

# LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

# VOLUME 2

## Volume 2

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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance Collection*

## Volume 2

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set with two additional bonus volumes, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Volume 2.

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

## **Dedication**

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

## **Ebook Layout and Navigation**

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

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

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

Enjoy.

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# #FIRST IMPRESSIONS #SECOND CHANCES

By Heidi Belleau

## **Photo Description**

Instagram picture of two young men sharing a surprised kiss, both of them with eyes wide open.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*He's always been a little shy and anxious in social situations, making it difficult for him to meet new people. Most nights he stays home. Even though his long-time friend calls trying to get him to go out every once in a while, he makes excuses and stays in where he's away from strangers and crowds.*

*After a long week, he wants nothing more than to relax into his typical routine when his friend shows up at the door.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jilly*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** first time, coming of age, friends to lovers, reunited, young adult characters

**Content warnings:** mention of suicide

**Word count:** 13,118

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# #FIRST IMPRESSIONS #SECOND CHANCES

By Heidi Belleau

*first day of class and i'm already late*

*#oops #but totally worth it #fashion #ootd #comme des garçons*

Jonah uploaded his Outfit Of The Day selfie—taken with his iPhone a few minutes ago in the full-length mirror behind his dorm room door—hit post, and slammed his laptop shut before he succumbed to the urge to watch the notes, and more importantly, the compliments, roll in.

He'd only planned on giving himself one last hasty look-over before he slipped out the door, but he couldn't help stopping to take just one more second to smooth back the cowlick in his black hair and practice his best dead-eyed male model expression, which he promptly messed up by grinning. Oh yeah, so *totally* worth being late.

His first-day-of-school ensemble was bright and cheerful and optimistic, which perfectly matched how he was feeling. College. He was a new man. Moving forward and never looking back. The striped black-and-ivory Comme des Garçons sweater with its bold slash of teal across the waist was sharp and clean and eye-catching, casual enough that he wouldn't stand out too much from his T-shirt- and rugby-jersey-wearing classmates, but those in the know would *know*, and that was the best feeling of all.

To fit in and stand out at the same time, sending subtle signals to the people who *mattered*, that was the person Jonah wanted to be from now on. Which was also why he'd accessorized with the little ring that up close looked like a tiny bondage shackle, wink-wink, not that he was expecting to get laid any time soon... or ever.

Probably ever, so it was a lucky thing being a somewhat emaciated and sheltered mid-twenties gay virgin was a romantic selling point in the fashion world instead of something to be ashamed of. *Too beautiful for this world*, wasn't that what one of his twee pastel-addicted followers had called him? You'd think he was some kind of doomed high-rent French prostitute dying of consumption in the 1800s, the way some people talked about him.



Kind of a complete and utter contradiction, but then, the line “I am large, I contain multitudes” came to mind. Speaking of which, Jonah snatched his battered Moleskine out from under his pillow and stuffed it into his Mismo backpack alongside his Introduction to Poetry textbook before finally slipping out the door. Twenty minutes late, now.

One benefit to being late: eating on the run meant Jonah didn’t have to do any agonizing over cafeteria seating. He just grabbed a bagel toasted to go and hustled right past the social minefield of half-empty tables and bacon-and-egg small talk.

Jonah mostly avoided socializing with the cafeteria crowd by eating at off-times, lunch at eleven in the morning and dinner at four like an old person, and if there wasn’t a table where he could sit alone, he took his tray back to his room to eat at his desk. Which seemed pathetic until you considered the fact that last time he’d sat with a stranger that stranger had called him “bloodmouth” and described the living conditions of cows in lurid detail while Jonah nobly tried to choke down his cheeseburger.

His fault for going to a hippie university, he supposed, but if it hadn’t been a militant vegan, it would have been a homophobe jock making fun of his faggy taste in scarves. The world was one big lose-lose situation and Jonah would have done this whole damn thing online if it weren’t for the part where his dickhead stepfather was gonna cut him off if he didn’t “learn to leave his fucking room once in a while.”

Which he’d have been happy to do, *Terry*, if leaving his fucking room had meant moving to New York to chase an internship or go pro with his fashion blogging instead of enrolling in some shitty second-tier Canadian college to do a journalism degree. Who even cared about journalism degrees anymore? Nobody relevant, that was for damn sure. Waste of time and money, was what it was, but then Terry and Jonah’s mom had piles of money to spare. Too bad the same couldn’t be said of Jonah’s time.

He pulled his teal bomber jacket over his head to shield his hair from the rain drizzling down as he dashed across campus, cursing the way his canvas sneakers soaked through pretty much instantly. By the time he made it to the lecture hall, he was forty minutes late and soaking wet and he looked like shit



and suddenly being late wasn't worth it at all. Fuck. Damn. Well, he'd just slip into the back row anyway, maybe leave class just before the professor dismissed them, and maybe then nobody would notice him.

Going from gagging for attention to desperately terrified of it in the span of a half hour? Yeah, that sounded like Jonah to a T. Maybe he should have taken up Doctor Jamieson's offer to forward his file to a local psychologist.

Eh, no, maybe not.

Taking a deep breath to ease the oncoming panic attack, he slipped as inconspicuously as possible through the door at the back of the lecture hall.

Which was right about when everything went to hell.

So much for his discreet entrance, because the professor down at his podium snapped his head up with a murderous glare at the sound of the door swinging shut. The man paced across the front of the class to his projector, which he turned off peevishly. The whole time, he never stopped *staring* at Jonah, his sharp eyes following as Jonah slipped into the back row and sat down.

"Name?" the professor asked, picking up a clipboard next to the projector and pulling a pen from the chest pocket of his shirt.

Really? The dude was taking attendance? There had to be three hundred people in the hall. Everybody said college profs didn't give a shit about that kind of thing. Everybody, and Jonah had believed them. Had kind of been depending on it, actually.

But the professor hadn't stopped glaring at him, so apparently he really was serious and holy shit how was this even happening right now. Jonah took another deep breath, this one even shakier than the one at the door. "Jonah Gilchrist," he said, relieved that his voice rang out clear and confident instead of squeaking, at least. Small mercy.

The professor scanned his clipboard and finally gave it a tick. "Do you *want* to be here, Mr. Gilchrist?"

*Not right now I sure as hell don't.* "Um, yes? I think so." The high collar of his sopping wet jacket threatened to choke him. He fumbled with shaking hands for the zipper, drawing it down a couple of inches.

He was suddenly absurdly unwilling to reveal the Comme des Garçons sweater he'd been so proud of this morning. He didn't want anyone to see it and associate it with *this*. This fucking very public shame.

“Really? Because sauntering in here forty minutes late doesn't seem like the actions of someone who wants to be here, Mr. Gilchrist. In fact, I'd go so far as to say they are the actions of a person who doesn't appreciate or deserve the *opportunity* of being here.”

Jonah squirmed, slumping in his seat and wishing he could melt right into the floor.

They were all looking at him now, three hundred heads turned, some of them smug, some of them righteously annoyed, some of them pitying, but the expression didn't matter to Jonah, only the stare.

“Let me guess, Mr. Gilchrist. Your parents are paying for you to attend this institution? Perhaps you have a trust fund? And meanwhile hardworking students desperate for an education stay at home because their scholarships and bursaries still aren't enough. *Deserving* students, Mr. Gilchrist. So I'll ask you again. Do you want to be here?”

“Yes sir,” Jonah mumbled, when all he wanted to do was put up both middle fingers and yell “Fuck no, New York or bust!” and maybe, “YOLO!”

Yeah, and then as he stormed out the door, the whole lecture hall would applaud and he'd write the incident up as a text post on Tumblr and it'd get a hundred thousand notes and wind up reblogged by those YOU WILL LOVE US ON YOUR DASHBOARD ABSOLUTE FUNNIEST POSTS vultures and Anna Wintour herself would see it and hire him right on the spot because she admired his gumption.

Except this was the real world, not a fucking episode of *Glee*, and Jonah was no rebel, and walking out of this class wouldn't bring him any closer to New York, especially not once his stepfather drained his bank account to zero.

Sure, he could hawk all his Mr. Porter clothes to make up bus fare and maybe a month's rent in slum housing, but then what? No way he was going to get any kind of respectable job dressing out of Walmart, and the job he *could* get wouldn't be able to pay rent on anywhere decent.

He'd last two months, tops, before he'd wind up busing back to Canada in defeat—or maybe hooking, but not the romantic eighteenth century version. And he wasn't sure how many people would follow a blog all about Failing At New York.

He scrubbed his face miserably, relieved at least that the professor had moved on to droning about sonnet forms and his classmates had returned—with renewed determination, thanks to the recent lesson on how slackers were treated in this class—to their notes.

All but one, that was. Two rows ahead, a tubby blond-haired guy who looked a little like a poor man's Seth Rogen was still staring at Jonah, brows stitched together and his big brown eyes full of liquid feeling, like a puppy's.

Oh, of course. Because this day wasn't shitty enough.

Sebastian Rose.

\*\*\*\*

*that moment when you think college is gonna be a fresh start and  
then you're sharing a class with your junior high crush  
#personal #fail #seriously though #why god why*

And that wasn't even touching on the whole fiasco with the professor publicly dressing him down. What did it say about Jonah that the professor's pointed accusations barely even rated in his mind compared to who had heard them?

Sebastian Rose.

Sebastian *fucking* Rose had heard them.

What were the odds? Well, Jonah supposed the odds didn't really matter, not once the thing actually happened. The real question now was what to do about it.

The immediate solution was, of course, to withdraw from the class entirely—after all, the professor clearly hated him—but if he did that, he'd be getting an angry call from his parents the minute he hit the button, and he did not relish the thought of having to explain any of this to them.

Which left: skulk around hoping neither Sebastian nor the professor ever noticed him again, get through the class by the skin of his teeth, and then try and forget all about it; *or*, do really fucking awesome, prove his professor wrong, and rub his success in Sebastian's face.

Wait, what?

Since when did Jonah need to rub things in Sebastian's face?

Sure, he was humiliated, but that was because Jonah cared enough about Sebastian that he didn't want to make a bad impression, not because he thought Sebastian was a judgmental person.

*Was* Sebastian a judgmental person? Jonah's first instinct was no, he couldn't possibly be, but then maybe he'd changed since they'd been in school together, or maybe Jonah had too rosy a memory of him.

As much as Jonah's paranoia wanted to think the worst of the guy, though, Sebastian had always been a teddy bear. Kind and charismatic and funny and friendly and he always gave Jonah the time of day, even though Jonah was weird and socially awkward and shy and way too obsessed with clothes. Even back in eighth grade, Sebastian hadn't known the difference between George by Walmart and Giorgio Armani, but he'd still complimented Jonah on his shoes or scarf or even his glasses.

In fact, Sebastian had been the only one to compliment Jonah on *anything*.

Jonah had been practically friendless all his life, mostly because he just never could quite get the hang of people. He'd started junior high awkward and hyper-focused on fashion and design, and ended it hateful and snobby, mostly as a defence mechanism.

It was easy to look down on everyone when you had good reason to believe they were all plotting to stomp your face into the smoking pit at recess. Easy to feel superior to a school full of cruel and petty homophobes who didn't understand your... *sensitivity*, as Jonah's mother so delicately phrased it. The problem with Jonah was, even though it had felt like it was him against the world, it wasn't, not really. But acting like it was—tarring the friendly or the indifferent with the same brush as the bullies—hadn't earned him any allies.

Except for Sebastian, who was so big and dumb and naive that even the nastiest barbs from Jonah at his most defensive never quite seemed to ruffle him. He never got offended at Jonah's snobby superiority and nose-in-the-air ways. Even stood up for him a few times when the hockey team had used him as practice for their shoulder-checking technique.

No wonder Jonah had had such a blazing crush on the guy, right up until the day Jonah had come home with one black eye too many and his parents had finally agreed to pull him out of school. Good thing, too, because God knew what would have happened if Jonah had gotten stupid or lovesick enough to actually come on to Sebastian versus just making googly eyes when he wasn't looking. Even if Sebastian himself was too damn good of a person to judge, the rest of the troglodyte bullies in their school sure wouldn't have been. Sebastian was popular. Well-liked. Funny. One of their own. They tolerated his pitying Jonah on account of the fact that Sebastian was just that nice of a guy, but there was no way in hell they could hold back their gay panic on his behalf.

Completely oblivious to the mortifying implications of his post—which included a webcam shot of him biting his lip in distress—sixty or so followers still liked it. Another twenty-some reblogged it, mostly without adding anything but a few with the usual gushing, meaningless comments. Which normally did wonders for Jonah's ego and made him preen and want to put together new outfits, but today just made him kind of annoyed, because what did the love of faceless Tumblr followers matter in the face of disapproval from *Sebastian*? Nothing, that was what, but just then a new notification popped up on his dash.

*thestarsjustblinkforus* replied to your post:

*omg u are living in a rom com. get it!!!*

Jonah stared at the message a long time, caught in some kind of existential horror he couldn't quite name, and for a while he had to clap his hands over his eyes, but even then he spread his fingers so he could peek at the message between them and—

A second chance.

His heart pounded. That wasn't the anxiety of imminent failure he was feeling, that was—that was—

That was the feeling of infinite possibilities. *Promise.*

He'd thought college was going to be a new beginning, and in a way it still was; he was surrounded by people he didn't know, who likewise didn't know *him*... or his shameful past. His fantasies of first impressions hadn't been completely spoiled quite yet, although that incident with the professor sure hadn't helped on that front. He could still bounce back from it, though. If he could bounce back from being bullied right out of school he could bounce back from *anything*.

And as for Sebastian? Well, it might be too late for a first impression with him, but it *wasn't* too late for a second chance.

\*\*\*\*

*so tell me, tumblr. and be honest.*

*this outfit: rom com hero, or villain?*

*#first person who says gay sidekick will be required to write me  
a four page essay on the meaning of soft grunge as punishment  
#i mean it #this is my story dammit #i will not be a sidekick  
#fashion #ootd #henrik vibskov #mr porter #cardigan love  
#glasses*

This time when Jonah hit post he wasn't tempted to watch the notes roll in at all. Too anxious and excited and full of butterflies about today's class to even think about his Tumblr fame, really. He'd had an entire week to make up a game plan for how he was going to get back into his professor's good graces and maybe-possibly Sebastian's heart and/or pants. Which was only barely enough time to plan a suitable outfit, but absolutely *plenty* of time to worry himself to pieces over an increasingly apocalyptic series of anxious what-ifs.

What if Sebastian doesn't remember me? What if he does remember me, but doesn't like me anymore after what went down last week? What if I'm banned from class after last week? What if I'm expelled from school after last week? What if the professor cancelled the class altogether? What if the whole school collapses on our heads? What if a comet strikes the earth?

Oh yeah, apocalyptic was the word for it, all right.

At least today he was well on his way to being early for class, thanks to setting his alarm and laying out his outfit the night before with a strong self-recrimination *not* to deviate from the plan at the last minute, which was a recipe for disaster.

And sure, now that it was morning he was eyeing the blue Etro wool sweater hanging in his closet, but he'd made a promise to himself, and if he tried the Etro on, it would be something else next, and something else, and then he'd need to change pants and of course shoes, and then he'd have to switch bags...

So he picked up his pre-packed bag and slipped out the door before he had a chance to second-guess himself further.

He grabbed breakfast to go on his way past the cafeteria, even though he had plenty of time to sit down and eat before class started. If he was going to be early, he was going to be *early*. Not the first kid in class, since that was just a little bit *too* keen and ass-kissy, but maybe the fifth or sixth. He'd stop and grab a coffee at the shop on campus proper, loiter by the door a bit, and then stroll in all casual when the time was right.

Twenty minutes later, chai latte in hand, it finally was. Jonah brushed non-existent lint off of his gorgeous Henrik Vibskov cardigan with its blocky orange stripe, proudly lifted his chin like he was posing for a mirror-selfie, and walked into the lecture hall like he owned the place. So far so good. Nobody pointed or stared. Nobody said, "Hey look, it's the rich slacker kid!" The professor wasn't even in the hall yet. No sign of Sebastian, either. Jonah found a seat safely in the middle of the lecture hall and settled in, pulling out his laptop in its matching Henrik Vibskov sleeve—oh yeah, he was *that* well-accessorized.

He was totally going to pull this off!

Or so he thought, right up until Sebastian plopped down into the seat right beside him.

"Hey," Sebastian said, not even bothering to look over at him, "On time today, I see."



Jonah's heart jumped into his throat, his hands seizing up like he had rigor mortis. "What?" he squeaked, too stunned by Sebastian's presence to even begin feeling offended by the gibe.

"You. On time." Sebastian smiled, and the fact that it was so charming and asymmetrical just made Jonah freeze up all the more. "Gotta hand it to ya, man, if that was me I'd have probably dropped the class."

Jonah blew out a shaky breath. "Ha. Yeah. Well. I almost did." He combed a hand over the top of his head—probably completely destroying his hairdo—but he was so full of anxious energy it was either that or explode from the built up pressure.

Sebastian just kept smiling, like he was talking to a normal guy instead of a homeschooled virgin having a panic attack. "Glad you didn't, bro." No trace of insincerity in his voice. Jonah had forgotten just how fucking *earnest* Sebastian was. How unassumingly kind. It was like being back in eighth grade again, Sebastian helping him up from where he lay smashed against the lockers in a daze, taking him by the hand and asking gently, "You okay, kid? Those assholes..."

"Um, thanks," Jonah mumbled, and turned away before Sebastian could see the hot blush covering his face and neck.

"So you're Jonah Gilchrist, right? I'm not imagining things? We went to junior high together?"

Speaking of humiliating blasts from the past. Well, not like Jonah hadn't rehearsed for this exact scenario. He'd come in here assuming Sebastian would remember him, would remember all of his past shame. The plan was to shrug it off and act like he wasn't damaged at all and maybe even admit to having a huge crush—ha-ha wasn't that so pathetic—but Sebastian was always so cool and could you blame him? Self-deprecating humor meant to make Sebastian smile, and maybe if he was lucky, Sebastian would respond favorably to the admission of attraction.

But then Jonah turned to him and said, a little coldly, "Yeah, that's me. And you are?" And Sebastian's expressive face fell, just for a fleeting second, and Jonah's heart seized, and he babbled, "Sorry, I've just kind of blocked out that part of my life, it's nothing personal."

Yeah, now *those* sure were the words of a man who'd completely left the traumas of his past behind him. Sure, buddy. Right.

"Oh." Sebastian rubbed the back of his head. "No biggie. I'm Sebastian. Sebastian Rose. I was a year ahead of you back in the day." *And was pretty much the closest thing to a friend you ever had, and now here you are snubbing me just in some lame attempt to save face.*

"Right. Sebastian," Jonah replied, feeling like the biggest asshole in the world and not sure how to make it better. "Of course. How have you been?"

"You know. Graduated, in college now." Sebastian's eyes twinkled, and he seemed to revive a little, like a thirsty flower watered for the first time in days.

Jonah let himself laugh, a sound he wasn't used to making. "No kidding, me too. What a coincidence."

The tension between them eased a little, after that, and by the time their professor arrived, they were able to turn from each other and listen to the lecture in companionable silence, all the awkwardness drained away.

Class went off without a hitch. Jonah made eye contact when his name was called at attendance, the professor didn't make a big deal of what happened last week, and in return Jonah listened attentively and took notes and tried to put the whole mess behind him, too.

