact that I promised her present would be worth me missing Christmas dinner that’s keeping her from spending money she doesn’t have and flying out here to be with us.”

“Yeah, I had to convince my mom not to try either,” Seb replied, and grabbed the remote back to start channel flipping again. “It’s a pity you can’t get the days off though.”

“Let’s be honest, it’s not like I’d be able to afford the flight back home yet either,” Dallas said, idly watching the television screen. Sebastian stopped flipping the channels on one of the musical concerts that were on all the stations during the holiday time. It was some choir or other, Dallas didn’t really care. It was a plethora of red and green and white, and he turned his head to watch Sebastian watch it instead, smirking a little at the small smile on Seb’s face as he watched.

Sebastian noticed, and arched an eyebrow at Dallas. “What are you looking at?”

Dallas shrugged, smiling; he was unable to put the emotion to words but it was somehow comforting to know that Sebastian was still Sebastian even after so long, and so much time spent so far apart. There were a few times when he’d noticed differences in Sebastian’s habits, and he felt guilty for not knowing when they had crept into Sebastian’s routines.

Dallas was his best friend; he ought to have kept in touch without the aid of their mothers. “Nothing, just enjoying the view.”

Seb blinked, his brow furrowing before he arched his eyebrows, and Dallas laughed, suddenly struck by how odd the statement might have sounded to Sebastian. It was something they'd said all the time when they'd been caught daydreaming and staring into space; but he hadn't used the phrase for a long time himself. He could only imagine Sebastian hadn't used it for even longer.

"Sure," Seb replied after a minute, and then cocked his head to look at Dallas. "Hey. I was just wondering... what were your plans for when you moved out?"

Dallas blinked at him, before he lifted a hand and shoved it through his hair, the words hitting hard for some reason. "I—I hadn't actually thought of—you need me out?"

"What? Oh. No. No, no, no, that's not what I meant. I was actually asking—I mean. You help out a lot with dinner and cleaning and stuff, and I was wondering—it'll give you some time to save up money for a place of your own if you want, but I was wondering if you wanted to become my official roommate, rather than a friend who's just staying while he finds his feet in a new city."

Dallas stared at Sebastian for a long minute, then laughed, and leaned back against the couch again. "God, you scared me for a minute," he teased. "I thought you wanted my room back, or wanted to invite men over or something."

Sebastian gave him an odd look, but it was accompanied by the huff of unexpected laughter. "Men over? Please, when have I invited any men over with you here?"

Dallas cocked his head. "You know, you don't have to hold back on my account. I can always stay in a hotel for a night or two if you needed me to, once you start dating—"

"Can we stop talking about this, please?"

Instead of the smile Dallas had almost expected to see from his teasing, Sebastian's face was tense, his expression tight as if he was scared of leaking whatever feeling he was hiding out into the open so that Dallas could dissect it. Dallas knew his best friend though; he knew when to seriously leave a topic

alone and when it might be pushed without repercussions. Dallas watched Seb for a moment, then shrugged and turned back to the TV. “I think I’ll take your offer. I like staying here. It’s nice being here with you.”

Sebastian smiled a little at that, at least. “I like being with you too.”

V – January

“I hate winter,” Dallas muttered, and dropped his head down on his forearms again, groaning as Seb just patted his back sympathetically. “Why do the roads conspire to make my life difficult? And why doesn’t the city *do* something about it?”

“Dallas, it only started snowing ten minutes ago. And besides, you weren’t planning on going out again, were you?”

“On the contrary, I have a hot date later tonight,” Dallas replied, and was surprised when, instead of laughing, Seb kind of flinched and stared at him, wide-eyed.

“You—you have a date?”

Dallas frowned and immediately felt guilty, although he wasn’t sure why. “Yeah, a hot date with Erica. You know. From work. We’re going out for drinks to celebrate the presentation we had to do on Tuesday. It was a great success.”

“Oh,” Sebastian said, and stared at him for a moment, his cheeks a little red. “I—I thought you meant an actual date. Not,” he added quickly, eyes wide as he caught himself, stopping the words short, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that, I mean, you can date whoever you want and I—”

Dallas broke in, shaking his head, trying to alleviate the sudden panic he could see in Seb’s eyes even if he didn’t understand the reason behind it. “No—no, I’m not interested in dating—I mean, I don’t want another boyfriend...”

They stopped talking at about the same time and stared at each other silently for a long minute. There had been more of the silences lately, although Dallas wasn’t sure where they were all coming from. He wasn’t even sure how to bring it up either. It didn’t seem like there was anything that Seb had any reason to be worried about—and yet, he clearly was worried about something.

“Is... is everything okay?” Dallas asked softly, and Seb just tilted his head and smiled at him.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I just—I don’t know. I’m concerned, I guess. I mean, you say you don’t want another boyfriend, and I can understand that, I just... never mind,” Sebastian laughed, the sound brittle in Dallas’ ears. “I don’t even know what I’m trying to say anymore. Just pretend I never said a thing.”

Dallas frowned and watched him, but Seb ignored his gaze and continued preparing dinner. He was making mashed potatoes currently, and Dallas sighed and got to his feet, moving into the kitchen and bumping his hip against Seb’s to nudge him out of the way. “I’ll finish the potatoes; you get the sausages ready, hmm?”

“Don’t you have to leave soon?”

Dallas shot the clock a quick glance, and shrugged. “There’s time enough to get there. It’s not snowing *that* badly.”

Sebastian laughed, but he moved over to let Dallas take over the mashing. “You’re pretty fickle tonight, aren’t you?”

Dallas hummed in agreement, his brow furrowing as he stared down at the potatoes, going over the conversation again in his head even as he tried to decide how to bring it up to Sebastian. He wasn’t sure why Sebastian was concerned, but maybe it was something like the same kind of jealousy that he felt towards Joshua. Maybe he was worried about being replaced or something; they’d been friends for a long time, and had been apart for a long time, so maybe Sebastian felt threatened of losing Dallas’ company again. It was the only thing he could think of that would explain the concern.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, and then Sebastian moved closer to drop some minced garlic into the potatoes. He smelled good, from that close, and Dallas turned his head to smile at Seb. Seb was watching him, his eyes warm again, and Dallas shifted unconsciously, moving closer before he even registered the movement.

Seb’s green eyes widened, and he stepped back quickly, dusting his hands off as he hurriedly moved back to the stove. “I think the potatoes are good now,” Seb said hastily, and Dallas frowned.

“Seb, you know I’m not looking to date anyone right now, right?”

Sebastian stilled, and then looked over his shoulder, shooting Dallas a small smile. “I know that.”

“And you know you’ll always be my best friend, right?”

“Mhmm,” Seb hummed, and turned back to the stove.

Dallas frowned, still feeling uneasy, but he couldn’t put a reason to it. He shrugged. “Well, then you have nothing to be concerned about, okay? As my best friend, I’m not going to be replacing you anytime soon, and Erica’s quite nice. You can even come with us tonight if you’d like.”

Sebastian stilled again, watching the sausages cook before he simply hummed in agreement. “I know. Thanks, but I think I’ll stay home tonight.”

“You all right though?” Dallas asked, brow furrowing. “You’re not still concerned, right?”

“Of course I’m all right. Why wouldn’t I be?” Sebastian replied, but he still wasn’t looking at Dallas, and Dallas couldn’t help but feel worse than he did before.

VI – February

“So that was an awesome Valentine’s Day dinner,” Dallas mumbled, his face pressed against Seb’s shoulder. Seb was wearing his favourite leather jacket, and he smelled so good; like leather and heat and the sharp, spicy scent of his cologne. “I like our friends, them’s good people.”

“They are very friendly, yes,” Seb replied. His words were short and clipped; he was trying his best to sound not as drunk as he actually was, Dallas knew. It was the habit he’d had since they’d been sneaking beer from their parents’ fridges in high school, and some habits just never changed. Fortunately, he knew how to fix the overly prim and proper manner.

“Here,” he said suddenly, and draped an arm over Seb’s stomach, only half noticing the way Seb tensed up at the touch. “Let me get your seatbelt.”

“I am already buckled in,” Seb protested, and Dallas lifted his head with a huge grin as he ignored what Seb was trying to say—and just started tickling him instead.

Seb had always had very ticklish sides; his ribs especially were the most dangerous place for him. It was even funnier when he was a little bit tipsy. Seb gasped and made a high-pitched sound, two octaves higher than his usual speaking voice, and he started to flail in an attempt to free himself or escape. Dallas refused to be moved, putting more effort into tickling Seb until Sebastian was gasping for breath and Dallas was more than half draped over him. It was only then that he stopped, laughing hard enough that the cab driver might have thought that Dallas was being tickled in return.

Sebastian had slumped back deeper into the seat, and was working on regulating his breaths again, and Dallas decided that moving would require too much effort. He stayed where he was instead; Seb had a very comfortable chest after all, and it was pleasant in a soothing kind of way to listen to Seb’s heartbeat under his ear. They stayed like that, in comfortable silence, for a few kilometres before Sebastian caught his breath back. Dallas just listened to his heart, waiting for his mind to stop reeling from the exertion. He made a small, surprised sound when Seb’s hand started running up and down his back before he hummed quietly in soft approval.

It was comforting, and sweet, and made him relax even further. It had been a good night. Sebastian had come out with him and Erica, and her husband, and they'd enjoyed a great meal and a lot of delicious drinks.

Sebastian's hand paused on his back and he sighed, making Dallas tense a little, because one of Seb's other habits after drinking was talking about things that Dallas usually didn't want to talk about. He tried frantically to think of ways to deflect the upcoming conversation, but he'd let Sebastian's hand lull him too far, and it was too late to even make the attempt. "You are doing okay without Joshua?"

"I had my chance with him," Dallas replied slowly, not lifting his head in the hope that maybe it would spur Sebastian to change the subject again. "I miss him, yeah, but I had a good time with him."

"Sometimes—sometimes I think you need a new boyfriend. To help you forget him."

It was almost sweet, but entirely unnecessary. "Nah, I'm okay. I don't really want another long relationship at the moment. I've used my chance."

"You can only have one?"

"Well," Dallas started, and then huffed out a tiny laugh. "It's not exactly a rule, but I don't think I'll find anyone who fit me as well as Joshua did."

Sebastian's heart thudded under Dallas' ear, the steady rhythm of it loud enough that Dallas had difficulty hearing Sebastian's next question, although that might have been the fact that Sebastian spoke even quieter than usual to ask it. "You think that this unknown person does not exist, or have you just not found him yet?"

Dallas shrugged one shoulder, not willing to think about it. He nestled in closer to Sebastian instead, trying to get more comfortable. "It's not that, it's just... it feels like I had my chance, and I blew it. If Joshua was the *one*—and I thought he was, for all those years—then that would make everything I had—everything I did when I was with him, and who I was—if there's somebody else, then that makes my whole relationship with him a lie."

Sebastian was quiet for a long time after that; the silence dragged out long enough that Dallas had almost fallen asleep by the time Seb finally replied, "That is stupid."

He obviously hadn't explained it well enough. That was what happened when Sebastian wanted to have a deep conversation about feelings when they were both drunk; points were missed, and they each thought that the other was an idiot. Dallas sighed and reluctantly lifted his head, feeling oddly petulant that he had to move when he'd been so very comfortable. "You're too drunk to understand, and I'm too drunk to explain it to you properly so—"

"I don't want to hear it," Seb argued, and Dallas frowned at him before he rolled his eyes. Of course Sebastian wouldn't want to hear it, even though he'd been the one to start the conversation and all Dallas had wanted to do was fall asleep on Sebastian and get home. He opened his mouth to tell Sebastian that, but Sebastian must have mistaken what Dallas was going to say because he stopped Dallas from saying it—he leaned in and kissed him.

Dallas blinked, wide-eyed with shock as Seb's lips moved against his own. He catalogued sensations without even thinking about it: the soft, hesitant way Seb kissed, the slight scratch of his stubble, someone's hitched breath, his own pulse ringing in his ears. Sebastian leaned back again after a short minute, his eyes closed to avoid Dallas' gaze, and Dallas could only stare at him.

"Seb?" he asked quietly. It didn't feel like he was drunk anymore, although his mind was still reeling. He wasn't sure it was the effects of the alcohol though; he had the sinking suspicion it was simply an effect of Sebastian. He also knew that if he didn't ask about it now, then his opportunity would pass, because Sebastian was adept at switching subjects when sober, and he didn't get drunk all that often. "Sebastian, do you want to look at me for a minute?"

"I feel sick," Seb said suddenly, and his hands scrabbled at the power button to try and open the window. Dallas watched for half a second, then hurriedly leaned forward and asked the cab driver to stop the car. He did and Seb scrambled to undo his seatbelt, throwing the door open as fast as he could, and the moment passed.

SPRING

VII – March

“How was work today?”

“It was fine,” Dallas replied, and debated telling Sebastian the latest story in one particular admin assistant’s ongoing saga to try and seduce the CFO’s son. She was a sweet girl, Dallas was rooting for her, and Sebastian had been as well, before—

Well, before Valentine’s Day.

Sebastian had already gone back to dicing the tomatoes whilst Dallas was thinking, and Dallas sighed and sat down at the kitchen table to watch him, wondering just how to fix the problem. It was difficult, after all, to fix a problem when Sebastian refused to admit there was a problem to be fixed.

Sometimes, Dallas thought he’d imagined the kiss. But he vividly remembered Sebastian being sick as a dog by the side of the road, and then being just as sick by the time they got home. He’d had the flu on top of the hangover the next day, and Dallas had had his hands full trying to keep Seb hydrated enough over the following week when Sebastian had to be the worst patient who ever existed. Petulant and begrudging even the slightest effort to make him do something he didn’t feel like doing—but that hadn’t been as bad as the fevered apologies and Dallas was just glad that Sebastian wasn’t still sick.

Three weeks after the kiss, though, and they still hadn’t talked about it.

Dallas was fairly certain he knew what the problem was, although he wasn’t going to act on it without some confirmation. The signs were definitely all there though. Each look Seb shot him from the corner of his eyes, the way Seb smiled—hell, even just the way that Dallas could draw the unexpected laughter from him so easily—he was a fool for not noticing it sooner.

Sebastian had the biggest, most obvious crush on him that had ever existed, and Dallas didn’t know what to do about it.

He loved Seb, he really did. But to start a relationship—when it had been hard enough to break up with Joshua, and Joshua had *not* been his lifelong friend... How could Dallas possibly go through life without Seb?

Even separated, they'd each known that the other would always be available if needed. Sebastian had offered to give Dallas a room simply on the knowledge that he would need one. Their whole lives had been made of similar sacrifices and offers and to not have that, or even the option anymore, if they broke up... the thought was terrifying.

The other option, of course, was to linger in this soul-sucking limbo for the rest of their lives—or until one of them broke. Dallas honestly wasn't sure which one would come first, but he knew neither sounded like a pleasant option.

Dallas sighed, and dropped his head to the table with a loud thunk. It didn't help, but the noise was satisfying, so he did it again. And then he did it again, and he was lifting his head for a fourth time to do it again when Sebastian pressed his palm to Dallas' forehead, holding it up.

"What on earth are you doing? I thought you just said work was fine."

"It is fine," Dallas mumbled, resting his head against Seb's hand, liking the way it felt against his forehead. It was the first time Sebastian had touched him in weeks; he'd never noticed how physically close they were until Sebastian halted all contact. "I just—it's just been a long month, that's all."

"Hate to tell you, but it's really only just started," Sebastian replied, but there was a hint of a smile in his voice, and Dallas' heart leapt behind his ribs. He sat up straight, and Sebastian dropped his hand from Dallas' head, preparing to go back to the counter when Dallas grabbed his wrist and held on tight.

Sebastian looked down at his caught wrist, and then lifted his gaze to arch his eyebrows at Dallas. "Yes?"

"I miss you," Dallas said earnestly, ignoring the vague sense of embarrassment that crept over him, and he hoped that he wasn't blushing. Sebastian stared at him like he wasn't making any sense, and Dallas swallowed, licking his lips nervously before continuing. "I feel like—there's

this wall between us now. And I don't want there to be, Seb. I miss you. I miss what we had. Are we really going to be the cliché and let one drunken moment screw us up forever?"

Sebastian stared at him for a moment, before his cheeks went red, and he pulled his wrist away without a word, going back to the counter again. Dallas groaned and dropped his head back onto the table. The *thunk* was distinctly less satisfactory, and he just let his cheek rest against the table for several long minutes before Sebastian cleared his throat.

"I... want to apologise for—I didn't mean to—to screw us up, I was drunk and... well. I'm making bruschetta for appetizers tonight. You can help, if you want?"

Dallas thought about it for a moment, and then lifted his head again, giving Sebastian a smile. It wasn't talking about the real issue, but Sebastian was avoiding his gaze, and if he pushed too hard, the olive branch would be retracted back into the awkwardness. He'd take what he could get, and bide his time in the meanwhile.

"Sure," he said, and pushed his chair back. "Did I tell you about Suzy's latest attempt with Jared?"

Sebastian glanced at him, and smiled as he shook his head and focused back on the tomatoes. Dallas' heart thudded out of rhythm, and he smiled back.

It was a start.

VIII – April

“Why do they do this to me?” Dallas moaned, and rolled over onto his back to stare up at the ceiling. It was more comfortable that way, and besides, it gave him the added benefit of taking his weight off his stomach.

Sebastian kicked a foot forward to nudge Dallas’ side, and Dallas flopped a hand lazily with his best effort. “Why do you do it to yourself, you mean,” Seb retorted, but he was grinning, and the fact was obvious in his voice. “As I recall, nobody was making you eat all the chocolate.”

“If they hadn’t wanted me to eat it, then they wouldn’t have put it *all* on sale.”

“I’m sensing a pattern here with you and holidays involving candy. And chocolates. In fact, junk food in general.”

“Not true,” Dallas argued, and opened his eyes to arch an eyebrow at Sebastian, smirking at him triumphantly. “I didn’t stuff myself after Valentine’s Day.”

Sebastian stared at him, eyes a little wide with surprise, and Dallas realised belatedly what he’d said. He didn’t take it back, though.

He’d formulated a whole new plan; one that involved getting Sebastian used to the idea that Dallas didn’t hold it against him and that it wasn’t actually an issue between them unless Sebastian made it an issue. It seemed to be sinking in slowly, because Sebastian took a moment to get over his surprise, and then he offered Dallas a slow kind of smirk that had a rush of heat flooding through Dallas that had nothing to do with chocolate bliss.

“Could it be that there’s a holiday you’re not going to exploit for all the candy you can get the immediate day after?”

“Maybe,” Dallas allowed, and closed his eyes again. “It doesn’t help that I didn’t really have anyone to give chocolates to on Valentine’s Day.”

A brief silence answered his words, and Dallas mentally counted to ten before changing the subject, congratulating himself on a job well done. Sebastian would have to get used to the fact they kissed if Dallas kept on

reminding him about it. Maybe—there was the slightest possibility too, that it might happen again.

Dallas was half sure it would happen, he just wasn't sure how. Seb hadn't gotten drunk on St. Patrick's Day; and the next genuine excuse that Seb might take to get drunk was Canada Day in July, and Dallas honestly didn't know if he could wait that long.

"So when are you taking me to Banff again?" he asked instead of pushing the topic of Valentine's Day again. "You promised me bears and moose, remember?"

"Think it's still a little early," Seb replied lazily, and nudged his foot against Dallas' side again. Dallas did the same lazy hand flop, prompting a small laugh from Seb. "And honestly, I'm not even sure you'd make it out the door in this state. You might want to give yourself a few weeks to digest all the chocolate. You might also want to pick up a gym membership."

"Yeah, you want me looking good?" Dallas teased, and cracked one eye open to catalogue the shade of red that Sebastian blushed. Surprisingly, Sebastian didn't go red until he caught Dallas looking at him.

"Why do you insist on... you know what, never mind," Sebastian said, and pushed himself to his feet. "I'm going to make myself some lunch. I'd offer you some, but I have my doubts you'd even make it to the kitchen."

"Mock me if you want," Dallas replied smugly, and closed his eyes again. "I have all weekend to get up if I need to, and I am much happier than you are right now. Chocolate is an excellent instigator of bliss, I'll have you know. You're just grumpy because you didn't have the forethought to buy as much as I did this year."

"Keep telling yourself that," Seb muttered, but he was laughing when he stepped over Dallas and walked to the kitchen.

IX – May

It started out simply enough. Dallas had been talking about their next planned trip to Banff, where they'd be staying, and if they could afford the luxurious Banff Springs Hotel. He'd always wanted to sleep in a castle, and Sebastian had all but promised him the next time they came they would.

"It would make an excellent Valentine's Day trip, it's a pity we didn't go back then," Dallas told Seb idly, hanging his coat up as he continued a conversation started in the car. He was expecting Sebastian to laugh and go through to the kitchen to start planning dinner.

He wasn't expecting Sebastian to stop in the middle of the living room and glare at him. "Would you quit it, please?"

Dallas blinked at him, frozen where he was, still by the doorway and taking off his shoes. "What?"

"Quit it. Just stop bringing up Valentine's Day, and I promise, you'll never have to kiss me again. All right? I can't stand the way you keep on bringing it up and then—you know what, forget it. Just stop talking about it, all right?"

Dallas frowned and straightened, moving closer to Sebastian and furrowing his brow. "No, I won't. I just *want* to talk about it, but you never seem to want to so what can I do but bring it up all the time? It happened *months* ago but you never want to acknowledge it so what am I supposed to do?"

"What's the big deal? Why do you insist on bringing up what's actually a *painful* memory for me and then—and then you just *ignore* it, and change the subject! Every single time, Dallas. You don't even let me talk about it once you *do* bring it up!"

"*Painful*—are you telling me that kissing me was so awful that you want to forget about it that badly?" Dallas retorted. "If that's the case, just—fine. Fine, I'll stop bringing it up and we can go back to the awkward silences and terrible pauses that we went through back in March."

"No, you idiot, I'm telling you I've liked you for years—so the least you can do is have the decency to tell me the truth and stop your stupid game. You

keep on bringing it up, you keep on wanting to talk about it so—do you like me too, or are you just carrying out more of your ‘*Desensitize Sebastian*’ plan?”

Dallas blinked, and Sebastian rolled his eyes.

“I know you, Dallas. You think I can’t tell what you’re doing? Bringing up Valentine’s Day at every plausible opportunity, but never actually talking about what happened?”

“I was waiting till you were ready to talk about it, you ass,” Dallas retorted, his brow furrowing. “And wait a minute; you’ve liked me *how* long? What kind of *like* are we talking about here?”

“Since junior high school if you must know, and honestly, how many different likes do you think there are? I can only think of one real definition to apply here.”

“Shut up and just tell me straight for once, Seb,” Dallas told him, and Sebastian closed his mouth with an audible snap. “No, seriously. Just—I’m tired of tiptoeing around you. I was trying to get you used to the idea, but you keep getting all twitchy when you’re uncomfortable and I didn’t want you to try and dodge the topic anymore, so I was building you up to it slowly—”

“Building me up to it *slowly*?” Sebastian repeated incredulously, his eyebrows arching up so high they almost hit his hairline. “What kind of guy do you take me for? Do you think I’m that stupid, that I couldn’t tell and—God, that is *so* insulting, Dallas, what the hell were you think—”

“Yes!” Dallas snapped, and shoved a hand through his hair, rolling his eyes. “Yes, all right, I had a plan, and it *worked*, all right. Getting you to talk about something you don’t want to talk about is *worse* than trying to herd a flock of cats to water to drink or whatever—”

The worst thing about Sebastian, Dallas realised, the *very* worst thing about him was the fact that the small huff of laughter that surprised Seb as much as it delighted him *always* made Dallas laugh as well. He couldn’t help it, he laughed as well, until he could barely stand anymore, leaving Dallas sitting helplessly on the couch as he laughed, curled up against Sebastian’s side. “I hate when you make me laugh and I want to be mad at you.”

“Yeah, well, I hate your ridiculous little plans when you try and be so subtle about it and fail so miserably that it’s obvious to everyone—”

“Yeah, yeah, shut up already,” Dallas mumbled, and dropped his head to rest on Sebastian’s shoulder. “I can’t believe you’ve liked me since junior high. What the hell kind of taste do you have? I remember me in grade nine. You must be joking.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Sebastian replied dryly. “Honestly, I couldn’t tell you either. Maybe it’s because you get under my skin and stay there.”

“Well,” Dallas mused, and lifted his head to look at Sebastian, smiling a little. “I guess if I have to be somewhere, that’s where I’d want to be.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes, but the corners of his mouth were curled up in a crooked smile. “That’s awful.”

Dallas just laughed. “What, you think so? I have more lines, if you want. What about—”

Sebastian kissed him.

Dallas thought briefly that he ought to be upset about being interrupted by kisses all the time, but if he was being honest with himself, he really quite liked it. Lifting a hand to cup Sebastian’s cheek as he kissed him, he deepened the kiss until Seb was moaning into his mouth—and then Dallas pulled back.

Sebastian looked at him, his expression looking a little bit wrecked; his eyes were bright and his lips were parted, and he obviously wanted more, and Dallas wanted to give him more, but first he had to clarify something. “It’s important,” Dallas murmured, and Sebastian blinked. Dallas watched, fascinated, as Sebastian’s gaze snapped back into focus.

“What is it?” Seb asked, his voice just as quiet.

Dallas smiled a little, and tilted his head. “You get under my skin too.”

Sebastian watched him for a moment, and then cocked his head. “Even though you’ve already had your *one* in Joshua?”

Dallas groaned. “Oh God, don’t bring that up. I was drunk, I didn’t explain it properly. I just meant that—”

“I know,” Sebastian said, and arched his eyebrow at Dallas. “But I prefer the analogy of closing a chapter in your life—and starting a whole new book.”

Dallas groaned, and rolled his eyes. “Now who’s got the bad lines—”

Sebastian just huffed a laugh—and Dallas kissed him instead.

SUMMER

X – June

“What’s all this?” Dallas asked, looking around in some bewilderment.

Across the kitchen, Sebastian’s cheeks went a little red, and he looked away, shoving a hand nervously through his hair. “It’s—well. Good morning.”

Dallas laughed, he couldn’t help it. There was a warm happiness sending a thrill through him, and it would accept nothing less than laughter. It also had the added bonus of making Sebastian blush even darker, and Dallas moved forward quickly before Seb could mumble an excuse and escape. He caught Sebastian’s hand and tugged Seb closer against him, tilting his head to press a light kiss to Sebastian’s mouth. “What is this all for?”

“Well,” Sebastian started, and then shook his head. “Never mind. It’s stupid. Forget I—”

“I will not forget, and honestly, if you don’t tell me what this is all about, I’m never going to let you forget it for as long as you live.”

Sebastian gave him a crooked smile for that threat, and then shook his head, rolling his eyes deliberately. “Well, it’s nothing, really. It’s just, we’ve been dating for two weeks now, so I just...”

Dallas looked at Sebastian for a long minute, and then turned his attention back to the kitchen table. There were plates of food, most of his favourites: pancakes, strawberries, sliced up watermelon, and grapes. There were thick slices of what smelled like fresh bread, and a pan of butter, and there were two huge mugs full of coffee, the scent of it nearly drowning out the fresh baked bread. “You... you did this all for our two-week anniversary?”

Sebastian rolled his eyes again. “Oh, shut up. If you don’t want it, then at least stop teasing me about it—”

Dallas laughed again, he couldn’t help it. He also couldn’t help wondering at Sebastian, being so sure of himself one moment and then vulnerable enough to feel defensive the next moment. There was only one thing that could enable the switch between emotions so very fast. “You must really love me, huh?”

Sebastian glared at him. “I’m going out for a run. Eat it, or don’t, I don’t care—”

He didn’t get any further; Dallas stepped closer and tilted his head up to kiss him again, bringing a hand up to curl around the nape of Sebastian’s neck. Seb moaned against his mouth and sank quickly into the kiss, his arms curling around Dallas’ waist to pull him in even closer. They kissed for a few minutes, luxuriating in the contact before Sebastian seemed to remember something and he pulled back a little.

He was breathless, his eyes a little dazed and his hair mussed up from where Dallas had been running his fingers through it, but his expression was open enough to make Dallas’ chest ache in response. “I do, you know.”

“Do what?” Dallas murmured, kissing him lightly again. He kept on kissing him when Sebastian remained quiet, following a trail down Sebastian’s jaw and down the line of his throat, enjoying the taste of his skin and the way the stubble felt against his lips, the way Sebastian smelled of soap and aftershave. “Seb?” he asked again, after a few minutes had passed.

Sebastian cleared his throat, and lifted his head to meet Dallas’ eyes fully, his own gaze intent. “I do really love you.”

It was difficult to breathe for a moment; Sebastian’s eyes were so green and bright with affection and—and *love*, and Dallas could do nothing but stare at him for a long eternal moment. “I know,” he whispered eventually, forcing the words out. He had to clear his throat before continuing, “I really love you too.”

Sebastian just looked at him for a few seconds, processing the words, and then he kissed Dallas again. It was harder this time, deeper and more demanding, but Dallas gave everything Sebastian asked for and more. The kiss went on and on, gaining heat and escalating until breakfast was forgotten.

It was fine though, was Dallas’ last thought. Even pancakes could be eaten cold.

XI – July

Dallas sighed and flopped on his back in the middle of the living room, laughing when Baxter bounced over towards him, rolling onto his side to avoid being licked by the enthusiastic puppy. “You spoil him too much,” he teased, and Seb looked down at him from where he was currently dusting the top of the bookshelves.

“I don’t know how you figure that, you’re the one always letting him use you as a chew toy.”

Dallas grinned up at him, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and Sebastian winked and turned back to the shelves, wiping away the last of the wood polish. “Maybe we ought to take him out this afternoon. He’s been cooped up with us in here all day.”

“Well, *some* of us have been cleaning all day,” Seb started to say, then stopped and turned to watch Dallas suspiciously as Dallas got to his feet, tucking the puppy under one arm. “What?”

“Nothing,” Dallas said, and put Baxter down before he came closer to Seb. “Why are you so suspicious of me, anyway?”

“Because you’re about as trustworthy as a—Dallas, I swear, if you tickle me, I’m going to spray wood polish on you—”

“Would I do something like that?” Dallas asked innocently, affecting a wounded tone of voice—before he lifted his hands and jabbed his fingers into Sebastian’s sides. Sebastian yelped and scrambled away, wielding the spray can like the weapon it was as Dallas advanced again, a cocky grin on his face. “Come on, Seb, what’s the harm in a little tickling? It’s almost as if you—”

“Back, you,” Seb told him. “Fine. Fine, we’ll go out. We’ll take the dog and go to the park or something, I don’t know.”

“There, that’s all I wanted to hear,” Dallas said happily, and winked when Sebastian sighed.

There wasn’t much more to clean, and with Dallas helping again it went a lot quicker. They left for their walk, Sebastian humming Frankie Valli under

his breath as Dallas tried to keep Baxter to stay to heel. Baxter meant well, but he was still young and his excitement at new smells sometimes left Dallas tripping over his own feet trying to hold the retriever back. He'd been an easy decision to make to complete the family, especially since Sebastian had always wanted a dog. Dallas had picked him up from the pound the week before Sebastian's birthday, but they'd had the talk beforehand. The *whole* talk, so Dallas finally had a wedding to look forward to in the distant future.

Baxter was just as excitable at the park, especially once he'd caught sight of all the children at the ice cream stand. Sebastian just grinned when Baxter tried to pull Dallas closer, and Dallas could only grin when Sebastian told him to stay put with the puppy, going to get the ice cream for them. Seb gave Dallas the ice cream, his fingers brushing against Dallas' in a way that sparked pleasant warmth in the pit of Dallas' stomach. Seb smiled at him, and then turned away, but Dallas watched him for a moment before he hurried forward and grabbed Sebastian's hand, giving it a light squeeze.

Sebastian smiled, and squeezed back.

XII – August

“I can’t believe we’ve only had him for two months and he’s still demanding to sleep with us,” Sebastian muttered, pulling off his T-shirt on his way to bed. Dallas glanced up from his book and cocked his head; right on cue there was a long, lonely whimper at the base of door. Dallas pouted at Sebastian.

Sebastian scowled and pointed at him, and then at the door. “No. No, I refuse to let him into the bedroom until we are ready to sleep, at the very earliest.”

“Oh, are you not ready to sleep yet?” Dallas asked innocently, arching his eyebrows and setting his book down on the bedside table so that he could watch Sebastian continue getting ready for bed. “I thought you’d had a long day at work.”

“Only when it comes to walking the brat,” Sebastian replied, smirking at Dallas when Dallas just laughed. “Besides, I was making dinner.”

“You do have a way with the steak,” Dallas murmured and shifted onto his knees, crawling forward as Sebastian sat on the edge of the bed and resting his chin on Seb’s shoulder. “That’s not the only thing you have a way with, of course,” he added, and smirked, pressing a small kiss to Seb’s warm skin.

“Yeah, apparently I have a way with you too,” Seb replied quietly, turning his head enough to press his forehead to Dallas’ temple.

“Mmm,” Dallas hummed, content to stay like that for a moment before he shifted again, rising up on his knees to drag his hands up Sebastian’s back, his fingers curling against Seb’s skin.

Seb sighed and leaned back into the touch, only to tense when Dallas flexed and uncurled his fingers, grazing his fingertips against Seb’s sides. Sebastian flinched, that small, shocked huff of laughter making Dallas grin against Seb’s throat.

“Quit it,” Sebastian muttered, and Dallas shook his head and straightened, pulling his hands back as Seb twisted to face him better.

“Why don’t you make me?” Dallas taunted, and laughed when Sebastian lunged, knocking him onto his back and crawling over him, his smirk positively wicked. “Oh, is this how it’s going to work?”

“Absolutely,” Sebastian mock growled, and leaned down. The kiss was lazy and deep, but it successfully quieted Dallas, who could only lift his hands, pressing his fingertips into Sebastian’s skin and pulling him down against him. Dallas loved the warm weight of him, the way he kissed as if they had all the time in the world—and the way he could prompt a sudden desperate need simply by shifting just the right way to make the kind of friction Sebastian went crazy for.

The best thing though—the absolute best thing—was the way that, when they kissed, there was no need for words, no need for anything but each other, and the rest of the world ceased to exist.

Out on the landing, Baxter fell quiet, but neither of them noticed.

THE END

Author Bio

May Ridge lives in Western Canada, and has been writing for over a decade.

She is a primarily a writer, but one cannot be a writer without the love of reading, and that's how it all started for her. Reading so many beloved books over her lifetime has prompted a passion for characters in her. There comes a point where another person's characters just aren't enough anymore, and that's what sparked her interest in writing.

Now she has many characters and plots constantly in her head, and the hardest thing to decide whose story is going to get discovered first.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

RADIO LOVE SONG

By J. Rocci

Photo Description

The photo is focused on two pairs of legs in baggy sweatpants and skate sneakers, toe-to-toe facing each other. One person is wearing light blue sweatpants and grey/black Vans, while the other is wearing dark blue Aéropostale sweatpants and dark DC skate shoes. They're outside and it's bright out, on dry grass with trees in the background. The person in the dark sweatpants is standing on his toes, leaning forward toward the other person.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have been blessed. I have only loved two guys. The first guy was literally the boy next door but we were so young. The second guy is still the one I'm with. We are happy, domestically so, just like an old married couple... if you know it was allowed. But finally! Finally! Our state passed a law that we can!

So now... WHAT IS HE WAITING FOR? I never thought in our lifetime that we would have this chance. Does he not want to marry me? Should I ask him? Help!

Definitely HEA. I just adore domestic, sweet, established relationships.

Sincerely,

Rissa

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: performing arts, established couples, family, flamboyant characters, holiday, multicultural, sweet no sex, weddings

Word count: 6,554

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

RADIO LOVE SONG

By J. Rocci

“Hey, Stokes!” Gurdeep called out as Liam tried to slouch past the radio station’s break room door unnoticed. “Check out MJ and Tooth’s wedding pics...”

There was a crowd around the break room table, passing phones and tablets around. Liam would have kept walking, but Gurdeep was a station manager and the one who had given Liam and his boyfriend, Eddy, the same days off for the first time in over a year. He couldn’t really ignore the man the same way he’d been avoiding all of his other coworkers cooing over the latest in-house wedding at WTFM.

Swallowing a sigh, Liam course-corrected and leaned over the shoulder of Lilah, their latest summer intern, to look at the tablet’s screen. Lilah was flipping through MJ’s photo-sharing site faster than Liam could track, but Liam had actually been at the wedding and made the appropriate noises. The pictures were standard rocker-wedding fare—a whole lot of tattoos, piercings, ear gauges and spiked hair; plenty of alcohol-induced stupidity; and a Chihuahua for a best man. At least Dozer had a tux on.

“So when’re you making an honest man out of our darling Eduardo?” Lilah asked Liam coily. “You guys have been together forever, haven’t you?”

This was the topic Liam had been trying to avoid. He just made a noncommittal noise and pointed at the tablet. “Did you guys see MJ’s status update...?”

“That the backpacking honeymoon was stalled in India because Tooth got Delhi belly?” Lilah snorted. “She even posted pictures.”

“Weak, man,” Gurdeep said dryly with a rueful headshake. “I don’t think they really thought it out when she agreed to fulfill Tooth’s dream of re-creating Anthony Bourdain’s Asian travels by foot.”

Liam slid away quietly while they were distracted. He quickly made his way down the scuffed hallway to the office shared by all of the DJs. He’d only

stopped by to grab his own tablet before heading out to a club, Plaid Water, for their Tuesday industrial night broadcast. While it didn't sound like it would be a popular night, the DC college scene ate it up and he'd be out later than usual. But that meant he'd miss his usual midnight dinner with Eddy, who got off shift around eight but kept a later sleep schedule so they'd be more synchronized.

Liam paused to watch Eddy through the studio window on his way out. They were lucky to get spots at the same station with awesome and accepting coworkers, after going through some rough years building up their reputations and resumes during college and after they graduated. DC wasn't one of the craziest party cities out there, but WTFM had had room on their already eclectic staff for both an angry frat boy night DJ and a flamboyant, ridiculously popular afternoon DJ.

Eddy was mid-broadcast, laughing into his mike as he camped it up for the commuters heading home and cracking up Jenna, his producer. Gurdeep had warned the staff enough times about distracting each other while on air, and Liam was usually good about it but Eddy was in fine form and he had to stop to watch.

Liam was only in his expensively-distressed pair of jeans and a baggy ringer T-shirt because he had to go out for his broadcast and mingle at the club, wearing a worn trucker cap backwards over his golden curls so the "What the FM??" and WTFM station logo was showing. He liked to play up his frat boy image as "Stokes," but Eddy—

Eddy was hot all the time, rocking his "Eddy J" style. Liam admitted to some bias, but he doubted anyone would deny his boyfriend's Latino good looks, with his dark hair slicked up in a little flip, his pert nose, and his wide smile. Tonight, Eddy had on a tight baby-doll tee, tighter pants, and a line of bangle bracelets almost up to his elbows that only served to draw attention to the strong bones in his wrists and hands as he worked the boards.

But it was more than Eddy's looks—Liam wasn't hesitant to admit the guy was perfect for him. Sweet to his friends and fiercely protective but always ready to diffuse tension, Eddy lit up a room when he entered. He was the one their friends went to for advice or a shoulder to cry on, while Liam was good

for getting sympathy-drunk and looming menacingly in the background. When Liam was worked up, Eddy calmed down. When Eddy freaked out, Liam was ready to break kneecaps. They balanced each other.

Obviously switching to commercial break, Eddy looked up and caught Liam watching. Liam waggled his eyebrows suggestively, getting a grin in return, and gave a little wave as he started walking again. Eddy held onto his headset with both hands and blew an enthusiastic kiss after him. Jenna must have made a snide comment because they both burst out laughing.

Smiling, Liam continued down to the elevator. Traffic in DC was a bitch and it'd take him at least an hour to drive the five miles to Plaid Water. He settled into the electric-blue Mini Cooper that he shared with Eddy and pushed the seat back when his knees ended up around his ears. Eddy would catch a ride home with Jenna. Probably.

“Listen up, all you sorry DCers stuck on the Beltway parking lot! You’re listening to Eddy J on What the FM and we’re about to get *muy caliente* up in here!” Heavy bass started pumping out of the car’s speakers. “Turn the volume up, dial those inhibitions waaaaay down, and get crazy—I wanna see someone on YouTube in the next ten minutes!”

Liam snickered, imagining the reaction of the station’s lawyers to that, and pulled out into traffic. At least he’d have Eddy to listen to on his way...

All the movies he’d watched as a teenager had made the life of a DJ seem glamorous, exciting, and above all, like easy money.

Hollywood lied.

In reality, the four hours Liam was on-air was only a third of the time he put in at the station or various promo get-outs. There was enough playlist planning to make him feel like a third grade teacher with a lesson plan. There were appearances, from concerts to events like Capital Pride to judging a college cook-off. There were the meetings, and constant brainstorming for new (but safe! and legal!) stunts (or the lawyers would cry!), and riding herd on the interns, and keeping Danno, his producer, from throwing himself out the window. There were social parties and work parties and mixes of both, and that was just Liam’s schedule, never mind Eddy’s.

