

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# VOLUME 12



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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance Collection*

## Volume 12

### 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 12.

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](http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance).

Enjoy.



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# THE BADASS OF HIS DREAMS

By Missy Welsh

## **Photo Description**

Two young men are naked on a bed in this black and white photograph. One sits up, his head thrown back to offer his tongue to the other. The other man kneels close against the first with his head tipped down and his mouth open; he appears to be a second away from kissing his lover.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*It was the middle of sophomore year when he transferred into my elite college preparatory academy. Right away it was clear that he wasn't there by choice, and he wasn't there to make friends. Not to be cliché, but if you looked up "bad boy" in the dictionary, there he would be. He had a chip on his shoulder the size of Kansas and he came from the wrong side of the tracks, and none of the rich kids there let him forget it. The guys hated him; the girls either lusted after him or sneered at his scuffed-up combat boots, messy hair, and the multitude of chains and rings and bracelets he wore in flagrant disregard of the academy's dress code.*

*Now it's the beginning of our freshman year of college and once again, we're at the same school. Even though I wanted him from the moment I first saw him, we've never really spoken. I might as well have been invisible for the attention he paid me, both then and now. That is, until a group outing to the city goes badly and leaves me alone on the wrong side of town. I was easy pickings for the guys who spotted me and saw a rich teenager out of his element. I'm not sure what the guys would have done to me if he hadn't shown up, but that night I discovered more than one secret. He wasn't just some regular boy with an excessive amount of bad attitude—he was a wolf, and I was his mate, and now that he had finally acknowledged me, there was no way we could live apart without sentencing him to death.*

Sincerely,

Harper



## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** college, barely legal, public activity, shifters, interspecies, soulmates or bonded

**Word count:** 12,367

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# THE BADASS OF HIS DREAMS

By Missy Welsh

It was the middle of their sophomore year of high school when T. Alexander Tait became the newest transfer into The Bennington Academy for Young Gentlemen in upstate New York. The name said it all about how snotty the school was, and it was instantly obvious to Pitney Gage that this Tait guy was never going to fit in properly.

*Thank God.*

Tait—as everyone eventually ended up calling him—came to his first day at an elite college preparatory academy wearing his uniform, yes, but not at all according to regulation. He made the blazer and slacks look like urban couture... and seriously sexy, too. Pitney couldn't stop staring at him.

With Tait's white dress shirt and navy jacket sleeves rolled up to just below his elbows, the collection of bracelets around his wrists were on display. Thin metal circlets jangled on his left wrist, while a couple leather bands hugged his right wrist. Then there were the three silver rings he wore on fingers with black nail polish. It was the one on the middle finger of his right hand that intrigued Pitney most: It looked old and was of a snarling wolf's head with ruby-red eyes.

Speaking of eyes, Tait's were a brilliant blue, and he'd ringed them in black liner so they seemed to glow like a gas flame. His lips were pink and glossy, the bottom one full and suckable. His hair was a hawk of nearly black spikes and waves that was at least six inches tall and trained forward so that the front of it flopped onto Tait's forehead. The flop made Pitney think of the mane on a surly black stallion and, for some reason, he just wanted to spend some time tugging on it.

Pitney was pretty sure the whole of Tait was supposed to look mysterious and intimidating—and he was—but more than that, Pitney saw a lost soul desperate for someone to understand him.

*Kindred spirits.*



Not that Pitney would ever in a million years make that observation out loud and he certainly didn't look anything like Tait on the outside—since he followed the dress code to the letter and was utterly forgettable otherwise—but Pitney recognized in Tait a fellow outsider. None of these entitled pricks would embrace Tait any more than they'd ever embraced shy and gawky Pitney Gage.

If it wasn't for the fact Pitney was pretty sure Tait would bite his head off for trying, he might've made a move to make friends that first day. Would've been easy to do since Tait was seated right behind Pitney in their English Lit class. But one look back at the way Tait glared at him, with a curled lip and everything, had made sure Pitney never said a word to him.

Ever. In two years.

Until graduation day, when Tait came over to Pitney—managing to make his navy blue cap and gown look artfully styled—and said, “What school are you going to now?”

Pitney had had a growth spurt between sophomore and junior years, so he looked down from his six-one height at the guy who'd been starring in his spank bank from day one and just blinked for a second or two. Tait's blue eyes blinked back up at him, that flop of hair just right there. Then Tait frowned and, though it was kind of adorable, the look brought Pitney back to the fact the badass of his dreams had spoken to him.

And he couldn't remember what Tait had said. “What?”

Tait sighed and rolled his eyes. “What. School. Are. You. Going—”

“Oh. NYU. In the fall. But I'm moving there next month. I'm actually really—”

“New York University?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Okay.”

And Tait had just walked away. The only thing Pitney could compare the experience to was being interviewed by one of those polltakers at the mall. Except those surveys felt a little more personal. Plus, it didn't look like Tait



wanted to ask anyone else where they were going before he got in his battered old Buick and drove away.

Why had Tait cared?

Of course, months later, while Pitney and his small band of new college friends had decided to spend spring break in a crappy hotel off Broadway, Pitney discovered he was oh so very glad Tait had cared, and it didn't matter why. When sprinting down some alley in a very isolated area far from anything familiar, Pitney was thrilled to see Tait ahead of him in all his badass glory. There were two gay bashers on Pitney's tail, he didn't have a clue how to actually fight someone, but Tait looked like he knew how to do deadly things with his pinky finger and a Q-tip. Maybe together they could survive this; then Pitney would never again say he was perfectly fine leaving a gay bar alone late at night to find his way back to the hotel.

Only Tait didn't ask what was going on, didn't even wait for Pitney to holler for help. He ran toward Pitney and, as he passed him, shoved Pitney into a huge pile of black trash bags beside a pair of dumpsters. Pitney landed spread-eagle on top of the bags, and it took a moment for him to figure out what the hell just happened.

Then he heard the screaming and... Was that a *dog* fighting?

Pitney looked over his shoulder, but stopped when he realized he was on something with sharp points inside one of the bags. Gingerly, he got up off the trash bags while trying not to freak about what that puddle of liquid he'd had his hand in might actually be. When Pitney finally turned around, the only thing left to see was Tait running a hand through that thick Mohawk and panting heavily.

The bashers were gone.

"Thank you, Tait." The breathy quality to his voice made him swallow nervously and try to control himself. "I don't know what would've happened if you hadn't... Oh my God, are you hurt?"

Because as Tait turned toward him, Pitney saw that the seam at the thigh of his jeans was split. Had one of those guys pulled a knife?

Pitney was on his knees beside Tait in an instant, pulling the seam wider to get a look at Tait's leg. But there was no bloody gash, just a fine dusting of



dark hairs on pale skin. No reason for Pitney to slip his hand inside the denim and rest his palm on Tait's twitching muscles. He did anyway, of course because, *hello temptation*, and then he looked up.

His breath caught at the way Tait was staring at him. Tait didn't seem to be breathing, but he did slowly lick his lips, and then take a breath, his nostrils flaring like he'd smelled something fantastic. He shifted his feet, spreading his thighs more, and angled his hips in a way Pitney had become really familiar with; that was the stance of a man who expected a blow job.

Tait wanted him?

Oh holy fuck, *Tait wanted him*.

There was suddenly a whole pack of tween girls screaming inside Pitney's brain like they were in the front row of a Bieber concert. Thankfully, he didn't echo them out loud, but he did wrap his hand more firmly around the back of Tait's rock-solid thigh. When Tait leaned down, blue eyes intent and cheeks flushed from way more than a fight, Pitney wet his lips in anticipation.

But Tait froze and just stared. Pitney couldn't let this stop now, so he reached up and grabbed the back of Tait's head, stretched himself up, and kissed Tait hard right on those glossy pink lips.

\*\*\*\*

The kiss was just getting good when Tait opened his mouth and Pitney slipped his tongue inside, but a second later, Pitney was on his back on the cold alley pavement. A moment more and Tait was on top of him, holding Pitney's wrists down on either side of his head. The look on Tait's face now was... Why was he angry?

"You dumbass," Tait said from his perch on Pitney's stomach. "You have any idea what you just did? I mean, for fuck's sake, man, you—"

Oh, God, he'd completely misread him. Tait didn't want him at all.

"I'm sorry. Please, it... It was just a mistake. I didn't mean—" Tait raised his hand toward Pitney's face. "No," Pitney hollered and turned his head, eyes shut tight and hands coming up to deflect the strike.

He should've let those bashers get him because to have it be Tait who beat him... Oh, God, that was so much worse. Not Tait. *Not Tait*.



But Tait didn't punch him; gentle fingertips brushed at Pitney's cheek instead. When Pitney looked up at him, wariness vying against hope, he gasped at the tender look on Tait's face.

"I'm not going to hit you," Tait whispered, leaning closer. "Might wrestle you, but I'd never *hurt* you."

"But... Why're you mad?"

Tait leaned over him completely, even planting his elbows on the asphalt to either side of Pitney's head. Those blue eyes so close, that mouth right there... All Pitney wanted to do was kiss Tait again.

"I wasn't ready to tell you." Tait's breath puffed against Pitney's lips. "We barely know each other, but now... Hell, Pitney, now you're stuck with me."

Tait moved his legs back, denim rasping against pavement, until his body straightened out so he could rest himself on top of Pitney and—*Oh... That's Tait's hard cock on my stomach. Holy Christ on a cracker, he's*—Pitney's brain lost that thought when Tait ground down against him. Pitney grabbed Tait's hips just before Tait rotated to rub on him again.

"Okay," Pitney whispered.

"Pitney," Tait said with a laugh.

"Huh?"

"Only thing on your mind right now is sex and—"

"Uh... Well, yeah." He frowned up at Tait, but used his grip on Tait's hips to pull him closer. "Can't imagine where I got the idea. I mean, guys lie on top of me with hard-ons all the time and don't mean to fuck me. Must be the piss-water soaking into my skull or something to make me think about sex. Silly me."

"Damn but you're a snarky bitch," Tait said with a snarl before his lips came crashing down onto Pitney's.

Yes, those weren't exactly the words he'd always wanted to hear a guy say before kissing the hell out of him. Pitney couldn't really find it in himself to protest mere words while Tait was doing raunchy, porn-like things to his mouth.



Pitney had only kissed a few times and never like this, so he knew he really shouldn't put too much stock in how fabulous it felt to kiss Tait. It was just a really good kiss, not anything meant to be and the earth didn't move or whatever... Well, despite the whole thing feeling like maybe it was fated and sort of did tilt the planet just a little more.

For heaven's sake, this was Tait kissing him!

But on the ground in an alley? *Yeck*. And it was only fair that he suddenly rolled over and put Tait on the bottom but, well, he maybe could've aimed where he was going to put Tait a little better.

Pitney heard a squishy splash and realized... Yeah, there was a swath of liquid filth pooled in the center of the alley and he'd just plopped Tait right into it. He looked down at Tait and tried not to smile at how wide open his blue eyes were. A snort slipped out of Pitney when Tait's eyes narrowed and his upper lip curled like a snarl of disgust. Well, maybe he snarled in some anger too, because he did growl, and it was pretty menacing. In theory anyway.

When Pitney made to get off Tait, let him get out of the "water", Tait used the fact he held Pitney's wrists again to keep him where he was. Geez, Tait was kinda strong. Tugging hardly moved Tait's arms from the asphalt. And now, the rest of Pitney was catching on to the fact he was sprawled out on top of his bad boy fantasy. An alley seemed like the perfect place for an illicit affair with a badass. Maybe not lying on the alley floor, of course, but he could get into kneeling on rough pavement under a lone streetlight, his jaw starting to ache from the girth of Tait's stiff, pulsing cock in his mouth. *Oh, man...*

Pitney hollered when Tait suddenly pushed up and swung him around until he was on the bottom again. And, oh, it was wet and this puddle smelled worse, like maybe there was some fresh piss in it. Rat piss, probably. He might be hard and wanting sex, but he seriously wanted a shower way more. Tait could join him, of course. Yeah, that was a *much* better idea.

Before Pitney could offer up the idea, Tait was saying, "Pit, you—"

"Don't call me that."

"Why not?" Tait's dark brows thrust down in a deep frown. "Everybody called you that. Why can't—"



Pitney frowned right back at him. “They also called me Armpit and Pitiful and said things like ‘he’s not a pitbull, he’s a poodle’, so my name is Pitney Alastair Gage and you can call me any one of those names, but you’ll use the *whole word*, thanks.”

Tait grinned down at him. “Alastair, huh?”

“God, shut up.”

Pitney struggled to get up again, but Tait really wasn’t budging. Was he part concrete? Damn, for a little guy he was heavy.

“Tristan,” Tait suddenly whispered.

Pitney stopped struggling. “What?”

Tait sighed. “T. Alexander Tait? The ‘T’ stands for Tristan.” He bit his bottom lip for a second, then rolled his eyes and said, “And I’m a fourth.”

Pitney needed a second to process that. “Tristan. Tristan Alexander Tait the Fourth.” He grinned cheekily. “You win.”

*Tristan* groaned. “Fuck you, Pitney.”

“Sure, but can I call you Tristan?”

“Only if you want to be ignored.” Then his eyes widened. “Wait, did you say—”

“What if I say something like...” He dropped his voice and tilted his chin up. “Kiss me, Tristan.”

A shiver shot through Pitney at the whine out of Tait. He dropped back down and reclaimed Pitney’s mouth. This time, the kiss was less porno and more deep, wet need. *Wet...* Damn it, the nastiness of their location was totally cutting into Pitney’s fantasy fulfillment.

He turned his head to part their mouths, and Tait switched right into kissing and sucking at Pitney’s neck. Pitney forgot why he’d moved for a minute, just enjoying how it felt to have Tait nibble and lick and suck like maybe he’d leave a mark. *Marked by Tait...* He’d walk around shirtless to make sure people saw that. *Tait wanted me. See? He left his mark right there.*

Into his ear, Pitney heard Tait say, “Aw shit, Pitney. I need to claim you.”



“Claim me?”

“Fuck you.”

“Do you mean—”

“Make your ass mine.” And there was some growl to that last word.

That’s what he thought he meant. “Well, see, I-I haven’t, um...”

Tait collapsed on top of him with a groan into Pitney’s shoulder. “That’s good because you’re mine and I get to do it first, but also shit fucking hell damn because now we can’t do it right here, right now.” Then Tait started taking deep breaths like he was trying to calm himself down.

Pitney smiled, but cleared his throat so he wouldn’t laugh. Kinda nice to know Tait wanted him so badly but wouldn’t push for something fast and painful here in this nasty alley. Strange how Tait saying Pitney belonged to him didn’t turn him off at all, but whatever.

“I could suck you off,” Pitney suggested. “I’m great at that. Not that I’m, you know, bragging, just that it’d be good. For both of us. And we could do it here. Now.”

Tait sat up, his expression a little homicidal instead of interested in Pitney’s idea. His hands pressing Pitney’s shoulders into the pavement, he used that growly voice to say, “Who’ve you been sucking off?”

Pitney frowned up at him. “Just guys. Hookups and stuff.”

“You haven’t been with anyone tonight.”

“How would you know?”

Okay, the pinning him down thing was getting old, and Pitney’s twisting and attempted sit-ups couldn’t budge Tait.

“I didn’t taste anyone in your mouth.”

Pitney tried to arch up, but it didn’t work. “Well, you wouldn’t. I always use condoms.”

Tait leaned in and sniffed all around Pitney’s face.

“Dude, what the—”

“You don’t smell like you’ve been with anyone in a long time.”



“I do bathe daily, you know.”

“Sex lingers.”

Now Tait moved his legs so that his feet hooked over Pitney’s thighs, holding his legs down too.

“That’s it. Get off me.” He punched Tait in the side, but the angle was awkward so it didn’t do him much good. “I mean it,” he said anyway.

In one move, so fast Pitney could barely track it all, Tait was off of him and standing while bringing Pitney up onto his feet too. Pitney swayed and stumbled, disoriented for a second there. Tait shoved him back so he collided with the brick wall behind him. Gave him something to lean against while he frowned over at Tait, at least.

“Are you on something? Seriously, dude, what’s with tossing me around?”

“You wanted up, you’re up.”

“For shit’s sake...”

Tait was suddenly up in Pitney’s face. Or as up in his face as the pip-squeak could get.

“No one else, Pitney.”

“Huh?” That growly voice was kinda distracting.

“Nobody but me. You hear me?”

“Hold on now. You—”

Tait grabbed Pitney by one shoulder and the back of his neck to pull him down for another devouring kiss. Pitney wanted to resist, because who was Tait to get all dominant on him, act like he owned him, the squirt, but...

There was the kissing. The desperate, dueling tongues and panted-breaths kissing. Pitney kinda felt like maybe Tait sorta *needed* him. And that was pretty hot, because Tait could’ve had anyone, but he *needed* Pitney. So maybe Pitney didn’t mind being Tait’s right out of the gate. He’d wanted it for so long already anyway, he could do monogamy.

“Nobody else,” Tait said right there against Pitney’s mouth.

Pitney meant to lick his lips, but licked Tait’s instead. The noise that came



from Tait's throat made Pitney shiver and swallow, because for Tait to whimper like that...

"Yeah, okay."

"Promise?" He sounded worried, and then... Puppy dog eyes? Tait knew how to make *puppy dog eyes*? Oh hell, he was done for.

"Yeah, I promise. Just you."

Tait smiled, then honest to God cuddled into Pitney's chest. Pitney could feel Tait breathing against his T-shirt like he might be sniffing him again. This time it was almost like Tait was taking hits of Pitney's scent. Pitney dipped his head to smell Tait's hair but... *yeck*... he smelled like garbage. Which meant Pitney smelled the same. Which meant Tait was seriously weird.

"Come on," Tait said as he pulled away. "Let's get back to the hotel."

Pitney pushed off the wall, nodding. Yeah, he was ready for the crazy to slow down some. An alley blow job would've been awesome, but the many possible things stuck to them, soaking into their hair... Yeah, he was way more interested in a hot shower and maybe slathering himself in an anti-bacterial ointment, just in case. And, possibly, doing the same for a naked, freshly-washed Tristan Tait too.

Tait reached back and took Pitney's hand. Pitney followed along, staring at their linked hands and blinking. The badass of his dreams was holding his hand and walking him "home". He grinned since maybe his tough guy was a little bit schmoopy on the inside.

\*\*\*\*

"There you are, *ohmygod*!"

Pitney looked farther into the hotel's lobby at that yell and saw his friends huddled together. Well, all of them except Livy who was tiptoe running toward him after her exclamation. He stepped inside, holding the door for Tait to come in behind him, and everyone froze.

Livy gave him a once over that included a hand hovering in front of her puckered up face. "What happened to you? Why do you smell? And..." She fluttered her fingers toward Tait and raised her eyebrows.



Marc, with his eyeliner smudged from sweaty dancing, and Jesse, flexing like there might be someone to beat up, joined them before Pitney explained.

“That guy I left the bar with? Turns out he just wanted me outside so him and his friend could attack.”

Livy obviously wanted to hug him, but the smell of him kept her back; she latched onto Jesse’s arm instead, making Pitney wonder again if something was going on between those two. Marc didn’t hesitate to come closer, make noises about whether Pitney was all right, and squeeze his shoulder. There was a small but definite protesting sound out of Tait’s throat that had everyone turning to look at him curiously, Pitney included. Pink splashed Tait’s cheeks, and he looked down at his sneakers.

Pitney took a chance and held out his hand toward Tait. Would he hold his hand in front of people Pitney knew? General public was one thing, but... Pitney smiled as Tait laced their fingers together and held tight.

To the group, and with a big grin on his face, Pitney said, “Tait came along just at the right time and helped me fight the guys off.”

Tait snorted, then coughed, and rubbed at his mouth. Pitney gave his hand a small yank. No way was he telling his friends he was sorting himself out of a pile of trash while Tait saved him single-handed. He didn’t want to look helpless, regardless of how awesome it made Tait look.

Then Pitney realized that while his friends knew all about Pitney’s ridiculously longtime crush on Tait and what seeing Tait on campus did to him, Tait didn’t have a clue who his friends were. He rectified that with quick introductions, even though Livy let slip that they knew all about Tait and it was good to finally meet him.

Tait gave Pitney a meaningful look while adjusting his overnight bag that they’d stopped to get from his car before coming in. Tait hadn’t gotten a room anywhere, which was good, but... Actually, come to think of it, why was Tait even in this part of the city? When Tait smiled just a little up at him—since Pitney was staring, *oops*—Pitney didn’t need answers. What he needed was to get his roommate for the weekend to vacate so he could be alone with Tait.

Pitney cleared his throat and broke off from Tait’s seriously intoxicating



eye contact. He looked at Livy. “Right, um... Livy, would you mind maybe bunking with Jesse and Marc?”

“Oh,” she said and it was so obvious she was trying not to smile ecstatically. “Sure. Sure, that’s no problem. Right, guys?”

There was a moment of Jesse and Marc blinking at Tait, who just stared at them, before they erupted into movement and agreement.

“Of course!”

“Sure!”

Pitney blushed. Never had he ever been so blatant about declaring he was going to go get laid now.

Livy rolled her eyes and got both men moving toward the elevators. Pitney and Tait joined them for a somewhat awkward ride up five floors that included Livy holding her nose.

Marc looked down at Tait and asked, “What product do you use to make your hawk stand up?”

“I don’t.” Tait scratched at the stubble on the right side above his ear. “Just have really thick hair that kinda does it naturally.”

“Huh. Lucky you,” Marc said to Tait but elbowed Pitney.

Okay, maybe not so awkward. Jesse might not have an opinion on guys, but Livy and Marc were on board with their friend hooking up with Tait. Still felt weird for Pitney, since he was kind of parading Tait before them like a prize before taking him into a bedroom with obvious intentions. He might’ve hooked up, but he’d never done anything like this before. It almost felt like—*gulp*—bringing a guy home to meet his parents.

Not that Tait wasn’t worthy for him to bring home, but Pitney had never really had that talk with his parents. They’d never asked about girlfriends, he’d never mentioned boyfriends... Would it be revelational, or did they maybe know?

Tait leaned and rubbed his cheek slowly against Pitney’s arm. Pitney looked down as Tait looked up and, holy fuck, Pitney needed to get Tait alone somewhere private really fast. They could maybe stay here in the elevator and



make it stop between floors or something. He just needed... If he could get Tait *naked*...

Tait smiled like maybe he knew what Pitney was thinking, then led the way out of the elevator onto their floor. Pitney followed along, his dick starting to push for its freedom. When they made it to the rooms across from each other, Livy working on getting the door open, and sending him a wink over her shoulder helped to give him a moment to cool down.

Pitney followed her in while Tait held the door open. Yeah, it was probably best they not close the door because Pitney might tackle Tait and Livy wouldn't want to see what came next. Well, she probably *would*, but she wasn't going to. So Pitney sat on the bed watching Livy tiptoe run all around gathering up items from the bathroom and the clothes she'd tried on and discarded before they'd gone out tonight. Tait just stood holding the door all the way open and looking nervous in a really cute way.

"You are so smitten, kitten," Livy whispered during one pass by Pitney.

He rolled his eyes and made shooing motions with his hands. "Hurry up, woman," he said loudly. Then he whispered, "Before he changes his mind."

"Oh, he wouldn't. Look at him," she said while stuffing her luggage full. "If you're nervous, that means there's something important going on."

"Important?"

"Of course. The first time's important, so you're nervous. When it really means something, you're nervous." She gave him a meaningful look and cocked her head toward Tait.

Pitney whispered even more quietly, "I don't think either of us are a virgin, Liv."

Over by the door, Tait fidgeted, but he was looking down the hall.

"The second part," Livy said, "you dork." She hefted her bag and tottered toward the door.

The second part? Of what she'd said? Good God, did she think this encounter was going to mean something important... to Tait?

"Actually," Tait said loud enough for both of them to hear, though he



looked up at Pitney. “Why don’t you shower in their room and I’ll shower here.”

Well, there went that fantasy. No wet Tait, soapy rubdown tonight.

“Um, I guess. If that’s what you want.”

Tait moved in closer and whispered, “We need to talk about something, you know, *first*.”

Pitney nodded, a whirlwind of possibilities going through his mind. It was just sex; what in the world did they need to talk about first? They’d already covered condoms and the fact two dicks were involved... What else was there?

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Pitney knocked before using his keycard to get back into his room. Not that he wouldn’t like to catch Tait naked and still toweling off, but Pitney still didn’t have a clue what this conversation they needed to have was all about. He was too nervous to flirt or tease. It was like the sex was definitely happening, but first he maybe had to... sign a nondisclosure agreement? Become a member of a cult?

So he knocked, heard Tait say he could come in, then he walked into the room while pretending to look like he wasn’t all messed up trying to figure out what came next.

Tait stood at the end of the farthest double bed, barefooted. Pitney took that as a good sign. Not that he didn’t have some fantasies involving Tait naked except for his clunky, black boots, but bare feet said he had no plans to leave the room. Standing by the bed, also good. But fully dressed and fidgety, not meeting Pitney’s eyes... Not so good. At all.

“There’s something...” Tait flicked a glance up at him and then away. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “There’s something you need to know about me. It’s why I was angry about the kiss. I should’ve told you this when I imprinted originally so you might have a choice in all this. So we both could, really.”

“I don’t understand. Didn’t we already make a choice?” He had anyway. Tait wanted sex, Pitney wanted sex, so they were going to do it. Simple.



“I really... No, see...” Tait crossed his arms and looked intently at the floor. “Imprinting is a chemical bond. When one of us imprints, it makes us really drawn to the other person, but it’s not permanent, and it’ll fade if neither acknowledges it. And acknowledging it is acting on the attraction, so when you kissed me...” He waved his hand, but still kept staring at the floor. “It sort of woke everything up.”

Where the hell was Tait going with all this? Pitney squinted at him. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“No.” Tait cleared his throat. “I mean, I don’t think it is, but... Well, you don’t have a whole lot of choice now.” He finally looked up and licked his lips. “I’m desperate to have you, Pitney. I want the bond permanent. I want to make you mine.”

*Oh, hey!* “So you do want to have sex with me.”

“God, yes.” He practically moaned the words.

Pitney smiled without cheering or doing cartwheels. “Excellent. Get naked.” He pulled his T-shirt over his head, but when he came out the other end, Tait was gritting his teeth and still standing there.

“Damn it. Hold on. You’re not hearing me and this—”

“For fuck’s sake, Tait. Are you *trying* to be a cock-tease?”

“I’m a werewolf!” Tait huffed out a breath like he was glad to get that off his chest.

“Huh.” Pitney looked him over. Sure Tait had always tended toward a sort of Goth-like style, but all freshly scrubbed now, he didn’t look like anything supernatural. As it was... “I would’ve guessed vampire, actually, but if you want to be—”

“This is serious, Pitney.” He sounded exasperated.

“Okay.” Pitney nodded, getting into this. “I can do role-playing. If you’re the werewolf, can I be the vampire?” Because nibbling on various parts of Tait could be seriously fun.

Tait sighed and rolled his eyes up to the ceiling.

“No, I like this,” Pitney went on. “We can, like, end the centuries-long feud by fuh—”



Pitney jerked away since something horrible was happening to Tait's face. "Fucking fuck! What are you doing?" Tait's face was elongating like he was growing a snout and there was hair sprouting all over him as he got a little thicker and that was why his pant leg split and were those claws? "Stop that! Tait!"

Pitney covered his mouth with both hands and stood there shaking in front of Tait the Wolf Man. If it hadn't happened right in front of him, he would've said Tait had a master special effects guy hidden in the closet, but... this was real. Really *real*. Tait was a cross between a wolf and a man like some kind of experiment in gene splicing to create the perfect killer...

Well, except for how scared Tait looked. This was no mindless killing machine with glowing eyes and fangs and blood lust. This was Tait and he was fidgeting and panting, wide-open eyes tracking everything, like he was waiting for Pitney to strike.

That was still Tait, and this was fucking *epic*.

"You're a werewolf."

Tait nodded, blue eyes watching Pitney from a face tipped down and turned slightly away. When Pitney took a step closer, Tait jerked back.

"Can I touch you?"

Again, Tait nodded, making Pitney wonder... "Can you talk like this?"

"Yes." But the voice was guttural and scratchy, not Tait's at all, and his canine snout moved like it wasn't easy to make it form words.

Pitney gently touched Tait's cheekbone, because Tait was still some creamy skin—just with more places where hair had grown and hung all over him. That hair was in normal-ish places, though, so like he had a beard and mustache with sideburns connecting it all. The hair on his head was longer and not a hawk anymore. Kinda looked like one of those Chinese crested dogs. Sort of. Way fiercer and not funny at all, but kind of like that.

Okay, maybe a little funny since one of his now-huge ears had a floppy tip that was seriously cute. Wolf Man cute, but still.

The rest of Tait was the same height, but lots more definition to his



muscles just everywhere, from his hands to his neck and his jeans... were... tight. Seriously tight. Okay, one part of Tait was lots bigger at the moment.

Was that a wolf-like dick or a man-like one?

Pitney reached down and palmed Tait's confined erection. A startled sound erupted from Tait, a dog's yelp, and Pitney chuckled. Felt like a human cock. A really nice one, too. He gave Tait a few slow squeezes to get more noises from him and watched Tait's blue eyes flutter closed while he whimpered and whined. Pitney leaned in and discovered Tait smelled fantastic, sort of like cinnamon and almonds. Into the flopped over ear, Pitney whispered, "You gonna shift back, or are we experimenting in bestiality?"

Tait growled, his lip curling up, then he gave Pitney a shove. With a laugh, Pitney landed on the bed just as Tait finished reverting back to normal, human Tait.

"That is *so* cool."

"You're just... fine?"

Pitney sat up on his elbows. "I guess so. I mean, I wouldn't have believed you if you hadn't shown me, but there it is. I'm totally sober, and I *totally* saw you do that." He sat up and leaned on his knees. "I have questions, of course."

"Ask." Tait crossed his arms like he was waiting for an interrogation.

"Did another werewolf bite you?"

"You mean, like, is that how I got turned? No. I was born this way. It's genetic."

"Huh. Okay. Are there a lot of you? In your family? Oh! Do you have a pack?"

Tait's shoulders drooped, and he shuffled and looked away like he was embarrassed. "See, there's an anomaly with me and my sister. Our dad shifts into a full wolf; most people would think he's a really big, black dog. But there's a little something in our mom's line that's made it so Holly and me only shift partially." He shrugged and sighed. "All we can do is what you saw."

It kind of seemed like Tait felt bad about that. "But yours is so much cooler."



Tait perked up. “Yeah?”

“Definitely! I mean, no offense to your dad, but a big, black *dog*’s got nothing on the Wolf Man. And you scared the shit out of those guys chasing me, and I bet you didn’t have to do anything but stand there. No dog could’ve done that.”

Tait chuckled. “When you meet the pack, don’t say any of that, okay?”

“You want me to meet your pack?”

Tait lost his grin as he took a deep breath. He fidgeted and sighed while looking at his feet. “Remember how I said you’re stuck with me?” He glanced up to see Pitney’s nod, then looked away again. “You’re my mate, Pitney. I imprinted the second I scented you in high school. It wasn’t set in stone... until you kissed me, acknowledging the mate bond, and now... You’re really it for me.”

*Whoa.* So much for that one night of awesome sex with his fantasy guy. Well... It wasn’t a bad thing, right? Tait once or Tait forever was so not a difficult decision. There was a lot you could discover about your crush without ever talking to them—granted Pitney had obviously never dug up the biggest secret Tait had going on—but Pitney liked everything he knew about Tait. And so what if he could go all wolfy? It’d make Halloween all kinds of awesome.

And then there was... “You really won’t want any other guy but me?”

Tait scratched at the hair of his hawk hanging limply in his face. He hadn’t taken the time to dry it, but it was still really sexy all floppy like that.

“I *can*’t want them,” he said, peeking at Pitney. “They’re, like, nothing to me.”

“Girls?”

Tait shrugged. “Yeah, like girls.”

“No, I mean can you want a girl?”

Tait wrinkled his nose. “Definitely not.”

“So just me forever then?”

“Pitney...” He rubbed at his forehead.



“You’re a moron.” That got Tait to look at him, even if he did glare. “I’ve wanted you from the moment I first saw you, too. I don’t know if humans are supposed to do the imprinting thing, but I’m pretty sure I’ve done it, and I’m okay with that.”

Tait just stared at him with wide eyes and parted lips. He looked like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop and wreck everything. Pitney could relate, but there was no other shoe.

“Come here,” Pitney said and held out his arms while laying back. “Let’s make sure our bond is good and fixed in place. Permanently.”

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Before Tait tackled Pitney, he practically tore himself free of his clothes; then he attacked Pitney’s jeans, shucking them, his underwear, and his shoes in one long pull. Fastest he’d ever gotten naked before and... *Whoa*. They were *naked*.

But Pitney only had a second to see just how cut Tait’s body was, and the fact he was erect and just fucking gorgeous, before he was tackled into the bed. Pitney laughed, feeling excited and crazy, and actually managed to flip over the strongest little guy in the world. He didn’t do it with any goal of dominance in mind, but when Tait got all growly, like being on the bottom was so not happening for him here, Pitney put up a fight to keep him there.

They rolled, then rolled again, and when Pitney was almost in giggles from the frustrated expression on Tait’s face, he lost the battle to keep Tait on the bottom. When Tait huffed down at him and said, “Good God, you’re annoying,” Pitney gave in to those maniacal giggles for a minute.

Once he sobered—which wasn’t easy since Tait kept trying not to smile at all—Pitney said, “Annoying? I’m delightful.”

Tait rolled his eyes and sort of collapsed against Pitney’s chest. “Delightfully annoying. Maybe.”

“See? We’re perfect.”

Tait looked at Pitney, and that something soft was back in those blue eyes. Having Tait look at him like that just *melted* Pitney. Then Tait nodded, and Pitney couldn’t help wondering if Tait was agreeing that he thought Pitney



was perfect. He leaned up and kissed Tait lightly, sweetly, like they hadn't kissed yet, and it was good.

For about three seconds. Then Tait grabbed Pitney's hips and managed to spin him around before shoving him face-first into the bed. Now it was Pitney's turn to snort because if Tait thought that was it? *Silly little wolfy*. He made to push up and flip over on top of Tait, but...

The way Tait was currently rubbing his cock into the crack of Pitney's ass and over his lower back was seriously hot. He didn't want that to stop just yet, so he stayed still and even bowed his back to push his ass up for more rubbing. Tait made the best sound then, a sort of grateful groan, and humped against Pitney faster and harder while holding Pitney's shoulders to the bed.

Okay, if this was how Tait wanted to fuck him later? Pitney was onboard. He did like fighting Tait for dominance, but oh yeah, "losing" at that was a good thing.

Tait leaned forward along Pitney's back, their skin sliding and catching enough to make them both moan. "We could try it," Tait said. "I'll do my best to be slow."

*It? Oh.* "Uh, no. Since there's this whole urgency you've got going on for the mate-claiming, bond-sticking thing, I'd rather not just 'try'."

"Do or do not, there is no try."

Before Pitney could laugh at the Yoda reference, Tait flipped him over again. As interesting as it was to have Tait now straddling Pitney's stomach, "interesting" turned into "I will make this my life's work" because Tait moved forward, grabbing Pitney's wrists to pin them against the bed, and that brought Tait's balls to rest up on Pitney's collarbone.

The warm weight of Tait's sac made Pitney lift his head to discover Tait's wet cockhead just barely brushed against Pitney's chin. *So close...* Pitney tilted his head and stuck out his tongue. He could smell Tait's precum and needed, really needed, a taste. The tip of his tongue managed a swipe along the slit, and Pitney felt Tait twitch, thigh muscles tensing, as Tait gasped. Pitney savored that one lick. When he looked up, he saw Tait staring down at him, mouth open as he breathed fast and his pupils were blown wide.



Time to give in.

“More,” Pitney said and was surprised by the growl to his voice now.

Tait snapped his mouth shut and swallowed as he nodded. When he shuffled forward on his knees, Pitney stuck his tongue out again and managed to curl it around one side of Tait’s cockhead. Even more fantastic than tasting Tait was watching his eyelids flutter and hearing his breath catch. Pitney pressed his tongue up just behind Tait’s cockhead and rubbed the taut lines of Tait’s frenulum. A whine burst from Tait’s throat.

“Sensitive?” Pitney whispered and saw how the puff of his breath made Tait shiver.

Nodding, Tait moved over Pitney more, until Tait’s balls were brushing Pitney’s chin. Pitney grinned at Tait, then opened up and sucked one nut into his mouth. While Tait groaned, Pitney tickled the tightening skin with the tip of his tongue, then pushed that one out to suck in the other. Tait watched, his expression getting wilder by the second. He pulled himself free to then grind his sac on Pitney’s lips and tongue, saliva slicking everything. Pitney felt so dirty but in the most exciting way.

Pitney could feel Tait’s thigh muscles trembling against his ribs. The heat of Tait’s groin along his throat was surprisingly erotic. He wanted to push Tait back and suck the cock rubbing his face as Tait rocked his hips, but Tait still held Pitney’s hands against the bed. So Pitney moved his head and managed to get his mouth on the base of Tait’s cock. He sucked, hard, and Tait sort of... well, *howled*.

Tait backed up in a hurry. “Please. Just—”

“Gimme.” Pitney opened his mouth and made an on-ramp of his tongue.

“Aw, yes.” Tait angled his cock right on in.

For a little while, Pitney just closed his eyes and enjoyed the velvet slide against his wet lips and the tang of Tait’s growing need. Oh, yeah, Pitney loved doing this.

But he loved it more since he could open his eyes and look up at *Tait*. Tait rocking into him. Tait watching. Tait moaning like Pitney was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.



They moved liked that until Tait didn't seem to be in control of his movements anymore. His eyes were squeezed closed and he was panting hard. Pitney smiled for just a second before he leaned up and sucked as much of Tait's cock as he could reach into his mouth. Knowing he'd driven Tait to this moment was fantastic, better than getting off himself. Then Tait came and flooded Pitney's mouth with warm, salty cum. He slurped and swallowed as much as he could, but he felt some running down his cheeks and onto his neck. When he choked a little, Tait sat back and grasped himself to pump out two more bursts of cum onto Pitney's throat.

The both of them panting, Tait leaned over Pitney. The look on his face was so serious. Pitney wasn't sure, but he thought maybe he was looking at the pure instinct inside of Tait. The wolf in there. He seemed so focused, but a little distant, while his fingers spread his own cum across Pitney's chest and from his cheek up into his hair. Pitney kept still, let Tait... let him mark him as belonging to Tait. That's what he was doing, and it made Pitney smile, really pleased to be claimed.

After a couple minutes, Tait blinked a few times and smiled. "You're mine now," he whispered and seemed shy about that.

Pitney licked his lips and caressed his hands up and down Tait's sides. "Do I get to make you mine too?"

Tait backed up, grinning at him, until he was off the bed on the floor between Pitney's legs. Pitney sat up to see him better, only to have his eyes close involuntarily when Tait opened his mouth and took Pitney's straining, red cock inside. Unwilling to miss seeing this, Pitney forced his eyes open and stared as Tait watched him and sucked his cock. Good as it felt, hot as it looked, those blue eyes were what really drove Pitney mad with lust. *Tait* was doing this to him. The one guy he'd always wanted was now his.

Pitney reached down, needing to touch, and traced the arch of Tait's brow, the hollow of his cheek, and his strong jaw. He slid his fingers up into the thick hawk of Tait's hair at the back of his head and gripped, though he didn't try to set the pace or pull Tait more onto him. Tait knew exactly what he was doing, but Pitney needed something to hold onto and some way to express how amazing everything Tait was doing to him now felt. So good he was about to come.



“Tristan,” he said, pushing the word out, and got a hard suck that had him falling back and arching up as he came deep inside a warm, tight throat. “Aw, God!”

Pitney could feel Tait’s mouth, throat, pulsing with him. Best feeling ever. It did not feel the same with a condom on, and he’d be greedy for this from now. He’d beg for it. Okay, maybe he’d tussle for it and then beg, but yeah... When he opened his eyes this time, it was like he had a life plan all laid out: Keep Tait so happy he’d do this all the damn time.

“You’re rebooting smile is goofy as hell,” Tait said above him.

“You really don’t have any room to talk there, cum-painting wolf-boy.”

Chuckling, Tait sat down on Pitney’s thighs, his hands caressing Pitney’s stomach. When Pitney sat up, Tait held onto his shoulders and looked down at him with a sweet expression. Pitney cupped Tait’s butt and tipped his head back. He stuck out his tongue and crooked it, making Tait smile before he came down and kissed Pitney.

The taste of himself in Tait’s mouth... Incendiary intoxication. Pitney felt a little high or just really buzzed because he had the man of his dreams. Tait’s expression when he looked down at Pitney again was so open and warm. Pitney knew, right then, he could so easily see them lasting forever. He could love Tait. Might already love him.

Then he noticed the spot of cum on Tait’s chin, like he’d lost a tiny bit. With his finger, Pitney swiped it up, then painted a “P” on Tait’s cheek with it. “I claim you too.”

Tait laughed as he sat down on Pitney’s thighs. Maybe it was cheesy, but hugging Tait right then, after everything, felt sort of better than the rest. Close, content... like home.

“You called me Tristan.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I liked that.”

“Yeah? But everyone always calls you Tait.”

He snuggled closer, making Pitney grin for his badass being a cuddler.



“You can call me Tristan. If you want.”

Pitney smiled. “Anyone else call you that?”

“No. My family calls me... Four.”

Pitney snorted. “Tristan Alexander Tait *the Fourth*.”

“Ugh,” he groaned and sat back again, leaving his arms draped over Pitney’s shoulders. Tait’s—Tristan’s hawk flopped in his face and it was seriously cute like that.

Pitney slid his hands over Tristan’s back, petting him just because. “But you’re my Tristan,” he whispered.

He looked kinda shy as he nodded. “Yes.”

“Tristan.” He gave him a tiny kiss. “My Tristan.”

He sighed out his promise, “Always.”

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Tristan hadn’t been kidding about taking Pitney to meet his pack. Apparently, it was required that new mates declare themselves. Pitney just would’ve liked more than a day to get used to being mates before Tristan drove them out of Manhattan and up near to where Bennington Academy was. Pack territory, Tristan called the nearby forest, despite the state thinking it was a park.

The seedy little motel they stopped at around the halfway mark made up for the sudden case of nerves Pitney was developing. Tristan had gotten inside Pitney enough that they’d both liked it a whole lot. Practice was definitely on the agenda for after the pack introductions.

“Um, Pitney?”

They were steps away from what looked like a VFW lodge or a little banquet hall. Pitney was really close to being calmly resigned, but now Tait looked nervous.

“What’s wrong?”

“They might not...” He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “There are some who might not like that I’ve got a mate now.”



“The gay thing?”

“The anomaly thing.”

Pitney frowned. “They don’t want you to have a mate because you become the Wolf Man instead of a dog?”

“Well, I mean, it’s not for the same reason as Holly since we won’t breed and continue the anomaly, but—”

“Wait. They don’t want your sister to find a mate because they don’t want her to have kids who’ll be like you guys?” At Tristan’s nod, Pitney crossed his arms. “That’s horrible and stupid and I don’t want to meet these people.”

“We have to.”

There was some whine to Tristan’s voice that Pitney didn’t like. Tristan wasn’t supposed to be like this, all worried and intimidated. If this was what being in a pack did to him, they shouldn’t go in there.

“Why do we *have* to?”

“Because they’ll know I’m mated from the fact I’ve got your scent all over me. I can’t lie about it, so we have to own up to it, whatever the consequences.”

Well, that was some bravery, but... “Consequences like what? Because if I might need some silver bullets—”

Tristan snorted. “That’s a myth. I mean, silver bullets will kill us just as much as regular bullets.”

“Great.” Pitney turned for the car. “There was a gun shop—”

Tristan grabbed his arm, not getting that it was a joke. “We’re not buying you a gun. They won’t hurt you. They’ll just... Some of them might be mad and say things. My dad... I wanted to warn—”

“Oh, I see. *Verbal* abuse. Excellent.”

Tristan sighed again, shuffling his feet and hanging his head, and Pitney got it. Right here and now, Pitney understood why Tristan could be a thug one minute and a scared kid the next. These people, his pack, made him feel like he was something wrong. An anomaly not in the cool way of a new discovery, but like Tristan was a freak of nature that shouldn’t exist.



That from people who could turn into dogs.

Pitney reached out and pulled Tristan into a hug. “We’ll face them together because there’s nothing wrong with what you are. My Tristan’s just all kinds of awesome.”

Tristan hugged him tightly and made a little sound that tugged at Pitney’s heart. His wolfy might be the badass, but Pitney was going to go in there and protect his mate. And he had a pocketknife on his keychain if his words didn’t do the job. Nobody was going to make Tristan feel like crap anymore.

Head held high, Pitney took Tristan’s hand and marched them right on into the lodge.

It was really difficult to be serious and strong when the room was full of old dudes in silly hats. Pitney looked down at Tristan, expecting him to be smirking too, but Tristan looked hesitant and maybe like he was about to bow or something. Pitney lost his smirk and realized the whole room of people were staring at them.

“What is this?” One guy hollered before shoving his way through the crowd. He might have been more intimidating if it weren’t for the red felt pirate’s hat on his head. Well, all right, he was pretty intimidating, since he was a thick guy with a snarl who was obviously pissed.

“Dad, um...”

“What did I tell you?” he said as he got closer. As Mr. Tait moved through them, people were backing away against the walls like they wanted to make sure everyone could see.

“I tried, but—”

“*Tried? You tried?* It wasn’t for you to *try* to do, you were just supposed to follow orders and *do it!*” He got up to them and glared at his son. “Now here you are stinking of a human, obviously mated, against orders and against what’s right for this pack, you disgusting little—”

“You stop right there!” Pitney hollered at him. He couldn’t keep quiet and let Tristan’s dad call him names, especially when he felt Tristan flinch beside him.



Mr. Tait jerked back, staring at Pitney. Since he had the man's attention, he dove right in.

"Tristan's a wonderful person, and I completely accept what he is. I'll even—"

"What he *is* is an abomination. Him and his sister both are a poison in this pack. They'll bring down our purity and make us vulnerable to attack. They're useless and—"

"They're your children! You made them and you're supposed to love them no matter what. That's your whole job as a parent."

"How dare you come in here and spout off about—"

"How dare *you* talk about your children like they're inferior or wrong. Have you seen what he can do?"

Mr. Tait waved a hand like he was shooing Pitney away. "I will not listen to some *human*—"

"You talk about getting attacked like there's some kind of turf war going on." Pitney stepped into Mr. Tait's space, their eyes level, both glaring. "Have you seen your son fight?"

There was a red glow to Mr. Tait's eyes—just like the snarling wolf's head rings they all wore—when Mr. Tait growled and showed his teeth. Pitney gulped, remembered now that there was a lot more animal to this guy than there was in himself. And he'd just pushed that beast a little too far. He fumbled in his pocket for his pocketknife.

Instantly, Tristan was between his livid father and Pitney. Wolf Man Tristan. That fast he was all teeth and claws and bulging muscles ready and willing to defend Pitney against attack. Pitney smiled at the back of Tristan's furry head, that floppy ear. When Pitney looked up at the crowd, he was surprised to find them all looking shocked. What was that about?

"Enough," a man said and, though he didn't shout, his voice resonated through the room.

Pitney braced himself for more of a fight, hoped it wasn't going to get physical, and watched this new guy walk up behind Mr. Tait. He was tall,



really fit, seriously handsome, and definitely someone in charge of things, since the whole place seemed to be waiting for his next words. Pitney sent up a silent prayer that those words wouldn't have anything to do with taking them down.

"You've improved, Four," the big guy said, and there was something kind of fond in his expression as he looked Tristan. When he looked at Mr. Tait, the fondness turned into accusation. "You neglected to inform me of your son's improvements."

The anger was completely gone from Mr. Tait now and he looked a little like he might be sick. Because Tristan had "improved"—whatever that meant—or because his leader was upset? Pitney looked back at Tristan as he settled back into humanity while the leader guy urged Mr. Tait to follow him back up to a big table in the front of the room.

Pitney leaned down and whispered to Tristan, "What is going on?"

Tristan looked surprised too. "I think Dad might be in trouble for not telling Alpha I could shift better than the last time Alpha saw me do that."

"They've never seen you shift?"

"Not really. Or not for a long time. When I first started, it took nearly fifteen minutes to do it all. Way longer than it takes any of them." He moved in closer to Pitney and held his hand. "Alpha said I'd be a liability, just like a human, and shouldn't ever be involved in a hunt or to fight to defend us from other packs. He was right about all that."

"Okay, I get that. But that stuff about... What your Dad said—"

Tristan's blue eyes looked up at him. "I think maybe Dad was lying when he said Alpha thought we were so awful. Or maybe Dad never told him about us getting faster at it like he'd said he did."

Considering a lot of the people around them now were whispering and staring like maybe there was a celebrity in their midst... "So this is them being impressed?"

"Guess so." Tristan shrugged, but he grinned up at Pitney.

"Can Holly shift as fast as you?"



“Yes. Faster, I think.”

Pitney smiled. “I’m thinking she might be about to get really popular with the single guys. I’m also really glad we’ve all permanently bonded up and everything.”

“Me too,” Tristan whispered. He was doing the melty, puppy-dog eyes thing while cuddling into Pitney’s side.

“Boys,” that alpha guy called. “Come on up here.” He waved them forward.

They went, holding hands and so close their arms rubbed. Pitney really liked their solidarity, but he seriously loved seeing Mr. Tait standing quietly behind the alpha and looking like he might’ve gotten his nose smacked with a rolled up newspaper. Shame they’d missed seeing it happen.

Alpha smiled at Tristan. “I’m elevating your status in the pack and lifting the breeding restrictions from you and your sister.” His gaze flicked to include Pitney before he said, “If you and your mate would like to have a ceremony here, we can make the arrangements.”

“Thank you, sir,” Tristan said, though he looked down at the tabletop. Was that a “no eye contact with the head dog” kind of thing? No wonder Mr. Tait had gotten pissed; Pitney’d stared him right in the eyes the whole time.

“Maybe we’ll do something this summer... or something,” Tristan went on and peeked up at Pitney.

Pitney resisted jumping up and down and squealing since, OMG, Tristan was asking him to get married. Smiling so big, Pitney said, “This summer sounds perfect. It’ll have to be human friendly, of course, so I can invite my family.”

“Of course,” Alpha said. “My pack is accepting of humans and... all other differences.”

Tristan shivered and sort of sagged against Pitney. Pitney held onto him, figuring it was a huge amount of relief making Tristan do that. He’d been in great need of that acceptance, apparently, and Pitney was thrilled for his mate to have it now.



Over the next hour or so, Tristan introduced Pitney to lots of pack members and also his mother and sister. Holly seemed shy, but really happy now, the two siblings sharing a tearful, smiling embrace that almost had Pitney choking up. Mrs. Tait was thrilled and gave Pitney kisses on both cheeks and about a million hugs, too.

Overall, they seemed like a decent group to Pitney, but he wasn't going to let them forget they'd turned on their own just because he was different. They were all different from everyone else in the world and should band together and celebrate their rainbow of differences. Pitney just believed that was how it should be, and he'd see to it that the acceptance their alpha was extending got obeyed by all of them.

When he and Tristan got a few minutes to themselves, they huddled together in a corner. Tristan was all cuddly wolfy, so Pitney was happy to snuggle him up. Looking out at the crowd, though, something was still bugging Pitney.

“Seriously, what’s with the weird hats?”

Tristan snorted. “I know. They wanted to make sure anyone peeking in would think they’re just a normal lodge or something. I guess members in those wear hats that mean different ranks.”

“Well, they look ridiculous.”

Tristan smiled brightly as he looked up at Pitney. He had to kiss Tristan for that, so Pitney hugged him close and bent around him. Right there in front of everyone, Pitney and Tristan kissed because they were mates, because they were going to fall in love, and just because they could.

\*\*\*\*

*One year later*

“Where are...” Pitney let his question fade away because he knew where they were now. “I remember this place,” he said with a grin over at Tristan.

Only one lone streetlight ahead of them illuminated the alley in which Pitney had forced Tristan to acknowledge their mate bond last year. A year ago today.



Smiling shyly, Tristan put the the old Buick in park before cutting the ignition. “Happy anniversary.” He placed his hand on Pitney’s.

Pitney held Tristan’s hand and leaned over to steal a kiss. Tristan loved romance, but it always made him so embarrassed when he actually went through with the mushy stuff. Sure, revisiting a filthy, old alley might not scream romance to most, but for them, yeah.

“You are just too cute sometimes,” Pitney whispered against Tristan’s glossy lips.

Tristan’s cheeks turned pink, making his blue eyes seem brighter. “I just wanted to stop in before we went back home.”

*Home.* Pitney kissed Tristan again, just savored him, and also savored the fact their home was an apartment off campus but still in Greenwich Village. He was living with Tristan Tait. That was dream-come-true stuff right there. They’d moved in together when Pitney got written up for having an overnight guest in his dorm room stay way longer than policy permitted. He hadn’t regretted it for a second.

He pulled away only enough to look at Tristan’s kiss-dazed face. A lot about their lives had changed in the past year, but one thing hadn’t: Pitney was still head over heels in love with Tristan.

“You know what I wanted to do with you that night?” he whispered.

Tristan chuckled. “Soak me in as much garbage-scented water as possible?”

“Before that, you dork.”

A sly grin. “I think I remember you offered to blow me.”

“Yep. Underneath that streetlight to be exact,” Pitney said and pointed over at it. “I thought it would be so hot to kneel down and suck you off right there. Like you’d paid me or maybe like we’d left a club and couldn’t wait to go somewhere else.” He sighed as his imagination put them over there again.

“Well, then.” Tristan opened the car door and got out.

Pitney watched Tristan walk around the front of the car and straight over to the streetlight. *Oh, man...* Once there, he turned to face Pitney and leaned



against the wall of the building. Tristan looked at Pitney, but undid his jeans and stuffed a hand down inside his baby blue briefs. A moment later it was obvious Tristan was over there jacking himself, cock and fist making his briefs bulge out from the V of his open jeans.

His breath coming faster and heartbeat starting to race, Pitney watched for a few seconds more. Tristan was over there looking so dangerous and sexy, like maybe he was the one about to get paid. It was such a deliciously wicked fantasy, perfect badass of his dreams kind of stuff. No way could he resist that.

Pitney was out the door and rushing over, not caring at all about how eager he was since Tristan was giving him his fantasy. He did give the ground a quick look for possible nastiness before he skidded to a halt and dropped to his knees when his brain gave the all clear.

Tristan's hand paused, just fisting himself behind his underwear. Pitney looked up to find Tristan biting his lip like he was trying not to smile.

"Oh shut up and haul it out here." Pitney glanced around at the buildings, but all the windows were dark. What traffic existed was behind the car on the crossroad, and it wasn't likely some passerby would be able to make them out. Well, not really. Not enough to stop him, anyway.

"You know what this does to me," Tristan said like that was some kind of warning. "You, like this."

Pitney scoffed and reached up to move the briefs around Tristan's erection. "Bring it, Wolf Man."

Tristan gripped his cock and pointed it at Pitney while also getting a handful of Pitney's hair at the back of his head. When Tristan made the low growl he always did when he had the power and pulled Pitney in, well, Pitney just opened his mouth and obeyed. Yeah, Pitney knew him submitting turned sweet Tristan's wolf all dominant and sometimes... Sometimes Pitney really liked them that way. Sometimes he didn't even want to make Tristan wrestle him for it.

Sometimes it was all about making his wolf howl.

Pitney closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Tristan's thighs, resting his hands on Tristan's butt, down low where he could massage and



make Tristan pant from the friction. He could smell Tristan's excitement a second before the wet cockhead touched Pitney's tongue. He licked quickly before Tristan eased that velvety shaft across Pitney's lips to fill his mouth. The taste added to the feel and made Pitney moan.

His hands gripped while he sucked and bobbed, meeting Tristan's thrusts. It wasn't long before Pitney's chin was wet and he was sweating, gasping breaths whenever Tristan let him. His own body begging for attention, Pitney reached down and undid his jeans. He fisted himself and moaned around Tristan's thick dick until Tristan stabbed it into his throat and cut him off.

Suddenly, Tristan yanked Pitney's hair, pulling him off. Startled, confused, Pitney blinked up at him, only to find himself manhandled around until he was facing the building on his right, his back to the alley. A moment more, just as Pitney was formulating a question about what the hell was going on, and Tristan yanked Pitney's jeans and briefs down over his ass. No need to ask what was next, except...

"You better have some—"

"Yeah," Tristan said, not so gone on wolfy dominance that he didn't know to provide at least a lubed condom. Which, yeah, that's what it sounded like just before a wet kiss met Pitney's asshole.

They'd gotten good at this. Practice really did make perfect because right now... "Oh, God yeah," Pitney said on a moan as they both pushed and Tristan dove right on in. They'd really gotten good at this.

Pitney put his arms up against the wall, the rough stone biting into his skin. His gold ring glinted at him, making him smile, then he rested his head against his arm and jostled with every thrust from Tristan. Pitney groaned and tipped up, helping Tristan peg him just right. When he did, Pitney bit his lip to hold back the whines bursting out of him with each rub even as he pushed back to speed Tristan along.

He was close, so close it felt like he might break from the tension or catch fire from the friction. Thoughts about keeping quiet flew away when Tristan did that squeeze to Pitney's cockhead that always, every single time, made him come immediately. Pitney hollered up at the night sky, past the streetlight and right into the stars, as his body clamped down. His wolf howled behind him.



In the panting aftermath, Pitney just had to say, “That was so...”

“Anim... Animalistic?”

“Fucked like a—” *don’t say dog* “—wolf in an alley. Hoo, boy.”

“By a wolf.”

“Whatever.” Pitney chuckled against his arm. “We are kinky beasts.”

“We should get T-shirts,” Tristan said before he slowly eased back.

Pitney hummed through that one last jolt of sensation as Tristan pulled out, then he set about getting up and fixing his pants. They both wobbled, bumping into each other and snickering for being clumsy with simple buttons and zippers. Finally, Pitney wrapped his arms around Tristan’s shoulders and kissed him with lips that felt puffy and hot from sucking on him. Tristan hummed now and leaned into him.

Eventually, they made their way back into the car. Pitney leaned back, sort of on his side, and watched Tristan watching him. He could tell his romantic wolf wanted a snuggle like he always did, so Pitney held Tristan’s hand to promise that they’d cuddle as soon as they were home.

Then, he remembered that he’d basically just crossed off one hell of an item from his sexual fantasy bucket list. One item of many.

“You know,” he said and kissed the back of Tristan’s hand. “I also have this fantasy about you doing me over one of our high school desks. Can’t tell you how many times I popped wood knowing you were sitting right there behind me.”

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Tristan said with a grin. “I’m not breaking into the school.”

Tristan had started calling him his sweetheart a few weeks ago. It gave Pitney a warm, squishy feeling inside every single time Tristan said it. Maybe it would for the rest of his life.

Tristan winked at him. “How about I just buy you a ruler instead?”

Immediately, Pitney’s mind conjured up just what he and Tristan might do with a sturdy wooden ruler and Pitney’s bare butt. *Oh my God, I’m such a perv...* He felt his whole head heat up with a blush.



Tristan started laughing like he was shocked, but also like he had some ammunition. Pitney chuckled and smiled because, okay, if someone was going to get to know his kinks—and maybe give them to him—he was fine with that someone being his wolfy mate who loved him completely and forever.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Romance has always been the main theme of Missy's writing, even when she was twelve and concocting little tales for her friends. She grew up watching tough-guy action movies with her dad and stealing her mom's romance novels, so it seemed perfectly normal to pair up the two and see what happened. As long as there are men being brave and falling in love, Missy plans to fantastize about them—Um, she means write about them.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# SURRENDER

By Eric Alan Westfall

## **Photo Description**

A black-haired, muscular young warrior, leather shirt open, six bleeding punctures in his chest, stares off to the right. Blood is everywhere. Dripping from the bared blade of his sword; from his open-palmed right hand and wrist; from the fangs of the monstrous Stone Beast on a pedestal behind him. Its eyes are blood-red, its long snout open in a snarl, its wings arced high. The scene is lit by thick candles oozing white wax.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*I'm intrigued to learn who this man is. Why does he have the blood on his chest and wrist? Is it the gargoyle that did to him? Is the gargoyle a shifter? Tell me what is the story behind this image.*

*My requests: Set in dark fantasy. No BDSM this time. I want a story that'll creep me out. I'm more interested in plot than sex. So keep sex to minimal :D Length doesn't matter. The ending is entirely up to you. It can be a bittersweet, HEA, or HFN.*

*Sincerely,*

*Zach Sweets the one that loves horror :D*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** dark fantasy with a hint (or more) of horror

**Tags:** The Kingdom and Empire, mages and magic, shifters, warriors, Stone Beasts, a mysterious Wall, a more mysterious painting, a tested love, an enduring love?

**Content warnings:** No HEA, no HFN, violence and blood, pain and suffering, mental/physical rape. Perhaps hope; perhaps not.

**Word count:** 43,626

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### *Acknowledgments*

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A very special thanks to Enny for her above and beyond efforts in creating a fantastic cover in such a very short time frame.

And especially to Zach, for selecting an image and writing a prompt that took me into new writing territory. Whether it worked is for others to judge.

Cover design by: Enny Kraft (<http://ennykraft.weebly.com/>)

Gargoyle image by: Andrew Borgen | Flickr

Warrior image by: Nikolay Klimenko | Dreamstime



### *Author's Foreword*

The tags told you. The content warnings told you. Now it's my turn.

This is not one of the HEA or HFN stories you have already read or will read from most if not all of the other LHNB authors.

Is this an M/M romance? Most definitely so. But it's not an easy romance. Not for Karel and Caaroc. And not for the reader.

So if those heads-up! words in the tags trouble you, make you uneasy, give you a Gibbs gut feeling that you really don't like stories that are like "this"—then honestly, you'll be better off reading something else.

On the other hand, if the warnings and tags intrigue you, or perhaps make you want to get out of your usual reading comfort zone (and we all have them, I think), I hope you'll take a chance on *Surrender*.

Eric



# SURRENDER

By Eric Alan Westfall

*From forth the fatal loins of Aerisan and Gaarchan foe, a pair of  
Beast-crossed lovers grow.*

**2 Summer 32, 19103 After Seren**

**9676 House Andrae**

**The Wall**

**tir-Lothian, Kilthar**

The painting is not merely larger than life. It is enormous when we see it from the end of the narrow mountain pass that brings us to this barren valley. The painting grows larger, more awesome, as our group of sixteen moves forward. No one has ever figured out how a painting this large can be hanging from the Wall. Mages say there is no spell to hold it up. Perhaps there is some unknown “super” glue.

The guide brings his *grila* to a halt about twelve fours from the Wall. We Kilthari do the same. Four of the five off-worlders have laugh-worthy difficulty getting them to stop. One doesn’t succeed until the *grila* has stubbornly plodded several fours closer, and then fights being turned around to come back.

None of us laugh, though we would if the scrawny man with the weasel face was one of us. We leave the mockery to his friends. Particularly the sneering nobleman. The travel price paid by each of the off-worlders is likely to be four, if not eight times greater than the rest of us combined. But even Clan Aeris knows you do not offend paying customers. Gouge the ones who are foolish enough to be gulled, but save your laughter for later. In private. As you count their coins again.

The guide waits patiently, or as patiently as is possible for an Aerisan, until the others are gathered close enough to hear him without having to lift his



voice too much. I am, as always, at a distance. A sometimes real, sometimes merely felt, space between the rest of them and me. In the past five days the guide has never made a gesture, said a word, to bring me closer.

He gestures toward the Wall. “The Mystery of tir-Lothian.” Heads turn obediently, hearing the capital “M” he puts at the front of the word, and his voice pulls them back. “The painting is four fours and a half-four wide. Six fours and a quarter-four tall.”

Even with their backs to me I am sure the off-worlders are looking confused. As with most of our visitors from the Kingdom and Empire... the *rest* of the Kingdom and Empire as of two generations ago... they haven’t bothered to learn how to count. The guide’s tone tells them he is explaining once and then they are on their own. “Eighteen feet wide, twenty-five feet tall.”

Three nods of comprehension. The massive, towering off-worlder who rides his *grila* as if born to it, and stays close to the nobleman, doesn’t move his head. Neither does the nobleman. I imagine his face is arranged to display a false, “Of course *I* knew that, even if the rest do not.”

The guide dismounts; we follow suit. The off-worlders are politely moved aside as the other Kiltari put feedbags on the *grila*. I take care of my own.

The guide waves back an off-worlder who starts toward the Wall, and speaks to all of us. “Take a moment to examine it from here. Closer and you will not have the full effect.”

I suspect no one else is troubled by these odd dimensions. A painting this size, magnificently done by a talent that is a direct Goddess-Gift, should honor Her four aspects. It should be four fours by six fours. Proper dimensions. Like the Wall itself honors Her by being a perfect square of eight fours to a side.

Not only are the dimensions wrong, but something else is wrong with the painting. I *know* it. But I have no idea what that wrongness is. I turn my shudder into a feigned stretching of muscles made weary by the final five hours of riding.

“The frame is solid silver, six inches wide, two inches thick,” he tells us, ignoring, not understanding *another* set of wrong dimensions. “The designs in each corner are made of inset rubies.”



The color of gushing blood.

Even from here I can see the edges are wave-carved. I have heard the flat surface is incised with runes. If it is a language, no one has been able to decipher it in the five years since the painting was discovered. Some believe it just artistic fancy. I do not care.

I wince at the flash of a memory crystal being used. It is nearly eight, half the day is gone, the sun is blindingly brilliant, and still the flash is like a lightning bolt striking nearby, without the noise. Another. And then another and another. It must be nice to be wealthy enough to own a memory crystal. Or more than one.

I have never... No. I *did* own a memory crystal. Once. It was... It was... Why can't I remember?

# *Focus.* #

# *As I am commanded, so will I do.* #

Since I have no memory crystal I will have to store the image in my mind in sight and words.

In the right foreground of the painting is a young Kilthari man, slender and broad-shouldered with a heavily-muscled upper body. Tall. His thick, straight, black hair curves around his head, waterfalls over his forehead, almost obscuring his eyes. His eyes are the silver of Clan Aeris. Smooth skin, a thin nose, a wide mouth with slightly plump lips that one can imagine would look well around a cock. If one were a disgusting *shkiril* who might imagine such things. His head is down and he is looking off to his left, expressionless.

“No. That man is *not* Aerisan.”

The guide's voice is flat. Dangerously so. Calling the man in the painting a member of Clan Aeris is the second-most offensive thing that can be said about it. The off-worlder who asked the question I didn't hear is the only one of them dressed appropriately for the kind of journey we have endured, since the rough terrain makes it far too dangerous for anyone to use a Road Gift to speed our travel.

The off-worlder is a scholar, perhaps, from the tone. An inquiring mind who only wants to *know*.



The scholar points at the man in the painting. Not everyone looks. I cannot help but doing so.

The man who seems too young to be a warrior nevertheless wears a warrior's tight, oh so very tight, black leathers, and the right side of his neck is pierced and scarred to display his four successful hunts. A thin leather collar almost tightly circles his throat, with two silver chains attached to it, and the Aerisan knotted cross hanging from the lower. The shirt is open, showing a smooth, broadly muscular chest. There is a long, old, jagged scar that runs from the top of his left pectoral down and towards his right. There are three bleeding punctures in an angled line on each side of his chest.

The scholar points out the pendant, and the belt with the knotted cross and other Aerisan symbols. He doesn't point out how the belt hangs well below the warrior's waist, emphasizing the impressive bulge just below it. Nor does he mention the warrior's torn—perhaps clawed?—trousers. Nor that his left hand is on the hilt of a bared sword held behind his back, the end dripping brilliant blood. Nor the out and down right arm, the black-gloved palm toward the viewer, fingers spread wide. There is a bright line of blood across the warrior's wrist, running down so that his fingers are wet as well.

The scholar's focus is so narrow he can see nothing else, as he argues that surely the man in the painting must be an Aerisan. If not a real one, an image intended to represent one. Surely, the guide would agree, that with all this evidence, the only rational conclusion...

The adamant voice of the guide cuts him off. "He is *not* an Aerisan. We do not permit the making of images of *dream* warriors, fouling our insignia by stealing them for a false display of something which never happened. Like this painting. If he had been a *real* Aerisan he would be *remembered*. His face and prowess would be known. He is not."

"But..." the scholar starts, then abruptly stops. The guide's face and words finally make an impression on him. The scholarly voice withers away, a grapevine shriveled by drought.

The Imperials do not... yet... know all there is to know about us. I do not think they know of the *sh'alii* who preserve our histories, our traditions, our records, joining minds to transfer knowledge from dying elder to younger



caretaker. They told Clan Chief Lorel, who told the Clan, who told all the world, that the painted warrior, so clearly Aerisan, is *not* Aerisan. He is unknown to them.

And still doubt lingers, though no one dares speak of it. At least not where an Aerisan might overhear someone wondering what the Clan is trying to hide.

Once again I pull my attention away from the painting and back to the group.

I suddenly realize what an *odd* group we are.

There are no women on this trip, though I know some wanted to come. Granted, three were pampered, bejeweled off-worlders, two belonging in some fashion to the nobleman. The excuse for refusing them might well have been their obvious inability to deal with the rigors of days of travel *grila*-back. But two others were Kilthari Clan Mothers, of Salis and Balir. No man, Clan or not, would be stupid enough to suggest a Clan Mother cannot endure the rigors of a trip overland, not if he wants his balls to remain intact and attached. In a very literal sense. I wonder how the guide got them to change their minds?

The off-worlders are naturally odd from that fact alone. We are too new at being members of a not-very-exclusive, still-growing Great Clan they call the Kingdom and Empire to be entirely comfortable with any of them, whether they arrive in large groups or a small collection like this one.

The nobleman made sure we knew from the outset that he is il-Iran Kilset-Herin—a dilettante pseudo-artist, pseudo-archeologist in my opinion—from the Throne World. From Illoraen-the-City itself. He is a member of a... Lower House and Family? Lesser? Minor? Not All That Fucking Important? Something like that.

Then there is his toady. From the customary expression on his face, and his assiduous attentions to the nobleman as we prepared to depart and then on our way here, my only wonder is whether he *wipes* his master's ass clean, or licks it so.

The large guard has the look of a skilled fighter, and the demeanor of someone who actually knows what he is doing, rather than being one who simply kills on command, or maims. The scholar is fourth.



The last, the one whose *grila* troubled him, reminds me of a *kiril* who prefers to skitter and chitter in darkness and scuttle away from light back into the walls, but is now bravely out in the day. Perhaps hoping to scavenge something.

The guide is, of course, Aerisan. Once Chief Lorel saw the image he simply... *decided*... that it would be Clan Aeris which would take control of the site. And access to it. And studying it. Though the Kilthari Clan Council *could* have objected and chosen another clan, perhaps claiming a conflict of interest and a lack of objectivity, they wisely chose to let the Aerisan decision stand. The simmering rage over the portrayal of a false Aerisan, rage that simmers and bubbles still, could have erupted into the kind of Clan infighting that would bring the Imperial Army down on our heads.

Oh, hells damn it. The scholar has shifted topics and is now on his way to the major disaster that is avalanche-after-a-shout imminent. Can't the guide figure out something to distract the man?

Far too late.

"And what is the significance of having a mythical creature crouched on that pedestal behind the... the... *non*-Aerisan warrior?" I can see a bit of his profile as he looks at the painting. He is trying to remember something—has it!—turns back to the guide. "Don't you call the creature a... stone beast? We would call it a gargoyle."

The guide's patience, paid for or not, is rapidly running out. "We don't particularly care what *you* call it. That 'mythical creature' is one of the Stone Beasts of the Gaarch. Our greatest enemy for most of the last two four-hundreds."

The Beast is so very lifelike. His chest is huge; it has to be to support the stone wings which arch above his back. His snout is long and reptilian, lipless, jaw dropped to display rows of fangs dripping brilliant blood. A long, narrow, pointed tongue hangs out, drooling. There are bony ridges above his glittering red eyes. Slender ears are laid back against his skull. A thick horn rises from each temple, slightly curved, ending in a thin, stiletto-sharp point. Deadly cones start at the center of his forehead and march between his ears, down his back, onto the prehensile tale that is just visible behind the warrior.



The scholar's voice squeaks. "It... it's r-real? Eight... eight *hundred* years?"

The guide shrugs off both reality and time. "They have killed many of us over the years. We have killed many of them. The warriors of Clan Aeris, *my clan*, are renowned as Beast-Killers." He nearly thumps his chest with his fist to emphasize his point. "Though the last kill was just after the Empire... ah... arrived. Perhaps you frightened them away."

His face, his voice, his stance, suggest how very unlikely that is.

And now the avalanche drops in. "But if the... the beasts are an enemy, why is the Aerisan, no, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, the *non-Aerisan* warrior, well, *protecting* it?"

Exactly my question. Though I am smart enough not to voice it. I know, as the scholar does not, that a Kilthari... *an Aerisan most of all*... would die before befriending a Stone Beast. Particularly since there is no known way to "befriend" a cunning, devious, but still not human-intelligent monster. And then to escalate the depravity of the idea by suggesting an Aerisan would not only befriend the Beast but defend it from anyone or anything, including the Clan? That kind of thinking, spoken out loud, is normally a killing offense, by dueling, if the speaker of blasphemy is of the Kilthari Clans, or quick execution if he is not.

But protecting, and thus implicitly befriending, is the only reasonable interpretation of what we see hanging on the Wall.

The scholar survives asking the question. Off-worlдер, money, ignorant. Those are all reasonable excuses for ignoring the insult to Clan honor and doing nothing to him. And there is also the never-admitted knowledge of what the Imperial Army would do to if he died an honor-death. Or a less-than-honorable knife or three in vital organs.

If I had asked, or even hinted I agree with that interpretation of the painting—well, I am not certain if it would be most or all of the eleven Kilthari who would join in my initial punishment, a beating.

I get my answer to my unvoiced question. The guide's face is flushed red with fury he has no choice but to repress, so he turns his head away from the scholar. And looks at me.



Something... *feral*... passes behind his eyes, something personal and aimed at me. Then it is gone.

Though I do not understand that expression, I know now they would all join in that beating, and as we Kilthari are methodical even in our angers, they would take turns, trading off on the tasks of preventing the non-Kilthari from interfering, restraining me, kicking me, and otherwise doing their Goddess-damned best to hurt me short of death. I would not die from that beating, because they could not count on the off-worlders to stay silent, but there would likely be a mysterious and fatal accident on the trip back. I have no intention of finding out if I am right.

The guide's voice is under control; the flush is fading. It is still cold enough to drop the temperature in the valley to nearly freezing. "The *false* Aerisan warrior is most definitely *not* protecting the Stone Beast. To suggest that he is, is an insult to all of the Clan, and by extension to all Kilthari. You might even say it is a culturally insensitive remark."

It is the scholar's turn to turn red. His face must be flaming given the color of the back of his neck. Cultural insensitivity is one of the Imperial taboos, we have learned, particularly with respect to a recent acquisition, or as the paid linkers refer to that group, "the primitive worlds which have voluntarily petitioned to become members of the great Kingdom and Empire of Illoraen, in order to experience all its benefits and glories."

The scholar searches desperately for a new topic. One which will not find bombs of mage-fire being lobbed at him.

"Ah. Yes. Of course. Well, ah, the Wall, the... the Wall is unusual, is it not?"

The puppet heads now turn to look at the Wall of blue-grey stone.

All but one other and me.

He is one of the other nine Kilthari who make up the remainder of the travelers.

The man who did not look is largest of the Aerisans, barefoot, filthy, wearing ragged clothes, standing to the left of the guide, slightly away. He can see me clearly, and the others cannot see him. His eyes... flicker... and then



get... hungry. His left hand reaches down in a quick movement to grope himself, wrapping thumb and forefinger around his cock and balls so they are briefly pushed forward and clearly outlined against the sweat-soaked thin fabric of the trousers he wears. He thrusts his hips forward. He is enormous.

I back up a single step, averting my eyes. Shamefully, my cock does not shrivel in fear or disgust, but enlarges. Thankfully, my clothing is loose and I am not so well enough endowed that there would be a significant risk of being seen even if I were fully hard.

Why would he do something like that? Take that risk? And why with me?

It does not matter that the laws of the Kingdom and Empire are completely clear that men who... who... who have sex with other men do nothing illegal, and those who hurt or kill them for that reason, or any other reason, will face Imperial justice. Merely joining an Empire that includes a great many of the stars we see at night and far more that we do not, is not enough to change opinions that have endured for many four-hundreds. I wonder how many years it will take to change. Or if ever it will. I know I will not be around to be unafraid for the first time in my life.

Men who fuck men are *shkiril*. *Kiril* are the worst vermin in our world, and it turns out even the Imperials have them. A *shkiris* is lower than the lowest vermin, an abomination fit only to be destroyed on sight or gelded and enslaved. Clan Aeris tends to employ the latter technique. Chief Lorel himself gelded two of the abominations some two fours and a half-four years ago. The shame that one of them was an Aerisan and a friend of the Chief's son was expunged by the swiftness of their punishment and the harsh conditions under which they worked. Within a year the friend hanged himself, and the other walked over a cliff. The Chief shrugged when he was given the news.

And this fool is courting that danger. And risking me as well!

Yet I cannot challenge him, since there are no witnesses. Just me. And I know I will not be believed.

I look up at him again. His mouth shapes the words "I'll fuck you" as his hands shape his cock and balls. I stare back at him, frightened, not daring to move. Then... the hunger vanishes, he lets the engorged cock subside... nearly



subside... behind the thin trousers. The gross display is over. The puppet heads turn back, as if that ending was a silent signal it was now safe to look.

The guide continues along his well-traveled verbal trail.

“There are passed down tales told to children or as entertainment in a long winter, about great palaces with walls that were eight fours to a side in Her honor. If the tales have even a modicum of truth, that time could only have been long before the fall of tir-Lothian. Never since. The Kilthari no longer create, if we ever did, buildings so tall, so wide, with so much wasted space.”

I stop listening to the explanation about the Wall that I know so well, though I have never been on this journey before. I barely scraped together the two golds for this one occasion. I should be hearing these words as entirely new. But they are not. Why am I remembering things I cannot possibly remember?

*# I have told them to you. Let those memories go. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

Architecture aside, what makes this wall the *Wall*—the only Wall in the world that has a capital letter everyone can hear when the word is spoken—is its existence. The assumption is that it was part of tir-Lothian, and when that city and its empire were crushed five four-hundreds ago, the Wall survived. By chance? Some purpose? No one knows. We have no records of that fall, not even garbled tales handed down from generation to generation.

The Wall may have been part of some structure, or it may have simply been built where it is for some unknown purpose. Or no purpose at all, since a ruler’s whim is purpose enough in and of itself. It is free-standing in a strangely level valley that seems almost designed to direct a visitor to this site.

So we stand under the brilliant sun, shading our eyes as we stare at the Wall, its edges hazy against the backdrop of the eye-dazzling blue of the cloudless sky. The midsummer heat sears both us and the dry land, barren of life as it is barren year round, devoid of any hint that here, where we stand, where the Wall stands, where the patient *grila* chew the grains in the bags we have each placed over their muzzles, here there were once streets and walls and halls and buildings and people. *Life*.



There is no life here. Except for us.

Or is there? Someone is watching. Hair rises on the back of my neck. I start to turn. Stop. Am stopped?

*# No one watches. There is no reason to look. Focus. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

There is no reason to look.

The guide's sweeping arm gesture tells us to move toward the Wall, so we squint in the midday light, and tread forward, shoes, boots, sandals, that one pair of hairy, roughly callused bare feet, making little puffs of hot dust rise, drift briefly and fall back as we walk.

Even from where we first stopped, and more so as we approach, it is clear that the painting is as crisply colored as when the last glistening brush stroke was laid down. If anyone actually painted it. There are those who believe it is mage-made. Five years of weather and it is untouched.

The others move right up to it, but that close you can only see pieces, shards of detail, not the whole. I stay back, pausing at six fours to drink it in, the image invigorating water to a dry mind, as refreshing as the warm water I carefully ration to myself from the leather-covered bottle.

Closer. I stop. I want to fix it in my mind, so that I will be able to recall it a week, a year, eight fours of years, twelve fours, from now.

The scholar speaks, and the irritating voice of the irritating Illoraeni idiot irritates me into paying attention again. I move closer until I am only a few feet from the painting, still well apart from the rest of the travelers.

"Good Goddess, man, how can you say that?"

I stumble at the sharp sound of the scholar's voice. Regain my footing. Look over, ahead, to see him gesturing almost wildly at the stolid guide.

"How can you possibly claim that this painting was not here until five years ago? This is clearly a perfectly preserved—a *mage* preserved—painting of the del'Arte School of Exotics, extant in the Empire around the time your tear, tor"—he mangles the words and waves off his linguistic failure—"vanished, or whatever it was that happened. I am an Authority on this School."



My ears are accustomed to vocal capitals. I can hear them easily. The Scholar has capitalized both himself and this type of painting. Are we to be awed? Bow down and worship? And if so, who and what are we to worship?

*“Obviously, someone made use of the Gate you didn’t know you had.”*

This last is accompanied by a sneer precisely suitable for speaking to ignorant peasants. It is followed by the excessively patient tone of a man explaining something even the village idiot should be able to comprehend.

“Why a mage-artist of such talent chose this remote location for a masterwork, among people who patently do not appreciate its quality, we will, of course, never know. We can but be humbly grateful that he had the foresight to ward it and preserve it for the future. Preserve it for... how long did you say since”—an irritated wave sloughs off a war and the death of a nation—“it happened? Two thousand years? At least, the way *our* Empire counts time and money.”

The smug look dares the guide to try to find an answer to his irrefutable logic.

The expression on the guide’s face is a reasonably close approximation of a smile. He is clearly reminding himself how much he has been paid, part of which is for being courteous while under the duress of dealing with off-world stupidity. Those of us who know some or all of the truth would prefer the simple solution of strangling the arrogant prick.

So the guide carefully explains. The first recorded visit to the Wall was four four-hundreds ago. Between then and the late spring of ’68 there were... and he pointedly translates our numbers for the Imperials... one hundred two recorded visits. Each of those visits was meticulously recorded. Not *one* mentions an impossible to miss or ignore painting magically hanging on a wall in the middle of nowhere.

“Absurd! Simply absurd! Inaccurate record keeping, visitors who didn’t really come here, are the more likely explanations. And if they aren’t, then just how did this ‘mysterious’ discovery occur?”

I can almost hear the guide’s teeth grinding. “As I said, sir...”

“Lord Kilset-Herin!” snaps the Imperial, at the same time his toady is saying, “My lord!”



The guide slowly inhales, shutting his eyes. The direct question has been asked and his contract of hire binds him to answer. He exhales, reopens his eyes, and decides to avoid a confrontation over honorifics. At least for now. The guide inhales again, begins. “The man who made the discovery was... *shkiril*. He...”

“A squirrel? What is a...”

Does this man never shut up? Much more and the knives will be out, and the Aerisans at least, or at best (worst?), all the Kilthari minus one, will take a chance on their ability to cover up the tragic deaths of five Imperials. Fortunately for interstellar amity, the toady tugs his master’s arm, and whispers a few words of apparent wisdom in his ear. The off-worlдер’s face moves from confusion to shock to... approval?... in a smooth glide.

“Ah. Yes, yes, of course, I understand your... upset.”

The toady is whispering to the other off-worlders, making sure they understand as well.

There is no need for whispering to us.

We know.

That Goddess-damned *shkiril* is why Kilthari, but especially Aerisans, hate to explain how the painting was discovered.

The guide waits, staring at the Illoraeni until the nobleman breaks and looks away. Silence ensured, the guide resumes.

“A man appeared one day in the Gate city. No one knows from where, though he was most definitely not Kilthari. Most likely an off-worlдер.”

The word sounds obscene as the guide uses it, but there is nothing the off-worlders can do about mere sounds.

“Besides being *shkiril* he was also a whore, and freelancing is frowned on by the licensed brothels. He was not directly in competition with them, since it is unlikely that the off-worlдер men who used him, in whatever dark corner they could find, would have visited the brothels anyway, but that did not ease their dislike. Nor the dislike of the Kilthari at having the man flaunt his perversions where everyone could see, and no one could give him all that he deserved.



“So it was... made clear to him... that he was not welcome in the city, that perhaps he should find a way to use the Gate and go back to a world where those perversions would be accepted. Of course, the enforcers tried their best, as is required by Imperial law, to discover the men who had beaten him so thoroughly. A thorough investigation was done each time it happened. Regrettably, they were unsuccessful. The whore claimed the men had not only beaten and whipped him until he lost teeth, had his back scarred, and was blinded in one eye, but that they had raped him as well. Repeatedly. Every time.

“That was, of course, nothing more than the desperate lie of an abomination, and why he thought he would be believed no one understood. Or cared. Yet still he went on plying his trade. He survived somehow, though he surely must have made less and less after each time the displeasure of the city was made known.

“Finally he began to look ill. A kind of wasting illness that turned the stomachs of the perverts who paid him. No one would use him. And with no one to pay him, he had no food, no shelter.”

The guide pauses and looks at the off-worlders. His voice is smug and contemptuous, risking much to make his point. “You Imperials require much of us, but you cannot require charity. You cannot force us to feed and clothe and house that which we loathe. So we did not.

“The city watched him begin to die, since you off-worlders were no more charitable. All was going well. The whore failed day by day, grew weaker by the moment. He would have soon been dead, but then he produced the memory crystal.”

The noble inhaled sharply, disbelief rife when he spoke. “A dying whore had a memory crystal in his possession. And waited to say so until he is near death? Absurd.”

“Agreed, sir.” The guide looks at the nobleman, at the toady, dares them to challenge that last word.

“True, even so. All Kilthari, and the rest of our world, know the prices you charge for memory crystals. And it was not a tiny speck that might hold only a



few words, a letter home, a short remembered moment. It was the size of a man's thumb. A *large* man.

“A dying whore, a *shkiril* whore, with a crystal that was worth many, many golds, regardless of what was on it? No one would touch it, touch him, of course, not where he stood, half-blind, skeleton-gaunt, there in the open market, displaying it on his trembling, open palm when he asked for food and was refused.

“But later? When he was somewhere else, when the moons were down and it was dark? I think he might have... lost... the crystal. Tripped and fallen, perhaps, injured his head but not enough to die. Not then. Just enough of an injury that he could not recall where and how the crystal had vanished.

“Instead, the whore spoke up. Spoke loudly so sellers, buyers, warriors, visitors, all within the square could hear his offer of an honor-bargain to Clan Aeris. He would return the next day to speak with the Clan's representative. And he left, the crystal in a pouch at his waist, his hand fisted around the pouch. Only a thief would ever have stolen the crystal. Even a thief knows better than to interfere with the offer of an honor-bargain. Especially with Clan Aeris.

“At noon the next day, the market was full, more so than usual since no one bothered with stalls except a few on the fringes who thought to, and did, make a profit on cool drinks. In the open circle in the center stood the whore and Chief Lorel. The whore pulled the crystal from his pouch, and a vial of *kitlit* as well.”

He pauses, looking at the off-worlders, realizes they do not know the word. “*Kitlit* is one of our deadliest poisons. The scent is distinctive and not deadly at all. A drop on your skin and you die slowly in agony. Drink some and you die more quickly but with the agony compounded and compounded again as it is compressed in a shortened time. It is a vile way to die.

“It was a Ninth-Hell bargain. He offered the word of an abomination that the crystal contained *memories* of extraordinary value by themselves, and a way to more wealth than whatever reselling the crystal would bring. But that way to wealth would have to be verified. He asked for three fours of gold immediately and an agreement that he could spend it in the city on food and



shelter and he would not be charged any higher rate because of who and what he was. And if the Clan, in honor bound, agreed the crystal offered a way to wealth, the whore would get three four-hundreds of gold, less the coins already advanced.

“When the crowd mocked him for offering a bargain where the risk was all on the Clan, and he could just slither away with his first golds and away through the Gate, he finished the offer. If the memories were not valuable, if they could not possibly lead to other wealth, then he would swallow the *kitlit*, or if he balked, the Clan could hold him down and force him to swallow. He lifted his hands, palms up, the vial in one, the crystal in the other, and said the ancient words, ‘It is by the Goddess sworn.’”

The unbreakable oath. Those are the words the scholar mutters. As if we do not know that already.

“The Chief placed his palms atop the whore’s, repeated the oath, and the honor bargain was made.

“The crystal contained the whore’s memory of the Wall and the painting. Four fours of memories that could be easily sold despite the offensive nature of the painting. The round trip to the Wall to verify the existence of a painting that had not been there before, took two weeks. We despise this painting for the lies it tells. We would destroy it if we could, wealth or no. But since we cannot, we will profit from it.

“The whore got his gold, less the advance, though he staggered and nearly fell while carrying the chest away. He was never seen again. No word of his death came back, though who would care to report the doings or death of a *shkiril* whore? The golds that were specially marked so that Aerisans could see the coins were tainted and reject them were also never seen again.”

*“There was no painting on the Wall until five years ago.”*

The near-glare that accompanies the end of the tale dares the Illoraeni, any one or all of them, to ask questions. They wisely do not.

In the following silence, it is the scholar who finds a change of subject. “Is it true the painting cannot be touched?”

The guide smiles a mocking smile and gestures toward the Wall. This is customarily the last part of the trip, unless one of the travelers wishes to



quickly make more crystal memories of the Wall or the painting before departure. Even leaving soon, it will be well after dark before we get back to the last place we camped.

“Try it. The Clan has offered five thousand golds to the one who can touch the painting, and of course, do it without causing damage.”

Nearly everyone who makes the trip to see the Wall is tempted, and ultimately tries for the gold. No one has succeeded.

They begin moving toward the Wall in a strung out group. I hold back. I have no desire to touch, even try to touch, a painting that unnerves me so. But I follow.

By the time I reach the painting, standing beyond its left edge, they have all, even the guide, made their unsuccessful tries. Their hands are stopped an almost... but not quite... imperceptible distance from its surface.

“Your turn.” It is the guide’s voice. I raise my head from contemplation of the dirt and shake a negative.

“Afraid?”

An Aerisan would take offense, challenge him to an honor-duel. It is obvious I am not Aerisan. It is undoubtedly obvious a short, thick, middle-aged man is not going to challenge him. What is not obvious is that I will not touch the painting. Nothing can make me touch that... that *wrong* painting.

*# Touch it. #*

A bubble of rebellion rises up in me. *# No. I can’t. #*

A whip that no one can see because it is in my mind lashes me. My back arches in the actual world. I can feel the blood oozing out of the thin line. Did they hear me scream or is the scream it only in my head?

*# Pleasure is in the mind. #*

Ecstasy runs through me, nearly unbearable but I am made to bear it, and I come. I can feel the hot seed splashing my trousers, leaking through, staining them.

*# Pain is in the mind. #*

Another lash making an X with the first.



# *Your Goddess must be praised.* #

A third, a fourth.

My back arches again, and again, and again. And then I curl my body, try to escape, as if I could ever escape. I drop to my knees gasping.

I drag my head up, look to my right. The off-worlders, the Kilthari... they just... *stand*. They are not shocked by the man in their midst who has shrieked and writhed for no reason at all. Not one blinks. Not one moves to help the man who stupidly turns to them and raises his hand, only to let it fall.

There is nothing *there* behind their eyes. Nothing of *them*.

It looks out at me. From all of them.

# *Touch the painting.* #

The rebellion-bubble burst and gone, I have no choice.

# *As I am commanded, so will I do.* #

I struggle to my feet, since the pain is no less real for not its cause being invisible. I step forward slowly. Too slowly. A tiny *flick!* of that whip compels me to stumble faster. I stand before the lower left corner and before the whip can urge me yet again, I stretch out my arm.

My right hand goes *through* the painting, touches the Wall... and remains there. I struggle to get my hand free, hearing mocking laughter inside my head. Followed by shouts of terror. I turn my head toward them, twist my body so that my arm crosses my chest, nearly touching. They are clumped together, now, back behind their own eyes, weapons drawn, visibly terrified. The toady has pissed himself.

Terrified of what?

# *Do you see what I see, standing at the Wall, little man? Do you see what I see? A Beast, a Beast, growling in the light, with a tail that cuts like a knife.*  
#

The voice rocks with laughter, and then suddenly, I am... inside the heads of them all, fifteen terrified men holding bared blades in the direction of that middle-aged man with a belly. But what they see, what I see, is a towering Beast.



In Third Form. Not fully Beast, not fully man. Eight feet tall. The face more nearly human than the Beast's True Form, but still fanged. A tail with a single deadly spike on the end lies coiled at my... the Beast's... feet. Grey, stone colored skin. Naked. So very obviously male. Unarmed.

"It's a Seeming!" I scream at them. "A hells-born illusion!"

I hear the *words*, but through their ears all I hear is the wild howl of an enraged Beast. The mortal enemy of Clan Aeris. They will remember that, the Aerisans at least, any second. Remember that they do not wish to die reviled because of cowardice, or be shunned if they run away to survive. Any second they will charge at me, and there will be no Beast, no Caaroc, to fight back. Just an unarmed man who will easily die.

Caaroc? Who... what... is Caaroc?

Quiet wicked laughter inside my head.

Will they feel remorse when I am dead and the Seeming is gone?

Unlikely.

Whatever held them in place moments ago has gone. They can move, and do so as if the restraint is not remembered. It has probably wiped away that small strand of memory. Only the off-worlders are utterly still. Voluntarily, this time. The Aerisans are emboldened by the fact the Beast just stands and rages, does nothing to move toward them, not even striking out with that vicious tail.

Useless though it is, I shout, and shout, and shout that it's just me, Kindal, a sightseer from... from... *I cannot remember!* But I'm not a Beast, I'm not. I beg them to stop, beg them not to hurt me, kill me. And all they hear are the insane growls of the Beast. All they see is a slaving Beast towering above them, unmoving. As I have been unmoving.

*# Bend forward. Swing your left arm up, out and down, as if you are going to scoop something off the ground. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

My arm swings out and down and the Beast appears to move, its killer-clawed paw striking toward the men at the back of the group. The cluster falls



apart, splitting into tinier clusters, those in the back yelling, and scrambling and fighting to get as far away as possible. Which leaves an opening for the men on the inside of that arc.

They take it. Two of the four blades sink into the Beast's leg, but the Beast doesn't react except to pull away and slightly back... as I do. The blades don't touch me, but that movement takes me right into position for the other two blades to run through me. One to my right shoulder, one just below my heart. The blades come out my back and stick, and the frightened, angry swordsmen yank and struggle and twist, desperate to get the blades out so they can strike again before the Beast takes revenge.

As my blood spouts, first in fountain arcs and then a steady flow, I collapse to the dirt, the pain overwhelming. My hand pops loose from the Wall.

And just like that, the Beast is gone. What remains is a group of frightened men at the far end of the painting; a quartet of men close in, valiant non-warriors who have nevertheless acquitted themselves as if they were, bravely battling the feared and loathsome... death-bleeding man on the ground. A man who had paid two golds to travel just as they had paid, only his payment turns out to be for a journey to his own death.

The coins are well-spent.

The two who missed stare at me in a different kind of horror, grateful now that it is not they who have murdered a traveler. The two who killed me look down on my almost-corpse with avidity. They see, or think they see, what no else yet has. They have killed a shifter. No one knew the Beasts were shifters, which makes them even more of an abomination. For this information, almost more than the Beast-killing, they will be rewarded, honored, praised, fucked almost to death by grateful women who want a chance to bear their children.

Fools.

I can't speak; can barely think; my life is draining away.

I am grateful. This is real. This time it is real. This time I will die.

I don't know why I must die. Why I need to die. Only that I must, and do.

I am close, so very close. My heart is slowing, slowing, slowing. Four beats, that's all it will take, four beats to pump out the final dribbles of blood and I will be gone.



Three.

Two.

O...

*# No. Not today. #*

I am on the ground still. In the same position in which I almost died. Except... I live. I am fully clothed. My body aches with the pain of the wounds that never physically happened. I slowly lift my head, look up at the two who almost killed me, or thought they did, over at the two who killed me—or thought they did.

Dully I realize it has done it again. Pain is all in the mind. Inflicting it. Receiving it. Feeling it.

Their eyes reflect amazement that I live, which slides into confusion about what just happened, which glides away into no memory at all.

*# You touched the Wall and fainted like the coward you are, is what they are thinking. Stand. Claim the reward the Aerisans promised. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

I turn mostly on my belly, pause only long enough to take a deep breath and not so long as to be lashed. Pull my hands and knees beneath me. Struggle to get on all fours. Get part way up, stagger, drop back to one knee, one hand in the dust. No one moves to help me.

When I stand, the residue of almost-death nearly undoes me. I sway, but control it. I look at the guide. I start to speak, can't, pause, inhale, gain control. "Five thousand gold. Word of Clan Aeris. Five thousand to touch the painting. I touched the painting."

I actually didn't, since the painting vanished and I touched just the Wall. But who am I to quibble and lose five thousand gold?

The guide shakes his head. It is his turn for momentary uncertainty. Then certainty. "No. You didn't. It was some sort of trick. An illusion, a Seeming, a trick. You get nothing."

"And so the honor of Clan Aeris..."

He raises the sword as if to strike at me, but the Illoraeni nobleman's voice cuts across the silence of another attempt at dying. Goddess damn him. The



other was not real, but this is. A non-Clansman insulting Clan honor is suicide, death by Aerisan. This could end it all and the fucking off-worlder interferes.

“Make him do it again.”

The guide swings angrily around, temporarily lowering his sword, the unbloody one that so recently did not nearly kill me, though I have the pain to prove, inside my head, that he made the effort. “What?” he snarls.

“If he touched it once, he can touch it again. And this time we won’t be tricked.”

The guide whirls back. “He’s right. Touch it again.”

“Once was enough. That was all the bargain called for, honorless Aerisan.”

Goddess damn! Fury rages across his face. But he controls it. Goddess damn!

He steps closer, but only enough so that the blade can dart out and up, the flat side of the tip resting under my chin, the point pressing up into that hollow just behind my chin bone. It produces a tiny drop of blood for the tip to drink. He pushes up, forcing my head back.

From here he can, with ease, adjust his arm to make a straight thrust parallel to my jaw and through my throat, or another adjustment for thrust upwards through my mouth and into my brain. Success either way.

I press my head toward him, and the blade bites deeper, blood seeping around the edges. I want to scream from even this small pain, but I do not. His eyes widen as I do it, but he doesn’t back away. He also doesn’t push forward himself.

*# Touch the wall. #*

Can I bear another punishment like the last one, even knowing I will be made to survive? I do not think so.

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

My aloud “very well” is a little bit garbled given the blade point, but he understands. He lowers the blade, watches me warily as he steps back, giving me space. The group moves in, forming a rough half circle around me, but with plenty of space in case something happens, though they no longer remember, no longer fear what that something might be.



Something does.

I feign confidence to mask the fear, look as arrogant as a man such as I can dare, when I am encircled by Aerisans who are a knife's edge away from killing me, and all of us watched by off-worlders.

*Flash!*

Imperials who are recording memories of my humiliation. My still-possible death. All of it into several crystals. Fuck them all.

I move into place, the half-circle of Aerisans moving with me. To ensure I do not bolt and run?

Where would I run?

Leap onto a *grila* and send it speeding toward the passage from which we came, at a pace barely more than a healthy man's fast walk? A sound plan to elude anyone coming after me. Or run around the Wall and head *away* from that passage, directly into the dead lands with no food or water or shelter from the blazing sun? An even better plan.

I face the Wall, move in close so if I lift my hand and stretch it out, my fingertip will touch the stone. I position myself. Take a step closer. I will not do this with fear, using only a fingertip and ready to pull it back. Palm flat and facing the Wall, I move another step forward, a half step.

I push my palm against the painting.

I touch nothing. My hand is sucked past it, through it, stuck against the Wall, the dirt and grit of five four-hundreds and more grinding into my flesh.

My scream this time must be real, for I hear the gasps behind, around me when it begins. I hear it both inside my head where it soars upward, trying to escape to the dark between the stars. I hear it with my ears as my voice soars here as well, rising to a pure silver note even Zhila, the most powerful of the countertenors of the Goddess' Temple in the capital, would envy. Though he would forego the praise and applause that note might bring, in exchange for not enduring the pain that creates it.

The painting begins to change. I begin to change.

My skin becomes warm, then hot, then burning. I have been tied to a stake and cannot move as every muscle, every fiber in my body howls in agony, the



flesh bulging, tearing my clothes until they hang in tatters, then fall away. Lumps... some so tiny they can barely be seen, others as large as my fist, begin to travel under my skin, making it ripple, swell, fall and rise, moving over every inch of my body to ensure the pain is equally shared.

I am somehow aware that the warrior in the painting is undergoing the same, though the lucky bastard does not feel what I feel.

The Beast before was an illusion. A mage's Seeming. *Its* Seeming.

Or... not a Seeming at all. Just control of the viewers' eyes, and... My mind splinters, the thought shatters.

But this... this is different. I am *shifting*. My body is actually changing its physical shape. I would pray to the Goddess, but why? She will not listen. She never has. And there is no reason to bother with crying out to Her since I will be dead when the shifting is complete. Not from it, but because I am a double abomination, both *shkiril* and shifter. That the Aerisans will only know the one and not both will not change my death or how I will meet it.

The fire burns in my blood until I am sure my flesh will just char and fall off in chunks.

Instead, it all ends.

The Shift is over.

I am at least standing. Naked but upright, not crouching like a beast or Beast, though my head is down. I appear to be a normal man. A normal *shkiril* who naturally checks his cock, relieved to see that it, too, is normal. Perhaps better than normal. Slender legs, muscular. Narrow feet that seem to have a strength all their own. The long black hair hides my face.

I am done. I am... what I am. And what I am I will not excuse.

I raise my head. The man in the painting does the same.

That odd vision returns. I look through my own eyes at the circle of men with bared blades. I see through their eyes as they look at me, look at the painting. My eyes are silver. I am Aerisan.

I am dead.

Without ever knowing who I am.



But I will not die, here and now, except by fighting.

I wait for their attack, my stance, my body language, hinting at resignation, at submission. This body—my body? my real body?—is young and despite the enduring pain of the shift, strong. And I know I am a warrior, though I have no idea where that certainty comes from. It doesn't matter. Naked, without a blade, I *will* defend myself. I will get one of their blades, perhaps two, and send at least some of them to the Hells, whether they join me in the Ninth Hell or not. As I will be heading there, because I cannot defeat this many.

The ones directly opposite me do not move, just stare at me. I see horror in some of the faces, horror because of something more, I think, than the abomination of a Shift. My cock is blessedly soft, so it provides no blatant announcement of my... *other*... nature. I glance right and left to see if the ends of the half-circle are closing in, trying to force me forward so I am surrounded.

They are not. Although the off-worlders have edged closer. Two memory crystals *flash!*

It is the guide who finally speaks, and though his voice trembles, his sword is steady. "Karel?"

The name means nothing. I shrug.

His face loses all expression; his eyes go blank. The ones in my direct sight are the same. And then the guide's face contorts with rage. *Its* rage? His own? It doesn't matter. He shouts "*Abomination!*" and as if it is a battle cry, the rest take it up, raise weapons to their best killing positions, and then they surge forward to do their Aerisan duty.

Except... they stop after only a step or two or three. Not enough to bring any of them within blade reach.

The stopping is not voluntary. I can see the increased rage in their eyes as they blame me for their immobility.

I am an Aerisan, true. A *shkiril*, true as well. Apparently a shifter. But I have no mage gifts. I have not done this. Words would be wasted, so I do not say them.

Only I can move. Somewhat. I look past the Aerisans. The off-worlders are again motionless themselves. The smart thing is for me to race past them, grab



a *grila*, and try to get as far away as I can before this... spell... or whatever it is shatters and lets them follow. I will at least have a chance to live. Although a part of me wonders why I wish to.

I am smart enough to know I should run. I just cannot implement the plan.

Now, I, too, cannot move.

*# Remember. Remember it all. #*

*# As I am commanded, so will I do. #*

\*\*\*\*

I remember... gathering this group of men, this particular group, doing something... no, it bars that sliver of memory... doing something to persuade them to come on this trip.

I remember... farther back, the trip before this one, when I arrived at the Wall as a near-doddering old man, and it tortured the minds of those who traveled with me, killed them and maimed them and restored them, again and again, until the other old man had a heart attack and died. Truly died. Those travelers watched, uncaring, as I endured the agonies of a shift and became... Kindal. I left the group before arrival at the inn from which the Wall trips started. Their memories of me were gone before I was a step away.

I remember... the trips to the Wall before those, the pattern always repeated, the worst poisons and pains reserved for me. I remember... how many of those who had been on the Wall journeys died later. But not nearby and so no one ever connected the Wall with their deaths.

I remember... dear Goddess, *I was the shkiril whore!* I remember the pain as *it* shifted me, gave me the body that I surrendered to the men who paid me and used me and abused me. I remember the beatings, the rapes, every *real* moment of every one. I remember where the gold is hidden. A fortune that could get me... several Gates, several worlds away. Except, if I leave and die, how will my soul find its way back here to be reborn?

The memories roll over me, drag me under, allow me to rise gasping to the surface, as I remember back and still back.

All the way to the *first* memory. The one that *it* has kept from me all these years. And all that followed.



Dear Goddess.

I remember...

\*\*\*\*



**Winterdeath Eve**  
**2 Winter 31, 19096 After Seren**  
**9669 House Andrae**  
**The Drunkard**  
**Halintown, Balir**

We introduce ourselves in a privy, exchanging names as we stand side by side, shoulders just touching, neither pulling away, pissing mightily into the equally side-by-side shit holes. With that much piss to get rid of, neither of us particularly cares whether the wood around the holes gets wet for whoever might use them next.

This exchange of names comes well after his arrival at The Drunkard. I was nursing my latest Zinarri ale when he opened the door and walked through, carefully ducking. He was so tall, when he straightened, a step inside, it seemed like the swept-back peak of the long hair topping his head should touch the ceiling. He stood at least a quarter four over my puny one four and a half four, though the Clan Mother has assured me I will grow and soon surpass my brothers, my *younger* brothers, and my father and uncles, all of whom tower over me. She has no idea when that might be, though, so after eighteen years of waiting, I know the truth. I am what I am. I am also not stupid enough to contradict the Clan Mother. Particularly when she is in fact my own mother.

I wondered why a man like that would be in a Sixth-Hell-damned tavern like this.

He turned his head slowly, made it seem casual, but this was no merchant checking for buyers, no enforcer checking for someone with a warrant against his name. This was a warrior checking for danger. His smooth, unlined face was remarkably young against the grey-silver of the hair that framed his face and rippled down onto his upper chest. Which was also remarkable. Remarkably broad and muscular, even covered by grey leathers buttoned nearly to the throat against the cold outside. The bitter cold he had temporarily brought in with him.

A wide grey leather belt with a design stitched in silver that cinched his



waist. A worn grey scabbard oddly on his right, a plain metal pommel protruding from it. The wornness was from use, not age.

I have perfected the art of looking at the bulges that conceal the cocks and balls I may not ever have, without seeming to do so. I am *shkiril*. I assume it is what we do, since I do it so often and so well. Though I have never known another who I could compare notes with. Or thought I had not.

I sat there and willed myself not to cry. Tarik was my friend, though I must deny him still. As I did when I and all the Clan watched him be gelded by the shears used on *grila* males for the same purpose. When the Clanless man whose cock Tarik was sucking when they were caught was gelded, too, their wounds cauterized with red-hot steel between their legs. When they were made slaves. Deny him even in death.

I will not cry.

I gulped down the last of the ale. I fingered the coins in my pouch. I had enough for another Zinnari. Or I could lower the standards I had already lowered just by being here, and instead get two, perhaps even three of the *grila*-piss beer that is the normal fare at this aptly-named tavern. Three gets you more drunk than one, no matter the foul taste in your mouth later. I should have figured that out earlier.

I got up and carefully, carefully did *not* stagger on my way to the bar. I had no fears someone would take my empty seat. True, this is Clan Balir territory, not far inside its part of the Four Corners, where the borders of Aeris, Gaarch, Balir and some strangely long-unclaimed land meet in border lines that are more ragged than the name suggests. But I *was* Aerisan, I *was* armed, and I *was* blooded with the first of what I am sure will be many silver chains woven into the side of my neck to show my hunt prowess. Though like everyone my age, I yearn to be the first of our age-group to kill a Gaarchan Stone Beast, despite the fact none have been seen since the last kill—oh, multiples of fours past. Yes, my chair was safe.

That I passed closely by the grey-clad stranger was, of course, inevitable. I had to get to the bar, after all, if I was to have any *grila*-piss to drink. Moving to the left around the table crowded with men who lived up to the tavern's name, arguing over some dice game, was, in truth, a slightly longer journey to my destination than going right.



But left to see a left-handed warrior seemed a reasonable reason for my route at the time.

I surreptitiously continued my subtle *shkiril* inventory. Long, muscular thighs that strained against the leather trousers. Darker grey boots, once shiny, rose over his calves and ended below his knees. Large feet. I often wonder if there is a relationship between foot size and cock size. My own long and slender feet seem to establish there is. So did furtive looks at other men and boys when swimming or bathing in the public pools, or on the trail, though the only ones I saw hard were by sheer accident and they quickly turned away.

The greatcoat he wore seemed to still exude the cold he brought in, chilled air sliding off the also grey leather that hugged his waist, then flared out to swirl around his ankles. Inspection done, I passed him by, went to the bar, got a flagon just by asking in a friendly tone for the barkeep's finest *grila* piss, and turned to go back to my table.

I turned left so that in making that half circle I would see if he was still by some chance standing in the same place. He was not. I finished the turn, started to look for him, found him easily. He was seated at my table with a large goblet in his hand. Perhaps I should have waited for a barmaid. He had pulled up another chair, so he had not technically taken my seat, and thus had not challenged me. There wasn't exactly a hush as I crossed back, just the tiniest dip in volume, as the other customers watched and wondered if, hoped that, a young Aerisan would be foolish enough to challenge an older warrior over a tavern chair.

Older, yes, I was certain. I thought at first not by much, but as I approached the table he had invaded he seemed much older, though that could have been a trick of the not well-lit interior of the tavern. Though I have heard of Imperial races that do not appear to age for fours of fours of fours, until suddenly they are simply *old*. Was he an off-worlder? Possible, but as I reached my table... my suddenly *shared* table... I decided he was not. Though he was from no Clan I recognized. Not that I have all that much knowledge of other Clans beyond those near Aerisan territory. I wondered how far he had come to get here, and why. What he had experienced on the way.

I stopped beside my chair. Looked down at him. His eyes were the grey of



storm clouds, the grey of the darkest granite. I knew my own to be clear, shining silver.

I stood over him, a momentary advantage that would vanish if he decided to stand, took a swallow of the beer, and felt unbearably young and foolish when I realized I had a foam mustache. I tried for nonchalance and undoubtedly failed as I attempted licking it off, gave up in disgust and raised my left arm to wipe my mouth on the sleeve. It was dirty anyway, so the addition of beer and more sweat didn't matter.

I could think of nothing clever to say, certainly nothing befitting an Aerisan warrior no matter how young. I sat. And tried not to slouch. Clan Mother raised me not to slouch. The head slaps, neck slaps, back slaps worked well as a training method. Clan Mother has a *hard* hand, and I am grateful others are now feeling it.

I felt his eyes on me as we drank in silence, ostensibly not looking at one another. He gulped the goblet contents down, raised his hand, and the barmaid miraculously appeared, simpering and thrusting her great breasts at him. I avoided shaking my head in disgust. Did she do it because that was just the way she was with any man she hoped might fuck her and pay her well? Or because she was trained to be?

Travelers in from the usual cold of Winterdeath Eve, especially in a place like this, often relished that kind of heat. Or so I have heard. I would probably spew in her face if she was beneath me. He declined without acknowledging he had been propositioned, and tipped her well to assuage her disappointment when she refilled his goblet.

We drank some more in silence. Stared at nothing and everything other than each other. I was certain I was intentionally not staring at him. Whether he was returning that favor I could not tell, which was, in a way, the whole point of not staring at each other. He finished his wine as I finished my foul beer.

He put the goblet down. Carefully. With the kind of care that usually meant, in my limited experience, that you are uncertain whether you are actually setting it on the table top, or whether you are going to set it on air and have it smash to the floor when you let it go.



“I have to piss.”

This pronouncement was made as though the fate of Clans rested on it. There was also the faintest “ish” sound to the end of the word. My grey-clad warrior... mine only, of course, in the cock-hardening fantasies my mind was already frantically weaving about these moments... had been celebrating elsewhere.

“Where do I piss?”

It was with the faintly belligerent tone of a man who might, given an unsatisfactory or too slow response, simply haul his massive cock out of his trousers... it had to be massive, my fantasies demanded it... and start pissing here and now.

“Privy.”

“Where?” He looked around the room as if he more than half expected to find one or two or three holes waiting for his use.

His head was turned away from me, and I did not dare touch him to get his attention. The temptation to caress and not let go was that great. The reality of death by grey warrior, death by tavern customers, death by gelding and slavery quashed the impulse. I spoke louder. “Down the hall.”

He looked at me again, grey eyes glittering. “Which hall?”

I blinked. He must be drunk indeed. There was only one arch leading to one plainly visible hallway. The only one in sight. I jerked my head toward it, and his eyes followed the motion, came back to my face. “That hall. To the end. Turn right. Second door on your left. A very short hallway. And then outside.”

He nodded his understanding, stood up carefully with only a slight sway he mostly hid. It was his turn to tower and given his both-of-us-standing height advantage, it was towering indeed.

He repeated his lesson with careful precision. “Down the hall. That hall.” He jerked his head in imitation of my gesture and for a moment I thought there was some humor in his stare. “To the end. Turn right. Second door on my left. A very short hallway. And then outside.”



He paused. Inhaled slowly, let it out. “I sometimes lose my way. Show me?”

I wasn’t fast enough to stop my mouth from dropping open, but at least I managed to regain control before it hit the floor and broke my jaw. He couldn’t be serious. Was he? Did he somehow know what I was and this was a ruse to get me alone? To kill or maim me before shouting for the rest of those who would be eager to help finish what he started?

I shook my head. He turned and headed toward the hallway.

That was *not* regret I saw in his eyes.

I looked down at my empty flagon. Looked carefully up and around. No one stared after the grey warrior. No one stared at me. It would be an incredibly stupid thing to do, to go after him.

So I did.

I could blame my decision to get up, with my own kind of unsteadiness, on all the ale and beer I had consumed. But Father had trained me to be honest. Honest with other Aerisans at least, reasonably so with other Clans, less so with the Clanless, carefully but not necessarily so with the Imperials. But I can never be honest enough to disclose *my* truth to them. And so I will not hide my own truth or any part of it from myself. The truth that I was following the grey warrior because I wanted to. Because I *needed* to.

And now we are here, pissing side by side. Not looking at each other again.

“I’m Caaroc.” His voice sounds oddly loud over the sounds of liquid hitting part-liquid, part-solid... substances... at the bottom of each of our holes. I wince at the thought.

Feel my cock twitching at the image of a different liquid hitting, spurting, into the bottom of different hole.

His? Mine? Either would do.

“Karel.”

I wonder if he, too, feels odd about introducing himself to another man while pissing. Do you grip forearms as is customary, even considering where your hand has just been, or do you clean your hand first? And where? In the



snow? And how do you do a warrior's clasp when one is right-handed and the other is not?

Caaroc has a solution as we finish, squeeze the length of the tube to get the last drops out, flick them off, and stand there, cocks still out, foolishly, dangerously, still out. His right hand grasps my cock. I freeze.

My voice is a harsh whisper. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

His thumb caresses the knob end, pulls the skin down a little on a back stroke toward my belly. He whispers, too, though there is a tinge of mockery in it. "We're alone. We're safe. And you want this."

He is right about all three, but not completely right. We are alone—for now. We are, indeed, safe, if that means merely being temporarily not in imminent danger of dying. A situation that could change in seconds just from another drunk who needed to piss. He is most right about my wanting to do this. What "this" would actually be since up to now I have only had my own sick imaginings of what might be possible. I just cannot do it. Cannot risk my life, risk humiliating my family and my Clan if the next drunk who needs to piss or shit stumbles in on us. And there is no lock on the door.

But perhaps I need not stop him. Not just yet. I can take this chance, feel a man's hand, a *warrior's* callused palm circling and rubbing and stroking my cock. For just a moment, only a moment. Something to remember. And then I'll make him stop, even if I am left whimpering.

Or perhaps several moments.

I moan as he strokes a little faster. Better, ah, so very, very much better than my own hand. I am building so rapidly... No. I cannot do this. I grab his wrist. He stops.

He does not let my cock go, a silent demand to let him finish, and my aching, leaking cock knob silently berates the thick-headed knob up above for denying both of my knobs pleasure. I could... I could squeeze his wrist, not hard enough to hurt, just enough that he understands my decision and releases me. I don't. We are at an impasse, though I know I am strong enough to force myself to do what needs to be done. I think.

In the near-darkness, I have the oddest sensation that he swells up, becoming so tall and wide that if my imaginings were real the privy shed



would be blown apart, leaving a cock-groping grey warrior, and a grope-accepting Aerisan warrior standing visible in the rubble. And then his invisible self shrinks back and vanishes inside him.

Goddess, I have indeed had far too much to drink, if the result is all these fancies.

His voice is confident. “There is no one near, no one coming down the hall. No one coming through the snow around the building. I will know if there is. We have plenty of time.”

I want to ask “time for what?” but doing so would be just a demonstration of how stupid I am. The *plenty of time* we have is for him to suck me.

Without letting go of my cock, he sits on the ledge, his ass over the hole he has just pissed in, ignoring what his own piss and whatever filth might still be on the wood are doing to his coat. He tugs me toward him and with a complete lack of warrior grace I find myself straddling his left leg, my trousers undone and pushed below my ass, his left hand caressing my balls, his right hand grabbing my ass cheek and pulling me so that every inch of my cock slides right into the welcoming heat of his mouth, and his throat.

I have *imagined* sucking. So very often. I have *heard* about it only a little. Never about the detestable *shkiril* version of it, of course. Just hints and raw, foul comments by men of my family and Clan, and men of other Clans on joint hunts, about women who had, women who might, women who would, if only, if only... Though part of my wondering has always been how a woman could do it well. Wouldn't a man, despicable though the thought is, know better what would pleasure a man because he knows what he likes when he is sucked?

It turns out I have no imagination at all. If a good imagination about getting sucked off is a full cup of the finest ale that money can buy, my imagination is the last drop of the last dreg of the *grila*-piss beer I am drinking tonight.

He slides all the way back, his lips and tongue getting me more slick it seems than the oil I sometimes use to pleasure myself. His tongue laps and tastes and teases around my knob and into my slit, then he moves forward again until his forehead is pressing against my belly. He slides back and this time lifts his mouth away. I don't like cold privy air on my prick. I prefer heated Caaroc air.



“Do you think you can fuck my mouth,” he says with a quiet smirk in his voice, “without shouting so loud when I let you come that we will be found by most of the men inside who will want to know who is dying, or better yet, who is getting sexed so incredibly well and can they get some of that, too?”

I let my indignation be felt when I grab the sides of his head and hold his skull in place while I take measurements of the depth of his mouth and throat, with my cock as a guide. I am losing my virginity with a magnificent man, fucking his face as I have so often dreamed, though in honesty my dreams more often involved the use of my presently unskilled mouth and throat by someone like my grey warrior. It takes an embarrassingly few strokes for his lips and tongue and heat and throat to make me cram my cock into him one final time without caring if he can breathe or not. And then I am seeding his throat, hells, I am seeding his Goddess-damned belly!

And though the bastard is right and I want to scream my triumph, shout as if I have just earned another hunt-chain woven into my neck, I remember his sarcasm, and hold it back.

He holds me in his mouth and throat, breathing quietly through his nose, as I gradually soften, and then he lets me slide free. I gasp as my cock pops out and away from his lips, start to sag. Why won't my legs hold me up? My grey warrior does instead.

“That was... That was...”

His voice is soft, only slightly sarcastic. “Superb? Wonderful? Magnificent? Both a mind- and cock-blowing experience?”

My befuddled mind slowly slides to earth from the clouds in which he had me soaring. He deserves my honesty. “All of that. And more.”

I caress the side of his face, run a thumb over lips that I can feel are slightly swollen. I am ridiculously proud that I caused that swelling. “I never expected...”

His “Never expected?” is loud enough that I have to hiss at him for silence, or if not silence, softness.

His voice is far more quiet, far more shocked. “This was your first time?”

I nod, realize it is unlikely he can see me since the only light is sliding through the uneven slats of the badly made door from the lantern on its hook



outside. Men do not need a lot of light to piss or shit; they simply aim in the general direction of the target, and hope—sometimes—for accuracy. “Yes.”

He sits abruptly upright. “Goddess damn, Karel. Why didn’t you say so? I could have gotten us a room, a decent bed...”

I clamp a hand over his mouth to stop the heresy that can get us both killed. All it would take is a man out in the cold, waiting for the holes in the privy to be vacant, listening avidly through the thin planks of the door. “Are you out of your fucking mind?” is the only logical thing I can think of to say. Again.

I lift my hand away from his mouth and frantically begin tucking my cock and balls back inside my trousers, though they plead with me to be allowed to stay out and play. I am hurriedly getting myself right again so no one will suspect what the two abominations have just done. Or rather, the *one* abomination. I have done nothing. One warrior helps another, no matter how great or small the task, a warrior’s debt is owed. While my particular task is—was—not great, more of a long and slender task, a debt is due.

But that debt will not, can never be paid in a tavern room. Where else? I almost laugh aloud at the idea of taking him to my home and explaining that I owe an honor debt... my father is big on honor, enormously so... and I am therefore taking my grey warrior to my room so I can suck his magnificent cock. And perhaps I will put myself deeper into his debt by persuading him to fuck me, deep and hard, despite my probably inept oral ministrations. Or if not deep and hard, at least briefly and thoroughly.

My smile is bitter in the near-total darkness. My throat would be cut before I finished the word “suck,” my blood-fountaining body falling to my father’s floor. It did not bother him when he gelded my best friend, enslaved him, and set him to tasks no man should endure. He did not care when my best friend hanged himself. But oh, he would care about the Clan finding out his own son is *shkiril*. He could not endure my gelding and enslavement though he would certainly think it just, but *his* shame would take precedence over the ruin of my body and my life. So he would kill me himself and make up a story that all would believe. And weep copiously over my corpse. And have no tears for my grey warrior’s slashed and mutilated body, because they could not let him live and be enslaved and possibly tell the truth.



I force my attention back to reality. They say all bad things come in threes, for no evil would dare the four sacred to Her. So I repeat myself in a harsh whisper.

“Are you out of your *fucking* mind? We are *shkiril*...” That word hits me, an unexpected gut punch from Samel, a giant among Aerisans with fists like hams... stone hams. I have never said it aloud before, and I realize that until this moment I have never truly believed it of myself. I get myself under control. He must understand what that kind of arrogance can cause.

My voice is low, and I let all the resentment and bitterness show. “We are *abominations*. We do not get rooms so we can fuck and suck while the rest of the tavern customers go about their business. We hide like the vermin we are and scuttle into darkness whenever someone tries to shine a light on us.”

I have the temerity, and the luck, to reach out and grab his shoulders and try to shake some sense into him. “You will get us both killed, you arrogant fool.”

He puts his hands up, curls his fingers around my wrists. He does not pull them away, does not crush them though I am certain he could.

His voice is as soft, as intense as mine. “I am sorry. I did not understand. In... where I come from we, you and I, warriors who love warriors are the ‘luck-found ones’.”

The idea that someone, anyone, anywhere, could have what I cannot, hurts. Far more that I could ever have expected, but then, until this second I had never believed it possible, except, perhaps somewhere far away in the Kingdom and Empire.

His thumbs caress me. “We are the *sh’kir*. And we are not abominations. *You* are not an abomination.”

That certainty staggers me, and some of the tension flows away. Leaving just the natural (unnatural?) tension arising from the fact that we are in a fucking privy fucking, or sucking, and all those potential consequences are waiting to land on our heads. Which is, of course, most of the reason for the fucking tension in the first place. And then there is the different tension from the fact I owe a warrior’s debt. I will pay it. Just not in the complete cold, out



there somewhere in the snow. It will have to be in the nearly-as-cold, breath visible and lingering if we had light to see it cold of this fucking privy.

“Are you still certain we are safe? No one is coming?”

Why in the hells am I asking that question? And *trusting* his answer?

Again that sensation that he swells to some giant size, listens, and falls in on himself. “I am certain. They are... at least some of them... having a pissing contest in the snow in the street out front. They don’t really need this privy now. Why?”

Arrogant asshole knows why. He cannot be the warrior he so clearly is and not know. I start to drop to my knees.

He stops me and in the tight confines I lose my balance and tilt forward, my knee smashing into the sharp edge of the ledge on which he sits. Goddess shit damn hells.

“No.”

It is my turn for my voice to be low and dangerous. “No?”

His turn to be soft, and not just in volume. “I will not be anyone’s duty fuck.”

“You mean I can fuck you? That’s even...”

He unerringly raises his hand and presses two fingers to my lips. I imagine I can see the grin that is invisible except for a faint hint from a line of light on his cheek. “Or duty suck.”