It was what happened *after* class that totally fucked Jonah's newfound equilibrium.

Because as he was packing up his laptop, more than ready to just pick up a sandwich or something from the cafeteria and go hide in his room for the afternoon, Sebastian suddenly turned to him. "You got another class after this?"

Jonah shook his head, forcing himself not to look too antsy about getting out of his seat.

"Oh! Well! Me and a couple guys usually go to the pub every week. I meet them over in the science building and then we go get some lunch and a couple drinks. You wanna come along?"

Jonah winced, remembering all the times a well-meaning Sebastian had tried to include him back in junior high. Sebastian had liked everybody; his

friends most definitely hadn't. Despite Sebastian's assurances that they were "totally cool," Jonah could tell they *weren't* cool with him. They'd sit around staring at him, giving him the cold shoulder, and the minute Sebastian was out of earshot—to take a piss, or to throw something in the trash, whatever—they'd instantly turn from cold to outright cruel. Jonah never stuck around long after that, and eventually he'd stopped accepting invitations from Sebastian at all.

Speaking of which...

"Uh, thanks, but I really, um, I really shouldn't. You know. Because. Um, I have stuff. To do."

Sebastian's shoulders dropped a little, but he still managed a smile. "Well, if you wind up with some free time, you know where to find us, right?"

Jonah nodded, trying to match Sebastian's unflappable optimism but probably failing on every conceivable level. "Totally. Thanks for the invite, though. See you next week?"

"Next week," Sebastian agreed, and why did it feel like they'd just made some kind of second, unspoken promise?

\*\*\*\*

*thestarsjustblinkforus asked you:*

*but is he cute tho???*

Jonah didn't know how to answer that question. Was it pathetic that he didn't know how to answer that question? He'd been so stuck on his memories of Sebastian—memories of kindness and patience and caring—that he hadn't even really taken the time to acknowledge the fact that the guy was more than just an amorphous blob of attractive traits and warm fuzzy feelings. He wasn't just a memory, he was a human being. A man, specifically.

An *adult* man, who'd changed *quite a bit* from the fifteen-year-old of Jonah's rosy memories.

But was he cute, though? Jonah surreptitiously looked up from his open-but-carefully-angled laptop screen to Sebastian sitting beside him.

It was like he was seeing the guy with new eyes. Luckily, Sebastian was focused on his own computer, so he didn't catch Jonah blushing.

This was the guy he'd dismissed as a poor man's Seth Rogan?

Sure, Sebastian had the round face and scruffy beard and bad fashion sense, but he also had... arms. Muscular arms that bulged in the confines of his T-shirt sleeves. Long legs that stretched out in front of him, the worn denim of his jeans clinging to his thighs. A broad, totally manly chest that dollars-to-donuts he didn't wax or shave. The same kind good-humored smile Jonah remembered, but now with fuller lips than Jonah had ever seen on a guy who wasn't an international male model.

And yeah, with that pot belly and scruff and unkempt hair, Sebastian was definitely no male model.

He was something better. Real, approachable, someone Jonah could touch and talk to and really know, so much *more* than just a striking but changeable image, selling him Burberry outerwear or Omega watches.

Sebastian wasn't selling him anything.

Nothing but his smile and *oh God he's smiling at me he saw me staring abort abort abort*.

"What?" Sebastian asked with a chuckle, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, nothing," Jonah spluttered, acting offended at the mere implication that he'd been looking. "Just wondering when you last got your hair cut."

"Ouch! Catty as ever, Jonah. Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Not a lady." Jonah crossed his arms and just *knew* he was pouting, too.

Sebastian gave him a slow, exaggerated once-over. "That you are not. That you are not."

God, now what was that supposed to mean?

Jonah's face flushed even hotter and he squirmed in his seat, finally sniffing in non-response and returning to his laptop.

*yes, he's cute. i'd even venture so far as sexy, in a grungy working class beer-drinking kind of way. thanks for making me look at him in that light, i'm sure it won't result in any awkwardness from here on out.*

*#it totally will #damn you #i already can't look at him without  
turning beet-colored #asks #personal*

Three pages of notes and one droning lecture on the importance of neatness later, class was over, and Sebastian was turning to Jonah with that same seemingly unflappable smile, which now made Jonah's knees weak and his face as hot as a sunburn.

"Going to the pub. You in this week?"

Jonah winced. "Sorry, I should really study for next week's quiz."

"Oh," Sebastian said, looking like a kicked puppy. "Honestly, I should too."

*Ask him to study with you!* Jonah's brain screamed at him.

*Yeah right, loser, like he'd want to spend the next three hours talking about poetry with some charity case from junior high.*

"Yeah," he wound up saying. "See you next week."

He left before he could embarrass himself.

\*\*\*\*

*if you'd have asked me before semester started if i would rather  
a class with a professor who publicly humiliated me over a class  
with my junior high crush i . . .*

*would probably still say my junior high crush, actually*

*i am the literal worst*

*#at least i'm humiliating myself in this brand new j crew tee  
#ootd #fashion #steven alan #scarf #j crew #stripes*

Another class, another several pages of boring notes on modernist war poetry.

Another invitation to the pub from a well-meaning but clearly somewhat clueless Sebastian.

Another awkward refusal.

Another look of brave-but-crestfallen disappointment from Sebastian.

Another pang of guilt.

“Look,” Jonah said, unable to stand Sebastian’s expression anymore. Something had to give. “Don’t take it personally, okay? I do want to hang out with you outside of class, get to know you again, all of that. I do. I just...”

Sebastian’s eyebrows curved sympathetically. “Still not too good with people?”

Jonah bristled somewhat, but nodded. He was meant to be comforting Sebastian, though, not fighting with him. “Something like that. The flattering term would be ‘shy’ or possibly ‘introverted’.”

“So wait, are you saying that if we went out one-on-one, then...”

“Yes!” Jonah cried. Oops, that was a little too enthusiastic.

Sebastian ran his hands through his dirty-blond hair, mussing it up in a way that absolutely *begged* for Jonah to lean in and straighten it again. “I’m confused,” he said. “Let me get this straight, okay? Because you’re fucking confusing and I don’t want to misread you and mess this up. Again.”

Jonah kept his hands at his sides. No hair touching. “Okay, shoot.”

“If you and I go out one-on-one, would you want to go as friends or... as a date?”

“A date?” Jonah gulped. God, did his voice just break? Yes, it had just broken. Eighteen and with a breaking voice. Yikes.

“Yeah. A date. You *are* gay, aren’t you?”

His cheeks burned up. “Is it that obvious?”

Sebastian crossed his arms and did that up-and-down look of his. “How much does that outfit you’re wearing right now cost, exactly?”

The (embarrassing) calculations ran through Jonah’s head. “Um, including shoes?”

“Yeah, exactly. Not to stereotype, but it’s pretty obvious.”

Okay, that was kind of uncalled for. Jonah raised his chin and fixed Sebastian with a glower. “Look, okay, yeah, I’m gay. But I’m not a predator or something. I don’t want to *turn* you. I respect boundaries.” He sighed in

dejection. “Actually, I’m too inexperienced on the whole dating... thing to ever have had to worry about boundaries before, but I understand the concept in theory.”

Sebastian nodded along with Jonah’s whole speech, face showing no judgment. Because of course he didn’t judge Jonah; how could he judge anyone? Guy was practically perfect. “Well, that’s nice to know, but you know I’m gay too, right? Perhaps not as fabulously dressed, but definitely gay.”

“Ugh. The ‘F’ word.” Jonah shuddered dramatically.

“What, ‘fabulous’?”

“Yes. Please never use it to describe me again. I prefer ‘fashionable’ or hell, ‘vain’ even, if you don’t feel like being complimentary. Just anything but ‘fabulous’. Please,” he finished lamely. Sebastian smiled back at him, like he was waiting for Jonah to realize something, something he hadn’t keyed into because of his kneejerk reaction to the F-word and—“Wait wait wait. You’re *gay*?”

Sebastian nodded like a proud father that Jonah had finally caught on. “Three dollar bill, etcetera.”

It was like it was too hard to take in, really, so Jonah fell back on his old defense mechanisms and scoffed. “Oh, well, that’s news. But I understand that it doesn’t mean you want to date or jump my bones or anything, I mean I’m hardly your type, just because we’re both gay doesn’t mean we’re, like, fated to be together.”

“Dude. Dude. Breathe.” Sebastian put out both hands, like a hostage negotiator. “You need to take a valium or something, there? I brought it up because I *do* want to go on a date with you. If you’re interested, I mean. Are you?”

“Yes!”

Sebastian grinned so wide at his outburst that Jonah didn’t have time to feel embarrassed by his enthusiasm, this time.

But still, he coughed and tried to smooth the boyish excitement off his face. Poise. Sophistication. Aloofness. “Yes, I mean. Yes, I’d like to go on a date. Definitely.”



Sebastian picked up his backpack and swung it over his shoulder. “Perfect. Let’s go, then.”

Jonah gawked. “What, now?”

“Yeah, duh. No time like the present. We can head off campus for something to eat, maybe catch a movie or go back to my place—no pressure on that front, though.”

“Well, um, that’s very, um, motivated, but I’m not exactly... I mean, it’s kind of sudden, isn’t it?”

“Is it? Not to sound pathetic but I haven’t really gone on any dates with guys of your caliber.”

*My caliber.* Jonah’s stomach fluttered, and he wasn’t sure if he was flattered and in love or just so anxious he was on the verge of puking. “It’s not exactly how I picture a date. Shouldn’t we set a time in advance, agree to meet somewhere, something like that?” *You know, give me at least enough time to plan an outfit?*

Sebastian narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “You need to pick out an outfit, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. Is there a problem with that?” Jonah asked archly.

“No problem. Just don’t go making me look like a schlub, okay? Friday, then. Six o’clock. I’ll meet you at the residence cafeteria and we can go from there.”

“You live in residence?”

“Um, yes? Two floors down from you, which you’d know if you came out of your room to do anything but use the common area kettle.”

“You’ve seen me using the kettle?” Jonah squeaked, trying to remember all the times he’d gone to make a cup of tea in the last several months. Had he ever left his room in pyjamas, or his sweatpants, or—God forbid—his robe? He just couldn’t remember, which was a terrifying proposition.

“Yes. I was watching TV with a buddy of mine in his—and your—common room and you walked in, didn’t return his or my waves, just stood there silently staring at the kettle until it ticked off. And then you poured some

water into your mug and walked out again. I'd say you were sleep-walking, except for the fact that you looked like you were in a prison shower."

"How awkward," Jonah said miserably.

"Yeah, well, I still like you." Sebastian knocked Jonah's shoulder with a loosely-curved fist. "Friday, then?"

"If I can gather my dignity by then."

"Gather it, buck-o. I've been waiting for this since ninth grade."

Now those butterflies were *definitely* lovesickness.

\*\*\*\*

*you guys i am freaking out*

*becaue*

*because*

*my junior high crush?*

*asked me out???*

*on a date??????*

*so yeah here is me with my paper bag*

*because oh my god my junior high crush asked me out and i have no idea what to wear but he told me not to 'make him feel like a schlub' and he may have made some comments about how expensive my clothes are and i don't think he's like judging me or anything but maybe he feels inadequate and is that a bougie thing to be concerned about, that you make other people feel inadequate?*

*oh my god i'm terrified somebody help me before i faint*

*#wasn't joking about the paper bag thing #oh god #where did this paper bag even come from #personal*

Okay, so the paper bag wasn't really helping his panic attack at all, because he was more in the "mind-spinning and coming up with terrible scenarios" mode versus the "hyperventilating" one. He had to admit, though, it added a

certain *je ne sais quoi* to his selfie, hair and eyes wild, bag inflated in front of the lower half of his face. He uploaded the picture, hit post, and turned from his laptop to the next, horrifying task: sorting through his closet for an outfit.

Sure, it was only Wednesday and his date was on Friday, but he'd been set a particularly complex task: to pick out a date-worthy outfit, as a man who'd never been on a date before, with a guy who'd specifically said not to make him feel like a schlub. Jonah didn't know the first thing about how to accomplish such a thing.

Or if Sebastian had even been serious in saying it. It wasn't like the guy didn't joke about, um, everything.

Jonah leaned back in his computer chair with a groan, scrubbing at his eyes, then shocked up out of the chair like somebody had put a literal fire under his butt. He stalked toward his closet and started ripping items off the rod, tossing them to his bed in vague outfit-shaped piles.

The Stephan Schneider blazer and shirt. Lanvin bowtie? Was that too much? What if he added the whimsy of the fly-shaped cufflinks?

Did he seriously want to go on a date wearing something he labeled "whimsical" in his head?

He snapped a couple shots of the individual pieces and uploaded them as a photoset, hashtags: Stephan Schneider, Lanvin, bowties are cool, whimsy, I hate my life.

*toopinkforpunk* replied to your post:

*just wear whatever u want baby, u will look cute no matter what!*

*pradamascus* replied to your post:

*any man who feels inadequate around you doesn't deserve you, you should date me instead or at least be my gay best friend ok*

*waisting-away* reblogged your post and added:

*I must have these cufflinks. Yesterday. [stephen colbert give it to me.gif]*

*thestarsjustblinkforus* replied to your post:

*my best guess: joking? he knows what u look like already, right?  
why would he ask u out if he didn't like your style?*

***anonymous*** asked you:

*first world fucking problems, jesus fuck I hate you and I hate  
hate following you*

***anonymous*** asked you:

*he means straighten out your fucking wrist for five minutes*

Ugh. Anons. Right on time. Well, maybe the blazer and bowtie was a little... much. Jonah pushed them aside, groaned in frustration, then went to hang them all up again. When he was done, he stepped back from the closet like an artist stepping back from a painting and rubbed his chin in contemplation.

Okay, maybe the grey Hope sweater. With... black chinos and a skinny black tie and... *oh yes!* his black and silver oxfords. He snapped a couple pictures and uploaded them.

***embracevanity*** reblogged your post and added:

*Too precious xx*

***annawintourhatesyourpolyvore*** replied to your post:

*where is this date to? love the sweater!*

Good question. Jonah wasn't sure. The movies, maybe? Dinner? A bowling alley? That could be fun. He posted a reply to that effect. Of course, the anons were quick to latch onto that.

***anonymous*** asked you:

*well unless this dude is rich enough to take you to some five star  
restaurant for lobster and foie gras or whatever I think you're  
barking up the wrong tree with the fucking ties, seriously have  
you ever heard of a fucking T-shirt? did they have those at your  
prepatory academy for rich fags?*

He snarled at the message, unable to take his eyes off it even as a hundred compliments rolled in around it. Wasn't that just the way of things, though?

All the kindness in the world never was enough for Jonah, he just focused on the negative until it was all he saw, until it drowned everyone and everything else out.

He knew he should just close his laptop and take a breather, or turn off anon for the night and carry on his merry way with his leagues of teenage girl followers, but he still hit the answer button.

*Insult my fashion sense all you like, insult me for being rich if that's what gets you off, but leave my sexuality out of it. It's 2013.*

*#asks #anon hate #fucking anons #tw: homophobia*

He hit publish. The supportive messages rolled in. But of course, the only thing Jonah saw was a message from some throwaway grey-face blog—not technically an anon but the effect was the same.

**er15384** *replied to your post:*

*it's not about your sexuality, it's about you being a faggot. all faggots are gay but not all gays are faggots, that's simple fact. seriously, the dude couldn't have been clearer about the fact that he wants you to just*

*tone*

*it*

*down*

*but go ahead and die alone from anorexia, surrounded by vogue magazines and six pugs with diamond collars.*

*you're fucking hopeless.*

*kill yourself*

**thestarsjustblinkforus** *replied to your post:*

*be yourself and don't apologize. he asked you out. if he likes you enough he won't care that you're overdressed.*

Too little, too late. Jonah turned his ask box off, typed up a generic thanks-for-your-support-but-I'm-outta-here text post, then deleted it. Shut his laptop

with a shuddering sigh. Returned to his closet and hung up the Hope sweater. Put the nine-hundred dollar oxford shoes back in their box, and the box back on the shelf. Pathetic. Nine hundred dollar shoes, what the fuck was he thinking? That was exactly the kind of thing Sebastian had been asking him not to do, and there he was forging ahead regardless, physically fucking incapable of toning it down.

Pathetic.

*kill yourself*

Oh, he'd tried that already. Couldn't stop thinking about it now, about how he'd been fifteen and trying to figure out if you took the pills two or three at a time until they were all gone, or if you took them by the fistful like eating bitter candy.

Killing himself like a girl.

Pathetic.

Dropped out of school.

Pathetic.

Couldn't even handle going on a date.

Pathetic.

Letting fucking Tumblr get to him, for fuck's sake.

Pathetic.

Why did he even bother?

\*\*\*\*

*nope, not going.*

*#mind's made up #personal*

Jonah hit post, and to prove his conviction, he tore off the so-called "casual" date outfit he'd dressed in not ten minutes ago: bright blue Gucci trousers, worn leather boots, an MP Di Massimo Piombi houndstooth blazer—all of it layered with a plain grey jersey T-shirt. A hundred dollar T-shirt, but a T-shirt nonetheless. Suck it, anons.

Of course, ten minutes ago when he'd dressed and posted the selfie, he'd done so with hashtags: hi haters and date night—on top of the usual string of fashion-related tags of course—which stated pretty clearly that he intended on actually going on a date tonight.

Yeah, well, he *wasn't* going, dammit.

Because it was a hundred dollar T-shirt, and obviously this thing with Sebastian wasn't going to work out. And yeah that anon had been full of shit about that gays-versus-fags line, and definitely wrong about Jonah needing to kill himself—they weren't getting rid of him that damn easy—but the likelihood of a down-to-earth guy like Sebastian sharing those feelings, even if he wasn't quite so cruel about it, was still high. And of course Sebastian would be *wrong*, but hey, sometimes people were wrong and sometimes life sucked and Jonah wasn't toning it down and if that meant dying alone, or at best becoming somebody's kept boy to support his designer fashion habit, well then, there it was. He wasn't going back to the apologetic kid he'd been in junior high. Not for Sebastian, not for anybody.

He took the whole stupid outfit and deposited it in a stack on top of his dresser, too dejected to put it away properly. Instead, he opened his pyjama drawer and pulled out the first ratty piece of fabric his fingers closed on. Another T-shirt, nearly worn through: his musical theatre shirt from grade eight. The year he'd been in chorus and Sebastian had been a lead, which in their topsy-turvy high school somehow made him as cool as a jock because there had been a weird not-tainted-by-gays popularity to musical theatre, likely thanks to the participation of Sebastian and Co. And definitely *not* helped by kids like Jonah.

He still treasured that year, treasured that brief feeling of belonging Sebastian and the class had given him. So very, very brief, and yet so powerful.

He pulled the T-shirt on, then rooted around for a pair of sweatpants.

Turned off his cellphone. Brought his laptop to bed and booted up Netflix.

Tonight seemed as good a night as any for a *Buffy* marathon.

Three episodes in, six o'clock came and went.



And sure, Jonah felt miserable, but at least he also felt *safe*. Which meant he hated himself even more, but still.

Safe. That was what mattered, right?