If they didn't share a condo, he'd be worried about their time management skills, but for the most part they'd worked out a nearly synchronized schedule, mostly thanks to only having one vehicle in a city where public transit was either spotty or took four times longer than driving.

Nearly synchronized, except for Tuesday nights. Liam always worked Plaid Water late and the Tuesday before the Fourth of July in DC was a new level of insanity.

Midnight came and went, and Liam was soggy from the heat of hundreds of bodies in an enclosed space, his T-shirt dark with sweat and his hatband sweated through. He'd kept guzzling water as he worked the mixer throughout the night, but now he just wanted a cold beer. Maybe a rum and Coke.

Alcohol appeared at his elbow, courtesy of Danno the Mindreader, and Liam seized it triumphantly. He nodded to a couple dancers where they hung out at the bottom of the raised DJ booth, and shouted the occasional encouragement into his microphone as a mosh pit started in the corner.

He cycled through the classics, from Nine Inch Nails to early Sick Puppies to Mudvayne and Slipknot. After a while, Danno smacked his bicep and pointed into the crowd when Liam turned to glare. Liam peered through the thick haze from the smoke machines and spied Eddy gyrating next to Lilah, both of them covered in glow sticks. He grinned and checked his watch. Almost time to announce last call.

If he wasn't doing an on-air broadcast, Liam would've tried to slip down to dance. As it was, he just kept his eyes glued on Eddy, which was difficult through the haze and the different colored strobe lights. The crowd thinned around closing time, though, so when Liam finally signed off and switched the sound system back to the club's standard pre-programmed playlist for the last song, he knew exactly where he needed to go. He waved at Danno, who'd started packing up, as he leapt off the podium and weaved through the crowd.

It wasn't hard to find Eddy, and Liam grinned at Lilah as he slid in behind his boyfriend, definitely up in Eddy's personal space. The shorter man tensed at the first touch, head whipping around in indignation, only to relax once he saw who it was getting frisky. Liam smirked down before kissing the back of Eddy's neck gently in apology. Eddy went up on his toes to steal a kiss.

The music and the crowd were too loud to talk over, so Liam just pressed their damp bodies together, chest to back, and swayed with the heavy beat of the last song. Eddy leaned back into him, legs on either side of Liam's left thigh, letting Liam bear most of his weight.

Wrapping one arm around Eddy's chest, Liam smiled against Eddy's neck when the other man stroked down his forearm in one sensuous undulation that started with their hips. Eddy's fingers trailed over his knuckles, rubbing at Liam's fingers before bringing them to his lips for a kiss.

Hot lips, soft skin, the lightest flicker of tongue, and Liam pushed forward with his hips to relieve the ache of his dick. Eddy ground back with his ass before pulling away, turning in Liam's arms to slide his hands up Liam's chest, fingers meeting at the nape of his neck.

"Home?" Eddy asked with a grin. Liam read his lips more than heard him, but nodded and motioned toward the booth and Danno. Eddy nodded back and drew Liam's hand up for another kiss, again on his left hand, and Liam wondered if it wasn't deliberate.

Reluctantly, he stepped away and made it back to the booth in time for the song to end.

"Let me guess," Danno drawled as the house lights came up. "You two are going home to make your own porno while us poor singles get friendly with our hands..."

Liam laughed. "There are so many things I could say to that, I have no words."

"Get outta here and go enjoy your vacation," Danno mock-grumbled.

"It's my grandmother's birthday and the Fourth of July, dude. Hardly a vacation!" But Liam didn't need to be told twice. He made a break for it.

Eddy was standing outside under a street lamp, skin glistening in the muggy heat of a DC summer night. He guiltily flicked a cigarette away as Liam approached, but Liam just rolled his eyes. They'd had that argument enough times to agree that no amount of Liam's bitching was going to get Eddy off his cancer sticks, and Eddy only indulged in social outdoor settings. Liam figured if he waited long enough, DC's anti-smoking laws would evolve

until it was impossible to smoke anywhere but home, where it was strictly off limits.

“*Vámonos, mi novio*,” Liam said with a truly horrendous accent, slinging an arm over Eddy’s shoulders.

Eddy shuddered in fake horror. “I’ll quit smoking if you promise to never speak in my native tongue again...”

Liam pretended to contemplate that as he steered Eddy towards the car. “Does it count as your native tongue if you were born in Brooklyn?”

“I think it’s the first language you learn, right? My parents only spoke Spanish at home...” Eddy plucked the car keys from Liam’s hand and went to the driver’s side. Liam was tired, so he didn’t argue, but he did snicker as Eddy had to move the seat forward nearly a foot.

“Since I mostly warbled with the dog until I was six, does that make my native tongue Bassett Hound?” Liam mused, slouching in the passenger seat. Eddy rolled his eyes fondly and a peaceful quiet descended.

Tall, boring concrete government buildings flashed past as Eddy drove back to their condo. The streets of the capitol were nearly deserted at that time of night, save the random homeless person huddled in a doorway or group of drunken partiers headed home. The entire trip took maybe fifteen minutes with traffic lights, ridiculous compared to his earlier drive to the club.

Liam yawned loudly as they walked through the parking garage of their building, following Eddy into the elevator. Eddy pushed the button for their floor.

“You know,” he said casually as the number ticked up. “Jenna’s moms are thinking about getting married in the fall.”

Liam glanced sideways at him, then held the elevator doors open when they reached their floor.

“Good for them,” he responded lightly, gesturing for Eddy to go first. “After three kids, and they’ve been together for, what, almost thirty years now?”

“Jenna turns twenty-eight this year, so yeah. About that much,” Eddy said

quietly, voice echoing down the hallway. The harsh fluorescent lighting still couldn't make him look bad to Liam.

"Hm."

Eddy unlocked their condo door and traipsed inside, shedding his baby doll shirt and tossing it at the overflowing laundry bag by the sofa. Liam kicked off his shoes and followed suit.

"You told the laundry service not to stop by on Friday, right?" Eddy called over his shoulder, heading towards the bathroom.

"Shit, I forgot," Liam cursed around another yawn. "I'll call tomorrow?"

"Yes, please," Eddy said pertly. His skinny-leg jeans sailed out of the bathroom doorway in the vague direction of the sofa. The shower turned on.

Liam got a cold beer from his drawer in the fridge, avoiding Eddy's microbrew bottles. He leaned against the kitchen counter and held the sweating can to his cheek. Peering at the sink with a frown, he realized there was something growing on one of the plates. They probably needed to do the dishes before they left town.

He'd just taken a long pull from his beer, reveling in the feel of the air conditioning against his bare chest, when Eddy stuck his head out of the bathroom.

"Well?" He demanded with an arched eyebrow. "Aren't you going to get in here? The sooner you're clean, the sooner I can dirty you up again..."

Suddenly, Liam wasn't as tired anymore.

Morning came too soon.

Liam rolled over with a groan, groping for the horrible buzzing noise. When he realized it was his cell phone and not the alarm, he gave up and let it go to voice mail.

Blissful silence, then the buzzing started again.

Blairily, he got hold of it and eyed the screen of his smartphone. Somehow, he found the coordination to answer.

“Lo?” he growled. Eddy whimpered behind him and burrowed his head under his beaten-up pillow. Liam tried to muster up the will to be jealous.

“Hi, honey!” his mom chirped. “I know it’s early for you” —Liam made a displeased noise—“but I’m here at the grocer’s and for the life of me, I can’t remember if Eddy drinks just diet, or does he prefer that zero-calorie one?”

Liam took a moment to process. “...just diet. I think.”

“You think?”

“He likes water.”

“Never mind, dear. I’ll just get both. Lord knows we’ll have enough people over this weekend, I’m sure someone will drink it.”

Liam was probably supposed to have a response for that, but he was in a warm, comfy bed with a warm, pliable Eddy beside him.

“You’re not even awake yet, are you?” she asked, proving she was still psychic after all these years. “I’ll let you get back to sleep, night owl. I just wanted to make sure we have things Eddy likes in the house. Your sister’s bringing that Jonathan boy she was seeing at Easter and I don’t want anyone to accuse me of playing favorites, but I completely am. Are you two still doing that low-carb diet? No, don’t answer. You go back to bed, and I’ll see you both tomorrow. Call if you’re going to be earlier than six in the morning, all right? Kisses for you both. Drive safe!”

Liam blinked at his phone, then let it drop onto the floor. If he was lucky, the carpet would muffle any further calls.

Then he realized what his mom had said.

“Oh fuck!” He jackknifed up in bed. “We’re going to my mom’s tomorrow!”

Eddy snuffled and mumbled, “Duh.”

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

“Shhhh.” Eddy pawed at him blindly, still face down in his pillow.

“We forgot to get Gram a present!” Liam hissed, envisioning the horrific hoards of Independence Day tourists crowding the streets of the city, blocking

traffic, and the massive shopping frenzy of all the malls in the region. He was doomed. They were heading out at ten in the evening just to have the possibility of getting to New York before Thursday night. Traffic would still be shit, even then.

“Maybe we can grab something in Pennsylvania tomorrow morning?” he asked in despair.

Eddy made a negative noise.

“You’re right. Everything’ll be closed. Unless it was a live Amish person churning butter in front of her, Gram wouldn’t care. Fuck. Keira’s going to have her stupid boyfriend and a perfect present, and we’re just gonna have a card with a crappy gift card she’ll never use...”

“Did that five years ago,” Eddy said out of the side of his mouth, eyes stubbornly shut.

“Damn, we did. Have we gotten any cool freebies lately?” A mental review of their grab box of station goodies left him disheartened. “Not unless she wants plastic ’80s sunglasses and a muscle T-shirt...”

Liam flopped down with a groan, shaking the entire bed, to burrow back under the covers and wrap them around his head. He whined pitifully and poked at Eddy with one finger. “We’ve got less than twelve hours to find something.”

Sighing heavily, Eddy lifted his head and glared adorably at Liam, a pillow crease mark on his cheek.

“As fun as it is to watch my grown-ass significant other cower at the thought of going shopping while I’m trying to sleep,” Eddy said hoarsely, voice deadpan, “All you need to do is go down to the jeweler’s on Connecticut Ave and pick up our order.”

“The jeweler’s?” Liam asked, hope creeping back into his body as he uncurled from the fetal position.

Eddy’s eyes were barely open, just glittering dark slits as his face sunk slowly back into his pillow. “Convenient, hm? Almost like someone knew you’d forget...”

“Have I told you lately that I love you?”

“If you dare sing Rod Stewart to me in my own bed, I will kill you,” Eddy threatened, tone dire even through the pillow. “Now go pick up the damn necklace and let me sleep.”

Kissing the top of Eddy’s dark hair cheerfully, Liam rolled out of bed and sniff-tested a couple shirts before putting one on. Flip-flops, board shorts, and sunglasses discovered, he was whistling his way out the door in under five minutes.

It was almost noon, so the sun was high overhead and the heat was unbearable when he reached the street. The jeweler they’d been going to since they moved to the city was only a few blocks away, though, so he just got an iced coffee from Starbucks and hoofed it.

The store was amazingly chilled when he entered, and he nodded to the nearest clerk, who said someone would be right with him. One of the reasons they kept coming back was because they could come in looking like beach bums and still get great customer service.

That, and the store played WTFM during the day, when the programming was more Top Forty rock than industrial grunge. It sounded like their midday guest DJ was doing his own mix of Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” with Rihanna’s “Pon de Replay”. Now he’d be thinking about putting a ring on it all day. Wonderful.

He wandered over to the men’s side, not really caring about watches or cufflinks but a new display had caught his eye. Where they used to have “domestic partnership” rings—a case he’d lingered over a few times during the past couple years—now they just had an expanded wedding band display, featuring tasteful rings with inset rainbow jewels or other inscriptions celebrating the city’s Pride history.

As much as it frustrated Eddy, Liam didn’t really care about activism or marching for rights and all that. He just wanted to live his life. But Eddy cared, so Liam went to all the meetings and the protests and the celebrations. He’d even been cheering outside with the crowd when Mayor Fenty had signed the DC Council bill that allowed same-sex marriages in DC.

Liam had always told himself and anyone who would listen that a marriage certificate was just a piece of paper. It was what people got to tell the rest of the world they were with someone for the long haul. So really, it was merely an outside validation of something he knew in his bones—it didn't have anything to do with how much he loved someone or how long they'd actually be together.

And now he was wondering if Eddy wanted to do the whole wedding thing. Like, back when the marriages first started, he and Eddy had been out of college for almost a year, young and struggling with finances and trying to get their lives together. They hadn't really talked about it, except for in a "maybe one day" kind of way. Some far off future when they had the money and time to do it right.

But now most of their friends were getting to that age when they were getting married, having kids, buying houses. They'd never be the picket fence sort, but when Liam saw how people treated those relationships differently after the wedding, well... It was tempting, to get that acknowledgement. To know that if something happened to one of them, the other would be treated with respect. To have people take them seriously instead of writing them off as a couple of kids. Plus, they were in a better place financially...

"Hi!" The clerk said cheerfully after she finished with her other customer. "What can I do for you today?"

"I need to pick up a necklace," he said with a smile, and gave her Eddy's cell phone number for her to look up the order in the store computer.

She made a thoughtful noise and clicked through a couple screens. Finally she asked, "You said a necklace, right?"

"Yup, under Juarez, I think. Or it might be under Stokely."

Smiling, she held up a hand. "Got it under Juarez. You're Liam Stokely? I just need to see your ID." He handed it over. "Great! I'll be right back, sir!"

Liam watched curiously as she went over to a locked cabinet drawer and sorted through a few white paper bags, holding two up to inspect the printed labels on them. She selected one and put the other back.

"Here we are," she said, breaking the seal on the bag and removing a velvet box. Inside was a white gold heart with what looked like randomly colored

gems along the edge. “If you could just confirm that these are the right birthstones...”

Liam tried to look like he knew what his own birthstone was, let alone the rest of his family’s, but there were enough stones for his mom, him and Eddy, and his sister, so he nodded.

“Looks great. Thanks.” He accepted the box and started to turn away as she did the usual “anytime” spiel. Pausing, he looked down at the case again and tapped above a ring on display. “Actually, you can help me with something else.”

“Oh, good choice! That’s one of our more unique pieces...”

Whether or not he was the one who asked Eddy or Eddy asked him, he was pretty sure he knew what the answer would be.

Pretty sure. Maybe.

When Liam’s parents had divorced after he was off at college, they sold the old family house in Vermont and his mom used her half of the money to move to the middle of nowhere in southwest New York. It wasn’t completely “nowhere”, but it was miles from the nearest spot of what Liam and Eddy considered “civilization”. She had a couple acres and a small private lake, with a small ranch-style house that had probably been someone’s vacation cabin at one point. It was cozy. A nice retreat.

By mutual agreement, they could only take a few days a year there. Thank God, they went to Eddy’s parents in Miami for Christmas.

Driving past the end of state maintenance sign about a mile from his mom’s house, Liam reached over to wake Eddy up. Their six-hour trip had turned into eight, and Eddy had dropped off to sleep around four hours in. At least one of them would be fresh to deal with Liam’s family.

He loved them, he really did. They were just a bit... much... in a concentrated dose. At least his dad wouldn’t be there. As far as he knew, no one had really spoken to his dad in a couple years.

“Mm.” Eddy groaned as he tried to stretch in the small car. “Should we take bets on how much drama your sister’s going to bring this year?”

“I don’t take sucker bets,” Liam said as he pulled onto his mom’s gravel driveway. The mailbox had the red flag up, and since his mom was paranoid even in the boonies about leaving outgoing mail in the box overnight, that meant she was up. Her pair of Labradors greeted them at the edge of their invisible fence, chasing the car up the drive and announcing their arrival.

Liam groaned when his sister’s car came into sight, parked beside the detached garage. “Man, Keira’s already here...”

They were beset upon by the dogs as soon as they opened their doors. Eddy squeaked as he was covered in drool, still not used to getting slobbered on.

“Why couldn’t your mom like cats?” he hissed.

Liam just nudged the dogs out of the way with a knee and grabbed their bags from the back of the car. His mom opened the front door as they approached, grinning widely.

“Hi there, strangers! Oh, let me look at you boys!” She smothered them both in hugs and kisses, which Liam took stoically, considering she barely reached his shoulder. He got his height from his dad, but his blond hair and blue eyes from his mom.

Eddy returned her embrace more enthusiastically, exclaiming over her new hair highlights or something. Liam didn’t wait around to listen; he just headed for the guest bedroom they usually slept in.

His little sister, Keira, was sprawled on the couch with her boyfriend, Jon. They looked half-dead in the light of the TV. Liam gave them a chin nod as he walked past. His mom and Eddy were chatting at a ridiculous speed when he followed their voices to the kitchen.

“Look at that frown,” his mom admonished when she noticed him. “Do you want something to eat? Grammy’ll be here any minute for brunch. You boys look so tired. You haven’t been working too hard, have you? You’re never home when I call—”

Liam didn’t even bother trying to answer, but Eddy started making noises about the drive, and the traffic, and all the hours they’d had to put in to get the weekend off.

Jon wandered in to get a soda as Liam settled in for the long haul at the kitchen table. Liam didn't know the guy very well—his sister met him online, and they'd only been dating a couple months. He seemed all right.

Two more days. Liam could totally handle this. The twin dog alarms went off.

"It's Grammy," Eddy declared dramatically, peering out the window. "Someone make me a Cosmo!"

Liam laughed. "You like Grammy."

"I adore that woman, but she has a tendency to pinch my ass and call me Fernando after she's had a couple gin and tonics," Eddy exclaimed as Jon choked on his diet soda. "I'm preemptively dulling the pain!"

Liam had to concede that. They still couldn't go back to the Olive Garden in Warwick, Rhode Island, after she threw bread sticks at the surrounding tables while shouting, "Fire in the hole!" Liam was the first to admit Grammy rocked.

"Lucky for you," his mom said with a grin, "I made a pitcher of Sangria this morning, and I have everything for mimosas!"

Liam was already at the fridge when Grammy shuffled in. Another round of greetings drew Keira from the living room.

"Food first, then presents," his mom announced as the small kitchen was suddenly full of people.

"Booze first, then food," Grammy declared. Liam handed her a champagne flute as he said happy birthday. "Knew you were my favorite, kiddo."

They settled in to eat, his mom producing some sort of fluffy egg and bacon dish from the oven.

"I heard from Marjory Blythe this morning," his mom said after a few bites. "We Facebooked."

Normally Liam would be noting that "Facebook" wasn't a verb, but he just paused chewing. Marjory was their old next-door neighbor in Rhode Island. She was also the mother of Liam's first (and only other) boyfriend.

“How’s she doing?” Eddy prompted. He knew the whole sordid story, and Liam appreciated the moment to finish chewing.

Keira glanced at Eddy then Liam, just like Grammy did. Liam hated the attention. The break-up had been inevitable, but painful. The relationship and its aftermath was one of the many reasons Liam hadn’t spoken to his dad in years. But all that had happened almost a decade ago. He was over it.

“She’s doing great,” his mom said with a hesitant smile at Liam. “She wanted to get the new address so she could send out wedding announcements. Simon’s marrying his boyfriend in the fall, since they just made it legal out there earlier this year.”

“‘Bout damn time,” Grammy muttered.

Again with the marriage stuff. It was everywhere he looked lately.

The ring box in his sweatpants pocket felt heavier.

“Good for him,” Liam said casually, resuming with his breakfast. It seemed like everyone around the table relaxed, and he wanted to roll his eyes. Christ, he wasn’t a teenager anymore.

“She asked how you were doing,” his mom continued more enthusiastically. “She listens to your program over the Internet. I told her all about Eddy, too. She’s a big fan.” She patted Eddy’s arm. “She sends her regards, and she’s glad to hear that you’re so happy. She asked when you two were getting married, but I told her I haven’t wanted to pry and I’m sure you’ll tell us when you’re ready.”

Her smile was encouraging and hopeful. Liam exchanged a glance with Eddy, whose expression definitely showed he was caught off guard. Liam had no idea what his own looked like.

“Oh, for chrissake, Dana,” Grammy grumbled. “I thought we agreed to leave the boys alone, and you can’t go for five minutes without bringing it up—”

His mom flailed her hands defensively. “I was just telling them about my conversation with Marjory—”

“Well,” Keira interrupted, clearing her throat and setting her fork down. “While we’re on the topic of marriage, Jon and I would like to make an announcement.”

“What?” His mom stopped mid-rant, voice flat, zeroing in on Keira. Jon leaned back from the table, swallowing nervously.

“We’re engaged,” Keira said calmly.

His mom made that face where her nostrils flared and her eyes widened. “No, you’re not. You’re twenty-one years old. You haven’t even finished college—”

“Yes, we are, mother. It’s just a declaration of intent. The wedding won’t be until Christmas—”

From the murderous look in his mom’s eyes, Liam felt pretty bad for Jon. At least Keira had waited until after the food had been cooked.

“Oh, no, you’re not. You just met him! We barely know this guy—”

“But I know him, and I love him!”

“You’re too young to know what love is!”

“Just because you and Dad couldn’t make it work—”

Liam slid back from the table himself at that one. He looked at Eddy again. Eddy’s eyebrows were raised, but he was obviously also happy to have the attention off of them.

“Don’t you talk down to me,” his mom snapped. “And think about your grandmother, bringing this up at her birthday brunch—”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Grammy drawled, sipping her mimosa. “I always enjoy a good shitshow in the morning.”

“Mother!”

“You never listen to me,” Keira yelled and threw her fork at the table. “For all you know, I could be pregnant—”

“*WHAT?*”

Granny just chortled into her champagne flute as his mom's face turned purple. Quietly, Eddy slid his mom's place setting out of the way by the corner of the lace placemat so her fists came down on empty table instead.

When the real screaming started, Liam caught Eddy's eye. *Run?* he mouthed silently and Eddy nodded enthusiastically. Grammy saluted them with her glass as they slipped away from the table and out the back door.

"Well, that was certainly dramatic," Eddy sighed once they were out of sight of the house, following the worn path down to the lake. The dogs panted behind them.

"Told you," Liam said with a grin. "Sucker bet. I think that beats even the scene at your sister's *quinceañera*."

"But this one didn't involve lobster tails down anyone's shirt and the limo in a water fountain."

"The day is still young," Liam mused.

Eddy laughed and caught Liam's hand, just holding on as they strolled through the dappled light of the trees. It was cooler than it had been down in DC, and Liam took a deep breath, thinking it was nice to get away from the busy city, and not dwelling on what would await them back at the house.

"Is it just me," Eddy asked lightly, "Or does it seem like everywhere we look these days, people are talking weddings and marriage?"

The tremor in Eddy's palm betrayed him. Liam gave his hand a squeeze.

"You noticed that, too, huh?" was all he replied. His pocket felt heavy.

"Yeah."

They walked in silence a while longer, following the trail out into a clearing. The dogs took off barking at something in the trees and they paused to watch them disappear into the underbrush.

"So—"

"Do you—"

They both started talking at the same time and broke off, chuckling. Liam grinned down at Eddy and tugged on his hand.

“You go ahead.”

“Nah, I was just—” Eddy broke off, grin fading. “I was just wondering if you’d ever thought about, y’know...”

Liam’s heart rate started picking up until he could feel it in his ears and in his flushed face. “I—um.”

“Never mind,” Eddy said with a wave of his hand, not meeting Liam’s eyes. “I mean, I know how you feel about it, so it’s just silly. I’m just being silly.”

“No, no, you’re not,” Liam was quick to say, even if he couldn’t find the right words. Instead, he fumbled in his pocket for the box. “Actually, I— Well.”

When Liam held up the box and flipped it open, Eddy gave a sharp laugh, which wasn’t quite the reaction Liam had been hoping for...

“No, I’m not laughing at you,” Eddy said with a thick voice. He let go of Liam’s hand to dig into his own pocket. His fingers shook as he pried it open. “I’m really not.”

Liam had to laugh, too. All that worrying for nothing. They’d picked out the same silver bands from the jeweler, with a spiky waveform engraved on the outside. It was the sound of the artist saying “Love”.

“So, I guess we’ve both been thinking about it?” he finally asked with a shaky voice.

“Yup.” Eddy nodded a couple times, and then they both burst out laughing in nervous relief.

Liam felt his laugh die off when Eddy stepped in, going up on his tiptoes to curl his arms around Liam’s neck. Liam wrapped his arms around Eddy’s waist and lifted him for a moment, grinning when Eddy squawked.

“You love me,” he said smugly against Eddy’s mouth.

Eddy kissed him back, hard, before pulling back triumphantly. “Did you ever doubt it?”

They kissed again and Liam had to grin, burying his face into Eddy’s neck. “You realize that there’s going to be a cage fight at the station to see who’ll DJ for us, right? It’ll be MJ and Tooth’s planning woes all over again.”

Eddy shrugged. “So we’ll make our own mix tapes and have an open bar. Problem solved.”

Liam laughed again, and they got lost in their own little world a while longer.

THE END

Author Bio

Since 2006, J. Rocci has published several GLBT romance stories with Torquere Press, ranging from contemporary to steampunk to fantasy. A voracious reader from a young age, Rocci currently has a career in research and lives near Washington, D.C. with the love of her life and their furry children. She often indulges the whims of her best friend—and Muse—when writing, and loves giving her characters happy endings.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE BRAT WHISPERER

By J.A. Rock

Photo Description

Image of a young man looking off into the distance with a tear running down his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He's alone—so alone. How did his life come to this? And who's going to help him find his way?

Please let this be contemporary with no paranormal elements and an HEA. Other than that, anything goes.

Sincerely,

Becca

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, domestic discipline, hurt/comfort, MMMM, spanking, nerdy trading card games, self-abuse

Word count: 18,750

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

THE BRAT WHISPERER

By J.A. Rock

The driveway was full, so I parked on the lawn. I recognized Jake and George's Jeep, Terrence's scuffed junker, Dave's motorcycle, and somebody's spotless blue Mini, gleaming in the late afternoon sun. A dog barked in the backyard.

Terrence was walking out to meet me before I'd gotten all the way out of the car. "Mike," he called.

"Okay if I'm on your grass?" I snagged my duffel from the passenger seat, straightened up and shut the door.

"Not a problem. How are you?" He stuck out his hand, then seemed to think better of it and hugged me.

"Doing fine."

He stepped back. "The trip wasn't too bad?"

"Nope." I nodded at the Mini. "Who belongs to that?"

Terrence gave a tight smile. "Corwin."

"Ah."

"I really appreciate you coming here, Mike. And I hope you don't think I've asked you here just because of the situation."

I wondered if he meant my situation or his. "Of course not."

"You've got a standing invitation anyway, just..."

"Just you needed a brat whisperer."

Terrence sighed. "Yeah."

Terrence and I had been friends back when we'd worked together in Toledo, but our communication had grown sporadic over the last few years. Ter had moved to a large house on the outskirts of Brookside, a dubious suburban paradise, and I'd stayed in Frogtown. I'd visited him once last

year—met Dave, George, and Jake and had helped them all plant a vegetable garden—but mostly we stuck to the occasional e-mail.

Ter and I didn't have much in common beyond our involvement in the BDSM scene, and in the Toledo days, that had been enough. We'd played together occasionally, but mostly we were confidants, sharing details of our sessions when we did meet up with subs, shopping for equipment together, and exchanging advice.

Ter was an interesting Dom—quiet and undemanding almost to where his patience could be mistaken for uncertainty. He was a good match for sugar kink subs—boys who liked to play games but weren't looking for a serious D/s relationship. He'd had one long-term partner since I'd known him, a sub his own age who was almost as easygoing as he was. They'd broken up two years ago.

Soon after Ter moved, he'd met Jake and his sub, George, and Dave, a switch. They'd all moved into a large farmhouse on Bolton Road, far enough from town to afford themselves some privacy, but not way out in the boondocks. I was fuzzy on the dynamics, but I was okay with fuzzy. The atmosphere of the house when I'd visited before had been relaxed and fun. Everyone got along well; no one seemed to feel jealous or excluded.

Until Ter had adopted Corwin.

Ter had spilled the story to me in a series of e-mails last month. He'd met a brat—young, beautiful, and out of control. They'd been play partners, then lovers, and finally Ter had invited Corwin to stay at the house for a while, since Corwin had apparently been surfing friends' couches for months. Ter didn't know much about Corwin's background but had reason to believe Corwin was a runaway.

As soon as Corwin had moved in, he and Ter started butting heads. Corwin left the house a mess, copped an attitude with Dave and Jake, and treated George like shit. The only time they were all happy was when they played together. Corwin was glad to submit to Terrence, Jake, and Dave in the bedroom. Anywhere else, he was a terror.

When Ter had finally sat him down to talk, he'd gotten a surprising confession: Corwin wanted Ter to punish him. Not sexually, but as a corrective measure.

Kudos to Corwin, I couldn't help thinking, for knowing what he needed. But poor Ter had no experience with that kind of arrangement. Ter didn't have experience with brats period.

So he'd called me. Mike Jarred: brat whisperer.

I'd always gravitated toward brats. A former brat myself, I guess I felt I understood them—the combination of fear, anger, insecurity, and enthusiasm that drove them to misbehave. Their deep need for contact, love, approval, and attention. Some Doms couldn't stand brats. I loved them, and more importantly, I loved them enough not to put up with their bullshit.

That was, from what I could make out, Terrence's problem. He adored Corwin, and he couldn't seem to reconcile adoring Corwin with punishing him when he needed it. However, the impression I got wasn't that Ter considered Corwin potential boyfriend material—more that he was fascinated by him, worried about him, and that he wanted to help Corwin in whatever time they had together.

Inside, Terrence showed me to the downstairs guest room, just off the kitchen. I cleaned up then went to join him at the table.

“Drink?” he asked.

“Water, please.” I looked around. The house seemed empty. “Where is Corwin?”

“At a friend's. He'll be back for dinner. I hope.”

I heard the barking again and looked out the window. A giant, shaggy black beast was chained to a doghouse.

“That's Monster.” Ter passed me a glass. “He's Jake's. I want to get rid of him. Slobbery booger. Corwin loves him.”

I snorted. “I'm trying to picture you cleaning up dog shit.”

“I don't.”

That was Terrence through and through—he didn't clean up anyone's shit. Which was why it surprised me he had taken Corwin on.

Ter sipped his coffee. "Can't believe the firm fired you. Bastards."

I'd known it would come up, but it took effort to keep my gut from clenching. Yes, I'd been fired. It shouldn't still make me wince to say it, or think it. "It was time for me to get out of there anyway."

"You look great, though. Your arms are, like... Are you working out?"

"Pretty much nonstop, now that I've got the time."

"Well, like I said, you can stay here as long as you want."

I nodded, more than ready to change the subject. "Tell me about Corwin."

"I tried what you said in your e-mail. Talked to him a couple days ago about not letting the dishes sit. I told him I expected him to wash his dishes after each meal and said I'd spank him if he didn't."

"How'd he react?"

"Last night, he finished supper, walked off and left his dishes. I told him to come back and clean up. He wouldn't, so I told him he was getting a spanking."

"And?"

"He flipped out. He said it wasn't fair, I couldn't do that to him, he wasn't going to take it, I was a bastard... then he left the house and didn't come back until almost midnight."

"At which point you..."

Terrence colored slightly. "We, uh, went to bed."

"You didn't spank him?"

"No."

"Next time put him over your lap before he can get all that nonsense out."

Ter took another sip of coffee. "I'm not going to physically hold someone down and hurt them when they're telling me they don't want it."

“He *does* want it. Or rather, he wants you to do it even though he doesn’t want it.”

Terrence shook his head. “I don’t get it. What the hell’s he want with a spanking that’s not gonna get him off?”

“He wants a safe way to screw up.”

“If I’m gonna punish him, he’s got to cooperate. I’m not you. I don’t have the scary voice. Or the brawny arms. I can’t *make* him do anything.”

“Come on, you’ve punished subs before.”

“As a *game*.” Terrence put his face in his hands and dragged his fingers down his cheeks. “I’m so not cut out for this.”

“If you really have no interest in a discipline relationship, you should tell Corwin that. But I do believe you can be trained.”

“Ughhh. I hoped you were coming here to train *him*.”

I grinned. “That’s your job.”

Terrence sighed. “I told him he can stay here as long as he needs, and I meant it. I think he trusts me and wants to, you know, impress me or something. But it just isn’t clicking for us. I mean, the sex is good. Really good. He plays well with all of us. But the rest of the time, good Lord. I want him to start behaving like an adult before someone in this house kills him.”

“It’s not right that he’s putting a strain on your relationship with Jake, George, and Dave.”

“He doesn’t mean to,” Ter said quickly. “Sometimes he’s really good.”

“In bed, when he’s getting the attention he wants from all of you. Right?”

Ter fiddled with his mug and nodded.

“Does he ever get jealous? Say, if you Tops are focusing more on George?”

“We’re really careful about making sure both subs get equal attention. But yeah, once in a while he gets pissy. Especially if George is being, uh, rewarded.”

“And does he—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish my question, because a car door slammed outside.

“That’ll be him.” Terrence glanced at me. “Don’t scare him, okay? You probably think he sounds like a total bastard, but he is nervous about meeting you.”

I grinned. “Good.”

The screen door slammed, and a young man bounded into the kitchen. He wore loose jeans and a fitted white T-shirt. His dark hair was thick and curled at his ears. He was a couple of inches shorter than I was, and considerably shorter than Terrence. He moved quickly and gracefully, making for the sink and rinsing his hands without looking at Ter or me.

“Hey there,” Terrence said.

Corwin didn’t reply.

“Have fun at Sam’s?”

Corwin shrugged and shook his hands to dry them.

“Cor, this is my friend Mike.”

Corwin glanced at me. Blue eyes, full lips, straight nose with freckles across the bridge. A soft, almost quizzical expression. “Hey,” he said.

“Hello,” I replied.

“So you’re here to fix me?” The question had a forced casualness, and he moved closer to Ter as he asked it.

Terrence nudged him. “I told you, Mike’s gonna talk to us and help us figure some stuff out.”

“I’m interested in what you told Ter the other day,” I said. “About the kind of relationship you want.”

Corwin ignored me, wiping his hands on his jeans and turning to Terrence. “I’m going out.”

“Jake’s gonna grill.”

"I'm going out," Corwin repeated. He left the kitchen and I heard him pounding up the stairs.

Ter shook his head. "Sorry. He's usually more social."

"Not a problem. He really is beautiful."

"Right?" Terrence lowered his voice. "Fucking *gorgeous*. But I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

"I want to help him. I really do. But I don't know if it's worth it to me to invest myself in this kind of relationship when I've got no idea if we're even—I mean, I don't think we're compatible. This is about sex. Sex, and him needing a place to crash. He wants something, and I just happen to be here, so he's asking me."

"You really think that's all it is?"

"Like I said, I think he trusts me. And that's good. And I do like him. I'm just not sure I want to be his boyfriend. Or even his long-term Dom."

"Does he know that?"

Ter nodded. "We've talked about it."

"And he still wants you to discipline him?"

"Yep."

I leaned back. "You don't have to be his 24/7 Dom. When he asks you for a spanking, you give him one."

"He doesn't ask."

"Of course he does. Why do you think he leaves dishes in the sink?"

"See, I don't know these things."

"You know more than you think you do."

Ter rolled his eyes. "We'll see." He drained the last of his coffee and set the mug firmly on the table. "He spends enough time washing that car. He ought to be able to do the damn dishes."

"Tell him that," I said. "Just like that, mug slam and all. I'd listen to you."

He laughed ruefully. "I think the problem is I want someone who *wants* to listen to me."

I didn't say anything. It could be a problem.

But maybe it didn't have to be.

Dinner was pleasant. Jake and Dave grilled, and George kept up a steady chatter. Corwin returned as we were cleaning up. We heard him in the backyard playing with Monster, the giant schnauzer.

"He loves that dog," Jake said.

"I think he just loves ignoring us," George muttered.

Corwin came in a moment later. He acted as though I wasn't there but was perfectly friendly toward the others. I asked him a question about his car, and he pointedly ignored me.

"Excuse me, Corwin," I said. The others looked at me, so Corwin had no choice but to follow suit. "I asked what kind of gas mileage you get on the Mini."

"Oh, uh. It's fine." He gave me a brief smile that I guessed was supposed to dampen my annoyance at having been disregarded for the last twenty minutes. "I don't know too much about cars. My parents bought that one." A dark look crossed his face, and he stared at me for a moment as though daring me to say something.

After dinner, Corwin, Terrence, and I went to the study. Corwin sat next to Terrence on the couch, and I sat in a leather chair, feeling not unlike a therapist as I tried to read Corwin's body language. He seemed to take comfort in Terrence's presence, but he wasn't clingy. Actually a good deal of his energy was focused on me. He sat slightly forward, watching me as though I was about to perform a magic trick and he was determined to see how I did it.

"All right," I said.

"All right," Ter echoed. He had his hand over Corwin's and was rubbing his thumb over Corwin's knuckles.

“I didn’t think we needed to call a summit meeting to talk about this,” Corwin said to Ter. “It’s not really that complicated.”

“Shh. Listen to what Mike’s got to say.”

“Corwin.” I kept my voice low and clear, and waited for him to look at me. “Can you tell me a little bit about the type of relationship you’d like to have with Terrence?”

“Uh,” Corwin said. “You know, like... discipline relationships?”

“I am familiar with them, yes.”

Corwin looked at his feet. “I can be a real asshole. I want Terrence to punish me when I am.”

“Punish you how?”

Corwin flushed. “What do you think? Spank me. Hard,” he added. “I don’t want to play around.”

“What do you think that would do for you?”

“Make me think before I act like a jerk. There’d be consequences, and maybe that’d make it easier to control myself. Like—I can control myself, but sometimes it’s hard to want to.” He glanced up. “Because it’s like, so what if I don’t? The world’s not gonna end.” He shrugged. “Whatever. I’m rambling.”

“That makes sense.” I kept my gaze on him a moment longer before I turned to Terrence. “How does that sound to you, Ter?”

“I guess I just wonder about, you know, consent.” He nudged Corwin. “When I told you I was going to punish you last night, you told me no.”

“I want you to make me. It’s not a fucking game.” Corwin’s voice shook a little and I realized suddenly how much this meant to him, and how difficult it was to ask for.

“I have trouble with that,” Terrence said.

Corwin looked at me again. “Maybe you could do it.”

“Pardon?” I said.

“Just to show Ter. I mean, you know a lot about this discipline thing, right?”

“You’re asking me to spank you?”

Corwin’s blush went from his forehead to his neck, but he nodded. “Maybe while you’re here I could answer to you. And we could see if spanking really works on me. And Ter would see it’s okay to make me take it.”

I thought it over. I’d given other Tops advice on how to administer spankings, but rarely did I spank a brat who wasn’t mine.

“You’d better ask Terrence, don’t you think?”

He turned to Terrence. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “Of course, it’s up to you.” He kissed Ter’s shoulder.

Ter pecked him back. “It’s up to *you*. If it would help you, and if Mike’s willing, I don’t mind.”

The words seemed to sting Corwin.

He wants it to be up to Ter. He wants Ter to mind. But there was something else there—resignation. Corwin understood that Terrence likely wasn’t a permanent fixture in his life.

“You won’t get jealous?” Corwin asked.

Ter stroked the nape of Corwin’s neck and shook his head slowly. “It’s like when you play with Jake or Dave, isn’t it?”

I flinched on Corwin’s behalf. Ter thought he was telling Corwin what he wanted to hear, but I had a feeling Corwin wanted to hear the opposite. Or maybe Ter knew exactly what he was doing. Maybe he was just being honest.

“But not play,” Corwin clarified. “And anyway, Jake and Dave don’t do anything to me unless you say so. I’m mostly yours.”

Ter’s hand stilled, and he tilted his head. “Would it be... I mean, would you be naked?”

Corwin glanced at me, looking, I thought, rather hopeful.

“I would require Corwin to take his pants and underwear down,” I said.

Corwin shifted. I wondered if he was hard. Wondered why I was wondering.

Ter squeezed his hand.

“While I usually prefer to use my hand for a spanking,” I continued, “I might use a paddle, hairbrush, ruler, belt, or switch as I see fit,” I said. “Understood?” I looked right at Corwin.

He nodded.

“A belt?” Ter raised his eyebrows.

“I’m fine with that,” Corwin said quickly.

“Here are my rules.” I waited until Corwin was looking at me again. “I will never administer a punishment without your full cooperation.”

“But—” Corwin started.

“I’m not finished. I know you said you like to fight. That’s fine. You can fight as much as you like, though that behavior will most certainly add to your punishment. But I’m not going to manhandle you over my lap. When you are ready to cooperate, you will take your own pants down. You will assume the proper position. And you will explain to me exactly what you did to earn your punishment. Understood?”

“What if I don’t?”

“Then you can hang out in the nearest corner until you’ve settled down.”