My tongue darts out and licks his fingers. He jerks them back as if he’d been pricked, but merely by a needle and not something better.

“I owe you, true.” I make my voice low and seductive. “But I want this because I want to. Here. Now. With you.”

Apparently I don’t do low and seductive very well, because he chuckles. His hand reaches out again, this time to caress my lips with his thumb, push it between my lips, let me suckle on it, before sliding it out again.

“You’re going to suck me? Here and now? Without knowing how large my cock is? Whether it will choke you? Whether it will hurt you if I hold your skull tight and fuck your face?”



I am hard again and my only answer to all those questions would be a loud “Goddess, yes!” if I were only allowed to shout. I have to make do with a vigorous nod.

However, nods that cannot be seen do not work well even with perceptive grey warriors. I improvise with a casually nonchalant, world-weary, *I have been there and done this before, you know*, “Of course.”

It is clear I do not do casual, nonchalant, or world-weary well. He chuckles again, and I laugh a little with him, only a little, softly. So I get down on my knees to start sucking my first, and undoubtedly only, cock.

Except...

Well hells, it never occurred to me that swords on the hips of both men are rather awkward things when you're in very tight quarters, even when all you really, really, *really* want to do is either suck the cock before you, or get your cock in the mouth in front of you. Especially when speed is something of a necessity, despite the virginity of the mouth and throat of the sucker. We mutter, and curse, and twist, and juggle, and wince when one of the sword hilts slams loudly against the side wall. We freeze and don't breathe and while we're doing both I give somewhat smug thanks to the Goddess, from whom all blessings flow, that it wasn't *my* sword.

In a fairly quick “eventually” the swords are off, their scabbards leaning against the ledge on his right, his legs are spread, I'm on my knees, his trousers are open, and I'm ready to... *For Goddess' sake! stop stalling!* I tell myself. *You can do this.*

I reach out in the near-total darkness to grab hold of his cock, being careful not to bash it in the process of finding it.

I need not have worried.

A blind man on a moonless, overcast night, down in the middle of the mile-wide cavern buried far under the Nelarín Mountains, with no torches and no mage lights, could have found this cock with absolutely no trouble. It could not possibly be missed.

The Clan Mother would definitely not appreciate my remembering her words in circumstances like these. But I cannot help recalling that when I was



a child and begging the Goddess constantly for a wide variety of things I had no need for and were far more likely to do me harm than good, she often said, “Be careful what you ask the Goddess for. She might give it to you.”

I now understand that “Ask and ye shall receive” can be a mixed, a *very* mixed, blessing.

I *did* pray to the Goddess that I could suck at least one magnificent cock before I died. And be fucked by one as well. She granted the first part of my wish. I would have appreciated some warning, however, that there was a high probability I will die from sucking that cock. With a proper notice, I might, perhaps, have reconsidered and withdrawn my wish, or substituted “modest” for “magnificent.”

Being killed for being a *shkiril* caught sucking cock in a privy would undoubtedly be painful. Just... could it possibly be more painful than choking to death while sucking *this* cock? Goddess, it feels like it belongs on a Stone Beast’s body. Not that I have ever seen a Stone Beast’s cock, except in the few ancient paintings based on descriptions of those who survived a battle with the Gaarchan monster. None of the pictures portrayed an erection, probably because fighting for your life, whether man or Beast, isn’t generally a hard-on-producing event.

I scoffed and mocked with the rest of the boys, as we told each other the artist exaggerated, that no cock, even on a Beast, could be that size. I am also sure I wasn’t the only one to find a private place later and look between my legs and feel miserable.

I bring myself out of the memories that I am using for stalling. My grey warrior has noticed the stalling.

“Second thoughts?”

He touches my hand, to remove it, perhaps, but I squeeze and stroke and tell him “no.”

I am an Aerisan warrior. I haven’t been trained for this but... I can do this. An Aerisan warrior can learn to do anything he needs to do, even something as *abominably* wonderful as this.

I lean forward and he sits up, pushing that erection down toward the... not terrified, just terribly nervous... hole it is about to enter. With my left hand I



circle the large knob, using my thumb on the slit, smearing the copious precome around in the hope that slickness helps. I lean in, with all that prick rubbing the side of my face, and bury my nose in thick, curly groin hair that my mind has decided must be grey and silver as well, gambling that I will be able to smell something other than the fumes rising from the holes, although his coat and ass at least form something of a seal over one.

The luck dice turn up eight. Despite the open hole near his thigh, I somehow block the noisome odors from my mind and nose, and I smell... the hot musky scent of a man who has been exercising vigorously. I have smelled that smell on myself but it has never been sexual before, and it's only a passing thought to wonder what he had done before coming to the Drunkard. A clean scent, too. The crisp smell of the air, cold and sharp in your nostrils and throat and lungs, high up in Ghilar Pass just before the first fall storm hits. And... something else. Something... odd. He smells like... *granite*. Or as I imagine granite would smell if granite actually did.

His rough-palmed hand caresses my hair, moves down my face. His thumb runs across my lips. His voice is gentle, "You don't have to, you know."

I do. Not because of duty but because I want to, I *need* to.

I could twist and start humping his left leg to demonstrate with my own erection how very interested I am, but that is just more delay.

I let go of his cock, put my left hand on his right wrist, hold it lightly in place and suck his thumb in, swabbing it with my tongue, sucking it like a miniature cock for just a moment's practice. I pull my head back, smile up at him unseen, move his hand aside, and lower my head.

My jaw isn't really dislocated as I somehow manage to get that knob all the way in. It is huge, and my exploring hands tell me that a foot, two feet, three or so downwards the shaft gets *really* wide. I pull back just a little and then force my head downward. I acquire perhaps a half inch more. At this rate it will be Summer's Eve before I can take it all, and long before then one of the other customers will have either noticed our long absence in the direction of the privy, or not knowing or caring what we are doing, just throws the door open to demand his turn.

The holes in the ledge may be available to everyone, but not *this* hole. Special men... grey warriors... only.



If my grey warrior doesn't get upset by the almost non-existent progress and just give up on me in disgust.

Instead, he puts those long-fingered, strong hands on either side of my head, runs his fingers through my thick hair, holds me still, and says, "Let me. I will teach you to be an *amazing* cocksucker, my Aerisan warrior. And I'll do it so well, you'll only want to practice on me. Yes?"

Cock knob in the mouth is not conducive to talking; even I know that. I try to make my vigorously approving head shake as pleasurable as possible. I must be succeeding, at least a little, since he moans... just a little.

With whispers of just very general instructions to breathe through my nose, and relax, he begins working that massive prick not only into my mouth but down into my throat. He moves my head in tiny circles and twists and turns, nothing painful, but with each one I can feel my throat expanding and accepting more and more. When he reaches the halfway point (Dear Goddess, don't let it be any less than that!) where his cock widens, I am certain that is all I can take.

He pauses, presumably to let me get used to the log cutting off most of my ability to breathe, and then starts slowly pushing up while pulling my head down. I have a moment of near-panic which he senses and soothes, just with his thumbs on my temples, and then it begins to work. My throat is adjusting! Relaxing, opening wide, wider, wider.

And then it is all in. Not some, not most, but every Goddess-blessed inch. We both hold very still, and then I can feel his cock move, just a little, tiny adjustments. For only a second I have the oddest feeling that it is his *cock* which is *adjusting* to the shape of my throat, shrinking just enough so that he stretches me but does not overwhelm me. Rather than my throat naturally, or perhaps forcibly, spreading to accommodate his length and breadth.

Absurd. Completely absurd. I am just a very good, natural born, vile *shkiril* cocksucker. It is *my* throat that makes the necessary adjustments and accommodations.

I must also get to work and complete the lesson my grey warrior is providing, or it may well be the last lesson I will ever learn.



My throat, his cock, we fit perfectly now. I proceed to prove it, slowly withdrawing until it is just the piss slit inside my mouth, then sliding back down again. All the fucking way! And again and again and again, increasing the pace, instinctively working his balls, feeling the tension in his whole body build and build, and then his balls are tightening up against his body and he is spewing his seed into my throat, on a direct line down to my belly.

And spewing, and spewing, and spewing.

I swallow all of it.

When at last he is done, he gently raises my head and as his thick cock slowly slides out I can feel my throat closing up after him, until it is only as wide as it originally was. But I now know what it's capable of.

I start to get up but he grabs my shoulders, leans forward and kisses me, deep and hard the way I have sometimes seen a man kiss a woman when they're fucking and don't know they can be seen. Tongues and kissing are a wonderful combination; more so with the sharing of the flavors and juices from each of us.

Then that, too, has to end. All of it has to end. But at least I know now what I will never have again, and at least I had it once. A kiss. My cock sucked. Sucking cock. And a grey warrior from the Goddess knows where whom I desperately wish was mine.

We get our cocks and balls hidden again, stand, kiss once more, and decide that we can put our swords back on out in the open. Two men using the privy side by side, pants down, is not unusual; it would be logical to remove swords and come out carrying them and put them back on again where there is room. If asked, that is the story I will tell, and I will stick to it.

The snow has been falling again and our footprints and the path cleared by men tromping to and from the privy is almost covered. Swords on again, we stand facing each other, Caaroc's back toward the privy. We are awkward now and I am far too new at this to know what to say or do to stop this strangeness. I wish, oh how I wish I could kiss him just once more.

But one moon has come a little out, and the lantern dimly lights this space between the back of the tavern and the alley. That kiss will not happen.



Only... will it? He leans in, moves his head close to mine, all it would take is a slight head turn and our lips will meet. I... do nothing at all.

Especially since he says quietly in my ear, “Your knees look like you’ve been sucking cock in a place with plenty of shit and piss and general filth on the floor. Any idea where that might be?”

I look down in shock. Goddess damn! And my cloak is back inside, draped over the back of my chair. I try to figure out what the hells I’m going to do and Caaroc solves my problem. He grabs me, unbalances me, turns me, and tosses me forward and down so that not only do I fall on my knees in fresh snow I continue falling and wind up with my face in it as well. My front is covered with snow and whatever might be beneath it.

Goddess damn him and his damned chuckling. I roll over on my back, neatly avoiding entangling myself with my sword. Raise myself onto my elbows, look up at him, grinning. He grins down, proud of himself.

He has apparently forgotten, if he ever knew, that Aerisans believe in payback. Even when being slightly sneaky is necessary to get it done.

I smile a smile as rueful as I can make it, which, surprisingly, is more than good enough, since when I stretch out my arm so he can clasp my forearm and help pull me up, he actually bends forward... and I kick his feet out from under him so that he lands flat on his ass. It is my turn to chuckle, and then toss my head back and laugh.

I definitely do not want to know what might be in the handful of snow which hits my face, a good part of it going into my mouth. We briefly become boys again in a rolling, tumbling, neither-of-us-trying-very-hard, battle that more than explains my now-soaked knees, and mostly-soaked rest of me.

All too soon our laughter dies and we help each other up in earnest. And stand again. Staring in silence. The Goddess be thanked for allowing us even this much time alone.

“Would you...?” Caaroc’s voice trails off as if he, too, is as uncertain as I.

What I hear is a sentence that ends “like to meet again?” and my joyous, “Goddess, yes!” has to be contained in an unsmiling nod.

He understands, but hesitates. Looks away, bites his lip. Looks back and down into my eyes. His voice is stern. “We are fools to do this, Karel. *I* am a



damned fool for even suggesting it. In so many ways more than you know. Your luck dice rolled for us tonight and they came up eight. We should be grateful and let it go at that.”

I can’t touch him, but I try to let my eyes tell him I understand, I agree. Tell him, too, that *I* can’t just “let it go,” unless I am forced to by his walking away. I take back a little of the lead I had surrendered so surprisingly and willingly such a short while ago, with such surprisingly wonderful results. “But you don’t want to do that.”

I see him try, for just a moment, to say precisely that in a way that will make me believe. See him surrender, too, to the recognition that my words are true. “No.”

“Neither do I.”

He sighs and slumps, shakes his head. Inhales deeply, stands tall, looks at me.

“I have to leave tomorrow. On a journey for... for my people. I will be gone—” He pauses, visibly calculating. “I will be gone the two more months of Winter, and then all of First Spring, possibly a week into Second Spring. To be safe, let’s say Second Spring sixteen, or seventeen? Can you be here?”

I have no idea how, but I will. I tell him so.

“Good. Be at the Drunkard about the same time as I arrived tonight. You won’t see me, but I will get word to you about where to meet, so we won’t be seen.”

I nod my agreement. Then do not try nearly hard enough to crush the brief surge of jealousy. Jealousy I have no fucking right to feel. “You’re very good at this, aren’t you?” My tone is definitely not approving.

He looks bewildered for a moment and then his face breaks into an extraordinary grin. He doesn’t move closer but his voice drops so that we are both certain only we can hear. “You mean making assignations? Finding a hidden place where I can take a gorgeous man and fuck him reasonably carefully the first time, since he’s a delicate virgin Aerisan warrior with a great deal of raw, untrained potential? Then, when I *have* trained his hole, fuck him into the bed or the wall or over a table a couple of times more? Perhaps even teach him how to be a better cocksucker without my dying from the results?”



I smile back and the jealousy evaporates. And then he is slightly more serious. “No. I never have. I have never had to. But for you, I will.”

My turn to be solemn. “We could die from doing this.”

“And we might as well be already dead if we don’t, if we’re not willing to risk... finding out what ‘this’ is.” And he flaps his hand in the air, to make sure I clearly understand what “this” he is talking about.

He is right.

He looks down at me with an intensity that is only visible in his eyes. “Imagine that I have just pulled you into my arms and kissed you so long and so thoroughly that I leave you gasping for breath.”

I can better that. “And I kiss you back so well your knees are weak, you can barely stand, and I’ve just made you mess your trousers with come.”

He lets out a sharp bark of laughter, and then spins on his heels, the coat flaring around his legs, and strides off down the alley. I go back inside to retrieve my cloak.

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*It lets me... makes me... remember...*

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**Winterdeath**  
**2 Winter 32, 19096 After Seren**  
**9670 House Andrae**  
**Aeris Hall**  
**Aeris, Kilthar**

“Don’t get her pregnant.”

I look up in shock from contemplating but not really eating the Winterdeath feast. My mind keeps wandering back to last night, early this morning. Caaroc’s cock in my mouth and throat. Mine in his, though obviously not so wide or deep. The promise of more, if he keeps his promise to return in Second Spring. The presence of Clan Mother, all three of my younger, bigger (as they so frequently remind me) brothers, plus three grandparents, one great-grandparent, and too numerous to count aunts, uncles, and cousins keeps me from getting hard.

Unfortunately, at just that moment my food contemplation involves actually starting to swallow a large bite of buttered bread dipped in thick, sweet *stenoch* gravy. I promptly start choking, which naturally requires brothers Denin (seventeen) and Larel (sixteen) to leap from their chairs beside me and begin vigorously pounding my back. Purely to preserve my health, of course, and not from any desire to pound me without fear of Father’s retribution, or my own.

When I recover, Father is looking at me with a smug smile at my discomfiture. I say nothing, in the vain hope that will end it. That is not what the Goddess has in mind for me.

“I was beginning to wonder about you.” He pauses and lets the silence stretch. There is something in his eyes that hopefully only I can see. Dislike? Disappointment? Disapproval? We have never been at ease with each other the way he is at ease with my brothers. Perhaps being the oldest but smallest of his sons has something to do with it. Even though I have excelled at every task he has set me, it never seems to be enough to get the grins my brothers so easily gain, the hearty back slaps. The hugs.



I vow that this time I will let the silence go. I make no attempt to stare him down, but everyone is aware of this brief contest of wills. The room does not go silent, because that would be an admission of listening in, but if you never admit it, you can still do it. I lose the contest, of course. As I always have.

I ask him, with enough deliberate insolence that it can be heard, but not so much that he can rightly call judgment on me, “About what?”

“Whether you’d ever get laid.”

He maintains a blank face for a second, then guffaws loudly and slaps the table with his huge palm. Nearly everyone else laughs as well after he does. It is an ingrained response. When the Clan Chief laughs, you laugh as well. But Father’s laughter has a false, *sour* note. So does some of the other laughter, although I do not know who since at the moment all I can see is him.

I cannot prevent the flush. So he wants to play out this humiliation in front of everyone. So be it.

Fury rises inside me, but I lock my face against its display. I am mad as all the hells, and I will not take this anymore. No denials. No evasions. Just lies. I *can* do this, I *will* do this.

“Yes. I did. Do you want me to describe her cunt and how well I fucked it, or is it enough to know that I did?”

A sword slices through the sounds in the great hall, kills them instantly.

The Clan Mother does not like gutter language at table, regardless of what her men... and boys... say elsewhere. What the Clan Mother does not like, the Clan Chief does not allow. It is a fist, now, that slams the spot where his palm landed. Bowls and glasses and utensils leap and fall back. He rises from his chair, sending it toppling. “How dare you!”

“How dare *you*, old man!” My turn to stand and shout and topple my chair.

Father is a huge man, taller, heavier, stronger. He could just reach out, since I was sitting, am now standing, immediately to his right, grab my throat with one hand and simply crush it. I will not do physical battle with my father, but words... yes, I am more than willing to use words. Particularly to divert attention.



The “old man” has given him a strangled look of inarticulate rage.

I lean toward him, yes, looking fucking up, but still confronting him. I will not back down. Never again. I could not face him, my grey warrior, if I did. My words tumble out, in a rush of unlocked, spilling out fury.

“Do you *wonder* about Denin, too? Wonder what hole his dick has been in, or whether he still has to use his hand? Have you asked him before the Clan at a sacred gathering whether he’s fucked anyone yet? Have you done the same with Larel?”

Denin, the most hot-headed of my brothers, starts to rise, possibly planning on using his height and weight against me. Possibly not. But I *am* a fucking Aerisan warrior. I spin to my right, my heel lashing out to kick the fallen chair well away and give me some space if I need it. There is a sharp cry. Apparently the chair hit someone. I don’t give a fuck.

He is only halfway out of his chair and freezes when I look at him. “Sit the fuck down, Denin. Or Goddess help me, the next time we spar I will forget how much you don’t know, but I won’t forget how fucking much better I am than you with sword and spear and *kimro*, and I will fucking give you a fucking lesson that ends in something broken. But it won’t be anything of mine.”

His face whitens. He sits.

I turn to look at Father. “That is the last time you question me about who I fuck, or how often, or what position. No more of this ‘I was only joking’ shit at my expense. About anything. Never again.”

I raise my voice so there is no question that everyone in the Great Hall can hear me. Fuck, the *grila* in the stables can probably hear me. “All of you. *Never fucking again*. I am a fucking Aerisan warrior! I will be treated as a warrior and Clan Heir deserves to be treated, unless and until I dishonor the Clan, or I am no longer Heir. Try me, any of you, and I will call an honor-duel on the one who does. No matter who he or she may be.”

There are a few gasps, some in surprise, some in horror. And in the pause a tiny voice shouts inside my head, “Don’t do this, don’t do this, don’t do this.”

I do it anyway. “It is by the Goddess sworn.”



The unbreakable oath has well and truly burned bridges, and built walls that can possibly never be breached. Father cannot sit while I remain standing or he loses face. He has lost enough already.

Am I out of my fucking mind? I must be.

Words as a fucking *diversion* from the fact the Clan Heir is a *shkiril* abomination and is yearning after another abomination? I haven't temporarily diverted the course of the river Jahila into a different channel a mile to the west, from which it will eventually return to its original course. I have moved the whole river to the fucking other side of the mountain. And it will never again flow in the same channels.

So be it. But still, I must end this. Ah.

I bow to Father, honoring him precisely as Clan Heir to Clan Chief, eldest son to father. He accepts with the required nod and remains standing, waiting to see what I will do now. For the first time ever there is hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

I turn again and look down the length of the main table where all my closest family sit in various poses, most of their faces composed once again so that they do not show me what they really feel or think. I feel most sorry for Eron, only fourteen, who is white-faced and trembling. I will repair what I can, if I can, when I can. I look at my mother, and again bow precisely. Clan Heir to Clan Mother, eldest son to... beloved... true mother. Her face is serene. At some cost, but I do not know the price she has paid for that serenity. And I never will.

I rise from the bow. "Clan Mother, my apologies to you for disturbing the feast. With your permission I will leave to..."

Cry in pain over what I have just done to myself. To my family. Think of Caaroc and try to figure out if there is indeed anything more to what happened between us than just incredibly good sex. Try to avoid letting that thinking turn into stroking my cock as it did this morning.

"...meditate on the requirements of honor."

An acceptable solution, and I see gratefulness in her eyes. A warrior may always, without question, meditate on the requirements of honor, and remain undisturbed while he does so.



She nods permission.

I turn away from her, look around. An honor-gift will be required for great-uncle Lirin, since it was his knee which bore the brunt of the connection with my chair. I make an appropriate bow to him and offer him the first apology. I have always liked Uncle Lirin. He grins and waves it off. I place the chair where it belongs, offer my still-standing father a slight bow, and take my leave.

My words must have had some effect. Before, had I ever made such a scene, the gabble of voices would have exploded just about the time I reached the door. Today, the explosion is obviously being held back until it is absolutely certain I am out of earshot.

Oddly enough, back in my room, I *do* meditate on the requirements of honor.

Until I fall asleep.

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*It lets me... makes me... remember...*

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**2 Spring 18, 19097 After Seren****9671 House Andrae****The Drunkard****Halintown, Balir**

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

I got drunk last night, got drunk the night before, and tonight I'm going to get drunk like I have never been drunk before.

The fucking bastard is not coming.

The last two months of Winter, all of First Spring, I made sure I excelled at everything I did. Never once allowed myself to be distracted by thoughts of "my" grey warrior when I was working, eating, pretending to be social in a way that hid how little I wanted to. I even made the Clan believe I was overjoyed with the celebration of my nineteenth birthing day.

My distractions occurred only when I was alone. When I could call up the memories, the sights and sounds and smells, every sensation as vivid as if stored in a memory crystal and replayed. When I could try to guess what it might be like when Second Spring sixteen and seventeen were finally here. Would we have both days? Just one? Part of one? Will I get to fuck him? Will he fuck me? When I could stroke myself to one or more comes remembering and wondering ahead.

When I told them I was taking time off, that I would leave on Second Spring fifteen, and probably not be back until at least the nineteenth, there were no objections. Nor was there a raucous, laughing departure with crude jokes from the men being left behind. There never had been with me, and although my relations with the Clan have improved since Winterdeath, I doubt that I will ever be accorded that familiarity, that closeness.

So be it.

I hired a room well way from the Drunkard. Third floor at the back, above a filthy alley. Not a good part of Halintown at all, but it has the advantage of



an outer staircase, and nothing but warehouse buildings across the way. Not exactly the normal abode of an Aerisan warrior, and there is no way to hide what I am. It is not my fault that the owner believes I am acting on a Clan matter, perhaps even a matter of Clan honor. That belief, of course, did not stop him from charging me full rate for the two rooms served by that stair, or trying to gouge a little more.

And if he imagined that the full weight of Clan Aeris would come down on him and his if he disturbed me or spoke of my presence, that, too, could not possibly be my fault. I never told him so. Not directly. Though I may have given him... a hint.

I was smug the night of the fifteenth. Sleeping in that narrow bed, not touching myself as I had not touched my cock for the last week. The fifteenth made the ninth day without coming. But my grey warrior would be here on the sixteenth, the seventeenth at the latest, and I had solved the riddle of where we could be alone.

The sixteenth was Zinarri ale. I was celebrating the soon-return of Caaroc, and when he did not show by the time we set, I soaked my sorrow, but did not quite drown it, in the ale. I had been so sure that he would be there on the sixteenth. I staggered to the building, dragged myself up the outer stairs, collapsed.

I drank sparingly on the seventeenth, only enough to justify my presence. Until his arrival time was gone. Then Therlessian brandy with ale back whiled away the empty hours until they threw my ass out. I vomited twice on the way to my room, and collapsed again.

I should have left, gone home, but I weakly gave him one more chance.

Now I sit. And wait. Drink the *grila*-piss beer as I will not waste more money on him. Fourteen arrives and departs. He is not here. I am tempted to give him another two hours, just until midnight, but I have humiliated myself enough. Time to remember that I am in fact an Aerisan warrior, and not *just* a vile *shkiril* pining for cock.

I get up, pay for the *grila*-piss that I hardly drank. Over-tip to cover the sixteenth and seventeenth as I was probably too drunk to be respectful. I am



not drunk. There is barely beer on my breath. So as I step into a night that is unusually cool for Second Spring, I am not pleased to be called a “young drunk” by the *old* drunk who barrels into me and nearly knocks me on my ass.

He grabs my left arm to steady me but I regain my balance on my own and try to shake it off. It is an unusually powerful grip.

I keep my voice low, though for the moment it is only the two of us on the street. “Take your fucking hand off my arm, or lose your hand.”

I am reaching for the dagger at the small of my back, but he grabs that arm, too. It isn’t the hands that actually stop me from hurting him and getting free. It’s the words. The whisper.

“But if I have only one hand, how can I play with your cock and balls at the same time?”

Caaroc. It’s Caaroc’s voice. And he’s a mage? He can Shift? Create a Seeming? What in all the fucking hells...

I angrily break loose, though I have no way of knowing if he lets me or if I do it on my own. I look into the face that looks nothing like his. “Fuck you. Fuck your hands, too.”

The eloquence of an angry young Aerisan warrior can at times be awesome. This is not one of those times. I turn away from him, and take long strides down the street. He catches up far too easily for his apparent age and gaunt, decrepit look.

It is the old man’s voice, but still Caaroc’s voice, which says, as we walk side by side, “I’m sorry, Karel. I couldn’t take the risk. I had to be sure.”

*That* brings me to an abrupt stop. Something he clearly anticipated since he does not go on walking, but stops almost simultaneously with me.

Mindful of the public space, particularly since it is neither late nor well-lit, and I do not know who may be lurking nearby, I somehow manage to keep my voice from exploding with loud rage, though he can still hear the explosion beneath. “*What* fucking risk? Sure of fucking what? This... this whole stinking pile of *grila*-shit mess is a risk to me, too.”

He starts to touch me. Stops. “Please. Can we... just go back to your room and talk in private? Then, if... if you tell me to leave I will.”



That note of uncertainty—real? Assumed to gain what he wants?—nevertheless tips the balance. I nod and begin leading the way. It takes me five full strides before my mind catches up with my hearing. How in the nine hells does he know I have a room? And if he knows I have a room, he has been there, and I am “leading” him nowhere he does not already know. That fucking bastard.

I convert the almost-stop into a stumble. I’ll deal with this when we get there. He touches my arm to steady me and I shake him off. Lengthen my stride and increase the pace. Since the fucker that exists somewhere beneath that old man image is taller than me with fucking longer legs, he easily keeps up. Fortunately, for him, he is not stupid enough to move ahead so that *he* is leading the way.

So we keep up the pretense a little while longer. We reach the alley and as I am about to turn in he says, “Wait.” When I glare at him, the look telling him he has less than a second to explain why I should, he adds a “please.” It is clearly a word that Caaroc does not often have to use.

I change my expression to “Get the fuck on with it.”

And he does... that *thing* again. The old man just stands there while *something* expands around and above him, invisible. Out in even the minimal light of the two moons that are up, and the street lantern nearby, rather than in the near-darkness of that privy, that *something* has no shape but I know it is at least ten feet tall, and that his head, its head, whatever constitutes a head, turns back and forth. Then Caaroc “shrinks” again until only the old man is in front of me.

“It’s safe.”

I had no reason to trust that assurance last Winterdeath, but I did. I have less reason to trust now, but still I do.

I sarcastically wave him forward and he immediately takes the lead, still in character, carefully, carefully climbing the steep stairs and artistically pausing for breath every so often. Without waiting for me, he proceeds to unlock the door I had so carefully locked earlier. Bastard.

Inside, the only choice for sitting is the bed or a somewhat fragile chair that is unlikely to hold his weight. He makes the obvious choice, sits, while I



follow him inside, locking the door behind me. I maneuver past his slightly outstretched legs, careful not to touch him, light the candle on the small clothing chest, and when I look at him again, the Seeming or whatever it was is gone. My... no... that lying fuck Caaroc is back. And sitting there with his Goddess-damned legs spread, just enough to show off the bulge that is, as he fucking well knows, impressively bulging at the moment.

Mistake. Not a huge mistake, or at least not this moment, but he's sitting on a bed that is not all that far off the floor anyway, which puts him, so my cock forcibly lets me know, at precisely the right height for me to stand between his legs, feed his mouth and throat my cock, and then, holding him in place, face fuck the Goddess-damned hells out of him.

My mind decides otherwise, and my infuriated cock demands a rematch. Best two out of three. Before turning to him, I have already pulled on the warrior face I rely on when going into battle or into a hunt. It is cold, emotionless, calculating. I surprise him. He flinches. Just a little.

"Explain why I shouldn't change my mind, haul your ass up off that bed, and then throw it and you over the railing."

"Because you couldn't?" He sits up straighter, stops flaunting. Or at least, flaunting so much. With what he has, flaunting is inevitable.

"Are you telling me that after what you've done, if I decide to do just that, you're going to resist?"

"Ah... no."

"Then fucking explain." I pray that the warrior face and tone are enough to prevent him from hearing the rest. The "in a way that makes sense, so I can forgive you and believe you, though that sequence should be reversed, and we can get down to the serious sucking and hopefully fucking I'm desperately in need of."

"I was told... ordered, really... not to meet you."

"Who the fuck...?"

His upraised palm stops me before I can get well and truly started on the outrage.

"We... we are... not from here. We..."



“*Goddess!* Caaroc. Did you think I was too stupid...”

I notice his glare and get the message that I should just shut my mouth and listen, because unless I do, the glare also makes clear my mouth won't be getting used for anything else. And *his* mouth being used for anything other than talking is less likely still.

“We are refugees. From...” He shakes his head. “I thought I had this planned. What do you know of the Worlds Beside?”

I stubbornly wait to say anything, for just a while, as if unsure I am now allowed to speak. “Of course I know about the worlds outside. Hells, the Goddess' Gates connect the stars...”

It is his turn to interrupt me. At this rate, six or seven Winterdeaths will arrive and go before we are finished.

“Not worlds *outside*. Worlds *Beside*.”

“Then, no. No idea. Well, unless you mean worlds in a galaxy other than the Heart and Spiral.”

He shakes his head. He holds up his hands, palms facing, almost but not quite touching. “Picture a very, very fine parchment, so fine you can almost see through it, between my palms. As long as the parchment is there, my palms can never touch. But if there is a hole in the parchment, a ripple, a bulge, a wrinkle in one palm might touch the other. And something, something so small as a drop of sweat, might move from one palm to the other.”

He put his hands down on his knees. I carefully refrain from looking at his hands, because that would lead to his legs and his thighs and his groin, and my cock would start making demands again.

“Every speck of your Goddess' universe touches the parchment that separates an infinite variety of Worlds Beside. We were that drop of sweat when we came through such a hole, many years ago, and found ourselves here. We never intended to stay, just pause long enough to rest and regroup and then move on. Except the mage who knew the secret of making those... holes in parchment... died four days later from wounds he received guarding the way, holding it open until we were all safe and he could seal it.”

He sighs. “We have been trapped here ever since. Your world has been...”



less than welcoming. And after all this time, we feared our race was doomed to die here. Until the Kingdom and Empire arrived.”

“You didn’t know about Gates any more than we did.”

His voice is so very, very patient with the not-quite-bright student. “No, Karel, we did not. A World Beside is not necessarily more advanced than the worlds it is beside. And yes, as you have surely guessed, we have found a new refuge. But even though we learned some of us have the Gate Gift as well, though none who were born where we came from, we couldn’t just storm the nearest Gate and force the Imperials to let us pass. Certainly not all of us at once. The Imperials, or you Kilthari, or both of you together would have destroyed us if we tried.

“So we have been... sneaking out... as rapidly as possible for the last nearly twenty-five of your years. Uh, six fours and a quarter four?”

I carefully refrain from explaining that if barbarians like the Imperials, and apparently, Caaroc’s people, whoever they are, do not know enough to calculate numbers so as to honor the Goddess’ Four, that does not mean those of us who do are too stupid not to understand a different numbering system.

“This last trip was... nearly the last trip. One more, perhaps two, and then they... we... will all be gone. My orders are to make that happen as rapidly as possible. Without side trips, without distractions. Yet I came to see you. Perhaps your Goddess knows why, since I certainly have no *reason* to do it. Only... a feeling, a compulsion, a *need*.

“I also told my family about... us.”

My mouth drops open. Fuck the warrior face. He told his father, his *family*, that he sucked an Aerisan warrior’s cock in a *privy*, and then had his own mouth fucked? *In a privy*? I open my mouth to express some of that horror, but apparently my face has said it all.

He holds his hand up to stop those words from tumbling out. He also smirks. “*Not* the precise details. Well, my great-uncle might enjoy those details since he is luck-called, himself, but the rest did not need to know. I just told them that... I believe I am luck-called. To you.

“Great-uncle is certain a luck-call can never be wrong. My sire, my



grandsire, insist it might. Insist you are a danger, and an Aerisan danger, at that. They insisted...”

He pauses. “Have you ever had a sire *and* a grandsire *insisting* you were wrong about something, when you knew, even if you couldn’t offer them tangible proof, that you were right?”

When I was Eron’s age... I nod. “And they are unwilling to admit even the *possibility* that you are right?”

His turn to nod. “They are certain that with as much warning as I gave you, with a precise statement of where I would be and when, I would walk into a trap with you as the bait. I would be captured, tortured, killed.”

He pauses. His voice has an almost pleading sound to it, but I won’t let it sway me. My warrior face is back.

“So... I had to be certain.”

“Certain I wasn’t a trap. Certain I wasn’t luring you into one.”

He nods.

And then just sits motionless, with the kind of stillness that speaks more of predator waiting to leap on prey, than a man waiting on a verdict he has said he will abide by. He stares slightly up at me.

I step away from him. Pace a few steps, all that is possible, and then back. Again. I am not certain whether I am actually thinking, or avoiding thinking, in those steps. I stop, stand in front of the connecting wall, only a few feet across the room from him.

Look at him. Let him see the hurt, but more, the anger.

“You arrived early. Waited for me. Spied on me in some Seeming or other. Watched me for two fucking days, three days? Let me believe you felt nothing last Winterdeath Eve, let me believe you would not show, all because you thought I might be planning to kill you.

“Well, not actually me, since you are *possibly* smart enough to realize I *am* smart enough not to believe I can do all that to you *by my fucking self*. So what you were really concerned about was possibly getting killed by the army of Aerisan and Baliran and Goddess knows what hordes of mercenaries I am



hiding in the next room, knives and axes at the ready, waiting for the signal. The signal to use them both to hack and carve an opening through this wall so they can rush in and surprise you. By coming through *this fucking wall!*” I am so close to it that the angry thump of my fist on the wood startles him.

“Of course you’re too fucking stupid to notice them trying to cut through the wall, and do something about that. And you’re too fucking stupid to notice the other contingent coming through the only actual door to this room, which is, you know, the fucking door that is perhaps eight fucking feet from where you’re sitting, while you stare at my dick and not notice anything. And as a result of all this stupidity, you were concerned that they—*that I, you fucking bastard*—might capture you and torture you and kill you?”

He opens his mouth. Shuts it. Nods. He has the grace to look at least slightly embarrassed.

“And you think this is fucking reason enough for me not to just grab your fucking non-resisting ass, shove it through the door without bothering to open it and then toss you over the railing to see if you bounce when you hit the alley?”

Caaroc does sheepish well. Extremely well. Goddess-damn it.

I will deal with the issues of people, people who don’t believe in the Goddess, people I have never heard of who have come to and have almost left Kilthar, or wherever in the hells their departure point originates, and Worlds Beside, later. Right now, my cock is satisfied with the explanation... fuck! my cock would have been satisfied with a fucking “I’d really like to fuck you right now” as an explanation... and is making his opinion known with the tent in my trousers, since I am not wearing smalls.

Apparently my mind is satisfied as well. Fuck it. I shrug. “Sounds reasonable to me.”

His burst of laughter fills the room, and the room beyond, perhaps the whole building. If the landlord knows what is good for him, he will not remember this laughter.

And now we are naked.

I have no idea how that happened. How we got from raucous laughter and shared relief that two drunken fools who sucked each other in a stinking privy



and did not meet again until tonight might actually have a chance to be something more than despicable *shkiril* looking only for cock, any cock.

I am on the bottom, on my back in the bed that is so very far from being just right for a man as large as Caaroc, or even one of my size. And even less so for the two of us together. Perhaps the whores and the men who use them, the usual occupants of this room, with rentals by the hour, by the minute, are all small. Or they make no real use of the bed. But this is all we have.

“I’m going to fuck you.

I smile up at him. “As if you had a choice.”

He slides off me, first grinding our leaking cocks together, and then he is kneeling at the foot of the bed, pulling me toward him, and when my ass is at the edge, slightly over, he says, “Raise your legs, warrior, spread them. Open for me.

Aerisan warriors do not surrender. It is never an honorable choice. We win or die But this... this does not feel like surrender. This feels, somehow, like rising up and joining something.

“This is going to hurt.” He pauses. “Oh, not this, but your first fuck will not be easy.” There is something almost unbearably smug about his next words. “Especially not since I am your first.”

Bastard.

I am a fucking Aerisan warrior. Sometimes, when potential pain is about to become unavoidable and actual, it is a good idea to remind myself of that. And what that honor requires. So I forcibly squelch the high, shrill, tiny asshole voice that wants to squeal, “Don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me.”

When you can’t say anything smart-assed, don’t say anything at all. I say nothing at all. Although I do yelp... a definitely *manly* yelp... when he puts his hands on the joining of thighs and ass, spreads my legs and my cheeks and puts his tongue on my hole.

I was expecting a finger, two, three, many, going inside first to get me ready, all spit-slicked, or lube-slicked from the vial I forgot to tell him is on the chest. Not his tongue. *Shkiril* actually lap and lick another man’s ass with every sound of enjoyment?



They do. Caaroc goes even further. His tongue is up inside my ass! I remember it from when it was in my mouth, but apparently my memory is flawed. I do not remember it being this thick, this long. It twists and curls and strokes the flesh inside my ass that I never knew could be pleased at all, much less this well. And it is almost as if the tip of his tongue has narrowed, extended, become as agile as a finger as it teases, taunts, and suddenly strokes over this... bump? lump?... inside me. Sparks leap through my body, and I am suddenly near, but not quite, making a joyful noise unto the Goddess.

If she will accept sexual praise from a *shkiril*, as I have been taught She never could, never would. And then I don't care whether She will or won't since he does it again, and my cock spurts a large spray of precome, plopping to my belly to lie glistening in the candle-lit dimness.

Caaroc lifts his head from my hole, looks up at me through the vee of my straining legs, up past my painfully hard cock, to where my head is lifted, straining my neck, to look back at him and see what he is doing to me.

Smug. So very smug. So very proud of himself and what he's doing to me. Bastard.

"Aerisans always have a plan, don't they?" His tongue, just an ordinary tongue after all, Goddess be praised for my wonderful imagination, laps my balls.

I manage a nod.

"Do those plans include a lubricant, or did you destroy it when I didn't arrive on the seventeenth?"

He goes back to eating my hole. My imagination about his tongue and its capabilities takes off once again. I finally manage to say the whole word "chest," after six or seven stuttering attempts with just the "ch" sound. I am sure he understood after the first one, certainly the second. He likes torturing me. I like being tortured.

I continue holding my legs up as he rises, walks over to the chest, picks up the vial of oil, and stand sideways so that the light outlines him. He uses his teeth to pull the small cork, and then pours some of the oil on the long, long length of cock standing straight out from his body. His hands caress himself,



circling, stroking, listening to my panting, knowing I am staring helplessly at him.

I tell myself firmly to remember that I had that cock in my throat. All the way. So having it go in my ass is no different.

My self reminds me that sometimes I have a meal of meat and cheese and sauce and onions on a thick roll, and a bite of that is actually far bigger around than Caaroc's cock. So my mouth and throat are more used to the idea, the reality, of having big things in them. My self also conscientiously reminds me that no turd that has ever come out of my ass has been as big around or anywhere as long as what is about to go in the other direction.

I tell my self to shut the fuck up and stop bothering me.

He is back beside the bed. He leans over. His arm muscles swell as his left arm goes under my knees, his right goes under my shoulders and then he simply fucking lifts me up and moves me closer to the tiny headboard. He climbs in between my legs, uses his left hand to push my right leg back. I follow with my left and my ass lifts off the bed. His right hand swirls the leaking, slick knob of his cock around my hole. I should be demanding that he stop immediately; that he force my ass up in the air so my hole is pointing directly at the ceiling, and then that he ease the edge of the vial to the edge of my hole, and quickly tip it up and down and in, so the rest of the fucking vial makes all my insides slick, perhaps even slimy. *That* is the proper way to fuck an Aerisan warrior fuck-virgin who is *not* feeling at all uncertain.

I don't bother. As little as I know my grey warrior, and I have no *reason* at all to call him so, I know him well enough to know he is going to fuck me as and how he pleases.

And it pleases him to tell me to open for him at the same time as he shoves.

Caaroc cock: 1. Karel ass: 0.

It is not a scream that comes out of my mouth. Warriors, especially Aerisan warriors, do not scream at a little pain. Or at a fucking lot of pain that feels like the sharpest of war knives has sliced every nerve in my ass and up through my body wide open. It is... a *grunt* that comes out. Warriors are allowed to grunt when they are in pain. It is, I admit, but only to myself and I will forever deny



it if Caaroc challenges me, a *slight* bit high-pitched. But then, my voice is more tenor, and not the rumbling bass of Caaroc.

His knob well in... *so fucking well in*... he pushes a little more of the shaft inside. This grunt is not as high-pitched as the first grunt.

He pauses, lifts his oily right hand from where he had been holding my left knee, and smears the residue on my cock. He tilts his head, drops spit once, twice, three times on my cock and smears that around as well. I like my cock slick. I like it even better when it is *his* hand making it slick.

I reach up to begin stroking my cock myself, but he bats my hand away. “Not yet. I don’t want you coming that quickly.”

There are several war knives’ worth of pain radiating from my ass, he’s shoving a log, granted, a hot, wet, slick log, at least a foot wide, perhaps more, up my ass and he thinks I will be coming any time soon?

“Open for me, Karel.”

I try, but it isn’t as if I’ve spent my entire life training the muscles inside my ass to move as I command, as I have with the rest of my body. So I have no idea precisely what it is I am supposed to do, especially when my hysterical self is yelling at me to “push back, push back, you fucking fool, push the invader out.” But whatever I do works and another few inches... feet?... of log slide inside.

Oh.

It is a good thing I am not stroking and neither is he. He has hit that button or lump or something. I gasp. He eases back, pulls a little out, and my self snarls, “No fucking way are we letting that go. Do something, you fucking idiot. Clamp down. Hard! Don’t let it get away!”

I do. And smirk just a little as he gasps above me. And then he shoves more inside me. He reaches a barrier. He pushes and nudges but no farther. I am sure if I could raise my head up and look between us I would see his hips thrust back at an awkward angle because of the massive length of cock that won’t fit. But what does fit is fine.

Then his hips push forward. Quickly.



That other pain. The one when his knob went inside my ass. That was a pin prick compared to breaching that second barrier. Fortunately for my survival and my sanity it is ended almost before it is begun. My ass is adjusting just as my throat did. A natural talent at both ends. I ignore the muttering of my self that “it isn’t us, it isn’t us.”

I feel the thick hair of his groin against my own hairless cheeks. Some day we can do this in the day, or a well-lit room, and I can see if that hair is the grey-silver I want it to be.

He slides a little way out, pushes back. Again. And again. His strokes become longer. My legs move around his waist, locking around his back. He lowers his head to mine and devours my mouth. I try desperately to devour him back. He lifts his head away, looks into my eyes, moans, lowers to rest his forehead on the pillow beside me, and begins to pound my hole. I instinctively nuzzle into his neck, licking, teasing, nibbling, nipping. His strokes lengthen until I can barely feel his knob inside me when he pulls back before shoving far and deep.

His cock... Goddess damn but his cock seems to swell up inside me, accompanied by a swift surge of that knife pain again just as he crushes against that lump. The combination of unexpected pain mingled with hoped-for pleasure makes my teeth clamp down against the soft flesh of his neck. The skin breaks. Blood spurts onto my lips, into my mouth.

Caaroc reacts as if a war knife, a pair of war knives had been rammed into him. He yanks his head away, rears back on his haunches forcing my legs apart so I am sprawling like the whores I have heard my uncles describe when they thought I was not around. I am still well and truly impaled so I am going nowhere. He presses his hand to his neck, pulls away, rubs his fingertips. His eyes are wide with something that looks like shock.

“You didn’t swallow any, did you? Tell me, please, that you didn’t.”

It is... was... only a little blood. I have tasted blood before. My own with a cut lip, or making an X with a knife tip in my forearm last spring, to suck out blood and venom and spit both out after a *ginelik* bite. When you are battling, and a warrior in front of you, friend or foe, gets his throat cut, blood is inevitable and sometimes you taste it.



His is... was... unusual. Not coppery at all. Cool and thick, the way granite should taste if it had a taste. It was only a little. He does not look like he has any disease, so why the panic?

So I do what any reasonable man does when he is caught doing something he is not supposed to be doing, even though at the time he starts doing it, he doesn't know he's not supposed to be doing it.

I lie.

When in doubt, deny. When questioned, deny vigorously. And then be righteously offended at the slightest hint that you are being accused of lying.

Caaroc believes me. I am so relieved I make an instant vow to never lie to him again. But I do not give the unbreakable oath, which would be stupid, because men need the ability to lie to each other.

But still he just sits there between my legs. So very still. I can feel him withdrawing, not physically, but inside.

“A warrior who's afraid of a little blood? What the fuck, Caaroc?”

That jolts him out of wherever his mind has taken him. Hinting at cowardice, however mild, stiffens a warrior's sinews, summons up the blood, though here the stiffening and blood are not for his sinews. He shakes his head, the loose thick hair spreading wildly about him, and down onto me. That shake shakes away whatever the panic was about.

His face becomes serious. Only... serious in the way a man is serious about achieving something he desperately wants, or needs, or both. Such as coming in my ass. I suspect that same look is on my face because it is a fucking consummation I devoutly pray for as well.

“I'm going to fuck you through the mattress.”

I snicker. “Go ahead. The mattress, hells, the fucking bed, will break before I do.”

And we proceed to have just that competition. The bed, not too sturdy to begin with, actually does break about ten minutes later. Just two legs on the right side, which tosses us onto the floor, but we roll, laughing, even when his cock comes out. I look at the tower of flesh as he lays beside me and regret



there are no awards for taking a cock that massive inside you, at either end. I deserve one.

He gets up on one knee, looks at the bed, and the two remaining legs. He stands, moves, lifts the right side of the bed with one hand and uses his left to snap off the third leg of the frame. Getting rid of the last one is a little more difficult but fairly quickly the mattress is flat again.

“On all fours.”

I may have bruises on my waist I will have to make sure no one sees, given the strength of that upper body and those arms and massive hands, but it will be worth it.

This time he needs no command to open for him. I am already slick with the oil, with fluids inside my body, with sweat and passion. He slides home easily, and it *is* home, it *is* where he belongs. And if his cock seems to thicken and lengthen once it is inside me it is just my body adjusting to the almost painful stretching it first endures and then ecstatically enjoys.

I am sure I will never again experience the kind of joy I experience from the way he fucks me. At least not until the next time he does it, and though it is not yet over, though I pray for a miracle that will just let this fuck go on forever, I can sense the ending approaching for both of us. He is not stroking me. I am not stroking myself, but I am close, so very close.

I desperately want this first time to end with us as close as it is humanly possible to be. Blind with lust I turn my head, twisting my neck towards where his sweat-slick forehead rests against my left shoulder as he pounds and pounds and pounds into me. He raises his head, our eyes meet, he moves forward and as our lips meet, as his mouth closes about mine, as our tongues tangle I realize how stupid I have been.

He stops. Doesn't move, doesn't breathe, doesn't take his lips from mine.

Shit fuck shit fuck shitfuckfuckfuck!

He fucking *knows*. How could he not? His blood is on my lips, on my breath, in my mouth.

*Goddess-damned fucking idiot!* I scream at myself. My self silently agrees.



My turn to hold very still, afraid that any movement I make, anything I say or do, will damage what we have, even more than the damage my stupidity has just accomplished. I *know* we have something beyond this fuck, beyond the privy sucking. I pray he knows it, too. I pray I have not damaged it beyond all hope of repair.

He slumps over me, just a little.

“You lied to me.”

Discretion, valor. Discretion, valor. I choose, I hope, valor and admit I did.

He puts his hand on my shoulders and digs his fingers in, pulls me up from my almost collapse.

“You never lie to me.” There is a growl... behind, around, through... his words.

Discretion. “No, Caaroc.” I whimper as he thrusts savagely deep. “I... I mean, yes, Caaroc. I won’t lie.”

“*We never fucking lie to each other.*” There is a hitch in his movement, the equivalent of a short, sharp inhalation. I am certain if I could see his face, I would see a “what the fuck have I done?” expression there. Followed by a “so be it” as he resumes, increases the now brutal pounding of my ass.

We are soaring somewhere, the two of us, up and out and beyond the whore’s room in a slum where our bodies sweat and grunt and moan and swear, where he is fucking my hole ruthlessly, not caring whether I come or not, so long as he gets what he wants, needs, from my ass. From me.

His cock swells inside me and I ignore the pain. Concentrate on the waves of pleasure, approaching tidal, that run through me.

“Come for me, damn you!” His voice is even more the growl of a beast, a dire wolf about to make a kill, perhaps, or a great bear.

I want to say something mocking in return, to show I am still in control. That doesn’t happen. My mind, my sanity, my self-control are all gone. I do what he says. I come for him, spraying the thin sheets below me, my chest, my chin, my arm, clamping my ass tight around his cock. And as my body does its very Aerisan warrior best to snap Caaroc’s cock off at the base, he comes as well.



Hells, not merely “as well” but far better than. I have stopped coming and still he is going as I try not to collapse on my belly, painfully pull that spewing cock out of my ass and wind up with a seed bath over most of my back and all of my cheeks and crack and gaping hole.

Eventually he stops. Holds very still. His gasps are loud in the room, though perhaps not as loud as when I screamed his name as we came. His cock is so wide and deep it is becoming painful. My first fuck was far from the gentle fuck he first mentioned. Not that I am complaining, but I will be complaining if the pain gets much worse.

And then his hard cock... shrinks... and starts to soften.

I am so grateful to have the just-starting pain go away, and ease even further away as he slides his nearly softened prick out and out and out, that I do not quickly understand the sequence.

His cock did not start to soften after coming, and then shrink. His cock shrank *first*, and then began to soften.

*What in the fucking hells?*

When he is finally all the way out, he scrambles off the narrow bed, allowing me to drop, belly down, into the multiple wet spots he is responsible for. I would purr if I could. But I cannot relax, drop off into the well-fucked sleep I so richly deserve.

I have to salvage this if I can. So I begin talking. With my face away from him at first, because what I have to say is too painful to be facing him. I tell him about my life, about being the runt, the smallest of the litter though I am born alone and first. About knowing, nearly all my life, that I am *shkiril*, and therefore, an abomination before the Goddess no matter the things I have overheard Imperials say to the contrary.

The rustling of clothes he was putting on stops. He sits on the mattress beside me, pulls me to him, holds me carefully in those massive arms while I cry, loud and long for all I will never have.

And when I am done, he has my truth. All of it.

It is past midnight. Seventeen in the morning, perhaps? Eighteen? He cannot stay too much longer. Even in this part of the town, a disheveled



warrior looking well-sexed, sneaking, or even boldly striding, out of a room known to be rented by another man is too risky. You might be a whore, a drug runner; you might trade in slaves and children; you might be an assassin, and no one in the under-city will care. Being *shkiril* gets a knife in your gut.

I wonder if he will gift me with any of his truths in return.

He is silent, though, and when he speaks, his mouth muffled as he buries it in the hair on top of my head, he just says, “I have a selfish question to ask.”

He feels my nod against his chest, but pulls back, moving me so that I have no choice but to sit up. He puts a finger under my chin to tilt my head up. He brushes a light kiss... no tongue at all, damn it... across my lips. “A serious question. A very serious question. So I need you looking at me, listening, actually paying attention.”

“Asshole.” I almost twist against him, and snarl as if I’m going to take a mock bite out of him. Fortunately I realize in time that is a joke that will not go over well; indeed, it might destroy this moment of peace between us.

He smiles tenderly, but there is something... pulling away... in his expression. “Will you let me make love to you one more time? Before I have to go? And...” This pause is much longer, but I wait patiently. “Even if what happens after is not... is not what you thought or hoped it might be?”

It is my turn to stop and think. To overrule my instinctive response to just tell him, “Of course,” and tease him for doubting me.

This is not something that warrants an unthinking answer. Here and now, I see only two reasons for his hesitation. For his belief, no, for his near certainty that whatever is going to follow our making love could damage or destroy that which is building between us. Or for me, that which has already been built, of solid stone, well-joined.

First, he is going to tell me that all I have imagined and hoped is nothing more than that. Now, he must get back to his family and his people, because he cannot take the risk that even though I did not betray him today, I might yet do so. And thinking that I will, I might, betray my honor by betraying him, he will walk away, trusting to my honor not to betray what his people have done, where they might be going. If those are his thoughts, my—perhaps—grey warrior is far from as astute as I have assumed.



Second, and far more likely, he is going to tell me at least some portion of his own truths. Perhaps the most important part. Apparently loving me, if he in fact does, is not high on the list of important truths. Or at least not as high as this truth he thinks will... what? Terrify me? Disgust me? So much so that I will not merely walk, but run from him as far and as fast as I can?

So. He is selfish enough to want one more round of sex as glorious as the two of us can make it, in case everything goes to the Ninth Hell immediately after. I am selfish enough to want that as well.

So be it.

I smile at him, which makes him blink a little, as if I have actually caught him off guard. "I plan on fucking you, Caaroc, at least as hard and fast as you just now did me."

That *definitely* catches him off guard. He blinks. And blinks again. I would tell him his open mouth makes him look like a fish about to be hooked, but that might upset him. Instead, I smile and finish. "But let's plan on that next time. For now, how about you fuck me? Twice if you can spare the time?"

His mouth acquires an even more fish-like gape, and then he closes it and does exactly as I ask. Not twice, unfortunately, but oh, that once more. A long and leisurely loving fuck that has no odd cock issues at all, except, perhaps the tiniest niggling thought that his cock, as wide as it spreads me, as deep as it is inside me, is not *quite* as long and deep as it was before. He works my body as if the Goddess had sent him, a specially designed man who knows precisely how far he can push my body, and then take me a step beyond. Again, and again, and again, the bastard takes me to the edge of the cliff, and never pushes me over the edge, falling endlessly until I crash and drown in the swirling seas below. He also doesn't let me throw myself over the edge either.

And then, finally, we both fall off the cliff.

I die happily, hoping as I fall asleep that it was a good death for him, too.

I wake only because he shakes my shoulder and quietly demands it. I groggily ask what time it is. His response is curt. "Half past twenty-four. Sunrise is a little past twenty-nine today. I need to be long gone by then."

"Fine. Then go." I sound like a sulky child, know I do, but cannot help myself. He is leaving, just walking away. So be it.



“Karel. You... gave me truths tonight. I made you no promise in return...”

I cut him off. “I noticed. My fault. I should have demanded the Oath before I spoke.”

He hears the capital letter in my voice and looks puzzled. “What oath?”

It is my turn to be puzzled. How can he not know the unbreakable oath?  
“The unbreakable oath.”

His brief laughter is sarcastic, pointed. “Any oath can be broken, if you are willing to dishonor yourself and be foresworn.”

“This one can’t. If you promise to do something, and I ask you, ‘Swear you so by the Goddess?’ you can always refuse, and take an honor-oath, or another oath instead. But if you reply, ‘It is by the Goddess sworn,’ only your death or the completion of the Oath will release you.”

He laughs again and then abruptly cuts it off when he sees from my face, by the light of the relit candle stub, that I am not happy with his disrespect to the Goddess and Her Oath. He holds his hands up in a calming gesture. “Peace, Karel. I respect your beliefs and should not have mocked, even though I don’t believe in this Goddess of yours.”

He pauses. “Now, please. Get at least some clothes on before I forget my own oaths and duties and decide to put you ahead of them. And then come outside.”

I understand that temptation since I feel very much the same about him. I stop questioning. Lever myself up, and quickly throw on a loose shirt tucked into trousers, a pair of thick socks, and half-boots. I start to gather up weapons, but he stops me.

“You don’t need them. Just come outside, please. And I will... explain. I won’t harm you. I will *never* willingly or intentionally harm you.” He stops talking, and stares at me. An odd expression ghosts across his face.

His thoughts are turned inward as he stands with his hand on the latch. I don’t think he realizes that he is speaking aloud when he says, “Yes. This is right.”

He brings his focus back to the room, to me. “You heard my promise?”



I nod.

“That promise? It is by the Goddess sworn.”

I stand very still. He is not a believer. I have heard vague rumors that somewhere out among the stars there are those who do not believe in the Goddess, who say She is a fantasy, a superstition. I know better. My people know better. And it makes no difference whether you believe in Her at all, or only occasionally, or with daily devotion. If the intent is there, then for that instant, the instant you give the Oath, you believe in Her. And you are bound.

He has given me a profound gift. The greatest gift I have ever had, perhaps the greatest I will ever receive. I will not dishonor that gift. I put the weapons back. Follow him outside, down the steps.

We are in nearly complete darkness, except for the faint light of two of the waning moons. The candle in my room was such a tiny flame that my eyes quickly adjust.

His face is somber in the shadows. “My family will be less than happy with what I am about to do. But before I explain, I need your word that you will tell no one, not your Clan, not another Clan, not the Imperials, what you learn tonight. Nor what more you will be able to figure out from what I tell you.”

He sees my hesitation for what it is. “With this addition. If you can in honor swear that what I tell you, what you figure out, will bring harm to your Clan, to anyone, then your oath is released.”

He trusts me to make an honorable choice. I have no choice but to trust him. “It is by...”

“No!”

“But...”

“Please. You should not, must not give me that Oath, that particular Oath, based on what I’ve just said. An oath on your Clan’s honor will be enough. More than enough.”

“Very well. On my Clan’s honor.”

When he tells me that there is just one more thing, I resist rolling my eyes.

“If... if, after I explain, you still wish to see me again, this trip will not be quite as long. First Summer twelve? At the Four Corners Pillar? Midnight?”



The Pillar marks the point at which the four lands connect. It is many four-hundreds old. It is also well off the main roads, in the center of flat, open terrain that makes it impossible for anyone to sneak up on someone at the Pillar. Which means if he arrives early, he will know if I am bait for a trap, if someone is going to make the attempt to capture him, torture him, kill him, since he will be able to see them coming.

The same dishonorable insult twice in one evening. The only reason I don't give in to the anger is because of his Oath. And because he has not demanded the same oath of me. It is an odd kind of trust, that he will rely on my honor, and not on an Oath that compels me to be honorable. Or at least to *act* honorably.

“Yes.”

He looks uncertain, still not entirely sure he should tell me whatever it is he has to say. The silence drags out.

He inhales. And between the downward stroke of an eye-blink, and the upward return, a Stone Beast stands in the alley. Precisely where Caaroc stood.

I am, I admit, that entirely un-Aerisan thing: utterly terrified. My bowels want to shit, my bladder wants to piss, and my legs want to run when all that is done, or better yet, while it is happening and fuck the mess. I restrain them all.

It makes no sound. No, not an “it.” *He*. The Beast is definitely male. I can hardly fail to notice that fact since it... he... is not wearing clothes or armor, and his cock and balls are on display pretty much at my eye level. The old paintings did not do the Beasts justice; the artists' imaginations were far too small.

He stares down at me, and then slowly, carefully, lifts vast wings of stone feathers, peaking them above his head, spreading them wide. From wingtip to wingtip the span must be four fours, hells, five fours or six. The long tail with the spike on the end coils up and up, and then the spike slashes down as if intending to smash into the ground. I don't move since it is not moving at me, and I am certain it will not make the kind of noise that will draw attention to this meeting. The tail stops moving a moment before it would land, and then drops to lie quiescent in the dirt.



The Beast's bright ruby eyes shine in the darkness, telling me nothing I can understand. He opens his mouth and even in the dimness I can see the brilliant white of the rows and rows of fangs, and the long, long snake-narrow tongue. And then in another moment of a single blink, Caaroc is standing there.

He pretends to be calm and quiet, but we both know that is untrue. What he has done has enormous potential consequences. He has put not only his own life, but the lives of his people—the Stone Beasts of Gaarch, who are not, after all, beasts at all, but who have been killing Kilthari, generally and Aerisans particularly, for generations—at risk. I could destroy him, and potentially all his people at the cost of a broken Clan honor-oath.

“I will not speak.” I am proud that my voice does not shake.

He offers the faintest of smiles. “Before... I did ...this”—and a single sweeping gesture encompasses the shift to Gaarchan and back again—“I admit I offered a little prayer to your Goddess. Taking no chances, you see. Perhaps she might exist after all.”

That last still sounds dubious.

I have questions, he knows I have questions. But we both know I cannot ask them now. He does explain one thing.

“What I showed you is my True Form. We call this”—and this time his gesture is just to himself—“our Lesser Form. I am one of the few who can take a Third Form.”

An idea occurs to me. The bastard. “A form somewhere between your Lesser Form and your True Form?”

He nods. I think he understands where this is going, but that's not really important.

“So, part you and part...”

“You can say it. We actually consider the name Stone Beast something of a compliment.”

“And that means you have some control over your size and shape.”

His nod is wary.

“Which explains making me think I was having hallucinations because



your cock kept changing size? Or that I simply have this incredible natural talent for taking enormous cocks inside me at either end?"

"Uh... yes?"

"Your tongue, too?"

This time it is just a nod. Yes, Caaroc does sheepish extremely well.

"Fucking bastard." I make my sigh loud and ostentatious. "Just make sure it happens again. Only next time let me at least try to be that incredible natural talent?"

"Karel, are you all right?"

The nonchalance that I was so not good at before is working now, though it is much harder to maintain, since there is still that part of me that wants to run howling down the alley, race home and have the Clan Mother hold me tight, stroke my shoulder and tell me everything will be all right. Though I was, in fact, allowed to do that only once. When I was four. Aerisan warriors, even warriors-in-training, do not cry. They do not need reassurance.

"Of course."

"*Of course?* Karel, you just got fucked by a fucking *Stone Beast*. You just found out *I'm* one of those fucking Stone Beasts. One of your Clan's enemies for something like eight hundred of this damned planet's years. Your generation has been raised and trained in the hope that the Stone Beasts haven't mysteriously died out, so that at least one of you can find one and kill it. And all you're concerned about is how well I can manipulate the size of my cock to avoid hurting you?"

I have to find the right words. I can't just say, "And your tongue, too," because I don't think he'll appreciate my un-Aerisan sense of humor right now.

Truth. He could have slaughtered me any time, possibly as my grey warrior, probably in this Third Form, though I have yet to see it, definitely in his True Form, because I would never have seen it coming.

Truth. He asked for my word as Clan honor rather than the compulsion of the Oath.



Truth. He gave me an unbreakable oath that he will not willingly or intentionally hurt me, even if he does not truly believe the Oath is unbreakable. His mind, I believe, will interpret that oath to include not only direct physical harm, but indirect harm through my family. Unless he has to kill in self defense—unwilling harm, unintentional harm—he has effectively taken himself out of any future battles between the Stone Beasts, no, the Gaarchans and my Clan.

I tell him all this. Carefully.

“Are *you* any different than before I knew about your... Forms?”

His “no” is nearly indignant.

“You are still you, no matter what Form you wear?”

His “yes” is rapidly approaching indignant.

“Then as long as you’re not going to try fucking me at either end in your True Form, my natural talent notwithstanding, then all we have to worry about are simple things.”

I pause to allow him time to sputter over the words “simple things.”

“Simple things. Like anyone finding out we’re *shkiril*. Like avoiding gelding and enslavement, or just plain death, if we are found out. Though you have the edge on me when it comes to that whole avoiding business. You know, height, weight, fangs, claws, tail, wings. Simple things like anyone finding out the unsuspected depths of my perversions, since I’m fucking a monster. Uh... I *will* be fucking you, won’t I? It seems only fair.”

The strain has vanished from his voice when he agrees to my fucking him *sometime*, though he carefully does not set that time. And he finds my efforts at humor worthy of at least some chuckles.

“And while we’re at it, perhaps, just perhaps, we could...”

“No. Not True Form. Absolutely not. Your Goddess would probably create a special Tenth Hell just for me, just for that. No.”

“Well, then, Third Form?”

Relieved that I have given up being unreasonable so readily, he nods. Pauses. Realizes he has given me what I actually wanted. Realizes I must truly



not see him as a Beast, as a monster, if I am willing to trust him in all his Forms.

Which brings us back to the uneasy silence of enforced parting. A parting where we are not permitted to hold each other one more time, to say a final “fare well, my love”—though while I foolishly, freely admit to myself I would add those last two words, I do not know if he would—not here, where we stand, in case someone sees.

Our voices become as soft as, softer than, his last going away, since we necessarily are standing farther apart than we were outside the privy. Had we been that close, I’m not sure I would have survived his transformation, even though my death or damage would have been accidental.

He smiles and says once more, “Imagine that I have just pulled you into my arms and kissed you so long and so thoroughly that I leave you gasping for breath.”

I can still better that. He has let me better that here and now. “And I kiss you back so well your knees are weak, you can barely stand, and I’ve just made you mess your trousers with come.”

We are smiling far more broadly than this night of revelations might have been expected to allow.

He turns with that same flare of his coat and heads down the alley.

I trudge up the three flights of stairs, thanking the Goddess for both darkness and the emptiness of the alley, so there is no one to see the wide and spreading stain on the seat of my trousers. Goddess damn, but my man, my grey warrior, my fucking Stone Beast Gaarchan, *my Caaroc* produces a prodigious amount of seed! I briefly wonder whether there is some magical connection to the Beast balls in his True Form that just replenishes his seemingly ordinary man-sized balls while he’s fucking.

I have to clean up. Thoroughly. Pay for the damage and more silence. Return home without allowing myself to be seen when I arrive. Or after. And then I have until First Summer twelve to figure out where we can go from the Pillar to be alone. I am certainly not going to have my next fuck, no matter how talented Caaroc is, or better yet, my first fuck of him, out in the open by the Pillar.



Oh, Goddess, no!

*It* makes me remember...

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**1 Summer 12, 19097 After Seren**  
**9671 House Andrae**  
**Four Corners Pillar, The Shrine**  
**Outside Kilthari Territory, Kilthar**

Is it inevitable that when you love you become a better liar? Or is it just me? Since that Winterdeath Eve I have learned that not only do I have a natural talent for taking cock in my mouth or ass, despite some little or *large* help from Caaroc, I apparently always had it in me to be a proficient liar.

I have continued the pattern of deception I started last Winterdeath. I make sure I continue to excel at everything I am asked to do, at everything an Aerisan warrior, a Clan Heir, is required to do. My brothers and I get along as well as we ever have, if not better. The Clan believes that things have returned to whatever the “normal” was before last Winterdeath.

And when I leave for a day here, a day there, I do it without confrontation. And without questions on my return. Even Father says nothing. But he watches me. Always. As if he suspects. But he can't. I have never said or done anything in his sight or hearing, nor in the sight or hearing of anyone who would report to him, that could possibly lead him to believe I am *shkiril*.

So I tell myself it is just my imagination. It is just Father being Father, or being Clan Chief.

It appears, however, that my proficiency as a liar is only with others. I am an abomination at lying to myself. But there is nothing I can do that I have not already tried, and so I let the watching go. And remain watchful myself.

And on the last of the trips to get away for no reason than getting away, I found the place for us for tonight. I lean against the Gaarchan side of the Pillar, lit by three full moons, unquestionably visible. Unquestionably alone. I have not betrayed my grey warrior, will not.

There are places in Kilthar that we might have gone, but they have the greatest risks of our being seen. We are not the largest of the Clans in Kilthar, but the most well-known, and being seen together by someone who knew



someone who knew someone Aerisan was an all too real possibility. For the first time in my life, I regret the hunt chain in my neck because only my Clan marks its warriors so. I regret, too, for reasons I do not care to examine closely, that I am Clan Heir and known more widely for that reason alone.

In theory, we could leave the Pillar and follow the trail into Balir. But that leads only to Halintown, where a repeat, whether of privy or private room, would be foolish beyond all reason. Particularly since I couldn't just walk up to a stranger and ask him where I could rent a room for a few hours so another *shkiril* and I could fuck around. Or even if I was not that explicit, I would probably be given the name of our temporary landlord and the same address, which would have left me with the necessity of explaining we had been there, had done that, and asking the stranger whether he knew somewhere even more sleazy.

The next closest town, more of a village, actually, is six wasted hours of walking there, and six back. I didn't bother to go in. Alone, I would be a Goddess Day wonder and talked about for months. The two of us, whether we seemed to be together or not, would be linked in town gossip for years.

I did not cross into Gaarch. I gave myself two reasons. First, if there was a likely place there, Caaroc would know of it and he would have already said something. Second, I could not risk renewing a war by invading Gaarchan territory. *That* thought was a jolt when it crept up on me and tapped my shoulder.

Two four-hundreds of tales of the insanely violent, incredibly cunning *animals* we call Stone Beasts, of fighting and killing them, often losing several Clan members to one of their deaths. How could I be the only one to have learned that the Beasts are people? How could I be the only one to have realized that what we did on both sides was not hunting, but *war*?

I am not. Great-grandfather was Beast-killed, and no Beast death ever avenged him. For twelve fours and a quarter four all young Aerisan warriors have been trained to hunt and kill the Beasts, but while there are hunts, no Beasts are ever found. There *is* a truce, unspoken, though I do not know how it is accomplished. I could not risk destroying it.

So very logical in my analysis, so very virtuous. Eventually, though, I told myself the truth. I was terrified that by crossing that border I would be found



by another Stone Beast in his True Form, and despite my logic, despite my certainty, I would be killed before I could see Caaroc again.

My last, desperate hope was somewhere outdoors. A cave, a forest clearing, anywhere with some degree of cover, and a location that would give us some chance of hearing anyone approaching before they stumbled upon us with one or the other's cock buried in one or the other's hole. And the only possibility for that was the unclaimed land.

When I crossed *that* border, I encountered something only a mage could have done. I had heard of battle spells, in the tales, but the Clan has not had, has not used, a battle mage in fours and fours of years. And since I was not lightning-blasted or fireball-blasted into cinders, or some equally dire fate, it could only be a ward. And mages set wards to prevent entry. But I went through with only a slight push against an invisible *something*, which meant that the ward was designed to keep something in.

I did not panic with that realization. I did not experience brief, heart-pounding terror that I was locked inside the unseen barrier. I did not turn around and race back through, tripping over my own feet and falling flat on my face.

I did not.

The test to determine whether the ward would allow me in *and* out was calmly carried out. If anyone other than Caaroc asks for the tale, that is my tale and no other.

I found the place within a mile of the barrier ward. A mid-sized stone building set back in a hollow. Weathered and worn. Part of an ancient roof was still there. The remains of a single, unusually wide door sagged on the one hinge partially left. Inside, it was, surprisingly, a single room or open space. A room which had seen war.

My training has taken me to battle sites, recent and not long ago, and ages ago. They all have the feel of ghosts walking still, no matter how long dead their bodies might be. Those ghosts walked here.

At the far end of the room I found the remains of what looked like an altar, but to what I could not tell. The single slab of the top was shattered in three places, the pieces angled against the stumps of the supports. On the wall



behind it, someone, perhaps many someones, had hacked away at whatever was once carved there. I could only make out a faint “oth.” I wondered if this place had something to do with tir-Lothian and the odd Wall.

I shrugged it off. As I shrugged off the feeling of being watched, both then and when I returned the next day with a laden, rented *grila*. The results of my efforts were not an immaculate, romantic bower, but there was a clean place under the roof remains. The well outside the no-longer-there side door still produced clear cold water, after a bit of cleaning. With blankets, and multiple armfuls of the overgrown sweet grass, I thought two warriors could fuck, and fuck hard and frequently without too much knee or back or side or ass damage.

When I left, given the fact that there were no signs anyone had been there before me since... what?... the fall of tir-Lothian five four-hundreds ago?... I was sure it would be unchanged when my Caaroc and I got there.

*If* we got there. If he did not decide he and his people were safer, despite my honor-oath, if we never saw each other again.

He did not make that decision.

I see him, as he sees me, walking toward the Pillar so that we arrive precisely at midnight. Alone. I thought for some reason that he would not be coming from Gaarch, but he is. I arrive from Kilthar.

And now at the Pillar we stand smiling foolishly at each other. Though I think both of us would take great *physical* offense toward anyone foolish enough to call our expressions foolish. He sets a large, heavy pack on the ground. Mine is not quite as large.

He is gorgeous. The long, thick hair I *still* have not seen in light is braided, and it hangs down his chest. His shirt is open, and though I can't see the large nipples and thick nubs I remember so well, at least I can see the sweat gleaming on his chest. I lean in to sniff, and he laughs, and both smell and sound make my already-hard cock ache.

“You were that confident I would make the preparations, find us a place?”

“Wha... Huh?” I wake from overloading myself with *him* after his aeons-long absence. I smirk up at him. “No. I found us a place. Not far, and if it works as well as I think it will, we can use it again.”



A profound silence drops on us at my unspoken, “one last time before you and your people are gone forever.”

We shake the silence off.

He shoulders his pack, and then hesitates when I pick up mine and start toward the unclaimed land. I am a few steps on before I realize he is not with me. I turn to look back at him. “What?”

I do not know him all that well, true. Well enough to know what I feel, though. And at least some certainty that the feeling is returned. I would never have expected... *uneasiness* in his face.

“The place you found is *there*?” He indicates the obvious with that chin-up, reverse nod men do.

I smile brightly. “Yes. Not more than a mile or so. Not much of a walk for a big, strapping—” I deliberately look at his crotch, and lean in to fake-whisper in the empty air, “*hung* Beast, is it?”

He doesn’t smile back. “We don’t go there.”

I did not expect that. “Why?”

He shrugs. “We just do not. If anyone ever has, no one has ever said. We are just... taught, trained, whatever you want to call it, not to go there.”

Fuck. And there is nowhere else to go. I don’t have a backup plan. Except... perhaps I do.

“Fine. When is the last trip?”

“What?” The change of subject disconcerts him. It fucking well should. He recovers and answers, “The day after tomorrow.”

“Last of your people, last of whatever you are taking with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then fine. We say good-bye here.” I step closer. Hold out my hand, and offer him a sincere traveler’s blessing. “The Goddess go with you, and keep you, and guide you safely to journey’s end.”

He looks from my hand to my face and back again.

“I’m not having sex around here, even if it is past midnight and unlikely in the extreme anyone will suddenly arrive. I am not stupid enough to go back to



Halintown and try to rent those two rooms again, or even one of them. There is nowhere else, unless you have a plan.”

He shakes his head. “No plan. I... just got back and came here as quickly as I could.”

Perhaps I should not be doing this. Manipulating him. No. There is nothing there but an ancient ward that keeps nothing out, and there is nothing to keep inside. I want this. It might be, it will probably be, my last time with him, my last time with anyone, unless I abandon my Clan and my home and Gate out of here.

“If we cannot, we cannot. Good-bye, Caaroc.” I push my hand just the slightest bit more toward him. Will it be enough to topple him over the edge?

It is.

“Very well.”

I carefully do not show any glee over getting what I want. He wants it, too, I know he does. And I have found a way to make it happen. For both of us, not just me.

He remains silent, though, as we walk. Until we reach the ward. He knows it's there. And says so.

I shrug. “It's nothing. Whatever it was supposed to do, the reason is long dead and gone. Watch.”

I step through the ward, and back again. I repeat it. Then step through again. I keep my face expressionless. I won't manipulate him again. He has to choose.

I very carefully avoid recognizing that stepping through the ward and waiting while saying nothing is both challenge and manipulation.

He steps through. Turns around and steps past it, but more slowly. As if he has to push his way through what is nearly non-existent for me. He stands there, his back towards me. I force myself to say nothing. I just hope he will choose me.

He does. He turns around, steps past the ward and up to me. His face is serious, almost grim. And then he lightens his expression. “As we are still in the open, though no one is near, consider yourself... lightly kissed.”



“Lightly is good. Deeply and well is better. But soon.” I turn to lead the way.

“You do know we are being watched, don’t you?”

I hope my laugh does not sound forced. “Of course. This was once, a long, long time ago, the site of some fight, some battle that no one remembers. The ghosts of those dead are still here. That is all you feel, all I feel. Nothing more.”

There is a short silence, an inhalation as if he is going to say something. Then nothing. Then in a slightly challenging tone, “So be it.”

I smile, making sure my back is toward him when I do. It might be misinterpreted as gloating over having gotten what I wanted. No. What *we* want; what we need. We walk on.

When we get there, when he sees the building, he stops, grabs my shoulder. “That’s a shrine.”

I shrug as best I can, what with his fingers gripping me so tightly. “So?”

He pulls me around to face him. “It’s a shrine.”

I do not understand the seriousness of his face and tone. And I will not let it interfere with... anything. “It isn’t a shrine to the Goddess. If it was, and She had a problem with what is about to... what is *hopefully* about to happen in there, She would have made Her will known. Hells, I probably wouldn’t even have found the place if She objected. But whatever it was, it isn’t any longer. It’s just an old, dead building, with the remnants of a carving that has something to do with tir-Lothian.”

Some of the wrong kind of stiffness drains out of him. “Are you sure?”

I evade with, “Would I lie to you?” And he takes that as answer.

He starts walking toward the building, more confidently now. “How did you manage to get mattresses, a table, chairs, fine food, candles, wine, out here?”

His tone is so very serious that for a moment I *believe* he is serious. My laughter when I understand he is not is tinged with relief that he has given in, though I hope he doesn’t notice. I will make it up to him. I will make it up to



him so well he will die in ecstasy. I carefully remind myself that Aerisan warriors, nineteen or not, do not go off on flights of fancy or fantasy.

This once I will. We will.

“Nothing so fancy as all that. I wasn’t really sure you were worth that many golds, so I didn’t spend them. Perhaps another time? If you show me that you are?”

He snorts in reply.

“But we’ll be under a roof... sort of a roof. A mild night. Clear skies. Sweet grasses piled thick to spread our blankets on. Oils. Several vials of oil, actually. And if you have the interest, you might see how well you can fuck me into the ground.”

He rounds on me just before we go through the door. Grabs me up, and his kiss tells me he likes that idea very much. So does the massive cock straining at his trousers. I hope he is not wearing smalls, as I am not. One less piece of clothing, one moment faster to get started on the reason we are here.

He fucks me twice, taunting me with subtle and not so, subtle changes in the girth and length of his cock, carrying me with him up to a higher peak than we’d ever reached before, and when we have tumbled over and died the small death, he waits... oh, not very long at all... to show me that there were peaks to be won that were higher yet.

The walls and partial roof provide some shadow, and, combined with the unusual lack of animal noises, we sleep well beyond dawn. I wake before he does, and though I don’t wish to leave my comfortable spot curled up beside him, his arm around me, I have the choice of staying in what will soon be very wet bedding, or moving.

I carefully roll away, and pad naked through a partially open side door. Stuck that way for fours and fours, probably. Outside I turn to face the wall, brace myself, and with careful aim at the stones, at an angle that minimizes splash back, I proudly piss like a *grila* trying to get rid of enough piss for multiple batches of beer for The Drunkard. Feeling much better when that feat is complete, I go back inside.

Caaroc has rolled over on his back, his arms spread wide. Goddess. My grey warrior *snores*.



My grey warrior is also hard. The least I can do is help him with that. That pillar might just come to some harm if it isn't cared for properly. My ass is slightly sore, so I am not going to be oiling my insides and sitting down on it. However, I think he'll accept my lips and tongue and throat as at least reasonable substitutes.

More than reasonable, judging by the sounds that soon start leaking past his lips. Much like the slick, tasty precome that begins streaming from his slit. I carefully work him up, heading toward a cliff that won't be quite as tall given this past night, and then stop. I lift my head away and sit back on my haunches.

He raises his head. Looks down his length to examine his length, then looks over to me. "What the fuck, Karel?"

Not angry at all. Just a very careful "I will not beg, I will not beg" tone behind the words.

I smile down at him. Spread my knees a little wider, and stroke myself. I raise my hand and twist my nipple, hurting it just a little bit. A slight addition to the marvelous, numerous small hurts he'd given me last night. I flaunt myself, just to be sure I have his attention, of course. Not because it turns me on even more to put myself on display for him, to watch him get even more excited by the way I use myself for his pleasure.

My best "innocent" expression is clearly not innocent, or nowhere near innocent enough, at all. Especially when I say, "Third Form?"

I'm not sure if the noise from his throat is a growl, or a snarl or an incipient roar. "No. We are being watched."

I sigh. Goddess damn it, we went through all this hours ago. "Ghosts, Caaroc, or more likely, just the memories of people and things and events long past that have seeped into the stones, into the soil, and have no effect on the here and now."

I pause. "Look, do that... thing you do. Get all swollen up—" and he clearly hears the intended double meaning "—and check. If you tell me there is danger here, actual danger, I will be leading the way to the ward, as fast as I possibly can. Try to keep up."



He smiles somewhat ruefully at that. Sighs, puts his head back down. “I did that while you were still sleeping.”

“And since you didn’t wake me, or just toss my ass over your shoulder and bolt for the border, you didn’t find anything.”

His voice is reluctant, but he finally agrees.

“Well, then?”

He hesitates. “Third Form is... unnerving.”

I let out a bark of laughter.

“Do I look unnerved at the thought? Did I look unnerved when you sprang your True Form on me? Did I run screaming into the night like a little child, setting aside the fact that Aerisans, young or old do not run screaming in fright anywhere? Did I become enraged and attack the vicious Stone Beast who had just fucked me so very, very well? Did I...?”

He holds his left hand up. “Enough. Enough!” Another sigh. “Move back.”

I shake my head. “Nope. I’m comfortable here. Just... grow, or shift, or change, or whatever the great grey Gaarchan Stone Beasts call it—over that way.”

*That* was definitely a snarl.

And then he is in Third Form. I gulp. My Caaroc is magnificent in all his Forms. He stretches his legs, pointing his clawed toes, just as I do when my body is tight from sleeping in a less than just-right position. He stretches his arms straight up in the air and I realize those stone-grey biceps are nearly as big around as my waist. Then above his head so that the backs of his hands touch the ground, and then a downward, wing-like sweep, to lie with his arms stretched straight out. He moves his left leg, too, nudging me, and I can hear his laughter, or the only laughter I have known up until now, through the rough gravel his voice has become.

The laughter is because I am staring, spell-bound without a mage in sight, by the tower rising up from his groin. I lick my lips. “You’re not fucking with me, are you?”

Definite gravel laughter, deep and reverberating. “Would you like me to?”



That makes me hesitate. As he intended. I point at the cock that is so clearly defying gravity. “Is that real, or are you just ‘adjusting’ things to be impressive?”

“That is as real as it gets. Each Form has a particular size and shape, and while... some... ah, ‘adjustments’ can be made they are downward, never up. Do you want a demonstration? Though the range of change is not as major as you seem to think.”

“Later, perhaps.” Perhaps? Goddess damned right there would be a demonstration later, but right now I just want to see what I can do with all that shiny, leaking reality.

I raise up on my knees, move closer, use one hand to brace myself on his thigh, the other to hold the cock somewhat in place, lower my head, open my mouth, a lick the drooling slit. Incredible. I...

*#ABOMINATION! #*

Sound and light hit me. The loudest thunder in the worst storm in the last several four-hundreds punches my ears from an inch away and I can no longer hear. A flare of light stronger than looking directly into the sun smashes my eyes and I can no longer see. White fire washes over me, through me, burning me from the inside out. I feel nothing but pain, *am* nothing but pain.

I am...

Somewhere else.

I drag my eyes open to blurred vision. My head pounds, my ears ring, and I am uncertain I can even lift my head, so I just look downward for a moment. Waiting to see, hear again.

Downward? With what just happened I should have fallen onto Caaroc, or beside him.

*Caaroc!*

My head snaps up. I have to...

Go nowhere at all. I am tied—wrists and ankles, chest, belly and thighs—to wood. Wood standing up in the shape of a giant X. Most of my weight is borne by my wrists; some by the chest and belly ropes.



My head is free and I look around but wherever I am, dear Goddess, wherever *we* are I hope, is utterly dark. A torch flares into life. Then two, three and four. I squint in the brightness, slowly open my eyes. The torches are in holders high against the... cavern walls?

Caaroc... my Caaroc is on the floor of the cave. Dear Goddess help us. In his True Form. His wings up and out and flat against the ground. Flat because they have been cruelly spiked. The arms he had stretched out as I leaned in to caress his cock are spiked as well...through his palms, his shoulders. Spikes in his feet and just above his knees. His head is raised, his eyes bright red, with tiny orange flames reflecting in them.

I call his name, but he says nothing. I do not even know if he *can* speak, at least Kiltari, in this Form.

I know better, I can tell how well I am tied, but still I struggle. And slump when it accomplishes nothing but to add pain.

A voice laughs. But I only hear it inside my head. Caaroc doesn't move at all, but if the way his head moves, if any part of his body could do the same, he might well be free, spikes or not.

*# Exactly. The abomination... the other abomination will not be moving. It is doubly pinned to the ground. #*

Despite the lack of noise coming into my ears, I look around as well as I can. No one is here but us, unless he, or it, is hidden far back in the shadows.

*# No threats of what will happen when the mighty Clan Aeris comes searching for its Heir? No warning of what the Stone Beasts of Gaarch will do in double or triple repayment for damage to one of their pack? #*

Something slithers inside my head, looking at me on the first sentence, at Caaroc on the second.

The voice knows no one will come for me. The Clan has no idea where I am. I suspect it is true for Caaroc's people as well. And if we are in a cavern where no one knows we have ever been, there will be no one to exact retribution for us.

Especially not for abominations.



*# Especially not for abominations. #*

“Get out of my head!”

*# Very good. If you want the other abomination to hear, you’ll have to speak aloud. But if you want a private moment, have words only with me, all you have to do is think. #*

“I have no private thoughts for you. And if you’d release the spell that keeps Caaroc silent, he’d have no words for you either.”

*# I prefer it this way. And now I just need to decide what to do with a pair of abominations three times over. #*

“We are not abominations.” Whoever, whatever, *it* is, this immaterial voice, I hope it cannot hear the lie.

*It* does.

A jagged gash appears slowly, slowly on Caaroc’s chest, starting at the spike and meandering in the general direction of his breastbone. The flesh parts and grey blood bubbles up. He says nothing.

*# Lie again and the Beast is hurt worse. The more you lie, the greater its pain. #*

“All right!” I shout at the air. “We are *shkiril*.” And for all our captivity it is somewhat freeing to say the words aloud.

*# The first abomination. What of the other two? #*

“I... If there is something other than that, I don’t know.”

A sharp, jagged blade slices down my chest to match the wound on Caaroc. And then another to make the sides of my chest match. I do not allow myself to cry out.

*# You profaned the shrine of the God-Emperor Tiroth. #*

Speaking before I think will be my damnation, the Clan Mother has always told me. Unless I, *we*, can figure something out despite the impossibility, the both of us are damned anyway.

“Never heard of him.” Despite the pain and the blood and the ropes, I try to join the words with a shrug. I don’t quite succeed.



*Its voice is suddenly hysterical, and that invisible blade with the jagged edge slices into me repeatedly as it shrieks.*

*# You would have! # Slash.*

*# Tiroth sent four of us and your Goddess could do nothing. # Slash.*

*# We found hosts, eager, willing hosts. So very willing. # Slash.*

*# We were making tir-Lothian great, a god of nations, to take control and join with Tiroth. # Slash.*

*# And then your mages rose up, your warriors rose up. # Slash.*

*# They razed the city, and salted the earth. # Slash.*

*# Destroyed the other three, and when I killed my host and hid, they caged me! # Slash.*

*Its voice is out of control. Had it been real its voice would have been panting and raw, hoarse and nearly gone.*

*# I have been cut off from the God-Emperor for two thousand years! I slept, but am awake again, still caged. You will repay my pain. #*

*The knife, or whatever it is, slashes over and over again.*

*When it stops I am nearly unconscious from the pain and loss of blood.*

*And then the wounds are gone. But only part of the pain.*

*# You won't die just yet, my little Aerisan warrior. You and your beast have a debt to pay. A special debt for your third abomination. #*

*I refuse to ask.*

*# I might have let you live. If it was only the two I would still have caught you as I have. I would have told myself it has been millennia since the altar was used, so there is not much to desecrate. Even the abomination of a man lying with a man as with a woman would have only led to making you both suffer, long and well, but still you would have survived. You won't now. Have you guessed, little warrior, what your third abomination is? #*

*A whip this time, also unseen, lashing out until I am certain I will die as the young Baliran boy did when his father went insane and whipped him to death. But I survive. As its voice promised.*



I open the eyes I have held closed and see Caaroc again. I force myself to hold back the gasp. Everything that has been done to me has been done to him.

*# Your Stone Beast is a shifter, just like those at... #* The voice stops and with barely a pause goes on. *# And you, you drank the shifter's blood. You bit the beast willingly and drank the blood and now your blood is corrupt as well. #*

An extended silence. More so because I try to speak, to reassure Caaroc somehow, some way, only some mage trick deprives me of my voice.

*# Your beast, little Aerisan, the one spiked to the floor. Would you protect it from further harm? Do anything to protect it? #*

There is no need to think about the response. Not anymore. “Yes!” My shout bounces off the walls and ceiling, wraps around the pointed pillars that drop from the ceiling and rise from the floor, fades into tiny echoes and then silence.

*# Prove it. #*

\*\*\*\*

“You caught a monster?”

I am no longer tied! But Caaroc, Caaroc is still on the floor. In his True Form. The spikes—vicious, hammered deeply, crusted with granite blood—still pierce his wings, his palms, his feet, his shoulders, his tail in several places. He is motionless, but his red eyes glow. He is conscious, in pain, but I am free. I can get to him. Help him.

And then the fact of the voice hits me like a sword-hilt to my temple. The fact that it is Father's voice is a blow to my other temple. Both jar my mind. I am unsurprised that Father's voice holds no approval for his eldest son and Clan Heir actually capturing a Gaarchan Stone Beast, subduing it, supposedly fucking *nailing* it in agony to the floor of this... warehouse? Wasn't it a cavern a moment ago? I shrug the uncertainty off—uncertainty gets warriors killed. No surprise, either, at the question that accents the “you?” with some degree of incredulity.

I whirl on him. I am... not naked. I am fully clothed in a warrior's leathers. My sword slides from the scabbard with an angry hiss as I spin. A twist of my



fingers and the scabbard falls into my left hand. A flick of my wrist that does not interfere with my movement, and the scabbard is tossed, clattering to the floor well out of my way.

I face father, legs braced for battle, my blade up and toward him.

“Turn that blade away from me, warrior. And then let’s kill the monster.”

“He’s mine.”

Father laughs, and it is not a pleasant sound. He pulls out his own sword. “You’ll get credit for the capture. And for sharing the kill. But the last death of man or Beast was your great-grandfather’s, *my* grandfather’s. The Beast ripped his heart from his chest, clawed his belly until his entrails spurted out, crushed his legs and crushed his skull. The battle with that Beast is why your grandfather has a twisted leg and limps. It is why I became Clan Chief too soon. That Beast escaped; this one will not. I *will* have my revenge.”

I back up a step, desperately trying to figure a way out of this. I make my voice strong and even. “No. He is mine. Just leave and I will deal with this.”

Deal with this? *Deal with this?*

Get the spikes out? Bandage him with nothing but my leathers available in this filthy room? And then what? If he can’t shift to his Lesser Form, to become my grey warrior, what? I am one four and a half four tall; Caaroc is at least two fours in this Form. Precisely how do I even get him upright? Much less out of here, wherever in the Nine Hells *here* actually is.

Father is angry now. “Get out of my way. Stand aside, or help, your choice. But I *will* kill the Beast.”

“No. I told you, he is mine and only mine.” I do not tell him precisely how my Caaroc is mine, but let him think what he will of my arrogance and selfishness.

“You arrogant child. You are good, Karel. You were good when you humiliated me before the Clan last Winterdeath. You have worked hard, become even better since then. But you aren’t as good as me. You don’t have a true warrior’s instincts... like your brothers have. Eventually, soon, really soon, you will lose to them. As you will lose now, to me. *Stand aside!*”



The last is a bellow that shakes the room, followed by a charge and a powerful swing at my sword, aimed at shocking me into inaction so that the sword is forced from my hand. He almost succeeds. I manage to get my blade up, to block the swing. And then I am fighting my father, seriously fighting.

Yet not. I am just defending myself. For all he dislikes, perhaps even despises, me, for a reason he has never disclosed, he is still my father. I cannot hurt him. But I cannot let him kill Caaroc.

I have to figure a way out. I have to...

...do nothing at all.

Ever again.

Father's blade is in my belly. We stand in place, staring in horror at each other. I begin to fall...

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*# So. That is how much you "love" your monster. You throw away your life, and let the Beast be slaughtered. #*

"No!"

My voice echoes in the cavern.

I... We are back in the cavern? But... How? Goddess, how? I look around, as much as the rope now around my neck will allow. I am naked again. Tied again, so tightly the ropes cut deep into my flesh. Caaroc is in agony on the ground. But... but I can still feel the sword in my belly, the exit wound at the back. Yet I am certain that even if I could bend and look, I would see no sign of the holes. Nor blood.

"No!" I scream once more to the cave that is empty except for Caaroc and me. "Come out! Fight me! I will not let him die."

*# Prove it. #*

\*\*\*\*

I am back in the warehouse. We are. Caaroc, Father, me.

Back at the moment when Father shouts and swings at me. I block it more easily this time. I know it is going to happen. We continue fighting. The blows



we strike are different; we aren't repeating everything that went before. I can change the outcome!

My breathing gets ragged. Harsh and loud. I am not used to fighting on the defensive. And this... this feels so *real*. But isn't. It's an illusion, a mind trick. And knowing that, I will be able to...

...do nothing at all.

Father's blade slices through my throat.

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I remember... each and every time I fight my father in that stinking warehouse. Each and every death. And all of them mine.

And with each battle Father's anger grows, as if somehow, phantom though he is, he remembers all that has gone before, notices cumulatively things he had not noticed individually, as they occurred. All my deaths, though, are accidental. There is an expression of near-horror on his face each time he strikes the killing blow.

Until the last one. The longest-fought battle. And in one of those odd pauses where two warriors silently agree to stop, for just a moment, the most temporary of truces, just to breathe deeply and gather ourselves before resuming, his face changes.

"You aren't fighting me to keep the honor of the Stone Beast kill for yourself. You are *protecting* that fucking abomination."

I am so shocked by the accusation, by the cold, absolute certainty of his tone, that I take too long to deny, and by my silence, admit.

"*You disgust me, shkiril.*" He leaps at me, breaking our temporary truce with the same energy he had when this fight started. I am completely on the defensive.

"You have shamed me almost from the moment you were born." The blows are so powerful I am forced back.

"I... prayed to the Goddess... that you had not been tainted by that foul *shkiril* you called friend."

The next blow almost deprives me of my blade and earns me another death.



“But I knew. I *knew*.” He cuts through my defense, slices my shoulder as I avoid a killing stroke.

Another few exchanges and I am bleeding again. And again. How can I survive? I am exhausted from each of the times I have fought him before, and he does not recall a single fight. And each time we start anew he is as strong as if all the rest had never happened. As they have not, for him. Just for me.

He leaps back and breaks off.

I am desperately glad for the respite.

He is gasping, too. And then he controls himself, his voice. “Redeem some small part of your honor. Submit and I will not geld and enslave you as is my right. Your death will be quick, your shame will be mine to know and the Clan will believe your Stone Beast killed you.”

I control my own breathing so I will not pant between words. “And if I will not?”

“Then you die a slow and painful death, and I will make sure that the abomination spiked to that floor behind you will die, if not as slowly, then in far more agony. Surrender.”

I scream my “No!” at him and launch myself.

I lose.

I lie on the floor, gut sliced open, bleeding out while the numerous slashes on my arms and chest and thighs and scalp drain me as well.

And while I die, my Father kills my grey warrior, slicing and jabbing, prolonging his pain, though he never makes a sound.

From time to time, Father pauses in his slaughter. He comes to stand over me, the blades he is using dripping granite blood on me. Deliberately. Knowing what it will do to me. Not caring. Each time, he tells me, “Surrender. And he dies now... quickly.”

And each time I refuse. I cannot, will not surrender. Caaroc would not want me to.

When at last he is done, and Caaroc’s remaining brilliantly red eye has dimmed to pale pink and then flickered out, Father is covered in bits and



pieces of my warrior's grey flesh. His whole body drips with grey blood and gore. He walks back to stand over me once more. This time with nowhere else to go. He doesn't speak. Just spreads his legs for good balance, plants the sword point in the wooden floor. And then, grim-faced, he watches me die.

\*\*\*\*

*# Surrender to me, little Aerisan. I will give your monster the clean death it does not deserve. #*

I am whole. Back and tied yet again. Unreal. All of it is unreal... was unreal.

And yet... and yet...

I feel every wound from every fight. My body trembles from the fatigue of long battle. I recall every blow, every movement my body made. If I were not tied so tightly to the X-frame that matches my Caaroc's sprawl on the ground, I would be down in the dust, sobbing.

My mouth is desert-dry, so my "no" is barely croaked.

*# Then once more, little Aerisan. You will not like what happens if you lose again. #*

\*\*\*\*

I do not know who spiked my Caaroc to the floor so thoroughly he cannot loose himself, though he is in True Form. Who silenced him since he does not speak, but his eyes tell me hears, understands, and is in the kind of pain I do not think he would let anyone see but me. I beg him to shift to his Lesser Form, stupidly thinking the spikes will not follow, since as a man he will not have those huge wings, those massive legs, thinking the spikes will only be in the floor, and not in him, through him.

He does not shift. And I cannot tell if it is because he cannot or will not. Goddess damn!

I do not know what to do for him, whether pulling the spikes out with my bare hands will hurt him or save him or kill him. Aerisan warriors do not cry, but fuck that rule. I let him see my tears, tell him my uncertainty, my fear. I lean forward, caress the massive muscles of his left shoulder, straining from



being stretched so far, held in place with a spike in his palm, a spike in his shoulder. I stroke a finger along the stony flesh beneath his glowing red eye.

That is when Father roars at me.

I do not know how Father found me. Found us. Startled by the sound, I whirl around and it is only the distance from the door to where we are that saves my life. He is charging me, his sword out, and his expression is one I have seen before, in battle last year against a group of bandits that had plagued the trade caravans for some months. An expression that says death and only death will satisfy him.

My death.

He says only one thing as he nears me and lunges as if he truly expects me to stand here and be run through. "Abomination. My son is an abomination!"

I did not hear that much contempt and disgust when he named Tarik in front of all the Clan... before gelding him.

But my sword is out, though he is not paying attention to it. So easy. I can raise it, extend it, twist my body to avoid his blade, and run *him* through. I don't. He is my father; he is my Clan Chief. I am honor bound not to harm him by word or deed, not to shame him or the Clan.

Except that I clearly have.

I begin fighting for my life. I am younger, stronger than I look, than he really knows, faster. I am fighting a man still in his prime, though he is five fours of years my senior. Taller, heavier. A longer reach.

He glances only once at the floor behind me, seeing only a pinned Stone Beast and not my grey warrior. His face tells me what he will do to when he has finished with me. Father never lacks confidence in himself, in his abilities. It is always justified.

But not today.

His momentary inattention is enough for me to take the battle to him, to force him back and away from Caaroc, to the open space in the dim room where the noise we make echoes as though we were in... a cavern? No more talking. Nothing except the clashing of the blades, harsh breathing, the stomps and slams of booted feet on wood as we dance death.



Death is the reason we dance, death the only outcome but no solution at all, for the one left standing will be destroyed as well.

We dance to the music of the blades. We sing the song of steel. And when it is over... I am the one left standing. Chance? Skill? Terror-driven strength? A hesitation on his part? I do not know.

My father lies on the blood-spattered floor, dead. I stand weeping, panting, trying to pray for forgiveness for choosing Caaroc over my father.

“You killed Father!”

I raise my head and blink, and blink again, to get rid of the tears. I cannot use hands or sleeves to wipe my eyes, as both are bloody. Denin stands in the doorway. Sword drawn.

Dear Goddess, *no!*

What does he see, looking into this room? A vast Stone Beast on the floor, dead or dying? His father, dead? His older brother, the Clan Heir, standing over his father's blood covered body, holding an equally blood covered sword? All this he sees, but not the regret, not the despair of having had to make that choice.

Another mantle of abomination to drape about my shoulders. Father-killer.

“Denin. I had no choice. He...”

“You had a choice, you fucking bastard. You always have a choice!” His voice is shaking.

“Let him kill me?”

“Yes!” he shouts. “If you fucking deserve it, honor requires...”

“*Fuck honor!*” His mouth drops open at my shout. “I don't surrender.”

“Then die.”

Denin is eighteen now, not quite as tall as Father is... was... not as heavy. Nor as skilled with the sword as he thinks he is.

Once more I am desperately defending myself, once more trying to persuade an opponent intent on killing me to back off, trying to get myself the time and space to think of a way out of all this. And all the while my Caaroc



lies helpless behind me. Denin is nearly all that Father was, all that mattered to Father that somehow skipped me and went to him. He will not give up.

I cannot give up.

And now my brother lies dead on the floor as well.

Dear Goddess, what in the Nine Hells possessed him to bring Denin with him on the hunt to find me?

The voices from the shadows beside the door shake me out of my stupor. I cannot help myself. The “no” that erupts from my mouth is a long wail of total dismay. My fucking Father brought all my brothers with him.

I send up a brief, panicked prayer to the Goddess not to allow this, to turn this aside somehow. I should not have to choose!

But life is choice. And if I must choose my life, Caaroc’s life, over the lives of my brothers—as I have already chosen him over Father and Denin—so be it.

They are as stubborn as Father, as stubborn as dead Denin. They will not listen to my pleas to stop. They attack me together, yet not in the coordinated way of warriors trained to battle in pairs or trios, their swords and war knives weaving an almost choreographed dance of death, knowing from experience, training, instinct how to move with your team, never interfering with each other. They are blind with rage and fear, but still they fight.

And lose, as it is inevitable they would.

My brothers, all my brothers, are dead.

A soft, stuttering breath intrudes on the silence broken only by my harsh breath and sobs.

Oh, Goddess.

Eron lives. Dear, sweet, fifteen-year-old Eron who never truly wanted to be a warrior. He will be dead soon. Bleeding out on this filthy floor. I pray yet again, knowing I will not be answered. Pray that he does not ask.

He does.

His voice is the thinnest of whispers as he says the one word every warrior



has the right to speak, the one demand every warrior has the right to make, even of the most hated foe. “G... grace.”

And so, blinded myself with tears that nearly make my task impossible, I give my little brother the Goddess’ grace. I plunge my blade into his heart.

*# You slaughtered your family to save a monster. Are you not just a monster, yourself? #*

I ignore *its* voice, which is everywhere, nowhere, perhaps only in my head, where my mind is being fucked. I no longer have any certainty about what is real and what is not. My only certainty, above the vast chasm of regret and despair, is that I made the choices I had to make.

I stand in a room reeking of death, an abattoir I am unlikely to survive myself. Though I am exhausted, I will battle yet again, if only, if only I can find a foe on which to use my blades. But there is none visible.

And then the bodies of my family are gone.

I blink, and blink and blink, but my eyes are not cleared. I am still in the warehouse room. I still smell the stench of their deaths.

*# You are going to die. So is the monster on the floor. You have sacrificed your family for the Beast, are you not willing to sacrifice yourself? Let the shifter have the clean death it does not deserve, little Aerisan. Surrender. #*

I say nothing. Can *it* feel the terror inside me, the despair? There has to be a way, *some* way for us to survive this. Together.

*# Your choice. Your responsibility. #*

I am frozen once more. No X-frame. Just locked into place. Unable to move, unable to blink, only able to stare as *it* begins to kill my grey warrior. That invisible blade slices through a single feather. An invisible hand yanks it out. Blood oozes, only a drop or two, and then stops as if on command. Then another and another and on and on until his wings are bare, punctured flesh. An invisible blow crushes a wing joint, the blade slices through it. Again and again until nothing is left of his wings but ragged bits of flesh and bone.

*# His voice is his own again. He could howl his pain, but your monster is stubborn. #*



The blade starts in on his left foot, cutting the claws off one by one. Slicing the foot until the wounds gape, the invisible hammer or boot or whatever it is, smashing his ankle joint. Then the other foot. Upward along each leg, slicing, gouging, pounding, destroying the backward-seeming joint; upward still until his knees are tiny chips of bones and the muscles are loose strands of flesh. Then up his thighs, blood spurting with every cut only to turn into a slow ooze.

Caaroc lives through all this. I see the pain in his eyes but still he will not give voice to it. If only we could link like the Imperials. I could at least share what I cannot prevent, cannot heal.

Caaroc's legs are no longer truly legs, just the ugly remainder of the power they once had. *Its* hand lifts Caaroc's balls, rotating them, almost caressing them.

*# A clean death for your surrender. Say the word. #*

My mouth is set free but the only word that comes out is another "no."

His balls are excised from the sack, held bloody and dripping on two invisible palms, which slowly crush them. His cock is next and then slowly, so very, very slowly, up to his belly where his entrails are bared and pulled out, this time with gushing fountains of grey blood. And again the blood dries up to just a slow, steady flow while Caaroc impossibly continues to live.

*# Your choice. Your responsibility. #*

His hands are next, fingers severed, joint by joint, and then the bloody stump at his wrist crushed. Upwards to his elbows, and when the destruction there is done, slicing and crushing to his shoulders. Then back down to the spike at the tip of his immobile tail and upwards destruction again to where it disappears under the hips he no longer truly has. Ears and horns are hacked away.

It is only when I realize that that invisible blade is hovering over his eyes, ready to pop the red orbs out and forever blind the love I see somehow still blazing in them as Caaroc looks at me, as he struggles to send me a message I cannot read, that I give in.

I drop to my knees... *it* allows me to drop?... head bowed as if praying. I do not want Caaroc to see my face as I do what I must.



“I surrender. Kill me as you wish, but... but just give him the clean death you promised. End his suffering now.”

*# Look at your monster. #*

I don't want to, but I realize I must. I raise my head and look directly into my grey warrior's eyes. If eyes could burn with despair, what I see in him would be a forest fire engulfing an entire continent with no mage to quench it.

*# Say it again. So your monster can hear what you do. #*

I shout it now, an agonized scream. “I surrender.”

Tendrils of blackness pierce my ears and begin burrowing inside. More up my nose, even more forcing my mouth open and sliding down my throat. My hole. My piss slit. Foul, slimy vines of darkness that slither and crawl into my core, take root, grow, fill my body, until only blackness pulses inside my skin. *It opens my eyes.*

The warehouse or wherever we were is gone. The cavern is gone. We are... we are...

*# Right where you have always been. Right where two abominations despoiled the God-Emperor's shrine. #*

I am naked, on the floor, Caaroc's come leaking out of my well-pounded hole. He is beside me, in his Third Form. For a precious moment I forget where we are, forget all that has happened... or *appeared* to happen. Instead I remember thinking in that instant before everything ended, that I liked his Third Form. Though I would have to remind him to be very careful of the size of his shifted cock. The actual size would probably destroy me. And Goddess knows I could never spread wide enough, mouth or ass, to take his cock when he is in his True Form. But it might be fun to try, just a lit...

*# Those thoughts were disgusting when they first occurred. They are no less so now. I will wipe those memories from you, my little Aerisan warrior—one painful slice of recollection at a time. Perhaps I will store them, then restore them so you will understand all you gave up when you took a coward's way out and surrendered. And then I will take them all away again. But for now, I want you to remember it all. You have a task. #*

“It was unreal? All of that? You fucking *mind-fucked* me? Us?”



*Its voice is vile inside my head. # Pain is only inside your mind. So is pleasure. #*

My cock is suddenly hard though there is nothing erotic about what has happened, what is happening to me, to us. I cannot move except to look down my body to see my prick standing upright, flushed red, straining, precome pouring out in a steady flow I have never before experienced. The waves of pleasure coursing through me are also beyond my experience, making my entire body flush. I can hear myself gasping and begging as if I am being ruthlessly fucked from the inside out, and then I am spewing a lava-flow of come that spurts out and away, spattering on the blanket and... dear Goddess... on Caaroc's leg.

I have never been ashamed of anything I have done, more than I am by the white globs that glisten against the grey in the bright morning sun.

I try to speak, to tell Caaroc something, anything, to explain what just happened. *It* does not allow me.

My body rises. Not by my choice! I walk over to where we dropped our clothes, our weapons, in our urgency to fuck. My body bends, squats, my hands rummage through the piles, find the knives, his and mine. My body rises and walks over to the fireplace, I don't ask why wood is available, and kindling, I simply start a blazing fire. And when it is burning well, I slide Caaroc's knife into a metal holder, and then swivel the holder on the long metal rod so that the blade is well inside the flames. A convenient design.

I rise again and go back to where Caaroc is still sprawled.

I stand looking down on him, knife clenched in my hand. I drop to my knees, use my left hand to grasp the large, clawed toe on his motionless left foot.

*# Cut it off. #*

"No!" My voice is shaking with new-found fear. "We had a bargain. If I... if I... surrendered, you would give him a clean death. You are honor-bound..."

*# Fuck honor! #* He throws my phantom-spoken words back at me. And from his expression I can see Caaroc is hearing all this as well. *# I lied. There*



*is no honor lost in lying to a monster, or in lying to a human whose blood is shifter-corrupted. But then I have no need of honor. All I needed was one of you... willing.*

*# Weakling. If you had only held fast I could not have... acquired... you, could never make you do what you will now do. Could never do all the things I will do to you when the monster is rotting. Cut if off! #*

*It lets me have my voice. "N... no." I have the urge to voice a child's defiant "you can't make me," but I know it can. Know it will.*

*# And as you cut, as you will do with every thing I demand of you, you will say, "As I am commanded, so will I do." #*

I clamp my lips tight, strain against the muscles that want to move my arm and hand, to move the knife and slice as I have been told.

That white fire surges through me again. Every nerve is ablaze with flame. The fire stops and my hand does what my mind does not order. I cut off his great toe and my mouth says, "As I am commanded, so will I do."

And then I repeat all that the invisible knife did to my grey warrior in his True Form. All that was not real before is real now. I know. Slightly different, of course, since what I am destroying is his Third Form. And there is no magic, or control of my mind, to stop the bleeding, reduce the flow. Just the heat of Caaroc's blade to burn and cauterize. With every cut, or gouge or blow I repeat the words I am required to say. And with each repetition, a part of my soul dies. As I reach his groin I am covered in his slippery blood.

Tears, if I had any left to give, would not wash me clean. All the water of the Inland Sea could not wash my hands clean. I would be more likely to turn the seas red.

I no longer know if it is *its* compulsion or my choice, which lets the words, "As I am commanded, so will I do," be said.

Over and over, endlessly over.

I want Caaroc to shout at me, to swear at me, to curse my body and soul, what little there is, if he has any mage Gifts at all. But he is silent.

Hours pass, how many I have no idea, as I continue with my careful carving and cauterizing. And through it all, Caaroc is silent. Initially because



he would not, then because he can not. Blinded, without tongue or ears, with horns only a stump, charred flesh the only thing holding the remains of his Third Form together, he yet lives.

*# Kill him. #*

I am already on my knees, beside his destroyed body.

“As I am commanded, so will I do.”

As I never did with Eron, or perhaps I did and the lie was that it was only inside my head, I give my Caaroc what little remains of a warrior’s grace. I cut out his heart.

I weep inside, in the vast emptiness where my soul had once been.

*# Karel, my love. #*

*# No. Don’t do this to me. Don’t mock me like this. #* I try to shout that tiny defiance, but my mouth no longer answers my commands.

*# It is me, my love. #* There is an almost amused chuckle. He is laughing? No, impossible. This is just another of *its* mind-fucks.

*# It appears I must believe in your Goddess... our... Goddess after all. My people can only speak mind-to-mind with each other. We have no “Gift,” I think you call it, for “linking” with others. Or hearing them back if we could. #*

*# But you’re dead! #*

*# Nearly. I have never prayed before, especially not to a non-existent deity, but She has apparently decided that a monstrous Stone Beast is worthy of a chance to say farewell. So She has given me... us... this moment. This is a death-link.*

*# And it cannot hear us. Does not know this is happening. But our time is brief. #* Another small laugh. *# Living without a beating heart is not exactly easy, you know. #*

I somehow summon a smile inside my head and hope that he can see it. My body is frozen in place. I can feel *it* savoring its victory, but only as something far away that can not possibly hurt me. I know that feeling is only temporary.

*# The rest of the Gaarch are gone. #*



*# Through the Gates? # No. Not just that. There is something in his tone. # You found a... better refuge? #*

*# Do you remember the World Beside? #*

I am not sure how he “hears” a nod.

*# Well, your Goddess... # and I can hear a wince as if he is being reprimanded, # our Goddess does not always pay attention to every spaarit fall. There are far too many who do. But eventually She did, no matter how little a Stone Beast looks like a tiny spaarit, and She found us another World Beside, with Gaarchans ready to welcome us. The dragon-shifters in the core of the Heart would have taken us in, but this is better. #*

*# Dragons? There are fucking dragon shifters in the Heart? #*

*# Focus, my love, focus. My people are actually gone. There was no other journey. I stayed behind for you. #*

*# All so that I could kill you. # I know he hears the pain.*

I can almost feel his hand, in each of his three Forms simultaneously, gently caressing my face.

*# I will come for you. #*

*# How? You're dead... dying... and it fucking owns me, body and soul. #*

*# Never your soul, my love, never your soul. No matter what it steals, hold fast to this memory. It will always be with you, even if... even if there are times when you do not know it. I am bound to you and you to me. I will find a way. # There is a near smile in his silent voice. # Perhaps I will even pray to Her to be the first Gaarchan ever reborn. #*

I hear but I cannot believe. I was too weak. I fucked up. *# I fucking surrendered. #*

*# A wrong choice? Yes. Weak? Never. Now, ask me for my Oath. #*

I hear the capital letter. No. Surely not. *# Why? #*

*# Ask the question. #*

I can't. I can't let him do this. *# No. That would bind you to me, forever. #*

*# Oh, my love, I am already bound. But you need this, and our time is running out. Ask. #*



I surrender... yet again. But somehow it is not as if I am giving in, but rising up and joining.

*# S... swear you so by the Goddess? #*

*# I love you. I will come for you. It is by the Goddess sworn. #*

And then he is gone. Caaroc is dead.

I hide the memory and pray that the Goddess grant me this small mercy, since She will not send me grace: that *it* never notices, never finds this memory.

\*\*\*\*\*



## 2 Summer 32, 19103 After Seren

### 9676 House Andrae

#### The Wall

#### tir-Lothian, Kilthar

It is done. I have remembered it all. Every instant of every thing I have done, whether I willed it or because I was commanded. Compelled.

I can feel *it* watching us.

Or... have I? I feel as if something is missing. A memory? But that cannot be. I had no choice but to remember it all. As I am commanded, so will I do.

Caaroc, *my* Stone Beast, my love, is dead. And I killed him long before my body took my knife and his and carved him to his death. I killed him the instant I manipulated him into crossing the ward. And for what? So I could be fucked. That one choice changed all. A different choice and we would be... would be at least alive.

Daily *it* ensures he is the only love I will ever have, ever remember, but only when *it* allows me the memories, so that it can painfully rip them away time after time. As *it* will when this day is done. If this day is not the day I actually die.

I pray for the Goddess' grace. It never arrives.

I look at my fellow travelers.

Did they watch Caaroc die by my hand, there on the painting that does not exist except when a mind is near to be manipulated by *it*? Do they understand it was my hand, but never my heart, my mind, my soul, my will?

Do they revile me, us, for what they saw? For what I have done since I killed Caaroc? For what I am? Do they *care*? Or is *it* just mind-fucking them, as well?

They surround me now, close enough to touch if they or I reached out, close enough to make me feel as though they are cutting off all my air, making me gasp, become frantic to get away. But I have nowhere to go.



No choices to make.

No freedom to choose.

*# Hands and knees. #*

*# No. Please. #*

I look in the faces of these men, one by one, turning myself in a complete circle as they now encircle me. Each face is the same as they stare back. Eyes overflowing with fear, disgust, hatred, shame.

Dear Goddess, no.

Lust.

*# Please don't do this. I will, I will... #*

An Aerisan warrior never surrenders. But I did. An Aerisan warrior never begs, but I do. I am so very tired of the pain.

And so I grovel, knowing it is futile. I have nothing to offer, nothing to bargain with, to say if only you will not, I will...

*It* knows that truth.

*It* squeezes my skull *inside* my skull, the pressure increasing until I feel the bones begin to crack. I tell myself this is not real, this is imaginary... nothing more than *its* depraved imagination. But my body shouts "*Liar!*" as my ears are crushed, pushed inside my head along with fours and fours and fours of four-hundreds of knife-sharp bone fragments.

I drop to all fours. My skull is not cracked, my ears are not crushed. The pain remains.

*It* makes my cock hard.

*# They will geld you first. #*

I scream. The men around me hear, but do not know why. They do not care, and if they tried, *it* would not let them. My voice is raw and ragged from all the screaming that has gone before. This time, unlike some of the times before, they can hear my voice, hear my terror. And still they do not care.

There is... something... something in each of them even without *its* control, something that responds to a serpent whisper that tells of the pleasures



of pain and wickedness and evil. The whisper coils and coils and coils around their souls, slowly sinks fangs from which poison oozes, to slither through veins and arteries, burning, burning bright, destroying the light.

*It* lets them loose, just enough that they can move, but not run. Do they hear *its* voice inside their heads, telling them they must be naked for what is to come? They must, because when they begin to disrobe, they are slow, clumsy, reluctant to expose themselves to the other men, a last moment of humanity before they succumb to the kind of invisible *kitlit* that glides inside along muscles and sinews, veins and arteries and will finally destroy them.

If not today, eventually. Trapped inside the remains of tir-Lothian, *it* has all the time in the world.

Does *it* flick a whip of silent pain across them? They jerk and twitch as if they have been lightly lashed. *It* must have done, because they move more rapidly, discarding clothes in tangled heaps.

They are naked now, closing in. Too many to stand side by side in that circle without touching each other. Some... most, all?... would never voluntarily touch a man the way they are touching each other now. Especially the off-worlders. But to do what they are going to do to me, they must be close. Close enough to hear me no matter how small and raw my voice may be. Close enough to see the muscled body of the former Aerisan warrior. Close enough to smell the fear rising off of him. Close enough, ultimately, to touch.

A man cannot rape without touching.

They move in slowly, coming closer and closer to me, closer and closer to each other, a smooth noble shoulder rubbing against a hairy smuggler's arm, a fat Baliran belly pushing against the ass of the Imperial toady. They angle themselves to get close to the naked, crying man on all fours in the dirt. Sides are pressed against sides, hips and thighs against hips and thighs. Cocks begin to rise; hard cocks graze the skin of other men, for the first time, for yet another time, some leaving an oozing trail of precome. They stroke themselves, and after a hesitation begin to stroke each other. All the sizes and shapes of my rapists' cocks are hard now.

The Aerisan who licked his lips, and flaunted himself at me is the largest. Larger than me, certainly, but not larger than my Caaroc. Not in any Form. I



am no longer used to being fucked by a Stone Beast cock in his Lesser Form. By a Stone Beast cock in his Third Form. My ass is tight. The *it*-forced Shift has ensured that. His cock will be the most painful to take, unless my hole has been opened up by one of the others, more of the others, first.

But that will not happen. He will be first.

*Its* voice inside my head is smug. # *He will.* #

I have no choice. No matter what I do, I have no choice.

Except to do what I did when I *had* a choice.

I surrender.

As I have before, I will again.

# *As I am commanded, so will I do.* #

They kick me, and punch me, do all that they can to hurt. And when I am curled in on myself, they turn me on my back, spread my legs to the point of agony. Numerous hands and knees press down on me.

I scream, over and over and over again, as my balls are hacked off with a filthy Baliran knife.

I howl in agony as the fucking off-worlder lord applies a white-hot sword tip to where my balls used to be, never questioning how he acquired a Kilthari sword, how it came to be white hot in the time it took him to lose control, get naked, get hard.

The blood is not stopped by the unreal sword *it* makes them see and believe, but by *its* control of my body.

*It* lets the pain continue.

Will *it* use my scant shifting ability to heal my body as *it* has before when the pain was real and not just inside my mind, when the wounds were actual? Or will *it* leave me maimed this time?

They force me to all fours again.

They laugh at the ball-less man they are going to use, every one of them. They spew obscenities at me, describing how I will be used, how I will be hurt, each word an acid drop on my skin, eating it away. The acid cannot touch my soul for there is nothing left to dissolve.



Tears drop from my bent-down face to briefly moisten the dust. Will my tears turn into a river's torrent to wash away the dirt below, or will the soil just suck each drop up and make it disappear? My body could dry as all the moisture departs; I could shrivel into dust and drift away to rejoin my grey warrior, if the Goddess will only allow.

She does not.

The Aerisan, the first of the fifteen who will rape me, as many times as their cocks can rise and spew seed, mounts me and enjoys my howl as he thrusts full-length into my bowels. I scream aloud though my voice is nearly gone and it can be barely heard, ripping my throat apart until I doubt I will ever be able to speak again.

Inside, inside, I scream louder and longer, where I have the voice *it* allows me to have, where *it* can devour my screams and gorge *itself* on my pain. And then *it* begins *its* own rape of my mind.

And then I remember. The memory *it* does not know about, the one *it* has not stolen.

The memory that is a single mote of light deep within the infinity of the Goddess' Long Dark between the stars. *It* does not, can not, *must never*, hear my Caaroc's voice, soft as the sound of a feather landing on a sky-piercing mountain of feathers on a world at the farthest edge of Her universe. # *I love you. I will come for you. It is by the Goddess sworn.* #

And so, I rejoice in a place *it* cannot see, the only place in which *I* still exist, and then I hide that light again, terrified that *it* will find that single bright spot and stamp it out, silence Caaroc's voice and leave me utterly alone.

And so...

I enter into hell.

Once more.

And ever more.

But perhaps, just perhaps... some day... never more.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*In the “real world” I write for a living, in a non-fiction “genre,” in which what we write is all too often considered fiction. That same profession would not appreciate this story, thus a pen name that has a meaning for me. I have, by what miracle I am not sure, now completed two stories that in the aggregate are around 93,000 words. A whole novel! Plus the 8,600 words of Unbirthday Present—a shifter love story with not a beast among ’em. Then there’s the nearly-done The Meeting. (“The Warlord. The bard. The Kingdom and Empire will never be the same.”) Plus a good start on bloodLight. (A serial killer stalks the criminals of Dialhon; a chief of detectives tries to hunt him down before his own death from a mysterious disease, while the City’s Senior Healer desperately tries to find or create the spell to cure his husband’s illness.) You know, there may be something to this writing stuff after all.*

*As I am not a social media person, you can reach me by email, if you have the good kind of “wow!” to share... or even other words.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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# CHANGE OF FOCUS

By Lucy Whedon

## **Photo Description**

A Japanese man with a black, wispy hair holds a camera. He is wearing a leather jacket and looking intently at the subject he is shooting.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*This was supposed to have been my honeymoon. How ironic, we've been engaged for 2 years but as soon as Maryland Equality in Marriage passed, he started to get cold feet and then he breaks up with me.*

*We always said we would go to Japan together but only one of us made it. So here I am taking pictures and feeling a little sorry for myself, when I hear the sound of someone taking pictures to the side of me. I turn and there he is, smiling, camera pointed directly at me, laughing even, and daring me to be in on the joke.*

*Maybe this trip is just the thing I needed, who knew a honeymoon for one could end up for two?*

*Notes: HFN or HEA, no bdsm please, angst ok as long as they are together at the end.*

Sincerely,

Melanie

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college, visual arts, HFN, masturbation, annoying ex

**Word count:** 15,420

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## CHANGE OF FOCUS

By Lucy Whedon

When Nikolas woke up the sheets were twisted around him. Not his own sheets, but much nicer ones. Without opening his eyes, he stroked them with his fingers. Three hundred thread count at least. But were his own sheets his own anymore? Who got custody of the linens? Was there a precedent for that in a not-quite divorce? He was terribly hung over, but not so much that he didn't remember where he was (*Japan, hotel*) or why he was there (*conference*) or why he had gotten so drunk (*major breakup*). He sighed and even this made his head hurt.

He knew he had to get up, if only so that he could take something pharmaceutical before his cousin Cara called and the ring of the phone struck him dead. She was merciless when she thought she was taking care of him.

She had tried to persuade him to stop drinking last night in the hotel bar, but when he refused her offers to go upstairs and talk it out, she had lost patience with him and left him to his fourth Manhattan. "At least drink something local," she had said to him before she picked up her sheaf of drawings and flounced out of the bar. Nik shook his head (*mistake*). Cara didn't understand the soothing qualities of bourbon and neon-red cherries. It was classic, a vintage drink. But maybe she was right. It was something Evan had introduced him to, and last night, every sip had made him think of Evan's mouth at the edge of a glass, every insanely sugary bite of cherry had the taste of Evan's lips.