Wow, he really was a loser. He tossed his laptop down the bed and smashed his pillow over his face, letting out a smothered howl. Which meant he almost didn't hear—

The knock.

At his door.

*Shit.*

At first, he tried to convince himself that it wasn't Sebastian—that it was his floor's Residence Advisor, or a pizza delivery guy who'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, or somebody going door-to-door looking for signups for a weekend dodgeball league. There were always plenty of reasons for door-knocking in residence, and Jonah's desperate brain cycled through them all. But of course, ultimately there was only one person it could *really* be: Sebastian.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Of course Sebastian would show up. He knew where Jonah lived, after all. It was only logical that after Jonah didn't show up for their date, Sebastian would come looking, if only to make sure Jonah hadn't been hit by a car on the way there.

On the other hand... couldn't the guy take a fucking hint?

Obviously Jonah didn't want to see him. Obviously Jonah had rethought the whole dating... thing. Why couldn't Sebastian leave well enough alone? He threw himself out of bed and stormed up to the door, swinging it open dramatically.

Too bad opening a door “with feeling” didn't quite have the same effect as slamming one closed.

It was only once the door had opened and Sebastian was standing *right there* that Jonah realized he totally wasn't dressed for this occasion. He made to half-close the door and hide his shabby state, but Sebastian got his foot wedged in before he could manage it.

“You stood me up,” Sebastian accused. He didn’t look angry so much as disappointed, which just aggravated Jonah more.

He rolled his eyes, flopping against his doorjamb. “Yeah, so? Don’t tell me you planned your busy schedule around little old me.”

“Um, kinda, yeah. I did.” Sebastian crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Can you at least let me in so we don’t have to have this argument in the hallway?”

“Are we arguing right now?” Jonah crossed *his* arms over *his* chest and pursed his lips.

“We’re about to be if you keep up this fuck-the-world ’tude. Gotta be honest, you’re giving me some serious junior high flashbacks right now and it is *not* pretty.”

Jonah flinched and practically wilted back into his room.

Sebastian followed him in and very gently, very calmly, shut the door behind them. “Okay. That’s better. Now, do you mind telling me what crawled up your ass tonight? You’re big time on the defensive right now and I don’t get it. Did I do something wrong?” He sat down on Jonah’s computer chair and spun himself lazily back and forth. “Because if you seriously thought I wasn’t going to come get you—”

“Why *are* you here, Sebastian?” Jonah flopped down onto his bed, halfway to a swoon.

“Um, because I asked you out and you said yes and then you stood me up with no explanation and I may be a nice guy but I’m not a saint, and I think if you’re gonna blow me off, the least you can do is tell me why.”

“Honestly?” Jonah asked, plucking at his sweatpants. “I don’t know why. Right up until this afternoon I was totally gung ho and then I couldn’t anymore and I don’t know why.”

“Kind of lame.” Sebastian raised his eyebrows and tilted his head, looking way too much like a disappointed dad for comfort. “But honest, at least. Look, I’m not going to get all ridiculous here and say ‘If you didn’t like me you should have said so!’ because I *know* you like me, Jonah. I know it, and I’m

into it. And just happen to like you too, so I was willing to overlook your eccentricities and try this thing out. And yeah, I did have to shift around plans with my friends in order to do this thing with you—”

“But why? We’re nothing alike. We haven’t talked to each other in years. I mean, I get why I like you—you were the only person who was ever fucking nice to me so I have that whole puppy love thing going—but you? You seriously would rather be with me than your friends? I don’t get it! I just don’t.”

Sebastian sighed. “I knew it. I knew that you were one of those balls of yarn. They look neat on the outside—maybe a little too tightly-wound—but then you pull on the end and a big eldritch horror knot comes out of the middle.”

“You—”

“Yes, I knit. I’m not the macho dude you have me built up to be, okay? But let me talk. One, we’re obviously alike enough to have chosen the same college class, so I was kind of hoping there might be something else there. Two, I concede the point that we haven’t talked in years, but I don’t know why that matters since people go on dates with complete strangers all the time.”

“Well that’s—”

“*Ah, ah, ah.* I’m talking, you’re listening, Mister Knotty Guts. Now where was I?”

“Three.” Jonah hunkered his head down between his shoulders like the scolded child he was.

“Right. Three, I don’t know your motivations for liking me all those years ago, and I hardly think they matter now, because you’re a different person now and so am I, and I’m glad being nice to you back then helped even a little, but you were never a pity case for me, and you’re not now, either.”

Fat chance. Why else had Sebastian asked him out, if not because of the same pity that had guided him to kindness all those years ago? It wasn’t like there was anything about Jonah that was remotely attractive or interesting or worthwhile on its own merits.

“And don’t think just because you’re not speaking now, I don’t know you’re still arguing with me. I can see it all over your face. I said it once and I’ll say it again, Jonah. I. Am. Not. A. Saint. This isn’t charity. I asked you out because you’re cute and funny and you don’t take yourself seriously. So yes, there’s something in it for me, even if it’s just some arm candy for the night.”

“How the hell do you know I’m funny? How do you know I don’t take myself seriously? Are you like, making up stories about us in your head? We’ve barely interacted.” Jonah screwed up his face in disgust, not willing to even touch the stuff about arm candy. Partly because the thought of being *anybody’s* arm candy was a thought completely foreign to him—while also being simultaneously intoxicating when it came to stroking his—er, vanity.

“Well, I wouldn’t count being pretty good friends in junior high as having ‘barely interacted’, personally, but uh... I guess in the interests of transparency, I have a confession to make.”

That didn’t sound good. “In the interests of transparency? You’re kind of freaking me out.”

“Okay so uh, after you left school and basically disappeared off the face of the earth as far as any of us knew?”

“Uh-huh?”

“I kind of... kept tabs on you. Did a little online sleuthing. Tracked down your Myspace. Livejournal. Uh... Tumblr.”

“T-Tumblr?” Jonah’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Did you say Tumblr? Tumblr?”

“Yeah, Tumblr. At first it was just to make sure you were okay, you know. I really did like you, Jonah. I wanted you to be happy and safe and for a while there I was worried you were gonna do something stupid like—”

“Don’t say it.” Jonah didn’t want to remember those days. Didn’t want to relive them, not with Sebastian right here beside him, Sebastian who he could have really *hurt*, and wouldn’t have even known he was hurting.

For the first time, Sebastian’s shameless open face seemed to close off a little. He looked down at his knees, playing with the frayed edge of a hole in

his jeans. “But the more I followed you around, the more I just started enjoying your perspective. It stopped being about knowing you were okay and more just about *knowing* you.”

“So you’re basically my online stalker, then?”

“Kind of? I mean, I didn’t dox you or send you anon hate or anything...”

“Oh my God. Wednesday when I got all those messages. You saw that, didn’t you?”

“Um, yeah.”

“So you kind of knew I was going to stand you up, didn’t you? And you knew why.”

“Yeah.”

“And then you come here playing dumb and get up in *my* face? What the hell, Sebastian!”

At least Sebastian had the good conscience to look chastened. He just kept staring at that hole in his jeans, like he could stitch it together again just by looking at it. The same way he thought he could stitch Jonah back together just by staring at *him*. “I’m sorry I didn’t come forward, Jonah. I just didn’t want to piss you off or weird you out and I felt really dumb for doing it at all, like jeeze talk about a puppy crush, right? And then I saw you were in class with me and I thought, well, I thought the stars had finally fucking aligned.” Now he was smiling, just grinning at his knees like a madman. “And before you say it, no I didn’t come to this college because of you. I applied *before* you, thank you very much. And I forced myself not to read the posts you made about your class schedule because—God, this is embarrassing—because I wanted for us to be in class together for real, if we were. Not because I orchestrated it or planned it or whatever. I just wanted it to be real.”

Jonah gawped at him. Put his head in his hands. “I feel like the whole world just flipped upside down. Are we in fucking Wonderland right now? All this time I thought *I* was the loser with the years-long crush on the unobtainable guy from my past and—”

“I should have told you right away.” Sebastian frowned, the tilt of his

eyebrows more annoyed than sad. “It was a violation of your privacy to not tell you I was reading what you wrote about me, and I’m sorry. I really am sorry. You have a right to be mad.” He paused, agitated, and ran his hands through his hair, mussing it up even more than usual. Jonah didn’t reach out to fix it, even though he felt himself wanting to. Because here was Sebastian: Sebastian the guy, the real person, not the ideal. And he’d fucked up pretty big with this, it was true, and Jonah should be angry at him, but all he was was falling for him more than ever. “I’m sorry, but also I’m not sorry, because dammit, I *liked* it. I liked knowing you liked me too. I could never get a read on you, Jonah. Back in school, I never knew if I was annoying you or if you liked me too or if you just hated my guts, and then here in college, with you refusing my invitations every week, I didn’t know either.”

“I never hated you,” Jonah admitted. “Sure I distrusted your motives, and sometimes I resented you for being so fucking cool all the time, and sometimes I was angry at you for not doing more for me, like it was your fault bullies picked me as their fucking target. Sometimes I was jealous of you. But I never hated you. I liked you. I... I still like you, Sebastian. I don’t know you, but I like you. I want to know you more.”

Sebastian’s eyes lit up, and he was suddenly out of his seat, on his knees at Jonah’s feet, both of Jonah’s hands clasped within his own.

*Please don’t propose*, Jonah thought, absurdly. He could overlook the online stalking for years. Sort of. Mostly.... Not like he was much better.

What he *couldn’t* overlook was the kind of delusion required for Sebastian to throw a ring at him.

But Sebastian didn’t. He just dropped his head onto Jonah’s knee with a loud, gusting sigh and went boneless with relief. “Damn. You have no idea how good it feels to tell you all this after all this time.” He chuckled. Pressed a kiss to Jonah’s lower thigh, chaste and thankful, and for the first time in his life, Jonah didn’t feel like a scared little boy anymore—even a scared little boy pretending at being an above-it-all Internet celebrity—he felt like a *king*. And wasn’t that an interesting turn of events. “I can’t even remember how many confessions I’ve written to you over the years and then deleted them. E-mails. Comments. Asks.”

Now it was Jonah's turn to laugh, the sound hoarse and rough, like he'd been crying. "Uh, yeah, I think I do know how it feels. Exactly how it—wait. Did you ever? Contact me at all?"

Sebastian sheepishly turned his eyes up, still with his cheek resting against Jonah's leg. It felt... surprisingly good there. Right, somehow. Almost religious, if such a thing were possible between two guys on the verge of—whatever they were on the verge of.

Cautious, wide-eyed, totally, *adorably* nervous, Sebastian nodded.

\*\*\*\*

*oh you know, just me 'n thestarsjustblinkforus hanging out,  
admitting our deepest darkest secrets nbd*

*#yes i'm wearing a t-shirt #and sweatpants #yolo #personal #by  
the way he was my junior high crush the whole time*

All those sweet, considerate messages. Supportive and kind and funny and going months back. They'd never been more than acquaintances for any of that time; Jonah hadn't even been following Sebastian's account back. All this time, Sebastian had been there, and Jonah had written him off as just another follower, just another yes-man looking for promo and status and reblogs.

Not anymore.

"Well, c'mon," he said, looking up from his phone and giving a little circular wave. Sebastian was still sitting on the floor, head between his knees in what looked to be the recovery position. It seemed his series of confessions had finally taken their toll on him, because seriously? Dude looked like he'd just run a marathon. Well, he had responsibilities now, so he was going to have to pull his shit together. "My public demands photo evidence."

Sebastian looked up and pointed to himself. "Me? Really?"

"Yes, you. Yes, really. I already typed up the post, see?" Jonah held out his phone in illustration. "Tagged and everything. All I need is a shot of us."

"You don't have to do this," Sebastian said, even as he clambered to his feet and sat down next to Jonah on the bed. So close. Sebastian's weight on the



mattress sent Jonah listing sideways against him, their shoulders and thighs thumping together.

Neither one of them seemed all that interested in moving apart again, though.

“Yes I do.” Jonah held up the camera at arm’s length above them and pursed his lips coquettishly, unabashedly examining the image he saw reflected in the phone’s screen. “You were one of the most important people in my life growing up, and for the last however long I’ve been treating you like an absolute *nobody*. Well, that stops tonight. If we’re going to try this, if we’re going to do this thing, then I’m going public about you. Now, look sexy.”

Just as Jonah snapped the picture, Sebastian grabbed his cheek, pulled him in, and kissed him right on the lips.

Jonah’s brain nearly shorted out.

He’d spent so many cynical, lonely years telling himself that kissing wasn’t like movies or photographs, that it wasn’t glossy and beautiful and life-changing, while simultaneously still falling into the fantasy that it was all those things and more. The reality was so much more profound, so much more complex. Both more mundane and awkward—and more sweet and heart-wrenching—than he’d ever imagined.

And all Sebastian had done was smooshed their lips together for the briefest moment. Jonah couldn’t help but wonder what kind of magic might happen between them if they did something more.

“How’s that for sexy?” Sebastian asked with a grin, his hand sliding from Jonah’s cheek to his shoulder and resting there. Jonah couldn’t stop thinking about the weight of Sebastian’s palm, the heat of Sebastian’s skin, like every single nerve and every ounce of awareness in his body had dedicated itself to experiencing that single touch.

“Oh, uh,” he stammered, then opened the photo to see. *Yikes*. He grimaced. “Terrible!”

But he was laughing as he showed Sebastian, and he knew that even if it didn’t fit the tone of his blog, even if he looked awkward and was wearing a

ratty old T-shirt, it was definitely going to stay. The camera had captured them at the exact “moment of impact”, as it were—Jonah’s startled face, Sebastian’s splayed palm, their lips pressed together, and both of them with their eyes wide open, that split second before either of them seemed to realize the kiss was actually happening.

“Is it really that bad?” Sebastian asked, looking a little ashamed now with spots of red on his scruffy cheeks. “Do you want to take another one?”

“No way!” Jonah hit post before he could change his mind, or before Sebastian could change his mind for him. “I love it.”

“I love *you*.” Sebastian clapped a hand over his mouth.

Jonah’s heart leapt like it’d been shocked. “What?”

Sebastian slowly lowered his hands, flinching like he expected to get hit. “I love you,” he repeated, and the nervous, apologetic expression washed away, replaced by something bold and reckless and life-affirming. “Jonah Gilchrist, I love you. I know to you I’m just a memory, but to me, you—I grew up with you, man. I kinda-sorta had to stalk you on the Internet to get there but... you were always there with me. Always. So I’m sorry if it’s sudden, or too soon, but I love you.” He cleared his throat. Stared down at his hands, which were now in his lap. When he spoke again, his voice was soft, but not ashamed. “I’ve loved you for a long time. I understand why you can’t say it back but—”

No, Jonah couldn’t say it back, not just yet, not to the man who sat in front of him as opposed to the fond memory, but what he *could* do was kiss the confession right out of Sebastian’s mouth.

So he did. A slow, sweet kiss, the exact opposite of the one in the photograph. He savoured Sebastian’s mouth—the way Sebastian’s lips softened under his own, the way the hair on Sebastian’s upper lip scratched lightly—and let those sensations lift him to that same hyper-reality he’d felt with Sebastian’s hand on his shoulder. Oh, but this was so much better. Exhilarating, not peaceful at all, not calm or comforting or steady, just hot and needy and—ouch!—a little painful when Sebastian nipped at Jonah’s lower lip. And yet the pain didn’t make Jonah shy back, it made him arch and growl

a little and thrust his hands into Sebastian's soft bedhead hair to pull him close.

He even liked Sebastian's tongue in his mouth. It certainly wasn't neat or elegant, but maybe he didn't need those things. Maybe he didn't need to be in control of this. It didn't need to look good, it just needed to feel good, and it *did*. He sank back on the bed, tugging Sebastian down with him. Didn't feel frightened or threatened by the weight of Sebastian on top of him... and didn't let Sebastian shift to relieve the pressure.

Which seemed to be just fine for Sebastian, who flipped like a switch from considerate make-out partner to incongruous sex-kitten. Or wildcat, maybe, was the better word for it. His elbows pinned Jonah's shoulders to the bed and there were those biting lips again, and now something new and irresistible as Sebastian's hips dipped down and Jonah felt the thick length of Sebastian's cock straining against the denim of his jeans.

A moan escaped Jonah's lips, high and urgent, not nearly as masculine as the deep sounds resonating from Sebastian, but the borderline-girly sound of it didn't make Sebastian laugh or pull back; he just thrust his tongue deeper and swept Jonah's mouth with it more hungrily.

Good God it felt amazing to arch his back and try to rise but find himself pinned by Sebastian's solid weight. He felt... not possessed or conquered, but precious, like something worth holding onto as tight as possible.

*Don't let up, don't let me go.*

Sebastian's arms framed Jonah's head on the pillow, his hands cupping Jonah's jaw. One thumb swept Jonah's swollen, tender lip, and Jonah let himself moan his girly moan again.

This time, Sebastian did pull away a little, but not to complain about the noise. His bright eyes stared down into Jonah's. "I don't want to do anything you're not ready for," he said, panting.

"I'm ready"—Jonah tried to reply, and realized he was panting, himself.—"for you to take off your shirt." He went boneless on the bed, feeling downright spoiled as he lounged there, Sebastian straddling his legs. The view

when Sebastian peeled off his worn grey T-shirt—revealing that broad pale chest with its thatch of dark blond hair and hard nipples—made him feel like the luckiest awkward virgin in the history of awkward virgins. And when Sebastian lifted his arms over his head? Jonah hadn't realized armpits could be so sexually appealing, but he most certainly knew now.

Sebastian cocked his head and grinned. "So I meet your exacting standards? I know I'm no Lucas Mascarini." He gave his own belly a simultaneously self-critical and confident slap.

"Exceed them, actually," Jonah told him, not lying at all. Sebastian was the very *definition* of sexy, in a way that specifically couldn't be defined. All Jonah knew was, he wanted him. Wanted him now, wanted him wholeheartedly, wanted him exactly as he was. "Can I... can I touch you?"

Sebastian nodded, that blush appearing again, and his arms fell obediently to his sides. Was he... posing? His posture was so strangely receptive, so expectant, like he existed solely for Jonah's pleasure, like he would wait a lifetime for Jonah's touch.

Well, maybe he already had.

If that was the case, then Jonah wasn't going to torture him any longer. He sat up. Shimmied back in the bed until he had a good view of Sebastian's body. The rise and fall of his chest. The soft V of his torso. The jut of his hipbones. Jonah reached out with both hands, greedy for tactile sensation. He touched Sebastian's arms first, feeling the bulge of muscle that shifted hidden under Sebastian's unassuming soft skin, then swept his palms inward. Traced collarbone, followed the subtle swell of pecs to the rough hair nestled at their centre. Scraping his fingernails through it made Jonah shudder with desire and Sebastian flopped his head back with a throaty groan.

Jonah wanted to hear more of that. He scratched his way down the narrow trail of hair that led from Sebastian's chest past his navel and down to the waistline of his boxers. It made him feel like a model in some pseudo-pornographic edgy editorial spread, especially when he lounged back and licked his lips, asking, "Can I see this, too?" The coyness in his own voice surprised him. Maybe he was a little bit of a sex-kitten himself.

“Hell yeah.” This time Sebastian didn’t wait; his hands fumbled to his fly and threw it open. He shamelessly yanked down both jeans and boxers and there it was, his big uncut dick bobbing between his legs, meaty foreskin welled up with a drip of pre-cum.