Corwin’s eye narrowed a little at that. I made a mental note of it. “What should I call you? Do I have to call you sir?”

“Mike is fine.”

He hesitated. “*Can* I call you sir during a punishment?”

“If you’d like.”

“Can Terrence watch?”

Huh. Interesting. “If that’s what he wants.”

“What about participating?” Terrence asked.

Corwin and I both looked at him.

“Maybe there’s something I could do to help you out, Mike.”

Corwin laughed suddenly. “You could hand him implements. Like a surgeon’s assistant.” He held out his hand to demonstrate. “Nurse—paddle.”

Ter grinned. “Something like that.”

I nodded. “That’d be fine.”

Corwin turned his face into Terrence’s shoulder and sighed. “I’m tired,” he murmured.

Terrence rubbed his back. “Why don’t you head upstairs? I’ll join you in a little while. If Mike doesn’t have any more questions.”

“I have one.”

Corwin’s gaze locked with mine. He didn’t look tired. He looked sharp, eager, ready. I still couldn’t quite process that I *actually had permission to spank him*. God, he’d be a pleasure to spank. All nerves and defiance on the outside, but so fucking desperate to have that stripped away. Even if I wasn’t spanking him to get us both off, my body inevitably reacted to the idea of him over my lap. There was something about being offered trust, control, the opportunity to guide a brat past that initial anxiety and resistance that was such a turn-on.

He’d dug his fingertips into his knees while he was talking, clearly tense. I gave him a brief smile.

“Have you been spanked before? Besides in play?”

“Um, not really. Maybe once or twice when I was, like, really little. I didn’t realize it was hot until a few years ago.” He paused. “Is that okay? That I think it’s hot?”

“Of course. Just be warned that a spanking I give you will not be an enjoyable experience.”

Corwin nodded. “Yeah. That sounds... I mean, that’s what I want. For it not to be enjoyable. But I also... I like that?”

“Then you’re perfect,” I said, and instantly felt my face heat. “For a relationship like this, I mean. Arrangement, I should say.”

He grinned. I almost couldn't stand it. No one had a right to look that stunning when they smiled. No one. "Thanks."

"You're dismissed," I said.

He got up, leaned down and kissed Ter, then gave me a nod and left the room.

"He's a good kid," Terrence said, staring after him.

"I can see that."

"Really?"

"Yep. A brat, but not a fool."

Terrence leaned back. "You feel okay about this? About spanking him?"

"I was gonna ask if you felt okay about me doing it."

"Are you kidding? I'm relieved as hell."

I laughed. "Well, you know I'd never pass up a chance to spank a brat."

"I don't even think I could take myself seriously if I tried to punish someone for real. He ought to have a Top like you who likes doing it."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I didn't like how quickly some core part of me leaped in agreement.

"You'll watch and learn," I said.

And hoped it was true.

I woke around two a.m. and got up to get a drink. I found Corwin at the kitchen table, a bunch of cards spread out before him, chin resting on his arms. He looked up when I entered.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi." He smiled shyly.

I couldn't explain it, but I was glad to see him. I told myself it was because I was ostensibly here to help him and Ter get on track with the discipline stuff, so it made sense I'd want to spend time with Corwin and get to know him.

“You’re up late. Are you—?” I paused. My eyes widened as I stared at the cards on the table. “You play *The Foresworn*?” I asked.

The cards were unmistakably TF cards. *The Foresworn* was a trading card game—absolutely beyond nerdy, but God, I loved it. I’d gotten pretty addicted in my early twenties but had been clean for several years now.

“Fuck yeah, I play,” he said.

“Can I see your cards?”

“These are just my new ones.” Corwin passed a small stack to me as I took a seat across from him. “I’ve got tons more.”

I went through the stack. “These are awesome. You play with the guys?” I nodded upstairs.

“Hell no. Dave and Ter had never even heard of TF. And George thinks it’s stupid. I play with a group in town. That’s where I was earlier.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“I don’t like them much, though. I mean, they’re okay people, we just don’t have anything in common outside of the game. And they’re kind of weird and boring.”

“I had a group I played with years ago,” I said. “I guess I worried I was too into it. So I stopped. Tried to convince myself I’d outgrown it.”

Corwin passed me a few more cards. “My parents used to hate hearing me talk about it. I was such a nerd when I was younger.”

“Oh, no way. No way. You have a Troubadour Demon?”

He slapped the table lightly. “Got it last year. Cost me a fortune.”

“You ever play in tournaments?”

“Nah. I’m not that good. And I’d need to build a better defensive deck. Right now I’m mostly offense.”

“Attack first, ask questions later?”

He half-smiled. “It’s how I’ve always been.”

My mind wandered back to what he'd said about his parents. "Where do your parents live?" I asked.

"In Crystal City."

"That's a hike."

"Got out of there as soon as I turned eighteen. I've never been back."

I looked up. "You miss them?"

"Nope. They fucking hate me. They didn't even care that I left."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Nothing to be sorry about. I hate them too."

"Hmm. I don't know them," I said carefully. "But they are your parents, and I'll bet there's a good chance they don't really hate you. That they're just... behaving badly."

He reached across the table and pulled the cards toward him. "You're right. You don't know them." I was silent, and he continued, "I'd live anywhere before I'd go back to them. I'd live in a fucking hole in the ground."

"Well," I said, not sure what else to say.

"Well," he repeated after a moment. "What's that mean?"

"It means I'm sorry your parents are dicks."

He looked bewildered and maybe a little angry. Then he smiled that huge smile. "Me too." He laughed. "I didn't think you'd say it like that. You seem really proper or something."

"Ter used to call me sanctimonious."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means I think there's a right way and a wrong way to do most things. And I tend to make my opinions known."

"And you like spanking guys who do things the wrong way?"

I snorted. "Maybe I'm kind of a prick sometimes. But I used to be a major brat, you know."

“Naw. You?”

“Yep. And I found a couple of guys to take me to task for that.”

“And now you’re the after picture?”

“The what?”

“Like before and after? Forget it. It was stupid.” He snagged a couple more cards I’d just put down. “I do things the wrong way all the time. I’m so fucking... I don’t know.”

He was having trouble getting one card off the table’s surface. I placed my hand gently on his. He froze.

“You’ll figure it out,” I said quietly.

He stared at my hand on his and swallowed. Nodded. I wished he’d look at me again. I wanted to see his eyes. “They send me money, at least. My parents. So I guess I shouldn’t complain.”

I removed my hand, and he pulled his arm slowly back to his side, leaving the card.

“Do you ever see them?” I asked.

He shook his head. “They never tried...” He stopped and shook his head again. “Um. To find me. Which is fine. Because I wouldn’t have... And okay, you’re a stranger, and this is weird.” He forced a laugh. “I’m just saying if you think I’m a freeloader, you’re pretty much right.”

“If you are, I am too, now. Maybe Ter told you I lost my job.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. Weird to have all these unfilled days.”

He picked up the deck and shuffled absently. “Sometimes I think I just play TF because it passes the time. I can play for hours. It’s like, yeah, I’m probably wasting my life, but at least it’s something I can focus on. I’m not totally ADD, you know.”

“Of course not.”

He finally met my gaze. “You don’t hate me, do you, Mike? I don’t want you punishing me if you don’t like me.”

“I like you fine. I wouldn’t discipline you if I thought my personal feelings would interfere.”

“Have you seen the shed out back?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. He wasn’t making much of a case for the “not totally ADD” thing.

“Come see it.”

“It’s after two.”

“It’s nice outside at night. Come on,” he pleaded.

I relented and followed Corwin out the backdoor, across the yard, and into the shed. Monster barked at us.

“We’re going to wake the whole house,” I said.

“We’re not going to. Monster is. Monster, be quiet!”

Monster barked once more, then fell silent.

“He just has to get the last word in,” Corwin said.

“No wonder you two get along so well.”

Corwin gave a delighted yelp, and I held back the urge to shush him. “Mike. I’m not such a brat, I swear. When I try to behave.”

“How often is that?”

He grinned. “Not often.”

The shed was nothing special. Unexpectedly tidy, with garden tools in one corner, a riding mower in another, and a little L-shaped stall that had an electric lantern on the floor.

“I come out here sometimes when I can’t sleep,” Corwin said. “I listen to music or read or whatever. I bring Monster in sometimes.”

“Do you have much trouble sleeping?”

He shrugged. “My brain gets loud. I can’t stop thinking about stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

He didn’t answer for a while. “I’m not sure how long I can stay here.”

“Why not?”

He moved a pebble around with the toe of his shoe. “They’re nice to let me stay. But I don’t fit in. Ter’s a nice guy, and he treats me really good, but we’re not right for each other. He knows it. I know it.”

“Well. He likes you a lot.”

Corwin smiled at me as though I was cute but not terribly smart. “Ter feels sorry for me. And I kinda like when people do that.”

For someone supposedly inattentive and unfocused, he had a pretty good handle on his own feelings.

“I do like Ter,” he continued. “And I’m not going to leave unless he wants me to. Maybe he’ll be okay with me being here if he can spank me to vent his frustration.”

“That’s a terrible reason to get involved in domestic discipline,” I said sharply. “Punishment isn’t about venting frustration or—”

“Would you relax? I’m joking.” He laughed. “Is this your sanctimonious side?”

“Maybe,” I said, feeling foolish.

He stared at me a minute. Then reached up and briefly touched my face. Mock scowled. “So *serious*,” he said, and laughed again, letting his arm drop to his side. “I’ve wanted a relationship like this since before I knew they existed. Ter’s the only person I’ve found I would trust to do it right. Well, and you.”

“Why trust me?”

Corwin shrugged again. “I guess because Ter does.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Corwin pulled the bulb chain and turned off the light. In the darkness, I could hear his breathing and the crickets outside.

We went back into the house. He stumbled going up the step, and I braced him with a hand on his shoulder. His skin felt warm under his T-shirt, his shoulder hard with muscle and a little bony. He paused just a little too long. I knew it was time to take my hand away, but I didn't.

I went to bed and tried to fall asleep. "*How often do you try to behave?*" I asked an imaginary Corwin.

"*Not often,*" he replied, grinning wickedly.

I figured Corwin would try to earn a spanking right off the bat to see what I was all about, but he was an angel the next day—friendly to everyone in the house, careful to clean up after himself. I helped Ter, Jacob, and George harvest some cucumbers in the garden that evening, then we all went out to dinner at a Japanese steakhouse in town. Corwin stayed out all evening, and I couldn't help feeling bizarrely betrayed. What had I expected? Just because we'd bonded a little last night didn't mean he was going to spend all of his time hanging around me.

Or that I wanted him to.

The next day, I went to the store. I was still trying to get used to being unemployed. It sucked extra hard to be fired from a job I'd hated. Yeah, it would have blown to lose a job I'd liked, but it was insulting to be fired from something I should have quit long ago. It felt even worse to be unemployed and staying under someone else's roof. I wanted to make sure I bought my own food, at least.

My parents had offered to loan me money. I had no intention of taking them up on the offer if I could help it, but I was grateful to them all the same. I thought about Corwin leaving home at eighteen, trying to imagine how hard that must have been. Sure, he was an adult, but who the hell had jack shit figured out at eighteen? I hoped Corwin's parents had the sense to know that sending their son an occasional check wouldn't make up for whatever they'd done to make him think he wasn't welcome in their lives.

When I came home, Corwin and George were at it in the living room.

“You’re a fucking lunatic,” George shouted. “If I were Terrence I’d beat your ass ’til shit comes out your ears.”

Then, from Corwin, a stream of curses even I was impressed by and a detailed description of where exactly George could go and what he could do there.

I set the groceries on the counter and went to the living room.

George saw me first, and he stopped shouting.

Corwin looked over his shoulder. When he saw me, he looked like he had to fight a smile.

“What’s going on in here?” I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorframe.

George smoothed his shirt. “Well, um, Corwin picked up one of my books by the front cover. I told him not to do that because it hurts the spine. So he threw the book, and now the spine’s broken.” George held up the book as evidence. “Then he acted like he was gonna punch me.”

I looked at Corwin and raised an eyebrow.

“That’s what happened,” Corwin said, not sounding remorseful in the least. “Except he also called me a cunt.”

“The book’s expensive,” George told me pleadingly.

Corwin shrugged. “No reason to call me a cunt. I’d have gotten you a new copy, if you hadn’t said that.”

“You’ll *still* get me a new—”

“Stop it, both of you,” I interrupted. “George, could you please give Corwin and me a few minutes?”

“Okay,” George muttered. As he passed me on the way to the door, I put a hand on his shoulder. He jumped about a foot and then froze. I gave him a reassuring squeeze, and he let out the breath he was holding.

“Jake’ll be home soon,” I said gently.

He nodded. I patted him and sent him on his way.

When I turned back to Corwin, he was watching me, a strange expression on his face.

I closed the gap between us in a couple of strides. Corwin took a step back, hunching, then quickly straightened and stared me in the eye, all defiance.

“What were you thinking?” I asked.

“Who cares?”

“I care. Answer the question.”

“I was thinking George’s got a shovel up his ass about his books.”

“I’d like you to take the garden shears, go outside, and cut a switch off the big elm in the back,” I said. “It should be about a foot long and thin, but not flimsy. You want something with some flexibility to it, but that won’t break when it lands.” I spoke quietly, matter-of-factly. “Strip the leaves off and bring it to me in the study. Understood?”

Corwin’s gaze hadn’t left mine. His jaw trembled.

He turned and walked out the front door. I heard his car start.

I sighed and headed upstairs.

He’d be back sometime.

I found George and talked to him for a bit. He cheered up quickly with a little attention.

“Do you and Corwin normally fight like that?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Usually we’re okay. He just gets in these moods. I actually like him a lot, when he’s being cool.”

“What constitutes ‘being cool,’ out of curiosity?”

“Joking and stuff. He can be funny. And he’s hot to do scenes with.” He paused. “I guess I make it worse. He pisses me off, I fight right back.”

“Which is probably exactly what he wants.”

George snorted. “Yeah.”

We talked for a while about George’s new job. He seemed uneasy at first, as though any talk of jobs might upset me, but opened up after a few minutes.

Eventually I went down to the kitchen to start dinner. Tried not to feel useless. If I'd still been employed, I would have been on my lunch break now. It was Friday, so a group of us would have gone to the corner deli and stayed away too long, letting the phones ring. I closed my eyes briefly. Whatever I'd thought of the job, the pay had been decent, and working beat the hell out of feeling like a bum.

Around five, Terrence came home. He found me reading in the study and asked if I knew where Corwin was. I explained what had happened.

Terrence sighed. "Jeez. I'm sorry, Mike."

"Nothing to be sorry about. We'll take care of it when he gets home."

Terrence nodded slowly.

"You're not sure about this," I said.

"I just don't see how it's gonna work. You went to punish him and he bolted. Does he really want this or not?"

"He wants it. But I think he needs some time to sort through things before he gives himself over."

Terrence didn't look convinced.

George and Jake were out for the night, and Dave had already eaten, so dinner was just Ter and me. It reminded me of evenings we'd spent together in Toledo. After a glass or two of wine, Ter would usually start in on how he wanted to get out of the firm and go somewhere else. For the first time since I'd been fired, it hit me that I had options. That I could go anywhere now, provided I wanted the hassle of finding a new apartment and uprooting my life.

Maybe I'd give away all of my earthly possessions and trek across the country. Maybe I'd go back to school.

Maybe I'd get back into TF play professionally. Some of the purses at those nerd tournaments were more than I'd have made in a year.

Maybe I needed to stop thinking about it.

I went back to the study with my book. Around ten, I heard a car pull into the drive. The screen slammed, and I heard low voices in the kitchen. Then the voices stopped, though I could still hear some moving and shuffling.

Ten minutes later, Corwin walked into the study.

He shut the door behind him, approached the desk, and set down a foot long elm switch. It was stripped smooth. I looked at it for a moment, then looked at him. He didn't look amused or frightened or angry. He didn't look anything at all.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

I put my book down. "Tell me why."

"I earned a punishment, and instead of taking it, I left."

I stared at him until he fidgeted. I noticed the pulse jerking in his neck, and I leaned back and motioned for him to sit in the chair on the other side of the desk. He did, clasping his hands between his thighs. "Why did you leave?" I asked.

He sighed. "Can we just do this already?"

I kept my tone low and even. "You're in enough trouble as it is. I suggest you answer my question."

"I left because I was pissed," he mumbled. "And I didn't want you to take a switch to my ass."

"Is it the idea of punishment itself, or the implement that scares you?"

"I didn't say it scared me," he snapped.

"All right," I said.

"I'm not scared."

"I hear you."

He took a deep breath. "I don't even know you. What if it's too much?"

"What if the spanking's too much, you mean?"

"You don't love me like Ter. Ter would stop if I couldn't take anymore."

"So would I."

“Really?”

I leaned back. “This works best if you trust me enough to punish you as I see fit. That said, you’re right. We don’t know each other. So if it’s too much, safe word.”

“You think I’m a jerk.”

“I think you need to work on impulse control.”

He cracked a smile. “No sh—I mean, no kidding. Are you one of those Tops that doesn’t like swearing?”

I couldn’t help but return the smile. “I prefer you be polite when we’re dealing with something like this. But I’d be a hypocrite if I told you never to swear.” I indicated the elm branch. “You brought me a switch. I take that to mean you accept your punishment?”

He nodded.

“You’re going to be very sorry when we’re done. But it won’t be more than you can take. Understand?”

“Yeah. Yes, Sir.”

“We’ll use the chair you’re sitting on. Up, please.”

He stood. His movements were less graceful than they’d been during our first meeting in the kitchen. I sat in his chair, which was armless and would give me plenty of room to swing.

“Bring me the switch, please.”

He tried to pick it up off the desk, and it immediately slipped from his fingers.

Not scared, my ass.

He got ahold of it, clutched it for a moment, and then handed it to me. I thanked him and tucked it under my right thigh. “Take down your pants, Corwin.”

He undid his fly and pushed his jeans down.

“Briefs too.”

He closed his eyes, hesitated for a second. Then he took his underwear down. His cock was flushed and half hard.

I patted my lap. “Over my knee.”

He took a step forward, hobbled by his pants. He paused. “Um—sorry, which side?”

“Head goes this way.” I indicated my left side. He climbed over my thighs, cock rubbing against my jeans as he tried to get comfortable. I raised my right leg and pitched him forward a little so his ass was higher.

He had a nice ass—smooth, taut, and small. The curves were subtle, and the muscles were hard as I ran my palm over each cheek. There was a shiver in his breath. “What is this spanking for, Corwin?”

He shifted a little, and I put an arm around his hips to steady him. “I threw George’s book and yelled at him. Then I left instead of doing what you told me.”

“What did I tell you to do?” I left my hand on his ass, hoping the weight of it would focus him.

“You told me to go cut a switch and bring it to you.”

“Why did I ask you to do that?”

“So you could punish me.” His voice was small.

“Yes.” I gave him a light tap with my palm and watched his muscles clench. “How do you feel right now?”

“Are you seriously gonna interview me while I’m over your knee?”

I gave him another warning pat. “Let’s try that again.”

“I feel pretty okay,” he said.

I waited.

“I mean, blood’s rushing to my head and I’m hard as fuck and I think this is really gonna hurt. But I feel okay about it.”

“What makes you feel okay?”

He twisted, stomach muscles moving against my thighs. “I’ve waited for this a long time. And you know what you’re doing.”

I raised my hand and smacked him once. The sound tore through the study. He jerked but stayed silent. I smacked him again, harder. I heard a small catch of breath.

“I know what I’m doing, huh?”

“Yes, Sir.” His voice was tight.

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

I felt him start to answer, then stop. I struck him sharply where his left buttock met his thigh, and he inhaled through his teeth.

“What do you mean, Sir?” he asked.

“You’re sure this is the kind of relationship you want with Terrence?”

I whacked him once on each sit spot.

“Ow. God. I don’t know.”

Another slap.

“I want this!” Another hard smack in the same spot. He tensed, wriggling a little. “I do. But I don’t know... maybe not with Terrence.”

I spanked faster, alternating cheeks, until he squirmed and whimpered and finally tried to swerve away from my hand.

“Hold still.” I tightened my grip around his waist and swatted the tops of his ass-cheeks.

His cock was still rigid against my thigh.

“It hurts,” he said through gritted teeth.

“You earned it. The way you spoke to George, and what you did with his book were immature and unfair.” I delivered three slaps to the exact same spot, making him moan. “Tomorrow you’ll apologize to George. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I will not tolerate behavior like that from you. You can do better.”

He let out a high-pitched cry as I gave the backs of his thighs a hard volley.

I stopped spanking and rubbed his rosy skin, ignoring his hiss of protest. “Stand up,” I said.

He got off my knee and stood. His face was as flushed as his ass, his eyes pink too, though he wasn’t crying yet.

“Go stand in that corner, please.” I pointed.

He stared.

“Now.” I swatted him.

He turned and shuffled to the corner.

I had him wait there for five minutes, while I read at the desk. Okay, pretended to read. All I could think about was what he’d confessed. “*I want this... but maybe not with Terrence.*” There was a wet spot on my jeans from his cock, and I wanted to know why it felt so right to have him over my lap, why it was so satisfying that he’d come to me, brought me the switch even after he’d fled. Even though he’d been scared.

After three minutes, he was fidgeting so much that I walked over and gave him two more swats.

He hunched and fell still.

I stayed behind him for a moment, not sure what to do. His breathing was harsh, ragged. I wanted to touch him, but I didn’t want to mix sex with this punishment. Didn’t want to send him the wrong message, even though I wasn’t sure at this point what the wrong message would be. Or the right one.

I placed a hand on the small of his back. Reassuring, I hoped, but also intimate. He tensed only for a second, then let out a long breath, pushing back slightly against me.

“Go get Terrence,” I said softly. “Bring him back here.”

Corwin turned to me. “He’s in bed. He has to work half a day tomorrow.”

“I realize that. Go get him.”

Corwin stepped out of the corner. His cock hadn't softened. He started to pull his pants up.

"Leave them down."

"What?"

"I said leave your pants down."

"What if I run into somebody besides Ter?"

I raised an eyebrow at him. He dropped his pants.

"Yes, Sir," he whispered.

"Good boy."

He shuffled by me with his pants around his ankles. I saw his ass clench as he passed me, and I smiled to myself.

A few minutes later, Corwin returned with Terrence. Corwin's head was down, and his ears were as flushed as his ass.

"Hey, Terrence," I said.

"Hey, Mike."

"Doubtless you're wondering why you've been dragged out of bed."

Terrence rubbed the back of his head. "Corwin said he's being punished. I've made it clear to him I'm displeased both with his behavior and with having to get up to deal with this."

"I apologize," I said.

"Not your fault at all." Terrence glanced at Corwin. "If somebody had behaved himself this afternoon, it wouldn't be necessary."

"If George hadn't—" Corwin started.

"Young man," Terrence said sharply. Corwin jumped and looked at him. "You know I work tomorrow?"

I bit back a smile. Terrence was better at this than he gave himself credit for.

“Yes, Sir.” Corwin’s voice was soft again, but there was a hint of sullenness in his tone.

“What time do I have to get up?”

“Six thirty. But you’ll stay in bed until a quarter to if I blow you.”

“Do you think that’s funny?”

“No, Sir.”

“Sleep is valuable to me. I do not expect to have to deal with anything like this again. Do you understand me?”

Corwin nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“All right,” I said. Terrence’s scolding was effective and probably quite sincere, but I didn’t want to push Corwin anywhere too negative during his first spanking. “Corwin’s done very well so far,” I told Terrence. “Corwin, I’d like you to bend over the desk to take the remainder of your punishment.”

Corwin hesitated only a second, then went to the desk.

“The center there is fine. Bend over. Legs shoulder-width apart, hands flat on the desk. Butt out.”

Corwin assumed the position, every muscle visibly tense.

Terrence and I watched him for a moment. His breathing was shallow, and he fidgeted slightly. I knew he wanted to know what we were doing behind him.

“Take a deep breath,” I said.

He obeyed.

I stood, picked up the switch, and walked to his left side. I expected him to tense again as I came near, but he remained fairly relaxed.

“Terrence,” I said. “Why don’t you go around to the other side of the desk and hold Corwin’s hands?”

Terrence glanced at me questioningly. I nodded. Terrence walked around, sat in the large office chair, and took Corwin’s wrists as though he were restraining him.

“Just for support,” I said. “Corwin is going to hold position on his own.”

Terrence moved his hands down, lacing his fingers with Corwin’s. Corwin gave a small, shuddering breath and mumbled something I couldn’t hear.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I hate this,” Corwin said.

“Why?” I didn’t really think he did, but I was interested in what he might say.

“I feel stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.”

Terrence squeezed Corwin’s hands. “I’m here with you, pup.”

I rubbed his lower back. “You’re doing well, Corwin. I know you’ll remember this.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I passed the switch through the air a couple of times, watching Corwin flinch at the sound. “Eight strokes. This will sting,” I said. “Hold onto Terrence, and cry or yell as much as you need to.”

I didn’t give him time to reply. I drew the switch back and delivered the first stroke to the crest of his ass. He gasped and his knees turned inward as though he longed to press his legs together. But he held position.

I rubbed the thin red welt briskly with my left hand, diffusing the pain, then stepped back and landed stroke two an inch lower. I rubbed him after each cut of the switch, easing the burn and reassuring him this wasn’t done in anger. His breathing grew shallower, and his grip on Terrence’s hands looked painful.

Stroke four brought a yelp. Stroke five, a sob.

Then he started begging.

“Please, Mike, please. I’m sorry.”

I rubbed circles on his ass, feeling the heat, the raised welts. “I know.”

“I won’t do it again. I won’t!”

“Shh. It’s almost over.”

I landed the sixth stroke on the lower curve of his ass, forcing him onto his toes. He gave a strangled whimper and squeezed Terrence’s hands even tighter. “No more, Ter. Please, tell him no more. I’ll be good. Fuck, it hurts.”

He was still holding back—stifling sobs and letting begging substitute for genuine surrender.

I whipped him again right in the crease where his buttocks met his thighs. He let out a miserable groan, but he didn’t make an attempt to break position. In fact, his body was amazingly still.

“Mike,” he said softly. I thought he was going to beg again, but he was quiet after he said my name. I tapped him a few times, listening to the soft *flick flick* of the switch against his skin, then delivered the final stroke to the tops of his thighs. It left behind a livid welt. He clenched his ass, fighting the pain, and then the sobs came in earnest.

“There you go,” I said quietly. “Let it all out.”

I rubbed his ass, soothing the worst of the sting, then moved my hand up under his shirt to stroke his back. Such smooth skin and hard muscle. So thin, the bones of his spine protruding beneath my fingers.

Terrence was running his thumbs over Corwin’s hands. He looked pale. “It’s all right, Cor. All done.”

Terrence glanced at me, and I nodded.

He released Corwin’s hands and came around to the front of the desk. He helped Corwin up and gathered Corwin against him, rubbing his shoulders. “You did really well,” he murmured.

After a minute, I moved closer. I wasn’t sure where I fit in anymore. I’d done my job, punished Corwin, and I supposed Ter could take it from here. Still, I wanted to stay long enough to make sure Corwin was okay.

Corwin suddenly wrenched himself out of Ter’s arms and leaned against me, issuing a series of quick, shuddery sobs. I glanced at Terrence, worried he’d be offended. He was watching Corwin, his expression unreadable.

“I’m sorry,” Corwin said into my shirt. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I wrapped an arm around him. “Over and forgiven.”

“You’re sure?” he asked.

My chest tightened. “Of course.”

Ter and I led him over to the couch and helped him sit with his weight on one hip, his body resting against mine, his legs folded in Ter’s lap. We both stroked him until he calmed.

He swiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. “I’m fine,” he said. He sounded like he was reassuring himself.

“It’s time for bed,” Terrence said.

“I’m fine, really. Sorry. I don’t know why—”

“Let it out,” I told him.

He stiffened suddenly and pulled away from me, as though he thought he’d done something he shouldn’t.

“It’s okay,” I said, so quietly I wasn’t sure he’d heard.

His gaze met mine for just a second, and then he threw his arms around me, squeezing me hard. I stopped breathing for a moment, just felt the weight, the warmth of him, the tiny hitches of his body, the beating of his heart against my chest, his tears soaking through my shirt.

I put my arms around him and held him loosely, rubbing circles on his lower back.

I caught Terrence’s eye. Ter just smiled. There was a little bit of longing in his expression, but the smile was genuine, and I bent my head next to Corwin’s and whispered, “Shh.”

Corwin loosened his grip on me but wouldn’t sit up. Finally he did, and he stood and left the room without another glance at me.

The next morning, Corwin did his level best to avoid me. He ate breakfast standing at the counter, ignoring Dave’s jokes about some local news story,

and when he saw me come in, he quickly put his bowl in the sink. I watched him stare at it for a second, and then he picked it up and started washing it. I almost laughed.

I waited until Dave left the room and said, "I gave Ter some aloe cream. Have him put it on you. You'll be less sore."

"I don't need it," Corwin muttered.

He headed for the door.

"Corwin?"

He hesitated.

"I'd love to see your decks sometime. All of them."

He turned. For a second I thought I'd only managed to piss him off further. Then he grinned, a smile that changed not just his expression, but also the way he held himself, the energy of the room.

"Now?" he asked.

"If you've got time."

He raced upstairs to retrieve his box of cards, then met me in the living room. Two hours later, Terrence found us in the middle of our third game. Corwin had lent me his Sacred Seas deck, which he'd spent the last six months building. It was a deck I'd never have come up with myself, but it somehow worked perfectly for the way I liked to play. Corwin was right, it was more geared toward offense, but there were some good defensive moves I could make as well. I found I wasn't nearly as interested in attacking him as I was in seeing what he'd throw at me and figuring out how I could counter it.

"Oh dear God," Terrence said. "I told you you'd get along."

Corwin pumped a fist in the air. "Nerds unite!"

"No kidding," Ter said dryly.

Corwin looked so happy I almost felt bad about what I had to do. "Noooo!" he cried, when I played the Mermaid of Kur and cast a sleep spell on his Demon Troubadour. "Why would you do that?"

“You built the deck,” I said. “Can’t blame me for rocking it.”

“Oh well.” He set down a creature I didn’t recognize—a sort of bull mixed with a snake, but with a single horn on its head. “I’ll just have the Cornus block the spell. *And* draw a new card.”

“You jerk!”

“I’m just naturally on fucking fire. Can’t blame me for rocking it.”

Terrence shook his head. “I’m going to take a nap. You dorks have fun.”

“We will,” Corwin said.

We finished the game twenty minutes later. “Jeez.” I sat back. “I could get used to being unemployed.”

Corwin gathered the cards. “Thanks for playing with me. You’re way more fun than the guys I play with in town.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“They all *look* like nerds. And they talk about boobs way too much. Probably because they’ve never actually seen any in real life.”

“Now, now.”

“Come on. You know the kind of guy I’m talking about. The horny nerd.”

“I *am* a horny nerd.”

“Yeah, but you’re hot. And you don’t talk about boobs.”

“Well... boobs aren’t really my style.”

He placed the cards in the box. “My ass didn’t hurt at all while I was playing. I forgot all about it.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No. I mean, I’m sore, but I don’t mind.”

“You should find Ter. Try the aloe.”

He nodded.

“Or I could do it, since Ter’s napping.”

Corwin glanced up. I instantly felt guilty. If I'd thought Ter would mind, I wouldn't have offered. But still... I didn't know quite what was happening to me. I looked at Corwin and felt somehow pleased, sad, and lonely all at once. I wished I could ask him what he was thinking. How he'd felt last night when I'd spanked him. Why he'd left afterward. Whether or not he'd gotten what he needed.

I saw him swallow. Watched the shallow rise and fall of his chest. He looked away. "That's okay," he said. "I'm okay."

Shit. I'd freaked him out.

"Was last night what you expected?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It was a lot."

"Too much?"

"No. Just... I don't get why I cried. Why it mattered so much."

"The spanking?"

"After."

He didn't elaborate. I should have pushed him. It was my job to help both of us understand what had happened. But I remembered the "after" too. I remembered holding him. Whispering to him. I remembered him boneless and pressed against me.

He packed up his cards and took them upstairs. A few minutes later I heard his car start.

The next couple of days passed without event. I helped Dave with preparations for an upcoming motorcycle convention he was attending. I looked for jobs online. I played way too many games of TF with Corwin and decided I was obsessed with his Sacred Seas deck.

"You can have it," he said.

"No."

"I'm serious. Keep it. I've got other decks."

“But this deck is badass.”

“That’s why I want you to have it.”

“It must have cost a ton to get all these cards.”

“Mike. I *want* you to have it.”

It was tempting. Not just because I loved the deck, but because... I’d have something to remember Corwin by? No. Not gonna go there. “I don’t play anymore,” I told him. “Back home, I mean.”

Saturday night I was in my room when there was a knock on my door. Corwin poked his head in. I was in my pajama pants and shirtless, and I felt awkward, like I shouldn’t be letting him see me half naked—until I saw he was wearing only briefs under his not-long-enough T-shirt. “What’s up?”

“They’re doing a scene in Jake’s room,” he said. “It wasn’t my thing. So I escaped.”

“Escaped?”

He grinned. “Can I stay with you while they play?”

“I’m...” *I’m busy? Terrified? Being alone with you to play The Foresworn is one thing, but alone in a bedroom with you is too much?* “Do they know why you left?”

“They probably haven’t even noticed I’m gone.”

I frowned at him. “If a scene was going badly for you, you need to talk to them about it.”

“Hey, Mr. Sanctimonious.” He sidled closer to the bed. “I don’t want to talk to them.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “Don’t feel like it.”

There was a knock on my door. “Mike?” Ter’s voice. “Sorry to bother you. Is Corwin here?”

I looked at Corwin and lifted my eyebrows.

He sighed and walked to the door. “Hey,” he said, as he opened it to Terrence.

Ter was wearing a rumpled, unbuttoned work shirt and a pair of backward pajama pants. He’d obviously dressed in a hurry to come down here. “We didn’t know where you’d run off to. Is something wrong?”

“I don’t feel like playing tonight. Can I hang out with Mike a while?”

Terrence glanced at me. “If it’s all right with Mike.”

“It’s all right with him,” Corwin said before I could open my mouth.

“You sure nothing’s wrong?”

“Yeah. I’m not upset or anything. I just don’t want to play.”

Ter leaned against the doorframe. “All right. If you change your mind, you know where to find us.” He headed off through the kitchen.

Corwin shut the door and turned to me. “See? It’s fine. And see how much he misses me? Like, not at all.”

“I have a feeling you like when people drop everything to check up on you.”

A shadow passed over his face. Then he tried to smile. “Yeah, maybe.”

“And I *didn’t* say it was all right for you to stay.”

“I’ll be quiet.”

I patted the bed. He sat beside me. There were goose bumps on his arms. “Cold?”

“It’s freezing up there. They’ve got the AC cranked.”

I stood and headed for the closet. “I ought to warm your backside. Barging in here like this.”

I glanced at him over my shoulder. He was sitting perfectly still.

There were different things brats needed out of discipline. Some needed to be taken in hand in a way that was harsh, uncompromising, and convincing. They didn’t want comfort after a spanking. They wanted to feel thoroughly shamed by a punishment.

Others wanted to know they were cared about every step of the way. They wanted to be reassured when they were nervous, praised when they took a punishment well. I'd been like that. Needy, I'd worried at first, until I'd seen how much the guy spanking me liked giving that reassurance. Eventually I'd realized my own truest fantasy wasn't to receive discipline and comfort, but to provide it.

I couldn't quite figure out where Corwin fit. He seemed to benefit from strictness, to like being forced. But he wanted comfort too, even if it scared him to accept it.

I waited for him to respond, but he was waiting for me—either to make good on my threat, or to acknowledge I'd been teasing.

“But I'm feeling merciful tonight.” I grabbed a pair of my sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt and tossed them on the bed. “Here.”

He dressed without a word. The clothes were way too big, and I laughed looking at him.

“That'll have to do.”

He smiled and brought his knees up to his chest, pulling the cuffs of the sweatpants over his bare feet.

“Warmer?” I asked.

He nodded. “Thanks.”

I sat with him for a minute.

“Still a little cold,” he said finally.

I gently put an arm around his shoulders and eased him against me. It felt good to hold him.

“Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“I like you.”

“I like you too.”

“Just as a friend?”

“You’re very attractive.”

“I know.”

“And your humility is nearly irresistible.”

He laughed.

“But you and Terrence—”

“We’re not a thing,” Corwin said. “I mean, he’s my Top, and I love him, but we’re... it’s temporary.”

“I see.”

“He even says so. He’s gonna get rid of me someday.”

“I doubt he says it like that.”

“We both know it, though.” Corwin leaned closer and nestled against my chest. “And he knows I like you. I told him.”

My heart thudded. “What’d he say?”

“Not to pester you.” He paused. “I was thinking—if you did like me, we could try playing together. See what happens.”

“Hmm.”

He hurried on. “With the other guys, I mean, it’s fun, sometimes, but it’s also, like, they were this family, and now I’m here, and... um. I feel like they kind of want me to fit with what they’ve already got going. But with you, we’d both be figuring it out.”

“How do you like to play?” I asked, before I could stop myself.

“I do lots of stuff. Blowjobs, bondage, gags... the guys like gagging me—wonder why. I even don’t mind enemas, if you’re nice about it.”

I chuckled.

“What?” he asked, looking at me.

“You’re a sweetheart.”

“You think so?” He seemed genuinely surprised.

“What about spanking?” I asked.

He shook his head. "Sometimes. But I don't really like pretending. I want it to be punishment, like the other night. Floggers are pretty hot, though. And sex, of course. You can fuck me any way you want."

"I think," I said softly, "it might be a good idea to know each other a little better first."

The change in his expression was subtle, but I caught it.

"I mean it," I said. "I'm not rejecting you. I just think we should wait a little bit. Talk to Terrence. Decide what you and he want to do about your relationship."

"I'm hot," he complained, pulling free of me and yanking off the sweatshirt. He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling under his thin T-shirt. He tossed the sweatshirt on the floor. "There *is* no relationship. Ter doesn't want to have a relationship. You won't either, when you know me better."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm too much to deal with."

"I doubt that."

"You won't like me much when you know more. Ter doesn't."

"Know more about what?"

He pulled up his T-shirt and showed me three long scratches running from his armpit to the end of his rib cage.

"Where'd those come from?" My first thought was Monster.

"Me." He glanced at me and yanked down his shirt. "It doesn't matter what you think," he snapped.

"Let me see," I said. I eased his arm out of the way and lifted his shirt again. He closed his eyes and inhaled, sucking his stomach in and pushing his ribs out. The skin over the bones was smooth and pale, and a spot near his navel pulsed as he held his breath. I touched him lightly, just underneath the scratches, and he exhaled as though I'd pressed a button. "When did this happen?"

“Last night.”

“Are you keeping them clean?”

“What’s the point?”

I took hold of his shirt. He flinched as I tugged the fabric over his head, leaving his hair crackling with static. He kept his arm close to his body, covering the scratches.

“Why?” I asked softly.

“I don’t know,” he muttered. “I like doing it. Ter says I should stop.”

“What do you like? The pain? The marks?”

“Both.” He took a shallow breath. “Sometimes I get marked in scenes. How’s it any different?”

“Does that help, too?”

“A little bit. Do you think I’m sick?”

I shook my head and put a hand between his shoulders.

“Ter used to like me a lot,” he said. “But after he found out, I don’t think he was too excited about me anymore.”

“Terrence cares about you.”

“He just can’t keep me.” Corwin wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I want to go.” He tried to stand. I caught his wrist. “I need to go out.”

“Lie down,” I said. “I’m gonna clean those and we’ll talk more.”

He tried to pull away, but I held on. “Go away,” he snapped.

“Corwin. Stop fighting me.”

He elbowed me—gently enough that I knew he wasn’t really fighting, that he wanted to be stopped. I stood, pulling him with me, and patted his ass. Just a warning, nothing more. He jumped forward and twisted in my grasp. I swatted him once, then let him go and pointed to the bed.

“Stretch out.”

“Fuck you.”

I bent him against my hip and gave him a few more light swats until he moaned with frustration.

“Don’t you turn against me too, Mike!”

I eased him up, and we faced each other. “You know full well I’m not against you. What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t have anyone,” he said, voice cracking a little. “No one really cares. They just pretend. You have no idea how it feels to be this fucking *alone*.”

I held him firmly. “You’re not alone. You have Ter and Dave and Jake and George and me.”

“You don’t give a shit. Neither do I.” He tried to push me off him. I didn’t let go.

“Ready to settle down?” I asked. I could feel his sides moving in and out too rapidly. I wouldn’t push him if he didn’t want to be pushed. I wanted him to get what he needed out of this.

“Make me,” he whispered. “Please.”

The next time he tried to jerk free, I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled him between my thighs, clamping his legs with my own. I untied the sweatpants and pulled them down, then bent him over my left knee.

“You need to listen, Corwin,” I said, smacking the seat of his tight black briefs. “I want to help, but you need to let me.”