Nik rolled his head back and forth gently, his eyes still closed. He didn't ask why he had drunk so much, since he knew. He knew also why he'd gotten up and started dancing by himself in the small crowd of people, mostly conference attendees, on the tiny dance floor. He had needed to move, and with five Manhattans sloshing through him, he had stood swaying on the dance floor to some very low-key jazz, his hands above his head and his hips moving slowly. He groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. He must have looked ridiculous, as if he were trying to dance the hula, or as if he thought he was at a club, showing off so someone would come and claim him.



Oh-oh. Nik bit the pillow, worrying it with his teeth, because someone had. Someone had come up to him and put his hands on Nik's shoulders, pulling his arms down, and on his hips, stilling them. Someone had whispered in his ear, although now Nik couldn't remember what he'd said.

"I know you," Nik had said to him, his words slurred. "You took my picture."

Someone, who was a Japanese guy with dark hair and eyes, held Nik's elbows. "Yes," he said. "Don't you want to sit down?"

"Want to dance," Nik had said. He'd freed his arms and put them around someone's neck. "You took my picture so you owe me."

"Afraid I stole your soul?"

"What?" Nick said, and then he pointed a finger at the face that was smiling at him. A nice face, with high cheekbones and dark hair falling across it. Beautiful full lips, quirked at one corner. "You don't sound Japanese," he said, as if this was a point he need to make.

Nice-faced someone had said something else then, but Nik didn't hear because all of the alcohol he'd drunk seemed to be rising up in his body, making his head swim and his brain slosh. His eyes were fixed on those full, pouted lips, almost even with his own. He leaned forward, aiming, and got just the slightest touch before someone was pushing him back, but so gently that he thought he was falling. Maybe he had fallen, because that was the last thing he remembered. Someone's lips, so close, and then the feel of them, soft, before he was drifting away and down, gone until he woke twisted in the hotel's sheets.

His whole body jolted. Wait—dancing, kiss, passed out, bed? Suddenly, he was afraid of what he'd find when he took the pillow off his head and looked around. Was he even in his own room? Guilt poured through him. What would he tell Evan? What had he done? Evan would be devastated...

But, no, he reminded himself. Evan was the one who decided that now wasn't the right time to get married, just as it had become possible in their home state, Maryland. Evan had said that he wasn't sure he was ready for the big commitment. He loved Nik, he kept saying, it wouldn't hurt to wait a little



while longer, would it? Everything was good now, why rock the boat? Nik had to worry about getting tenure at the university where they both taught, shouldn't he focus on that? And then after that, they could sit down and make some real plans.

Nik threw the pillow off his head and sat up, ignoring the pain that rocketed around his skull. He was almost disappointed to find out that he was alone in the bed. He was still wearing what he'd worn last night, but someone had put a blanket over him, and (*he wiggled his toes*) had taken off his shoes. He could see them, set neatly by the door. He felt relieved, but also a little miffed. Not good enough to marry, and apparently not good enough to date rape.

He got up and went to piss. He stared into the mirror. He didn't look too bad, he thought. His brown eyes (*your best feature, Evan had told him more than once: shut up, Evan*) were only a little reddened. His chin length dirty blond hair (*a good cut would give you a more professional appearance: shut up shut up shut up*) was only a little tangled. He didn't look bad enough for Cara to guess how much he'd drunk, and how much he'd made a fool of himself. He'd have to avoid running into the not-Japanese guy, who had looked very Japanese to him. No problem, he thought, and then remembered the barest touch of not-Japanese guy's mouth, dry and soft. Had there been more that he'd been passed out for? Well, it didn't matter.

He pulled off his clothes and stepped into the shower. When he came out, rubbing his head with a towel, the phone was ringing. He sat on the bed to answer what must be Cara's call, leaning over the unused pillow. Something crumpled under his hand, and he threw the towel off. Five photographs lay on the pillowcase. One was the photo that not-Japanese guy must have taken yesterday in the conference hall: Nik had been sitting in the auditorium waiting for the keynote speaker to begin. He had just been turning to talk to Cara when the photographer caught his eye. Not-Japanese guy had smiled at him and clicked off the shot.

The second one showed Nik on the dance floor last night, his arms reaching toward the ceiling where there was an honest-to-god disco ball, glittering like a hundred stars. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back. His



mouth was a little open, his shirt riding up to show his navel. The people around him were blurs. Nick flushed. He looked vulnerable and open, ready to be hurt.

The third showed him lying in bed, this bed. No blanket, so someone had covered him up. His hair half hid his face. His arms were flung out as if he'd been pushed there, probably from when not-Japanese guy had dumped him on the bed. His fingers were curled a little, as if he'd been holding on to something.

The fourth and fifth were arranged so that they were out of the line the others made, slightly overlapping one another, showing a cup of coffee sitting on a table, and a bottle of beer, uncapped.

Still looking at them, he picked up the phone. "Your panel is in an hour," Cara said without preamble. "Do I have to come up and pour you into the shower?"

"No," Nik said. "I'm all clean and pretty. Come up though, and please, please, please bring some coffee?"

While Nik tried to drink coffee and put his shirt on at the same time, Cara examined the photographs. "Creepy," she said. "You look hot in this one though." She put her finger on the second picture. "So who is this guy?"

Nik looked up from putting on his shoes. "I don't know. He was taking pictures at the keynote yesterday—that's what the first one is. I don't understand."

"It seems pretty obvious." She pointed to the first three pictures. "He thinks you're hot," then the last two. "And he's asking you out. You have your very own stalker." Cara bounced on the bed, making her curly hair, the same color as Nik's, fly around. They looked enough alike to be siblings, but they were some kind of complicated cousins. "I'm so proud." She drank some of her own coffee. "What will Evan say?"

"It doesn't matter what Evan says." Nik started stuffing the papers he needed into his backpack. "He dumped me."

Cara lounged back across the bed, dragging and arranging the pillows to be comfortable. "He didn't actually dump you. He refused to marry you and you dumped him."



Nik looked over his shoulder. “Are you taking his side?”

“No, but technically—”

“We’ve been together for three years, living together and practically engaged for two. We were planning to do a commitment ceremony next summer. When Maryland passed the new law, I thought—crazy me,” he hit his forehead with the palm of his hand, forgetting that he still had a headache, “that we’d jump on that. Ergo, I thought we’d start picking out metaphorical china. And all of a sudden, he doesn’t know if he’s ready.” He picked up his backpack, hefting it as if he couldn’t figure out whether he’d forgotten anything or not. “I should have stuck around after that?”

He hadn’t really moved out, not yet. He’d left for the International Fantasy Association conference the day after the argument, a trip long planned with Cara. He was moderating a panel on language and image in pulp fiction of the ’20s and ’30s, and Cara was going to receive an award for one of the fantasy book covers she’d designed. The thought of having to go back to the apartment and pack up all his stuff made him feel nauseous. Of course, Evan might have thrown it all out on the lawn, or given it away to Goodwill.

“Maybe he got cold feet,” Cara said. “People do, you know.” She was propped up on her elbows, examining his face.

“Why are you staring at me like that? Does my hair look bad?”

“I’m just trying to figure out how devastated you are,” Cara said. “But also, I hate that shirt. Why don’t you wear that blue one I like?”

“I am devastated,” Nik said. “Are you happy? Devastated and I have a headache, and now I have this panel—”

“In twenty-five minutes.”

“And there’s not-Japanese guy—”

“Who?”

“The photographer. He told me he wasn’t Japanese.”

“You had a conversation?” Cara sat up, interested.

“It was just something he said, right before,” right before I tried to kiss him, Nik thought. He hadn’t confessed this bit to Cara. “Before I passed out.”



Cara laid back, her hands behind her head. "If only we were still teenagers. I could get you in so much trouble with your parents. I would own you. You'd be my slave for life."

"Shut up and come on. You need to go and get me some more coffee before I have to stand up and talk about Lovecraft."

The hotel wasn't a single building, but a compound, laid out around a central area with three swimming pools, one glass enclosed, and various gardens and plantings, some hedged in and some in neat geometric spaces between walkways. Nik's room was in an almost motel-like U-shaped building with a courtyard in the U, full of flowers, miniature pine trees, and singing birds in cages. As he and Cara went through the gate that separated it from the central area, he could see other conference attendees going in the same general direction in pairs and groups, toward the Takasha Building, where most of the panels and talks were held. He could feel his heart speeding up. "I'm nervous," he told Cara.

"You'll be great. Who knows more about krakens or whatever, than you do?" She flung out her arms. "Nikolas Jewell," she intoned, in her best horror movie announcer voice, "Lover of Lovecraft. Master of Monsters and Creatures of the Deep. Revered Pulp Mixologist."

"Stop it, you weirdo." Nik could feel his face heating up as other people glanced at them. His phone chirped at him and he pulled it out. <MISS U>, the screen read. "Crap," he said.

Cara looked over his shoulder. "Is that Evan?"

"Who else would be missing me?" Nik felt as if someone had hit him in the stomach.

"He's got a nerve," Cara said. "Text him back something snarky. Tell him you met someone."

"I thought you were on his side." They were walking through a corridor of brilliantly colored roses whose petals were so thick on the path that their footfalls were softened.

"I'm always on your side," Cara said, taking his hand. "I was just trying to be reasonable."



“Please stop that right now.”

“Seriously though—tell him you met someone. Why shouldn’t he suffer?”

“He wouldn’t believe me,” Nik said. They paused on the steps to look at the conference schedule and map. “He knows I’m not good at that kind of thing.”

“Maybe you need to change,” Cara said as they went in.

Although I did meet someone, Nik thought. Even if he is peculiar.

When they had found the right room, and Nik had organized his notes and introduced himself to the two panelists he didn’t know, he was starting to feel better. He knew that his paper, “Strange Tongues: Repeated Words and Images in Lovecraft’s *Call of Cthulhu*,” was pretty good. He picked up the coffee that Cara had gotten for him and took a sip, determined to put Evan and his lying text out of his head. He looked at the clock—almost time to begin, and tapped his microphone to check if it was live. The room was three-quarters full, not bad for a panel with no big names on it. Some latecomers came in, and he prepared himself to begin.

Just as he opened his mouth, one more person slipped through the doors. Nik froze, his notes rattling in his fingers. It was not-Japanese guy, his neck strung with two cameras. Cara was making faces at him from the front row which probably meant something like “Start already,” or “What are you doing, moron?” Nik watched as his photographic nemesis made his way to a seat on the side. He sat and raised one of the cameras to focus it on the panel, and this, at last, snapped Nik out of it. He shut his mouth, which had been hanging unattractively open, and shuffled his papers again to give him a moment, and then began, introducing himself and the other panelists. Then, since his paper wasn’t first, he sat back, arranging his face into a listening expression, and tried to compose himself.

Not-Japanese guy was taking pictures of the panel and of the crowd, but for the most part, he sat, listening. He wasn’t as beautiful as Nik had remembered. His face was a little thin, his hair perhaps a little too long for Nik’s taste. His eyes—Nik was sorry that he was too far away to see their color—were they black, as he remembered from last night? But his mouth was



still very nice. He was looking at Nik now, and as Nik watched, he raised one of the cameras again. Nik was sure he was blushing. He looked away to see Cara making exaggerated motions in what she no doubt thought was a subtle way. What? She mouthed at him. Nik pretended he couldn't see her. He saw her swing her head toward where he'd been looking, and then saw her fix on the photographer. She turned back to face him with a knowing smile on her face.

So absorbed in this drama was he that Nik didn't notice when the first paper had been concluded until the polite applause began. The woman sitting next to him nudged him, and he leaned forward to begin. "H.P. Lovecraft, the twentieth-century master of weird fiction, whose very name has become an adjective for all that is dark and uncanny..."

He kept his eyes on the page, even though Evan had always said how important it was to maintain eye contact with his audience. He was afraid to look up and see those (*black? brown?*) eyes fixed on him. All through the other papers and then the Q and A, he looked away from the right side of the room, so resolutely that one of the other panelists had to point out a hand raised out of his line of sight. When they were done, and people were coming up with last comments and questions, he was afraid that not-Japanese guy would be one of them. Nik didn't want to face him with the memory of last night between them.

Or rather the not-memory. What had happened between the almost-kiss and his waking up alone with pictures strung across his pillow? His clothes felt tight, his body not his own, as if those five or six unconscious hours had taken something away from him. He had been touched by a stranger. Someone had put his arms around him to get him upstairs, had held him when laying him down on the bed, touched his feet when he took off his shoes. Nik raised his head, sure that he would see him there in front of him, demanding something, or laughing at him, but the person standing there was a young woman who wanted to tell him her own feelings about Lovecraft and explain Lovecraft's mistaken ideas about eastern religion.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," he said to Cara a little later, as she led him down the hall and toward the snack bar.



“You were brilliant,” Cara said.

Nik dragged his feet. “I just want to go back to the room and lie down with my face in a pillow,” which made him think of the photos in their carefully arranged line. “Oh god.”

“Stop it,” Cara said. “I have intel. Don’t you want to know what I found out about your stalker?”

“No,” Nik said. “Well, yes. But first tell me exactly how awful I was.”

“You were fine, and you know it.” She shoved a pomegranate juice at him, and dragged him toward one of the little outdoor tables. “Sit.”

Nik sat and obediently drank some juice, wiggling the straw in the bottle.

“His name is Daniel Ito, and he’s doing PR for the conference, all the social media and updating the Web site with photos and so on. He’s a friend of the conference director, they went to college together, and she’s the current president of IFA, and he’s doing it as a favor for her. He’s half Japanese—his father is American, and his Japanese mother is dead.” She sat back, waiting for applause.

“How did you find all that out?”

“I asked around while you were fending off your groupies. People like to talk—and there’s more.” She made a show of sipping deliberately at her juice.

“What more?” Nik squeezed her straw between his thumb and finger, cutting off the flow.

“Hey,” she said. “After I played spy girl for you.”

“So what else?”

“All the people I talked to said he’s really nice. And that he’s single. And that he’s—” she leaned forward and said the last word in a seductive purr, “—gay.”

“I really don’t need this,” Nik said. “Stop pimping me out.”

“Just letting you know,” Cara said. “What you do with this information is entirely up to you. Got to go. I have a meeting with somebody from that new urban fantasy press. They want me so bad.”

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Nik watched her walk away, twirling the straw between his fingers. It was sunny, and the small outdoor patio was attractive and cozy, a wash of earth tones, the tables and chairs made from bent metal in graceful forms. He had given his talk, and now he was free to enjoy the conference. He would sit here for a while and people watch, then he would go to browse at the book fair, maybe pick up something to read for the flight back, and then check out a few panels. There was one on history of steampunk that looked good, and another promising to debunk Tolkien, which might be amusing.

A little voice in his head reminded him that he should be making plans: what would he do when he went back? He'd have to move out of the apartment. He'd have to tell everyone about what had happened, admit that what he'd said about true love was a load of bullshit. How could he have been so wrong about Evan?

They had met in the first week he was teaching, introduced by Nik's faculty mentor in the English department office. He'd noticed Evan's looks first, and also Evan's appreciative glance, the inquiring press of his hand, but as he got to know him he liked him for his intelligence and passion for his scholarship. Evan had done more mentoring for him than Dr. Jentosh had bothered to do, always ready with tips and insider knowledge of the university, who to befriend or avoid. Evan had influenced his work, too, giving him new ideas, new directions. Of course, he wasn't uncritical. He disapproved strongly of Nik's work on fantasy tropes, saying that no one would take him seriously if he worked in genre. Nik almost smiled at the memory of Evan saying this to him a month after they'd met, as they lay in each other's arms in Evan's bed, Evan's mouth moving against Nik's chest, emphasizing the word "genre" with a little bite.

Had Evan ever loved him? Was Nik merely convenient, the only other gay man in the department, someone to mold and shape? (*Push around*, his inner voice commented.) The sun was shining on Nik's face, and he pulled his chair further into the shade. Had he loved Evan? Or had he only been dazzled by the attention of someone a little older, more sophisticated and knowledgeable? This was possibly the most horrible result of Evan's backing out of what Nik thought they'd agreed on—that he was doubting his own feelings, as if with a few words, Evan had changed the past into something unrecognizable.



Nik began to gather his things, when his phone chimed again. Evan, of course.

*<U R being childish,> it read. <Y all or nothing?>*

He clutched his phone hard, wanting to bash it on the table until the words disappeared from the screen. *<Love IS all or nothing>*, he texted, jabbing the screen to send it.

So quickly that it was impossible to believe that they were separated by however many miles of continent and ocean, Evan texted back: *<Cant we just forget abt all this? Rnt u lonely?>* There was a pause, and then, *<Phone sex?>*

Nik stared at the juice bottles on the table without seeing them. He knew that Evan intended this to be conciliatory, but it had only made him more angry. He grabbed his phone and pushed his chair back with a harsh scraping sound. Heads turned, and a group of men getting drinks glanced at him. One of them was not-Japanese guy, Daniel whoever he was, looking at him with a question in his eyes.

Nik got up and went over to him, getting close and in his face. “You really are stalking me, aren’t you? What’s your problem? Wasn’t last night bad enough?” he added incoherently.

The guy, Daniel, didn’t step back from Nick. “I’m here with some people.” He nodded toward the two men behind him, both trying to pretend they weren’t listening.

Nik was still angry, but now he felt like an idiot. “Whatever,” he said eloquently. “I’m—” he shook his head. He was still clutching his phone as if he could squeeze the Evan out of it, and he put it in his pocket. “I’ve got to go,” he said.

Daniel put a hand on his arm, but Nik pulled away. I should have gone with Cara, he thought. I apparently need a keeper. He turned and left, walking through one of the rose-lined aisles.

He meant to go to the book fair, but he found himself on the path to his room. The hidden courtyard of flowers and birdsong was soothing, and the feeling of the door of his room shutting out the world even better. He did what he’d told Cara he wanted to do earlier, flung his bag on the floor and lay



facedown on the bed. “I am such a moron,” he said out loud. He tried some yoga breathing, and then doing math problems in his head, but neither calmed him down.

If he hadn’t already decided it was over with Evan, that last text would have made him sure of it—one of Evan’s tricks, using sex to settle an argument. The trouble was that now he was thinking about sex. He groaned and rolled over, rubbing the heel of his hand down over his cock. Oh, he so did not want to think about sex with Evan now. He wanted to burn all those memories out of his head. But somehow his hand kept rubbing, and then stroking. Not Evan, he said to himself, trying to think about his pre-Evan fantasies. The kid in Boy Scouts who had always maneuvered it so they were lagging at the end of the hike, so they could kiss. His tenth-grade English teacher, with sexy glasses and wide shoulders. (*Hmmm—was that how he’d picked his major in college?*) Evan, the first time they’d danced at a club. Not Evan, not Evan, he chanted.

His hand was inside his good pants now (put on to look professorial at the panel), his belt and zipper undone. He stroked his cock, feeling the soft skin slide over the hard, blood-filled length, pushing Evan out of his head. It could be anyone’s hand, he told himself, anyone bending over him. He tugged harder, feeling a space open inside of him, sensation rushing in. Someone’s hand on him, someone pushing his legs farther apart. He lifted his hips toward this someone, and as he came, spurting hard, someone took shape in his head. Not-Japanese guy, watching him with his quiet eyes, his beautiful mouth pursed a little as if he were about to ask a question.

“Fuck,” Nik said a few moments later, lying sticky and spent on the hotel bedspread, come all over his favorite shirt. Yes, he was an idiot.

At two o’clock, he and Cara were sitting in the audience, waiting for the intimate chat with Darius Gavent, famous and revered author of fifty-seven books of fantasy and thirteen graphic novels, six of which had been made into movies. Intimate apparently meant that the author would sit onstage in a comfy armchair in front of several hundred worshipful people. “Where did you go?” Cara was searching through her purse. “I thought you were going to the book fair.”



“I was tired,” Nik said. “I went to lie down for a while.”

“You sound like my grandma. It’s a good thing you and Evan broke up. He’s been turning you into another old man.”

“Evan isn’t old,” Nik said. “He’s only thirty-eight.”

“Did you ever see his driver’s license? I bet he shaved off a few years.” Cara came up with the package of gum she was looking for, and held it out to Nik.

He shook his head. “I wish you’d make up your mind. Are you glad I broke up with him or not?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Cara said, unwrapping her gum.

“Mmhmm.” All around them, people were rustling and shifting, checking their conference schedules, paging through the books they’d found at the book fair. There were a fair number of cosplayers in the audience, dressed as various characters in Gavent’s books. A group in the rags and metal cuffs and hats—the street children from *Iris and Fred*. Several representations of Lord Languor, the anti-hero in *Beautiful Kingdomz*. He counted at least twenty women wearing the slashed velvet rags and long curls of Fair Katrina, the doomed heroine of *All Desire in a Day*.

This dressing up was another thing that Evan hated—he found it childish and demeaning. “No one dresses up as Jay Gatsby or Jake Barnes,” he liked to say. “The more serious works of literature don’t encourage that kind of fandom.” Evan wrote books on American literature of the early twentieth century, which he persisted in calling “contemporary.” The last time they’d had this argument, Nik had pointed out snappishly that nothing could be contemporary if it was from another century. And furthermore, Nik had said, he didn’t like *The Great Gatsby* all that much. “I’m tired of hearing about those giant spectacles and the fucking green light.” Evan had sucked in his breath, reeling back as if Nik had struck him. They had made up, of course.

“But I **don’t** like *The Great Gatsby*,” Nik muttered. And he found the cosplayers interesting—a kind of embodied fan fiction—even endearing.

“What are you talking about?” Cara asked. “Look, there he is.”

Darius Gavent was standing by the comfy chair on the stage, talking to several other people who all seemed anxious to do something for him. A



young woman was adjusting the lamp beside the chair, another setting out a water bottle, pouring some into a glass. The stage curtains were drawn back, and more people hovered in their shadow. One of them was not-Japanese guy. Of course, Nik thought. He's everywhere. He shifted in his seat, feeling uncomfortable and resentful. Because of the whole wanking interlude, which he felt Daniel whoever had unfairly intruded on, and because he, Nik, had behaved so badly earlier, and probably last night, too. He ought to apologize. He sighed.

"Stop sighing over stupid Evan," Cara said. "Look, your guy is up there. Maybe he can get us an intro to Darius."

"I'm sure he'll want to do that," Nik said. "Not."

"Why not?" Cara folded up her program and waved it in Daniel's direction. "He's all 'I like you with random impromptu photos'."

"I might have been rude to him," Nik said, not loudly at all.

"What?" Cara said. "Shhh, they're starting."

Now it was Nik's turn to sit in the audience and look at Daniel. He stared at him, as Darius Gavent rambled on pleasantly in answer to fond, foolish questions from his admirers. Where did he get his ideas? Was Fair Katrina based on someone he knew? What was his agent's name? What advice did he have for someone who had a completed 1000-page fantasy trilogy?

Nik half-listened to Darius' gentle humor, his eyes on Daniel. He was wearing a dark-red shirt, his hair slicked back from his forehead today. This should have made him look a bit demonic, but instead he looked delicate, a little fey. Nik's head ached. Why couldn't he have been at this conference under different circumstances? If he and Evan were solid, he wouldn't have gotten drunk, he wouldn't have given this guy a thought. He might have noticed him, admired him, but then he would have passed on without all this angst and damage. That would have been best, and he wished it were so.

But, his inner voice argued, it would also have been excellent if this was pre-Evan, or better yet, if there was no Evan at all. Then he would be free to enjoy someone's unusual seduction, if that was what it was, and to watch him move gracefully on stage, setting up shots, circling Darius Gavent but somehow keeping discreetly out of the way. Nik had the fantasy that he was



invisible to everyone else, that only Nik really saw him. He noticed things he hadn't seen before: the glint of silver in his earlobe, the length of the fingers that manipulated camera and lens, the way his forehead wrinkled and his mouth drew up at one side when he was concentrating on the next shot.

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Afterward, Nik dragged Cara away for a late lunch in another one of the little snack bars, this one set up near one of the swimming pools. Cara had her iPad out, looking at the conference Web site. "Only two more days," she said. "I'm having so much fun, I'll hate to leave. I got three more 'expressions of interest' from presses, did I tell you? It's the award, probably."

"I guess," Nik said. He'd had another text message from Evan, which he'd deleted without reading.

"Look, there's a page of conference pictures. It's me getting my award!" Cara frowned at the picture. "Why did I wear that dress? I look like a sick cat in that color."

"What does a sick cat look like?"

Cara didn't answer. She was frowning at the photo set. "You know," she said. "You are in a lot of these. Here, after my award ceremony. And in some audience shots." She pointed. "Some are close-ups, even."

Nik leaned over to see. His face leaped out at him from the Web page, here profile, here full face, a few times from the back—he recognized his Weird Tales T-shirt. "It's just random," he said. "If you looked for someone else, you could probably find as many of them."

"Right," Cara said. "There certainly aren't as many pictures of me."

"Jealous?" Nik said lightly, although he was feeling a little flushed.

"I'd only be jealous if I was interested in being seduced by a certain gay photographer." Cara smirked at him.

"Stop it," Nik said, and surprisingly, Cara did. She let her iPad lie on the table, going back to the counter for more napkins. Nik extended one finger and tapped the screen to refresh it. There was something almost comforting about seeing all these images of himself dotted on the Web page, as if he were being



seen by someone who knew him, although that was ridiculous. This man didn't know him. And when people did get to know him, obviously, they lost interest. They found fault, they overlooked his wishes, they pulled back just when he was starting to feel content. He tapped the screen again when it faded. There was one of him sipping juice through a straw, one of a crowd at the snack bar. He must have taken that one this morning, Nik thought. His lips looked very pink.

Had Evan ever taken a picture of him? He pushed the iPad away. Now that was ridiculous. As if a photo showed proof of love.

"Did you bring your swimming stuff?" Cara asked when she sat down.

"Yes," he said. "You?"

"Of course." There was a sign that proclaimed the temperature of the water, in Japanese characters, English, French, and German. "What are you doing this afternoon?"

Nik poked at his rice bowl. "I don't know. A couple of panels, I guess. Did you want to go swimming?"

Cara was tapping at her iPad. "We should do some sightseeing. They list some tours on the conference Web site—here's a historic tour of old Tokyo."

"I'm not sure—" Nik began.

"Are you really going to come all the way to Japan and then just sit around in your hotel room?" Cara pointed her chopsticks at him.

"I've gone to lots of stuff," he said, scowling at her.

"Conference stuff. It's a small, small world, populated with people just like you, Mr. Xenophobe."

Just then, a man and woman passed them, holding hands, dressed as Tolkienish elves, all pointed ears and hair extensions. Nik nodded toward them, grinning.

"You know what I mean," Cara said. "If you just barricade yourself here and go from panel to reading to lecture, you're acting like—I don't know," she spluttered, "the ugly American."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to let you call me ugly," Nik said,



pretending to preen, smoothing his hand over his hair with a fake sigh. “So where do you want to go?”

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An hour later they were sitting on a tour bus, one of two that would take them on one of the historic tours.

Many stops later, the bus drew up at a building that looked hundreds of years old. Another temple. Nik groaned. Cara elbowed him. “I’m not a xenophobe,” he whispered to her. “I wouldn’t be any more excited about going to fifty-six American churches either.”

“It was only five,” Cara said. “Come on, it’s the last stop.” She had brought her sketchpad along, and she’d been making quick pencil drawings that Nik knew she would use as ideas for her illustrator work. “Look at those cool columns,” she said, making a beeline for them.

Nik saw that this temple had a garden, and he broke off from the bus tour crowd so that he could be alone for a while. He didn’t need to see another Buddha. The garden was enclosed, but not small, bounded by head-high stone walls. Three-quarters of a football field long, Nik estimated. It was cool and shaded and quiet, with paths that curved between smooth plots of grass or raked stones.

The space seemed open and randomly laid out, but the way the few trees and bushes were placed formed private spots, some with benches. Meditation stations maybe, Nik thought. He followed one of the paths until he found a tiny sub-garden, hardly larger than a queen-sized bed. There was a circular pool in the center, only three feet across, with orange fish swimming slowly in the green water. Five fish, Nik counted. This space had no bench, but there was a flat rock under some willows that hung over it, making a leafy cave. He sat down to watch the fish and think, but somehow his mind refused to settle. He didn’t want to think about Evan or his career, or anything at all, really. His head was filled with images, floating as slowly as the fish.

The garden was silent. If there were other people who had escaped the promised onslaught of historical information, he couldn’t hear them. He could hear the air moving through the trees, a rustling, sibilant whisper. A flurry of



pink and white followed the breeze, cherry petals maybe, falling into the water of the little pool and drifting across the pavement surrounding it. The fish rose to test the petals' edibility and then sank, unimpressed.

I wish I could stay here, Nik thought. I could build a hut and become a hermit. He imagined himself staring into the pool for inspiration, the fish, his brothers, existing on cherry petals and beauty. That would work, he thought, if I could stand to be alone for half an hour. If I could speak Japanese. If I didn't have to go back to my insecure job. He'd have to take what inspiration away that he could gather now. He waited expectantly to see if something would come to him, an idea about his life or the universe, or something. He abandoned the fish and closed his eyes, shutting them tightly as if this would help the process. I'm thinking, I'm thinking, of... What? He could see the shadow of an empty page, or rather a page in a book that was lying open. Wow, he thought, I'm good at this. He hoped it wasn't his dissertation, which he was supposed to be turning into a book which he had begun to hate. He squeezed his eyelids down harder, trying to get more.

"Are you okay?"

Nik's eyes flew open. "What?" he said intelligently.

It was (*of course it was*) the guy, camera guy, not-Japanese guy. Again. "Really?" Nik said. "I mean, really?"

He said nothing for a moment, just looking Nik not quite in the eye and fiddling with one of his cameras. He half turned, as if he would go.

Nik sprang up and took hold of his arm. "Don't go," he said. And then, when the other man looked at him, almost smiling, "I mean, you owe me an explanation." He looked down at his hand on the unfamiliar arm. He flexed his fingers and then let go. "Don't you think?"

"What kind of an explanation do you want?"

"Well," Nik fumbled. "Why are you here? You're always turning up. What are you doing?"

"We should introduce ourselves before we have a deep philosophical discussion." He bowed his head slightly. "I'm Ren."

"I thought your name was Daniel." When the other man raised an eyebrow, he flushed. "Cara said, my cousin said—well, it doesn't matter."



“Daniel Ren Ito for formal, Ren for usual. You’re Nikolas Jewell. I looked you up.”

“Nik,” he found himself saying. They were still standing close, not touching, but closer than Nik found entirely comfortable. This man has had his hands on me, he thought, and it made him a shiver a little, he hoped undetectably. “And you’re here because?”

Daniel, or Ren, laughed. “In Japan? A favor for a friend, and a sort of vacation before I start a new job.” When Nik started to protest, he went on. “And here, in the garden? I heard your cousin say you were coming and I bought my own ticket. I was on the other bus.”

“But—” Nik waved his hands around.

“I came because I wanted to see you and talk to you.” He raised one hand when Nik sputtered. “You’re not going to ask why, are you?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

Ren grinned at him. “One, I am a free person and can do what I want, within reason. Two, I am emotionally unencumbered and so are you. Three, I find you entirely beautiful and enticing, although maybe a little slow.” He spread his long-fingered hands, as if there could be nothing more to say.

“How do you know I’m unencumbered?” Nik said.

“Do you want to sit down?” Ren asked. He moved to the flat rock and arranged himself, angling his body so gracefully that Nik was almost speechless.

Almost. “How did you know?”

“It’s a story,” Ren said. “Not terribly long, but not short.” He patted the rock and after a moment, Nik sat down.

“Okay,” he said. Again, they weren’t touching, but their bodies were close. Ren’s hand lay on the rock, fingers close to Nik’s hip. Nik found that he was breathing more quickly. It had been a long time since he’d been this close to another man, in just this way. For three years, only Evan—but no, he wasn’t going to think about Evan. “How do you know? Did Cara say something?”

“You told me,” Ren said. He extended his hand and tapped one of his fingers against the back of Nik’s hand. “When I was taking you back to your



room. You don't remember? You told me you'd broken up with someone named Evan on a matter of principle."

"I told you that?" Nik felt a little horrified that he'd had essentially a blackout, that he'd been walking around and talking unguardedly and couldn't remember any of it.

"You did." Ren's finger drew a little circle on Nik's hand and then pulled away. "You were very chatty."

"And the pictures?" Nik was beginning to get a headache.

"Did you like my story?" Ren grinned.

"Yes," Nik said, "I mean no, but that's not the point. I meant why have you been taking all these pictures of me. Cara showed me on the Web site—" Ren put his hand on Nik's knee and the words dried up in his mouth.

"I let my eye draw me to things. My eye is drawn to you." Ren had something in his hand, his phone, and he brought it up between them. He paused courteously, giving Nik time to object, and then he clicked off several pictures, moving a bit this way, a bit the other way. He leaned toward Nik and held the phone out so that Nik could see the screen. "You see?" Ren said. "It's simple. You're rather beautiful, and I'd like to know you better."

Nik felt his jaw loosening, and clapped his teeth together so that he wouldn't gape like an idiot. "It's not that simple." He stood, as if this would clarify matters.

"It is," Ren said. "Can we have a drink together tonight?" He stood, too, and touched Nik's elbow.

"I don't even know who you are," Nik said. "Why are you not Japanese?"

Ren grinned at the question. "I'm not from Japan," he said. "I'm half. My mother's parents were. She was born in Virginia." He gestured toward himself, his arm a graceful arc that swept from head to foot. "I look like that side, not like my father."

"Oh," Nik said. Now that he'd asked, this didn't seem like the most crucial thing he had to know. If he had to know anything.

"It's not a big thing," Ren said. "Say no, if you don't want to. But, just to



be clear—I do want to. Want to know you better. Want to have a drink with you. Want to kiss you. Want to—”

“Stop,” Nik held up his hand, a signal for Ren to wait, and he did, closing his mouth. Nik felt hot and a little angry, a furious swirl of turbulence in the calm order and beauty of the garden.

The petals were still falling. A handful of them decorated Ren’s hair. Nik didn’t know what he wanted—to shove Ren away, to turn and walk farther into the garden, to touch that soft black hair. He felt stuck, a feeling that had started when Evan had turned to him with what he now remembered as a patronizing smile and blown their life apart. Stuck, paralyzed, unable to go forward. Evan had done this to him, he thought. Stupid Evan.

“Okay,” Nik said.

“Fine. Hotel bar at seven?” Ren said, his hand coming up to pull at one of the buttons on his shirt.

Was he nervous? Nik wondered. “Fine,” he said.

They stood there for a moment longer, and Nik waited to see what Ren would do. Would he lean forward for a kiss? Would Nik let him? He was very conscious of his lips, he had to sternly repress an impulse to wet them with his tongue. Wrong message, he said to himself. (*But was it the wrong message?*) It seemed like a long time, this business of possibly leaning toward one another, Nik feeling Ren’s eyes on him.

“Nik!” Cara was calling him, and he pulled back from Ren so quickly that he stumbled, almost stepping into the fishpond. Ren grabbed his arm to steady him.

“Not now,” Nik said, and then blushed, as if this had committed him to something. He couldn’t look at the other man’s face.

“Coming,” he called.

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Nik and Cara were whispering at the back of the big room where the History of Steampunk panel was debating the importance of the zeppelin. He’d filled her in on the latest in what she had taken to calling his stalking romance. “I’ve never passed out,” she said. “What was it like?”



“It was like nothing,” Nik said. “That’s the whole point of the blackout—you remember nothing.”

“Like amnesia,” Cara said, as they bent their heads together. The room was very full. It felt as if there weren’t enough air. “Remember, you used to have amnesia fantasies.”

“That was when I was fifteen,” he said. For a while, after he’d seen *Spellbound* at a Hitchcock festival, he’d thought that it would be rather nice to wake up after a not-too-severe head injury without any memory of his life. He’d have to start over from scratch, surviving on his good looks and intelligence. (*He’d had an unrealistically high estimate of both, probably.*) He’d imagined living under a new name, perhaps in a small town, working as a librarian (*which, apparently, he’d considered to be a job that didn’t require skills or education*). Cara knew about these fantasies, although she didn’t know that one of their standard features was that when he woke up as a blank slate, his gayness was one of the things that had been wiped away. Rightly, he’d been too ashamed to tell her that. He’d forgiven himself though; fifteen was not a good year for him.

“Never mind that,” Cara said. “What are you going to wear?”

“I don’t think I should go,” Nik said.

“What!”

“Do you mind?” The woman in front of them had turned around to hiss at them.

“It seems like a bad idea,” Nik whispered.

Typically, Cara didn’t bother asking him why, since she knew him so well. “Come on,” she said. “This is almost over.”

“But—” Cara had his arm and was dragging him out of the row they’d been sitting in. “Excuse me,” Nik said to the people whose knees he was bumping, “excuse me, excuse me.”

When they were out in the hall, Cara turned on him with a fierce expression. “You are going.”

Nik looked down at his feet.



“Aren’t you going to ask me why?” she asked. When he didn’t answer, she said, “You’re not asking me why because you know why.”

“To metaphorically flip Evan off?” Nik said. “Because I need to ‘get back out there’?” He hooked his fingers for air quotes.

Cara shook her head. “Evan is out of the equation. Yes, he’s an asshole who doesn’t appreciate you, as well as having one foot in the grave, comparatively. But that’s beside the point. You should go because this Daniel—”

“He likes to be called Ren.”

“This guy Ren is ‘A’—very hot, and ‘B’—he’s interested in you, and ‘C’—I want you to. That last one is the most important, you know.”

“Right,” Nik said. “I’m doing it for you.”

“Now you’ve got it,” Cara said, smiling.

At 6:45, Nik was hovering in front of the mirror, holding bits of his hair out in front of the mirror, wondering if he should give himself an impromptu trim. He snipped some, only a quarter inch of dusty blond, and then another quarter inch. He shook his head to let his hair settle. Nervously, his fingers itched to cut more, but he was afraid that if he gave in, he’d end up with too-short hair standing up on his head in ugly stubs. (*Once, in that bad year of fifteen, he’d cut his hair to within an uneven inch of his scalp.*)

He was dressed in unreasonably nice clothes—gray slacks and a dark-blue shirt with cuffs that required cufflinks, very nice enamel ones that had belonged to his grandfather. He had on the jacket he’d worn to his panel. Frowning, he took it off, and put on his leather jacket. He put the nail scissors away in his duffel bag, to remove the temptation to snip away more hair.

It was 6:49. If he waited a little longer, he could argue that it was too late, and take that excuse for deciding not to go. He slid his feet into his shoes, and stood still, waiting to see what he would do. He picked up his phone to put it into his pocket, after checking to see if he had a text, but Evan was silent. He hadn’t texted Nik for hours, which was annoying. He didn’t want Evan to text him, but apparently, he didn’t want him to give up so easily either. I am not rational, he thought. And going to the hotel bar to see this virtual stranger was certainly not rational. So maybe he should go.



“Stop thinking,” he advised himself, and the sound of his own voice propelled him to open the door and go out. He hardly noticed the madly singing birds in their wicker cages, they were lovebirds, Cara had told him. He walked toward the hotel bar as if he were going to something dreaded—a test he wasn’t prepared for. And yet he was walking quickly, as if he wanted whatever it was that would happen.

The soles of his shoes tapped on the stone walkway with a cheerful sound. All around him, conference attendees were walking or sitting in pairs, talking about the panels they’d attended, looking at books they’d bought, trying to decide where they’d eat dinner on the second-to-last night of the conference. Cara was going out with some people she’d met, a group of illustrators who had banded together in mock solidarity against what Cara called “all you word people.” They were going to talk images, she’d told Nik smugly, “You know, those things that are worth a thousand of your text-y things.”

Nik stood at the entrance to the bar. This was not, happily, the same bar where he’d made a fool of himself with the Manhattans. This one was small and intimate, more Japanese in style than the other two bars that the hotel boasted, although whether this was genuinely Japanese or only what tourists expected, Nik didn’t know. The lighting was low, the workings of the bar hidden behind screens, which also divided the main room into smaller areas. There was a sound of softly moving water, although Nik couldn’t see where it came from. Music was playing, nothing he recognized, the sound so low that it almost wasn’t there.

He took a step forward, looking for Daniel—Ren. There were other couples here, and one larger group of what looked like businessmen of varied nationalities, laughing over a tableful of half-filled glasses, their drinks glowing oddly in the light of the small shaded lamps. He didn’t see Ren.

While he was trying to decide whether he should stay and wait, or flee, someone took his elbow. Someone—Ren. Nik felt the muscles in his arm tense up, and as if he felt it, too, Ren smoothed his hand over Nik’s bicep. “You’re here,” he said. “I had a bet on whether you’d show or not.”

“A bet with who?” Nik swung around.

“Only with myself.” Ren laughed. “A win-win.” He waved to the hostess,



who led them to one of the little tables, sheltered by a set of screens, its own alcove. Ren sat down on the bench seat and slid over.

Nik hesitated, but there was no separate chair to put him safely on the other side of the table, and he'd feel silly asking for one. He sat down, leaving a little space between them, feeling as prim as a Victorian maiden.

"Do you like sake?" Ren asked.

"Not really," Nik said.

"Good," Ren said. "I hate it when people think that's all the Japanese people, or half-Japanese drink. You wouldn't believe how many times I've been faced with a bottle of cheap sake when I go over to someone's house."

"Hopeful dates?" Nik said, relaxing a little.

"Those, or dinners with acquaintances."

"They're trying to be nice, probably," Nik said. "Sensitive to your perceived cultural identity."

Ren grimaced, which should have made his mouth look ugly, but didn't. "I know. But I hate it anyway. I wasn't brought up any other way than American. I wouldn't have known I was part-Japanese when I was a kid if everyone wasn't always reminding me."

"Your mother?" Nik said. "She didn't want you to know about your background?" They were sitting half turned, so they could look into each other's faces.

"She died when I was two, so, no." Ren shrugged.

"Sorry," Nik said. "And your father probably didn't have time for any of that?"

The waitress had come over for their orders. Nik hadn't looked at the drinks list, since he almost always ordered the same thing. But he found that he didn't want to drink a Manhattan in front of Ren, as if it would be disloyal to someone. (*He couldn't work out whether this someone was Ren or Evan.*) He made a face at the list, undecided.

"So, beer?" Ren asked.



“What’s good?” Nik asked the waitress, and when she’d pointed out a few recommendations, they ordered.

They were silent while they waited for their drinks, Ren looking out into the main room, tapping his fingers on the table. Nik was feeling a little let down. After the way that Ren had chased him, he’d been expecting more in the way of a seduction (*not that he wanted that, not at all*). Ren hadn’t even touched him since that grip on his arm when he’d gotten there. But Nik could feel him, even though their bodies were separated by those crucial inches. The heat along the length of his thigh, the touch of Ren’s scent, the movement of his longish black hair when he turned his head.

“What are you going to do with all those pictures you took?” Nik asked. “Of me,” he clarified when Ren turned to look at him.

“They’re on the conference Web site,” he said. “You saw.” Ren had a complicated expression on his face, which Nik couldn’t interpret.

“You’re not going to build a shrine in the secret room in your house, are you?”

Ren laughed. The waitress was back. She opened the bottles and poured the pale golden beer into tall-footed glasses. “That’s the plan,” he said. “It’s in the Stalkers for Dummies rules.” He took a sip of beer.

“Aren’t you supposed to offer to sell me the negatives?” Nik said. He found himself leaning toward Ren.

“You know that the whole negatives thing is meaningless with digital, right?” Ren had moved, too, so that his knee brushed fleetingly against Nik’s.

“Are you laughing at me?” Nik drank some beer and looked at Ren over the rim of his glass.

“Yeah.” Ren put his glass down. “Should I take you more seriously?”

The words “take you” made Nik feel as if he had started to burn, slowly. “How do you mean?” Wow, that sounded intelligent, he said to himself.

“Have we gotten into the innuendo now?” Ren said. “Good.” He leaned closer to Nik, his mouth almost touching Nik’s ear.

“Umm,” Nik said, taking a quick drink of beer. “What’s Ren? A nickname or something?”



“It’s my Japanese name—Daniel from my father, Ren from my mother. And since we’re backing off on the innuendo, why don’t you tell me about this Evan guy? What happened?”

Nik took another drink to stall, suddenly sorry that he’d changed the subject. “We broke up. End of story.”

Ren frowned, turning the glass in his hands. “You told me about the whole marriage thing,” he said. “How he wouldn’t go through with it.”

“My god,” Nik said. “Did I never shut up?” He pulled away from Ren, starting to get up.

Ren put his hand on Nik’s arm, stilling him. “Sorry,” he said. “I just wanted to know more about you.”

Nik stayed seated, but he pulled away from Ren’s hold. “I hate it that I said and did all these things and that I can’t remember any of it. From the time I—” he stopped himself from saying ‘tried to kiss you’—“you came up to me until I woke up next morning with those stupid photos on the pillow next to me—it’s all gone. A black hole. Nothing there.” He found that he was trembling. “I hate it.”

The closeness and dimness of the bar around them suddenly seemed cloying, suffocating, the laughter of the businessmen mocking and triumphant. Nik rubbed his eyes, feeling tired. “I should go,” he said.

“Don’t,” Ren said. “I’m sorry I brought it up. I can see how it would be upsetting.” He didn’t move closer or touch Nik, but Nik could feel that he wanted to. “Stay,” he said. “Stay here for a little, and then, maybe,” his voice got lower, “maybe come back with me, to my room. Or yours.” His voice was just a whisper in Nik’s ear.

“I want to,” Nik was surprised to find himself saying, “but I really, really don’t think I should. It’s like this is a fantasy, not anything to do with my life. I don’t think I can afford a fantasy right now.” He laughed. “Irony, right? I’m at the International Fantasy Con, and I’m rejecting what I came here to discuss.”

Ren nodded. “If that’s what you want,” he said decisively, as if they’d been discussing a business deal.



Nik thought that he looked sad. Impulsively, he leaned across the little space between them and touched his mouth to Ren's. "Good-bye," he said.

Nik was expecting Ren to return his kiss in kind, chastely and regretfully. But after the first touch, Ren opened his mouth a little and licked between Nik's lips, and when Nik stilled, but didn't pull back, he lunged forward, angling his body so that they pressed against one another from shoulder to hip, one arm bracing himself against the seat, the other catching Nik at the nape of his neck, fingers under Nik's hair.

Nik's elbow caught on the tablecloth, dragging it toward them, and he thought that he ought to do something about it so that their beers didn't fall into their laps. But instead, he found himself sinking a little in his seat, his legs sprawling under the table. With one eye, he tried to see if anyone was looking at them, but then Ren took his hand away from Nik's neck, still kissing him fiercely, and touched his waist, just above the hip. Nik's shirt had pulled up, and Ren's hand was laying against skin, hot and gentle. Nik didn't want anything more than for that hand to skim down past his belt and the front of his pants to cup and smooth over where his cock was pushing against his zipper.

But then Ren was pulling back, his hand and his mouth releasing Nik. "Sorry," he said, holding his hands up as if to keep Nik from hitting him. "I know. Sorry. Okay," he said. He turned away a little and picked up his beer. "Right—good-bye."

Nik got up, tucking his shirt in as unobtrusively as he could. He walked out, not even thinking about paying, and walked back to his room, trying to think, or even just to walk without stumbling. When he had shut the door behind him, he lay down on the bed. The phone was blinking at him, probably a message from Cara wanting to know what had happened, but he ignored it.

Stupid, he said into the pillow. I am so stupid.

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At breakfast the next day, the last day of the conference, Nik sat alone in the white table-clothed splendor of the breakfast café. Cara was sleeping off what she'd described in a late-night text as an epic-drinking bout with her



illustrator buddies. Nik ate his bacon and poked at his eggs, thankful that the server had brought him a pot of coffee instead of only a cup. He'd brought a book to read, but he couldn't concentrate on it, choosing instead to watch the other early breakfasters.

He saw someone wave at him and jumped a little—it was one of his fellow panel members. He was relieved that it wasn't Ren, he told himself. How awkward would that be? But this was the last day of the conference, so opportunities for the awkward would be limited. Nik poured himself more coffee. Probably Ren didn't want to see him any more than Nik wanted to see Ren. No one likes being rejected. I certainly didn't, he thought.

That was what it was with Evan, he realized. It wasn't a betrayal so much, but just that Evan was saying he didn't want me that way, the way I thought he did. Was it always me who talked about marriage? Did Evan smile and nod instead of arguing? Evan didn't like to argue. He liked to state his opinion and wait for you to agree with him.

All right, Nik thought, that was a little unfair (*but only a little*). What had he really been to Evan? Nik had thought that they loved each other, but maybe it was just attraction and liking and compatibility. And convenience? He sighed. It didn't matter, he supposed. He was going home tomorrow, and he'd have to meet with Evan at least briefly, to settle things, and to move out. And of course he'd have to see him at work—what a nightmare that would be.

Determinedly, he opened his book, one of those he'd bought at the book fair. A noisy group came into the café, talking and laughing. Nik looked up, and his eyes zeroed in on Ren, as if he knew he'd be there. They looked at each other across the room crowded with little tables and people drinking coffee. Ren's hair was tousled, as if he'd just gotten out of bed, his sleeves pushed up to show his forearms. His hands were thrust into the pockets of his jeans. He looked sulky, only half awake, but as their mutual gaze went on, his face, his whole body, seemed to soften and open. He stood still in the middle of the group waiting by the hostess station, looking at Nik, and Nik knew that all he had to do was raise his hand, or even nod, and he would come over to him.

Nik didn't move, he felt as if he couldn't, the hand that had been about to pick up his cup frozen to the table, the other cramped on his open book. He



didn't look away for a long minute, but then, as if there had been a time limit, Ren nodded, grimacing. He turned and left, melting away through the line of late-arriving breakfasters.

It's just as well, Nik told himself. He made himself finish his coffee and linger, pretending to read his book. (*Pretending for whom?* he asked himself.)

He kept repeating that to himself all day, while he made a last run at the book fair with a hungover Cara, went to some panels, and met for a farewell lunch with a few colleagues. Just as well. The timing was wrong. Couldn't go anywhere anyway. When Cara asked, he told her that they'd had a nice time, just a friendly drink, no big deal. Headachy and hiding behind dark glasses, she hadn't pushed, only asked him if he had some more extra strength Motrin.

Nik thought he'd see Ren and have to avoid him, but if he was still at the conference, he'd made himself invisible, for he didn't see him all day. And all day, perversely, Nik kept thinking of him, wondering what would have happened if he hadn't pushed Ren away. Stupid, he told himself. Stupid... stupid... stupid. But he didn't know which stupid thing it was: Saying no? That he kept thinking about it? But, as he'd said brightly to Cara, it didn't matter much, since he was getting on a plane tomorrow.

That night he went back to his room early. He and Cara had had dinner together and vowed to get to bed by ten. "Who scheduled us to leave at that crazy hour?" Cara had moaned, although they both knew it had been her. "You've been so quiet," she said to Nik before they parted to go to their own rooms. "Is Evan still hounding you?"

"An e-mail this morning," Nik said. "He wanted to know if I knew where his old electric razor was."

Cara laughed. "Romantic bastard." She ducked her head. "Sorry. But really?"

"I know," Nik said. "But it's how he always was, mind on the practical." He realized that he'd put Evan in the past tense. If Cara noticed, she didn't say anything.

Back in his room, he started to pack, laying his clothes in his suitcase and filling his duffel bag. This took much less time than he'd thought it would. He



stretched out on the bed and turned on the TV, flicking through the channels. He wasn't the least bit tired. The bedside clock informed him that it was 9:15. For a minute, he tried to figure out what time it was in Maryland, but as usual the consideration of international time zones made his head ache.

TV was boring, and he didn't want to read. Shower, maybe? He sat up on the side of the bed, considering, one hand on the table. First, he decided to go through all the crap he'd been carrying around in his backpack. He dumped it out on the bed and made two piles—trash and save. Most of the colorful brochures he'd picked up here and there were trash, also business cards various people had pressed on him. (*He could find them on Google if he really wanted to get in touch.*) Lots of napkins. He set aside the notes he'd made on various panels and events to go through later—something for the long plane ride.

Thinking he might as well go through all his pockets and clean them out as well, he got out his two jackets. The sport jacket was clean except for some stray change. His leather jacket had more odds and ends, since he'd worn it more—a pencil stub, Cara's Chap Stick, more change, and, oddly, a postcard. It showed a garden, stretches of green and raked gravel, pink-blossomed cherry trees, and—he straightened up—a small pool? Someone sitting next to it?

Nik held it closer to the light. It wasn't a postcard at all, but a photo on cardstock paper. It was the garden at the temple, and the person sitting on a rock by the side of the pool was himself, knees drawn up, chin resting on them, hair falling forward in his eyes. He looked like someone dreaming, or waiting. Slowly he turned it over. On the back, someone had written a number—272, with a W after it. W for west he thought, for the farther end of the hotel, where much of the conference staff were staying. Ren must have put it in his pocket at the bar.

Nik stood up, staying very still for several minutes. Then he picked up his leather jacket and put it on. He went out, leaving the mess from his backpack on the bed. The love birds were asleep in the courtyard, only one or two chirping when he passed.

When he found 272, he knocked on the door as if he'd always meant to be here tonight. Why not? He asked himself. Why shouldn't I?



When Ren opened the door, Nik lost his focused calm. Ren was wearing jeans and an unbuttoned shirt. Behind him, Nik could see his half-packed suitcase on the bed. All the lights were turned off except for the one on the bedside table. Ren stood there, not saying anything, not even really looking at him.

“I thought I’d,” Nik said, “I mean.” He stopped. “We didn’t really say good-bye,” he settled on.

“Actually, we did,” Ren said. “You know, with the words and all.” He put a hand on each side of the door, hanging between them a little, which made his open shirt part wider.

Nik could see the paleness of his chest. He couldn’t think of anything persuasive or sensible to say, so he put his hand on Ren, on the hard bone of his sternum, flattening his palm against his skin. “I’m really pretty stupid,” he finally came up with. “If you couldn’t tell.”

Ren took in a breath. “They let you teach college with the stupid thing going on?”

Nik didn’t want to talk, he really didn’t. He held out the picture he’d found in his pocket, showing it to Ren. “Maybe I’d like to have my picture taken.”

Ren took Nik’s hand, crumpling the photo a little between them. “I don’t know if I’ll have time for that,” he said.

He pulled Nik into the room and closed the door. They stood there, looking at each other, linked by the hands that held the photo. Then Nik moved forward, wanting to show that he didn’t have doubts, this time. He stretched, tilting his chin up a little, putting his mouth on Ren’s, who stood there, not yet responding. This was the first time they’d kissed standing up—Ren was only a little taller, an inch or two.

Nik moved his lips over Ren’s. “Are you going to kiss back?” he asked. “Or am I going solo here?”

In answer, Ren put his arms around Nik and opened his mouth. They stood there, kissing, swaying a little awkwardly. Ren’s mouth and hands were warm. “Are we going to—” Ren gestured toward the bed.

“Please, yes,” Nik said, and Ren pulled him across the floor, while he kissed his neck.



When they were on the bed, he rolled so that Nik was half under him, keeping their mouths fused together. Nik felt Ren's hand come down on his waist, his hip, just as it had in the bar the night before, but now it paused for a moment and then moved down, pushing firmly across his groin, finding his cock under the denim of his jeans and rubbing it, one hard stroke after another.

Nik had a moment of panic. It had been three years since he'd been with anyone other than Evan. The moment that was coming on so quickly, when he'd be naked, his arousal and desire there for someone else to see, for Ren to see—was he ready for that? He struggled for a minute, pushing at Ren's shoulders, twisting away from his stroking hand.

“What—” Ren said into Nik's mouth. He pulled back to look at Nik, and somehow this made Nik feel calmer, as if Ren's eyes and his hands would anchor him to the bed. “Okay?” Ren asked.

“Okay,” Nik said breathlessly.

Ren rose up, and for a minute Nik was afraid that he hadn't been clear enough, but it was only to push the suitcase off the bed. When he had done that, Ren put his hand on Nik's belt, opening the buckle, and then the button of his jeans. He looked at Nik, who looked back at him. “Okay,” he said again.

Ren tugged the jeans down along with the briefs under them. It seemed to Nik that Ren couldn't look away from his cock, and he had to look himself, to see if it was more wonderful than he remembered. Ren bent down, putting his mouth against it, nuzzling it with his lips, rubbing his cheek over the head. “What do you want?” he asked Nik. “What do you want me to do?”

In answer, Nik pushed his jeans and briefs down, wriggling out of them, kicking them off. He reached for Ren, who almost fell on top of him. Nik curved his spine to rub against Ren. “You know,” he whispered in his ear, licking into it.

Ren was pushing off his own jeans, and scrabbling at the suitcase half-emptied on the floor. Nik wished that there was more light—he wanted to see all of Ren, the curve of his shoulders, the bend and twist of his back as he bent toward Nik, one hand on his cock, as if reminding Nik of where they were going. He watched Ren put the condom on, and almost laughed when he



offered Nik a palmful of lube. Ren was sliding his fingers under Nik's balls, a soft touch that got firmer and more insistent, circling and rubbing against Nik's entrance. Nik smoothed lube down over Ren's cock. He was moaning, he knew, and was embarrassed for a minute (*Evan had hated it when he did that*), but the look on Ren's face made him forget everything but that fierce grimace and Ren's hands on his ass and his fingers pushing inside him.

When Ren entered him, Nik's breath came out in a long sigh. He felt the burn and welcomed it. Ren's arms were wound around Nik's thighs as he pressed himself closer, farther, all the way in. Ren's hair fell around his face, curtaining it, and Nik wished that he could see his expression better, to know if he felt as much as Nik did. And then Ren was thrusting into him, every push inside a wave of desire and pleasure, and he forgot to think about who felt what. Ren crouched over him, touching him, holding and stroking Nik's cock, and the orgasm broke over him in waves, washing over them both, so that they rode it out together, clinging to each other.

After, Ren pulled out and rolled to the side so that he could hold Nik against him. He said something, but Nik was too blissed out to pay attention. He felt Ren get up and then come back to sit on the side of the bed, and he tried to open his eyes. But he fell into sleep as if it were the blackout of that first awful night. He was aware of Ren moving around, and then of the comfort of a sheet pulled up, and then of nothing at all.

When Nik woke, the room was dark. He was lying on his stomach, nudged up against Ren, who had his arm draped across Nik's ass. He could see the red numerals on the bedside clock: 4:13 a.m. He turned his head carefully so that he could see Ren's face. His eyelids were twitching a little, as if he were dreaming, and Nik started to put his hand to Ren's cheek, to soothe him in case it was a nightmare. What would it be like to wake up with this beautiful face every morning, this long lanky body against his?

Nik sighed. Again with the stupid. Wasn't this how he got into the Evan situation? Thinking that wonderful sex meant soul mates? He had only gotten four hours sleep after round two, but he felt horribly awake, and his airport shuttle left in about forty-five minutes. Slowly, he pulled away from Ren, and felt around for his clothes. When he was dressed, he stood by the bed for a



minute. Ren had turned over when Nik got out of bed and was lying on his side, the sheet pulled down so that Nik could see all the places he'd put his hands a few hours ago. Should he leave a note? But he didn't know what he could say, and so he went to the door and slipped out, closing it carefully so that he wouldn't wake Ren up. He wasn't sure who he was protecting—Ren or himself.

\*\*\*\*

## *Epilogue*

### *Three months later*

Nik gathered his papers and books together as his Contemporary Lit students left the classroom, trying to remember where he'd put his calendar.

"See you next week, Professor Jewell." Janelle, a junior stopped at his desk. "I've got an idea for my final paper. Can we meet next week?"

"Sure," Nik said. "Study hard this weekend."

"Mm, maybe," she said. "In between waves. I'm going to Ocean City."

"Ah, summer school," Nik said. He waved to a colleague in the hall, and then stopped in the department office to check his mailbox.

"Nice to see you, Dr. Jewell," the secretary said. "You're looking pretty happy. TGIF, right?"

Nik grinned at her, grateful that she never mentioned how he'd avoided the office at the end of spring semester, afraid to run into Evan. She would have known why—the department secretary always knew everything.

Should he have gotten over Evan so quickly, he wondered as he walked out to the parking lot? Didn't that mean that the feelings that he'd thought were so deep, so permanent—hadn't been?

"Hello, Nik." He turned to see Dr. Jentosh, his faculty mentor. "I saw your article in the *New Studies Journal*," he said. "Some interesting angles."

"Thanks," Nik said. He opened his trunk and put his book bag inside.

"What are you working on now? A few more of those articles, and you'd have the beginnings of your next book."



“I am thinking about a book,” Nik said. He got in and waved.

No need to tell Dr. Jentosh that the book he was thinking about centered on a shy giant, who teamed up early on with a dog that sang opera. Nik grinned as he pulled out of the lot. Without Evan to make supercilious comments about wasting his time on writing genre, Nik had made a good start on a story that might turn into a novel, but if it didn't, he was having fun writing it. It had even given him some insight to the theory and criticism on fantasy. Maybe he would get a paper out of that, he thought, the writer's take on the theorists.

Without Evan, he thought as he drove to the supermarket, and before he'd gone to Japan, those words would have represented an emptiness, a tragedy. And now—he was doing okay. He'd spent a couple of weeks on Cara's sofa, and sure, he'd done a little wallowing. The first time he'd seen Evan, when he'd gone to the apartment to pack up his things, well, that had been pretty awful. But moving into his own place had helped, and having to plan his summer school classes, and Cara, of course. He'd had to restrain her from her wilder plans of revenge. (*Keying someone's car is not only juvenile, Cara, but also illegal.*)

Nik browsed the produce section, picked out some strawberries, a head of lettuce, a bag of apples. He liked cooking for himself, or for Cara, sometimes, instead of finding things that pleased Evan's fussy palate. He pretended for a minute that he was going to buy a package of Hamburger Helper, just to imagine Evan's horror.

Stop Evan-bashing, he told himself. He didn't need to see Evan unhappy in order to feel okay. Which was a good thing, since Evan already had a new boyfriend, someone he'd met at an art gallery. Nik had heard him telling a colleague at a faculty party that it was so nice to be with someone who wasn't an intellectual. That had made Nik laugh, since he was pretty sure that he himself hadn't been nearly intellectual enough for Evan.

But whatever. He was okay, his work was going well, his classes were good. I'm good, he told himself, and he meant it. If he thought sometimes about someone, well, that was how life worked. You met people and then you parted. If he got himself off thinking of someone's high cheekbones, his soft black hair and long fingers—well, that was natural. There was nothing wrong with regret.



He'd gotten to the wine department, and he found himself in the International Wine Boutique. He wondered, since he was thinking of Ren—yes, of course, they had sake. He remembered how Ren had complained about the ubiquitous bottle of sake. He put his hand on the neck of the bottle, and suddenly, he was flooded with a memory of Ren on that last morning, when Nik had left in the dark, Ren lying sprawled out on the hotel sheets, his hair in his eyes, his long pale body almost entirely uncovered. How beautiful he'd been.

Nik tried to smile. Things were fine, but he could still be stupid. He picked up the bottle to look at it. Decisively, he put it in his cart—a way to defuse the past, he thought. Nothing wrong with regret, but not too much of it.

On the drive home, he called Cara. “What you doing, hon?” she said.

“Going home,” he said. “What about you?”

“I’m going surfing,” she said. “I don’t suppose you want to come.”

“Please: no. Remember what happened the last time?”

“Everybody gets hit in the head with their board, wuss.”

“Once is enough for me. I’m going to do some reading, maybe go to a movie.”

“The joys of the single life. Well, have fun, sweetie.” She paused. “I know you will.”

When he pulled into the driveway of the double he was renting the top of, he gathered his grocery bags and, juggling them with his book bag, made his way up the back steps. He had his key out when he noticed something taped on the door. Pushing the key in, he leaned in closer to see what it was.

A photograph.

His hands were cold suddenly, and he took in a quick breath. Hand still on the key, he looked around at his landlady’s backyard, but there was nothing and no one to see among the flowerbeds.

He looked at the photo. He’d expected to see himself, he realized, another one of those stealth photos Ren had taken, something from the conference, or even a more intimate picture. But it wasn’t him—it was Ren himself. A black



and white photo of him in a winter jacket, his beautiful hair wispy. He was holding a camera (*of course*) and he was smiling a sort of Mona Lisa smile, a smile that almost wasn't there, that promised something. Or someone.

Nik dropped his bags and pulled the photo off the door, turning it over to look at the back. No message, he thought, more disappointed than someone ought to be who was trying to give up regret. But looking closer, he saw that there was a series of numbers written very small in the bottom corner. A phone number.

Fingers shaking, he punched in the numbers and waited, hearing the ring of someone's phone. When he heard a voice say hello, he leaned against the door, unable to stay upright.

"Hello," Nik said, trying to sound calm.

"Nik?"

Nik nodded his head, and then said, "Yes. Where are you?"

Ren hummed into the phone, and then said, "I didn't know if you'd want to see me."

I'm dying to see you, Nik thought. "If you're in town, we could get together."

"Sure." Ren paused, and Nik tried to analyze what "sure" meant, what level of enthusiasm it showed. "What about your boyfriend?"

"Who?" Nik said. "You mean Evan?" For a minute, he had forgotten Evan had ever existed. "He's still my ex."

Ren's voice was lower. "Do you want me to come over?" When Nik didn't answer right away, he went on. "The way you left, I thought it was just a one-shot for you."

Nik was clutching the phone hard enough to make his fingers white against the screen. "If you thought that, why are you here? Wait—why are you here anyway? How did you get my number?"

He heard Ren clearing his throat. "I—well, I got it that first night. Your phone sort of fell out of your pocket. It seemed like an opportunity."

"You liked me even drunk and blacked out and falling all over the place," Nik said, feeling smug.



“Well, yeah. And I got your address from your cousin.”

Nik leaned his head against the door. “Come over, I guess,” he said.

He heard footsteps coming around the side of the house, and straightened up. Ren appeared, looking up at Nik. He climbed the back porch steps and stood there. His hair was a little shorter. He was wearing jeans and a Pokémon T-shirt, and had the usual two cameras slung around his neck.

“You’re here,” Nik said stupidly.

Ren stepped in and put one hand on Nik’s hip, tentative at first. But then when Nik leaned toward him, he pulled him in, not kissing yet, but laying his cheek against Nik’s and rubbing a little. “You smell good,” he said.

“You smell like you’ve been on an airplane,” Nik said. He felt so overwhelmed, he could hardly think.

“You care?”

“No,” Nik said, and then they were kissing, their lips soft on one another, the grocery bags around their feet and Ren’s cameras between them.

“I have sake,” Nik said when they pulled back.

“I’m so disappointed in you,” Ren said, laughing. “Should we, you know, go in?”

“Right,” Nik said, flustered. He gathered up the groceries and his backpack.

Once inside, he took Ren’s hand and led him to the living room, thinking they would sit on the couch and talk. But Ren turned to Nik and began kissing him again.

“Why are you here, though?” Nik asked. “You didn’t move here, did you?”

“No,” Ren said, “although that would be a pretty good stalker thing to do. I should have thought of that.”

“But—”

“Please,” Ren said, “let me.” He kissed Nik again and pushed him toward the couch. “Let me.” He stopped, looking into Nik’s eyes. “Unless you don’t want to.”



Nik answered this by dropping onto the couch and pulling Ren with him. “I so want to,” he said.

Wrestling against each other, they didn’t bother to take their clothes off. All the times that Nik had spent in the shower thinking about Ren, or in his bed, trying to remember what it had felt like when they’d been together—none of those memories or imaginings was anything like having his hands on Ren’s back, his arms, stroking the hair lying smooth on the back of his neck. Ren’s mouth on his jaw, and then his shoulder, Ren’s hands cupping his ass and pulling them more tightly together, Ren’s voice harsh in his ear—it was nothing like the Ren in his head. This Ren was infinitely more satisfying, his little grunts, the hardness of his elbow against Nik’s ribs, their knees knocking together. They held onto each other, thrusting up, first finding a rhythm and then losing it. When they came, seconds apart, they were breathing and crying out into each other’s mouths.

After, they lay there, shifting a little so they were awkwardly side by side. “My new job is in Washington,” Ren said into Nik’s ear. “DC.”

Nik touched Ren’s mouth with his thumb.

“No pressure.” Ren licked at Nik’s fingers.

“That’s not so far away.” Nik rubbed his face against Ren’s.

“I know,” Ren said.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Lucy Whedon has been writing and publishing for a while, but this is her first m/m story. She may have liked writing it way too much: look out for more.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#)

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# AN ADVENTURE IN BEGINNINGS

By Alex Whitehall

## **Photo Description**

A fit older man with a full head of short, silver and steel hair sits naked in an old fashioned tub. His piercing dark eyes stare toward the camera and his lips are in a firm, flat line with a touch of sadness in the corners.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*Today is the three-year anniversary of my wife's death. I married her right out of high school and she gave me two children. I loved her dearly and miss her every day. So imagine my surprise when I find men catch my eye. There's nothing wrong with looking of course but that's all I'll expect to do. I don't do the bar scene and I'm not into one night stands. If only there were some men closer to my age...*

*Sincerely,*

*Issa*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** first time, coming out, disabilities, men with pets, over age 40

**Word count:** 11,323

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# AN ADVENTURE IN BEGINNINGS

**By Alex Whitehall**

Tyler rinsed the soap off his shoulders. Water droplets clung to his short gray hair, then dropped, tickling down his back.

“Another year without you, Emily.” His words echoed in the bathroom. Hollow. One last handful of water to catch the last of the suds and he stood, swiping the towel off the nearby toilet seat. “Gretta and her boys are doing well. Max is just as crazy as ever, but he’s a good husband to Gretta, and a good father. We don’t always see eye to eye, but...”

He trailed off as he dried himself and stepped from the tub, wrapping the lavender cloth around his waist, more out of habit than need. No one else lived in the creaky old house anymore. Just him and Moriarty, the cranky old cat Emily had taken in. He and the cat never really got along, but they’d come to a truce since Emily’s passing. Moriarty didn’t attack as long as Tyler remembered to feed him.

Speaking of which... Tyler traded the towel for jeans in his bedroom, and then headed down to the basement, where the cat’s food dish and litter box were kept, to dole out the daily offering. Moriarty sat perched on his cat tree, monitoring his work. “All ready for you, your highness.”

Moriarty meowed, then hopped from his spot and ambled to the food, giving it a sniff. When he didn’t attack, Tyler figured it was a job well-done and headed back upstairs to finish getting dressed. Just a polo today. An anniversary he never wanted to celebrate. “I was thinking fish for dinner tonight. What do you think, darling?”

He huffed a laugh at himself and skimmed a hand through his hair. “You’re probably thinking Gretta’s right and I need to get out more if I’m still talking to you after all this time.” He sat on the bed to pull on his socks and slippers. “You know I’ve tried. It’s just hard for an old man like me. I know you didn’t want me to be alone, but I’m not sure you meant...”

He sighed. He couldn’t blame this on his wife. She’d always been open-minded and free-spirited. He’d loved that about her. She would have only



patted him on the shoulder with a laugh and explained, “It just means you’re bisexual, darling.”

He’d had to look it up. Well, not exactly *look it up*. More like stumbled upon it in his browsing. That was how he’d seen the first image. A man splayed out on the bed, dick hard, muscles firm, eyes closed in pleasure. He hadn’t been able to look away. And the quiet voice that had worried him as a teenager had spoken up again. The voice that Emily’s love had made inconsequential. It was back.

Bisexual. Thankfully, the Internet was a wellspring of information. And porn. And potential hookups. But who wanted a fifty-three-year-old man? All the men looking for men that he’d seen wanted someone between twenty and thirty-five. A tad younger than him.

“I think you may have been the only one for me, Emily dear.”

He headed downstairs to throw some milk and cereal in a bowl for breakfast while he read Saturday’s paper. More bad news, of course. But an ad at the bottom of one page caught his eye.

“The Queerest Beef & Beer You’ve Ever Seen! Come join us and help raise money to update the local LGBT center. Eat, drink, and be very merry!”

Pictured were two cows knocking mugs together, along with a phone number, date, times, and an address. It was that night and a fair price. And taking place at the fire hall five minutes away. “You telling me I need to get out more, Em?”

“Meow.”

He glanced over at Moriarty, who cleaned his paws by the door and stared back, unimpressed.

“Well, I guess it can’t hurt to go out this one night.”

\*\*\*\*

Outside the brick fire hall, a colorful rainbow banner hung, welcoming guests to the beef and beer. The parking lot was fairly full, but Tyler tucked his Jeep Wrangler between a Ford Taurus and a Saturn; one with an “Out and Proud” sticker, the other with a bright yellow equal sign clinging in the rear window. He was in the right place.



Or the completely wrong one.

Either way, he followed the markers to the side door where a woman with bright red hair was selling tickets. “How many?”

“Just one.”

“And are you interested in entering the raffle for two bottles of local red wine? One ticket is a dollar, or six tickets for five.”

“Sure, I’ll take the six tickets.”

“Excellent. That’ll be twenty-five dollars.”

She took his money and handed him six tickets and a pen to write his name on each half that would go in the mix. Once he’d added them to the giant bucket she provided, she directed him down the hall to the dining area. It was one giant room with tables lined in rows and covered in white linens. At the front, three large tables were burdened with food and drink, one just with the stars of the evening.

It was already cluttered with people, mingling and talking, sitting and eyeing the tables of food, and generally having fun. And young. They didn’t make him feel old, but the age curve was closer to thirty than fifty, that was certain. He took a deep breath and scanned the tables, trying to find a place to sit. Maybe there’d be others who came alone and he could strike up a conversation.

He ended up next to a woman with short black spiky hair, a tattoo trailing down her neck and under her T-shirt, who was knitting.

“Hi!” She beamed up at him, barely even pausing in her knitting. “I’m Danny.”

“Tyler.” He offered his hand, which she shook with a surprisingly firm grip. “May I sit here?”

“Sure. Did you come alone too?”

“Yes.” He was distracted by her knitting for a moment. Emily had tried knitting once. It hadn’t gone well. This young lady obviously had no problem. “I guess not many people don’t bring a friend.”

And why hadn’t he thought to invite Rick or Stewart? Or even Jenna. She would have probably enjoyed the night out. Of course, it all came down to the



cause of the fundraiser. He wasn't sure how his friends would react to him attending this type of function. He hadn't wrapped his head around it, yet, and he didn't want to have to explain himself to his friends.

"Yeah. My friend was supposed to come with, but picked up a nasty bug from her kid, so we figured it'd be best if she bailed. I'm not complaining if it got me your company." She winked. And when he blushed, she laughed. "Aren't you cute?"

He smiled, still flustered. He hadn't expected to get hit on by a woman here. Though the more he watched her, he wasn't sure she was a woman. She had delicate features and slender hands. She was soft. But she sat with her legs slightly spread, and her chest was noticeably flat beneath the shirt. "I think I'm completely out of my depth, is what I am."

Danny laughed again. "First time at an LGBT event?"

"Yes. I—" He hesitated. She didn't need to know his whole life history. "I'm just realizing some other parts of myself, I guess."

She grinned, broad and toothy. "It's never too late." Her head perked up and twisted toward the front where more dishes were being served, then she carefully folded up her knitting and shoved it in the bag she stored under her seat. "Food's about to be served. They call each table up at first, then you can go back for as many servings as you want."

"Thanks. The last beef and beer I went to just had waiters bring food around to the tables. But I like this, and I like that they have something aside from beef and beer, too." He chuckled. "As odd as that sounds."

"Not at all. I'm sure our stomachs appreciate it at least!"

They chatted a little longer before the intercom came alive. "Thank you all for joining us tonight in raising money to update our LGBT center. Tonight's donations will go toward getting some newer computers for the kids to use, buying some furniture to replace our well-loved stuff, and some additional educational materials. Your presence here not only helps us update our center, but it also bonds the community that we are focused on helping. Thank you for coming! Rebecca, our staff leader, will be around to indicate when each table can go enjoy the feast. And be sure to save a little room, because Takes the



Cake has donated some of their Strawberry Delight and Choco Heaven cupcakes for dessert. Enjoy!”

The noise in the hall grew raucous as the tables of people started filing past the buffet to fill their plates. Some people spoke over the noise, but Tyler and Danny sat silently, waiting their turn. There was still plenty of food left when they were allowed to go up, and the nearly empty platters were refilled. The buffet was amazing. And when they got back to the table and ate, it was just as delicious as it had been varied.

While everyone munched, the noise died down to a more comfortable level as people talked with neighbors while eating. Danny had a funny story for everything and told them one right after another, keeping Tyler chuckling into his meats. She’d obviously led a very interesting life already. And as much as he’d enjoyed his life, it didn’t compare. Or maybe she was just a good storyteller. Either way, she made a good dinner companion.

“Stop,” he said, still chortling over her last tale. “I want to go get refills.”

“Good! It’ll give me a chance to shut up and eat.” She grinned at him. He shook his head and headed to the buffet.

He paused to slop some macaroni salad on his plate and noticed that the line was curving around a man grabbing some slices of roast beef. From the side all Tyler could see were broad shoulders, a muscular body gone soft with age, and a head full of steel-gray hair. Then the man shifted, reaching for the meatballs, and Tyler saw his face—broad, too, and tough, like he’d spent most his days outdoors, but curled into a smile at the edges of his lips.

He must have felt Tyler staring, because a breath later, he was looking up and Tyler was trapped in his pale blue gaze. His heart thumped noisily in his chest, but he couldn’t pull away from those eyes. They studied him a moment, then wrinkled at the corners as his smile widened. “Hi.”

“Hi.” And still they stared at one another. At least Tyler was staring. He cleared his throat, forced himself to look away—and looked right back again. “Hi.” He winced. “Great food, huh?” He winced at that too, but it was better than repeating greetings.

“Beef and beer. Can’t go wrong.” The man held out his hand. “George.”



His hand was rough and strong and sent a flush of heat through Tyler's chest. "Tyler."

The touch lingered a long moment, then they released. "Did you need to get to the meatballs, or are you just as surprised as I am to find another guy here our age?"

"Definitely that." He laughed and rubbed his free hand through his hair. "Although the meatballs do look good."

"Well, I won't interfere between a man and his meat." Before Tyler could reply, George took the cane that rested against his far hip and used it to move out of the way. But he didn't go far.

"Thank you." Tyler busied himself with getting the meatballs. George shuffled over and seemed to look over the options. "So, um, do you— wow, this is going to sound lame—but do you come to these things often?"

George laughed, a deep rumble that drew Tyler's eyes back up to him. He was sure it was just the lights, but damn if George's handsome blue eyes didn't sparkle with joy. "I've come to some of the center's events, yes. I don't make a habit of hitting up beef and beers though. You?"

"No, I haven't been to one in five years. And this is my first time... um... doing anything with the center."

They moved farther down the table, ignoring the people who shuffled around them as they made their very slow progress. George favored his left leg and used the cane in the right hand. If it hurt him, he was good at hiding the pain, or else he'd gotten used to it. "So what brings you out here this time?"

"I saw the ad in the paper this morning and I... I thought it'd be a good idea to get out of the house today." They shuffled forward a few steps in silence, then hit congestion. Tyler cleared his throat. "Today's the... My wife died. In 2004. Three years ago today."

"Oh. Oh, I'm sorry." George focused on spearing some pickles onto his already-full plate. "How long were you together?"

"Since we were eighteen. So, a long time." Tyler cleared his throat again. "So you're involved with the center?"



“Yes. Donate what I can, mostly my time. The kids like hearing my war stories. And I think it makes them grateful they weren’t gay in the seventies.”

“So you’re...” He coughed. “I didn’t want to presume, just because you were here.”

George stopped and turned to face Tyler. He stood straight, only leaning some of his weight on the cane, and his eyes were fierce. “Yes, Tyler, I’m gay.”

Tyler flushed. “Okay.” George waited a minute, but Tyler didn’t have anything to add. At least until George turned and started moseying down the length of the table again. Then he blurted, “I may be too.”

George glanced back, one steely eyebrow arched. If he was going to reply, Tyler didn’t give him a chance. “I loved my wife very much and I never looked at anyone else while we were together,” he rushed out. “But since... since... Well, men have caught my eye, I suppose.”

George nodded, as if that made sense. “Not before?”

He sounded like he believed Tyler, and that let him relax a little. A smile reminisced on his lips. “Once I saw Emily, no one else could make my eyes wander.”

“She was a lucky woman.” George turned and shuffled forward a bit more, eyeing the sides on display.

“I was a lucky man. But now. Now, I guess I’m trying to figure things out.” He laughed, desperately uncomfortable. “I’m sorry for blurting all this out. I just, well, you’re the first guy my age...”

“Who’s gay?” George finished with a chuckle.

“Who I thought might understand.”

George stopped browsing and looked over his shoulder at Tyler, the humor slipping from his face. He nodded. “Would you like me to join you at your table?”

His breath caught. He nodded, then added, “Not if I’d be stealing you away from someone.”

“My friends will understand.” George smiled. “Where are you sitting?”



He pointed out Danny, then they finished filling their plates and Tyler made his way over to his seat while George explained the situation to his friends and gathered his things. Tyler set his plate down, glanced up to George, then down at his own plate before he sat. It was ridiculous, but Tyler had butterflies. It warped him back to high school, when he'd first asked Emily to dance. But this was a man, a grown man, and it wasn't a dance, it was just conversation.

"You a'right?" Danny asked.

"I, uh, someone's coming over to sit and talk with me. Not that you aren't a wonderful dinner companion," he quickly added. "I just met, um, George. He's my age." His eyes flickered up to where George was leaning over, talking to his people.

"And cute. *Rawr*."

"That's *not* why I invited him over." But he was blushing like the liar he was. It wasn't the only reason he'd invited him, although he couldn't deny it played a part. "I need to talk to someone my age who might understand. Help me."

Danny smiled, as if *she* understood. "I got ya, Tyler, don't worry."

When George arrived, Danny introduced herself, then scooted her chair over to give them more space as she turned back to her food. Tyler refused to blush, but he couldn't quite meet George's eyes either. "Thank you for coming over."

"My pleasure. Though I must say, all my friends think we're flirting."

That brought Tyler's gaze up, and when he met George's, the other man smiled. Tyler's heart seized, then thumped loudly as it restarted. He opened his mouth to reply, but his brain hadn't gotten the memo, so he just sat there like a cave for flies. George's smile softened, tender, maybe even pitying. "Is that all right with you?"

"Yes." His voice cracked like puberty. He cleared his throat. "Yes. That's fine." He glanced down at his plate, picked up his fork and poked a meatball before he looked up again. "So you just came with friends?"

"Just friends. Lucy and Olivia have been together for..." He chuckled. "For longer than they'd want me to tell a stranger. Might reveal their ages,



after all. And Marcus and Luke met twenty years ago, although they've only 'been an item' for about ten. Rebellious youth and all."

His own youth had probably been the opposite of rebellious, but he nodded. He'd known guys—and girls—like that. Straight or gay didn't matter in that regard. But that hadn't answered the question Tyler really wanted to know about. "And you're single? I mean," he added, "I'd be surprised if you don't have someone."

"Then prepare to be shocked, because I'm single. I had someone for a long while, but he passed away... a long time ago. Since then it's just me and my foster dogs."

"Foster dogs?" Tyler asked because he wasn't sure if he could come up with anything else.

"Yes, I foster for No Bull, a bulldog adoption group. But I didn't come over to talk about my pets, did I?"

"No." He glanced down at his plate and speared a meatball. "I'm not sure... what to say." He shoved the morsel into his mouth and chewed.

"Well, if you have any questions, I can try to answer them. Or I can introduce you to people who could. I can just plain introduce you to people in the community—I'd be glad to keep you company if you decide to visit the LGBT center." George spread his hands wide, encompassing whatever Tyler wanted it to encompass. Then he picked up his own fork and prodded at the pile of sliced beef on his plate.

Tyler swallowed. "I guess I don't even know where to begin, really. I've known the same people for a long time. I guess I just need to get out there and meet new people."

"The center would be good for that, although there tend to be more kids there than anything."

"Well the guys our age who go must not be any good if you turned them down."

The words were out of his mouth before his brain had time to censor it. But George just grinned and laughed, and if Tyler was right, he saw a bit of color



in his cheeks. “Thanks, but I think you’re assuming far too many positive things about me. Maybe I wasn’t good enough for them.”

“I find that hard to believe. You’re kind and sexy—” He cleared his throat to be able to choke out the next words. “What’s not to like?”

George chuckled. “Well, thank you, but I am a stubborn git, too. But if it’s too soon for you to meet groups of people, I can introduce you to my friends in smaller numbers.”

Tyler nodded, getting it. “Thank you, but you can just tell me to stop my inept flirting, you don’t need to pass me off onto someone else.”

George looked up from the meat he’d been piling into a roll, one eyebrow quirked. He studied him long enough that Tyler looked down to his own plate rather than meet that intense gaze. “Flirting?”

“Ineptly, obviously.” He shoved a forkful of macaroni salad into his mouth so he could choke it down. Or just choke. He was remembering why he’d never been particularly social before. Emily was by no means the life of the party, but she could guide him around and he’d happily followed, shining in her shadow. It was why he’d waited three years despite being so lonely.

“Maybe not,” George said. For a moment the silence was profound, even in the hall full of chatting diners. “Like I said, I’m stubborn. I marked you as too classy for me and refused to even consider you’d look at a guy like me.”

That shocked him into raising his gaze. George was still smiling, but the turn of his lips was soft, as if it was hard to keep going. But he met Tyler’s eyes and Tyler met the smile, helping it grow. “Well, I’m looking. If anything, I need a friend, George. And you seem like you’d be a good friend.” He swallowed. “At least.”

“A friend I can be.”

The topics segued into safer territory after that. No talk of being gay or meeting people, just normal conversation. Eventually even Danny joined in. She was witty and dry and made them both laugh, although he didn’t miss the wink she gave Tyler when she excused herself to leave for the evening.

Still, it gave Tyler a chance to learn about George. He’d joined the army young and had been in Vietnam, where he’d injured his knee. It had healed



well, but had forced him out of the army, so he started in farm work. He said he liked being under the sun, and Tyler could see that about him. He belonged outdoors. George had retired from the farm when his knee finally gave out, and now he worked at the local Tractor Supply.

“Not a glamorous job, but it pays the bills. And they let me sit on a stool when I’m behind the register. Plus, I know my shit.” He winked. “Pun intended.”

Tyler laughed because George inspired that in him. It had been too long. “A job’s a job. My work as an architect keeps me busy. Can you even imagine sitting at home being retired?”

“Hell no!”

They both laughed at that. Eventually, one day, they’d be too infirm to really do their jobs, but they were young still. If it hadn’t been for work, Tyler didn’t know how he would have survived after Emily passed away. He probably wouldn’t have. But work kept him from rattling around his house, even if it meant dealing with annoyed clients and peevish designers.

After the raffle drawing—neither of them won—they sank back into conversation. But eventually the evening ended, and the workers cleared the buffet and started moving the tables. Tyler startled from the conversation and saw George looking around just as surprised. “I guess it’s time to go.”

George nodded and glanced at his watch; his eyes widened. Then he stood and grabbed his empty dinner plate. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

They dumped their plates and pulled on their coats—George was wearing a jean jacket, perfect for the soft cool of late September—then headed to the lot. “Where are you parked?”

Tyler glanced around the mostly empty lot and pointed out his Jeep. Wordlessly, they began journeying over. After the noise of the fire hall, outside seemed tranquil, despite the traffic noises. Tyler broke the silence. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Sitting and talking with me.” Tyler pulled the keys from his pocket and clicked the unlock button.



“No need to thank me for that, but you’re welcome.” They strode the last few feet. “What are you doing Monday night?”

Tyler froze with his hand on the door handle. “After work?” He paused, trying to think if he had anything and came up empty. “Nothing.”

“Would you like to grab dinner somewhere? We can continue our conversation. Or we can eat in, if you’re nervous.”

“Nervous?” he asked... nervously.

George just gave him that winning smile. “If you have any questions you might not feel comfortable asking at Burger King.”

“Oh.” He sighed with relief and disappointment. It was far too soon, and yet he couldn’t help wanting for George to make him nervous. “Wait, Burger King? No offense, but I’m sure we can find somewhere better.”

“Wherever.” George rolled his eyes. “You want to go or not?”

Tyler wet his lips and nodded. “A pizza parlor just opened on Walnut by Chester Street. If you like pizza. We could meet there.”

“Sounds good. Can you make six?”

“I can.” He pulled the latch and swung open his door.

“It’s a date. See you then.” With no other word, George turned and headed to the lonely Jetta sitting in the far corner of the lot. Tyler barely noticed. He was too busy trying to stop his heart from pounding wildly.

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It wasn’t so much a date as two guys getting together to eat pizza and talk. It was like any other night out with friends. Mostly. Dinner at the burger joint (*not* Burger King) was the same. Laughing, talking, and an undercurrent of sexual attraction. At least on Tyler’s end. George was easygoing, funny, and honest. But Tyler wasn’t sure he was interested. Being nice didn’t mean anything.

And then, after the Asian bistro...

“I’ll walk you to your car.”

Tyler laughed, because George always walked him to his car. “I *can* manage on my own.”



“I know.” But George followed him over anyway. That’s when Tyler saw they were parked next to one another, and he grinned.

“Well played.”

“I thought so.” George reached over and slid his hand into Tyler’s. Tyler jerked in surprise, but gripped his hand when George made to pull it back. “Too fast?”

“So this was a date?”

“I said it was.” They stopped at the Jeep, and George stepped closer, leaning his weight on his cane and smiling up at Tyler. “You didn’t think it was?”

“I thought you were joking.”

The glint in George’s eye gave away that he was about to tease Tyler. Tyler’s heart leapt in his chest.

“I never joke.”

“You joke all the time! It’s your best trait.”

George laughed. “Really?”

“Really. I’d like someone in my life who makes me laugh.” And then he took the plunge. He leaned forward—and down just enough to be familiar—listed his head to the right, and brushed his lips over George’s. It was a chaste kiss. At least it started that way. Then George parted his lips and Tyler took his welcome for what it was. And for a moment they kissed in the parking lot of the restaurant.

George pulled away first, licked his lips, and crooked his smile at Tyler. “So the hand holding was a good move?”

Tyler chuckled. “I think so.” A burst of noise startled him out of the cocoon he’d felt wrapped in, although a quick glance showed only a noisy bunch of kids walking down the sidewalk. He sighed and returned his attention to George.

“Afraid to be seen kissing a man?”

That wasn’t what he wanted to be thinking about. He was still reeling from the knowledge that he’d actually kissed a man. And part of him felt young and



reckless and wanted to lean down and kiss him again. To feel the rough scrape of their chins brushing. But he answered George's question, fighting through the swirl of emotions to be honest. "A little. Maybe not so much afraid, as..." He laughed breathily. "It's like going on a rollercoaster. It's terrifying and uncertain, but that doesn't mean I won't enjoy it."

That description lit George's eyes and tweaked the corners of his lips. "I like that answer."

"Good." Tyler breathed. "So, tomorrow's Saturday." George grinned knowingly, but made Tyler actually say it. "Would you like to get together tomorrow? As a date."

"I would. Are you up to coming over to my house? I could cook dinner for us."

Tyler's heart tripped over itself. There was an offer lying in those words, more than just dinner. But maybe it was just a promise of a languid kiss good night, and not... something else. Either way, he wouldn't know if he didn't reach out and grab what he wanted. Much like the kiss, he took the plunge. "Yes."

And was rewarded with George's grin blossoming even larger. "Excellent!"

There was a shuffle to get paper so George could write down his address. And then was the moment they would go their separate ways for the night. Only Tyler wasn't getting in his car and George wasn't moving. His heart thumped. George reached up, slid his hand behind Tyler's neck, and guided him down for another kiss.

"Good night, Tyler."

"Good night."

George's smile was mellow and pleased as he turned and headed to his car. Tyler got into his own, slid the key in the ignition, and let the engine roar to life.

It was a good night, indeed.

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George's white rancher had dark green shutters and a sizeable yard with a low metal fence surrounding the back, obviously for the foster dogs to run. As Tyler pulled into the driveway, the sunlight glittered off the windows and a curtain over a front window moved. He parked the Jeep and took a deep breath before killing the engine.

He'd replayed their last kiss in his mind since yesterday, the feel of George's fingers against the back of his neck, and the raw passions it evoked. If he hadn't suspected his interest in men before that, it would have awoken him to the startling realization. Now he was certain. He took another deep breath and got out of his car.

The front door opened as he stepped on the porch, and George stood there, weight resting on his cane, his lips curled in a smirk. A short-legged bulldog sat at his feet on a leash, his entire butt wagging with his short excuse of a tail. "Hello. Come on in."

"Hello. Thanks. And is this Rufus?"

"Yes. He still tries to sneak out open doors, so I like to put the leash on. You won't mind him running around, will you?"

Tyler stepped inside and closed the door behind him, kneeling down to let Rufus sniff his hand. "That's fine." He laughed when the dog licked him, entire butt still wiggling. Tyler stood. "How are you?"

"Good. Spent the day woodworking. How about you?"

"I met with Gretta for brunch," he admitted. "And then she dragged me shopping with her. Her husband Max hates shopping and I just like spending time with my daughter."

"That sounds like a nice way to spend your day." They headed into the kitchen, where a casserole sat on the stove top. "Do they know..." George paused as he pulled down two plates, then glanced over his shoulder and studied Tyler's face. "Do they know you're dating?"

"I really hate how blunt you are sometimes." He inhaled. Exhaled. "Gretta knows I've been seeing someone. She's been pushing me to get out more for a while. My son Tom is struggling with the idea of me—well, I suppose of me 'moving on.'" He shook his head. "But no, I haven't told them it's a man I find myself dating. I know I'll have to, but..."



He didn't know how to finish that sentence, but George did it for him. "It's a lot. I understand. Come on over and show me how much ziti you want."

"Just like that?"

"What?"

"It's okay, just like that? I was expecting... I guess I figured you'd be offended."

George chuckled and reached over, grabbed Tyler's hand, and pulled him closer to the stove. "Two kisses is a lot to take a giant leap on. Now come on, how much do you want?"

They dished out the pasta casserole, found room on their plates for salad, and filled drinks before settling at the table. Rufus, freed from his leash, was always underfoot, but they both survived. Then he took up begging.

"How old is he?" Tyler nudged the two paws off his lap with his elbow.

"Old enough to know better, but we don't think his previous house had much use for rules. He's about seven, though you wouldn't guess it, would you?"

Tyler chuckled, ignoring the pouting dog staring up at him. "I wouldn't know. I haven't had a dog since old Bonkers died my first year in college. I never felt like I was home enough, and now there's Moriarty."

"He doesn't like dogs?"

"I'm not sure." He laughed. "I'm not sure he particularly likes *me*, let alone a dog. Emily found him and took him in. I think she needed someone to coddle after the kids left. And he only really ever let her do that. He and I have more of a truce."

The food was good, but it was the company that made dinner so enjoyable, as cliché as that sounded. As bad as a line from one of those romantic comedies Emily always watched. He winced at the thought of her.

"Something wrong?"

"No." Aside from thinking of his wife while courting a man. "No, just... thinking."



George nodded. “So, how is that couple from Hell you’ve been working with?”

Tyler groaned. “Still hellish. I can understand them wanting everything just right for their home, but they changed their opinion—and the design—on the back porch three times this week. Thankfully we’re not far enough along for it to be a major issue, but I’m starting to think they believe they are the only project we’re working on.”

“What?” George mocked surprise. “You’re not there just for their beck and call?”

“Unfortunately for them, no. I told my boss if they called me again I wasn’t going to answer. He told me they’d just call again or leave a message.” Tyler grinned. “I told him that technology is very confusing and that message might just get deleted.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“Not much, he was too busy laughing. He knows I was one of the first in the company to start working with the computerized visuals program.”

“You must be tech-savvy then.”

“Well...” He laughed, brushing a hand through his hair before slicing off another bite of ziti. “If I sit down and focus on learning it, I’m good. But otherwise not so much. Gretta got me a computer for Christmas two years ago and the only time I use it is when she is forcing me to video chat with her or to check e-mail. The grandkids use it more than I do.”

“More than I’ve done. But I was never good at sitting down and wasting the day staring at a screen.”

“No television?”

George snorted, grinning. “Watching *NCIS* is not wasting the day.”

They talked through dinner, walking Rufus, and then washing up the dishes—Tyler insisted on helping. Once everything was in the drying rack, George leaned against the counter, resting his leg, and watched Tyler finish drying his hands and hang up the towel.

“If you have some time, we could watch a movie. Or go out and see one. Or would you prefer bowling?”



Tyler shrugged, stepped closer, his breath catching in his throat. George smiled, reached out to hold Tyler's hips, then pulled him forward so they were flush. It forced the air from Tyler's lungs, but his own hands found themselves resting on George's biceps. Warmth flooded his front, the heat from George, from their proximity, and from the feeling of a man's penis pressed against him, even with the clothing between them.

"Not bowling then," George said.

Tyler shook his head. "I'm good with staying in and watching a movie."

"Good." George tilted his head up and Tyler leaned down to meet his lips. Tomato and basil and the slide of warm tongue. He shivered when George's hands grazed upward, staying outside of his shirt but teasing his skin with the barest touch. The kiss melted, transformed, took many shapes until it finally was just the flutter of lips like butterflies.

"So. Movie?"

George kissed his chin. "What do you want to watch?"

"What do you have? Something we won't have to pay attention to?"

George chuckled, his breath washing over Tyler's lips. He slid his arms so they encircled Tyler, keeping them snug before he scraped their chins together. "And what do you have in mind instead?"

His heart pounded, his head was dizzy, and his body tingled. "I was hoping for a few more kisses." He demonstrated, letting the kiss linger lightly across their lips. "If that's okay."

"More than okay." He slid his arms down to Tyler's hips, gently separated their connection there, then drew the fingers of his left hand down Tyler's arm before clasping their hands together. "Shall we?"

He grabbed his cane and led Tyler down the hall into a simply furnished den. The walls were a dusty green, with plain gray curtains and white blinds over the windows. The centerpiece was the extra-large brown leather couch and the television it was aimed at. Rufus had already run in and curled up on his doggy bed, his big brown eyes watching them.

They went over to a cupboard and George opened the doors, revealing two rows of DVDs and four of VHS tapes. "This is everything. From *The Hunt for*



*Red October* to *Grosse Pointe Blank*. Just don't tell Marcus and Luke about that."

Tyler snorted. "What's wrong with it?"

"Film snobs." George shrugged. "So what's your poison?"

Tyler scanned the titles, then grinned and slid a DVD off the shelf, flipping it in his fingers to show George the cover. He grinned when George rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't have expected this here."

"*Love, Actually* is good." He snatched it from Tyler and headed to the TV. "And for that, we're watching it."

"Good. That's why I picked it out."

George made a big production of huffing and complaining, but he was smiling the entire time. He slid in the disc, grabbed the necessary remotes, then joined Tyler on the couch. It was a big couch. They could have easily sat on opposite ends and not been anywhere near each other. But what was the fun in that? Tyler had plopped himself smack-dab in the center and George fit himself right beside him.

George flicked through the opening sequence, made sure the volume was loud enough, then hit play and slid the remotes onto the glass-topped coffee table. George settled back, nestled his shoulder against him, and laid his hand on Tyler's thigh. Tyler's chest tightened, his heart thumped in his chest, and then he covered George's hand with his own.

On the screen, lives unfolded. Weddings were celebrated, deaths were mourned, and romances were shattered. And people met. Tyler kept his eyes on the screen but dragged his fingers against the back of George's, the tips gliding between his digits until they were interlocked. George turned their hands, twisting his so their palms met. Tyler could feel the rough calluses as George traced fingers over skin. The touch was light; it tingled up his arm to his chest and drew his eyes down. Their skin was contrasted by roughness, years in the sun, and the abuse of life.

Hands that had built. Hands that had fed. Hands that might have killed. Tyler hadn't asked about George's time in Vietnam, he'd just listened to what he'd been told and heard the pain as George explained his knee injury and the



long journey to heal. George wasn't an army man, although he'd served proudly. Working the earth, handling animals, building those calluses, that was George.

He lifted their hands to brush his lips against George's knuckles, then lowered them and turned his head. Their lips met, a brush, a kiss, and then George was sliding his free hand along Tyler's neck, turning their bodies so they could press closer. Lips, hands, chest. The kisses dropped from his lips and trickled down his jaw to follow his throat to the cotton-blend that covered his torso.

As the rough of George's cheek stroked up his neck, Tyler kissed his temple, then ear and finally mouth again. They kissed, and touched, and sometimes even watched the movie. Hands wandered, but by the time the credits rolled, they were both still dressed. At least once the shirts had been pulled back down.

"Did you enjoy the movie?"

Tyler chuckled and tucked his head against George's shoulder. "I think I enjoyed it even more this time than the first time."

"Oh?"

He nodded, then sat up, pulling George up with him so they were once again sitting side by side. "It was a nice evening."

George winced. "But?"

"But I should probably be going." He tucked his hand behind George's neck and pulled him forward for a soft kiss. "But maybe this week you could come over and meet Moriarty."

George smiled, and it was worth all the butterflies in his stomach just to see that.

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Against all odds, Moriarty *liked* George. Not that George was unlikeable, but Moriarty tended to look askance at anything Tyler brought home that wasn't food. He wasn't sure if it was a good sign that the cat liked George, but Tyler didn't really believe in signs anyway, so he decided to take the cat's approval as confirmation that he was doing right.



Not always easy, but right.

Gretta had stopped by one evening without calling first, so she met George. She'd glanced between them, a smile lighting up her face, and kept her mouth shut. At least while George was there. She'd called her father the next morning to gush how happy she was that he'd found a new *friend*. Emphasis hers. He'd asked, and she'd said it was a little odd to think about her daddy with a man, but she just wanted him happy.

And George made him happy.

Of course she told Tom, who had called, flustered and uneasy. Tom wasn't as excited as Gretta had been—who would be?—but he'd begrudgingly admitted he was glad Tyler had someone to keep him company.

Tyler wasn't sure he'd blushed more in his entire life as he had during those conversations, but once they were done, he almost fainted in relief. He'd expected drama and arguments, and he'd gotten acceptance, each in their own way. He told George about it the next time they got together, over shrimp scampi which Rufus begged ruthlessly for.

"So none of the kids mind?"

"It appears not. For the most part. Tom'll come around. I think he'll like you." He swallowed. "If you want to meet him."

"I do. Gretta was very nice. I liked... seeing your family." He chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. "I love the family I've made, but there's something special about relatives, even if they drive you crazy. Maybe it's because they drive you crazy and you still stick around. Or maybe not. I don't know. Don't mind me."

"You don't have any nieces or nephews?"

A cloud covered George's face. "My sister died in childbirth along with the baby. So no, no family."

Tyler nodded. He'd known that most of George's family had distanced themselves when he'd come out, but it made his chest ache to think that he'd been alone all those years.

"Not blood, at least. I'm godfather to all of Lucy and Olivia's brood. All five. And I get to play at Uncle George there. And Great-Uncle George too,



now.” The sun broke out over his face. Maybe he wasn’t as lonely as Tyler had thought. Maybe he was only as lonely as Tyler had been these last three years.

“Congratulations.” He lifted his glass of milk and they clinked in a toast, then broke down laughing.

After dinner Tyler headed toward the living room for their usual couch session, but George caught his hand in the archway. He turned back, brow raised, and found George smiling like the Cheshire cat, a glint in his eyes.

“What?”

He stepped forward and pulled Tyler to him until they were divided only by cloth. “I thought you might like to see more of the house.”

Thank God he was in good shape, because if not, that would have stopped his heart. “Yeah?”

“If you want.”

“I want.” Suddenly he nothing but wanted. All their previous evenings together had kept them dressed, hands wandering under shirts and over crotches, but never further than that. He’d been grateful, he had. But he was also curious. He slid his free arm around George’s waist and relaxed into the heat of his body.

George chuckled. “It’s hard to show you the rest of the house like this.”

“Spoilsport.” But Tyler released him, stepping back just far enough that George could turn and head down the hall, drawing him along with his hand.

“Bathroom,” he indicated with a tip of his head, although Tyler had already seen it. “Spare-room-slash-office-slash-weight room.” Another tip. “And my bedroom.” He used his cane to push open the door.

A queen-size bed captured the focus of the room, with two large dressers flanking it on either side. It was covered in a navy blue comforter, folded back to reveal off-white sheets and two pillows, although one had a dent where George slept. Tyler appreciated the dark, relaxing colors and the complementary wood.

But part of him could only think how he’d never slept in a bed with someone besides his wife in over thirty years.



George squeezed his hand. “Would you like to come in?”

He did, but he couldn’t move. He was frozen on the threshold, staring at the bed, clamped on George’s hand. Words died before his brain could even form them. Was he betraying his wife? Their marriage? What had he been thinking, starting something with George?

“Breathe.”

He gasped and tore his eyes from the bed to George, who leaned his cane against his thigh so he could cup Tyler’s jaw. He brushed his thumb over his chin and lips, then settled it, stroking his cheek. “It’s okay. Let’s go back and watch a movie.”

A movie. As if he could just forget the expanse of cream sheets and the vision of George lying there, his tanned skin a heady contrast. And skin that didn’t see the sun finally exposed to Tyler’s eyes as they revealed themselves to each other. As if that thought could be forgotten.

No more than he could forget his wife’s apple-scented skin and the tickle of her nails when she trailed them down his back. Her flowing brown curls that she’d let age naturally, even when it looked ridiculous—by her account. Or her soft kisses.

Lips sealed over his. Soft with a hint of sharpness, the gruff of skin shaved several hours ago. Stunning blue eyes held him. George. He inhaled, capturing a new scent in memory with the kisses. Woody. An apple tree, he thought to himself and smiled, breaking the kiss with a tremulous laugh. He swallowed. “I don’t want to watch a movie.”

“But it’s too soon.” It wasn’t a question, but uncertainty lingered in George’s expression. Tyler shook his head.

“It’s a lot. But we should at least go sit down, you’re going to hurt your knee like this.”

George nodded, letting his fingers slip away from Tyler to grab his cane. He turned to head back to the living room, and this time it was Tyler stopping him. He tugged George’s hand until he turned around, then Tyler led George into his own bedroom. His heart was pounding in his chest, but it relaxed when George sat on the bed, the tension draining out of his shoulders as the weight



left his leg. “You’d think after all this time I’d know when I’ve pushed it too long. Shouldn’t have taken Rufus on that walk today.”

“If you hadn’t, he would have been bouncing as high as the dinner table in his excitement.” He sat down to George’s left and slid his hand from his thigh down to his knee. “How bad does it hurt?”

“Just an ache. It already feels better just taking the weight off.” George folded his hand over Tyler’s and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“Go on, lie back.” He gave a nudge with his shoulder, then sank to the floor so he was kneeling at George’s feet, one hand still on his knee. He gave it a squeeze. “I’ll rub the tension out of it.”

George studied his face, searching for something, then he nodded, inhaled, and leaned back on the bed with a deep exhale, lifting his hand off Tyler’s. And then George was stretched out before him like an offering, the bulge in his jeans more noticeable from this position. Tyler swallowed and yanked his eyes back to his own hand on George’s knee and forced himself to rub the joint and massage the surrounding muscles.

George sighed and hummed when he hit a particularly sensitive spot, and so he proceeded to ease out the ache there. Tyler also sighed as the tension slipped away. This felt familiar. This he could do. Slowly his eyes rose from where his hands worked, up the long stretch of thigh to the even more prominent bulge and then to George’s hands fisting the cloth of his shirt over his stomach.

“It doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No,” he grunted. “Feels good.”

“Good.” He stopped the massage and just smoothed his warm hands over the joint for a moment. Then he breathed. And slid his hands up George’s thigh, lightly working the muscles as he went until his hand cupped crotch, and George’s eyes flew open.

“Tyler?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his thumb along the ridge of the pants, dragging his fingers a little farther up so his palm pressed in, and grabbed the zipper with



his pointer and middle finger. Before he could think, and before George could speak, Tyler pressed in the heel of his hand and dragged the zipper down.

“You don’t have to—”

“George.” Tyler cut him off, undoing the button of his jeans as distraction. “My heart is pounding. I’m terrified. But I’m also pretty hard and I—” He choked. On air. On terror. On want. “I’ve been dreaming about tasting you and I... I think I can handle this.”

George’s hand covered the fingers slipping into his pants. “As long as you’re sure.”

It was ridiculous, but because he wasn’t *on* the bed, sharing the bed with someone else, everything seemed okay. “I’m sure. Can we...” And damn if asking wasn’t harder than just doing. “Lift your hips?” George did and Tyler tugged down his jeans and underwear to midthigh. And after that, he could look at nothing but George’s package.

Of course it wasn’t the first dick he’d seen. If he hadn’t before now, the Internet would have shown him that. But it was the first, aside from his own, that he brushed with his fingers, circled with his hand, and stroked. George moaned and thumped his hands against the mattress, inhaling deeply. Tyler thought he was going to say something, but when no words came, he slid his hand back down, mesmerized by the feel of another man’s dick in his hand, the heat and the colors and the smells.

He leaned forward, letting his breath tease over the heated skin before he inhaled, taking in the aroma. His hand worked, the skin sliding beneath his touch, George’s dick hardening with each stroke. When he looked up, George was staring down at him, his hands bunched in the covers, his eyes dark with pleasure. “Want to come up?”

He didn’t so much answer as lean down and swipe the width of his tongue against the tip of George’s dick. The flavors burst across his taste buds, pretty much what he expected them to taste like—but he was surprised by how much they turned him on. He pressed the heel of his free hand into his crotch and wrapped his mouth around the head, his hand giving little strokes to the base.

George groaned and Tyler let a little more slide into his mouth, his tongue pressing against the head to keep it from moving too fast. It *tasted* good. It *felt*



good. It filled him and made his dick fill just as much. He let his tongue slide under as more fed into his mouth until he hit his hand and the natural thing seemed to be suck his way off.

“Dammit,” George breathed. “It’s been a really long time since...”

When he reached the head, gravity pulled him back down. George inhaled sharply. Tyler fell into a rhythm, the rush of flesh in his mouth hypnotizing as he applied the same tricks he’d always loved done to him. George groaned and grunted in pleasure until his one hand finally released the cover and tried to grip Tyler’s short hair.

“I’m gonna come if you don’t stop.”

He dragged his lips over the sensitive skin when he pulled off and looked up at George’s pupil-blown eyes and parted lips. Tyler licked his own swollen lips and smiled, a decision made. “Okay.”

He sank back down, sucking in George’s dick as far as he could take it.

“Jesus,” George cursed. It wasn’t long before he shot in Tyler’s mouth. He tried his best to swallow, but it surprised him and some dribbled out and back down George’s dick. An embarrassing slurping noise cleaned that right up, though, and he let the dick go to beam up at George.

“Proud of yourself, aren’t you?” George didn’t sound the least bit disappointed.

“Yeah.” He cleared his somewhat raspy throat. “I am.”

George grinned. “Now will you come up here?”

He wanted to. His one hand still cupped his crotch, interchanging between rubbing and pressing. But he couldn’t. His legs trembled at the thought of being in the same bed. It was fantastically stupid, but he couldn’t move.

Maybe George saw that on his face, because he sat up, pulled his pants on enough to not trap him as he gingerly sank to the floor in front of Tyler. His grin wasn’t all evil, but Tyler knew he was in trouble when it crept across George’s face. Then he was being pushed to the floor and George was undoing his pants and pulling him out.

And then it was wet heat and groaning and embarrassing noises that urged George on.



When he was younger, he would have been embarrassed with how quickly he shot. Now he just enjoyed the rush of pleasure. George swallowed with more grace than he had, and Tyler was staring dizzily up at the ceiling, a silly smile plastered on his lips. At least until George leaned over and kissed him, swirling their flavors together.

Then it was bliss. He gently pulled them apart and guided George to lie to his left so the weight would be off his bad knee. "Thank you."

"No thanks necessary." George propped his head on one arm to peer at Tyler's face. "That okay?"

"More than." He leaned over and kissed George's nose. "But I was saying thanks for coming down here. I... It's hard to imagine being in bed with someone else after all these years."

George didn't look thrilled about it, but he nodded in understanding and slid an arm around Tyler's chest. "Not even for the cuddle after?"

Tyler sighed, shaking. "Sorry. Not yet."

George kissed his cheek. "It's all right. I'll be honest, I wasn't expecting a blow job."

Tyler laughed and closed his eyes. "You just taste so damn good. I couldn't help myself."

They snuggled together and rested in the post-coital bliss for as long as their old bones would bear them lying on the floor.

\*\*\*\*

It was sunny and October only hinted at its arrival with a slight bite in the air. Still, a gorgeous Saturday. So when George came over after working the morning shift, Tyler suggested they go for a walk. The other man gave his knee a rub, then nodded, and they headed out, taking full advantage of the sidewalks that stretched through the suburban town.

"So I was wondering," Tyler said once they were a few blocks in, "if you wanted to come over next weekend."

George raised a brow, eyes focused ahead as he thought about the date. "Yeah, I don't see any reason why not. Is there something special about next weekend?"



“No. Yes. I...” He huffed. “I invited the kids over next weekend, too.”

“Oh.”

Tyler reached over and held George’s hand. “You don’t have to meet them if you don’t want. I just thought you might. And you said before you’d be okay with it. But if it’s too soon, I understand. I just... Hell, we’re not getting any younger. And I...” He choked on the last words. He cleared his throat, but his mouth still wouldn’t take form.

George stopped, pulling on Tyler’s hand so he turned and they were facing one another. “What?”

His mouth flopped like a grounded fish until he gave up and shut it. Took a deep breath, wishing George wasn’t watching him so intently. As he exhaled, he realized he wasn’t going to be able to say it yet. So he started with something else entirely. “Well, you’ve met Gretta already, so I didn’t think it’d be a fuss or anything and then they’d know I’m serious. Because I am. Serious.”

There. He’d said it.

George smiled and started walking, tugging Tyler along. “I’d like that. Them meeting me and knowing we’re serious about each other.”

Damn if that didn’t set his heart pounding. Possibly in relief. “Good.” He breathed. “Good. So how was work?”

“Tiring,” George groaned. “The idiots working the night shift stocked half their shit wrong so we had to take care of customers and reshelve everything. I’m not sure who thought cat treats and horse treats went side by side—they don’t. We have an equine section. Why would you not put them there? And that was one of the less idiotic choices they’d made. I’m glad I have tomorrow off. I think I’ll spend the day being a major grump.”

Tyler laughed. “I think you earned it. I’d invite you to spend the night, but I know you need to get home to Rufus.”

“Thanks. Maybe after next week, we can introduce Rufe and Moriarty and see if they can put up with each other. Then I can spend the night at your place sometimes.”



“I’d like that. Not that your house isn’t nice,” he hurried to add. “And yours doesn’t have all those damn steps to worry about.”

“We’ll figure it out as we go,” George said, but Tyler could feel him leaning more weight into their handhold. “But we should probably head back. I think this morning wore me out more than I thought.”

They turned and headed home. Thankfully it wasn’t far, because with each block, George’s grip on his cane turned whiter and whiter and the tension in his lips and shoulder increased. Tyler tried distracting him with stories, and it worked for a little, but by the time they could see the house, George wasn’t responding so much as grunting in pain.

Inside, he collapsed on the couch with an exhausted huff and abandoned his cane to rub his knee more gingerly than Tyler had ever seen him. His jaw was tense as he worked, his hands barely touching as if he was afraid to dig into the soreness like he usually did.

“What can I do?” Tyler asked.

“Have a heating pad? Usually heat helps everything relax and stop firing off these damn pain flares. Dammit.” He frowned, one hand on his knee, the other going back to dig into his lower back. “Sorry about this.”

“Jesus. Don’t be.” He watched George rub the two points and asked, “I have a heating pad, but would a hot bath help?”

George nodded, fighting a grimace.

“I’ll get it set up, you stay here and... We’ll figure out how to get you up there. Maybe piggyback style.”

Normally that’d get a laugh, but George was focused on his leg. Tyler took the steps two at a time to the tub and started the water as hot as he thought George could take it. Then he tried to figure out how to get him up there. Maybe they should use the heating pad and bring him upstairs later. He sure as shit wasn’t going to be able to carry him up bridal-style. He was strong, but George was dense muscle. Plus, stairs would not be a good idea. He could just imagine the two of them taking a tumble back down. Maybe piggyback was the best way. It would take the weight off his knee at least, although if the pain was spreading, it might not help.



While he debated, he tossed in some scented soap Emily had kept around that was meant for relaxing and soothing. It couldn't hurt. Though it almost made him smile with how *gay* it all seemed. But he didn't think George would be laughing right now. He filled the tub, almost scalding, and headed back downstairs, figuring the water would cool by the time they got George in.

George was still on the couch. Although the pain was obviously still there, the intensity had passed if his expression was anything to go off. "How's it feeling? I ran the tub, but are you up to getting there?"

"Yeah." George nodded, rolling his ankle. "For a hot soak I could probably crawl up on my own."

"No need for that. On my back or put your weight on me, it's a pretty wide stairwell."

"Can your back handle me? I don't want both of us laid up."

A fair point. Then he watched another twitch of pain streak across George's face. "I think I can do it."

Giving rides to a slight wife and young kids was nothing like hoisting a grown man on his back. Plus, George could only wrap one leg around his waist while the other gripped with its thigh and hung awkwardly down. Once he was secure, Tyler walked—hobbled—to the steps. He grabbed the banister and gathered his strength. "Good?"

"Yes. You sure about this?"

"Yes." Tyler lurched up the first few steps, then found a plodding pace the rest of the way. Once he was moving, it wasn't too bad. He definitely had the strength to get to the top, although he worried once or twice about his balance.

But they were successful. And then it was just a hop—with no actually hopping—down the hall where he deposited George, somewhat gently, on the toilet seat. Thankfully he was still in the habit of putting the top down so Moriarty kept out of it. George grunted.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." George nodded and began undoing his one shoe, so Tyler dropped to his knees and undid the other. Between the two of them, they undressed George without making him stand and got him into the tub and sitting.



“Shit, a towel.” Tyler popped down the hall to the linen closet, then returned, hanging the towel on the rack beside his. He stepped back, unsure if he should stay or go. Undecided, he leaned against the doorjamb and watched George ease back in the tub, his face relaxing into an expression of bliss. “Better?”

“Much.” George sighed and moved just enough to rub his knee under the sudsy water. “A heating pad would have worked, but this is beyond better.”

“I’m glad.” Tyler studied George. He still rubbed at his aching leg, but the tension in his shoulders had practically vanished when he hit the hot water. Tyler inhaled the scented bubble bath mix. He didn’t know if it made him relax, but it did give him the courage to push off the wall and cross the distance to the tub.

George didn’t open his eyes, just smiled and raised his near hand from the water to prop it on the tub lip, fingers curling toward the ceiling. Tyler sat on the floor facing him, his left arm on the rim. His hand slid easily into George’s, tickling the bubbles off his palm. George rubbed his slick thumb over the back of Tyler’s hand, absently tracing the veins and tendons. “Thank you.”

Tyler smiled, turned over George’s hand, and leaned forward enough to kiss his knuckles. “You are very welcome.”

For a while, they sat in silence, their hands speaking for them in brushes and strokes, painting in water and bubbles. Then George opened his hand, spread it wide, and captured Tyler’s. “So. Next weekend?”

“Yes?” Had George changed his mind? Tyler studied the soft smile and tired wrinkles around his eyes. Surely he wouldn’t be smiling if he were about to back out.

“You’re ready for it?”

“Yes.” He shifted their hands so they were holding on to one another. “Are you?”

“I am. I was wondering if you’d like to join me at Sunday brunch with Lucy and Olivia tomorrow.”



Tyler leaned down, scuffing his lips against knuckles once again. Hands meant for working. Hands meant for building. Maybe even hands for building their lives together now. “I would.”

“Good.” George turned his hand and cupped Tyler’s jaw, lifting his head, while George leaned forward and met their lips in a kiss. They fit together.

Hands for building. Lips for kissing. Yes, they fit together.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Alex Whitehall may have grown up, but still wants to believe in magic—fairies, wishes, and things that go bump in the night—as long as it has a happy ending. Since none of that seems to exist in real life, Alex creates make-believe worlds where suffering is stopped, passions never cool, and the leads always end up happier than they started. When not writing, reading, riding horses, working, running, reading, working, and being social, Alex is sleeping.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE BEST PART

By Penny Wilder

## **Photo Description**

A super-hot man is stripping in what appears to be a kitchen. He has an extremely fit and tanned body, with a ripped six-pack and muscular thighs. He has tattoos outlining his torso and across his lower abs that trail down his pelvis into his nicely-packed pink Emporio Armani bikini briefs. He is pulling a pale pink sweater over his head.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*Who are you and what have you done with my best friend? You think you know a guy and then, wham, it seems like I know nothing at all.*

*My previously shy and somewhat geeky best friend seems to have been hiding a few things from me. For example, pink underwear—what the hell? And when did he acquire that ripped body and those tats? And why is he undressing in my kitchen? And why, oh why, am I even noticing his body and feeling the overwhelming desire to touch his skin and trace that intricate pattern with my tongue? He’s a guy! And my best friend! How did this happen and what else has he been hiding from me? I can’t breathe...*

*Sincerely,*

*Wendy*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** accounting, performing arts, assistant coach, friends to lovers, gay for you, men in suits, tattoos, musical theater

**Word count:** 12,093

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*Dedication*

As of August 1, 2013, same sex couples will have the right to legally marry in my home state of Minnesota. This story is dedicated to the members of the Minnesota House and Senate who voted yes. Thank you for voting for equality. I hope it spreads.



*Acknowledgement*

Special Thanks: to Kevin Murphy and Dan Studney who wrote the song “Mary Jane/Mary Lane” for the movie version of *Reefer Madness*, and inspired my chapter titles for this piece.



# THE BEST PART

By Penny Wilder

## CHAPTER ONE

*Like a diesel train*

Ben Green was a twenty-four-year-old accountant. He liked structure and order. He organized his socks into their own little cubbies. At six foot five, he felt too tall at most public gatherings. He had an uncooperative mop of sandy brown hair that fell down in his hazel eyes, a hooknose, and pale skin. He owned five suits, and wore a different one to work every day. He was a runner and kept himself in pretty good shape. He was usually calm and collected, but right now, you'd never know it because his suit was disheveled, collar open, tie hanging loose, sleeves rolled up, and hair sticking up like a haystack. He couldn't breathe, which was why he was hiding in the bathroom.

"Ben?"

Ben blamed Soraya. It was completely her fault that he was hiding in the bathroom having an asthma attack, panic attack, whatever.

Ben's best friend, who at some point turned into Tattooed Sex God, also known as Manny, was in Ben's kitchen, naked. No, almost naked. He was wearing bright pink underwear. And Ben hadn't been able to look away.

Pink. Hot P-I-N-K Emporio Armani sexy little bikini briefs. The briefs were tiny, by Ben's underwear standards, though in the few seconds that Ben gaped at them, he noticed that what was under them was by no means tiny.

Manny was borrowing some old tux of Jonathan's for a gig next weekend, and when Soraya dropped it off, he left her in the living room and snuck into the kitchen to try it on. Ben had just arrived home from work and happened to walk in from the garage just as Manny was getting naked. In his kitchen.

Manny gave him a muffled "Hey Ben" just as Ben turned the corner and practically bumped into Manny's pink underwear butt. Unprepared for this scene, Ben started, and stared. Manny turned around as he was wrestling with



pulling his sweater over his head, all the while giving Ben some kind of muffled explanation about borrowing Jonathan's tux. Ben gaped at his friend. Manny, in his head, was still a short skinny fourteen-year-old with acne and no muscle definition. Actual Manny, with his spiky black hair, wide brown eyes, olive skin, and muscled body had been distracting Ben for the past week. Seeing Manny in his underwear pretty much clinched the fact that he was attracted to his friend.

When Ben realized he was staring, he bolted. He ran out of the room while Manny was still pulling his sweater over his head. He ran because the minute he glimpsed those bright pink briefs and the ripped six-pack covered in tattoos, all the blood in his body rushed south. Ben was also pretty sure that he had gasped.

"Ben?" There was tapping on the bathroom door. "You okay? You've been in there awhile." Ben thought he had managed to pull himself together until he heard Manny's voice call out to him a second time. He stood up, but didn't move to open the door.

"Ben, hurry up you have to come see Manny in the tux. He looks fantastic!" Soraya called from the living room.

Ben rolled his eyes, and took a deep breath. He could do this. "Okay!" he hollered at Soraya. To Manny, he managed to say, "I'm fine, I'll be out in a minute." To his own ears, his voice sounded rough, and tense, but it was the closest to normal that he could manage at the moment.

"Sure." Ben heard Manny back off, and then he could hear their voices coming from the living room. He sank back down on the closed toilet in a daze.

Before last week, the last time Ben saw Manny was when they were fourteen. Before that they were inseparable. Fast friends since kindergarten, they'd sat next to each other on the bus on their first day of school, and that had been that. They'd only lived a few blocks away from each other, so Ben would hop off the school bus at Manny's stop, and the two of them would play together till it was time for Ben to head home for dinner, or not, if he could manage it. Behind Manny's house was a small forest and a marshy pond, which provided hours of entertainment for two kids.