Jonah’s mouth was suddenly full of saliva. He bit his lip and swallowed and forced himself to tear his gaze away from Sebastian’s dick and look at his face. Sebastian smiled back at him, and the earnest look in his eyes—*This is for me. It’s all for me.*

He thought he’d be afraid, or feel awkward or stupid or misshapen, but all he felt was touched and privileged and fucking turned on. And he wanted to get Sebastian off.

“Can I make a suggestion?” Sebastian asked, voice playful, and thank God for that not-judgmental thing he had going because otherwise that half a laugh in his voice might have made Jonah want to melt into the floor.

“Uh. Sure.” Jonah wet his lips. How had his mouth gone from being overflowing with spit to dryer than the Sahara all of a sudden?

“Maybe you could get your junk out too?” The sweet hopefulness in Sebastian’s voice soothed any potential insult inherent in the reminder. Somehow, Jonah felt powerful instead of inept. Maybe because Sebastian wanted him. Wanted him bad. Wanted something only Jonah could give... something Jonah could very well refuse.

Not that he would.

“Go ahead,” he said with a smirk and leaned back on his elbows. Oh yeah, he was a sex-kitten, all right. And say what you want about sweatpants, but they made his boner look *good*.

“Now I *definitely* love you,” Sebastian growled, lunging forward, and suddenly his thumbs were hooked in the waistband of Jonah’s sweats and then the sweats were gone, yanked down, and Jonah’s cock was sliding along Sebastian’s and both of them were encircled by the tight heat and rough friction of Sebastian’s fist and Sebastian was bullying him down onto the bed again, pinning him and kissing him hard as their trapped cocks moved

together, just two desperate horny guys fucking into Sebastian's hand as Sebastian's tongue fucked just as desperately into Jonah's mouth.

Jonah had never come so hard and fast in his life, but then, he'd never come like this, bucking into such a strong hand, kissing such a sweet and giving and earnest man, sharing pure pleasure without an ounce of shame.

Sebastian laughed when he came, that kind of pained laugh people got when you tickled them too hard, but there was no questioning that he was fucking happy.

*So happy he could burst*, Jonah thought, and then he laughed, too.

\*\*\*\*

*i have gained new appreciation for sweatpants*

*#personal*

Jonah glowered at the compose screen, puffed his floppy hair out of his eyes, and closed his phone's Tumblr app without publishing his post. There were some things that his followers just really didn't need an update on, now that he was thinking about it.

Sighing with strange relief, he set his phone aside and turned back to where Sebastian lay sprawled out on his bed, shirtless still and absently toying with the hair below his bellybutton. Just looking at him now made Jonah want to simultaneously squeal with joy, find his paper bag again, and jump the guy's bones.

Which might be awkward to do while breathing into a paper bag, now that he thought of it.

"Well?" Sebastian asked, holding out an arm so that Jonah could lie down snuggled beside him. "Am I going to have five hundred angry anons howling for my blood?"

Jonah hid the lower half of his face in Sebastian's armpit and peeked out at him sheepishly. "Um, maybe? I mean, I didn't... I didn't post anything new just now, if that's what you're asking, but you might want to disable your ask box just in case."

“I have a better idea,” Sebastian said, wrapping his arm tight around Jonah’s shoulders and giving him a little jostle. “How about instead of sitting around here waiting for your heartbroken followers to attack me en masse in a fit of jealousy, we go out on that date I had planned?”

Jonah blinked. Looked from his own dishevelled sweatpants to Sebastian’s shirtless chest and back again. “What, now?” He hadn’t been expecting Sebastian to fuck and run, or anything, but spending the evening together in bed maybe watching a couple movies before Sebastian went back to his room seemed like a more sensible option for them at this point.

“Yeah, now.” Sebastian sat Jonah up and practically pushed him out of the bed, then went rooting through Jonah’s tousled blankets in search of his discarded shirt. He threw it on and hopped out of bed himself, nudging Jonah toward his closet. “Believe it or not, as fantastic as that hand job turned out to be, I really was looking forward to seeing you in those Gucci pants you posted.”

Jonah reached for them, still folded in a neat pile on top of his dresser with the rest of his abandoned date outfit. “Really? You wouldn’t prefer that I just wore jeans and a T-shirt or something?” He hugged them to his chest, biting his lip. “You know, like a normal guy?”

Sebastian rolled his eyes and closed the space between them, cupping Jonah’s cheek and pressing a soft, undemanding kiss on his lips. “I don’t want a normal guy, Jonah Gilchrist. I want *you*, Lanvin bowties and all.”

“You won’t feel like...” Jonah lowered his gaze, twisting his lips in consternation. Sebastian’s warm, gentle hand never left his cheek. “A schlub?”

The sound of Sebastian’s laughter surprised him, nearly humiliated him, until he remembered this was Sebastian, here, not someone who’d so callously minimize Jonah’s insecurities and neuroses. “Of course I will. You’re fucking gorgeous and fashionable and yes, more than a little bit vain. How could I not feel like a schlub?”

How could he say that and still sound so happy? So carefree? Jonah’s face burned with shame.



“But you know what? I’m a *damn lucky* schlub, and that’s good enough for me.”

*I think it’s me who’s the lucky one.* Jonah looked up again with a tentative smile, and saw that Sebastian was grinning right back. “You promise?” he asked, and God, it made him sound like an insecure fucking fourteen year old again, but then, if there was anyone in this world who could accept that part of him, it was Sebastian.

And Sebastian was just as good and just as patient and just as accepting as Jonah had built him up to be, because he didn’t scoff at Jonah’s juvenile self-doubt, he just accepted it for what it was with a kind look and a reassuring kiss on the forehead. “Promise. Now get dressed. I can’t wait to see you trying to sell bowling shoe chic to the fashion blogger set.”

“Two words,” Jonah quipped as he stepped out of his sweatpants and into the blue Gucci trousers. “Hashtag Rockabilly. Don’t think I can’t make it work.”

“Oh, there is no room for doubt in my mind when it comes to you. If you can pull off a schlub for a boyfriend, you can do anything.”

*Boyfriend.* There came those butterflies again. “Knit me something, then,” Jonah teased, not missing a beat as he traded T-shirts and ducked into his blazer, “And then we’ll see just how much I can ‘pull off’.”

Sebastian opened the door and stepped aside to let Jonah through, smiling mischievously. “Oh, I plan on it. Can you say ‘toque with a pom-pom’?”

*Yikes*, but still totally doable. Jonah smiled right back. “I don’t know, can you say ‘this winter’s must-have accessory among fourteen- to seventeen-year-old girls’?” With that, he stepped out into the hallway, out into the wide world of strangers that suddenly seemed just slightly less scary with Sebastian at his side. He took his boyfriend’s hand.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Heidi Belleau was born and raised in small town New Brunswick, Canada. She now lives in the rugged oil-patch frontier of Northern BC with her husband, an Irish ex-pat whose long work hours in the trades leave her plenty of quiet time to write. Her writing reflects everything she loves: diverse casts of characters, a sense of history and place, equal parts witty and filthy dialogue, the occasional mythological twist, and most of all, love—in all its weird and wonderful forms. When not writing, you might catch her trying to explain British television to her daughter or sipping a drink at her favourite coffee shop.*

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# **BREATHING SNOW**

By **Dev Bentham**

## **Photo Description**

Two men stand whisper-close, one second from a kiss.

## **Story Letter**

We've hated each other for three years. Since we were supposed to be rivals and everyone expected us to fight, we just did it. But then we met under completely unexpected circumstances and realized that neither of us is the prick we thought the other one was. Eventually, we became friends and now I cannot imagine a life without him. Just a few people know that we only fight for publicity now and actually like each other very much.

But during our last "fight" something went awfully wrong. He grabbed me in front of the cameras and kissed me! And I liked it! Now, everyone asks me if we are gay or if that was some kind of prank. But I really don't know! I need to talk to him but he doesn't react to my phone calls. The only thing I know is that I don't want to lose him.

*Dear Author,*

*It's up to you if these two are movie stars, athletes or some other kind of famous people. You can also decide if the story starts with their first meeting or the first kiss or at another point. I just want some hot and sizzling sex, but also tender moments, a little angst and a sweet HEA or HFN, but please no BDSM.*

*Thank you very much! :)*

*Sincerely,*

*Fina*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** athlete, enemies to lovers, sports, coming out, in the closet, oral sex

**Word count:** 15,169

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*Dedication*

For Fina

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# BREATHING SNOW

By Dev Bentham

JUNIOR NATIONALS

*Alaska*

Cory's heart pounded. His breath grew uneven. Two more turns. Ignoring the ache in his thighs, he punched it, focusing on the swishing of his skis and the perfect plant of each pole. Push, glide, push. This was it, what he'd been working for all year, through the sweaty summer runs and winter skis, through every hour of every day he'd worked to save for this trip. Not to mention the money other people had raised to help him. He thought about his coach earnestly pressing a hundred bucks in his hand and his mom taking on extra hours so she could buy his plane ticket. There were other events, but the sprint was what he was best at, going all out, no reserves for three and a half minutes, then doing it again and again until here he was at the finals and he wasn't going to let everyone down. Cory sucked in a deep breath and pushed harder. The number two on Mackinac Mike's back seemed closer. Cory glanced up, gauged the curve—sharp and steep. During the practice run several skiers had ended up in the snowbank on this turn. Mike Sanders from Mackinac Island, who'd earned his number two by going damned fast in the qualifier, slowed slightly and Cory grabbed that millisecond advantage and pushed past him, flying around the curve, pumping up the hill. Behind him he could hear the thwack as Mackinac's skis slapped the snow in relentless pursuit. Cory leaned into the cold, empty space in front of him. From the crowded sidelines, cowbells rang, someone called his name. His lungs burned, his shoulders ached and his thighs screamed, but he kept his gaze focused on the red line painted in the snow. With one last, hard shove he threw himself across it.

He was still gulping air when Mackinac pounded him on the back in that good old boy way that straight guys seemed to like. "Good race."

"Thanks." Cory smiled. He'd envisioned this moment for a lifetime, had known that if he could compete at Nationals, he'd win. Now he'd be taking home the gold in the *J1* Junior Men's Sprint.



Mackinac shook his head. “You know, this shit was much easier when you used to stay home.”

Cory felt his smile falter. Two thousand dollars. That’s what had stood between him and Nationals the year before. Mackinac, who Cory’d beaten by almost five seconds in regionals that year, had gone on to win. Cory straightened his shoulders. “Not going to happen again, so you better get used to seeing me around.”

“Glad to hear it. Gives me a chance to pummel your ass next time.”

They were engulfed by a crowd of coaches and the rest of the Midwest team.

When the hubbub subsided, Mackinac nodded toward the back trails. “How about a cool down. Unless you want your legs to cramp up while you’re lapping up everyone’s praise.”

“You’re on.” This time Cory let Mackinac lead the way. After a couple of easy loops, they were back at the finish line. They left their skis by the lodge and walked toward their teammates.

Cory didn’t know anyone at the race outside of the Midwestern skiers whom he’d competed against in regionals. He noticed a cluster of older guys standing by the Northeast region’s tent waiting for the *Under 23* events. His attention was captured by one in particular, a tall, thin redhead who leaned on his poles with a grace that took Cory’s breath away.

Mackinac nodded in their direction. “There’s Teag, Robert McTeague. He almost medaled at the World Cup this year.”

“The redhead?” Cory watched a blonde girl say something to the guy, who threw back his head and laughed.

“Yeah, with the blue bandanna. He pulls it up over his mouth when he skis. Even when it isn’t very cold. Sort of like a trademark, I guess. Like he thinks he’s Billy the Kid or something.” Mackinac stared at Teag for a moment, then continued, “Word is he’s rich as all get out. His father’s CEO of some sports franchise. Teag spends his summers skiing in Chile, went to a prep school that’s all about training pre-Olympic skiers and now he’s skiing for some

fancy college out east, when he's not jetting all over Europe for the cup. Some guys get all the luck."

Cory looked away in disgust. Who wouldn't win medals with help like that? Instead of training in Chile last summer, Cory had sweated through his days washing dishes in a steamy kitchen, squeezing workouts in before and after his shifts. Even after all that, Cory's high school had to hold a fucking bake sale to help get him to Soldier Hollow, where he was sleeping on a lumpy couch at the house of a guy who was a friend of a friend of his coach. While McTeague was getting elite training, Cory had been lucky to get any coaching at all. If it weren't for the nearby Nordic center where an ex-Olympian ran the ski shop, he would've been shit out of luck. As it was, he had to work at the ski shop while he sandwiched in training sessions in-between customers. Even now, Cory had no idea where he'd find the money for the Junior World Cup tour if he made the team. He had no use for a guy born with a golden ski.

"Fuck him. Let's get something to eat." Cory nodded toward the local Rotary Club's table of free snacks.

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Teag watched Robert "Bob" McTeague Senior swirl Rémy Martin in his glass. Teag hated it when Bob came to the race and insisted on taking him out after the awards banquet, away from his teammates and friends and having what Bob called "serious father-son time". His mother thought it was a sweet bonding exercise. In reality, the conversation always devolved into a long discussion of everything Teag had done wrong in the race, or if he won, everything else that was wrong with him and all the reasons he should give up the sport entirely. Even thinking about these little moments made Teag's stomach churn.

This time he'd won in his best event, men's freestyle sprints, come in second in the long race, and placed in the top ten in his least favorite, the mass start classic. As he waited for his father to speak, Teag wondered which direction it would go this time, skiing or life.

"Have you considered Patterson's offer?" Ah, it was to be life then.

"Yes." Teag took a sip of beer to remind himself he was an adult now. He

had a right to make his own choices. And a desk job wasn't something he wanted, ever. "And it's a generous one. But—"

Bob's eyes narrowed. "I cashed in a lot of favors to get you an offer at that firm."

"I realize that. Thank you." Teag took a deep breath. "But I want to concentrate on my skiing."

"Don't be ridiculous." Bob's glass hit the table hard, splashing amber liquid over his fingers. "You wanted to ski and I supported you. I've poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into this extracurricular activity of yours."

It wasn't worth engaging in the argument. They'd had it too many times before. Teag would offer to pay Bob back and Bob would counter that that wasn't the point and Teag would ask what the point was and... Teag clenched his jaw to keep his mouth shut.

His father continued, "In a few months you'll be a college graduate, for God's sake. Quit now, before you turn twenty-three and age out of the junior circuit. No one will question why you don't go out for the senior team. It's time to buckle down, get a job and live up to your responsibilities as a man. Besides, you know how your mother worries about your health."

Teag unclenched his teeth and took another sip before answering. "I have a good shot at making the Olympic Team."

"So what." Bob waved his hand dismissively. "You're not going to win. The Scandinavians and Italians take all the medals. Even if you did, by some miracle, earn a bronze, it's not like anyone would know. It's a marginal sport. The only thing being an Olympic Nordic skier is going to get you is a job teaching people to ski. And what kind of money can you make doing that?"

"I've made up my mind." Teag drained his beer. "Now if you'll excuse me, I had a long day and I'm tired."

"Oh don't get your panties in a bunch." Bob signaled to the waitress for another round. "What does Lora say about all this?"

Lora, his best friend. And the pretend girlfriend who helped Teag keep up his facade. So much for manning up. Teag shrugged. "She's a damned good skier and hopes to make the team herself."

“I guess that explains it.” Bob accepted his drink from the waitress. His expression softened as he considered Teag. “I suppose a few more years won’t hurt. But don’t leave it too long or you’ll end up an underemployed has-been.”

It was typical of these little chats that Bob threw the worst zingers as Teag started to relax. Maybe someday he’d learn, but it hadn’t happened yet.

Bob brightened and changed the subject. “How about that J1 sprinter, Cory Miller. Now that kid’s fast. Only seventeen and he skied a perfect race. We’ll be hearing about him for the next few years, you can count on that. We’re going to offer him a few sponsorship dollars. Always better to sign them young, builds athlete loyalty.”

“It’s your money.” Why the fuck wasn’t he ever worried about Teag’s loyalty? What was so special about some kid from Wisconsin? Teag had never once worn his father’s company’s name on his sleeve. *Can’t have the stockholders accusing us of nepotism*, as Bob had patiently explained, *and where did Teag think he got the money for all those fancy training camps anyway?*

It didn’t really matter. Teag had plenty of equipment sponsors providing him with everything he needed to ski, and God knew he could afford the travel costs. Still, he hated hearing his dad crow about his prodigies, and hated the poor suckers who fell for it.

Teag drained his second beer and said good night. He didn’t want to endure another minute in his father’s presence. He had a date with Lora. After he finished complaining to her about Bob, they could spend the evening mooning about boys. Together.

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### THREE YEARS LATER

#### *West Yellowstone Super Tour*

“Trying your luck with the big boys this year?”

Cory turned to see Teag leaning against the doorway of the waxing hut. Teag was wearing a black racing suit that showed off the bulge of his thigh and shoulder muscles. Auburn stubble outlined the sneer of his lips. If he wasn't such an asshole...

“Right. This from the guy who competed in the Juniors until he aged out.” Why was McTeague getting in his face? It was bad enough that Cory had to pimp for his old man's company.

“Touché.” Teag's eyes wrinkled in amusement.

Mackinac called out from the corner where he was scraping his skis, “Don't let him get you, Cory, he's just jealous. We can't all be famous models.”

Cory shot back, “Enough with the model shit, okay?”

Teag looked disconcerted. After a moment he furrowed his brow and frowned at Cory. “You're a model?”

“The underwear ad for the sportswear catalog?” Mike sounded incredulous. “Don't tell me you didn't see it. One of the guys sent a scan of it to everyone on the team.”

Teag shook his head. “Sorry. Must have ended up in my spam filter.”

“It's no big deal. Some of us have to work.” Cory bit out the words but could feel the burn of embarrassment lighting up his cheeks. That shoot paid his way to tour with the junior ski team last winter, but that didn't mean he liked having pictures of himself in tight long underwear floating around.

He was going to kill Mackinac.

The smell of hot wax was thick. Cory focused on the skis as he used the iron to smooth melted wax along the bottoms. He wanted to get out and tour

the trail before tomorrow's race. What he didn't want was to look into Teag's gorgeous, but disdainful face.

"The lack of governmental support is criminal." Cory was startled by the anger in Teag's voice. "How are we ever going to medal when our athletes have to spend half their time begging for corporate dollars?"

Cory looked up. Teag's cheeks were flushed. With that skin he probably blushed easily. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy.

Teag spat. "Prostitution, that's what it is."

Or maybe he was. Cory ignored him and squinted down at his skis. When he eventually looked up again, Teag was gone.

\*\*\*\*

"Yoo-hoo, anybody home?" Lora poked her head around the door, her long blonde pigtails swinging. "A bunch of us are heading down for food, you want to come?"

Teag looked up from where he sat on the bed, laptop balanced on his knees and shook his head. "Not yet. You go on ahead."

"Whatcha doing?" She threw herself onto his roommate's bed. The bed frame squeaked as the mattress released a cedary puff.

Teag nodded at his laptop. "Blog."

"Oh man, I forgot again. Do you have to show me up in everything? How's your breathing?"

Teag shrugged. "Okay I guess. They've got me on something new."