I carried on for a moment, stinging him until his grunts of protest turned to whimpers.

“No, wait,” he begged, as I slid his underwear down. He put one hand behind him, but I pinned it against his back.

“Enough,” I said. “Relax.”

My plan was to stop once his ass had a little color, but it was obvious he was getting something major out of this spanking. The tension had left him, and he was quiet, face buried in the comforter, making no attempt to pull away as I layered circuit after circuit of what were actually very light swats. Occasionally he rubbed himself against my leg. “That’s right,” I whispered,

letting him know it was all right to enjoy this. He sighed as I went to work on his thighs, first one and then the other.

I stopped when he was flushed from his hips almost to his knees. I set my palm on the hot skin. "Very good," I said quietly. "You took that so well."

"Shit. Mike..."

I stroked him, feeling the tiny bumps my hand had raised on his ass.

"Hurts."

"I know." It couldn't really have hurt much, but I knew what he meant. I'd hurt like that too. I gathered him onto the bed with me and lay beside him, just holding him.

"You're mad." He pushed away until he could see my face. His was blotchy, but there was no sign of tears. "You're mad I hurt myself."

"Not true. That spanking was for not listening to me." I paused when I saw his jaw tighten. "Do you wish I was mad that you hurt yourself?"

He tried to roll away.

"Answer the question, please."

He shook his head. "Not sure."

"I'm not pleased about it. But I'm not angry."

"You want me to be safe," he whispered hopefully.

"I want you to be happy."

"I can't." He sounded anguished. "Only sometimes. I can't just be that, Mike."

"I know. Lie here and be good while I get some stuff to clean you up."

I brought him a glass of water, too, which he chugged. The scratches weren't as deep as I'd initially thought, and they looked like they'd heal just fine. Corwin lay silent, flinching a little when I put the peroxide-soaked cotton ball on his skin.

"It won't hurt," I said.

"I know," he replied, a little defensive.

I swabbed the three marks.

“This stops,” I said, calmly but firmly, as I pulled his shirt back down. “If you’re thinking about hurting yourself from now on, you find me or Ter. We can give you safe pain, if that’s what you need. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir.”

I climbed into bed, stretching out beside him and pulling the covers over both of us.

“I can stay?” he whispered.

“Go to sleep.”

He lay quiet for a moment, then rolled to face me. I saw his neck extend, his face moving closer to mine, and I almost couldn’t make myself stop him. I wanted so badly to know what it felt like to kiss him, to explore his mouth with my tongue, to touch his whole fucking body. Just in time, I got a palm on his chest and pushed him away.

“Sleep,” I repeated, trying not to acknowledge my pounding heart, my hardening cock.

“You don’t want to?” he asked.

Fuck, kid.

“I don’t know if Ter’s okay with this.”

“Why is it Ter’s business? Ter has George and Jake and Dave. Why can’t I have someone too?”

“I told you what I want. I want you to sleep. I want us to think about this.”

He sat up. Stared at me. “You know,” he said, “I get why you’re a Top or whatever. You’re good at being bossy, and you sound like you’re in charge. And you’re, like, hot and you know when to be nice and you make people want to listen to you. But there needs to be a balance, you know? You don’t get to tell everyone what to do about everything all the time.”

“I hardly think that’s what I do.”

"I'm just saying I don't really care what you want right now. Because I want something too."

"Corwin..."

But he was already out of bed, striding toward the door.

"Come back here."

"No," he said. And left.

I didn't see Corwin until just before lunch the next day. The others went out to some seafood place I wasn't into, so I shut myself in my room and job-hunted until I heard sounds in the kitchen. I figured it was Corwin, and part of me was nervous about whatever conversation we needed to have, so I didn't go out right away. I hid in my room with my laptop and listened to the whirring of the blender.

I finally steeled myself and went out. I was prepared to apologize. Prepared to admit that yes, I was bossy, and yes, sometimes it was hard for me to listen instead of giving orders, and yeah, I knew what he wanted, and I wanted it too.

Then I saw what he was putting in the blender.

TF cards. He was sitting on the counter, dropping them in one by one. And not just any cards.

"You blended the Sacred Seas deck?" I shouted.

He pressed the on button, and the blender roared.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I demanded when he turned it off. I looked at the gray pulp inside, horrified.

"A lot of shit!" he said, dropping in the Mermaid of Kur and starting the machine up again.

"Turn that off right now!"

He pretended not to hear me.

I strode over and turned the blender off. He calmly pulled it off the stand, admiring the contents.

“That deck was—it was fucking *perfect*,” I said.

“And now it’s mush. Sacred Mush.” He held the blender out toward me. “Want some?” He swirled the glop inside.

I stared at him. Then I turned and started to leave.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“I need to get out for a while.”

“What, you’re not going to punish me?”

I didn’t answer.

“Mike! Come back here, or I swear I’ll pour this all over your damn bed!”

I left the kitchen, crossed the living room, and went out the front door. Let him just try pouring that shit on my bed. I’d make sitting down a personal trial for him for the next two weeks. The passive-aggressive little punk.

It wasn’t just the deck. It wasn’t just him. It was me too. I was twenty-nine years old and I’d thought I knew the right way to do things. I wasn’t supposed to get fired from my job. I wasn’t supposed to be blindsided by my feelings for someone I barely knew. I was supposed to have life figured out. I was supposed to be in *control*.

Corwin said he wanted me. He also said he felt alone and like he didn’t think he had anything permanent with Terrence. So what was I to him? Another chance to be taken care of? Did he even give a shit who I was—or was he so desperate not to sleep by himself that any bed would do?

Our TF connection had almost convinced me I meant something more to him than a source of attention, but then he’d blended the deck. The deck he’d tried to give me.

The Sacred Fucking Seas.

That’s why he blended that deck. To hurt you. To send you a message.

“Because I want something too,” he’d said last night.

Fuck.

Should I be flattered or furious?

I was gonna go with furious.

“You two are awful quiet tonight,” Jake commented.

I refused to look at Corwin. We’d been trying to out-sullen each other since dinner began.

“How was work?” I asked Jake.

Jake nodded. “Not bad. There’s a new copier at the office, which is supposed to make our lives easier, except no one can figure out how to work it.”

Corwin reached across the table suddenly and grabbed the salt from in front of Dave, knocking the pepper over in the process. He began shaking it over his food so hard the salt scattered everywhere. Dave calmly reached out and righted the pepper. Corwin leaned forward to slam the salt back on the table, intentionally tipping the pepper again in the process. This time Dave snagged his wrist.

“Let go!” Corwin snapped, pulling back.

“Easy,” Dave said. I could see Dave wasn’t holding him hard. “Pick up the pepper.”

“You’re not my Dom! None of you are, not really.” Corwin jerked his head at me. “Especially not *him*.”

“And you’re not a six-year-old,” George pointed out. “So calm the fuck down.”

“Corwin,” Dave didn’t raise his voice, but there was an unmistakable warning in it. “Pick it up.”

Dave let go, and Corwin sulkily repositioned the shaker.

All at once I felt a surge of jealousy I didn’t understand. Part of me missed my days as a brat. Missed having something to push against, the solid reassurance of a Top who wouldn’t let me get away with any bullshit. I felt strange and out of sorts. I didn’t have a job, I wasn’t a part of this group, this weird little family; I was a *guest*. And the one person at this table I did feel a

genuine connection with hated my guts. I grabbed the potatoes, slopped them onto my plate, not caring that some of them hit the table. I set the casserole dish heavily on the potholder.

“Uh, Mike?” Terrence said.

“What?” I demanded.

“Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine. Except that *somebody* blended his Sacred Seas deck.”

“*Somebody* doesn’t give a shit about somebody else’s feelings,” Corwin shot back.

“Somebody cares enough about your feelings and other peoples’ not to go rushing into anything!”

“Guys,” Jake said, “can we do this after dinner?”

I scooted my chair back, wiped my mouth, and stood. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Me too.” Corwin stood.

We both clomped out the back door. Monster barked, pulling eagerly on his chain.

“I’m walking this way.” Corwin pointed to the left. “So you can go that way.” He jerked his thumb right.

“I want to see the garden.”

“Fine. I’ll go this way.”

I headed left, and he went right.

My anger faded a little as I walked. I knew I was being ridiculous, but it felt good to indulge the brat side I’d walled up for so many years. After a few minutes, I heard footsteps behind me. “I want to see the garden too,” Corwin muttered.

We walked side by side to the garden.

“Zucchini’s coming up,” he said brusquely.

“And the peppers.”

We paused.

“We were pretty idiotic back there,” he said.

“No kidding,” I replied, almost before he’d finished.

He looked at me and laughed suddenly. “I didn’t know you could make a scene like that.”

“Surprise.”

He shook his head and stepped closer to me. His shoulder brushed mine. “I didn’t know you’d get so mad about me blending the deck.”

“It’s a good deck.”

“And a good blender.”

I snorted.

“The blades are probably all dull now,” he said.

We were quiet a moment. “I’m sorry about last night,” I said finally.

“Me too. And about today.” He glanced around. “Hold on.” He walked over to the elm tree and reached up to grab one of the branches.

“Hey,” I said, as he broke off a long twig. “No.”

He brought it over to me, pulling the leaves off as he walked. “Here.”

I shook my head. Took the switch from him, snapped it in half, and tossed it on the ground. “I’m not going to punish you.”

“How come?”

“Because I am bossy. And I don’t always know when to turn it off. And I just spanked you last night.”

“That wasn’t, like...”

“I know. But I don’t think what we’re dealing with here is gonna be solved with a spanking.”

He was quiet for a minute. “You said I like attention. You’re right, but I don’t want people to drop everything to deal with me. That sounds so pathetic. I just... I want them to give a fuck when I get upset.”

I nodded. "Okay."

"Which is stupid, because the stuff I'm getting upset about doesn't matter." He looked at me pleadingly. "I just like to know someone hears me."

"That's not a bad thing." I reached out and stroked the curls at the nape of his neck. He breathed out. "If you like attention, I don't mind giving it."

"You don't?"

"It's a game, right? It's roles we play. You perform, and so do I. But we get something out of it for real, too. I really do like taking care of brats. And you..."

"I really like being one."

"So we're a good match." My heart pounded.

"You don't think I'm stupid, Mike?"

"Not at all."

"I don't have some kind of Daddy fetish, all right?"

"Who said you did?"

"I just don't want you to get the wrong idea. I'm not trying to pretend to be some little kid."

"I'm not gonna treat you like one."

"I'm gonna act like one sometimes, though."

"I'm gonna spank you when you do."

He stared at me a moment, then shook his head. "This is messed up."

"Not at all."

He leaned forward and kissed me. Soft and sweet. He drew back slowly and raised his gaze to meet mine. "I like you."

I smiled. Ran my thumb across the nape of his neck and leaned forward for another kiss. "I like you too," I murmured, just before my lips touched his.

The next two weeks passed quickly.

I had one phone interview I was pretty sure wouldn't turn into anything. Corwin made a thousand bucks painting a few rooms in some rich lady's summer home in Brookside. I tried not to feel inadequate when he and the others were gone during the day. I took lots of walks and worked out in the basement. Did whatever chores I could think of. When Corwin was home, we worked on building a new TF deck together, often in the shed or in my bedroom. But somehow, no matter what we sat down to do, we ended up making out.

Ter had figured out pretty quickly that something was going on, and to my relief, he'd given us his blessing. "I knew you guys would be a good match. I seriously knew it. Not just because of the nerdy card game, but just... something about the two of you." He clasped his hands in front of him like a proud mother. "It's perfect."

"Are you saying you tried to set me up with Corwin?"

Ter grinned. "Not exactly. Just that I thought you'd like him."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Mike, Jesus. I'm *thrilled*. I love him to death. But you can give him what he *needs*."

"I'm not sure what this is," I admitted. "What we're doing."

Terrence snorted. "We all said the same thing when we started living together—Jake and George and Dave and I. Hell, sometimes we still don't know. But it's fun, right? Whatever it is."

Yeah, it was fun.

Corwin really did seem to be making an effort to be politer, to help around the house. I hadn't spanked him since the night he'd shown me his scratches. I'd stuck him in the corner a couple of times when he needed to cool down. He'd hated it at first, but once he discovered that corner time ended the same way spankings did, with my arms around him, he put up less of a fight.

I surreptitiously checked his body each night for new marks, but I never saw anything. We hadn't fucked yet, just fooled around. We played with a pair of handcuffs Jake had lent us—I cuffed Corwin to the headboard and explored

his body, teasing him until he was an incoherent, begging mess. He was always eager enough when we exchanged blowjobs or made out, but I got the sense that what he really liked was falling asleep with me afterwards.

It was hard to overlook that loneliness, that vulnerability. The fact that he did have some growing up to do. And equally impossible to ignore the fact that I couldn't stay here forever. What would Corwin do when I was gone? Was it presumptuous to think that was even an issue for him? Maybe I was just supposed to be a summer fling.

But I worried about his future—about *him*. I hardly felt in a position to suggest he look for a job, yet I had a feeling he'd feel better once he was financially independent from his parents. And when he had something to occupy his time besides TF and sex.

Not that I was complaining.

We tried BDSM scenes a couple of times with the other guys, but for some reason, it didn't feel like it had when Ter and I had Topped together in Toledo. I'd never been self-conscious around Ter or other play partners before, but I was now. And I figured the reason was Corwin. I wanted him to myself. I bristled when Dave gave Corwin an order. If I tried to watch Ter use a flogger on Corwin, I wanted to yank it out of his hand and take over. Corwin caught on to this quickly and started using scenes with the others to tease me. I found it less funny than I probably should have.

The company I'd applied with e-mailed me to schedule a second interview—this one in person. Corwin coached me in some practice runs. I saw what he'd meant that first night when he said he could behave when he wanted to. He was so reassuring, so confident and enthusiastic when he coached me, that I lost my nervousness quickly. He was more than a needy brat, and it was nice to relax a little and let him take care of me.

And he was excited to learn the job was in Sequoia Heights, only fifteen minutes away.

"You can stay here now," he said.

"Well, not here here," I said.

He frowned. “Why not?”

“It’d get a little crowded if this was a permanent arrangement, don’t you think?”

He left shortly after that, and stayed gone several hours. Running off was still his favorite way to deal with situations he didn’t like. I resolved not to give him any special attention when he came home—didn’t want to encourage his behavior. But as soon as I heard his car pull up, I was out on the porch. I pulled him into my arms and kissed him hard.

“Sorry,” he murmured against my chest. “I don’t want you to go.”

“It’ll be all right,” I said vaguely, wishing I knew what to tell him. “I’m not going anywhere right now.”

Corwin seemed fine the rest of the evening, but there was something a little off about his behavior. At dinner he started making fun of the way George pronounced “eggs” and wouldn’t let up. George finally snapped that things had been a lot better around here before Corwin arrived, and Corwin had left the table so fast he’d overturned his chair.

That night I found two short but deep scratches on Corwin’s arm. “What’s this about?” I asked.

“Dunno.”

“What George said?”

He shifted, trying to pull his arm away. “I did it before that.”

I wondered if it was about me, then, and the job in Sequoia Heights. But I didn’t want to bring that up, because I didn’t know how to reassure him. If I left, I wasn’t sure what would happen between us, and I was afraid he’d want answers.

I pressed my lips gently to the scratched spot. “What did I tell you to do if you wanted to hurt yourself?”

“Tell you.” He lay still, staring at me. “But you’ve got the interview tomorrow. I didn’t want to upset you.”

“This does upset me,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said, but didn’t sound it.

I gave him a brief spanking, and then we curled up together. He was stiff and resisted being held at first, then softened as I kissed his jaw and throat. He reached down and stroked my cock while I sucked a bruise on his neck. I took his cock too, and we panted against each other’s lips, his soft whimpers colliding with mine. By the time we fell asleep, he seemed better.

The next morning I went in for the interview, and at the end of it, I was offered the job. The relief I felt outweighed any regret about having to give up my long, slow summer days at the farmhouse. There was a part of me that almost wished I didn’t have to go back to a desk job, that wished I’d used my period of unemployment to reinvent myself, to accept that I didn’t have control over everything and let myself free fall. I grinned and silently blamed Corwin for those thoughts.

I drove back to the house, eager to celebrate.

Except I was the only one there. Corwin’s car was in the drive, but he was nowhere to be found, not even the shed. I looked out the window and saw Monster sitting beside his doghouse. So Corwin wasn’t out walking him.

I called my parents to tell them the good news. Then I texted Corwin to ask where he was. A few minutes later I sent him another text letting him know I’d gotten the job. He didn’t respond.

Terrence came home from work early, and we opened a bottle of wine.

“Where’s Corwin?” he asked.

“Not sure. He’s not around, and I haven’t heard from him.”

By five, Jake, Dave, and George were home, and we were all worried. We’d searched the property several times, and Ter had called one of Corwin’s TF buddies in town. We’d all tried Corwin’s phone.

“He’ll come back.” George sounded a little nervous. “He always shows up eventually.”

“Where would he have gone without his car?” Ter asked. “There’s nothing around.”

I stood at the kitchen sink, trying not to let on how queasy I felt. If Corwin had gone and done something stupid just because he thought I was abandoning him... if he'd hurt himself, if he had run off for good...

"It's a stunt," I said. It had to be, because I didn't want to think about the alternative. "He's pissed at me because he thinks I'm leaving him."

"So he's what, hiding somewhere?" Terrence asked.

"Probably."

I noticed Monster crouched by the entrance to his house, snuffling and wagging his tail. "Out there," I said suddenly, and hurried out the back door.

I reached the doghouse and pushed Monster out of the way. He slobbered happily on me as I got on my hands and knees and peered inside the house. Corwin was curled up in there, his eyes shining in the darkness.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked.

"Hey, Mike," he said dully.

"Get out of there right now."

I stepped back as he extricated himself from the doghouse and got unsteadily to his feet. "Are you all right?" I looked him over. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Just—"

"Good." I took his wrist, tugged him forward, and swatted his ass. He hissed and winced but didn't protest otherwise. "Then I'm going to whale the ever-loving tar out of you."

Terrence had joined us. "Corwin? What's going on?"

"Do you mind giving us a few minutes, Terrence?" I asked, forcing myself to be polite.

Terrence nodded. "You okay, Cor?"

Corwin didn't answer.

"I'll be inside." Terrence headed back to the house.

I guided Corwin out of reach of Monster, who was trying to jump on both of us. "A day in the doghouse, huh?" I asked flatly.

“Figured at least Monster likes me all right.”

I swatted him again. “Quit feeling sorry for yourself. Tell me what this is really about.”

“Ow. All right, yeah. Honest to God, Mike, I do feel like people hate me most of the time. And I wanted to be out of everybody’s hair a while.”

I steered him over to the stone bench by the garden, pushed him down and sat beside him. I took his chin in my hand and made him look at me. “Hiding from us was not the right thing to do.”

“Whatever,” he said as I released him.

I pulled him awkwardly over my lap and delivered six hard smacks to the seat of his jeans.

“Ow! You can’t do this out here are you—ow—crazy?”

“Don’t you whatever me.” I helped him sit up. “Ter was worried about you. George was upset. Monster, I’m sure, missed his house.”

“You weren’t worried?”

“I suggested it might be a stunt.”

“You make me sound like such a jerk,” he mumbled.

“You were incredibly immature.”

He turned away. I could see his jaw trembling. “That’s what I hate about the world. Most of the people you pass on the street won’t give you the time of day. They’ll treat you like you don’t even matter. But if you try to escape somewhere and just be on your own, people get on your case.” He wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

“What were you escaping?”

He shrugged again. “Noise. Like I said, I feel like I’m on everyone’s nerves.”

I placed an arm around him, and he leaned gratefully into me. “Why do you think you get on people’s nerves?”

“Just the way I am. I push people. And I don’t do much of anything. Not like George, who knows how to do all these random things. Or Jake, who works, like, sixty hours a week. Or Ter or Dave who know how to make everyone feel better. I’m not like that. I don’t really have anything people want.”

“Now that is some first class self-pitying.”

He shot me a glare. “I do feel sorry for myself. It’s a feeling, same as being happy. You wouldn’t tell someone to quit being happy, would you? Or even sad. Because if they could quit feeling something they didn’t want to feel, they would.”

“I guess you’re right.”

He stretched and sort of smiled, rubbing his nose against my shoulder. “Woe is me.”

“Unless they get hooked on feeling that way.”

“Believe me, I wish I was normal.”

“I think you’re perfectly normal.”

He rolled his head in my direction and fixed me with a skeptical look.

“You don’t need to do anything special to impress people,” I said. “There’s a lot to like in you.”

He glanced at his hands. “Sometimes I think so too.”

“Good.”

“Not today, though.”

I put a hand between his shoulder blades and scrubbed his back briefly. “Is this about me getting the job?”

“Yeah. Partly. I’m so happy for you, you have to believe that. I just can’t stand how everyone leaves. How you came here, and now it’s just like... And Terrence... Is it so stupid of me to want just one person who’s *mine*?”

“No,” I said quietly. “It’s not stupid.”

We were silent a while.

“Is it stupid I want you to be that person?”

I sighed. “No. We’ll work it out, Corwin. I’m not walking out on you, okay?” I stood and offered my hand. “Why don’t you come inside and eat something?”

“Is Ter pissed?”

“Ter’ll be fine once you talk to him.”

“Are you gonna...?”

“We’ll figure it out inside.”

I supervised Corwin through supper and snagged an egg timer from the windowsill while he was washing his dishes.

I told him he had six minutes to shower, dress, and be standing in front of me.

He looked at me a little desperately, like he wanted to argue.

“The timer starts now.” I set the timer for six minutes. It ticked steadily.

Corwin hurried to the bathroom.

I was sitting at the table when he emerged, damp but dressed. He stood in front of me. I saw the outline of an erection through his pants. He didn’t say anything, and we waited for the last thirty seconds to tick by on the timer. He jumped when it dinged.

“Study,” I said, leading the way.

Terrence was already there, sitting right where he had the first night he and Corwin and I had gathered here to talk about DD. Corwin balked a little when he saw him, but followed me inside. “Corner,” I said. He hesitated, and I patted his ass to get him moving. He stood in the far corner with his hands laced behind his head, nose to the wall.

After a moment, I looked at Terrence and nodded.

Ter cleared his throat. “Corwin?”

Corwin tensed when Terrence said his name. “Yes, Sir?”

“Come here, please.”

Corwin went to Terrence, but glanced at me.

Terrence snapped his fingers. “Look at me.”

Corwin’s gaze dropped to the floor. Terrence caught his chin and tilted his face up.

“You scared me,” he said simply. He held Corwin’s jaw for a long time, forcing Corwin to look at him. “I didn’t know where you were, and that worried me.”

“Why?” Corwin asked bitterly. “Why do you care what happens to me? You didn’t even want me.”

Terrence shook him. “Enough of that. You know we love you. All of us, including Mike. That’s why we were worried.”

Corwin swallowed. “I was just in the backyard.”

“Hiding from us.” Even I cringed a little at Terrence’s tone. He might not have a scary voice, but he did disappointed better than anyone I’d ever met.

“I like being alone sometimes,” Corwin said. “You never mind when I leave for a few hours. And for all you know, when I’m gone I’m doing way worse stuff than lying in a doghouse.”

He had a point. And I was glad that he’d stayed close. Maybe it was an escape, as he’d said, from whatever feelings were overwhelming him. But he could have run, could have tried to avoid Ter and me completely. Instead he’d asked for help in the only way he knew how.

Terrence wasn’t impressed. “You know exactly what you did,” he said. “And I am really, really disappointed in you.”

Corwin ducked his head. Terrence planted a rough kiss on it.

“Try anything like that again, and I’ll be the one blistering your ass. But for now, you can answer to Mike.”

Terrence stood, gave me a brief nod, and left the study.

Corwin turned to me. He looked uncertain and a little disoriented.

I ordered him back to the corner. He went. I listened to him gradually regain control of his breathing.

I wanted to go to him. Wanted to stand behind him and hear his breath come faster. I wanted to brush my lips over the back of his neck, then order him to turn around and kiss me. Run my hands down his back and over his ass and pull him against my body. I wanted to let him know I wasn't going anywhere, that he meant too much to me, that I might be the one who got to spank him, but he was the one who knew how to undo me.

But I had to finish this.

"Turn around," I said.

He did, keeping his hands behind his head. His eyes met mine.

"We're going to the shed," I told him, and walked out of the room without waiting to see if he followed.

Monster bounded to the end of his chain as we walked through the yard. I was almost to the shed when I looked back and saw Corwin crouched on the grass, hugging Monster.

I walked over to them, and Corwin buried his face in the dog's shaggy coat. I took him by the ear and pulled him to his feet. "Shed," I said, tugging him the rest of the way. He gave a small whimper but came with me. I ushered him in and shut the door, then pulled the chain to turn the single light on.

It was quiet in here, and smelled faintly of gas from the riding mower.

"Ter was awful," Corwin said, rubbing his ear. "I feel horrible now."

"He was right."

"It's not fair," he added. "You acted like you weren't pissed after it happened. You were nice to me. And now you hate me."

"Knock it off." My words echoed in the small space. "You don't try to manipulate me to get out of a punishment. That won't ever work. If you're confused, we can talk. If you're scared, we can wait. But *do not play me.*"

He gave a quick nod and looked down.

"Do you know why you're being punished?"

“I was a brat.”

“What did you do?”

“Hid from all of you.”

“Why was that wrong?”

“It scared you,” he said.

“It did,” I confirmed. “It scared me a lot.”

He exhaled slowly.

“You’re a special person,” I said. “And I care about you a lot. I couldn’t stand to think about you in danger. Or running out on me. I thought you cared about me too, at least a little bit.”

“I do,” Corwin said, jerking his head up. I could see he was blinking back tears. “I wasn’t trying to...”

“I get that you stayed close,” I said. “I get that you didn’t run. Believe me, I appreciate that.”

“You’re the one who’s trying to leave!” he said.

“And you thought you’d punish me for that?”

“No.” He shook his head furiously. “You don’t *get* it.”

“You wanted to know I’d find you.”

He looked stunned. Then he nodded, relieved. “I... I just wanted to know you’d *look* for me.”

“I did. And I always will. But I think the next step is that you *talk* to me when you’re upset. Even if it’s just to tell me you want to be alone for a while. Okay?”

He scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. “Okay. Yeah. I’m sorry I got you worried.”

But you’re a little bit glad, too, aren’t you?

“Don’t ever do that to me again,” I said quietly. I undid my belt and pulled it through my loops. He tensed at the sound.

“Mike?”

“Bend over. Hands against the wall.”

“No,” he said uncertainly.

“Right now. Or I’ll add another dozen licks to your count.”

He bent at the waist and braced against the wall, shifting a little as I stepped behind him. “Two dozen,” I said.

He didn’t respond.

I doubled my belt in my right hand, making sure the buckle was tucked against my palm. I brought the folded leather across the seat of his pants four times in rapid succession, producing four crisp, rhythmic *cracks*. I moved an inch lower and delivered four more. He sucked in a breath.

“Straighten up,” I said. “Grab the beam above your head.”

He obeyed. I reached around him and undid his pants, pulling them to his knees. His legs were muscular and pale except for the skin at the edges of his briefs, which was tinged pink. His shirt rode up, exposing his narrow midsection.

“Relax,” I reminded him.

I saw him try, but he clenched again as soon as my belt struck. I spaced these blows farther apart. He tried to push his hips forward and tuck his ass in, but I reached around and adjusted him. After four licks, I stopped and rubbed the hot skin. Then I cracked him four more times on the underside of his ass.

He clung to the beam, panting, as I yanked his briefs down.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

“What was that?” I asked.

He shook his head, eyes closed.

“Are you telling me how to conduct this punishment?”

“No, Sir.”

“I can add another dozen.”

“I’m sorry.”

I propped one foot on the bottom rung of the wooden stool by the workbench. "Over my knee," I said.

He shuffled over to me, his cock flaccid, face flushed, ass an angry red all over. He bent over my raised leg. I wrapped my left arm over his shoulders and swung the belt with my right.

He yelped as it connected with his bare, flushed skin.

Then he was quiet except for a few close-mouthed whimpers as I delivered seven more strokes, traveling down his buttocks and to his thighs. His stomach muscles tensed against my leg, and he clutched me, body trembling as I delivered the final sharp crack.

He didn't move. I lowered my leg slowly, keeping my arm around him to support him.

The skin was welted in a few places, and I ran my palm over the roughness of it. He clenched, panting.

"We're all done," I said softly.

He staggered away from me, nearly tripping over his pants. He went behind the wall of the L-shaped stall.

I left my belt on the stool, went in, and stretched out next to him on the straw. I drew him close to me. He didn't make a sound except for one choked sob.

"Easy," I said, stroking his hair back from his face. "Let it out."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Over and forgiven."

He resisted only a second when I put my arms around him, then he curled against me and lay quietly for several minutes.

"Better?" I asked finally.

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

He hesitated. "I don't want you to leave me. I want to go with you, wherever you're going."

"I'd like that," I said.

He started. "You would?"

"Yes." I traced his lips with my fingertip, then leaned forward and kissed him. It really was that simple, I thought. I wanted him with me. And there were ways we could make that happen. "I'll probably sublet a place for a while until I'm sure the job's gonna work out. You're welcome to split rent with me."

He grinned and socked me in the arm. "Mike. Are you serious? We can do this?"

"We can do this," I confirmed. He clambered onto me, but I put a hand on his chest before he could kiss me. "We're both gonna work though, okay? If you decide you want to go to school, and your parents want to help you out with that, fine. Otherwise, you need a job."

"Bossy," he muttered.

"I know."

He leaned down and kissed me hard. "I want to do more of this," he said when we parted. "A lot more of this."

I kissed his jaw, biting lightly around the bone.

"We will," I promised. I pushed my hands under his shirt and rubbed from his belly to his chest, circling his nipples with my thumbs. He sighed and closed his eyes. I rolled him off me and pressed him back into the straw, then teased his lips open with my tongue. I sucked his lower lip while I continued to play with his nipples, pinching and tugging on the hard nubs until he arched his back and whimpered.

"Show me," I whispered. "Show me how much you want it."

He wrapped his legs around my waist and pressed his hips against mine. Rubbed his cock against the front of my jeans, then fumbled with my fly. I helped him out, yanking my pants down.

“Will you fuck me?” he asked. “I want you to show me how much *you* want it.”

“Oh.” I grinned. “I would. But no condom.”

He produced one from his jeans.

“Were you planning this?” I asked.

“I live with four guys. I keep ’em on me.”

I rolled the condom on, breathing onto his cock as I did, making his balls tighten. The condom was pre-lubed, but I added some spit.

He groaned as I entered him. He was tight, maybe a little nervous. I kissed him as I slid all the way in. He kept his legs around me and I took him in long, smooth strokes. He whimpered with each one. At first I thought I was hurting him, but when I tried to slow down, he pulled me closer and urged me to go faster. He came suddenly, shooting onto my chest.

“Yes,” I whispered. “So good.”

He arched and wriggled, still panting. “Keep fucking me,” he begged.

“Don’t worry.”

I sped up my thrusts and came a minute later.

I held him afterward. The floor of the shed was too uncomfortable for me to sleep on, but he drifted off after a few minutes.

I liked listening to his slow breathing, his soft snores, and knowing he was mine for keeps.

THE END

Author Bio

J.A. Rock was recently released from Alabama and has been set loose on the world. She is currently in South America with her partner in inadvertent crime, SB, and will spend the latter part of the year farming in New Zealand. She writes LGBTQ romance and is the author of By His Rules, Wacky Wednesday, Calling The Show, The Brat-tastic Jayk Parker, and, with Lisa Henry, The Good Boy and The Naughty Boy.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

ROUTINE WATCH

By Gina A. Rogers

Photo Description

A man looking through binoculars. He has muscular shoulders. His hands wrap around the binoculars, thumbs meeting along the bridge of his nose. His face is blocked by the binoculars but we can see dark scruff, full lips and dark, slicked-back hair. Reflected (almost hidden) in the lenses is an image of two naked men, one behind the other. The man in front is on his knees, back arched, with a smile on his face.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm new to town, just got out of the Navy—back from the Middle East. I moved here to be close to my brother and he's only lived here a couple years. I'm looking for a job and trying to get settled, but some of my habits from the Navy have carried over into civilian life. Like I can't sleep at night until I've closely checked the neighborhood out and made sure it's safe. And what to my wondering eyes did appear...

Wow... I've got to get my application in at the office building across the street!

Thanks—

Kiki

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: voyeurism, former military, self-discovery, fetish, toys, HFN

Content warnings: light BDSM

Word count: 9,427

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

ROUTINE WATCH

By Gina A. Rogers

Up. Down. Flex. Contract. I push my body to its limits, the muscles of my upper body—triceps, deltoids and pectorals—straining to fulfill my demands. Up. Down. Even though I've been shore-side for three months I can still hear Master Chief Zhang calling out the commands in his deep, barking voice. *Seventy-five reps done, only twenty-five more to go* I tell myself. Up. Down. The desire to break rhythm, go harder and faster, nips at me but I quash it down.

It's the end of yet another day in my new life, and the physical exertion is part of my daily wind-down routine. Routine. A customary or regular course of procedure. It's what the United States Navy was built on, and what kept me on the straight and narrow for the last twelve years. Wake up. PT, or physical training to regular folks. Eat. Train. Eat. More PT. Sleep and repeat.

But routine can also be defined as dull or uninteresting; commonplace. And I am starting to feel that itch, the one that starts as a tiny spark of thought in my cerebral matter and then travels as a stinging, needling sensation. It traipses down to my shoulder blade then around to my pec before seeping down to my thighs, all the way to the space between my toes. Of course I know it's all just psychological and there aren't really tiny fire ants, crawling just under my skin.

It's that knowledge right there that helps me keep this steady up and down pace, allowing my routine to wrap its mental bindings around me and keep me from breaking free. In the Navy, there was just the right balance of rigid structure and adrenaline rush. Now that I'm on the outside? I've got the rigidity part down pat; but without the bursts of heart-pounding excitement, my inner chaos is trying to claw its way free. Freedom for a guy like me? It's dangerous.

I finish my first set of one hundred push-ups and let my knees hit the floor. My arms and shoulders burn, but it's a minor inconvenience. I swing my legs around so that I'm sitting on the floor, knees bent. I say a small prayer of

thanks for the carpet beneath my ass as I lower my torso to the floor to begin a set of sit ups. Once you've experienced the ache of doing this during Basic Training on the grinder, a slab of unforgiving concrete and asphalt, even the slight padding of carpet makes you want to sing hallelujah.

My abdominals tighten and I take a second to enjoy the sensation before I lever myself off the floor, silently counting off one when my chest brushes against my knees. I lower myself slowly, loving the taut strength of my core. I feel like a god when I'm doing this; powerful, in control, hot as fuck, invincible.

What in the happy fuck do you think you're doing? the memory of Master Chief Zhang screams at me. I realize I've completely lost count, as well as control, as I snap my body to and fro so fast my back will probably be bruised tomorrow.

I close my eyes, counting off from fifty, and envision myself back in Virginia under my Navy security blanket. I can see the master chief's boots as he walks through the lines, watching for anyone slacking off or any little mistake. Sometimes I would be tempted to fuck up on purpose, just so I could experience the zing I got from being the focus of such intensity. Was the feeling fear? Adrenaline? Arousal? I try not to think about that last one as I finish my reps at a nice even pace.

One hundred. I stretch my legs out flat and sit for a minute, hands on my thighs, listening to my body, telling it to behave. Sweat trickles from the nape of my neck down my back, following the trail of my spine. Fucking repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell. The policy had been yet another rope I used to bind myself, a rule that needed to be followed. But after the repeal became effective in September, 2011, it became a case of please-don't-ask-because-I-don't-want-to-tell. So when my re-enlistment came up the beginning of this year, I did something I never thought I would. I got out.

And so here I sit, on the floor of my brother's apartment in New York City, feeling like a SEAL out of water. No enforced routine, no structure, no purpose. I tell myself to give it time. For now, self-regulation, my own personal brand of self-medication, was doing its job. I'll figure out what to do with myself soon, despite having no real clue as to what that might be.

At least I know what to do with myself right now in this moment. I roll to the right, bringing myself to rest on my hands and knees. I lock my elbows and shift my weight off my knees and onto my toes, flattening my body into a smooth line. *Down. Up.* I settle into the rhythm once again and let it soothe my thoughts.

By the time I complete three sets of one hundred, the hyper state I was in throughout the day gives way to the throbbing burn of my muscles. Phase one of daily Operation Beat Myself Into A Moderately Sound Sleep is complete. I rise from the floor and saunter towards my room.

Twenty minutes later I stand before the bathroom mirror, swiping my hand across its foggy surface before placing my palm on the edge of the sink to brace myself. I lean in, studying myself in the streak of exposed mirror. My thick, dark hair is slicked back. I have a strong forehead, not too long and no signs of wrinkles yet. My nose could be described as Greek I guess: long, straight and narrow. My jaw, covered in a dark nine o'clock shadow, is still square despite having taken its share of punches.

Sitting above my chin are some of my best assets; my lips are soft and plump. The color not really red-based but more like bronzed peach and the arches and curves nearly perfect. But the best part, the thing that drives people wild, is the little shadowed dip that forms just below my full bottom lip. Too bad what I really want isn't some simpering chick begging me to use those lips on her body. No, I want a man. Want him to take that lip between his teeth and bite down right on that spot, just hard enough to sting. Want him to grab a handful of my dark hair and—

Fuck! I break eye contact with my reflection and scrub my hands over my face. I'm gay. I've known that since I was fourteen. True, I pushed those desires aside once I joined the Navy, and fucked my share of women in the last ten years. Hey, when a guy gets tired of his hand and being gay is against the rules of the job he needs, he takes what he can get.

But being gay isn't really the problem right now. I already have a hard time settling down at night. A hard on and a jonesing for some cock is not going to help that situation. Finishing my routine, that's what I need to be doing.

In my bedroom I pull on a pair of plaid pajama bottoms. My towel and dirty laundry get sorted into the proper baskets and I lay out an outfit for

tomorrow. Moving to the bed, I fold back the blankets before going to the nightstand and pulling out Mildred, my Beretta M9. We've been together for twelve years and not a day goes by that I don't check her over. I pull out the magazine, check the slide. Tomorrow I'll spend some one-on-one time with her, lovingly taking apart all her pieces and cleaning them.

Safety back on and Mildred tucked away, I grab my other favorite piece of equipment. As much as I would like that to be my dick right now, it's not. Although my two-thousand-dollar Swarovski high-definition binoculars can be just as fun to play with sometimes.

Recon. It's the final step in my bedtime routine; the familiar lullaby that rocks me to sleep. Not that I really need to be scouting the area for enemies, but for some reason looking into the lives of the people around me, seeing some of their issues or their happiness and even their pain makes me feel at peace. I'd like to think it has something to do with seeing my own smallness in the big scheme of things but really I'm probably just being a selfish voyeur. Good thing my brother is a cutthroat and makes the big bucks. It's a shame he never gets any downtime to enjoy the apartment. It has a hell of a view.

Walking through the apartment, I make sure all the lights are off before settling into the oversized leather armchair I've turned to face the line of floor-to-ceiling windows that border the living area. Moving east to west I check in with all my favorites. Mrs. Fluffikins, the blonde-haired princess who likes to let her little yippy dog lick her face, currently has the dog sitting on the kitchen counter while she paints its nails.

Mr. Stewie on the seventeenth floor of the brown brick complex is getting ready for bed. He already has on his giant diaper and is walking towards the kitchen, probably to grab a bottle from the back of the fridge where he keeps them hidden.

Why these people don't have any fucking curtains is beyond me. Then again, I'm sure they don't expect someone to be peering through their windows with a pair of binoculars that cost more than some of their furniture.

Of course there are plenty of normal folks too: TV watchers, exercisers, book readers. But the weirdoes, those people are some of my favorites. Like the ones on the infamous *People of Wal-Mart* website, the people of New York City always make me feel normal when I watch them.

Feeling calmer, I move from my usual suspects to scan the streets below. Nothing exciting going on down there either. Though I'm not really sure whether some excitement would be good or bad for my restlessness. I can't stop the huge sigh that escapes through my parted lips. I really need to find something to do with myself. I just have no clue what. Anything that involves sitting in an office all day is definitely out. So are mundane repetitive-type jobs.

I have plenty of money, that's not the issue. I lived on base during the entire twelve years I was in the Navy and rarely spent any of my income, just gave my brother access to it all. The fucking genius nearly tripled it. Another sigh bubbles up.

Maybe I should concentrate on the small things first. I swing the binoculars towards the gray high-rise on the block catty-corner from this one. I've been thinking of putting in an application for an apartment there. Living with Jake isn't bad. He's hardly ever home, but I need my own place, something I have complete control over. I need to feel comfortable bringing people home. I haven't had any "guests" since I got here, and that sure as hell is not helping my situation.