They went on like that, all the way to the beginning of their freshman year of high school. Until Manny's father, Sal Velazquez, had to transfer to Virginia to keep his job. After that, Manny and Ben did their best to keep in touch, mostly through e-mail, but for Ben, it wasn't the same. They grew up and grew apart, but, they both remembered how it used to be, which is why when Manny e-mailed to say that he'd accepted a position as the Gopher's new assistant football some-such-or-other coach, Ben offered him a place to crash without hesitation. After a week of putting Manny up and hanging out, Ben knew he was attracted to his old friend, and walking in on a half-dressed Manny in the kitchen had pretty much confirmed that. He hadn't had much luck with dating, but he'd never been with a guy. Until now, he'd never wanted to be. Why of all people did it have to be Manny, and what was he going to do?

\*\*\*\*

A week ago, reuniting with Manny for the first time in ten years had been great, but not entirely uneventful. First, Manny's flight was late. Ben had been sitting on the bench near baggage claim four at MSP for almost an hour and a half when he finally got a text from Manny saying that the plane was at the gate, and he was just waiting to deplane. Ben shoved the file he'd been working on back into his laptop bag, and tossed his coffee cup in a nearby can. He sat back down, phone in hand. He figured he could get through at least a couple e-mails for work before Manny made it to baggage claim.

Fifteen minutes later, a crowd had gathered near baggage claim four. All of a sudden, someone in a pair of worn flip-flops and ragged jeans walked up and stood right in front of him. Ben wondered for a second what crazy asshole was wearing flip-flops in Minnesota in December. Then Ben looked up into familiar warm brown eyes, and grinned.

"Ben."

"Manny." Ben stood up, and quickly realized that even now, he was the tall skinny one. Manny was still shorter than Ben by several inches, just as he'd been at fourteen, but the skinny geek with the glasses and the shaggy black hair that filled many of Ben's childhood memories was gone. In his place, with Manny's eyes and Manny's smile, was some built and burly gym rat with short



black hair, and a guitar case slung over his shoulder. Ben had seen Manny's transformation in photos, and the few times they had video chatted on Skype or messenger, but in person, after ten years, it was a trip.

"Jesus," Manny said, sizing him up, "You're huge." Ben ducked his head down, as if somehow that would shrink his lanky six-foot-five frame, and held out his hand for Manny to shake. Manny took his offered hand but gave him a look, and used his grasp on Ben's hand to pull Ben into a tight one-armed hug. Ben grunted, as Manny squeezed him hard.

"You're one to talk, look at you!" Ben smirked when Manny let go and stepped back. Manny looked great. Really great. Ben smiled. This was going to be just like old times.

"So... bags and stuff?" said Manny, gesturing behind him to the baggage claim.

Ben grabbed a luggage cart from the cart dispenser, and between them they wrestled Manny's three bags and a box onto the cart. Manny said there was just one more bag, and then they were golden. They waited and waited, but it never came.

By the time Manny had filed a lost baggage claim, it was well past dinnertime and both men were starving. Of course the lost bag just happened to be the one holding Manny's winter coat and boots, so Manny had to dig through his bags for a couple of layers and some shoes and socks before he could brave the December freeze that waited for them outside the door. Ben lent him his hat, scarf, and gloves, but even with taking the skyway to the parking ramp and a mad dash to Ben's car, Manny was shaking, and his teeth were chattering.

"Sonofabitchpileofmonkeynuts!" Manny said as he shut the door to Ben's car. "I forgot how freaking cold it gets here."

"Wuss," Ben teased, "It's not even below zero today, just wait." Manny groaned and shivered in response. Ben turned the heat up as high as it could go, grateful that his car would only take a few minutes to warm up. "So... do you want to grab something to eat?"

"Please. Anywhere, as long as it's fast."



“Well, I was thinking, there’s a 5-8 Club on the way to my place...”

“Oh man, I haven’t had a Lucy in ten years.” Manny paused. “Normally, I would tell you no, because as a trainer, that type of food is not on my nutrition plan. But...” He grinned. “Since I’m not actually back in charge of training anyone for another month, and I haven’t seen you in ten years, I am going to make an exception. Just this once.”

“Juicy Lucys” were, in Ben’s opinion, quite possibly the most delicious food on the planet. If you ate beef, anyway. Two burger patties pressed together and stuffed with American cheese on a bun along with fries, plus deep fried pickle chips with ranch dressing, and a Summit EPA to drink. What could be better?

They didn’t talk much until the food was devoured. They lingered over their beers, and made small talk about Manny’s new job. Ben felt on edge and he didn’t know why. Part of it was that they hadn’t seen each other in ten years, but there was something else.

“I get paid to whoop their asses. Drills, strength training, endurance. I get to tailor each of their workouts. Plus I’m officially an assistant coach, which is way better pay and title than I had at UVA.” Manny had only been a trainer assisting the Cavaliers with weight training during football season, and supplementing his income by working in the school fitness center the rest of the year. Assistant football strength and conditioning coach was perfect for Manny. Ben would never remember the title, but it would give Ben a perfect excuse to go to Gopher games again.

“It sounds great. I’m happy for you.” Ben really was, but there was a little twist of envy inside his chest as he said the words.

“So what about you? How are things in the world of Shtup, McCrappen, and Fishfingers?”

Ben snorted. He schooled his face to give his standard, *I’m fine and everything’s great* reply. Life as an accountant at Schulman, McCashin, & Frederickson was mind-numbingly dull, and Ben was starting to dread going to work every day. He looked down at his food basket and pushed his one remaining French fry around in the ketchup. He opened his mouth to respond, but Manny caught the pinched look on his face.



“Fuck, you hate it, don’t you?”

Ben blinked. He did hate it. He just hadn’t told anyone. He adopted this blank stoic face while at work, and when anyone talked to him about work. No reaction, no emotion. Bottled and buried. He knew for a fact that his stress level was through the roof, and he’d been sleeping like crap for the past year, which had to show, but if anyone had noticed, they hadn’t said anything.

“It’s awful,” he admitted. “I’m good at it, and the pay is great,” he paused for emphasis, “but it *sucks*.”

“What are you going to do?”

Ben shrugged. He really didn’t know what he was going to do in the long run, other than not stay there. “For now? Keep going, I guess.”

Manny rolled his eyes. “Ben. You double-majored, accounting and music, right?”

“I... Um, yeah. Yes. Music. I focused on vocal pedagogy and performance. But I had to take a job that paid well. My mom needed help with Ronnie’s tuition. I knew after my dad passed that there was no way I was going to get to use that degree. I just finished it because I was less than a year from graduation.” Ben didn’t want to talk about music. He hadn’t performed since he’d graduated, and that was that. His father had been in a coma for nearly two months after suffering from a cerebral hemorrhage that left him in a permanent vegetative state. He’d simply stood up from the breakfast table one morning, and collapsed. They had held out hope for two months that he might wake up, but when test after test showed no improvement, Ben and his mother and Ben’s baby sister, Ronnie, all knew he was never coming back to them. They decided to take him off of the machines after that. Manny had called Ben a lot during those months, and Ben would never forget that.

“How long before Ronnie’s finished?”

“Two and a half years.” In Ben’s mind, it felt like an eternity.

“You still working with Soraya after hours? Any chance that might become full time?” Ben had written to Manny about Soraya shanghaiing him into helping with her books for her first professional show in Minneapolis, before Ben was even finished with school. It was a huge learning experience for Ben. His experience with Soraya had helped him land his job at the firm.



“Yes, and no, at least not right now. She’s been able to scrape together enough investors to do one show a year, and this is the first year she’s actually paying me for my time. She couldn’t even afford that before.” There was no way that Soraya’s production company, S & J Productions, LLC could possibly afford a full-time bookkeeper and accountant. Not when she could barely pay herself anything anyway. “S & J made money on their last three shows, which is great, but Soraya’s just beginning to build a reputation here. I swear, every show we do in this town, it’s been like pulling teeth to get any recognition from the theater community. They look at Soraya, and they see a kid. I know she’s twenty-seven and married, but she’s tiny, and she looks like she’s about sixteen. No matter what she does, some people have a hard time taking her seriously as a producer and director.”

“So what show is she doing now?”

Ben grinned. “*Reefer Madness*. We’ve got about a week and a half left before previews, and then the official opening night is the following Friday. The cast is great.” He launched into a rundown of the show and all of the work that they had been doing. Ben could tell that Manny was doing his best to look interested, but Ben knew that this had never been his thing. “Just a warning too,” he said to Manny, “if I know Soraya, she’s already got plans to drag you to rehearsal and beg you to work concessions.”

“Hey, you’re putting me up, and I don’t start at the U until the end of J-term, so if you want to put me to work, I’m game.”

“Seriously?”

Manny nodded.

“I don’t know if we should tell Soraya that, you’ll end up as her slave for the next month. But thanks, I’ll keep it in mind for when I’m going crazy.”

“Sure. I could just be your slave.” Manny waggled his eyebrows suggestively, and Ben choked on his beer. He coughed.

“Don’t say things like that when I’m drinking, dude!” Ben chuckled, “You’re only allowed to offer indentured servitude to mess with me when it won’t waste good beer. That almost went up my nose! Gross!” He rubbed his nose for dramatic effect. Ben looked up and Manny had a strange look on his face. “What? What did I say?”



Manny shook his head. “Nothing. I just spaced out for a minute. I think I’m gonna crash pretty soon. You about ready to head out?” They both reached for the check, but Manny stopped him. “Ben, you’re putting me up until I find a place, the least I can do is feed you.”

So Manny paid.

When they were back in the car, Manny sat back and said, “That was fucking awesome, dude. Maybe once a year when I am on a break from training, we can come here again.”

Ben smiled. “So are you going to take a break from training in August for the State Fair? They have deep-fried bacon on a stick, and deep-fried Oreos. What about turkey legs at the Renaissance Festival?”

Manny laughed. “I’m going to stay far away from deep-fried anything, especially if it’s on a stick. Training camp is that month anyway, but maybe I can manage a turkey leg. At least that has protein. Plus, it’s the RenFest. Remember when you got sick on the Viking ship?”

Ben groaned. He’d been eleven, and thanks to the swinging ship, had puked lemon ice all over his and Manny’s shoes. “Yes, I do, thank you so much for bringing it up. Anyway, bacon on a stick has protein too, you know.”

“Coca-Cola? Bad. Doughnuts? Bad. Fried bacon on a stick? Really bad.” Manny smiled.

“Whatever, you’re missing out on awesomeness.”

They were both quiet the rest of way back to Ben’s place, a three-bedroom townhome with a big balcony overlooking a park area with picnic tables, a playground, and a small forest. The balcony was nice in the summertime, Ben pointed out, and Manny said he’d be sure to look again sometime, when there wasn’t two feet of snow on it.

After the brief tour was over, and Manny’s stuff was all loaded into the guest room, Ben left Manny alone to unpack.

Around midnight Ben heard the soft strumming of a guitar coming from the guest room, now Manny’s room. Manny had gotten pretty good. He listened for a minute, and then tapped lightly at the door, before sticking his head in. What he saw made him wince. It looked like a tornado had hit Ben’s



guest room. Manny's bags had basically exploded all over the room, their contents covering every surface. There were piles everywhere, and Manny's shoes were lying in the middle of the floor, along with the clothes he'd had on earlier. Ben bit his lip and gripped the door handle to stop himself from tidying up the room, or at least moving the shoes out of the way so no one tripped on them.

"Oh hey," said Manny, as he glanced at the clock. "I didn't realize it was so late. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Nah, just heading to bed now. I just wanted to say it's good to hear you play. It's been a while."

"Thanks." Manny smiled shyly. "Shoot, I really didn't look at the time. Will your neighbors mind?"

"I'm not sure how much they can hear, but this guy," he pointed at the unit to the left of them, "had a party last weekend and blasted techno music till two in the morning, so I really don't think he can complain. Quiet hours are supposed to be after ten, so if we follow that for the most part, it'll be fine. You were playing pretty softly anyway. So, you know my friend Jonathan?"

Manny nodded.

"Well he's Soraya's husband and one of the partners at Schulman. He sometimes plays with this group of guys on the weekend for weddings and stuff. I know they sometimes need a good guitarist. I can put in a word for you if you want."

"What type of stuff do they do?"

"Standards mostly, I think. Sinatra, swing, they're pretty decent."

"Do you ever sing with them?"

Ben made a face. "They've asked." He hadn't said yes though. He was afraid that it would make it harder to get up and go to work every morning, not easier.

"Well I don't know how available I'll be once the semester starts, but for now I've got the time, so sure. As long as he knows I can only do it every once in a while."

"I'm sure he won't mind, most of the other guys are lawyers who



sometimes have to put in extra hours on cases, so I think they end up rotating anyway.” Ben pulled the door closed as he backed out of the room.

“Hey, Ben?”

“Yeah?” Ben poked his head back in to look at Manny.

“In case I forgot to say it before, thanks for putting me up. You didn’t have to, and means a lot to me that you did, so thank you. Goodnight, Ben.”

“Night, Manny.”

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Manny looked insanely great in the tux. Of course he did. Ben plastered what he hoped was a convincing smile on his face. Manny modeled the tux, doing the full spin for Ben and Soraya.

“Doesn’t he look great, Ben?” gushed Soraya.

Ben shrugged, and avoided looking Manny in the eye by focusing on his bow tie instead. “Looks better on him than it did on Jon.”

“Ben Green, you take that back!”

“Nope. He’s way cuter too.” At that, Soraya tossed a throw pillow off the sofa at him. Ben ducked and it glanced off the side of his head. He stuck out his tongue at her. Soraya stuck out her tongue in return and turned back to Manny. Manny gave both of them that look that most adults reserve for naughty children.

“Thank you so much for helping Jonathan out next weekend. I know he really appreciates it, and the guys are looking forward to meeting you. Oooh also, Manny, you should come with Ben to rehearsal sometime this week.” Then Soraya was talking Manny’s ear off about marketing, costumes, choreography, and the grueling rehearsal schedule for tech week. Ben blocked most of it out. He sat on the couch, nodded when it was appropriate to nod, and smiled when they looked over at him. He thought he was doing pretty well until Soraya asked him a question that actually required a verbal response. He tore his eyes away from the slight stubble he’d been staring at on Manny’s jaw, embarrassed. She and Manny were both looking at him expectantly, and he had no clue what she had said.

“Um. Sorry, I missed the question?”



Soraya rolled her eyes. “I said tomorrow is the sing-through with the orchestra. Can you swing by after work, and keep Manny company?”

“Oh. Sure.”

Soraya’s phone rang, and she went in the hallway to answer it. Manny was still watching Ben. “Hey, you okay? You zoned out on us there.”

Ben met Manny’s eyes. His poker face sucked. He really didn’t know what was showing in his eyes right now, but he was pretty sure that Manny could at least see that he was upset. Manny looked worried. “Sorry, long day at work. I just need to go for a run and work off the day.”

“You want some company?”

Ben was sure that watching Manny run would be, in no way, relaxing. “Nah, I’m good, I’ll be back in a little bit. I’ll um, probably just grab a protein shake for dinner, so you can go ahead and make something for yourself.” Manny looked surprised and a little disappointed. For the last week, Manny had made Ben dinner, actual edible, not from a box, *dinner*, and they had sat in the kitchen and talked for hours. Ben didn’t look at Manny as he stood up, and just as he did, Soraya came back in from the hallway.

“Gotta run boys, they need me for costume fittings. Manny, thanks again.” Soraya grabbed her purse and headed for the door. “I’ll see you boys tomorrow.” She gave Ben a raised eyebrow before she turned to exit, as if to say that she knew something was going on with him. Ben knew that meant he should expect to be grilled the next time they talked in private.

“Bye!” he and Manny chorused.

When the door closed, Ben headed up the stairs to change his clothes, eager to have some distance between him and Manny. He needed to clear his head. He knew he was acting weird, rude almost, but he couldn’t cope. In his room, he tore off his clothes, threw on his gear, then rushed back downstairs, and out to the garage. He was still shoving his arms into his coat sleeves as he hopped in his car and drove to the gym as fast as he could go.

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Close to two hours later, Ben staggered back into the house, exhausted and covered in sweat. He hated showering at the gym because the showerheads



were all too short, but it sucked in the winter. He hung up his coat, kicked off his shoes and staggered up the stairs. Manny's door was closed, and Ben could hear him playing his guitar. He shed his clothes in a trail as he made his way to the shower. He'd done four extra miles, and he felt shaky. He let the hot water run over his body and closed his eyes, too tired to think about anything. He knew he couldn't actually run from how he was feeling, but the not-thinking for a little bit was awesome. Ben guzzled a shake, and passed out not long after. He was extremely grateful for that.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Resistance like hot Velveeta*

Rehearsals at The WAREHOUSE were, hands down, the best part of Ben's day. The theater was part of a converted cereal factory, and walking into the performance space was like walking into a giant brick cave. The space was a big box, complete with a balcony and flexible seating. Something about the musty smell (brick dust?) in the space relaxed him. He took a deep breath and punched the code for the door as he let the day float away. The lobby was nothing to write home about, too small and plain, but Soraya always decorated it and made it work for them. To Ben, it felt like home.

When Ben opened the door to the theater itself, he was hit with a wall of sound. That was the other thing he loved about the space. The sound was epic. The space was dark, aside from the lights on the stage. The cast was arranged in metal folding chairs, set center stage in a giant U-shape, with the band set up in front of them downstage right. The WAREHOUSE didn't have a traditional pit, and in *Reefer*, they'd eventually be housed on a platform in the upstage right corner.

The cast was on their feet, halfway through singing "Mary Jane/Mary Lane", when Ben paused at the top of the stairs to take in the sound. It would be even better with the mics and speakers added to balance everything. He descended quietly, wincing slightly with every step. Thanks to his extra-long run yesterday, everything hurt. He rounded the corner on the top flight, and saw Manny sitting by himself in the balcony. Instantly he was a bundle of nerves, but he'd come to the realization last night that running away wasn't going to accomplish anything. He just figured he'd try to act normal, and hope that Manny didn't catch on. When Ben stepped onto the balcony landing, Manny saw him and waved him over. Ben carefully navigated the glow-taped rows and settled in next to Manny.

"Hey," he whispered.

"Hi," Manny whispered back.



“What time did you get here?”

“Around four thirty. I figured out the bus.” Manny grinned. They both settled back in their seats, and the singing continued. The crazy thing was that sitting next to him in the dark, Ben felt hyperaware of Manny now. His smell, their shoulders brushing occasionally when they shifted, the way their legs were millimeters away from touching. Ben, who was still in his suit from work, reached up to loosen his tie. When they were on “Little Mary Sunshine”, Manny leaned over to whisper in Ben’s ear, and Ben shivered as Manny’s breath tickled his ear. “They’re really good,” he said. Ben sucked in a breath and bit his lip. He had to stop himself from tilting his head toward Manny’s. Ben nodded, but he couldn’t bring himself to look over at Manny.

During the last chorus of the song, someone sitting in the audience yelled, “Hold.” It was Meghan, the stage manager. She looked at her phone, and then back at the cast. “Take ten minutes, people.” As she spoke, one of her minions, some skinny pigtailed intern whose name Ben had forgotten, ran over and switched on the house lights. Ben blinked as his eyes adjusted.

There was an echoing response from the people on stage of, “Thank you, ten minutes!” At least half the musicians and a few cast members headed outside for a cigarette break. Some of the cast waved to Ben on their way up the stairs. He smiled and waved back.

Ben turned to Manny and said, “Come on, let’s go say hi.” They made their way down to the stage floor towards Soraya. Ben saw several of the people they passed, both men and women, check out Manny, looking back over their shoulders as they walked offstage. Soraya, who was in the midst of an animated conversation with her music director, Jake, waved the two of them over.

“Hey boys,” said Soraya, “So, what do you think?” She opened her arms to give both of them hugs.

Ben squeezed her back and said, “It sounds good.” Manny nodded in agreement.

“So you’re saying Cam is overacting?” she said in jest, loud enough that Cam could hear her.



“I heard that! Don’t make me come over there on my break, bitch!” shouted Cam sarcastically as he ambled toward them. Cam was playing the Lecturer in the show. He was great for the role, talented, and good-looking. The problem, in Ben’s opinion, was that he knew it. He swatted Soraya playfully with his empty water bottle, and turned to Ben and Manny “Hey Green,” he said to Ben, as he looked Manny up and down. “Who’s your friend?” Cam actually batted his eyelashes at Manny, and stuck out his hand. Ben wanted to slap his hands away, but Manny was already grasping Cameron’s hand and smiling. Ben looked around for help, but Soraya was back talking with Jake.

“Cam, meet Manny, Manny, meet Cam.”

“Hi,” said Manny. “Nice to meet you.” Ben noticed the way Cameron’s handshake lasted a few seconds longer, and he gave Manny’s hand a little extra touch before he pulled his hands away. Ben watched Manny’s expression carefully for signs of disgust or disapproval, but it remained impassive.

“So, how do you know Ben?”

“We grew up together. I just moved back to the cities for a job, and this guy,” Manny gestured to Ben, “agreed to put up with me until I can find my own place.”

“Manny’s the new assistant coach for the Gophers,” said Ben.

“A jock?” Cam asked. Manny looked a little amused by the comment, but nodded. To Ben’s dismay, Cam actually knew quite a bit about the Gophers, as a U alum, and apparently still followed their games. They began an animated discussion, which Ben had absolutely nothing to contribute to. About a minute in, while Manny was discussing his plans for winter training, Ben felt a tug on his elbow. He turned to find Soraya looking up at him.

“Hey, can I steal you for a minute?” she asked. Ben looked from Cameron to Manny. He didn’t really want to leave Manny alone with Cam, and Cam was definitely hitting on Manny, which made Ben’s guts twist up. Short of declaring his own attraction to Manny right then and there, there was nothing he could do. He nodded and followed Soraya backstage. They walked back to the prop tables, and Soraya adjusted a couple pieces on the table before turning to face him. “Can I ask you a question?”



Ben nodded.

“Did something happen with Manny?”

“I...” Ben had no idea how to answer that. “No. Nothing happened.” Soraya raised her right eyebrow and stared him down. Ben threw up his hands. “Well, I saw him. In my kitchen, and now I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“You saw Manny in your kitchen, and now you can’t stop thinking about him?”

Ben took a deep breath. “He was in his underwear,” he whispered. He could feel his face starting to heat up.

“So?”

“I um...” Ben floundered. He gave Soraya a *you know exactly what I am talking about* look.

“Oh. Oh my God, you like him!” Soraya beamed. Ben nodded, and blushed. Soraya actually jumped up and down and did a little dance. “Oh my God, Ben that is awesome. I am so excited for you.”

“How am I supposed to be normal around him? Ever since I saw him it’s all I can think about.”

“That good, huh?” Soraya waggled her eyebrows, but stopped her teasing when she saw how red Ben’s face was.

“I’ve never felt like this. About anyone. He’s a guy, and he was my best friend, but I hardly know him anymore. To see him, after ten years, and bam! Just like that. I don’t even know if he’s like that.”

“Gay?”

Ben nodded. He ran his hand through his hair and rubbed his face. “Or even *if* he is, who knows if he would even consider me as anything other than a friend?”

“I don’t know, but I am sure you will find out one way or the other. Sweetie, I’ve known you since college, and I’ve never seen you like this. I know that there probably isn’t much I can say to reassure you, but you are going to be just fine, and no matter what happens, Jonathan and I love you, and we’ll be there for you.”



Ben made a wry face. “How do you think Jonathan’s going to react to this?”

“What, this as in, you liking a boy?” Ben nodded, and Soraya laughed. “He’ll be fine with it. You know, we wondered if you might be gay or bi. You never really seemed that into anyone you were dating.”

Ben hadn’t been really, so there wasn’t much he could say about that. “What do I do?”

“You need to be a good friend, and it will all work out however it’s going to work out. If you need to tell him, tell him, but you need to be prepared for what might happen if you do.” Soraya paused, and looked down at the time on her phone. “I hate to say this, but we have to get back in there.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

*Stirred up like beef chow mein*

Ben worked on the ledger for *Reefer* for the rest of rehearsal. Both he and Manny sat in the main floor seating area, a few seats away from each other. Ben was focused on his work, and wasn't really paying attention to the sing-through. With about thirty minutes left in rehearsal, they stopped briefly because Keith, the actor playing the lead, had to leave to go do a radio interview to promote the show. Soraya instructed Jake to run through a solo number. As the keyboard began the intro to "Lonely Pew", she headed over to Ben. That was when Ben realized that he was being set up.

"Ben?" she said, tapping on top of the screen on his laptop.

"Don't touch my screen." He tried to sound grumpy.

"Ben. Keith had to leave. The cast hasn't had a chance to run 'Tell 'Em the Truth' yet with the pit." It *was* a setup. She was asking him, sneaky minx, in public, in front of Manny, where he couldn't say no without looking like a total jackass. "I was wondering, if you might be willing to sing Keith's part so the cast could run it?" Ben looked at her, trying to decide if it was worth it to argue at all. He looked over at Manny, who was watching the conversation and looked amused.

"Don't look at me. I sound like a tone-deaf Bob Dylan when I sing." Manny grinned.

"You knew he was leaving early," Ben accused.

Soraya nodded. "Of course. I hoped we'd get through everything, but we didn't. I know you know the songs..."

"You know them too."

"Benny, please?" She gave him her sad puppy look, which only worked because Ben knew she would keep making the face until he gave in.

Ben glared at her. He didn't answer, but shut down his laptop, and started to put his things away. As he finished, Maize, the girl playing Mary Lane, sang



the last few notes of “Lonely Pew”. He stood up and walked down onto the stage, then turned to look back at Soraya.

“One time.”

“Fine. Everyone, can I have your attention for a moment? Ben has kindly agreed to sing Keith’s part in ‘Tell ’Em the Truth’ so that we can run it. Thank you, Ben.” Ben could see the glint in Soraya’s eye. She was enjoying this far too much.

“Happy?” He growled, grabbing the binder Meghan held out to him.

“Fuck yes, I’m happy. Now all of you, sing it like you mean it! Jake? From the top, whenever you’re ready.” Soraya sat back in her chair, completely unperturbed. Which was just unfair, since she didn’t have to stand up and sing on the fly in front of a bunch of professionals. Ben closed his eyes. He was too tall to actually play the role, but he knew the song. He listened as Jake gave a couple notes to the cast about crescendos, and stood with the cast as Jake counted them in and played the piano part.

He took his cue from the girl playing Mae, and let go. By the time he made it to the first chorus, he was enjoying the hell out of it. He knew that everyone was watching him because they were curious. Hell, some of them probably didn’t even know he could sing in the first place. He listened to the cast and did his best to blend with them when he was supposed to. When they finished, several of the cast cheered and applauded him. He blushed and looked over to Manny where he sat in the front row. Manny’s eyes were bright, and he clapped as he smiled back at Ben.

“Okay, great everyone. We have about fifteen minutes left. Jake, is there anything else you’d like to run before we stop for the night?”

“Yes, actually,” Jake replied. “I’d like to run ‘Mary Jane/Mary Lane’ at least two more times. The ensemble and cameo lines were a little messy, and the band messed up two of the transitions. However, since we are down a Jimmy, Ben would you be willing to fill in again?”

Soraya looked at Ben. “Your call, hon. You agreed to one number. It’s up to you if you want to do more.”

Ben looked at Jake. “I guess if it’ll help, I can do it.”



Jake smiled, and nodded. "Okay then."

Maize, stood up next to him as Jake gave the cast and band a few notes before they rehearsed the number. Ben was shifting his weight back and forth while he stared down at the music in the binder he was holding. Maize tapped him on the arm. "Hey, thank you," she whispered. "I really wanted to work on this again, so thank you for filling in for Keith."

"I feel a little weird," Ben whispered back. "I'm too tall for Jimmy."

Maize smiled. "You sound good, though. Just have fun."

So he did. Their voices suited each other. By the time they got to Maize singing her first chorus, about halfway through the number, both he and Maize were feeding off of each other's energy, their timing synched, and they nailed the belting. The second time through, Ben actually felt like he knew what he was doing. He'd forgotten how right he felt standing on the stage. When they finished, he closed the binder he was holding and handed it back to Megan. He felt a little dizzy.

"And that's a wrap people! Great work, thank you everyone. Ben, thank you for filling in. What time is call tomorrow?"

"Call is at two for principles, and four for everyone else," said Meghan.

"Thank you, Meghan! See you tomorrow everyone!" Soraya crossed the stage to Ben and stood with her hands on her hips, looking up at him. The house lights came on as the stage lights shut off. Everyone moved around them, packing up their gear and heading out. "Well?"

"Was that for them, or for me?"

"Both."

Ben didn't understand. "Why?"

"Them, because some of them needed a kick in their diva asses. They get lazy and forget that everyone who works here is fucking talented. You put them in their place."

"And me?"

"Because you've forgotten how much you love it, and how goddamned good you are at it."



“Jesus.”

“You’re welcome.” She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. She reached into her bag. “Want to close up for me?” She dropped a massive chunk of keys into his hand. Theater, car, house, everything all hooked together.

“Won’t you need your keys to get home?”

“I’m just going over to The Loop to grab a drink with some of the cast. You can walk over when you’re done and give them back to me.”

“You’re the devil.”

“What? It’s a Friday night, and you could use some R and R. I’ll even buy you and Manny a drink as payment.”

Ben nodded. “Fine. You’re still seriously evil though.”

She paused to look over her shoulder as she started up the stairs. “Seriously awesome. You love me. Farewell darlings, see you in a few!”

After about two minutes, Ben and Manny were the only two people left in the theater. Manny was still sitting in the front row, where he’d been since the break. Ben came over to grab his bag off the seat next to Manny, and Manny reached out and grabbed his right wrist to stop him. “She’s right, you know,” he said, his eyes steady as he looked up at Ben.

The grip on his wrist didn’t hurt, but touching Manny was like having the breath knocked out of him. Or sticking a fork in an electrical socket. “I... you... about?”

“You are insanely goddamn good at it. Jesus, Ben.” Manny stood, but didn’t let go of Ben’s wrist. “You sing and it lights you up. I’ve known you half my life, and I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you so...”

“Shiny?” was Ben’s poor attempt at distracting Manny. He could feel his face flush, and his ears felt hot.

Manny smiled. “Happy,” he said softly. “Animated. You really love it, don’t you?” Ben returned Manny’s gaze and nodded. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Manny released his wrist, and stepped back. “If you love something, maybe you should find a way to do it more often, hmmm?”



“I...” They were right. Both of them. When he thought about singing, he missed it so much his chest hurt. “Maybe I should,” he conceded.

Manny grinned. “Come here, I’m proud of you,” he said, pulling Ben into a bear hug. He crushed Ben’s arms to his side and picked him up to hug him tighter. “I mean it,” he breathed into Ben’s shoulder as he lifted him, “that was incredible.” When Manny released him and stepped back, Ben had to quickly stoop to pick up his bag, which he used to cover the sudden bulge in his dress slacks. He looked up to find Manny watching him, his expression unreadable.

Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, Manny smiled and said, “So, what does closing up entail exactly?”

“We have to check all the rooms to see everyone’s out, make sure all the lights are off, and check that all three doors are locked.” Ben handed Manny the keys and grabbed the rest of his stuff.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

*Pleasure mixed with pain*

Aside from the fact that wandering through a theater with all of the lights off had given Ben all sorts of ideas about what he'd like to do in the dark empty theater, alone with Manny, the actual locking up part was pretty uneventful.

The Loop, which was just a short walk from the theater, was pretty well packed for a Friday night. The music was loud, not at impossible-to-talk levels, but you still had to talk pretty loudly to be heard. Ben spotted Soraya right off, sitting with some of the cast members at a booth near the back. About halfway to the table, Manny grabbed his shoulder to stop him. Ben turned his head and looked at his friend, startled, but Manny gave him a small smile and said, "Hey, what kind of beer do you want?"

"A Surly."

"Got it, be right back." Manny patted him once and was gone. Ben made his way over to the booth and plopped down on the U-shaped bench next to Soraya.

"Your keys, milady."

"Thank you, kind sir."

"So, is your Jonathan joining us tonight?"

"Nah. I texted him before, but he's going to have to go in to the office all this weekend to work on some kind of deposition, so he's at home."

"I don't know how you guys do it, I really don't."

"Hard work and sheer stubbornness. Plus I'm adorable, so that helps." Soraya grinned. "We just fit. I don't know any better way to explain it. That's what makes it worth dealing with our shit schedules, and all our other bullshit."

"You LURVE each other!" Maize interjected from the other side of the table. Soraya smiled at her.



Then Manny was there, with who else but Cameron trailing along behind him. Ben gritted his teeth. Cam was getting on his nerves, the jerkface. Manny set Ben's beer down and to Ben's surprise, slid into the seat next to Ben, leaving Cameron to grab the seat across from him. There were enough of them squeezed into the booth now that Ben's thigh was pressed right against Manny's. This was going to make for an interesting evening. *Fuck it*, he thought. He turned to Manny, said, "Hey, wanna drive us home?" and gulped his beer. Manny's eyes widened, and then he grinned.

\*\*\*\*

Ben was about halfway through his fourth beer when he realized that: one, he hadn't had any dinner; two, he was a total lightweight; and three, Cameron Lennox was a giant turd.

Not that Cam had done anything other than talk to Manny, but yeah, GIANT turd. Ben was actually tipsy enough that he came pretty close to telling Cam this. Ben was also embarrassingly, a cuddly drunk, and right around the point where he started telling everyone, aside from Cam, how awesome they were, and alternating between hugging Soraya and Manny who were on either side of him, Manny caught on and ordered him a pizza off of the menu before the kitchen closed.

When the pizza came, Ben ate most of it while he finished off his fifth beer. He laid his head back against the seat, tummy full, and sleepy. It was a good thing that Manny had ordered the pizza, he thought. Manny was nice. "You're nice," he declared. Leaning sideways he nuzzled his head on Manny's shoulder and closed his eyes for a minute.

When Ben opened his eyes he realized it had been longer than a minute. Several of the cast had taken off, and Soraya was wrestling her way around to the other side of the table, where Cam, who was still there, stood up so she could exit. He lifted his head from Manny's shoulder and yawned.

"Hey Sleeping Beauty," said Soraya.

Ben blinked. The world felt fuzzy. "You leaving?" he asked, yawning again.

"Yeah. Jonathan promised me waffles for breakfast if I made it home before one."



“Mmmm waffles. Waffles are good.” He reached out to Soraya. “Hey. Soraya?”

“What Benny?” She leaned in past Manny to give him an awkward hug.

“Thank you for making me sing.”

“Welcome, baby.”

Soraya left. Manny turned to Ben. “Hey buddy, how’re you doing?”

Ben had to think about that for a minute. “Sleepy. Less drunk than I was.”

“You ready to go, or did you want to stay a little bit longer?”

“Go.”

“Okay buddy, let’s get you home.”

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The temperature outside the bar had dropped at least fifteen degrees since they’d walked over to The Loop nearly three hours ago, and the wind chill had to be below zero. Within a minute of walking in the brutal cold, Ben was way closer to sober than he really wanted to be. They didn’t talk on their way back to Ben’s car. It was just too damn cold.

They were rushing by the time they rounded the block back to Ben’s car. Manny hit the button to open the doors and they piled in. They were both shivering.

“Heat please,” Ben chattered, as Manny started the car. “Brrrrr.”

“Fuck, you’re funny when you drink, you know that?” Manny turned up the heat full blast, and sat back to wait for the car to warm up. “You just say whatever you’re thinking. It’s a nice change.”

Ben blinked. “From what?” he asked.

“Sober Ben. You edit everything carefully before you say it out loud. I can’t tell what you’re thinking half the time.”

Ben’s snort turned into a giggle. “That’s a good thing, trust me. I think things that you shouldn’t know about.” God. That *was* out loud.

“I’m sure that’s true, but Ben, there are things that I haven’t told you about myself, because I wasn’t sure how you’d react.”



“What, like your tattoos?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your tattoos. S’okay. I saw them in the kitchen. They’re nice.” They were nice. Smooth ink over ripped olive skin. The largest design on Manny’s right side disappearing into tight pink briefs. Ben licked his lips.

Manny blinked, and paused. “I’ll tell you about my tattoos some other time. Well actually, there is one that you didn’t see that I’ll tell you about.” Ben looked at Manny. Manny was sitting with his hands clasped in his lap, his eyes focused on the top of the steering wheel. “One of my tats is a star with a pride rainbow inside of it.” He turned his head and looked directly into Ben’s eyes, searching Ben’s face for any type of reaction.

It took Ben a few seconds to remember what a pride rainbow *meant*. “Oh,” he said when it finally clicked in his somewhat addled brain. Manny was gay. Or at least he was pretty sure that was what Manny was hinting at.

“See, you’re doing it again. How am I supposed to interpret that?”

“What?”

“*Oh*. What does that mean?”

Ben wasn’t really sure how to answer, so he didn’t answer.

“Ben, I’m gay, and if it makes you uncomfortable, I can go to a hotel, until I find a place.”

“No.” Ben shook his head vehemently. “You don’t need to go to a hotel.”

“No?”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“You’re sure? ’Cause you seem freaked out.”

“I’m sure.” He was freaking out, but not because Manny was gay, but because the way he felt about Manny meant that he probably was gay too, and *how did he tell Manny without telling him that he couldn’t stop thinking about him?* “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“It took me being in the closet for all of college, and one completely screwed-up relationship with a former teammate to realize that I didn’t want to



lie about it anymore. I got the star tattoo when I was eighteen, but I only added the rainbow inside about a year ago. That's when I told my family, and started telling everyone. With you, I hadn't seen you in so long, I didn't know how to start. I guess I was just waiting to tell you in person."

They were both quiet for a few moments. Ben's mind was racing, trying to figure out what this could mean for them. "Manny?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you told me."

Manny smiled, his dark eyes bright as he reached out and patted Ben's mitten with his gloved hand. "I'm glad too. Should we head home?" Manny pulled out of the parking spot and navigated through the icy, mostly empty streets of Minneapolis, and back to the highway. As he pulled onto the interstate, he said, "So, Cam asked me out."

*Damn. Fucking Cameron Lennox. Sticking his stupid button nose, and his slick hair, and his unnaturally long eyelashes where they didn't belong.* "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What did you say?"

"I said I wouldn't mind grabbing a drink sometime. He gave me his number, so I guess it's up to me now."

"Oh."

"I swear Ben, if I live with you long enough, I am going to break you of that habit. I fucking mean it. I'll just keep asking questions till you say what you really think."

Ben groaned "Sorry."

"Don't *sorry* me, mister. Starting now, until we get home, I want you to think about what you actually wanted to say, instead of *Oh*. Then we're going to go in the kitchen, I'm going to get you some water and some aspirin, and you're going to tell me. Got it?"

"Fuck."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

*Touch me and kill my pain*

As instructed, Ben was silent for the rest of the ride home. He was thinking so hard that he didn't even realize that they were home until Manny opened his passenger door and shook his shoulder. "C'mon Ben, we're home." He handed Manny his bag, and managed to make it from the garage to the kitchen. He removed all his winter gear and plopped down on one of the bar chairs at the kitchen island. Manny was right behind him. He poured Ben a glass of water, and then turned to the cupboards. "I think tea sounds good right now, don't you?"

Ben took a big gulp of his water, and nodded. "Sleepytime, please."

Manny grabbed Sleepytime for Ben, and a red chai for himself. He set the teakettle on the stove, and then leaned across the island so that they were face to face. This felt familiar. Then Ben remembered.

"Your mom used to make us tea."

Manny smiled. "And cookies, yeah. She still does when I visit." He studied Ben. "How are you feeling? You were pretty far gone for a while there."

Ben blushed. "The cold sobered me up. I'm almost back to normal. Thank you for taking care of me."

"Anytime."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Your parents, were they okay when you told them about you?"

"There was a lot of lapsed-Catholic guilt, mostly about not having kids, but once they got past that and the initial shock wore off, they were fine. It helped that my sister Gina gave birth to twins about a month after I told them. Now when I call, my mother demands to know if I have met a nice young man yet."

"You could always adopt, or use in vitro."



“I know, but I don’t want to give her any ideas. Otherwise it will be all I ever hear about. The *we want what’s best for you* and the *we want you to be happy in only the way that a committed relationship can make you happy* lectures of guilt are bad enough.” Manny rolled his eyes. “So, you gonna tell me what you were thinking before?”

“I...” Ben turned bright red. The teakettle whistled, and Manny signaled for him to wait for a second while he filled the cups and placed them on the island. He gave a gesture for Ben to continue. “I was thinking that Cam is kind of a dick.” He winced, not sure what reaction Manny was going to have to his comment.

“A dick huh?” Manny grinned and poked Ben in the shoulder. “Well if I do decide to go for a drink with him, and he does turn out to be a dick, you can say I told you so.”

“Or, you could just go have a drink with someone who’s not a dick.”

“Ben, after spending years of my life lusting after unavailable men, and hiding in the closet, the idea of going out in public to have a drink, with someone who is interested in me, even with someone who might be a dick, is refreshing.”

Ben stopped himself from saying *Oh*, out loud again. Instead he actually asked the question that he knew he had no right to ask, but knew that he was just shy enough of sober to get away with asking. “How long?” he blurted.

“How long what?”

“How long have you been lusting after unavailable men?”

Manny looked startled. “Ben, I don’t think...”

“Look, you brought it up. What does that even mean anyway? Unavailable men. Like married?”

“No, not married, thank God.”

Ben blinked. “Well, what then?”

“I shouldn’t have said anything. Just drop it all right?” Ben was watching Manny shrink in on himself. He tightened his muscled arms and curled himself over the counter. He wouldn’t look up. Ben stared at the short black hair on top of Manny’s head, appalled. He had known it was none of his business, but



he hadn't expected the question to hurt. He reached his hand across the counter and laid it on top of Manny's clenched hands.

"Manny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." Ben floundered. "I'm sorry."

Manny shook his head. "You couldn't know."

They were both silent for a moment.

Then Manny took a deep breath and continued, "I'm afraid of what you'll think if I answer. Ben, if I answer, I need you to know one thing. If you hear what I have to say, and you want me to leave, I will leave." Ben tried to interrupt him, but Manny waved his hand to shush him. "Let me finish, this is hard for me to say to you."

"You don't have to..."

"When I was thirteen, I had this monster crush on my best friend. Who was a guy, and unavailable."

God, if there was ever a time to respond to something somebody said with an *Oh*, that was it. *Oh shit. Oh holy shit.* "You liked me?" Ben whispered.

Manny walked around to the side of the island where Ben was sitting and pulled out the other stool. He moved slowly and carefully as if he wasn't sure how Ben would react. "Yeah," he replied.

"But..."

"But what?"

"But I wasn't. Unavailable, I mean."

"What?"

"I wasn't unavailable. Not to you. At least I don't think I was. I just didn't know that I was. Available, I mean. It kind of took me a long time to figure it out."

"Are you trying to tell me that you're... that you like..."

Ben nodded. "Um. Gay or bi? I think so. I mean I haven't actually been with a man, but I'm sure. I know I had no fucking clue at thirteen, but maybe if you had told me about you, or stuck your tongue down my throat, I think I would have figured it out."



Manny was staring at Ben, his mouth open and his dark eyes wide as he leaned forward on his stool. Then Manny growled, “And now?” He leaned even closer in to Ben. “What would happen if I did that to you now?”

Ben still didn’t have the words to say that he’d been drawn to Manny since he got off the plane, that he liked him, and that he was attracted to Manny more than he’d ever been attracted to anybody, so instead, he kissed him. He leaned forward on his stool and practically fell into Manny’s lap as their lips slammed together. Fuck. Manny jumped a little when Ben’s lips fell onto his, but then he reached up and took Ben’s head in both his hands and kissed the hell out of him.

Oh. Kissing Manny was perfection. Kissing had never felt like this before. Ben wanted to touch him everywhere at once. He brought his hands up Manny’s sides to trace over Manny’s chiseled abs. He moaned, and Manny stood up from the stool and brought their hips together. They both gasped. Manny’s length was pressing into his thigh, and Ben’s was pressing into Manny’s belly. He broke the kiss, and pulled back to look at Manny. They were both breathing hard. Manny’s hand stayed lodged in Ben’s sandy hair. Manny’s eyes were wide, and Ben saw a hint of fear there. He reached out and cupped Manny’s jaw and caressed the skin on his face and neck. Manny’s eyes closed and he shivered.

“Ben,” he whispered.

“I’ve never done this with a man before,” Ben murmured, leaning in and pressing his lips to Manny’s jaw line. “But I want to with you. Can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Never stopped thinking of you. Just thought I’d never have this. Ben...” Manny groaned as Ben nipped at a spot behind his ear, “If this is just fooling around for you, you need to stop now. I’ve thought about this for ten years, and if you don’t mean it, then I don’t want to do this.”

Ben pulled back to look at his friend. “I mean it. I do. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I have never felt this way before.”

Manny looked into his eyes but didn’t answer. Manny just pounced. Ben found himself pinned up against the island countertop as Manny took control.



He kissed Ben and pressed against him. They kissed until Ben felt like his legs couldn't hold him up anymore, and then, as Ben sunk to the floor, still kissing Manny and pulling him down by his shirt, Manny started to explore. He untucked Ben's shirt, unbuttoned it, and pulled off his tie. Ben ran his hands under Manny's shirt over his muscled stomach and up his back to his shoulder blades, as Manny sucked on his neck and rubbed his nipples into hard nubs under his undershirt. Manny kissed him again, sealing their mouths together. As he continued their kiss, he reached down to grab Ben's ass. Manny ground against him in a steady rhythm. Ben moaned, and his movements became jerkier and more frantic, as he pressed his length against Manny's. He pulled Manny down on top of him, as Manny tried frantically to undress them both enough to release their cocks. When he finally did, Manny reached up to kiss Ben hard before wrapping his fist around both of their silken shafts. The combination of the heat, the smoothness of being pressed together, and the rough grasp of Manny's hand, was like nothing he'd ever felt before. With just a few strokes of Manny's fist, they both came hard and shaking, their cries of relief echoing in the quiet kitchen.

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## EPILOGUE

### *Loved by...*

The best part, Ben realized, was watching Manny sleep. Manny still had the same look on his face that he'd had when he slept as a child. So beautiful and so peaceful. He always slept on his stomach, covers kicked off, his bare ass proudly displaying a rainbow star on the side of his left cheek. Ben had spent hours kissing that star. It was his favorite of all of Manny's tattoos, and that was saying something, because Ben loved them all.

Manny never left to find his own place. He had moved into Ben's room after that night in December and never left. They'd had to work on the moving in part a bit. After a few rather heated discussions, Ben had gotten Manny to agree not to leave his shoes in the middle of the floor, and Manny had drawn the line at organizing his socks into cubbies. His drawers were a jumbled mess in Ben's opinion, but in spite of their completely opposite philosophies of organization, they got along fine. Now, almost a year and a half later, Ben could hardly believe how much his life had changed.

The alarm blared, interrupting Ben's reverie and eliciting a groan from Manny, who rolled over and watched as Ben leaned over to shut off the alarm.

"Hey," said a very groggy Manny.

"Hey," whispered Ben as he leaned over to press a soft kiss to his lover's lips. Boyfriend. That had been strange to say at first. They quickly figured out that rather than telling everyone they knew, they simply held hands whenever they were out together, and let people draw their own conclusions.

"How much time do we have?" Manny murmured, as he pressed his body against Ben's, his morning wood pressing into Ben's hip. Ben grinned, and turned his head to find Manny's lips again.

"Enough. If we hurry."

\*\*\*\*

They were only fifteen minutes late to help the band set up for the wedding reception, and that was Manny's fault, because Ben ended up with come in his



hair, so they'd had to shower, which led to another round of sex in the shower, with Ben bent over and Manny pounding into him till they were both sated and completely out of hot water.

One of the other things that had changed in the last seventeen months was that Manny had made him sing. The first time that Jonathan's band was short a singer, Manny volunteered him, made him do it, and he'd been helping out ever since. Today both of them were filling in, Manny on guitar and Ben on vocals. Ben loved it. Being able to perform even occasionally had made such a difference for Ben. He hadn't admitted that it was something he needed, but Manny had understood. Manny knew him better than he knew himself. Getting to see Manny all day in a tux a couple times a month didn't hurt either.

The reception was for Maize and her new husband, Vince, both actors, so the hall was full of friends and acquaintances that Ben knew from all his work with Soraya. As Ben sang and the band performed, the guests had a blast dancing to the old songs. On their second set break, Ben noticed two other familiar faces in the crowd. He made his way over to them.

"Mom, Ronnie, what are you doing here?" He hugged them both, but looked at them suspiciously. They both looked guilty. What was going on?

"Soraya called us, dear." His mother replied, as if that explained everything. Right on cue, Soraya walked out of the crowd, and right up to Ben's mother. She let out a little squeal and hugged both of them.

"I'm so glad you guys could make it!" She crowed. "Ben, why don't you go get these two lovely ladies a drink?"

Ben raised his eyebrow at her, but wandered over to the bar across the dance floor to do just that, when he heard a familiar voice on the microphone.

"Uh. Hi everyone, could I have your attention for a few minutes? I asked the bride and groom for permission to say a few words." Manny was standing on the empty stage, a microphone in his hand. "First of all, I want to say congratulations to Maize and Vince. Maize I have known since I moved back to Minnesota about a year and a half ago, and I am thrilled to be here today and honored that she and Vince asked us to perform at their wedding. Maize and Vince, may you have a lifetime of happiness. I'm here, well I'm sure all of



you heard the news that Governor Dayton signed a bill into law this Tuesday that will allow same-sex couples the right to marry in the state of Minnesota, starting on August first of this year. In light of this news, I have a question I need to ask someone who is very important to me. Ben, could you come up here please?"

Ben had been standing stock still at the bar since Manny had begun speaking. All eyes were on him as he crossed up to the stage. Manny reached into his pocket, pulled out a small box, and knelt on the edge of the stage. With the height of the platform, Manny's head came up to Ben's shoulder. There were gasps from the crowd. He set the box down and reached for Ben's hand. Ben stared into those warm brown eyes and gripped Manny's hand like it was the only thing holding him up. "Ben Green, I have known you for most of my life, and I would willingly spend the rest of my days at your side, married or not. I love you with all my heart, and I had to ask now that I can, will you marry me?"

He let go of Ben's hand and reached for the box and handed it to Ben. Inside were two wide, simple platinum bands. Ben's eyes filled with tears as he looked at them. He looked up at Manny, threw himself into Manny's arms, and said one word.

"Yes."

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Penny Wilder is an avid reader and sometimes reviewer of romance and erotic novels. She lives near Minneapolis, Minnesota with her amazingly supportive husband and three cats. She works for a nonprofit by day, and by night, in addition to reading way too many e-books, moonlights as a blogger, artist, illustrator, and also sometimes as a business manager for a fledgling theater company. She has spent a good deal of her life working in theater, either onstage as a performer, or backstage doing just about every job imaginable. Her love of writing dates back almost as far as her love of reading.*

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# LOST TIME

By Parker Williams

## **Photo Description**

The black and white photograph shows a bed, from directly above, with two young men all the way over to the right side, visible from the waist up. Their torsos are bare. They lie facing one another, and their embrace is tender and loving more than it is passionate.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*I was hoping you could tell me the story of these two beautiful men?*

*They have known each other for many years. They were close friends for a long time, but life just got in the way and their competitive careers and busy lives meant they somehow fell out of touch. They never forgot about each other, and they have both been waiting for this moment for years.*

*I'd like to see an emotional reunion, maybe a hint of hurt/comfort in there somewhere if you can fit it in, but most of all just a whole lot of love (I'm a hopeless romantic!).*

*Please, **no** paranormal elements (I'd like a contemporary romance) and preferably no BDSM either, and I would really appreciate a wonderful HEA. If nothing else, please just give me a happy ending. :D I know I'm requesting an emotional story, but I'd like it not to be too angsty, if possible.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lauren*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, first time, restaurant owner, teacher, hurt/comfort, HEA

**Word count:** 16,388

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# LOST TIME

**By Parker Williams**

Kurt Danvers was born three days before me. We grew up in the same neighborhood, went to the same schools, enjoyed the same things. We became fast friends, and our parents often remarked how well we seemed to fit together. There were sleepovers, there were play dates. We were closer than best friends, even closer than brothers. It was almost to the point where we couldn't exist without the other being nearby. Kurt spent a lot of time at my house, just like I did at his. Our folks eventually gave up trying to separate us, realizing it wasn't worth the effort. When his parents wanted to take him on a trip, he cried so hard he got sick, because he wasn't going to be with me. When I had to go to the hospital to have my tonsils taken out, they had to bend the rules to allow Kurt to be near me because I threw a tantrum of epic proportions.

While we were in grade school, Kurt assumed the role of my protector. Anyone who had something to say to me had to go through him first. It was something he took very seriously. It wasn't that he was bigger than I was, but he had a personality that just screamed he was in charge and people respected that. Kurt was a very demonstrative friend. He'd have no problems with displays of affection. He'd put his arm over my shoulder while we walked or hug me in front of other people. He never cared what people would think. The only opinion that mattered to him was mine.

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Junior high school, everything started going to hell. It started to dawn on me that I was different. While other guys constantly talked about girls, what they'd do with them, what they liked about them, about how much they wished they could actually *be* with them, I stayed quiet. I never had those feelings. I mean, I had a couple of friends who were girls, but never a girlfriend. My parents told me I was probably a "late bloomer", but I didn't think that was it at all. I was happy with what I had. When Kurt was around, I didn't need anyone else. Hell, I didn't want to be with anyone else. If we went out with friends, I always found myself wishing they weren't there.



A bunch of us went to the beach one day. The weather was amazing. Everyone was splashing in the surf, hanging out together. Except me. I sat on a log just taking it all in. Kurt tried to get me to come with him to join in the fun, but I begged off, saying I was fine where I was. He smiled at me and sat down on the log, his shoulders touching mine. I told him he should go have fun, because I wasn't really in a fun mood. He bumped shoulders with me and said, "You're such an idiot. I came here to be with you, so where you are is where the fun is." I got a funny feeling in my stomach when he said that. I also kind of got hard, but there was no way a guy wanted to say that to his friend.

Kurt was always quick with a comment, a smile, or a laugh. People were drawn to him like metal shavings to a magnet. He would get invited to parties or over to other people's houses. Hell, some girls even worked up the nerve to ask him out. When he'd get asked over he would ask me if I wanted to come along. I was at the point in my life where I started becoming an introvert. Groups made me nervous so I'd tell him to go ahead and I would see him the next day. Without fail, he'd show up at my house, ready for a night of watching television or just hanging out. When I asked him why, he would give me this look where he'd arch an eyebrow and glare at me like I had just asked the stupidest question known to man. I guess that was what he thought doubled as an answer. It wasn't long before I stopped asking why and just relished having him near me. Whenever he was, I'd always get a fluttery stomach and a goofy grin. I wasn't sure why, but it made me feel good.

\*\*\*\*

By the time we started high school, it was fairly obvious I was never going to be a part of the "in-crowd". I had neither the money nor the jock reputation. Kurt could have easily been part of that group, but he chose to stay close to me. He and I had so much in common—we both loved *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the cartoon, not the lame movie, we enjoyed the same music, but most of all, we really just enjoyed spending time together. We were the best of friends. There wasn't a time you wouldn't find us doing something. It didn't matter if it was exciting or mundane; all that we cared about was the fact that we were doing it together. I cherished every moment I had with him, every glance, every smile. Even his ridiculous braying laugh was precious to me. I



kept them all in my memory because they sustained me in the odd moments when he wasn't around. We shared everything together, except for the one thing I knew he would never understand.

I was hopelessly in love with my best friend.

Throughout high school, Kurt was my rock. Never once had he given up his role as my white knight. When my parents divorced, he was the one I turned to. When my dog, Patches, died, Kurt was the one who comforted me, holding me while I cried myself to sleep. He never judged me, never made me feel less than important in his eyes. When our prom came, Kurt asked me to double-date with him and the Delaney twins. It was weird because he didn't leave my side the whole night. Jessica and Janice never once said anything about it. Even the few times we all went to dance, it was almost like he was glued to my hip. That night we dropped the girls off at their house and went back to mine, where Kurt spent the night. When I asked him why he hadn't gotten a hotel room for him and Jess, he smacked me in the back of the head and told me not to ask such stupid questions.

Anyone who couldn't see his beauty was obviously blind. I knew Kurt was destined for great things and I could only hope I'd be there when they happened.

As you're growing up, you start to think things will never be different. The people in your life will always be there for you. It's a hard lesson to learn that growth means change. When it came time to go to college, I got accepted to Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, where I was going to study special education. Kurt got accepted to Michigan State University, to study restaurant management. He had high hopes of eventually opening his own place. The day came for us to head off on our own paths, and it was a tearful goodbye for us both.

"God, Alex, I can't believe this is it," he mumbled into my neck. I pulled him tighter against me, not wanting to break the connection. His warm breath just below my ear caused my skin to pebble. We had hugged each other often over the years, but never like this. Not one where we knew that once we let go, we would no longer have each other to fall back on.

"I don't want to lose touch. Please tell me that's not going to happen," I begged him, stepping back to look into his sweet chocolate eyes.



“Naw, man. We’re good. We’ll e-mail, text, call, whatever it takes we’ll stay in touch. You’re my best friend. Losing you would be like losing a part of myself. I don’t think I could live without you. You know that, right?”

I nodded, still unwilling to let go. Kurt’s mother’s voice broke us apart, though. “Come on, Kurt. Time to go.”

He pulled away from me, giving me an intense look before he leaned forward and put his hand on my face. I resisted the urge to nestle my face in his palm. “Don’t let anyone ever sell you short, Alex. I will always have your back.” With those words he leaned in and kissed my cheek, then ran off to the car where his mom waited for him. I watched as they drove away, my cheek tingling where his lips had pressed against it.

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My freshman year was tough. The course work left little time for me to do anything outside of academics. I was determined to buckle down and graduate with honors. I wanted everyone to be proud of my accomplishment. Well, mostly I wanted Kurt to be proud of me. His opinion was always the one that mattered the most.

True to his word, we kept in constant contact. Not a single day went by when I wouldn’t find a text message on my phone sending me encouragement or praise, or even just a smiley face. Something to let me know that he was thinking about me. It didn’t matter how crappy life got, he always had my back, just like he promised.

I can’t point to the first day when I didn’t hear from him. I was so busy with finals, I’m not sure I even noticed. I sent him a couple of messages before I finally heard back. He was in the same boat I was. College was a lot more difficult than high school and it required a lot more attention to stay on top. We agreed we wouldn’t panic if we didn’t hear from each other for a while, knowing that our courses were tough and the professors demanding.

Over the next six months the messages came with less frequency. There would be one every few days. Then a week or so would go by before either of us had the chance. Toward the end it would be one, maybe two a month. Then they stopped coming altogether. We’d drifted apart, pulled in different



directions by our careers and the lives we'd chosen to lead. When classes weren't in session, I attended lectures, took labs, whatever I could do to keep my grade point average high. This left me no time for socializing, but not a day went by that I didn't think about Kurt, remembering all the things that made him special to me. Not a moment went by that I didn't regret not taking the time to give him a call. Before I realized it, graduation was upon me. I was excited, receiving my bachelor's degree at the top of my class, and I wanted to share the news with my best friend. I pulled out my phone and dialed his number.

"Hello?"

"Kurt? It's me, Alex."

"I'm sorry. I think you have the wrong number."

I repeated the number back, praying I had dialed wrong.

"Yeah, that's this number, but there isn't anyone here named Kurt. Sorry."

The man on the other end disconnected and I was left staring at my phone. I could feel the warmth of the tears streaming down my cheeks and I realized that with everything I gained, what I had lost was so much more valuable to me.

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I gave thought to staying in school to earn my Master's degree, but decided it wasn't worth the extra money. What I really wanted to do was find a school that I could teach in. The odd thing was, as eager as I had been to leave home, I really wanted to get back there. Even though both my parents had moved to different states, Evanston, Illinois would always be my home.

After moving back, I contacted a few grade schools in the area and found one that had a position available. I interviewed and was told they would contact me. Three weeks before the start of the school year I got the call. The job was mine. It wasn't an easy job, but working with children that have learning disabilities was rewarding in its own way. To see the smiles on their faces when they succeeded made everything worthwhile. Well, almost.

About eight months into the school year, I had called in a parent for a conference one day. His son's grades had begun to slip and I needed support



from his family. Jake Tanner was a big man, broad shoulders, misty blue eyes and a voice that could seriously melt butter.

“Mr. Tanner, thank you for coming. I’m Alex Jeffers, Logan’s teacher. I know it’s difficult finding the time to come see me.”

He leaned his lanky frame forward in the chair, a bright smile creasing his lips. “I appreciate your time, Mr. Jeffers. I know Logan is a handful.”

“Alex, please. Don’t get me wrong, Mr. Tanner—”

He held up a hand, “I’ll call you Alex, but I need you to call me Jake.”

I grinned and gave him a quick nod. “I was wondering if you might know what caused this sudden change in Logan’s behavior? He’s always been such a bright boy.”

Jake scrunched his face a bit, his pert nose wrinkling. “His mama and I got divorced about five months ago. Life at home has been rough for us this past year. When she finally moved out, she didn’t want to take Logan with her. It’s just been me and the boy since then.”

“Yeah, I can see how that would be hard. It also goes a long way toward explaining the way Logan’s been acting out. I think we can probably work together to give him the guidance he needs right now. If you’re free any time this week we could get together to talk further.”

Jake stood. “How about some dinner? Logan’s with my mama tonight, so if you’re available....”

I looked Jake over, trying to figure out if he was flirting with me. He was sexy as all hell, but he just didn’t do it for me. I must have been quiet for a bit too long, because his eyebrow arched.

Jake’s face flushed. “Oh geez, I’m sorry. That didn’t come out the way it sounded. Just friends. Promise. Nothing against you, but I’m honestly not looking for anything else.”

Decision made, I grabbed my jacket. “Let’s go.”

We took Jake’s car, chatting as we drove. He told me about the breakup with his wife, how the stresses of raising Logan got to be too much for her to handle. While I was in school, I had done a project about the pressures on the family of special needs students and understood what he was saying.



“Shannon, my ex, had these big dreams of a perfect family. When Logan was born those went up in smoke. She came to resent him, and I couldn’t have that. My son was too important to let her hurt his self-esteem, so she had a choice. Therapy or divorce. She chose the divorce.”

We drove the rest of the way in silence. I had nothing I could say, but it wasn’t awkward between us. When we got to the restaurant, Jake led the way. The host approached us, acknowledged Jake by name, and directed us to a table in a walled-off section toward the back of the room, handing us the blue leather-bound menus.

“I take it you come here quite often?” I gave a chuckle.

“We *used* to come here a lot. It was Logan’s favorite restaurant, but since the divorce he refuses to eat here.”

After we ordered our meals, Jake and I focused on Logan’s needs. We had gotten the basic outline of a plan, when I heard something that my mind told me couldn’t be true. After I heard it again, my head popped up like a freaking jack-in-the-box. A loud, braying laugh filled the room. I scanned the people until I saw him. I rubbed my eyes, certain that I was seeing things, but I wasn’t. Across the room stood the man that I hadn’t seen in years. My former best friend, Kurt Danvers.

“Alex? Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I slumped back down into the chair. I couldn’t breathe. My heart was hammering a staccato beat, thumping hard against my chest. I heard my wheezing breath. Jake grabbed my arm and shook me firmly, bringing me back to my senses. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. Throwing sixty dollars on the table, I apologized and told him I had to leave. Before he could reply, I stood and fled the restaurant. I heard Jake call my name, but all I could think of doing was getting out of there. I jumped into a cab and had it take me back to school where my car waited.

Returning home, I paced my apartment, trying to decide if I’d made the right choice. I could have easily gone up to Kurt and demanded to know what happened. Why he had abandoned me without so much as a call. Why he threw me away. I knew it wasn’t logical, the hurt and pain that I felt. I was just



as much to blame for our loss of contact, but he never even had enough respect to tell me that we weren't friends anymore. I undressed for bed, pulled the blanket up, and as the memories of our friendship played through my mind, I sobbed myself to sleep.

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For most of the next day, I was a zombie in class. Having gotten almost no sleep, I was barely surviving on caffeine. It took an inner strength not to snap at my kids. They were a lively bunch and I loved them all, but my mind was elsewhere. When Logan came into class that afternoon, he handed me a long, white envelope.

"It's from my dad," he informed me.

I opened it, prepared to be cussed out at the very least, but what was in the letter surprised me.

*Alex,*

*I'm not sure why you left so suddenly last night. I certainly hope it was nothing I did. The owner of the restaurant came over to ensure that everything was okay. He said he knew you and asked if we were on a date. I laughed and told him no, that you were my son's teacher and he smiled, said thank you and told me that our dinner was complimentary. I'll try to get in touch with you soon so we can discuss our plan for Logan.*

*Thank you,*

*Jake*

Kurt had asked about me? Why would he care? He was the one who'd left me. I thanked Logan and pushed the envelope into my pants pocket. I had a class to teach and no time to worry about Kurt. Though I admit, the thought did occupy a corner in the back of my mind and might have made me smile. Just a little.

Three o'clock couldn't come quickly enough. I needed some time to sort out how I was feeling. After the last student left the room, I grabbed my bag and papers, intent on heading for the door. When I turned around, I had to



catch my breath. There stood Kurt, looking every bit as handsome as the last time I'd seen him nearly five years ago. His smile radiated through me and all I could feel was warmth. Damn him.

"Sorry about your dinner," he said. "I brought you back your money. You shouldn't have to pay for a meal you didn't eat."

He took a couple steps toward me; the look on his face seemed to be one of amusement. How *dare* he smirk at me like that. And how dare my body respond. He reached for me, forcing me to duck under his arms.

I didn't want to talk to him now. I needed some time to figure out my feelings and I couldn't do that with him being so close to me. "What do you want, Kurt? What are you doing here?"

The smirk fell from his face. "What happened, Alex? Why did you cut me out of your life?"

My jaw fell open and I sputtered, "Me? Cut *you* out? I called you and found someone else had your number. Not a message from you. Not an e-mail. Nothing."

He dropped his eyes. "I thought you wanted it that way. After two months of you not answering my messages, I just assumed you were done with me. I can't tell you how much it hurt to think that—"

My stomach heaved. "No, you can't pull that on me. You could have found me. I'm on Facebook. It's not like I went into hiding. You didn't even try," I replied sadly.

He took another step toward me. He never once raised his voice. He asked quietly, "And *you* did? Can you look me in the eye and tell me you tried to find me?"

He was right. I knew he was. My damned ego wouldn't let it go, though. I'd hurt for years thinking he had done this to me on purpose, and there was no way I could just let it go.

I wanted to throw my arms around him, beg him to forgive me for my stupidity, but I didn't. Instead, I made things worse. "You said you came here to give me back my money. Thanks. You can give it to me and go now. It was



good to see you. Maybe we can do it again in another five years.” I wanted my voice to sound firm, but I knew it was quivering.

He shook his head and regarded me with that cocky grin again. “No, I don’t think so. When I saw you yesterday, all those years melted away. It was like I’d never been apart from you. You will always be my best friend. Despite what happened between us, you and I aren’t done. We’re going to be together again. You can count on it.” Long, thick fingers pushed an envelope across the desk in front of me. “I’ll be seeing you, Alex.”

When he walked out the door, I exhaled loudly. What I couldn’t tell him was seeing him at the restaurant brought all those old feelings back in a tidal wave of emotion. I still yearned to love him. Every guy I tried to go out with, not one of them could match up to Kurt. Not one could cause my hands to sweat and my stomach to get butterflies with just a quirk of an eyebrow or a grin aimed at me. I picked up the envelope and thrust it into my pocket. Walking through the door I caught a whiff of his cologne and groaned. Regardless of what my mind tried to tell me, my body still wanted him. I knew this wasn’t going to end well. No matter what, at some point he was going to pick up on my attraction to him and that would probably end our friendship, despite what he said.

I approached my car, a beat-up Toyota Camry, popped the lock and was about to slide into the driver’s seat when I noticed a small package on the hood. It was wrapped in white tissue paper and had a note held on by a thin blue ribbon. I snatched it off, pulled the note from under the ribbon and opened it.

*I didn’t forget.*

My hands trembled slightly as I unwrapped it. I cursed myself for being so nervous. When I had the last of the paper stripped away my heart did a small skip. In my hand was a package of Teaberry gum, something I used to love when I was a kid, but hadn’t seen in years. My shoulders slumped and I heaved a deep sigh, as a sweet memory washed over me. Almost subconsciously, I pulled a stick of gum from the pack and slid it into my mouth, relishing the vaguely wintergreen flavor. I chewed it for a moment, remembering how Kurt had given me my first taste of it. He’d found a pack at



the store when we were about twelve and he convinced his mother to buy it. He was chewing a piece when he got to my house, the sweet scent wafting on his breath, and asked if I'd ever had it. I told him no. He pulled it out of his mouth and popped it into mine. I should have been grossed out, but the truth was, I was overwhelmed by it. The act was almost like him giving me a kiss and I treasured it.

I didn't sleep well that night. Memories of my childhood that I'd tucked away came back to haunt me. I remembered every look, every touch, with vivid clarity. Each flash of skin in gym class. Fantasies I had long locked away bubbled up to the surface, taunting me. Forcing me to remember every detail of Kurt's lithe body. How his dark hair shaded his eyes. How the corner of his mouth drew up when he smiled at me. How hollow I felt when I realized I'd lost him. I finally gave up trying to sleep, instead moving into the living room, sitting in the overstuffed armchair and thumbing through some old photo albums my mom gave me before she moved. I spent a good while tracing my fingers over pictures of Kurt from our childhood, trying to will away the ache in my heart. If I was being truthful, I wanted him back in my life, but admitting it just seemed wrong, because I didn't think I'd be able to stand that pain again if we split apart. I barely made it through the first time. I knew I couldn't go through it again, so it was best to just keep him away. I'd finally settled on my plan, but even knowing that, my heart still hurt.

\*\*\*\*

I pulled into the parking lot at school and found a small crowd gathered near the door, pointing at something on the ground. I strode from my parking spot and neared the assembled group. Sally Lemke, one of the first grade teachers, turned and gave me a wide smile. She stepped aside so I could approach. Taped to the door was a cardboard panorama, with several small teddy bears dressed in tuxes and dresses. A note hanging from the layout told me exactly what it was.

*Alex,*

*Best. Night. Ever.*

*Do you remember what I said?*



I pulled the scene down from the doors, balanced it on top of my briefcase, and carried it back to my car and stuffed it in the trunk before I began my march back to my classroom. Each step of the way I remembered a bit of prom night. Did I remember what Kurt said? I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I knew what *my* best memory was:

*“Hey Kurt, Jess and Jan headed to the bathroom. Seriously, what do girls do in there that they need to go together? I think it’s a conspiracy. They’re in there plotting the downfall of men.”*

*I laughed and rolled my eyes. Kurt stepped closer, putting his hand on my elbow.*

*“Wanna dance with me?” he whispered into my ear. “I’ll let you lead, if you want.”*

*I shoved him away with another laugh. “No, dude, I’m not dancing with you. That’s just... creepy.”*

*God, how I wanted him to take me in his arms and move around the dance floor. My head would rest on his shoulder perfectly, since he was a few inches taller than I was. The thought of being wrapped in his warmth, my face pressed to his chest as he held me, had me quivering with excitement.*

*“Why do you care so much what other people think? We’re just two friends having a good time. I’d so dance with you. C’mon, what do you say?”*

*I shook my head, fiercely interested, but completely scared. “No way, you’re not my type.”*

*“That’s fine. Just remember, I asked,” he murmured. “I’ll always dance with you, but the next time you’re gonna have to ask me.”*

I shook my head in a vain attempt to push the memories out. Between the two of us, Kurt had always been the strongest. I was always deathly afraid of someone finding out I was gay. My heart would race every time Kurt would do something demonstrative. He never had problems touching other people, hugging some of our friends, or just being friendly. I’d stutter, and my face would heat viciously if someone tried to put their hands on me. I always wished I could be as self-confident as Kurt. It’s one of the many things I tried to instill in the kids. Be proud of who you are. It took me years to figure that lesson out.



About an hour before the end of class, there was a knock on the door. I stepped into the hall to find a delivery driver in a crisp brown uniform, with two large boxes.

“Mr. Jeffers?”

“Yes, that’s me. Can I help you with something?”

“I’ve got a delivery for you.” He handed me an electronic pad. “If you could use the stylus or your finger and write your name on the bottom, I’d appreciate it.”

I tried to think. I never had stuff delivered to the school and I wasn’t expecting any supplies. Even if I was, those would go through the office.

“I don’t think you’ve got the right person. I didn’t order anything.”

He gave me a small smile. “The order was placed this morning. The gentleman was insistent that it be delivered promptly at two pm. If you could just sign for me?”

I did as he asked and handed him back the pad. In exchange he gave me two plain brown boxes, one of which had a white envelope taped to it.

“What is this?” I asked the man. He just smiled and gave a small wave before moving off down the hallway. I took the boxes into the class, my students eyeing me eagerly. I placed them on my desk and opened the envelope.

*If it means anything, one of my favorite memories was you, me, and Patches near the pond.*

I pulled open the boxes and found a dozen black and white dog-faced cupcakes in each one. Another note simply said to share them with the class. They were giddy when I handed each of them one of the treats. While they nibbled on their chocolate goodies I sat at the desk, staring at mine.

*Kurt and I were about fifteen. Summer vacation. It was a warm afternoon. Patches was really old by this time. He was chasing a duck around the pond with no hope of ever catching him. Kurt lay out next to me on the blanket. His weightlifting was paying serious dividends. He was toned and fit. Not overly muscled, but he looked amazing. Many times I embarrassed myself when he hugged me. Fortunately no one ever noticed.*



*“Do you ever think about having kids?” Kurt asked, his voice dreamy as he lazed by the water’s edge.*

*“No, I don’t think I want kids,” I replied.*

It wasn’t the truth. I did want kids. I mourned the fact that being gay meant I’d never have children of my own. I knew I’d be a disappointment to my parents when they found out they’d never have grandkids.

*“I think you’d make an awesome dad,” Kurt said softly. He sat up and turned to me, “I think we’d each make great dads.”*

I remember smiling at him and turning to a puddle of goo when he smiled back. He nestled in close and fell asleep with his head on my arm. I think it was probably the most perfect afternoon of my life.

“Mr. Jeffers?”

My head popped up. “Yes, Logan?”

“The bell rang. Can we go?”

I looked at the clock. It was nearly five after three. I was so deep into remembering I hadn’t even noticed.

“Yes, class dismissed. Remember on Monday we’re going to be talking about family. Bring something that means a lot to you that relates to your family.”

The kids filed out of the room, leaving the cupcake wrappers and crumbs all over the place. I smiled and started clearing the mess.

“They really tore them up, didn’t they?”

I got a chill through me as I spun toward the door. Kurt lounged against it, wearing a black T-shirt that stretched across his chest so tight, you could see his nipples beneath the fabric. He stepped into the room and began to clean up.

“What are you doing here, Kurt?” I asked, a touch of exasperation in my voice.

“I helped to make the mess; it’s only fair I should help to clean it up.”

I shook my head. This was definitely perfect Kurt logic. “That’s not what I meant. Why can’t we just go our separate ways? We were fine for five years.”



He glared at me through his long lashes. "It might have been fine for *you*, but it was never that way for me."

He put his armful of garbage into the bin before moving to where I was. He reached for me. I tried to step back, but he grabbed my sleeves and held me in place.

"I'm coming back next week, Alex. I have something I need you to understand about why I didn't look you up. Now isn't the time, though. I'll be back sometime in the afternoon on Monday. Before I go, I want you to think on one thing. I need you to remember Steve Jensen, okay? Do that for me, please?"

Without another word he turned and hurried out the door, leaving me confused as to what had just happened.

\*\*\*\*

I sat in my living room going over my lesson plan. An untouched glass of merlot sat on the desk beside me. Why would Kurt want me to think about Steve? I hadn't given him a thought in years. I tried to concentrate on what I was doing, but my thoughts kept drifting to the kid who made it his mission to make my life miserable.

Steve Jensen was a complete ass when I was in high school. He'd been the one who thought he was the big, tough, macho guy. He didn't need a reason to dislike you other than who *he* thought you were. I was sixteen at the time, just starting to put the gay label to myself, realizing that I never thought about girls the way I thought about Kurt. Steve must have picked up on this, because he made it his business to harass me at every turn. He always took great joy in finding me alone, where he'd be able to push me around while no one was watching. One Friday afternoon, the coach had me putting some stuff away after gym class and I got to the lockers late. I threw off my clothes and hit the shower, wanting to smell nice when I was around Kurt. I washed quickly, knowing that I should be meeting Kurt in a few minutes. I hurried to my locker, but I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings and that was a mistake. A hand shoved into my back, knocking me against the lockers and dazing me. I fell to the floor, trying to get my bearings, when I felt a hand grip my hair and pull my head back.



*“Well, if it’s not the class faggot,” Steve hissed.*

*I tried to struggle, to get away from him, but he jerked my head against the locker.*

*“Sit still,” he demanded.*

*I struggled to get out of his grip. He practically dragged me into the bathroom, closing the door behind us.*

*“Please, don’t hurt me,” I pleaded.*

*He moved within inches of me, his face hovering near mine. His breath stank of cigarettes and he smelled like he hadn’t showered. “God, you’re such a freaking pansy,” he snapped, throwing me against the wall.*

*Tears streaked my cheeks and I couldn’t stop whimpering. His hand flashed out and smacked against my face, the sound reverberating against the walls.*

*“I don’t get you faggots. Why do you need to suck a dick when there’s all this pussy around?” he goaded me.*

*He pressed me against the wall, holding me there with one hand. His other hand balled into a fist and he thrust it into my stomach, causing the air to explode out of my lungs. I sank to my knees. My stomach heaved.*

*“Yeah, I figured you wanted to be on your knees in front of me. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he snarled. “Get back up. I got no interest in nothing like that from you.” He gripped my hair again, and I cried out as he pulled me up to a standing position.*

*“I wonder if I could beat the fag out of you?” he mused.*

*I saw him raise his hand again and squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for another hit. Suddenly, his hands were off me and I dropped to the floor. I looked up and saw Kurt, nostrils flaring and eyes wide. He had Steve’s jersey clenched in his hands, his knuckles white. He twisted around and shoved Steve against the stall door, which banged loudly against the wall.*

*“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he snarled.*

*“Just havin’ a bit of fun,” Steve said, a nasty grin spreading across his face.*

*Kurt got up close and said through gritted teeth, “Alex, go get changed. I need you to leave now.”*



*I sat on the floor, too stunned to move.*

*“Now, Alex!” Kurt shouted.*

*I scrambled to the door, preparing to flee when I heard Kurt’s voice, dangerous and low.*

*“He’s mine, do you understand? If you ever come near him again, I swear to God, I will kill you. Do I make myself clear?”*

I never got to hear Steve’s answer. I hurried to my locker and started trying to put my clothes back on, intent on hurrying home. I kept fumbling with my shirt, the frustration growing with each passing second. I couldn’t make anything work right. I slammed my hands into the locker over and over. The pain was intense, but I didn’t care. Kurt caught me and pulled me into his arms, pressing my head against his chest.

*“I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry,” he kept murmuring, holding me close to him. Having Kurt near me, thinking on what might have happened, I broke down and sobbed into his shoulder. He helped me finish getting dressed and all but carried me out to his car. He took me back to his house and called my folks, letting them know I’d be staying with him for the night. He put me in his bed and ran his hand over my back, mumbling apologies for some phantom transgression. I spent the weekend at Kurt’s house. By Saturday, I had calmed down, but Kurt’s eyes still blazed every time he looked at me. I thought I had done something wrong and he was angry with me, but he assured me that wasn’t the case at all. He would say he was sorry, but when I asked why, he wouldn’t tell me.*

*Monday, when I returned to school, Steve had a huge black eye, and he avoided me like the plague. I had a sizable bruise on my stomach, but the mark on my face had faded. When I saw Steve in the gym, I made every effort to avoid him, but I swear he was trembling when I got anywhere near him. Kurt would never tell me what happened that day. When I asked, he would get this pained look on his face and say it was best if I just let it go. After a while, I stopped asking.*

*For a couple of weeks, my relationship with Kurt was strained. He wouldn’t open up and talk to me, and I didn’t know what I could do. After a*



*while he slowly returned to normal, but there was always an edge there that I could feel, even if I wasn't able to define it.*

\*\*\*\*

I spent the weekend talking with Jake and finalizing our plans on how we'd help Logan. When we'd finished, Jake asked me about Kurt, and I grudgingly told him things I had never told anyone else. It felt good to get it off my chest, thinking that since he didn't have any particular allegiance he might have a different perspective. He listened politely, and when I finished he was quiet for a moment.

"You're an idiot, you know that, right?" he finally said.

"And how's that?" I demanded.

"Seriously? You don't get it?" He paused for a few seconds. "Look, Alex, I know we don't know each other that well, and I don't know Kurt at all, but you don't throw away almost twenty-five years of friendship over hurt feelings. If he's really your friend, you'll find a way to get past it. I'm thinking if you get your head out of your ass, you might actually be able to open your eyes. I really think there are things you need to see. Look, I have to go. I'm taking Logan to the zoo today. Just... don't give up, okay?"

We disconnected, and I was left to ponder what he meant.

\*\*\*\*

Monday morning started out in the worst possible way. It was storming, with lots of thunder and lightning. I never liked those kinds of days. I ran to the car only to find I'd left the driver's side window open and the seats were soaked. I ran back to the house and grabbed a garbage bag to put over the seat so I could get to work. Days like this always made the kids antsy. If it kept up, there wouldn't be any recess and all that energy would have to be channeled elsewhere. Then there was the fact that Kurt had said he was coming to see me today, and I still wasn't sure what to make of it. A litany of emotions swirled in my head, giving me the start of a tension headache. Nothing good would come of this day, I knew it.

As I expected, the day was rough. We made it through our talks about family, and most of the kids remembered to bring something to talk about. A



couple of kids had the sniffles, which meant they were not only hyper but probably coming down with something. Between wiping runny noses, dealing with bored kids, and trying to get them to pay attention to the lessons, I was ready to go home by lunchtime.

After lunch the kids filed back into the room, a little more subdued now that they had something in their bellies. I was just beginning the afternoon lesson, when the door swung open. I groaned when a gorilla with a boom box and a shopping bag walked in. The kids squealed with laughter as the costumed man wandered through, ruffling hair and waving at each kid. I marched over to him and crossed my arms.

“I don’t know how much he paid you, but please, just go,” I said harshly.

The gorilla shook his head and made his way to the front of the classroom. He placed the boom box on my desk and removed several long, ripe bananas from the bag. He flicked the switch and the room filled with a somewhat funky beat. The gorilla started dancing. The kids went... well, they went ape. He moved over to me and tried to get me to dance, but I refused. Instead he went to each kid and gave them a little shuffle. He then made his way back to the desk. He grabbed a banana and shimmied over to me. He handed me the deep-yellow fruit and started moving back to the desk. I looked at the banana and saw it had writing on it in black marker.

*I*

Glancing back toward the gorilla I saw he had picked up a second banana and was sliding back in my direction. The kids were obviously enjoying themselves, dancing around the room with the gorilla. He handed me the next piece of fruit and waved at me. Grabbing up one of the kids, he did a few quick steps, before putting her down and snatching up the next piece of fruit. I quickly looked at the one in my hand.

*Want*

The song on the tape changed, the music smoothing out into a light jazz.

The gorilla twirled toward me, doing a poor imitation of a salsa dance. He handed me another banana, teased a few of the kids—which set them to shrieking with laughter—and cha-cha’ed back to the desk. I stole a glance at the banana.



*You*

This was getting weird, and very distracting. The next few trips brought back several more bananas. Each had a word written across it.

*To*

*Know*

*I*

The gorilla seemed to hesitate. He paused next to the desk, eyes down. Finally his back straightened and he picked up the remainder of the bananas. The music changed again. This time to soft strings and piano. Definitely not something to dance to. He tentatively reached out with the next banana before handing each to me in turn.

*Love*

*You*

*A*

*Bunch*

I glared at the gorilla. Why would Kurt do this? How could he embarrass me like this? I turned away from the class, trying not to show my tears. All these years I'd loved him and now he was going to mock me? The gorilla tapped me on the shoulder, insisting that I look at him. I figured he expected a tip or something. When I was finally able to turn and face him, I found him standing there, arms open. I had no idea what he wanted. He took my hands and placed one on his hip, and the other he held out. He pulled me along in a strange waltz. I resisted at first, but then lost myself in the moment. When the song ended, the gorilla leaned in and whispered in my ear.

"I've wanted to dance with you for so long, Alex. Thank you for making my dream come true."

He then picked up the boom box, waved at the kids and went out the door, while I stood in stunned silence.

\*\*\*\*

The kids were in high spirits the rest of the day. A dancing gorilla isn't something one sees every day, apparently. It was very difficult to keep them



focused on lessons, which was fine because I had a hard time focusing as well. I had no idea what to make of Kurt's declaration. I had an even harder time understanding what the whole thing meant. Did Kurt know my feelings for him? Was he trying to let me know that he knew I was gay? My stomach did a slow roll thinking about it.

By the end of the day, my nerves were on edge. I wasn't sure what to do next. I had so many thoughts running through my head. So much, in fact, that in the time it took me to get to my car, I didn't even notice Kurt standing there, waiting for me.

"What the hell was that little display?" I demanded.

"I'm pretty sure I made it clear if you were reading my bananas." He chuckled. "Okay, I know how that sounds, but I stand by what I said."

I lowered my voice, hoping to keep the tremor out of it. "So, what? Now you know I'm gay and you're going to do what about it?"

He smirked and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Yeah, still the same old Alex. Always about you. I've always known you were gay. Why do you think I worked so hard to protect you?"

I gave him a blank look.

"You don't get it, do you?" he asked sadly. "Come have dinner with me. I think it's time we clear the air about a lot of things."

He held out his hand to me, just like old times. I felt safe when he gripped my hand tight. "Where are we going?" I muttered.

"You'll see. Maybe when you get there, things will finally start to sink into your head."

We got into his truck, a sleek, black Ford pick-up. After we'd buckled in, he reached over and took my hand, seemingly unwilling to let go. While he drove, he kept the conversation light, asking questions about the kids, my job, the weather. I finally noticed we were heading the same way Jake had gone when we went to eat previously.

"So you finally got your dream, huh? Opened your own place. Guess it must be pretty popular."



He shrugged. "I do okay. You'd have known that if you stayed for dinner the last time." A smirk danced across his lips.

We pulled into the parking lot. He let go of my hand, got out and moved over to the passenger's side, opening the door and taking my fingers in his. I gazed at him as we walked through the lot. He hadn't really changed much. His dark hair and broad chest contrasted against my slender build and blond hair. His eyes, though... They shone bright with such intensity that I could get lost in them.

"I missed you," he said quietly. "I never stopped thinking about you."

I pulled my fingers from his. "How can you say that? We haven't seen each other for years. I'm supposed to believe you thought about me?"

He spun to face me. "I thought about you every goddamn day, Alex. Look!" He turned and pointed to the restaurant.

It took me several moments to understand what he was pointing at. When I finally realized it, my heart split in two. I hadn't noticed the sign outside the building my first time there. Now I wanted to break down and weep. When Jake had told me to open my eyes and look, I hadn't understood what he meant. Until this very moment. The sign outside the restaurant, *Kurt's* restaurant, held the truth in his words. I stared in awe as I noticed the name of the place for the first time: *AJ's*.

"You... you named your restaurant AJ's?" I cast a look in his direction. He face was flushed and he was trembling. He nodded slowly. "Why?"

"Because I needed you and you weren't there," he replied, his voice soft. "I've always needed you. When you stopped... when we lost touch, I thought you didn't need me. I thought you'd moved on and left me behind."

It only took a moment to understand what he was saying to me. In that split second, everything I thought I knew went out the window.

"I always thought if you knew how I felt it would mean the end of our friendship. I've loved you for the longest time. I always thought you might care for me in return, but I didn't want to risk what we had in order to find out. After we lost touch, I pulled myself along, trying to hold onto something, so I bought this building and made AJ's."



My heart melted. So much time had passed and now I knew he felt the same way I did. I blamed him for leaving me behind because I thought he no longer needed *me*. He was popular. He was social. I was awkward and didn't fit in anywhere. I just thought he'd finally realized it and had outgrown me. It took me a long time to come to terms with that. To build up enough of a shell so that people wouldn't hurt me again. So I'd be able to go out with the few friends I had. To find out he was hurting every bit as much as me made me realize how unfair I'd been. To both of us. I admitted to myself I hadn't looked for Kurt because I was afraid to be hurt again.

"I don't understand something—" I began.

"Only one thing?" Kurt chuckled, wiping away a tear from his eye.

"I'm going to ignore that. I have things I need to know," I replied, trying not to smile at the ease with which the banter started flowing again.

"Can we go in and eat? I hear they have great food, and the owner is an awesome guy once you get to know him again."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. I had been so stupid. Ego, pride, fear or whatever the hell it was, had cost us both. Kurt put his hand on the small of my back and led me toward the door. When we stepped inside, the host immediately came to us.

"Good evening, Mr. Danvers. Your table is ready, sir," he said. His tone was very professional, but I could feel him looking at me. I stepped closer to Kurt and he wrapped his arm around me protectively. It was such a natural thing and I found myself relaxing against him.

"Thank you, Paul. Is everything set?"

Paul beamed. "Yes, sir. Everything is set to your exact specifications."

I whispered to Kurt, "What's he talking about? What's going on?"

He looked down at me, a grin creasing his lips. "You'll see. Come with me."

Kurt moved effortlessly through the busy restaurant, pulling me along with him. My stomach fluttered, excitement coursing through me. He directed me to a room in the back and opened the door. Lamps were set up in the corners of



the room, providing subdued lighting. Soft classical music was playing from speakers placed throughout. In the middle was a small table, covered with a red cloth. Candlelight warmed the surface. Kurt walked me to the table, pulled out a small wooden chair, and waited until I sat.

“What is all this?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from squeaking.

“Our first date, like I always wanted it to be. This is the one I’ve been dreaming about since we were in junior high. Well, except now I can afford to have it.” He chuckled and took his seat. A tuxedoed waiter stepped into the room and waited at the door until Kurt summoned him over.

“Alex, this is Victor. He’s going to be our waiter for this evening. If you need anything, please ask him.”

Victor gave me a nod. “A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jeffers. I hope you’ll enjoy the evening we’ve got planned for you.” With that he turned and left the room, pulling the doors closed behind him.

“Kurt, I—”

He waved his hand. “Can we not talk about anything right now, please? I just want to sit here and enjoy your company. I promise afterward we can discuss anything you want. Would that be okay?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but closed it. He’d done this for me. I wasn’t going to ruin it. The candlelight danced in his eyes, which seemed misty.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

He nodded. “I am now.” He reached out and our fingers twined together. He just sat smiling at me.

Victor returned a few minutes later with a bottle of wine and two long-stemmed goblets. He placed a glass in front of each of us and presented the bottle to Kurt, who turned the bottle over a few times, before nodding to Victor. Victor cut through the seal and uncorked the wine and handed it to Kurt. Kurt gave it a gentle sniff and nodded to Victor. He poured a small bit in Kurt’s glass. Kurt swirled it gently, took a whiff and sipped it.

“This is perfect, Victor. Thank you.”

Victor poured us each a glass before placing the bottle on the table. He



gave Kurt a small bow and strode from the room. I peeked at the label on the bottle as I took a sip and almost choked.

“Where did you get a bottle of Chateau Le Pin Pomerol?” I enjoyed my wines, but this was an elite bottle. I’d seen them for sale online for nearly a grand each.

Kurt smirked. “I know people who know people,” he informed me.

I’d known Kurt for years, but for some reason I found myself tongue-tied around him right now. I never thought we’d be having a date. I wouldn’t have believed he would even have feelings for me. I glanced up, and for just a moment I hated Kurt. He had the most infuriating smile on his face, his eyes crinkled in the corners creating the scene of someone perfectly at ease. How I envied him.

“You look good, Alex.” He took another sip of his wine and filled our glasses again. After putting the bottle down, he reached out and took my hand. “Have you been... seeing anyone?” he asked cautiously.

I shook my head. How could I explain to him why I didn’t date? “I’ve gone out with a few people, but never more than as friends.”

His smile broadened and his fingers tightened briefly around mine. Victor opened the door and rolled in a tiered serving cart. He stopped near the table, placed some warm rolls and butter in the corner and silently began to assemble a Caesar salad, brushing the bottom of a wooden bowl with a freshly cracked egg. I looked to Kurt. “Um... you know I’m a vegan, right?” I asked.

His expression grew grim. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—”

“I’m kidding,” I snickered. “This looks delicious, Victor. Thank you.” I gave a quick glance to our server who looked like he was having a hard time suppressing a smile.

Kurt glared at me. “Yeah, okay, you got me on that one. I’ll get even, don’t worry,” he chuckled.

After Victor left, we began eating. The salad was delightful. I’d never had better. The flavors burst on my tongue.

“This is so good,” I said, covering my mouth so I wouldn’t spit my food.



“I’m glad you like it. Our Caesars are one of our most popular dishes. People enjoy the extra attention and the tableside show.”

“I can see why. Where’d you come up with the idea for this place?”

He began to speak about his vision for the restaurant. How he wanted a place where the food was outstanding and the people who worked there were highly skilled, but still warm and friendly.

“I wanted a place where everyone was welcome. Families, friends,” he paused for a moment, “lovers.”

I could feel those familiar butterflies again as he regarded me with such tenderness. I wanted him to push the table aside, have him pull me against him and hold me in his arms. Fortunately, I was saved by Victor’s return. He quietly removed the dishes and announced the main course. He clapped his hands and three other servers entered the room carrying a variety of dishes. Victor pulled plates from a stack and began to arrange them about the table.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d want, so I asked Chef Mateo to make us a bit of his specialties.”

There was so much food. I’d never seen a spread like this before. Roasted chicken served with dumplings, spaetzle with cubes of spicy sausage, pasta and cheese with a crumb top, and a host of others that I couldn’t identify. Each was flavorful, enticing, and melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

“I might have to eat here again,” I said solemnly.

“Count on it,” Kurt said. “I’m hoping you’ll be having meals here a lot from now on.”

We ate in relative silence. My moans over the taste of the food were pretty much the only sounds—other than Kurt’s chuckles every time I found I was unable to stop from making a fool of myself. By the time we’d finished, I was stuffed. I couldn’t eat another bite. Victor removed the dishes and asked Kurt, “Are you ready for the dessert, sir?” Kurt nodded and Victor left, only to return a few minutes later.

“I can’t. I’m going to burst,” I complained.

“Michelle, our pastry chef, will be hurt and disappointed if you don’t try her turtle profiteroles.” Kurt smiled and gestured to Victor.



Victor placed the plate down in front of me. Cream puff shells had been stuffed with French vanilla ice cream, covered in caramel and chocolate sauces, sprinkled with nuts and a decadent amount of thick whipped cream. I told myself I could suffer through a bite. The next thing I knew, I was scraping the plate clean, trying to get every last bit.

“Alex, do you remember how I said I was going to get back at you for your teasing earlier?”

I looked up from my plate, and was greeted with a spoonful of whipped cream splatted against my face.

“And it’s not vegan whipped cream either,” he said with a big laugh.

I reached over to his plate and grabbed a handful of whipped cream and chocolate and flicked it at him, catching him square on the chest. By the time we were finished, we were covered in goo, but both laughing so hard it was difficult to breathe. Kurt stood and walked over to me. He looked down at me and I trembled when he put his sticky fingers on the side of my face. He didn’t speak, just lowered his head and caught my lips. He squeezed me tighter and our kiss went deeper. I opened my mouth, trembling as his tongue licked inside my lips. I could taste the flavors of chocolate, caramel and Kurt dancing on my tongue. When he broke away, I whispered to him, “I want you.”

He looked at me with passion in his eyes, but shook his head. “No. We need to get to know each other again. I don’t want to rush this in any way. I want us to both be comfortable with each other again before we move ahead. Is that okay?”

In that moment I knew he was protecting me again. I got up and walked over to the middle of the room before I stopped, turned and stood looking at him. “You lied to me, you know.”

He cocked his head. “How so?”

“When you asked me to dance with you at prom you told me that you wanted to dance with me, but the next time I had to ask. You did it at the school.”

He shook his head. “No, you danced with a gorilla. And I hope someone took pictures, by the way.”



I held out my hand. “Either way, you didn’t wait for me to ask. So I’m asking now. Will you dance with me?”

He moved quickly to my side. I wrapped my arms around him and put my head onto his chest.

“We’re a mess. Are you sure you don’t want to wait to get cleaned up?”

I shook my head. “No, this night has been wonderful, and I’m happy right where I am.”

Kurt wrapped me in his arms and rested his head atop mine. “I’m happy, too.”

We didn’t need to speak anymore. Our dance said it all.

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By the time we were ready to call it a night, all the other staff had left. Kurt told me not to worry, he had already covered it with the cleaners, and by tomorrow the room would be spotless. Since we had a few drinks after dinner, I was in no shape to drive. Kurt called a cab to take me home, telling me he’d swing by in the morning to take me to work. As the driver pulled up, Kurt pulled me in close and gave me a quick peck.

“I had the most amazing night. Thank you. It couldn’t have gone any better.”

The look on his face made my toes tingle. In my entire life I’d never had anyone look at me the way Kurt did. Adoration, want, love. All these emotions held my gaze tight. He fixed the collar on my shirt, leaned forward and murmured in my ear, “I can’t wait to see you again.” He gave my ear a lick, which drew a sharp moan from me, and sent me home.

Kurt made it a point to talk with me every day after that. Usually he’d call me in the evening, after I got home from work. Even if it was busy at the restaurant, he’d find a few minutes to check in and ask me about my day. We rediscovered our friendship, and more, but hadn’t taken the final step. I wasn’t sure why he wanted to wait, but I respected that he did.

Kurt really knew how to make me feel special. Wanted. I’d leave for work in the morning and find a small note, “Just thinking about you. I hope you



have a great day” taped to my window, or someone from the restaurant would bring me a meal for lunch with a card attached, “I figure if you’re anything like I remember, you probably forgot your food again today”. One night I got a call, “Hey, we’re really busy tonight, but could you turn on the radio? WQWM. Gotta go. Have a good night.” When I found the station I heard, “To Alex, I’m glad you’re back in my life. I missed you. Yours, Kurt”, and the sounds of Herb Alpert crooning “This Guy’s in Love with You” enveloped me, making me smile, but also causing tears of joy to roll down my cheek. When the song finally finished, the DJ came back on, “That was Herb Alpert for Alex from Kurt. Sleep well, my friend.” I pulled the pillow to my chest and fell asleep to the most beautiful dreams of the most amazing man.

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We’d been seeing each other for about a month when Kurt showed up one Saturday morning, well before any normal person would be awake. He seemed pensive, almost to the point of being nervous.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

I stepped back, allowing him to come into my apartment.

“Sorry if I woke you up,” he started. “I was hoping you’d come with me today. I want to take you a few places and we’re going to be gone most of the day. I had Chef Mateo put together a picnic lunch for us, so we won’t starve to death.”

“Thanks. That’s really nice.”

“Well, I figured even if you didn’t want to be with me, you might still tag along for the food.” He snickered.

I put my arms around his waist and gave a light squeeze. “I’m happy to go anywhere with you.”

Kurt ran his hands over my back, staying just above the belt line. He kissed my neck, causing me goose bumps. “Come on, let’s get moving. We have a lot of ground to cover today.”

He walked me out to the truck, opened the door, and allowed me to get seated before he closed it. Then ran around to his side and got in. Putting the truck into gear, we backed out into traffic and headed toward the freeway.



“Where are we going?” I wondered aloud.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course, but—”

“I’m going to ask you to just come along with me without questions. Those answers you were looking for? Today I’m going to do my best to give them to you. I’m really nervous about this, so I’d appreciate it if you promise you’re not going to freak out on me.”

I stared at him for a moment. Now *I* was nervous. I did trust him, though, so I agreed. He smiled and I relaxed a bit. We drove for about twenty minutes before we pulled up outside a small split level house. It was a cute cottage-type home, faux-wood stained siding, a pretty flower bed bursting with a variety of annuals, and a mailbox that looked like a miniature version of the house itself.

“Who lives here?” I asked Kurt.

“Jess Delaney,” was the only answer I received. I couldn’t imagine why we were at the house of Kurt’s prom date. I had weird images of Kurt together with Jessica and felt sick to my stomach. I suddenly had the urge to run away, but Kurt reached out and took my hand, giving it a quick squeeze. We got out of the truck and stepped up to the front door. Kurt used the brass knocker to announce our arrival. A moment later, Jessica answered.

“Hi, Kurt. Hey, Alex. Good to see you. Come on in. Jan’s in the kitchen with a fresh pot of coffee, if you’re interested.”

We walked through the front door. The house was charming. A hutch stood in the corner of the room that had an assortment of wildlife knickknacks, cute little critters with big eyes. Jess gestured toward the sofa before disappearing into the next room. Kurt sat down on one end, I sat on the other end, which drew a frown from Kurt. A few moments later, the sisters came back in carrying four cups of coffee. I looked them over. They still looked similar, but Jess had cut her hair very short, with longer bangs. It definitely highlighted her face. Jan’s hair was still long, the dark tresses just past her shoulders. They each took a seat in one of the armchairs.

“It’s good to see you, Alex,” Jan said, giving me a polite smile.

“Nice to see you, too. It’s been a while.”



Kurt scratched his cheek. “Alex, I called Jess and Jan because I wanted to come clean with you about everything. I decided I would start here.” He gave a nod to Jess. “Can you explain to Alex why we’re here?”

Jess took a deep breath. “We know Kurt talked you into asking us to go to prom with you guys. The thing is, he talked to us first. It was really you he wanted to go to prom with, but he figured you would be uncomfortable going as his date. He asked us if we’d be willing, and we said yes.”

I sat in stunned silence for a minute or two. My mind was trying hard to grasp what Jess had just told me. I turned to Kurt and he refused to meet my gaze.

“Why, Kurt?” It was the only thing I could think of to ask.

He looked at his shaking hands. “I didn’t want you going with anyone else. I was always afraid of losing you to another person.”

I stood up and saw Kurt flinch. “I need to know. Why did you agree to go with us to the prom if you knew he wanted to go with me?”

The twins looked to each other. Jan nodded and Jess turned back to me. “We thought it was romantic. That night, we saw the way he looked at you and that’s how we wanted someone to see us. We thought he’d give you the world if he could.”

“I still will,” Kurt murmured.

We visited for a little longer. Jan told us she had been married for two years and Jess said she was engaged herself. Before we left, Kurt gave them his business card and asked them to stop in for dinner one night. As we were getting in the truck, I asked Kurt why he’d kept in contact with our former prom dates.

“Why Alex Jeffers, are you jealous?” he asked sweetly, fluttering his eyes at me.

“No, of course not,” I huffed.

He reached out and rubbed my cheeks. “You are! That’s just so adorable.”

I grumbled loudly as Kurt started the truck.

“I didn’t keep in touch with them. You wanted answers and I needed you to have them, so I looked them up and called to ask them to talk with you.”



I felt warmth throughout my body. Kurt wasn't just going to explain, he was going to show me the answers.

Our next stop was the old pond where we went with Patches that summer day. Kurt unloaded the picnic basket, took my hand and led me to the trees where we used to lay. The pond wasn't there anymore. In its place was a playground. Kids climbed over the equipment, laughing and having a good time. I felt a pang in my chest, knowing that we'd talked about children here. Kurt laid out a checkered blanket, sat down and tugged me down next to him. He unpacked the lunch of potato salad, roasted vegetable hoagies, and lemonade. It was delicious. I lay back, looking up at the sky.

"That day we came here with Patches I asked you a question. Do you remember what it was?" he whispered.

"You asked me if I ever thought about having kids. I told you no, but that wasn't the truth. I just didn't think it was going to happen because of me being gay. It's part of the reason I wanted to teach. Now it's like I have kids, but every day they go home to someone else. The last time I talked with Jake, he said he was going to take Logan to the zoo. I felt a twinge because it was something I'd never have."

"That's the thing. I want that, too. With you. I've always wanted a family, but I wanted you to be a part of it. I've always had plans for my life, Alex. Every one of those plans had you as part of it. When we drifted apart, so did my plans. I had never considered any plans that didn't have you in them, so I was lost." He rolled over on his side to face me. "I need you in my life. Not just now, but always."

I listened as he was talking, but instead of calm I found myself getting irritated with him. "And you were going to inform me of these plans when? You never once said a word about any of this to me."

"I *tried*. Why do you think I took you to those places? Asked you those questions? I would ask you things that I hoped would lead you into a conversation, but you kept pushing it away and I wasn't sure how to bring it up to you."

I sat up and threw my hands in the air. "Oh, I don't know. How about



‘Hey, Alex, I’m gay and I want to have a family with you.’ I think that would have been pretty self-explanatory.”

Kurt pushed to his feet. “And what if you didn’t feel the same? What if you laughed in my face? What if...” He got quiet for a minute. “What if it split us up? I had plans that would have worked with us being friends. It wouldn’t have been easy on me, but as long as I was with you, I was happy. Like I said, I didn’t have any plans that didn’t involve you. I was selfish, though. I wanted it all.”

I kicked at the grass. I knew I should have been happy to know Kurt had the same feelings and doubts as me, but I was angry over the lost time because we didn’t communicate with each other.

“I always thought we told each other everything,” I said sadly. “Is there anything else you’re not telling me that I need to know?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice barely audible. He sighed and held out his hand. “Let’s go. We’ve got one more stop to make.”

He pulled me up onto my feet, and packed the dirty dishes and blanket back into the basket, then walked silently back to the truck. I wanted to say something, but I was still fuming over the fact that he’d kept secrets from me. The thing was, I didn’t know if I was angry at him or myself, since I had committed the same sin.

Neither of us spoke as we drove. I could feel the tension rolling off Kurt, and it made me nervous. We pulled into the parking lot of the high school. He put his arm in mine and walked to the doors.

“When I told you to think about Steve Jensen, what came to mind?” he inquired.

“The time he hit me in the gym. The one where you pulled him off me.”

“You always wanted to know what happened, but I wouldn’t say. This is my final secret. I’m going to let you know what I did, why I did it, and how it impacted our lives. After that, if you prefer we go our separate ways...” He took a deep breath and hissed it out. “I’ll abide by your wishes.”

The look on his face broke my heart. For years I wondered what happened, but now I wasn’t sure I wanted to know. If the memory caused him this much



pain, was it really worth it? I reached out to touch him, but he shrugged off my hand.

“I need to say this, okay? Just let me get through it,” he begged.

I took a step back. Right now I wanted to be anywhere other than here. I never wanted to be the cause of the look on his face.

“The coach was heading to his office that day. When I passed him I asked if he knew where you were. He told me you were just finishing up. I figured I’d go wait for you, and, maybe, check you out in the shower.”

I watched the blush creep up his face. I grinned when I thought about him watching me as my geeky teenage self and still liking me.

“I stepped into the locker room and I heard voices. At first I wasn’t sure what it was. When I got closer I heard Steve say something about you wanting to be on your knees in front of him. I got angry at you. For just a moment I pictured you and Steve—” He stopped. His chest was heaving and I needed so badly to comfort him.

“Kurt?” I took a step toward him and he spun away.

“Don’t you get it?” he shouted. “I thought you were doing something with him! I almost ran out of the locker room. I almost left you there with him. He would have hurt you and it would have been all my fault. When I heard you scream? That’s when I went running for the bathroom. I pushed open the door and found him ready to hit you. I lost it. In that moment I hated myself so much, but I hated him more. I wanted to hurt him so badly. I grabbed him, pulled him off you and asked what he was doing. He gave me that cocky grin like I should have known what he was doing and I told him you were mine and that if he ever touched you again I’d kill him. I meant it, too. At that moment, I wanted you more than anything in my life.”

I couldn’t move as tears streamed down Kurt’s face. I had no idea what to say.

“After you left the bathroom, I pushed him up against the wall and told him in graphic detail what I’d do if I ever saw him so much as look at you funny. He said that you were just a faggot and demanded to know why I cared. I punched him in the face. His head bounced off the wall with a heavy crack and



he fell down to the floor. I grabbed him by the hair and yanked his head back. I told him it was because I loved you. You were mine to have. Mine to protect. Mine to love. Only mine. I staked my claim that day. When I came to find you and saw you crying by your locker, I lost it. I realized what would have happened if I hadn't shown up. What he could have done to you if I had left. It was my fault. All of it. I almost walked away and left you there with him because for a second, I hated you. And I'm so very sorry."

Kurt looked up at me. His eyes wet and bloodshot. He sank to his knees in front of me, choking back the tears. I knelt next to him and wrapped him in my arms. I finally understood what happened that day. Why he was so distant with me. He sat back, sniffled and wiped his face with his hands.

"So now you know. I almost failed you. I swore I'd never do it again, that I would keep you safe. Then we fell out of touch and I failed you a second time. The day I saw you in the restaurant, I knew I finally had a chance to fix things. To make them right between us. It's why I held back with you. I wanted you so bad, but I needed you to know I wouldn't fail you again. I had to be sure you still wanted me." He peered into my eyes, a look of sheer desperation on his face. "Do you, Alex?"

Memories flashed through my mind. I recalled with startling clarity my lifetime of moments with Kurt. Every time he was there for me. Each hug that warmed me. All the smiles that held my heart together when I was sure it was going to fly apart. I looked back into his eyes and I knew love. "I've never wanted anything more," I swore to him. There on the school grounds I kissed him, laying my own claim to his heart.

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Kurt drove me back to his house. Like the man, it was sturdy and masculine. A sprawling A-frame style home with an outdoor fireplace on a large open air porch, picture windows that showed every beautiful detail of the home. Lit at night, the place was beautiful. I could see Kurt living here, at ease in his surroundings. He took me into the living room. A sunken floor with rugged log furniture dominated the area. A high-definition television adorned one of the walls, surrounded by floor to ceiling walnut bookcases. Kurt enjoyed darker colors, the furniture coverings were done in a deep brown. The paint was a silky gray.



He pressed me down onto the couch, hovering over me, kissing my face, my neck. I reached up and started unbuttoning his shirt. When my hands finally touched his bare skin he hissed.

“Clothes off. Now.” He stood and began stripping. I sat a few moments, taking in the sights of the body I had dreamed of since I first saw it. I wanted nothing more than to touch, caress, and taste every inch of the man. As he unbuckled his belt he cocked his head. “Are you waiting for an engraved invitation? Or do you want me to just tear them off of you?”

I shuddered at the thought of him taking me that way, but stood and slowly started to remove my clothes. As the last piece hit the floor, he grabbed my hand and dragged me along with him to the bathroom. A huge glass-enclosed shower stall with six shower heads was the centerpiece of the room. He turned the water on, waiting for it to warm, then turned and buried his face in my neck. He nipped at my throat, drawing moans from me. His fingers traced the muscles in my back, working their way down and grabbing at my ass.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered in my ear. “You taste amazing. Every inch of you is mine.”

I trembled at his words. “Yes, yours,” was all I could manage to gasp before he took my mouth in a scorching kiss.

The shower door opened, the warm, damp air swirling around us. He drew me into the shower with him, grabbed a loofah and some citrusy bath gel, and started drawing it over my skin. He took great care in washing me. He was tender and gentle, but insistent. Nudging my legs apart so he could wash between them, sliding the loofah over my butt cheeks and crack. It was incredibly erotic. My cock bobbed in front of me like a pointer. Kurt knelt down to wash my legs and placed a reverent kiss on the head of my dick. “I’ll get back to you later,” he promised, peppering kisses along my legs.

I closed my eyes and put my hands on his shoulders to steady myself. He kept his fingers moving, touching everywhere within reach. Lightly stroking, teasing spots that elicited moans from me. Then, for an instant, he stilled. I looked down at him and he smiled for a moment before he took me into his mouth. I cried out from the feeling of the heat on me. His heat. He worked the shaft of my cock for several minutes before I attempted to pull away. He



clamped his hands on my legs and held me in place. I grunted, trying to draw away, wanting to make it last. When his finger tapped lightly against my hole I lost control and started shooting. He kept sucking while my essence sprayed into his mouth. When I could stand no longer, I collapsed on one of the benches in the shower. He grinned up at me and licked at his lips.

“I was right. You *do* taste amazing.”

I patted the bench and he sat down next to me. I reached over and gripped his hardness. He pushed into my hand and his eyes rolled back into his head. “Please,” he whimpered. I got on my knees in front of him, placing my hands on his hips. I leaned forward and let his silky skin slip into my mouth. Kurt’s fingers clamped on my shoulders and he let loose a deep moan. I sucked him as best as I could, his hands encouraging me to take him deeper. I felt his body begin to shake and I backed off. He glared at me until I stood and tugged his hand. “Bedroom?” I asked. He smiled and quickly shut off the shower. We dried each other off and he directed me into the master suite. He lifted me onto the high mattress and pushed me back against the cool pillows.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked. “I don’t want to do anything to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I know it.”

He reached into the nightstand and drew out a small tube and a condom. I lowered my eyes. “I haven’t...”

He put his finger under my chin and drew it up. “I know. I haven’t either. I wanted to. I tried. Each time, though, they were all missing one thing. They weren’t you. In all my life, you’re the only person I’ve ever wanted. I didn’t think it was fair to give something to someone else that I had promised myself you would have first.”

I looked him in the eye. “In my heart, my wish was that one day we’d be together again. You had always been everything to me. I wanted you to be the only person who I would be with.”

His smile became shy. “I’ll wear the condom if you want. I don’t want you to be unsure—”

I shook my head. “Today you told me everything because you didn’t want anything between us. I want that now. Just you, nothing else.”



He tossed the condom onto the bedspread and kissed my stomach. "Thank you for this gift," he said quietly. "I swear I'll always make sure I deserve it."

He stretched out beside me, letting his fingertips ghost over my skin. I arched, trying to get more of his touch. He drove me near crazy with the feather touch. He tantalized and teased me for what seemed to be an eternity, grinning all the while.

"Bastard," I hissed, clutching his hand. I pushed it down between my legs. "If you're going to do it, get it right," I grumbled.

He gave me an evil grin and leaned down, popping one of my balls into his mouth. I clutched at his head, gasping for breath. He reached down with a finger and began to run it on the skin under my sac. I moaned heavily. My head was overloading with sensations. I felt a buzz throughout my body. When I felt the tongue moving lower I moaned and spread my legs. He lifted them up and tickled my crack before plunging into my hole. I tugged on his hair, eliciting a grunt from him. He didn't stop, though. Not until I was begging him for more.

He lowered my legs and I watched as he twisted the cap on the lube, running a generous amount over his fingers. He stroked his shaft until it was glistening. My eyes grew wide as he ran a finger over my pucker. He stared slack-jawed as his finger started sliding in. "That is so hot," he murmured. He bent down and gave my shaft a lick as he pressed his finger inside of me. My groan must have startled him because he pulled the finger away and his expression changed. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"I won't be if you don't put that finger back!" I groused. "It felt... different, but it was a good feeling."

Kurt moved his hand back and slid the finger back into me, slowly pushing deeper. I opened my eyes and caught him watching me. I gave him a smile to show him everything was good. In return he started moving his finger, sliding in slowly, then pulling back gently. Kurt chuckled when my hips started lifting, wanting him deeper.

"More," I heard a husky voice cry out. I winced inwardly when I realized it was me.



When I felt the second finger probing I didn't tense, I just let him take the lead. When he started wiggling his fingers, my breath started coming in gasps. I'd never felt like this before. I needed Kurt inside me. I had to have that connection with him. "Kurt, please..." I begged.

"Relax, Alex," he soothed. "It's going to be soon."

Kurt slowly added a third finger. Never in my life had I felt so full, but still it wasn't enough. I knew he was bigger than three fingers, and I needed that. I needed him. Just when I thought I'd go out of my mind, he removed his hand. I whimpered from the loss, but when I felt him kneel on the bed I realized why. I opened my eyes and saw him adding more lube to his hard length.

"Do you want to maybe roll over?" he asked timidly. "It might be easier."

I shook my head. "I'd like to see your eyes. Is that okay?"

He nodded and gave me a gentle smile. "I'd like to see yours, too."

I pulled my knees back and he moved in between them. I felt the blunt head pushing against my hole and I tightened a bit, still feeling nervous. He looked at me so patiently.

"We don't have to do this," he said in a hushed voice.

"I want to, really. Just... go slow, please."

He dipped his head and positioned himself again. When he first pushed in, the pain shot through my system. I could feel tears pricking at my eyes. Kurt rubbed a hand over my stomach. "We don't have to do this," he said again. "We can lie together. I just want to be near you."

"No. Just give me a minute."

To his credit, Kurt didn't move at all. When the pain dulled, I shifted a bit and I saw him bite his lower lip as he groaned my name. I rubbed my hands down his arms as he started pushing again. The bite was still there, but it had dulled into a pleasant fullness.

"Oh my God," Kurt sighed, as he finally sank all the way in. "I never dreamed... it's so hot. You're so incredibly tight around me. Are you okay? Because if I don't move soon I think I'll die."

I bit back a laugh at the expression on his face. "Go ahead." As he started rocking in and out, I pulled my legs back more, giving him better access. It



was awkward at first. Kurt would slip out and we'd have to reposition ourselves, but eventually he found his rhythm and started pushing deeper and faster. I threw my head back at the new sensations. He reached up and started rubbing the head of my cock, twirling his lubed fingers, making me gasp.

"I've dreamed of this, you know?" he panted. "Being with you. In you. I never thought it would be like this."

I smiled at him and drew my legs around him, encouraging him. He was making this so amazing for me and I wanted to do what I could to make it every bit as good for him. Kurt put his arms on the sides of my head, and began pumping in earnest. It was hard and deep, and I loved every thrust. I threw my head back and murmured encouragement to him, begging him for more.

All too soon he started breathing heavily. Grunting as he drove into me. "Touch yourself, Alex. I want us to do this together, please." I wrapped my hand around my aching cock, knowing it wouldn't take long. Kurt started chanting my name as the thrusts came faster. He cried out in a long moan as he started shooting inside of me and that brought me to a climax as well, spraying out on my stomach and chest. I pulled him down on top of me, not wanting to break the connection. He kissed the sides of my face and neck before he slowly pulled out. He collapsed on his side and drew me to him, his lips blowing softly on my neck. I curled my arm around his head and pulled his face closer to mine.

"I love you, Alex. For me, you've always been the one. I want that plan. The one where you and I raise a family together. I need you to be here with me. I'd like you to make this your home, too. With me. I'd like us to have a surrogate give us your child. I know you need some time to think, but I wanted you to know how I felt. I'm not going anywhere. And I won't ever give you up again. Will you think about it? Will you be mine?"

In my head I saw every problem, every potential for heartbreak, each day that I spent knowing I'd lost him and would never have him back. To find myself at this point, right now, the answer was obvious, even to me. "God, yes. But just so you know, I have plans of my own."

"Of course. Anything you want. I'll be there by your side every step of the way."



“What we just did? I expect a lot more of that. At least a couple times a day. We’ve got a lot to make up for.”

He pulled back a moment, holding me in his arms, and gazed into my eyes. “Oh yes, I promise you, I fully intend to make up for every moment of lost time.” He gave me a waggle of his eyebrows.

With that he pulled me back to his chest and we held on, a sticky mess, until we drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms, knowing it was the dawning of a new day for us. One where best friends had finally admitted they were so much more. Where two halves finally found what was needed to make them whole.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Parker Williams is the pen name for adult m/m stories of Will Parkinson. Parker's first story, 500 Miles, was recently picked up by MLR Press to be included in their Mixed Tape anthology.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE SENTINEL

By Eden Winters

## **Photo Description**

A sepia tone photograph shows a handsome man, bare-chested, who sits cradling a baby in both hands. He has short hair and a muscled body, and he gazes adoringly at the baby.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*This man is a protector, a fierce and rugged man with a checkered past and an absent family... and yet he holds our new daughter with such tenderness and care. He loves my entire clan of a family nearly as much as he loves me, and despite his horrid birth family, he has become the brother, the son, the cousin, the uncle that they never knew they were missing.*

*He loves us all, and protects us all... even when the proverbial s\*\$% hits the fan.*

*Please tell our story, how he came to be so gentle and loving of my family, OUR family, yet can be so fierce, so distant, from the rest of the world.*

Sincerely,

Brett

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** futuristic, other world, enemies to lovers, military, men with children

**Content warnings:** off-page child abuse

**Word count:** 16,903

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# THE SENTINEL

By Eden Winters

## CHAPTER ONE

*Move out, but avoid the caves*, the commander warned, the communication resonating through the soldier's frontal lobe implants. *They're lined with crystals that block our signals.*

Soldier Fourteen nodded, snapping the last section of his body armor into place. Prickles raced across his skin, tiny filaments piercing his epidermis, digging in deep to meld suit to body. Properly geared, he joined his brothers on the field. Simple orders today, eradicate the colonists who refused the Federation's demands. Laser fire peppered the air, mixed with screams and pleading. The acrid scent of burned flesh seared his nostrils, but Fourteen ignored the cries of the rebels with their primitive weapons, carrying out his orders with single-minded determination—capture able-bodied youths and destroy any others. His implanted com-link shrieked a steady stream of banter into his mind: officers' instructions, his brothers-in-arms' triumphant shouts as they lay waste to the colonists. Stupid colonists, withholding rightful due.

Through the villages they swarmed, skirting the caves to maintain signal. *Beep, beep, beep, beep!* An alarm shrilled in his ears. He ducked and rolled. Fire blazed through his side. Curled on the ground, he lay perfectly still. A scream and the high-pitched whine of a particle discharge spoke of another soldier's shot in his defense. *Take that, you rebel!*

Covered for the moment, Fourteen requested, *Damage?*

*Primitive projectile weapon*, came the diagnosis from his suit. *Point of entry: C7 and C8 joints.* Over his left ribs, then, in the vulnerable area between armored plates that allowed flexible movement. A very lucky shot for the rebel. *Topical lesions. Exit point C15 and C16 joints*, the diagnostic program continued. *Circuitry damage in section...* The coordinates streaming through his visor stuttered and went out. Fourteen raised his weapon, but his robed assailant ducked into the cave. Fuck that! Signal or no signal, he'd go in. No one shot him and got away.



Fourteen struggled to his feet. *Diagnostic!*

*Communications circuits malfunctioning*, the tinny voice of the suit transponder replied. *Attempting repairs, maintain position.*

Oh, hell no! Not until he took out the bastard who'd clipped him. Even as he watched, the scratch on his skin sealed and the suit mended itself back together. He shuffled past the mouth of the cave. Silence. For the first time since his parents dropped him off at the Federation recruitment camp, no voices rang in his head, no orders overrode his own thought processes. Only eerie silence.

He'd thought his own thoughts once, back before they'd shoved a com-link into his head, hooked him into a processor, and relieved him of that responsibility. Back then he'd had a family, a name... Fourteen slammed the door on the memory, a memory he'd believed scrubbed from his mind forever. Must be the crystalline interference his CO spoke of.

A series of electric impulses throbbed through his connection with his armor. Yes, though it didn't possess a brain of its own, his suit calmly reminded him that he wasn't alone and probably never would be—not for long, anyway. The sharp bite of a medical filament on his left glute followed, delivering medication and promising sweet relief. The pain vanished; adrenaline leveling out, his heart rate normalizing, and tension melting away. Bless the Federation and their miracle drugs, delivered in perfect doses for each situation. The suit/soldier units proved well-nigh impervious: he'd seen near-corpses continue battling. Drugs, circuitry, programming, and nothing to lose made for one hell of a soldier.

Sweeping one arm back and forth while seeking a target with unaided vision, he probed his now pain-free injured side with his fingers before venturing farther into the cave. *Engage sensors*, he intoned, wondering how much the suit had managed to repair itself. A stream of numbers filled his periphery, faded and incomplete in some cases: temperature, Federation time. Life forms. An infrared beam emitted from his visor. There! *Weapon!* The suit selected a tight-beam laser—useful in confined spaces with possible ricochet factor. The tingling at his fingertips told him *armed and ready*. Making use of the shadows, he advanced on a huddled form on the floor, the tips of his mitt



aimed and ready to fire. But first, what did the enemy look like, the foolish one who'd defy the government?

Two life form signatures appeared in his vision feed, one weak, one strong. He eased forward, ready to duck if necessary. A thin river of red seeped from beneath a gauzily wrapped form. A rebel? Without armor? What was this flimsy garment the thing wore?

A pale face stared up at him, lips moving, making incomprehensible sounds. He tapped into his com's translator and waited while the program shifted through the being's garbled speech. "Mercy," he finally heard. And, "Please." The light in the creature's eyes faded, its last breath wasted on a final "Please."

Mission completed, Fourteen checked his side again, preparing to leave the cave. Wait! What about the second signal? Maybe this thing was only a decoy. He searched the body, finding a sling strapped across its front.

Weapon at the ready, he commanded, *Analyze*.

The schematic in his peripheral whizzed through several species and subspecies, finally settling on, *Humanoid, female, infant*.

Huh? He'd been commanded to kill. He poked at the squirming pink bundle wrapped in more of the gauzy material. Didn't look very dangerous to him.

*Danger?* he asked, staring at the mewling creature. So tiny. A long-suppressed memory surfaced of himself as a human, before he'd become a soldier, and his mother presenting him with a similar bundle, named "Sister."

*Helpless*, the dispassionate mind connection advised. Helpless? The government sent a fully charged destroyer at a helpless target? What threat did she present?

