

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

YOU GET FULL CREDIT FOR BEING ALIVE

Cari Z

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

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By Cari Z

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free 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 do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, 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

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may 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.

This story is 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.

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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: 39,798

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.”

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 reprovably. “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.

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.

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?

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 151st 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*.”

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’a 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.

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 gangbanging 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.

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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