The building is well-maintained and the apartments are just my style; modern with dark wood floors and an overall industrial feel. Plus it's close to Jake and the park and it has a pool. I peer through a few windows, looking to see if any look vacant. As I make one last sweep, something on the periphery of my vision catches my eye. I backtrack, looking for the movement.

Oh shit! My lips part as my breath catches and I instantly feel the familiar tightening of desire in my groin. Two men—two abso-fucking-lutely gorgeous men are having sex in full view of the window. One guy, I immediately give him the nickname Fuck Thing One, is on his knees, legs spread wide and upper body braced by his long muscular arms. His head is thrown back, arching his neck and spine, as the guy behind him, Fuck Thing Two, pounds into his ass.

I am so, *so* fucking thankful I paid top dollar for these binoculars. The high color contrast ability means this hot live porn show is razor sharp. I can see the sheen of sweat glistening off their bodies for Christ's sake! I mean, I've seen

plenty of porn on a high-quality computer but this is real-time real life and Fuck Thing One and Fuck Thing Two have no idea I'm watching. Call me a creep, but that makes my blood run hot. All the way to my cock.

I have no intention of looking away. Two has a hand on One's hip, the grip so powerful I can see the shadows made from the indentation of his skin. Two's other hand is on One's shoulder. I watch, enraptured, as the muscles in his arm flex to pull One back hard onto his cock each time he thrusts his hips forward. I roll my own hips, squeezing the muscles of my ass, trying to get some friction between my dick and cotton.

I need both hands to hold the Swarovskis steady, preventing me from reaching into my pants and slow-jacking my shaft. Besides, I decide, jerking off while watching strangers have sex crosses the line. I think. No matter though, because the burn of arousal that's humming through my system right now is eerily similar to the adrenaline rush I'd get from something like running through a live-fire training mission. And the rush alone is enough, for a guy like me.

Savoring the feeling and wanting to prolong it, I concentrate on the scene before me again, this time checking out Fuck Thing Two a little closer. His arms are covered in dark hair and I can see each tendon and muscle, outlined and defined by shadows. The V that runs from his narrow hips catches my eye as well, drawing my attention to the center of his body. Dayum! Two has some serious abs going on. Flexing and rolling as he thrusts his hips.

I readjust my grip, my palms starting to sweat, as I lean forward in the chair trying to get closer, even if it is only a few inches. God, the pounding Two is dishing out! The thought makes my mouth dry and I lick my lips, wetting the parched skin. Two is still going and it's making me squirm, the muscles of my ass squeezing and releasing, wanting some of that action.

One must be in heaven. I pan downward to torture myself some more by watching the look of bliss on his face. What I find is so unexpected I nearly drop the binoculars. One looks like he's in pain. And not the good kind. His face is pulled tight, forehead and eyes scrunched. He's grabbing at the floor, scraping along the hardwood like he's trying to pull himself away.

Now that the haze of lust has cleared a bit I notice some other things, too. One has a bruise on his cheekbone and his lips are moving. I stand and bring

the binoculars as close to the window as I can, my surveillance training kicking in as I try to figure out what he's saying. "Oh shit," I gasp out loud. *Stop.* He's saying *Stop.*

A sudden wave of nausea hits me as I realize I haven't been watching two men slake their passion. I've been watching a rape and getting turned on by it. Immediately I go into hero mode as I reach into my back pocket to grab my phone, one hand still on the binoculars.

I briefly look away to dial nine-one-one only to come to the realization that I have no idea what to report. I can't really say I was peeping into people's windows with my high-definition binoculars and happened to see two guys having sex and I watched long enough to realize it's not consensual. I don't even know the address.

I focus my eyes on the building again, and count the floors up from the sidewalk. Okay, so I know it's the gray building on the corner, sixteen floors up. I check in on One. Fuck! Two is holding him down now, hand between his shoulder blades, smashing his face to the floor.

Damn it! I need to do something. Frozen with indecision, I watch as Two reaches behind himself and then raises his arm, something long and black in his hand. When he brings the object down hard across One's back I turn and run towards the door, deciding to take matters into my own hands. I pause to set the Swarovskis on the hallway table and briefly consider grabbing Mildred before deciding against it.

I do, however, grab one of Jake's hoodies off the coat rack and slip my feet into a pair of tennis shoes as I run out the door. I take the stairs, leaping down two at a time until I get to the lobby. Luckily it's late at night and there aren't that many people around as I sprint out the building and down the sidewalk. I haven't given much thought to how I am going to get into the building, but luck is on my side when a young couple leaving holds the door open for me.

I walk quickly across the foyer, deciding to take the elevator and trying not to draw too much attention to myself. Plus I need the time to try and orient myself and figure out which apartment I need to look for. The only other person in the elevator with me gets off on the eleventh floor, so I pull the hood of my sweatshirt over my head as far as I can, concealing my face as much as possible.

The ding sounds, notifying me I've reached the sixteenth floor. I take a deep breath and step out into the hallway. Calculating the direction of my building and the position of the windows, I turn left and walk five doors down, turning to knock on the door. I'm prepared with a I'm-just-looking-for-my-friend kind of speech as I raise my knuckles to the door.

The door to my right suddenly opens, the sound startling me and making me jerk my hand back. Instinctually I turn towards the noise, just in time to see One step out into the hall. My heart is pounding and the rush of adrenaline is a welcome and familiar feeling. I tense my muscles, prepared to jump to One's rescue.

I catch a glimpse of Two, wearing nothing but a pair of gray slacks, standing just inside the doorway so that the only things I can see are muscular bronze arms crossed over a bare chest and a side profile of his shadowed face. He's taller than I expected, at least six foot two. But I'm a trained Navy SEAL and I know I can easily take him if I have to.

Poor One, he looks weak and shaky. I move to step towards him, offer him some help, when he turns back towards Two and wraps his arms around his waist before kissing his cheek. Two is like a statue, staring straight forward, not so much as a twitch.

My brain simply cannot process the scene before me. Two looks as though he's the one who's been violated and abused, while One is acting like a lovesick schoolgirl, clinging to him and practically purring. With another kiss on Two's cheek, One steps back and utters the most unfathomable words. "Thank you."

My mouth drops open in shock. Completely oblivious to my presence, One continues on. "I know you don't like to use it while fucking but I needed the crop to take me over the edge. Thank you, sir. You always give me exactly what I need."

Two simply nods and turns away, closing the door with a quiet snick. I have just enough sense to turn back towards the door in front of me before One starts walking my way. My mind is still reeling, trying to make sense of everything. I realize I must look like a serial killer standing here in a hood just staring at the navy blue door.

I slide my eyes towards One just in time to see him notice my presence. His step falters before he inconspicuously slides towards the far wall and increases his pace, practically jogging towards the elevator. So now I'm the bad guy here? Un-fucking-believable.

I take the next elevator back down and walk back to the apartment, my steps slow and heavy. I feel kind of numb, my body crashing hard from the rush. I flop down into the leather chair again, back to where it all began. My mind gradually comes back on line and I begin to process exactly what happened.

I jump up out of the chair and begin pacing. I want to scream. This is just like me. At least the pre-Navy me. Rushing off half-cocked, thinking I'm some kind of hero and seeing exactly what I needed to see to make that happen. I saw a little kinky sex and turned it into a life-or-death, do-or-die, situation, and once again did something that could have gotten me hurt or arrested.

I drag a shaky hand down my face. Things are getting out of control. I'm getting out of control. I need... *something*. An image of Two, all power and control, flashes across my mind. I shake my head, trying to dislodge the thought.

Before I can think about it, I grab the binoculars again. It only takes me a few seconds to locate Two's window. My mind no longer clouded by a combination of boredom and frenetic energy, I take everything in. The apartment is all clean lines and dark colors. Very masculine. Precise.

Movement catches my eye. Two is bending over, picking something up off the floor near where he and One had been going at it. There are actually several items laying around and spread across the nearby coffee table. I focus on them. Several dildos and a bottle of lube I recognize, but there are other things I don't. There is metal and lots of black. A little shiver of revulsion rolls through me.

Two comes into view once again, picking up more of the implements. I follow him this time to an ornate wardrobe against the wall. He swings the doors open, revealing neat rows of pegs and several long drawers. Methodically, from top left to bottom right, he puts things away before closing the doors and returning to the remaining items.

He picks up several dildos, all shapes and sizes, and heads towards the kitchen. A towel has been laid out across the island and he lays each item down, perfectly spaced from left to right. He picks up the first one and sprays it with something before using a rag to wipe it down. His movements are fluid and almost graceful as he picks up each one and cleans them.

I find myself watching his face. He really is gorgeous, and now that I know he's not a rapist I allow myself to appreciate it. His dark eyebrows and chiseled jaw give him a striking appearance, the cleft chin driving it home. Something about his eyes is off though. He looks almost haunted. Not what I would expect after a successful fuck session.

One had said he got exactly what he needed from Two, but I get the feeling the reverse is not true. I watch a little while longer. Two is methodical in his movements and I recognize a piece of myself there. I can see he uses routines and obsessive compulsiveness to protect himself. The question is from what. I lower the binoculars and tell myself it's none of my business.

The day suddenly catches up to me and exhaustion hits me like a ton of bricks. I head towards my bedroom, wanting to put the entire day, all my stress and uncertainty, to rest. As the Recruit Division Commander informed me on my first day in the United States Navy, "The only easy day is yesterday." I hope that's true come morning.

God, I feel like such an ass! I can't believe I let myself get so carried away last night, running into that building like some kind of vigilante. The walls I've built around myself, carefully put together out of routine tasks and physical endurance, are starting to crack. I feel twitchy and on the edge. I try to concentrate on the feel of my feet slapping the pavement as I take my early morning run through Central Park. I've got three miles behind me and yet I still feel like I'm being chased. By life. By myself. By *him*.

As I expected, even though I'd followed my routine and exhausted myself, I slept like complete shit last night. I tossed and turned, the physical manifestation of my mind's inability to simply shut the fuck off. On that fuzzy ledge between awake and asleep, thoughts of Navy life, miniature dogs with giant tongues, and hot-ass motherfuckers with sweat-slicked abs swirled

around in my head right up until my alarm went off. I could have just hit snooze and tried to get some more rest, but the need to keep on task yanked me up and out of bed.

The pounding song on my iPod fades out and is replaced by a recording of one of the many cadence calls I've become accustomed to. It's just what I need to focus myself on the run. I call it out in my head as I stretch my legs to max capacity.

*Down in the ocean,
down in the grimy sea
There's a Great White Shark,
he's a lookin' at me.*

*He said 'Hey there SEAL,
I'm the King of the Sea'
'And if you want to get by,
you gotta get through me.'*

*The point man laughed,
as he drew his knife.
He said 'Hey there Sharky,
you must be tired of life.'*

I smile, the words of the cadence bringing back feelings of bravado. We SEALs *are* pretty badass, I think to myself. Makes me wonder why this little situation is freaking me out so badly. I've parachuted out of airplanes in the pitch black of night and been grazed by bullets while sprinting across sandy beaches. I should not feel such choking anxiety over watching a little rough sex.

Another mile gone and I'm not any closer to an answer. It's not like anyone knows what I saw or that I went running off looking like I was going to rob a convenience store. Even if I did run into One or Two, they probably wouldn't be able to recognize me.

Lost in my thoughts and worrying about putting one foot in front of the other, I nearly get pummeled when a big barrel-chested guy comes crashing across my path. I stumble a few steps and turn to give the asshole a lesson in

profanity, but before I can utter my first four-letter word another guy tackles him face first into the ground.

I quickly recognize the dark blue police uniform and stop to watch, thrilled to have an unexpected adventure. The officer has Mr. Criminal pinned down, a knee between his shoulder blades, as he pulls his arms back. The glint of cold steel catches my eye and apparently my nipples feel the chill as well because they're all pebbled and tingly now. I hear the ratcheting sound of the handcuffs being tightened and it makes my cock twitch.

Light bulb. Well, what do you know, I'm not embarrassed or disgusted by handcuffs and rough play. I'm turned on by it! I watch the scene before me a little longer, as the cop pulls Mr. Criminal to his feet and begins shoving him back down the path. Another officer meets up with them and back pats are given between the policemen. There's power and camaraderie there. And I want it, desperately.

I know I look ridiculous standing here, gawking, so I force myself to turn the opposite way and continue my run. It only takes me a minute to decide I don't want to be a cop. If I wanted to worry about being shot in the back because my coworkers don't appreciate the fact that I like dick I would have stayed in the Navy.

Having watched Fuck Thing One and Fuck Thing Two last night though, I know there's an alternative. I can't say I'm very knowledgeable when it comes to the whole bondage and domination lifestyle but I know it exists, and I absolutely plan to find out everything there is to know about it.

Looks like I've got myself a task to complete, I tell myself; but not wanting to break routine, I finish the ten-mile circuit. So maybe I got back to the apartment fifteen minutes earlier than usual. I let it slide. I may, after all, have discovered an answer to my problems.

Using my recent epiphany as an excuse once again, I rush through my shower and breakfast. I even skip making my bed and doing the dishes. Jake is already gone for the day, so I bring my laptop into the living room, not worried about anyone seeing the topic of my search.

What is the topic of my search, I wonder. Kinky sex? I decide that's not it. There's more to it than that. I can feel it. I sit on the sofa with the computer on

the coffee table in front of me, a Google search box pulled up and my fingers hovering over the keys. I decide to start simple, and type 'bondage' in the box. I click on the little magnifying glass and hold my breath.

The first site listed is a Wiki on BDSM. Figuring that was a safe bet for starters, I click on the link. Once I get past the pictures of men and women in rope and gags and such, I can concentrate on what is actually written.

When I finish reading the last paragraph, I look at the time in the corner of my screen. Over three hours have gone by. That's the thing with using Wikipedia; clicking on all the embedded links can be a little bit like falling down a rabbit hole. I learned a lot though, about the BDSM lifestyle and about my own proclivities. I now know that I would be very interested in rope bondage, am absolutely ordering some leather gear and would definitely not be interested in any kind of public display.

I also know, with absolute certainty, that this is what I want. I need to be a Dom. Thanks to the beauty of the internet I'm now familiar with the term. Self-control being one of the key factors of a good Dom. It's perfect for me. A reason to keep the control and structure I so desperately need in place. And I get laid in the process. Score another one for me!

Feeling happier and more enthusiastic than I've been in months, I stand and stretch, cracking my back. I walk towards the kitchen but stop as I pass the big leather chair, still turned towards the windows. My binoculars are sitting on the floor, right where I left them last night after watching Two. I pick them up and stand in front of the window. I have the binoculars to my eyes before I even think about what I'm doing.

I'm sure his apartment is empty right now, but I'm drawn to look. Not a single thing is out of place. The line of dildos and the towel from last night are gone. There are no dishes in the sink or food sitting on the counter. I pan to the right, my eyes drawn to the gothic cabinet. I can name many of the items tucked away there now, thanks to the internet.

The coffee table catches my eye next. Nothing there now but a pristine white decorative bowl, made of something like antlers or coral. Looking around, you would never guess at what had been going down in that room less than twenty-four hours ago. A slideshow of images flashed behind my eyes.

One's arched back and Two's long fingers pressing into the thick flesh of his hips. Two's thrusts, hard and unforgiving.

My stomach growls, cutting off my line of thought before it brings *other* bodily needs to the forefront. I toss together an arugula salad for lunch, something simple that doesn't require a lot of concentration to make, allowing me freedom to think about my next steps.

A BDSM club is an obvious place to begin. I wonder if Two has a favorite one. I figure I should probably find some good leather-and-whips kind of porn to watch at home as well. I should look closely at Two's shelves to see if he has any videos there. My thoughts continue along the same lines as I eat. When I'm done, I force myself to put everything away and wash the two sets of dishes in the sink.

What I really want to do is look into Two's apartment some more, but I know I need to not let myself get too far off task. I go to my bedroom and finally make my bed, wondering what Two's bed looks like. I bet it has a sturdy headboard with places to tie ropes or clip handcuffs.

I am thinking about Two a lot I realize. Obviously I'm turning the guy into some kind of Dom role model. I wish there was a good way for me to make contact with him, maybe ask his advice. The answer comes to me as I'm brushing my teeth, scrubbing away any leftover bits of green.

I look in the mirror, making eye contact with myself. "I need an apartment in that building," I utter. I spit and rinse before heading back to the living room and the laptop. I've got a new objective now. And one thing about SEALS, we love the fuck out of a new mission.

I unlock the apartment door and walk into the darkness. Jake probably wouldn't be home tonight. Good for him. The guy works too hard and definitely deserves a fun night out at the clubs once in a while. I throw my keys on the table in the entryway and walk towards my room. The moon is shining brightly through the floor to ceiling windows and there's no need for me to turn on a light to guide my way.

I'm coming home from a club as well, but not the kind of club I imagine Jake is enjoying. Sitting on the bed, I remove my heavy black boots and stand

to take off my pants. A sigh escapes as the black leather is peeled down, cool air hitting my damp sweat-slicked skin. I love these pants, but they definitely make me hot. In all kinds of ways, I snicker to myself.

It's been three weeks since I decided the BDSM lifestyle was the answer to my post-Navy derailment. The D part in particular, providing me with the water I need to fight the flames of my ADHD. It's a battle I wage every single day in the war to control my impulsive and reckless urges. My parents didn't 'believe' in medication. I joined the Navy at eighteen, terrified of what I would continue to do on my own without some sort of control, and it literally saved my life. Now that I'm just a regular civilian, I desperately need a way to keep myself under lock and key.

I've been studying, devouring every piece of information I could find online about the lifestyle. I've chatted with others online and visited all of my local sex shops, scoping out the various tools and gear. Finally feeling ready to put myself out there and put all my newfound knowledge to the test, I put on my black leather pants and a tight charcoal gray shirt, and went to Pleas & Thanx, a local gay fetish club.

The club had various rooms, like movie sets, all with only three walls so that people could watch what was going on within. There was a classroom, a medical facility, something that looked like an interrogation room out of a *Law & Order* episode, and a room with bales of straw and saddles that, quite frankly, frightens me a bit. Despite having watched an insane amount of kink porn in the past weeks, I still feel off kilter, like I don't belong.

I guess having some experience will make me feel less like a poser. Only one way to get it, I thought, so I wandered around, taking it all in, making mental notes and trying to find that moment, the one where I would initiate contact and take action. It never came.

A few guys had approached me and polite hey-how-are-ya conversation was made, but I just wasn't feeling it. I chalked it up to first time jitters but doubt niggled at me as I walked home. What was I doing wrong? I know, *know*, this is right for me and I want it so fucking bad I practically vibrate with wanting.

I found myself, yet again, thinking of Two as I showered away the night. Several times I had caught myself searching for him at the club tonight. In the

days since ‘the hoodie incident’ as I call it, I’ve peeked in on him a few times, but I’ve been trying real hard not to cross the creepy-stalker line. I just need some guidance. I make it a goal to find a way to contact him when I move in on the twenty-second floor of his building in two weeks. I’m sure I can find him by the mailboxes or in the elevator or something.

Dried off and dressed, clothes sorted and laid out, Mildred given some love and attention and it was time for my routine watch. I may have to ask Jake if I can buy his leather chair because I’m pretty sure this one is molded to fit my ass perfectly by now.

It’s pretty late so there’s not much going on out there. The blue glow of televisions makes an odd checkered pattern across the neighboring building’s sides. Down on the street a rather tall woman is walking in her open-toed stilettos, long dark red hair blown behind her by the breeze. She’s wearing an obscenely short skirt and tight deep-cut blouse. On first glance I thought she was a hooker, but the man with her, tall, dark and handsome, was looking at her with entirely too much affection to be a john. They look like tourists actually, heading back to their hotel after a night on the town.

Watching the infatuated couple makes me feel a bit maudlin. I unconsciously sweep my gaze to the gray building, sixteenth floor. I wonder if Two is alone tonight, but quickly see that he’s not. The apartment is completely lit and Two steps into view, eliciting a quiet gasp from my throat.

He’s fully dressed. The dark slacks, emerald green button-down shirt and dark patterned tie make him look like he’s at a board meeting rather than walking across his living room with a flogger dangling from his hand. I slowly turn my head, binoculars glued to my eyes, to watch him swagger across the room.

I can see One now. He’s kneeling on the floor, facing east with his hands cuffed or tied behind his back. Two paces behind him, rigid and yet somehow fluid at the same time, lightly slapping the strands of the flogger against his own thigh. He looks completely in control. So powerful.

Before I can think about what I’m doing, I slide off the chair onto my knees, eyes transfixed on Two. The hairs on the back of my neck are up and a shiver rolls down my spine. When he stops, inches from One’s shoulder,

commanding all of his personal space, and drags the knotted ends of the flogger across his skin I swear I can feel it ghost across my own.

Shaken by my reaction I nearly drop the Swarovskis, my hands quivering. I carefully sit them on the floor and run a hand over my face. What the fuck? My heart is racing and my breath comes in short erratic gulps. I cup my cock with my other hand. Rock. Fucking. Hard.

I leap to my feet and rush out of the room, putting as much distance between me and Two as possible. I splash cold water over my face in the bathroom. It's been a long night, I tell myself, and I am just exhausted and overwhelmed by everything that happened. I turn off the light and head to bed, burying myself under the covers.

Of course this is the time when my brain decides to go into overdrive. A half an hour of tossing and turning and I throw my covers off. Every nerve ending in my body is strung tight, like a guitar string on the verge of snapping. And worst of all, my fucking dick is standing straight up, pre-come leaking from the tip and soaking through my pants.

Fine. Fuck you brain. I'll do what you want, follow this thread until I've unraveled the problem. I throw off the blanket and push my pajama bottoms down and lie there, legs splayed and arms thrown out. I imagine cuffs around my wrists and ankles, holding me open, giving Two complete access to anything he wants. I can feel a warm drop of liquid roll across my abs and down my side.

My body clearly knows what it wants. I may not understand it but it's time for my mind to figure it out as well. I close my eyes and relax my body. A scene begins to paint itself on the back of my eyelids.

My hand on a silver door knob, turning it to the right and pushing open the heavy blue door. I step into Two's home. The lights are bright and I can see a row of clear glass windows ahead. I feel exposed and vulnerable as I walk further into the apartment, towards the big black chair that's turned towards the window, facing the night sky.

Two is sitting in the chair, the back of his head and swell of his shoulders visible. He doesn't move or acknowledge my presence as I walk around to face him. He's looking straight ahead, one hand resting along the arm of the chair

and the other holding a tumbler of amber-colored liquid. His right ankle rests on his muscular thigh, exposing his cloth-covered groin.

I move directly into the path of his gaze. His eyes travel the length of my body as he sips from his glass. My hands come up to the collar of my shirt. I realize I'm wearing my Navy dress whites, showing him exactly who and what I am, offering him everything.

Slowly I unbutton my shirt and remove it. I carefully fold it and place it on the coffee table, knowing that's what he would want. My shoes, socks, pants and briefs follow. The whole time Two is simply watching, occasionally sipping his drink.

I take a step forward and divert my eyes downward, not missing the bulge of Two's cock behind the zipper of his pants. It's a heady feeling, knowing I did that to him simply by undressing. Mere inches separate me from him as I drop to my knees, almost as if I were melting.

I can feel the hard unforgiving floor beneath my knees, a sensation I can focus on as I wait for him to take what he wants from me. I don't move. I don't fidget or twitch or even so much as sigh, held there by his absolute power over me.

In that moment I can finally see the difference between us, what makes him a Dominant and me... I am a submissive. I didn't understand that before. Two, he wields the belt. It's an extension of himself and he controls everything about it. It's what he was created to do and what makes him whole. Me, I want to feel the belt wrap around me, because that squeeze is what makes it possible for me to breathe without fear of my lungs bursting.

I can't crack the belt and wear it at the same time; and that's why here, on my knees offering up everything to somebody else's control, all the pieces finally fall into place. I could sit here forever, held in place by Two's will and my deep-seated desire to please him. It's my fantasy though, so Two doesn't make me wait long.

He sets his drink down on the small table next to the chair and leans forward. He places a finger under my chin and forces my head up, our eyes meeting. "You want to be mine?" he asks, pinching my nipple between his fingers and twisting hard to emphasize his words.

The harsh, possessive touch makes my nerve endings scream and my cock lengthen and fill. "Yes, Sir," I croak, my sandpaper tongue scraping against the words.

Two sits back, and the breath I'm holding takes the opportunity to escape. So many sensations, threatening to drown me. My nipple throbs and I can feel the weight of my cock and balls hanging heavily between my legs, gravity tugging on them like a lover.

"You're going to have to prove it to me," he says as something cold and smooth wraps around my neck, adding another layer and bringing my attention back above my waist. I want to look down, reach up and touch it or ask about it, but I don't. My eyes, my fingers, not even my voice belong to me. I would rip out my fucking heart and hand it to him on a platter just to feel this way for the rest of my life. Free. I feel so goddamned free!

Two relaxes back into the chair, taking a moment to admire his work before reaching down along the cushion and pulling up a long silver chain, the sound of the metal unfurling like a musical waterfall. He reaches forward and clips one end of it to the thing around my neck before standing. His cloth covered dick is mere centimeters from my mouth and I want so badly to take him in and show him how long a Navy SEAL can hold his breath. Decisions. Choices. They don't belong to me any more either.

Two steps to the side and tugs on the chain. "On your hands and knees," he says. I turn towards him and drop my hands to the floor, rushing to obey, driven to prove myself. Two's shoes are black leather with sophisticated points at the toe. I admit to myself that I would lick them if he told me to. I would go that far.

Something cold and wet plops between my shoulder blades and I jerk, unprepared for it and unable to control my reaction. It's moving now, sliding down my spine and leaving a trail of goose bumps. It's Two's glass, I realize, and he's sliding it into the valley of my lower back and up the mound of my ass. At the tip of my ass crack he pushes a little, spreading my cheeks just enough for a drip of cool liquid to slide between before reversing direction, settling the weight of the glass in the middle of my back.

Another tug, on what's essentially a leash, pulling me forward. "Come," Two commands and I swear I just might but not the way he wants me to. I slide

my hand and the opposite knee forward as I begin to move. The glass shifts and I flatten my back to keep it from sliding off. Steadily I follow Two, eyes focused on the heels of his shoes as he leads me where he wants me to go.

I'm crawling on the floor, wearing a collar and leash, I think to myself. But I don't feel like an animal or anything less than the man I am. I don't feel demeaned or forced. I've been given directions and a task to complete and I do it to the best of my ability because I want to. I want to make Two proud. I want to make myself proud.

Two comes to a stop and I follow suit. We're in the kitchen. I recognize the cherry cabinets. The weight on my back is gone and I can see Two moving about for a few seconds before he turns back towards the living room, confident in the fact that I'll follow, with or without the presence of the leash.

We stop by the couch and he orders me to kneel. He walks behind me and I can feel the release of pressure as he removes the chain from my collar. His footsteps echo on the wood floors as he walks away. I hear a latch click and the squeak of hinges. I know what he's doing and my cock jerks.

Two sits on the couch to my left and places several items on the coffee table. "Have you ever been spanked," he asks me.

I have to swallow before I can respond. "No, Sir."

"Do you want to be?"

"Do you like doing it, Sir?" I flinch as I realize I didn't answer a direct question but this feels important. I want to know. I risk looking at him, knowing I'm breaking protocol but I need to see his face.

I'm surprised to see that he actually has to think about it before he answers, "I do."

"Then, yes, I would like to try it, Sir."

When he looks at me this time, his eyes are no longer the distant cold I've seen in the past. They shine, pleased with my answer, and it makes me feel so powerful. He orders me to lay across his lap, my dick hanging between his open thighs and not getting any of the friction it so desperately craves.

I barely feel the strokes of the leather against my skin, still flying high with the knowledge that I can control Two this way. When he's finished I can feel

the tingling heat spread across my skin. Two's hand is gentle as it glides down my back and over my ass. His voice seems almost reverent when he whispers, "So beautiful."

Louder now he tells me, "On your knees again."

I scramble off his lap, less graceful than I want to be, and kneel on the floor.

He stands and orders, "Give me your hand." Placing it against the zipper of his slacks, he grinds his hard cock into my palm. "See what you do to me," he says, grabbing a handful of my hair with his other hand and jerking my head back. "Spread your legs and sit back on your heels. I want you to feel what I've done to you while I use you."

He grabs another item from the table. I've seen ring gags being used, but the thought of actually experiencing it myself excites me. "Open," he orders and I drop my jaw, stretching my mouth as wide as it can go. It's still not enough and the pressure against my lips and jaw is almost more than I can bear as he inserts the gag, locking my mouth open.

He fastens it behind my head and steps back. His eyes are like a mirror as he gazes down at me because I can see myself reflected in them, in the heat and desire there. His hands go to the button of his pants and his nimble fingers slowly slide the button through the hole before lowering his zipper.

His briefs are deep purple. That's the last thought I have before everything is replaced by Two's cock. It's thick and dark and uncut. I want to wrap my lips around it and swallow it down and for a second I hate the fucking ring gag with an absolute passion. But then I remember it's not my choice, not my pleasure, it's his, and the building pressure of anger and frustration is relieved.

Two grabs a handful of hair again, his other hand at the base of his cock pulling back his foreskin and guiding it towards my open mouth. "I'm gonna fuck your throat. Gonna feel it squeeze my cock and make me come down your throat."

I run my tongue along his length as he slowly pushes in through the ring of the gag. He tastes like espresso. I have to fight the feeling of panic when the

crown first pushes down into the tunnel of my throat, blocking my airway. This is Two, I tell myself. He's in control and he'll take care of me.

I relax then, giving Two my trust as he thrusts into my mouth over and over. He fucks my throat raw before coming with a moan so deep I feel it vibrate in my balls. Tears are streaming down my face. Not from pain or humiliation but from joy. I brought him to the line between heaven and earth and showed him the angels.

Two wipes the tears from my cheek with his thumb and looks me dead in the eye. "You're mine now, Calvin. Mine."

My eyes fly open and for a moment I forget that I am actually lying on my bed in my brother's apartment. Holy shit! Holy fucking shit! My heart is racing yet my mind is absolutely still. My mission is crystal clear. I've already done the recon. I'll be setting up a base of operations in two weeks. And then it will be time to take action, focusing on my objective. And if there's one thing that's for absolute fucking certain about a United States Navy SEAL, we complete our mission or die trying.

THE END

Author Bio

Gina A. Rogers is an Amazon living in South Central Pennsylvania where she grew up, and will never be allowed to forget she once sported a mullet. She has mild OCD issues with regards to symmetry and reading order and is obsessed with the letter V. She loves nerds and men who wield swords (pun intended), especially while wearing skirts of the tartan or even leather variety. Although she loves reading dark and tragic stories, the ones that play out in her head and find their way to paper are fun, snarky and always end happily ever after!

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

FROM DON TO DOM

By Naaju Rorrete

Photo Description

Against the backdrop of a plain, white brick wall, a man with short dark hair sits on a modern sofa, flanked by two naked younger men. He wears a black dress shirt and slacks, and short shiny black boots. The curly-haired young man on the right lies on his side, knees tucked up, and has his head in the man's lap, his right hand tucked under the man's thigh, fingers curling up. On the left, the other young man leans on one elbow to look at the camera, leaning back against the man's chest.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name is fifth-generation Sicilian, passed down from father to son. Just like my profession. Mob boss with the Cosa Nostra. These are my boys. The one to my right is strong-willed and needs a firm hand. The one to my left is damaged and fragile, and requires more patience than I have most days. They have each other, which is good because we're at war with a rival family, and my time to devote to them is not enough, never enough. I fear one or both will become a target. A way to hurt me where I live, where I love and from which I'd never recover.

Sincerely,

Moderaterix Lori

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: M/M/M, BDSM, twink, hurt/comfort, mafia, D/s

Content warnings: some violence

Word count: 28,023

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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FROM DON TO DOM

By Naaju Rorrete

CHAPTER 1

The air reeked of danger. More than a smell, it was the sensation of knowing something critical was about to happen. Giancarlo had felt this eerie excitement in the past, and it always resulted in a dramatic milestone. Like that day when he lost so many loved ones to violence. He'd spent today trying to ignore the unwelcome feeling. What his grandmother called intuition, Giancarlo believed was only his unconscious mind warning him about something he already knew that could result in a disaster.

In his line of work, violence and death were the norm, but he had never gotten used to it. He'd struggled for the last decade to transmute most of his family's businesses into legit ones. But even if he succeeded, there were some associates who preferred the old ways. On his behalf, he counted on the support that mattered the most. Ernesto Montefiore, Giancarlo's grandfather was the official boss of the Condottieri family, and although Giancarlo considered himself only a lieutenant, most thought of him as the acting boss. Even before he had been made, some people began calling him the Don. He'd quickly corrected them, because his grandfather was alive and they didn't rule a monarchy. However, power inspired respect, and money, by all means, translated into power. And money was something Giancarlo knew how to produce.

Today, unlike other times, it wasn't his life on the line, but his sanity—although his life could follow for sure.

He should have never agreed to meet Braulio Santorno, but the boy sounded so distraught that Giancarlo couldn't refuse to see him.

Now, he waited in a mall parking lot for the right moment to let Braulio into his car without being seen. They usually took this type of precautions, but today, thanks to his hunch, more than ever.

Reclining on the backseat of the luxury car, Giancarlo held two cell phones: his personal one with which he stayed connected to his cousin, Nico, who was inside the mall executing their little scheme. And a prepaid untraceable phone he mostly used to talk with Braulio.

In the driver's seat, Nico's brother, Luciano, waited for orders. They were Montefiore too, Giancarlo's cousins. While at work, they never behaved like family, but employees—a matter of respect.

“Braulio, get closer to the exit that leads to the parking lot, but don't come this way yet.” Giancarlo instructed, and waited for Braulio's agreement before asking, “Nico, is he being followed?”

The answer came fast. “Yeah. Two guys I'd seen with Santorno in the past.”

Giancarlo uttered a curse. “Don't let them see you. Go create a distraction, we need to give Braulio a few seconds to get lost.”

“Sure, boss.” The cousins always referred to him as *boss* or *sir*.

A few minutes passed before he heard again from Nico. “I met two girls who assured me they're great screamers. They're going to pretend someone snatched their iPhone and run after the thief in the opposite direction to the parking lot exit.” He paused and faked a cough. “Boss, you owe me two hundred.”

“What?”

“They're good screamers.” Giancarlo almost could see Nico's witty expression.

“And where is your charm? I thought you didn't need to pay for it.”

“Well, my charm needs time to develop, and we needed a quick motivator. I'm sure even those goons are going to look at these girls, at least for a few seconds. Who knows, they might feel like rescuing them.”

“All right, I'll see you get your cash back,” Giancarlo conceded.

“Don't worry, I'll write it as a work expense to see Claudio flip.”

Claudio Albano was his right hand and much more. For some reason, Claudio's stoic attitude inspired everybody to provoke him, simply to see him lose his cool. Claudio, Luciano and Nico were Giancarlo's personal crew, the men he trusted with everything, including his deepest secrets.

Nico was talking again. "Boss, we're ready to go in sixty seconds."

"Thanks, Nico. Meet us at the sidewalk by the main door." Giancarlo ended the communication with his cousin, and put all his attention to getting the boy to do his part. "Braulio, are you carrying anything?"

"Yep, my backpack and my cell."

"Which is not an iPhone, right?"

"No, Dad would never get me one of those."

"Cool. Listen, turn off your cell and put it into the backpack. Next, hang it on your back, and when you hear girls screaming, ignore the commotion because that is part of Nico's plan, and start walking—no running—towards the parking lot exit. We're waiting for you outside the second level door."

After Giancarlo ended the call, Luciano got out of the car and stood next to the passenger's door, holding it open. Both Nico and Luciano often drove and protected his grandfather around town, and in the event that Santorno accessed the mall's security cameras, they could say that it had been the Don waiting for Braulio. Getting his grandfather to agree and help would take a lot of convincing, but it was a possibility that Giancarlo kept as his plan B.

Anything but getting Giancarlo directly involved. He knew that Santorno would blame him for everything his son had done within the last five years, including Braulio being gay. When all Giancarlo ever did was to offer his friendship and support to an abused teenager. Braulio had been born that way, whether the boy's father accepted it or not. Besides, Santorno ignoring their friendship had worked to their advantage, because Giancarlo had become a secret refuge for those times when Braulio couldn't take any more abuse at home.

He sighed with relief when he saw Braulio walking out of the mall's exit and getting into the car. As soon as Luciano got into the driver's seat, they were out on the street.

"Thanks so much for helping me." Braulio said while fussing with the seatbelt.

Giancarlo smiled at him. "No problem."

They stopped long enough for Nico to get into the front seat. "Hey, dude. Nice to see you." Nico's friendly smile told Giancarlo that he enjoyed these crazy runs, which were so different from the dangerous stuff they'd done in the past. Braulio smiled back at him and thanked him again.

The tinted windows of the car allowed enough light for Giancarlo to see Braulio's bruised face in spite of the sunglasses he wore. Giancarlo bet those hid a black eye. Fury ran through him, and he wanted to beat Fabian Santorno to a pulp. One day he would do it, that was a promise.

The bastard had raised Braulio in a cocoon, and thought he had the right of life and death over his only child. Who was already a grown-up man, but because of the way he was treated all his life, still behaved like a teenager most of the time.

When Giancarlo saw Braulio's hurt face, with his brave expression, he felt like holding him in his arms and assuring the boy that he would be safe, protected. Giancarlo had promised to be there for Braulio if he ever needed support, and he always honored his promises.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

For Giancarlo it was getting harder to resist the desire to touch the young man in front of the others. His cousins sort of knew the type of relationship he had with Braulio, but Giancarlo was always careful not to express any feelings in public. His logic was that if he got in the habit of hugging and kissing Braulio in front of those he trusted, he might do the same carelessly in public by impulse, and he couldn't let that happen.

“Thanks for coming. You have no idea how much this means to me.” Braulio extended an arm across the seat and grabbed Giancarlo’s hand as if it were a lifesaver. “I need you more than ever. If you weren’t here for me I don’t know what I would do.”

They held hands in silence for a few seconds, and then Giancarlo said, “You worried me with what you said over the phone. What’s wrong, Braulio?”

“I wanted to say good-bye in case I don’t make it past next week.”

“What? Wait, it doesn’t matter what it is, please don’t even think about killing yourself. I’ll help you with anything you need, you know that you count with me, right?”

Braulio nodded and the short bangs of his black hair followed the movement. “Yes. Giancarlo, I would never commit suicide. If you ever hear I did, you will know I was murdered.”

“Then, what are we talking about?”

“My dad again.”

“Well, that’s nothing new.”

“This time is the real thing because I told him the truth.”

“You came out to him?” Giancarlo asked, thinking, *Are you out of your mind?*

“I had to tell him, I couldn’t keep it inside anymore.” It was all Braulio said for a while.

That explained the bruises on his face—something that Giancarlo had seen more times than he wanted to recall and that he had never got used to. He sent caution to the wind and undid the seatbelt that separated them and pulled Braulio closer. “Come here.” After hesitating an instant the younger man accepted the embrace. Giancarlo could feel Braulio trembling and wished he could transfer some of his strength to him.

“Well, if your face is any indication of how he reacted, I guess I don’t need to hear the details.”

“It was worse than other times. Before he suspected it, now he knows. He said that if I let anybody else know, he will kill me, and if I don’t do as he says, he will kill me, that if I get involved with another man, he will... well, I’m dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Giancarlo said. “For now, you have to keep a low profile and do what he says, until I can find a solution.”

“Speaking of solutions, Dad told me that he would give me one last chance to make things right. If I go to this place and get cured, he will forgive me.” Braulio handed him a brochure. Giancarlo put the reading lights on to read the contents. “Reparative therapy? But that doesn’t work. I mean, do you think it will work with you?”

“No. That’s why I ran away.” A sad smile curved his lips. “I guess I should have done it years ago.”

“Better late than never. The only problem is, as soon as he realizes you’re not coming back, he will go insane.”

“I know, but I can’t let them put me thru an ex-gay camp.”

“Is that bad? I’m sorry, I heard of those places, but I have no idea how they work.”

“I did some research online, and what I learned repulses me.” Braulio added.

Giancarlo continued to hold him in silence until they arrived at the building where he had his offices, and an apartment at which he stayed sometimes. He still lived with his grandparents, because after losing his parents, he wanted to spend all the time he could with his old ones before they were gone too.

The car entered the underground garage, and this time Giancarlo helped Braulio out of the vehicle without any concern because he owned the whole building and controlled the security cameras. They rode an elevator all the way to the penthouse, and after they walked into the apartment, Braulio stood still looking at the Philadelphia skyline for a few seconds. Then he turned around and faced Giancarlo. “I won’t do like you. I won’t deny it, and if I find someone to love, I will love that person proudly.” Braulio resented that

Giancarlo refused to deepen their friendship into anything else for fear of being revealed as gay.

“Braulio, you have no idea of what you’re saying. In our world, this is the way things are. You keep this type of secret to yourself, and you don’t come out of the damn closet unless you have a death wish.”