Fourteen focused on the wispy covering of the larger creature. Perhaps the older being presented the danger. *Analyze*, he ordered again.

*Humanoid, female, deceased*.

Fourteen peered through his visor for a better look. In the past twenty years he'd battled many of the Federation's enemies, but where lay the threat in



colonists? Federation citizens? With only close-range projectile weapons, why engage them at all? Why not rain fire from beyond the atmosphere? Oh yeah, bodies to swell the ranks of the Federation's military, in order to conquer more worlds. Can't spoil the goods.

Images flashed through his mind: his parents screaming, his mother pleading, and then, finally, sobbing and clutching her bloody nose as his father led him out the door, the last time he'd ever seen her. Is that what happened here? Had the older female been told to give up the younger? Is that why the colonists fought? All for naught. What the Federation couldn't get they'd destroy.

Tiny noises escaped the tiny human. Fourteen reached out a hand—why, he didn't know. The infant wrapped miniature fingers around his glove. Then she peered up at him, in all his hideous, bloodied glory... and smiled. "Sister" had smiled, too.

Fourteen stopped, waiting for directives. Nothing. For the past twenty years, the constant stream of instructions had rendered no need to make major decisions. Now, in the calm of the cave, with only his own heart for guidance, he raised his weapon to follow his original orders.

That smile. That guileless smile.

He lowered his hand. Before, each target had offered its own reward: freeing the Universe from anarchists, or repelling marauding invaders. Ending their lives spared his, and the lives of fellow soldiers. But killing harmless colonists? On an agricultural world?

He powered down. Mindlessly cutting a swath through armed and screaming invading forces was one thing, killing a helpless infant another entirely. But what to do? If he simply left the creature in the cave, could it care for itself? Probably not.

The diminutive female smiled again while pulling his finger to her mouth. Hungry. Fourteen recalled a time when he'd put food in his mouth to nourish his body, long before being assigned an enhancement suit to see to his needs and keep him ever ready to fight.

Something in his chest tightened. He'd been young and helpless once.



*“Please, Father, not again!” he shrieked, while his mother stared down at her hands twisted together in her lap.*

*Spittle flew from his father’s mouth, his nose mere inches from Fourteen’s. “You’ll do as I say, and you will please the senator. If I hear one bad word...”*

There’d always been a senator, a judge, a magistrate—even a governor. None came to Fourteen’s aid. At night they’d taken pleasure from his body, and in the morning they’d opened their doors and surrendered him back to the man who’d continued to use him in a bid for power and influence.

He couldn’t turn back time and stop the madness for himself, or for “Sister”, wherever she was now. He’d stop it for this child. The first thing he needed to do was get her someplace safe.

His life pod wouldn’t make it very far, being designed only for short trips to a planet’s surface and back to the ship, but hadn’t he heard of another colony nearby? In the midst of battle chaos, pods launching and landing, and interrupted signals, surely he had time enough to hide the child off-world without being missed.

*Boom!* Dust and rock rained down. He threw himself to the ground and shielded his intended victim with his body until the danger passed. The ground stopped shaking, and his visor adjusted its lens to allow vision through dust clouds. Now or never. He scooped the child from the dead female’s arms and tucked it inside his armor, catching a whiff of something clean-smelling. The infant made a warm lump against his chest. A few filaments broke free of his flesh to wrap around the child, cradling but not entering her skin. His peripheral now displayed two heartbeats and monitored two sets of vital signs. He left a gap in the suit so he could peer inside and keep watch over his new charge. Warmth seeped through his skin where she lay.

“You be quiet now, little one,” he said in a voice long unused, after two failed attempts to communicate via his implanted com unit. Right. Sergeant would hear via com once he left the cave. Voice only from here on out. Voice. Did he even remember how to use spoken words, or did his voice emerge as primitive grunts?

Trained to stand tall and depend on his suit for protection, now he slunk in the shadows to the mouth of the cave. *Report!* blared through his now active com-link.



*My pack took a hit, intermittent signal*, he replied, grateful that the link only picked up his thoughts and not the yawn from the sleepy child. He stared in horror. The thing had no teeth! How could it eat? Time enough to worry about the future when they survived... if they survived.

*Regroup east of the city*, his commander replied. East of the city. Far from the pods. Fourteen could work with that, and if discovered, could blame his malfunctioning com. But something more must have malfunctioned. He'd been conditioned, fed drugs, had circuits wired into him to guarantee obedience, and yet here he was, no longer under the shield of the crystal-infested caves, making his own decisions. All instincts screamed, *Run!*

He paused a moment. What could he do for the child's dead mother? With no other course of action, he merely promised, "Your child will live in my care," and set off toward the pods.

Once inside he closed the lid while tucking the infant into a more comfortable position for a long cryosleep. He set course for the nearest colony, then gave himself over to chemically induced slumber.

\*\*\*\*

*Skreek, skreek, skreek!*

What?! Fourteen jerked from sleep and stilled his breathing, straining his brain cells for his commander's voice to explain the claxon. The soft touch of his pod's consciousness greeted him instead.

*Landing in five, four, three, two...*

He'd barely had time to register a stirring beneath his breastplate before impact. Fourteen willed his body limp and rode out the juddering as the pod landed and slid along a soft surface before coming to a stop.

*Damaged circuits twelve, seventeen, thirty-eight, forty-nine...* the pod's connection recited, telling Fourteen what he'd already known. This mad dash to wherever he was had been a one-way trip. Oh yes, Q-218. Colonized.

*Atmosphere?* he demanded.

His peripheral display scrolled complete numbers this time, having had time for repairs: temperature, oxygen mix, not that he couldn't breathe other



gases, thanks to his enhanced physiology and a semi-sentient suit, but he'd found the child in a predominantly oxygen atmosphere.

*Nitrogen, oxygen...* More elements ran through his display, the ratios sufficient to support human life.

Satisfied that they'd both survive the air, he popped the entrance on the pod and crawled out into a blinding mix of sand and sun. Sand. Great for landing, but being in the middle of a desert didn't bode well for finding civilization. What? Damp sand? Shells? In a desert? He breathed deeply of salt and seaweed, with no water in sight.

Wherever they were, the child needed civilization. Food, clothing, lodging, and someone who knew how to care for the young.

*Skreek, skreek, skreek!*

Oh, fuck! The claxon. Even now it sent out a beacon, summoning the mother ship to a downed pod. For better or worse, no turning back now.

Parts of him didn't seem to be working, having not yet slung off cryosleep. He dragged himself along on the sand using his heavily armored forearms, his numb legs trailing behind. Surely the damage wasn't permanent. No time for a diagnostic now. How the hell was the child inside his suit still sleeping?

He eyed the pod. Yeah, he should be far enough away by now. He raised his shields, took a deep breath, and held his arm out in front of him, depending on the suit to choose the weapon. *Sorry old friend*, he sent as a mental message to his transport. A single blast obliterated the pod. Nice. Those enhancements he'd gotten on NG-38 had paid off.

Next, he breached his armor, baring his forearm to the harsh warmth of the sun. The little one slept on. He slipped his fingers beneath the plated joint at his elbow, grabbed the faux skin covering, and pulled, revealing a panel mounted deep in the amalgamation of flesh and nanotechnology. *You and I, we go together, little one*. He jabbed a digit into the bright red reset button, forever severing his link with his last commander. Ah, free will. What a wonderful thing.

Scrolling numbers, a mute cry, warmth against his chest. Oblivion.

Scrolling numbers, a shadow blocking the sun. Guttural language.



*Translate!* Fourteen commanded his suit. Mahogany skin and tight ebony ringlets clinging to a rounded head declared the being standing above him humanoid, even without the suit's assessment.

*Old Earth dialect, modified,* the com-link replied, adding, "I am Connell."

The name drifted down into Fourteen's programming, taking hold. *Soldier Fourteen, at your service, Colonel.* The man's face scrunched up into a look the com identified as confusion. Oh, the colonel wasn't wearing armor, and therefore wasn't connected to a com-link. Using his rusty voice, Fourteen stated, "I am Fourteen and yours to command, Colonel." A squirming against his chest, a whimpering cry, and then oblivion once more.

\*\*\*\*



## CHAPTER TWO

Connell stared down into the bay at a bright object flashing in the sun. A gouged track in the sand marked the transport's passing, and for the love of the colony, would someone please make it shut up!

Several times before, Federation pods had landed on New Wailea, and after a ship's beam flashed down from the heavens Connell had helped to fish bits of flesh and hardware out from inside. Strange creatures, half man, half machine, but this was the first time he'd seen one crawl from the pod and struggle across the sand. The Federation could easily obliterate all evidence of whoever earned their ire, and Connell tired of their grisly little reminders of what happened to those who didn't bow to the government's might.

No beam. Maybe the Federation sent this one. Connell narrowed his eyes and spat on the ground. Damned Federation.

He checked the horizon. Nighttime would soon be upon them, and the twin moons would bring the tides. He must act quickly to save the man/machine/whatever that had just blown the pod to the mountains. A deserter then, who didn't want to be tracked, and fast enough to do the deed before the Federation found him. Interesting. And potentially deadly. A criminal, maybe? No, the Federation would have detonated any prisoner the moment they escaped bounds. Connell shuddered at the memory of how he knew that fact, when a man he'd spent an evening with turned out to be a rebel.

With no use for the Federation, which made huge demands in exchange for protection, supplies, and additional colonists which never came, Connell wasn't alone in despising the self-proclaimed rulers of the universe. Rulers who demanded the better part of their crops while robbing them of the young people who were needed to help with the harvest—presumably to make more bio-engineered soldiers. Oh, well. The soldier currently in the path of high tide had been someone's son, once. Far be it from Connell not to offer assistance—providing this wasn't a Federation trap. While he had reason to hate the Federation and all it stood for, he couldn't leave someone to die in the



oncoming surf. Precious life wasn't to be taken for granted, as he'd learned when the man he'd slept with vanished before his very eyes. There one minute, gone the next. No warning. No time to cry out. Just... gone. How many more had the Federation claimed in a similar manner?

He'd made his way halfway across the sand with his sled when he heard the first wails. Cold chills raced up his spine. A terror? Hunting in broad daylight? One of the huge beasts he might hold off, but not a whole pack, and they seldom traveled alone. Roughly the size of two men when fully grown, the voracious carnivores feared nothing. The sound came again, more familiar this time. Not a terror, but the screeching protests of a small child.

A baby? The soldier carried a baby? More cautiously now, fairly certain of a trap, Connell approached the still figure. The crying grew louder and more aggrieved.

A handsome face stared up from behind the duro-glass of the soldier's face shield. The man blinked, but otherwise remained quiet.

"I am Connell," Connell said. Was the thing hurt?

After a long moment the mixture of man and machine replied, "I am Fort'een, and yours to command, Colonel."

Fort'een? What kind of name was Fort'een for a humanoid? The soldier's crystal blue eyes slid shut. Was he dead? Asleep? In stasis while his biomechanical suit repaired damage? Connell had heard of such marvels in recruitment ads, had read of their ilk before he'd left civilized worlds for a backwater colony and a new start. But how to fix a broken one he hadn't a clue.

With a bit of maneuvering he managed to arrange his foundling on the sled on top of the day's catch of fish. Howling emerged from inside the thing's breastplate. Connell ran his hands over the soldier's exoskeleton suit. There had to be a latch, right? How in the world did the soldier get the thing on or off? The moment he touched the man's helmet a mild shock coursed up his arm. Ow! "Okay, okay, I'll leave him alone," Connell grumbled.

Warily eyeing the helmet, Connell strapped the soldier with his screaming burden to the sled and slipped into the harness. In the distance the waves



roared, and he checked the sun once more. Time to get moving. Now! His leg muscles burned and he hunkered low, grunting as he dragged the heavy transport across the sand.

The first of the waves rumbled across the vast shore as Connell reached the cliffs and clipped the sled into place. Hand over hand he worked the pulleys to raise himself and his cargo. Salty spray rained down on him. The village might be disappointed that he'd brought few fish home this evening, and the elders might condemn him for the soldier, but several couples with quiet dwellings would battle for the child—so few were born these days, and what ones survived infancy were carted off by the Federation.

Connell wouldn't think of injustice now. He'd apply himself to getting the strangers to safety. He could always wait to visit the village later. The wailing stopped about halfway up, and he employed the local tradition of praying to the twin moons that the infant merely slept. It took longer than normal to reach his home, what with hauling three times the weight of the heaviest harvest he'd ever taken in.

His stone cottage shone like a beacon in the fading light of the sun, and the twin moons rose over the bay along with the evening wind by the time he'd stored his catch and wrestled his unexpected guests into his home. He chopped herbs and diced roots to add to a simple fish stew, and while dinner simmered he knelt down next to the stranger again. His tentative touch to the breastplate cracked open the hull. Connell gasped and jumped back. How did that happen? Had he broken the suit? Would he get zapped again for his troubles?

The visor slowly lifted, revealing narrowed blue eyes. The soldier spoke, but his words were undecipherable. "I don't understand," Connell told him.

More garbled sound followed. Finally the man said, "Talk."

"About what?"

"Talk," the man repeated.

Connell helped the stranger remove portions of his suit, though the helmet remained in place.

*What the hell should I talk about? What does he want to hear?* "I know it's not much, but welcome to my home," Connell said, puttering around the room,



lighting fish oil lamps to drive back the coming darkness. “The twin moons are in their final phase, so we’re having a poor fish harvest. It’ll pick up again when the weather clears.”

The soldier stared impassively. Squirmy sensations wound around Connell’s insides. “I came to New Wailea six years ago,” Connell prattled on. “I lived in the village until... until I decided I preferred my own company and found a way to get up and down to the beach to harvest fish.” Liked his own company. Liked not hearing the villagers’ murmured speculations behind his back painted a more accurate picture. “We’re having fish stew for dinner. You do like fish, don’t you?”

The soldier remained quiet, entire attention focused on Connell. The squirmy feelings intensified. Connell continued, “I lost my parents young and grew up in an orphanage on Tanaina 4.”

When the man finally unstrapped a squirming child from his chest, both Connell and the man, Fort’een, rather, breathed heavy sighs. The child appeared grumpy and soiled, but otherwise unharmed.

The child began to cry and a pungent aroma filled the cottage. “I’ll be right back!” Connell blurted. Looked like he’d visit the village tonight after all.

By the light of Shun and Nan he raced to the village, then returned, tugging on the arm of a scowling midwife. “You’ve been too long in the sun, Connell, when you imagine finding babes on the shore instead of stranded fish.”

The unmistakable sound of an unhappy child split the night. “What are you waiting for?” exclaimed the midwife, grasping Connell’s wrist in a claw-like hand and charging toward the cottage. She pushed open the door, and Connell barely had time to tackle her to the floor before the ozone odor of a particle weapon discharge seared his nose. He rolled upright, placing himself between the woman and his mysterious guest’s outstretched hand.

Fort’een crouched in a corner, cradling the child. Fully dressed in his suit once more, he more resembled a metallic beast than a man. His weapon remained trained on Connell and the villager.

Oh shit! It suddenly occurred to Connell that bringing a Federation warrior home wasn’t the smartest thing he’d ever done. The cybernetic being with the



ability to end life in the blink of an eye homed his vision on the midwife. “Human female,” he said, as though puzzling out some great mystery. “Advanced age.”

Palms splayed, Connell held his position yet managed to capture the soldier’s attention.

“Why here?” the armed threat asked.

“For the baby,” Connell said.

The soldier cocked his head to the side. One big, mitted hand patted the squalling infant, tucked once more into the soldier’s breastplate. “Mine.” The soldier’s fingertips remained rigidly pointing at Connell, and Connell stared at the small openings in the mitt. In different circumstances he’d have been fascinated by the weaponry. Now? Not dying at the hand of his house guest would be nice.

“She’s here to care for the child,” Connell tried again, a trembling sweep of his hand indicating a now furious baby.

The soldier glared and retreated further back into the corner. “Mine!” he growled again.

“Yes, yours,” Connell agreed. “But the baby’s clothing is soiled and it needs to be fed.”

The soldier spared one glance for the child, one for Connell, and then nodded to the old woman peering out from behind the door. He spoke a few phrases in some strange tongue. Connell understood only two words: “Not hurt?”

Connell puzzled over the question. Was he asking if the midwife was okay or was he wondering whether the woman would hurt the child? The protective way he held the infant was all the answer Connell needed. “No, she’ll not hurt the child, I promise.”

After a few more moments the soldier rose and crossed the floor. Very gently he placed the child in the woman’s hands. “Human. Female. Infant. Mine,” he said.

Though the woman’s eyes were wide and she gulped audibly, she took the baby. “In the morning. I’ll bring her back in the morning.” With a final



nervous glance at Connell, she ducked out the door. Her footsteps hastened away.

Fort'een eyed Connell, standing at rigid attention. Then he sighed, or rather, issued a noise reminiscent of a sigh. After a moment, Connell realized the edges to the plates that pieced together to create the man's body armor had slid apart with a hiss. Section by section the soldier dismantled his covering. First he removed the breastplate, revealing a powerfully built chest totally devoid of hair. Next came the sleeves. A discreet glance inside that Connell hadn't managed earlier revealed sensors and other marvels he'd only seen once before—in the ship that had brought the original colonists to New Wailea. An impressive display of muscles relaxed and contracted as Fort'een continued removing his armor. Bulging leg muscles came into view next, and Connell blushed when the soldier unclipped that portion of whatever material turned him from man into fighting machine. He was totally nude underneath the suit so far. The girdle joined the rest of the suit, and a dozen or so devices that might have been weapons, in an organized pile. Beneath the marvel of science the soldier wore a pair of thin pants that unrolled to cover him from waist to ankles. A sigh of relief escaped Connell, even while a niggling of disappointment filled him. What he'd taken in of the gorgeously arranged warrior was enough to whet Connell's appetite to see the unrevealed bits.

*Stop thinking like that! What if he's like the villagers and prone to cast judgment?* What would the soldier do if he knew what thoughts chased themselves around his host's brain? Connell turned away, lest his appreciation for the stranger's form be noticed.

Fort'een pointed at his helmeted head. "Translator," he said. "Can't understand without." His words were clipped and emerged in an unfamiliar cadence, like he seldom spoke, or was unused to human language.

Connell nodded. Fort'een pressed a series of buttons from beneath a concealed panel on his visor. Odd clicks and hissing followed. Finally, the helmet slowly rose, Fort'een's large hands lifting it from his head.

The moment the apparatus cleared, Connell's heart stuttered in his chest. He froze in place, stunned by the sheer beauty of the being standing before him. Taller than the average colonist of New Wailea, the man stood six four or



better, his larger frame necessary to carry the bulk of the suit, no doubt. Bright blue eyes gazed out from a face that seemed chiseled from the stone that village women used to fashion plates and bowls. A well-formed nose and sharply defined cheekbones topped full lips and a deeply cleft chin. Fort'een's close-cropped hair nearly matched the honey-colored wood of Connell's table, chairs, and bed.

Oh! Bed! Since Connell had inadvertently invited the stranger to stay, where would the man sleep? And would he wake from a bad dream, see Connell as enemy, and kill, as soldiers existed to do? There was the fish cave, where Connell stored his harvests, a smelly, cold place, chilled by sea water from underground. No, Connell could never send someone there.

*Sniff.* Was something burning? The stew! He rushed to the area set up for cooking and fumbled for a spoon to stir their forgotten dinner. Scorched maybe, but not burned, thank the twin moons. His tiny table boasted two chairs—one seldom occupied by a dinner guest. He ladled up two bowls of stew and placed them on the wooden surface. A quick trip to the well added water for them to drink.

Throughout dinner preparations Fort'een merely stood at the edges of the kitchen, observing, as though cataloguing Connell's every movement. Connell's, "Sit, eat," earned him a quizzical, raised brow gaze. "Food," Connell tried again, spooning up a taste of stew and moaning unnecessarily loudly when the liquid touched his tongue.

The soldier's eyes widened but he didn't sit. "Suit," he said, in his broken speech pattern. "Gives needs."

His suit? Perhaps he simply didn't trust Connell enough to accept a meal. Most colonists reviled Federation soldiers, and once more Connell questioned his judgment in bringing this one to his home instead of letting fate decide the man's future. In the distance waves smacked against the cliffs, high tide having arrived in force. The soldier would most certainly be dead by now if not for Connell's intervention. And the baby. A smile tugged up the corner of Connell's mouth. The tenderness in the big man's eyes whenever they'd fallen on the child must prove him capable of more than killing, right?

Fort'een folded himself onto the floor, watching each movement as Connell ate. Unease settled over Connell at being observed during the simple



act of having dinner. Whenever his heart began pounding in fear, he imagined the soldier with the baby and his fears calmed somewhat.

After cleaning the dishes, sponging himself off, and settling down for the night, Connell opened the window shutters to let in the air. While the villagers feared living so close to the sea, Connell welcomed the crisp and salty scent of the ocean breeze, the proximity to the fish whereby he made his living, and also the isolation from the others.

Now, however, he faced a problem. What should he do with the soldier? “I...” Connell began, though not really sure what he’d say.

Fort’een solved the problem for him. “I stand watch.” With surprising agility he redonned his suit. After a last, long look at Connell, the stranger wandered away into the night. Where was he going? There! The twin moons reflected off the soldier’s armor where he sat on the cliff, staring out to sea. Didn’t he sleep? Or was he asleep?

Several times in the night Connell rose to check out his window, and each time found Fort’een motionless on the rocks. At last sleep claimed him. *Would that he not kill me before dawn breaks.*

He tossed and turned, and woke with a start when his dreams of exploring the nooks and crannies of the soldier’s muscles ended with a pool of seed on his belly.

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Connell awoke to find Fort’een pacing the cottage, wearing the long, gray pants and his helmet. The moment Connell’s eyes popped open the man demanded, “Is morning! Where is child?”

As if in answer, a rap sounded against the door. Before Connell could issue a warning, the soldier stalked across the floor and threw the wooden panel wide. There stood the midwife, baby in arms and a pack on her back. Ignoring the stranger’s scowl, she stepped into the cottage. Connell couldn’t help noticing her assessing gaze and small nod of approval at the soldier’s toned physique. “I have everything you need for the day, here,” she said. “Do you know how to change a baby?” she asked.

“Change into what?” Fort’een asked.



The woman smiled and promptly crossed to the table to demonstrate. Connell took advantage of their distraction to pull his pants beneath the covers and remedy his nakedness. When he glanced up he registered a small flinch from Fort'een and would have laughed at the soldier's horrified expression as the man realized what the midwife intended. Taking pity, Connell hurried to the table and took a turn changing the cooing baby. Though an orphan, sent to New Wailea to make his fate, before he'd left the Federation worlds he'd helped plenty in caring for infants left parentless by conflicts within the galaxies. Some had required a whole lot more specialized care than a human child. Morphians! Yikes! Try changing a child who not only fought with two arms and two legs, but sixteen tentacles! And a nasty attitude.

The little girl gurgled and smiled, and... the soldier smiled back. The rigidity of his hardened features softened when he stared at the child, and when the baby wrapped tiny fingers around his larger digit, the sheer amazement on the man's face melted Connell's heart. This man was a killer? He seemed no more a remorseless machine capable of decimating worlds than Connell was himself—and the military had formally announced Connell incapable on his eighteenth birthday, due to not meeting their size requirements.

"Here is what you feed her," the woman said, producing a device Connell had seen many times before to deliver nutrients to a child too young to eat solid food.

"I've taken care of children before," Connell told her.

She nodded. "Then I'll be back this evening to collect her."

The sudden stiffening of the soldier's shoulders announced his understanding of her words. "Mine," he said.

"Yes," replied the woman, "but would you rather get up every two hours at night, then have to work all day, when it's my responsibility to care for youngsters?"

Before the stranger could answer, Connell replied, "We thank you for your help."

The woman left and warmth once more returned to the room with the stranger's smile.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Fourteen wore the child carrier on his back as he'd done for the past few days, an improvised canopy shielding the baby from the bright sun while they worked. Several village women repeatedly offered to keep the child while he helped his colonel harvest the flopping silver bodies left behind by receding tides. But the child was his to care for, though Midwife insisted on taking her every night. The women of the colony wanted Fourteen, he knew, for his suit detected their arousal. He didn't want the women, and their constant giggling and tittering confused his language translator, his suit proclaiming the grating sounds as Old Trevorvian—a language long dead. Colonel? Colonel worked quietly, unless ordered to speak to allow the suit time to gather words, and his talk was slow and even. Soothing. It wasn't mind to mind, but... pleasant. How Fourteen would love to connect with his colonel's mind. So much more efficient than cumbersome words.

His suit also picked up arousal from his host, arousal that disappeared when the women arrived. Hmm... Worth further study. And while his host wasn't quite as large as most of the soldiers Fourteen had lain with, he was appealing and humanoid.

And the more time Fourteen spent without the neuro-inhibitors or his suit, the more his arousal grew. By day he stripped down to his thin undergarment, only keeping his helmet on for translations, as Colonel seemed wary of body armor. At night Fourteen kept watch, fully geared, to allow his suit time to cleanse his body of toxins, feed him, and erase the day's exertions. Perhaps he should order it to care for his other needs as well, without fellow soldiers around to ease him.

Throughout each night since arriving he'd watched for enemies and listened for signals. Had he truly escaped? Would approaching ships detect his presence? He dared not destroy his suit, if such a thing were even possible. But—he smiled at his latest discovery—the world he'd landed on boasted an extreme amount of sunlight. His light-powered suit thrived on the abundant energy, and fish blasted into fine powder made a workable replacement for the minerals the suit needed, far superior to the synthesized chemicals supplied by



the Federation. And while he and his colonel worked to harvest the stranded fish from the sands each day, each night Fourteen and his suit quietly worked in tandem, refining protocols to accommodate new circumstances.

Where once he'd studied battle tactics, now he searched the suit's database for tide and weather patterns. If only the programming contained information on child rearing. He gazed at the poor unfortunate life forms left behind by receding tides, leaving miles of damp sand until the return of the waves at nightfall. Some things he'd just have to figure out on his own, with Colonel's help.

The child squirmed on his back, releasing a few snivels that heralded a full-blown howl. He knew the drill. He smiled and held out a hand, telling his commanding officer to stop the sled. With careful hands he placed the child on the sled and changed her soiled clothing. Then he sat on the edge and held her in his arms as she sucked greedily at a bottle. Warmth he'd not experienced in a long, long time flooded through him, and he couldn't help the smile that pulled at his lips. Though he'd been administered chemicals from an early age to enhance his body and fit him for duty, he'd never felt as powerful as when he held the girl in his arms. She needed him. She smiled at him. She gave him purpose over and above killing. And in the mindless task of gathering fish, in the company of a child and a gentle man, he found peace for the first time in his troubled life.

"What word used, people belong together?" he asked. Words. Such awkward things.

His colonel crouched down beside him, brushing careful fingers over the light golden fuzz on the baby's head. "There's many," Colonel replied.

"People who," Fourteen stopped, sifting through his hood's neurons for the proper term. "Care. People care, protect," he finally said with the help of his translator. How he longed to simply connect with Colonel mind to mind. So much easier, so much more efficient.

"Ah!" The colonel's teeth emerged from behind his lips in a gesture that suddenly made the day warmer. "You mean family."

"Family?" Not the right word. Fourteen had had a family once. They didn't care. They'd sold him for favor.



“Yes, family,” Colonel said. “They care for each other, would do anything for each other.” He placed his lips close to the sensor intake on the helmet, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Would die for each other.”

“Would die,” Fourteen repeated. Yes, he’d die for the child, as he would for his colonel.

“We can’t keep calling her ‘child’ or ‘baby’,” Colonel said with a toss of his head toward the contented bundle of infant in Fourteen’s lap. “We need a name for her.”

If she were a soldier, she’d have a number, subject to change with assignment. With his campaign as “Fourteen” over, should he be ‘One’ now? Would that make the child ‘Two’? And Colonel outranked him, so Colonel should do the naming.

“You. Name her?” Fourteen asked.

Colonel whipped his head up and stared at Fourteen with shock in his eyes. “Me? Me name her?”

“Yes,” Fourteen replied.

“Well—” Colonel’s expression took on the intensity it normally did when he was thinking. “I’ve always been fond of the name Pearl.”

“Pea-rl.” Fourteen tried out the name, how it flowed from his tongue. While speaking mind to mind was faster, words fascinated him, how to form them, how to speak them, how others responded. Still, the loss of a constant influx of thoughts and ideas left him... isolated. Could he somehow modify his helmet to allow him to instantly share ideas with Colonel? How about Pearl?

“Family,” he said, testing the word with his tongue.

Colonel gave him a lopsided smile. “Family.”

Once the baby, no... Pearl was fed and drowsing, Fourteen strapped her to his back and continued collecting fish to store in the cave. Every day he and Colonel filled the chilly space, and every morning they woke to an empty cave after villagers came in the evening, leaving behind vegetables, clothing, toys and pretties for Pearl—even a cradle—and other things they might need. Not a bad life.



A pity it could end with a single ship passing by. Would the colonists be punished for hiding him? Fourteen couldn't let that happen. "Family," he said again.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

“Why do they do that?” Fort’een asked.

“Do what?” Connell responded, studying the young couple who’d just left the cave with a basket of fish. Pride surged through him that without the helmet on, Fort’een took great care to enunciate his words, though he still struggled at times.

“That thing with their...” Fort’een cocked his head to the side as though searching for a word. The wrinkling of this brow relaxed when he found it. “Lips. Why do they do that with their lips?”

Connell scratched his head, trying to decipher the soldier’s meaning. Just then, the young man inclined his head and placed a kiss on his wife’s lips. Then he bent and repeated the gesture on the cheek of his child.

“Oh! It’s how people who care for each other show affection. When they part company, they’ll kiss goodbye, greet each other with a kiss when they return. They also kiss when...” Connell let his words trail off, a flush creeping up his cheeks at what he’d nearly said. He fought back the image of Fort’een bending down and placing his full lips against Connell’s...

Fort’een didn’t seem to notice the broken off sentence, being far too busy watching the couple. “Kiss,” he said. “Affection.” He kept his eyes trained on the path until the family disappeared from view on the village trail.

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Connell lay on his bed, the moonlight illuminating his housemate sitting outside on the cliff. Though the winds blew and the rains fell, Fort’een held his ground.

If Connell were a braver man, he’d march outside and insist upon Fort’een getting into the house this instant. Then he’d remove the armor piece by piece, dry the man with a soft cloth, and tuck him into bed. Into Connell’s bed. Most of the women of the village probably entertained similar notions; but though many came daily, flocking around the unattached newcomer, the Federation soldier didn’t respond to their advances, or their unspoken requests for him to expand the colony’s gene pool.



No, the only female Fort'een cared about was Pearl, but sometimes, every now and then, Connell caught a curious gaze turned his way, particularly when he'd offered some kindness. And although Fort'een still found nourishment in his suit, he'd sampled Connell's cooking and had abandoned the suit's cleaning and shaving to bathe in the stream as Connell did. Was it wrong to sneak peeks at such a finely formed body?

And exactly what did the man want? He seemed happy to harvest fish, share Connell's unpretentious cottage, and care for the baby, but this man had seen all the Federation had to offer. He never spoke of the future, the past, or even much about the present, satisfied to simply listen, asking the occasional question. How long would he remain content in a place like New Wailea, with its violent tides, dwindling population, and primitive existence?

Sleep descended. Warm and cozy in his bed, Connell gave over waking thoughts to dreams wherein the man outside, shrouded in mist, offered to share the bed, and more.

*Bong, bong, bong!*

Connell shot upright. The village signal drum rang out again. *Bong, bong, bong!* An attack! Fort'een bolted through the door, eyes wide behind his face shield. "What is it?" he asked.

"Terrors," Connell replied. "Great beasts with sharp teeth and claws. But there's not been an attack in months."

"Human?"

"No. Vicious animals."

"Where?"

"The village," Connell replied, shimmying into his clothing. The creatures cared naught for fish, preferring animal—or human—flesh. He'd heard tales of the original colonists having nearly been decimated by the pack-hunting creatures.

Normally Fort'een avoided the village and the stares of the curious. Now Connell struggled to keep up with the man's long strides. Ignoring the rain, he slogged through ankle-deep mud, straight to the midwife's cottage. "Pearl?" he demanded.



“Safe,” the woman said. “We’re heading for the caves.” She bundled the child up and darted out the door, followed by a youngster of perhaps six years and leading another by the hand.

A harsh breath wafted from the soldier’s body armor. He turned to Connell. “Where are attackers?”

Connell led him to the north side of the village, the edge closest to the forest where the creatures lived. The Federation denied colonists proper weapons to defend themselves, fearing disgruntled settlers might turn any arsenals on their harsh masters, as had occurred in the past. Many a colony failed due to settlers’ inability to protect themselves from indigenous life forms. Hiding in caves and defending themselves with arrows, slings, and farming tools was all the villagers could do.

“Go with others,” Fort’een demanded. He raised the visor of his helmet, cradled the back of Connell’s head in one massive mitt, and bent down to graze his lips along Connell’s. “I’ll be back.” Fort’een’s smile blazed like the noontime sun before he turned and disappeared into the night.

Connell stood on the path, fingers skating along his lips where Fort’een had kissed him. “He kissed me! Fort’een kissed me!” A roar split the night, followed by another and another. Though his heart went with his warrior, Connell’s feet took him to the safety of the caves, where he picked up a spear and joined the other men who kept watch.

Throughout the night he strained his ears for news. A yelp, a roar cut short, the *zip, zip, zip*, of some kind of artillery. A streak of light from a laser weapon. Never had so large a pack descended from the higher elevations, and never had an attack gone on so long. Would the village have even survived without Fort’een’s help? Outnumbered and alone, would Fort’een survive? Connell spared a glance behind him to ensure Pearl’s safety, then whispered a prayer for his family, his heart warming even in the cool, rainy evening to discover that, unbeknownst to him, he, a cast-off soldier, and a child whose origins were still unknown had somehow formed the thing he’d always wanted most in the world. Granted, his family didn’t quite match the villagers’ notions, but it suited him just fine.

Towards dawn the roaring faded, the creatures moving farther away. Through early morning fog a lone figure approached. Even as Connell



watched, Fort'een's amazing suit shifted and changed, bloody spatters disappearing, ripped fabric mending itself. Ignoring any possible reprimands from the others, Connell rushed forward. "Fort'een!" he cried. "Are you hurt?"

"My suit mends my body," the man replied, raising his visor to bestow another kiss. "How fare you and Pearl?"

The man had just saved an entire village of people, and only two of them mattered. Connell's heart swelled. "We're fine."

Fort'een looked past Connell to the midwife holding the baby. "Take her," he told Connell. "Let's go home."

*Home.* The word had never held much meaning for Connell. Now it meant everything.

They took the child and trudged back to their cottage, Connell uncaring that he and his—partner?—left behind a small fortune in terror pelts.

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"Daughter," Connell said. "Daugh-ter."

"Daughter," Fort'een repeated.

"That's right." Connell pointed at Fort'een. "You father, Pearl daughter."

The vacant expression came over Fort'een's face that indicated he'd disappeared into his mind to communicate with his helmet. His eyes refocused after a minute. "What are you?"

*I am yours for the taking* sat poised on Connell's tongue, though he dared not say the words. The baby gurgled and waved her chubby legs and arms, distracting the man and saving Connell from having to answer.

*What am I, indeed?*

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Once more, Connell lay awake. So many times he'd visited the garden alone to relieve tension. Did Fort'een have the same urges, and if so, how did he alleviate them, or did his miraculous suit tend those needs as well?

Outside the window Fort'een shuffled restlessly on his cliffside perch. Did the man get lonely sitting out there all by himself at night? Since he didn't



sleep, maybe they should defy village custom and keep Pearl themselves at night.

A low moan carried on the breeze. What? Was Fort'een okay? Connell pulled on his pants and hurried to the cliff. "Is something wrong?"

Silence. After a long pause Fort'een whispered, "I miss..."

Connell had never considered that Fort'een might have left a lover behind. The moonlight washed over the man, his features vulnerable even while fully armored. Connell eased down beside the soldier. "I'm sorry. You loved someone?"

"Loved?" Confusion passed over Fort'een's face, gone a moment later. "Not loved. At night, I... soldiers... we." Even in the low light of the waning moons the man's blue eyes shone. He raised his visor. "We took comfort from each other," he finally said. "Suit is not the same."

"Oh?" Connell absorbed the meaning. "Oh!" His eyes locked with the soldier's. They moved as one, lips connecting. A gasp of surprise gave Connell his opening to dive his tongue inside Fort'een's mouth. Ever since he'd first arrived on New Wailea to discover the hard notions of the colonists, he'd despaired of ever experiencing the physical pleasures he'd found with other young men at the export station where he'd waited patiently for an immigration opening. He'd snapped up the first opportunity, overlooking the requirements and a carefully worded call for "breeding stock." Small colonies had little use for those not inclined to increase the genetic pool to prevent inbreeding.

Fort'een drew back. "But I cannot ask that of my commander."

"Your... your what?" While the soldier's vocabulary skills had grown over time, he still missed the odd word on occasion.

"You are my commander, my colonel. I cannot..."

"Colonel?" Only then did Connell recognize the subtle inflection that wasn't "Connell" as he'd always believed, but "Colonel", a soldierly rank. He threw back his head and laughed. "I'm not your colonel, I'm a civi... civil..." Drat! Now words failed Connell.

"Civilian?" Fort'een offered.



“Yes, a civilian. Connell is my name, not a rank.”

The soldier flashed a brief, barely perceptible smile and began to descend again. Connell stopped him. “Your name? Is it really Fort’een, or is that some kind of military name too?”

“Fourteen. My comrades were Thirteen, Fifteen, and Twenty-seven.”

A number? All this time Connell had been calling the man by a number? “Don’t you have a real name? A name given to you by your mother or father?”

Fourteen’s lips drew into a thin line of distaste. “I would not speak of them. You have taught me what family is. They were not family.”

“Then I will erase the bitterness from your mind.” How many times had Connell dreamed of having a family while living in a Federation orphanage, a place too overrun to even hope for adoption? The very young, the beautiful, the exotic children found a place, but not someone like himself with no skills or looks to speak of. Fourteen, though, would have been taken in a minute, probably by an unscrupulous person who planned to raise him for use in a pleasure house.

This time, when Fourteen closed the gap between them, Connell opened his mouth. While hesitant at first, the soldier soon joined in the tongue play. Earlier he’d asked about kissing, yet he’d mentioned finding comfort with other men. Had none of them ever kissed him? Had they shared their bodies only?

“Come with me to my bed,” Connell said. “We’ll be more comfortable there.” He rose and held out his hand. The soldier took it, and together they strolled the moonlit path to their home. They fell onto the bed in a tangle of arms, legs, armor, and heated embraces. Clicks and clanks announced the suit’s plates hitting the floor. The helmet fell last.

Though the night hid details from Connell’s eyes, he ran his hand up Fourteen’s arms, seeking out the tiny depressions where suit gripped flesh, and where he knew tiny wires punctured muscles and drilled past tissue to arrive at the central nervous system, to add nutrients and take away toxins, to adjust the soldier’s body for maximum efficiency, and otherwise alter his physiology for maximum performance and longevity. Ah yes, watching a living, breathing soldier had greatly advanced Connell’s knowledge of how they worked.



In response to Connell's explorations, the soldier did his own discovering, dipping his fingers in the ridges of muscles on Connell's back and shoulders—muscles honed by pulling a sled full of fish across sand, and hoisting pulleys to raise the bounty up the cliff face.

“Family.” That single word gusted from the soldier's mouth to Connell's ear, saying many things probably foreign to a warrior tongue.

“I want you,” Connell murmured. “I've long wanted you, in my arms, in my bed, in my body.” He rolled to the side, then onto his back, spreading his legs.

“I would have more kissing first.” Fourteen climbed above him, sealing their mouths together once more.

The soldier's cock nestled against the cheeks of Connell's ass, bumping against his hole. Connell reached back and fondled the length and width. Already the anticipated burn to come sent tingles up inside. Oh, to be filled so completely by this man. But what could they use for lubrication? Spit? A bit of cooking oil? He reached under the bed for the small vial kept there, hoping the soldier wouldn't figure out exactly how Connell put the oil to use while alone in bed at night. He smeared the dampness against his hole, venturing a finger inside.

*Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me!* he silently chanted.

Though every bit as hard as Connell, Fourteen seemed in no hurry. Gentle kisses turned fierce, and hesitant groping emboldened, yet still Fourteen avoided direct contact with the places on Connell's body that might trigger release.

When at last the kiss broke, Fourteen skated his lips over Connell's eyelids, across both cheeks, and down to his neck. Connell moaned and Fourteen released a chuckle, the first laughter Connell had ever heard from the man.

With tongue and a gentle application of teeth, Fourteen mapped out the contours of Connell's neck, shoulders, and chest. Whereas Fourteen's body boasted little hair, a dark mat of short curls adorned Connell's own torso. Fourteen sifted his fingers through the mass while rising up for another kiss.



Finally (finally!), longer, thicker fingers joined Connell's at his entrance, skillfully working in the lubrication. Giving up their kiss with a sigh, Fourteen slid downward to take Connell's neglected cock into his mouth. Oh, by the moons! How glorious! A mouth on him, for the first time in ages. And not merely any mouth, but Fourteen's.

A mouth on him, fingers in him, Connell's consciousness fuzzed around the edges. Though kissing seemed new to his partner, pleasuring a man certainly was not. Fourteen took Connell to the very edge of ecstasy, held him there, then backed away. The pressure built inside. Just a little deeper, a bit longer... Damn! Fourteen stopped once more, his melodic chuckle soothing to Connell's frayed nerves. "Patience," the soldier ordered, then began the exquisite torture again.

The double sensation of mouth and fingers ended abruptly, and Connell released a whimper of frustration. Fourteen's mouth covered his anew, the taste of his own pre-come sending a spike of desire straight to his groin. He fought not to come, but... oh, a thigh brushed against his straining flesh. Connell bucked up, sending his cock sliding against Fourteen. Fourteen shifted, bringing their erections in contact.

"No more teasing!" Connell opened his legs wider in invitation. He wanted, oh, did he want—the burn, the stretching, the filling...

A moment later, something larger than fingers breached his opening.

Slowly, slowly, Fourteen sank inside of him. Their bodies sealed together, then drew apart, breathy sighs mixing with harsh pants and the roar of the sea against the cliffs. Connell moaned when the length of his lover pushed inside, filling him so very completely. Fourteen's mouth roamed freely on Connell's neck and face, in constant motion. Weight braced on one arm, the soldier caressed Connell's skin with his free hand.

Time after time the man returned to Connell's mouth, as though having now discovered the joys of two mouths joined, he couldn't get enough.

Muscles Connell knew to be genetically altered bunched beneath his fingertips, and he scrabbled for purchase on sweat-slicked, marble surfaces. His hands came to rest on a firm backside that plunged and retreated like the



tide, filling his body on the forward strokes and leaving him longing and bereft on the aft.

Gradually they fell into a rhythm, moving together as though two parts of a whole, designed to work in unison. In, out, the gentle swaying of their bodies yielded to harder thrusts. Outside, lightning crackled and rain beat against the roof, the weather keeping time with the intensity of their loving.

With increasing force Fourteen shoved into him, and Connell met and matched each stroke. Twin strangled cries announced their arrival at a mutual destination, and they lay in each other's arms, catching their breath.

Two heartbeats, thudding furiously. Deep breaths sounding in harmony. Gradually both slowed, and the storm moved farther inland. Nestled snug in the bed, Connell dared to ask, "Where are you from?"

Fourteen hesitated so long that Connell thought he'd either offended the man with the asking or that his companion had fallen asleep. Finally, a throaty, "From D391," reached his ears.

"D391?"

"Civilians call it Noorvik."

"Noorvik?" Really? Only the elite of the races resided on the Federation home world. The residents there weren't bound by colony law to hand over crops or children. "How did you wind up a soldier?" he blurted, only realizing his rudeness once the words left his mouth. "I'm sorry; you don't have to answer that." If Connell had only been a little bigger, he himself might have wound up with implants and weapons at his fingertips.

"I do not mind," Fourteen stated, in his oddly-inflected accent. "My father sought favor with the senators. When allowing them to use me for their purposes didn't win what he sought, he took more permanent measures." No anger, merely mild acceptance.

"Use you!" Connell rose up on his arm to stare down at the man beside him—likely bred to be the epitome of Federation beauty, to be used as a bargaining tool. He'd heard tell of such, had seen similar things in the facilities he'd called home. Some young men never recovered from their ordeals, their minds destined to forever wander in the past.



“It is nothing,” Fourteen replied with some conviction. “I have family now. I have purpose. I no longer serve a corrupt Federation.”

Connell tightened his grip on Fourteen’s arm, willing the man to know the truth in those words. “Is there something I can call you besides Fourteen? Having a number for a name seems so impersonal.”

The soldier’s eyes glittered in the dark, and he held Connell’s gaze a long moment. “What would you like to call me?”

“Did you ever have a name?”

Fourteen’s words emerged on a growl. “I will not use the name *they* gave me.”

Immediately Connell wished he’d remained silent, and hadn’t reminded the poor man of times best forgotten.

More quietly, Fourteen said, “There was a boy, a... *friend* I believe is the word, who I met when I first entered the Federation camp.”

A lover, maybe? Connell’s heart constricted. What? Jealousy? “Were you close?”

A head shake said no. “He was... kind. No one had been kind to me before.”

*I’m a lowly fish harvester, but what I wouldn’t give to borrow that miraculous suit and lay waste to any who’d hurt this gentle warrior.* Connell damped down his indignation. “What happened to him?”

“He was too kind, others took advantage. He took his life.” Was that a glimmer in those blue eyes? “I should have been kind in return. I was not. He died. I would be called by his name, to let him live again in some small way.”

“What was his name?”

“Stone.”

“Alright, Stone.” Connell tried the name out for good measure. It suited his new companion—solid and unmoving. “Now, what...”

Stone stopped the questions with more kisses.

Connell fell asleep to the sensation of lips upon his face and awoke to find himself still lying in a secure embrace.



They packed up all they'd need for their day and waited for Pearl's arrival. Stone dressed in pants and boots and nothing else. His suit lay on top of their sled, collecting solar rays. Weeks spent in the sun lent his skin a golden hue, still much lighter than the mahogany tones of Connell's own skin. "Why does Pearl stay away at night?" Stone asked. "I need no sleep. I could care for her."

"It's tradition here," Connell explained. "One room cottages don't offer much space for intimacy, so children are kept by the midwife to encourage the birthing of more children."

"Intimacy." Stone rolled the word around in his mouth before letting it fall from his tongue.

"Intimacy. Ummm... what we did last night." Heat rose up Connell's face to his ears.

"Ah, intimacy." A little half-smile lit the soldier's face. "I like intimacy."

*Oh my! He didn't just say that!* Connell choked, fighting for and not finding words to answer what sounded like a delightful challenge. Any response died on his tongue when the midwife approached, surrounded by villagers, but without Pearl.

Connell raced up to her. "Where's Pearl? Is she all right?"

The woman shot a wary glance at Stone, then another at the magistrate, who'd come wearing formal robes. Not a friendly visit, then. "This couple have no children and have agreed to take the baby as their own."

What? "Now wait a darn minute! Pearl is ours, and she's not going anywhere."

The magistrate cleared his throat. "The child needs two parents, and this couple..."

"Stone! They're trying to take Pearl!" Connell shouted.

Stone made not a sound. He merely donned his armor, methodically snapping the pieces into place until he stood before them, no longer a man, but a human/machine hybrid, and a deadly one at that. He raised his hand. Two blasts pulsed from whatever weapon he'd invoked. A boulder shattered nearby, debris spraying the nearby bushes. The couple, the magistrate, and the



midwife all jumped. Hell, even Connell couldn't help a wince. Over the past few weeks he'd grown so accustomed to Stone's tender side that he'd forgotten the man was a professional killer.

The magistrate recovered himself, for the most part. A shaking in his hands betrayed his true fear. "You'd use your strength against us?"

Stone calmly raised his visor. "I'll use my strength to protect my family, as I used it to protect *your* village."

"Family? Family!" the man sputtered. "Two men cannot be a family."

"Two men and Pearl," Stone corrected. He took aim at another boulder. It exploded into chunks.

"What was that for?" the magistrate asked, once he'd recovered from the shock of the blast.

"I need smaller rocks," Stone replied, "to add a room to the cottage for our daughter." To the midwife he said, very deliberately, "She sleeps here now. Go get my daughter. If I must come collect her..."

The woman fled, the magistrate on her heels. Only then did Connell notice that the couple who'd wanted Pearl were no longer there. Smart people.

"Family," Stone said, before swooping down to kiss Connell.

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*Stone. Much better than Fourteen.* Neural inputs zinged along his skin. Ah... his suit agreed. He sat on the cliff, staring out at sea, tuning his ears to hear if Pearl cried or his mate needed him. Mate. Some of the soldiers in his unit formed semi-permanent bonds, ended by death or reassignment. Stone had fought the temptation to get close, knowing any warm feelings couldn't last. The military encouraged short-term attachments; it kept soldiers content, and no one fought as hard as a soldier fighting to protect another. Like he'd fought for Pearl and Connell that day. And would again if threat ever came.

But today he'd experienced a strange sensation, one he'd not encountered before. The chemicals fed nightly into his body prevented sickness and slowed aging, but did being away from the ship counteract the meds? *Diagnostic*, he ordered. Numbers and symbols zipped past his peripherals. Nothing out of the ordinary. And yet today...



A magistrate, the midwife, trying to take Pearl. *Zip, zip, zip.* Point by point his blood pressure rose, until the suit administered an antidote. Instant calm slowed his pounding heart. Next he pictured Pearl when she'd returned, how she'd laughed and tugged at his visor. No matter how big and scary he might look in his uniform, the baby saw past that, saw past the machine to the man. As Connell did. Connell. And there it was, the twisting of his heart, the lurching of his stomach, the pressure in his chest. *Diagnostic!* he ordered.

More numbers, more symbols, all meaningless. *What is wrong with me?*

*Readings are normal for extreme human emotion.*

*What emotion?*

The suit paused before offering, *Affection.*

No. He'd held affection for Connell and Pearl before. This was something above and beyond affection. *What is more than affection?*

*Love.*

Love? He'd heard of that. Two soldiers had cared deeply for each other. So deeply that they'd talked of deserting, going away to build a life together. The next day the commander came and took one away. The other wasn't the same after that, and soon died in battle. Stone swore he saw the man step directly into the path of that missile.

Now he understood. If anything happened to Connell and Pearl, he might seek out a missile of his own. Emotion! Emotion enabled those two soldiers to defy their programming, and emotion allowed him to rescue Pearl—the reason commanders separated those who grew too close, no doubt. He'd just have to ensure nothing happened to the ones he'd come to love.

He lay back in the darkness, staring up at a million glittering stars. Connell gave them beautiful names, like The Angel, and Shell, for a lovely twisted mollusk they'd found on the sand. Stone knew them as TR-749 and QL-9, gaseous balls around which other worlds orbited. How much had Connell seen of the universe? So many marvels Stone wanted to share with his lover. If only they could join minds as they did bodies, allowing Stone to share his memories, his hopes, his fears. To not be alone. How did humans survive, living with a lover but not fully connected to them?



*Lover. I have a lover.*

A bright light in the sky winked and moved. A ship. What would happen if any found him here? He'd have to make sure none ever did.

Closing his eyes, he brushed his consciousness against the ship's, ready to retreat at the first sign of threat. Unlike Stone's suit, which relied on his own brain for cognizance, the ship possessed a mind of its own, a necessary trait to maneuver a ship full of cryosleeping children from a colony to a Federation camp for training. Duty. A duty transport.

The colonists needed children to help populate this world more than the Federation needed additional soldiers to conquer alien races. Stone's lips curved upward. *Greetings and welcome*, he told the ship.

The Federation surely wouldn't miss one little vessel and fifty recruits, would it?

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## CHAPTER FIVE

“Where is the ship that brought you?” Stone asked as he bounced his daughter on his knee. More and more visions of a wrathful Federation plagued his mind. He must act and protect the new joy he’d found. The cryoship that had made parents of nearly every joined pair in the village was merely a class-one drone vessel, not possessing the type of equipment required to ensure the planet’s safety. Drastic measures were necessary. Never would Stone’s colonel... his “Connell” or young Pearl be subject to an uncaring government’s whims.

“I arrived by Federation transport,” Connell replied. “It left after I disembarked.”

“Is there a ship here? From before?”

“The Federation disabled it so the original colonists couldn’t leave and renege on their duty agreements.”

Considering the age, some parts might be worn or missing, but Stone doubted the Federation would hold much interest in the supplies he needed. “Does it remain, still?”

“Yes. Not far from here.”

“Take me there.”

Stone donned his full gear and hissed when the million tiny pinpricks entered his body, connecting him to his suit. Whereas once he’d felt naked without his armor, now the weight pressed down. Had he always seemed so awkward? And even with the peripheral reading telling him their temperature, general health, and their emotion when he touched Connell or Pearl with his mitts, he preferred what his fingertips revealed. The softness of their hair, the warmth of their skin, the bumps that rose when Stone ran a finger up Connell’s neck. Without the armor he could pretend he was just a man, as any other in the village—until his needs drew him back to his suit. While Connell’s cooking might sustain him for a time, he’d been altered too much to return completely to flesh.



He sighed. With all the circuitry throughout his body, and with the special nutrients fed to him by his gear, unless subjected to extreme battle conditions, Stone would exist long after Connell and Pearl departed the world. A heavy weight tugged at his heart. Having only just found family, giving them up was unconscionable. Enough of that later, first to keep them safe.

The ship had seen better days, and obviously hadn't been touched much since landing. Stone foraged through the narrow corridors until coming to the main flight deck. The beacon, that's what he needed, and the proximity warning to alert him to the arrival of ships in orbit.

He passed Pearl to Connell and hoisted his newfound treasures. "Take me to the highest peak."

The rest of the afternoon was spent arranging and testing the old equipment. He retrofitted solar panels for power, an abundant resource on a planet with plenty of sun to spare.

"What are you doing?" Connell asked.

"This," Stone held up a silver cylinder nearly his own height and plunged the end into the ground, "is a warning beacon. Any approaching ships will sound the alarm." He thanked the heavens for his translator hood, for he still hadn't mastered all the inflections of local language.

"And that?" Connell pointed at a square, boxy device.

"It is a liar."

"A liar?"

"Yes. Ships approach a planet and send out a greeting, to see what creatures may live there. This device warns of high radiation, to drive away any who get too close." Simple, yes. Effective? Stone hoped so.

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Connell rested his head on Stone's shoulder, cuddling a sleeping Pearl in his arms. Another funny feeling coursed through Stone, one his suit labeled "contentment."

"Why did the magistrate think that couple better than us?" he asked. They provided for themselves and their daughter quite well. And the village never lacked for fish.



Connell's shoulders lifted and dropped. "I guess because they're joined."

Stone glanced sharply at his mate. "We join. Whenever we can." In his opinion, they couldn't get Pearl's room built quickly enough, so they could join whenever she slept if they wanted to.

His enhanced night vision allowed Stone to observe the lovely flush to his Connell's skin, usually brought on by thoughts of mating. Stone loved mating. Even without voices in his head, when so close to Connell, the two became one.

"They say words," Connell said. "Then the magistrate pronounces them joined and they spend the rest of their lives together."

Rest of their lives. Sorrow tugged at Stone's heart. The rest of his life would far outstrip the rest of Connell's. "I would spend my life with you," he declared, for surely he would—if he could.

The baby sighed, joined by Connell. "And I with you. Before you came here, I attended my daily routine, but there was never a reason to get up, or hurry home, and nothing to look forward to."

"What words do the villagers speak when they join?"

"They differ."

There it was, that lovely flush again. "What is it?" Stone asked.

"It's nothing," Connell replied, too quickly to have been speaking the truth.

"It is not nothing. What are you thinking?"

Very softly, Connell whispered, "I used to dream of joining one day, of no longer being alone. I... I even came up with the words I wanted to use."

"Tell me."

"You'll think me silly."

"Perhaps." Stone kissed the tip of Connell's nose to remove any sting from the words. "Tell me anyway."

"My heart, my life, all that I am, I give to you, my mate. In laughter and in tears, forever to remain by your side."

The choked up feeling the suit called love lodged in Stone's throat, and for a moment, words wouldn't come.



Connell pulled away. “See? I told you you’d think me silly.”

Words. Yes, sometimes inconvenient, sometimes confusing, but Connell’s words? Melded minds never made Stone feel so close to anyone. He pulled his mate back to his side, dropping a kiss to Connell’s mat of tightly-curled ebony strands. Only one way to prove it. “My heart, my life, all that I am,” he replied, “I give to you, my mate. In laughter and in tears, forever to remain by your side.” No matter what happened, he’d keep his word. And when Connell breathed his last? Well, Stone would just have to see if the abandoned ship held a laser cannon to step in front of.

After a moment, Connell repeated the vow, his voice hushed and reverent.

“What happens now?” Stone asked.

“Um... we’re supposed to seal the deal by mating.”

Stone discovered that fishing line and blankets made an excellent partition between Pearl’s cradle and Connell’s bed.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“Come back here, you!” Stone dashed across the sand, chasing a giggling, four-year-old Pearl. Usually so serious, the big man’s demeanor totally changed around the child who’d tied both of them around her finger. He still hadn’t answered the question of a mother; whenever Connell asked, he merely shrugged and replied, “She’s ours.”

*Vrrrt, vrrrt, vrrrt!* Connell dropped the sled harness and stood stock still. That wasn’t the terror warning; besides, the creatures had learned to stay away, thanks to Stone.

Stone snapped to attention. “The alarm! A ship’s approaching orbit!” He raced forward with lightning speed, snatched up Pearl, and handed her over. “Make for the caves!” he shouted.

The last Connell saw of his mate was the man in full armor, climbing the hill to the beacon.

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“I have news,” Stone said after he’d come to reclaim his family. “The Federation is revisiting duty laws. Some within the Federation itself complained about destroying colonies.”

“About time if you ask me,” Connell replied, “but how do you know?”

A rare, non-family generated smile dimpled Stone’s cheeks. “The ship. An S-type cruiser, very intelligent. We spoke.” He tapped his helmet with a fingertip.

Sometimes Connell forgot his mate came from another place. For four years he’d seemed happy here in the middle of nowhere. What would happen if he grew bored and wanted to return to civilization?

“Stone?” Connell asked.

“Yes, Connell?” Stone stopped on the narrow track leading to their home. Pearl’s legs dangled over his arms where she lay sleeping in his embrace.

“Do you ever think about leaving here?”



He answered by shifting Pearl to his shoulder and enclosing his family in a hug, kissing them both soundly on the cheek. "I cannot."

"Why not?"

"I belong here. With my family." All humor fled his face.

"Are you ready to tell me yet why you deserted?" Connell told himself he wouldn't ask, but the words slipped out before he could stop them. Whatever happened before lay in the past. Did he really want to know what atrocities Stone might have committed in carrying out the Federation's vengeance?

"Something happened," Stone replied, his voice as hard as his name. "I questioned all I'd been told."

"What was that, if you don't mind my asking?"

A pained look appeared in Stone's eyes. "I'd take back all my years of service if I could. Every life I took from a colonist, every village I laid waste to."

Connell's heart gave a painful lurch. He'd heard of entire colonies being wiped out by the Federation, but didn't want to imagine Stone, his dear, sweet Stone, carrying out such orders.

"I was wounded," Stone said, staring off into space. "My commander warned that cave crystals would block our communication, but I went in to find who'd shot me." He nodded toward the child in his arms. "I don't know who fired the shot that killed her mother, but the woman died protecting her child."

Moisture leaked from the corner of Stone's eye. Connell pretended not to notice.

"I needed to protect the young one, and I promised her dead mother that I would."

Connell squeezed underneath Stone's arms, giving his mate a hug. "Thank you for telling me."

"Do you think less of me?"

Children entered training camps to train day in and out for years, their systems flooded with chemicals to produce the perfect, obedient killing



machines. And somehow, Stone managed to break his programming, abandon the only life he knew, for Pearl. “How could I think less of you, when you gave up all you knew to save our daughter?”

A brief flicker of a smile chased away the clouds on Stone’s face. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. As you’ve done every day since.”

“Connell?”

“Yes?”

“Is this one of those times we should kiss?”

“Yes, Stone, I believe it is.”

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“Connell?”

“Yes?”

Stone shuffled from foot to foot, holding out his helmet. “I want to show you something. I’ve made modifications to my helmet. You’ll never bond as I do, can’t join your mind to mine, but maybe my present will work.”

“Present?”

“Trust me.”

Connell’s breath caught in his throat when his mate lowered the heavy helmet onto his head. Tiny tendrils tickled the hairs on the back of his neck, turning into pinpricks. Oh, shit! They were burrowing into his head! Images flashed before his eyes. By the twin moons! What was happening?

Stone, the cottage, even Connell himself disappeared. Rain. Warm rain spattered skin much lighter than Connell’s, though not as pale as Pearl’s. Stone’s? Was he in his lover’s body? He glanced up, noticing the prism of colors in the spray. Not rain. Up and up his gaze traveled to the very top of a waterfall so tall the edges flirted with puffy blue clouds against a greenish sky. Where was he? He gazed down, catching glimpses of rainbow shapes flitting in the water beneath his feet, too beautiful to be the indigenous fish of New Wailea.



One moment he stood in a rainbow's spray, the next he sat on his bed, huddled in his mate's arms. "Where was I?" he asked.

"You saw?" Stone beamed, eyes sparkling.

"A waterfall. Bright fish. Green sky."

If possible, Stone grinned wider. "It worked. XI-47 is my favorite planet. I took leave there once and spent two days exploring." Leaning down put his lips so close to Connell's ear that puffs of breath caused shivers. "Did you enjoy your visit?"

"Yes! You loved that place and wanted to share it with me?"

"I want to share all with you." Stone kissed him. No matter how many years passed, or how long they stayed together, Stone never seemed to grow tired of kissing.

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"Fathers?" Pearl stood in the doorway to the room they'd added for her, nibbling at her lip. A cascade of golden hair flowed down her back, and any who saw her blue eyes believed she was Stone's in truth, so marked was the resemblance. Age-wise, though, she appeared more sister than daughter to her father, who hadn't changed much since the day of his arrival.

Her dad, on the other hand... Just that day Connell had found more white in his hair, more laugh lines around his eyes. Not that he didn't deserve them. It seemed for the past fifteen years, since his mate and daughter's arrival, he done little else but smile. "Yes?" he prompted.

Pearl studied the floor, her white blonde lashes sweeping her cheeks. "You know Georges from the village."

"Yes. And?" A twitch appeared in Stone's cheek. They'd talked about this, the day their little girl would begin seeking a mate of her own, especially since she'd apprenticed to the weaver and spent much of her time in the village instead of under the watchful vigilance of her parents.

"And, I wanted to know if maybe he could come to dinner..."

Stone's jaw twitched harder. "Georges, you say." Living near so small a village greatly limited the possibilities, and although Stone and Connell both



liked Georges, letting him tag along on fishing expeditions and allowing him to court Pearl were two different things entirely.

“That’s a fine idea, Pearl,” Connell offered, placing a hand he hoped would be calming on Stone’s arm.

“A fine idea,” Stone repeated, the twitch becoming a sinister grin. “In fact, I think we should dress up for the occasion.”

“Oh, Dad! Father! Thank you so much!” Pearl dashed into her room, undoubtedly to change into the new frock she’d completed the week earlier and not noticing her father’s scary mien.

“Stone.” Connell added a warning growl to the name.

“What?” his mate replied with a look of faux innocence. “When he was little, Georges *loved* to look at my suit. Asked me a million questions. Surely he’s still curious.”

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The silent sentinel stood guard, only, instead of sitting on the cliffs, Stone glared at the village path.

Connell watched out the window while he prepared a meal. What exactly did Stone plan? And should Connell try to stop him?

Finally, a familiar, lanky youth came trotting up the hill. *ZAP!* One of the few remaining boulders within viewing distance vaporized. Stone wrapped his still-smoking arm around a visibly shaking Georges—smoke Connell knew was for show, and a recent addition to the suit. He held his breath and heard his mate ask, “So, Georges, you will respect my daughter, right?”

After dinner, Georges’ goodnight kiss on Pearl’s cheek cost them another boulder.

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Pearl and Georges stood in the clearing in front of the stone cottage she’d grown up in. It’d taken some doing, but Connell had managed to convince his mate not to wear “the suit” to the joining.

Two years. It’d been two years since Georges first made known his intentions; two years, and all remaining boulders within easy reach.



Never had Pearl looked so lovely. Was that a sniff? Connell shot a worried glance at his mate. “Something’s in my eye,” Stone said, rubbing a finger over his eyelid.

The young couple stood, surrounded by their families. “My heart, my life, all that I am, I give to you, my mate,” their daughter said.

Even Connell choked up when the magistrate declared Pearl and Georges joined.

That night, instead of keeping watch on the cliffs, Stone sat lonely vigil in Pearl’s now-empty room.

In the early hours of morning, Connell coaxed him into bed. “Remember the first time you took me, right here?” he asked.

“How could I forget?”

Gentle kisses grew more heated, and though well-acquainted with his mate’s body, Connell explored anyway, taking his time as Stone had done that long-ago night.

When the sun rose he fell into an exhausted, sated sleep—in his lover’s arms.

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Connell studied his reflection in the stream, the lines around his eyes, the white taking over the darkness of his hair, and the eyes that didn’t see as well as they used to. As he watched, a handsome man, unchanged by time, stepped up behind him, wrapped him in an embrace, and softly whispered, “I love you.”

Shouts from the house of “Grandfathers! He hit me!” elicited sighs from them both.

“Let’s get back up there before our grandchildren destroy the house,” Connell said. They took their time walking the path, hand in hand.

“And you thought my suit destructive,” Stone grouched. “It could learn a thing or two from our grandsons.”

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“I could give up the suit,” Stone argued for the hundredth time in fifty years. “Perhaps I’d age as you do.”

“No,” Connell replied, hand shaking a bit as he placed it on his mate’s shoulder. “The village needs your protection. I’m merely grateful for the time we’ve had.”

As if on cue, the ship warning sounded. Stone placed a kiss on Connell’s forehead and headed out into the night to protect all he held dear.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Father, I’m afraid it’s time,” Pearl said. Her snow white hair now matched her name. Stone nodded and enfolded his daughter into his embrace. Her tears dampened his collar. Holding tight to the child he’d abandoned his old life for, he closed his eyes and breathed in her scent. Home. Family. Love. Where once she’d depended on him for strength, now he relied on her. “What are we going to do without Dad?” she murmured, voicing Stone’s thoughts. What indeed.

“I need to go to him.” He blinked back tears and entered the room where his mate lay in the bed they’d shared. Old and fragile now, Connell bruised at the slightest touch, and many a night Stone stood watch in the house to keep an eye on his lover. And while he’d sat in the darkness, counting every inhale and exhale from the bed, he’d planned. Today would see those plans either succeed or fail. Stone swiped a hand against his damp cheek. No, failure couldn’t happen. He wouldn’t let it.

Too weak to fully raise his hand, Connell waggled his fingers. Stone dropped down beside the bed. “It pains me that you’ll be all alone,” Connell rasped. Without enhanced hearing Stone wouldn’t have been able to hear the man.

He gave his mate a tight smile. “I won’t be alone,” he said, placing a kiss on his lover’s head. Then he lifted his helmet.

“What?” Connell asked. Although he’d enjoyed seeing other worlds in Stone’s memories, he’d never lost a touch of fear for the attire of a Federation soldier.

“I would give you a choice. You may leave here, and hope one day I can find you again, or you can join your mind with my mind, be a part of me, in truth, for as long as my body bears life.”

“Is this possible?” Was that a tiny bit of hope shining in Connell’s eyes?

“Remember the waterfall world? Trust me.” Stone strapped the apparatus in place, prayed to the twin moons his alterations worked, and snapped the visor closed. “Is this what you want? You must decide.” *Please say yes, please say yes.*



The steady whoosh of Connell's breathing sounded unnaturally loud from under the hood. Connell nodded, a mere dip of his chin, but agreement. Clinging tightly to his lover's hand, Stone waited. A warmth pressed against his back as Pearl joined him. She placed her hand on their joined ones.

Stone stared down at the three linked hands, two wrinkled with age, his relatively unchanged by the passage of time. The man he'd spent most of his life loving coughed, drawing Stone's attention upward. Their gazes met and locked. "I love you." Connell's lips formed the familiar pattern of the words, though no sound emerged from his dying body.

Stone witnessed the light leaving his mate's eyes. At his back Pearl sobbed, clutching at him with frantic hands. If she only knew what her father planned, but he'd dared not tell her. Not until he knew for sure...

Then Stone removed the helmet and placed it on his own head. Confusion, curiosity, a touch of panic.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, with his mind Stone said, *Hello, love*. Then he did something he'd always longed to do—wrapped his consciousness completely around his lover's, merging two minds into one.

*What? Where am I?* Instead of a feeble croak, Connell spoke with all the strength of the young man he'd been when Stone first found him.

*I harvested your consciousness. Now I'll never have to be alone, and neither will you.*

*But... but... how?*

*I was a soldier, not a scientist. Do you know how the tides work? No, and yet daily they drop their bounty on the sands and retreat again. Does it matter how it works? Wherever I go, you'll go with me. We'll be together, forever.*

Gradually the panic faded. *I'm still alive?*

*"Yes, and will be as long as I am."*

Connell peered out at the world through Stone's eyes, Stone's mind following along. "Oh, Pearl, don't cry!" Though he'd used Stone's vocal cords to craft the utterance, the words and will behind them were purely Connell's.

"Dad?" Now came their daughter's turn for confusion.



“I’m here, sweetheart. I’m with your father.”

“How? No, never mind how! Oh, Dad...”

And once again Stone shared an embrace with his family.

*You know you have free access to my mind and memories now, right?*  
Stone asked.

*Really? You mean I could...*

Yes. Stone swallowed hard and led his mate through neural pathways, to the time he’d been fighting and had found a baby.

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*I still don’t understand how we’re doing this,* Connell said, communicating mind to mind as Stone had once dreamed.

*Sometimes you don’t have to understand something to appreciate it.* Stone knew all Connell needed was time before he’d come to accept their bond. Until he grew comfortable in his new circumstances, a little distraction might help. What wondrous places Stone could now show his love. *Come with me,* he said.

One minute they sat on the cliff overlooking the pounding surf, the next...

Warm droplets rained down, only now, Stone’s memory added a younger Connell to the scene. Mouth against mouth, they tasted each other’s tongues and the sweetness of the water falling upon them. In the shallows, the rainbow fish danced.

Stone laced their fingers together and led Connell to another marvel he’d discovered years ago, in another lifetime. On a bed of moss, softer than a whisper, Stone settled between his lover’s spread legs. Connell raised his hands, turning them this way and that. “They don’t shake,” he said, awe in his tones. “They’re not wrinkled!”

“You are as you were when we first met,” Stone confirmed, before sealing their lips together. He’d shared his body with many a man, but never his tongue—or his heart. Those belonged to Connell only.

After delving into the wonders of Connell’s mouth, Stone lowered his lips to firm pecs to sip the water caught in the dark curls on his mate’s chest. The



sweetness of the droplets and the muskiness of Connell's skin made an intoxicating mix. Lower and lower he roamed, until his mate's cock teased his lips. He opened, taking his lover inside. Stone tasted pre-come and honeyed water. Connell's balls drew to his body beneath Stone's fingertips.

"I want you," Connell exclaimed on a gasp. Stone maneuvered until his cock slid between Connell's lips. In their shared consciousness he experienced his own pleasure as well as Connell's. A swipe of his tongue up the underside of his mate's shaft sent chills zinging through them both.

He pulled out and once again positioned himself between the strong thighs he'd enjoyed for over half a century. A nudge at his lover's opening sent shockwaves directly to his groin, but also to Connell's. Through their connection, Stone enjoyed both.

Tight heat gripped him, while the glorious moment of entry teased his mind. Oh, fuck! He was fucking while being fucked. By the twin moons! And no need for cooking oil. "Do you feel me?" he asked.

"I feel you," Connell replied, wonder in his voice, "and yet I *am* you. Is this how I always make you feel when you're inside me?"

In answer, Stone kissed him, let the man feel the pressure in his chest, how he'd rather die himself than ever lose what he'd found on New Wailea so many years ago.

They rocked together, pressure from penetration vying with the sheer delight of plunging into a lover's body. Tension built, firing through Stone's groin and belly in double dose. Connell's gasp became his gasp, his moan emerged from Connell's throat.

Stone grasped Connell's hands, twining their fingers together. Skin to skin, mind to mind, inside and outside all at once. They fused and merged, the line between the two blurring, only to disappear in the pure white bliss of total completion. They cried out with a single voice.

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*No.* Connell invoked a stern voice seldom heard during his life.

*Why not?* Stone challenged. It would be so easy. Connell's transition proved that.



*It wouldn't be right.*

*She'd still be with us!* Stone stared down at the bed where his little girl had once held her own little girl—now a grandmother of three herself. With each breath, Pearl faded more and more. A few seconds in the helmet and she'd live forever, exactly as she'd been the day they'd met, or at any point in her life she chose to remain.

Connell explained without spoken words. *We don't know where Georges' soul is, but it's not in here with us. She'll find him. And I'm here with you.*

But if she was a baby, sharing consciousness with her father and her dad, she wouldn't worry about a husband... Oh. If Stone carried out his plans, he'd rob his daughter of the memories of her own family. He sniffed. *I can't stand to lose her.*

*We'll never lose her; she'll always be a part of us. We're her family.*

"Family," Stone repeated. "We're her family." He bent to kiss their daughter goodbye, then together, through Stone's eyes, he and his mate watched their sweet baby girl breathe out one final time.

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They sat on the hilltop. The beacon pulsed, as it had been doing all day. "Just a cruiser," Stone assured his mate.

He stared up at the night sky. Did Georges now embrace Pearl once more, somewhere in creation?

His little girl was gone, taking his last reason for staying. His grandchildren all had mates, as did his great-grandchildren. With carefully selected ship landings over the years, he'd swelled the colony's numbers into the thousands—a colony still undiscovered by the Federation, thanks to the false warning he'd set up. Forty more villages dotted the planet surface, and in many, Pearl's legacy flourished. No, she wasn't really gone; she'd always live on in memory and through her descendants.

The cruiser approached hailing range. Nothing held Stone here anymore. *Have you ever been on a cruiser before?* he asked Connell.

*No, just a regular transport, sandwiched between excavation equipment and livestock.*



Stone grinned. *Want to hitch a ride?*

*Who'll stand watch here if we're gone?* Connell, ever the voice of reason.

*I'll set the beacon to alert us no matter where we are. Our body will still be here, waiting for the day we're needed.* Stone closed his eyes and focused on keying the beacon's frequency into the suit's receiver and setting up relays to bounce off passing ships. Tricky, but workable. The sleek little vessel nearing orbit hailed New Wailea. *Want some company?* Stone asked.

*Sure,* the sentient brain powering the craft replied.

*I'll show you the universe,* Stone promised his mate.

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## EPILOGUE

“And that’s the legend of the sentinel,” the teacher said, snapping her book closed. Fifteen students stared in rapt attention at the statue before them of a man in an odd-looking uniform and helmet. Nels crept closer to glimpse through a clear face shield. Eyes closed, one side of his mouth quirked up in a half-smile, the man appeared so lifelike, so real, unlike most statues Nels had seen, carved of stone. When no one was looking he placed his hand on the statue’s arm, only to jerk it back. Ow! That zap hurt!

Next to the statue sat two strange-looking objects their history books called “beacons”. He’d looked up “beacons”. Apparently they were some kind of warning device. Maybe touching them wasn’t such a good idea. Nels shook his still-tingling fingers.

The teacher droned on about the heroic acts of the man named Stone. According to his great-grandmother, Nels himself had been descended from the great sentinel, though half the kids in his class boasted the same. Only, how could anyone be descended from a statue?

“Now, what’s the sentinel’s purpose?” the teacher asked.

Nels lifted his hand above his head. “He keeps watch over New Wailea, and if we’re ever threatened, he’ll wake up and keep us safe.”

“Very good, Nels! Now...” the teacher stopped mid-sentence, eyes wide as she backed away.

*Vrrrt, vrrrt, vrrrt* split the air. “By the twin moons! What is that?” she gasped.

*Vrrrt, vrrrt, vrrrt*. The students screamed and scattered, the teacher chasing behind, shouting, “Wait! Wait!”

Nels froze in his tracks, staring fascinated at the statue. Did it... did it just move? He blinked hard. Then, as he watched, the face shield rose and one blue eye opened.

**THE END?**



## Author Bio

*All Eden Winters requires to spin a yarn is two hot men and a happy ever after. A spectral Highlander haunting a Scottish castle while awaiting his lover's rebirth? Why not? A time-traveling pirate? You betcha! A pack of ravenous... possum shifters? (Crickets beware!) Yeah, that's how Eden's mind works. She's the author of such Rainbow Awards-recognized novels as The Wish, The Angel of Thirteenth Street, Duet, Diversion, and Lambda Literary Awards finalist Settling the Score.*

*Currently, Eden calls the southern US home, and yes, her possum shifters speak with a Southern accent. She divides her time between a day job, friends, grandkids, writing, trying different varieties of vegetarian cuisine, and exploring her world. Her musical tastes run from Ambient to Zydeco, she owns a TV she never watches, and she's a firm believer that life is better with pets. You might find her cruising down the road on the back of a Harley Davidson.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# MERGER OF EQUALS

By Liz Winters

## **Photo Description**

A color sketch of two young men passionately embracing and kissing in front of floor-to-ceiling windows in a modern office building. The taller man with unruly black hair has the button of his pants undone and is shirtless, exposing dark, scarred skin. The shorter man has bleached-blond, immaculately-styled hair, pale skin, and is fully dressed in trousers, button down shirt and tie. Both men's eyes are closed as they are lost in the moment.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*I'm the son of a corporate tycoon who wants me to take her place one day. I just want to finish college and strike out on my own, but Mom won't hear it, so I'm doomed to spend my entire summer behind a computer screen.*

*Anyway, here I was late last night after a long day of crunching numbers when my mom's receptionist—a short blond guy who can't be much older than me—walks in and asks if I want anything to eat. I swear that guy's got a fifteen inch stick up his ass, always about the business, always proper and neat. He never shows any emotion. Never even smiles.*

*Out of pure nastiness, I send him out on a food chase. After he's been gone for about forty minutes I'm getting kind of hungry, so I step outside to check if he's back. He's not, but something on his desk catches my eye. A cute little drawing of a bunny. I shift the papers aside to get a better look and that's when I see it: a drawn picture of him and me kissing. He's got me down in detail, including all the ugly scars on my body. It's signed with his name, so he must have drawn it.*

*I didn't know what to do, so I snatched the drawing in panic when I heard the elevator ding. I don't know why I took it—I don't even know if I'm into guys—but I've been staring at it whenever I have a spare moment.*

*Dear author, can you help me? What do I do?*



*(Both these guys have a past. I figure they've had enough of hardship. Please give them a HEA or a HFN—no BDSM between them, no paranormal, please ^.^).*

*Sincerely,*

*Erica*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** businessmen/lawyers, sweet no sex, abduction/kidnapping, hurt/comfort, coming out

**Content warnings:** off-page deaths of background characters, off-page child abduction, discussion of past child abuse, discussion of past sexual abuse

**Word count:** 23,448

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# MERGER OF EQUALS

By Liz Winters

Of all the deceitful, conniving, underhanded things his mother had ever done, this had to be the worst! Jordy ground his teeth as he stood in front of his mother's imposing glass and stainless steel desk, having received a summons he'd been in no position to refuse.

"Mother, you're being completely unreasonable. I've been planning this trip for months!"

"Without consulting me," she interjected.

"I'm twenty-one years old. I hardly think I need to consult you about my summer vacation plans."

"On this point, at least, we agree. You hardly think. Exactly how were you planning to pay for this European adventure?"

Jordy stared at her, silently fuming.

"Let me guess. You were going to charge everything to credit cards that are yours in name only, just like you did the plane tickets. And you didn't think it was appropriate to tell me about these expenses in advance?"

"It's not like you can't afford it," he replied sullenly.

"That is not the point."

"What's the big deal? I'll pay you back when I get access to my trust fund."

"If you get access to the trust fund."

"Why wouldn't I... ?" Jordy narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't dare!"

"I suggest you don't tempt me. I have the right to delay your access to that fund and that's exactly what I'll do if you continue to behave like an irresponsible, petulant child. You know damn well you can't just take off on a tour of Europe without giving me sufficient notice. Even if I didn't need you here this summer, I'd need time to make the necessary arrangements."

"Did it ever occur to you that I didn't tell you precisely so that you



wouldn't have time to make those arrangements? I'm too old for this now. It has to stop sometime."

"Too old? What does age have to do with anything? Have you forgotten—?" she stopped abruptly and Jordy figured she must have seen the painful grimace on his face. As if seeing his father shot dead before his eyes was something a son could ever forget.

Unable to look at her, he glanced to his right, where his eyes met those of his mother's executive assistant, Ken. The weasel who undoubtedly combed through all of Jordy's credit card statements and must have brought this to his mother's attention. The man—and it was hard to refer to him as such, because he couldn't be much older than Jordy —wore his usual uniform of a two-button, single-breasted suit, over-starched shirt, and the obligatory muted tie. He stood ramrod straight, every single one of his bleached-so-blond-as-to-be-almost-white hairs perfectly in place, awaiting his boss's command. His face was as blank and impassive as always, but when their eyes met, Jordy was sure he saw a glimpse of pity. Rather than endearing Ken to him, it only pissed him off. He was fine. The last thing he needed was the pity of some glorified gofer. He shifted his eyes back to his mother, who looked uncharacteristically chagrined.

"You can't expect me to go through the rest of my life followed by bodyguards," he said quietly, his anger draining away. "It was a fluke. It's not going to happen again."

"You don't know that. It's too big a risk," she argued weakly.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take, and you have to let me. I'm traveling with friends. It's not like I'll ever be completely alone."

"I'll tell you what," she relented, "I'll call off the bodyguards if you agree to stay here for the summer. If you're who-knows-where in Europe this summer I'll be worried sick, and I can't afford the distraction."

She stood and walked up to him, reaching for his hand. It was the equivalent of carefully plucking at his heartstrings. Jordy knew that virtually everything his mother had done since the day he was born was for his benefit. He owed her a great deal, and he knew she, of all people, had had enough worries and heartaches to last several lifetimes without him adding any more.



“The past aside, I need you here at Ryder Corp., Jordy. I believe this merger we’re working on with Kronar will be the best thing for both companies, but I need hard data to substantiate my gut feeling. You have a good head on your shoulders, and after listening to me all these years, I know you understand our strengths and weaknesses. I can’t oversee everything myself, and who better to confirm the due diligence than my own son? I hope someday you’ll be sitting behind this desk, and there’s no better way for you to show everyone your merit than by helping with the merger.”

“Merger! What a joke!” Jordy pulled his hand out of hers, his ire rising again. “I still don’t understand why you’re even considering this deal. You know Kronar isn’t interested in a merger. He just wants to take Ryder Corp. over so he can cherry-pick our best assets and toss away the rest.”

Jordy couldn’t believe it when his mother had first mentioned she was considering Kronar’s merger overtures. He had thought she was a savvier businesswoman than this, especially given how hard she had worked to make Ryder Corp. the company that it had become. Had he had an equivalent interest in the company’s success, he would have offered a stronger protest. As it was, though, he had a secret agenda to start his own business, which would be much easier, if post-takeover, there was no place for him at Ryder.

“Morten Kronar is a typical man,” Rowena waved her hand in annoyance. “All he thinks about is control. He doesn’t understand that in order to maximize the value of both companies, we have to use finesse. While you, hopefully, confirm my hunches on the business case, my job will be to make Morten understand that as strong as both our companies are, they each have a strategic weakness. Each company can fill in the other’s void, increasing the value of the whole, but only if neither company is made to feel like the weaker link. I have to make him see that in business, as in life, you can achieve more when partners come together as equals.”

Jordy rolled his eyes at his mother’s naiveté. He’d heard her talk about how equality was the backbone of her successful marriage, but he wondered how much of that equality was real and how much was caused by a natural tendency to idealize the husband who died trying to protect their only son. And even if his parents’ marriage had been completely egalitarian, that was a



relationship between two people in love. Jordy seriously doubted the same approach would work in business.

“Do we have a deal? Will you stay here this summer and help me steer through these merger discussions?”

Jordy took a deep breath, but the refusal wouldn't make it past his throat. Resigned, he hung his head. “Yes, Mom, I'll stay.”

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Ken's quick glance at the clock told him it was just shy of seven o'clock. The office was quiet. It was Friday and most Ryder employees had thrown in the towel around six, leaving to blow off steam after what had been an exhausting week. With the merger moving full steam ahead, many of them would also spend parts of their weekend hunched over their computers, reviewing documents, crunching numbers, populating spreadsheets or preparing slide decks for presentations. For now, though, there were only two of them left: he and Jordy Ryder.

Jordy's exemplary work ethic had surprised Ken. He'd seen the younger man's animosity when his mother informed him that instead of bumming around Europe with his friends all summer, he was expected to stay in New York to help her with the merger. Jordy's reaction had led Ken to believe that the son would do only the bare minimum to satisfy his mother's condition. He fully expected Jordy to stroll in after nine, take long lunches, and skip out no later than five, surfing the web or chatting with his friends while actually stuck in the office. However, nothing could have been further from reality.

Once he accepted his fate, Jordy became a model employee, setting an impressive example for the entire staff. He showed up early, earlier even than Ken, and more often than not, stayed late as well. More impressive was the fact that his work product was always timely and impeccable. Even Rowena had been surprised and Ken was duly impressed, except when this work ethic interfered with Ken's family plans.

Ken sighed and looked longingly out the window. He had hoped to take Nessa to the park that evening, taking advantage of the longer summer days, but it was already close to her bedtime and Jordy was obviously planning a late night.



Ken frowned at the wall that separated Jordy's office from his own. Despite the fact that he was finished with his work, he couldn't go home. When Rowena Ryder left for her business trip to Japan, she'd asked Ken to shadow Jordy at work, fully aware that the request would result in extensive overtime for her assistant.

"Can you make arrangements?" She had asked, always considerate of his special circumstances.

"I can." Ken replied simply. His boss would have understood if he could not, but he knew this was important to her and his overtime pay would more than cover the money he'd owe his college-aged neighbor for spending time with his father and sister and making sure they had everything they needed. It helped ease his conscience that both his dad and Nessa loved Kathleen.

"Good. I know it's an imposition, but I feel better knowing he's not alone here after hours," Rowena glanced down to hide her guilt-laden face.

"He's your only son and you worry. I'll be glad to stay. Of course, I can't do anything after he leaves the office."

"I know," she said curtly, a flush spreading up her neck. Ken instantly realized that despite her promise, Rowena had not terminated the private security firm who had kept watch over Jordy since his return home. They did so from a discreet distance once he went away to college, but they were always there, just in case. "Please don't say anything to Jordy. His privacy is completely protected. They tell me nothing about what he does. They're just there to make sure he's safe."

"You can count on my discretion," he assured her. While he felt sorry for Jordy, Ken owed his loyalty to Rowena.

Privately, Ken thought Rowena was being too overprotective, and he found the idea that his presence in the office after hours gave her any sense of security downright comical. Although he was four years older than Jordy, he was shorter and smaller, with no athletic ability and limited self-defense training. Asking him to watch over anyone was like appointing a Chihuahua to guard dog duty. Still, Rowena had asked and he owed her way too much to even consider refusing. So every night this week he'd stayed a few minutes



longer than Jordy. The younger man communicated his resentment though glowering looks, but Ken had no choice, so he simply affixed his professional blank mask, ignored the visual daggers, and remained at his guard post.

He had hoped Jordy would take pity on the both of them and leave earlier on a Friday night, but since that didn't look likely, Ken picked up the phone to let his family know not to expect him for dinner.

"Another late night?" Kathleen answered, and Ken was relieved she was already at their apartment without him even having to call her. He knew exactly how lucky the three of them were to have Kathleen living on the same floor. She was far more dependable than most girls her age and genuinely seemed to like them, which meant helping them was more than a paid chore.

"I'm afraid so. I'm not sure when I'll be back, but you don't have to stay until I get there," Ken informed her regretfully.

"Oh, I know. Your dad said the same thing. I'll leave after Nessa goes to bed. We're having chili cheese dogs for dinner, and I picked up a new movie out of the machine at the drugstore. It's rated PG and no violence."

Ken smiled at the way Kathleen anticipated both his concerns and his family's needs. "Chili cheese dogs, huh? Sounds like I'm missing out."

He actually didn't care much for chili cheese dogs, but they were Nessa's favorite and made a frequent appearance on their dinner rotation. It was an easy meal that his father and sister could handle even without Kathleen's help.

"You sure are," Kathleen said brightly. "Here's Nessa."

"Why do you have to work late today? It's Friday," his sister complained.

"I know, Nessa, but I will be home all weekend. And when this big project is done, I'll take a few days off and we'll do something fun," he cajoled.

"You promise?"

"I promise. And I'll tell you what, I might even be able to bring you something tonight."

"A bunny?"

"Is that what you'd like?"

"Yeah, I want a bunny. A real cute one!" she demanded.



Ken couldn't help smiling, and he wasn't the least concerned about finding a pet or toy store open late on a Friday night. Without having to say it, he and Nessa both knew he'd been offering to draw for her. She loved his drawings, and the walls of her room served as a gallery of his work.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do. Can I talk to Dad?"

He could hear Nessa carrying the phone to their father, who would likely be in his usual chair by the wide-open window. He liked to sit where he could feel the breeze on his face and listen to the sounds of the neighborhood. The window went up as soon as temperatures warmed in the spring and stayed up until the fall chill turned to outright cold. Hating to be cut off from the action, his father had refused to have a window air conditioning unit in the living room, even during the most sweltering New York summer heat. Ken finally put a unit in Nessa's room, and during the worst heat waves, he bunked down on the floor in her room at night. Whether in his bedroom or in the living room, however, their father was never far away from the open window.

"Hello, Son, they still working you hard over there?"

"A few more hours overtime, that's all. How are you feeling today?"

"I could complain, but what good would it do?" his father gave his standard reply. "It's no worse than usual."

"Should I call Doctor Abramovitz to get you some more pain pills?"

"No! They're too expensive and they dull my senses, which is the last thing I need. I worked a little with the clay today. It's getting easier."

"That's excellent!" Ken swallowed past the lump forming in his throat. "I can't wait to see when I get home... I need to go now, though," he added after a moment of silence.

"Okay, kiddo. Be safe on the way home."

Ken hung up and quickly wiped off the moisture that had collected in the corners of his eyes. It pained him to remember how much his father had lost in the accident that took Nessa's and Ken's mother. The responsibility of taking over as the head of the family weighed heavily on Ken, but his father's burden was even greater.

Desperate for a distraction, Ken reached down into his messenger bag, pulling out his pencils and portfolio. He had always loved sketching and once



had hoped to go to art school, but that would have been an extravagance even before the accident, and was absolutely impossible after. In a way, it was good that Ken had never gone down that road, because he couldn't miss what he never had. Besides, there was little money to be made for most new artists, and his family needed him to bring in a good salary in order to make ends meet.

Ken did what he had to do without any resentment, especially after he landed the job with Ryder Corp. He knew with his minimal education he could have just as easily been a file clerk, or a receptionist at his best friend's hair salon, or something even more menial and less lucrative. He didn't love his job the same way he loved sketching, but he was damn grateful to be working for a demanding but respectful boss, and he took pride in his work. He satisfied himself by sketching in his spare time, except this week, when he'd had nothing else to do as he waited for Jordy to finish working and go home.

The top page in his portfolio was a sketch that was the embodiment of his fantasies. He'd managed to finish it the previous night, and in a moment of sheer vanity, even signed the piece, only belatedly realizing that by doing so he'd lost all ability to disassociate himself from the potentially incriminating image. He loved the picture, though, and even looking at it made him blush as his imagination inevitably leaped beyond what he could see on the page. This, however, was not the right time for those kinds of thoughts. Ken shoved the picture under the papers on his desk and took out a blank sheet, selecting the pencils he'd need to draw the bunny.

Forty-five minutes later he was done with his sketch, but still had not heard anything from the office next door that would indicate Jordy was close to finishing up for the night. Ken's stomach rumbled and he realized it had been nearly eight hours since either of them had eaten. This wasn't unusual. It seemed Jordy got so engrossed in his work he simply forgot about the basic necessities, leaving it up to Ken to remind him. Ken wondered if this was the real reason Rowena had asked him to stay, and then decided that it didn't matter. The overtime pay was the same no matter what. He set his pencils aside, stood, and walked to the office next door.

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"It's getting pretty late. Would you like me to order dinner?"



Jordy glanced up, only partially surprised to find his mother's assistant and resident spy in the doorway to his office. It seemed while she was away, she had assigned Ken the task of keeping track of Jordy's comings and goings. He still managed to get to the office before Ken most days, a point of personal pride, but there hadn't been a single evening when Ken hadn't outlasted Jordy.

"I can order something from the Deli, or some Chinese food, or Indian?" Ken proposed in his officious tone.

Jordy had almost been ready to wrap things up for the night, but the opportunity to make Ken run all around the city to bring him a meal that fit his exact specifications was too tempting to pass up. He felt slightly evil as he began listing the various items he wanted from his favorite restaurants, which he knew were out of delivery range and would require Ken to traverse a large swath of Manhattan during the typical Friday night rush. Then he remembered that Ken had hardly let him out of his sight the entire week, and his pity evaporated.

Ken committed Jordy's requests to memory without even having to write them down. Jordy would have been impressed, if it wasn't so annoying. He was pleased to see Ken's brows draw together in distress.

"It's late, and it may take me a while to get all that. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer something from restaurants around here?"

Jordy frowned with annoyance. It was the uptight assistant's job to do his mother's bidding, no questions asked, and in her absence Jordy felt he deserved the same.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're still on the clock at overtime rates, so the length of time shouldn't be a concern. And if it's your own stomach that concerns you, just get something for yourself first and eat it as you're getting the things I requested. Or is this too much of a challenge for you?"

Jordy deliberately baited Ken, hoping to provoke the other man into losing his cool, but Ken remained annoyingly calm. The only hint of emotion he displayed seemed more like disappointment and dismay than anger, and even those were so fleeting Jordy couldn't swear he'd actually seen them.

"Of course not, I'll be back as soon as I can. I keep some snacks for emergencies in the refrigerator in my office. There's not much—just some



carrot sticks, hummus and a couple of apples, but please help yourself if you get too hungry while you're waiting," Ken offered and stepped out of Jordy's office, heading for the elevators. Jordy heard the telltale ding and the sliding noise as the doors opened and closed, and then the office fell into an eerie near silence.

He'd often been the first one in the office in the mornings, but he quickly discovered that things were different at night. All through the week, Jordy had been bothered by Ken's hovering, but only now that he was alone did he realize how much comfort he'd subconsciously derived from the other man's presence. Noises and sounds that he'd never noticed before set his nerves on edge.

He knew the building was guarded and secured, and that no unauthorized person could enter after business hours, yet for the first time in years he felt vulnerable and regretted asking his mother to call off the bodyguards. It hadn't been easy to live life knowing that someone was being paid to watch his every move, but there was a time when that knowledge was the only thing that helped him overcome the paralyzing fear and leave the safety of their home. He thought enough time had passed for him to conquer his phobia. Clearly, he'd been wrong.

*"It's okay. You're safe. No one can get you here and they'd have no reason to even if they could,"* he told himself silently, forcing himself to slow down his breathing and decelerate his anxious heart. He wasn't a scared, scrawny kid anymore. All the hours he'd spent with physical trainers and martial arts instructors had given him the body and skills to defend himself against any future would-be kidnapper. And yet, despite all that, Jordy felt a trickle of cold, fear-fueled sweat roll down his back. Reluctantly, he admitted that his mother had been right: he still wasn't ready to be alone.

It finally occurred to him that this must have been the reason his mother arranged for Ken to stay after hours, and that none of the fear he was now experiencing would have been necessary had he simply allowed Ken to place a delivery order for food. *"Karmic payback's a bitch. That's what you get for being an asshole!"*

Eventually he managed to calm himself enough for his hands to stop trembling and returned to his spreadsheet for distraction and escape. When



Jordy next looked at his watch, Ken had been gone for forty minutes and Jordy's stomach was rumbling with complaint. He ignored the hunger pangs for another five minutes, but then decided to take Ken up on the offered snacks to help him avoid a headache and indigestion.

He only intended to take the offered food, but when he walked into the other man's office he couldn't help looking at the top of the desk. Predictably, Ken's work papers were stacked in neat, organized piles, but in the center of the desk lay some color pencils and a detailed drawing of a bunny. It was a very cute bunny with dappled gray and brown coloring, sitting in a flowery meadow and munching on a dandelion leaf. The subject matter was oddly juvenile, but Jordy couldn't deny that Ken had talent and pulled the paper forward to take a closer look. There was another sketch underneath, and the image was shocking enough to cause Jordy to take a step back.

"What the fuck?" he asked aloud, even though there was no one to hear or answer. Cautiously, as though afraid that the subjects of the second sketch might suddenly spring to life off the page, he stepped forward again to peer at the drawing.

The sketch was of him and Ken, both of them drawn so well there could be no doubt as to their identities. Ken was wearing dark trousers and a light purple dress shirt, his hair immaculate as always. Jordy was only wearing dark dress pants and even those were partially undone, while his hair was drawn longer and wilder, the way it had looked before he started working at Ryder Corp. for the summer. In the sketch, he and Ken were locked in a passionate kiss in front of the floor to ceiling windows in his mother's office. The drawing was vivid and much too detailed. Ken had gotten every inch of Jordy right, down to the various ugly scars that marked his upper body. Jordy felt both repulsed and attracted by the drawing. His stomach churned, but he was shocked to realize that he was also growing aroused, and that was more disturbing than anything else.

He was still staring at the sketch when he heard the elevator ding announcing Ken's return. For a moment, he was paralyzed with indecision. He knew he should simply push the bunny sketch back in place and pretend he never saw the other picture, but he feared that in doing so he'd ensure that he'd never see it again, and somehow, oddly, that wasn't an option. He quickly



grabbed the sketch and returned to his office, shoving the paper into a folder that he hastily placed inside his briefcase. He grabbed the mouse and put his laptop to sleep, not caring that without saving first he risked a crash that could wipe out much of the evening's work. He was in the process of slipping the laptop into his briefcase when Ken appeared in his doorway.

"I'm sorry it took so long. Traffic... are you leaving?"

"Yes, I've done all I can for tonight. I'll get back to it tomorrow morning," Jordy explained.

"But what about your food?" Ken was incredulous.

"I'll just take it with me," Jordy said, holding out his hand for the bag. "Is that all mine, or did you bring something back for you too?"

"Um, I did pick up something for me, but it's right on top," Ken reached in and withdrew a take-out container. "I am really sorry for the delay..." he tried to apologize again.

"It doesn't matter. You still saved me a trip. Well, I'll see you Monday."

"See you," Ken said, still sounding extremely surprised.

"You don't have to bother coming in this weekend. I'll be working from home. Have a good weekend," Jordy said, taking the food bag from Ken as he passed him on his way out.

"I'll call for a car for you," Ken said behind him as Jordy waited for the elevator.

"Fine, I'll wait in the lobby."

On any other night Jordy might have argued that he'd take a cab home instead, but he was shaken enough, both by the fear he'd felt earlier and now by his reaction to the sketch, that he longed for the ride in a quiet limo rather than with an artificially chatty cab driver.

He waited in the lobby like a cat on a hot tin roof and darted into the car as soon as he saw it pull up. He was tense the entire limo and elevator ride back to the apartment, a tension that did not ease as he kicked off his shoes in the elaborate entryway and ran up the internal staircase to his room, avoiding their live-in housekeeper, Cara.



In his room, behind the door he'd slammed shut, Jordy threw himself on the bed and the dam finally broke. His body shook with deep, agonizing sobs. He didn't want to remember, but memories came flooding in anyway. He could feel all of it: the fear, the pain, the humiliation, the anger, and the desperation, all more clearly than he'd felt in years. He cried in frustration, knowing that this might never really be over and forgotten, that a trigger could come at any moment out of things that were completely innocent, like a quiet office, or a simple drawing. Eventually he grew tired, but his mind still raced so he went to the en suite bathroom and swallowed the sleeping pills he hadn't touched in months, then returned to his bed and waited until he drifted off into a chemically-induced slumber.

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Ken couldn't understand Jordy's rapid departure until he went back to his office and realized that the sketch he drew of the two of them together was gone. He cursed himself for stupidly leaving it on his desk, albeit hidden by the sketch of the bunny. Ken could well imagine what had happened: Jordy had gone into his office to snoop, and it wouldn't have taken him long to discover the drawing. What Ken couldn't understand was why Jordy had taken it. Why had he rushed out of the office instead of confronting Ken about it? The possible explanations he came up with were all bad. Either Jordy planned to show the sketch to his mother to convince her to fire Ken, or he'd try to use it to blackmail Ken.

Ken was panicked, but there was nothing he could do. With a heavy heart, he packed up his things and called the car service to take him home. It was a perk of the job he tried not to abuse, but this night he was too preoccupied to navigate the New York public transport as vigilantly as would be prudent given the time of night. As the car whisked him home to the tiny apartment in Queens, another thought occurred to Ken: Jordy may have simply been scared!

It was impossible to work at Ryder Corp. without hearing rumors about how overprotective the CEO was of her son and why. Ken was human, so he'd found accounts of the abduction: of Rowena's husband's being shot dead when he tried to stop the kidnapper; of Jordy's ultimate escape, weeks later; and of the way he provided information that led the police to not only capture his kidnapper, but also to bust up a huge pedophile network. Thankfully, none



of the articles detailed exactly what had happened to Jordy while in captivity, and the police had found enough other damning evidence that the perpetrator pled guilty without need for a trial or Jordy's testimony, but it didn't take a genius to imagine what the perverted men did with a thirteen-year-old, helpless boy. Ken saw confirmation of some of his suspicions in the building gym, where Jordy often worked out wearing only gym shorts, unconcerned about revealing his numerous scars.

Ken could easily imagine that a drawing of a man he barely knew and intensely disliked holding and kissing him could frighten Jordy or, at the very least, bring up some horrific memories. He buried his hands in his face, feeling profound regret and berating himself again for foolishly leaving the sketch out in the open. It took a few moments outside his apartment before he was finally able to compose himself enough to face his family without giving away just how awful his evening had been.

He hardly slept that night, tossing and turning with worry, imagining Jordy's demands that Rowena fire him. It wouldn't be an unreasonable request. A mother should fire an employee who made her son afraid and uncomfortable. But Ken needed the job too badly to simply accept termination. He would have to try to explain that the picture was innocent, just a man with a crush drawing out a fantasy. He'd somehow have to convince the both of them that he'd never act on his thoughts, and that he'd never draw anything like it again. He would even offer to take another position, one that would place him far away from Jordy, so the younger man would never have to see him. It would mean a pay cut, but it was better than losing the job completely.

Ever since he became Rowena Ryder's assistant, he'd been dreading the day he would lose the position. After all, he got the job through a stroke of good fortune that was simply too good to last forever. He had been working as a temp on an office cleaning crew and had been assigned to the executive floor of Ryder Corp. It was late and all offices but Rowena's had been empty. Ken couldn't help overhearing her curses, and out of habit, he offered to help. It was sheer luck that he happened to have the exact skills needed to fix a presentation Rowena's temporary assistant had thoroughly botched up, which she happened to need first thing the following morning. After he'd fixed the



file, at her request he and Rowena shared a take-out meal and talked. She told him about her son, who had just left for his first year at Princeton, and she got him to open up about his family and their dire situation. By the end of the night, she offered him a job as her executive assistant.

*“Ms. Ryder, I appreciate the offer, but I don’t really have the right experience for that kind of a position,” he pointed out.*

*“I didn’t have the right kind of experience to lead a company once upon a time, but I managed to do it, and do it well, anyway. You helped me tonight, which tells me you have the skills I’m looking for, and I like you. I’ve gotten far in business following my gut instinct, and my gut tells me you’re the right man for the job.”*

*“Even if I was, I don’t have the right clothes to work as a CEO’s assistant, and I couldn’t afford them.”*

*“Say no more,” she pulled out her wallet and gave him a card of a personal shopper at Saks Fifth Avenue.*

*“Paulette will make sure to get you everything you need and she’ll put it on my account.”*

*“But I won’t be able to...”*

*She held up her hand firmly to stop his protest.*

*“This is a gift from me. Whether you stay at Ryder Corp. or leave, you’ll have the clothes you need to find a similar position elsewhere. It’s a gift for helping me tonight. No strings attached. Now, how much notice do you need to give to quit your current job?”*

Ken had felt overwhelmed, but he’d been smart enough not to try to give back the golden ticket he’d just been handed by a CEO of the leading PR firm in New York City. He showed up at Saks and allowed Paulette to select his new wardrobe and to arrange for an updated haircut at the store’s salon. Nessa hardly recognized him when he came home with multiple bags filled with suits, shirts, belts, and socks. His father frowned, muttering something about soul-sucking corporate devils, but knowing their financial situation, he hadn’t tried to talk Ken out of taking the job.

Ken and Rowena got on well from the start. With her backing and through his diligent efforts to learn everything he didn’t already know about assisting



the CEO, he also soon earned the respect of the rest of the staff. He took his job seriously and made every effort to anticipate Rowena's needs and exceed her expectations to earn every penny of his generous salary, but he was always aware that in the corporate world no one was indispensable, least of all an assistant. He'd heard Rowena speak about Jordy often enough to know that if she had to make a choice between Ken and her son, there would be no contest.

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Jordy woke up with a dry mouth and a thick tongue and not particularly well rested, though if he'd had nightmares, the drugs had ensured he couldn't remember them. Two glasses of water only partially alleviated his condition, so he headed down to the building's gym to sweat out the remainder of the medication. He ran flat out for thirty minutes on the treadmill and did a corresponding thirty minutes with weights, followed by a shower back in his own bathroom and a full breakfast prepared by Cara to his exact specifications.

The food finally made him feel better, at least physically. Back in his room, he took out the sketch he'd stolen and felt sick over the whole debacle. Ken must have seen what happened immediately after Jordy left, and Jordy had no idea how he'd explain his actions, especially since he still didn't fully understand them himself.

He wasn't as affected by the picture as he had been the first time he'd seen it, but he couldn't deny that it stirred up feelings in him he had tried his best to suppress. He had the phone numbers of several therapists who would have made themselves available to talk to him, even on the weekend, but in that moment he wanted to speak with only one person.

"Cordie, something happened last night and I need to talk to you. Can you come over? Like right now?" he asked when his best friend answered her phone. She must have heard his desperation because she agreed to come immediately, and twenty minutes later they were both in his room. They sat side by side on his king-size bed, their backs resting against the massive upholstered headboard.

Cordelia Lesnig was of average height with a trim, athletic body, pale ivory skin and an elf-like elongated face that was set off by straight, shoulder-length, black hair. She and Jordy met on the first day of first grade at the



private school for the over-privileged children of Connecticut-dwelling Manhattan executives. At the time, Jordy thought she was a magical creature, and he hadn't changed his mind since, except about the nature of her magic. He no longer believed she was a pixie or a fairy, but he knew well enough that she was the only one who could lift his spirits when he descended into those dark places that he desperately fought to leave behind.

Except for his time in captivity, they had always been together, nearly inseparable. They were both only children of their respective parents, and felt as close as siblings. Jordy knew their parents hoped they would eventually grow into more than friends, and under different circumstances perhaps they might have, but they'd been too young to contemplate such things before he was abducted, and afterwards the idea of being loving and intimate with anyone was too difficult for him to contemplate. He wouldn't have wished his broken self on the girls he hated, much less on the one who had always been his better half. He played the overprotective brother/friend when she started dating other boys, but it was only to keep her out of the clutches of self-absorbed jerks. Jordy had backed off when she'd found the first guy worthy of her attentions, and every decent guy since, including her current boyfriend, Thomas. For his part, Thomas understood the unbreakable Jordy-Cordie bond, and seemed to hold no grudges when Cordelia flew to Jordy's side whenever he expressed a need.

"What's wrong, Jordy? You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"Not a ghost," Jordy shook his head. "Just a bad reflection, maybe. I don't really know."

"I'm a little lost. Why don't you tell me what this is all about?"

Jordy reached over to his nightstand for the sketch and handed it to her. She contemplated it for a moment, and then abruptly turned, sitting cross-legged on his side to be able to see him better.

"What is this? Who drew it? Is it real?" She peppered him with questions.

"I don't know what it is, exactly. I found it on my mother's assistant's desk. It has his signature, so I assume he drew it. That's him in the picture with me. But nothing like this ever happened, and I have no idea why he drew it."



Cordelia frowned, looked back down at the sketch, and then glanced at him dubiously.

“I think it’s pretty obvious why he drew it. He’s got the hots for you, dummy! Has he said or done anything?”

“No!” Jordy’s head snapped violently from side to side. “And I never did anything to make him think... I mean, I don’t think I did... I mean, I’m not attracted to him... I mean I wasn’t... I mean...”

“You don’t really know what you mean, do you?” Cordelia spoke gently. “Are you attracted to him?”

“No! I’m not... that way. I can’t be.” He reached for the drawing and returned it to the nightstand, face down.

“Can’t be what? Gay?”

Jordy looked away, but didn’t try to resist when she reached for his hand. Cordelia could be extremely tactful or extremely blunt, depending on which approach she deemed better suited for the occasion, but she was never deliberately cruel, and Jordy knew she wasn’t trying to hurt him. He hadn’t expected her to challenge him like this, though.

“Since you’ve been back, you’ve always avoided talking about your attraction to people, boys or girls. I know it’s a sensitive subject, and I never wanted to push, but...”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t!” Jordy insisted.

She let out a small, exasperated sigh.

“Then why did you ask me to come here? Why did you show me the sketch? I thought you were finally going to open up. There’s nothing wrong with being gay.”

Jordy turned to look at her with horror-filled eyes. She reached for his other hand and squeezed both tight.

“What happened to you, it was sick and wrong, but not because you were a boy and the...” she paused, “It was because you were just a kid, and it was done against your will, not because of the genders.”

Jordan’s eyelids slammed shut. Behind them, he saw the room that had been his cell, illuminated only by a few rays of light filtering through the gaps



between the boards that covered up the window and prevented his escape or any contact with the outside world. He remembered the restraints; the creak of the door that announced a new visitor; the vile, acrid odors that permeated the air even as he shut his eyes to dull his senses. He remembered the devices they used and the things they forced him to do. Worst of all, he remembered the one who had been gentle, who coaxed but never forced, the one who wasn't technically raping him because despite his best efforts Jordy couldn't hide his reaction, and they both knew he had enjoyed the things that man did.

"Jordy, hey Jordy. Are you with me? Come on. Should I call someone?" Cordelia's worried tone brought him back to the present.

"I'm okay," he said slowly, "or at least as okay as I'll ever be. I'll never be able to forget, will I?"

"Maybe not. Certainly not if you never do anything to replace those awful memories with some good ones. Jordy, you can't spend the rest of your life alone. I can't even imagine how difficult it must be for you, but you have to try to make a connection with someone, to let yourself fall in love."

Abruptly, he shifted his feet to the floor, stood and began pacing, his hands repeatedly clenching into fists.

"You think it's just that easy, huh? Fall in love, fall in bed, and shazam!—Jordy's cured!"

"I never said it would be easy..."

"It's not going to happen, all right? Don't you get it? I'm damaged. Falling in love is for normal people, not for someone like me. And even if I could fall in love, it's not a one-way street to the cure, is it? Someone would have to fall in love with me too."

He walked up to the window and looked down at Central Park. It was a beautiful summer day and he easily imagined happy couples strolling or picnicking down below. That was their reality. It would never be his.

He felt her come up behind him and allowed her to wrap her arms around him. She rested her cheek against his back.

"You have no idea how easy it is to love you, Jordy. I'd bet everything I own there have been dozens and dozens of people who've crushed on you, if



not outright fallen in love with you over the years. You just need to open your heart to one of them. And based on that sketch, I know just the guy!”

Jordy pulled himself out of her embrace, frightened by the surge of excitement he felt at her pronouncement. He could not let this happen, and yet he knew that once Cordelia got something in her head, it was almost impossible to dislodge it. The only option was to go on the offensive.

“Why?” he turned around and pointed his finger at his friend.

“Why what?”

“Why would you assume I’d even consider it? I’ve never been interested in men!”

“Jordy...” she had that look of pity on her face that he hated so much. The look that said she thought a village somewhere was missing its idiot and he’d be the perfect candidate for the job. “I’ve never seen you look twice at a girl, except to note if the clothes she was wearing were from this season or last. You even comment on handbags!”

Jordy started, but could not deny the truth of her statement.

“Straight men don’t pay attention to stuff like that,” she added, as if he wasn’t able to infer her meaning.

“They do if their best friend is obsessed with fashion and fills their heads with a bunch of useless information,” he defended.

“No, they don’t,” she stated firmly.

“So that’s it? One wrong interest and my sexual preference is set?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Of course that’s not it. There’s a lot more. But you don’t really need me to spell it out for you, do you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I do, since you seem to know me better than I know myself.”

“Finally! You finally admitted it!” she said triumphantly.

“What? I didn’t admit to anything!”

“You admitted I know you better than you know yourself. Now just do what I tell you, and everything will be fine.”



“Like hell! Let’s assume, only for the sake of argument, that I am... open-minded. I’m not saying I am...”

“I know, I know. Just get on with it.”

“Why would you push me towards the first guy who showed interest, some stranger you don’t even know? I’ve vetted every guy you’ve ever dated!”

“Often without my consent, and sometimes against my wishes!”

“Maybe, but it was my job to look out for you, when you were too ga-ga to do it yourself.” He started feeling better, suspecting he’d just stumbled on a perfect way to derail her plans. “This guy has, like, zero personality. He’s as stiff as a nail, hardly ever cracks a smile. And he’s my mother’s assistant. How would that look? Not that it matters, since regardless of how he may or may not feel about me, I’m definitely not interested in him.”

“Uh-huh. Right. That’s why you took the sketch. Because you’re not interested.”

“You’re changing the subject. Why don’t you answer my questions?”

Cordelia bit her lip and he knew he had her! She only ever did that when she was at a loss for a counterargument. Then her face brightened and his fell.

“I’ve got it! I’ll stop by your office Monday at lunchtime. I haven’t seen your mother in ages, so I’ll pop in to say hello, and that way I’ll meet him. Then I can judge for myself if he’s as unsuitable as you claim he is.”

Jordy started to protest but she held out her palm to stop him.

“Save it. We’re having lunch Monday and that’s final. Now, Thomas and I were going to go to a concert in the park this afternoon. Would you like to go with us?”

Jordy looked back out at the park. It was tempting to tag along with Cordelia and Thomas, if only so he could get away from that sketch, but he didn’t want to interfere with their plans. Besides, she would only pick on him, something he didn’t need.

“No thanks,” he waved towards the door, “you two lovebirds have fun.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve got work to do. Say hello to Thomas.”



“I will. Bye, Jordy!” She came up to him and lifted to her tiptoes to give him a soft kiss on the cheek. “I only want you to be happy, you know.”

“I know. Now go, before you get any other crazy ideas.”

“Okay. See you Monday!”

She left, but the lightness she’d brought with her stayed behind along with the subtle scent of her perfume. Jordy tried to tell himself that he wasn’t looking forward to Monday except that, as he picked up the sketch again, he had to admit that he kind of was looking forward to it after all.

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Ken thought he’d managed to hide his distress all weekend so as not to worry his family, but after Nessa went to bed Sunday night his dad asked if he was having trouble at work.

“Not really. Things are just a little stressful right now, with everyone so focused on this big project.”

“I know you’re working very hard for us, and I wish there was something I could do to help. It shouldn’t be like this. You shouldn’t have to bear so much responsibility. I can tell how heavily it weighs on you.”

“I don’t mind, Dad. Really, I don’t. In fact, I love that we’re all together.”

“Well, if the job gets to be too much, quit. We’ll manage somehow,” his father tried to sound convincing, even though they both knew they could never manage without Ken’s income.

“If it ever gets to be too much I will, but you know I like my job. Sure, it’s demanding, sometimes more than others, but it’s fulfilling too, and Rowena is a great boss.”

“I just hate that you can’t live your own life because you have to take care of us. Instead of spending all your time working and here with us, you should be out with your friends, or a boyfriend.”

Ken winced as his dad’s offhand comment found its mark, but he kept his voice neutral. “I go out as often as I want to, but I also like spending time with you and Nessa. Now would you stop trying to get rid of me? You’ll give me a complex.”



He carefully sidestepped the boyfriend subject and though his dad probably noticed, he didn't push Ken to discuss it. Instead, he returned to his seat by the window and started working the clay again while Ken prepared lunches for the following day. As he made sandwiches, Ken couldn't help but think about how the car accident seven years before had changed all their lives forever.

At the time, his dad had been an artist on the verge of success, his paintings finally selling at modest prices at a trendy Manhattan gallery. Ken's mom had held down an office job throughout their marriage, carrying the family medical benefits and earning enough to pay for life's necessities, while her husband struggled for a breakthrough in the art world, and the investment was finally starting to pay off.

Other women might have complained through the years, but she never had. Growing up, Ken remembered always being happy and feeling loved. What their family lacked in wealth, they made up for in other ways, so Ken had never felt deprived.

When Ken turned thirteen, his mother announced she was pregnant, and with Nessa's arrival, the three musketeers became four. It took Ken a while to adjust, but he soon grew to love the little sister who hung on his every word and gave him sunshine-filled smiles. And then, a month after Ken's eighteenth birthday, a horrific car crash reduced their number back to three.

Ken wrapped the sandwiches and placed them in the fridge, wiping a tear as he did so. He still missed his mother every day; they all did. The years since her death had not erased the memories or the pain. It was somewhat easier now, but Ken didn't believe they would ever get over their loss, especially not his father.

As if he knew Ken was thinking about him, his dad carefully packed up the clay and rose from his chair, reaching for the cane that hung from the back rest. "Time for me to turn in. And you too!"

"Yeah, Dad. I'm almost ready. Lunches are done."

"I could hear that," his father acknowledged. He began shuffling towards the bathroom, his stiff-jointed movements making him seem far older than his years. He knew the apartment so well, he hardly needed the cane. He was



halfway down the narrow hallway when he paused and half turned back. “I don’t tell you often enough how proud of you I am, Son. I don’t know any other eighteen-year-old kid who could have stepped up the way you did, or one who would have stuck around as long as you have. I’m sure your Mom is really proud of you too!”

Ken smiled and then, remembering his dad couldn’t see his expression, said, “Thanks! That means a lot.”

“Don’t stay up too late. You’ll get too few hours of sleep as it is,” his dad admonished before disappearing into the bathroom.

After yet another restless night, Ken arrived at the office at his regular time and did his best to maintain his professional facade even though his heart was pounding wildly and his palms were damp and clammy. For the first time all summer, Jordy was not there before him, but if anything, this made Ken even more nervous. As the day wore on, his muscles began to feel like a macramé plant holder he’d seen hanging off his elderly neighbor’s fire escape—at once stretched taut and full of knots of various shapes and sizes. Jordy and Rowena came in together, but Jordy had remained in his office and Rowena gave no indication that anything was amiss even as she debriefed him on what had gone on at the office in her absence.

“Thank you for your diligence, Ken,” she told him, seeming entirely sincere. “I appreciate you keeping a close eye on everyone, especially Jordy. And I really appreciate your willingness to work overtime last week.”

“Please don’t mention it. It was no trouble,” Ken had muttered, his normally pale cheeks coloring. Rowena wouldn’t be cruel enough to say nothing if Jordy had told her about the sketch, which meant that Jordy had kept quiet. Ken should have felt relieved, but his tension simply mounted as he contemplated how else Jordy might use the drawing.

Right before noon, the decibel level outside Ken’s office unexpectedly dropped. He was about to investigate when he heard an unfamiliar female voice in Jordy’s office.

“I can’t believe you’ve been back for weeks and we still haven’t had lunch. I’m so glad you finally let me pull you away from the desk. Just let me say Hi to your mom. I haven’t seen her in ages.”



In seconds, a pretty, porcelain-skinned, dark-haired girl walked into his office with Jordy in tow. She threw one glance at the closed door to Rowena's office before making a beeline for Ken's desk.

"Hi, I'm Cordelia Lesnig. My family and the Ryders are neighbors in Greenwich. I'd just like to poke my head in and say hello to Mrs. Ryder. Is she available?"

Ken swallowed to lubricate his drying throat and glanced at his desk phone, which showed that Rowena was using her landlines.

"Just a second. Let me check," he said formally, grateful for the distraction that allowed him to avoid looking directly at Jordy. He pressed the intercom between his and Rowena's office and waited for her to pick up.

"Ms. Cordelia Lesnig is here to see you. Do you have a moment?"

"Yes, of course. I'll be right out."

Ken frowned. Ordinarily Rowena preferred to have him show her visitors into her office. He couldn't think of a single person who had caused Rowena to meet them halfway, other than her son. But then, if Cordelia was the girl next door, then perhaps Rowena thought of her as a kind of a daughter, or maybe a potential daughter-in-law? Ken tried to subtly evaluate Cordelia and flushed for the second time that day when he realized she had him under close scrutiny as well.

*Was this the way Jordy planned to ambush me? Ken wondered. Maybe he told his girlfriend, and she was here to ensure that Rowena knew exactly what kind of a man she had hired to assist her?*

Any further speculation was cut off by Rowena opening her office door.

"Cordie, how are you? It's so good to see you!" she exclaimed as she swept the younger woman into a warm hug. "How are your parents? And school?"

"Everything's just fine. Mom and Dad are in Europe for the summer and I'm working on my pieces for my thesis exhibition. It's very exciting, but scary too. I've been busy, but not as busy as Jordy claims to be. I practically had to beg him this weekend to agree to have lunch with me today. Would you like to join us?"



“Much as I would love to, I’m afraid I have a previous engagement. Isn’t that right, Ken? By the way, Cordie, this is my assistant, Ken.”

As Rowena made the introductions, Ken’s frown deepened. He knew for a fact that Rowena had no lunch plans this day. After all, he had been the one to keep her schedule open on her express instructions.

“Hi, Ken. Nice to meet you. Jordy’s told me so much about you. Would you like to join us for lunch in Rowena’s stead?”

Alarms began going off in Ken’s head. Whatever Jordy had told her, it could not have been favorable. Ken felt nothing good could come from accepting this invitation.

“No, thank you. It’s very kind of you, but...”

“You should go. I know for a fact you worked really hard last week and you deserve a nice lunch out. Besides, this will give you and Jordy a chance to get to know one another,” Rowena unexpectedly encouraged. Ken’s back stiffened. The situation was highly suspicious. He didn’t know what exactly was happening or why, but he instinctively wanted nothing to do with it.

“I’m sure Ms. Lesnig and Jordy don’t need a third wheel at lunch.”

“If that was the case I wouldn’t have asked. You must come!” Cordelia enthused.

Ken looked around his small office, trying to find a task that might save him from this forced interaction. The fact that Jordy looked equally unhappy with the plan only confused him more.

“Please, Ken, I insist. You truly deserve this.”

Ken didn’t know if Rowena’s phrasing had been intentional, but she’d hit a button that made it impossible for him to refuse. However miserable the idea of this lunch made him, after what he’d done the previous week, he certainly deserved it. He gave a curt nod and almost winced when Cordelia clapped in victorious delight.

Ken was reserved and wary on the way to the restaurant, but Cordelia skillfully manipulated the conversation and was quickly able to overcome his defenses. She directed the conversation like a magician wielding a wand,



guiding it this way and that with impeccably timed questions and comments designed to extract the information she desired. Ken was aware of her tactics, but he was also helplessly swept up in her charisma.

Halfway into the lunch, after neither Jordy nor Cordelia mentioned the sketch, Ken began to relax. Jordy hadn't said much at all, but Ken couldn't sense any malice. Whatever his reaction to the drawing, Jordy seemed intent on keeping it to himself.

By the time their waiter was clearing the dishes, Cordelia knew more about Ken than most of his good friends, though he only shared the basics about his home life. They talked about work and hobbies, and when he'd reluctantly admitted his interest in drawing, she explained that she was in the Masters of Visual Arts program at the Columbia University School of the Arts, and hoped to have a career in furniture design. Ken was envious of her opportunities, but she was far too charming and vivacious for him to be resentful.

If the lunch had been Rowena's attempt to get her son and Ken to bond, it had been a dismal failure. Jordy hardly spoke throughout the meal, preferring to sulk silently over his food. His discomfort visibly increased when Ken talked about drawing, but still he said nothing. This would have bothered Ken a great deal had Cordelia not provided a perfect distraction. And then, suddenly, Cordelia looked at her watch and gave a horrified gasp.

"Look at the time! I was having so much fun I got carried away, and if I don't leave right now I'll be late for my appointment with my advisor. Jordy, be a doll and take care of the check?"

Before either Ken or Jordy could say a word, she was out of her chair and breezily kissing them both on their cheeks before rushing out of the restaurant. The two men were left staring at each other in a stunned silence that grew more awkward with each passing moment. Jordy finally looked away, trying to catch the eye of their waiter to request the check.

"I'm sure he'll be here shortly," Ken finally said when Jordy's visual search yielded no waiter. He was still scared, but the tension was killing him and he decided to stop avoiding the elephant in the room.