Before he thought to stop her, she picked up the catalog he'd left open on the bedside table. "Underwear shopping? Hey, I know that guy. Someone sent this around in an email. Isn't that Cory Miller, the one who came in fourth at the Junior Scandinavian Cup last year? Word is he's a hell of a sprinter, might even give you a run for it."

"Uh huh." Teag pretended to concentrate on his computer screen. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her studying the picture of Cory bare-chested, his bottom half clothed in shiny black thermal tights. The

photographer had captured Cory's dark sexiness perfectly. His big brown eyes and the way he tilted his left shoulder toward the camera, the jut of his hip—Teag closed his eyes like that would make him stop seeing it.

"He's cute." She glanced at Teag. "You think he's gay?"

"How would I know?" He'd been aiming for nonchalant and overshoot into something closer to petulance.

"You want me to ask around, see if anyone's seen him with a girl?"

"No." Teag shook his head. "He's a self-absorbed prick who thinks he's better than me, full of all that self-made crap, like we aren't all dependent on luck and good coaching."

She looked back at the picture with a theatrical sigh. "Too bad. Nice shoulders."

"Thighs aren't bad either," Teag muttered, his eyes glued to his screen. He gave her a sideways look. "If you're interested in him, you know we can 'break up' anytime."

"Not my type." She threw the catalog down on the bedside table, scooted around until she lay facing him and put her legs up the wall. "I'm holding out for a European who'll want to make little gold medal babies with me."

Teag typed in a description of the light ski they'd done in the afternoon, how the poles had made the snow squeak in the cold and about the herd of deer they'd come across around a bend in the far loop. He uploaded a picture of Lora posing with an Italian sprinter they knew from the World Cup Tour. He turned the computer so Lora could see it. "Just link to this and you'll be fine. Take you two minutes tops. Do it now, if you like."

"Thanks." She smiled, sat up and reached for the laptop. "When you eventually decide to come out, I'm going to miss the perks of being your girlfriend."

Teag leaned back against the pillows and looked up at the knotty pine of the ceiling. Pretending they were dating was chicken-shit crazy. But talking with Lora was what kept him sane.

Lora's attention was too easily diverted, so Teag waited while she posted to her Web site. Since she'd soon be raising money for the World Cup Tour,



she couldn't afford to neglect her social media, no matter how much she hated it. Teag had been helping Lora through the more academic parts of their lives since they'd skied together in school. She, in turn, helped him maintain his lie.

She quit typing and set the laptop beside her. "Can we eat now? I'm starving."

He nodded but didn't move. "You think I'm a coward, don't you?"

"What?" She slid over to his bed. Teag scooted over and Lora lay down and wrapped her arms around him. "No, I think you're the best friend I've ever had. And I'm serious that I'll miss you when you finally do decide to brave the media storm and come out."

He squeezed her close. "You won't need to miss me. We'll always be friends."

They lay quietly for a few moments.

Teag whispered, "I don't want to be a gay athlete."

"You are a gay athlete."

"You know what I mean. I don't want my sexuality to become more important than how fast I am on skis."

"Which is pretty darned fast."

"You bet your ass it's fast, young lady."

"And you know what makes you keep going fast?" She patted his belly. "Food."

With a groan Teag sat up. When she was right, she was definitely right.

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## THE FOLLOWING SUMMER AND FALL

*Olympic Training Center, Park City, Utah*

The whirl of grasshoppers, buzzing bees, the clatter of dozens of rollers and pole tips on pavement and breath—his own loudest in his ears. In the brutal August sun Cory could smell his sweat mingled with the chemical scent of the suntan lotion he'd slathered on before starting the climb, a five-mile-long mountain road that looped up through this meadow and disappeared into the forest somewhere up ahead. They couldn't be more than halfway up and already he could feel the strain in his quads and shoulders.

They'd all started together, but by now the team was spread across the hillside in little clumps of moving men. Mackinac and a few of the other long distance guys were making the next curve. Behind him, Cory could hear the huffed breath and rhythmic clicking of the larger group. Cory and Teag were alone in their own bubble of movement. Cory kept pace a few feet behind Teag. It was too early to try to push ahead of him and besides, he had to admit it was pleasant to watch Teag's back muscles grip and release. No doubt about it, the guy had a great body. Cory let his gaze drift down to Teag's ass, watching the clench of his glutes beneath thin nylon shorts. Too bad he was an asshole. Cory's roller ski hit a rock and for a second he lost his rhythm. He forced himself to look away from Teag's ass and focus.

"Having trouble keeping up, kid?" There was only a hint of breathlessness in Teag's voice.

"Fuck you."

Teag laughed. Cory growled and pushed harder, determined to pass the smug prick.

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Teag relaxed into the familiar clang of weights, the hum and thump of the treadmill, the muffled grunts and indistinct conversations. Ever since his first semester at boarding school, the rubber and sweat smell of the gym had calmed him. Twelve years old, lonely for his mother and relieved to be away

from Bob, he'd found his home with the other exercise-addled boys. Two years later, when he'd fallen in love with skiing and talked Bob into letting him transfer to Stratton Mountain School, the weight room had still been his second home. Skiing, he loved the wild rush of competition—with other people, the elements, breath and himself—and the feeling of abandon as he plunged forward, sliding along the snow with a combination of awkwardness and grace that felt like magic. It was exhilarating and terrifying. But here, in the gym, he could soothe himself with steady repetitions and precise movements. He'd been to a shrink once, a bald man with an annoying habit of asking questions Teag didn't want to answer. When he'd asked Teag to imagine his safe place, the image of his high school gym had sprung to mind. Teag had walked out of the psychiatrist's office and hadn't gone back. Instead, whenever he was anxious, he found safety where he always had, in pushing himself to the limit.

This morning the gym was crowded. All the treadmills were in use as athletes warmed up, preparing for the coaches to arrive and start doling out workout plans. The August training camp brought out dozens of athletes hoping to move to the next level on the development pipeline. Teag had been at the top of that pipeline since he was twenty-three. And as long as he stayed at the top, the pressure from Bob to leave the sport and get his MBA stayed at a dull roar. Teag had no intention of going into business. Coaching, teaching, those were the occupations that drew him. Still, the longer Teag could stave off that argument, the easier it was on everyone.

He looked across the gym at Cory, Bob's latest golden boy. It was weird how much contempt his father had for professional athletes, considering how much he paid them to endorse his products. The whole enterprise felt morally bankrupt. Lora claimed Teag was jealous of Cory. That wasn't it. The problem was the kid was good. Too good. There were only four spots on that A team. After an injury and a retirement, two of those spots were open for the next season. Teag was confident this year he'd keep his place. But the one thing he could predict about the future was that at some point, his body would betray him and someone younger and stronger would slip in to take his place. Right now, his money was on Cory and that didn't make him like the kid, no matter how great he looked in running shorts.

Teag shook his head in self-disgust. He was only twenty-seven and had plenty of time left. He adjusted his gloves as he strode toward the bank of chin-up bars. Today he owned this gym. There were at least a dozen guys in here who'd ask him for his autograph when it became clear they wouldn't make the A team and that he would again. He leapt up and grabbed the bar, at the same moment hearing a clang as someone hit the bar beside him. He looked over. Cory hung straight armed, staring at Teag. Teag took in the glint of challenge in his gaze. If the fucker wanted a piece of Teag—good luck.

Teag pulled his chin over the bar and lowered himself back down. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cory do the same. Teag continued. Cory stayed with him, keeping perfect time. Two, three, four. At ten Teag glanced over to see if Cory was slowing down. At fifteen he looked again. By twenty a small crowd had gathered. Teag could hear the bet-making. It sounded like even odds. He blinked sweat from his eyes. His arms were burning. Cory showed no signs of slowing down. Teag gritted his teeth and kept going. Someone was counting aloud, which was good because Teag had lost track. His entire focus was on the curl up and the release down. His fingers started cramping. His shoulders ached. He flexed his toes, hardening his entire body as if that would help. He was going to lose. The thought made him crazy and he pulled harder, not bothering to look over because he could feel Cory rising and falling beside him like a piston, could hear it in the rhythm of the counting down below.

“What the fuck is going on?”

At the angry sound of the head coach's voice, the counting stopped. The crowd parted for him, like the red sea around Moses. At the sound of his name, Teag let himself hang, then dropped to the ground, his feet hitting with a thump that seemed to echo as Cory thudded down beside him.

Teag rubbed his arms as the coach glared at them.

“If you think this little stunt is going to get you out of a complete workout today, you are both sadly mistaken.” He thrust a workout plan at Teag and another at Cory. He turned to the rest of the team and began passing out the sheets. “We've gone to a great deal of time and expense to develop these individual plans. I will not have you changing them without permission. Is that understood?”

As the others mumbled their acquiescence and moved away, Teag caught Cory's eye. Cory gave a slight shrug, a laugh playing at the edges of his mouth. Teag couldn't help but smile back.

Coach cleared his throat. When he had their attention he said, "Gentlemen, I'll personally supervise your training today. As long as you're in the mood for extra work, why don't you start with two sets of a hundred sit-ups."

Everyone else was done by noon. Coach chewed his sandwich and barked orders at Teag and Cory. At one, Cory puked into a waste basket. Teag followed suit half an hour later. By the time Coach released them, Teag was slippery with sweat and every muscle ached. Cory collapsed onto a mat.

Teag looked down at him. "Can we declare it a tie?"

Cory frowned. "I guess."

With a shrug, Teag shuffled out of the gym and headed for the dining hall to see if there was anything left from lunch.

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They said it was just a test, that the final decision would be made based on his record from last season, but Cory wasn't leaving anything to chance. All he wanted was to compete with the best and if he was going to be able to train full time, he had to make the A team, which meant he had to be stronger, fitter and faster. There were four men's slots and one of them had to be his.

Standing on the wide testing treadmill, he balanced on roller skis while a trainer strapped on an oxygen mask, connecting him to a computer that would record his VO2 max, a measure of lung capacity that required taking the athlete to and beyond his ability, the ultimate endurance test accomplished in under ten excruciating minutes. The technicians fussed with the straps holding him in and did last minute checks of their equipment. Cory bounced on his roller skis impatiently. The mask had a minty plastic smell. He hated waiting.

The people crowding around him moved off the treadmill. The guy at the computer screen gave him a nod and flipped a switch. Cory started to skate as the belt moved beneath him. He concentrated on his breath. Slow and even. With a loud clunk followed by the whir of cables, the angle changed and he

was skiing uphill. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the green line of his oxygen consumption start to climb the graph on the computer screen. His focus shifted abruptly back to his legs as the machine moved again and the slope got steeper. He pumped his arms and legs, finding that grace he loved, the flex and push of muscles orchestrated by breath, his whole body engaged, alive.

The machine whirled again and Cory leaned in to the artificial hill. His breath echoed in the mask, amplified so that it almost drowned out the pounding in his ears. He imagined snow, the rustle of wind in the trees. This was a race, too. Not for time, but for breath. He envisioned the alveoli in his lungs opening wider, taking in more oxygen to feed hungry muscles. His legs and shoulders started to burn. He pushed harder, climbing the endless treadmill hill. His attention narrowed to glide, push, glide, push. Blackness at the edges of his vision. The body could only go so far, after that the mind took over. Strength of character was more important than muscle strength. He felt himself slowing and leaning into the effort. Cory's vision had compressed to a single spot of shiny medal ahead of him. He couldn't feel his hands anymore but it didn't matter. He'd trained them to hold on to the poles, trained his arms to swing forward, plant and push, his legs to lunge and thrust. Keep moving. That was all that mattered. Plant, push, lunge, thrust—

"Jesus." He heard it from somewhere far away and then the belt around his waist jerked hard and then nothing.

When he came to, the treadmill was level again and the mask was off. Someone unfastened the safety belt and someone else took off his roller skis. Cory sat up, confused and embarrassed.

"You passed out." One of the coaches smiled down at him. "It was an impressive effort."

Cory looked over toward the computer screen. "How'd I do?"

"Good." Another smile from the guy at the controls. "There's a reason they call you guys the fittest athletes around."

Cory didn't feel fit. He felt wasted to his bones.

The coach reached a hand out to help him up. "We'll get a blood sample, then you can take a break. After lunch we'll hit the weight room."

Cory winced as a tech poked his finger.

Mackinac stood a few feet away, preparing for his own VO2 max test. He smiled. “You’re a tough act to follow, Miller.”

Cory stepped off the treadmill with a smile. “The key word being follow. Face it, that’s all you’re ever going to do.”

“Why do you think I became a distance man? You were killing me in the sprints.” Mackinac nodded toward the treadmill. “Is that as bad as it looks?”

“Worse.” Cory patted Mackinac’s shoulder. “Have fun.”

Mackinac rolled his eyes.

Life was slowly coming back to his limbs as Cory walked toward the front door. He still felt exhausted, but at least feeling was coming back.

Cory squinted as he stepped into the sunlight and inhaled a deep lungful of pine-scented air. He sent a silent prayer to anyone who was listening. Maybe he was only twenty-one, but he’d been in the USSA development pipeline since eighth grade. As a member of the Junior US Ski Team, he’d had some of his costs taken care of, but had still had to fund his own travel—and flights to Italy and Norway weren’t cheap. Modeling, sponsorship, fundraising and giving ski lessons back home had helped, but they took energy and time. Now, with only one season before the Olympic team was chosen, he needed to focus. No matter what, he’d still need to raise some money. But it would be much less if he made the A team. He really needed to make it.

Unlike that gorgeous rich prick, Robert “Teag” McTeague, who’d anchored A team for the past few years even though he didn’t need the support. It wasn’t fair that Teag, who could have flown first class to every event, had his ticket paid for, while Cory’d had to scramble for every dollar, fitting workouts around work. Cory’s time had been seconds behind Teag’s all last season. If Cory could focus only on skiing, he was sure he could win. He just needed half a chance.

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Teag sat alone on a picnic table overlooking the obstacle course. During his morning run, the chill air had been a reminder that winter was just around



the corner. Now the sun felt hot enough to make him strip off his shirt. The air smelled of pine and dust. Teag unfolded the letter from Tom, indulging in a rare bout of self-pity as he skimmed over the passages about Tom's children, his lovely wife. It was crazy to feel sad. His affair with Tom, if you could call the secret groping of adolescent boys an affair, had been over before they graduated high school.

At the distinctive sound of sticks crackling under boots, Teag folded the letter and set it on the table. He looked up. It was only Lora, trudging up the hill, a sheet of paper fluttering in her hand.

When she got closer, she waved. "Thought I'd find you up here."

Teag shrugged. "I felt like being alone."

"Saw you dart out after mail call." Lora stopped a few feet from the picnic table. "Who'd you hear from, you dad or Tom?"

"Tom." He looked away from the compassion in her eyes.

"Asshole." The table jostled as she hoisted herself up beside him. "He never treated you right, you do know that, don't you?"

Teag gestured to the paper in her hand. "Is that the team roster?"

She passed it to him. "Posted a few minutes ago. The press conference is this afternoon. Your underwear model made the A team. So did that long-distance guy, Mackinac Mike Sanders."

Teag read through the list, four men, four women, four bedrooms reserved at each event. Cory Miller was infuriatingly gorgeous and it would take a lot of maneuvering on Teag's part to make sure they never shared a room.

"You never know, he might be gay." Lora leaned her head against Teag's shoulder. "A couple of the women have tried, but he always says he wants to concentrate on racing."

"And that's probably exactly what he's doing." Teag folded the team roster and ran his fingers along the crease. "You don't get that fast by fucking around."

"You're that fast."

Teag snorted. "And you don't see me having sex with anyone, do you?"

Lora sat up and inhaled deeply. “I love the way it smells up here, don’t you? I love the smell of pine. Do they make a pine-scented aftershave? I swear if they did, I’d be a goner.”

“I’ll tell that Italian sprinter you were flirting with last season. If there isn’t an aftershave, maybe he could douse himself in floor cleaner.”

She slapped his arm. “Not the same thing. And what makes you think he’d care?”

“He’d be a fool not to.” Teag wrapped an arm around her and squeezed her close. “What do you say we break up this winter? Give the Italian a chance.”

“You’re in a weird mood. What did Tom say?”

“Nothing.” Teag kissed the top of her head and released her. He picked up the letter and passed it to her. “He and his wife couldn’t be happier. They’re expecting their second child, yada yada. I’m glad for him. Really. I mean, if he’s happy.”

“But...” She was looking at him, not the letter.

Teag shrugged. He looked out at the distant snow-capped mountains. In a few weeks, there’d be enough snow up high for the team to start practicing. After that the season would unfold and he’d be caught in the flurry of races, wins and finishes, collecting points and scrambling to be good enough to make the next Olympic team in a sport where the US hadn’t won a medal in his lifetime. Maybe Bob was right. It was a futile, silly thing to do.

“Teag, what is it?”

He sighed. “Don’t you sometimes wonder what we’re doing? I’m twenty-seven years old. Other people our age are getting married, making families and I’m still busting my ass in a sport I can’t win and jacking off to sportswear catalogues.”

“I knew you liked him.” Lora jumped off the table and faced Teag. “You just need to get laid. Next time we get a weekend off, we’ll go down to Los Angeles, stay with my brother and you can hit the bars.”

Teag shook his head. “Thanks, but a one-night stand isn’t going to fix this. Sorry. Didn’t mean to get you involved in my pity party.”

“He might be gay, Teag. You never know.”

“No. He’s not. And it wouldn’t matter if he is. He hates me. And I don’t blame him, I’m the one he has to beat.”

Lora frowned. “Men.”

Teag slapped her knee. “Let’s go. I’ll race you. Last one down the hill buys the beer.”

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## NEXT WINTER

*World Cup Tour Switzerland*

As the wheels touched the ground, Cory woke with a start. It took him a moment to remember where they were. Zurich? He unfastened his seat belt and stretched. His shoulder was still bothering him from his fall in the quarterfinals in Val di Fiemme. He'd need to get one of the volunteer physical therapists to take a look at it again.

The plane came to a stop. The pilot announced in three languages that they were waiting for a gate. He apologized—there would be a short delay.

Someone tapped Cory on the shoulder. He looked up to see Lora holding out a granola bar. A big sack of them hung from her other hand.

“Coach says everyone has to eat something. Looks like it'll be at least an hour before we can get through customs and have breakfast.”

“Thanks.” Cory frowned at the bar but took it anyway. “I'd kill for some bacon and eggs, but I suppose we're more likely to get pastries and café au lait.”

She laughed. “You sound just like Teag. Neither one of you has any culture.”

“You guys broke up, right?”

She leaned against the seat, looking down at him with a playful smile. “Why? You interested?”

“No.” Cory could feel the blush climbing up his cheeks. Of course he wasn't interested. At least not in Lora. He looked away and stumbled through his practiced excuse. “I mean, you're great, or at least you seem really nice, but I'm concentrating on my skiing.”

“That's what all the boys say.” Her laugh was musical. “Glad you think I'm nice. I think you're nice, too.”

When he looked up, she gave him a sisterly smile.

It had been a lonely start to the tour, and it might be good to have a friend. He wondered what a pleasant woman like Lora had been doing with a stuck-up ass like Teag. So what if he was handsome, rich and super-hot? That wasn't enough for a relationship, was it? Like Cory was an expert? Hardly. His one relationship had lasted a only few months during his one year as a college student skiing for the University of Montana, with a guy who resented Cory's need to stay deep in the closet and who cheated on him whenever the team went out of town.