“I know, you told me that years ago.”

Yes, Giancarlo had guessed the boy’s dilemma, and in an act of sympathy confessed his own secret and offered his friendship. Giancarlo told Braulio to call him if he ever felt desperate and at the end of his rope. Giancarlo never imagined that in the process he would lose his own heart to this tender man.

“I think that the best solution is that you move out west. I’ll help you.”

Braulio crossed the room and hugged him, being about a foot shorter, his head ended where Giancarlo’s chin started. “No. I want to be with you. What’s the point of being happy and free in San Francisco if I’m alone?”

Giancarlo lowered himself to a face-to-face position. “With your looks you won’t be alone for long.”

“We’d been through this before. I’m not leaving you. I’ll wait until you make up your mind.”

Giancarlo separated himself slowly from him and asked, “Do you know what today is?”

Braulio smiled widely. “Sure. I could have waited until Monday to run away, but I had to spend your birthday with you.”

“I didn’t know I was going to see you, and I have plans with my grandparents.” Braulio’s disappointed face moved him to add, “But after they go to sleep, I’ll do my best to come back here.”

Happiness lit up Braulio’s face again. It was so simple to make him happy, and sometimes Giancarlo hated himself for not giving the boy what he wanted. Like this moment when he had to bring him back to reality.

“Braulio, I’m thirty years old today, and I already decided how I’m going to spend the rest of my life.”

“In the damn closet, right? Did you patent the thing or what?” Fury distorted Braulio’s handsome face. His olive skin-tone showed off blue eyes under thick eyebrows—the most dominant feature of his face.

Giancarlo could lose himself in those eyes for hours, but now, he evaded them and sat on one of the sofas, explaining, “If you were anybody else it should be harder to understand my position, but you know what it means to be out for me. It’s a death sentence.”

“No. It’s playing along to the prejudices and macho ways of others. You’ve accomplished so much! Even Dad praised you, he can’t believe you got the organization back into Atlantic City, and what you accomplished in Philly is awesome.”

And that, coming from Fabian Santorno, had some weight. The man was short-tempered, and the bloodiest of all the underbosses, but Ernesto Montefiore kept him around because Santorno was also the one who brought in the most cash from their long list of illicit enterprises. That was before Giancarlo got the Family back into legal gambling in the casinos, though.

Giancarlo shook his head. “My success makes me more vulnerable. Don’t you see it? If I am known as gay, those who want to take over our territory will use it as an excuse to kill me. It’s happened before.”

“That was in the past.” Braulio said.

“We live in the fucking past, Braulio. Do you remember when the associates visited your father? They behaved like we are still in the feudal era. And with my grandfather, it’s even worse.”

Braulio had to agree with that. “It’s a matter of respect.”

“There you have it.” Giancarlo sighed deeply, opening his arms wide, and told him in a kinder manner, “You know your way around here, relax, take it easy and decide where you want to move to.”

Braulio remained silent and turned his back to him again, so Giancarlo added, “You’re secure here. Nico and Luciano will be doing the rounds tonight all over the city, but the guys downstairs are looking out for you. If you need

anything, call me using the land line.” When Braulio didn’t move, he insisted, “If you don’t want to call me, then call Nico.”

With those words, he walked towards the door. In an unanticipated act, Braulio turned around and ran to him, lifted himself up on tiptoe and pulled Giancarlo’s head down to kiss him briefly on the lips, begging, “Forgive me. We’ve discussed this so many times, and I still don’t get it.”

“No, you forgive me for not being what you need.” With great effort Giancarlo left Braulio there alone, but his grandparents were waiting on him for dinner. Sadly, he couldn’t take Braulio, not even as a friend, because Santorno might learn they were together and all hell would break loose.

“Please come back tonight, I’ll have a surprise for you.” Braulio said.

CHAPTER 2

It was supposed to be a quiet evening in the company of his grandparents. Giancarlo had good reasons to decline a huge celebration of his thirtieth birthday. He'd learned his lesson years before—when the whole family was together, they kept asking questions about when he was going to marry and have children of his own. Like they didn't reproduce fast enough, they needed his progeny running around, too. It was a theme he refused to discuss at all costs, but family is family and his were nosy by nature—shamelessly speculative, to be exact.

The more they questioned him, the more inclined he felt to stand up and shout out that he wasn't dating any woman because he liked men, and since they wouldn't approve of a same-sex marriage, he wasn't going to marry at all. He'd fantasized about their scandalized expressions after hearing such a statement, but knowing that his grandfather would be hurt rather than shocked, he avoided the temptation.

He tried to pay attention to the documentary his grandparents were watching while he sat there with them eating nuts and sipping wine. Ernesto and Carmela Montefiore had celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary a few months ago, and they were not only Giancarlo's favorite people in the world, they were also living proof that love existed. Maybe that was why he liked to spend time with them.

He could have been at any of the clubs or casinos his family owned, but when one's job is managing entertainment and gaming offerings of all types, the last place he desired to be on a birthday was a public one. Although the most important reason to spend the night with his grandparents was that there was nobody else to share the night with, or that the person he preferred was out of the question. So this was the closest to a homey kind of night he would ever have.

"Giancarlo, can you get another bottle?" His grandfather extended the empty Prosecco bottle and Giancarlo took it as his grandmother also stood.

"Let me get it, today is your birthday," she offered.

The younger one shook his head. "I'm getting more cheesecake, too, do you any of you want some?" Instead of a birthday cake he had asked her for the biggest caramel macchiato cheesecake she could bake, and Giancarlo had no intention of sharing it with anybody else but them. His grandfather refused, but his grandma walked alongside him toward the kitchen.

"Giancarlo, it's better if we get another tray together," she suggested.

"I can do it, Nonna."

"It's my kitchen, you know."

By the time they entered her kitchen, he feared she wanted to talk to him alone. He'd been traveling all over the country in the previous weeks, so there had not been much opportunity for them to speak. Once in a while, she liked to check on her favorite grandson's love life or lack of it. Avoiding her inquisitive stare, he fetched the bottle from the wine chiller and headed back to where his grandfather was. "I'll be right back."

When he returned, his grandmother was setting a tray with plates and forks. He opened the refrigerator, and using both hands, took the cheesecake out and placed it on the table. At the same time, she put a piece of paper in front of him, a simple phone number written on it, with a New Jersey area code.

"Juliano wants you to get one of those disposable phones and call him at this number."

"You mean a prepaid phone?"

"Well, that type. Not your phone is what I understood."

"Are you sure this came from Juliano?"

"His own mother gave it to me yesterday afternoon." Her black eyes met his. "She said that you should call him at that number, but not to tell anyone else about it." Giancarlo put the piece of paper in his pants pocket while she continued talking. "Why the secrecy? You are cousins, and you were the best of friends until he got that crazy idea to become a cop. But he's still family, Giancarlo, isn't he?"

"Of course, he's family. He'll always be."

He cut three pieces of cheesecake and set them on the small plates on the tray. Even if his grandfather said he didn't want any, he might change his mind when he saw the dessert. If not, Giancarlo would eat the extra piece.

She insisted, "I still don't understand why Juliano chose that way to earn a living when he could have been your right hand. It's a good thing his father is long gone, so he couldn't see what Juliano is today."

Giancarlo put the rest of the cheesecake back into the refrigerator. There were things she would never understand, and he hated that Juliano got her involved, but since he had, there must be a good reason for it. "Nonna, don't worry about it, everything will be all right."

"His mother said that he begs you not to tell anything to Ernesto or Claudio about him getting in touch with you. I don't mind hiding this from Claudio, but Ernesto is another matter."

"Did you tell Nonno?"

She shook her head. "I trust that you will tell him, Giancarlo."

"Thanks, Nonna. Listen, Juliano doesn't want Nonno to know yet, but as soon as I know the details I'll explain everything. Got it?"

She nodded. "Yes, but I don't like to keep secrets from him."

He leaned forward, putting an arm around her shoulders, and kissed her on the temple. "Me neither. I think that Juliano doesn't want to worry him, that's why he wants to talk to me first."

She raised her head and looked him in the eyes, he tried to explain what he thought could be going on, so she didn't feel like betraying her husband's trust. "Juliano is not a cop, he's an FBI agent. A Fed. And that has been good for us, because he alerted us to danger in the past. There might be something threatening us again, and thanks to Juliano, we will catch it in time."

"Fine, I'll leave it up to you because you know what to do."

"Thanks for your trust." Giancarlo gave her one of his smiles that he knew no female was able to resist. "Who knows? Maybe he wants to give me a birthday present."

She smiled too, but the expression didn't reach her eyes. "I hope so, too."

They were in the middle of the hall when Giancarlo's phone rang. He had left it on the couch next to his grandfather, so when they were entering the living room his grandfather looked at the screen and asked, "It's Claudio—do you want me to get it?"

"Yes, please." Giancarlo had his hands full with the tray, and there was no reason for Claudio to call at that hour unless something important happened, or the man wanted to get Giancarlo out of the house for personal motives. He knew that asking his grandfather to answer was also risking the old man learning something he shouldn't if Claudio was up to something wicked tonight, but refusing would have looked weird. Giancarlo silently prayed that it was business as usual while he placed the tray on the coffee table.

His grandfather explained, "Giancarlo is next to me, but busy, so this better be good, Claudio."

Giancarlo observed how his grandfather listened and frowned with displeasure before saying. "No, no. Wait a second." The kindly old patrician features switched to don mode in an instant. "Giancarlo will be on his way as soon as possible, and Claudio, pay attention to my words, let Giancarlo handle this matter, are we clear?" He ended the call and handed the phone to Giancarlo.

"What is going on?"

"They got the person who's vandalizing the properties. It's Gazzara's son, no doubt about it." He raised his eyes until they met Giancarlo's. "Claudio wants to kill him and be done with it."

In that moment his grandmother picked up the tray and walked out of the room saying, "I better put this back in the fridge until your return."

Neither of them said anything else until she was gone. They both knew she hated to hear details of the family business when harm to someone was part of it. Giancarlo took his holster from the closet at the far end of the room and checked his handgun, then he stood in front of his grandfather as he adjusted the straps, explaining, "Claudio has been after him for months now. The damage has been thousands of dollars, but the worst is the irreparable harm to our reputation."

“What do you mean?”

“Rodrigo Gazzara is also the person who has been stamping the Montefiore coat of arms on every property that we were not supposed to own. All those articles in the press about our association with the Condottieri family are a direct result of his graffiti.”

Giancarlo put on his leather jacket, waiting for his grandfather’s opinion on the matter. He didn’t want the boy dead either, he’d met him years ago while his father was still one of his grandfather’s underbosses. Before Gazzara ended up in jail. The older man handed his grandson a fresh glass of wine and said, “If that boy gets killed, I’ll end the rest of my days in prison, and you know it. Giancarlo, remember that we have a deal with Gazzara to protect his family.”

Yes, they did. In the past decades, most hit men who got caught betrayed their bosses, cooperating with the federal government and going into the Witness Protection Program to avoid prison. Because of that, whole crime families had gone down.

In Mario Gazzara’s case, it could have been Ernesto Montefiore going down. And not only him, but the whole Condottieri family—which included the Santorno, the Gazzara, the Albano, and the Montefiore families as well. The Condottieris distinguished themselves from other families in La Cosa Nostra because they were blood relatives from those four families only. This blood relation was supposed to foment loyalty, and somehow it had worked up until now. Mario Gazzara didn’t cooperate with the authorities, and received two consecutive life sentences in prison.

Giancarlo finished his wine and asked, “So what do you want me to do?”

“If Gazzara cooperates with the Feds he still can bury us with his testimony.”

“Okay, I got it. Having his son killed would turn him into a rat. Don’t worry, I’ll keep the kid alive no matter what.” With those words Giancarlo walked out of the house, thinking he’d better rush before Claudio lost his patience.

Once outside, he saw Nico getting out of one of the company’s cars and walking toward the house. “Boss, there is a situation going on in Philly.”

“So I heard. Thanks for telling me.”

It was good to know that even if Claudio didn't call, his men would have told him of the situation. Giancarlo passed by him toward the car and Nico rushed to open the door for him. They immediately headed into the city.

CHAPTER 3

He asked Luciano to drop him off with Nico at the casino, and walked toward the basement, where he assumed Claudio was holding Rodrigo. Once he entered the hall where the offices were, he slowed down, trying to come up with a way to approach Claudio without taking his authority from him in front of everyone. Yes, his grandfather gave clear orders, but now it was up to Giancarlo to deal with the issue successfully, without insulting the man who meant so much to him, and whose true relationship with Giancarlo his family ignored.

His relationship with Claudio was very complex. While he had picked Nico and Luciano to form his crew, it had been his own grandfather who appointed Claudio Albano to be his right hand, and to show Giancarlo the ropes of their true family business. Soon, Giancarlo learned that Claudio's responsibilities were more than his simple well-being. The man wanted Giancarlo to succeed because that was the only way Claudio would achieve his goals, too. Only two years older than Giancarlo, sometimes it seemed as if Claudio were twenty years his senior, hence Giancarlo always followed his advice—from essential things like how to dress, to sex.

This last part was the ultimate proof of how far Claudio would go to ensure nothing stood in the way of their success. Years ago, when Giancarlo first attempted flirting with a guy at the gym, and went as far as getting a date, Claudio had said nothing, but insisted on driving Giancarlo to the place where he would meet the young man. Instead, Claudio drove Giancarlo into a motel where he'd had a room ready.

Recalling the incident, Giancarlo smirked, because yes, it was going to be a long night trying to persuade Claudio to not kill Rodrigo.

That other night, long gone in the past, Giancarlo had entered the motel room, and whirled when he heard Claudio closing the door behind him.

“What's this? We're going to be late.” It was all he could say while he watched Claudio silently removing his clothes until he was standing nude in front of him. For a few seconds all they did was to stare at one another. Then,

slowly, Giancarlo had looked up and down the beautiful body he'd admired for some time. He knew the instant Claudio bound him with those invisible bonds of his, because with a curt nod he had moved to pull something from a bag.

"I have condoms and lube, and a gay sex manual. Since neither of us has ever done this before, it will be something we learn together, like other things."

Giancarlo had been in awe. "Are you serious? What about my date?"

"Forget about him. I look better than him and I know you like me. Yes, I've noticed the way you look at me when you think I'm not aware of it."

"I didn't know you were..." Giancarlo had broken off the comment, but continued to look him in the eyes.

"I am not, but I'm doing this for you," Claudio had answered, raising a hand and pulling Giancarlo down to his face, their breath mingling, "I'm doing it also for me. I won't let you get killed over this sexual kink of yours, and lose everything I worked so hard for all these years. Go ahead, touch, do whatever you want with my body."

Giancarlo hesitated a few seconds, but gave in because he wanted him. However, the moment he leant forward to kiss him, Claudio skipped his mouth and said, "Except kissing. We're having sex, this is not a romance, and never will be."

Giancarlo had his doubts. He knew that Claudio's loyalty was real, but the motives to become his lover were not. Still, he accepted what was offered. And Claudio had done it in the same way he did everything else, efficiently. He had taken Giancarlo's cock up his ass in the same way he would have taken a bullet for him.

Somewhere along the way, Claudio must have liked it, because his body showed its enthusiasm for the act. As for Giancarlo, he had fallen in love with Claudio, his first lover, and assumed that even if they could never go public with their affair, it could last years. Then Claudio met his wife and decided he wanted to be married and have kids. Giancarlo faked that it didn't hurt, like he had done with many other things, but it had hurt like hell. It still hurt every

time he noticed that ring on Claudio's finger and remembered what it meant. Through the years they came to an agreement—when Claudio could, when Claudio had time, they had sex. Sex and nothing more.

“Giancarlo, what are you doing standing out there? I got worried that something happened to you.”

Claudio's remarks pulled him from his memories into the present. Giancarlo focused on him and couldn't believe his eyes. He'd known the man for years, but had never seen him so distraught. Claudio had always taken great care of his appearance, his custom-made clothes were a priority. Even Giancarlo let him pick out his own clothes, because Claudio knew more about fashion than him. So, Claudio's current disheveled look—wrinkled button-down shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbow and missing tie—surprised him.

“Can we have a word?” Without waiting for him, Giancarlo entered the office, and Claudio closed the door after following him inside. “Why didn't you call me as soon as you had Rodrigo?”

“Because I was busy with the rest of his gang.”

“What did you do with them?”

“I handed them over to the police. They were nothing but thieves and addicts—they let Rodrigo manipulate them—but knew nothing about this.” He pointed to a folder filled with accounts of the amount of money that Rodrigo's vandalism had cost them over the years.

Giancarlo glanced at the numbers on the paper, he'd seen them before. “If you kill him, who is going to pay for this?”

Claudio shrugged. “Nobody would, anyway. Even if I sell him by the piece he's not worth this much. Killing him will bring me some peace of mind, and we won't be dealing with his surprise attacks anymore.”

Giancarlo knew that regardless of that speech Claudio wasn't going to kill anybody tonight, otherwise Rodrigo would be already dead. “What is really going on, Claudio?” When there was no answer, he grabbed him by the shoulders. After breathing deep Claudio said, “It's that boy. Well, he's not a boy anymore, he's a man, the most annoying one you can imagine. He drives me crazy!”

“That I can see. You really unnerved Nonno, he’s sure you want to kill Rodrigo.”

“When I called you I was so mad, I might have done it. But I don’t really want to kill him.”

Giancarlo let him go. “I believe you, but the next time, insist on talking to me, even if Nonno answers the phone.”

“I’m sorry, I just needed to talk to someone who could stop me from doing something I would later regret.”

“What is it about Rodrigo that bothers you so much?”

“He called me names—like *faggot* and *bitch*.”

“Those are common insults. There is no way he knows...”

Claudio interrupted him. “I’m not gay, you know that. What happened between us was because of the circumstances.” As if he suddenly realized that what he was about to say was silly, he concluded by admitting the truth. “The worst of all is that when he calls me those names, I still feel something I shouldn’t feel.”

“I understand, it happens to me often.”

Claudio shook his head, “No, you don’t get it. It’s this need—it’s so wrong.”

He was an attractive man, with his carefully cut blond hair, blue eyes, and outstanding classical features. Giancarlo placed his hands on either side of Claudio’s head, looking into his eyes. “I thought this day would never come, at least not like this. You feel an attraction for another man besides me, that’s all. Yes, look at me, that’s normal.”

“No.” Claudio closed his eyes and shook his head.

Deep inside, Giancarlo enjoyed Claudio’s dilemma, because it was about time the other accepted his reality. “Listen, I know it’s disturbing. When it was only me, you could say that it was because you were helping me to channel my sexuality in a way that didn’t harm our lives. Yes, those were *your* words. This, my friend, is the truth, and you’d better learn to live with it. The good news is you don’t have to have sex with every guy you find hot.”

“It can’t be.” Claudio shook his head again.

“In spite of all Rodrigo has done, it’s not his fault he gets you horny. So let’s go and resolve this matter.”

“Are you going to forgive him?” Claudio stood in front of him.

“We don’t have a choice, because we can’t take the risk of getting his father mad at us.”

“What about handing him to the police rather than taking justice into our own hands?”

Leaning against the desk, Giancarlo answered, “Too risky. The last thing we want is publicity. It’s one thing to catch the gang that was vandalizing our customers, and another thing to let the press make the connection between the gang’s leader and Mario Gazzara. It cost us a fortune getting them to forget Gazzara’s partnership with Nonno.”

“Yeah, right. It would start the whole thing all over again.”

“Don’t worry, Rodrigo won’t simply walk away. I’m thinking I can use him somehow, keep him under control, and have him pay some of his debt to us at the same time.”

Claudio stared at him with wide eyes, and Giancarlo quickly added, “Not in that way.”

Calmer now, Claudio said, “Wait until you see him again before you decide.”

“I don’t even remember how he looked before,” Giancarlo admitted.

“Of course, because even back then you only had eyes for Braulio. Speaking of whom, I hope you know the risk you’re taking by spending time with Santorno’s son.”

Giancarlo’s fingers combed his short black hair and he said, “I’m getting a headache, Claudio. Let’s be done with this.”

“You’re too tense, you need to get laid.” That was Claudio’s remedy for everything.

Knowing it would bother him, Giancarlo answered, “I know, I’m spending tomorrow night at Angelo’s place.”

Angelo Messina managed what they called the Adult Business Division, essentially four successful gentlemen's clubs and a very discreet—and successful—escort service. Altogether, they brought in as much cash as one of the smaller casinos. All thanks to Angelo's skills in entertaining the select clientele of all five enterprises.

The comment worked. Claudio pursed his lips. "I had other plans for us tomorrow night, Giancarlo."

Feeling more relaxed, Giancarlo teased him. "Then you need to be more specific, and rather than saying I need to get laid, you should have said that you need to get fucked. But with enough lead time, because like I said, I have plans."

For a few seconds Claudio seemed to consider the issue before he asked, "Are you having another jealousy attack?"

Giancarlo faked innocence. "Of course not. I simply assumed you were going to spend the weekend with your wife and kids, so I told Angelo to expect me."

"So you guys are becoming an item?"

"I thought Angelo got your seal of approval, Mr. Albano."

"For occasional sex, yes. I thought it was going to be only during those times you were desperate and I wasn't available."

Giancarlo wanted to remind him that lately he'd been very busy, but instead he said, "I didn't get the memo."

"So you like him." Claudio's eyes focused on the closed door in front of them, but Giancarlo could feel the bitterness behind the affirmation, and he wished that there was more to his liaison with Angelo, so his next words were more enthusiastic.

"Claudio, the guy is a professional at what he does. You know what, you should try him one of these days."

"Me? No, thank you, very much." This time he ventured to glance at Giancarlo briefly. "You're not falling in love with him, are you?"

"The closest Angelo and I could ever be is friends-with-benefits."

“Employee with benefits, because once again you’re forgetting who is the boss.” Claudio remarked.

“No, let’s say I like to keep my employees comfortable because it promotes loyalty. You should know that as well.”

“I’m not your employee, I’m your associate. There is a difference, and you know it.”

“Sure, how could I forget that?” Giancarlo opened the door and held it for him.

Anybody else would have taken his words at face value, but Claudio knew him well, too damn well. He sighed before saying, “Giancarlo, when are you going to accept that this is the way our lives are? I’ll always be here for you, anything you need, but I have to take care of my family too.”

They started to walk down the hall and Giancarlo wished to tell Claudio the truth about his non-existent relationship with Angelo, but tonight, he wanted to get back at Claudio for all those years he suffered because of him.

Giancarlo ignored that last comment, because they had arrived at the room where Rodrigo was held.

CHAPTER 4

The pain was something Rodrigo could endure—he had to—because this was only the beginning. Claudio Albano’s sadistic side had awoken, and he might torture him before he was killed. Rodrigo had finally succeeded in getting the Condottieri out of their freaking comfort zone. While his father rotted in prison, the bastards had become more successful than ever, and Rodrigo simply couldn’t let that happen. It might cost him his life, but after that, he was sure his father would put them where they belonged. Damn code of silence! For all he knew they didn’t deserve to be free while his father wasn’t and Rodrigo was alone on the streets.

His fists clenched in the plastic ties used as shackles—no way he could break free from those. Damn it. He heard voices outside and Claudio walked out, leaving his goons to look after him. Rodrigo resisted the impulse to provoke them further. There was no fun in poking them; Claudio was his target, and seeing his stoic image shattered was almost worth dying over. Lately, life didn’t offer many challenges—he had done everything he pleased in the last seven years, and nothing excited him at all.

The idea of dying without saying good-bye to his mother crossed his mind, but he cast it aside. His mother had been afraid of him since the day he nearly killed her new husband. The fear in her eyes and the way she had begged for the guy’s life had haunted him for days. She asked him to leave and never come back. He still missed her sometimes, but the part that hurt most was being away from his siblings.

The last time Rodrigo called home, they had been cold, and the youngest one had said that their mother didn’t want them near Rodrigo because he was like his father. So nobody but his father would miss him if he died tonight. He regretted not visiting the old man the previous week, but since they moved him out of the state, it had become harder to go see him. And there was no way Rodrigo could have guessed that son of a bitch of Claudio would catch him today.

The door opened and two other men entered with Claudio. Both looked familiar, but it took him a while to place them. One was about thirty, don’t-

mess-with-me type of big, and at least six and a half feet tall. He was dressed casually in jeans and a leather jacket, but something in his handsome face spoke of authority. The other one, in a dark suit, was maybe twenty, the same age as Rodrigo.

Giancarlo Montefiore. Of course, it must be him. And the younger guy was Nico; Rodrigo used to play with him as a child. Giancarlo's features were rugged and elegant at the same time, something Rodrigo never noticed before, maybe because when they met in the past, he wasn't into checking out guys yet.

Claudio spoke first, as if he were the ambassador or something. "Mr. Montefiore wants to talk to you, Rodrigo."

"Good evening, Rodrigo. It's been a long time since we saw each other." The moment Giancarlo spoke, his soft but firm commanding voice settled Rodrigo and soothed him like a warm hug. It felt wrong given the circumstances, but the minute their eyes met, Rodrigo also felt safe. He distracted himself from the younger Montefiore's charm by recalling all the hardship he'd endured when they betrayed his father. His rage came back like magic.

Regardless of his painfully split lips, Rodrigo managed a twisted smirk to go with the cynical comments. "What an honor! The motherfucking boss came to see me. Did you get bored of fucking your blond bitch and want variety?"

Before Giancarlo had a chance to understand Rodrigo's words, Claudio slapped the younger man again. He wondered how much the boy really knew, or if he was fishing for information simply to offend. Sadly, Rodrigo had hit the nail on the head, because if there was anything Claudio hated, it was being called a faggot.

Rodrigo sat tied into one of the office chairs, his beautiful face beaten. He spat blood, looking furious at Claudio. "Remember that whatever you do to me, my father will do to you ten times over."

Claudio laughed, a short and disturbing noise in the small room. "Really? How will he get his hands on me? Last thing I heard, your father is in a maximum security prison."

Even before Rodrigo replied to Claudio's mocking remarks, Giancarlo knew the answer. All the same, Rodrigo's menace distressed him. "He will be out in no time, as soon as he learns I'm dead. He'll go to the feds to tell them everything he knows. Nothing will stop him."

Claudio clenched his fist at his sides. "It's too late for that. It's the word of a convicted felon against ours."

Rodrigo's surprise seemed genuine. "Who said it was only words? Dad has evidence, lots of it, and murder doesn't have a statute of limitations."

Giancarlo moved closer to the pair and said, "Enough insults and threats for today. Rodrigo, stop being a hothead." He pulled up a chair and sat next to Rodrigo. "We need to discuss the mess you've made with your life since your father went away."

The look he got from both of them clearly said the other two didn't want to discuss anything, and Rodrigo seemed willing to die in order to achieve his revenge. What, exactly, was the boy so mad about?

Putting a hand on Claudio's shoulder, Giancarlo said, "It's better if you go home, I'll take care of this."

All he got was a warning look before Claudio left the room, but his soldiers stayed outside the door. Giancarlo opened the door and asked them to release Rodrigo. They were shocked, and one of them even said, "With all due respect, boss. This guy is not what he looks like, he's dangerous. It took two of us to bring him down."

Giancarlo appreciated their concern, but he knew that he could deal with Rodrigo. So he smiled and said, "It's okay. I'm equal to at least two of you, Nico is another, and this one amounts to a dozen." He patted the gun at his side. Without another word, one of the guys entered the room and cut whatever was keeping Rodrigo tied.

Next Giancarlo told the guys, "Please be sure Claudio makes it home safe."

They left with a, "Yes, sir," and Nico asked, "Do you prefer to speak with him in private? If so, I'll be outside."

Giancarlo nodded. "Please."

After his cousin left the room, he stared at Rodrigo, who hadn't moved at all after being freed, not even to massage his hands. He glared back at Giancarlo with controlled rage. Giancarlo asked, "Are you hurt? Do you think you need a doctor?"

Rodrigo simply kept looking at him, as if he expected to be attacked again and were ready to defend himself.

After a few seconds Giancarlo broke the glaring match, and went over to pull a couple of water bottles from a small fridge behind the desk. He handed one to Rodrigo, who turned his face away and didn't make any effort to take the water from Giancarlo's hand.

Giancarlo placed the bottle on the nearby desk. After drinking half of his own bottle, he said, "You were very talkative with Claudio, why so shy with me?"

The boy continued to ignore him, so Giancarlo teased him. "Oh, I see, you prefer them blond. Should I call Claudio back? He will inspire you to talk for sure."

That got Rodrigo's attention. "Go fuck yourself."

"Watch your mouth, Rodrigo. I'm not Claudio, and if you get me upset you'll regret it."

"What the hell do you want from me? If you are going to kill me, just fucking do it."

"Are you scared? Do you think that's why I'm here?"

"I know what you guys do with problems like me. I won't see a new day."

Giancarlo sat again, in the chair next to Rodrigo's, and said, "Rodrigo, calm down. I'm your friend and I'm here to help." He tried to find the right words to explain his presence and what he planned to do with him.

Before Giancarlo could say anything else, Rodrigo exploded. "That's bullshit. You betrayed my father, fucking traitor!"

That was it. If he insisted on acting like a spoiled brat, he was going to be treated as one.

Using one hand, Giancarlo jerked Rodrigo out of the chair and across his lap. Rodrigo instinctively balanced his body by extending his hands to touch

the floor. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, you son of a bitch?” His voice sounded truly scared this time.

Giancarlo smiled; two could play this game. The answer Rodrigo got was one of Giancarlo’s hands at the top of his shoulders, keeping him in place, while the other hand pulled down his faded jeans to expose his backside. Giancarlo heard Rodrigo’s gasp, and held in his own.

The brat didn’t wear any underwear, but before any sensual thought could cross his mind, Giancarlo brought his hand down and began spanking him as hard and as fast as he could. He could hear Rodrigo’s grunts, and he obviously was trying to avoid screaming out of pride.

But suddenly, the grunts became moans, and Rodrigo sought his hand’s contact, even rubbing his ass against it. In one of those attempts, Giancarlo’s hand slipped between Rodrigo’s ass cheeks and the impulse to explore further crossed his mind. Rodrigo had a nicely sculpted ass.

The hardness rubbing against his legs clearly was a growing erection. Damn it! Claudio had been right, the boy was naughty as hell. Giancarlo spanked him harder, and the response was more moaning, and soon the next erection was his own. He stopped and pushed Rodrigo off his lap, onto his feet, only to find himself face to face with Rodrigo’s cock. He was hard.

Giancarlo raised his eyes until he met Rodrigo’s dark ones, and stood without breaking the eye contact. He’d never been good at reading people, but his rude touch had worked like magic. The rage in the young man face was gone, replaced by expectancy and vulnerability. He deserved that spanking, but somehow Giancarlo felt bad looking at his hurt face. It reminded him of Braulio, and no, he didn’t want Rodrigo beaten any more than he would want Braulio to be hurt by anyone.

“God, Rodrigo. What am I going to do with you?”

“You can start by finishing what you started.”

When Giancarlo didn’t get it right away, the boy asked, “Where do you want me? Bent over the desk?”

“Why would I—” Giancarlo shook his head in awe, and in case he had any doubts Rodrigo added, “I have condoms.”

Giancarlo sat in the chair one more time, and resisted the impulse to bury his head in his hands out of desperation. Instead he asked, “What the hell happened to you after Mario went to jail?”

The fury came back to Rodrigo’s expression. “Leave my dad out this. My dad liked you, you were his friend. He trusted in you and you did nothing to help him.”

“We did help him. Who do you think paid those lawyers that prevented him from getting the death penalty? And who has been supporting your family to this day? Didn’t your mother tell you? Why have you been doing all these things that harm the family?”

Rodrigo frowned and something changed in his demeanor. “Because my dad is alone, paying for something you all were involved in a way or another.”

“Rodrigo, he knew the risks in the same way we all know them. But like you said, let’s leave your father out of this.”

Rodrigo nodded in agreement, and after thinking for a few seconds, said, “I’m not stupid. If you’re not going to kill me it’s because you’re going to make me your plaything. And I know better than to resist. Besides, my body likes you.”

He held Giancarlo’s gaze. Again, Giancarlo gave up and moved on. “Where do you live?”

“Here and there.”

“Stop playing games.”

“It’s the truth. I don’t have a permanent place. The last one I crashed in, I guess I shouldn’t go back, because if I do I might kill the owner.”

“And why is that?”

“Someone sold me out to Claudio. And I suspect it was one of my roommates. I deserved it, you know, I should have known better than hanging with folks that have a three-hundred-dollar-a-day drug habit.”

Deciding he had enough, Giancarlo explained, “Here is the deal. You’ll stay with me until I can find you a proper place to live and a job.”

“And why should I do that? Or better, why would you be so generous, when your bitch wanted me dead?”

“Among other things because you truly offended Claudio Albano tonight. And he is vindictive, but if you’re with me, he will control himself.”

“Really? Now that I’m not tied to a chair, I’m dangerous too.”

“I prefer if you don’t take the risk. Who do you think replaced your father as our problem solver?”

“That bitch is a hit man?”

“Rodrigo, stop calling him that. If you’re going to be close to me, you better get on good terms with Claudio.”

“Why? Because he is closest to you? Listen, I love threesomes, but I’d rather cut my dick off than fuck that whore.”

“Go to the bathroom and clean yourself up, I have a couple of calls to make before we leave.”

After Rodrigo left, Giancarlo sent a text before dialing his grandfather’s number. “Nonno, I have everything under control.”

His grandfather sounded relieved. “Thank God, Giancarlo. Listen, I was thinking that maybe you can do something for that boy. He might be useful, you know. We should have tried to approach him before.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Giancarlo said. “The problem is under control, but the kid is badly beaten up, I don’t think he needs a doctor, but I’m going to take him to see Palmeari, just in case. And later I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“So, you’re not coming back home?”

“No tonight. I want to keep him under observation, so we’ll be staying at my condo.”

“Good. Thanks, Giancarlo. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Nonno... please tell Nonna that nobody died tonight.”

“Sure, I will.”

Giancarlo felt grateful for still having his grandparents with him, he didn’t know what he would do once they were gone. He ended the call with a smile and turned around. His gaze met Rodrigo’s, who apparently had returned from

the bathroom while he was on the phone, his expression hard to decipher when he asked? “So, we’re sleeping together tonight. Aren’t you afraid that I will find something to turn it into a weapon?”

“It’s not in your best interest to do such a foolish thing.” Giancarlo disregarded both Rodrigo’s eavesdropping and the sexual innuendo.

“And why not? Do you think I’m too weak to attack you?” Slowly Rodrigo sat down on the same chair he’d been tied into before.

“No. What you are is really lonely. I saw your expression when I finished talking to my grandfather. Don’t bother denying it. You miss your family, the way it was before your whole world crashed.”

“Stop psychoanalyzing me.” Rodrigo stood and Giancarlo stepped closer to him.

“Listen, I can’t give you back what you lost, because I didn’t take it from you in the first place, and even if I wanted to, there’s no way I could.” Giancarlo suppressed a grin, noticing he had the Rodrigo’s attention. “What I can offer is another chance to do things better, and my friendship.”

Rodrigo said, “You know nothing about me and would *never* understand my reasons.” Looking him up and down he added, “I’m only interested in your friendship if it includes benefits.”

“Benefits?”

“Friend with benefits, fuck buddies, or whatever you want to call it.” Impatient, Rodrigo waved a hand. “Even you should know what that means.”

Of course Giancarlo knew. He couldn’t even reject the notion, because his only close friends were exactly that. If anybody could see behind closed doors, that would be the definition of his friendship with Claudio and Braulio, even if he didn’t have intercourse with the younger one.

“So you don’t think there could be friendship only between two people.”

“Yeah, there are cases, but I’m not interested.” Rodrigo attempted a silly smile with his hurt lips, but it ended being an I-can’t-believe-I’m-stuck-with-the-likes-of-you expression. They looked at each other for a few seconds and Giancarlo changed the subject.

“Let’s go, I have a doctor waiting to see you.”

“Are we going to the ER?”

“No, I have a doctor who works for us, who has a clinic for this type of incident.”

“I see, the guy who puts you guys back together after a shootout.”

Giancarlo said nothing else, and started to walk away with Rodrigo on his tail.

CHAPTER 5

When they arrived at Dr. Palmeari's clinic, Giancarlo thanked the doctor and his staff for coming to open the facility that late. These types of things, where they needed a private doctor late at night did not happen that often anymore. A nurse took Rodrigo away, and Giancarlo asked the doctor, "Can you check him out, I mean, can you run a blood test on him?"

The doctor squinched his eyes at him. "Do you want me to do STD testing on him?"

"And drugs too, please." When Dr. Palmeari frowned at him, Giancarlo added, "I'm a little concerned because he's been living on the streets."

"It doesn't look like that, trust me. I see the homeless at the hospital all the time. But I'll include those tests with the others."

"Thanks."

While they checked Rodrigo over, Giancarlo walked around the empty clinic lobby and hallways. He sat at the waiting area and took out his prepaid phone to call his cousin Juliano. The phone was answered on the third ring. "Why did it take you this long to call me?"

"Nonna just told me. Why did you get her involved, eh?"

"I also got Mom into it. Besides, she's my Nonna, too. Listen, you should be grateful instead of scolding me, you know?"

"What is it?"

"I have a few topics to discuss with you, but I won't be able to meet with you until next month. We can't talk about this sort of thing on the phone, but there is a matter that can't wait."

"Go ahead. I think this type of phone gives us some privacy."

"I learned that your young friend is in danger."

"You mean... how the hell did you know?"

"That he's in danger, or about you and him?" Juliano sounded as cocky as usual.

“You and your undercovers. I should check under the bed before going to sleep in case one is hiding there.”

“In your case, I suggest you check on it too, because there’s a chance you will end up in bed with one of my men one of these days. The way I see it, you are undercover, too, ’cause from your position you can protect your fellow gay folks. And here I am, helping out too, in the name of the blood ties we share.”

“You are a little crazy, Juliano.”

“So, knowing that he’s in danger doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course. Thanks for the tip. But right now he’s in a secure location, and he’s not going back home. And anyway, he’s been in danger since I met him.”

“Well, this is different. His father put out a contract on him.”

Giancarlo breathed deeply and still couldn’t find words to express his consternation.

“Hey! Are you still there?”

“Sure. I can’t believe he’s so cruel. He’s maltreated him all his life, and now he’s going to have him killed?”

“Well, my source said that he told someone that he prefers a dead son to a faggot in the family.”

“There has to be a way to stop him. Can you do anything?”

“No, all this is off the record. Until they make an attempt on his life there is little we can do.”

“I can’t believe this is happening and there is nothing you can do.”

Juliano explained, “We always say no names, but what the heck. I need you to understand the risk you’re taking protecting him.” When Giancarlo didn’t add anything, Juliano continued, “It’s not an open contract for anybody to execute. Santorno sent for Daniel Bucciarelli, who should arrive any day. However, Santorno won’t tell him who the target is until they’re face to face. That’s gives you time to move the kid to a secure location.”

“Oh, Jesus. A hit man—why?”

“I guess it’s easier if someone else does it, fast and painless. It’s his son after all.”

There was a silence that again Juliano broke. “Cousin, I’m sorry about the boy.”

“Don’t be, he’s not going to die. But get ready, because I might have a sacrifice for you.”

“Maybe more than one, if it is what I supposed.”

“Your job is keeping them away from the Witness Protection Program, are we clear?”

“Sure.”

“I’ve got to go, cousin. Thanks again. I owe you one.”

Giancarlo loved Braulio as he had never loved anyone. So much so, he was willing to set Braulio free to live the type of life he dreamed.

Long after he ended the call, he sat without moving. What was he going to do to protect Braulio while he delivered Santorno senior to the Feds? Yes, Santorno was going to be the sacrifice he promised Juliano, because that was the only chance he had. Killing Santorno could start a war, and he wasn’t going to make that mistake. The problem was the meantime.

All his men were known to Santorno, and openly protecting his son was almost as risky as killing him. Giancarlo used his smartphone to log into the security cameras at the casino and search for the video of Rodrigo’s capture. It looked like something out of a movie, not only did the boy know how to fight, it truly took two of the guys to take him down. Maybe Gazzara had been training him. There were rumors that he had been training a replacement, who better than his own son? Giancarlo closed the app with the video access, and breathed deeply.

The squeak of rubber-soled sneakers resonated in the empty clinic hallway, and a slender, tall figure came walking toward him. Rodrigo’s smile was a total surprise. “I’m done. The doc said I’d live to fight another battle. What’s next?”

Both of his hands were splinted. “What happened to your hands? And why didn’t you say anything before?”

Rodrigo stood in front of him with a bored expression. “Those dudes that

protect your bitch are tough-skinned. And why should I tell you anything—you're not a doctor."

"How long do you have to have those on?"

Rodrigo raised his left hand. "This one, a couple of days, and I can take it off if I need to." He sighed. "But this one, I have to wear for at least a week, and it can't get wet." That was his right hand. He grinned and added, "I can hold my dick to pee with my left, but jerking off doesn't work right. I know because I tried. I'm going to miss my right hand a lot."