"While we wait for him to come back, I want to apologize for what you found in my office Friday night. You were never meant to see that."



“I figured,” Jordy muttered, avoiding Ken’s eyes. “Why did you draw that?”

“I often draw things I see in my head, but this was stupid, reckless. It will never happen again.”

“But why me?” Jordy pressed. “I’m not...”

Ken narrowed his eyes. Was this the problem? Did Jordy believe Ken was somehow trying to make him into something he wasn’t? Ken had suspected for a while that Jordy was gay, but had never had any confirmation. Maybe he’d been wrong, or maybe Jordy still hadn’t accepted that part of himself? Regardless, it was just another reason for Jordy to be uncomfortable with the drawing.

“Like any man I have fantasies, and since I *am* gay, mine are about other men.”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re gay or not?”

“They’re fantasies.” Ken shrugged.

“Well you shouldn’t be... fantasizing... about me.”

Ken noted Jordy shifting uncomfortably in his chair. The younger man’s discomfort was rolling off him in waves that Ken was sure could be felt by all the other restaurant patrons.

“Okay. I’ll stop.”

“Just like that?” Jordy looked up at him abruptly and with suspicion.

“Yes. I can control who I think about. You asked me to stop, so I’ll stop. I would have never done anything about those thoughts anyway, except drawing. Like I said, I never wanted you to find out, to make you uncomfortable in any way.”

“So you’ll just... stop?”

“Yes.” Ken kept his tone firm in response to the incredulity in Jordy’s voice. Jordy snorted, unconvinced. “Look, part of a fantasy is the mystery. It’s easy to think about someone who’s practically a stranger. Now that we’ve interacted, shared a meal...”

“Spending time with me makes me less desirable?”



“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean? And why are you always so freaking calm? We might as well be talking about the filing system instead of your secret sex drawings!”

Ken flushed. He kept his eyes trained straight ahead, certain that people at nearby tables had overheard Jordy’s complaint. He’d been prepared for humiliation, just not anywhere this public. It would have been easy to let his emotions get the better of him, but instead Ken took a deep breath, trying to absorb some of Jordy’s excess frustration. He’d seen similar reactions when his father had first learned to cope with the limitations of his disabilities, and he knew the best he could do was to remain calm in the face of the storm.

“I can’t help what happened in the past. All I can do is apologize and make sure it doesn’t happen again. And I’m calm because I have few options. You have every right to be angry with me. I accept that. I don’t have a corresponding right.”

Jordy calmed down and looked positively sheepish.

“I don’t have the right to be angry. You haven’t done anything to me. I went into your private office and snooped around. I saw something that I was never meant to see. And to make matters worse, I stole it!”

“I don’t care about that. But... did you destroy it?”

Jordy shook his head.

“What do you plan to do with it? Your mother knows I’m gay, but if you show her the drawing she’ll probably...” He was too superstitious to finish the sentence.

“She wouldn’t do anything. She’d understand, especially if you explained it the way you did just now. But she’ll never see it. I’ll bring it back for you tomorrow.”

“If you do, you can watch me shred it. Then you’ll know for sure no one else will ever see it.”

They fell back into silence. Their waiter materialized to see how they were doing and disappeared again when Jordy requested the check. A nagging



thought took root in Ken's mind. It wasn't exactly a good time for this discussion, but he knew he might never have another chance.

"Why do you dislike me so much? Is it because I'm gay?" he finally blurted out.

"I..." Jordy had been about to protest, but stopped. He thought a moment before he spoke again. "No. I didn't even consider that before Friday. I just... well... you're just always so competent and professional, and you obviously live and breathe Ryder Corp., like my Mom. I see how much she appreciates that and how much she trusts and depends on you. Sometimes I get this feeling that all I do is disappoint her."

"That's just not true! You couldn't find a mother who's prouder of her son. She's always talking about you, how someday you'll be running Ryder Corp."

Jordy sighed and Ken stopped, then tried a slightly different approach.

"To be honest, before this summer I assumed you were an overprivileged, spoiled rich kid, undeserving of all her praise. But I was wrong. I've watched you and you work really hard. You know what you're doing and you add value. You may not be ready yet, but someday you'll easily step into your mother's shoes."

"Right, thanks," Jordy said with more resignation than appreciation. Their waiter brought the check and Ken had time to consider Jordy's response as the other man pulled out his wallet and extracted a credit card.

"Obviously I'm missing something," Ken said when the waiter left to scan the card.

"Look, she and I both know I could take over Ryder Corp. someday. But Ryder Corp. was hers and my father's dream, not mine."

Ken sat back, stunned. Knowing how much Rowena had sacrificed to build up the company, all for the benefit of her only son, he wanted to rage at Jordy for being an ungrateful selfish brat. But then he wasn't completely unsympathetic. As far back as he could remember, from the moment he'd shown a talent for drawing, everyone had compared him to his father and talked about him taking over his father's legacy someday. At the time, he was flattered by the comparison, but if he were to pursue art as a career now, he'd want to be more than just his father's shadow, however difficult that might be.



“What’s your dream?”

“I want to start my own business, with Cordie. She’s an amazing designer, but she has no head for marketing or finance. With her talent and my brains, I’m sure we could make a go of it.”

Ken let his imagination take him to a boutique storefront displaying quirky, one-of-a-kind furniture pieces, the kind only the very wealthy could ever afford. He had been impressed by Cordelia’s passion when she talked about her designs, just as he was now impressed by Jordy’s drive to achieve independent success.

“Why couldn’t you do both? Rowena isn’t ready for retirement yet. I’m sure if you shared your idea with her, she’d be open to continuing at Ryder while you built up your venture with Cordelia. Eventually you’d have people running the business for you and you could have the helm at both companies.”

Jordy looked at him, and for the first time Ken saw absolutely no contempt in his expression. He felt a tiny flutter in his belly that he immediately tried to quash, but his body wasn’t cooperating.

“You’re the first person besides Cordie who not only heard me out, but didn’t tell me I was crazy to consider going out on my own. Don’t you think I shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth and just fall in line at Ryder?”

“The Trojans didn’t look their gift horse in the mouth, and where did that get them? Everything about Ryder makes sense for you, but just because it makes sense, doesn’t make it right. It would have made a lot more sense for my father to take on some menial job instead of painting, but my mother wouldn’t hear of it even as she carried the financial load for our entire family. She used to say that only the lucky few hear the call of their destiny, but those who do should follow their inspiration.”

“I’m sorry about your mom. I should have said that earlier, when you were telling Cordie. I know how hard it is to lose a parent.”

“Thank you, and I’m sorry about your dad too,” Ken ventured, hoping the mention of Jordy’s father wouldn’t bring up too many traumatic memories. Fortunately, Jordy seemed to be fine.

The waiter brought back the check and Jordy signed for the meal and tip, graciously accepting the waiter’s thanks.



“Guess we’d better go,” he said, and Ken thought he sensed a slight reluctance, which made his stomach flip again.

They stood up and headed for the exit, walking out onto the crowded Manhattan sidewalk. Ken felt the urge to grab Jordy’s hand, which he stifled by balling his fist and shoving it into his pants pocket. Despite the rough beginning, the lunch turned out to be a success, and he wanted nothing more than a repeat experience.

“Your mother mentioned she wanted us to get to know each other, and we’re off to a decent start. Maybe we could have lunch together again? It would be nice to have someone my age to talk to. Most of the younger staff don’t want to hang out with the boss’s assistant.”

Ken wasn’t concerned when Jordy did not respond immediately, because he could tell the other man was evaluating the proposition.

“Okay,” Jordy finally replied. “An occasional lunch would be nice, and it would make Mom happy.”

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Jordy tried to focus on the spreadsheet displayed on the computer screen, but his eyes kept darting to the clock as it slowly moved past two o’clock. He was distracted by a powerful mix of emotions about the charity reception he was scheduled to attend with Ken. Usually his mother handled such high-profile events herself, but on this particular afternoon she and other Ryder Corp. executives were meeting with their counterparts at Kronar in an attempt to smooth out some merger glitches, so neither she nor any of the company vice-presidents could be spared to oversee the reception.

“All the details have been seen to by the events team. You’re there just to show the client that we value their business,” his mother said when he expressed reservations about attending the function.

“How will they get that impression if you send the most junior of employees to represent our company?”

“I’m not sending a junior employee. I’m sending my son!” his mother dismissed his concerns.

“But I don’t know anything about this event or this group. What if I mess up?”



“Ken will give you a primer beforehand and he’ll attend with you. He’ll be your right hand man and will give you any information you need in real time. And before you say it, he’s not going as your babysitter. He would have gone with me too, and done exactly the same thing. I know our clients better than you do, but even I can’t remember all of the pertinent details, while Ken somehow manages to maintain an encyclopedic knowledge of them and has near-instant recall.”

Jordy knew that he’d been outmaneuvered. His mother had silenced all his reasonable objections before he could even voice them. He couldn’t tell her that there was another reason why he didn’t want to go to the gala with Ken. Even though it was a business function, Jordy worried it would feel too much like a date with a man who’d taken up residence in Jordy’s fantasies.

He and Ken had been having lunch together at least twice a week, and they were getting to know one another quite well. In fact, after only a few weeks, Jordy was sure Ken knew him better than anyone except Cordelia. This wouldn’t have been a problem if Jordy had been able to keep his feelings for Ken confined to friendship, even a warm friendship. That, however, hadn’t been the case.

Although Ken promised he wouldn’t destroy the sketch when Jordy returned it after their lunch with Cordelia, Jordy had also secretly made a copy of the drawing just in case, and found himself staring at it every night. He found it disturbingly exciting, and while he resisted at first, eventually he’d started touching himself as he imagined their passionate embrace. At first, he did his best to ignore the implications of those acts, but eventually he acknowledged that he wanted more than friendship from Ken, and that desire terrified him.

To Jordy’s frustration, Ken kept his word and never again even hinted at any feelings for Jordy beyond friendship. He’d gotten over Jordy far too quickly for Jordy’s taste, especially given the equally rapid change in Jordy’s own feelings in the opposite direction. It seemed their roles had reversed, and Jordy felt at a distinct disadvantage.

“Ready to go?”

Jordy looked up at the sound of Ken’s voice. He had to work hard to keep his admiration off his face. When he’d first met him, Jordy thought the dress



shirts and ties made Ken look too stiff, but now he had to admit that Ken wore his professional clothes well, his body accepting the slim-cut style he preferred with no need for alteration. Most days, Ken shed his suit jacket immediately upon arrival, so Jordy didn't have a lot of time to admire the total package. Now, however, Ken wore the full ensemble. He wore a suit that Jordy had only seen a couple of times, obviously his best, and the way he looked in it almost made it too difficult for Jordy to stand up. With a deep inhale through his nose, he managed to calm himself. He stood, reaching to pick up his suit jacket from where it was hanging on the back of his chair.

"I'm nervous."

He would have never admitted this to Ken before, but now he felt comfortable enough to know the confession wouldn't be used against him. Ken didn't need to know exactly what he was nervous about.

"No need. You look amazing and I'll be right by your side to make sure you know who everyone is and what you need to say. I've done this many times for your mother."

"She told me. I know I'm in good hands with you," Jordy said and then quickly turned away, using the effort to shrug on his jacket to hide his embarrassed flush.

Although the Plaza was within walking distance of their offices, his mother had insisted they take the car, worried that the late July heat would cause them to appear less than crisp at the start of the event. Jordy didn't mind, but as he and Ken shared the back seat he found it difficult to ignore Ken's hand, which rested on the seat between them, and he wanted to reach over and cover it with his own. He knew his thoughts were inappropriate and completely adolescent, but this was the first time he'd ever allowed his attraction for another guy to take hold, and he didn't know how to control it.

Things became a little easier once they reached the Terrace Room at the Plaza. Although they were among the early arrivals, there were still enough other people there to distract Jordy as Ken explained who everyone was and steered Jordy towards the woman who hired Ryder Corp. to organize the event. Ken and Jordy knew Rowena had called in advance to explain why she would not be able to attend, so Ken needed only to make the introductions. He



then stood at Jordy's side, smiling pleasantly but only participating in the conversation when called to do so, letting Jordy take the spotlight. Between his mother and Ken, Jordy was well prepared for this encounter, and his success in charming the woman boosted his self-confidence. Being sure of Ken's solid support helped ease his nerves as well.

For the next several hours, he and Ken mingled among current and prospective clients, mostly limiting their conversation to the fundraising effort that was the goal of the afternoon, and only subtly slipping in reminders that Ryder Corp. organized the event. By the end of the event, Jordy was tired of talking and smiling, but he had business cards from several prospective clients and he basked in the glow of Ken's approving smile.

"You're a natural! Rowena could not have sent a better ambassador to represent Ryder Corp. She hardly could have done a better job herself. Those women were tripping over themselves to give you their business and the men weren't far behind," Ken praised.

Jordy beamed. He'd been growing tired, but upon hearing Ken's assessment he felt lighter than air.

"Let's celebrate! My first big event as the company's representative and I managed to get through it! You have to help me mark the occasion."

"You did more than just get through it. You sailed through it! Watching you was a thing of beauty."

"I couldn't have done it without you. So what do you say? What should we do? We need a drink!"

"You're not twenty-one yet," Ken pointed out. Jordy frowned. He had thought Ken's suggestion that they stick to sparkling cider during the reception was because they were there to work, but now he wondered if it was just that he thought Jordy was too young and immature to handle his liquor.

"I have an ID that says I am."

"But it would not be in Ryder Corp.'s best interest if someone checked and that ID turned out to be false. Or worse yet, if someone published a picture of Jordy Ryder drinking in a hotel bar following a charity fundraiser," Ken explained calmly. "I suppose we could have a soda."



“Oh, no. I am not going to celebrate with a soda. My place is just down the street, and there’s no one to check ID’s or take pictures. You have time, right?”

It was seven o’clock on a Friday, and Jordy knew he was being presumptuous, but then he’d seen Ken stay at work much later on other Fridays.

“I could come over for a drink. Let me call my family to let them know I’ll be late.”

Jordy left to use the restroom to give Ken some privacy for his call. Afterwards, it took only a few minutes for them to reach the Ryders’ apartment.

“It’s been weird staying in the city the whole summer. We haven’t been to the Connecticut house once. Mom and I have both been too busy with the merger. I suppose now that I’m graduating, there’s really no reason to keep it. Mom should sell,” Jordy opined in the elevator.

“Have you shared that with her?”

“No. I just thought of it now. You think I should?”

“I think she’s holding onto the house for you. She wouldn’t make a unilateral decision to sell your childhood home.”

Jordy glanced at Ken, hearing the message between the lines. “For a couple of years, it was the only place I felt safe. But I don’t need that giant security blanket anymore. I guess I need to let Mom know. Hi Cara, I’m home. And I brought a friend,” Jordy called out as they stepped into the apartment.

“Hello, Jordy. Should I fix you something to eat? Oh, hello Ken,” Cara said as she appeared from around the corner. Jordy knew he shouldn’t have been taken aback by the fact that Cara and Ken knew each other. After all, they both worked for his mother, and it would have been natural for them to meet. Nevertheless, he found their familiarity unwelcome, especially when Cara hugged Ken warmly and asked about his family. He knew it was selfish, but he had hoped he wouldn’t have to compete for Ken’s attention in his own house.



“We’ve been grazing on hors d’oeuvres all afternoon, but maybe something light? What do you think, Ken?”

“Please don’t trouble yourself, Cara. I’m really quite full,”

“It’s no trouble. I’ll make pasta primavera, enough for you to take home, too.”

“Really, that’s unnecessary,” Ken tried to protest, but she walked back in the direction of the kitchen. “I’m sorry. I tried to stop her.”

“It’s all right. It’ll be nice to have dinner together. What are you drinking?” Jordy strode over to the antique cabinet that had been retrofitted to hold not just the liquor, but also the refrigerator and ice maker.

“I’m not picky, but I’m also a lightweight. A glass of wine? White, if you have it.”

Jordy surveyed the inside of the wine fridge and pulled out a bottle.

“Sauvignon Blanc?”

“That’s perfect,” Ken smiled with approval. Jordy uncorked a chilled bottle and poured. His fingers tingled where they touched Ken’s as he handed him the glass.

“To your first successful client event,” Ken toasted, holding up his glass. They clinked and drank the wine. Jordy motioned for Ken to step further into the apartment, leading them into the entertainment room where they made themselves comfortable on the plush, oversized sofa that faced the large screen TV.

“This room isn’t in your mother’s usual style,” Ken commented with a small smirk.

“No, she did this so I’d have somewhere to hang when I stayed in Manhattan, though she does use it for her Academy Awards parties.”

“She likes having you nearby. She misses you when you’re away at school.”

“She tells you that?”

“She doesn’t have to. She’s much calmer and happier whenever you visit.”



“She worries too much,” Jordy glanced down into his wineglass with a frown.

“She’d tell you she could never worry enough.”

“She needs to let me grow up!”

“She has no problem with that. It’s not your age or maturity level that concern her. You know that,” Ken reminded Jordy pointedly and Jordy felt ashamed. “My father is older than I am, yet I worry about him as much as your mother worries about you.”

“Why? You mentioned he was in the car accident with your mother when she died, but you never said what happened.”

Ken sighed. “I try not to talk or think about it too much. Even after all these years, it’s still painful. It’s even worse for him. He’s still in physical and emotional pain every day.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“I know and you’re not. If you had asked me a month ago I probably would have changed the subject, but we’re friends now, and something like this shouldn’t be a secret between friends.”

Ken took a deep breath and began sharing his story. Jordy’s heart twisted into painful knots as he listened to Ken recount how a truck driver, who fell asleep behind the wheel, veered into oncoming traffic and hit his family’s car head on. His mother, the driver, was killed on impact. Ken, who had been sitting behind her, somehow escaped with only lacerations to his lower body. His little sister, next to him, was the only one who suffered nothing but whiplash. Glass and jagged car parts sliced his father’s face, blinding and scarring him. His left arm was crushed and partially severed, and had to be amputated below the elbow. These, along with numerous internal injuries, kept his father in the hospital for weeks.

“My mother’s sister flew out from Sioux City to take care of Nessa while Dad and I were in the hospital. Fortunately, I was released the next day and I was over eighteen, so there was never a question of anyone taking Nessa away because Dad was incapacitated. My aunt helped as much as she could, but then she had to go back to her own family. She offered to take us back with her, or



at least Nessa, but Dad needed to stay in the hospital and I couldn't let my sister be taken away from us."

Choked up, Ken paused to wipe a few stray tears. Jordy slid over and put his arm around Ken's shoulders in an effort to provide some comfort.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea. We can stop talking about it."

"It's okay. I just... It's been a long time since I allowed myself to think about it all."

Ken's hand shook violently as he took a sip of his wine. Jordy set his glass down before reaching out to take Ken's glass and placing it alongside his. Thinking only of Ken now, Jordy took his friend's hand into his own.

"It's okay. It's all in the past. You made it through the worst of it, and you found a way to provide for all of you."

Jordy was hit with a sudden clarity. For the first time, he understood Ken's position. He was the head of his family, the provider and the caretaker. All the responsibility rested on his shoulders. No wonder he took such pains to be professional at work. Given his home situation, he couldn't afford to lose his job. He had to prove his worth to Rowena and the rest of Ryder Corp. every day. Had Jordy been standing, he would have reeled at the unfairness of it. No one so young should have to bear such a heavy burden.

"At first we had life insurance from my mom, but even while dad and Nessa were still covered by her medical insurance, bills ate through the money quickly. Because I was an adult at the time of the accident, my hospital bills weren't even covered."

"What about the other driver? Didn't his insurance pay?"

"Not immediately, and I got some bad advice. Neighbors told me we should sue, so I hired a lawyer, but as it turned out my mom had some alcohol in her system. She was under the legal limit, but the other insurance argued that she contributed to the accident. They threatened to stretch out the case, to bury us in depositions and discovery requests, to basically make our lives miserable unless we took their lowball offer. Dad was in no position to decide, so it fell to me, and we were so desperate for money... In retrospect, I should



have waited. Our family would have made sympathetic plaintiffs. Instead, I caved. After the lawyer took his cut, the remainder barely made a dent.”

Ken was morose and Jordy suspected that he still felt as guilty over the decisions he made seven years ago as Jordy did about his father dying in an effort to stop his kidnapping. It was stupid and pointless. Neither one of them had options at the time, and there was no way to undo what had been done. Jordy desperately wanted to make Ken see this.

“You were only eighteen! You did the best you could,” he protested, thinking back to how immature he had been three years prior. There was no way he could have dealt with what Ken had had to deal with when he turned eighteen in the middle of his first semester of college.

“I was old enough to make mistakes that will have repercussions for the rest of our lives. The lawsuit was just one. I also sold all of my Dad’s paintings. Right before the accident, he’d had his first solo show at a gallery in Manhattan, and people were starting to notice his work. When the gallery owner heard about the accident, he offered to buy Dad’s paintings. I thought he was doing it to be kind, and the offer seemed good. I actually thanked him for his generosity. At the time, I didn’t realize how large the hospital bills would get, how much therapy Dad would need even after he was released from the hospital. I wasn’t thinking about the cost of daycare, or Nessa’s college tuition.”

“*Or your own*,” Jordy added silently. He knew Ken only had a high school education, but not because he wasn’t smart enough to go to college.

“Anyway, the gallery owner who bought them capitalized on the fact that Dad would never paint again, and he cornered the market. They’re so much more valuable now. I wish I had been smart enough to hold on to one or two.”

“Ken, no one could have known. The art world is so fickle. This man took a gamble that paid off, but it could easily have gone the other way.”

“I suppose. Sometimes I wish it had, just so I could have fewer regrets. It’s nice to read about his paintings being sold at auction from time to time and the critics have been very effusive. Too bad they hadn’t had their eyes open before the accident.”



“So your dad stays home with your sister while you work?” Since he knew nothing he could say about the paintings would actually make Ken feel better, Jordy tried a distraction.

“He stays home, period. He hardly ever goes out. His disabilities are bad enough, and the scars make things worse. He says he can feel people staring at him when he goes out. In theory, he could do some things, even blind with only one hand, but in practice... He misses my Mom, he misses his art... But he’s still a good father to Nessa and he does what he can around the house. The disability checks help. And he just started working with clay, sculpting. It frustrates him, but I think it’ll be good in the long run. I just wish...”

“You’re doing everything you can,” Jordy said with absolute certainty. Over the last month he had begun to see Ken in a new light, and this evening his eyes were finally fully opened. He couldn’t believe not so long ago he thought Ken was an uptight, kiss-ass lackey. Discovering how wrong he’d been was almost physically painful.

“I could never do enough. Every time I look at him, I think about how different things would be if we had had enough money for plastic surgery, so at least the scars wouldn’t be so bad, or if we could afford a seeing-eye dog, or more therapy.”

Distressed, Ken leaned over and buried his face in Jordy’s chest. Once, Jordy’s instinct would have been to shove Ken away. Now, however, he just pulled him closer, offering as much comfort and silent understanding as he could.

“Ken, you’re a good person and you’ve done, you keep doing, everything you can for your dad and your sister. You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Your Mom says the same thing. I see a lot of her in you. She’s a remarkable woman, and she raised a remarkable son. You’re so much more than just the pretty little rich boy everyone was expecting. You have talent, and drive! I saw that as soon as you started working this summer, and that’s what fueled that crush. I knew it was completely inappropriate, but I couldn’t help myself.”

Jordy knew Ken wasn’t trying to hurt him, just the opposite, but the reminder that this wonderful guy once had feelings for him, that Jordy forced



him to abandon, was singularly unpleasant. Too late, Jordy realized that he wanted Ken. Not just physically, though to his shock that was an aspect of it, but to share their successes and burdens. Only thanks to his stupid knee-jerk demand, Ken no longer wanted him.

“Were you really able to, you know, stop? When I asked you too?” Jordy asked softly, hanging on to a thread of hope. Even though a confirmation would crush him, he needed to know. “Ken?” he asked when a minute later he still hadn’t received a response.

“No,” Ken finally said cautiously. “I tried, but no, I couldn’t, not completely. I swear I haven’t drawn anything else, though, and I’m trying not to be obvious. Was I too obvious?” he asked, pulling away and turning his face up to Jordy’s. “Are you angry? I’m sorry. I promise I’m not a threat.”

In that moment of insecurity Ken seemed years younger, and Jordy felt his protective instinct rise.

“I know you’re not. It’s okay. To be honest I was surprised when you seemed to just turn your feelings off, and disappointed.”

“Disappointed? But I thought...” Ken’s furrowed brow conveyed his confusion.

“I know.” Jordy frowned too, wishing he could be less awkward in communicating his feelings. He got the idea that it might be easier to show Ken what he meant instead of telling him. “Do you mind coming up to my room? I want to show you something.”

“That may not be the best idea,” Ken hesitated.

“I know you won’t try anything,” Jordy said confidently. “Besides, I’m bigger and stronger, and I’ve got Cora. If anything happens to me she’ll drown you in pasta sauce.” He was thrilled to see that his joke coaxed a small smile from Ken.

“Okay.”

Ken went up the stairs gingerly, lacking his usual confidence. He paused in the doorway to Jordy’s room, his eyes sweeping the unfamiliar area before he finally walked in. Jordy closed the door behind them and walked purposefully to his nightstand, picking up the paper that lay on top. It was a copy of Ken’s sketch.



“I know I asked you to stop thinking about me, but ever since that first lunch, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. I made a copy of your drawing because I couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing it again. I look at it every night and imagine what it would be like.”

“But you said you’re not gay.”

“I know. I didn’t think I was. I’m still not sure. Maybe I feel this way because of what those men did? I don’t understand it. I do know I’m not really attracted to women. I’ve kissed a couple of girls. It was okay. Not disgusting, but nothing special. I haven’t kissed a man since...” He hung his head, leaving them both to contemplate the circumstances of those kisses.

“A true kiss wouldn’t be like those others must have been. It would not be forced. If you and I kissed, you would be in control.”

“You make it sound so tempting.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not why I came up here.”

“I know, but I’m pretty sure it’s why I asked you up here. I keep thinking about it, and I would like to try...”

Jordy set the drawing on the bed and closed the distance between them until they stood face to face, almost close enough for their bodies to touch. Jordy felt Ken’s radiant body heat and his own rising excitement. He waited for Ken to do something, but Ken was reluctant.

“It has to be you, Jordy. You need to initiate it. Show me what you want.”

“I don’t know what I want.”

“You don’t have the words to describe it, but your body knows. Show me.”

Jordy wanted to, but fear kept him frozen in place. His mind was in turmoil. He had only done this once before. The men who had used him when he was a boy sometimes forced him to kiss, but those had been brutal, bruising experiences that churned Jordy’s stomach. But there had been one who had been gentle and sweet. At first, Jordy had been resistant, like with the others, but eventually he gave in. Afterwards he had hated himself for that weakness, even as the memory of what he and that man did had aroused him again.

The recollection forced Jordy’s hand. He had to know if this would feel the same. He placed his hands on Ken’s waist and lowered his head until their lips



met. The kiss was soft and hesitant, but also tender and welcome. Ken's warm lips yielded under his. Jordy tasted the wine and a hint of the appetizers Ken had eaten at the reception, and his nose filled with a faint mixture of Ken's sweat and deodorant. He pulled Ken closer and his kiss became firmer, drawing a sigh from the man in his arms. Then he felt Ken's hands on his shoulders and the lips beneath his became more demanding. Jordy felt light-headed, giddy with excitement and something more. His thoughts faded and he gave himself over to his senses, falling headlong into the amazing rush.

Reality intruded as Jordy's phone beeped and vibrated, signaling an incoming text. He and Ken sprang apart and exchanged nervous looks, both surprised at having been so carried away. Jordy was frustrated, but the moment was over anyway, so there was no point to ignoring the interruption. He pulled out the phone and looked at the screen.

"It's Cara. Dinner's ready."

"We should go downstairs."

"Yeah, but," Jordy reached out to grab Ken's elbow.

"But?"

"Can we come back up here after dinner? Please?"

Ken evaluated him with keen eyes. "I'd like that."

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Ken had no idea what to expect as they returned to Jordy's room after dinner. Their kiss had been amazing and magical, but Ken didn't want to be disappointed by expecting another. He needn't have worried. Jordy initiated contact as soon as the door to his bedroom closed behind them. Their second kiss was as wonderful as the first until Ken lifted his hands to capture Jordy's face, causing Jordy to step back abruptly.

"I'm sorry," Ken said. Jordy's face was painted with fear and something nearing revulsion, which made Ken sick to his stomach with dread. "I shouldn't have... I didn't mean to..."

Jordy was staring at him, wide-eyed with terror. His breaths were shallow. His hands were shaking. His whole body shuddered when Ken took a step towards him and he backed away until he reached the wall and could retreat no



further. Ken wanted to reach out and comfort him, but he knew that could make things even worse.

“I’m so sorry, Jordy. Please forgive me. I’ll go.”

He left the room, closing the door behind him. He couldn’t just leave Jordy alone in his room though, experiencing a mental crisis. When he reached the bottom of the stairs he sought out Cara, knowing that the housekeeper had been hired for more than her domestic skills.

“Jordy isn’t feeling well,” he told her, unsure of how to explain without completely betraying Jordy’s confidence. “Is there someone we can call besides his mother?” He knew Rowena would drop everything to be with her son, but he didn’t want to take her away from the merger talks unless he absolutely had to. No, that wasn’t it. He simply did not want to have to tell her that he had been the one sending her son into a panic.

Cara was already dialing the phone. “Cordelia? This is Cara. Jordy may be having an episode. Ken said Rowena is at a business meeting and... Yes, he’s still here... Okay, I’ll tell him. I’ll have tea ready when you get here. Thank you.”

Cara hung up the phone and filled a teakettle with water before placing it on the stove.

“She’s on her way. She should be here within twenty minutes. She asked if you could stay to explain what happened.”

Ken nodded. He owed someone an explanation, and based on everything Jordy had told him Cordelia was very discreet. He called his father to explain that he’d be even later than he initially thought, and then waited in the living room.

Cordelia arrived promptly, with her boyfriend in tow. She quickly made the introductions and then asked Thomas to wait in the media room while she spoke with Ken and went up to see Jordy.

“What happened?”

“We kissed, at his request. Nothing more, I swear. It was fine at first, but then I touched his face and he got scared, terrified.”



“It’s not you, Ken. He’s been through therapy, but some things still trigger those memories. He’s not really in control of his reactions,” Cordelia tried to explain.

“It’s fine. I mean, it’s not fine that he has these episodes, but no harm done to me. I just wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Okay, good. I’m glad you understand. And I think you will be able to help. You said he requested the kiss?”

Ken nodded. “I even waited for him to initiate it. I promised him he’d be in control, and he was. I stopped as soon as I sensed his distress.”

Cordelia bit her lip. “I know it seems bad now, but this may actually be a good thing. We have to go up to see him. Would you carry the tea?”

“Are you sure I should go with you?”

Cordelia was already striding towards the stairs, ignoring his hesitancy. Cara appeared with a teapot, three cups and a plate of cookies on a tray, which she handed to him as if she knew what had been in Cordelia’s mind. Ken took the tray and followed Jordy’s best friend upstairs. She knocked on the bedroom door.

“Jordy, it’s me. Can I come in?”

No audible response reached Ken’s ears, but Cordelia opened the door anyway and stepped inside.

“Jordy? Oh, Jordy, honey!”

She rushed into the room. Thoroughly alarmed, Ken followed quickly behind her. Inside, Jordy had squeezed himself into a corner. He sat on the floor with his knees pulled to his chest and his arms wrapped as far as was possible around his legs. He rocked back and forth, and although his face was half-hidden, his back shook with silent sobs. Once again, Ken felt sick for having provoked such a reaction. He set the tea tray down on a desk and stood back to watch Cordelia minister to Jordy.

She approached him carefully, reminding him in low tones who she was. Even so, he flinched when she first touched him, trying to shrink away from her but having nowhere to go. She slid down to the floor and sat next to him,



leaning on him, whispering. Ken felt completely helpless and wondered if his presence wasn't doing more harm than good. He was about to leave when Cordelia gave him a look that rooted him in place.

"You're safe, Jordy. It's just me and Ken here, and we're not going to hurt you. Ken didn't mean to scare you. He didn't know to ask."

Jordy let out a heart-wrenching whimper. Ken took a step forward, and then another, until he was sliding to his knees in front of Jordy and Cordelia. She reached for his hand and then placed both his and hers over Jordy's. She looked at Ken, indicating with her eyes that he should speak.

"I'm sorry, Jordy. I didn't know. I never meant to hurt you. I never would!"

Jordy let out another whimper, but he lifted his head to look at Ken.

"I'd never intentionally hurt you," Ken told him directly in a reassuring tone, willing Jordy to believe him.

"We brought tea. Want some?" Cordelia asked. Ken rose to get the tray when Jordy gave a small nod. He brought it over and placed it on the floor next to them, pouring out three cups. Cordelia handed one to Jordy before picking up her own. His hand trembled slightly as he took it, but he managed to bring the cup to his lips and took a swallow.

"Ken told me what happened. It was very brave of you to want to try a kiss," Cordelia mentioned conversationally. "It sounds like it went pretty well, too, until Ken touched your face."

Jordy shuddered and Ken felt as if he'd been punched in the gut.

"Did it remind you of something bad?" Cordelia prompted.

"Some of them used to grab my face and head, to force my mouth open and..." Jordy closed his eyes, unable to continue speaking, though it was obvious his thoughts sent him back to the time he was in captivity.

"I would never do that. I would never force you to do anything."

Jordy looked up at Ken. "I know that. In my mind, I know that. But I still couldn't stop. I'm sorry. I should have never started this today. I wanted so badly to see what it would be like. I should have guessed I'd mess it up, behaving like the freak that I am."



“You’re not a freak!” Ken and Cordelia admonished in unison.

“I don’t think you’re a freak at all,” Ken continued. “I understand. To this day, I don’t like to sit in the back of a car behind the driver. I know it’s not the same, but...”

“It kind of is,” Jordy said. He released his hold on his knees and sat up straighter. “That accident was just as traumatic for you.”

“Maybe not quite as traumatic.”

“I still have dreams, and flashbacks. The dumbest things can set them off. A certain touch, like tonight, or sometimes even a sound or a scent. How can I ever have a relationship when I’m like this? Who wants to be with someone they always have to treat with kid gloves?” Jordy directed his accusatory question at Cordelia.

“I’m used to treating people with kid gloves,” Ken said quietly. “My dad needed that after the accident. I don’t mind, and I’d like to help.”

“I’m not a charity case, or a project. I don’t want you to be with me out of pity.”

“I wouldn’t be helping you out of pity. Just the opposite. I’d be doing it for entirely selfish reasons. I’m the one with the crush, remember?” Ken kept his tone calm but firm.

“You had no idea how messed up I was when you developed that crush.”

“I knew some of your background, and I haven’t learned anything since to make me change my mind.”

“Has Jordy told you what happened?” Cordelia asked Ken.

“A little, in general.”

“Maybe if you told him more... Not necessarily today, over time. Don’t push Ken away just because you’re scared, Jordy. You can’t assume people will reject you or hurt you. You have to give someone a chance.”

“Please give me a chance.”

Jordy’s glance shifted between Ken and Cordelia uncertainly.

“We can just keep talking, as we had been. We don’t have to touch.”



“I think you probably don’t need me here anymore,” Cordelia said, shifting to rise, “but Thomas and I will stay downstairs for a while, just in case, okay? You two need to talk.”

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Ken and Jordy didn’t disagree, but for a long time after she left the room neither of them could think of anything to say.

“Is it okay if I sit next to you?” Ken finally asked and moved to the spot next to him when Jordy nodded.

“I meant it when I said we don’t have to touch, but could I hold your hand?” Ken followed up tentatively.

Jordy still didn’t say anything, but slipped his hand into Ken’s.

“If you want to tell me what happened, I’m here to listen. But it’s up to you. It doesn’t have to be today, or at all.”

“You should know everything. It’s only fair. You need to know what you’re getting into.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jordy realized the inherent assumption that their relationship would continue in some form.

“No one knows exactly what they’re getting into at the start of a relationship. I don’t need to know everything at once.”

Ken’s acceptance gave Jordy courage to continue. He wanted to tell him anyway, so slowly, haltingly, he revealed the full terror of what he had suffered at the hands of the sick bastards who had kidnapped him and forced him to satisfy their perverse needs.

“For a while after I came back, I didn’t want to leave the house. I felt dirty, and I thought no one would want to have anything to do with me. I didn’t want people staring at me and talking behind my back. I was scared, too. Mom hired tutors, therapists, and physical trainers. They all lived in the house with me, along with the housekeepers and bodyguards. She was there too, most of the time. She practically ran the company from the house.

“The only other person who came to see me was Cordelia. I didn’t want any other visitors. She’s the one who finally convinced me to start going out



more. Eventually, I went back to school and completed senior year with the rest of my class. I even played tennis on the school team, but I couldn't participate in any sports where there was a chance of someone touching me..."

"You're an incredibly courageous man. Nothing that happened to you is your fault, and it certainly doesn't make you dirty. You were incredibly brave just to survive this ordeal, and you did even more. You escaped and gave the information the police needed to bring these perverts to justice, helping other boys avoid the same fate. You're a hero!" Ken said emphatically.

"Hardly. You saw what happened earlier. Sometimes I get frightened by a noise or my own shadow. I don't need to be a hero. I just want to be normal, but you saw what happened tonight."

"You are normal, and courageous. Not many people could go through what you went through and still keep going. You went back to school, went to Princeton University. You joined Ryder Corp. and today you charmed the people at the reception so much we probably will get a few new clients. You're incredible!"

Jordy shook his head. "None of it means anything if my whole life I keep freaking out the way I did tonight."

"You won't. You simply haven't had a chance to conquer this fear yet. I can help you. We'll go slow. We'll take teeny tiny baby steps."

"Why would you want to do that? You deserve a normal boyfriend. Someone who'll take care of you for a change, instead of yet another burden. You deserve that, after everything you've been through."

"My family is not a burden, and neither are you. Let me worry about what I deserve. I happen to think I deserve to be with a gorgeous son of a corporate tycoon."

Jordy smiled, recognizing that Ken was teasing. He considered Ken's statement, and felt a stirring of hope.

"You're serious? You really want to try? Do you realize that I don't know if I'll ever be able to do more than kiss you? Hell, I don't know if I'll be able to even do that without freaking out."

"I guess I'm a gambler. I'm willing to take that risk. Besides, I can see



what kind of a man you are. You do not just accept limitations and give up. At one point you didn't think you'd leave your house, but look at you now."

"That took two years!"

"I'm a patient man."

"But..." Jordy hesitated. "You have needs that I won't be able to..."

"I've never had a boyfriend," Ken said flatly. "When I was in high school, I fooled around with a couple of guys. We kissed; exchanged hand jobs; that's it. After the accident, I didn't have time or money for dating, and I was too scared of STDs to just have casual sex. My dad and my sister depend on me—I can't afford to get sick. I've been taking care of my own needs for a while, and wasn't expecting that to change."

Jordy felt bad for feeling so elated at hearing about Ken's experience, or lack thereof. In a way, they would be starting off on even footing. And Ken obviously didn't lie about his patience if he hadn't been with anyone in seven years. Still...

"You shouldn't have to wait. And you're assuming I can get over this. What if I never do?"

"I think that's unlikely. Let's cross that bridge if we come to it."

"Are you sure?"

"I was pretty happy when we were just getting to know each other as friends. The kiss was an unexpected bonus. Maybe we could try that again someday?"

There was something in the way Ken spoke, wholly without expectations, that made Jordy feel safe enough to make an unexpected suggestion.

"I'd like that a lot. Maybe we don't have to wait for someday?"

"Are you sure?"

Jordy didn't blame Ken for being reluctant. Rather than answering with words, he moved until their lips met for a brief, sweet kiss.

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Ken couldn't have been happier when he discovered that Jordy was interested in him and was open to starting a relationship. He was under no



delusions that helping Jordy overcome his fears of intimacy would be a quick jog around the park, but he believed all good things were worth the wait.

Once they made their decision, Ken and Jordy spent as much time together as they could. They remained professional at work, but as often as possible they had lunch together away from their co-workers' prying eyes. When they weren't working on the merger they could be found at Jordy's place or, more frequently, at Ken's apartment. Ken was relieved that Jordy didn't mind hanging out in their small place in Queens. His one request had been that he be allowed to purchase a larger TV for them, complete with surround sound, which made their living room feel like a movie theater. Ken started to object to the extravagance when the system was delivered, but seeing the delight on his sister's face made him swallow his pride and accept the gift graciously. He was even more pleased later when his dad actually left his seat by the window and for the first time joined them to watch a movie, commenting how the clear sound and bass vibrations made him feel like he was part of the action.

Ken had been concerned about how Nessa and his father would react to his bringing home a boyfriend, but even before the entertainment system arrived he saw that there would be no problems. His sister found Jordy as fascinating as Ken did, and fortunately, the eleven-year-old girl didn't trip any of Jordy's triggers because from the start she clung to Jordy closer than Ken was able. He would have been jealous, if he didn't see how good all the perfectly innocent physical contact was for Jordy. His father must have sensed it as well, and probably more, because he never once made any derogatory comment about Jordy's lack of artistic talent or his fascination with business and finance.

"He seems like a good boy who cares for you and brings a smile to your voice. What else could a father wish for his son?" was all he said when Ken, dying of curiosity, finally asked his opinion. The approval thrilled Ken, but what made him even happier was that his relationship with Jordy seemed to release something in his father that had been locked up since the accident. His dad started to put more effort into sculpting, and while his pieces were small, some of them were quite extraordinary. Even Cordelia agreed when Ken had sneaked out with one of the small pieces to show her. She, in turn, borrowed the piece to show her professor, who was astounded to learn that it had been created by a blind artist who sculpted using only one hand. He was convinced



that if Ken's father could make enough pieces and some in larger scale, he could talk a gallery owner into organizing a show. It took every bit of resistance Ken had to keep the news from his father, but the last thing he wanted to do was to apply undue pressure, so he simply rejoiced as his dad continued to create.

Ken's favorite moments were the stolen ones, when he and Jordy were alone in either of their rooms. They talked a lot, often in whispers, and laughed over childhood escapades. They kissed and Jordy slowly grew used to Ken's caresses, so that eventually he not only tolerated being touched, but actually enjoyed it. Ken always made sure he pre-announced his actions, giving Jordy complete control. Even with these precautions, there were setbacks. Jordy would sometimes unexpectedly freeze up and they would have to back off. Ken was fine with this, since they always managed to talk through the fear, which he was convinced was the only path forward. He sensed that Jordy was often frustrated with the slow progress, but Ken knew a faster pace wasn't possible. More than anything, he wanted to avoid causing Jordy more pain, so he soothed Jordy's impatience and tried to keep them on a slow course. Sometimes it wasn't so easy.

"You smell so sexy today," Jordy said, nuzzling at the spot on Ken's neck beneath his right ear.

"Stop it. I can't possibly," Ken's protest was diminished by his pleasurable sigh.

"You can and you do. It's driving me crazy," Jordy's hand drifted to the buttons on Ken's shirtfront and he began to push them through their holes.

"Jordy!" Ken warned, struggling to keep a cool head as his boyfriend pulled his shirt and undershirt out of his waistband and slipped his hand beneath the fabric to caress Ken's stomach.

"I've been wanting to do this for a while now," Jordy confessed, kissing his way along Ken's neck and jaw. "Let's take these off," he suggested, pushing the T-shirt up to reveal more of Ken's torso. Ken tensed, feeling extremely self-conscious.

"Slow down! We should wait."



“Why? Don’t you like this?” Jordy slipped his hand higher and tweaked Ken’s pebbled nipple. Ken let out an involuntary moan.

“You know that’s not it,” he stammered. “It’s just, that we’re going too fast.”

“We’re not. I just want to touch you. To feel your skin against mine.” Jordy placed his lips over Ken’s immediately after he stopped speaking to keep him from arguing. For a while, Ken allowed himself to get distracted, but when Jordy pushed the shirts up higher, he snapped to.

“Jordy, I should go. This isn’t the right place or time. It would be too easy for us to get carried away here.”

“So? Let’s get carried away,” Jordy ground his hips against Ken, drawing a groan from his boyfriend.

“You’re not playing fair. We can’t. Not tonight.” For once, Ken wasn’t just worried about a setback for Jordy. He was extremely self-conscious about his body, convinced that when Jordy saw him out of his clothes, he’d rethink his decision to date.

“Why not?” Jordy pulled away with a grimace. Ken was used to this reaction. Often when he didn’t get his way, Jordy regressed to the mindset of a thirteen-year-old only child. This was harmless, and more than anything he found it amusing. It was Jordy’s regression to a terrified kidnap victim that Ken feared and wanted to avoid.

“Because when we’re alone and worked up like this, it’s too tempting to go too far. And I know that seems like a good idea, until it isn’t. If we’re going to try taking our clothes off when we’re together, we shouldn’t be so isolated.”

Jordy hugged himself in frustration. “So what? You want me to call Cara and Mom? You want them to monitor?”

“No, of course not. I just think it would be better if we could be somewhere where there are more people. How about a dance club? Guys take their shirts off all the time in clubs.”

Ken frowned before he even finished his sentence. A club had been such a stupid suggestion. Jordy wasn’t ready for a place where he would be grabbed



and jostled by a bunch of horny men. That could send him into a regressive spiral far worse than anything they could do privately in Jordy's room. And more to the point, Ken wasn't ready to have his boyfriend grabbed and jostled by a bunch of horny men. He'd have to think of something else. He scanned the room looking for ideas, and he found the perfect one when his eyes landed on a picture of Jordy taken in the summer.

"How about the beach?"

"Oh," Jordy contemplated. "Sure, that would be great. We can go to our house in the Hampton's Saturday."

Ken wasn't sure the two of them alone at the Ryders' house in the Hamptons was any better than in Jordy's room, but at least it gave him a couple of days' reprieve.

Jordy picked him up Saturday morning in a chauffeured car, thoughtfully taking the seat behind the driver. Ken was anxious, but he was determined not to show it. In contrast, Jordy was very relaxed, even excited. As they got closer to the beach, however, Ken sensed Jordy's growing tension.

"We don't have to do this if you're not ready," he reached across the seat for Jordy's hand and squeezed it.

"I'm ready," Jordy said, though he didn't sound it. "It's time. We've been seeing each other for weeks."

"We're not on any timetable."

"I know, but the longer we wait... I'm ready. I really am ready!" The trademark Ryder stubbornness and determination crept into Jordy's voice as they pulled into a driveway of a house.

"Okay, then let's go."

Ken reached for the handle and opened the car door, stepping out into the warm, bright August day. The sun was still making its way to its zenith and Ken felt the cool breeze blow off the ocean as sea gulls soared and squawked overhead. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the salt-laden air.

Jordy emerged from the car right behind him and held his hand out for the picnic basket, which their helpful driver extracted from the trunk of the car.



“We’ll call when we’re ready for pickup. Shouldn’t be more than a few hours,” Jordy said, slipping the driver an overly generous tip to make sure the man could afford a nice meal at one of the nearby restaurants while he waited.

“Thank you, Mr. Ryder. You gentlemen have a nice day,” the driver replied politely before getting back behind the wheel and leaving them alone in front of the Ryder beach house. Ken stared up at the house, almost modest by the neighborhood standards, but still at least ten times larger than his family’s apartment. Jordy walked up to the door and unlocked it, motioning for Ken to follow him inside.

“Can you get some fresh ice while I find a blanket and some towels?” Jordy asked, pointing Ken towards the kitchen with his chin and handing him the picnic basket.

“Sure. Don’t forget the sunscreen, unless you’d like to see what I look like as a lobster.”

“That sounds kind of cute. Don’t tempt me,” Jordy leaned over and gave Ken a quick kiss before departing down a long hallway. He was back with an armful of blankets and towels by the time Ken replaced the warmed freezer packs and partially melted ice with fresh supplies from the kitchen.

“We should probably change now,” Jordy said, some of his earlier confidence gone.

“We don’t have to change. We could just take our shoes off and walk barefoot in the sand,” Ken suggested.

“Your pants will get wet,” Jordy pointed out. Despite the temperature, Ken was wearing long pants, albeit ones made from a lightweight cotton fabric.

“It’s just water.”

Ken tried not to steer Jordy one way or another, but he wasn’t really sure which of them was more nervous about stripping down to their swimsuits. Jordy thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Let’s do it. It’s why we’re here. If we don’t do it now, we’ll have to wait another week before we can come back.”

“Okay. Remember, it’s no different than the gym. I’m perfectly happy to look and not touch,” Ken tried to put Jordy at ease. “And for what it’s worth, this isn’t easy for me either.”



His fingers fumbled with the buttons of his short-sleeved shirt. Jordy stepped forward and reached out to help.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this. You’re always covered up.”

“Unlike you, I have nothing to show off.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

Jordy undid the last button and parted the shirtfront, pushing it back and down Ken’s shoulders. Ken shivered, uncomfortable under Jordy’s close scrutiny.

“I could probably add a little bulk if I tried, but there’s not much I can do about the pale skin. I’m afraid the O’Mahers don’t tan well.”

“Shush. You don’t have to change a thing. You’re perfect just as you are.”

Tentatively, Jordy reached out to run his hand over Ken’s chest and down to his ribs.

Ken flushed. “One of us is perfect, and it’s not me.”

“You know I’m not perfect. You drew all my scars.”

“Your scars are as perfect as the rest of you. Wait ‘till you see mine.”

“My scars didn’t used to be so ‘perfect’. It’s only the plastic surgeons my mom hired that made them tolerable. And even now...” Jordy reached for the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up in one swift move that doubled the size of the bulge between Ken’s legs. He only just managed to remember that it was too risky for him to run his hands over Jordy’s magnificent chest the way Jordy had over his. He kept his arms down, hands curled tensely, his eyes bulging with appreciation.

“Wow!”

“You’re the wow,” Jordy took a half step forward, and then another, and then abandoned all caution and closed the distance between them, pulling Ken into his arms and mashing their lips in a hot, searing kiss. Even if he’d wanted to, Ken wouldn’t have been able to stop his cock from hardening. He nearly panicked, until he felt a corresponding reaction from Jordy. If this was a mistake, it was a most delicious one, as both men opened their mouths and allowed themselves to taste the other.



Ken knew that they were walking a tightrope and that at any moment a small touch could send them toppling over, but when he felt the warmth of Jordy's hands on his back, he couldn't help reaching up to touch Jordy as well. His fingers gently traced the sinewy muscles and ridged spine, and the spots where Jordy's skin had healed over injuries in distinct knots and furrows. He relished this opportunity to explore his boyfriend's body, but it was nothing compared to the jolt that coursed through him as Jordy's fingers slipped under the waistband of his pants and trunks and moved lower over the curve of his ass.

Ken's cock throbbed with approval, but his brain set off a warning alarm. He knew from past experience that Jordy sometimes let his physical urges override his reservations. While this was enjoyable for them both, sooner or later they would go a touch too far and the resulting setback could be far worse than proceeding at a slow, steady pace. Ken had fallen into this trap before, each time desperately hoping that maybe Jordy would finally be able to conquer his fears, but he'd been disappointed every time, and he didn't want to be disappointed again. Reluctantly, he broke the kiss and took a step back, taking Jordy's newly freed hands in his own.

"Maybe we should take a dip in the ocean to cool off a bit?"

Jordy's confusion gave way to resignation.

"That's probably a good idea, though I wish..." he grimaced instead of finishing his thought.

"We're doing fine," Ken interjected. "We're together and happy. Isn't that all that matters? Do we have to be just like other guys, jumping into bed barely knowing each other's name?"

"You're right. I just wish we were taking it slow by choice, not by necessity."

"For me it is by choice, so pretend you're humoring me. I like that by the time we're ready to be fully intimate, we'll know each other better than most other couples. I love just cuddling and talking with you."

"I like that too," Jordy admitted. "I think I'll like it even better out there on the beach. Time to take off those pants!"



Jordy unbuttoned and unzipped his cargo shorts and let them fall to the floor. Underneath he wore loose swim trunks that came down to his mid-thigh and were still half tented in the front. Ken reluctantly followed Jordy's example. He worried how Jordy would react at seeing his pale, scarred, skinny legs. He relaxed a bit when Jordy had no reaction at all, beyond teasing him about the prudish knee-length of his swim trunks.

"Are you even gay, wearing something like that? We're gonna have to go shopping, and soon!"

"Shut up!" Ken laughed. "You should appreciate how privileged you are. This is the first time anyone other than my family has seen me out of long pants in eight years."

Jordy instantly became serious. "I do appreciate it. A lot! Probably more than you realize."

"What do you mean?" Ken was surprised by Jordy's somber tone.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but it's like what Mom keeps saying about Ryder's merger with Kronar. In a partnership, no one wants to be the weaker link. I always thought I'd be the weak link in any relationship. That's why I never even wanted to be with anyone. But with you, it feels like we both have something to contribute. We both make each other's lives better. Does that make sense?"

It made perfect sense to Ken. He'd always felt that, given his background, he'd never be good enough for someone like Jordy. Now he knew that what Jordy needed and valued was patience, understanding, acceptance, and love, all of which Ken could offer in perpetuity without limits. And their having suffered through similarly tragic circumstances meant that they could communicate on a level few other people could ever understand.

"Yeah, I totally get it. No one else would have been able to convince me to do this, but I know you understand how difficult it is to conquer a phobia, and how important. And since you've come so far already in defeating your fears, the least I could do is tackle this one."

Ken glanced down at his legs and cringed. He usually tried to avoid seeing them, since they always made him think of Frankenstein. But then, it wasn't as



though the rest of his body was any great prize, and shockingly, Jordy didn't seem to care.

"I think you're beautiful, inside and out."

Ken rolled his eyes, but grinned. "You need to get your eyes examined."

"My eyesight is just fine, thank you very much. Haven't you heard? Beauty's in the eye of the beholder. And I'm beholding a beautiful man."

"All right, all right, enough," Ken said, flushing again with embarrassment. "We want to spend some time on the beach, right?"

They set up the blankets, towels and picnic basket as close to the water as they could while still avoiding the incoming waves. Then they took their time applying liberal amounts of sunscreen to each other's bodies and then, somewhat awkwardly, ran into the water to hide the obvious results of their ministrations. They worked up an appetite while swimming and wrestling, and returned to the blanket to towel off and eat lunch.

"It's really amazing out here. I wish I could bring my dad and Nessa. I bet they'd really love it, or at least Nessa would."

"Why not bring them? The beach is pretty private and if your dad minds the occasional beach walkers, he could have complete privacy on the deck."

"I don't know," Ken hesitated, though the idea was very tempting. He knew his sister would be over the moon at the prospect of going to the beach.

"We could stay for the whole weekend, make it a party. My mom could come too, and we could ask Cordie and Thomas. It would be a great way to introduce the families."

Jordy looked so pleased with the idea, Ken couldn't say no. He was, however, still filled with trepidation.

"Convincing my dad to leave the apartment will be a Herculean effort."

"We can always let Cordie do it. I swear, that girl could sell sand in the desert. She just doesn't take no for an answer when she really wants something her way."

"We shouldn't complain. If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't be together right now."



“That’s true, I have to give her credit for shoving me in the right direction, although I was pretty fascinated with that sketch without any help from her. It’s entirely possible that eventually I would have worked up the courage to talk to you about it even without her interference. Maybe.”

Ken grinned. “All the same, I’m glad she was there to give you that shove,” he said and leaned in for a kiss.

“So what do you say? Family beach weekend?”

“I think Cordelia is not the only one with a talent for sales.”

“She taught me everything she knows,” Jordy smirked.

They re-applied the sunscreen and only then did they finally lie down. They determined it was safest for both of them to lie face down, initially just letting their hands entwine between them. Soon Jordy was shifting closer to Ken, hooking his ankle over Ken’s. Ken turned onto his side, supporting his head on his bent arm as he raked over Jordy’s amazing body with his eyes. He threw caution to the wind and shifted so that he was half-lying on top of Jordy, pressing his lips against the sun-warmed bronze skin of Jordy’s back.

“I love you, and I love being here with you like this,” he told Jordy in a husky murmur, moving his lips to a ridge of scarred skin and tracing it with the tip of his tongue.

“I love you too, and I especially love this!” Jordy echoed. In a split second, hardly aware of what happened and how, Ken was on his back with Jordy hovering above him as he dipped his head to pull them into a deep kiss. Ken knew they were being reckless, but in that blissful moment, he just couldn’t bring himself to care. Setback or no setback, he knew he and Jordy would make it through any obstacle in their path, together.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Liz Winters loves to write about relationships between men, be it in M/M romance or gay lit for adults and young adults. She was first drawn to the genre through fan fiction and is still finishing her last fan-fiction epic, but with her husband's encouragement, she has also moved to original fiction. Her original fiction m/m romance novella, Handle with Care, and her gay erotica short story, Lakeside Reunion, are both available as ebooks on Amazon and Smashwords. Her first LGBTQ YA novel, Beneath Angel's Wings (writing as E. Summers,) will be released in July 2013.*

*Liz spends her days in a corporate cubicle and much of the rest of the time writing. She writes character driven stories (except for erotica, where the stories have an entirely different driver) and likes her characters slightly flawed, because it makes them more interesting. She is forever trying to learn how to be less wordy, but the lessons don't seem to stick.*

*She's also a movie and TV junkie, loves to read, and adores traveling with her husband of fifteen years.*

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[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Twitter](#)

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# THE FIVE TIMES RAPTOR MESSED WITH THE BULL

(And the One Time He Got the Horns)

By Xara X. Xanakas

## **Photo Description**

A tall, bulky SWAT officer is walking away from the camera on his way into a bedroom, stripping off his bulletproof vest and shirt along the way. His pants are down around the tops of his thighs, giving us a view of his tighty-whitey encased backside.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*Aftermath of dangerous hostage rescue situation; one guy is from an assault team, the other one is a sniper and their adrenaline is still pumping...*

*Sincerely,*

*lege*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** law enforcement, sparring turned sticky, back alley hand job, public shower handies, seriously handsy protagon, bathroom blowjob, self-denial, repeated cases of blueballs, snarky heroes, plot-what-plot?

**Word count:** 9,620

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# THE FIVE TIMES RAPTOR MESSED WITH THE BULL

(And the One Time He Got the Horns)

By Xara X. Xanakas

## ONE

*In which Raptor meets the Bull*

Only the lights directly over the weights were on when Raptor got to the police station's small gym at two-thirty in the morning. He preferred working out this way, all alone in the near-dark. He pulled his long, black hair into a ponytail and strapped his weight vest on before getting started on the treadmill. Halfway through his run, he noticed a figure moving in the shadows. The new guy walked up to his treadmill and smiled as he leaned one elbow on the display screen. Bull had just transferred in from another precinct to fill the gap in their SWAT team after Drake got promoted to squad leader.

"You're the Raptor, aren't you?" he asked

Raptor didn't spare him a second glance as he adjusted his ear buds and bumped the treadmill up faster. Bull took the treadmill next to Raptor and began jogging. Raptor shot him a look, raising one eyebrow, but Bull kept pace with him. When Raptor slowed down, so did Bull. They were both walking before Raptor looked over at him. He pulled one earbud out and looked over at Bull.

"You're the one they call Raptor?" he asked again. "I've heard about you."

"What do you want?" Raptor wasn't even trying to hide his annoyance as his treadmill came to a stop. *Another 'roidhead with more balls than brains.*

Being the only openly out officer on the squad brought challengers out of the woodwork. Raptor admitted he didn't look like he'd be much of a fighter next to the rest of the guys—at five foot seven, he was shorter than most of them, and his features leaned more toward pretty than handsome. His long,



black hair only added to their biased impressions of him. Every new class had someone who wanted to prove his mettle by calling Raptor out, and the gym seemed to be their location of choice.

“Just wanted to introduce myself. They call me Bull.” He smiled again, and Raptor gritted his teeth, ignoring the dimples that made Bull look like a harmless puppy.

“What do you want?” Raptor asked, slower this time.

“I just wanted to meet you.”

“And now you have.” Raptor wiped a towel over his neck.

“Are you finished?” Bull asked as he checked the clock.

“Why? Did you have something in mind?” Raptor’s voice was low and breathy. Almost any other time, he might have considered flirting with the big man, but Raptor knew better. The police gym was not the place to try to get lucky, no matter how deserted it was. It was almost a shame, Raptor thought. Bull was just his type: tall and adorkable, with big, green eyes and dimples—*God, those dimples*—when he smiled.

“I could use a sparring partner,” Bull said, looking around the deserted gym. “I kind of hoped for some more people around here. The gym at my old precinct was always busy, no matter what time of day.”

“I had hoped to be alone.” Raptor kept looking at him, that one eyebrow raised. Bull grinned and shrugged at Raptor. “Fine,” Raptor finally said, leaving the treadmills and walking over to the mat in the back of the gym. If Bull wanted to fight him, he might as well get it over with. Bull was at least a head taller and probably had forty pounds of muscle on him, but Raptor was ruthless and methodical when fighting. Too many opponents thought their brawn would beat his brains. Raptor enjoyed proving them wrong. He stopped at the edge of the padded floor and took off his weight vest.

“Do you always wear that for working out?” Bull nodded at his gear.

“What’s it to you?”

“Just curious. I don’t know of anyone else who runs in boots.”

“Well, I haven’t run across any criminals willing to give me a time-out to change into sneakers and wind shorts before they take off running.”



“Have you had to chase many criminals down?”

“Enough that I make sure I can do it in my TAC gear now,” Raptor said as he sat down to remove his boots and socks.

“I guess that makes sense.” Bull nodded as he stepped over and kicked his shoes off. Then he stripped off his T-shirt and wiped his forehead with it before he dragged it over his sculpted abs.

Raptor shook his head and ran his towel over the back of his neck. This was not the time or the place to get hot and bothered by Bull’s body. He cleared his throat and focused back on the challenge Bull had issued. “What fighting style did you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure. Do you have any preference?” Bull asked with a grin.

Raptor had several thoughts, but he doubted Bull would appreciate those kinds of ideas. “Your challenge. I really don’t give a fuck.”

They moved to the center of the mat and circled each other. Raptor was patient, refusing to make the first move, so Bull charged at him. Raptor easily dodged to his right and shoved Bull as he went by.

“Nice move,” Bull said. He circled back and faked left before charging right, catching Raptor off-balance and toppling them both to the floor. Raptor growled and wrapped both arms around Bull’s shoulders. He planted both feet on Bull’s left side and rolled them over. Bull struggled in his grasp, managing to knock Raptor loose, but Raptor kept the advantage. Bull fought harder, but Raptor dug in more, pinning Bull face down on the mat. Bull moaned and shoved his hips back into Raptor’s. “You’re stronger than you look.”

Raptor felt the adrenaline kicking in, and the friction of Bull’s body touching his soon had him hard in his shorts. He put any sexual thoughts out of his mind as he used his hips to push Bull back down into the mat, ignoring the grunts Bull made.

“Not quite what you had in mind, is it, big guy?” Raptor hissed in his ear. Bull shivered as Raptor pumped his hips against him. Raptor moved one of his hands to Bull’s hip. His fingers dug into the sensitive flesh there as he squeezed Bull’s hip tight before moving his hand to press it flat on Bull’s thigh. “Thought you’d pick a fight with the queer sniper to prove yourself?



Not working out for you, is it? Am I going to have a problem with you, big man?"

"Only if you leave me hanging, little man." Bull turned his head to grin at Raptor as he lifted his ass higher to rub along Raptor's crotch. Raptor stilled above him. Bull pushed back again.

"Are you getting off on this?" Raptor asked as he took the hint and shoved one leg between Bull's.

"Yes," Bull whispered as he rocked into Raptor again. He pulled Raptor's hand under himself to palm his erection, leaving no room for Raptor to mistake his intention.

"You crazy son of a bitch," Raptor whispered and wrapped his hand around Bull's cock to stroke him through his sweatpants. "You know anyone could come in here and catch you like this. They could find you, lying on the floor under me. What about everyone finding out?"

"Let them," Bull whispered.

He ran one hand up to grab Bull's hair and pull his head back before settling on his knees between Bull's legs. He used the better leverage to thrust his hips hard and fast against Bull. "They'll think I'm fucking you," he whispered into Bull's ear. "How would you like that?"

"I'd love you to fuck me," Bull said with a moan as Raptor stroked his cock faster. Bull whimpered and pumped his hips back and forth, rubbing harder between Raptor and the mat.

"You really want this?" Raptor asked as he twisted his hand over Bull's cock.

"Fuck, yes," Bull moaned. "Yes. Close. So close."

Raptor knew he should be more cautious, but the feeling of Bull submitting to him made him reckless. He leaned forward and bit down hard on Bull's neck, and Bull cried out as he came in his pants. As Bull got his breath back under control, Raptor got up to pick up his things, his cock tenting the fabric of his shorts as he stood back up.

"Same time tomorrow?" Bull asked with a grin.



Raptor chuckled and shook his head. Bull was going to be a whole different kind of trouble than he was prepared for. When Bull approached him, Raptor expected a physical fight, not whatever it was Bull seemed to be starting with him.

With a shock, he realized he was looking forward to seeing where it would go.

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## TWO

*In which the cat gets out of the bag*

Raptor was on the roof of the building across the street from the bank. His rifle muzzle barely cleared the edge of the building, and he was watching everything that was going on. The new nerdy kid, Urkel, was next to him, looking through his own scope at the action below. Hunter had his own rifle set up on the other end of the rooftop.

“What the fuck is he saying?” Typhoid asked over the comm unit.

“Twelve hostages and three hostiles, reporting up to one leader. All hostiles are wearing bulletproof vests,” Raptor said.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Urkel asked.

“Watch his hands. Two open-palm taps to his thigh, followed by two fingers. That means twelve people on the floor. Now, three fingers in the middle of his back, and one pointing out as he runs it over his head. Three middlemen, one leader. Tugging on his shirt tells us the hostiles have protective wear on.”

“Dude, that’s fucking spooky. When did you learn to speak Bull?”

Raptor shrugged. “It’s standard communication protocols.”

“What’s with the hand dragging across his chest?”

“That means everyone’s okay. What it doesn’t explain is just what in the fuck he’s doing in there,” Wolf added from the ground team.

“No clue, but let’s just be thankful he’s in there. At least it gives us eyes on the situation,” Drake, their squad leader, said. “Better than flying in blind. Raptor, do you have a shot?”

“Negative.” Raptor flipped off the mic and looked through his scope again. “What is that idiot doing?” he mumbled.

“What?” Urkel asked.

Raptor shook his head. “So, what do you think is going to happen here?” he asked, taking the training opportunity for the newest sniper team member.



“Well, we’re behind him on the right, so after he gives us the go-ahead signal, he’s going to duck left to give us the best shot.”

Raptor nodded. “That’s what he’s trained to do.” Of course, Raptor knew Bull well enough by now to know that he rarely did what was expected. So, when Bull started pacing in front of the windows, luring the hostiles with him, Raptor wasn’t really surprised. Four men in masks followed Bull to the open end of the room. Bull allowed one of them to grab him by the front of the shirt and shove him into the window. He spread his arms wide and slid one hand down the glass.

“That’s the signal. Get ready,” Drake called over the comm unit. “Raptor, you on?”

“I’ve got the one on Bull. Urkel, get the one on the right, Hunter get the left. Can you guys mop up once we bring them down?”

“No problem,” Typhoid grunted. “Just keep that asshole out of our way.”

“On it,” Raptor grinned. Bull tapped on the glass pointed toward the right. A second later, all hell broke loose. Urkel and Hunter fired in unison, dropping their two hostiles, and Bull shoved the man standing in front of him. He tumbled backwards and toward the left, and Bull fell to the right.

“Shithead!” Typhoid shouted, but Raptor had been expecting some kind of boneheaded move from Bull. When the shot opened, he took it, narrowly missing Bull’s left shoulder. The bullet impacted in the center of the leader’s chest, knocking him off his feet. Bull jumped up and restrained him, and the assault team stormed into the bank and grabbed the masked men.

Nadia, Pete, and Maya joined the team inside and immediately began working at calming the hostages down and tending to any injuries they had. Raptor, Urkel, and Hunter climbed down the stairs and met the ground team in the street. Raptor noticed Bull had a comm unit on, and the mic strapped around his throat.

“Were you wearing that the whole time?” Raptor asked.

“No, they just gave it to me,” Bull said as he tucked the earpiece in. “I’ll take Raptor and clear the alley.” He grabbed Raptor’s arm and started to walk away from the group.



“What the fuck do you think you were doing?” Raptor asked after they turned the corner.

“What?”

“Why were you even in there?”

Bull shrugged. “I had to cash a check.”

“You are the unluckiest son of a bitch.” Raptor shook his head as they went down the alley.

Bull grinned at him, showing his dimples. He flicked the mic on before he spoke again. “Alley is clear. Repeat. Alley is clear.” He flicked the mic’s switch again and grabbed Raptor’s shirt, pulling him close. “Fuck, that was hot.”

Raptor kissed him hard before shoving him into the brick wall. “What the fuck were you thinking, ducking right? You knew where we were, jackass.”

“Exactly. I knew where you were, and I knew you could make the shot. That’s why I pointed right instead of left,” Bull said, sounding like it was completely reasonable to forego every bit of training they had had.

“But it might not have been me up there,” Raptor shouted. Bull tugged on Raptor’s hips to pull him in for another kiss.

“But you were there.”

“But I might not have been.” Raptor grabbed Bull’s belt and opened it.

“Fuck, you yelling at me gets me so fucking hot,” Bull mumbled into Raptor’s neck.

“Then prepare to get really hard, you stupid motherfucker,” Raptor growled as he tugged Bull’s zipper down. He reached into Bull’s pants and pulled out his mostly hard cock. “Because you never, *never*, go against your training,” he shouted, giving Bull’s cock hard pulls as he talked.

“Oh, fuck yes. Do that again,” Bull said.

“You could have died, you dumb shit.” Raptor moved his other hand into Bull’s pants and cupped his balls as he stroked Bull’s cock.

“Fuuuck.” Bull closed his eyes and dropped his head to the wall behind him.



“You *should* have been shot, dumb ass. And then where would we be? Your fucking funeral.” Raptor panted as he rubbed his groin along Bull’s leg. “I should have shot you just to teach you a lesson.”

“I like this lesson better,” Bull moaned. “Fuck, Raptor.” His breathing was speeding up, and his balls tightened in Raptor’s hold. He bit at Raptor’s shoulder as he came.

“I’m going to teach you another one later, asshole. Once we all finish cleaning up this clusterfuck.” Raptor tucked Bull’s cock back into his boxer briefs and wiped his hand on the grey cotton before he zipped Bull’s pants back up. “Don’t ever do that shit again.”

Bull smiled and cupped Raptor’s face in his hands before he leaned in and kissed him. “I knew you wouldn’t miss.”

“Fucker,” Raptor said, but he couldn’t help grinning. “Let’s go to the debriefing.”

When they left the alley, they found the squad standing there, staring at them. Their expressions were a mixture of shock, amusement, and in Typhoid’s case, irritation. Raptor didn’t know what was going on until Drake stepped forward.

“You put this on upside down. For next time, the volume is supposed to go on the other side,” he said as he reached over to Bull’s mic. He shook his head and flipped the switch to the off position.

“So much for covert affairs,” Raptor mumbled as he shot a glare at Bull. Then he stood up straighter, adjusted himself, and walked away, ignoring the comments they hurled in Bull’s direction.

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## THREE

### *In which Bull learns a lesson*

Debriefing sessions were painful enough, but when an op went south they became endless torture sessions. And going south would have been an improvement on this one. FUBAR didn't even cover how badly this op had gone. A couple of the rookies jumped the gun, disobeying the hold order. The aftermath was an epic disaster. Two officers were hurt—luckily only a few bruises, but it could have been so much worse.

Raptor was glad Bull was currently riding a desk after another blown op, because this was just the kind of boneheaded move he would have made if he'd been there.

Five hours of finger-pointing later, and it was safe to say Raptor was pissed as hell. The other guys staring at him as he stalked down the hall to the locker room didn't help his mood any. They all knew about him and Bull, and Bull's constant hovering since the squad returned to the station only intensified the whispers. Bull kept wandering by the conference room where the captain was reaming the team out for the screw-ups. Raptor finally got up and closed the blinds, but that didn't shut Bull out completely. He resorted to texting Raptor when he couldn't see in anymore. After the seventh, the captain glared at Raptor until he finally shut off his phone.

He walked up to his locker to find Bull standing there, waiting on him.

"That bad?" he asked.

"You don't even want to know."

"But you're okay?"

Raptor slammed the door shut. "Yes. Just like I answered in response to your first four texts."

"So you're done here for today?"

Raptor nodded his head. "I think I've had enough for one day."

"Good. Let's go."



“In a hurry?”

Bull leaned closer. “I’ve been hard since you stormed into the building this morning.”

“Patience is a virtue.”

Bull laughed. “Not my strong point, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Oh, I’ve noticed. I just haven’t done anything about it.” He looked at Bull’s face, taking in the eagerness in his expression as they left the locker room. “Yet,” he added as he followed Bull out of the building. Instead of heading for the parking lot, he made a left.

“I’m parked over here,” Bull said.

“My place is closer,” Raptor called when Bull made to go to his car.

“Yes, sir,” Bull said playfully as he followed Raptor down the sidewalk.

When they got inside his apartment, Raptor shoved Bull into the back of the door and kissed him. Bull went with the movement, letting Raptor take the lead.

*Good.* He had plans for Bull.

“I want to...” Raptor said after he pulled back from the kiss. He was still keyed up after the rough day.

“What?” Bull was panting for breath as he stared down into Raptor’s face.

Raptor shook his head and pushed Bull. He glanced from Bull’s eyes down to his lips and back up. “Get the fuck in the bedroom,” he said, his voice low and full of dark promise.

“Yeah, okay.” Bull grinned and nodded, bumping the back of his head on the door.

Raptor knew Bull loved when Raptor was like this, assertive and in charge. Bull’s cock was hard as a rock where it was pressed into Raptor’s hip. Even with the barely contained aggression still simmering just under the surface, Bull trusted Raptor not to hurt him.

Today, he’d push Bull to his limits, and maybe just a touch further, but never anything beyond. The faith Bull had in him made Raptor dizzy.



“You. Bedroom. Naked. Now,” Raptor ordered.

“Yeah. I can do that,” Bull said as he spun on his heel and walked away. He heard the clunking of Bull’s boots on the ground as he pulled them off and dropped them. Raptor grinned and closed the door to the tiny bathroom attached to his bedroom. He gave Bull a couple of minutes as he washed his face and pulled off his shirt. When he opened the door, he found Bull lying naked on his bed, one hand tucked under his head. His eyes were half-closed when he looked over at Raptor. He licked his lips and started stroking his dick with his free hand.

“Stop that,” Raptor said.

“What?”

“Stop touching yourself.”

“But you look so good,” Bull whispered.

The breathy sound of his voice made Raptor’s cock twitch. Raptor cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest in an effort to get control over himself.

“Stop touching yourself, or I will have to restrain you.” Bull’s breath hitched and his hand slipped along his cock. It had been a mostly empty threat, but Bull’s reaction made Raptor start thinking of all the possibilities. He raised an eyebrow and watched Bull’s hand travel up and down his length again. “Should I dig out the cuffs?”

Bull licked his lips and nodded. Raptor went over to his closet and dug in the bottom of the chest he had pushed into the back corner.

“You’re not going to use the flex cuffs, are you?” Bull asked.

Raptor glanced over his shoulder and saw Bull’s concerned look. “No, those bite too much for what I have in mind for you.” He pulled out a pair of padded nylon cuffs. A short chain connected them.

Raptor stepped up to the head of the bed, and Bull held his hand up to him. He wrapped the cuff tightly around Bull’s wrist. Then he straddled Bull’s chest to thread the chain through the slats of his headboard and secured Bull’s other wrist. He could feel the heat coming from Bull’s body through the fabric of his cargo pants.



“That all right?” he asked, running his hands along Bull’s shoulders as Bull tugged on the chain.

“Feels good.”

“That feels good? Then maybe I shouldn’t do this,” Raptor said as he reached down to stroke Bull’s cock. Bull groaned and bucked his hips.

“No, you should definitely keep doing that.”

Raptor chuckled and slid off Bull’s chest. Bull started to protest, but it turned to a hiss when Raptor leaned over and licked one nipple while he flicked the other with his fingers.

“Sensitive?”

Bull nodded. “Always have been.”

“I wonder,” Raptor said as he spread his fingers over Bull’s ribs to thumb his nipples. Bull groaned and his cock jerked.

“Please,” Bull moaned.

“Can you come from this?” Raptor bent back over to take a nipple between his teeth. Bull rolled his hips, and his cock bounced in time with Raptor’s tongue flicking over Bull’s skin. “Can you? I bet you could.”

“I’d come if you breathed on it right now.” Bull groaned. “Please,” he whispered again.

“What do you want?”

“I want you to touch me.”

“I am touching you.”

“More.”

“More of this?” Raptor asked as he teased Bull’s nipples, lightly scraping his fingernails over them.

“Lower,” Bull said with another roll of his hips.

Raptor chuckled. “All in good time.”

“I’m not going to last much longer.”

Bull’s broken whimpers were driving Raptor crazy. He wanted to draw this out, take his time taking Bull apart, but just this little bit of teasing already had



him on edge. He knew Bull wasn't going to last much longer. With a sigh, he sat up and got the lube out of the nightstand drawer. He slicked up his hand and wrapped it around Bull's cock. Bull grunted as Raptor began sliding his hand down his cock in long, slow strokes, going head to base, then repeating the stroke. Bull shuddered and pushed his hips up in an effort to speed Raptor's hand, but Raptor kept his pace languid.

He tightened his grip and added an upward stroke to his teasing. Bull groaned loudly, and Raptor picked up the pace as he reached between Bull's legs to cup his balls, rolling them between his fingers. Bull grunted and pulled on the cuffs, and Raptor moved his hand from Bull's balls to work his zipper open one-handed and remove his cock. Bull watched him through his eyelashes as he worked both their cocks.

"Now, Bull," he whispered, and Bull shouted as he came over Raptor's fist. His body thrashed on the small bed, and he yanked hard on the cuffs, cracking the wood of the headboard. Raptor came a second later, coating Bull's cock and balls with come. He panted and rested his head on Bull's chest. He heard the Velcro ripping as Bull maneuvered his hands over to release himself. Bull hummed happily to himself as he wrapped his arms around Raptor.

"You fucking tease," Bull said. His voice was hoarse from the panting and shouting, but he was smiling.

"That was kind of the point," Raptor said with a grin.

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## FOUR

*In which Raptor has a typical Tuesday*

Raptor had been minding his own business, just practicing some moves with the sparring dummy in the gym. That's when these three assholes showed up and challenged him. Since the "Bull's Bank Bust" incident, the whispers had gotten louder. It was only a matter of time before the next big shot came at him.

"You guys really want to do this?" Raptor asked as he tightened the wrap around his wrist. "Now? Don't want to get more backup?"

Their leader stepped forward and gave Raptor a once-over. "I think we can handle it," he said with a snort.

"Whatever." Raptor shrugged his shoulders, then cracked his neck. "Let's go."

One of the guys started to advance, but he tripped on the mat and fell down, hitting his head with a loud crack. He rolled onto his side with a groan but didn't say anything else. His chest was moving with his breath, but Raptor didn't have a chance to check up on him before the next guy was advancing on him. He grabbed the guy's arm and flipped him over, twisting his arm as he held him down on the mat with one foot. The guy screamed and rolled away, grasping at his shoulder.

Drake and Typhoid had been sparring with Wolf and The Comet on the mat next to them, but they all stopped to watch Raptor. He knew they would have his back if he needed it, but they also allowed him to fight his own battles. After a moment, Drake nodded and stepped away to help Pete check on the jerk on the floor.

Raptor had landed a series of blows to the jock's face when Bull showed up. He started forward, but Typhoid stopped him with an arm across the chest.

"But—" Bull started.

"You can't," Drake said.



“What do you mean I can’t? What the fuck are you guys doing just standing here?” He tried to step in again, but Typhoid curled a hand around Bull’s arm.

“He needs to finish it himself.”

“But—” Bull protested, glaring back at the action in front of them.

The jock landed a punch and Raptor’s head snapped back. He had blood on his mouth and the beginning of a bruise on his cheek. Raptor countered the punch with a jab of his own, followed by two more and an uppercut. The jock was stumbling, but he managed to lunge forward and grab Raptor around the waist. They both tumbled to the ground, with the jock landing on top of Raptor. He wrapped his hands around Raptor’s throat, and Bull shouted. Comet helped Typhoid hold him back as Raptor put both hands on his opponent’s hips. He bucked up and pulled the jock down to him, grinding their groins together. The jock grunted in surprise, and Raptor used the leverage to flip them over. He slapped the jock’s hands away and pinned his wrists to the mat.

“Forgot you picked a fight with the queer, didn’t you?” he asked, low and dangerous. “Thought you’d find easy pickings and make yourself look like a big man on your first day? Didn’t quite work out that way, did it?”

The jock didn’t say anything, but his downcast eyes spoke for him. They sat there for a moment, catching their breath.

“Sorry,” the jock finally said, accepting his defeat.

“Now, here’s what’s going to happen. After you guys take your friends to get checked out by a doctor, you’re going to take my squad out for a beer to apologize for doubting their faith in me. Then you’re going to give me the fucking respect I deserve. That work for you?”

“Yeah.” The jock grunted as Raptor stood. Raptor held a hand out to help the guy up, and after a second, he took it. “You’re better than they say.”

Raptor patted him on his back. “I have to be. Now go, get your friends some help.”

“Are you coming with us?” the jock asked.



“No, I’ll be coming somewhere else,” Raptor said with a smirk as he looked at Bull.

Typhoid finally let go and Bull rushed the mat to cup Raptor’s face in both hands. He turned Raptor’s head both directions to get a better look him. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing more than usual.” Raptor shook his head as he pushed Bull back to the edge of the mat to where his bag was laying on the floor.

“Thanks for taking it easy on them,” Drake said, joining them.

“That one idiot knocked himself out. Fell off the damn mat. What are they teaching these kids now?”

Comet snorted. “Not much, it appears.” He held a cold pack out to the jock, who took it gratefully before he held it up to his swelling eye. “Now, someone said beer?”

“Let’s make sure these geniuses are okay first.” Drake made his way over to where Pete was helping the now-conscious idiot in question to sit up. “How many fingers?”

“Two?” he answered in a groggy voice.

Drake looked at his hand where he held up three fingers. “Okay, hospital for Grace here. How about you, Lefty?” He turned to the one still clutching his right arm tightly.

“I just pulled something, I think.” He tried to rotate his arm and winced, but he was able to move it a full revolution. He took the cold pack Pete handed him and slapped it against his shoulder while he flexed the fingers of his right hand. “I’ll be all right.”

Pete nodded. “Rest, ice, repeat.”

“What about you, Dunccecap?” Comet asked the jock. The jock glared, but shook his head.

“I’m fine.”

Raptor chuckled. “And new nicknames are born. They’re never going to live those down.”



“Maybe we should get you checked out too,” Bull said, trailing a finger along the bruise starting to form on Raptor’s cheek.

“Do you want me to fuck you through the mattress or not? Because, in case you haven’t noticed...” Raptor said, grabbing Bull’s hand and holding it at his crotch, leaving the suggestion hanging in the air.

“And we’re out,” Typhoid nearly shouted as he turned away and wrapped an arm around Duncen to lead him toward the door. Raptor noticed a blush creeping up Typhoid’s neck as he made a quick exit.

“We’ll take Grace here to get checked out. See you tomorrow,” Pete said. Grace staggered a little, but at least he was moving on his own. Lefty and Wolf followed them. Comet winked at them and patted Drake on the shoulder before heading out himself.

“Raptor,” Drake started with a shake of his head.

“I know, LT. But what can I do? They keep coming after me.”

“You don’t have to fight them yourself,” Bull said.

“Right,” Raptor snorted.

“Bull’s right, Raptor. You’re not alone in this anymore,” Drake said.

“I may not be the only out officer here anymore, but I’m still their best target.”

“How do you figure?” Bull asked.

“Look at you. They’d have to be complete idiots to take you on. You’re six and a half feet tall and four feet wide in your TAC gear. Wolf’s almost as big as you, and with his dreads and helmet, he looks more Predator than human when you’re facing him down. Pete’s a medic, so they don’t really bother, and besides, he’s so innocent-looking, they may as well kick a puppy while they’re at it and cement their Disney-Villain status. But the pretty little man with the big reputation? Yeah, he’s fair game.”

“Raptor...” Bull said, but Raptor shook his head.

“No. That’s just how it works. And it’s okay. They need to know I can have their backs when shit goes down. If it takes kicking their asses to do it, so



be it.” He pushed past Bull to the now deserted locker room. He flicked the lights off before he stripped and stepped into the furthest shower stall.

“Do you want to meet later?” Bull asked from outside the stall.

“No.”

“Oh,” Bull said. Raptor didn’t miss the disappointment in his voice. He turned to face him.

“Why wait?”

“I just thought. After that time...” Bull started, but he was staring at Raptor’s body. Raptor’s cock twitched under Bull’s gaze.

Raptor glanced back down the hallway. “Everyone else left. No one is around. Why don’t you...” he tilted his head in invitation to join him.

Bull looked back at the door, and then he started yanking off his clothes. He crowded Raptor against the wall and kissed him. He moaned when his cock slid beside Raptor’s.

“Shh,” Raptor said. He soaped up his hands and wrapped one of them around both their cocks. “Just because we’re alone now doesn’t mean it’ll stay that way. You need to be quiet.”

“Kinda hard to be quiet when you’re doing that,” Bull whispered. He reached down to cover Raptor’s hand with his own, stroking them both hard. “Fuck, Raptor.”

“Maybe later.” Raptor let go and grabbed Bull’s hips, digging his fingers into the flesh there. He pumped his hips with Bull as Bull jerked them faster. He twisted his wrist to cup both their heads together, and Raptor’s body jerked. “Yeah. Like that.”

“Uh-huh,” Bull breathed. Raptor could tell he was close, so he reached down between Bull’s legs to tug on his balls. “Fuck,” Bull whispered as he came over his fist. He let go of himself and tightened his grip on Raptor’s cock, letting his cum slick the way.

“Bull,” Raptor whispered. He dropped his head back onto the tiles, letting go as Bull stroked his cock. Bull leaned down to nibble along his jaw, and Raptor came hard as he let out a hoarse shout.



Bull held him through a round of aftershocks, and when Raptor opened his eyes, the grin on Bull's face made his heart clench.

"I thought you said we needed to be quiet," Bull said after a quick glance up the hall.

"Shut up." Raptor gave Bull a shove, and Bull laughed and reached around Raptor for the bar of soap. He washed them both off and then turned off the shower. Raptor moved to leave, but Bull held him in place for a moment, staring at his face.

"You're not alone anymore," he whispered. "I'm here now."

Raptor shivered, but it had to be because of the cold room and his wet skin. It had nothing to do with the way Bull's words wrapped around him and snuggled into his brain. Nothing. At all.

Or so he told himself, but neither he nor Bull called him out on it.

\*\*\*\*



## FIVE

*In which Raptor has a revelation*

*You're not alone anymore*, Raptor thought as he took another swallow from his beer. The bar was packed for a Thursday night. Duncicap and Grace were chatting with a couple of girls at one end of the bar, and Raptor was sitting with Pete at the other end.

"Really, Raptor? Bull?" Pete asked.

"Yeah. Bull," he said, thumping his head on the bar. "What's wrong with Bull?"

"How..." Pete shook his head.

"No fucking clue." Raptor drained his drink and tried to flag the bartender down for another.

"I mean, he's hot, in a dorky, puppy dog way. And those dimples."

"Those. Fucking. Dimples." Raptor shook his head and tried to get the bartender's attention again.

"But, really? Bull?"

"You keep saying that like it's going to change anything. Yes, me and Bull. Got a problem with it? You don't see me getting crazy about you and Wolf, do you?"

Pete blushed and stammered.

"Dude, relax."

"I didn't think anyone knew about us is all," Pete said.

"At least you didn't broadcast it for everyone to hear. Fucking Bull," Raptor said.

"If it means anything, it was really hot. Objectively speaking, of course."

"Dude, really?"

"What do you think finally got me and Wolf together?" Pete asked. His blush was darkening.



“At least tell me you waited until you left the scene.”

Pete laughed and sipped his drink. “We did. Not long after we left, but we did wait.” He got up and left Raptor alone at the bar. Raptor sighed and closed his eyes. A hand on his brought his focus back to the bartender.

“From the guy at the end of the bar,” he said, pointing to the guy in question. It wasn’t anyone Raptor remembered seeing before, but that didn’t matter. He smiled and nodded at the guy. He took that as an invitation to come over. He stood close to Raptor, crowding in the small space Pete had left.

“Hi, I’m Kelvin,” he said with a huge smile. It was a nice smile, but it was missing something.

Raptor chuckled and shook his head. *Damn you, Bull, and your damn dimples.*

“Look, thanks for offering, but I can’t take this.” Raptor pushed the drink toward Kelvin.

“Come on. You look like you could use some company.”

“I’ve got company,” Raptor said, but Pete wasn’t sitting near him anymore. Wolf had showed up, and Pete was currently trying to climb him on the dance floor.

“One drink won’t hurt anything,” Kelvin said as he looked Raptor over.

“Look, I—” Raptor started, but a hand on his shoulder interrupted what he was about to say.

“Hey, babe,” Bull said. He leaned in and kissed Raptor’s temple before glaring at Kelvin.

“I was just telling him he shouldn’t be here alone,” Kelvin offered. He and Bull smiled at each other, but there was no friendliness between them.

Bull stood up taller. “Well, he’s not here alone anymore.”

The words shook Raptor. They meant something different in this context, but Raptor went back to the night in the shower and he shivered again.

“You okay, babe?” Bull asked as he wrapped an arm around him.

“Fine,” he said, pushing away from the bar. He hated being the center of attention, so he turned around to find Pete and Wolf. They were now sitting at



a table in the back of the bar. He looked at them and Pete motioned to one of the empty chairs.

“Tired of the testosterone fest?” Wolf asked with a laugh.

“They can have their pissing match.”

Pete laughed. “Sorry, but how long were you alone?”

*You’re not alone anymore* echoed around in Raptor’s head as Pete smiled at him.

“Wait, I know this one,” Wolf said. “Yeah, since always, right?”

“And now you’ve got two candidates just waiting for you to pick him,” Pete said. “If you would have advertised you were available before now, you wouldn’t have had to be alone for so long.”

“It’s not like I magically became available.”

“Yeah, you kind of did. I mean, I’ve never seen you go out with anyone, in all the time I’ve known you. I know Bob hurt you, but damn. You practically checked into a monastery,” Wolf said.

“I think what he’s trying to say is we’re really happy for you, whether you decide to settle down, or whether you decide you want to play a little,” Pete added, nodding to where Kelvin and Bull were still glaring at each other.

“I don’t want to fucking play. I played plenty before Bob.” Raptor rubbed a hand over his eyes. He really was done with games. “And Bob played plenty for all of us, so I’m over that shit.”

“And so Bull’s the one?” Wolf asked.

“I don’t fucking know. It’s been, what, two months now?”

“Two months since you guys advertised it for the world. How long was it before that day?” Pete asked.

“Couple weeks.” Raptor shrugged. He didn’t bother trying to hide it now. That day in the alley was irrefutable evidence that they had been intimate before. No sense fighting over it.

“Standard communication protocols my ass.” Wolf grinned and held out a hand. Pete rolled his eyes and dug out a five dollar bill, passing it to him over the table. Raptor raised an eyebrow at them.



“He called it. Said no one could become that fluent in Bull without knowing him. I just didn’t expect that you *knew* him, knew him.”

Raptor groaned and rubbed his eyes harder.

“Just...” Wolf said.

“What?”

“Be careful with him.”

“Me, be careful with him? Have you met him?” Raptor laughed. Bull was so sure of himself, with enough confidence for both of them, that the idea of him hurting Bull was crazy.

“Yeah, I have,” Wolf said, his tone serious enough that Raptor looked up and met his gaze. “He tends to jump in with both feet, hard and fast. So please, if you can, don’t make us pick up his pieces.”

“I...” Raptor shook his head.

Pete leaned over to bump shoulders with Raptor. “Look, I know how hard it is for you to open up, to anyone. I don’t want you to fall to pieces either,” he said.

Raptor looked back at the bar where Bull stood, staring back at him. Yes, it was true that Bull had charged into his life and basically demanded Raptor let him in. Thinking back to that night in the gym, there wasn’t one moment when Raptor considered fighting Bull’s charisma. It was deeper than his dimples, and more than his bright green eyes. Everything about Bull screamed “Love me,” and Raptor didn’t even try to fight it.

Bull’s gaze from across the bar never left Raptor. He stood there, drinking beer from a bottle, watching as Raptor talked with Wolf and Pete.

“He needs to be invited. To make sure he didn’t fuck it all up,” Wolf explained.

“What?”

“That’s why he’s staring. He won’t come over until you give him the go ahead.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Raptor stood up and looked directly at Bull. Then he walked to the bathroom at the back of the bar. At the door, he looked at Bull



and nodded before he went in. Thankfully, it was clean. And deserted. He stepped to the side of the door and Bull came pushing through it a few seconds later.

Raptor shut the door behind Bull and flicked the lock before he grabbed Bull and pushed him back against the closed door. He slammed his hands on either side of Bull's shoulders and looked up at him.

"What do you want from me? From this?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Bull said quietly.

"Bullshit." Raptor ran one hand down Bull's chest to palm his cock through his jeans.

"I really don't." Bull shook his head.

Raptor leaned in to kiss him, slow and deep. Bull put his hands on Raptor's hips and pulled him close. Raptor reached between them to undo Bull's pants and work them and his boxer briefs down to his knees.

"Tell me what you want," Raptor said.

Bull bit his lips and shook his head again. "I can't say."

"Fuck," Raptor said with a sigh. Everything came so easily with Bull. Everything but the talking about it, that is. It was easier to be with Bull than with anybody before. Raptor knew he wanted more of that. All of that. With Bull. It scared the fuck out of him, and made him question his sanity, but he was ready to charge right into something with Bull.

"Maybe this will help you decide if we're on the same page," he said before dropping to his knees and taking Bull's cock in his mouth, swallowing him to the root in one quick movement.

"Oh gods," Bull moaned. He pulled the tie out of Raptor's hair and ran his fingers through it as Raptor sucked his dick. It was messy and wet, and had very little finesse. Raptor hadn't planned on going down on his—what, boyfriend? lover? Jesus, they really should talk about it—in a bar's bathroom that night, but now that he was, he was doing it with as much gusto as he could. He swallowed noisily around the head of Bull's dick, and he tightened his jaw as he sucked Bull deep into his throat. Bull didn't seem to mind



Raptor's sloppy technique at all, going by the moans he made. His legs trembled as he kept himself from pumping too deeply into Raptor's mouth.

"Fuck, Raptor. I'm going to—" he said as he bounced his hips into the door behind him. Raptor hummed and nodded his head. "No, come off." He pulled gently on Raptor's hair, encouraging Raptor to stand. He wrapped his other hand around his cock to jerk himself off as he kissed Raptor hard.

They were both moaning into it, and when he came, Bull shouted and threw his head back, banging it against the door. Someone slammed on the door from the other side, calling for them to unlock it. They chuckled, and Bull rested his forehead on Raptor's. Bull tucked his dick back in and they both went to the sink to wash their hands. Bull turned to Raptor and opened his mouth, but Raptor raised a hand and shook his head.

"Don't say anything, yet."

Bull pulled him into a hug. "Okay. But dinner? Tomorrow?"

Raptor adjusted his still hard cock and unlocked the door. "Okay."

\*\*\*\*



## PLUS ONE

*In which Bull gives Raptor the horns (and everything else)*

“Honey, I’m home,” Raptor called out as he stepped into Bull’s house. The bruise on his chest twinged as he leaned down to drop his bag next to the couch. Bull came out of the kitchen to kiss him. He had that full-on dimpled smile that lit up the whole room around them. “What’s up with you?” he asked.

“You said you’re home,” Bull grinned.

“It’s just an expression.” Raptor was deflecting, but he couldn’t help but wonder how nice it would be to have someone to come home to every night. Or if Bull would even want that with him. Sure, Bull’s house was huge compared to his tiny apartment, and Bull had given him a key, but that was just for convenience. *Wasn’t it?*

“Come on. Dinner’s ready.” Bull led him back to the small table in the corner of the kitchen. Candles flickered in the dim light, and there was a small cluster of fresh flowers in a bowl in the center of the table.

“What’s all this?”

Bull shrugged. “Nothing?” he sort of asked, acting shy for the first time since Raptor had met him.

“Bull?”

“It’s nothing. Just—let’s eat.” He pulled a chair out and urged Raptor to sit.

“It looks good.” Bull had made his meatloaf, leaving Raptor the crusty end part, just like he liked it. Bull kept looking at him, but didn’t say anything during dinner.

After they ate and cleaned up, Raptor cornered Bull along the countertop.

“Something is up. Tell me.”

“It’s just... Not here.” Bull pushed back and took Raptor’s hand, dragging him along to the stairs.



Raptor laughed and followed Bull up to his bedroom. “If you wanted me to put out, you just had to ask.”

Bull didn’t respond. He just pushed Raptor down on the bed and helped him out of his clothes. Bull was gentle as he eased Raptor’s shirt off his shoulders. His breath caught when he looked down at the yellowing bruise in the center of Raptor’s chest. He reached a hand out but stopped just short of touching it. Raptor grabbed his hand and pulled it against his chest.

“Hey, I’m here.”

“When you went down, I thought...” Bull shook his head.

“Thank God for Kevlar, huh?” Raptor grinned.

“But—”

“No. We’re not going to play *what if*. The vest did its job, we did ours, and it all worked out how it’s supposed to. That’s all we need.” When Raptor pulled Bull in closer to flip their positions, Bull held firm, caging Raptor in place with his larger body. He reached up to run a hand over Raptor’s hair, tangling his fingers in the long strands. Raptor spread his legs wide, and Bull settled on his knees in between them before leaning down to kiss Raptor as he went back to work on Raptor’s belt. He quickly had them both naked. Raptor reached out to grab Bull’s cock, but Bull stopped him.

“I just...” Bull said with a shake of his head.

“Okay.” Raptor knew what was going on in Bull’s mind. Watching someone you—*love? Holy fuck, is that what this is?*—come under fire, seeing just how quickly you could lose him, it really played with your mind. Raptor’s mind reeled when he realized that, yes, he did love Bull. He lifted his arms above his head and stretched out, flexing all his muscles before going lax under Bull’s long body, giving in to the feeling.

“You’re so beautiful,” Bull whispered as he nuzzled Raptor’s jaw. His fingertips barely touched Raptor’s skin, raising goose bumps down his arms. Bull followed his fingers with his lips, kissing every bit of skin he could touch as he moved down Raptor’s body.

Raptor wanted to disagree, to tell Bull that he was the gorgeous one, but he couldn’t form words with Bull’s breath tickling his balls. He reached down and clutched at Bull’s hair, trying to guide his mouth, but Bull shook his head.



“My turn,” he said before licking a long strip up the underside of Raptor’s cock. Then he did it again.

“Fucking tease.”

“Takes one to know one,” Bull said, and Raptor chuckled.

“Funny guy.”

“I’m here to please.”

“Then get on with it,” Raptor growled as he tightened his grip on Bull’s hair.

“Someone told me once that patience was a virtue. But since you insist,” Bull said just before dragging his tongue down over Raptor’s balls to his hole.

“Oh fuck,” Raptor moaned as Bull alternated between teasing licks and gently nibbling the outer muscle of his hole. One of Bull’s hands stayed on Raptor’s cock as he rimmed him.

“You like that?”

*What the fuck do you think?* Raptor wanted to ask, but Bull moved to take his cock into his mouth, and all Raptor could do was choke out a garbled grunt. Raptor would have complained, but it was lost to the tightness of Bull’s throat closing around the head of his dick, in time with two slicked fingers pushing into his hole. He was dimly aware of Bull pulling away, and he risked a glance up.

“You okay there?” Bull asked.

“Uh-huh,” Raptor managed to grunt, lost in the feel of Bull’s fingers sliding in and out of him in time with his mouth moving over his cock.

“Just checking.” He held up a condom so Raptor could see it. “This all right?”

“Fuck yes. Now.”

Bull grinned wickedly before he twisted his wrist to rub his fingers over Raptor’s prostate, and Raptor’s body arched off the bed without any thought on his part. Raptor watched the movement of Bull’s muscles as he rolled the condom on. With the way the soft light of the room played off the light sheen of sweat on his body, he could have been carved by one of the masters. Except



Bull was real, warm flesh and blood instead of cold marble. Raptor reached out to run one hand along the deep grooves of Bull's abs.

"Perfect," he said as he licked one of Bull's nipples. Bull smiled and leaned forward, pressing Raptor back into the mattress.

"No, you are." Bull pressed his cock against Raptor's hole. Raptor lifted one leg to wrap over Bull's hip and his cock slipped through the first ring of muscle, making them both gasp. Bull pushed in slowly until he was all the way in. He waited until Raptor's shivers stopped. "Still with me?"

"Yeah. Now move," Raptor said as he ground his ass down on Bull's cock.

"Bossy." Bull chuckled but complied with Raptor's order, starting with slowly dragging almost all the way out before pushing back in. Raptor grunted and moved his hips again, and Bull took the hint. He lifted both of Raptor's legs, balancing them on his chest as he grabbed Raptor's hips and increased the rhythm. Raptor groaned and clutched at Bull's arms, holding on tight as Bull's thrusts got harder, pushing him deeper and deeper into Raptor.

"Fuck me," Raptor moaned.

"That's what I'm doing," Bull said between thrusts. He let Raptor's legs slip down to brace his weight on his elbows before he bent forward to kiss Raptor softly.

"Close, babe," Raptor whispered into Bull's mouth before he reached between their bodies to grab his cock.

"Okay." Bull nodded and changed his angle as he snapped his hips forward, making Raptor see stars.

"Again," Raptor panted, pumping his fist fast as Bull managed to hit that spot every few strokes until Raptor finally shouted and came. Bull fucked him through his orgasm until his hips faltered. His body stilled, and he let out a guttural moan as he filled the condom. They laid there for a few minutes before Bull reached down to pull out. Raptor's over-stimulated body shuddered as Bull's semi-hard cock slipped out.

"Love you," Raptor groaned, half out of it as he rolled onto his side. The mattress dipped as Bull moved off it, and then again when Bull came back to



sit on the edge of the bed next to him. Gentle fingers stroked the side of his face, tucking his hair behind his ear. He grinned and blinked up at Bull.

Bull's eyes were focused on the bruise on his chest, but the expression on his face was guarded.

"Hey," Raptor said, sitting up to touch Bull's face. "What's up?"

Bull didn't say anything, but he reached out to touch the bruise again.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Did you mean that? What you said a minute ago?" Bull whispered.

"Mean what?" Raptor replayed the last few minutes to see if he could pinpoint what Bull might mean. Then he realized what he had said. He exhaled and dropped back down to the bed. He took another deep breath and looked back up at Bull before nodding. "Yeah. Is that all right?"

Bull grinned, that light-up-the-room smile of his, dimples and all. "So you'll stay?"

"For the night?"

"For all the nights," Bull whispered before clearing his throat. "I know your lease is up. And I've got all this room here. You're here a lot anyway. And..." He glanced at the mattress before looking back up at Raptor's face. "And I want you here. With me. For as long as you'll stay. Because I love you, too."

*Oh.* Raptor felt liked he'd been gored by a bull's horns when he saw how open and vulnerable Bull's expression was. His heart stuttered in his chest and he nodded.

"Yeah. Okay. I can do that."

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Xara X. Xanakas decided years ago to embrace her weirdness. A friend first described her that way to the man who's been her husband for over twenty years. That formula fits her, and she figures if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Being Texan, her crush on cowboys comes natural, but the techie in her loves to show nerds a good time. She relishes all things different, and brings saucy style to her writing. Whether wrangling a wayward ranch hand or adding another critter to her were-menagerie, Xara strives to make the outlandish appealing. She'll make you quirk a brow and snort with laughter, and that's all right by her. Xara believes that unique is best and happily ever after is the icing on the cookies.*

## Contact & Media Info

*Give her a shout out at her website, or ~~stalk~~ follow her on Twitter and Facebook.*

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# **FRIENDS OR LOVERS?**

By **Sara York**

## **Photo Description**

Two men are in bed with an empty champagne bottle and two glasses.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*It was supposed to be my dream honeymoon with my partner of five years. Yeah, I knew that he was reluctant to make our partnership legal but I thought that he would eventually be as happy to be my husband as I was going to be his. Nick tried to warn me, though I didn't listen. It's funny how my best friend Nick seems to be right about a lot of things lately... like how I should go on the honeymoon that I spent forever planning even though Mark and I aren't together anymore. Taking Nick with me so that the extra ticket wouldn't go to waste was another great idea. Just wish I knew how we ended up in bed like this....*

*Sincerely,*

*Dionne*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, vacation, tropics, HFN, jilted, left at the altar

**Word count:** 5,903

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## FRIENDS OR LOVERS?

By Sara York

Shane heard the pounding on the door and groaned. He didn't want to get out of bed. Warmth surrounded him and the pillow felt perfect half lodged under his chest and head. The noise sounded again and he feared he'd get a noise complaint from the hotel. He moaned and tried to move but was trapped.

"Fuck, what the—" Shane turned his head and panic filled him. His lungs seized and heat washed over him. *Nick!* Why the heck was he in bed with Nick, his best friend in the entire world? Then it came rushing back—the drinking, the dancing, and more drinking; cutting loose and partying until neither one of them could successfully navigate the dance floor. Then Nick led him back to his room and one thing led to another. *Pity sex.* He was sure he'd seen it in Nick's eyes and heard it in his voice, but he'd gone along because, damn it, making love to Nick had felt so good.

Now the sun was streaming in, and someone was pounding on the door. Nick was dead to the world, his arm thrown over Shane's back, pinning him to the bed and preventing him from moving. The knocking continued and Shane rolled his eyes, wondering which version of hell he was in for sleeping with his best friend. Forcing his way, he slid out from under Nick's heavy arm—the guy worked out and his biceps were huge—and grabbed a pair of pants, pulling them on.

They swamped him, the legs dragging on the ground, and he had to keep a tight hold on the waistband even with the button fastened. Wearing Nick's pants, he stumbled out to the main room of the suite, staring at the aftermath of his and Nick's night—beer cans, champagne bottles, their shirts, a condom—ah hell.

Shane closed his eyes, leaning against the door, thinking about Nick and his muscular frame. The man didn't seem that big when he was dressed, but when Nick had taken off his clothes, revealing his perfect ass, Shane had almost passed out. He'd slept with his best friend, allowing the man to take liberties even Mark hadn't. Just remembering the slide of Nick's tongue on his



balls, the way the man had held him down, licking and sucking where no one else had in years left him shivering.

A hard rap on the door made him jump as fear slid through him. “Shit.” Shane grabbed the handle and pulled open the hotel suite door, not even bothering to look through the peephole. “What do—Mark?”

“Shane, I’m so glad you opened the—Whose pants are you wearing?”

Shane glanced down, noting how obvious it was that he was in another man’s clothes. He pushed at Mark and stepped out of the room. The lock clicked, sending a sick feeling to the pit of his stomach—he didn’t have the key card. He sighed and grabbed the pants tighter, hoping Mark would make this quick.

“Shane, I still love you.”

Shane held up his free hand and shook his head. “Don’t. I don’t want to hear it.”

Mark grabbed his shoulders, pushing him against the door. There was no way for Shane to escape, nowhere to run. “Babe, please listen.” Mark leaned in, his lips trailing over Shane’s neck, the familiarity rolling over Shane, leaving him dumbfounded. Mark took the opportunity to kiss him, sliding his tongue between Shane’s lips, gliding along the side of Shane’s.

Mark moaned, and Shane felt the first tingles of desire tug at him. Five years of history and love came rushing back, tempting him to hold on to Mark, wondering if they could have something again. But fuck, he couldn’t, not after what Mark pulled.

Shane tore his mouth away from Mark’s and stepped back. “Stop!”

“Babe, I’m sorry. I was wrong. Forgive me. Don’t ruin this.”

Shane couldn’t take the apologies and pleas for forgiveness. Three days ago Mark had told him he was going to work late and would be home soon, that was the day before their wedding. The next morning there was still no Mark. Nick was right there, holding his hand the whole way to the small, private dining room they’d rented above O’Riley’s, their favorite Irish eatery. Nick had stood beside him for the most embarrassing two hours of his life



while their friends debated whether Mark would show. Then when someone finally got a hold of Mark and revealed that Mark wasn't going to marry Shane, Nick had wrapped his arms around him, keeping him from flying apart.

Then last night, their first night in paradise, Nick had eased the ache in his heart, making love to him like he'd been doing it for years instead of it being their only time to do more than hug—Fucking shit, now Mark was at his door, begging to be taken back.

*Five years.* Shane stared at Mark, trying to decipher the mystery of what the fuck had happened. "I don't get it."

Mark dropped to his knees, his hands folded like he was in prayer or beseeching Shane to listen to him. Shane wanted to tell Mark to fuck off, that he'd hurt him too much, but the years together meant something—at least Shane thought they had.

"Please, just five minutes and I'll explain everything. All you have to do is listen."

Shane glanced back at the door to his room, wondering what would happen if Nick came out and saw Mark. Nick had been angry and hadn't said anything really negative about Mark, but what would he do if he saw the guy here?

A hotel employee was headed their way, the blue jacket indicating he worked behind the desk or higher up in the hotel hierarchy. Shane recognized him, realizing it was the person who'd checked him and Nick in yesterday. Shane turned to Mark, frowning as he weighed his options. "Go to the hotel lobby. I'm going to see if I can get back in my room."

Shane didn't wait to see if Mark did as he was told. He waved at the employee—Chris, he remembered. "Excuse me, Chris, I locked myself out."

"Oh, Mister Malone, didn't grab your key?"

"I forgot." Shane shrugged, holding the pants tighter, knowing he looked like a fool.

"Just give me a second to confirm which room you're booked in. I trust you, but policy dictates..."

"No problem. I'm fine with that."



Chris called in the query then hung up. He smiled as he slid his card in the slot, opening the door for Shane. “Just grab your key next time. I’d hate for you to have to walk to the lobby in someone else’s clothes.” Chris smirked before taking off.

“Sure, and thanks,” Shane called after him, his face burning hot.

The door clicked closed behind him and Shane heard the toilet flush. Fuck, Nick was awake. Shane froze.

Nick stepped out of the bathroom, his gaze zeroed in on Shane. He took four steps and was on him, pressing Shane up against the door. Nick bent close, his mouth closing over Shane’s, reminding him just how awesome last night had been, and how sorry a lover Mark was. But sex wasn’t everything. Mark had cared—Shane knew he had. But Nick had been there through the bad and the good.

He was about to step away when Nick placed his hands at Shane’s waist, shoving the pants out of the way, his fingers sliding between Shane’s butt cheeks, brushing over the tender pucker then wandering over his hips to his dick. Shane moaned, dropping all resistance to Nick’s touch. His fingers sought out Nick’s hips, curling into the firm mounds of flesh that were Nick’s ass.

Nick palmed Shane’s cock before sliding his hand over Shane’s balls, rolling them gently. The kiss ended and Nick pulled back slightly. Shane slowly opened his eyes, not sure if he would have remained standing had Nick not been there holding him up. Of course, if Nick hadn’t been here then Shane wouldn’t be so confused and that kiss never would have happened.

Nick narrowed his eyes, his brow furrowed. “What happened? Where were you?”

Shane couldn’t look at Nick, not with the load of guilt and confusion swimming through him. He closed his eyes and rested his head against Nick’s shoulder. The man really was big. At least six inches taller than he, Nick’s shoulders were broad, his body full of muscles from working out and from the excellent genes he’d inherited from his parents.

Shane sighed. “Do you remember that day back in ninth grade when we



were running through the woods behind my house? I tripped on a limb and somehow my foot got caught between a rock and a tree.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Nick smoothed his hands over Shane’s shoulders and down his arms, entwining their fingers.

“When we finally got my leg out, I couldn’t walk.”

Nick squeezed his hands. “You broke your ankle if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah. You carried me for almost a full mile through rough terrain. I kept telling you to just leave me behind and go get help.”

“I remember that day. There was a storm blowing in. I couldn’t leave you behind.”

Shane shuddered at the memory. Nick had always been stronger than he. “Yeah, you took care of me.”

“What happened just now?”

Shane opened his eyes and met Nick’s gaze. He didn’t like the haunted look in Nick’s eyes. “A storm is blowing in—Mark’s here.”

Nick didn’t jerk back, but he might as well have. His body stiffened, his breath caught, his eyes narrowed just enough for Shane to register the movement and his lips tightened. Nick didn’t like Mark, hadn’t for a long time. It was the one thing that almost drove a wedge between them, but Shane had kept at Nick, forcing their friendship.

“I have to go talk to him.”

Nick was a great guy, probably better than Shane ever deserved for a friend, and he was a hell of a lover—too bad Shane hadn’t figured that out earlier. If their positions had been reversed, Shane would have thrown a fit but Nick didn’t. He straightened, the features on his face relaxing. “I agree. You need to talk to him.”

Shane hadn’t expected Nick to be so understanding. Part of him wanted Nick to put up a fight. Maybe last night hadn’t meant anything to Nick. So they fucked. It wouldn’t be the first time friends hooked up to blow off steam, but it was a first for them. Hell, he had no idea how they’d ended up in bed together. Maybe too much booze and heartache mixed with desire.



Shane turned to get dressed, tossing a mumbled thanks over his shoulder when he heard Nick behind him. Then Nick pressed in close, forcing Shane against the wall. Nick's breath was harsh against Shane's ear, his fingers digging into Shane's flesh. "You go talk to Mark, listen to what he has to say, but don't forget this." Nick licked Shane's neck all the way to his earlobe, toying with the fleshy nub before biting down on it and tugging gently. "And this." Nick grabbed his own dick and grazed it over Shane's crack before reaching around to stroke Shane. "And don't forget this and what I did last night when you were in my arms, screaming my name as you shot your load. So go talk to Mark, hear what he has to say" —Nick spun Shane around, cupping his face with his impossibly strong hands—"but don't forget this." Nick leaned in close, brushing his lips over Shane's, delivering the sweetest kiss he'd ever experienced.

Nick licked at Shane's lips and he opened to him, unable stop himself. The slide of Nick's tongue against his own left him shaking. His dick swelled, leaving him wanting his best friend for more than just a friend. Nick pulled out of the kiss with a growl, his gaze intense. No words were spoken, just a heap of silent communication that left Shane more confused than ever. Five years of Mark had left Shane feeling like he owed it to him to be the good lover, to give and give, never once asking for something in return. Last night with Nick opened more questions than it answered. Nick pushed away from him, marched to the bathroom and slammed the door.

Shane waited a moment before finding his shorts and a shirt, pulling them on so he could find Mark and hear what the man had to say.

Before Shane left he put his hand on the bathroom door, wondering what the hell he was doing. An image from last night, of Nick buried balls deep in his ass, Nick's fingers in Shane's hair as he hung above him, his eyes bright with caring—that's what he wanted. Mark had never looked at him that way.

The bathroom door whipped open and Nick gasped. "I didn't—I thought—"

"Shhh," Shane placed his finger on Nick's lips, noticing the red-rimmed eyes and the splotchy face. Shane's eyes burned. He hated that he'd made his best friend cry. "Nick," Shane groaned and pulled him into a tight hug. "Hell,



buddy, I—crap, this is difficult. Please, don't leave. I'm going to need you here when I get back."

Nick nodded then buried his nose in Shane's neck, inhaling deeply. He'd been such an idiot. Now with Nick in his arms, and especially after last night's lovemaking, he saw things more clearly. But he didn't want to ruin everything. Slowly, that's the only way to proceed. This could make everything go to hell and he certainly didn't want that.

"I'm going to find him. I promise I'll be back." Shane leaned back and gazed up at Nick, wondering why the hell he hadn't seen the man this way before? He wasn't just a friend, there was so much more between them.

Shane grabbed the mouthwash off the bathroom counter and rinsed, then spit. Nick hadn't moved, which Shane took as a good sign. He snagged a key card, turning back to peck Nick on the cheek before rushing out the door and down the walkway to the lobby where Mark was supposed to be waiting for him.

\*\*\*\*

Nick dropped to his knees after Shane rushed out the door then sank all the way to the floor, curling up into a ball, letting the tears flow. Fuck, he'd had Shane in his arms and spent the night making love to the man, showing him how much he cared. It was a one-time shot, an opportunity he'd never get again and Mark, the fucking bastard, was here to ruin it.

That night, five years ago, was forever etched in his mind. He and Shane had gone out dancing. They were just friends but Nick wanted them to be so much more. Shane had entranced all the men at the club, as usual, but one guy took a shine to his best friend, secreting him off to the back hall and putting the moves on him, leaving Shane totally star struck. Mark was older than they were, he had money and threw it around, spiriting Shane off for a whirlwind courtship that weekend to British Columbia, staying in posh hotels and wining and dining the man, leaving Shane so thoroughly impressed that Nick hadn't stood a chance at making Shane his.

Had Mark been abusive or a cheater, Nick would have said something, but the guy was nice, always treating Shane good, but never really loving him. Everyone could see it—well, except Shane. The years ticked by and Nick took



to sleeping around, never finding anyone who measured up to Shane. Of course Shane found out and teased him about it. Shane pointed out many times how awesome it was to be in a committed relationship and expressed his pity for Nick and his lack of having someone special.

Shane didn't share private details about their love life but Nick wondered about how close he and Mark were because of the way they acted around each other. Something was off. Mark had come to Nick two months before the wedding fiasco, begging him to talk some sense into Shane. That really tipped Nick off and he tried to tell Shane something was wrong, but he wouldn't listen and he didn't want to ruin their friendship. Nick hung close to Shane and he stopped going out to bars to pick up strangers. He wanted to be there if Mark did something stupid.

Of course the day of the wedding was tragic. Shane had been devastated but Nick didn't believe in wasting time. He hadn't meant to sleep with his best friend, at least not yet. They were just going to hang out and have fun. Fuck, he'd screwed up by tumbling Shane into bed and showing him how good it could be between them.

Now, if Mark and Shane got back together, it would destroy their friendship. Shane wouldn't lie to Mark, and Mark would demand Shane stay away from Nick.

The thing was, he knew Mark was hiding something, he just wasn't sure what. Little clues had been left behind, and though Nick hadn't even tried to put them together, now he knew there was more to Mark than he was telling.

Nick pulled himself up off the floor, and threw on some clothes. He went in search of his best friend, praying like heck that they *were* still friends after that amazing night together.

The resort was quiet with few of the other guests roaming around. He glanced across the garden into the pool area and saw Shane sitting with Mark at a table, plates loaded with breakfast. Nick's stomach grumbled. They'd eaten early last night then went dancing. They'd drunk more than their share of booze, which may have contributed to them sleeping together. He was worn out and hungry, and he should have grabbed some food before chasing after his dream, but he needed Shane more than he needed food.



Nick realized he looked stupid standing on the path and if Shane and Mark looked over they'd be able to see him too easily. He glanced around, not seeing anyone walking around, and moved to lean against a tree, trying to look as natural as possible as he watched Mark and Shane talking to each other.

He felt like a rat spying on Shane with his ex—fuck, he hoped they stayed ex's and Mark didn't sweet talk Shane into going back with him. Mark was pulling out all the stops. Nick noticed Shane's favorite breakfast foods along with an unwrapped package on the table. Mark had ordered champagne but the glass by Shane appeared untouched. He focused in on the food, thinking it too looked like Shane hadn't taken a bite, but he couldn't be sure.

\*\*\*\*

Shane found Mark in the lobby and followed him to the outdoor eating area by the pool. Mark had already ordered their food. This was typical Mark, always trying to impress with money and buying things. In the beginning of their relationship Shane had liked receiving gifts but something was lacking and he'd always ignored that lack. Now that Mark had stood him up at the altar, he saw things more clearly.

Then there was Nick...

"Did you hear me?" Mark asked.

Shane hadn't been paying attention, his thoughts on Nick and what they'd done. He shifted in his seat, realizing that his dick was growing hard just thinking about his lover—Good lord, he already thought of Nick as his lover—this couldn't be good.

"Please, I made a huge mistake. I didn't mean to be late."

Shane held up a hand, stopping Mark's words. "Just a minute. You weren't late. You told Jen and Alec that you weren't coming then you sent me a text saying that it wasn't going to work. You broke up with me via text."

"Baby, I didn't mean to—"

"Stop. I don't want to hear about your excuses."

"Shane, I love you. Here." Mark pulled a package out of his bag, it was beautifully wrapped with silver paper and a blue bow.



Shane took the box but didn't open it. The food was enticing but the glass of bubbly reminded him of Nick and the night they'd shared. "I appreciate the gifts Mark, but money won't buy your way out of this one."

"Just give me a chance."

"I did."

Mark leaned forward, taking Shane's hand in his. "I promise it will be different. We can go get married when you get back. I'll reduce my hours and spend more time with you."

"What about—" heat flooded Shane's face. He loved blow jobs but Mark wouldn't do them, said it made him gag. Just thinking about their lovemaking made Shane sad. Last night, Nick had blown him away, taking him somewhere he'd never been before. When he'd first hooked up with Mark, he'd been young and inexperienced. Mark had only been his third lover and he'd been too embarrassed to ask his friends about the blow job thing. Mark had overwhelmed him with his wealth, buying him loads of gifts and clothes, hooking him up with a good job and eventually paying off his student loan. He owed Mark—or he thought he did.

Shane was older now and the blow-off at the altar had matured him. Sure, it had only been three days ago, but being stood up in front of his friends and co-workers had left its mark, cracking his sheltered shell and leaving him wiser. Money wasn't everything.

"What?" Mark asked.

"I need more."

"Don't I give you enough?"

"Mark, there is more—" Shane didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to explain to Mark that what they had was nice, but Nick had opened his eyes and it was more than just sex that had changed him. "Mark, I need time to think."

Mark grabbed his hand, squeezing twice before he leaned in and tried to kiss him, but Shane turned his head, only letting Mark kiss his cheek. He felt nothing. No wiggle in his stomach, no tingle across his skin. There was nothing.



That's when Shane realized he hadn't felt anything for Mark in a long time. Mark had been right in not wanting to get married. Hell, he shouldn't have pushed, but he had. He'd thought the marriage certificate would fix everything, make their lives more exciting, but nothing would fix their relationship. Now, he had no partner and no place to live.

Shane stood up and stepped away from the table before turning to face Mark. "I'll get my things when I get home."

"You don't have to move out," Mark begged.

Shane shook his head. "No, I need to leave. I need space to think. I'll talk to you when I get home, but please let me have some time."

"Shane," Mark paused, his gaze narrowed as he stared up, his lips pursed, "don't make this mistake."

"Goodbye. Have a good trip home."

The relief he felt surprised Shane, but he still didn't know what he was going to do. Confusion filled him. Where would he live? Would he even have a job when he returned, they were Mark's friends at his work, not his. Well, he was a good employee, but still, fear and uncertainty swirled through him. Even if he ended up homeless and jobless, something had to change.

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Shane stumbled back to the room, slid the key card into the slot and pushed when the lock clicked open. Nick was on the couch and jumped up when Shane entered but he didn't move a step. Shane stepped in far enough to let the door close behind him. They stared at each other for a long time, neither of them moving. Nick took a step toward him but Shane held up his hand.

"I need time."

"Okay."

"Last night was... amazing."

Nick nodded and stayed planted in his spot. Shane loved the way the man was giving him space. Part of him wanted to race over and snuggle close, allowing Nick to fill the empty spot in his heart, but he couldn't do that to his best friend.



“Last night was great, but I need some space.”

“I understand. Do you want me to leave?” Nick asked.

“No.” The word was said as a sob and Nick didn’t hesitate. He rushed over, wrapping his arms around Shane, hugging him close.

“Cry it out, babe.” Nick held him for a long time, not even trying to kiss him.

When Shane was done crying, Nick held him at arm’s length and smiled. “Let’s go grab some breakfast. You look like you could eat. Then how about we just hang out, maybe go snorkeling or out on a boat.”

Shane nodded, wondering how he’d ever been lucky enough to have a friend like Nick. Another guy would have taken advantage of Shane’s upset, but not Nick. When they left the room, Shane was half afraid Mark would still be hanging around but he didn’t see him anywhere. He and Nick spent the day by the pool, sipping cocktails and talking about nothing and everything. They were walking back from dinner as the sun was setting. Shane glanced at Nick, worrying about the sleeping arrangements. Hell, he wanted Nick again, wanted to feel the man’s lips around his cock and his fingers doing wicked things to his body, but he’d told Nick he needed space.

“Hey babe,” Nick slid his thumb over Shane’s cheek, “what’s wrong?”

“I feel like such a dick.”

Nick wrapped his arms around Shane, his breath hot on Nick’s neck. “Why?”

“Because I want you.”

Nick drew back, his eyes grew darker and his nostrils flared. Then Nick took him by surprise and dropped his arms before stepping back. “No, you’re hurting too much. I don’t want you to regret us.”

“Us?”

“If there is going to be an ‘us’—any chance of an ‘us’ after we leave this place—you need to enter our relationship with a clear conscience and clear motives.”

“Fuck.”



Nick lifted his brow and smirked. Shane didn't push him. The man was right. He needed to take a break.