He smiled at Lora. "Thanks for bringing me food."

"Welcome." She glanced back, shook her head at someone, smiled again at Cory and moved forward to offer one to another athlete.

Cory ripped open the package and bit into the overly sweet, gooey mess.

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## CANADA

Cory stared at the event roster for the Alberta races. In Italy, for the first week of the World Cup season, he'd finished a respectable thirty-sixth in the 15 km and picked up a few seconds for the team in the four-man relay. The next weekend in Switzerland at the first sprint race, he'd finished in the top twenty-five, behind what seemed like a million flying Finns, and less than a second after Teag. Now they were headed back across the Atlantic for the Alberta races, where it looked like he was scheduled in the team sprint, a two-man relay, with Teag, the one member of the A team who Cory had never gotten along with. After their showdown in the gym, Cory could count on one hand the number of times they'd spoken.

Even though, weirdly, Cory found him attractive, he didn't actually like Teag. He was too slick and rich. Clearly the feeling was mutual. Teag barely acknowledged his existence. Cory had no idea what Teag's problem with him was. Couldn't be that he'd figured out Cory was gay—that was a secret Cory planned to keep until he'd quit skiing. Or until he had an Olympic medal swinging from his neck. Then it wouldn't matter because he'd be one of the first Americans to medal in the sport in over three decades.

And Teag couldn't be jealous. He was half a second faster in every race. Probably just had a stick up his butt and Cory'd never know why. He'd decided the first week of training that the best strategy for dealing with Robert McTeague was to ignore him.

Which wouldn't be easy if they had to share a baton.

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Alberta wasn't supposed to be this cold. Teag ran a finger across the bottom of his practice skis, checking the wax. Soon he'd need to start the complicated mix of medication and warm-ups that kept his asthma at bay. He hated when the temperature dove this low. Even through his mask, cold, dry air bit into his lungs. He stared at the digital temperature gauge. If it dropped even a few degrees they'd need to cancel the race.

When it was this cold, timing made all the difference for Teag. For sprints it didn't matter so much. The thirty-minute window his routine earned him

was more than enough to take him through a four-minute race. But the team relay was a twenty-minute event. Cory was slated for the first and third legs, which left Teag to sprint the middle and last. On a regular day the order made sense—Teag was a fractionally faster skier and had more experience plunging toward the finish line on this track. If everything went smoothly, he'd finish with a few minutes left before his chest tightened and the cold sucked his breath away. He glanced at the clock. Almost time to start warming up.

Usually Canmore, an hour's drive west of Calgary, was one of Teag's favorite race venues. The course started with a long rise, so stamina counted. Then around the first turn a vista opened up, revealing craggy mountain peaks. The first time he'd skied this course, the sun cresting over snow-covered mountains had cracked his heart open. He loved coming back.

Teag glanced at Lora, who was chatting with her relay partner as they watched the groomers prepare the course for the men's race. The two women were laughing, their heads bent toward each other, their body language that of old friends happy to be together. Teag looked at Cory, who stood staring out at the course and frowning, his arms folded across his chest. When he noticed Teag watching him, he nodded, his scowl etching deep lines around his beautiful mouth. Teag sighed. This intense sense of competition and dislike they had for each other couldn't be good for the team. But he had no idea how to rein in his own jealousy, much less find a way to temper Cory's.

It was time. Teag dropped his practice skis, clipped his boots into them and headed for a side trail to warm up. When he was out of sight of the lodge, he pulled his inhaler from the pocket of his windbreaker. Trying to keep his asthma secret was silly. Half the team knew. The officials had to in case the steroids showed up in a drug test. And there was no shame in being asthmatic, at least that's what Lora always told him. But he couldn't help feeling it was a sign of weakness that he was dependent on drugs to keep breathing in the sharp cold air. He didn't want anyone else to see him. Certainly not Cory.

He made it back to the starting area with a few minutes to spare. There was something wrong with the crowd. No one was lining up. Teag slid over to Cory and stepped out of his skis.

Cory glanced at him and went back to staring crossly at the course.

“What’s up?” Teag leaned his skis against the team van.

“Some asshole drove an ATV across the track. They’re regrooming. Everything’s delayed ten minutes.”

Ten minutes. His time cushion evaporated and Teag could feel himself beginning to panic. Should he start his warm up again? Even at a sixty percent effort, if he skied too long before the race he could tire. Teag looked at Coach, who knew the time frame as well as he did. He was approaching one of the B-team sprinters. Teag did not want to sit out this race.

He turned to Cory. “I need to take the first and third. Can you anchor?”

Cory gave him a suspicious look. “Why?”

Teag felt his fear turn to anger, fueled by the shaky, light-headed feeling his inhaler always gave him. “It doesn’t matter why. Can you do it?”

“Of course I can do it,” Cory spat. “You think I can’t?”

“Well, whether you can or not, you’re going to have to.”

“Fine.”

An official was waving the first leg athletes to the starting line. Out of the corner of his eye, Teag saw Coach and the B-team sprinter approaching. He pulled up his mask, grabbed his racing skies and headed over, not bothering to look back to see what Cory was doing. What was it about that kid that got him so riled up and why the fuck couldn’t they have a normal conversation? Teag flashed on Lora and her teammate laughing. Maybe it was a guy thing. All he could think was that Cory better not fuck up the final leg. They’d be in enough trouble from Coach as it was.

As he slid back and forth in the tracks waiting for the signal along with fifteen other guys, Teag spared one last look at the sidelines where an especially red-faced Coach stood glaring at him. Fuck it. Teag hadn’t backed down when his parents insisted he give up racing, he wasn’t about to step out of this race because his asthma made it hard to ski in the cold. He’d done lots of hard things before. He could do this. He wouldn’t back down. Not in front of Cory.



And then they were off. The weather had kept most spectators away but a few cheered and cow bells clanged as Teag and the others scrambled up the first hill. Teag concentrated on the slide of his skis, the bite of the edges and the clatter of poles and skis as he climbed his way past a dozen other skiers. Despite his mask, the air felt biting cold. He pushed hard. He needed to get out front early, just in case.

Rounding the first corner, Teag slid past the German team. The sight of sunlight gleaming off the far mountain peaks lifted his spirits and going downhill, Teag flew past the Swede. By the next curve he was a length behind but keeping pace with Finland and Italy. His shoulders were burning, but he pushed past the halfway mark. Another uphill and it felt like sucking knives. He could see the hand-off area. Cory was sliding in the tracks, watching over his shoulder as Teag approached. Teag entered the hand-off zone and Cory started forward, slowly accelerating until Teag brushed his back and Cory took off, his legs and arms pumping.

Teag got out of the zone and sank to the ground. He pressed a gloved hand over his mouth, hoping to warm the air. Someone pushed an arm beneath his shoulder and helped him stand. Teag looked at Coach, who was shaking his head, an exasperated frown on his face.

“You gonna be okay for the next leg? I can call it. The hospital in Calvary is a long drive.”

Teag shook his head. “I’m fine.”

Coach nodded toward the temperature sign. It was even colder than when the race started. “Looks like this is the last race of the day.”

“Guess I better make it a good one.” Teag skied back to the hand-off area. Cory would be coming around that last turn soon.

Cory’s hand-off to Teag went smoothly enough and Teag charged up the hill again, this time right behind the Finn. Cory must have passed the Italian. Silver was better than any American had done in a World Cup race in years. Teag put his back into it. He ignored the scream of his lungs as he sucked in icy air. He could do this. Willpower, that was all it took. Teag could hear the Italian behind him. The Finn was three lengths ahead. Teag poled hard on the

downhill and hit the last uphill with his jaw clenched. The Italian was gaining on him as he hurtled toward the hand-off zone. His chest was tight and his breath was disappearing. He tried panting, willing oxygen into his legs even as they slowed. A few hundred feet. Cory was starting to accelerate and Teag wanted to yell to him to stop, to wait, wait... Teag threw himself forward, trying to move faster than his skis, beyond his body. His ski hit something, throwing him off balance. Just a little wobble, the type they'd drilled for in practice over and over again and that would normally take him only a millisecond to correct.

His oxygen starved muscles wouldn't react. The moment before he hit the ground, Teag saw Cory staring at him in horror. And then he was down, still sliding toward Cory, who had stopped at the edge of the zone and was waiting. It took everything Teag had to get up and slide slowly over to Cory and pat him on the back so that Cory could start skiing. Teag watched Cory climb the hill, dead last, before he let Coach help him off the course and into the first aid tent.

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It wasn't the fall that bothered Cory, anyone could fall. It was the look in Teag's eyes and the way his open mouth stretched that blue face mask. Cory'd found himself fascinated by the fast in and out of the material as Teag panted. That look haunted Cory as he climbed the hill. He pushed hard, wanting to chase away the memory of Teag's fear and a vague guilty feeling that maybe he'd been unfair.

Shit. Cory pushed past a couple of skiers. Was Teag okay? Cory's muscles warmed. It had felt too cold to stand around in a flimsy racing suit but as his thighs and arms pumped, he could feel himself start to sweat. One more turn. Legs and arms pumping, he passed more skiers. The exhilaration he'd felt on his last loop, that feeling of making history, had hardened to grim determination to earn a respectable finish and avoid humiliation. Cowbells rang. A whistle blew. Cory looked up in time to see the Finnish skier glide across the line followed by the Italian. Cory put his head down and leaned into the final stretch. His bad shoulder ached and his stomach clenched. He lunged

forward, passing one more skier before crossing the finish line, right in the middle of the pack.

Mackinac appeared while Cory was still catching his breath. “Nice pickup. You really slammed that last leg.”

Cory shrugged. “Not that it matters.”

“Hey, you made the top ten.”

“We came in tenth. Not the same thing.” Cory looked around at the dwindling group of skiers and spectators. “Where’s everyone going? Doesn’t the women’s relay start soon?”

Mackinac gestured toward the temperature display, which read:  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}/-4^{\circ}\text{F}$ . “Game over.”

Cory kicked out of his skis. “How’s Teag?”

Mackinac shook his head. “Medic shot him full of epinephrine and he’s shaking like a leaf. Coach is pissed as hell at both of you.”

“Me? What did I do?”

Mackinac shrugged. “Something about how you should have stopped him. Guess he’s not supposed to race when it’s this cold. Triggers his asthma.”

“Teag has asthma?”

“You didn’t know that? He’s like a fucking poster child for overcoming that shit.” Mackinac turned toward the warming hut. “Let’s go. It’s freezing.”

Cory trailed him inside, wondering how he’d missed that crucial piece of information about Robert McTeague. Coach was right to be mad. Cory hadn’t been paying attention and that was unprofessional, not to mention self-absorbed. He pictured Teag’s face right before he fell. Whatever else Cory thought about him, the guy had guts.

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Teag convinced everyone that he didn’t need to be driven to the hospital in Calgary. This wasn’t his first attack. He endured Coach’s twenty-minute lecture about how much his country had invested in him and how he could

have done real damage and for what—a moment of ego. Teag kept his head down and nodded until Coach left. He'd stopped shaking but still felt jumpy. He ached all over and had the beginning of a roaring epinephrine headache.

Lora poked her head into his room to ask if he wanted to go down to dinner. He declined. Food, light and sympathy sounded even more painful than self-recrimination. It wasn't the asthma attack that bothered him, those he thought of as part of the price he paid to ski. What kept making his stomach clench was that stupid fall. He'd messed up. No other way to think about it. Cory'd done more than his share in the race and Teag had blown it.

He coughed up another lungful. The next week was going to suck. Teag grabbed a towel. This lodge was supposed to have a sauna somewhere in the basement. With everyone at dinner he should be able to use it in peace.

The brightly lit hallway had that wet-dog smell he associated with ski vacations as a child, back when skiing was a family activity and Teag was Bobby, the wild child. The Finns and Italians would be staying at fancier accommodations down the road, but Teag was fine with the more modest rooms reserved for the underfunded US team. He could barely hear his own footfalls on the soft aging carpet. In Europe the places they stayed were often spartan, with clean lines, blond wood and starched sheets. The crowds there were bigger but the rooms were smaller—funny that. A varnished wooden sign had the letters FITNESS ROOM AND SAUNA burnt in black with an arrow pointing down the stairs. A door opened somewhere. Teag felt like a fugitive as he ducked down the stairs, hoping whoever it was wouldn't see him.

The lower-level floor was linoleum rather than carpet. Another sign pointed down a dimly lit hallway. Teag swiped his key in the lock of the marked door. Inside, a TV blared in an empty room fitted with three ancient exercise bicycles, a worn treadmill, and a rack of mismatched weights. Twin wooden doors marked by gender pointed the way to the sauna. The men's room turned out to consist of a corridor festooned with hooks at the end of which was a cedar doorway. The hooks were empty except for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. Teag considered turning back. He really didn't want company. But then another cough racked his chest and he decided what the hell, peeled

out of his clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist, and opened the sauna door.

A blast of hot air and the acrid smell of cedar and sweat hit him as Teag stepped in and closed the door. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust in the dim light. The vague premonition that had started when he'd seen the familiar T-shirt coalesced as the man seated on the top bench took shape.

"I thought everyone would be at dinner."

Cory shrugged one naked, sweaty shoulder. "Wasn't in the mood for company."

"Know what you mean. The sympathy can be hard to take." Teag hoisted himself up on the opposite shelf. "But you don't have anything to feel bad about. You skied a damned fine race. Too bad your partner let you down."

Cory stared into the corner where the heater glowed red beneath fake coals. He spoke softly. "Coach is right. I should have known, should have talked you out of racing in the cold like that. He says you might have done permanent damage."

As if in agreement, Teag's lungs spasmed into a wracking cough. When he could look up, Teag saw Cory watching with concern. Teag shook his head. "It'll take a couple of days but I'll be fine. I always am."

"Still, I should have known. I wasn't paying attention and I'm sorry."

From this distance and in this light, Cory's dark eyes looked black. Teag focused on them to keep from staring at Cory's bare torso, which was even more enticing in person—bulging muscles glistening with sweat—than in the underwear ad photos Teag kept in the bottom of his duffel. Pathetic, really, having a physical crush on his teammate.

"No reason for you to be sorry. It's not like I go around advertising my 'condition'." Teag made ironic air quotes around the word. "Besides, you switched positions with me and that's all I wanted. I wouldn't have let you talk me out of it anyway. I really thought I'd be okay as long as I was fast. A miscalculation on my part. Not your fault."

Cory played with the fabric of his towel and Teag had one breathless moment wondering if he'd toss the cloth off and stand naked in the sauna. When Cory didn't move, Teag wasn't sure whether he was disappointed or relieved. The last thing he needed was to humiliate himself even further by popping a stiffy in the sauna at the sight of his race partner's ass. More proof that he couldn't control his body.

Cory cocked his head and considered Teag. "One thing I don't get. Why aren't you a spokesman for your dad's company? I mean, I know you don't really need the money, but I'd think he'd want to keep it in the family."

"He hates that I race." Teag winced internally at the bitterness in his voice. He took a deep breath and started again. "He and my mom are convinced that skiing hard in the cold gave me asthma." He shrugged. "Maybe they're right. It didn't show up until my third year on the Junior circuit. Sponsoring one of my teammates is his little way of letting me know he wants me to quit."

Cory's eyebrows rose. "Whoa. That's heavy."

Teag gave him a wry smile. "You should be flattered. He always picks the ones he knows might actually beat me."

Cory didn't laugh. He looked very serious as he said, "I can't imagine what it would be like if I didn't have my mom's support. She's been amazing. She even organizes a lot of my fundraising."

"Money. It's fucking crazy that it costs so much to race." Teag leaned back against the cedar wall, breathing through the sting until his skin got used to the heat. "I envy your independence. My folks are always threatening to cut me off if I don't stop. So far, they always fold, but I can never be sure about the next year."

Cory snorted. "I spend half my time hustling. Doesn't feel independent to me."

"If my folks do ever cut me off, I'll know who to come to for advice."

Teag closed his eyes and focused on inhaling and exhaling the hot air.

He opened them again when Cory said softly, "I've been hating you for how easy you have it."

Teag smiled. “And I hate you for being Bob’s golden boy.”

“You call your father Bob?”

“He’s not the daddy type.”

Cory nodded.

Teag sat forward and stretched out his hand. “If we’re going to be relay partners, we should act more like we’re on the same team.”

“Deal. On the same team starting tonight.” Cory smiled and shook Teag’s hand. “Who knows, maybe we’ll end up friends.”

“Don’t push your luck.” Reluctantly, he released the handshake. “Let’s go see if there’s any food left.”

“Good idea.” Cory jumped down from his bench and moved toward the door. “I’m starving.”

Teag followed him out, his hand still tingling from their touch. Friends. Just friends.

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## FINLAND

In Kuusamo, Lora made the top ten in the women's 10 km and, with a personal best, Mackinac made the top fifty in the mass start. There hadn't been a relay scheduled so Cory and Teag competed against each other in the 5 km sprint, earning eighth and sixth respectively. Overall it was the best a US team had done in years and the four decided to stay on for a few days to celebrate, relax, and enjoy the legendary ski trails—500 kilometers through the sparse woods overlooking the Lake District.

With its pedestrian village and signs for reindeer sleigh rides advertised in five languages, the little town of Ruka at the base of the alpine ski slopes had the dollhouse feel of a place built for tourists. Even sharing a room with Mackinac, Lora and Teag, the expense was going to set Cory back for a while. But it was beautiful and between racing and working out, he'd barely seen any of the European cities he visited the year before, so he gritted his teeth and put it on a card.

It was worth it. Over breakfast Teag and Lora pored over trail maps while Mackinac lingered by the coffee station flirting with a waitress. Cory concentrated on the buffet. He didn't have any information to add to the route discussions and wasn't interested in the women, so he focused on trying different fish dishes. Other than bluegill fried over a campfire, fish hadn't been on his breakfast menu before. But he found he liked the sweet relish-like taste of pickled herring, and smoked cod on toast was surprisingly good. And it was all included in the room fee, so he figured he'd better eat his fill.

Teag gave him an amused glance the third time he returned from the buffet. "They're losing money on you."

Cory smiled. "I hope so."

A group of Italian racers entered the dining room. The sprinter who had finished between Cory and Teag spotted them and smiled. Teag glanced at Lora, who seemed to be blushing as she studied the map. He caught Cory's eye and nodded toward the Italians, who'd taken a table across the room.

"You know what they call us? *Gitani*. Gypsies. Have you seen the entourage they travel with? Doctors, masseuses, physical therapists, wax



technicians—not to mention you don't see them schlepping equipment. It all comes down to funding. They have it, we don't."

Cory considered the group of tall, very fit men. "It must drive them crazy when we do well."

Teag laughed. "I suppose you're right. Still, I'd like a team doctor who stayed for more than a week."

"I like our doctors." Lora looked up from the map. "They're nice people, why else would they volunteer?"

"To pad their resumes?" Teag suggested.

She shook her head and went back to the map. "You are such a cynic. What do you guys think of starting with a long climb to warm up?"