Giancarlo looked him up and down in shock. "Do you ever think or talk about anything else?"

"There is nothing more interesting that I know of. Do you have any suggestions?"

God, he was going to need patience with this one. "What else did the doctor say?"

"I got probed everywhere, except where I would have liked it." The smile on Rodrigo's face suggested the same place Giancarlo thought of. Well, two could play that game, and he had to find a way to get Rodrigo on his side.

"No prostate massage? No wonder you looked so disappointed." Giancarlo started walking.

Rodrigo followed him. "No, I'm not, because I'm going to get it in a better way."

"What do you mean?" Giancarlo kept going toward the exit.

"I had to sign those forms for the blood work you requested. A total waste because I'm clean, you could have asked me. Of course, you don't have to trust me. I wouldn't trust myself."

Damn! That Dr. Palmeari needed to learn who was the boss. Giancarlo made a mental note to remember this indiscretion the next time they discussed the clinic's budget.

He made an effort not to halt his steps. "It was just a preventative measure, Rodrigo. It will expedite your work placement."

"Really? Am I going to be working at a brothel?"

This time, he stopped and the boy almost crashed against him. “Rodrigo, don’t push me anymore tonight because I have more important things to worry about right now.”

“Well, I think you should know that I’m not going bareback.”

“Me neither.” Giancarlo regretted those words the minute he saw the younger one’s grin.

Nico muttered an “ouch!” when he saw Rodrigo, but as soon as he looked at Giancarlo’s expression he limited himself to opening the door for them, and went to wait for orders in the front seat. *That* was the type of discipline Rodrigo needed to learn, Giancarlo told himself before asking Luciano to take them to his apartment.

Then Braulio came back to his mind, and he knew who would protect him better. Even if he wasn’t sure yet how far he could trust Rodrigo, he was the best option. A few people remembered him in their circle, and being closer in age to Braulio, nobody would find them hanging out together unusual, and in the same way, nobody would link Rodrigo to the Montefiore crew. But the most important part was that Rodrigo knew how to defend himself.

The fact that Rodrigo couldn’t fight or hold a weapon at the moment crossed Giancarlo’s mind, but he could get to know him better during the boy’s recovery. He could assign Rodrigo to protect Braulio from Santorno and any assassins sent his way. But who was going to protect Braulio from Rodrigo? There was no doubt that Rodrigo liked sex, and liked men.

Giancarlo needed to see them interacting before he would know if he could trust his innocent friend to Rodrigo. Maybe Nico would do a better job. Nah, nobody else would do. Giancarlo felt jealous of imagining anyone close to Braulio. He had been willing to let Braulio find the love of his life, but putting someone next to him that would simply use him and leave him heartbroken—no, never that. He made up his mind and informed Rodrigo, “You’ll be staying with me tonight.”

“Where?”

“At my place. I have an apartment at Center City.”

“Yeah, I remember your conversation with your grandfather. And after that, what’s next?”

“I already have a job for you. I’ll know for sure tomorrow morning.”

It was almost two in the morning by the time they arrived at Giancarlo’s apartment. He asked Rodrigo not to make any noise, and for once he obeyed, maybe because he was exhausted too. The living room of Giancarlo’s apartment looked cozy, three couches against each of the walls, with side tables and lamps, expensive fine art on the walls and a coffee table in the middle. At one end, a huge flat screen TV, and at the other end, panoramic windows showcasing the Philadelphia skyline.

Giancarlo checked the guest room, and when he saw it empty with the bed made up, he asked Rodrigo to wait right there. He rushed to his own room, and opening the door confirmed that Braulio slept in his bed. For once, this was a good thing. He told Rodrigo to stay in the guest room and then went back to his bedroom to lay down next to Braulio. They’d slept together before, but Giancarlo had done his best to keep the sexual play limited to mutual jerk offs and blowjobs. And kisses. They could kiss for hours. For Giancarlo knew that if he fucked Braulio, he would never let him go to live his dream gay life.

As if they slept together every night, when Braulio felt Giancarlo’s body on the bed he snuggled against him. He felt warm and welcoming. “You came back.”

“Uh-huh. A friend of mine had a problem and needed a place to stay. So I brought him here.” Giancarlo spooned Braulio’s body.

“But what if he sees me?”

“It’s fine. He’s going to work for me, and you already know him.”

“Do I?”

“He is Mario Gazzara’s son.”

“Sure, I remember him. He’s a bully.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you alone with him until I know he won’t hurt you. Go back to sleep, we’ll talk in the morning.”

Giancarlo started dozing when a beeping sound announced he had gotten a text message. It was from Dr. Palmeari, and it simply read, *the boy is totally clean.*

Giancarlo put the phone down on the nightstand and cuddled against Braulio's tender body, inhaling his sweet smell and kissing the top of his head. Braulio was the closest equivalent to a boyfriend Giancarlo had ever had, but for the younger one's sake he'd always referred to their relationship as a friendship, deeply caring, but a friendship.

He had even encouraged Braulio to find a boyfriend, someone closer to his age who could go out with him and have a normal relationship. According to Braulio, he tried, but nobody got him the same way Giancarlo did, so he always came back.

They had known each other forever, but Giancarlo started noticing him during the family gatherings his grandfather insisted they attend. It was a way for all the members of their organization to know one another. It didn't guarantee loyalty, but his grandfather thought it would help to make some sort of bond among them all, preventing the frequent betrayals that plagued their organization lately.

Santorno had always come with his only son, and they always got everybody's attention because the father would smack the boy for anything, or scream at him. Sometimes Santorno's actions were more violent than others. On a couple of occasions Giancarlo had begged his grandfather to intervene. But he refused, because it was the man's child. He was trying to discipline him. However, as Braulio grew older, the violent episodes didn't stop. At one point, the older Montefiore told Santorno to control himself, or he would not be welcome anymore.

The public abuse stopped, but obviously continued in private.

Braulio brought a light of hope to Giancarlo's life in one of the worst moments—right after his parents were killed, and Claudio got married. Braulio had been there for him with his warm smile, his comforting words, his presence. Giancarlo couldn't let him down. On the other hand, Braulio dreamed of having a normal relationship with a gay partner, even marriage, and acceptance, the joy of living in a community without spite.

And Giancarlo believed that Braulio could have those things, alone. Unlike him, Braulio didn't have responsibilities or people to protect. What Santorno called his son's weakness served to prevent him from getting involved in the

family businesses—the illicit and the legit ones. So, in a way, Braulio was free to do what he wanted. On another hand, his father would never let him go and do anything that could shame the family name. Santorno would rather have Braulio killed.

Giancarlo opened his eyes in the dark and muttered, “Not on my watch.”

CHAPTER 6

Rodrigo did not use the bed in the room Giancarlo assigned to him. He sat on one of the living room couches all night, and at some point fell asleep for a couple of hours. He'd lied when he told Giancarlo that he didn't have a home. He did, but it was far away from the city and he didn't want anybody to know about it. It had been one of his father's hideouts that Rodrigo had kept, hoping his dad would escape one day. The hope thinned as time passed. It wasn't as luxurious as this apartment, but it was all his.

When the boss said he was taking him to his apartment, he pictured a nice place, but the apartment turned out to be a duplex penthouse with rooftop swimming pool included. Rodrigo had discovered it when he opened a glass door to see the Philly skyline better. He spent most of the night watching the moon dance against the artificially blue water.

So, Giancarlo didn't want him for sex after all, because he had someone else. Rodrigo didn't miss that somebody was sleeping with him in the main room. But his glance had been too brief to know who it was. Somehow, the idea bothered him. He wanted those big hands touching him in different ways than they had done up until now.

Something in Giancarlo's eyes invited him closer—so mature, and so young at the same time. Rodrigo wanted to be near him, but he also needed to be by himself, to understand what the hell had happened. He'd always been picky about who he fucked, and he refused sugar daddies all the time, because he loved to be free. But upon meeting Giancarlo again, he wanted to chain himself to him.

Rodrigo had heard so much about Giancarlo since he was a child, but he never expected to find him attractive. Yes, he knew that he was young, his father had complained at first of having to follow Giancarlo Montefiore's orders, but later had started to praise the young man, saying that he was as smart as his grandfather. One of the few men of honor born in his generation.

Mario Gazzara had never told him if Giancarlo had anything to do with his downfall; Rodrigo just assumed he did, because he was the acting boss.

Whatever Giancarlo might have done, he'd redeemed himself tonight. Well, he'd certainly changed Rodrigo's life forever, and he had no idea of what he'd gotten into.

Rodrigo had always been a rebel, he would do the contrary of what he was ordered just because he felt like it, and he would never do as he was told. His mother put him on the street when he was fourteen because she couldn't control him, and even if it had been hard, he never regretted it, and he managed to survive. Not for a second did he stop being rebellious, and he'd never followed anybody's will, or felt the need for it.

Until tonight.

For the first time in his life he wanted to please someone to the point that he would do anything Giancarlo asked. The memory of Giancarlo's spanking drew a slow smile to Rodrigo's lips.

The next morning, Giancarlo took the opportunity while Braulio was taking a shower to talk with Rodrigo about the bodyguard job. "Of course, it will start after you are recovered. In the meantime, you will have to stay with him inside the apartment."

"And who is he?" It was the third time Rodrigo asked the same thing. Giancarlo supposed it had to do with the fact that his charge was male. Couldn't he wait to get his hands on him? Giancarlo finished setting the breakfast table and asked, "Do you remember Santorno's son?"

"The punching bag?"

Giancarlo looked at him hard for a few seconds, and Rodrigo said, "Okay, I'm sorry. Yeah, I remember him, I don't remember his name, but the fact that his father was always punching him around is hard to forget."

"Yes, and you have no idea of what that does to a person."

"Father or not, if someone treated me like that, the man would get something back from me." Another hard look from Giancarlo and Rodrigo quickly added, "At a minimum, I would have run away long time ago."

"Well, not everybody is like you, Rodrigo. Besides, I bet that most of your confidence comes from the fact that Mario always treated you well."

“Well, that’s true.”

“We both had good fathers, and even though I didn’t agree with mine on everything, I’m still proud of him.”

“What’s his name? I mean the punching bag’s name?”

Giancarlo sighed. “Braulio.”

Rodrigo said, almost to himself, “How could I forget a name like that? Anyway. So you need me to protect this Braulio person? Is he your lover?”

Giancarlo smirked and answered, “None of your fucking business.”

“Hey, that’s not fair.”

“See how it feels when you get that type of answer?”

“You want me to risk”—Rodrigo used his splinted hands to emphatically gesture at his own body—“all of this, protecting that boy, and you aren’t even telling me why?”

Giancarlo tried to ignore the shape those hands showcased. “Because it’s the right thing to do. What would your father do in the same circumstances?”

Rodrigo ignored the question but said, “I miss him, you know.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” The bitterness in Rodrigo’s voice touched Giancarlo in an unexpected way.

“Listen, there was no point in the whole family going down. Your father knew that if he were the only one in jail, business would continue as usual. And that my family would protect yours.”

Rodrigo turned around as if he were to leave the kitchen. “I’m tired of your fucking mantras, dude.”

“Mantras?”

He turned back. “Honor, respect, and family. You keep saying those words over and over, but the truth is that all of that is a matter of convenience.”

“You are going to be paid well for the favor. And I’m even considering forgetting your debt to us.”

“Debt?”

“Yes, all that damage you caused at the casino.”

“In that case, deduct it from my pay, I don’t want charity.” Rodrigo squinted at him. “Where is the cash?”

Giancarlo opened a briefcase containing thousands of dollars and placed it on the kitchen counter. Rodrigo pulled it to his side and picked up a few bills, holding them up against the light coming through a nearby window.

“Do you think I would give you counterfeits?” Giancarlo grumbled.

Rodrigo shrugged. “I’ve known you all my life, but the truth is I don’t really know you.”

“That’s more cash than you’ll probably ever see in your life.”

“You’re underestimating me again. You know, I have ambition. This is just the start of a very lucrative career.”

“Rodrigo, I hope you’re not planning on blackmailing me later.”

“I’m not stupid. I know that this can buy a few kills without a body left behind for evidence.” He smiled and stepped toe-to-toe with Giancarlo. “However, I’m going to cut a different kind of deal with you.”

“You want more money?”

“No. I want you.” Rodrigo looked him up and down. Slowly. “But you know that already. I want you to want me. I want to be your submissive, Boss.”

“You and your kinks,” Giancarlo sighed. “Rodrigo, I’m not into leather.”

“*Our* kinks. Because I know you like it too, or at least, your cock does. You’re a natural, Boss.” The way he said the word *boss* sent all types of sensations throughout Giancarlo’s body.

While Giancarlo tried to control that cock of his, Rodrigo closed the briefcase and said, “By the way, I’m taking the cash too. You know, working expenses.”

“So, you still have that fantasy of being spanked and fucked afterward?”

“Hold on. That was then, the other night—we’d just met again. Now, I want more of you.”

“Fine. Do you want a whole night? I can do that, no problem.”

Rodrigo shook his head slowly and Giancarlo asked, “A whole weekend? That can be arranged.”

“I want more.”

“What exactly do you have in mind, Rodrigo?”

Again those dark eyes evaluated him before Rodrigo sighed and said, “I’m a natural born rebel. I love to do the opposite of what I’m told, and I hate to follow orders. I want to see if I can submit to someone. You might have what it takes to make me a submissive. If you succeed, I want to be with you for a while.”

The idea pleased Giancarlo, too. “Okay, I’ll do it, but you have to keep Braulio safe, at least until this issue is dealt with.”

“What is this issue and how are you going to deal with it? If I’m going to be his bodyguard, I have to know, right?”

“The main problem is that Santorno has a contract on Braulio. He hired someone to kill his own son.”

“I told you he was going to kill me!”

Braulio stood in the kitchen doorway, and after the initial surprise of seeing him there, Giancarlo crossed the distance to pull him into his arms. “No, he will not kill you. I will protect you, and we were talking about that this very moment.”

He placed his hand on Braulio’s shoulder and gently walked him forward until they stood in front of Rodrigo.

“So this is your friend.” The blue eyes looked Rodrigo up and down with distrust.

“Braulio, you know him from years ago. Remember those hunting trips we took with all the guys, back when you were kids?”

Braulio nodded and Giancarlo continued to explain, “This is Gazzara’s

son, Rodrigo.” He turned toward Rodrigo and said, “This is Braulio Santorno, I’m sure you remember him, right?”

Rodrigo laughed, and moaned when, apparently, his lips hurt. “Of course? How could I forget the punching bag?”

Of all the things Rodrigo could have said, that was the one Giancarlo never expected. “Rodrigo!”

Braulio looked Rodrigo up and down again, and said, “Yes, Rodrigo, I do remember you. Welcome to the club. It’s obvious someone has been punching you around, too.”

Where did that come from, Giancarlo wondered. He’d never heard Braulio talk that way before.

Rodrigo raised both arms in a peaceful gesture. “I didn’t mean any offense, dude. Back in the day, your old man used to beat the hell out of you, so we joked about you being a punching bag.”

“You all were so insensitive back then. A bunch of bullies.” Braulio clearly recalled those days with discontent.

And Rodrigo didn’t comfort him either. “Don’t get any illusions that we changed. I just saw Nico and Luciano, and they’re the same bad-asses as usual.” Rodrigo walked out of the kitchen as if the matter was settled, and headed to the living room.

To Giancarlo’s surprise, Braulio followed him, asking, “So you’re hanging around here now?”

Giancarlo joined them in time to hear Rodrigo’s answer. “I’m more like a prisoner, dude. The boss over here doesn’t know what to do with me.”

Braulio frowned as if he were trying to figure out what Rodrigo was talking about. The other young man kept talking, accompanied by his usual hand movements, while he contemplated the suite. “On second thought, I don’t mind being a sex slave in this type of place.” He sat on the sofa and placed his feet on the coffee table.

Braulio repeated the words like he was in a trance. “Sex slave? That doesn’t sound right.”

“Well, after seeing you, I don’t have much hope he will ever touch me. Who would care about someone like me when he has someone like you as a plaything?”

Braulio turned to Giancarlo with wide eyes. “What’s he’s talking about?” Before Giancarlo could answer, he added, lowering his voice, “Is he high?”

Giancarlo nodded.. “Yes, high on problems and he keeps adding them up.”

He closed the distance to Rodrigo and said, “Stop being a bother, if you annoy me enough I might do something you will regret.”

“Will I get another spanking?”

This time Giancarlo didn’t find it amazing at all. “Rodrigo, drop the act. You’re not really a prisoner, but if you walk away, don’t count on my protection. Remember that Claudio is still mad at you.”

That interested Braulio. “Does he have a problem with Claudio?”

Giancarlo answered, “Yes. Big time. Claudio almost killed him last night, although he denied it later, but I wouldn’t discount a vendetta.”

Braulio smiled and sat next to Rodrigo. “In that case, welcome aboard. Claudio’s enemies are my friends.”

That was the *last* thing Giancarlo expected to hear from Braulio. And Rodrigo seemed pleased. “Oh. Thanks. It’s nice to see you again... Braulio.” The *punching bag* nickname lingered in the air.

“Great, you guys are friends. Now, let’s eat breakfast,” Giancarlo told them.

“Boss, I’ll take the deal.” Rodrigo’s expression was the most serious he’d seen in him.

“Good for you. I’ll honor my part too.”

“Which deal?” Braulio asked.

“I’m your new bodyguard,” Rodrigo announced proudly, and Braulio demanded, “You and how many more?”

“You’ll see when the time comes, but if you insist on knowing my credentials, let me tell about that time when...”

Giancarlo walked back to the kitchen, wondering how was he going to survive a few days with these two in the same place. A series of activities that Rodrigo would approve of ran through his mind, and he smiled to himself. Yeah, why not? A plan started forming in his head, his priority that the young men would forget past encounters and bond as fast as possible. The hope that Rodrigo inherited some of his father's loyalty would be the base of Giancarlo's agenda.

CHAPTER 7

The three of them were outside, wearing nothing but swimsuits, relaxing next to the private rooftop swimming pool at Giancarlo's penthouse. As long as Braulio was at Giancarlo's place, he was safe. Even if Santorno found out where his son was, he would know better than to attack him in the middle of Philly.

After much discussion, they agreed that once Rodrigo's hands healed, the boys would go to a cabin that Rodrigo's father had somewhere in the Lehigh Valley. Nico would drive them out there, and nobody else would know the location. As nice as it was to relax by the swimming pool, Giancarlo wanted the whole thing over with, because the sexual tension among them was rising to new levels. Rodrigo could provoke merely with his presence. Even if it had been only two days, Giancarlo felt it had been a whole week of controlling his desires. And Braulio was being affected too.

Point-blank, Braulio asked him, "Will you make love to me while he watches? Would you like that?"

"Where did that come from, Braulio?"

"I have noticed how you guys look at one another, and you've never looked at me that way." Braulio alternated continually from jealousy to wanting Rodrigo to himself, and because of his lack of experience, it was easy to guess his feelings.

"Did Rodrigo suggest that to you?" Giancarlo asked as casually as he could.

"No. It's my idea. Believe it or not, I have a brain. And I can be naughty, too."

"Hey, come here." Giancarlo pulled him over to him. He slanted his face and took Braulio's lips between his. In no time, those lips separated to receive his tongue. They kissed for a while, and Braulio calmed down, or at least that was what it seemed like.

For a few minutes afterward, Braulio snuggled against Giancarlo, but he

kept watching Rodrigo. “Giancarlo, if we make love in front of him, he will know that you belong to me, and stop provoking you.”

Make love? Until now it had always been having sex, and what he’d done with Claudio or Angelo never included the word love. They didn’t even kiss. Maybe that’s why he liked to kiss Braulio so much, but Giancarlo had always stopped after getting Braulio off using his hands or his mouth. The shy question struck him the wrong way. What was so wicked about Rodrigo? He’d had many chances to take Braulio completely and had always controlled himself.

What was it about Rodrigo that drove him nuts?

Giancarlo sighed. “If we do anything sexual in front of him, he will more than likely join us.”

He studied Braulio’s reaction, how he looked from Rodrigo’s lean body back to him.

“And isn’t that what you wanted when you brought him here?” The words were strong, but the tone meek.

Giancarlo tried to find the right answer to that, and then Rodrigo, who had skinny-dipped since the first day, staying in the shallow end of the pool because he couldn’t swim, walked toward them.

“You two, stop showing off, because I’m getting hard.” As if Rodrigo’s cock heard him, it rose towards his belly right in front of them.

Rodrigo begged. “See? Are you going to leave me like this again?”

“Rodrigo, why don’t you wait until your hands heal before doing anything sexual?” Giancarlo teased him.

“My tongue and my ass are perfectly fine. I learned a long time ago how to take a beating, and I’ve had worse.”

Rodrigo placed a towel a few feet from them, and lay on it. He rubbed his cock against the towel frantically, the still reddened flesh of his exposed ass moving as if he were fucking someone. “Damn it, if I could only use my right hand,” he complained loudly. As if they needed to hear about his beloved right hand’s functions or how those were highly missed.

Braulio and Giancarlo watched, transfixed by the demonstration. Giancarlo's hand yearned to touch Rodrigo again, but for his plan to work, he had to control himself. He had been right when he assumed that having access to another man would awaken new desires in Braulio. During the last two days the sexual tension had heightened considerably, and on purpose Giancarlo limited the attention he gave to Braulio.

He felt disappointed and excited at the same time. It didn't take too much thought to guess what Rodrigo was trying to accomplish by calling attention to himself like that.

Braulio whispered in Giancarlo's ear, "Should we help?"

Giancarlo embraced him and whispered back, "If he lets you touch him—"

"What about you?"

"I'll be watching, making sure he doesn't hurt you. Braulio, use only your hands."

Braulio crawled toward Rodrigo, who opened his eyes to see who was kneeling next to him. From his position, Giancarlo saw the tiny disappointment in the dark pupils, and hoped Braulio didn't notice it. As if he read his mind, Rodrigo smiled as much as his hurt lips allowed and said, "Go ahead, I'm all yours."

Braulio couldn't believe his luck. He'd come to Giancarlo looking for the usual refuge and companionship, and also hoped this was the weekend he would be completely possessed by him, but apparently his lover didn't have any intention of furthering their lovemaking.

Maybe he misread Giancarlo's eyes that told him love wasn't that far away. If only he could express how much he was willing to be anything Giancarlo wanted. However, fate had brought a nice addition to their shared passion. At first, Braulio resented Rodrigo for invading their privacy, but now, he couldn't wait to feel that golden skin, all that lean, muscular body begging for his touch.

He had caressed only Giancarlo before, but there were parts of him that Braulio never dared to put his hands on or his fingers in. They'd never

discussed it, but instinct told him that Giancarlo's ass probably was off-limits, while Rodrigo waved his in an inviting manner.

"Rodrigo, turn over." Giancarlo's voice surprised both of them, but the command was obeyed instantly. Rodrigo turned over and Braulio breathed deep before he extended his hand and pinched a nipple between his index finger and thumb. He rolled it a little, caressing the skin around it up and down, and then pinched the other nipple. It pleased Braulio how Rodrigo arched in delight, and how the little pinkish nubs hardened.

Braulio licked his lips. Giancarlo had ordered him to use only his hands, but he was dying for a taste. Instinctively he raised his eyes to meet Giancarlo's gaze. They were on the same page, because without hesitation, Giancarlo nodded and Braulio lowered his head, darting his tongue and licking Rodrigo's nipples.

"Rodrigo, turn over." Giancarlo repeated the order, and Rodrigo obeyed, a little slower than before. This time, Braulio slid his hands all over Rodrigo's back, from his shoulders down to his calves, and up again. He lingered a little on the sculpted curve of Rodrigo's buns, until he heard the other one grunting his approval. For the first time in his life Braulio experienced what it was to feel pleasure by giving it to another.

Giancarlo spoke again, "Braulio, come here. Now."

When Braulio crawled toward him, there was something so sensual in the almost feline pace that Giancarlo's cock lengthened and throbbed against his swimsuit. Behind Braulio, Giancarlo noticed that Rodrigo followed, and resisted the urge to tell him to stay away. He could only imagine the view Braulio offered Rodrigo as he moved toward Giancarlo's chest. He didn't want to touch Rodrigo again, at least, not tonight. Because if he did, it wasn't going to be the type of caresses he planned to dispense to Braulio—he would take Rodrigo hard and fast.

So he ignored Rodrigo and focused all his attention on Braulio, gently pulling down Braulio's swimsuit, before spreading him over his own body, and brushing his lips. Braulio was beyond excitement, as he pushed his tongue

out and searched for Giancarlo's tongue, slipping in it deeper with a newfound passion. Jealously could be a strong aphrodisiac.

Giancarlo fought for dominance of the kiss. They had played this way before, but this time Braulio's need turned into desperation. He reached to touch Braulio's back with his hand, and before he could, he felt Braulio tensing up while looking at him with wide-open eyes. It took him a few seconds to understand what was going on, he looked behind Braulio's to see that Rodrigo knelt with his faced buried between Braulio's ass cheeks.

For an instant, the eroticism of their nude bodies, in that pose, distracted him. A new sensation invaded Giancarlo's most inner self, the need to own another and proclaim his possession, and the redness he could still see on Rodrigo's buttocks, fed that need. A jolt of pleasure went through Giancarlo's whole body, but he had to look out for Braulio's reactions, currently puffing air against his mouth. "Are you okay with what he's doing to you?"

The rasped question got an equally raspy answer. "Yes."

Braulio leaned on Giancarlo's chest while Rodrigo licked his asshole. Giancarlo watched, fascinated, as Braulio's face contorted in pleasure—he had never done something like that to him, mostly because he'd stayed away from Braulio's backside, but by the way he was enjoying the invasion of Rodrigo's tongue, it should become part of their routine. He had been playing with the idea of keeping Rodrigo around for his own kinky reasons, but he worried about Braulio's reaction to a triad. Now, it was obvious that Braulio wouldn't put up much of a fight.

As if he were summoned, Rodrigo raised his head and asked, "What are you planning with him, Giancarlo? Why is he still a virgin?"

It was the first time Rodrigo said his name, and it sent another rush of heated blood to his cock.

While he talked Rodrigo moved closer and closer, until he stood next to Giancarlo's legs, allowing his hard dick to skim the skin. Giancarlo felt the wetness of the other's pre-cum leaving a trail, and yearned for a taste, or at least a simple touch. The black eyes were now on his face, trying to steal answers Giancarlo never planned to share with anyone.

Braulio was the one who answered. "I'm not a virgin."

Giancarlo frowned, wondering where was this going, and Rodrigo elaborated. "I know a virgin asshole when I see, or taste one." His wicked smile flashed briefly. "How long have you guys been together?" He insisted.

Again Braulio answered, "A couple of years, and why would you care, Rodrigo?"

"Because I want to fuck the hell out of you, but I doubt the boss would let me."

Giancarlo stated, looking into Rodrigo's eyes, "There will be no fucking here tonight."

Rodrigo rolled his eyes. "What have you guys been doing all this time? Holding hands and kissing under the moonlight?"

Those words in another's mouth would have sounded funny, but Rodrigo's mocking ridiculed what Giancarlo thought was the most respectful thing he could have done for Braulio. Recalling his lover's expression when Rodrigo rimmed him forced him to face the truth. Maybe Braulio didn't want to be respected, but completely possessed.

In an unexpected movement, Giancarlo grabbed Rodrigo's cock and started pumping him up and down. A slow smile appeared on Rodrigo's face. The message was clear to Giancarlo—*I got you, dude*. He resisted the desire to hurt Rodrigo or to stop jerking him off. He had been manipulated enough for one day.

"I'm not giving you what you want, but I'm going to get you off so you'll shut up and go to sleep."

Rodrigo pointed with his head toward Braulio. "What about him?"

"He's my problem." Giancarlo had shared enough for the moment.

As if he took that as his cue to join the action, Braulio said, "And you're mine." He pulled down Giancarlo's swimsuit and lowered his head, placing a tender kiss on Giancarlo's cock. The gesture inspired a laugh from Rodrigo, quickly followed by a groan when Giancarlo pulled his dick with extra force.

Then Giancarlo watched as Braulio licked the pre-come from the head of his penis before taking it into his mouth as he had taught him. He slowed down

the pace at which he was pumping Rodrigo to match the rhythm of Braulio's sucking. His gaze met Rodrigo's nearly closed eyes, and he almost came. The sultry look promised every fantasy he could think of coming true. And all of them were as dark as those eyes.

Giancarlo slid his other hand down the curve of Braulio's ass and between his cheeks. The skin was soft but firm, and he regretted all those times he controlled himself. His eyes searched Braulio's, and it pleased him to see the same expression he saw earlier, when it had been Rodrigo's tongue probing him. He increased the pace of his hand on Rodrigo's cock, briefly stopping to gather the pre-come and use it as lubricant before rushing him to a loud climax. Rodrigo nearly convulsed in pleasure, ending with his mouth open, gasping for air. He slowly dragged himself to lie on a towel, away from Giancarlo and Braulio. So he didn't like being touched during afterglow. Giancarlo took note of that fact, who knew, it might come handy in the future.

Rodrigo found his voice. "Thanks, Boss. That was good. However, my prostate feels neglected."

Letting go of Giancarlo's cock for a moment, Braulio asked, "Prostate?" and Rodrigo answered with another question. "Under which rock have you been living, Braulio?"

"Rodrigo," Giancarlo warned.

Looking more relaxed, Rodrigo added, "If the boss gives me permission I'll show you what I'm talking about."

Giancarlo made up his mind. "There is no need, I'll do it myself."

Giancarlo gently pushed Braulio backward and moved up to lie beside him, his head propped on one hand. He began to kiss Braulio's neck, alternating soft kisses with the light trace of the tip of his tongue, then he trailed a chain of kisses down his chest. Giancarlo was making an effort to be gentle. Admiring Braulio's perfect skin, the nicely defined muscles of his chest, the dark nipples, now hard as a result of Giancarlo's mouth on them. Speaking of hard, Giancarlo noticed that Braulio had an erection. He also had his eyes closed, breathing through his mouth, and his lips were trembling. Then Giancarlo kissed his mouth again; softly, slowly, enjoying every second of it. Braulio kept his eyes closed, but responded to his kisses. For Giancarlo, those were

kisses that he felt deep down in his most inner self. He paused, and emotion made his voice almost unintelligible. "You are really beautiful."

It was all Giancarlo could say before continuing to explore Braulio's body, the way he had wanted to since the first time they met. Giancarlo kept stroking his thighs while his tongue circled one of Braulio's nipples, enjoying the sensation of feeling it harden even more. After that, Giancarlo went down and took Braulio's swollen cock in his mouth. Braulio opened his own to say something, and Giancarlo raised one hand to slowly caress his lips. The sensual touch urged Braulio to kiss that finger, then suck it, almost imitating what Giancarlo was doing with his length. Giancarlo gave a slight forward push with his chin every time his mouth sucked Braulio's dick, bobbing up and down. He increased the pace, noting how Braulio began to moan. He could almost smile, if his mouth hadn't been full. Then he went for the finishing touch.

With his hand, he caressed Braulio's buttocks, until he located his entrance. Giancarlo could feel how Braulio froze, but he continued, anyway. He kept sucking him faster, while using the tip of one of his fingers to softly caress the outside of his entrance, Giancarlo was so busy, he didn't anticipate the intensity of Braulio's coming in his mouth. He swallowed the hot bitter fluid, still holding Braulio's member with his lips, and he could feel Braulio's spasm in the most intense orgasm he had ever witnessed from him. A few seconds later, Braulio was still trembling and trying to catch his breath. He muttered a *thank you*, and Giancarlo let him go.

In that exact moment, Giancarlo felt another set of hands on his legs, stronger than Braulio. He guessed it was Rodrigo, and paused to tell him to let him alone, but somehow Rodrigo got under him, his whole body spread against Giancarlo's torso and genital area.

For a second Giancarlo thought he was trying to be penetrated by him, but Rodrigo intentions were something he'd never tried before, rubbing his backside against Giancarlo, he spread his legs enough to clamp Giancarlo's erect cock between his ass cheeks and guide it between his strong legs, and using the motion of his hips and the friction of his thighs, he started returning the favor of jerking Giancarlo off.

“Did you change your mind? You said that you were not going bareback.” Giancarlo muttered against his ear.

“We’re not, and this is for your pleasure. Since you’re not fan of penetration, there will be none.”

He didn’t bother denying it, he could have given him a demonstration to prove how much he wanted to penetrate him, but instead Giancarlo started moving his hips, and aimed for Rodrigo’s scrotum. The second time he nudged it, the moans out of Rodrigo were clear.

“What? I thought it was only for my pleasure.” Giancarlo teased him.

Rodrigo kept moving fast, and met his thrusting until they both came, the pleasure unexpected and different. Giancarlo avoided falling onto him, but pulled Rodrigo on his side and hugged him tenderly. He felt Rodrigo tensing his body as if he wanted to reject him, but soon he relaxed. From the side of Rodrigo’s body Giancarlo extended his hand and held Braulio’s, meeting his blue gaze with some concern of what he was going to find there. Braulio smiled, satisfied, and the smile reached his eyes, giving Giancarlo peace of mind, and in a few minutes, they all were sleeping.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning during breakfast Giancarlo put down his cup of coffee and asked, “Braulio, do you mind sharing some of your clothes with Rodrigo?” He was tired of seeing him around only in a pair of briefs, provoking constant erections that needed to be taken care of in a similar way to what happened by the swimming pool.

“No, why should I mind? I already shared with him what I care about the most in the world.”

Rodrigo winked and said, “Thank you. You have no idea of how much I appreciate it.”

It was hard to know if they referred to him or the clothes. Giancarlo had the feeling they were talking about him.

The last person Giancarlo wanted to see was Claudio, but there was no way to stop him when he came through the door, followed by Nico. “Since when do I have to announce myself to see you?” he asked from the living room.

Behind Claudio’s back, Nico shrugged both shoulders while opening his hands in a sign of resignation.

“You two, please stay here.” Giancarlo walked toward Claudio. “I thought we were not going to see each other until Monday.”

Knowing things could heat up soon, and not in a romantic way, Giancarlo walked out of the living room hoping Claudio would follow. He did, and they stood in the middle of the guest room to argue.

“Now I know why I’m persona non grata. You got company.”

“Claudio, irony is not one of your best skills. Listen, I’m in the middle of a dangerous situation.”

“That’s not news given the company you choose these days. Giancarlo, stop thinking with your cock. Those boys are going to ruin everything we worked for so hard all these years.” Giancarlo didn’t say anything, he knew these types of comments were expected. Claudio continued to make his case. “Don’t you see it? Rumors will start, and soon your secret will be out. If you want to have sex with younger guys, Angelo can safely arrange that for you.”

“It’s not only about sex, Claudio.” Giancarlo stepped closer to him. “I’m tired of being by myself.”

“And you couldn’t find a more appropriate companion?”

“I’m not taking a wife like you.” Giancarlo lowered his voice. “I can’t leave Braulio alone now, either.”

“Why is that?”

“Santorno put a contract on his life. I have to protect him until a better solution comes up.”

Claudio’s mouth was a thin line, drawn tight at some thought. Giancarlo studied his face before asking, “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“No. You’ve become suicidal. Can’t you see that there is no way this can end well. There is nothing I can do around here, I’m going to spend the rest of the weekend with my family, and on Monday, I’ll go back to work as usual.”

“Good for you. I was hoping you’d give me a solution.”

“There is no way out of this. You’re going to have to kill Santorno, and a war will follow.”

Nico knocked on the open door. “Boss, everything is ready, we got to go.”

Claudio asked, “Where are you going, Giancarlo?”

“Not me. The boys are going to be taken to a secure location by Nico.”

“Both of them? What does have Rodrigo to do with all of this?”

“He will be looking out for Braulio.”

“I can’t believe you trust that delinquent. No, don’t tell me the details, I don’t want to know, the less I know the better.” With those words, he stormed out of the room and the apartment—the wish that Claudio would storm out of his life struck Giancarlo as a surprise. Yes, it was about time for him to revise his relationship with Claudio. But that had to wait.

He went back to the living room and gestured to the boys to join him. “Everything is ready, you guys need to go now. Nico will drive you and give you a new cell phone to keep in touch with us. Don’t use it to call anyone else.”

Giancarlo kissed Braulio briefly on the lips, but hugged him for nearly a minute, both with eyes closed and knowing that it might be the last time they saw one another or touched each other. Making an effort, Giancarlo let go of Braulio.

“Rodrigo, I know you think of yourself as dangerous, but this guy, Daniel Bucciarelli, he’s someone you don’t want to fight.” As if to help to get his message across, Giancarlo put his hands over Rodrigo’s shoulders and lowered his face a few inches to match his, nose to nose. “Promise me that if you see him you will run, that you will escape as fast as you can. Braulio is not a street fighter like you, remember that.”

Rodrigo looked him in the eyes. “I promise, Boss. I will keep him safe.”

When their breath mingled Giancarlo felt the urge to kiss him, but controlled himself, because he’d never kissed his men before sending them out on a deadly assignment. He perceived the same craving in Rodrigo, so he eased their mutual need when he added, “Good. Nico will give you a weapon, too.”

Rodrigo smiled at that, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Braulio hugged him again, his face buried in Giancarlo’s chest. It took a few minutes of reassuring words to get him out of the door. The last he saw of them was Rodrigo’s dark eyes, with a new sense of commitment in them. His bonding plan had worked better and sooner than anticipated—to his own detriment, because now, he not only worried for Braulio, but for Rodrigo too.

They arrived at the one-story cabin in the woods, the perfect place for a hideout. There were neighbors, on the other side of the stretch of woods. This part of Lehigh Valley was considered rural, but at least the little house had electricity and running water. Rodrigo showed him around and said, “I’m sorry, if it’s this simple.”

Braulio smiled. “Thanks for bringing me here, and for sharing what you have. I really like it.”

The four rooms were clean, and the kitchen had food, lots of food, besides what Nico got for them. For security reasons, they agreed to sleep in the same

bed. Of course, Braulio knew that Rodrigo had his own agenda, but he didn't care. By now, he shared that agenda, and who knew, he might learn a thing or two that he could use with Giancarlo if he ever saw him again.

First, they had to survive this ordeal. The idea of going back to his father to avoid putting Giancarlo and Rodrigo in danger had occurred to Braulio. But he knew that if he did that, and his father killed him, Giancarlo would start a vendetta that would cost many more lives.

He helped Rodrigo to fix a motorcycle that, according to Braulio's limited knowledge, didn't need any fixing. When Rodrigo took him into the woods and found a small valley for Braulio to learn to ride it, he understood that the bike might be part of some escape plan, in case they were found.

"But nobody knows we're here," he'd told Rodrigo one afternoon.

"Braulio, I'll tell you a secret. My dad started to train me as his replacement before he went to jail."

For some reason this didn't surprise Braulio. "Really? So, you're like that guy that's after me?"

"No, I don't have his experience, but I learned two rules from Dad. First, kill with anything at hand, don't rely only on your weapons. And second," he stared at Braulio before continuing. "Anyone can betray you, anyone. So, we need a plan B. One that only the two of us know about."

"Giancarlo would never betray—"

"Okay, maybe not him, but what about Nico, Luciano or Claudio?"

Braulio couldn't argue with that. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Rodrigo grinned and said, "Get on all fours and spread your sweet ass for me."

Braulio thought he was serious and looked around to find a place that wasn't covered with rocks and moss. Rodrigo laughed and said, "I'm kidding, maybe later we'll try that one. Now, I need you to learn to ride the bike on this terrain, because if something happens to me, I want you to ride it to the city."

Braulio nodded, and paid attention to Rodrigo's instructions. They spent the next two days riding the motorbike, and finding the closest but most

hidden places to put it. They even practiced how long it would take for Braulio to get out in the middle of the night and find it, start it, and run with it.

Braulio woke up startled, and it took a few seconds for him to realize what was going on and that there was no imminent danger. Rodrigo was right there, standing, resting his back on the wall next to the bed, with one knee bent. In the semidarkness of the room, what caught Braulio's attention was what he held in his hand. He could see Rodrigo's swollen cock, fully erect. And from his point of view it looked huge. Rodrigo was breathing heavily, his eyes were closed, and his lips shivered. He opened his eyes and looked back at Braulio with surprise, but recovered very fast, and continued his task.

Braulio stayed on the bed, staring at him.

Rodrigo caressed his own nipples with one hand, while the other kneaded his thick length, teasing with the slow show until the urge made him increase the pace. His strong hand moved up and down, sometimes in a circular motion, or pulled his cock, letting his hand slide to the head and spreading the pre-come down to the base.

Braulio watched him for a few seconds before saying, "I would like to do what you were doing the other night with Giancarlo. It looked like fun."

Rodrigo raised an eyebrow as if the comment were unexpected. "Then come over here."