"Fine, if I hop into bed with you right now it wouldn't work. I am a mess and I need time."

"Yeah." Nick pinned him with a heated stare. "But don't think for a minute that I don't want you. I'm going to sleep on the couch tonight and tomorrow night, then it's back home. Where will you live?"

Shane shrugged. "No clue. I can probably crash at someone's house for a bit."

"I do have the extra bedroom."

He shook his head, "Too much temptation."

"Yeah, you're right there." Nick scrubbed his hand over his face. "Do I need to find somewhere else to sleep tonight?"

"No, I think we can keep our hands off of each other. We've been friends forever."

\*\*\*\*

After dinner, Shane suggested a moonlit stroll on the beach. It had sounded like a great idea to Nick at the time, but the way the soft light played on Shane's skin made him horny as hell. Somehow he kept from molesting his friend. Now he was lying on the pullout couch, the sheets pulled up over his heated body, his hand palming his cock as he listened to Shane softly snoring in the other room.

Last night he'd been right there, his body wrapped around Shane's as the man snored. He wanted that. Fuck, Shane was the most responsive lover he'd ever had—six times the guy had blown. He'd never had a guy go off that many times. Even when he'd picked up super-hot twenty year olds who looked like they were built for sex, they hadn't come that much.

Nick groaned and rolled over, humping against his hand, trying like hell to ease the ache in his balls. He was close to coming as he imagined Shane underneath him. A noise interrupted him and he turned over, heat washing over him he clawed at the sheets, covering up. Shane flipped on the light and stood in the doorway, his hand on his cock.



“Don’t stop,” Shane whispered.

Nick met his gaze, reveling under the lust he saw in Shane’s eyes. He pushed the sheets away, revealing his hard dick. Shane didn’t move as Nick repositioned himself, shoving another pillow under his head. He wrapped his fingers around his cock then reached between his legs and grabbed his balls. He stroked a few times before lifting one leg, sliding his fingers over his hole. Shane gasped and Nick glanced at him, noticing how Shane stroked his own dick.

Nick wanted to tell him to come closer but he stayed silent, allowing Shane the pleasure of watching him. Funny that they’d never done the circle jerk thing when they were younger. Back then, Shane was with Mark, and Shane had vowed never to cheat. But now Shane was free—at least Nick hoped he’d stay free long enough for Nick to show him how it should be. The thought of holding Shane close each night did him in and he came, shooting his load over his chest.

Shane moaned and Nick glanced at him, watching him come. It was so beautiful—Shane’s mouth was open, his eyes closed and his hand still stroking his spent dick. Nick wanted to go to Shane or at least reach out for him, but he didn’t dare. This had to be Shane’s decision. After the last shudder raced over Shane, he opened his eyes, his gaze seeking out Nick. The air between them was thick and Nick couldn’t help himself. He bolted off the pullout couch and into Shane’s arms, his lips seeking and finding Shane’s.

“Babe—fuck, tell me to leave you alone and I will.”

Shane clutched at Nick’s arms, his whole body shook, and for a moment Nick thought he was crying. But he wasn’t.

“Nick—God, I want you.”

Nick tilted Shane’s head back, licking at his lips, begging him to open. Shane didn’t disappoint him. Their tongues tangled as their hands grasped at each other, trying to gain purchase. Nick walked Shane backward to the bed but he didn’t push him to the mattress. With his last ounce of self-control, Nick broke the kiss and backed away from Shane. His friend reached for him but he jumped away.



“Shane, I don’t want this to be something you’ll regret in a few weeks. I can’t stand losing you as a friend... Fuck, I want you so bad. I want to hold you in my arms and make love to you, tasting every inch of your body and then do it all over again. I want to have hot, nasty, sweaty sex with you and sweet, cuddling sex. I want lazy sex and make-up sex and angry sex, but I don’t ever want goodbye sex. This” —Nick pointed at Shane then waved his hand between them—“this is more than just a lark. If we do this, if we go here, I need you to understand that I don’t take sex between us lightly.”

Shane nodded then swallowed hard. He sat down on the chair in the corner, staring up at Nick. Tears formed in his eyes, trickling slowly down his cheeks.

Nick wanted to dash those tears away but knew not to move, not yet. It would be so easy to take Shane in his arms and force a relationship, but he wanted their being together to be Shane’s idea, not his.

“I’m sorry.”

Nick felt like a balloon that had just been pricked with a pin. His heart stopped and his head spun. *Shane didn’t want him.* Shane tilted his head then jumped up, his hands on Nick’s arms. “Wait. That’s not what I meant.”

Nick drew in a jagged breath. “What did you mean?”

“I can’t promise you forever now. I’m too—fuck, I’m messed up. But I—” Shane’s face turned red and his breathing grew shallow. “Nick, what you did to me—” he closed his eyes and breathed in deep, tilting his head back in an alluring way. Shane groaned and leaned against Nick, his hot body so tempting Nick almost kissed him.

“Yeah,” Nick whispered.

“I want to feel that again. I’ve never felt that before. You were amazing. Like totally and completely over-the-top amazing.”

Nick couldn’t help his smile or the pride he felt. He was good in bed and he knew it, but once they got together, there would be more than just a few booty calls and rolls in the hay, they would be partners because he’d be crushed if Shane ever had sex with another man. “Let me hold you tonight. No sex, just you and me in bed sleeping. No pressure, I just want to take care of you.”



A sob escaped Shane's lips and he nodded, allowing Nick to push him to the center of the bed, wrapping his arms around him and cuddling him close. They may not have forever yet, but Nick had a chance and that's more than he thought he would ever get.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Writing is Sara's life. The stories fight to get out, often leaving her working on four or five books at once. She can't help but write. Along with her writing addiction she has a coffee addiction. Some nights, the only reason she stops writing and goes to sleep is for the fresh brewed coffee in the morning.*

*Sara enjoys writing twisted tales of passion, anger, and love with a good healthy dose of lust thrown in for fun. Almost a quarter of a century ago Sara met her lover, falling for him after knowing him for ten minutes. Sara's passion for him comes out in her stories, mixing with her passion for life, love, and good times, flowing onto the page and becoming tales from the heart.*

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# YOU GET FULL CREDIT FOR BEING ALIVE

By Cari Z

## **Photo Description**

In the center of the photo is a dark-haired man sitting, head down, with his arms around his knees. Behind him is another man, blond and muscular, with his arms wrapped completely around the other man's body. Their faces are hidden, but the impression is one of protectiveness and affection.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*I was never one of the good guys. Never got along with people and never felt the need to. I did a lot for money. Even killed, especially killed, but never without a good reason. After years in this violent business I retired to a quiet life in the woods because I was sick of all the blood. No one knows me here and everything was fine until that night...*

*First I didn't see the body through all the rain and darkness but when I drew near I saw him. Thought he was dead with all the blood. But he wasn't and I considered for a moment to end the job because really... it would have been a mercy kill. He wouldn't survive those injuries and even if he did he would be a vegetable. I mean... look at that head wound!*

*But something in the way he was dumped on the back of my property in his ripped police uniform and the word FAG scrawled on his chest made me help him.*

*So now I'm here. His guardian angel, kind of ironic considering what I did in the past. I watch over his recovery, standing in the shadows where no one can see me.*

*The docs don't think he will ever walk or speak again. The massive head trauma caused too much damage but I think he has a strong will. I saw his eyes. There is still life and reason in him. And I will help him to get back on his*



*feet and will wait for the day when he thanks me with his own voice. As soon as he's strong enough I'll bring him home with me where he can heal because he has no one else.*

*And after that? I'm going after those fuckers who tried to off him. Because they know he is still alive...*

*Please be realistic and don't rush their story, give those two time and patience to understand each other. I welcome dark and hurt/comfort, but no BDSM or urban fantasy this time :) Of course there must be a HEA for them but I don't mind if you make them suffer/work for it. I don't need sex scenes but give them some sweet, gentle moments.*

*Sincerely,*

*Alaska*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** law enforcement, assassin, slow build, hurt/comfort, disabilities, men with pets

**Content warnings:** graphic violence

**Word count:** 39,439

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### *Dedication*

Tremendous thanks to my lovely betas, who were invaluable on this project, and to everyone working behind the scenes for this event. You've all made my story so much better, and I'm honoured to be a part of this group. To Alaska, my wonderful prompter, I hope this is what you were looking for. :)



# YOU GET FULL CREDIT FOR BEING ALIVE

**By Cari Z**

I was born in the middle of a desert, at a gas station on the side of the road. At least that's what they told me when I was young, and still stupid enough to ask. Born abandoned, to a poor country girl who couldn't make it to help in time. Born with no father, no name, and no future. Born with no hope, so I should be grateful for what I was given, damn it, and stop asking questions. I suffered through my youth in the desert, I joined the army and was sent to the desert, and a hell of a lot of my freelance work took place there too. For some reason it's a lot harder to get a job to kill someone on a tropical island than it is in the middle of a godforsaken wasteland with nothing but sand, rocks and sun to recommend it. Oh yeah, and oil. That was usually the deciding factor.

I was sick to death of deserts, literally. They were just killing fields as far as I was concerned, and so when I retired—by which I mean ran as hard as I could, covered my tracks and didn't look back—I chose the Pacific Northwest as my new home. Nothing but rain and trees and mountains. It had cloudy skies, cool temperatures, and plenty of isolation if I wanted it, which I did. I found a fixer-upper on the east edge of Renton, Washington, under the shadow of Mount Rainier. I modified it to my specifications, moved in everything I owned (a U-Haul trailer carrying more weapons than clothes, and no furniture) and accidentally ended up with a dog, too. The dog wasn't my idea; she was a stray, a bruised and whimpering thing I'd found hunkered down in my driveway. I had never had a pet before and had no intention of starting, but the lure of company won out over the inconvenience in the end. That was how I ended up tramping along the trail behind my house late at night about a year after I settled there, walking my damn dog in the drizzling rain.

Della was a good girl, don't get me wrong, but she was young and training was going a little slowly. I still didn't trust her not to get distracted and run off if I let her out at night on her own, so I went with her. It was Della who found the body, suddenly straining against her leash in a way I'd almost broken her of, whining and eager. Her gangly paws dug into the leafy trail as she pulled against my grip.



“Heel,” I told her, forcing her down by my side. She subsided, but was still quivering. “What’s your problem?” I muttered, looking forward into the misty gloom. It was early spring, still cold by my thin-blooded standards, and the only light around came from my flashlight. “What?” I thought it might be my neighbor’s dog Princess; Mrs. Carlsen and her cocker spaniel went for walks around the woods here and our two dogs played together sometimes, but Princess was a barky little thing, and there was no noise other than the patter of rain on leaves right now.

Della whined again and made an abortive little twitch like she wanted to spring forward, and I let her this time. She pulled me the next twenty-five feet at a brisk pace before stopping abruptly at the base of a thick tree. Something was propped up against it.

Not something. *Someone*.

Now that I was closer I could smell the blood in the air, that telltale tang that you never can forget. There had to be a lot of it, for me to smell it over the rain. I told Della to sit a few feet away, so she wouldn’t get any ideas about whether this was a good time to try licking the body, and shined my flashlight down at the corpse’s face.

His skin was so pale it was blue, his lips gone purple. A sticky river of red trailed from somewhere in his thick brown hair down the side of his face, darkening his neck and the collar of his uniform... oh, *fuck* me. His police uniform. This was a cop. I had a dead cop less than five hundred feet from my house, from my safety net. How the fuck had he gotten out here? Who would go to that kind of trouble? More to the point, did it have anything to do with me? There were plenty of people I preferred to remain anonymous to in my new, civilian incarnation. If one of them had found me, and he was some kind of warning—

Then I saw the word scrawled on his chest in smeared yellow spray paint, and my paranoia flipped over into anger. **FAG**. All caps, wide and aggressive. There was more blood beneath that—Christ, how much had this poor guy bled before he died? The redness was almost black in the harsh glare of my LED flashlight. I sighed and moved the light back up to his face, and froze. His eyes were open. They had been closed before.



He was still alive.

“Shit.”

His eyes stayed open and focused on me. There was no expression in his face and he didn't make a sound, not even a whisper of the pain I knew he had to be in, but he was looking at me. Now that I was looking for it I saw the infinitesimal rise and fall of his chest, his barely-there breathing. This boy should have been dead, but he wasn't. Well. That took away some of my options. Unless I wanted to end this here and now, which... well, it wouldn't be the first time I had helped someone along who was just too far gone to make it back. A fast death could be the greatest mercy in the world, sometimes.

Della whimpered and scratched the ground near the body, looking up at me with dark, shining eyes.

“Yeah, I know,” I told her sourly. If I couldn't leave a dog to die on my property, there was no way in hell I could leave a person, even if that person was a cop. The last thing I needed were the police looking into me, but maybe... maybe they wouldn't have to know.

I unhooked the leash from Della's collar, then slid my arms beneath the young cop's torso and thighs and lifted him up. His head lolled back, and he did make a noise this time, a hoarse, punched-out groan in the back of his throat, probably not consciously. I swore and tilted him more against my body, for better support, then walked as fast as I could in the dark back to my house. I opened the back door with some difficulty—the kid was heavier than he looked—but eventually we got inside. I lay the cop down as gently as I could on my leather couch. Della stayed close to me, my own tension affecting her, and we both looked at him.

It took a moment for me to notice that he was seeping blood all over my couch. “God damn it.” I ran to my bathroom and pulled down my first aid kit, yanking out the gauze bandaging and tape. I came back, took a closer look at his head wound and grimaced. That was skull I was seeing in one place. This kid needed way more help than I could give him, my significant experience with field medicine notwithstanding. I put the gauze over the wound and taped



it down, heedless of his hair, just knowing that the bleeding needed to stop. His eyes had thinned to thin slits, the irises barely visible, but I could feel their focus on me. "I'll get you to help," I promised him, not caring if he could hear me. I needed to reaffirm it for myself. No ambulance, but I still had temporary plates on the Explorer in my garage. I could rip those off and drive him to the nearest ER, leave him there and no one would be the wiser. Sounded good.

The first part was easy enough. I prepped my car, carried the kid out and laid him down in the back seat, started up the engine and headed toward town. The closest hospital was nine miles away. If I drove fast I could be there in eight minutes on these roads.

There was no wallet or badge on the kid, but he was wearing a name tag that had been obscured by the paint. I'd had the time to make it out as I was settling him into the backseat of my car. Officer S. Bennett. I wondered what the S stood for. "Sam," I tried out, keeping my eye on the back seat. He was perfectly still now, and I couldn't see his face. I wondered if he was still breathing. "Steve. Nah, you don't look like a Steve. Scott. Simon." I ran through every S name I could think of, filling the emptiness of the air with words as I took corners at insane speeds and gunned it even more on the flats.

By the time we got to the hospital I'd been silent for two minutes, stuck at Sakima. I pulled into the ER lane, pulled the hood up on my bulky, oversized jacket and ran inside. "I need help out here!" People stared at me. I swung my bloody fingers at the nearest wall, leaving a watery red spray across a banal painting of a pine tree. "Now!"

In moments the car was swarmed with people, medical staff climbing into the back and transferring S. Bennett to a waiting gurney. One of them kept firing questions at me: "Where did you find him? When was he injured? What's your name? Sir... sir, I need your name. Sir!"

"I'll be right back, I'm coming back," I told her hastily, doing my best to act rattled. "I just have to park the car."

"Sir, you need to wait—" She was tenacious, this nurse. Luckily an ambulance pulled in then, sirens blaring, and she suddenly had more important things to worry about than me. I got into the Explorer, slammed my door shut and pulled out into the night. There. Duty done. I could go home now.



I convinced myself of that for all of about thirty seconds before groaning and pulling a U-turn at the next stop sign.

The thing was... the thing was, I was curious. I was interested, and I hadn't been interested in anything since I'd moved here, apart from Della. I had been very, very careful not to *let* myself get interested in anything, because curiosity killed the cat, or in this case, it killed whoever I was piqued enough to go after. When I was active in the business, I had made sure to only take offers that felt right to me. People I thought needed killing. No amount of money could convince me to go after a person who hadn't done anything to deserve death other than making someone else jealous or unhappy. I occasionally got curious enough to go after the people who'd tried to hire me for the contract in the first place, for free, just because the world would be a better place and deep down inside, all that Catholic school morality was still percolating in whatever passed for my soul.

I don't do what Jesus would do, but I like to think he'd understand my rationale.

I knew that the kid would be in surgery, probably for hours. He was being taken care of; at least he'd better be. What I needed right now was more information, and the best place to get that was close to the source.

I pulled into a parking lot next to a playground three blocks away from the hospital. I put my seat back to give myself space, then opened up my duffle bag and grabbed out a water bottle, rinsing the blood off my hands out the window. I cleaned the steering wheel then pulled out one of the ubiquitous heavy-duty black garbage bags that were such a boon in my line of work and started stuffing my clothes into it. Jacket, henley and T-shirt, jeans, socks, and boots—even my boxers, I trashed. Anything that could have the slightest hint of blood on it. I'd burn it all when I got home. I rinsed again, made sure the seat was clean, toweled off, and then started getting into my new outfit.

Jeans, a little ratty but unremarkable, a plain, dark green T-shirt, socks, and underwear that came out of packages of six pairs, and a pair of sneakers so old the tread was worn away. I'd paid a bum fifty bucks for those sneakers, in a moment of charity. Topped it all off with a grey pullover, tousled my light blond hair a bit—I glanced at my reflection in the visor mirror and practiced my easygoing smile. I looked ten years younger when I smiled.



I zipped the pullover up so that the scar on my neck was covered, grabbed my spare wallet, then locked the car and headed for the hospital.

The best thing to do for now was to observe. This late at night, everyone coming in here would be coming through the emergency room, which meant that if I staked out a place in the waiting room I'd be there for pretty much everything. At the very least, I might get a first name for S. Bennett out of it.

I didn't want to get called out by whoever was behind the desk, so I needed to look like I belonged. I glanced in the doors, picked out a lady sitting next to a large, ornate fern that blocked the line of sight of the cameras, and went directly to her as soon as I walked in. The nurse behind the desk—the same one who'd been trying to get my information before I hightailed it out of there—glanced up at me but didn't say anything.

The woman seemed surprised that I sat right next to her when there were plenty of empty seats around. "Ah... um." She was about to ask something awkward, and I wanted to head that off.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, keeping my voice pitched low. "It's just I don't like sitting alone in hospitals. It really creeps me out." I smiled shyly at her, and her discomfort melted away.

"It's okay, I understand completely," she said, patting my arm. "I guess I'm here so often that I stopped noticing it after a while. I came with my sister," she continued, eager to share and lessen her burden. The slightest opening could turn the most stoic person into a chatterbox, under the right circumstances. I'd used that inclination a lot, when getting information out of people in my previous line of work.

Of course, sometimes you had to force an opening. With a pair of pliers, occasionally. This lady was much easier. "She lives with me, and her son Kyle has the worst asthma attacks. We have to come in here, like, once a month, so I'm pretty used to it at this point."

I nodded and hummed at the right times, told her lies when I couldn't deflect and eventually let her fall asleep on my shoulder. She was tired, and it gave me a reason to be there. I closed my own eyes and waited, not sleeping, just listening to what was happening and waiting it out. Information would come. It usually did.



I heard the sirens first, growing louder in the distance. Not ambulance sirens, no, this was the steady *whoop-whoop-whoop* of a cop car. The sirens finally stopped, very close to the ER, and then a man burst through the doors and stalked over to the desk, and I opened my eyes and watched him go. He was tall, broad-shouldered and strong, a fairly handsome guy if you ignored the odd flatness where his nose had been broken and poorly repaired. He wore a wrinkled suit and a trench coat, and he was waving his badge at the nurse behind the desk like it was a gun, aggressive and impatient.

“You’ve got a cop here,” he said with no preamble. “Officer Bennett. I need to see him.”

“We did call down to the department,” the nurse said slowly, not at all intimidated by the man. “Are you his supervisor?”

“No,” the man bit out harshly. “I’m his boyfriend, Detective Peter Janich, and I want to see Shawn *now*.”

Shawn. I hadn’t thought of that one. Nice name. This hypermasculine pillar of the community was his boyfriend? I ignored the curl of disappointment in my gut and took the opportunity to examine the detective closer. Shawn had... interesting taste in men. I suppose it wasn’t easy to be a gay cop, and dating each other was probably easier in some ways than looking in a wider pool. Still, there was something about Detective Janich that felt off to me. His distress was real, but it wasn’t borne out of grief. I knew grieving. This was harsher than that, less personal.

“You can’t see him right now, he’s still in surgery,” the nurse told him.

“Once he’s out, then.”

“Only family is allowed to—”

“He has no family!” Janich yelled, making the woman on my shoulder stir uneasily. I stroked her hair with one hand, soothing her back into sleep as I listened in. “No parents, no brother or sister, nothing. I’m his emergency contact and as such, I want to know everything, you understand me? I want to speak to his doctors, I want to see him once he’s out of surgery, and I want to know what’s going on!”

“Then you’ll take a seat, Detective, and wait quietly until I have more information for you,” the nurse said, absolutely implacable. She was clearly



used to dealing with people in distress, and it was going to take more than one overbearing detective to get under her skin. “Right over there,” she added with a wave of her hand toward the chairs.

The staring contest lasted a little longer before Janich broke. He sat down across the room from where I was, a picture of angry discontent. He was older than the cop—Shawn, I reminded myself—closer to my age, but a little thicker around the middle. They probably weren’t partners professionally, not with Shawn in uniform and Janich in plainclothes. Janich had a short black buzz cut, and his eyes were overshadowed by a heavy brow. He looked like a bruiser, like the kind of guy a lot of my targets used as bodyguards. I amused myself by picturing all the ways I could take him apart while I surreptitiously watched him fidget, checking his phone again and again, like he was expecting something.

The wait lasted for another three hours, and I sat and watched through it all. Janich paced sometimes, drank five cups of coffee and never took his hand off of his phone. He was the only person who came in for Shawn, which at two a.m. wasn’t too surprising, but *was* a little depressing. Poor kid. On the other hand, one person was a lot easier to stay on than several, and when the nurse finally called him over and told him where to go, I was grateful for the chance to stretch my legs without worrying that I was going to miss something while I followed him.

“ICU room two-fourteen,” she told him, pointing at the elevator. “The surgeon is waiting to talk to you there.” Janich didn’t say thank you, he just took off. After a moment, I got up, carefully tilted my sleepy companion’s head back so she didn’t wake up, and nodded to the nurse as I headed for the bathroom. She didn’t even look up at me. Perfect.

The bathrooms were conveniently located right next to the stairwell, and I took the stairs two at a time as I legged it up to the second floor. The hallway I exited into was the two-thirties, not quite right, but I took a moment to examine the evacuation chart on the wall. The halls made an H shape, and the rows of rooms bracketed an office area in the center.

The elevator dinged. I poked my head around the corner and watched Detective Janich exit. Happily the office area was empty at the moment, and I



followed a ways behind but kept him in my sights. The door to room two-fourteen was open, and I got to within hearing distance and then did my best to look unobtrusive. Despite my size, I was pretty good at blending in with the walls when I wanted to be.

“You’re his partner?” the doctor asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, I know this must be a difficult time for you, Detective Janich. Whatever I or the staff here can do to make things—”

“Just tell me what’s going on with him. He’s going to live?”

“At this point, we’re cautiously optimistic that Officer Bennett will survive his injuries. As for how his recovery will go, well... it’s hard to say,” the doctor prevaricated, like they always did. “The head wound cracked his skull and caused severe bleeding in the cerebral cortex, which could lead to any of a number of complications. Additionally, blood pooled in the cerebellum, which may cause additional issues with mobility.”

“So it’s like he’s had a stroke or something?”

“In a matter of speaking,” the doctor said. “He may very well have difficulties with movement, speech and vision. He was brought here in the nick of time, really.”

“Any word on who brought him here?” I heard the first real thread of worry in Janich’s voice now.

“No. Some Good Samaritan, I suppose. He didn’t stay long enough to be identified. Are you aware that there was a... a homosexual slur written on your partner’s chest?”

“No.”

“It seems like this crime was motivated by hate, Detective Janich.” The doctor sounded truly remorseful, and I appreciated that. So many of them couldn’t even be bothered to fake it after the first few years. “I’m sure your department will get to the bottom of it, though. Officer Bennett’s effects are all bagged and set aside, you can claim them whenever you like.” He paused, then continued gently, “Your partner is a young man, very physically fit. There’s no



reason to think that, whatever problems or disabilities his injuries may bring about, that he won't recover very well with the right therapies."

"But he might not," Janich said dully.

"No, he might not," the doctor agreed. "But try to stay positive. I'll leave you two alone for now."

I pulled back and began walking casually in the opposite direction down the hall as the doctor left. Once he was gone I doubled back, just in time to hear Janich place a call.

"It's me. Yeah, he's still alive." A pause, followed by, "The doctor just doesn't know, okay? He might never speak again. Fuck, he might never even wake up. No, I know." I could hear him pacing as the person on the other end of the phone had their say. "No, it's too soon for that. He still might not survive, you don't have to bring anyone in." Another pause, then, "I *did*. I've got no fucking clue how he ended up here, some goddamn hiker maybe... no, no name, not even a decent description. Just some guy." One final pause, before he said, "I will," and ended the call. I glanced into the room for a split second and saw Janich just standing there, staring down at the still figure lying in the bed a few feet away.

"Goddammit, Shawn," he said softly, then something too soft for me to hear. I turned and walked away again as he left the room and headed for the elevator, all the energy gone from his steps. Once I was sure he was gone, I came back and entered the room.

Shawn didn't look good, even in the low light. His head was wrapped in bandages, probably all of his thick dark hair shorn away. Yellow iodine stained the skin at the edge of his forehead, and his chest and arms were festooned with wires leading to different machines, as well as two IVs. His chest was bare, and he looked cold to me.

I didn't have much time, I knew it, but I couldn't resist getting a little closer. I had held this body in my hands just hours ago; I had cradled his broken head on my shoulder. I had looked into his eyes, dark and bloody though they were, and had seen someone staring back at me. Someone strong and vital.



I had no reason to get attached to this man. I had saved his life, yeah, but he didn't owe me anything for that. And what had I saved him for? A life as a vegetable maybe, unable to move or communicate. Hell, he might not even make it to the vegetable stage, if that conversation by his asshole of a boyfriend was anything to go by. Janich knew a lot more about this than he was telling people, and what he knew was nothing good. Shawn wasn't safe here, and I wanted him safe. I wanted to protect him. He was dragging me back into a world that I'd firmly left behind, and if I had a modicum of sense I would be running in the other direction, but...

If I had any sense, I would never have come back to the hospital. From that moment on I was committed. My sense of curiosity had gotten the better of me. At least, that was the best way I had of explaining it.

"Shawn," I said gently, laying my bare hand on his chest. The heartbeat monitor spiked momentarily as I first made contact, then settled again. I could feel the strong, steady *thump-thump* against my palm, and smiled. This kid was tough. He deserved a chance, the same as I had gotten. Someone up there, someone with a very ironic sense of humor, had chosen me to be his guardian. It was already way too late for me to walk away. It had been from the moment our eyes met.

"Shawn," I said again, rubbing my thumb gently over his sternum. "I'm Justin." It was one of my favorite aliases, close enough to my real name that I always responded naturally to it. "Listen up. You've gotta fight through this, okay? Fight and wake up and get stronger. This isn't a good place to be. When you're better, I'll take you somewhere safe." Back home with me, of course. Where else could he go, with no family and a lying fucktard for a lover? Oddly, I felt no compunction over offering up my sanctuary to this man. He'd already been in it, after all. Besides, Della liked him.

"I'll take you home."

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I got a job at the hospital. Professional sanitation engineer, that's me. It's not the first time I'd worked as a janitor to get close to a mark, and there was nothing else I was qualified for in a hospital setting. If I was going to keep Shawn safe I needed to be there with him, and there was no way I could just



hang around day after day without someone starting to ask questions about who I was. Plus, when I took on a job I performed it to the best of my abilities, no half-assing it. So, I became Jay Jones, just another aimless mid-thirties high school dropout who knew enough to push a mop and broom, and who wouldn't complain about the piss-poor wages they were paying for the privilege. I got the night shift, which was perfect. The ICU was bustling during the day, but at night traffic slowed down to a trickle. If anyone was going to make an attempt on Shawn, it was going to be at night.

Regardless of my good intentions, I did actually have to *work* for my cover identity, so I bugged Shawn's room, adding a few microphones and audio recorders that I jury-rigged to broadcast to my iPod. I looked like I was listening to the grunge bands of my youth, when actually my ears were filled with the quiet, steady *beep... beep... beep* of Shawn's heart monitor. I also got to listen in on any conversations the doctors and nurses had, which was nice.

For the first week, Janich came by every night. He'd stay for five minutes, get an update from whoever was working the floor, and leave again. I don't think he ever touched Shawn. I was glad he didn't. Just looking at the detective made me itch for hand sanitizer. After the first week, when there had been no change and doctors were starting to worry about the possibility of pneumonia, and maybe putting Shawn on a ventilator, Janich stopped coming by so often. I, on the other hand, decided to lengthen my visits.

I saw Shawn every shift I worked, which was as many as I could persuade them to give me. Usually I just stayed for a few minutes, but I figured out after a while that this was the wrong approach. The kid was failing to thrive, and who could blame him? No one was talking to him, and he was never touched except for the impersonal physical tasks the nurses performed. So at the beginning of his second week in the hospital, at the end of my shift at six a.m., I slipped into his room, pulled a chair up, and took his hand. His fingers were cold.

"What did I tell you?" I asked mildly, tracing nonsense patterns across the back of his hand. "You've got to fight. This, right now? This is not fighting, Shawn. This is giving up. Pneumonia is a serious illness, and that's the last thing you need on top of all the rest of it." I cupped his fingers in my own and



breathed warm air over them, trying to warm him up. “So it’s gonna be tough. So you’ve got a shitty boyfriend who can’t be bothered to stay by your side. So what? That’s no excuse for being a quitter.” I worked my hands up his forearm, rubbing gently and avoiding the IV line. “Tell you what, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll spend an hour a day with you from here on out, and you stop fucking around and make an effort. What do you say?” I set Shawn’s hand down and clasped his shoulder, and waited.

There was a small spike, almost too small to notice, on the heart monitor. I might not have picked it up if I hadn’t been listening to his heart for eight hours a day for the past week, but I caught it. I smiled at him. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

As good as my intentions were I knew it wouldn’t be very discreet of me if my janitor persona suddenly started spending time with a patient, so I needed a second cover. I decided to be a volunteer with my “service dog” Della, which would be good socialization time for her and give me a reason to come in during the day.

Becoming another person was all about body language. You didn’t need to change the easily visible things so much as change the way you moved, the way you held yourself and the intonation of your voice. Jay Jones was a slumped, stooped guy who looked smaller than me, who wore baseball caps to work and constantly chewed nicotine gum when he couldn’t smoke a cigarette, which he smelled of no matter what he was wearing. He wore thick glasses that made the sides of his head appear to contract and turned his eyes small and beady. No one talked to Jay; no one gave a fuck about him, and that was perfect. Reggie Jameson, my bright and happy volunteer persona, was a recently returned army vet who walked with a limp and carried a cane, and who was using his volunteer work with Della as a kind of therapy for himself. He was tall and broad and still wore his dog tags around his neck, not quite ready to put them away yet. He had short, spiky blond hair and a wide smile, and the staff loved him.

Della ate up the attention. She was trained enough to know not to jump on people, and it didn’t take long for her to work out that she simply had to position herself for affection and it would be lavished on her in spades. The



only other time she really got to interact with someone other than me was the occasional meet and greet with Princess back home, and that was nothing compared to this kind of fun. Della worked out where to sit when someone was in a wheelchair, where to stand when someone was in a bed, and how not to get tangled up in crutches. The kids in pediatrics loved her, and I kind of got a kick out of seeing her with them as well. I also got hit on by plenty of moms, a less pleasant way to pass the time, but I put up with it until I could get around to Shawn's room.

I knew I had no bedside manner. There was no way I could just talk to the kid for an hour a day; I didn't have that much conversation in me. So after the first day, which was awkward and cut short, I brought a book with me. I liked Vonnegut, so I brought in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and started reading it to him. You wouldn't think it's the sort of book a person recovering from an injury would want to hear, but I thought the themes, of looking at all of life, death and beyond as one continuum, with no beginning and no end, were kind of comforting.

"This is just a moment trapped in amber," I told Shawn one day, about three weeks into his stay. He wasn't awake yet, but scans were showing increased brain activity, so that was good. "One little moment. You've got so many more to live, you can shake this one. And by the way, the asshole?" My colloquial name for Janich, who hadn't been by in three days, come to think of it—maybe he was just burying his head in the sand and hoping that no news was good news. "Yeah, that guy reminds me of Weary." Roland Weary was the jerk-off in the book who died of gangrene after being forced to march around in clogs. Now that was the kind of punishment I could get behind. That was the sort of experience you learned from. Or, in Weary's case, died from. We had yet to see what Detective Janich's fate would be, but I wasn't laying odds on a long and happy life for him.

Three weeks turned into four. I got into a routine, working at night and visiting during the day. It didn't leave much time for sleep but I'd never needed to sleep much, not since I was a teenager. I was lucky if I got four full hours a night, and could get by on two for almost a month before I started seeing things. I could handle it. I was doing more talking than I'd ever done in



my life, though, and to spare my vocal cords, I started switching things up. I held Shawn's hands, tracing the veins along his wrists and warming up his ever-cold skin. I rubbed his temples, gently, like I remembered Margot doing for me once when a bout with malaria had me so out of it I could barely breathe. I even massaged the bottoms of Shawn's feet, figuring it couldn't hurt. Those were also cold, like ice. Couldn't these people bother to put some socks on him? Blah blah edema, blah blah circulation, I'd heard them talking about it but honestly, how much could a pair of fuzzy socks hurt? I resisted the impulse, though. I didn't need to leave any more of myself behind than I already was. It was a routine, just one more routine, and I adapted to it with an increasingly pessimistic outlook.

And then, at the beginning of the fifth week, Shawn woke up.

I was there when it happened. Not there as perky Reggie, no, of course not, that would have been too convenient. I was there as Jay instead, dumb Jay Jones, mopping Shawn's floor and using it as an excuse to draw closer to his bed. When I was close enough, I reached out and tugged gently on his earlobe. Just one little, grounding touch, just a reminder that someone was there, that he wasn't alone. That, of course, was the time that Shawn chose to open his eyes.

At first I couldn't believe it was happening. Nothing had changed, not even the tempo of the heart rate monitor. Shawn just went from closed eyes to open, and then he was looking at me. *Really* looking at me. His eyes were the shade of a coral reef I'd seen once from the deck of a boat. It had been during one of my only vacations, and the brightness of the coral, even through the clear blue water, had surprised me. Bright and blue and flecked with lighter colors, almost opaline in appearance. Shawn stared at me and didn't blink. He *saw* me.

"Shawn," I said, tugging off my baseball cap and glasses and moving closer. I took his hand in one of mine. "You remember your name is Shawn?"

Slowly, glacially slow, he nodded.

"Do you remember me?"

There was a long pause, and I was sure for a moment that he didn't. But then he nodded, and he squeezed my hand. Not very hard, he probably



*couldn't* squeeze hard yet, but I felt the pressure of it. "My name is Justin." I smiled and shook his hand like we were formally being introduced. "Nice to actually meet you." I found myself stroking the underside of his wrist with my thumb, not a very formal reaction, but couldn't quite bring myself to stop. "What else do you remember?"

His mouth opened, and I prepared myself to hear his voice for the first time. I admit, I'd had more than a few thoughts about what he'd sound like. What I hadn't been prepared for was for him to sound like nothing at all. Shawn closed his mouth, opened it again, then shut it. His eyes widened, a precursor to the panic that suddenly flooded him, manifesting in a greatly increased heart rate.

Wonderful, *that* would definitely set the nurses off. I put Shawn's hand back on the bed and pulled away. He looked confused, and his fingers twitched toward me.

"Shh, it's okay," I said soothingly. "But Shawn, I'm a secret. I'm your secret." I had no idea if he understood what I was talking about, but I didn't have any more time to explain. I snatched up my mop, put my cap back on and stared dumbly at the bed as a nurse rushed in. It was Nurse Rebecca, not my favorite, partly because she was all business and never bothered to talk to Shawn like some of the others did.

"He's really awake!" she exclaimed, then looked over at me. "What happened?"

"Dude, look, I was just workin' on his floor," I said, shrugging slightly. "Maybe he likes the smell of bleach, I dunno."

She sighed and waved me out of the way. "You need to clear out," she told me.

"But the floor's not done."

"Finish it tomorrow," she said sternly. "Right now, just go."

She didn't need to tell me again. I'd learn more from eavesdropping anyway. I took my mop and cart and got out of there, working my way down to the other end of the hall. I saw two doctors arrive, another nurse, and heard a flurry of medical technobabble that I understood one in five words of. What I



didn't hear, not once, was Shawn's voice. They were trying, but he either couldn't or wouldn't say anything.

By the end of my shift I realized that I wasn't going to learn anything else tonight, and I wasn't going to get back in there either. So I decided to go home. I'd take Della for a walk, get some sleep and come back sometime during the day to see how things stood. Good plan.

The first two parts went perfectly. I made it home, and I took Della for a walk. She was eager to get outside, and I considered, yet again, installing a doggie door for her. She hadn't had an accident inside yet, but it was probably only a matter of time. Apart from worrying that she'd run away, though, I didn't like the breach in security a door like that afforded. Not that anyone was looking for me... that I knew of. But while I personally was too broad to ever fit through a doggie door, some of the best in the business were wiry little fuckers who'd slide through it without breaking stride. I had worked mostly as a lone wolf, solitary but straightforward, but these people were the cougars of the trade. They were men and women who fit into places no human should go and then toyed with their prey, stalking them until the mood to kill finally struck. You could see why I'd be worried.

The walk was good, Della was tired out and lay down on the floor to sleep, but I could already tell that short of exhausting myself and then taking some drugs I wasn't going to sleep any time soon. I couldn't stop thinking about Shawn. Why he didn't speak, how he was recovering, whether he really knew who I was and had any memory of me at all. Whether or not Janich was there with him.

The transmitters in the bugs I'd put in place had a fairly limited range, enough that I could hear what was going on while I was in the hospital but not much further. Everything was being recorded and I could listen later if I wanted to, but that wasn't doing it for me tonight. I needed to know.

I put Della in my other car, a ten-year-old silver Civic that looked like a thousand other cars on the road at any given moment, and drove back to the hospital. There was a coffee shop a few blocks down. I grabbed a latte, parked within listening distance, and sat back to get the lay of the land.

There was a lot more movement in the room now, people coming in and out, doctors, therapists, nurses all vying for Shawn's attention. He seemed to



slip in and out of sleep, dozing for as long as they would let him before someone else had to test something. He still wasn't speaking, but they more than made up for his silence. I lay my seat back, closed my eyes and let the words flow over me. It was relaxing, almost Zen, to hear them outline his injury in such distant terms, test and poke and prod. I enjoyed it, because it was all proof that he was really awake, really alive, really doing this. It couldn't be fun for him, but life wasn't about fun. Life was about survival.

Around eleven that morning, just as I was getting ready to get out of the car and go inside, Janich arrived. I settled in again and waited for him to get up there. Janich knew even less than I did about medicine, which meant a real explanation was coming.

"Detective Janich, thank you for coming—"

"You said he was awake," Janich said briskly. I heard footsteps moving fast, then stopping abruptly. "He's not awake." The tone was accusatory.

"Shawn has had a very busy twelve hours," the doctor said reprovingly. "He fell asleep about fifteen minutes ago, right after we called you."

"Is he speaking?"

"No. That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about. Please, sit." There was silence for a long moment, then the scraping of chairs being pulled out on linoleum. "Shawn is exhibiting some symptoms of both aphasia and dysarthria, which isn't surprising given that he's sustained major head trauma."

"What are those?"

"Both disorders manifest in many different ways, but primarily they concern difficulty with speech and language comprehension and problems pronouncing words. In Shawn's particular case, he seems to understand everything we say, but can't access the correct words to respond himself. He can follow text and comprehend it—he was able to read yes or no questions and answer them with a nod or a head shake—but he isn't able to speak beyond making the most simplistic noises."

"So what, he's some kind of idiot now?" Janich's voice was harsh and, I was pleased to hear, sounded more than a little guilty.



“Not at all,” the doctor said immediately. “Shawn’s mental capabilities, his problem-solving abilities, his reason, his personality—those haven’t changed, at least not that we’ve noticed so far. Obviously we aren’t experts on his personality since he’s been asleep for so long, but he was able to respond to humor and to show understanding of his situation, and compassion for his caregivers. He’s still the man you knew before.”

“How much does he remember about before?” Guilt and nervousness, clear as day in his voice. I savored the rush of Janich’s fear as I kept listening, absently scratching Della between the ears.

“The speech therapist asked about that. Eventually she came to the conclusion that Shawn has no memory of the attack that sent him here, or the person who brought him in. He knew he was a police officer, he picked out your name and your supervisor’s names from a list she showed him, but beyond that, we’re just not sure. Short term memory loss is very common with this kind of injury, Detective Janich.”

I heard a muffled scrubbing sound, like someone was rubbing a hand over their face. “What else?”

“We’ve noticed some mobility issues. After nearly a month in bed a certain degree of muscular atrophy was to be expected, but Shawn is having significant difficulty with independent movement in his arms and legs. He can sit up, his core strength is surprisingly good, but he’s not able to support his own weight standing yet, and his hands aren’t capable of holding a writing implement or a fork, for example.”

Janich gave a heavy sigh. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Detective, your partner has just come out of a coma of significant length,” the doctor said, and I could hear the effort he was putting into remaining compassionate with the jerk. “None of this is necessarily unexpected, and a lot of it’s actually good news. With the proper care, I think Shawn stands an excellent chance at a very good recovery.”

“Can’t be a cop when you’re a cripple, doc.”

“I’m sure there are other avenues open to Shawn if that ends up being the case,” the doctor said stiffly, patience almost exhausted. “Now, if you have no other questions, Detective Janich?”



“Nah.”

“Then I’ll take my leave for now.” Another scrape of the chair, and the doctor walked out. Janich stayed behind, still quiet. I listened to him breathe, listened to him scratch himself and shift in his chair and sigh the sigh of someone who was in way over his head. *Welcome to reality, asshole.* I listened to him quietly stew in his own worry, and that was good.

Then he said, “Fuck this bullshit,” and started shaking Shawn, and that wasn’t nearly so good. “Shawn. Wake up.”

I was out of the car in an instant, clipping Della’s leash to her collar and grabbing my cane from the back seat. I didn’t trust Janich as far as I could throw him, which, unless it was off a building, was no more than a few feet. I definitely didn’t trust him to be alone with Shawn, not when he was so worried about what Shawn knew. Janich might not have been the one to do the deed, I wasn’t sure yet, but he had no compunctions about covering it up, and that made him nothing more than a timer in my mind. Eventually his clock would wind down, and I would be there as the last second struck, his own personal grim reaper.

*You’re not a killer anymore*, my poor, neglected conscience whispered to me, stopping me in my tracks. My conscience had the voice of an old man I’d once known, very briefly. It had been an encounter that I’d never been able to forget, no matter how much I wanted to. I squeezed my eyes shut. *You wanted to get out. You had to get out, remember? This is why.*

“Shut up,” I said firmly to myself. Someone was staring at me from over on the sidewalk. I didn’t care. “Just shut up.”

*It’s a long, slippery slope back down to the bottom*, the voice continued. *How much more blood will you have to spill before you regret your choice? How much of it will be your own?*

“I have things to do,” I told my conscience. “So if you could just back off for a while, I’d really appreciate that.” The voice subsided, and I exhaled with relief and looked down at Della. She stared up at me adoringly, wide brown eyes full of nothing but love and anticipation of another visit to the hospital.

“You’re crazy,” I told her, then laughed at my own words. I probably had that backwards, but I wasn’t the only crazy person here. Dogs as a species



were just insane. To put their boundless faith into a creature so patently undeserving of such love and devotion as a human being, it was ridiculous. “Let’s go in,” I said, and she eagerly trotted by my side.

“Hi Reggie!” the nurse at the front desk said as I walked in. He was a young man, cute and definitely interested, if all the flirting he did every time I visited was any indication. I smiled in return.

“Hi Carlos.”

“Going to visit the kids today?” he asked as he reached down to pet Della, coincidentally giving me a perfect view of his stellar ass as he bent over the desk. I gave him full props for trying. I wasn’t interested in picking someone up right now, but it was nice to know the option was there.

“I thought I’d start in ICU,” I said thoughtfully, removing the iPod’s earbuds. Shawn hadn’t woken up yet, but Janich was still trying. I wanted to get up there before things had a chance to escalate any further.

“Sounds good. Let me know if you or Della needs anything, okay?”

“I will,” I told him, and headed for the stairs. When people asked, I told them it was good exercise for my bum leg, but in reality you wouldn’t catch me dead in an elevator. Tiny little metal boxes and I didn’t get along so well. I had been buried in one once, and ever since then I had no trouble admitting to myself that it was fine, just fine, to avoid them like the plague.

I slowed down in the ICU, stopped to talk to the girls at the desk. “Will you visit Mrs. Cavanaugh today?” one of them asked. “She’s getting discharged to a long term care facility tomorrow.” Mrs. Cavanaugh was recovering from a stroke, but she was a dog lover and had enough control in her right side to offer Della doggy biscuits and gentle touches. Della in turn nosed her palm gently, and licked her hand once she was done. Della was too good for this fucking world.

“I definitely will, but I’d like to look in on Shawn first, if you don’t mind.” Shawn was a common topic of discussion amongst the staff, because he was a cop, because he was hot, and because he was in a coma. *Had* been in a coma. The circumstances could have come straight out of a soap opera.

“Omigod, he woke up!” one of them—Bertha, a tiny little thing whose parents must have hated her—squealed. “Last night! His boyfriend is in with



him right now!” She frowned then and lowered her voice. “It’s the first time he’s been here in five days. Honestly, he seems like kind of a jackass.”

*Truer words were never spoken.* “I’ll give them some space,” I lied pleasantly. “Start with Kip, maybe.”

“Sounds good. Have fun, Reggie.”

“I plan to,” I said with a grin, and turned away toward Shawn’s room.

I could hear Janich’s voice from twenty feet down the hall, rough and urgent. “You need to tell me what you know. Can’t you make a mark, or something? What’s the last thing you remember, Shawnie?” *Shawnie?* That sounded like a politically incorrect stripper name. I gave up on my half-formed plan to listen in and decided to enter instead. I’d be exposing my face, but this cover was fairly complete and most of the staff could vouch for me. Plus I had a dog. Friendly dogs inspired trust.

“Hi!” I said brightly as I entered the room. Janich was trying to force a pen into Shawn’s fingers and Shawn looked uncomfortable. Then he saw me and his look turned flat amazed. Janich wasn’t nearly so pleased, and I knew I had to speak fast.

“Wow, you’re awake!” I said to Shawn, happy surprise coloring my voice. “It’s so great to see you recovering! I’m Reggie, and this is Della.” I gave her a signal and Della lifted her paw and batted at the air in an imitation of a wave. “We’ve been visiting you for a while.” I turned to Janich. “And you are?”

“His boyfriend, and we were having a private conversation,” Janich said tightly. Shawn frowned at him. “But I guess it can wait,” he amended. “Shawnie, I’ll be back later, okay?” He hesitated for a moment, then leaned in and pressed a kiss to Shawn’s lips. Then he left without another word, ignoring me completely. Perfect.

“Hi,” I said again, softer this time. I moved into the chair Janich had abandoned and took the pen out of Shawn’s lax fingers. Della peeked over the edge of the bed, sniffing interestedly. “Do you remember me?” I took Shawn’s hand in mine. “Do you recognize me?”

He nodded, a little hesitantly. His fingers clenched, and I relaxed a little, thinking maybe I was holding him too hard. But instead he used his thumb to



slowly, carefully brush the letter *J* into my palm. I smiled with genuine delight this time.

“That’s right,” I said. “I’m Justin.” I repeated the trace with my index finger against his own palm. “People call me Reggie when I look like this, but for you I’m Justin. Just for you.”

Shawn shook his head a little. “I know, it’s complicated.” I sat back a bit but kept a hold of his hand. “Do you know that you were attacked?” A hesitant nod. “Do you remember it at all?” A head shake this time, very firm. “That’s not surprising, given how badly you were injured. Someone dumped you in the woods behind my house. I found you and brought you here, but no one knows that.” His eyebrows quirked quizzically. “I have a problem with authority of any kind knowing my whereabouts,” I explained. “I’m a private guy. Did anyone tell you the details of your attack?”

Shawn nodded, and gestured slightly towards his still-bandaged head. “Right, you were hit in the head. You were hit really fucking hard, Shawn. When I found you, you were bleeding out fast and I could see part of your skull. You’re lucky the bone didn’t fracture.” The look he gave me was a little suspicious. “That’s what the doctors said, anyway.”

He traced a question mark into my palm. “What, how do I know what the doctors are saying?” Shawn nodded emphatically. “Oh, I’ve got a little recorder set up in here. I’ve been listening in practically every night since you first arrived.” He looked a little offended at that. “I did it to keep you safe, Shawn. Everyone assumes this was a hate crime. You had the word ‘fag’ spray painted on your chest.”

Shawn’s eyes widened. Apparently no one had told him that part. “Yeah, it’s not very pretty.” I didn’t tell him my suspicions yet, but I had to ask... “So, how long have you been with Detective Janich?”

Shawn opened his mouth, shut it again and rolled his eyes towards the ceiling in frustration. “Sorry, that’s not a yes or no question,” I apologized. “Hang on.” I reached for the sheaf of forms attached to a clipboard at the foot of his bed, turned one of them over and jotted a few words down on the back. *Weeks, Months, Years*. I held it up where Shawn could see it and moved my finger along the three. “Nod when I get to the right one.” He nodded on



*Months.* “More than six months?” A head shake. “Five months. Four. Three.” He nodded there. “Three months, then. Not so long, in the grand scheme of things.” That might explain the detective’s brusque manner, but it didn’t explain the phone call he’d made on Shawn’s first night here.

I had more questions, but Shawn’s hand was trembling, and he looked tired. I put the clipboard aside and held up the copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that we’d finished just last week. “I suppose you don’t recall me reading any of this to you.” Shawn shook his head, but he looked interested. “I don’t have any problem with starting over,” I told him honestly. “I’d like to be able to discuss it with a more attentive audience, anyway.”

Shawn looked away from me then, but I saw the shame in his eyes, and in the hunch of his shoulders. “Nonsense, of course you can still discuss things,” I told him. “We just need to figure out a system that lets you. It’s a problem to be solved, nothing insurmountable. Don’t mope before you know it’s going to be an issue. In fact, don’t mope at all. It’s not very attractive.”

Shawn looked at me like he couldn’t quite believe I was real. It wasn’t the first time I’d gotten that reaction, but it *was* the first time I’d gotten it without a gun in my hand. I smiled at Shawn. It was startlingly easy to smile at him. “We can hold off on the reading, though. Della’s been waiting very patiently to be introduced to you.” I made space between the chair and the bed and let Della prop her front half up on my knees so she could see better. Her tongue lolled, and when Shawn’s hand stretched out to her she licked it eagerly.

“I think she’s part Rottweiler, part lovebird,” I said with mock despair. “Della, it isn’t nice to slip in tongue on the first date.”

Shawn smiled, which was the whole point. It was only coincidence that his happiness coincided with a spread of warmth through my own body, making me feel a little foolish. This wasn’t about my happiness; it was about Shawn getting the chance he needed to make it. My concerns were secondary.

“You look like you need to sleep, and I need to keep making my rounds,” I told him, standing up. “I’ll see you again tonight.” He raised his eyebrows again. “I work as a janitor here at night.” Understanding dawned in his face. “Yeah, from last night, that was me too. I’m a man of many names, but for you I’m Justin, okay? Only for you.” He nodded, and his eyes drifted shut. He



snapped them open again, but I knew he needed the rest. "I'll be back later," I assured him. He accepted my words, and this time his eyes stayed shut. I watched his chest rise and fall for a few minutes, still feeling stupidly happy. Della looked like she'd be content to stay too, but we had a job to do, so after another long glance we left, heading down the hall for Kip's room.

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I'd never realized before just how many specialists there were in medicine. When I was sick as a child I was tended to by the local Catholic clinic's nurse practitioner; in the army there had been army doctors and field medics. After the army there had been back rooms and bloody instruments, and never any names exchanged. Then there had been Margot, and Margot had been good at everything Dom and I had ever needed. But our needs hadn't been rehabilitative, while Shawn's were nothing but.

He had different doctors for his pain management, for his brain function, for his mood, for his fuckin' kidneys, even. He had discrete therapists to help with swallowing, with speech, with reading comprehension, and basic mobility. He had nurses to help with the everyday bodily functions, and after a few weeks there wasn't a bit of him that hadn't been picked over. It took up a lot of his time, and there were some days that I didn't even get to see him while he was awake, thanks to his new schedule.

On the plus side, Shawn was definitely improving. Not dramatically, but noticeably. Shawn still wasn't speaking, but he could answer any question as long as you had a variety of responses ready to pick from. He could sit in a wheelchair, and even propel himself a little with his arms, although his physical coordination was still pretty shaky. His legs wouldn't support his weight, but he could move his toes now, and his memory was getting clearer by the day.

I tried not to push him on the memory thing. The longer he went without remembering, the longer he could stay here without Janich making a problem. Janich came by every few days, but beyond asking Shawn a few awkward questions about how he was doing and passing along a little cop gossip, there was nothing of substance there. I did push Shawn a little bit about his terrible taste in men.



“Seriously, why him?” I asked, chewing on a piece of rank nicotine gum. Shawn had been awake when janitor-me got around to cleaning his room that evening, and I had a little time to spare. “You’re too good-looking to be that desperate.”

Shawn raised an eyebrow at me. “Please, I know what you normally look like.” I’d done a lot of research on Shawn without the faintest bit of guilt; it always paid to know as much as you could about your mark. He was twenty-three, he had an associate’s degree in business, he’d grown up in Seattle and worked on the force there for two years before transferring here almost six months ago, and he’d had absolutely zero contact with his family after coming out when he was seventeen. He’d been arrested as a juvie for possession, but the arresting officer had encouraged the judge to give him a break, so Shawn got community service in the local precinct instead of being locked up. You couldn’t say the judge didn’t have a good sense of irony.

His arresting officer, Sergeant Doug Hamilton, had ended up as Shawn’s partner once he made the force. Rumors had swirled about the two of them, but either Doug hadn’t been interested or he just hadn’t been out like Shawn. He’d died when their cruiser was struck by a semitruck during a car chase. Shawn had been the one driving. He’d asked for a transfer right after the funeral.

“Here,” I told Shawn, pulling a pad of notepaper out of my back pocket. “I’ll write down some options, you pick the one that best describes Detective Janich.” I grabbed the pen from his chart and scrawled out: *better in bed than he looks, overall low maintenance, and just bored out of my fucking mind*. I showed him the list and he laughed silently, and shook his head a little. The smile he wore turned to a grimace of discomfort as the headshake rattled his brain.

I waited for his grimace to pass, but it didn’t. Shawn stared down at his hands and clenched them slowly, and his jaw tightened. He looked angry and upset, but I didn’t think it was because of me. Nevertheless, I thought he might like some space. “You want me to go?”

Shawn looked over at me unhappily and shrugged. His hands unclenched, and he seemed dismayed and uncertain. “You remember something?” I hazarded.



He paused, then nodded slowly.

“Something about the attack?”

He very carefully shook his head no.

“Something about Detective Janich?”

Shawn looked away, but I knew I’d nailed it. Shawn didn’t know how to lie with his eyes. “Is it something I can help you with?” I asked cautiously. Shawn seemed to accept me as an unofficial guardian of sorts, but he hadn’t asked me for anything other than my company so far. I hadn’t brought up the conversation I’d overheard, or my plans to bring him home with me when the time was right. Our relationship was cordial but cautious, and I didn’t want to push things too quickly.

He paused for a moment then mimed writing again. “Sure,” I said. “Just tell me what to write.”

Shawn had a copy of the alphabet printed in large letters on a piece of paper by his bed. I handed it to him and he trailed his fingers over the letters, pointing out the ones he wanted. I wrote them down faithfully, and when he was done I showed him the result. **DID YOU STOP?** “Is this what you wanted to ask?”

Shawn nodded, and I handed the question over to him. “Did he stop what?” I asked. Shawn shook his head no again. “Look, you can trust me.”

Shawn managed to arch his eyebrow sarcastically. I was impressed at his fine motor control, and a little pissed that *now* was when he decided to start doubting me. “You don’t want to let me in on whatever’s happening between you and Janich, fine, it’s not really my business. But I’m not here to hurt you or rat you out or make trouble for you. I’m only here to help.”

Shawn still had the copy of the alphabet on his lap. He pointed to a new set of letters. **WHY?**

That was a tough question, and one I didn’t really want to answer, but Shawn deserved something. “Well...” Honestly, I was still a little unsure about this myself. “I—look, I *found* you, okay? I found you and kept you alive and I feel responsible for you. I know you don’t have any family that cares or



they'd be here with you, and Janich is..." What could I say that was the least offensive? "Unreliable. I've been in shitty situations not unlike this before, and they're a lot easier to get through when you're not alone."

Shawn tilted his head and smiled faintly at me. He pointed again. **WHO ARE YOU?**

Oh boy, even harder. "Well, I really was in the army," I prevaricated. "I got out of it after seven years. I did some other stuff for a while, then I retired from that and now I live here."

Shawn considered that for a moment then asked, **SPY?**

"Yes," I said immediately, because that was better than the truth. "Bond, James Bond."

Shawn shook his head.

"What, you don't think I could be James Bond? Not British enough?"

**NO ACCENT**

"Oh, I can do accents, luv," I told him, putting on my Estuary dialect with a flourish. I'd spent three months in a flat in London shagging the living daylights out of a mark's brother before that particular job ended, and having orgasmic nonsense screamed in my ear night after night had done wonders for my linguistic retention. "But you're right, not British. And I was never anything as official as James Bond." *Or anything as legal, either.*

Shawn opened his mouth and tried to say something, but what came out wasn't really a word, just a string of sounds that made no sense. He took a breath, then tried again. After a few more attempts he smacked one of his hands down on his lap and stared at the ceiling for a moment before turning back to the alphabet page. **DOESNT MATTER. THANKS**

"The pleasure's all mine, pet," I said, keeping the accent on for now. "I've got to go, these rooms won't clean themselves."

**GOODNIGHT**

"Goodnight, Shawn." I put the glasses back on (damn things gave me a headache but I had to wear them or I wasn't really Jay), popped in the ear buds and slowly pushed my equipment out into the hall. I had four hours left on my



shift, and if I didn't get this entire floor done my manager would bust my balls about it.

The thought of that small, balding man laying into me, threatening me with this and that, made me laugh. If that was the worst threat my current life could offer me, I was really living in a fantasy world. I had lost teeth and toes to torture before, and now I was wearing a persona who was stricken by the thought of a reprimand from his manager. It was just hilarious.

“Less laughing, more working,” Nurse I’m-A-Raving-Bitch said as she walked by me. “The patient in two-twenty just vomited all over the floor.”

Well. At least I hadn't already cleaned that particular room tonight.

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Detective Janich usually came to visit around lunchtime, which was perfect for me. I could catch a few hours of sleep between my night shift and my volunteer stint, then grab a cup of coffee and take Della for a walk in the park while I listened in on his and Shawn's conversations. They were still pretty one-sided, but lucky for me, Janich was a repeater. Maybe he liked having the extra time that repeating what the other person said gave him to think; maybe it was a part of his training as a detective. Maybe he just needed to hear something more than once for it to sink into his thick troglodyte skull. But no matter what the reason was, thanks to that habit I got a lot more information out of his visits to Shawn than I would have otherwise.

This day's visit started like all of them seemed to, with a heavy sigh and a perfunctory “Hey, Shawnie,” before he pulled up a chair and sat down. “You speakin' yet?”

No, no he wasn't. But he was asking questions, apparently. “Did you stop... what the fuck's that supposed to mean?”

*Tap tap.* The sound of a finger pushing on a piece of paper, emphatic.

“Stop what, Shawnie? Stop smoking?” Janich chuckled, but he sounded nervous. I called Della back from where she was running around and clipped her leash back on. We might be needed in the hospital before long.

“What, did you remember something?” That was definitely nervousness in his voice. “What did you remember? Something about the attack?”



*Tap tap.*

“You’ve gotta be more goddamn specific, Shawn, otherwise I can’t answer you!” Janich said, his voice rising at the end. It was shockingly loud; he had to be close to one of my microphones. “If you can write this out then you can write me an explanation. Here, take the pen.” There were the brief sounds of a tussle, or more likely manhandling. “Write it out, goddammit. Write it out for me, tell me what you know!”

One long moment of silence later Janich said, “Jesus, look at you. You can’t even hold onto the fucking pen. You got someone to write this for you, then? Who, one of the nurses? Have you been talking to someone?” His voice got lower. “Did you tell someone else about... whatever this is about, Shawn?”

I put on some speed, swearing at myself in my head for giving Reggie a limp now. I couldn’t move at anything close to a run. Della whined, maybe sensing my own worry.

*Tap tap.*

“You’re confused,” Janich said at last. “Out of your head confused. You’re a goddamn crippled *nutbag*, Shawn, and it doesn’t matter what you think you know, no one’s going to take the word of a head case like *you* for anything, especially not anything about me. I’ve got twelve years on the force here. You’re just a Johnny-come-lately who got his last partner killed. No one cares what you have to say, Shawn.” There was a slamming noise, then the chair scraping again as he stood up and stomped out of the room.

I ran into Detective Janich on his way out. Literally ran into him; I made sure to turn my shoulder into it and ram him right in the solar plexus as he came out of the front doors. It was easy; he’d been looking down at his phone the whole time, glaring as he texted furiously. He fell back on his ass, the phone flying out of his hand.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry! Here, let me help you. Della, fetch!” I pointed at his phone and she bounded over and grabbed it up gently in her jaws, then carried it back to me. Janich was still flat on his back, the air knocked out of him thanks to his diaphragm contracting so violently. My time as a high school



football player had been more useful in my working life than I'd ever anticipated when I'd been a young linebacker. I took the phone out of Della's mouth and stared at it. "Huh, it's kind of yucky. Let me get the drool off this for you." I backed through his last text exchange as fast as I could. The one I'd interrupted was still undone and unsent.

**Toni—**

**Not 2 late 2 finish this.**

**He remembers something. I dont know what.**

**Suspicious.**

"Give... me..." Janich was getting his breath back now, and groping for the phone. I had to hand it over to him before I could find out the contact's number; the name was listed as *G*.

"Wow, I am so sorry, again," I said, standing up and offering Janich my hand. He ignored it and stood up on his own. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Just get the fuck out of my way." Janich stalked towards the parking lot and I watched him go, my spine prickling with apprehension.

I would have been concerned even if I hadn't read those texts, because I'd listened in on that conversation. I knew just how disturbed Janich was, and I knew that he was involved in what had been done to Shawn. I had a sixth sense when it came to detecting imminent violence; it had gotten me out of situations that should have killed me plenty of times, just because I was a paranoid bastard. That sense, coupled with those texts, clinched it for me. Shit was going down soon, which meant I needed to be ready for it. Shawn had only gotten three weeks' worth of rehabilitative therapy, but that was something to deal with at a later date once I was sure he was safe. Which he definitely wasn't, here.

But I probably had until tonight. I assumed that meant after normal visiting hours, but I couldn't be sure. Which meant that I needed to stick around, wait for whoever Janich was talking with to come, and then take him out.

I didn't have to wait. I could shanghai Shawn out of here fairly easily once I'd convinced him it was necessary. It would be harder during the day but not impossible; I could probably even convince the nurses that I just wanted to



take him for a ride around the building in his wheelchair to get him some fresh air, then drive off into the sunset. But that wasn't a final solution, and I liked finality. I wanted to know who was after Shawn so I could better know how to defeat them, and that meant using Shawn as bait.

*Your logic is so fucked up, my asshole conscience informed me. Take the kid and run, moron.*

"Fuck off."

*You're just feeling antsy. If you want to kill something so bad, go get a hunting license.*

"Who said anything about killing?" I demanded.

"Reggie?"

I turned to look at the entrance and saw Carlos there, staring at me a little uncertainly. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I told him, pasting on my bright smile. "Sorry, I just... I get a little distracted sometimes."

"It's fine," he said, although clearly it wasn't. I'd just tarnished my perfect volunteer persona in his eyes by arguing with myself like a crazy person. It was probably a good thing that this was going to be my last day at the hospital in either of my capacities. "Some of the kids were asking about Della. You want to start there?"

"Sure," I said, amenable enough. I'd hear whatever was going on in Shawn's room. I could get there in a flash if I needed to. "Sorry about that," I repeated as I limped into the entryway of the hospital. "That hasn't happened to me for a long time."

Carlos' wariness softened in the face of my obvious disability. "It's okay, I get it. I know life hasn't been easy for you, man." He glanced down at the floor and then back up at me. "If you ever want to get coffee and talk about some of it, I'm... I could definitely be available."

*Oh, Carlos. You're way too good for me.* It was true, and I knew I could never take him up on it. Reggie would have, though, and so I smiled and said, "I'll keep that in mind."



It wasn't a yes, but it was close enough to make Carlos smile back at me, his good humor restored. "You do that," he said saucily, and headed to the front desk while Della and I went for the staircase.

The time we spent with the kids that day was great, better than usual, every word and interaction limned with goodness because I knew it was the last. Della was perfect, playing with them gently and lapping up attention like the love sponge that she was, and even the single mothers weren't too overbearing. By the time I freed myself and headed for the ICU, I was in a genuinely good mood. It evaporated immediately when I entered Shawn's room and saw him lying flat on his back, staring at the ceiling as tears dripped down the sides of his face.

"Shawn," I said, but he didn't look at me. He just blinked and turned his face away so I couldn't see him. I told Della to stay then walked over to the bed.

"Shawn." I laid my hand on his arm and he flinched. That was when I saw the bruises that ringed his forearm and wrist, heavy and fresh from where someone had grabbed him. "Oh." Courtesy of Detective Janich, probably, the finger pattern was broad. The last of my geniality was instantly consumed by my rage, and I stood very still and took a moment to visualize, in graphic detail, all of the things I was going to do to Janich before I killed him. The man was going to die; I didn't really care at this point whether he was the one who had attacked Shawn or not. He was guilty, case closed. The only question now was how long I was going to make it last.

No one could make me kill a person if I'd decided against it, but the other side of that coin was, no one could dissuade me from a kill once I'd decided that a person needed to die. I couldn't be bought off, I couldn't be tortured into making that promise, and I couldn't be gentled into it. Janich was going to die, but Shawn didn't need to hear that right now.

I lightened my touch to a gentle stroke. "I'm so sorry," I told him honestly. *I was* sorry that Janich was a bastard and that I was going to have to kill him now. It was an inconvenience. But I was mostly sorry that he'd hurt Shawn to begin with.

Shawn pulled his arm away and wiped at his face, then fumbled for the controls to raise the bed. I didn't help him, even though I wanted to, just let



him work it out until he got a hand on the button and pressed UP. Slowly he rose, and once he was upright he sighed and tapped his ear. It was his way of saying, *so you heard that, huh?*

“I did,” I confirmed, sitting down and finally motioning Della over. She immediately jumped up onto Shawn’s bed and curled against his side, and I was almost jealous of her before I saw the smile it put on Shawn’s face. “I take it things are over between the two of you.”

That got me an emphatic nod.

“Shawn...” I hesitated for a moment, because there was really no good way to ask this, before saying, “Is Janich a dirty cop?”

Shawn looked away for a moment, his hands clenching briefly in Della’s short hair. His upper body’s motor control was really getting better. I just sat, quiet, until he nodded.

“Do you remember what his business is? Who he’s working with?”

That got me a tilted hand wobble that meant, *A little*.

“Is it guns? Drugs?” A nod. Yes to drugs, then. “Working with one of the California cartels?” The city of Renton was in a good position to move drugs, since it was on a harbor and fairly close to Canada. Shawn shrugged with frustration. “You don’t know the details. That’s fine, Shawn,” I added when he looked like he wanted to hit something. “You found something that made him uncomfortable, and you’re remembering it now. Still nothing about the attack itself?”

Shawn shook his head, grimacing. I took a moment to admire his hair, still short but at least visible now that the nurses had removed the bandaging around his head. The scars stood out pretty starkly, but in a few more months his hair would be long enough to hide them. It was always good to diminish any identifying marks.

“Do you see the connection I’m seeing?” I asked Shawn gently, joining him in scratching beneath Della’s collar. She made a groaning sound of contentment. “Between your attack and Janich’s side business? That it probably wasn’t a hate crime that put you in here?”

Shawn looked anguished. He might not be in love with Janich—I really hoped he wasn’t—but they had been something, and the thought of a partner



betraying you like that was infinitely painful. I knew that much from experience. He shrugged, not willing to commit.

“Okay, but do you understand how you might not be safe here?” I pressed. I hadn’t told Shawn about the conversation I’d overheard between his lover and the mysterious G, but now was the time for a few disclosures. “Janich is very nervous, Shawn. I ran into him on the way out and got a look at his phone. He was texting to someone about you. I think they might try something tonight.”

Shawn squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, resolutely fighting the tears that were creeping out anyway. “Fine,” I said, although it wasn’t fine. “Just... tell you what. Let me stay close to you tonight. The whole night. If nothing happens, great, but if something ends up going down, you let me get you out of here.” Really, I planned on getting Shawn out of here tonight regardless of whether anything went down, but cooperation was important in an extraction operation.

Shawn’s lips tightened, and he reached for the alphabet. I followed his hand. **IM NOT BETTER YET.**

“I know. I have a friend who’s a doctor, I’ll ask her to fly in and stay with us for a while until you are better.” And oh, wasn’t Margot going to love that? “Friend” might be a bit of a lie at this point, but she’d come when I called. She had to. She owed me.

**YOULL GET TIRED OF ME.**

“I seriously doubt that,” I said earnestly. I might be a lot of things, but fickle wasn’t one of them. Not in my work and not in my personal life, and as far as I was concerned, Shawn was an intersection of both. I was interested in him, I wanted him to survive and succeed, and I would do everything in my power to get him there. “And I’m not planning on coercing you into anything either, so drop that line of thinking,” I added. The mildly guilty look on his face gave away that that had been *exactly* what he was thinking.

Not that he wasn’t beautiful, but he was broken. I could fix him. I had given up on the thought of ever fixing myself, but I could help someone else back into the world. I could make myself let him go. I’d have to; it wasn’t like I deserved him.



**I DONT UNDERSTAND YOU.**

“You’re in good company.”

**BUT THANKS JUSTIN.** He was looking very seriously at me now, and his gravity infected me. This wasn’t a light moment, it wasn’t something to joke about. Shawn was being... appreciative. Well, that was new.

“Don’t thank me,” I finally said. “This isn’t over yet.”

But he shook his head and kept spelling. **THANKS FOR EVERYTHING ALREADY. I DONT DESERVE YOUR HELP. YOU DONT EVEN KNOW ME.**

“I don’t,” I agreed, smiling a little at the strange parity of our thoughts. He thought he didn’t deserve *me*? It was truly laughable. “But I want to get to know you.”

I stayed with him until his next therapist came in then took an hour to run Della back home and do something a little unscrupulous to one of my co-workers. Not *really* bad; I mean, Luke was a decent guy, but he had the swing shift I needed. I wanted to work four to midnight, which meant getting Luke out of the way.

Yes, I had memorized all my co-worker’s schedules and might have peeked through their personnel files once or twice to get their home addresses. That was just being thorough.

Luke lived a little off the beaten path like me, and he had a Chevy Impala that he loved and adored. It was a nice car, really nice, the kind of flashy car I could never imagine myself driving. I almost felt a little bad as I slashed all four tires, then did his son’s motorcycle too, just to be safe. The chances of Luke catching a bus were nonexistent, and a taxi would cost too much. He was effectively grounded for the evening. Now to make sure I got his shift.

I got into my Jay gear, went to the staff lounge and got myself a cup of coffee. I sat back on the lumpy couch that none of the nurses or doctors would touch, put my feet up on the stool in front of me and turned on the TV. Baseball. Could be worse.

At about ten minutes after four my manager stormed into the lounge, probably looking to rouse someone from their mandatory fifteen minutes a



little early thanks to Luke, and did a double take when he saw me. “Jones? What are you doing here so early?”

“Dude, so, my cable got shut off and I ran outta coffee at home, so I thought I’d come here ’cause, y’know, it’s free.”

My manager’s eyebrows lifted in a brief moment of “Is this person real?” before going on the offensive. “This hospital is not your home away from home, Jones! You don’t just get to use the facilities in your off hours whenever you please. You’re here to work. And now that you’re here, you can *do* some work.” Oh, he sounded so pleased with himself. I loved it when a setup came together.

“Huh?”

“Luke’s out for the day, transportation issues. As you’re not doing anything better, you can take his shift.”

“But dude... the Braves...”

“The Braves can wait,” he said with a sneer. “The floors can’t. Get suited up and over to the ER.”

“Uh... ’kay.”

So I started my shift early, and I listened to Shawn get speech therapy—he could make some noises, with a lot of prompting, but he couldn’t pull them together into words yet—have dinner and get showered before the nurse helped him back into a clean bed. “You’re doing so well!” Bertha cooed at him, and I smiled at the surge of pleasure I got from hearing that. He was getting better. I’d have to make sure he continued to improve once I got him home.

A lot of the staff left between five and six, and even more left at eight. By ten the hospital had been pared down to its skeleton crew, and I was hyperaware of everything around me, every moment, every sound, every silent space. I positioned myself on Shawn’s floor and worked slowly, like the dullard Jay was, and let my senses sharpen. Something was going to happen soon, I just knew it. I could feel it.

I knew everyone who worked on this floor, so when I saw a man that I didn’t recognize, dressed as an orderly, come out the stairwell and head



straight for Shawn's room I knew this was it. He was a tall, lanky guy, not quite my height and skinnier but with a lot of reach on him. I didn't see any bulges indicating a weapon, but I followed him silently down the hall and watched him quietly close Shawn's door. I eased it open a crack and watched the scene unfold. I wanted to make sure this guy was the assassin before I acted.

Shawn was asleep in bed, snoring softly. The man stared at him for a moment, then grabbed a spare pillow off the chair and moved in. He almost had time to press it against Shawn's face before I was close enough to slip the garrote over his neck and haul him back. The effect was instantaneous.

He dropped the pillow and reached up, one hand going for his bulging neck and the other clawing behind his head at me. His feet went flying and I yanked him away from the monitoring equipment, staggering back until we were propped up against a wall with nothing for his flailing limbs to kick over. I didn't want any of the nurses running in to check on a noise and seeing this. Collateral damage wasn't something I wanted to deal with, but I'd do what I had to do.

I turned my face to the floor to protect my eyes from his fingers and wrapped one of his legs up with my own to reduce his range of motion. He bucked against me, his breath emerging as a wheeze. His neck was slippery with sweat and blood and I curled my hands out, tightening the garrote as much as I could from the position I was in. He kept flailing for another few seconds before finally starting to go limp. I kept holding on until I was sure it wasn't a fake out, until I couldn't hear the rushing beat of his heart through the back of his chest any longer. Then I eased him slowly to the ground, left the garrote in place (I always wore gloves when I cleaned, a handy part of the cover identity) and looked over at the bed.

Shawn was definitely awake now, and he was *horrified*. I didn't know how much of it was fear of me or his attacker or the entire situation, but all of that was secondary to getting him out of here.

"It's okay," I said soothingly.

Shawn's mouth fell open and he spread his hands as if to say, *how is this okay?*



“No, really, it’s fine. He was coming to kill you, I got to him first, it all worked out. You’re going to be fine, but we’re going to have to go.”

Wide blue eyes stared aghast at me, and then fumbling hands reached for the alphabet. **COPS.**

“No cops,” I said immediately. Shawn spelled it out again, slowly, stubbornly. Shit, I didn’t have the time to argue with him right now. Off went the kid gloves. “Shawn, who do you think sent this guy here in the first place? You think a...” I checked the back of his neck, then his arms—bang, the stylized RS on the inside of his left wrist gave it away. “A member of the Red Scorpions just came here out of the blue to burke you? Not likely. Who’s the only guy you know with a reason to want you out of the way right now?”

I’d thought Shawn couldn’t get any paler, but he managed it right then. I think if he hadn’t been propped against the bed he would have fainted. “I know it sucks,” I told him quietly, keeping my hands back even though I wanted to hold him, to reassure him somehow. He’d just seen me kill a man with these hands; he probably didn’t want me touching him. “I know that, but Shawn, we’ve got to go. You aren’t safe here and my cover will be blown as soon as another person walks into the room. Please, let me get you out of here. Let me take you home.”

### **YOUR HOME?**

“It’s really the only option,” I sighed. “I’m sorry.” I was sort of wishing that I’d taken the initiative to drag the guy off to an empty room and kill him there before he’d gotten to Shawn, because doubt was a hard thing to combat when you were trying to be nice about it.

Surprisingly, Shawn nodded immediately. “Really? Great.” I tried not to let my relief show too much as I smiled. “Just let me go and get a wheelchair. We can take the freight elevator.” I bent over and hauled Mr. Red and Dead over to the other side of the room, behind a chair, then went out looking for a wheelchair.

There were usually a few sitting close to the nurse’s station, but I was trying to avoid that place. There weren’t any out in the halls, so finally I resorted to sneaking into Mr. Greyson’s room, right next to Shawn’s, and



grabbing his. The nursing staff usually left one in there because he had to get up so many times at night to go to the bathroom. Fortunately he was sleeping soundly, and I eased the chair out of his room and into the hall without a problem. The problem came once I turned back around and came face to face with Nurse Grumpypants. I *had* taken the time to learn her name, even though she'd never bothered to learn mine, but it was more fun thinking of her in less than flattering terms.

“And where are you going with that?” she demanded, hands on her hips.

“Gotta move it to do the floor in there,” I said after a moment. I still had my gloves on—had I gotten blood on them? On myself? I hadn't taken the time to check. Sloppy, too sloppy.

“You can come back to his room later. One of the aides accidentally emptied a catheter bag onto the floor in two-oh-six. Go take care of it.”

“Kay.” I left the wheelchair in the hall, turned and grabbed my cart and started wheeling it in the opposite direction, discreetly looking back the whole time. If she went into Shawn's room...

She seemed to consider it for a moment, but in the end she turned around and headed back to the nurse's station. Good. I left the cart out of sight around the corner, then hurried back and pushed the wheelchair in to Shawn. He was sitting up and had swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

“We have to hurry.” I sat beside him and pulled one of his arms over my shoulders, then stood up, taking most of his weight. Shawn's legs crumpled immediately and he winced, but he used his free hand to help guide himself into the chair. I grabbed a blanket and put it over his legs, then dismantled my listening equipment and, after a moment's consideration, grabbed the copy of his chart. I'd either need to make a late night run to a pharmacy soon or get Margot to bring it with her when she came. I figured I could get her here in less than twenty-four hours, which should be plenty of time.

“Ready?” I asked Shawn. He nodded nervously. “Good.” I settled another blanket around his shoulders, opened the door and pushed him out into the hallway.

It was almost anticlimactic, how easy it was to get out of the hospital. The freight elevator was empty when it rumbled up to meet us, and the



maintenance hall that it opened into on the first floor was similarly abandoned. I punched the code that opened the door to the loading bay, then wheeled Shawn down the ramp and over to my car. We were out in less than two minutes.

“Wave goodbye to your old life, Shawn,” I told him as I helped settle him in the backseat. He looked a little grim, but determined all the same. Shawn wasn’t happy, I knew that, but there was no happy option here. There was only dying or surviving, and for me?

Surviving won every time, no matter the cost.

\*\*\*\*

Shawn had fallen asleep on the ride to the house. By the time he finally woke up again, around noon the next day, I’d pretty much gotten everything arranged. The first hour of it had been the worst. I’d been viciously harangued by Margot for fifteen minutes before she calmed down enough to listen to me, and even then, it had been hard to convince her to come here. In fact, despite everything between us, at first I thought she was going to just hang up on me.

*“Tu cochon! Je t’ai dit de ne jamais m’appeler encore, as-tu oublié si vite?”*

Calling me a pig had just been her getting warmed up, but eventually she’d come around. I let her yell at me for being stupid and abducting someone, rail at me for not getting his drugs worked out in advance and finally settle into that frosty, single-word set of responses that meant she was planning to kill me, but she’d help me out first. I gave her directions to my house—no way I was going to the airport to meet her—and settled into setting things up for Shawn.

I had a lot of very useful skills, and even more than weren’t useful in an everyday sense but could certainly save a life. However, none of them revolved around construction. Deconstruction, at that I was a pro, but the putting things together aspect? Not so much. I broke five tiles installing a bar next to the bathtub, drilled way too many holes looking for studs in the wall as I tried to find the right spot for the bars in the bathroom and bedroom, and just about nailed my fingers into the floor as I installed the shallow ramp Shawn



would need to get his wheelchair from the lower living room level to the rest of the house. Finally I gave up and called it good. Ugly as fuck, yes, but functional.

Margot agreed to bring the drugs, and since it would have been inconvenient for me to go to a pharmacy, I let her. Not that I'd planned on paying for them, per se, but it was one less thing for me to do. The other thing I needed to take care of—and fast—was bugging Detective Janich's home. When he found out Shawn was missing, as he probably already had, he was sure to be talking with whoever his dark side connections were. All of this was information that I needed to know, and the smartest thing to do would have been leaving Shawn alone and going off and doing it. I could've made it back before Margot arrived and gotten started on the next phase of my operation.

Instead I stayed home and looked at Shawn. Looked after him, I mean. He was asleep in the spare bed, still wearing his hospital nightgown. I'd pulled the comforter up to cover his chest and shoulders, but he still looked cold. I wanted to climb in there with him, curl in close and warm him up myself, but I knew there was no way. Instead I let Della climb up, again—I could tell this was going to become a bad habit and couldn't really bring myself to care—and she settled in against his hip with a contented doggy sigh.

He looked tense, unhappy even in his sleep. I wanted to wipe that tension away; it was new since Janich's treatment of him. "You can do better," I told Shawn quietly from the chair I'd set across the room. "You can do a lot better."

I wasn't referring to myself. I could be honest and say that I was attracted to Shawn; sure, of course I was. He was more than cute, like so many men as young as he was were; he was honest-to-God handsome, with the kind of face that was only going to get better looking with time. I liked how he looked, I liked his sense of humor, I liked his will to live. I liked a lot about him, but I wouldn't be acting on any of that. Because that would be...

*Wrong, my conscience supplied dryly. That would be taking advantage of his situation, Justin; I can't believe I have to remind you of this.*

"I'd prefer you didn't," I muttered.



*Yes, because that way worked out so well for you before, didn't it? You've always known what the difference is between right and wrong, you just chose to ignore it until you couldn't any longer.*

“And then what happened to me?” I asked. “I didn't exactly get my fairytale ending, did I? Unless you count the really macabre ones where no matter what you do, the people you love die anyway.” There was a moment of silence, and I smirked. “Yeah, not much to say to that, is there?” My conscience was just as much of a smug bastard as the person it had chosen to sound like, but occasionally I got the upper hand.

Shawn slept through Margot's arrival, which was good. She and I needed a moment to come to terms before he was exposed to her. She texted that she was here, and I disarmed the two alarms and the booby trap by the front door and let her in. She swept past me into the front hall with an air of haughty discontent, and I traced her passage with my face, reflexively inhaling more deeply at the blended scent of her perfume and the filthy cloves she insisted on smoking.

Margot looked almost the same as I'd last seen her: her short, dark hair a stylish bob, her features thin and elegant, just like the rest of her, and her eyes a furious sparkling green, the only physical characteristic she'd shared with her twin. She wore designer clothes in earthy tones that clung to her curves with precision, and the heels on her boots elevated her to practically my height. They were precariously tall, but she walked like she owned the place, fast and confident. She set her purse down on the side table as I shut the door, and we turned and looked at each other in silence for a moment.

“Why did you do it?” she asked at last, sounding far more tired than I'd expected. It was a far cry from the anger of our last conversation. “What do you mean by taking on another stray? Justin...” She pronounced it the French way, long, relaxed vowels and a barely-there *n*. Margot might be Québécois, but she put the French in French Canadian. She'd done her residency in Paris before coming back to practice medicine in Montreal. “Remember how the last time worked out?”

“Dom was hardly a stray,” I said. I was surprised to find my voice was a little hoarse. “And I think we took on each other.”



“Yes,” she agreed with a sigh. “And dragged me along for the ride.”

“You were already into it hip-deep, Margot. Dom led and you followed, it had been that way for years before I came along, remember?”

She smiled, her beauty twisted out of shape by bitterness. “How can I forget?”

How could either of us? “I cleared my bedroom for you. You can have it for the length of your stay.”

“And where will you be?”

“On the couch.” On the leather couch where Shawn had bled some of his life away a few months ago. It was a little short for me, but I’d manage. I’d slept in worse places, and I wasn’t about to ask Margot to share.

She nodded, then took off her coat and handed it to me. “Hang it in a closet,” she told me. “Don’t put it on one of your awful coat racks; that will ruin the lines of it. My bags are in the car. I will make espresso and we will go and see your foundling.”

“I don’t have an espresso machine,” I said regretfully. I wanted one, but there were a lot of memories associated with them that I was trying to forget.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Fine. Then we will drink your filthy, awful coffee and *then* we shall see what can be done with this mess you’ve made for yourself. Go now. My things should not stay folded for so long.”

I went.

Margot brought three enormous bags with her. Never mind weight restrictions, never mind that we probably wouldn’t even be leaving this house; she always had to look her best. Even when she was stitching Dom or me up after a troublesome job, she did it wearing Prada beneath her plastic smock. It took me a while to get them all into the house and in my room—her room.

By the time I joined her in the kitchen there was coffee made, far stronger than I usually preferred it, but I was willing to defer to her tastes on that. “This place has no heart,” she told me as I sat down across from her. “How long have you lived here?”

“About a year.”



“So long and it still looks so bare. Where are the hints of your personality, Justin? What happened to the prints I gave you?”

“They’re in the closet.” I loved the early twentieth-century Japanese ink prints Margot had given me two birthdays ago, but I hadn’t been able to look at them for a while now. Not since I’d moved, certainly.

“*Quelle* surprise,” she quipped, sipping and making a face. “Now, tell me more about this man. You say you found him dying?”

“I did.”

“And yet you say he has no connection to your business?”

“I’m not in the business anymore,” I said, a little stiffly. “You know that.”

“But that means nothing to those who remember you. Are you sure he’s not part of one of your contemporaries’ plans for revenge?”

“I’m sure.” I had hid my tracks too well, and besides... “I’d never even met him before the night I found him out back. I think he found out something that he wasn’t supposed to, something that had to do with the detective he was dating. I don’t know the details and he doesn’t remember the attack, but he ended up abandoned a few hundred feet out from my back porch with a head wound that almost killed him.”

“Have you already killed the detective?”

God, it wasn’t like I didn’t have other responses to an emergency. “No. I’ve hardly killed anyone at all. Just a gang member who came to finish the job on Shawn.”

Margot’s eyes glittered, emerald cold. “Interesting. Before, you would have killed first and bothered to tend to the wounded later. Retirement has softened you.”

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe you like this young man better than you ever did Dom, to lavish such attention on him.”

I sighed. “You of all people should know that Dom was... complicated. He didn’t want me hovering over him when he was injured.”

“You never tried.”



“I tried once,” I corrected her. “And I got bit for my trouble, so I didn’t try again. Besides, he had you to patch him up, he didn’t need me.” Dom had emphatically not needed me, in the end.

Margot’s fingers twitched, as though she were itching for a cigarette. “Well,” she said with reluctant grace, “perhaps you’ve grown some as a person since those days. But let me assure you, I am not here to do all the healing while you slip off to kill the people you’ve got your eyes on, and I *know* you do, even if you’ve not acted on it yet. You and Dom, I swear, you worked less like a team and more like you were in competition with each other, trying to outdo the wrongs done to the other with even more bloodshed.”

She leaned forward and caught my gaze with hers. “I am *no one’s* convenience, Justin. Not anymore. You cannot give this man to me and run away. I won’t let you. You say you are retired, then truly *be* retired. Let someone else deal with his assailants and betrayers, and you stay here and work with me to fix him.”

Wow, that was just... well. Margot put words to thoughts I’d barely even been aware of, ripped them out of my subconscious and laid them out between us before I’d even come to terms with what was going on here. Not that I had been planning on abandoning Shawn to her care, no, definitely not. Look at everything I had done for him already. Abandonment wasn’t in the cards. More a sharing of responsibilities was what I had in mind.

I opened my mouth to say something stern and incisive, and heard the toilet flush. “Wait, he’s up?”

“I looked in on him while you were moving my things inside,” Margot said, sitting back in the chair. “He was awake. I helped him into his chair and to the bathroom, which—*Mon Dieu*, Justin, those bars!”

“Yeah, I know, they’re not perfect.”

“They look like they were installed by a blind monkey.”

“Thank you,” I said acridly. “Anything else you want to criticize while we’re being so honest?”

“Yes. Your hair is absolutely terrible. You should let it grow again.”

I stared at her for a long moment, then smiled despite myself. “Bitch.”



“*Je t’emmerde, mon cher,*” Margot replied, patting my hand. “Let’s go and look in on your young man.”

“Shawn Bennett,” I told her, standing up with her. “Call him by his name. Not my young man.”

“Your Shawn, then.”

“Margot...”

“You have dragged me thousands of miles for him, Justin, you do not get to dictate how I amuse myself at your expense when I’m doing you such a favor.” Margot headed for my room. “I need to get his medications ready. I’ll be there in a moment.”

I felt very put in my place. It was a familiar sensation, one I had chafed against for most of my life, but coming from Margot, it was bearable. She’d always had a way of pulling Dom and me back from the edge.

God, I was so sick of thinking of Dom. I went to the spare bedroom and knocked on the door. “Shawn, I’m coming in.” I would have asked permission, but with the dysarthria it wasn’t as though he could call out an answer. I was a little worried I’d find him on the toilet—not that I didn’t know how to deal with that, but I knew it would embarrass him. Fortunately he’d already made it back into his chair, and rolled slowly out of the bathroom to meet me in the space next to the bed. Della trotted next to him, coming over to me for a brief caress before heading back to Shawn’s side.

“I see you’ve stolen my dog,” I told him.

Shawn reached for the alphabet and slowly spelled out **WE CAN SHARE**.

“Damn straight we can share.” I sat down on the bed so that our heads were level. “How do you feel?”

He wiggled his hands back and forth.

“Yeah, I get that. I guess you met Margot.”

Shawn was a lot more enthusiastic about that, grinning widely.

“Yeah, well, let me tell you right now—don’t listen to a word that woman says about me. Seriously, it’s all lies and hearsay. You don’t speak French, do you?” He shook his head. *Thank God for small favors.* “Good.”



The *click-click* of Margot's heels announced her impending arrival. She completely ignored me as she walked into the room, all her attention on Shawn. Della looked interested, but didn't move from Shawn's side.

Margot was smiling. It was her real smile, the kind she used to use on me and Dom in those rare times when we didn't have a job, when there was nothing to do but the itch hadn't come back into our skin yet. We had all shared a house in Montreal for two years, and I could count on two hands the number of times I had seen that open and pleased expression on Margot's face. Dom had been the devil on her back for as long as they'd been alive, and I had turned out no better, despite her initial hopes. That Shawn already got that expression from her actually made me feel a little jealous.

"*Bien fait*," she told him, patting his shoulder as she sat down next to me, straight across from him on the bed. She had a stethoscope around her neck and a blood pressure cuff in her hand. "Let me get your vitals, *d'accord*?" Shawn raised his arm—and pretty smoothly too, I was pleased to note—and she took the weight of it in her own, slipped the cuff on, tightened it and began to pump. She had a number in under fifteen seconds and jotted it on the chart, took the cuff all the way off, then handed it to me. "Now you."

I stared at her. "What?"

"Now you," Margot said implacably. "You need to know how to do these things. Consider this the beginning of your training."

Fuck, she had meant what she said about not letting me slack off on this. I turned and looked at Shawn, who blushed a little when our eyes met. "You don't mind being my guinea pig?"

He shook his head.

"Okay then." I put the cuff on him, tightened it like Margot had, then followed her directions on where to place the head of the stethoscope and what to listen and look for.

I cradled Shawn's arm against my side, trying not to get distracted by the smoothness of the skin on the underside of his arm, or the warmth that seeped right through my T-shirt and into my chest. I knew I liked touching Shawn and I knew it helped him relax, but for a brief moment as our eyes met, just as I



snugged the chest piece into the crook of his elbow, I could see the reciprocal of the pleasure I got out of the simple act in his own eyes. Shawn liked this, not just being touched but being touched by me, close.

Dangerous thoughts to let my brain get a grip around. I ignored it and tried to get his blood pressure.

It took three tries before I read off numbers anywhere close to what Margot had written down, and that didn't count the two times I fumbled the scope. I could field strip a Glock 17 in less than ten seconds, and I couldn't manage my own freaking hands while trying to take a blood pressure. Goddamn embarrassing, but it made Shawn laugh out loud and Margot kept her smile, even as she got agitated with my slow pace, so it was worth it.

She observed how Shawn and I interacted like a distant predator, gathering information before she decided whether and how to strike. Even with the smile that was a scary-ass expression, and usually heralded things I preferred not to remember. I did my best to ignore her entirely and focus on Shawn.

"Close enough," she said at last. "Now the medications. Do you remember any of what you were taking in the hospital, Shawn?"

He nodded.

"Good. When was the last time you had a seizure?"

I frowned at him. "When did you have a seizure?"

"He had several, according to the chart. It isn't uncommon with head injuries. Shawn?"

He moved his finger across the alphabet. **TWO WEEKS**

Margot looked at the laminated alphabet and sniffed derisively. "We can do much better than that for communication. That comes next. Two weeks? Then we'll keep you on the anti-seizure drug a while longer." She asked him about other symptoms, other medications and generally behaved like a doctor, and I finally got out of there with the excuse of needing to let Della out.

As devoted as my dog seemed to be to Shawn, when you gotta go you gotta go.

Della ran around in the back yard for a while, wagging and sniffing and generally enjoying herself. I stood on the porch and watched her play, and



figured that Della and my alter ego Reggie deserved the decency of a proper explanation at the hospital before we split for good. Reggie was a clean persona, I didn't anticipate any problems heading back in with him, and he'd be useful one last time for getting an idea of what the people at the hospital made of a janitor killing one man and kidnapping another.

I smiled to myself. It had been one of my slicker moments lately, despite Nurse Frown Lines' interference. Fine, one more trip to the hospital, so Reggie could say goodbye and Della could have one last play date with the kids. And if I happened to get a few other things accomplished while I was in town, well, that was just good planning, wasn't it?

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I managed to excuse myself from the proceedings the next day by explaining to Margot that I had a cover to retire, as well as promising to bring her back a bag of the smoked tea that she liked when I went to get groceries. It was funny; if she couldn't have espresso she went around the bend and stuck with tea, not bothering with coffee. I made sure to check in with Shawn before I left as well.

"Anything for you?" I asked. "Something you just can't live without? Jello, maybe?"

Shawn plucked pointedly at the scrubs he was still wearing. I'd looked in my closet for something for him, but I didn't own all that many clothes and everything I had was too big. "Right, clothes. Any particular style? Hipster, maybe?" Because damn, I would love to see him in some skinny jeans, but I knew they wouldn't really be appropriate for a guy who spent most of his time sitting. Loose and comfortable, that was key.

Shawn rolled his eyes then slowly typed a few words into the tablet Margot had given him. It was loaded with different programs to help with his therapy, including one that would read off complete sentences once he typed them in. "*Can I have a beer?*" The voice was a rather stern tenor, older than I imagined Shawn's own voice sounding.

"Not on your medications," Margot informed him pertly.

"*Then no. Thank you.*"



“All right. I’ll be back before long.” I touched his shoulder briefly, then stood up and left the room, whistling for Della. Margot followed me out into the hall.

“You’re not taking the sedan, are you?”

“No,” I told her, stifling my own eye roll, because, really? Just because I was retired didn’t mean I had forgotten everything about how to do the work. “I’m assuming the car is compromised. I figured I’d take your rental, actually; I’d rather not show up there in the truck either, just in case.”

She stared at me, green eyes like lasers boring through my skull. “Just out and back for the sake of this identity. Do not stop and do something... distracting.”

“Yes, Mother.” I grabbed Reggie’s cane and left, locking and rearming the door behind me as I did. After a brief stop in the garage for a briefcase I’d tucked under a tarp in the back, I put Della in the back seat of Margot’s Mercedes, and she sneezed immediately.

“I know, it smells like plastic in here, huh?” I said sympathetically, pulling out of the driveway and heading down the hill. The sky was perfectly blue, not a cloud in sight, and as I got out of the trees I could even see the looming curve of Mt. Rainier. The mountain was out today, apparently. We didn’t see it all that often, especially not during the winter, but we were well into spring at this point and starting to get beautiful days like this.

Too bad. It would make the other part of what I had to do while I was out a little more challenging, but I’d manage.

The first place I went was the hospital. I walked in light and cheerful like usual, nothing of skulking Jay left in me, and Carlos greeted me happily at the front desk. “Reggie! Good morning! It’s earlier than we usually see you.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said with a rueful chuckle, running one hand through my short blond hair. Maybe Margot was right, maybe it really was too short. “I actually have to talk to Andy today,” Andy the volunteer coordinator, “because I’m going to be gone for a while. My mom’s sick back home in Ohio and I have to go take care of her.”

“Oh no!” One of his hands flew to his mouth. “Is she gonna be okay?”



“It’s hard to say,” I sighed. “She’s one of those people who never tells you the truth about what’s going on, you know? Doesn’t want to worry me, but I think it’s pretty serious. Anyway, today is Della’s and my last for the foreseeable future, at least.”

“Well, we’re going to miss you,” Carlos said, looking at me from under heavy lids. “We never did go out for coffee, you know.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” We sighed in unison—it was just one of those things, I could see him thinking. I was turning into Carlos’ “one who got away.” The fond memories would be all that was left, and that was fine. “I figured I’d head up to the ICU, start in there.”

“Oh God, did you hear?” He looked at my expression of blank incomprehension and his eyes got wide. “You didn’t! Shit, Reg, Shawn Bennett? You visited him, right?”

“Yeah, the cop with the head injury, Della loved him. He’s not dead, is he?” I asked, putting some real anxiety into my voice.

“He was stolen out of the hospital! Some gangbanger was found in his room choked to death, and Shawn was gone! They think one of the cleaning staff was in on it.”

“Oh God, poor guy. What do police think is behind it?” I frowned and snapped my fingers. “Wasn’t Shawn dating another cop, too?”

“Yeah, Detective Janich. Oh man, you’re lucky you weren’t here yesterday, they were in and out and ordering people around, doing interviews with staff and cordoning shit off like they could just shut down the whole hospital while they investigated. Word is they don’t really know *what* the hell is going on.”

“Well, it definitely sounds confusing.” *Nicely done, me.* “I guess I’ll skip up there today. Jesus, I hope Shawn’s okay.”

“Me too.” I started to head for the elevator when Carlos remembered something else. “Oh, Reggie! Detective Janich was asking for the names and phone numbers of everyone who had contact with Shawn, and Bertha put you down on the list. I just wanted you to know so you won’t be surprised when you get a call from the police.”



“Thanks for the warning.”

That was a little wrinkle of complexity, but nothing I couldn't handle. Reggie and Jay shared no contact details in common, and neither of them had anything to do with the real me on paper either, so I was pretty well in the clear. I just had to answer the rote questions like the friendly, easy-going guy Reggie was and they'd get off his case soon enough.

I let Della bask in the love and affection for a while before saying my goodbyes, making sure I signed all the proper paperwork and gave Andy a dummy email address to get in touch with me if she needed to. Then I got back into my car, glanced at the spot on the map I'd circled—it might be the digital age but some aspects of the job were still stalwartly low-tech with me—and headed for a little condo on 151<sup>st</sup> Street.

Detective Janich lived in a building shaped like a rectangle, with all the personality of one of those boring parallelograms as well. The paint was a faded green, there was indifferent brickwork at the bottom and a few bushes out front that grew thanks more to the climate than any personal attention from a gardener. Janich had the end unit, which was nice if I needed to abruptly flee, but I already knew he wasn't going to be there. If he stuck to his schedule, which he tended to, then Janich was at the precinct doing paperwork. Not a glamorous part of the detective's job, but a necessary one. It was also one of many reasons I had never aspired to go legit. There was very little paper work in black ops and covert assassination.

I walked right in the front door—no bells, buzzers or alarms, for fuck's sake—and down to Janich's condo. Picking the lock was child's play, and once inside I opened up my briefcase, pulled out the things I needed and got to work. It was the work of ten minutes to set things up to spy on Janich and broadcast everything he did and said to my remote receiver. A little fiddling around with the charge cord for his phone and I'd be downloading all his texts when he plugged in at night as well.

“Thank you for being so cooperative, Detective,” I murmured under my breath, then packed up my briefcase and headed back to my car, where Della was laying down in the Mercedes' back seat. I took off the latex gloves I'd slipped on and pitched them into the nearest garbage can, then made my way to the grocery store.



By the time I got back it was getting dark and Margot was getting antsy. I figured that she would, so I fended off her wrath with a double cappuccino from the closest coffee house and went to put the groceries away, dropping off a bag of easy-wearing clothes, mostly T-shirts and sweats, outside my bedroom door on the way. “Shawn!” I banged on the door with my foot. “There’s some stuff for you out here.” Then I headed for the kitchen, because really, the frozen foods wouldn’t last forever.

I heard Shawn roll into the kitchen a few minutes later, but I didn’t glance over until he spoke.

*“Need help?”*

The tablet’s voice was still strange to me, but at least I didn’t jump when I heard it. “Nah, I’ve got this. I was going to get dinner started as soon as the countertops are free again.” I put the milk and ice cream away while I waited for Shawn to type out his next sentence. I know, ice cream, what kind of killer am I? While I couldn’t indulge my various proclivities as much as I might want to, I could give in on some of the easy things, and the local ice cream shop had a wannabe chef running it who made crazy flavors, including my favorite, piña colada with coconut flakes. I got vanilla and chocolate too, because statistically those were the two most popular flavors in the States, despite how incredibly boring they were.

*“You cook?”*

“Well, Margot certainly doesn’t, and I’m not going to starve you while you’re here. I do okay.” I learned how to cook in the orphanage, for twenty people at a time, but I’d learned how to pare it down and add flavor over the years. My food was still simple, but at least it was edible.

*“Hard for me to picture.”* I glanced over at Shawn and he smirked. *“Mister Badass cooking.”*

“You’re the sort of guy who lives on frozen dinners, aren’t you?” I shook my head in mock sorrow. “Those things are disgusting.”

*“More like pizza.”* He frowned and retyped. *“Like pizza. Fried chicken. Good food.”*

“Yeah, for young guys with crazy metabolisms, maybe.”



Shawn pretended to flex, then looked down as his face fell. Even though I'd done my best to guess his size, I still bought a little too big for him. The plain white T-shirt hung loose on his chest and abs, and the sweatpants were cinched tight around his waist. Shawn had lost a lot of tone and his muscle control, even in his upper body, was still far from what he was used to.

I thought about it and made an executive decision. "I'm making meatloaf and you're my sous-chef. I'm going to put the ingredients on the table, with a measuring cup, and you're gonna put them all in the bowl."

Shawn didn't look exactly enthusiastic. "And if you're thinking something about how you can't do that, I don't want to hear it. You can type, you can talk, you can push yourself around so you can definitely help me with dinner." I grabbed an egg, milk, breadcrumbs, and handed over the ground chuck I'd left out on the countertop, then grabbed the utensils. "One cup each of those two, all of the meat and egg." Then I turned around and started chopping up an onion—no way was I going to pass that responsibility on, no knives for Shawn—and listened.

For almost a minute there was silence, then I heard the roll of wheels on the floor. A moment later the bowl shifted, and I found myself smiling even though there was no one else to see.

By the time I had the onion minced and turned around, Shawn was done. While there were plenty of breadcrumbs outside of the bowl, as well as a few splashes of milk, it still looked pretty good. He'd even gotten the egg in there. "Good," I said as I poured in the onion then doused the mix with salt and pepper. "Stir it up while I make the glaze for the top."

It was kind of fun, cooking with someone. Dom had had no interest in cooking, just like his sister, but they both had pretensions when it came to what they ate, and they were more likely to order in something from *Tapeo* or *Au Pied De Cochon* than eat whatever I made. Needless to say, the kitchen had been a pretty lonely place when I'd lived with them. Shawn didn't seem to mind lending a hand though, or maybe he was just being nice, but either way I had help and company.

I washed my hands, left the meatloaf cooking and the potatoes boiling and sat down next to Shawn. "Can we change the voice on this thing?" I asked,



gesturing to the tablet. “That guy just doesn’t sound like I imagine you sounding.”

“*We can try,*” Shawn agreed.

While Margot spent the hour before dinner soaking in a bath and sipping cappuccino, Shawn and I spent that time trying every voice the speech program had to offer and then downloading new ones when we got sick of those. We tried sultry women, shouty men, growly monster voices, and were still laughing over how everything sounded helium-style when Margot finally joined us. She sniffed the air and grimaced. “What sort of farmer food did you cook tonight, Justin?”

“Meatloaf and mashed potatoes,” I told her. “Pull up a chair.”

She pulled one up and sat, but didn’t look too pleased about it. “Is there wine?”

“Would I dare try to feed you without wine?” I asked, rhetorically of course, since there was no way I wanted to be around Margot without a glass of red nearby to quell her ire. It was bad enough handling her complexities (Dom would have said “fucking minefield of a personality,” but then he’d always tended to be crass) without a constant supply of good espresso. “It’s on top of the fridge. There’s an opener in the drawer over there.”

Some people can open beer bottles with their teeth. I’d always been half-convinced that Margot could jam one of her fingernails into the cork of a wine bottle and draw it out that way if she was really desperate, but tonight wasn’t the night for a test. She poured some for herself and for me, and thoughtfully got Shawn a glass of juice with a straw in it.

Dinner was a fairly silent affair, since Shawn couldn’t eat and type and Margot and I weren’t about to delve into any deeper topics in front of him. At the end of the meal, as I was clearing the plates, she said, “So now we must discuss your care, Shawn. You had therapy twice a day in the hospital, no?”

He nodded.

“Then we will work twice as hard here. I don’t know how much *this* one—” she jerked her head at me, “has told you, but this is not a safe harbor. There are people from the past who would love to learn that Justin has a



weakness, and there are more people here who will be looking for you, because of what you know and because you have disappeared. The best thing to do would be to leave,” she looked at me again, and yeah, she had a point. But I still wasn’t convinced that I couldn’t just make the most of the situation with Shawn and send him on his way while staying here myself. This place... it wasn’t *home*, exactly, I hadn’t had a home in a long time, maybe never, but I was used to it here now. I had a house and a dog and a decent defensive perimeter. What more could a man want? Apart from revenge, which I was also planning on getting.

“But since that is not happening, we must focus on improving your health as quickly as possible,” Margot continued. “Physiotherapy in the morning with me, and again in the afternoon with Justin. Speech therapy in the morning with me as well, and massage to improve your blood flow and proprioception. Justin can handle that.”

“What?” I was aghast. Shane smiled as he typed.

“*Really?*” his tablet squeaked in its helium-mode.

“*Bien sûr.*” Margot batted her eyelashes at me as she patted my hand. “Justin is a wonderful masseuse. He learned when he was in Montréal, and it was a skill my brother and I took rampant advantage of.”

“I learned for a job,” I muttered. It had been a good one too, surprisingly easy once I was vetted through the front doors of that particular woman’s mansion.

“Yes, and you learned so well. That can start tomorrow. Tonight I want you to get to bed early, because you will need your rest.” She frowned and took the tablet back. “And I don’t wish to converse with a mosquito, so,” she tapped and swiped before handing it back.

“*Boring voice.*” Shawn looked unamused but resigned. Ha. Welcome to my life with Margot.

“I agree,” Margot said. “The best voice by far to use will be your own, so that is something we should work on, no?” She stood up and took hold of his wheelchair. “Do you need anything from the bedrooms to make up the couch?” she asked me.



“No, it’s all in the hall closet.”

“*Why couch?*”

“Because I have his bedroom and you have his guest bedroom,” Margot explained.

“*Share,*” Shawn suggested immediately. “*Your house, shouldn’t have to sleep on your couch.*”

“I’d just keep you awake,” I told him, but I couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed at having to turn him down. It had been a long time since I’d slept with anyone I liked, and the warmth and connection was enough to let me sleep for a few hours back to back, sometimes. “I’m a bit of an insomniac.”

“Not to mention he might roll over and crush you if he did fall asleep,” Margot said lightly. “Come now.” She turned the chair around and wheeled Shawn away, and I turned my attention back to cleaning up from dinner.

Preparing the couch consisted of me throwing a blanket and pillow down on it and calling it good enough. Using sheets when you were sleeping on a couch was just fussy. Besides, I really was something of an insomniac, so it wasn’t like I expected to get much sleep there.

I heard the shower start up in Shawn’s bedroom, and I spared a brief thought—or maybe not so brief—of him sitting in the tub, head tilted up into the spray, his long neck glistening with water as he closed his eyes. I could see my hands on that neck, gentle for once, worshipping instead of destroying. I could almost taste the water on his skin...

No, that was me drooling. I shook my head and got out my laptop, checking on the programs I’d installed earlier today that were connected to Janich’s home. Nothing yet; he was probably working late. I decided to check twice a day, morning and night, to see what our detective was up to. More if I had the chance, but chance wasn’t something that happened often around Margot.

It was both comforting and aggravating being near her again. I lay back on the couch and crossed my hands beneath my head, thinking about the last time I’d slept on a couch. It had been the night Dom had taken off; I’d been too wound up to sleep in our bed, pissed and worried and drunk all at the same



time. I'd managed to catch an hour's worth of sleep around dawn, and when I woke up Margot had been sitting at my feet, in her silk dressing gown holding a tiny espresso cup. It had trembled in her so-steady hands. "*Il est mort.*"

"No," I'd said, because Dom wasn't dead. He was an inconsiderate asshole who was going to be hearing about what a moron he was for months, but he wasn't dead.

"*Oui,*" she'd replied. Her eyes were dry but red, and the look she'd given me was that of a wounded animal, accusatory and pained. "*Je suis sûre.*"

And goddamn it, she'd been right. The job Dom and I had fought about, the job he'd taken on his own because I was too injured to go with him on it, had killed him. His body was found in the Rivière des Prairies two days later. His corpse had been missing numerous fingers and toes.

Margot had been the public face of mourning, the well-to-do doctor grieving the sibling who'd never managed to amount to as much as she had. I was the darker side of things. Margot didn't ask me not to seek revenge; she was as desperate for it as I was. I finished healing, used most of my money and burned almost all of my bridges getting the specific names of who had done the deed, and then... then I'd gone looking for them. And found them.

After that it gets a little hazy for a while. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt I did hideous things to those men. Three of them, Filipino cousins who felt they had something to prove, men who were wickedly good with knives but didn't know nearly enough about guns to save them from me. By the time I was done with them, at first glance it would have been impossible to tell how many bodies there were total, because the pieces were kind of spread around. I came back to myself covered in blood, holding a curved karambit blade in my right hand that I must have taken off of one of them, shivering and sick with horror at what had happened. I was a killer, but before that night I was professional about it. After that night...

After that night, I retired.

Things between Margot and I had been brittle ever since, but I was grateful she was here. Grateful she was helping Shawn, grateful she still cared about me enough to give a damn who I killed and why. But this situation was



completely different. Shawn wasn't my lover; he was just someone I'd decided to help. Janich may or may not be behind beating him, but I wasn't willing to move on the guy until I had proof. And I hadn't hunted down the rest of the Red Scorpions in the area and done away with them despite my surety that they were in on it, which, I mean, pretty amazing, right? Just one death out of this debacle? I was a fucking boy scout.

The shower turned off. I heard Margot speaking softly, Shawn's mechanical mouthpiece answering her, and a few minutes later the gentle open and shut of a door. Margot clicked back down the hall to my room in her heels and Della came out to sit down next to me, laying her head on the pillow and sticking her unreasonably cold nose against my ear.

"Jeez, dog," I muttered, pushing at her a little, but she just followed it up with a lick. "What, you don't want to sleep with your new man tonight? You feel guilty about abandoning me?" Della looked at me for a long moment, then turned and padded away to the guest room's door. She clawed at the door with a paw, then whined.

"You're an attention whore," I informed her as I got up off the couch. Yeah, I was my dog's bitch, so what? "I won't respect you in the morning, I just want you to know that." She stared at me openmouthed, panting cheerfully. "Stop it." I knocked on the door, then opened it.

Shawn lay on the bed on his side, facing the door. I couldn't quite tell by the illumination of the hall light, but his eyes looked wet. It could have been water still clinging to him after the shower, but...

The best thing I could do was ignore it. If I were in his place, I wouldn't want someone else, much less a guy, to call out the fact that I'd been crying. "Della apparently wants to spend the night with both of us," I told him. "Do you mind if I leave the door open for her?"

Shawn shook his head and patted the bed. Della jumped up and settled in next to him, and then he gave me a smirk and patted the bed again.

"I'm doing just fine on the couch, thanks," I drawled. "See you in the morning, Shawn." I left the door cracked and shut the hall light off, then checked the security system one last time. All quiet on the western front. I



settled back down on the couch, turned off my computer and felt around for the nearest weapon. I had a sweet little Ruger LCR taped to the underside of my couch that I could grab and fire in less time than it would take someone to break in, which was soothing. I plumped the pillow up, shut my eyes and let random thoughts float through my brain without taking hold of it. It was meditative, and the closest I could get to sleeping at this time of night without resorting to drugs or a lot of alcohol.

When I fell asleep for real, around three in the morning, my dreams were much less restful. They were mostly about killing or planning to kill, in that way you could do in dreams when even though you knew the person was dead, they kept talking to you. I killed Dom and chatted with him for a bit, and then I killed Margot and wow, did that ever put her in a bad mood. I killed Shawn too, and he didn't speak. He didn't even move once he was dead, just fixed his eyes on me and forced me to look back. And I looked and held his face, and watched blood pour out of my hands until it covered his beautiful, awful eyes, and then I screamed.

I woke up. I didn't scream, I'd had that kind of noise trained out of me, but I did cup my hands over my face and breathe into the skin of my palms for a while. Thank God I wasn't the type to self-analyze, because that was the sort of shit that could make you doubt your own sanity after a while.

Della appeared by my side in an instant, nosing at my fingers until I reached out and scratched behind her ears. I pushed the blanket back and stood up, then headed for the back door. Della and I went out onto the lawn, still cool and wet with dew, and I dug my toes down into the dirt and breathed deep and inhaled the pale sunshine as best I could, because my lungs felt like they were mired in thick, tacky red. It had been a while since I'd had a dream that bothered me so much.

After I checked up on Detective Janich's activities—two texts to his mother and a call to his captain at the precinct—I made pancakes for breakfast for myself and Shawn, organic yogurt with walnuts and half a grapefruit for Margot. Margot was a proud Québécoise but she didn't go in for a lot of their heavier foods, and for breakfast, that mostly included meat, eggs and enough sugar that even an American would be satisfied. We ate together in



companionable silence, and after making sure Shawn took his medications, Margot took him off to the living room and started in on their PT. I went and watched, and oh my God... hard and boring as hell.

It was an hour's worth of chair pushups, leg extensions, fine motor control work for his hands, more arms, more legs, core work, hands again... by the end of it Shawn was exhausted and I had almost fallen asleep.

"There's no way I can make him do that twice in one day," I told her at the end of it. "He'll keel over."

To my surprise, Margot just shrugged. "Physiotherapy isn't my specialty. These exercises are basic but they are effective. You're welcome to do something more creative for your session, but it has to be exercise and you're not allowed to help him the way I know you would—no, don't try to deny it!" she added. "I know you! I know how you think, and no. Make it challenging, make him do it. How do you feel now, Shawn?"

He fumbled the tablet the right way up in his lap and typed out, "*Tired. Okay.*"

"Then we'll continue with speech therapy." She looked closely at him for a moment, taking in the rising blush, then said, "Back in your room, I think. There is no need for an audience right now."

There was nothing I wanted more than to hear Shawn's voice, but I read between the lines. He hadn't spoken yet since his attack, he didn't know what he'd sound like if and when he did and he was embarrassed. "I'll get started on lunch," I said. "Is chili okay, Shawn?"

*"It's good. Thank you Justin."*

"You're welcome." I headed for the kitchen.

Margot and I ended up eating lunch alone; Shawn was back in bed sleeping the morning off. "It will be a process," Margot said calmly, picking at her cornbread. "He is doing very well, truly, but his stamina is not there yet. They babied him in this hospital; I would have had him out of bed and standing a week ago."

"Do you think he'll be able to stand anytime soon?" I asked.



“With the proper assistance. I would suggest a walker, but really, what would be better right now are parallel bars. But those are quite expensive and you would not want them delivered here, if you were trying to be discreet.”

“Parallel bars.” A brief vision of the Olympics sprang into my mind. “Like gymnasts use?”

“Essentially. The models for physiotherapy are a little different.”

This gave me an idea. “What kind of stuff do you need to make a set of those?”

Margot arched an eyebrow at me. “Do I look like a carpenter?” she demanded. “This is the age of the Internet, no? Go and look it up!” Her hand suddenly shot out and covered mine. “Wait. Are you going to try to build this yourself? Justin... it is folly.”

“I’m not going to build it by myself, I’m going to make Shawn help me,” I told her. I’d found the perfect way to combine physiotherapy with getting useful shit done. “Trust me, this is going to be great.”

“Great” might have been overstating it. I printed off plans for a set of parallel bars and spent two hours trawling through the hardware store two towns over, looking for what I needed. It turned out I needed a lot more than I’d bargained on—in addition to the raw materials I needed saws, levels, a drill, two different types of screwdrivers, screws, special nails... it was a shit lot of stuff.

Shawn looked at me with wide, doubtful eyes back at the house when I laid all of this out in front of him. “We’re building this,” I said, passing him the plans. He took them and shuffled through the sheets slowly. “Or actually, you’re building it; I’m just a set of hands, man.”

Shawn’s enthusiastic nod made me laugh. “I didn’t expect you to agree quite so fast.”

*“Dude. Ramps. Two feet long and still bumpy.”*

“Don’t look at me like that, ramps are hard to make.”

Shawn rolled his eyes. *“Yes, triangles are sooo hard. Good thing it’s not an octagon.”*



“Are you always a smartass when you’re well-rested, or is this attitude special just for me?”

Shawn reached out and tapped me with the toe of his right foot. His leg shook a little from exertion but I was impressed that he was able to do the move. “*Special for you Justin.*” I tried not to let that make me feel warm inside, but it was too late. Of course, then he followed it up with, “*Don’t touch anything okay? Wait for me.*”

I helped Shawn down onto the floor next to me (with his back propped against the couch—he couldn’t hold a sitting position for too long yet) and started sorting things out. I had been thinking we’d get most of it done today, honestly, but Shawn insisted on *measuring* everything.

“What do you mean, they’re too long?” I asked as I held up the two-by-fours that would support the parallel bars.

“*Too long for me. Look.*” Shawn shifted around until he was on the ground and arranged one of the pieces of wood next to him. The top of it came up to just above his hipbone.

“It looks perfect.”

“*Extra hit.*”

“Extra what?”

Shawn sighed and struggled to push himself back up into a sitting position. My hands itched to help him, but I forced myself to stay still until he was upright and tilted against the couch again. He slowly typed, “*Extra height with the bars on top. Not adjustable, so make it right first time.*”

Oh right, the bars on top. “Okay,” I said. “So how long should these be, then?”

After almost two hours we got as far as cutting the boards, after Justin measured them all and made sure they were equal. He monitored my sawing closely, and even tried it himself a few times, but his control just wasn’t quite there. After a few hash marks appeared he frowned and handed the tool back to me. Not that I did it perfectly, but at least I got it done. After that he insisted on sanding the pieces—why I didn’t know, it wasn’t like he was going to be



putting his hands on that part of the apparatus, but it was good exercise so I agreed. Della watched us make the mess with interest, sitting far enough back that the sawdust stayed out of her nose.

“I think that’s good enough for today,” I said once all the pieces were smoothed down. “We can pick it up again tomorrow.” I started to pack everything up and shove it over against the wall.

“*Clean saw.*”

“What?”

“*Clean the saw.*” Shawn pointed at the cheap little handsaw sitting on the plywood board I’d bought for a base. “*Lasts longer that way.*”

“It’s a ten-dollar saw, I don’t plan on keeping it forever.”

Ooh, that got me a dirty look. “*Cheap isn’t worthless,*” Shawn pointed out, his mouth a tight line. Clearly I’d struck a nerve. “*Clean it. Please.*”

Son of a bitch, hauling out the “pleases” with me. “Fine. Then you vacuum.” I went over to the closet, got out the dust buster and handed it to him. “I’ll be right back.”

I banged the thing a few times on the porch rail outside until the sawdust fell out of the teeth, inspected it for any other signs of obvious use and then called it good. Honestly, what else was he expecting? Did you have to oil these things? Whatever, chore accomplished. I went back into the living room—

And found that the floor was clean, the wood was stacked and Shawn was lying on his back panting. He looked over at me and I held up the saw for his inspection. “Good enough?” He shrugged and looked away. I chalked it up to moodiness and set the saw someplace Della wouldn’t step on it, then lay on the floor next to him. “You hungry?”

Another shrug.

“You must be, since you didn’t eat lunch. Want to come into the kitchen and get something to eat?”

Nothing this time, not even a shrug. Okay, fine, I knew where this was going. I was pushing too hard, just like I had with Dom. The only difference was that with Dom, he’d been able to walk away from me to get the space he



needed. With Shawn I would have to do the walking away. “Okay,” I said softly, and started to sit up.

Shawn’s hand wrapped around my wrist before I could get far. His grip wasn’t strong—actually his whole arm was shaking with exertion, far more than he’d shown earlier in the day. He held on gamely though, and I lay back down. “Tired, huh?”

He nodded. Fuck, of course he was tired, I’d probably gone and overdone it with him this afternoon. *Sorry*, he mouthed, turning his face into my shoulder. *Sorry, sorry*. His lips moved in silent and completely unnecessary apology, and I gave into temptation and turned enough so I could stroke the nape of his neck, pressing against tight muscles and tendons and lingering just a little bit against the short, soft hairs there. “It’s fine,” I told him. “We’re fine. Don’t be sorry.” We stayed there for a moment more before the hardwood let my back know that I’d be suffering tomorrow if I didn’t get up.

“C’mon. Dinner and then you can have a massage.” I got to my feet and helped Shawn back into his wheelchair, and then we both headed for the kitchen.

Margot joined us for leftovers and a glass of wine, made sure Shawn took his meds and scolded me about our PT. “Pushing too hard will be counterproductive,” she informed me, as though I hadn’t already figured that out. “Making the poor boy haul himself across the floor was not exactly the exercise I had in mind, Justin.”

“Your exercises are boring.”

“Safe.”

“Dull.”

“Effective.”

“Mind-numbing.”

“Fine,” Margot snapped, pushing her glass away and getting up from the table. “Don’t listen to me, just do as you please, like always. And when Shawn is as ruined by your efforts as Dom was, perhaps you’ll finally realize that you aren’t always right!” She stalked off and I didn’t watch her go, I just sat and



stared at the far wall and didn't think about anything. Nope, nothing happening in my head. Not a fucking thing.

*"Who's Dom?"*

"Margot's dead brother," I said flatly.

*"Who's Dom to you?"* Shawn persisted.

"He's dead to me, Shawn."

It was true, but the soft, sad sound that emerged from Shawn's mouth made me rethink being so abrupt. I swiped a hand over my face and sighed. "He was my..." *My lover, my best friend, my brother...* "He was my partner," I finally settled on. "We worked together, we played together, we slept together. For two years. Then he died, and I moved here." I stood up. "C'mon, I owe you a massage."

I let Shawn roll himself back into the bedroom. He went into the bathroom to take care of getting ready for bed and I pulled back the covers and dimmed the lights. Della sat by my side and watched my simple efforts with the kind of casual appreciation only a dog could show, and I ruffled her ears and scratched a little under her collar, my own mild effort at appreciating her half as much as she did me.

Shawn came back out, smelling like mint and soap. "Can you lie face down?" I asked him. He nodded. "Good." I helped him onto the bed and let him arrange himself to his satisfaction. "Mind if I put my hands on your skin?"

I could only see half of his face, but his look of "Are you kidding me?" was still very clear.

"Got it. Hang on a second." I grabbed some of the therapist's massage cream that Margot had brought with her and warmed it in one hand while pushing his T-shirt up with the other. Shawn was thinner than he'd been but not skinny yet, his muscles softly rounded instead of sharply defined. His skin was smooth, a little paler than mine, and so perfect that I was a little afraid to put my hands on him. It was completely irrational and I forced myself past it and pulled up next to him, then reached out and touched him. Warm, inviting... I blanked my mind and set about reducing the tension in the muscles.