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Cory fell in at an easy pace behind Teag. The temperature was perfect, cold enough to keep the snow firm while the sun warmed his back. He'd stripped down to one layer on top and tied his windbreaker around his waist. It felt amazing to ski like a man on vacation rather than pushing himself until he puked. He could almost imagine a life after skiing, one where he worked all week and only went to the mountains on weekends. In a life like that there'd be room for someone else, someone who loved to ski and who understood the call of the woods on a cold winter day. Whoever he was, he'd need to be strong, fit, able to keep up with Cory, even challenge him. He'd need to... Cory realized he was staring at Teag's ass, watching the muscles tighten and release as he skated ahead up the hill. Cory forced himself to look away.

"How's your shoulder?" Teag called back.

Cory checked in. He'd forgotten all about the injury. Funny that Teag remembered. "It feels fine. Thanks."

"Good. Keep it that way. We're gonna surprise them in Milan on Saturday."

"Go team." Mackinac called from behind Cory.

Teag glanced over his shoulder. "Of course the big surprise in Milan is that Lora has a date."

“No shit?” Mackinac’s voice grew fainter as he looked back at Lora. “You and Teag getting back together?”

“No.” Lora’s voice rang out clearly. Cory was disgusted with himself for how pleased that simple declaration made him.

As he came to the top of the hill, Teag paused and let the rest of them catch up. He smiled down at Lora. “She’s moved on from skinny redheads and is looking for someone tall, dark, and Italian.”

“Fascinating as it is, can we drop the subject of my love life?” Lora gestured to the valley below where snow covered lakes dotted the forest. “What do you think it’s like in summer?”

“Beautiful.” Teag said softly. Cory glanced at him and Teag smiled back. It was dangerous to fantasize. Made you imagine you were seeing things that couldn’t be there. Cory looked away.

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## ITALY

With its flat relay track circling through a park in the center of town, this venue was the opposite of the remote hamlets they usually skied. An actual goddamned castle towered over the start and finish line. The team was bunked four to a room in a hotel on the outskirts of Milan, and it had taken them a full hour for the van to make its way haltingly through the busy city streets. Now, on race day, a noisy crowd stood on bleachers beside the track. Temperatures hovered at freezing and the snow was wet and slick. Breathing wouldn't be a problem today.

Teag watched Cory bounce on his skis as he waited at the starting line. When the announcer called his name, he raised a pole in salute. In his form-fitting white ski suit, watch cap and goggles, Cory looked focused, confident and powerful. Of course, the Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, Italians and Germans looked good too. No slopes and wet snow meant that everyone would be fast today.

A word from the official and Cory's arms went up in expectation. He leaned forward, every muscle in his body telegraphing his readiness to bite into the snow and be off. When the signal came, Cory's start was flawless. Teag watched as he disappeared around the bend. Teamwork was much easier now that Teag didn't have to pretend to hate him. In the past few weeks they'd edged toward friendship and it felt good.

Each leg of the relay involved two loops of track. There was no way for Teag to know what was happening on the far side so he watched the corner where they'd appear and when they did, he cheered with the rest of the team to see Cory only a few lengths behind the Finn, the Swede and the German, who were tied for first. The crowd roared and cowbells rang as they flew past. Teag made his way to the hand-off zone to be ready for the slap on the back that meant it was time to ski.

When he saw Cory round the bend, Teag started moving forward, confident that Cory would catch him and tag him before he left the zone. His back tingled with awareness, waiting for Cory's tap. He heard him before he

felt him, the sound of his skis and his breath as distinctive as footsteps—then the brush of Cory’s hand down Teag’s spine which propelled him forward like a shot. Teag concentrated on the push of legs and arms. He felt coordinated and graceful and his skis sang. The Swede had fallen back a length, but the German and Finn were still battling for first place and Teag stayed a pace back. He could feel someone behind him on his left. He didn’t dare waste a fraction of a second looking back and it didn’t matter anyway. It was probably Lora’s Italian, who was fast enough to make Teag want to stay ahead of him. Another turn and they’d be passing the castle again. Teag let himself push a little harder. The crowd sound, never absent on this urban track, swelled as he passed, then faded as they rounded the corner again.

In the back stretch of his second loop, Teag unfurled. He wanted to give Cory the opportunity for glory. If he climbed closer to the lead, Cory might be able to pass. Gold, silver or bronze, it didn’t matter. Teag pushed hard, gaining on the Swede so that they rounded the final corner with Teag only inches behind. Cory spotted him and started off slowly. Teag hit his back at the very end of the pass zone, then watched Cory’s body fly into magnificent motion. Teag navigated off the course and bent double, sucking air in big gulps. He heard Coach ask if he was okay and nodded without looking up, concentrating on replenishing the oxygen leached from his muscles.

Once his breathing slowed down, he straightened and smiled. “Just catching my breath.”

“Speaking of catching...” Coach was staring over Teag’s shoulder.

Teag looked around to see the racers coming around again. Cory’d passed the Swede and was bearing down on the German. Teag smiled. “I knew he could do it.”

Coach patted him on the shoulder. “You’d better get out there. Go make some history.”

Cory slapped his back seconds after the Finns passed off. Teag flew. He could feel his heart expanding, encompassing the entire park, the city, the globe. It wasn’t like anything he’d felt before. The first loop spun by almost in a dream and he was still feet behind the front runner. As he passed the castle,

his glance fell on Cory. Teag couldn't have seen him for more than a split second and yet that image of Cory shouting from the sidelines and pumping his arms in the air seemed to fill his vision and gave him an extra boost of energy he hadn't known he possessed.

He leaned forward, ignoring the screaming of his muscles, pumping harder than he ever remembered. The Finn looked back over his shoulder and Teag knew he had him. Teag lunged forward, plunging through the final turn and into the din of the crowd. His vision narrowed so that all he could see was the finish line, a dark line in the snow. He dove toward it, each step a jump and lunge, his skis leaving the ground as his poles dug in, landing and shooting him forward as he raised his arms again. Adrenaline made his muscles tingle and air seared his lungs. He knew he'd be coughing for days but it didn't matter. All that mattered was that last extra inch he needed to push past the Finn and... Cowbells clanged, a horn blew and Teag collapsed on the snow as his leg muscles gave out. Every part of him hurt. He forced himself to get up, step out of his skis and walk toward the sidelines. Cory was running toward him with a smile cracking his face in two. In spite of the pain and the breathlessness, Teag couldn't help his own answering smile.

Cory slammed into him and wrapped his arms tightly around Teag.

"Did I pass him?" Teag looked down into Cory's gorgeous brown eyes which were ringed with red marks from his goggles and shining with happiness.

Teag flipped his own goggles up.

Cory was nodding wildly. "You did it."

"We did it." Teag rested a hand on Cory's cheek.

Cory tipped his head back and looked up at Teag. Teag held Cory's gaze, spellbound. He forgot where he was, who he was, and everything around them. Suddenly he was kissing Cory, who stayed very still for a microsecond, long enough for Teag to come to his senses and start to pull away. But then Cory opened his mouth and Teag lost himself in the play of tongues and lips.

Someone gasped.

Teag jerked back. He looked at the bleachers where the once noisy crowd had turned silent. Hundreds of eyes stared back. Teag blinked. He looked at Cory, who stood there looking shell shocked. A few feet away Coach gaped openmouthed. Behind him Lora tried to look encouraging.

Teag turned and strode toward the entrance. Cory tried to follow but Teag waved him away. He didn't want to see the pity he was sure would be in Cory's eyes when he recovered from the shock. Teag had humiliated them both and needed to get away, to be alone. The team had staked out a spot near the castle. Teag snatched his bag and started running toward the city streets. Somewhere deep in his bag, his phone trilled. He ignored it. He'd return in the evening for the podium ceremony. He owed Cory that. But for now he needed to disappear.

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Reporters surrounded Cory. "Are you and Robert McTeague lovers?"

"Is this some sort of publicity stunt?"

"How long have you..."

It was not how Cory had imagined coming out. He waved away their questions. With Coach on one side and Mackinac on the other, he pushed through the crowd. With a baffled look and an uncertain pat on Cory's back, Coach turned back toward the course. It was almost time for women's sprints.

Mackinac started to say something but Cory cut him off. "I need to talk to Teag."

"So are you two—"

"Don't you start."

"Sorry, man." Mackinac threw up his hands in the universal gesture of men backing off from an argument.

Cory pulled off his cap and ran a hand through his hair. "No. It's okay. I shouldn't have jumped down your throat."

Mackinac's expression turned into a sly smile. "Wasn't my throat you were jumping down in front of hundreds of spectators and a couple of TV cameras."

TV. Cory groaned.

Mackinac shrugged. “Of course, the good news is that you’re the first men in thirty years to win a World Cup for the good old US of A Cross Country Ski Team. All those reporters were gonna want to interview you anyway—this gives you something to talk about.”

“Oh fuck.” Cory rummaged in his bag until his hand closed on his phone. He thumbed in Teag’s number. No answer. He bit his lip and tried to imagine where Teag might have gone.

“You don’t think he’ll skip the podium ceremony, do you?” Mackinac looked alarmed for the first time. Apparently sexual peccadillos among teammates didn’t begin to compare with blowing off the gold. Actually, if it had been anyone else’s love life, Cory would have felt the same.

“Teag’s a responsible guy. He’ll be back. But I need to talk to him before that.” As his sweat dried, Cory started to shiver. He kicked out of his ski boots, pulled a fleece and a pair of sweat pants over his racing suit and shoved his feet into snow boots. “I’m going looking for him.”

Mackinac frowned. He looked at his watch. “Okay, but take your phone and don’t get lost. You need to be back here in three hours at the latest.”

Cory nodded. He glanced toward the castle. Would Teag have gone in there?

“Maybe he went sightseeing.” Mackinac gestured toward the city. “He kept talking about that church we passed on the way in. Late Gothic, early Romanesque—I tuned him out.”

Cory straightened. The Duomo. It was a start. And it would take him away from the damned reporters until he could talk with Teag.

It wasn’t until he rounded the castle and found himself on a busy modern street that the enormity of it all hit him. They’d won the gold. And Teag had kissed him. Really kissed him. Away from the rest of the team, from the press and from everyone who thought they knew him, Cory let himself remember that kiss. Teag had tasted of snow and victory. His tongue, his lips. Cory hoped like hell it wasn’t a publicity stunt because that was something he wanted again. And again.

In the distance he could see the cathedral spires. He pushed through the crowd of shoppers, fear and excitement and need propelling him toward what he hoped might be the future.

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The phone in Teag's bag rang again. He ignored it. The cathedral rose above him, a stone giant decorated as delicately as a wedding cake. Tourists flowed past Teag in groups of two and five and twenty. No one paid attention to a red-haired man wearing a ski team windbreaker over a stretchy jumpsuit. It was Milan after all, Italy's fashion center, perhaps they thought he was making a statement. Was he?

He knew he should move, if only to keep his thigh muscles from stiffening. Other than understanding that shame lingered a breath away, Teag felt numb. He'd thought so long and hard about coming out, about being the first gay cross country skier and always stopped himself, not wanting his sexuality to outshine his athleticism. All things considered, that was a laugh, wasn't it?

Every time he remembered the kiss, his mind skittered away. Cory would be thinking... Oh God, he didn't want to think about what was going through Cory's mind. Poor kid had had his win ripped away by his predatory teammate who should have known better.

The phone rang.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

Teag started.

Cory was standing beside him, staring up at the cathedral. "Is the architecture Gothic or Romanesque, Mackinac couldn't remember."

"Both." Teag scanned Cory's face, looking for the anger he deserved. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Cory met his gaze. His big brown eyes softened and a smile played around his lips.

"You aren't angry?"

Cory shrugged. "Your timing was interesting."



They'd turned to face each other. Teag held his breath, waiting for Cory to back away.

Instead he stepped closer. "You definitely got my attention. Maybe we can try it again without the audience."

"Are you serious?" Teag watched Cory's mouth.

Cory licked his lips, with a slow grace that made Teag's cock stir. Teag blew out air and looked away. If he didn't calm down the whole square would know how he felt about Cory. "We should talk."

"I agree. We have a podium to stand on in a few hours. Can we find somewhere private?"

Teag looked back sharply.

Cory smiled. "To talk."

As Cory held his gaze, something in Teag let go. He gave a short nod. "Last year I stayed on in a hotel near here for a few days after the race. Let's see if they have a room."

"So we can talk." Cory ran his hand along Teag's bicep.

Teag shuddered. He picked up his bag and led Cory down a side street. A few blocks down and Teag spotted the hotel marquee. He pulled Cory through the glass door into the lobby, which must have been elegant thirty years before when it was last remodeled. Now the velvet upholstery and dark woodwork exuded a worn-at-the-heels charm.

Cory whispered. "Teag, I can't afford this."

"Let it go, Miller. I just ruined your life. The least I can do is pay for the room." Before Cory could object again, Teag bellied up to the ancient walnut reservation counter and negotiated a room.

"Yes, one bed, thank you, we'll be bringing the bulk of our luggage this evening."

Clunky key in hand, Teag started up the stairs. Cory followed, his earlier brashness gone. He looked a little embarrassed. Maybe they really would just talk.

The room had the musty smell of old carpets. A starched white linen bed with primly spaced pillows filled the room, leaving a narrow pathway to a small wooden desk and the window above it. Teag stepped inside, suddenly sure this was the wrong choice, that he was making an even bigger fool of himself, that Cory would run away. He heard the door close.

Cory cleared his throat. "I could use a shower."

Teag turned to him. In the small room there was nowhere to stand but close. Cory didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. After a moment, he rested them on Teag's chest.

Teag smiled down at him. "You don't have to do this. I know you're a sweet guy and all but—"

"Don't be an idiot." Cory pulled Teag down into a kiss. His lips were warm. With no crowd or cameras, Teag could let himself fall into the kiss. He cradled Cory's face in his hands. Cory tasted like peppermint and smelled of the winter air and sweat. He opened to Teag's tongue and pressed himself close until Teag could feel the fist of Cory's erection against his thigh.

Cory ran his hands down Teag's back and squeezed his ass. He pushed his thigh between Teag's and pulled him closer. Cory's hand slid around to caress Teag through the thin fabric of his suit. Teag groaned and ground into him. Cory was wearing sweatpants over his racing suit. Teag snaked his hand down the front of Cory's pants. It was like skiing through fog, everything shiny, slippery and undefined. Teag leaned back, letting himself fall onto the bed and bringing Cory down on top him. The bed frame thudded against the walls and the bedsprings squeaked.

The scrape of Cory's stubble sent shivers of excitement through Teag. He caressed Cory's shoulders, feeling their strength through the sweatshirt. It was like a dream and he let the kiss go even deeper to assure himself it was real. Cory's fingers dug into Teag's sides. Teag dragged down Cory's sweats so that they were racing skin against racing skin, cocks dancing together against the Lycra. It had been so long since Teag had felt the wrestle of real muscle, been overwhelmed by the strong smell of another man's sweat, the taste of his tongue and the rasp of his cheek. It didn't matter they weren't naked. Maybe

that would come later, maybe it wouldn't, but the pant and groan, the huff of breath and warmth and wet—this was now. His racing skin was damp where his cock leaked against Cory's.

“Oh Jesus.” Cory broke the kiss and groaned. His ass muscles stiffened beneath Teag's hands. He threw back his head. Teag watched his face contort in glorious ecstasy. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and in that instant, as his own body responded with a wave so strong, it left him breathless. In that moment, Teag knew this was what he'd always wanted.

They lay together catching their breath. Eventually Teag whispered, “We'd better get cleaned up. We've got a medal to collect.”

“Oh that old thing.” Cory rolled off him, sat up, stretched and sloughed off his sweatshirt.

Teag pulled the zipper down the back of Cory's suit. “The showers in this place are too small for company. You can go first.”

Cory looked over his shoulder at Teag as he peeled out of his suit. “You bring guys here on a regular basis?”

Teag laughed. “You'll see. They're barely big enough to fit one person.”

Cory dropped his suit and stood. His back looked smooth and strong and his ass was as defined as Teag had imagined. Teag watched the play of muscles as he walked away. God, he was sexy.

“I see what you mean.” Cory's voice echoed from the bathroom and the shower spurted to life. Teag swung his legs off the bed and started climbing out of his clothes. He could feel his thighs and shoulders stiffening. He'd be achy tomorrow. A hot shower began to sound pretty good.

Naked, he stepped into the tiny bathroom, which consisted of a sink, toilet and shower wedged into a remarkably few square feet. Teag leaned against the sink and watched Cory through the smoked glass of the shower. This domesticity was something he could get used to. He hadn't realized how lonely he'd been.

The shower stopped and Cory stepped out. Water glistened on his strong chest and his curls lay flat against his head. He grabbed one of the soft white

towels. Teag watched him dry off. He looked even better in person than he had in the ad.

Cory stopped toweling his hair and looked Teag up and down. “I wondered if you were a redhead all over.”

“You think about my pubes often?”

“Occasionally.” Cory smiled. “I will even more after this.”

Teag laughed and pressed past Cory to the shower. He washed quickly. They really did have to talk.

When he stepped out there was Cory, leaning against the sink holding out a towel. Teag took it gratefully and dried quickly. Cory was still looking at him.

Teag dropped the towel. All the questions he’d planned in the shower—where do we go from here and what do we tell the world—dissolved in the face of Cory so close, naked and half-aroused. Teag stepped forward so they were real skin to real skin. He stroked his hands up Cory’s arms, kneading the muscles. Cory let his head fall back as Teag kissed his neck. Teag slid his hands across Cory’s pecs, the chest hair soft against his palms. He flicked a thumb over a nipple, relishing Cory’s sharp intake of breath. Cory caressed Teag’s back as Teag licked and kissed his way across Cory’s shoulders and down his chest. Teag bent low and tongued Cory’s right nipple until it puckered and then he did the same with the left. Steam made the bathroom air warm, like a comforting bath across Teag’s lungs. He thought that the smell of this hotel’s shampoo would always make him think of the moment when he sank to the floor, his knees cushioned by the wet towel, and met Cory’s cock for the first time.

It was thick and earnest, like Cory himself, and surrounded by a bed of dark hair. Teag leaned close and inhaled soap and musk. He ran his hands up the inside of Cory’s thighs. Cory gripped the edge of the sink as he leaned back and let his legs open. His cock stiffened as Teag flicked his tongue along the length. Running his hands up Cory’s torso, Teag took him into his mouth. Cory’s breath quickened. Teag blindly traced the muscles of Cory’s chest. He opened wider, letting Cory’s cock slide across his tongue and fill his mouth. Teag closed his eyes as he replayed the well-worn fantasy. Only this was the

real thing, Cory's real skin beneath his fingers, Cory's real cock filling his mouth, Cory's fingers tangled in his hair. And it was better. God, he wanted this. Teag brought one hand down to stroke his own rock-hard cock. Cory banged against Teag's throat. He gagged, recovered and dove forward for more. Cory rocked forward and back, moaning. Each thrust sent a bolt of excitement through Teag. He could taste salt. Teag opened his eyes and looked up to see Cory tossing his head back.

Yes. This.

Cory's cock pulsed in his mouth. At the first sweet salt taste, Teag's heart blew open and he came hard, wetting the black and white tile floor. He sucked every drop out of Cory before reluctantly letting go. Teag sat back on his heels and looked up at Cory.

"Will you come back later and spend the night with me?"

Cory's eyes crinkled. "You think you could keep me away?"

Teag smiled. "I hope not."