Braulio got nude and, raising both arms, pulled Rodrigo into a hug. A simple embrace that bonded their bodies from to chests to loins. He rested his head on Rodrigo's shoulder, and muttered, "I know what Giancarlo said about no fucking, but you guys agreed that night that it wasn't fucking, right?"

This was a new experience for Braulio, and Rodrigo didn't want to mess things up. His previous experiences with other men in the past, had been fast and intense. There were few words exchanged, only the urgent need to satisfy the craving they had at the moment. But Rodrigo remembered the way Giancarlo made love to Braulio, so gentle and caring. He had felt envious of this boy that inspired so much in the man Rodrigo wanted. He'd been used to

grabbing what he wanted from life, taking sometimes without permission. Never one to beg, for the first time in his life he wanted to make a deal with fate. He wanted Braulio to live, but most importantly, he wanted to be kept by Giancarlo. He wanted the man to be his reward for a life without love or tenderness. Could someone love two people at the same time?

Lust was possible, he had no doubts Giancarlo desired him too, but would he ever love him like he loved Braulio?

The touched of hands smaller than his own took him away from those deep thoughts.

Braulio's breathing and trembling body spoke of fears and excitement as he touched Rodrigo's back. If the hard evidence of that excitement weren't pressed against his own belly, Rodrigo would have turned him down. No matter how much he wanted to get intimate with him. Giancarlo might punish him later, but rather than fear it, he craved such discipline, so he was game. Rodrigo had always found it hard to resist a little play

"Since you've never done this fake fucking, let me drive."

As gently as he could, he freed himself from Braulio's arms, and stood behind him, pulling Braulio against his front. Next, Rodrigo placed his hands on Braulio's hips, feeling how he trembled against his body. There was a new type of sensuality in the boy's stuttering breath.

Rodrigo instructed Braulio, "Open your legs a little bit."

The friction was totally different than being inside of him would have been, but Rodrigo could do with this, because it still felt better than his hand.

Braulio felt the press of Rodrigo's groin on his back, the sensation overwhelming. Rodrigo ran a hand across Braulio's torso and ended by caressing his cock, the expert grip lingering there. Next, Braulio felt the hardness of Rodrigo's cock sliding under his ass and between his legs. He gasped, unable to control the sound—the feeling so new to him, and beyond any forbidden fantasy.

As Rodrigo pressed his penis against his flesh Braulio felt the wet tip leaving a hot trace of pre-come, nudging the space between his ass and his

balls. Before Braulio could adjust to this, Rodrigo placed one hand on his hip and grabbed Braulio's dick with the other. The moment Rodrigo's thumb spread the pre-come dripping from his dick while rubbing the slit, Braulio thought he would come. "Rodrigo, I think it's too much, I'm going to... I can't handle it much longer."

"Go ahead, that's the idea."

"What about you?"

"Nice of you to be thinking of me. For now, be selfish and just feel."

Rodrigo's hand started stroking him, up, down, and around. Repeatedly. He gently but steadily started to fuck Braulio's inner legs while jerking his dick to the same rhythm. Then Rodrigo whispered in his ear. "Do you like it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Close your legs as tight as you can and try to match my rhythm."

Braulio obeyed, and Rodrigo increased his thrusts. Seconds later, Braulio came, the release so much stronger than he anticipated that after the initial spasm of pleasure he almost lost his ability to stand. Rodrigo gripped his hips before shoving himself with more intensity, the movement lasting only seconds before Rodrigo twitched, stood still, and lay down on the bed, taking Braulio with him.

CHAPTER 9

After the boys were gone, Giancarlo thought he was going to lose his mind. He couldn't sleep at all, so he stayed up planning scheme after scheme to get rid of Santorno. As soon as he saw Nico the next morning he asked, "Do you know where Santorno keeps the stuff he does business with on the side?"

"I think at one of the warehouses in South Philly. I'll tell you tonight for sure."

"Good." Giancarlo sat behind his desk. "I got a plan."

Nico sat in front of him. "Luciano doesn't like it when you say that, and I get nervous."

Giancarlo ignored the comment and leaned forward, asking, "Can you ask our friends, the Mexicans, if instead of cash they can pay their toll in merchandise?"

"Are we going to sell that stuff?" Nico twisted his nose at the idea.

"No, but I need some of it for evidence."

"Evidence? To incriminate someone? Santorno? I don't have to bother our associates, a small amount I can easily get."

"No, I need a few tons for the plan to succeed."

Nico was speechless for a few seconds. "What is the plan?"

"We're getting rid of Santorno once and for all. No bloodshed, sadly. If I want a long sentence he must be charged with conspiring to import tons of cocaine, some heroin and money laundering. We know he's done worse than that, but we have no proof."

"Okay, I'll speak with them and we will get a delivery to Santorno's South Philly location." He paused and looked Giancarlo in the eyes before announcing. "It will cost millions, Boss. Way more than what we charge them for doing business in our territory."

"That's what I like about you, efficient as usual. Don't worry about the cost, we will recover it some other way."

Nico observed him thoughtfully for a moment. “Giancarlo, you know, sometimes you can be evil. I don’t want you as an enemy.”

“Sometimes? That was the least cruel of my ideas. Like I said, I’m going to miss the blood spilling. I hope he gets it in jail, I need to send a message to Gazzara.”

Nico laughed at that. “Are you going to ask for Rodrigo’s hand in matrimony?”

“No, he wouldn’t approve it, but he will be pleased to know his son is part of my crew. I also want to give him a list of our enemies, the ones locked up like him. Old habits die hard, and who knows, he might take care of the bloodless issue.”

Nico stopped laughing. They both knew Giancarlo wouldn’t kill unless necessary, but this was one of those killings essential to keep the peace.

“Boss, I’ll find a way to get your orders to him. He will be thrilled to be of service.”

“Thanks. As long as Santorno is out there, we won’t be at peace.”

“I promise you, I’ll make it fast and painless.” Daniel Bucciarelli told Braulio, with the calm attitude that Braulio knew went along with what they called honor and respect. The boy shook in fear, and not caring if they thought he was a coward, he extended his hand to grab Rodrigo’s. They hadn’t had a chance, because the two men had arrived at night, while they slept, without making any noise, and easily bypassing the traps Rodrigo had set. They were armed with what Rodrigo told Braulio were automatic weapons, so there was no point in fighting, hence Rodrigo didn’t even try. They were taken to the small living room of the cabin and watched over with a semiautomatic by Peter Rocco, Santorno’s main henchman.

Bucciarelli searched everywhere. He collected the four weapons Rodrigo had, making a nice pile in a corner of the next room and removing the ammunition before dropping the guns on the ground. They even found the one hidden inside the toilet tank in a plastic container.

Braulio had known Daniel and Peter all his life. They weren’t friends, but

it was hard to imagine how they could be like this with him. "Please let me go, you can say anything to Dad, like we escaped or that we—"

"Stop begging." The order came from Rodrigo, who had said almost nothing since they were captured. An unusual behavior in him, if Braulio were asked.

Daniel shook his head. "And get your father upset with us? No way."

"Are you going to kill me?" Braulio asked.

"Not, yet. Your father is on his way. He wants to personally take care of this one." He punched Rodrigo again and Braulio yelled, "Leave him alone!" When Peter stepped backwards, Braulio added, "He is just a friend, he had nothing to do with my choices."

Daniel laughed. "Tell that to your father. We're following orders." He walked away from the younger men, but kept a watchful eye on them.

"They got all your weapons." Braulio pointed to the guns in the other room.

Rodrigo didn't say anything to that, and remained silent for a few minutes. The men were standing between him and his guns; he could have tried to fight, but Braulio figured that not resisting them earlier had paid off because they didn't restrain them.

"When my father gets here," Braulio whispered, "he will kill you to hurt me. If he recognizes you, he will think that we've been together for years, maybe since we met at the family gatherings."

"How romantic." Rodrigo smirked and whispered back, "Listen, I will try again to get rid of these guys. As soon as you see me walking to the kitchen, run to where the bike is. I'll try to join you, but if by the time you're passing the house, I'm not outside, you leave without me. Are we clear?"

Braulio nodded, and lowered his voice further. "What are you going to do?"

"What I planned for at the start, and no, you don't want to know the details."

Braulio couldn't believe his ears. "You planned this?"

“Not step by step, but I knew I didn’t have a chance in a confrontation with Bucciarelli. So, I’m taking my dad’s advice.”

Braulio remembered what he told him the first day they got there, and since the bike was plan B, it had to be the kill-without-weapons part. No, he didn’t want to witness that.

Rodrigo looked at him and said, “Never underestimate anyone, especially not a gay teenager you think is weaker than you.” Braulio looked at the men and back at him without understanding. Rodrigo smiled. “Let me kiss you good-bye, just in case. Run when I say so.”

He leaned forward and kissed Braulio without closing his eyes. Braulio didn’t close his either, and lamented that the kiss was a lie. Rodrigo was a good kisser. If they survived this, he was going to do way more than kiss him.

Daniel yelled at them, “You two, stop doing that—this is not Romeo and Juliet.”

Rodrigo walked fast to the kitchen, and on his way, he muttered to Braulio, “Remember to run as soon as they follow me.”

Braulio stood, but stayed put as if he didn’t know what to do. As Rodrigo predicted, Daniel went to the kitchen after him, but Peter stayed near Braulio.

Speed and surprise were his main weapons, besides the barbecue fuel the mobsters overlooked while they were looking for weapons. Without wasting another second, Rodrigo picked up the liquid fire starter from under the sink, stood up on the kitchen counter and sprayed Daniel with it. Next Rodrigo threw a match at him to light him on fire as he shouted out, “Braulio, run!”

Peter hesitated a second as if he couldn’t decide to go after Braulio, or stay to help Daniel, who tried to put out the fire by rolling on the floor. Apparently, Peter made up his mind, because he entered the kitchen, fired a shot at Rodrigo and missed. Rodrigo jumped away from the sink, and used the same method to light Peter on fire. As both men tried to help one another, Rodrigo didn’t hesitate, he ran outside, grabbing a handgun and their cell phones on his way.

By the time he reached the road, Braulio was coming toward him riding the motorcycle, so he jumped on the back yelling, “Go, go!”

On the road they saw lights coming from a car, and Rodrigo told Braulio, “Let’s take the side road.” They barely had time to make a turn to get off the main road when the car passed, a black Mercedes.

Braulio said, “That’s my father.”

Rodrigo told him, “Well, we better hurry, before he comes after us.”

They also heard sirens heading toward the cabin, so probably the neighbors called 911 when they heard the commotion.

They changed positions, and Rodrigo rode the old dirt road as if the devil himself were after them.

Giancarlo ended the call with Juliano and made an effort not to show how affected he was.

“What happened?” Asked Nico.

“The police found two guys with burns in the cabin, but no trace of the boys.”

“That’s good news.”

“Yes, it means they are on the run. The problem is, why haven’t they called me?”

Nico’s expression told Giancarlo that he was hiding something from him. “Is there anything I should know?”

“Well, if I were Rodrigo, I wouldn’t have called you either.”

“And that’s why?”

“Giancarlo, someone close to you told Santorno where they were hiding. Only you can’t see it. All I’m going to say is that Luciano and I would never betray you.”

“So, according to you, Claudio told Santorno.”

“Of course he did. He hates Rodrigo, he has never liked Braulio, and he thinks you belong to him.”

“I find that hard to believe. And anyway, how could he have known the cabin’s location?”

“Boss, haven’t you ever heard of GPS? Claudio has access to our system, he bought the cars for us.”

“Damn it! I never expected that from him, Nico.”

“Let’s set a trap for him. Come on.”

Giancarlo followed Nico, even as his mind refused to believe Claudio would do this to him, because he knew how important Braulio was to him. Maybe precisely because of that he betrayed him. When they arrived at Claudio’s office they found him sitting behind his desk, doing some paperwork, as usual. In that moment, Giancarlo realized that Claudio had always acted as if he were the acting boss, or a CEO.

As soon as he saw them, Claudio asked, “Any news about the boys?”

Giancarlo said nothing, but Nico commented. “Should we expect any? I thought they were safe in Giancarlo’s South Philly warehouse.”

As if Giancarlo knew Nico’s intentions he said, “Nico!”

“What? Claudio didn’t know?” Nico’s innocent expression seemed real... almost as much as Claudio’s curious one.

“What should I know?” Claudio asked.

“That we changed the location where the boys were going to be at the last minute.” This time Giancarlo answered.

“You sent them to that warehouse? Are you insane? That place is so uncomfortable.” Claudio asked.

“Yes, but it’s safe,” Giancarlo replied. He studied how nervous Claudio looked, rearranging the objects on his desk as if he couldn’t wait for them to leave. Claudio finally opened a folder and started flipping pages. “I don’t know about you, but I still have work to do. Please keep me informed.” And just like that they were dismissed.

Giancarlo nodded and followed Nico to the door. At the last instant, he decided to use the trick of closing the door as if he had left, but remained inside. Nico closed the door behind him, and when Giancarlo turned around he

saw Claudio, his back facing Giancarlo, walking toward the windows, already dialing someone on his phone.

After a quick exchange, Claudio said, “I don’t know who attacked those men, but the boys were never there. Well, if they were, they no longer are. They are at the warehouse, yes, the same one where the merchandise is. By now they saw it. You have to rush and get rid of them. No, Santorno, you listen to me, go and do what I’m telling you, or you’re alone in all of this.”

Giancarlo opened the door again, and let Nico enter the room with a grim expression on his face as he nodded to his cousin. When Claudio heard the noise he turned around and looked at them in shock.

Nico pulled his handgun and said, “Your gun, and your hands where I can see them.”

If it hadn’t been for the bitter taste in his mouth, Giancarlo would have smiled. Nico and his witticisms. Maybe he had recommended the wrong cousin to be a Fed after all. But that was another story for another day. Today might turned out to be tragic.

“You better kill me now, because if I live I will come after you all.” Claudio’s tone was cold as ever.

Giancarlo made an effort of matching it. “In that case, I will not hesitate to kill you.”

“Aren’t you worried that I will tell everybody the truth about us?”

“Which truth? You mean our lie? That you manipulated me to do whatever you wanted? I know that you’ll never tell anything to anybody, because you’re too ashamed of what happened between us, to do so.” This time the bitterness escaped in his words.

“You’re right. I didn’t mention you to Santorno. I told him that Braulio’s romance is with Rodrigo. So we can still fix this between us.” He looked Giancarlo with the charming expression that seduced him in the past.

Giancarlo couldn’t believe the nerve. “And fuck you as usual while I await your next betrayal?”

“Giancarlo, you will never find someone to replace me.” Claudio truly believed his own words.

“Where? In or out of bed? Managers are a dime a dozen, and as for in bed, I won’t have a problem there, either. And as a matter of fact, you were right about Rodrigo.” Somehow Giancarlo faked a smile. There was no evidence of the lust Claudio had shown before for Rodrigo, so it had obviously been another lie.

Then pragmatic, as usual, Claudio asked, “If you’re not going to kill me. Then what’s next?”

“I’m going to give you the opportunity you didn’t give Rodrigo or Braulio. I’ll let you go to jail, and with luck, you will never end up near Mario Gazzara, who will soon learn how you tried to kill his son. Twice.”

“I can’t imagine how you could send me to jail. I’ve done nothing that will stand in court.”

“It’s not going to be me. Actually, it will be a collaboration of the FBI and the DEA.” With a tilt of his head he told his cousin. “Nico, lock him inside the warehouse together with that extra merchandise we talked about yesterday. Claudio is Santorno’s coconspirator in his money laundering operation.”

After the initial shock Giancarlo’s words drew in his face, Claudio raised his head high and walked out as if nothing happened, as if they never cared for one another. And maybe, on his part it had been like that, and Giancarlo had only been another stepping stone on his way.

Giancarlo didn’t need Juliano’s call to confirm his plan was a success; the ten o’clock news covered the arrest of Santorno and his crew. That Claudio Albano had been at the same location spoke of betrayal to anyone in the know. At least, Giancarlo could denounce Claudio’s disloyalty without it being a complete lie. Giancarlo hadn’t been surprised to see how calmly they all reacted to the arrest, they were probably counting on the good lawyers the Family would assign for their defense.

Of course, they might have a good defense, but there would be a better prosecution. There was no way Juliano, or the prosecutor would let Fabian Santorno walk away. There was no coverage of the burnt men at the cabin, but Juliano had told him that they were going to be processed for a bunch of charges when they left the hospital. Daniel Bucciarelli had a long list of crimes to pay for.

Braulio looked at the screen of the cell phone and said, “Rodrigo, it’s Giancarlo again. We have to answer.”

“No. Someone next to him is a rat.” Rodrigo repeated what he had told Braulio earlier.

Rodrigo and Braulio had found refuge in a truck stop near Philly. The place looked a lot like a diner, and people came and went all the time.

“Wait. He left a message, let me check.” Braulio frowned as he listened, and said, “You were right. They got the rat, and they also got my father. We can go back home.”

Rodrigo didn’t say anything. He was glad the run was over, but at the same time he was going to miss his little cute friend, and as for the boss, he’d rather ignore any thoughts of him. “What home are you talking about? You mother died years ago, your father is going to jail. You have the same home I do, here and there.” Maybe he would stay with him, Rodrigo hoped.

Braulio faked a smile. “Welcome back, Mr. Optimism. Listen, Rodrigo, wherever Giancarlo lives, is my home. And I think you’re welcome too. He likes you a lot.”

“Yeah, right.”

Braulio called Giancarlo and they agreed to wait for Nico to take them back home. Rodrigo almost felt like leaving Braulio to go “home” by himself, but he had to report back to the boss and deliver the package safe.

There was a TV behind the counter, and the cashier and the waiter were listening to the local news, where the arrest of Fabian Santorno was breaking news everywhere. The boys sat at a table a few feet away, but they heard and saw the report.

“Braulio, come here.” Rodrigo opened his arms in an unusual gesture of warmth, and Braulio didn’t waste a second. He was inside the embrace and burying his face against Rodrigo’s neck as soon as he heard the invite. Then, as he remembered where they were, Braulio sat up straight in his chair.

“I know what you are going through...” Rodrigo said.

“No, you don’t.” Braulio explained. “Your father is a man that everybody missed. My father is someone that everyone will be happy is in prison.

Starting with me. I'm not sad for that, but I'm worried for Giancarlo. If my father talks, the whole Condottieri family is going down."

"That won't happen, I can assure you." Rodrigo spoke with confidence.

"How do you know?"

"During the first days my dad was locked up, there were a bunch of guys watching him to see if he was flipping, and if he had shown any sign of ratting out, they would have killed him right there."

"But others have succeeded."

Rodrigo insisted, "That was in the past, I'm sure he won't have the chance if he chooses to talk. Trust me on that one."

CHAPTER 10

When they arrived, Braulio jumped into Giancarlo's arms and kissed him. Rodrigo skipped the kissing couple and went to take a seat on one of the sofas. After a few minutes of making out, Giancarlo and Braulio walked over to where he sat, and Giancarlo said, "Thanks for bringing him back safe."

"You're welcome. Where is my cash?"

Giancarlo's smile froze and Braulio looked at Rodrigo, shaking his head. "I can't believe you can't wait."

Rodrigo shrugged. "Wait for what? I did my job, and I want to be paid. Whatever is left after the money I owe the casinos, of course."

Giancarlo answered, "What I gave you before is where you left it, in the kitchen." If Rodrigo cared so much about money, why did he leave the briefcase behind? It didn't make any sense. "I'll get your extra cash as soon as I can, but I just fired my general manager and we're sorting things out."

"I can't believe Claudio betrayed you." Braulio remarked.

"He most likely betrayed the both of you, which is the same thing. If someone hurts you, they hurt me too." Giancarlo explained.

Rodrigo stood as if he couldn't take it anymore and said, "Well, I'll call you tomorrow. Now, I better get going."

Braulio looked at Giancarlo with wide-open eyes, silently begging him to do something. Giancarlo extended an arm and stopped Rodrigo on his way to the door. "Do you want me to beg you to stay with us? Didn't you hear what I said?"

Rodrigo looked sideways at him. "I thought you were talking to Braulio."

"I included you, too, Rodrigo. I'm not sure what is going on between all of us, but whatever it is, I want to give it a good try."

Rodrigo faced him as if he were trying to figure out what Giancarlo wanted. "No need to be nice and gentle with me. What you want is to give me a good fuck. Ah. Before I forget, I didn't fuck Braulio, I touched him yes, because he asked and because I couldn't help it, but his ass is as intact as when we left this house."

Giancarlo laughed because Braulio's expression didn't announce anything good for Rodrigo. In that moment Braulio pushed his upper arm and said, "What is your obsession with my ass, Rodrigo? Stop it. This is more than fucking and you know it. If you want to leave, just do it."

Rodrigo stared at Braulio in awe because he'd never seen him mad. Giancarlo put his arms around both of their shoulders and said, "I understand Rodrigo's obsession, Braulio. You have such a nice ass."

"You too, Giancarlo?"

Giancarlo sighed and glanced at Rodrigo and then back at Braulio. "The truth is, Rodrigo's ass is the one I've been thinking a lot about."

Braulio pushed him again, and asked defiantly. "Rodrigo, do you feel better now?"

"No. I already know he wants to fuck me."

Giancarlo took a moment to clarify. "Yes, I want to fuck you, but after I spank the hell out of you. Hero and all, you're still a badass, Rodrigo. I can't believe I bothered doing anything nice for you."

Rodrigo stared at him and asked, squinting his eyes, "What nice thing are you talking about?"

"Remember our last talk before you hit the road? I considered your suggestions and went shopping." Giancarlo walked toward the guest bedroom and opened the door, "I got a lot of stuff that I have no idea of how it works, but I'm eager to learn. And I would like you to join me."

Rodrigo entered the room. It had been transformed into a dungeon, even the formerly white walls were now black and burgundy. He touched some of the devices in there. He didn't know how to use them either, but the smell of leather and the shape of some of the toys on the different shelves excited him.

Giancarlo asked, "What do you say, are you hanging around here? Or going to your usual here and there?"

Rodrigo picked up a pair of metal cuffs and casually asked, "Is there going to be fucking with penetration?"

Giancarlo controlled a smirk. "Sure, deep penetration. I have condoms and lube too."

Braulio stepped between them. "What about me? You guys aren't going to leave me out, right?"

Rodrigo answered him, "This is for grown-up people."

"I saw your driver's license, you're younger than me."

"Maybe in years, but in experience, I'm ancient. I'm sorry, Braulio, you're destined to die a virgin."

"I am not." Braulio insisted, and Rodrigo turned around to face him. "You are."

"I've done so much stuff all these years with Giancarlo that I think we're lovers. I'm not a virgin."

"If he has never put his cock in you, that's a virgin in my book."

"Enough." Giancarlo said the single word and both turned to look at him. Then he added, "Rodrigo, if what you want is to be the first to fuck him, tell him, and if he wants it, go ahead. I don't have a problem."

"You don't?" Rodrigo asked surprised, and Braulio silently showed the same expression.

"No, I didn't do it before because I feared becoming too possessive if I did. But you're already very possessive of him, so to keep things in harmony, if he agrees, end his virginity."

Braulio put his arm around Giancarlo. "And after I do it with him, will you ever go all the way with me?"

"Sure, I will. I'll make love to you in any way you want me to."

Rodrigo walked out the room, "Well, you know what, I love the sex thing, but I'm hungry. You've got to feed me first, or I won't let you touch me."

Braulio followed him, singing, "Somebody is jealous."

As Giancarlo closed the door to their makeshift dungeon, he got the feeling that this was going to be more intense than anything he ever faced in his life.

Rodrigo held Braulio's hand for a second longer than needed. "Please stay."

"No, pain isn't my thing."

"It's not really painful, well, the good type of pain, I like it. This is something I always wanted to try." He looked at his hand, an unusually shy gesture for Rodrigo. "When Giancarlo spanked me, I knew I had to do it seriously."

Braulio smiled as if he understood, but still said, "I pass. I'll be in the master bedroom." He leaned forward and whispered something in Rodrigo's ear that provoked a grin. Giancarlo watched Braulio leave with a thoughtful expression and asked, "What was all that about?"

"It's a secret."

"So you're keeping secrets from me, eh?"

"No, Boss. He said that he missed my tongue, and that he wants me to make love to him later."

"Do you know the difference between making love and fucking, Rodrigo?"

"I think I do. You should care deeply for the person you make love to, right?"

Giancarlo agreed. "Yes, but in Braulio's case, he would probably like more tenderness."

"I don't know about that, but when I had to choose who lived back at the cabin, Braulio or me, I chose him. I knew I would have survived, but there was only one chance to escape, and I handed it to him."

"Welcome to the club. I've never loved anybody until I met him."

"So, we're in love with the same guy."

"I guess so." Giancarlo wanted to add, *and after tonight, probably with each other*, but he moved on.

"Rodrigo, pick your safe word."

"Stop."

"Stop? Not very original, but it will do."

Rodrigo could hear Giancarlo circling him, slowly. Assessing him. Where had Giancarlo been while they were in the woods? He trusted him, but there was a little concern that wasn't there before.

"The last time the three of us got together, you were all over the place, doing whatever you wanted. This time"—he held Rodrigo's chin between his fingers—"I'm in charge." He let go of his face.

"Is there any particular thing I should call you?"

"Just sir, or boss. Master is too much. I'm learning this together with you, so I don't consider myself master of anything. Inside here, I lead, that's all."

"Good. Tell me what to do."

"That sounds nice. For now, get undressed and put on some of this leather." He handed the gear to Rodrigo, who took a while to figure out what it was. It looked like a bunch of intertwined leather strips. Giancarlo explained, "It's a body harness. I'm wearing one too."

"Can I see it?"

"Not yet. Let me help you put this on."

Rodrigo observed as Giancarlo adjusted the different straps using the buckles at the ends of each one. The lower part left his bottom totally exposed, and only two leg straps helped keep it in place. At the front, Rodrigo easily recognized a set of two leather cock rings, resembling a pair of cuffs. Rodrigo was going to ask why two, when Giancarlo buckled one ring at the base of his cock and another all the way around the top of his sack and his cock. He figured out he wasn't going to come any time soon, but he didn't say it.

When Rodrigo spent too much time looking at it, Giancarlo explained. "We release one first, then the other, at different times."

Next, Giancarlo put a set of leather cuffs on him, at both wrists and ankles. Rodrigo had never worn leather cuffs before, and he liked the feeling and security of the leather.

Finally, Giancarlo stood in front of him holding a leather collar that had a short leash. He hadn't been kidding when he said that in here he would lead. Rodrigo was amazed at how he could put all that gear on him without really

touching him. That changed when the last piece was brought out—nipple clamps. Giancarlo's fingers briefly touched his skin as he adjusted the clamps on his nipples and Rodrigo wondered if he did it on purpose.

Giancarlo looked him in the eyes and asked, "Do you like what I put together for you?"

Rodrigo nodded, filled with an emotion he couldn't explain with words. It made him feel special that Giancarlo went this far to satisfy him, and now, what Rodrigo wanted the most was to please him. "Yes, Boss. Very much."

Giancarlo moved a few feet away and stopped in front of a leather seat that looked more like an ottoman.

"Get over here, and kneel on this. I want your ass in the air, knees bent and spread, and your hands resting next to each of your ankles." At first, it was hard to understand what Giancarlo intended, but once Rodrigo assumed the position, his cock went hard inside the leather rings. He would be so exposed with only the leg straps framing his bottom, a perfect position for spanking or being fucked.

"Beautiful, more than I expected." Giancarlo praised him.

"Thanks, Boss."

Giancarlo walked around the furniture, admiring his creation, and discarded his robe by throwing it over a nearby table. Rodrigo understood why he waited until then to show himself. He looked magnificent, wearing a similar leather body harness, the only difference that the cock ring was made of metal. If Rodrigo had seen him from the start, there was no way Giancarlo could have gotten those two leather cock rings on him.

Giancarlo picked something off the leather bench, and it was then that Rodrigo realized that it had restraints that Giancarlo attached each of his cuffs to. An extra leather piece he hadn't noticed before forced his ankles to stay spread. Once all four cuffs were buckled down, the only way Rodrigo could move was forward and then backward until he could sit, his ass and balls resting on the leather that kept his legs apart. This sitting position was gently suggested by a tug of the leash on his collar.

For the first time in his life, Rodrigo enjoyed being tied up and dominated. It was also the first time he didn't have anything to argue or rebel against. It

felt so right, and looking at Giancarlo, it seemed almost as if he was an experienced Dom.

Rodrigo raised his face to find Giancarlo standing right in front of him, holding his erect cock at his lips. “The other day you bragged that you were good at this. Do you want to show me how good?” Giancarlo suggested.

Rodrigo opened his lips to accept the uncut cock inside his mouth. Without using his hand, it was going to be a real challenge to display his talents, but he would enjoy every second of it. He used his tongue to lick the pre-come already gathering at the head, then he pushed the foreskin further back and continued to flick his tongue over the head and slit. He ventured a look at Giancarlo, hoping to see him lost in passion, but even as he breathed hard and fast, his eyes were set on Rodrigo and what he was doing.

He alternated sucking and licking, and at one point he left the cock to pay attention to Giancarlo’s balls. He played with each one, again sucking and licking, then went up to engulf the head—and this time Giancarlo moaned. He used the leash to pull Rodrigo closer, going deeper into him. Rodrigo got ready to take him into his throat, but Giancarlo pulled his cock completely from his mouth, and said, “Lean forward like the first time, it’s time for us to enjoy this seat.”

Rodrigo wondered what happened. Didn’t he like it? Was he going too slow, or did Giancarlo fear that he was going to come regardless of the cock ring?

He forgot all those questions when the leash was pulled again and he ended up leaning forward all the way, his chest almost between his spread knees, and his backside totally exposed. He felt Giancarlo standing behind him first, and next he felt a big strong hand, not the slap he expected, but a touch, a caress that could undo him more than the spanking.

The hand went up and down each of his buns, and after Rodrigo grew comfortable with that seductive touch, the first slap hit him. The tempo indicated that Giancarlo might be counting, unlike the first time, and the rhythm indicated a pattern he didn’t have before.

The aching, like he said to Braulio earlier, was the best kind. He closed his eyes, holding in any scream he might want to release. Giancarlo stopped, his

hand caressing again. Rodrigo could sense him walking around the seat, but he didn't open his eyes. Not until Giancarlo stood in front of him and raised his face using his hand, not the leash. "Are you okay, Rodrigo?" He was concerned, and that pleased Rodrigo. It had been a long time since anybody had been concerned about him. "Rodrigo?" he asked again, his voice had a little higher pitched this time.

Rodrigo almost forgot to answer. "Yes, I've never been better."

Next he felt Giancarlo moving around, undoing his restraints, but he still left the cuffs on. "I like how they look on you, but it's enough for today. We have many more nights and days to play with all of this."

Was he going to keep him around? Hope surged through Rodrigo's body, from head to toe. Yes, he cared deeply about Braulio, he wanted to make love to him, but the person that changed his life, and probably his destiny, was Giancarlo. His feelings ran so deep, he didn't want to admit them—not even to himself.

Rodrigo let the other man help him to his feet, and placed his hand on Giancarlo's waist, the skin tempting. He wanted to touch Giancarlo all over, but instead waited.

Giancarlo clamped onto his short hair and kissed him on the mouth. Slowly first, only with his lips, and later hungrily as if he couldn't help himself, sucking Rodrigo's tongue. "Do you think you can still do Braulio tonight?"

Rodrigo nodded. Simply by seeing him, he might come. "Yes, please bring him in."

"No, it's better if we go to the bedroom. There is a chance afterward you won't be able to walk."

"Really? Just watch me, Boss."

CHAPTER 11

They went to the next room, where Braulio sat on the bed, nude and obviously waiting for them. “Are you okay, Rodrigo?”

“Yes, I’m doing so well—guess who is going to lose his virginity right away?”

He pumped his cock up and down, and sat on the bed, but as soon as his backside made contact he stood up. “Oh. This time you did better than before, Giancarlo.”

Giancarlo laughed, and said, “It looks better too. All red and sweet.” He threw a few condoms on the bed and the bottle of lube. “I’m going to watch.”

“Hey, you said that you were going to do it to me tonight.”

“And I will. First do the honors to Braulio.”

“And you? Are you not going to touch me?” Braulio asked Giancarlo.

“Sure, if you want me to.”

“Please.”

Rodrigo kissed Braulio and slid his hands all over his abdomen, the muscles nicely shaped, not a six-pack, but who cared, he had a really lean body, and Rodrigo had enjoyed touching him so much back in the cabin. Now he couldn’t wait to be inside of him. He pinched Braulio’s nipples with both hands at the same time, and was rewarded by Braulio arching his neck in pleasure. Rodrigo licked his neck, and showered kisses all over his torso. At one point, his eyes met Giancarlo’s, who simply smiled, like he approved, before Giancarlo leaned forward and kissed Braulio on the lips.

Rodrigo went downward, a trail of nibbles until he reached Braulio’s cock. There, he licked the cut head and started to suck on it, looking for a reaction, but Braulio and Giancarlo continued kissing.

Then Rodrigo remembered what drove Braulio insane. Rodrigo lay between Braulio’s open legs and cupped Braulio’s ball sac in his palm. Keeping Braulio’s balls and cock out of the way, Rodrigo concentrated on the

rosebud of muscle between Braulio's ass cheeks. Using his head to keep the balls and cock up, he spread Braulio's ass cheeks until his tongue could access Braulio's asshole and then he started to flick his tongue over it. He didn't need to see what Braulio was doing, because he could hear his moans and his encouragement. He continued to lick him that way, until he felt Giancarlo's hand sliding into the crease of his own buttocks searching for his entrance.

"It's lube time, Rodrigo" He said with a deep voice that indicated the high excitement he was experiencing.

"Yes, Boss."

Rodrigo tried to concentrate on getting the slippery gel onto his fingers and into Braulio, carefully and slowly, pushing a single finger in and out. But it was hard concentrating on another's asshole when his own was being fingered, too. Besides, every time Giancarlo moved his fingers inside his crease, he also touched his bruised backside, and the sensations became hard to ignore. He finally got two fingers into Braulio, curving them he touched his sweet spot. Braulio shook with pleasure and Rodrigo twisted his fingers, looking behind him he said to Giancarlo, "I'm going in."

Giancarlo moved away to let him kneel between Braulio's wide-open legs. Rodrigo placed each of Braulio's feet over his shoulders and looked at his eager expression. "Braulio, at first it will bother you, even hurt, but after a few minutes, it will be okay. Let me know if you can't take it."

Braulio nodded, and Giancarlo handed Rodrigo a condom, which he rolled over his cock before placing the head at Braulio's entrance, pushing forward past the sphincter. Braulio grunted, but quickly encouraged him to keep going. Rodrigo went in and waited until Braulio moved his hips, then Rodrigo pulled out almost completely before going back in and starting a rhythm. Then he felt Giancarlo behind him, asking, "Do you want me now?"

Rodrigo hesitated for a second. He'd never done something like that, but if it was possible, of course he wanted it. "Oh, yes," he muttered through the intense pleasure of how Braulio grasped his cock. He had forgotten the cock rings, although in that instant he felt grateful for having them on.

Again he heard Giancarlo at his ear. "Open your legs, I'll do the rest. Pay attention to Braulio."

Rodrigo noticed how he winked at him before placing himself almost under Rodrigo in order to get his cock in a good position to enter him. Rodrigo stopped his hips long enough for Giancarlo's penetration, and the burning pleasure of each thrust, coupled with the firm grasp of Braulio's ass around his cock, almost drove him insane.

They achieved a good rhythm, and Braulio was the first one to come, his head thrashing from side to side, and nearly breathless Rodrigo asked, "Hey, Braulio, see? I was right, you were a virgin."

All Braulio could do was nod, and then Giancarlo placed his hand at the base of Rodrigo's cock, still inside Braulio, and undid the first cock ring. Rodrigo thought he was coming, too, the next time he received Giancarlo's cock in full, but he didn't. He let go of Braulio and started a frantic back and forth with Giancarlo, his head resting on the broad chest, their bodies going at the same tempo. He nearly missed when Giancarlo released the second cock ring—all he knew was why some called it the small death, because he felt himself dying and reviving again after that orgasm.

He felt Giancarlo removing the condom from him, and maybe he muttered a *thank you*, he wasn't sure, but he saw Braulio's smile after he kissed him briefly in the lips. Before falling sleep, he prayed for the first time in years. He prayed for them to continue to be together for the longest time.

During the last three years, ever since Braulio went to college and came back, Giancarlo kept expecting that Braulio would find a boyfriend, someone around his own age who would attract him more. He never expected to be the one who introduced Braulio to this person, or that it was going to be Rodrigo. *What does he see in him?* He asked himself. *Idiot, the same thing you do. The guy is sex incarnate.* But the thing Giancarlo never, ever expected was falling in love with an intensity that scared him.

His love for Braulio was tamed, controllable—what he felt for Rodrigo didn't know restraint. He was in deep trouble, his only hope that Rodrigo cared about them at least enough to stay for a while.

Now, they lay together on the bed, Giancarlo in the middle, and each of them at his sides. Braulio snuggled, as was his custom, while Rodrigo kept the physical contact to a minimum.

“How was it, Braulio? Did you like it? Did he do a good job?”

Braulio smiled and said, “Yes, he was awesome. Now I know why fucking is so popular.”

Giancarlo laughed and Braulio joined him. They did that often, laughing together was one of their favorite things. Rodrigo didn't join them, and he stayed with his face hidden under a pillow.

Giancarlo poked at him. “Hey! Do you want a refund? Didn't you like it?”

Slowly Rodrigo turned and looked at him. “It was good.”

Good? Giancarlo felt everything inside him drop down to his feet. *Only good? God.* Then he noticed the sadness in Rodrigo. “What's the matter?”

“Nothing. I said it was good. Almost great.”

Yes, something was amiss. “Rodrigo, feel free to say whatever is going on with you.”

“There is nothing to say.” He turned his back on Giancarlo again, this time with no physical contact at all.

Braulio was going to reach out and touch him, but Giancarlo gestured at him to wait. Then he sat on the bed, resting against the headboard and asked Rodrigo, “Even if it was only *good, almost great*, will you stay with us for a while?”

This time Rodrigo turned over faster, and sat up. His dark eyes looked into Giancarlo's face and then Braulio's, before he returned his gaze to Giancarlo and confessed. “I'm afraid of getting used to this and losing it.”

Giancarlo felt those were the most sincere words Rodrigo said in a long time. “Me too, Rodrigo. Listen, if I use the word love, you will ridicule me, probably with reason, because it's too soon. So, I'm going to say, that whatever is happening between us, it's good, almost great, and I want to keep it for a while. Please stay.”

Braulio repeated, “Please.” And hugged Giancarlo while extending his hand. Rodrigo kissed it, and then hugged Giancarlo himself while saying, “I don't know anything about love or those things people feel, but I agree, this good thing, we should enjoy it for a while. And since you guys are begging me. How can I say no? So, I'll be hanging around here for sure.”

“Great.” Giancarlo smiled and held on to both of them.

Then Braulio asked, “Giancarlo, your grandparents have each other. Can you stay with us all the time? I mean, really live here with us, and go visit them?”

In that moment Giancarlo realized that he had a lot of explaining to do when he met his grandfather again, he hope his old man would buy his story of hiring these young men as new members of his crew. But that could wait, he smiled at Braulio and answered, “Since you’re begging too, I’ll live here permanently to save commuting time, because I have a submissive to train, and a lover to share.”

Braulio poked at a nearly sleeping Rodrigo. “I want to do the same thing you were doing with Giancarlo.”

“The other night?” Rodrigo asked drowsily. “We did that at the cabin. Do you want to try it again?”

Braulio demanded, “No, what you guys were doing just now.”

“I thought you didn’t like the dungeon.” Rodrigo barely opened his wary eyes.

“Who is talking about the dungeon? I want to be the one in the middle.” Braulio said.

Rodrigo opened his eyes wide. “You want to fuck me? Is that what you’re saying?”

Giancarlo rolled over and covered his head with his arm. “Guys, I’m taking a nap. When you know who is going to take it and from who, wake me up. For the record, my asshole is out of the equation.”

“Sure, Boss, we’ll be practicing. Braulio under me, of course.”

Braulio picked a condom and gave Rodrigo a nudge and his most angelic smile. “I’m waiting, my friend. So, you’re going to ride me, right?”

“You little monster, stop pushing me.” Rodrigo muttered between his teeth. “And give me that, you have no idea how to wear one.”

Braulio stood and grinned. “No? Get down on all fours and I’ll show you.”

“Give me that, I said!” Rodrigo tried to reach him in vain, and Braulio ran out of the room followed by Rodrigo to continue the argument all over the apartment. It took a while for Giancarlo to fall asleep, because they were making too much noise. Once in a while he heard what the argument was about, and the last thing he heard before falling asleep while smiling, was that they were flipping a coin, and Braulio won every time.

THE END

Author Bio

I live somewhere in the Northeastern United States and write gay fiction, because there are passions that don't fit in any closet. Please visit my blog to learn more about me or my current work.

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)