Shawn's shoulders were a wreck, and I spent a lot of time on them. I ran my hands in long, swooping lines down the sides of his spine, soothing the muscles of his lower back but going no lower, at least not directly. By the time I got to his lower legs Shawn was half asleep, drowsing against the pillow, and when I finished with his hands I thought he was completely out. I rubbed a final time over the base of his palm, then began to shift away.

His hand caught mine, similar to just after my own version of physiotherapy, but there was no shaking this time. His fingers slid down my hand and patted the bed next to him. An invitation to stay.

I wanted to, fuck, I wanted to, but...

*Not right*, my conscience piped up. *This is your chance to be a better person, Justin, don't waste it.* Depressing but true. "Not this time," I told Shawn, and moved away—reluctantly, but I did it, damn it. I left his door cracked so Della could come and go and headed back to the couch.

I booted up my computer and checked on Detective Janich's status—a few less than cordial exchanges between him and his superior, but nothing too eyebrow raising—and settled against the leather, not even bothering with the comforter tonight. My back protested the position I put it in, and I thought about the bed I'd just left behind, and the beautiful warm body in it, and sighed.

She'd taken her heels off, but I could still hear Margot moving through the hall. I smelled her before she crouched down next to me, the sharp scent of freshly-smoked cloves overwhelming her delicate perfume. Her hands were cool on my face, and when she leaned in I felt the tears on her cheeks transfer to my own. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, kissing my cheek. "I'm so sorry, I should never have said that to you."

"Don't apologize for being honest."

"It wasn't honesty, darling, please believe me," Margot entreated. "You know how I was about Dom. Even when he was at his worst it was impossible for me to turn him away. It has always been easier to blame you for his death, but I know it's wrong, I know, I do. I just... I miss him terribly. And I see some of him in Shawn, and more when the two of you are together. He looks at you the way Dom would, and it frightens me."



I sighed. Margot was seeing things that weren't there. Still, I wasn't cruel enough to leave her hunched over on the floor. I slid back and let Margot curl up beside me on the couch. It was just barely wide enough for both of our bodies. I tucked her head beneath my chin and held her while she cried, so softly I barely knew it was happening. Margot hadn't cried at all for Dom, that I knew of. Not when she learned he was dead, not at the funeral, not when I left. She always preferred getting mad over being sad.

I'd never delved too deeply into Margot and Dom's relationship. It had been complicated, like I suppose it is with all siblings. Even when I was surrounded by other children in the orphanage, I'd always been single, alone, me against the world. Margot and Dom were twins, forever a pair even when one of them was gone. They'd lived together, finished each other's sentences, had the same taste in men—namely me—and for a while with them I'd been happier than I knew my life deserved. Holding Margot now was like holding a memory of a better time, for what was probably the last time. I loved her, but I'd always loved her through the lens of her brother first. If we were ever to be friends beyond this point, I'd have to get to know Margot for herself. It didn't seem likely, but stranger things had happened.

"This couch is terrible," Margot sniffled. "Beautiful but terrible. How your back must ache."

"It does," I said.

She didn't offer to share my bed. I didn't expect her to. She did say, "The next time your Shawn offers you a place to rest beside him, you should take it. He wants you to be there."

"He feels indebted."

"No, Justin." Margot lifted her eyes and looked at me. "He *wants* you to be there. I've only known him a day and I know this already. You better than most know how rarely an opportunity to love presents itself. You should not waste one just because you are unsure."

I waited for a beat, but my conscience was unusually quiet. "Maybe," I said at last. "At some point."

"*Peut-être*," Margot agreed. After another beat she sat back up, then stood,



pulling away from me. I closed my eyes and listened to her leave, only to come back and drape the comforter over my body. “*Dors-bien, Justin.*”

“*Merci.*”

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It got better, better for all of us. By the end of our first week together we had a tentative system in place. Margot and Shawn both settled in, we got a schedule together for therapy that all of us could live with, and Della stuck her nose into everyone’s business with impunity. It took Shawn and me four days to build those damn parallel bars, but once they were up he and Margot started him weight bearing almost immediately. It was... painful to watch. His arms were stronger than his legs at this point, but that didn’t mean they were up to supporting his whole weight yet. The first few attempts were exhausting and resulted in Shawn standing for all of, oh, ten seconds total. His failure annoyed him, and Shawn being annoyed went one of two directions: self-recriminating or irritably petulant. Margot just ignored his mood swings, claiming they were exacerbated by his medications and circumstances, but I couldn’t ignore them.

On rough days, I’d make sure to take the time to talk to Shawn after lunch, just talk, not about therapy or anything concerning his health. I asked him what project we should start next, and he decided on a coffee table, because apparently, “*Everyone has one. Drug dealers have coffee tables. You need one.*”

“I have no fucking clue how to build a coffee table that doesn’t involve the use of milk crates,” I told him honestly.

“*I can.*” And he could, without having to look up a plan online, getting the list of stuff I needed to buy straight out of his head. Of course I didn’t have the right tools, and I needed this type of wood and this type of finish... I took the list he gave me and bought everything on it. It was worth it to give him a project that he was enthusiastic about, and more than any other way of killing time I’d suggested, Shawn liked to build things.

“Aren’t kids these days supposed to be all about video games?” I asked him, marking out where we were going to stick the nails. Shawn rolled his eyes and punched me in the shoulder. It actually kind of hurt.



“*Not a kid,*” he typed. “*And you’re not old. I like carpentry.*” Building furniture had been the family business, one that started with Shawn’s great-grandfather and was eventually passed down to his father. Shawn’s brother had opted to go into the navy instead of making tables and chairs, and so the mantle of responsibility had passed to Shawn. Only Shawn hadn’t turned out the way his parents had wanted.

Being a cop hadn’t been Shawn’s first choice, but despite his constructive inclinations he didn’t have the heart, not to mention the funds, to go into business for himself. Drugs had been easier. When his arresting officer had offered him a hand getting into the police academy he’d taken it, and when Shawn got out and partnered with Doug, he’d actually enjoyed being a cop.

“What kind of person was Doug?” I asked as we clamped down the pieces we were gluing together.

Shawn was getting better at typing, faster. “*A good guy. Older. Hot. My type.*” He smiled a little. “*But I wasn’t his type. Wanted to be, but wasn’t. Still had to leave when he died. I got him killed.*”

“You were the one driving, but you didn’t kill him.”

“*Close enough,*” Shawn said. “*And everyone knew it.*” The look he gave me showed that he knew more about my situation than I’d told him personally. There was something of comradeship there, a familiar feeling of having fucked up too far to escape the inevitable consequences. I didn’t know what Margot had told Shawn about Dom, but whatever it was, it hadn’t turned him off of me. Maybe the opposite, actually.

“C’mon,” I said, distracting him from whatever he was thinking. “What’s next?”

He glanced down at my handiwork and winced. “*Loosen the clamp. It’s biting into the wood.*”

I looked down and sure enough, I’d pushed the fucking thing too far. “Damn it.”

Shawn shrugged. “*You can sand it out.*” Nothing was ever too far gone for Shawn, not even the frou-frou soufflé I’d attempted for Margot last night. It



had come out... well just flat-out bad, but Shawn had tried it anyway. I, in turn, tried not to appreciate that about him, and failed miserably.

After four nights of sleeping on the couch, I was getting to the point where I'd need to beg a massage from Margot just to get up the next morning. She could do the work, but she had hands like a master of Iron Palm kung fu, and the agony that came with getting the best results usually wasn't worth it. Both Shawn and Margot noticed how I was moving, of course, and by the time I was helping Shawn into bed—the bed whose virtues Margot had been extolling all day—and he looked up at me, and wordlessly asked me to stay, I was too desperate for a real mattress to listen to my diminishing conscience on the subject.

"Fine," I sighed, falling onto my side. "I give up. Don't blame me when I wake you up in the middle of the night, though."

Shawn shook his head—*No, of course I won't*, his expression read. Yeah, I'd believe it when I saw it, but I was through fighting with myself on this. I went out and grabbed my laptop, brought it back with me and settled against the headboard, checking through Janich's communications. Nothing new since this morning; he probably hadn't gotten home yet, but I particularly loved this one from an unknown number: **NO NEWS YET? BAD FOR YOU, PETE. GET SOMETHING SOON.** The "or else" wasn't written, but very clearly implied. Apparently the drug dealers weren't happy with the fact that Shawn was still at large and Janich had no clue as to his whereabouts. It was like reading a modern interpretation of a tragic Greek play, the kind the nuns hadn't let us read in high school because so often there was incest involved.

Shawn watched me check. His face wasn't giving anything away now, but he knew what I was doing. "I'm just keeping tabs," I told him. "I'm not planning on doing anything to him." It was rare honesty from me, when it came to something like revenge. I really wasn't planning on doing anything to Janich, not at this point. Right now he was floundering at work, he had drug-dealing gangsters impatiently watching his every move, and his loose end was hopelessly at large. At this rate I wouldn't *have* to do anything to Janich; circumstance would take care of him for me. It was a nice feeling.

I put the laptop off to the side and settled onto the bed, staring at Shawn. He stared back. Well, this was off to a wonderfully awkward start. Despite the



tension of mutual attraction that we carried between us, neither of us was ready to address it, much less do something about it.

Dogs are either immune to awkward or have a sixth sense for comfort, because that was when Della jumped onto the bed between us, running over me in the process, and rolled over onto her back. She went from semi-mature mutt to flopsy puppy in all of about two seconds, and I had to laugh at her.

“Well, someone’s night just got easier,” I said. “Now she won’t have to run back and forth between the two of us.”

Shawn nodded and scratched gently at Della’s chest, not even wincing when her paws smacked him across the face as she turned to face him. “Rude,” I told her. “Della.” I snapped my fingers and pointed at the foot of the bed. It was a newer trick, but she was picking it up pretty fast. “Down there.”

She whined but obeyed, heaving herself up and moving down to curl between our feet. The stare was broken and I could relax again. “She’s exhausting,” I said. “I’m ready for sleep, how about you?”

Shawn nodded again. I reached over and turned off the light, and spent the next few hours listening to the sound of Shawn’s breathing, and the quiet twitches of Della’s paws against the covers. It was the most restful night I’d had in months. Even better, when I woke up at five the next morning, my back felt almost normal again.

It was still dark outside, but I could see the outline of Shawn’s body, just a foot away from mine. He hadn’t moved much in the night, and he’d slept soundly despite my fears about waking him up. He was amazingly adaptable, and part of me was still waiting for him to wake up and realize that I’d completely changed the course of his life, that I’d taken him away from everyone and everything he’d ever known and that he had the right to be angry about that. He hadn’t been angry though, not yet, not about that. Shawn was angry about his body and his brain and his abilities, and he was angry at how incredibly fucked up his situation was, but he wasn’t angry at me. Which was good, because if he started making demands I’d just have to refuse them for his own good, no matter how I felt about the guy.

*Maybe he’d like New York,* I thought absently, tightening my fingers around the edge of my pillow to keep my hand in place, and not reach out and



touch him. *Or New Orleans. Someplace completely different.* I'd lived in both of those places, briefly, and while big city living wasn't something I took to naturally, it might be something Shawn enjoyed. I could get him set up, apartment, job or maybe a shop of his own, a new identity, a new life, and then...

Walk out of it?

*Now you've gone and done it, my conscience sighed. You've fallen for him. Completely. Damn it, boy, you're getting soft in your old age.*

"I'm only thirty-seven," I whispered, so quiet that Shawn didn't even stir. Arguing with my conscience wasn't something I could do silently; it felt too schizophrenic to keep it all inside my head. Of course, talking to myself out loud wasn't perfectly sane either, but it made me feel better.

*Old enough to know better, but fuck it. When did you ever listen to me, really?* The old man in my head heaved a sigh. *You're not gonna be able to stay here long, then. Not if you're really thinking of his best interests. You need to get out, fast.*

"I know, but he needs to be more mobile and off of some of the drugs."

*The longer you stay, the more time there is for something to go wrong.*

"I know." And I did. "I'll deal with it."

It was going to be fine. The only person who was looking for Shawn with any tenacity was Janich, and he was still drawing a blank as far as I could tell. He'd left a message on Reggie's cell phone the other day, asking him to call back, but I didn't think I would. Reggie was a busy guy, after all, taking care of his mom, and he had better things to do than talk to rude detectives. It might have been a little out of character, but I wanted Reggie severed from people's minds as fast as possible. Silence was your friend there.

*That might be a bad idea,* my conscience had pointed out at the time, but I'd ignored him too.

By the end of the second week Shawn was able to stand and make it all the way down the length of the parallel bars. His steps were halting and painfully slow, but Margot assured both of us that this was pretty goddamn miraculous, all things considered.



“Very impressive,” she told both of us over lunch. Most of her anger had bled away, leaving her more like the Margot I remembered, deliciously sarcastic and warm. “The next step for you is a walker.”

The expression Shawn made wouldn’t have looked out of place on a two-year-old. “*I’d rather use a cane.*”

“I would rather you not fall down and break a bone or exacerbate your head injury, and for now I am the one whose opinion matters,” Margot replied, then turned to me. “And if you even think about giving him a cane before I say so, I will make you cry, *mon cher.*”

I held up my hands peaceably. “Hey, no argument here.”

Shawn made a sound of discontent. He was making more sounds lately, but he hadn’t started saying any words yet, at least not to me. Margot said his dysarthria made him self-conscious, and that she had a regimen programmed into the voice software for him to follow so he could continue the speech therapy on his own.

“Temperance and diligence are heavenly virtues,” Margot informed Shawn. “So is patience. These are all necessary pursuits for you once I leave. Don’t rely on Justin to keep your improvement on track.”

“Are you calling me undependable?” I asked, mock-offended.

“I am simply thinking that you have enough trouble minding yourself at times, much less someone else,” she said with a wry smile. “But for the most important things you are dependable.” She looked down at her watch. “Ah. My flight leaves in four hours. I must go now to get to the airport on time.”

“Do you have everything you need?”

“My bags are packed. Everything is in order.” She went over to Shawn, bent down and kissed both of his cheeks. “You are a darling man. Do your best to keep this one from being a fool, yes?”

Shawn blushed and nodded. “*Thank you Margot.*”

“Everything I have done for you here has been my pleasure.” She straightened and cast me a sidelong look, one that I recognized.

“Do you mind loading the dishes?” I asked Shawn. He shook his head and I left him and Della in the kitchen and followed Margot out into the hall. Her



bags were already loaded into the car, the Mercedes ready and waiting for her outside.

She turned to face me, and I took a long moment to memorize her face. I had no idea when or if I would ever see Margot again. Honestly I wasn't sure which I hoped for more, but I saw Dom in the green of her eyes and the delicate shells of her ears, and I saw nothing but Margot in the heart-shaped symmetry of her face and cupid mouth, and I let myself have a few aching moments of loving them both before I reined my emotion in. "Thanks," I said at last. "For coming and for staying."

"Silly, stupid man," Margot said, her hands coming up to rest on my shoulders. "I am many things, but not inconstant. You hold a piece of my heart, no? And I will always come if you need me to." She leaned in and embraced me, and I closed my eyes and held on tight. "Run away with him," she murmured. "Run away and let yourself finally heal. You deserve to be whole, and Shawn will help you become so. No more killing, Justin."

"No more," I agreed, and at that moment I really did believe that. My job here was almost done. Loose ends would stay loose ends, flapping aimlessly in the breeze, their questions unanswered, and their suspicions unconfirmed. Soon we'd be gone, and I—we—could be happy. I didn't know what was going to happen with Shawn, but I knew we had the potential to be happy. Even if we never kissed, I could give him some happiness, and feel free to accept it in return.

"*Bon.*" Margot kissed my cheeks, then once on my lips. "*Jusqu'à la prochaine fois.*"

"*Au revoir,*" I told her, and she opened the door and left.

I had expected things to get a little strange now that it was only Shawn and I in the house. Margot hadn't been much of an icebreaker but she was still a distraction, and now that it was the two of us I expected a period of settling in, a time when things would be unsteady between us before we figured out a rhythm again.

I was wrong. I'd underestimated Shawn, of course. Apart from me taking over helping out with his morning therapy session (we usually spent it solely



on walking, saving the workshop stuff for the afternoon) everything was the same. We cooked together, ate together, watched movies on my computer together—I'd never bothered to get a TV. The only thing he did by himself was the speech therapy, and he was adamant about that so I didn't fight him on it.

One thing we didn't do was go back to sleeping in separate beds. There was no reason for me to keep sleeping with Shawn now that my bedroom was my own again, except for the fact that neither of us seemed to want to give up being with each other at night. Watching Shawn sleep calmed me down, made it easier for me to fall asleep myself, and Shawn was comfortable enough now that he'd started moving in closer to me, his back to my chest, until finally I woke up one morning to find him in my arms with no memory of him getting there.

What was happening between us was intimate without feeling forced, which was nice. Shawn's libido was diminished by the extensive cocktail of drugs he was on, and I rarely got hard when I didn't want to, so there were no opportunistic boners interrupting the—Jesus Christ—the *cuddling*. The first morning I figured out that was what we were doing, I could barely look my reflection in the face when I brushed my teeth. Cuddling, for fuck's sake. I had never cuddled in my entire goddamn life, not even with Dom—when we shared a bed we kept space between us as a courtesy, as both of us could get violent in our sleep—but with Shawn cuddling just *happened*.

Even worse, I started to let it happen at other times. He'd be grating something at the kitchen table and I'd brush my fingers over his neck, and get a smile like the rising sun out of him. My arm found its way around his shoulder during a movie and Shawn just snuggled in deeper, perfectly content. Holding him did something funny to me, made me want more, like a drug, and Shawn seemed happy to be my fix. When we got close together sometimes he would look at me like there was literally no place he'd rather be, and I desperately wanted to believe him. Slowly, I was beginning to believe him.

Naturally, the idyll couldn't last.

I should have seen it coming. I did see it coming, really, there was no excuse for my lack of attention. I saw Janich's life going down the drain, heard



it in his phone calls and read it in his texts and sensed it, like a predator getting a bead on the weakest prey. I saw Janich heading for a crash and burn, support drying up for him on both sides of the law, and I loved it. I let it happen, I delighted in it and after a few weeks of voyeurism, I ignored it. I checked on him once a day; I let it go for two, because I had things to do, a new focus for my attention and for the first time that I could remember, something like hope in my heart. I had better things to do than worry about a washed-up cop dancing on the edge of the end.

But he didn't have anything better to do than look for Shawn, and I—and Della—became a part of that somehow.

The alarm was tripped at four in the morning. It was the one on the perimeter of the back lawn, a simple motion detector that had gone off twice before since I'd installed it. One time was a raccoon, one time was Princess, who'd jerked her leash out of her doting mother's hand and run for the last place she and Della had played together. I sat up immediately and pulled up the security camera feed on my laptop. It was a high quality camera, gave me everything from infrared to night vision, and when the image showed a human-shaped heat signature creeping toward my back door, I needed five tense, furious seconds to swear at myself in my head before I could get up and deal with the situation. And deal with it I fucking would.

Shawn woke up as I racked the slide of the closest gun I could get my hands on, an HK with a silencer, which was important at this time of night. I heard the change in his breathing, saw the sudden rise in his shoulders and did my best to ignore it. "Della," I said sternly as I addressed our dog, sitting at attention at the foot of the bed. "Guard Shawn." That was a command she knew well enough, and she immediately moved up next to Shawn.

Shawn fumbled for the bedside light, and I reached out and stopped his hand. "Leave it off," I murmured. "Someone's coming up to the back door, and I don't want to tip them off that we know it."

Shawn's hand turned under mine, and for the first time in a long time he traced his words right against my skin. *Who?*

"I'm not sure yet," I said, although I really was. "Stay here, okay?"

*Careful.*



“Always.” I headed out to the hallway on silent feet, moving slowly and cautiously through the living room—the coffee table was done but we’d started on a rocking chair, and it was taking up a lot more space than one damn chair should merit—and into position to see through the glass of the back door.

Oh, I’d know the shape of those shoulders. The detective wore bulky black clothes, particularly thick on top, and his face was obscured by a ski mask. A gun sat in a holster beneath his left arm, and he was doing his damndest to pick my lock as I watched. Well, wasn’t he a proper burglar.

It occurred to me that I could shoot to kill him right now and thanks to the state’s Stand Your Ground law I’d be behaving in a completely legal manner, no matter who the person doing the breaking in was. But that would require too much interaction with more law enforcement, too many questions, and just as fast as it came, the thought that this might not be the end shriveled and died before it had more than the barest breath of life.

So I waited until he was through the first lock on the door and started on the second before I pulled back the deadbolt, yanked the door open and jerked Janich inside, then kicked him in the side of the knee as I shut the door again. Janich pitched forward with a pained grunt, and I shot him in the back twice to ensure that he’d stay down for a while as I verified that he’d come alone.

He was still alive, of course. I could tell from the bulk of the clothes and the feel as I’d pulled him forward that he was wearing a vest, and this particular gun was a small caliber. Two shots at close range would bruise, maybe crack his ribs, but nothing he couldn’t recover from. Not that this piece of shit was going to get much of a chance to recover, but there was a time and a place for killing, and my house at four in the morning was neither.

I checked the camera feed as I relocked the door—nothing. I left the monitor on and dragged Janich’s wheezing body further into the room, where I could keep an eye on the feeds just in case and be safely away from the windows as well. I rolled him over onto his back, grabbed a zip tie out from under the couch—I stored more than just guns under there—and fastened his hands together. I frisked him and grabbed his phone, keys, spare magazine and a rather nice knife, then sat down on the couch and looked at him. It was too dark to make out details but I knew immediately when he registered me. His breath stopped for a moment, and then he said, “Fuck me.”



“Oh trust me, you’re fucked,” I assured him. “What brings you to my neck of the woods, Detective?” I was hoping he’d talk without needing extra persuasion. I didn’t want Shawn to have to stop up his ears.

“Fuckin’... you, you bastard,” Janich moaned, then somehow chuckled. Dark humor, but still humor. “Knew something wasn’t right with you, *Reggie Jameson*.” He looked around the dark room. “Where’s your fucking dog, anyway?”

“None of your business.” He’d tracked me down as Reggie? How? “Reggie Jameson doesn’t live here.”

“Think you’re so smart? God,” Janich said suddenly, his voice cracking. “I gotta sit up, my back’s killing me.” He started to roll and I stopped him with a very firm nudge to his bad knee, making him hiss.

“First you explain, then we think about your comfort. What made you think of Reggie Jameson?”

“I didn’t like you,” Janich said bluntly after he caught his breath. “Not from the moment I met you. There was something off about you, something wrong. And running into me outside that day... you fucked with my phone, I know it. Then you up and disappear, but you were already on my radar. I pulled a picture of your car from the surveillance videos at the bank you parked across from. The license plate belongs to a dead man two counties over.”

Which was the whole point. “That doesn’t explain what you’re doing here, Detective. I suggest you start connecting dots for me, or I shoot you in the vest again. How many times do you think I can nail you in one spot before you start to bleed?” That was mostly bravado; at this point I’d just start working him over with my hands, but guns tended to be pretty motivational for most people, and I was hoping that Janich wasn’t an exception.

He wasn’t. “Christ,” Janich sighed, laying his head back against the floor. He was still wearing that stupid ski mask, and he had to work to tug it off his head. I didn’t help, but I did let him do it before nudging his knee again. “All right, man, calm the fuck down.” He sighed again. “You found him, didn’t you? You found him in the first place. You ain’t really Reggie, and you ain’t



that janitor who went missing. You're the guy that brought Shawn to the hospital. This is your house. Papers on the place just read J. How the fuck did you manage that?"

"Paying in cash, in full, buys you a lot of leeway when it comes to paperwork," I said. "You're telling me that you broke into my house on the basis of some cryptic paperwork and the fact that you dumped Shawn like a piece of garbage in the woods back there?"

The roughness in Janich's voice when he spoke again wasn't all due to being shot. "I never meant it to happen like that. I never wanted Shawn to be hurt, but he saw things he shouldn't have seen. Gave me an ultimatum. I guess you know all about that now."

"Actually I don't," I replied, and it was true. After establishing that Shawn was in danger, I really hadn't cared all that much what he'd seen. "It doesn't matter. Keep talking."

"I wasn't the one who hurt him," Janich said. "And I didn't want to leave him like that, but... it was him or me."

"You put him in your car and drove him up here."

"Yeah."

"You painted 'fag' on his chest and left him in the rain."

"We keep paint around for blocking off traffic accidents. Who'd think I did it, with that word on him?" He sighed. "I thought he was dead by the time I left him," Janich confessed. "I'd hoped he was. Fuck. And then he showed up in the hospital, and we couldn't keep it quiet."

"You didn't even try," I reminded him, remembering Janich's hurried conversation the first time he came in and saw Shawn.

"Well, didn't look so good for me, did it?" he asked rhetorically. I answered him anyway.

"No it didn't. You still haven't told me why you decided to break into my house tonight."

Janich cracked a grin up at me. I couldn't see it in the darkness, but I smelled the blood in his mouth. "I called around to some of your neighbors,



asking about reports of a vicious dog in the area that'd attacked some folks. Asked if they knew anything about it. Mrs. Carlsen was very helpful, told me the only other dog in the area was yours. Della. Described her to a *t*, told me how sweet she was. I knew I had the right guy." He coughed roughly. "Didn't expect this though, I gotta say."

"You seem remarkably sanguine about it."

"It's better not to antagonize the man with the gun," Janich shrugged. "Especially when he's ready to use it."

Detective Janich was a reasonable man. Of course there was no way he was walking away from this, but I applauded his common sense. "I would hate to have to clean this floor after killing you, so thanks for that," I told him.

He was silent for a long moment. "You won't kill me. I'm a cop."

"You're not a very good one."

"There'll be too many questions," he argued. "I left notes on my computer, and my captain knows how I'm spendin' my time. They'll figure it out and come here."

"Does your captain know about you working with the Red Scorpions too?"

"Separate issues," Janich argued. "And no, he doesn't."

"But he suspects something, doesn't he?" Silence again. "He does, otherwise you would have gotten backup before coming up here. Hell, you would have come as a cop instead of a thief in the night. So you can't expect any support there."

"You can't just get away with killing a cop."

"Why not?" I asked. "You did. Or you would have, if I hadn't intervened."

Janich swallowed hard. "Where's Shawn?"

"In the bedroom."

A moment later the light flicked on, making a liar out of me. I must have been seriously focused on Janich to miss the noise of Shawn getting himself out of bed by himself, still an ordeal, and Della had been absolutely silent. Janich and I both looked over at Shawn, who stared at the scene with wide



eyes. I could only imagine how it looked to him: me holding a gun on his rat bastard of a former lover, who was prone and bleeding from the mouth, but not too badly. Probably just a bitten tongue, not a broken rib giving him internal bleeding.

“Shawnie,” Janich croaked, reaching a hand out to him. “I can explain.”

Just hearing him address Shawn, like he had the right, made me furious where a moment ago I’d been calm. I leveled the gun straight at his head. “Shut your mouth.”

“Shawnie, baby, you know this isn’t right,” he continued, despite me. “You know that I love you, I never meant to—” The gun fired in almost perfect silence, but the bullet ripping into the floorboard an inch from Janich’s skull made plenty of noise. He flinched violently and Della—or maybe it was Shawn, I wasn’t looking at them—whimpered.

“That’s the last warning you get,” I told Janich. “The next one goes through your eye socket and to hell with the mess. Don’t talk to him. You don’t have that right.”

“What, and you do?” Janich sneered, but at least he was addressing me now. “Like you and me, we’re all that different? I know you’re a liar, I know you’re a fake and I’m pretty goddamn sure you’ve killed far more people than me, so don’t get high and mighty about being better than me when Shawn probably has no idea who you really are.”

I was acutely aware of Shawn’s eyes on me, but I didn’t look at him. “You’re not wrong,” I said. “I am a liar. I can be a fake, and I’m absolutely certain that I’ve killed people all over the world in more ways than you can imagine. But here’s the thing.” I leaned forward and stared Janich in the eyes. “I’ve never tried to kill Shawn. I’ve never abandoned him. I’ve never hurt him like you did, and I never could. I love him.”

Holy shit, I said it. I’d been thinking it to myself for a while now, quietly, safely, way down in the dark spots inside where it was too deep to escape. Apparently those dark spots rose to the surface when assholes started breaking into my house. Shit. I loved Shawn, and I’d just said it for the first time while threatening his boyfriend with a gun. I was so disgusted with myself that I



barely heard the next few words out of Janich's mouth, but as soon as they registered they broke me out of my stupor.

"I love him—"

I kicked him in the knee again with my heel, making him grunt with pain. "Clearly our ideas about love come from very different places. And now I think I'm done listening to you." I grabbed the abandoned ski mask lying next to his head and stuffed it in his mouth, then took another zip tie and tightened it around his head to hold the mask in place. The tie cut into the flesh of Janich's ears and had to be uncomfortable as hell, but I didn't care. A large part of me wanted to start zip-tying other, more sensitive parts of his body, but I didn't even need to consult my conscience to know that was a mistake. At least, it was if I did it in front of Shawn. Who I needed to talk to really badly.

I zipped Janich's feet together for good measure, stood up and walked over to Shawn. "Will you come with me?" I asked. I was genuinely unsure, and when Shawn nodded, albeit jerkily, I sighed with relief. "Okay. Kitchen." I glanced down at Della and pointed to Janich. "Della, guard." She immediately moved over and sat down next to Janich, who made a noise of frightened protest that I ignored. Della was no threat to him, at least not yet. I hadn't had time to teach her the attack commands.

Shawn had something typed out and ready to go by the time he got to the kitchen table. "*What happened?*"

"He broke into the house," I said, flopping down in a chair. God, I felt tired. "He figured out that I was Reggie, and that Reggie might have something to do with you. I underestimated him." Oh, and wasn't that a bitter pill to swallow? "I should have been more careful. I'm sorry, Shawn."

Shawn's face was pale, his mouth tight. He typed, "*What will you do now?*"

"Well, it's not like we can keep him around," I said. "I've got to get rid of him."

Shawn was already shaking his head no.

"Yes, I do. If I call the cops they'll ask questions about you, even if you're not here, because Janich will talk. Once they start asking questions they won't



stop, and then they'll find out about me. He's right about me, Shawn. I'm a killer. I took contracts for years, not for any kind of ideal, just for money. I met Margot because I was supposed to kill Dom and didn't, and he ended up taking me home." I knew Shawn had been curious about Dom, but this was probably more than he wanted to know. It didn't matter. Everything was wrong now. "We worked together until the job got him killed. That's when I quit. Too late to do Dom any good." And now I was too late to do Shawn any good, too slow. We should have left weeks ago, should have packed up along with Margot and hit the road.

*"You can't kill him."*

"Funny," I said with a half smile, although it wasn't funny at all. "He said the same thing."

*"Leave him here. We can go now."*

I shook my head. "That'll prompt a manhunt. We don't have the resources to deal with that." Not to mention the last thing I wanted was information about me, or any of my aliases, being splashed around the news. There were people out there who, if they saw that, would be a lot more dogged than the cops about hunting me down. "We'll leave once he's gone. I'll set you up somewhere nice, I promise."

Real panic entered Shawn's eyes. *"No, stay with me."*

"I can't. Janich is right, I've lied to you from the start. I don't deserve you, Shawn." Never had, never would. "I do... I care about you, though." *Understatement*, my conscience prodded me, but I wasn't going to say the word "love" again. Once had been painful enough. I shut my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to stave off the headache I could feel coming. "And I promise, I won't kill him." I wouldn't have to. "Please don't call anyone, and stay here until I get back." Not that I thought he'd leave, or really could, but I was worried he'd call 911.

*"No, stay with me."* He repeated it over and over, and I retreated like the coward I was and went back into the living room, cut the tie on Janich's ankles with his own knife and hoisted him to his feet.

"We're leaving." I had a bag ready to go in the garage with everything I'd need, and the sooner I had Janich out of the house, the better. I blocked out



Shawn's words following me into the living room, and the rapid, panicked sound of his breathing as he tried to keep up with me. I wanted nothing more than to comfort him, but that was impossible. Right before I pushed Janich into the garage, I looked over at Shawn.

I shouldn't have. Tears leaked down his face, and he was making unintelligible noises that nonetheless told me exactly what he meant. *Stay, no, don't do this.* Shawn reached out to me, practically falling out of the wheelchair in his effort to stand up, intervene, do anything at all, and I still denied him. "Fuck, I'm so sorry," I whispered, stricken.

Then I left.

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We took Janich's car, which he'd left along the road at the end of the cul-de-sac. I drove for ten minutes before I got tired of Janich's muffled curses and cut the zip tie off his head. He spit out the ski mask and coughed for about a minute before looking at me with murder in his eyes. "What, you're gonna drive me some place quiet and off me now?"

"I'm not going to do a damn thing to you, unless you try to make a grab for the wheel of the car," I said conversationally. I'd seen his hands twitching. "In which case, yes, I will shoot you, ditch your car somewhere remote and set the entire thing on fire. I haven't decided if I'd keep you alive for that part or not yet, so don't tempt me, Detective. What you said earlier about not antagonizing the guy with the gun was very wise."

Janich frowned. "If you're not gonna kill me, then what are we doing here?" He paused, then added, "Listen, we can make this work. You take Shawn and go, it'll be like this never happened. All square, I won't come after you."

"No, you'll just tell your gangbang friends about us and then let them do the dirty work." I was looking for Janich's tell and there it was, that slight hesitation in his breath. "I know they want Shawn dead, and I know they're holding you responsible for finding him. I know they're not going to be happy about you screwing it up, either."

"Yeah?" Janich sighed and leaned back against the car seat, all his bluster deflating like a balloon. "What else do you know, Mr. J?"



“Lots of things.” I checked my mirrors before switching lanes; the last thing I needed right now was to be pulled over for a traffic violation. “Like the location of Kent Station, for instance.”

Janich froze. “Kent Station? Why, you putting me on a train? It’s a little early for that.”

“It’s never too early for what I’ve got in mind.”

“You’re insane.”

“Nope.” I smiled at him. “I just want to give you the chance to be a hero, that’s all.”

The rest of the ride was silent, at least until we pulled up just outside the parking garage at Kent Station. “They hang out on the lower level at night, don’t they?” I asked as I put the headlights on bright. The eastern sky was just starting to get a little bit of color now. “The Red Scorpions.”

“You want to send me in against those guys?” Janich laughed hoarsely. “Bad idea. They won’t kill me, not until they torture your name outta me. You and Shawn still won’t be safe.”

“There’s not going to be time for conversation,” I said, reaching into the back seat for my special bag. It was reassuringly heavy. “Because I’m going to level the playing field a bit.”

I could see movement inside the garage. A man appeared at the entrance to it; I could only see his silhouette, but I was pretty sure he wasn’t an early morning traveler. Janich saw him too, and stiffened.

“You’re going in with me?” he asked, not at all reassured.

“Not exactly.” I pulled my weapon out of the bag. Janich took one look at it and groaned. “I’m just going to clear a path.”

“You fucking son of a bitch, they’ll kill me!”

“And you should be trying to kill them right back,” I said encouragingly. “This is what happens when you do business with a bunch of murderers, Detective. When things go wrong, they can only come up with one answer.

“You’re dead any way you look at it,” I said bluntly, leaning in. “Either they kill you, I kill you, or if by some miracle you survive this morning, you



get arrested by your own people and you end up in prison, which will certainly kill you before long. You're a dead man, Detective. You just have to pick how you want to go out. Killing a bunch of drug-dealing gangsters, or however I decide to do you. And I'm still leaning toward slowly."

"You're a sick fuck."

"Yes," I agreed.

"You don't deserve Shawn."

"Of course I don't. But neither do you. Now pick, Detective." I took out my gun and pointed it at his kneecap. "Or I pick for you."

There were two men at the entrance to the garage now, looking straight at our car. Probably wondering why the engine was still running and the lights were still on. I could see a gun in one of their hands.

"Fine," Janich said at last. "Untie me and gimme my fucking weapon."

"A fine choice, Detective." I cut his hands free and handed over his gun and spare magazine. "Go get 'em, sport."

For a moment I could see that fire in his eyes again, the desire to lay into me, to shoot me, kill me. The M203 I held in my hands seemed to deter him, though. It wasn't just for firing off grenades; the rifle worked just fine. "You gonna clear a path for me with that?"

"Sure," I said with a smile. "I like to be sporting."

I opened up my door and stepped out of the car. Janich followed on the other side. One of the men recognized him. "The fuck you doing here, pig?" he called out. "You got somethin' for us?"

"I suppose we have the right guys, then." I raised the weapon to my shoulder, sighted and fired swiftly. The high explosive round sailed into the parking garage, detonating a moment later. Smoke and screams emerged, and the two men at the entrance flinched violently, then started firing at us. "Time to get going, Detective."

Janich stared at me for a long moment, full of hatred and fear and remorse. I tensed, waiting for his attack as bullets began to perforate his car. Then he turned and began firing all at once. The two men fell almost instantly.



“Good shot,” I murmured. Janich limped forward and I stayed behind, taking out two more men who had started to run this way from the nearby park. I only shot them in the legs; they might have been innocent bystanders, although generally those people ran away from gunfire, not into it.

Shots rang back and forth for over a minute. It wasn’t too surprising; Janich still had his vest on, after all, he wouldn’t be that easy to kill unless one of them shot him in the head. I could occasionally make out a muzzle flash in the darkness of the garage, but the men themselves were completely obscured. Finally the noise died down, though, and just as I got ready to head in and make sure the job was done, Janich came staggering out. He fell over facedown a few feet outside of the structure. I walked over to him and rolled him.

The vest had held, but his right leg was leaving quite the puddle. Janich stared up at me and mouthed the word *ambulance*.

“Oh, they’re coming,” I assured him. They were, too; I could hear sirens in the distance. “They’re on their way. But not for you, Detective. Remember? You’re a dead man.” It wouldn’t be long; his femoral artery was practically gushing. “You did the right thing, though. You made the right choice.”

“T... t... ell... Sh... Sh...”

“I’ll tell Shawn,” I said.

“D... di... lo...”

“I know you did. I know.” *Just not enough*. I watched his eyes close, watched the flow of blood slow to a trickle. “Not enough.” I felt briefly for his pulse; nothing. Peter Janich was gone. And now I had to be.

I stole a new car, since Janich’s was very obviously riddled with bullet holes, and headed for home. I still had equipment at Janich’s house, the bugs from before that would probably be found as the police started to investigate his death, but I wasn’t really worried about that. They were generic and clean, and could belong to anybody. Maybe even his former allies. Either way, it was no skin off my back. My mind made up, naturally it turned from being focused on action to musing over consequences.

Doing my work in the heat of the moment was never a problem for me. I focused in on what needed to happen and made it so. It wasn’t until afterward



that I thought about what I'd done or how I'd done it. And even then, it didn't used to bother me. But now...

I spent the entire ride back thinking about what I'd just done, and how it would disgust Shawn. How it was going to alienate him. God, how he must *despise* me... I had promised him I'd keep him safe. I'd wormed my way into his life, unasked, taken over everything, all of his choices, and made him suffer.

*You did it to save his life*, my conscience reminded me. It was a bad day when that part of my psyche was trying to be encouraging.

"I fucked up."

*Not at saving Shawn's life, you didn't.*

"How am I even going to look at him?" I shut my eyes for a moment, feeling the car start to weave. It would have been so easy to weave right off the road. Some days I was just tired of living, so sick of myself I wanted to die. Everyone would be better off that way.

*No-no*, my conscience said gently. *Keep driving, Justin. Drive on home. You can make it. It's okay, you can still go home.*

My conscience got me home, but it didn't manage to get me through the door. I parked the stolen car and walked around to my back yard. I lay down in the middle of the grass, still cool and damp with morning dew, and prayed like I hadn't since I was a child. I prayed for the ground to open up and swallow me whole, prayed for the sun to scorch me to a cinder as soon as it finished rising, prayed for absolution by third party intervention. Fuck it, I'd take a goddamn meteor strike right now as long as it left the house standing.

I heard the door open. I expected Della to run out, but she didn't. Instead I heard the sound of heavy footsteps stumbling down the stairs, and a soft, frustrated exhalation. Shawn couldn't walk without his arms supporting him yet, and once the rails leading up to the porch weren't available he got down on the ground and dragged himself instead.

I could have made it easier for Shawn. I could have gotten up and walked over to him, closed the distance myself instead of making him work so hard to come to me, but the truth is I was a coward. I didn't want to talk to him, didn't



want to have anything to do with him right now. I didn't deserve to be in his presence, and it would be better for both of us if he was angry by the time he got to me. That would set the right tone. Anger I could deal with. Shawn crawled, painfully, inch by inch, and I listened to him move and imagined myself in Hell. It would probably feel like this, self-loathing so thick I was choking on it, self-destructiveness so sharp I could almost cut myself with it. I could barely breathe for hating.

I managed to keep my outward stoicism up until Shawn was almost close enough to touch, and then I started speaking.

"Janich is dead. I didn't shoot him, someone else did, but it's still my doing. I'm..." I wasn't sorry Janich was dead, but... "I'm sorry I let you down. Shawn, I—"

"Justin!"

What the... I looked at Shawn, all astonishment. That was his actual voice, not something synthesized coming out of a computer, not random syllables. It was Shawn's voice, tight and desperate and fierce, a perfect match to the expression on his face. He was beside me a moment later, his tablet tossed down on the ground next to us, and he pressed the button for speech over and over again as he threw himself against me and kissed me, hard.

*"Idiot."*

*"I love you."*

*"Stop it."*

*"I love you."*

*"You saved me."*

*"I love you."*

*"I love you."*

*"Idiot."*

*"Don't ever do this to me again."*

*"Stay with me."*

*"I love you."*



*“I love you.”*

“Justin,” he breathed, putting an inch of space between us as he cupped my face with his hands. My lips still tingled from the kiss, hard pressure and heat turning me on like someone had lit a fire inside of me. I stared into Shawn’s bright blue eyes and read them like a book, love and fear and desperation. Not fear of me, fear *for* me. “Justin,” Shawn said again, clear as a bell. It was probably the only word he could say. I imagined him repeating it to himself over and over, alone in his room. Practicing saying my name, a word more important to Shawn than his own name. I almost couldn’t believe it, but I didn’t have another choice.

“Justin.” Shawn kissed me, softer now, soft and sweet and hungry. “Justin.” He held onto me and finally, I held him back. My hands felt swollen and clumsy, and my eyes were too hot, I had to shut them. I couldn’t look at Shawn anymore. He kissed both my eyelids, and my whole body trembled. I held on for dear life and he didn’t move away or change his mind or start to hurt me. Shawn just waited, touching me gently and kissing me until I barely recognized how I felt.

“Why?” I asked finally, still shaking but not as badly as before.

I listened to the *tap tap* of his finger against the tablet, and finally he said, *“None of this is your fault. You saved me. You didn’t even know me and you changed your whole life for me. Why?”*

Why? I opened my eyes and looked up at Shawn. Backlit by the rising sun, the edges of his dark hair glowing reddish gold, he was ungodly beautiful. “Because you saw me,” I husked, unable to be anything other than completely honest. I felt like I was in confession. “You looked at me that night and you *saw* me. It was like you saw inside of me. And I couldn’t stop thinking about you after that.”

*“Lucky me.”*

“Lucky both of us.” I shut my eyes again and grabbed one of his hands. “Sorry I made you come out here after me.”

*“Just wait, soon I’ll be running. Then you won’t escape me.”*

“I don’t want to escape,” I confessed. “But the running is something we’ll have to do. Today, preferably.”



*“As long as we run together.”*

“That’s really what you want?”

Shawn rolled his eyes. “Justin,” he said, fond and exasperated all at once.

“Okay, got it.” I really did, this time. “And, you know... I meant it when I said that I love you too.” It was so much easier to say it again now that I’d heard it from him.

*“I know.”*

I helped Shawn into the house, where Della greeted us anxiously. Packing up didn’t take long; we had to leave the new coffee table, though. I promised Shawn we could make another one wherever we ended up. I drove the new car a few miles away from the house, well off the side of the road, then set it on fire and hiked back. Didn’t need to abandon all our bits and pieces in one place. The house... I really wanted to just leave it, but our fingerprints were everywhere inside. The last thing I needed was for someone new to come looking for Shawn, so it had to go too. Luckily it had been a wet spring, and none of our neighbors lived too close.

We loaded everything into the Explorer, checked the house over one last time for particularly incriminating evidence of our existence, then drove away. As soon as we got onto the main road, I pressed the button on the remote detonator I’d hooked up to the last of my plastic explosives. A *bang* followed by a plume of smoke rose up behind us.

It wasn’t even noon yet.

I had no fucking clue what I was doing, really. I’d never been in a situation like this before, with someone who loved me like this, someone I still had so much to learn about. I should have been scared as hell. I should have been anxious and snarling.

Instead all I could do was glance over at Shawn and Della, feel a moment of terrible, blinding gratitude to someone or something I didn’t comprehend, and drive on.

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There were few things I liked better than watching Shawn work. He got really intense, focused on the piece of wood and whatever he was shaping it into. Despite the snow outside, our house was warm, and he wore a thin T-shirt that left very little about the shape of his deltoids to the imagination. But right now, as much as I liked watching him work, I wanted his attention more. “You should take a break,” I told Shawn as I moved in behind him, massaging his tense shoulders and neck. He shut his eyes and leaned back into my touch for a moment, then pulled away.

“Three days,” he reminded me. Like I was going to forget.

“I know Margot gets here in three days, but that’s plenty of time to build a third chair,” I argued.

“I’m building it,” Shawn said carefully, enunciating every word. His speech had vastly improved over the past six months, but he still had to take it slow to make sure the words came out all right. “You’re watching.”

“I just didn’t want to disturb things. Besides, I’m sanding our headboard. That’s work.”

“You’ve been sanding it for a week.”

I moved in close and stroked my hands across Shawn’s shoulders and down his arms. “That’s because when I tie your wrists to it I don’t want you to get any splinters,” I murmured in his ear, and he made a small, needy noise and pressed back against me. I had been pleasantly surprised to find out that Shawn was okay with being tied up. More than okay, really. He was way more adventuresome sexually than I’d anticipated when I’d run away from Renton with him.

We’d traveled all over the states while we figured out what the hell we were doing. We switched cars out every thousand miles or so (cars I *bought*, because my passenger wasn’t okay with me stealing them), got some new IDs (way more expensive than the cars and worth it, because they were complete in every way, from valid social security numbers to Facebook profiles) and stopped in at every kitschy themed motel we could find. I got rooms with doubles for the first week before Shawn walked over to my bed, fell down on top of me, kissed me brutally hard and informed me we would be sharing. Then he went down on me.



Motherfucker, that kid could give head. It might have been because I was coming off such a long celibate stretch or because I just really, really wanted Shawn, but I came so hard I almost blacked out on a comforter decorated with a cross-stitched portrait of Elvis, and that just wouldn't have been dignified.

Margot had said we could cut back on Shawn's meds and that had been a good decision, because his libido was back and kicking, and when I returned the favor his orgasm tore through him like a hurricane, leaving him wrecked and me thirsty for more. I knew I loved Shawn, I was slowly learning that he loved me, but sexual compatibility had been the last thing I'd really been uncertain about. It turned out not to be a problem, which I was eternally grateful for.

We ended up settling in Estes Park, Colorado. It was a little touristy town deep in the mountains, surrounded by a national park. Our house was remote enough to satisfy me, came with an attached wood shop that satisfied Shawn, and had all the animals Della could ever want to chase after, although one long look at an elk had her headed in the opposite direction.

I was getting into the whole "retirement" thing this time around. I found part-time work at a local shooting range just to keep my hand in, Shawn already had two commissions for furniture from our neighbors and we hadn't even finished building things for our own house yet, and no one seemed bothered by the fact that our new aliases shared the same last name. Justin and Shawn Cunningham were married and proud of it. We even had rings, something that my old contact responsible for the identities had handed over with the paperwork. The rings were nice, heavy silver and fit each of us perfectly, so we kept them.

Doesn't mean I wasn't planning on proposing properly at some point. It just took the anxiety out of it.

"You really should take a break," I told Shawn, slipping one hand around his hips to press against the erection growing in his jeans. "Make sure you don't strain anything."

"I would hate to strain something," Shawn agreed, putting the saw he held—my old cheap saw—down and arching further back.



“Oh, me too,” I said. Which was why I picked him up and carried him into the bedroom as fast as I could get there. Shawn didn’t care for being picked up—the disconsolate punch to my shoulder reminded me of that—but I didn’t want to do this in the shop. The last time we’d gotten filthy with sawdust. Shawn had a cane which he got around with fairly well, but I didn’t have the patience for that either.

Shawn glared at me as I laid him down on our bed. It was a king-sized monstrosity, beyond comfortable, and perfect except for the lack of a headboard. I loved seeing Shawn in it, his dark jeans and maroon shirt making him stand out starkly against the light blue of the comforter. I knelt at the foot of the bed and started untying his shoes.

“I am not a damsel in distress,” Shawn informed me. “No more princess carries.”

“But baby,” I teased, pulling off his sneakers and starting in on his socks. “I bet you’d make a gorgeous Snow White. We could role play it right here, all we need to find are some dwarves—”

“Fuck off,” Shawn said very distinctly, but he was smiling a little. “Just for that, you have to watch.”

“Watch what?” I asked, but he was already moving, unbuttoning the top of his jeans and opening them just enough to get his cock out. He wasn’t fully hard yet, but that changed as he stroked himself, eyes closed, hips moving restlessly against the bed.

I wasn’t very good at being a passive partner, no matter what we were doing. With Dom everything had been a fight, from who would top to who came first. With Shawn I was never vicious, but it was rarely perfectly easy either. At first I had constantly pushed him, shifted and moved and worked against him even when he had me on my knees, thrusting into my body. And sometimes Shawn liked the battle, but other times he just wanted sweet and slow and careful, and for him I was ready to adapt. That didn’t make it natural or easy, though.

Now that I had Shawn I couldn’t imagine not being able to touch him, but sometimes he liked to watch me, or for me to watch him. I think what he liked



best about it was driving me up the fucking wall, honestly, but when it came to making him happy I was absolutely whipped. He touched himself and I watched, followed his slender fingers as they squeezed his dick, slow and soft to start, just a tease against the sensitive skin. Shawn's jeans slipped further down his legs as he got more aggressive with himself, and once they were all the way to his feet I tugged them off the bed. That didn't really count as helping, I figured.

Shawn spread his legs wide and slipped his other hand between his thighs, fondling and tugging at his balls before he went lower and circled a fingertip around his hole. I'd been inside of Shawn just that morning, barely four hours earlier, but watching him push a finger inside, slow and easy, made me crave being back in him. Welcome and warmth and a slick, tight sheath that made both of us feel so good...

Shawn opened his eyes, looked at me and groaned. I was palming myself through my pants, doing my best not to blow right then and there. "Come here," he said, pleading in his voice, and there was no way I couldn't do what he said. I paused long enough to grab a condom off the bedside table, threw my clothes off and slid down the vee of Shawn's legs until my bare cock nudged against his. I shivered and pressed harder, rubbing us together.

"Justin," Shawn urged, letting go of himself and pulling his knees further back. "I'm ready."

Some days were for slow and sweet, touching each other with care and wondering what I'd done to get someone this good, in my case. Today though, right now, was for fast and hard. I put the condom on, already lubed and ready to go, lifted Justin's hips into the right position and thrust inside. He was still a little loose from earlier, clinging around my length but not so much I worried about hurting him. I groaned with satisfaction as I slid all the way in, then leaned in close and pressed my lips to Shawn's, swallowing the little sound he always made on the first stroke. I waited another couple seconds before I started to move, out halfway and back in, the slap of our bodies a counterpoint to the ragged breathing that filled the air.

Shawn clenched his ass and I saw stars, muttering a ragged "Fuck" as I moved faster. He was touching himself again, whipping his hand over the



blood-red head of his cock in tandem with my movements, ratcheting himself higher and higher with every stroke.

“Justin,” Shawn said tightly, “Oh God, harder, please...” He was so close and I was right behind him, and I gave him what he wanted, pounding into his ass as hard as I could. His eyes shut again and he pressed hard against me, every muscle squeezing and tense as he came all over his stomach and hand with a hoarse yell.

That was it for me. I buried myself as deep in him as I could and let go, everything whiting out for a moment with the force of my orgasm. I rode out the aftershocks in a state of rigor, finally relaxing enough to unlock my elbows and settle down on Shawn’s chest.

It didn’t take me long to catch my breath but I still didn’t want to move. Shawn didn’t seem to have a problem with that, scratching his fingers across my scalp and tangling them in my hair. “Okay?” I asked after a moment.

“Yes,” Shawn said, voice throaty and satisfied. “Very okay. You?”

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh. “Perfect.” Or closer to it than I’d ever imagined being, which was pretty much the same thing. “Just perfect.”

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Cari Z is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine, which is good because living there, she sometimes gets both in the same day. Get back on your meds, Colorado! \*ahem\* Anyway. She's published stories with Storm Moon Press, Dreamspinner and Total E-Bound among others, and her novel Changing Worlds won a Rainbow Award last year. Check out her blog for new, free serial fiction every week.*

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# DESERT RAIN

By Victoria Zagar

## **Photo Description**

A red-haired man in an Army National Guard uniform touches his friend's face tenderly. They both look agonized by the touch. There is a spark in their eyes that speaks of forbidden love and desire.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*That look he's giving me is making it so hard to leave, but I have no choice. My fingers on his chin right now is the most intimately I have ever touched him. I wonder what he would do if I kissed him? Would it be fair to him?*

*Help!*

*Sincerely,*

*Kathleen*

*PS: I prefer emotion without heaps of angst, no bdsm, no cheating, no jumping into bed (better to have no sex than superfluous sex) and please give these boys an HEA. Also slow burn and UST are awesome. :D*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** military, sweet no sex, religion, bullying, friends to lovers

**Content warnings:** HFN

**Word count:** 8,723

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# DESERT RAIN

By Victoria Zagar

*Thursday May 19th 1988*

*Northern Iraq*

Strong hands shook Nadir awake in the middle of the night. He opened his eyes and saw a scene of chaos unfolding around him as he was pulled to a sitting position. His mother's voice hushed him with urgency and he cut off his sob as he saw her terrified expression; even as a child knowing that look meant life or death. She dressed him quickly and he was hustled down the corridor with other female members of his extended family.

His small legs struggled to keep up with the women and he was hastily lifted up into his mother's arms as they raced through the dusty desert village. The sound of gunfire was deafening and Nadir saw dead bodies filling the streets as he was carried to a military truck. His mother and the other women climbed into the back and the truck sped off into the night.

Nadir heard his mother crying for the first time in his life. He looked at the faces in the truck to see his father was not with them. Nadir realized that he was back in the village, one of the dead men who had won them time so they could escape from the Iraqi Army. He clutched the sleeve of his mother's dress and sobbed as the truck drove off into the night, towards an uncertain future.

\*\*\*\*\*



*Tuesday August 24th 2004*

*Kevin's Apartment, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin looked himself over in the mirror. His short reddish-brown hair was neatly shaven within an inch of its life. Blue eyes shone back at him from his reflection. The National Guard uniform did look good on him, he had to admit. He looked like a real soldier. He turned around and took one last glance before walking away.

Now for the hard part, the burden that had been weighing on his soul from the moment he'd signed his life away while Nadir was in college. It was time to tell Nadir he'd received orders to deploy in Iraq.

Nadir had been a part of his life since he'd arrived as a young refugee in the eighties and enrolled in his school. At first the young Iraqi's English had been lacking, but Kevin had always had patience with him when others had not. Now, at twenty-one, Nadir was out of college and pursuing a career in journalism. Even while Nadir was in college, they had exchanged letters. Kevin had read each one and committed it to memory. Each letter had probably been more important to Kevin than Nadir had realized, but Nadir was his last friend in a fast-shrinking landscape. Most of his other friends had gone away to get married or pursue careers, but Nadir was the one who came back. There were barely any opportunities in Greenville, so he'd taken a job with the local paper.

Kevin left his apartment and climbed into his Explorer, driving the short distance to Nadir's house and parking on the street outside. He sat in the truck just thinking for about fifteen minutes, studying the house like a stalker as he mulled over the words he would use in his conversation with Nadir. *I can't tell you that I'm doing it for you, but that's the truth. I want to liberate Iraq so that you can go home, if you want to. I want to get revenge for your father and for the childhood you should have had, in your homeland.* He closed his eyes and sighed. *I have my orders. Whether I can justify them or not, I have to go.*

He opened the truck door and jumped out, standing on the sidewalk in his National Guard uniform. Doubt rose inside him for the first time since he'd



completed advanced training. It took all his courage to walk up the neat garden path to the front door and ring the doorbell. The door opened after a tense moment to reveal a middle-aged woman wearing a long dress, her hair veiled by an elegant headscarf. Nadir's mother recognized her son's childhood friend and called up the stairs after her son.

Nadir's mother turned back to Kevin. "Why don't you come in?" Kevin stepped through the door and stood awkwardly in the small hallway, waiting for Nadir.

Nadir hurried down the stairs, a relatively short figure in a Metallica hoodie with long black hair tied back in a ponytail. He paused in his tracks as he saw Kevin in his military uniform. Kevin thought he saw a tiny "oh" escape Nadir's mouth. Nadir's mother excused herself and made her way to the kitchen, where she busied herself with dishes.

"Kevin." Nadir struggled to find his voice for a second and looked down at his feet. "When...?"

Kevin felt the need to justify himself rise up in his gut and the things he'd never meant to say spilled out onto the carpet as if his chest had been cut open. "I joined the National Guard while you were in college. I wanted to make something of my life. Now I have a chance to save your country. I'm shipping out this week. I thought you should know."

Nadir shook his head, his expression reflecting the shocked disbelief at what he was hearing. He seated himself on the stairs and sat still for a long moment. Kevin shifted awkwardly where he stood. "Say something, Nadir. Anything."

"You're an idiot." Nadir's voice was barely a whisper, yet his tone was firm. He looked toward the kitchen where his mother was still obliviously working, then back to Kevin. "Iraq is not my country any more. America is my home. I thought you knew that. I thought..." His voice trailed off.

"You thought what?"

"It doesn't matter. You've made your choice." Nadir stood, his eyes meeting Kevin's. Kevin saw two wells of pain that seemed to bore into his very soul. At that moment he regretted the rash actions that had led him to sign



away his life. Nadir came the rest of the way down the stairs and gripped Kevin's arm. Kevin could feel his heat and thought that handprint might just be burned into his skin forever, the desperate grip of Nadir's fingers that seemed unwilling to let him go.

As if suddenly aware of his mother's presence, Nadir tore his hand away. "You must do what you must. Whatever you think is right. Just don't say you're doing it for me."

The words stung and Kevin took a step back, opening the front door and letting the hot August air rush into the house. He stepped through the door, suddenly feeling the need to get away from Nadir and his painful words. An ache emanated from his chest. He realized it had been a mistake to come here and stir up feelings he thought he'd buried long ago.

He strode down the garden path, only to hear Nadir following him. Nadir grabbed his hand and spun him around. Kevin steadied himself, only to find his hand on Nadir's face. The first traces of stubble tickled his fingertips and he wondered what it would feel like to kiss that mouth, to feel Nadir's lips on his.

*That wouldn't be fair to him, Kevin thought, pulling away from the thoughts that flooded his mind. It wouldn't be fair to kiss him and run away to a foreign war. He must never know about my true feelings for him. Even if I die out there. It's better that he never knows. His culture and religion would never allow us to be together. I never want him to have to choose between me and his family.*

Yet there was a pleading in Nadir's eyes that had the gravitational pull of a thousand suns, and Kevin felt himself pulling closer despite his previous thoughts. He came so close that he could feel Nadir's warm breath on his face before Nadir pulled away, sensing his mother's presence at the door.

"Nadir, are you going out?"

Nadir wanted to say yes, but Kevin shook his head. "I'll see you later, Nadir. I have some preparations I have to make before I ship out tomorrow, so I'd better get going." Kevin hurried back to his car as Nadir's mother drew Nadir back inside the house. Kevin felt his heart racing as he sat in the driver's



seat. He turned on the ignition and pulled out in a hurry, his wheels skidding on the tarmac as he raced away, eager to escape the shadow of what had almost been and what could never be.

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*Tuesday July 7th 1992*

*Kevin's Parents' House, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin sat down on the steps of his back porch. He was tired, a million adults having fussed over him the past few days. He was tired of being told what to feel when he just felt numb inside. Mom and Dad were dead, taken away by a horrific car crash. They'd told him the other driver was drunk.

Nadir appeared at the glass double doors, a smile on his face when he realized he'd found Kevin. He slid the door open and plopped himself down beside Kevin on the steps.

"My Dad died too," Nadir said.

"Really?" Kevin turned to Nadir and found real sympathy in his eyes, a stark contrast to the fake well-wishes he'd received from family and friends who were worried they would have to take him in.

"Yeah. Back when we escaped from Iraq. It feels like I barely knew him now. I remember at the time I felt so empty. But it gets easier." He slipped his hand around Kevin's shoulders and for the first time Kevin felt some real comfort, a warm gesture from somebody who understood. "Just feel what you feel. Don't let all those people tell you that you have to act a certain way."

"Thanks," Kevin said. "Hey, I heard that Josh's dad is ordering the wrestling pay-per-view tonight. He invited me over. Would you like to come along?"

"I wasn't invited..." Nadir withdrew his arm and looked down at his hands.

"You're with me, so it doesn't matter. You want in?"

Nadir smiled. "Yeah, I do. Thanks, Kevin."

\*\*\*\*\*



Wednesday August 25th 2004

*Kevin's Apartment*

Kevin folded a sweater and placed it into a packing box. The last of his possessions were ready to be packed into storage, his apartment given up to a new tenant. He sat down on the bed, thinking about Nadir. How close they'd come to kissing in his front yard. *Did I do the right thing by telling him about my deployment, or am I just running from him?* The TV was on in the background, the news showing details of the latest casualties in the War on Terror. *I never meant to say that I was doing it for him. What a thing to tell him. Now, if I die, all he'll do is blame himself. I never meant to burden him like that.*

The phone rang and Kevin dived across the bed, picking it up off the nightstand. "Hello?"

"It's me." Nadir's voice was quiet and cautious. "Look, I'm sorry about what I said. You have the right to make your own life decisions. I support your goal. I just... I don't want to lose my brother out there."

*My brother.* The words at once warmed and stung Kevin. *Close, but never close enough. Brothers never touch the way I want to touch you. That's why we've drifted apart.* "I know," Kevin struggled to say. "It's going to be okay."

"I wondered if you'd like to hang out," Nadir said, changing the subject. "I mean, if you're shipping out tomorrow, I'd like to spend some time with you before you go. We haven't seen each other enough since I came back from college."

"Agreed." Kevin eyed the boxes around him and mentally shrugged. There would be time for packing later. If he died in Iraq, he would never see Nadir again. He had to make time for the man while there was still a chance. "Where do you want to go?"

"I guess we're too old to hang out at the mall."

"Nah. Never." Kevin chuckled. "I'll meet you there, then?"

"Actually, my car's in the shop. I was wondering if you could come by and pick me up?"



“Sure thing,” Kevin said. “I’ll be right over.”

\*\*\*\*



*Sunday August 22nd 1999*

*Nadir's House, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin was sleeping over at Nadir's house. They watched movies together into the small hours of the night. The other kids at school liked to hang out with their girlfriends, but Kevin and Nadir were happy just to hang out together.

"My mother's always trying to set me up with girls," Nadir sighed. "Girls, girls, girls. As if I'll fall off the Earth if I don't settle down and start a family right away."

"Plenty of time for that shit," Kevin said.

"Right. That's what I said." The movie reached its peak, the hero rescuing the girl and kissing her. Nadir shifted uncomfortably where he was sitting on the bed next to Kevin.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. I've just been sitting for a while." The movie credits rolled and Nadir turned off the TV. "I guess we should settle down." His pajama pants clung to his ass and Kevin tried to avert his gaze. His mouth was dry and he covered himself with the sleeping bag on the floor before Nadir could see the start of an erection tenting in his pants.

"Good night, then," Nadir said.

"Good night."

Kevin laid awake sleeplessly as Nadir dozed off. He watched Nadir's face as his features settled into peacefulness and felt a warm protectiveness rise up in his belly. He dozed for a while before he was awoken by a cry. Nadir was shifting in his sleep, the captive of a nightmare. Kevin grabbed him and shook him awake and Nadir woke with a start, grabbing his wrists and pulling him down on the bed. Their faces were inches apart as Nadir realized what was happening.

"Sorry, I had a nightmare."

"You okay?" Kevin whispered, praying his body wouldn't betray him. He was lying on top of Nadir, face to face, his lips inches apart from Nadir's. One



movement and he could claim those lips in a kiss. Only the sheet separated them. He rolled off of Nadir quickly, lying beside him. He moved to get up off the bed but Nadir pulled him down.

“You don’t have to sleep on the floor. There’s room for both of us.”

“You sure?” Kevin’s heart was racing, pounding a steady beat in his eardrums.

“Of course.” Nadir looked up at the ceiling before closing his eyes.

Kevin shifted uncomfortably, afraid to get too close to Nadir. At some point he must have fallen asleep, however, as he woke to find his arm wrapped around Nadir, his body pressed up close to his friend. He panicked as he realized what he’d done in his sleep and slowly withdrew his arm, rolling away before Nadir could stir.

“Hmm? What time is it?” Nadir stretched. Kevin closed his eyes so that Nadir would think he was asleep. Nadir glanced over at Kevin and got up, grabbing his towel and heading to the bathroom. Kevin was still pretending to be asleep when Nadir returned. Nadir dropped his towel and Kevin opened his eyes a crack to see his friend in all his naked glory. He looked like a Persian prince. His silken black hair was untied and falling around his shoulders. His body, although skinny, was well-defined, his skin a rich tan color. His dick sprouted from a nest of pubic hair and Kevin felt himself swallow a lump as he imagined Nadir aroused, that cock full and hard. He was glad to be lying on his side as he felt himself getting hard. Nadir dressed and shook him awake, and Kevin responded with a sleepy groan.

“In a minute, Nadir...”

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*Wednesday August 25th 2004*

*Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin remembered their last sleepover with a smile. Seeing Nadir naked had spawned a thousand wet dreams, his favorite of which involved lying Nadir down in the hot desert sand and making love to him, but it had made sleeping over again an impossible prospect. Kevin had found himself suddenly busy until graduation, and then Nadir had left for college. All he had left after that were the letters and the occasional phone call. He'd thought about seeing Nadir on break but calls to his house revealed that Nadir had not come home, much to Kevin's disappointment. Kevin himself was busy with training and so he never made the road trip to Princeton to see his friend.

He pulled up outside Nadir's house and honked the horn, and Nadir hurried out of the house, still wearing the Metallica hoodie from before. He climbed into the passenger seat of the Explorer and Kevin shifted the vehicle into drive, being sure to check for traffic before he pulled out. It was bad enough that his parents had died in a traffic accident, but if anything were to happen to Nadir on his watch it would be too much to bear. He pulled out of the suburbs and onto the highway, Nadir silent in the passenger seat, as if mulling over his thoughts.

"It's been a while since we hung out like this," Kevin said, looking for a conversation starter to break the awkward silence that hung over them.

"Three years," Nadir replied. "I thought about coming back on spring break, but... I dunno. I felt like you were avoiding me at the end of our senior year of high school. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, of course not," Kevin said. "Nadir, I missed you. Those letters you sent me from college were my lifeline."

"I'll write to you in Iraq, if you like."

"I'd like that." Kevin felt a smile cross his face. "Nadir, I never meant to distance myself. I just thought... that you would find some new friends at college, you know? Maybe even a girlfriend. I thought you might not need me hanging around anymore."



Nadir shook his head with a bitter smile. "I guess I lied to you. College wasn't as rosy as I made out in my letters. In fact, I got a lot of hell after 9/11. People calling me a terrorist, that kind of crap."

"That's awful. Nadir, you could have told me. I would have driven up there and put them in their place."

Nadir laughed. "I would have liked to have seen that." He twiddled his fingers. "Sorry I didn't tell you. I just figured you probably had enough problems of your own, you know?"

"Nah. Life's been boring down here. Absolutely nothing to report."

"Not even a girlfriend?"

"There was someone I cared about, but we drifted apart."

"Oh. That's a shame."

"Yes, it is." Kevin pulled into the mall parking lot and found a spot, pulling in and stalling the engine. "So, anything you're looking for?"

"Some new CDs. Maybe a cell phone." Nadir pulled out his beat-up phone. "I think this one's on its last legs."

"I don't even have one," Kevin said. "Guess I don't have much use for one now."

"I guess not." Nadir opened the door and climbed out, closing the door and waiting for Kevin to lock up. The SUV beeped its horn as the security system engaged, and they walked towards the mall.

"So what's up with your car, anyway?" Kevin asked.

"Transmission's shot. Can't afford to get it fixed right now."

"Well, how about this? You can borrow my Explorer while I'm in Iraq." Kevin tossed the keys to Nadir, and he caught them gracefully.

"I couldn't do that. Kevin, you bought that truck with your parents' insurance money."

"Sure, and I don't want to sell it to some garage to make a buck off of it. I'd rather you drive it around. If I don't come back, you can keep it."

"Don't say that," Nadir said, a sudden fierceness in his voice. "You're coming back."



“I’ll try, but life has no guarantees.” Kevin shrugged. He noticed they’d stopped walking, that Nadir had turned to him with a sad look in his eyes. “Ah, stop that. I’ll be fine.” He patted Nadir’s shoulder. “Seriously. I’ll be coming back for that truck, so don’t you dare crash it.”

“Life has no guarantees,” Nadir mimicked with a wry smile. They started walking again and headed to the clothing store situated on the corner. A familiar face passed them and muttered something with a wicked grin.

“What did he say?” Kevin asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“No, seriously. What did he say?”

“He said towel-head,” Nadir sighed. Kevin marched over to the man, around the same age as they were, and spun him around.

“Peterson. So you’ve still got the emotional maturity of a six-year-old, I see. How about you leave Nadir the fuck alone?” Peterson was taller than him, but Kevin wasn’t intimidated.

“Kevin, why are you still hanging out with that terrorist, anyway?” Peterson glared at Nadir, who shriveled like a wallflower.

Kevin grabbed the front of Peterson’s shirt and thrust him into the wall. “He’s not a terrorist, and you know it. So shut your face.” Kevin let go of the man’s shirt and he fell back into the wall. Kevin marched away, back to Nadir’s side. “Let’s go.” They walked into the clothing store and Nadir started looking through shirts.

“You should have left it, Kevin. Now he’ll just be worse.”

“You’ve got to stand up for yourself, Nadir. Don’t let them say shit like that.” Kevin’s blood was boiling as Nadir quietly browsed through rock band shirts and hoodies. “What a prick.”

“You and I must be a funny sight, Kevin. An American soldier hanging out with an Iraqi Muslim? Most people would expect us to be enemies.”

“Well, they don’t know you.” Kevin leaned on the clothing rack. “You’re as much an American as anybody else here. They’re the ones missing out on your warmth and friendship if they can’t see past the color of your skin.” He reddened slightly as he said it, and Nadir smiled.



“Well, as long as you think so, I’m okay. I don’t need friends like him, anyway.” Nadir held up a shirt. “What do you think of this one?”

Kevin seized the opportunity to drop the heavy conversation. “It looks good. What about this one?”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I do. Get both. They both look great on you.”

They left the store with both shirts and hit up the record store. They browsed through CDs, comparing tastes before Nadir settled on a selection. As they left the store, Kevin felt his stomach rumble.

“I could go for something to eat. How about you?”

“Sounds good.” Nadir nodded towards a sandwich shop. “Is that okay?”

“No problem.”

Nadir picked out a salad and Kevin settled for egg sandwiches. Nadir looked at his CDs while Kevin sat eating and looking over at him. *One last, happy day to spend together. A snapshot to remember when I’m fighting for his country, a reminder of why I’m fighting.* He memorized the shape of Nadir’s face, his pleasant smile, his quiet taste in loud music.

They finished eating and headed home, settling into a companionable silence as Kevin drove. *I’m not ready to say goodbye yet,* Kevin thought, as he pulled up outside Nadir’s house. Nadir reluctantly opened the truck door.

“Um, are you doing anything tomorrow morning?” Kevin asked.

“No, why?” Nadir pulled the door closed again.

“I could use your help moving my things into storage. I’m giving up my apartment, since there’s no point paying rent if I’m not going to be here.”

“Oh. Yeah, I’d be happy to help,” Nadir said.

“I’ll come pick you up around ten. When we’re done I’ll give you all the paperwork for the Explorer and it’s yours.”

“I’m not sure I can accept it, Kevin.”

“Please, Nadir. Besides, you’re just borrowing it, okay?”



“Okay.” Nadir nodded. “I’ll see you at ten, then.” He opened the door and dropped down to the pavement level, offering Kevin a wave as he pulled out onto the road.

\*\*\*\*



*Wednesday August 16th 2000*

*Greenville High School Graduation Ceremony, Greenville, Arizona*

Nadir stepped up to receive his diploma. He took it and looked backstage at Kevin, meeting his eyes. He saw admiration and longing there before Kevin looked away. Clutching his diploma tightly, Nadir stepped off the stage. Everyone knew that he'd received a scholarship to go to Princeton for a degree in communication studies, but all he knew was that it would mean leaving Kevin behind. Kevin would no doubt move on with his life once he was gone.

He felt like crushing his diploma and tossing it into the crowd, but he stood firm, watching Kevin receive his. Kevin stood next to him, but they didn't exchange so much as a whisper. Conversation had been strained ever since the fateful sleepover. A summer break they should have spent together would instead be spent packing and preparing for a new life. A life without Kevin in it.

Nadir turned his eyes to the ground and pretended the tear welling up in his left eye was all about pride.

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*Thursday August 26th 2004, 4:00 p.m.*

*Kevin's Apartment*

"I think that's all of it," Nadir brushed his hands together to wipe off the excess dust. The apartment was empty save for a couple of folding chairs, which they sat down on.

"Thanks for your help," Kevin said. "I don't know how I would have done it all by myself."

"No problem. That's what friends are for."

"Say, you want to get something to eat? I was thinking of ordering in, but I know you can only eat certain things. Is a cheese pizza okay?"

"Sure." Nadir twiddled his thumbs while Kevin went to find the menu and number of a delivery place.

"Can I borrow your cell phone?" Kevin asked. "I packed up my regular phone."

"Of course." Nadir handed his cell phone to Kevin, who called and placed the order.

"So, I guess that's it then," Nadir said, looking around the empty apartment with a wistful expression. "Here we are, adults now. You're going off to war and I'm meeting a girl later. I wish we didn't have to leave it all behind."

"A girl?"

"Yeah, my mom's setting me up with a girl from the mosque, Nadia. Her father is bringing her over to meet me tonight." Nadir looked down at his hands. "My mother is growing impatient. She expects her only son to get married and start a family. I guess it's time."

"Hey, it's only time if that's what you want, Nadir. Don't get married because your family expects it. I want you to be happy."

"Thanks." Nadir swallowed a lump in his throat and was relieved when the doorbell rang. Kevin rushed to the door and paid the delivery guy, bringing back with him a delicious-smelling pizza box. He and Nadir reached for a slice at the same time and Kevin found his fingers meeting Nadir's.



“Oh, you were first,” Kevin said, but his hand lingered. He laid his hand over Nadir’s and gave it a gentle squeeze before letting go. “Promise you’ll take care of yourself.”

“You as well,” Nadir said. “Especially you.” He rested the slice of pizza on a piece of kitchen paper. “You never did tell me the real reason you joined the National Guard.”

“I guess not.” Kevin shook his head. “I just blew all my chances in this town. You were always the best thing about this place, Nadir. I didn’t want to go to college and I don’t have good job prospects. The National Guard offers me decent pay and a little bit of respect in this town when the job is done. It’s the best choice I have now.” He shook his head. “Nadir, answer me one thing. Why did you come back here after graduating from Princeton? You could have worked for one of the big media outlets. Why come back here and work for the local paper?”

Nadir fell silent, then bowed his head. “I didn’t graduate, Kevin. I dropped out.”

“What? Why? But you sent me all those letters from Princeton...”

“I had a friend up there mail them out. I didn’t want you to know that it didn’t work out for me. You seemed so proud when I got the scholarship. I didn’t want to disappoint you. I already disappointed my mother. Truth is, the bullying became too much. I couldn’t take it anymore. I even thought about suicide. So I came home and moved back in with my mother, and didn’t even let you know I was back until college would have been over.”

“Nadir, you should have told me—called me—come to visit. I would have helped.”

“I know that now,” Nadir said. “Seeing you put Peterson in his place was satisfying, I have to say. But we drifted apart, you know? After that sleepover, things just weren’t the same between us. I still wonder what I did wrong, what I did to make you run away from me. We were still friends, still talked, but you seemed to become just another person I had to please. That’s why I sent the letters, sounding happy with my college life. I wanted you to be proud of me. I didn’t want to let you down.”



“Nadir, you’ve never let me down.” Kevin finished up a slice and reached for another. “You didn’t do anything wrong at the sleepover. I was just... a little embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? Why?”

“Ah, man. This is hard to admit, but that morning... I wasn’t sleeping. I saw you naked. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, I know, but I was embarrassed about it. So there. I’m an idiot and got all freaked out because I saw my best friend naked. What else is new?”

“I’m sorry,” Nadir said. “I never meant to—”

“Don’t be silly,” Kevin said. “The problem was mine, not yours. It was just one of those rough moments of adolescence, figuring stuff out, you know?”

Nadir nodded. “Do you have a ride to the airport?”

“Yeah, I booked a taxi.” Kevin stood. “I shouldn’t keep you any longer. You have that thing with Nadia later on. Good luck, Nadir.” He pressed the SUV’s keys into Nadir’s hands and closed Nadir’s fingers around them. He let go and embraced Nadir in a big bear hug. Nadir’s arms squeezed him just as tightly and he found it hard to let go.

“Be safe out there.” Nadir’s voice had a raspy quality to it. “I’m just borrowing the truck.”

“You bet.” Kevin said. He watched Nadir leave with a lump in his throat, hearing his Explorer pull out onto the street with squealing tires. He plonked himself down on the chair and put his head in his hands.

\*\*\*\*



*Thursday August 26th, 8:00 p.m.*

*Greenville Airport, Greenville, Arizona*

Heavy rain clattered on the taxi's roof as it headed along the freeway towards the airport. Kevin fiddled with the straps on his backpack. There'd always been a part of him that believed he'd never make the trip, but that piece of him became smaller and smaller as Greenville disappeared into the rearview mirror. The National Guard was his future now. He was traveling to Iraq where he'd shoot people who looked a lot like Nadir on the pretext of liberating a nation. He tried not to think about it as the taxi pulled up to the curb. Kevin pulled out the fare and paid the driver with a reasonable tip before opening the door and heading out into the rain. A strong wind had kicked up, blowing the rain into his eyes as he headed for the terminal. He was relieved to go inside and see the hustle and bustle of people, and forced away the knot in his chest by focusing on what he had to do. *Check in at the ticket desk. Find my terminal. Wait for my flight.*

Kevin kept looking behind him at the doors to the terminal, knowing he was hoping for Nadir to arrive and talk him out of leaving, but he knew it was a lost cause. Nadir had a future of his own to attend to, and Kevin was just holding him back. Wasn't he? He thought about Nadir dropping out of college and felt a deep sadness that his best friend, his brother, his soul mate hadn't had the trust to confide in him. The letters from Nadir were in his backpack but they felt empty now, comforting lies that he'd held onto for so long. *I never wanted to be someone you had to please, Nadir. I would love and worship you if you had absolutely nothing to offer.*

"Next, please!" Kevin was pulled from his reverie to find he was at the front of the ticket line. He turned around to see some irritated looking passengers glaring at him before he realized he was being summoned forward. He handed his ticket to the lady sheepishly with his driver's license.

"That'll be Gate 14B," the lady said, and Kevin was done. He took one last glance at the double doors. *It's time to let go and move on*, he thought, and joined the line for security screening.

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*Meanwhile, at Nadir's House*

"This is Nadia." Nadir's mother introduced the young woman, who wore a headscarf and traditional clothing. She was shy and demure as her father stood over them watchfully at the kitchen table. Nadir pulled out a chair for her and she sat down, and then took his place at the other side.

"So, tell me a little about yourself," Nadir said. Nadia recounted her life story and education, how she felt she would be a good wife, but how she also wanted to pursue a career of her own. Nadir tried to concentrate but found his mind wandering to Kevin at the airport. Wind and rain battered the house, an appropriate analog for the storm in Nadir's heart.

"Are you listening, Nadir?" Nadir's mother interjected, and Nadir realized he hadn't heard a word Nadia was saying. All he could hear were Kevin's words. *I want you to be happy.*

He stood up. "Please excuse me." He left the room and started to put his coat on. His mother followed him out into the hallway.

"Just what do you think you are doing, Nadir?"

"I have to go to the airport. I have to stop Kevin from getting on that plane."

"Kevin? Nadir, you have more important things to think about than your friends! Your future wife could be sitting in that room! I went to great pains to arrange this meeting. The least you could do after dropping out of college is to find a good wife!"

"I don't want a good wife." Nadir grabbed his keys from the hook and opened the front door. The wind and rain buffeted him and he pulled the door closed, running to the SUV parked in the driveway. His mother opened the door to follow, but he was already in reverse, racing out onto the street. He was halfway down the street before his mother had even reached the end of the yard.

*I have to hurry, Nadir thought, racing to the freeway. His plane could leave any time. I have to tell him the truth. Even if he decides to leave anyway, I have to let him know before it's too late.* The rain poured down on the



windshield and the wipers darted back and forth, wiping the screen as clear as it could manage before the next torrent covered it. The wind threatened to pull the vehicle into oncoming traffic but Nadir wrestled with the steering and kept himself going.

He found himself slowing down as he saw red and blue lights up ahead. Traffic was backed up due to an accident, and he found himself beating the steering wheel in frustration, imagining Kevin's flight taking off before he was even halfway to the airport.

The accident was eventually cleared and traffic started moving again. Nadir sped the rest of the way to the airport, leaving the Explorer curbside and rushing into the terminal. He was soaking wet, cold and tired, but he was determined to find Kevin, to say something, anything. *Anything to stop him from walking out of my life forever.*

\*\*\*\*



*Thursday August 26th 2004, 10:00 p.m.*

*Greenville Airport*

“All flights are cancelled due to gale-force winds. Please see the ticket desk for rebooking and layover options.”

Kevin almost smiled, but realized his wait would be spent alone. *If Nadir was coming, he'd be here by now.* He left the gate and headed back to the main terminal, past the throngs of cranky, dispirited people who had just learned they would not be getting home tonight. He joined a mile-long line for the ticket desk, one eye on the door again. *Stop that. Nadir isn't coming. It's over. You had your one chance to tell him how you felt and you blew it.*

He didn't notice the wet figure entering the terminal right away, his long hair drowned and hanging back in a wet ponytail. The young man's jacket was soaked, his expression one of pain and frustration. He looked around desperately, fixing his eyes on a man in uniform and realizing it wasn't Kevin before spotting him in the ticket line. His expression changed from frustration to one of hope as he rushed forward.

Kevin noticed a wet figure running towards him and recognized Nadir at once. His heart rose in a vision of ecstasy as he realized that Nadir had come for him. Nadir rushed into his arms. Kevin caught him and spun him around like a lover, laughter in his smile as he set Nadir down on his feet.

“Nadir. You came.” Further conversation was cut off by Nadir's lips on his, a kiss that tasted like desert rain, hot and fresh. He returned the kiss with equal fervor, not caring that many pairs of eyes were fixed on them. Nadir was kissing him and if anybody had anything to say about it they could answer to him.

Eventually Nadir broke off the kiss and pulled back slightly. Kevin wiped the rain from Nadir's face and lifted his chin, getting a good look at the man he loved and who apparently loved him.

“Say something.” Nadir started to shift uncomfortably. “Tell me you won't go.”

Kevin felt a pit open in his stomach. “I have to. I signed up. It's not as easy as just quitting.”



“Call your commander. Tell him you’re gay. Under the rules of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, he’ll have to discharge you.”

“Really?” Kevin felt hope rising up within him. “Nadir. What are you going to do about your mother? Your community? Your religion? They won’t accept this.”

“We live in America. They’ll have to accept it.” Nadir took Kevin’s hand in his. “Please come with me.” He started to pull Kevin towards the terminal exit.

“Where are we going?”

“Outside. Too many eyes here.” The automatic doors slid open and Nadir pulled Kevin out into the rain. He unlocked the Explorer and they sat inside.

“Do you love me?” Nadir asked.

“Stupid question. Of course I do, Nadir. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Fear. I’ve never been as scared as I am tonight.” Nadir’s hands were shaking and Kevin took them in his.

“You’re worried about what your mom and your religious community will think?”

“Yeah. I can’t be the only Muslim who’s ever come out as gay, but that doesn’t mean they’ll take it well. My mom...” He shook his head. “I can’t even imagine how disappointed she’ll be. I can’t help it, though. I can’t be the person she wants me to be. I can’t just let you walk out of my life.”

“Nadir. It’ll be okay. We’ll work it out.”

“I have to go home. I have to tell her the truth. Will you come with me, Kevin?”

“Of course I will,” Kevin said. “I’m driving, though. You’re in no state.” He leaned over and kissed Nadir again. Kevin got out of the truck and they switched sides. Kevin started up the vehicle and pulled away into the night, Nadir at his side.

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*Friday August 27th 2004, 12:00 a.m.*

*Nadir's House*

“Nadir? Where have you been!” Nadir’s mother rushed to the door as Nadir entered, Kevin following behind him.

“Did Nadia and her father leave?” Nadir asked, looking around.

“Yes. Her father was very angry. You have an apology to make.” She looked up at Kevin. “Now, are you going to tell me what all this is about?”

“You should sit down.” Nadir took his mother’s arm and guided her to a chair, where she sat. He gestured to Kevin to sit as well, and Kevin took a spot on the edge of the sofa. Nadir paced the room nervously, looking for the words to tell his mother.

“I’m gay.” Nadir looked straight at his mother’s face, looking for any sign of her reaction. Nadir’s mother closed her eyes as if hearing a piece of terrible news, then opened them again and looked at Nadir.

“Nadir, open your eyes. Look at me.”

Nadir’s eyes were brimming with tears when he opened them to look at his mother’s face. She stood up and embraced him tightly.

“Nadir, I always knew you were different somehow. Now I know why.” She paused for a moment. “You are my son. I love you as you are.” She let go of Nadir and turned to Kevin. “I assume you are the object of my son’s affections.”

“Yes, Mrs. H.,” Kevin said, shriveling under Nadir’s mother’s gaze.

“Nadir, leave us please. I would like to talk to Kevin.” Nadir nodded and hurried into the next room, closing the door.

“You have known Nadir for a long time. You know he is sensitive.” Nadir’s mother leaned forward in her chair. “You will have to make sacrifices if you are to be with him. Nadir cannot be “out” in the way you might want to be. If the others at the mosque knew of his sexual orientation, they would torment him until he took his own life. You must keep his secret, Kevin.”

“I understand. It’s okay. I can do that. For Nadir, I would do anything.”



“Would you? This path will not be easy. I will still have to arrange his meetings with potential brides. Even if he won’t be married, he has to at least seem interested. Or they will suspect. If you are to live together, it will have to be officially as roommates. As you get older, it will be harder to hide. You must protect him, Kevin, against any who would hurt him. You cannot leave him here and run off to the military. If you can’t be there for him, it would be best for you to leave.”

“I’m not going to Iraq,” Kevin said. “Not now. I can call my commander. Gays aren’t allowed in the military, so I can probably get discharged.”

“And the rest?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes, Mrs. H.” Kevin stood up. “I’ve loved Nadir for a long time. I never knew he would be able to return my feelings. So whatever I have to do, it won’t be a sacrifice if I can have him in my life. I can keep my mouth shut, and I was never a big fan of pork anyway.” He flashed Nadir’s mother a winning smile.

Nadir’s mother smiled wanly before becoming deadly serious again. “Did he tell you about the bullying at college?”

Kevin nodded. “I know. I know what would happen if people found out he was gay. I know he wouldn’t be able to take the persecution. So I’ll keep him safe. I’ll never let anything happen to him. I swear it.”

Kevin looked behind him to see the kitchen door was open. Nadir shyly walked in and took Kevin’s hand in his. Kevin knew that Nadir had heard the whole conversation from the look in his eyes, the shining light of love and admiration directed at him. Kevin had to hold himself back from seizing Nadir and squeezing him in a protective embrace right then.

“Then I’ve said what needs to be said.” Nadir’s mother swept across the room towards the exit to the kitchen. “I’ll leave you alone to say good night.” She entered the kitchen and softly closed the door behind her.

Nadir led Kevin to the front door. Kevin reached for the handle, but Nadir’s hand rested on his, stopping him. Kevin withdrew his hand as Nadir’s hand reached up to explore his face. His fingers slowly brushed Kevin’s stubble and Kevin felt himself inhale sharply at Nadir’s tender touch.



“Will you be all right in a hotel room by yourself?” Nadir looked at him with a yearning expression that made Kevin bite his lip as he thought of the implications. But Nadir’s one eye was on the kitchen door, weighing up what his mother had said.

“I’ll be fine,” Kevin said. “We have to be discreet. No checking into hotel rooms together. We’ll have time for everything, Nadir; there’s no hurry.”

Nadir reached up and kissed him with a kiss that spoke of need and desire. Their tongues met and wrestled with each other and Kevin gasped for a breath as Nadir ground his body into him. Kevin pulled away, his hot breath teasing Nadir’s ear as he struggled to find his thoughts. He was hard as a rock, every nerve in his body singing with his need for Nadir, his desire to take his dearest friend to the hotel with him and make him his lover at last. His lips found Nadir’s again and he kissed him like he was an oasis in the desert, drinking in the flavor of desert rain as his hands tangled in his wet hair. His hands moved down his body to rest on Nadir’s hips and brushed over his warm ass.

Nadir glanced at the closed kitchen door. Kevin got the message and let go, his entire body complaining at the absence of its other half.

“I guess I should go.” It was almost a whisper that passed Kevin’s lips; an admission of his dirty thoughts, the wish he could stay the night and take Nadir upstairs.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Nadir’s tone was all business but the sparkle in his eyes was a promise of all the things that were to come. Kevin’s cock twitched in his pants and Nadir reached for it, tracing its outline in the khaki fabric. Kevin had to bite his lip to stifle a gasp. Nadir laughed but his eyes spoke of a barely leashed desire. Kevin swallowed the lump in his throat and opened the door. The warm night air rushed in, speaking of the outside world and all the things they would have to hide from it.

“Good night, Nadir. I’ll call you tomorrow as soon as I get the apartment back.” Kevin stepped outside. Nadir stood behind the door, watching Kevin as he walked back to his truck and drove away.

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*Friday 27th August 2004, 2:00 a.m.*

*Greenville Inn, Greenville, Arizona*

Kevin plopped his bag down and sank into the soft mattress of his hotel room bed. His mind was spinning. Just a few hours ago he thought he would never see Nadir again, now Nadir was his. He closed his eyes and felt Nadir's hands on him again, and his cock rose to meet the occasion. He teased himself like Nadir had teased him, gently touching the outside of his pants, feeling the hard bulge from the outside of the fabric. He had to admit that the pants certainly flattered him. He wondered if he'd be allowed to keep them.

His erection floundered as the thought of the military came back to him. He fumbled in his bag and pulled out his deployment papers, reaching over to pick up the hotel phone and punching in the phone number listed on the contact sheet. His heart was beating in his throat as the phone on the other end rang over and over. Just as he was about to give up, a gruff voice answered on the other end.

"Yes?"

"This is Kevin Madison. I can't take that flight. I can't ship out to Iraq."

"That's too bad, son. You've completed basic and advanced training. Barring a serious reason—"

"I'm gay." The words spilled out of Kevin's mouth. "I'm in love with a man. My best friend."

"You do understand that under Don't Ask, Don't Tell, you're looking at a discharge?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll have to attend a hearing, but in cases like these it's usually straightforward enough. You'll receive a letter in a few days with more instructions." The commander sounded resigned, and Kevin knew he had won. The rules were the rules, after all.

"Thank you, sir, and good night." Kevin put down the phone and exhaled a sigh of relief. He had to fight the urge to call Nadir and instead rolled over on



the bed. He looked up at the ceiling, clutching a pillow in his arms as if it were Nadir. He thought about all the long years he had yearned for his friend, all the missed moments, stolen touches over the years.

*Now he's mine. We can build a life together. Yesterday I was ready to give my life for my country. Now I can give it to Nadir.*

Kevin laughed as he squeezed the pillow tightly. He laughed until he was out of breath, tears rolling down his cheeks, then rested his head back on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. A million images flashed before his vision; finding a place to live together, sharing everyday life with Nadir, and of course the thought that teased him the most, making love to the man who had fueled a thousand erotic fantasies.

He rolled onto his side, contentedness filling him up inside. He felt himself growing hard, but there was no urgency to it. It could wait until tomorrow, like the rest of the world. Emotionally exhausted, Kevin closed his eyes and awaited the dawn of a day filled with promise, the first day of the rest of his life with the man that he loved.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Victoria was born in the United Kingdom but immigrated to the United States at age 21. She's bisexual, happily married and still shouts in a British accent.*

*She's been reading and writing m/m and f/f romance pretty much non-stop since 2006, after dabbling with short stories since childhood. She decided to release her sci-fi m/m romance novel *Written In The Stars* in June 2012 and launch herself into the exciting world of self-publishing, which has been an incredible journey of learning and self-improvement.*

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# REPAIR MY HEART

By Zeoanne

## **Photo Description**

A very handsome, sweaty and shirtless mechanic. The hood is open and he's leaning against the bumper of a car, both hands on the engine. His face and arm are smudged with grease and he's looking at you.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*I've been alone for so long now, not able to trust easily. I live in a very small town where everyone knows everyone's business, so I remain quiet about my sexuality. I've had romantic relations in the past but they have all failed. Now, I want someone who will think of me, someone who thinks honesty and sincerity is at the top of their list. I want to find my happily ever after. I'm due some happiness.*

Sincerely,

Phoenix

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** mechanic, satellite repairman, Native American, interracial, homophobia, bullying references

**Word count:** 6,974

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# REPAIR MY HEART

By Zeoanne

*Dammit, I need to get out of here if I'm gonna be on time.* Chad screwed the last bolt on the transmission he was working on. Looking at his boss, he said, "Dude, I need to leave or I'll miss my appointment with the guy coming to repair the satellite."

"Okay, take off, man. Are you going to come to The Silver Spurs tonight?" David said, exiting his office.

"Don't know. If I'm in the mood, I'll be there."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I hear the same excuse all the time and you never show up. What's the matter? You're too good to spend some time with me and the boys? About time you find yourself some sweet skirt. You ain't getting any younger, you know?"

"*I am young!* I gotta run or I'll miss my appointment," Chad said, turning away from David.

Living in a homophobic town wasn't easy for Chad. At five foot eight, he tried his hardest to keep his sexuality hidden. He'd had enough abuse from bullies, from middle school until the day he graduated high school.

His biggest mistake took place the day he stared too long at one of the jocks while at baseball practice. Chad couldn't keep his eyes off the tight pants he wore. He realized then he liked boys.

When he finally looked up, it was too late. Two of the jock's friends were watching him, disgust evident on their faces. From that day on, the name-calling, the shoving against the lockers, and the beatings were enough to make him want to keep hidden as much as he could and become invisible in the eyes of society.

He changed in the locker room, swapping his grease-covered uniform for clean clothes, then drove home as fast as possible. As he approached the front of his house, a van waited to pull in coming from the opposite direction, displaying the satellite company's logo on the side. Looking in the van's window, he noticed the driver.



“Hey! Thought I was gonna miss my appointment with you. Glad I made it on time.” Chad said, getting out of his car once they parked in the driveway.

“No problem, man. I would’ve waited. I’m a few minutes early. Name’s Takoda.”

“Hey Takoda, I’m Chad,” he said while approaching the van. Chad took a sharp breath when the door opened and Takoda got out. The tall, muscular Native American stretching his hand toward him was impressive. Chad’s hand disappeared in Takoda’s larger one, and Chad stared at the man in front of him.

Amber-colored eyes stared back at Chad, full lips grinning wide, hair so dark it shone blue against the bright sun. He wanted to run his fingers through the long, waist length strands just to see if it was as soft as it appeared, and take off the elastic band at the back of his neck to bury his face in it.

When he realized he was holding Takoda’s hand for longer than appropriate, he let go.

“Do you have to go inside first or take a look at the satellite?” he asked, lost in the golden eyes.

“I need to take a look inside and see what the problem is,” Takoda replied, as he opened the side of the van to retrieve a toolbox.

“Okay, then let’s go in.”

Chad took him to the living room where he had a large flat screen TV and gave him the controller. Takoda started pressing buttons.

“I think I know what the problem is. Have there been a lot of strong winds lately?” Takoda asked.

“Yeah. These past few days have been bad, as a matter of fact.”

“Thought so. High winds can throw the dish out of alignment, making the screen show blue. It’s no biggie though. I’ll readjust the dish outside and the signal on the receiver, and that should fix the problem. I’ll go and adjust it, then come back inside. Which way’s the dish at?”

“Left, toward the back of the house.”

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Takoda made quick work of readjusting the satellite. As soon as he was finished, he returned to the living room to work with the receiver.

Meanwhile, Chad was busy in the kitchen fixing dinner.

“How’s it working now?” Chad asked as he came into the living room.

“I’m almost done programming the channels.” A few seconds later, the image on the screen became clear. “There, it’s done. Now you can watch all you want.”

“Here, I brought you some lemonade.” Chad said, handing Takoda a glass.

“Oh, thanks. That’s a sweet screen you got there. You watch any sports?” Takoda asked.

“Yeah, can’t watch sports on a small TV. I mainly watch hockey and football.”

“There’s a good football game going on tonight.”

“Yeah, I planned on watching it.”

Takoda stood for a few minutes drinking while looking at the pictures on the walls.

“You made those?”

“Yeah, I like playing around with paints and charcoal from time to time.”

“You’re pretty good. What else do you like playing with?”

Chad’s mouthful of lemonade went flying out like a projectile, bathing Takoda’s chest.

“Oh. My. God! I’m so sorry!” Chad hurried toward the kitchen for a towel. *I wonder how long until my fucking picture is posted on the side of milk cartons warning people to stay the hell away from me. Damn it, damn it!* “I’m sorry. Lemonade went down the wrong way. I’m not usually this clumsy,” Chad said, handing him the towel. *Yes you are. You’re a walking accident.*

Takoda was biting the inside of his mouth. After a few seconds, he laughed heartily. Embarrassed, heat crept up Chad’s face, and he knew he was turning red.

“Sorry about that, man. Look, Chad, I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I really like the paintings. I have a couple of friends who are into that and



jewelry making. One of them does leatherwork as well, and I thought to ask if you were into anything other than painting,” Takoda said, still smiling.

“It’s okay. I’m good,” Chad said as he was heading back to the kitchen, with Takoda following behind. “Do you have any other appointments?”

“Nope, you’re my last.”

“Well, how about staying for dinner? It’s the least I can do after my clumsiness.”

“Only if you don’t mind. I don’t want to impose.”

“No way, I’d appreciate the company.”

“Then, yes, I’d be glad to stay for dinner, but only if you don’t spit on me again,” Takoda said, laughing.

“Ha. Ha. Ha. I promise to behave.” Chad laughed as well and busied himself checking on dinner.

True to his word, Takoda soon finished the job and had the papers ready for Chad to sign. He called the company, letting them know he was finished for the day.

“Well, since you’re off the clock now, how about something stronger to drink?” Chad asked.

“Sounds good to me.”

“How about a cold beer?”

“Oh yeah, I could use a cold one just about now. I’d like to go and grab a clean shirt from the van first, though, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. Come right inside on your way back, okay?”

“Damn, cute and domesticated,” Takoda said under his breath as he went out to the van.

*Damn, what a beautiful man.* Chad watched him as he went.

“May I use your bathroom so I can change?” Takoda said, startling him.

“Oh, sure. Second door on the left.”

When he heard the bathroom door open, Chad went to the fridge to grab a couple of bottles of beer. When Takoda appeared back in the kitchen, Chad



turned around and froze. Like a fool, he stood there looking at the tight T-shirt in front of him, his eyes sweeping Takoda up and down.

“Umm. You know, beer is best while it’s cold, and I’m sure it’s getting warm quite fast in your hands,” Takoda said—a smile plastered on his face.

“Oh, sorry. Here,” Chad said hurriedly, handing him one of the bottles. “You can’t blame me for staring, though. It’s not every day I have the company of a god in my kitchen looking all kinds of sinful and all.” Chad felt his face heating up once again. “I’ll check on dinner while trying to scrape some of my dignity off the floor.” Chad turned and opened the oven door wondering if he should join the chicken. *Shit, shit, shit. Here I go again with my big mouth. What is it about this guy that I can’t stop making a fool of myself! Ugh! How embarrassing! He’s having a blast watching me suffer.*

“Hey, don’t sweat it. Thanks for the compliment. By the way, whatever you’re cooking smells good. What is it?” Takoda asked, sitting himself on a stool by the counter.

“Rosemary chicken, baked potatoes and cheesy broccoli. Hope you like it.”

“If it tastes as good as it smells, I know I will.”

While Chad stood at the counter fixing a salad, Takoda sat at the opposite side, talking and watching Chad work.

Once dinner was ready, Chad filled their plates, placed them on the counter, grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and sat next to Takoda.

“Pretty good dinner. I can’t cook worth a crap. Wouldn’t mind if you teach me a thing or two.”

“Oh, I can think of a few things I could teach you.”

“Hey, I’m talking about food here,” Takoda said, laughing.

“Oh, me too. Food can be very... exciting.”

“Yeah... I bet,” he replied with a leer.

Once finished, Takoda helped him with the dishes while they talked and learned about each other—their likes, dislikes, and so on.

“Care for some coffee?” Chad asked.



“Sounds good.”

They took their steaming mugs to the living room and watched the game.

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“Well, this has been a surprising day for me. Never in my life did I think I’d be working, have an invitation to dinner, and meet a beautiful, interesting man like you, all in the same day,” Takoda said, heading toward the front door. He turned and looked intently into Chad’s eyes. “Thanks for dinner. You’re great company. I’m glad it was me they sent to fix your satellite. I really enjoyed your company.” He reached out, cupping Chad’s chin with the tips of his fingers, and slowly brought their lips together in a soft kiss. “I’d like to take you out for a drink tomorrow night.”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

“How about I pick you up at eight.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Once alone, Chad went to the bathroom, turned the water on in the shower, lathered his hands with the soap and took hold of his cock, imagining what Takoda would look like naked. Just thinking about seeing him tomorrow was driving him crazy. He pumped harder and faster. Opening his mouth on a silent scream, he came with such force his knees buckled, hitting the floor of the shower. Once he was able to breathe easier, Chad took the soap once again and bathed. Sleep didn’t come easy for Chad that night. He tossed and turned, until finally he was so tired his eyes gave in to the darkness.

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Chad woke late and anxious for time to hurry so he could see Takoda again. He kept himself busy doing housework to kill time. At noon, Takoda called him and suggested they go out to dinner before drinks, and Chad accepted.

The view of the river was spectacular from the semi-private table they sat at.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I’m Kelly, and I’ll be your server for the evening. Would you care to see the wine list?” their server said, handing them each a dinner menu.



“Thank you, Kelly. I’d like to see what is available.”

Kelly retrieved a list from her apron pocket and handed it to Takoda.

“I’ll be back in a couple of minutes to take your order.” The server smiled seductively at Takoda, which he ignored but Chad didn’t.

“What’s your favorite Italian food?” Takoda asked.

Chad cleared his throat and buried his face in his menu. “I’d have to say I love shrimp scampi.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve had that. It’s good.”

“Hmm, then that’s what I’ll have.”

The server returned to their table after a few minutes. “Are you gentlemen ready to order?”

“Yes. Could you bring us the house pinot noir? I’ll have the shrimp fettuccine Alfredo.”

“And I’ll have the shrimp scampi.”

“Very well, I’ll bring the wine right away.”

Once again, the server smiled seductively at Takoda. Chad noticed her interest and raised one brow, his eyes going from Takoda to the girl as she turned to get their wine.

“I believe someone has taken a liking to you.”

“She can like as much as she wants. I’m here with you and, well, she’s missing something you have. Besides, I like your company better.”

“Thank you. I like your company as well,” Chad said, blushing. “So, tell me more about yourself.”

Takoda talked about his ancestry, how his grandparents lived on a reservation in Arizona, and his desire to travel around the country as a younger man. In his late twenties, he decided to settle down and moved to Richmond, where he met Bryan. The beginning of their relationship was a heated one, full of passion and adventure. In less than two months, they had moved in together at Bryan’s insistence. Soon after, everything changed. Bryan became demanding and jealous of everyone, even Takoda’s family.



“One day he came home and he said he’d gotten fired from his job. I told him I was making enough to pay the bills and we’d be okay until he found another job. Time went by and he didn’t even make an effort to go job hunting. When I started putting pressure on him, he became verbally abusive. Mind you, I’m a big guy—but Bryan’s much bigger than me and I didn’t want to come to blows with him.

“A few months later, I told him either he went out to find a job or I was leaving. That’s when shit hit the fan. He grabbed me by the neck and slammed me against the wall. I hit my head so hard I got dizzy and couldn’t react in time. When I woke up, I had a bruised face and broken ribs. Spent a couple of days in the hospital. When I went back to the apartment, he’d cleaned it out, took everything except my clothes, so I had to start all over again from scratch. I haven’t gotten into a relationship with anyone ever since.”

“Jeez, I don’t blame you. What an ass. Have you heard of him again?”

“Yeah, unfortunately. One of my friends told me he met someone else, but the poor guy wasn’t as lucky as me. I heard he left the guy in a coma and he’s in jail for it, where he belongs. How about you? Tell me a bit about your life.”

“Well, you know what living in a small town is like, right?” Takoda nodded. “I know there are other gays living here, obviously, but I’m the only one I know of. Everyone else keeps to themselves. If anyone found out I’m gay, I don’t know what would happen—but I know I wouldn’t be safe. The comments I hear from my co-workers at the transmission shop I work at are reason enough for me to stay in the closet. Yet one more reason why I don’t bring guys home. I know I should’ve known better before moving here, but I wanted the slow pace a small town brings.”

“There are places as quiet that are not necessarily in a small town. Richmond has areas where you wouldn’t have to hide who you are and still have what you want. Besides, there is a large LGBT community there.”

“I wish I had known that four years ago. When I moved I wasn’t even thinking about the gossip and hatred these people have shown. I moved down from Baltimore and I guess, looking for small town USA, I ignored the downsides.”



“Here we are, gentlemen. I’ll be bringing your food in just a few minutes.” Their server interrupted them, bringing their wine.

“Thank you,” they said in unison.

“Baltimore? I bet you made a killing there working in transmissions, and I know for a fact you can’t be making the same where you live now,” Takoda continued after the server left.

“Yeah, I was able to save enough to buy the property.”

“What are you growing there? Or are you raising livestock?”

“Neither. What you saw planted on both sides of the house belongs to someone I’m renting the land to. I’ve had some people approach me wanting to buy the farm from me. It’s not big, just twenty acres.”

“So you’d have no problem moving to a more gay-friendly area if you had the chance?”

“Oh, in a heartbeat. I’ve only had the place for four years and if I could find a place where I could build a shop, even better.”

“Hmm, having your own business sounds like a good idea.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking of.”

Their server showed up at their table, this time with a tray filled with plates.

“Oh, this smells delicious,” Chad said while rubbing both hands together. “Mmm. I love garlic. There’s enough to ward off a flock of vampires.” Takoda laughed, then Chad realized what he’d said. *Uh, oh. What if... Oh, shit! What if he wants to kiss me? I’m gonna kill the poor man with my demonic breath! I hope dessert will help as a cover-up. If not, when we get back home I’ll have to run to the bathroom and gargle with freaking bleach and hope that helps!* He had no choice but to eat anyway.

“It does smell good. Here, have some of mine and I’ll get a bite of yours, that way we’ll both be warding off the vampires.”

“Okay, we’ll both have garlic breath then.” Chad laughed. They ate while making small talk.



“Would you care for dessert?” Their server asked once they were finished, taking their plates away.

“Yes, I’ll have the tiramisu with amaretto cream. Could you add lots of whipped cream and hot fudge?” Chad said, still thinking of his breath problem.

“Sure we can. And you, sir?”

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

“I’ll be right back with your dessert.” She smiled at Chad and winked at Takoda. Chad rolled his eyes at Takoda, who was smiling, looking at her as she left their table.

Their server came back with this amazing, delicious looking dessert. As asked, it was topped with a pyramid of fluffy whipped cream and hot fudge dripping down the sides. Chad started eating while Takoda watched, smiling at him. It was so rich a diabetic could go into a diabetic coma right away. But the cake was sweet, and so creamy and moist he couldn’t resist.

Since Takoda was so intently looking at him, he decided to make the experience a little more interesting. He set the spoon down and started running his finger through the top, gathering whipped cream on the digit. Chad brought his finger slowly to his mouth, smearing some on his lips before inserting the finger in his mouth while letting out a low moan. He repeated the same move a couple of times. Takoda’s mouth fell open looking at Chad’s sensual lips, then closed it with a snap. His Adam’s apple bobbed hard as he swallowed and bit his lip. He brought his hand under the table, adjusting his cock, which was getting hard and uncomfortable.

“You know you’re gonna pay for that later, right?” Takoda whispered, breathless, his eyes intense.

“With interest, I hope,” Chad replied with a leer.

“Oh, yeah, with interest.”

Chad scooped more cream on his finger and brought it to Takoda’s lips. He sucked on the digit, giving Chad the hottest look he’d ever seen. He held Chad’s wrist and moved his finger in and out of his mouth in slow motion. *Oh, yeah, I’m really going to pay for this. I hope.* Chad continued feeding them both until the cake was gone.



“Wanna skip the drinks and go straight to your place?” Takoda said, breathing hard.

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Standing in front of the door, Chad’s hands began to sweat. Nervousness was overtaking him, and he had a hard time unlocking the door. Takoda reached over, taking the keys from his hands.

“Here, let me. You know, you don’t have to be nervous with me. I’m not going to bite you... hard,” Takoda said, his eyes full of want. Chad squirmed, letting out a low moan.

Takoda put his arm around Chad’s shoulders and gently pushed him inside. Once the door closed behind them, he turned Chad around and, next thing he knew, Takoda’s lips were on his. His embrace was all he needed to melt Chad’s inhibitions away. The kiss, which started as simple exploration, had them both breathing hard, Takoda’s hands exploring every inch of Chad’s back. Takoda reached down and lifted him up, his arms wrapped around the smaller man’s ass. Chad automatically wrapped his legs around Takoda’s hips.

“Where to?” Takoda asked into his mouth. He pointed toward the bedroom at the back of the house, their tongues still tangled in a heated kiss.

Takoda laid him down on the bed but Chad didn’t let go, his legs still wrapped around Takoda forcing the taller man to lie on top of him. One hand closed into a fist around Chad’s hair while the other pulled his shirt up, sliding against his warm skin until he reached one nipple, pinching until it became dark and hard. His breath was like a drug to Chad, a drug he couldn’t get enough of, and he wanted more.

Chad brought his hands down, pulled Takoda’s shirt free from his pants and started rubbing his back, his sides, his chest. Takoda pulled the smaller man’s shirt slowly while his mouth kissed his jaw, slowly licking down his neck leaving a wet, smoldering trail over his chest and finding a nipple with his lips, sucking like a starved man. Takoda lifted him up to pull his shirt off the rest of the way. Chad wanted to feel his skin, his body, his sweat; he wanted to smell his essence on himself. Pulling on the hem of the taller man’s shirt, he stopped kissing long enough for Chad to free him from the garment.



Chad's hand went down to undo Takoda's belt buckle, roved back up again, squeezing his chest muscles, enjoying the heat of his body. After taking a moment to unbutton his pants, Chad wrapped his fingers in Takoda's hair, taking the elastic band at the back of his neck, letting it fall like a silk curtain on his body and face. *Oh, feels so good.* Chad thought.

Chad pulled the zipper of his own pants down and Takoda lifted his hips up giving Chad room to pull his pants and boxers down. Takoda briefly stood to step out of his shoes and pants then patted him on the hip so he could dispose of Chad's jeans, dropping them next to his pants on the floor. He pulled Chad up toward the pillows and lay down on top of him, nose-to-nose, chest-to-chest, cock-to-cock, rubbing together. Chad knew there was no stopping now. He wanted this; he needed to be fucked by the amazing man in his arms.

"Umm, Takoda?"

"Yeah."

"I need to tell you something before we continue," Chad said, his voice shaking with emotion.

"What is it?" Takoda said.

"It's been a long time since I've had sex," Chad whispered.

"Don't worry, I'll go easy. It's good to know you're not a player." Takoda smiled tenderly, understanding.

"Well, I did mention I don't bring guys home. I haven't had the courage and, even if I did, I haven't found anyone I felt comfortable and trusting with. Until you." There was something different about Takoda. Something that told Chad this might be the real deal, and his instincts were usually on the spot. He wanted to pursue the friendship and see where things led.

Takoda lowered his head and joined their lips in a soft, tender kiss.

"I'll take care of you, babe. We'll take it slow and easy. Do you have lube and condoms?"

"Lube, yes, condoms, no. Sorry."

"No worries, I have a condom in my wallet. Where's the lube?" Chad pointed to the night table. Takoda reached over to pull the drawer open and



retrieve the tube, then reached for his pants on the floor to get the wallet from his pants and dropped the tube and condom on the bed next to Chad. "It's been in there for a while now but I'm pretty sure it's still good."

"A while?" Chad asked.

"Yeah, I don't go fucking around either, you know? I work long hours and by the time I get home all I wanna do is crash."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Takoda brought their mouths together, kissing him gently at first. With their cocks rubbing together, the kiss turned into a fury only a hurricane could imitate. Takoda's hand explored the smaller man's body, sliding down his stomach until he reached his cock. He started stroking him slowly, his lips kissing and sucking on his neck. His tongue left a trail of wet heat down Chad's chest until those gorgeous lips found a nipple and once again started sucking and biting hard, the pain turning to pleasure in no time. Chad's mind was lost and he wanted more. He wanted everything the man had to give.

Takoda slid his tongue down Chad's stomach all the way down to his cock. Heat burst out when he licked the head, and when he started sliding down the length of Chad's shaft. He went back to the head and sucked him hard, teasing his tongue on the slit. The feeling it evoked in Chad was maddening. He knew he wouldn't last long when Takoda took in the whole length of his cock and paused, keeping the shaft in his throat, tightening the muscles repeatedly. He'd never had anyone do that to him before. His breathing was shallow and uneven. Slowly, Takoda bobbed his head up and down, sucking hard on his way up.

"Koda, you're going to make me come."

"Yeah babe, come for me."

Chad heard the flip of the lube cap opening, then a cool finger massaging his ass and then penetrating him slowly. His first instinct was to tense up.

"Shhh, relax, I don't want to hurt you."

Chad relaxed his muscles as best he could to accept the digit. He felt the finger going deeper and moving around.



“Oh my God!” Chad nearly lifted off the bed when Takoda’s finger rubbed against his prostate.

“You like that?”

“Like? Do it again!” And he did. Again and again. Chad couldn’t wait to have the man’s cock inside him. Takoda’s tongue slid along his body, reaching his mouth for a hard kiss.

“I’m gonna put another finger in, stay relaxed for me, okay?” He kissed Chad again, making him forget the sting in his ass while his fingers rubbed his prostate. He moaned in Takoda’s mouth, making him want to come.

“Please, I want you now.”

Takoda slid his fingers out and put the condom on, spreading more lube over his covered cock and Chad’s ass, lifted Chad’s legs and positioned himself between them.

Takoda pushed the head of his prick inside as slowly as he could. As it finally went past the ring of muscles, Chad opened his eyes wide and grabbed the sheets below him in his fists. It was painful but he was looking forward to the pleasures to come.

“Shhh, keep breathing, don’t hold it in. I won’t move until you get used to me.”

After a few seconds, Chad nodded his head slightly. Takoda started pushing his way inside the hot channel, inch by slow inch until Takoda’s pubes touched Chad’s balls. Takoda stopped, allowing him to get used to the girth of his cock. He leaned forward and kissed him once again. This time it was gentle, one hand fisted in his hair while the other held the side of his face, fingers caressing his temple. Once the sting subsided, Chad wrapped his legs around the taller man’s hips and pulled him tighter against his body. Taking the hint, Takoda started sliding his cock in and out.

“Oh yes, that feels... Oh!” Finding Chad’s prostate, he continued hitting it every time he pushed in. “Faster, harder, Takoda!” Chad grabbed onto his lover’s long hair and brought him down for a hard kiss.

In and out, faster and harder, their bodies a liquid, sweating mess. Takoda raised Chad’s body, grabbed him by the hips and started pounding him hard.



The only sound was the slapping of bodies as they came together and their uneven, rapid breaths. Chad felt a fire starting from his balls and spread rapidly throughout his body.

“I’m... come...!”

“Yeah babe, I’m. With. You.” Takoda said between clenched teeth.

“Koda!” Chad screamed, as he came harder than he’d ever come before. White streams of cream shot out, hitting him on the chest, face and neck. Soon after, Takoda tensed up. Takoda pushed twice, three, four times inside him in rapid fire. He turned his head up, his long hair trailing down his chest onto Chad’s stomach, the tips gliding along the warm come. He had the most beautiful expression on his face as he came inside Chad, his mouth open in a silent scream.

Slowly he pulled out and dropped to his side next to Chad, their bodies vibrating and breathing hard. Chad brought his arms around the other man’s waist and held him tight. After a few minutes, Takoda rolled over, bringing Chad with him, half his body on top of Takoda as Chad lay his head on Takoda’s shoulder. Takoda wrapped his arms around the smaller man and held Chad’s hand on his chest. Chad lay there, listening to his lover’s heart and watched his chest move rhythmically as he breathed.

“I have no words for what you made me feel. That was fucking great. I know I won’t be able to walk right for a week!” They laughed and Chad raised his head, touching their lips together for a soft, slow kiss.

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Two weeks later, Chad was heading to his locker at work when David approached him.

“Hey Chad, the guys and I are going out tonight. You know, Friday and all that. Why don’t you come with us?”

This time, Chad agreed. He’d only agreed to go out with them once before and he hadn’t enjoyed himself. He’d had to put up with Bobby Joe and Roscoe, his two co-workers, talking shit and starting fights with anyone who didn’t look macho enough. That wasn’t his scene, so he’d declined further invitations.



“All right. I’ll go this time, but the minute I hear those two start shit with anyone, I’m out.”

“I’ll try. But you know, they’re just having fun is all.”

“Fun? At whose expense? What they do isn’t right and you know it. I don’t see how you put up with them,” Chad said, shaking his head.

David stood there staring at Chad for a moment while Chad started changing his coveralls.

“Fine. We’ll be there at around eight, I’ll see you then.”

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Opening the door to the bar, Chad recognized the familiar faces from the town. He looked around until he spotted David and his crew at a table toward the back. He nodded his head when David spied him and motioned to the bar. He got himself a beer and went to sit next to David at the table. It was still early and the place was not crowded yet. After talking for a while, Bobby Joe and Roscoe’s attention went toward the door.

“Well I’ll be damned. What do we have here? Looks like we got us a couple o’ fags,” Bobby Joe said.

“Them two ain’t from ’round these parts, I reckon. Never seen them ’round.” Roscoe replied.

Chad’s head swerved toward the door. Two young men with lithe bodies, like models, headed toward the bar and sat. The bartender gave them a not-too-friendly look.

“How ’bout we have us some fun, boys?” Roscoe asked.

Chad stared at David, imploring with his eyes to make things right.

“Come on now, guys. Leave ’em be. Looks like they’re just passing by. Ain’t nothing wrong with that.” David said after staring at Chad for a few seconds.

“Well, boss, ain’t nothing wrong with us having some fun with them fags. Teach ’em to be men. We don’t like no pansies in our town. There’s no fags living here,” Bobby Joe said.



“Are you kidding me? You think that all four thousand people in this town are all straight?” David asked.

“Sure thing. You don’t see no faggots walking ’round, do ya? ’Course there ain’t fags living here. You tell ’im, Chad,” Bobby Joe replied.

“I need another beer.” Chad got up and went to the bar, hoping no one would sit on the stool next to one of the men. Picking up a pen and a napkin from the top of the bar, he wrote, *Leave now before it’s too late!*

Calling the bartender’s attention, he ordered a beer but didn’t return to the table right away. Pushing the napkin inconspicuously toward the man next to Chad, he waited until he noticed. The man took the napkin, read it and looked at him. With head lowered, Chad whispered, “Go, now,” hoping the men would understand they were in danger.

The man said, “Thank you,” in a low voice, and both stood up to leave. Chad turned his stool around, leaning against the bar, and looked toward the table where David and the other two sat staring at the two men leaving hastily. Noticing Roscoe and Bobby Joe getting up, Chad put the bottle down on the bar and started heading toward the table. Halfway there he dropped to one knee on the floor, knocking a chair on his way down. He made a loud moan as if in pain, calling everyone’s attention to himself.

“Holy Mary and Joseph, Chad. What in hell happened? You okay?” Bobby Joe asked him, stopping his pursuit of the other two men with Roscoe in tow.

“Oh man, my stomach. Help me up, man. Damn, it hurts.” Chad grimaced and wrapped both arms around his stomach, trying to make it believable. Once up, he turned his head toward the door, but the two men were already gone. “I think I better get home... Not feeling good.” He headed toward the door, his body vibrating with the fear he still had within for the other two men as well as for himself.

“Hey Chad, wait up.” David said as he approached Chad, who was already closing the door of his car. “I saw you writing on a paper and handing it to one of the guys. Listen, I don’t like what those two fools say and do either. My youngest brother is gay as well. The biggest reason why I come here with those two is to stop them from bashing anyone they might deem as easy target.



Am I right to assume that the reason why you don't come to the bar is because you're gay?" Chad didn't answer immediately and after a minute, he slowly nodded his head, his eyes intent on David's, watching for his reaction.

"You did good in there tonight and I'm proud of you for sticking up for them. I'll try and make them tone it down at work from now on," David said, nodding his head.

"Thanks David. I just don't see how you can listen to all their shit, having a gay brother."

"They are good workers and that's the only reason why they're still working for me. Otherwise, they'd be long gone. I won't say anything to anyone about you, you're safe with me."

"Thanks." Chad sat looking up at David for a while not knowing what else to say. He nodded his head and closed the door, turned the ignition and went home.

Chad reached for his phone as soon as he opened the door and called Takoda, explaining what had happened at the bar.

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Their feelings got stronger as time went by. Of course, as with any couple, they had disagreements, but nothing they couldn't resolve peacefully. The sex kept getting better and better. Eight months of traveling over an hour after getting off work to visit each other was taking a toll on them. When they were too tired to visit, they spent long hours on the phone. Chad loved hearing Takoda's voice but it didn't compare with the feeling he got when his moist, hot breath was right there on his ear, whispering his love. Then one night, after making love for the umpteenth time, Takoda turned to him with a serious look.

"Chad, you know how much I love you and I know you love me as well. I also know I want to spend the rest of my life with you. The pain and disappointment I lived with after being used and manipulated for so long is gone, thanks to you. You gave me hope and the kind of relationship I've always wanted. I don't ever want to be without you. I want you to move in with me. I talked with the boss and he said he'll hire you at the shop, at least until we find the right place for you to open your own business, if that's what



you still want. I hate the days when I can't hold you and all we can do is a quick jack-off on the phone. I want to have you with me every night. I worry about you living here. So, what do you say?"

"I've been thinking the same thing. I do love you, more than I can think. Remember the guy who had planted all that corn on my property last spring?" Takoda nodded. "He came by yesterday and made me an offer for half the land. I told him I'd sell him the whole thing, not just part. He said he'd think about it and get back to me this weekend. He's a fair person, so I know the offer will be good. We should start looking for a place immediately. What about your lease? You still have a few months."

"Yeah, that's no problem. If I have to pay until it's up, I'm willing to do it. I'll call a real estate agent tomorrow and tell them what we're looking for. We'll have our own place in no time." Takoda hugged him to his chest and kissed his forehead.

"You got one thing right, these jack-off sessions on the phone are getting old," Chad said.

"It's a deal, then." Takoda brought their lips together for a soft kiss.

And that was that. Chad sold the house and they bought some acreage outside of Richmond, away from the city traffic and noise, and even adopted a cat named Sir Chester.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Hi, I'm Zeoanne, or at least that's my pen name. I started writing poetry as a young teen. Later in life, I became a mom and dedicated my time to them and their school activities. A few years ago my daughter came out as lesbian and in doing research, I discovered the world of gay stories. I was fascinated from the get go and started reading all the paperbacks I could afford on the internet. I didn't even know what an e-book was! Gasp! Soon enough I found out though, and well, let's just say that in the past five years I've collected a LOT of e-books. One day, as I was reading, a young man started talking in my head wanting his own story, and of course, he needed a partner. I took a challenge and joined NaNoWriMo in 2012 but didn't start until the third day. By the 20<sup>th</sup> and with the help of two fabulous friends, the story was born. I have many other young and not so young men waiting for their break into stardom. I'll get to them as soon as I can if the fiends stop pulling on my hair! I hope you enjoy my first published story.*

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