Two hours later, still not having talked, they climbed the podium to the very top. A group of reporters stood to one side, perhaps more of them than usual, it was hard to tell. Smiling women held flowers to give to the racers. As the official approached with their medals, Cory leaned toward Teag and whispered, "Let's make history."

Teag smiled as Cory's hand curled in his and cameras flashed.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Dev Bentham is the author of several m/m contemporary romances, including Moving in Rhythm—2013 DABWAHA finalist, Tarnished Souls—a Jewish holiday series and August Ice—an Antarctica story. She has two new stories coming out soon—Bread, Salt and Wine from Loose Id (6/11/2013) and Painting in the Rain from Amber Allure (6/16/2013).*

## Contact & Media Info

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# DAVIN'S GUARD

By Mandy Beyers

## **Photo Description**

Two naked men kiss on a tan couch. Both are toned and muscular, as is shown by the arm strength holding most of the Caucasian man's upper body above the cushions while the darker-skinned man holds his lower body up with an arm wrapped around him.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*In the five years since turning pro, I've become the best quarterback in the league, so when I start receiving death threats, my team insists on hiring a bodyguard who's with me twenty-four seven. They think the threats are racially motivated, but I know better. How can I keep my past and my desires secret, when my protector is so hot? And what happens when the man behind the threats finally makes his move?*

*This is the first time I tried posting a picture, so I hope I did it right. For some reason this one made me want an m/m romantic thriller. My only other request is please no BDSM.*

*Sincerely,*

*Liz*

## **Story Letter**

**Genre:** contemporary, romantic suspense

**Tags:** athlete, bodyguard, homophobia, in the closet, multicultural, sports, two alpha males

**Word Count:** 5,763

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## DAVIN'S GUARD

**By Mandy Beyers**

Another Monday morning, another boring team meeting. I was fine as long as Coach was the one speaking, but as soon as one of the team owners started pontificating about how to increase ticket sales I found myself tuning out. I hadn't slept my best the previous night and hearing more of the same old, same old wasn't helping me stay awake at all. An elbow to the side from my teammate changed that, though.

"Rochester, man, are you listening? Lerner just said something about hiring you a bodyguard!" Al's whisper was not near as quiet as he thought it was, and all eyes were turned toward us when I looked up.

"Sorry, I missed that..." I let my voice trail away as I waited for someone to fill me on what I had missed in my dozing.

"We've had two more confirmed death threats against you, Rochester, and the team has decided to hire a bodyguard to make sure no one gets to you before the police find this nutcase." Lerner looked like he'd rather suck a lemon than loosen his purse strings for unexpected expenses, but the possible price of losing the best-performing quarterback in the league must have weighed heavily in his cost analysis.

"I wasn't aware that the team was taking the threats seriously—I thought y'all said that it wasn't a problem when the first one came?" The first note came directly to me, just a hate-filled letter spewing nastiness about how I shouldn't be allowed to play football at all, much less be a starting quarterback. After that, all my mail had been forwarded through the team office. It had been three months, and I had forgotten about the problem to be honest.

"These letters have turned out to look more like a serious stalker than just a random threat. There have been pictures in them, which ups the threat level significantly." I turned at the sound of an unfamiliar voice and tried not to swallow my tongue at the first sight of the man I assumed was the bodyguard Lerner mentioned.



Coach intervened with introductions. “Davin Rochester, Jamison Nichols. Rochester, Jamison here is the nephew of a good friend of mine and has been highly recommended for this type of assignment. The team will be picking up Jamison’s salary, but until the police catch the person behind these letters, the two of you will be together twenty-four seven.”

The look on Coach’s face and the fact that the team was spending the money meant that they were truly serious about this. How was I going to keep my secret when the best-looking man I had seen in a long time was going to be spending all his time with me? This was not good; this was not good at all. I felt panicky, but kept my breathing even and focused. “Can I see the letters?” It seemed like I should at least know what I was facing if I was losing my privacy over it.

Coach’s frown deepened as he pulled a folder out of his briefcase. There were more pages there than I expected to see, and as I scanned them, I saw racial slurs and nasty comments that made me want to scour my brain, but no real clue as to why this person was so pissed off at me. Nichols reached over as I started to turn to the last letter and suggested I wait until my teammates weren’t around to look at it.

“That letter is the one that convinced your team to take this seriously. I don’t think you want anyone seeing it that hasn’t already.” By this point the team meeting had mostly ended, so I took Nichols’ advice and waited to turn the final page until everyone else had left the conference room.

“Shit!” The letter writer had apparently lost his skill with the English language and replaced it with defaced pictures of me—at my kitchen table, a local café, walking onto the practice field, and in my car. Black X’s covered my eyes and mouth and red letters shouting “DIE!” were scrawled over the whole page.

Nichols sat quietly beside me for a few moments as the shock set in, then wore off just as fast. “The police think this is someone who knows you, maybe someone from your past who is angry with you. Do you know anyone that fits that description? An angry ex, a girlfriend’s spouse, anyone like that?”

I looked away, not wanting the thoughts in my eyes to be visible to

Nichols. “No one. I haven’t been on a date since college. Football has been my whole life for the five years I’ve been pro.”

“What about college? Is there someone that could have held a grudge? I know the first letters had racial comments, but they seem faked. These last few seem personal in a way that goes beyond skin color.”

My thoughts went back to college, to the last time I had really been myself, and I wondered. Was it possible that my past was catching up to me? I couldn’t help but remember Jeffrey, the way that he shuddered underneath me whenever we would make love, and the terror he felt when his parents found out we were together. His father was rabidly anti-gay, and the hate that spewed from that man’s mouth terrified anyone found on the wrong side of an issue from him. The fact that I never heard from Jeff again after graduation proved to me that hate was stronger than love, and rather than risk another scene like that ever again, I buried myself in the game I loved and gave up on dating. My team didn’t even know I was gay, and I planned to keep it that way as long as possible.

The silence stretched out as I thought about the past until Nichols nudged me. “I can tell you are remembering something. Why don’t you tell me as we walk? We’re going to take my car and get a hotel. We can run by your place to pack a bag, but you cannot stay there. This sicko obviously knows where you live.”

I tried to decide which part of my college memory to tell him—certainly not about my relationship with Jeff, he wouldn’t understand that, I thought. I glanced at his hand, wondering if he had a wife or girlfriend that would be missing him while he guarded me. Finally, I broke the silence that had built around us. “My college roommate’s father was full of hate and venom. He’s the only person I’ve ever known to hate me, but I don’t know why he would be threatening me now. I haven’t seen him *or* my former roommate since we graduated.” That much seemed safe to share, and it was certainly the truth if not the whole truth.

“Why don’t you give me his name and any other information you can remember and let the police check him out? At least then you’ll know one way

or the other if he is behind this.” I agreed and gave Nichols what I remembered, Jeff’s last name and the city he called his hometown when we were in school.

After quickly throwing a week’s worth of clothing in a duffle bag and grabbing my toothbrush and other essentials from the bathroom, I rejoined Nichols in the living room. He seemed to take his time looking over my apartment; I wondered what he saw as he looked at it. I knew the truth about how sterile my life had become; there were a few pictures on the desk, bills that needed to be paid, and my flat-screen television on the wall. Other than that, the furniture came with the apartment when I originally moved in and I never replaced any of it. I spent more time at the gym or on the practice field than at my apartment anyway. I didn’t bother trying to make a home out of it. As Nichols turned to face me again, his quizzical look faded to an emotion I couldn’t quantify. “The only way someone could have taken that picture of you at the kitchen table is from another apartment in your complex.” I realized he was correct; the kitchen window looked out onto an interior courtyard and the angle meant it was taken from above. “I think getting you out of here for a while is definitely the right move. Are you ready to go?”

I grabbed my laptop and unpaid bills and walked out the door, fuming that I was being driven out of my apartment by this freak. Really, what could anyone have to gain by this campaign? As I asked Nichols that question, he glanced at me from behind the wheel of his SUV. “Most stalkers are logical only to themselves, not to normal people. His or her motivation may not be truly clear until we catch them.” As he drove I continued to rack my brain, worrying and trying to remember if anyone in my past could truly hate me so much, but I kept coming up empty-handed.

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After checking into a nice hotel (“Nicer places have their own security which increases your safety,” Nichols explained when I objected to the cost), I discovered that the team was picking up the cost of a suite for us to share. Although the view out the windows was probably fantastic due to the height of the building, Nichols insisted that the curtains stay drawn. He was taking no chances and we settled in to wait out the evening with room service and pay-

per-view. Once we settled on a suitably distracting action-adventure neither of us had watched yet, I finally managed to push the whole situation to the back of my mind.

Unfortunately, I had a new concern to take its place—my growing attraction to Nichols. From what little I had gleaned so far, we liked the same foods and movies, so spending time with him should be no problem if I could convince my cock to stop getting its hopes up. I had absolutely no business acting on any desires I felt, especially when those desires were for my (probably straight) bodyguard. But every time he laughed, I smiled, and when he kicked back on the couch and put his feet on the table I fought myself not to lean closer and join him. When the movie finished I set a land-speed record getting myself out of the room and behind closed doors where I quickly and silently relieved the pressure that had built up behind my zipper during the evening. And if the vision in my mind had Jamison Nichols' face and body, that was my problem and no one else's.

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Practice for the next three days was ordinary, and the upcoming game was against the last-ranked team in our division, so there was little to no press hanging around and even fewer distractions from my two problems. Sharing space with Nichols was making me crazy—every time I turned around he was right there, within my personal boundaries, practically breathing down my neck whenever we left the hotel suite. But even worse was the time we spent together in the suite every night, filled with movies we both enjoyed and Nichols' funny stories about his very close family and growing up on a farm. I liked him a lot—he had a sense of humor and a protective streak a mile wide, not to mention his gorgeous ass. However, I still feared my secret escaping, so I tried to keep my hands to myself. That battle was finally lost on the fourth night in our hotel room, though.

Tired from hours of drills and running, passing the ball and taking hits, I fell asleep on the couch as we waited for room service to deliver our nightly meal. Sound asleep, I let my guard down so completely that when Nichols leaned over to wake me up, I thought I was still dreaming and grabbed that ass that was haunting my sleep. “Shit! Sorry, Nichols, I was...”

He cut off my stammering with a grin. “Don’t you think it’s about time you call me Jamie?” he asked. “After all, if we’re on close enough terms for you to grab my ass, I think we are past the last-names stage of our relationship. Don’t you, Davin?”

I’m sure my mouth was gaping open. I’m not sure what I expected, a punch, maybe? Or at the very least an order not to do that again, but instead he shoved my feet over and joined me on the couch with our dinners. Rather than taxing my tired brain with figuring out what had just happened, I shoveled my dinner into my mouth like a starving man and waited him out. A ringing phone ended my introspection and the look on Jamie’s face as he listened to the caller on the other end made me glad I was done eating.

“Your apartment complex reported a break-in to the police,” Jamie said as he returned to his seat next to me. “One of the empty apartments on the fourth floor opposite your unit has apparently been hosting a squatter for at least a couple of weeks, according to the detective I just spoke to.” His face looked serious and drawn, not at all his usual light expression. “There were quite a few more pictures of you and some nasty weapons as well, but the apartment was empty when the police arrived. They said he must be still in town, though, because there were newspapers from this morning open to the sports page with details about tomorrow’s game.”

I swallowed, hard, then asked him the first question that came to my mind. “Do the police think he will target me at the game?”

“They do. They want you to keep your eyes open for anyone out of place or that looks familiar whenever you aren’t actually on the field. They said the escalation is such that they expect this case to break this weekend. They don’t think that with his mental state he can stay hidden any longer.”

“That’s good, right? The police will catch him, and we can both go back to our normal lives. I’m sure someone is waiting at home for you...” My babbling trailed off as Jamie’s face continued to look serious, worried... and sad?

“Someone like this, an obsessed stalker, is often mentally disturbed. Capturing them without anyone getting injured is extremely difficult. I’m

concerned that you'll get hurt in the process. I cannot protect you once we get to the stadium and you leave the locker room. That's a lot of time in the public eye." Jamie looked down at his fingers, as if he couldn't stand to look me in the eye as he continued to speak. "And although I will be thrilled to know you are safe once we catch this fucker, I don't want to leave you."

The silence stretched out between us as I tried to fit his words into a framework my brain could understand. Finally, I reached out and placed my hand on his cheek, turning him to face me. "What are you saying, Jamie?"

"I'm saying I want you." No longer was there any confusion as to what I saw in his eyes. Lust and desire shone in them as he looked me over, slowly, letting me see how he felt. He was no longer hiding from me. My shock only lasted a few seconds as he continued. "I've wanted you since we met, but I was never sure which team you played for, if you know what I mean. You do a great job of acting asexual and not interested in anyone at all, but when you grabbed me earlier I saw a glimpse of the real you. I don't want to chance something terrible happening tomorrow without telling you how I feel." He leaned toward me slowly, giving me plenty of time to back away. Instead I met him in the middle, crushing his mouth with my own, letting go of all my inhibitions for this one beautiful moment, suspended in time. No more words were needed as we devoured each other in long, glorious kisses, twining tongues and learning each other's mouths.

When we broke away for necessary breaths, I moved closer on the couch, reaching for Jamie's hands with mine. "It's been a long time since I dared to touch another man... not since college..."

"Will you tell me what happened? What made you so skittish and made you hide yourself away from the world?"

As my thoughts went back to that time, I shivered a little, but began my story. "His name was Jeffrey and he was my roommate through four years of college. He was the experienced one, and after about three weeks of living together, one night we got drunk and I let him seduce me. At first I was just one of many for him; he was a partier and I was satisfied with studying, football, and Jeffrey. After our second year of school, though, he settled down some, and after a while we were exclusive.

“We had planned to move away together to wherever I played football, but the week of graduation, everything changed. His father came into town, and I don’t think Jeffrey thought he would even come to the ceremony—much less show up at our apartment—but he somehow talked himself into the building and got into our room. I guess the super let him in—he paid Jeff’s bills, so his name was on the lease as well—but, well, he walked in on us.

“He blew a gasket, spewing filth like I never heard before. Most of it was aimed at me, but plenty of shit went Jeff’s way, too. He apparently didn’t like gays, blacks, scholarship recipients, football players, or anything else he thought he could label me as, while Jeffrey was the victim of my terrible wiles one moment and an evil changeling the next. Because of course, his *perfect* son couldn’t be fucking the poor black kid.

“The whole time we scrambled into clothing he kept getting louder and closer until he was literally spitting in my face with every word. I finally stiff-armed him off me but he continued to rant until Jeff pulled him into the other room and, I guess, talked him down. I didn’t see his father after that, but two days later, Jeff walked off the stage after graduation and I never saw or heard from him again. His things were gone when I reached our apartment, his cell was disconnected, and his mail came back *address unknown*. I just chose to throw myself into playing football and stay away from people as much as I could; it seemed safer.”

“Lord, Davin, I can’t imagine how difficult that all was, and for him to then disappear without a word... no wonder you’ve been so closed off to other chances. Was he your first?” I nodded and Jamie went on, lightly running his fingers over my skull and down my neck to my shoulders. “Come here, then, and let me love on you a while. I think you could use some human touch.” He massaged my shoulders for a few minutes, then slid his hands under my shirt and lifted it over my head. After maneuvering me until I was lying flat, face down on the couch, he continued to rub my shoulders and upper back. “Hold that thought,” he said as he walked into his room, returning after a few minutes with a towel and a bottle of oil. After massaging me into a limp puddle, he tugged at the waistband of my sweats. “Lift your hips and let me do your lower half, too.”



“Is that your subtle way of getting me to strip?” I was so relaxed my words slurred, but his laugh let me know that Jamie understood me.

“Of course,” he said, as he stretched out over me, chest to back, skin to skin, and whispered in my ear. “All I’ve wanted since we met is to get my hands on all those lovely muscles.”

I could feel myself smile in a way that felt almost foreign, as if I’d worn a mask for so long that I had forgotten what my real expressions felt like. “I almost swallowed my tongue at the team meeting when I realized you were going to be spending all this time alone with me. I never imagined it would turn out like this, though.”

“Tell me what you want,” Jamie whispered, as his tongue delved into the shell of my ear and his breath made shivers run up my spine. “Anything you want, anything at all, if it is in my power I’ll give it to you.”

“Make love to me, make me forget, give me some good memories.”

“Oh, I can do that.” His growl in my ear doubled the gooseflesh on my torso and for a few seconds I doubted my decision, but as he covered me with kisses and little nips I stopped thinking and just let myself feel. The slickness of the oil between our bodies smoothed his way as he slid over me, sliding down until he reached my feet, then working his way back up, massaging every inch of skin in between. He paid special attention to my ass, kneading the globes and wedging his body between my legs as he slicked his fingers. “One last chance to back out, no harm, no foul,” he offered, leaning over me to reach my lips. A biting kiss was my answer and he grinned as he tore open a condom and smoothed it on. Jamie took his time loosening me up with his fingers, slowly driving me crazy with his touch. When I was rocking back and forth between his hand and the couch cushions, he pulled back and lifted my hips, positioned his hard cock against my opening and pressed into me. Slowly, so slowly, but inexorably he gained ground, little by little until his hips were fitted against me.

“So full...” I murmured.

“So tight...” he whispered back.

“Move,” I demanded, and he laughed, lightening the mood and doing as I requested. As we found a rhythm that worked for us, he reached around and



fisted my cock, stroking me hard and fast in time with his strokes. A few more pulls and I erupted in his hand, biting the pillow beneath me to muffle my sounds. Jamie thrust a few more times, and then stuttered to a stop. I craned my neck to watch his face as he came. His gorgeous green eyes were shut tight and his head thrown back in ecstasy; the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

“Too sore?” he asked as he came down from his peak and pulled away, taking care of the condom and wiping up our mess with the towel.

“Just right,” I answered his sly grin with one of my own and we both laughed. That was another thing Jamie had brought into my life, it seemed. Even with the stalker threat hanging over my head, he found a way to amuse me.

“Good, ’cause I’m not done with you yet! I want you inside me this time.” And my cock immediately perked up at the thought of being inside Jamie. As we moved to Jamie’s room, kissing and stumbling over furniture on the way, all I could wonder is how I got this lucky.

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The next morning I could certainly feel the unexpected exercise in my normally unused muscles, but the soreness only made me grin. A shared shower and power breakfast later, Jamie and I were once again headed to the stadium, this time for the pre-game meet and greet. Jamie’s expression dimmed and he sat straighter and more alert as each mile passed and we came closer to the event. No longer the laughing lover, my bodyguard was again on high alert. The mood in the automobile was grim, as if we both felt a premonition of danger, yet could do nothing to change the outcome.

We left the underground parking garage slowly, Jamie checking each corridor before allowing me to proceed, but it turned out that the real danger was inside waiting for me. As I began circling the room, shaking hands with the ticket-holders that had been allowed inside, I heard a loud pop and a sudden shove took me to the floor. Jamie screamed, “Look out!” and people started yelling and running in all directions. Jamie covered me with his body, but I could tell something was wrong with his breathing. A ranting madman stood over us and I could see the gun in his hand.

“You killed my boy! It’s your fault my Jeffrey is dead and now you will be, too! Stupid fag, making my Jeffrey sick and like you! No one like you should be allowed to live!” Variations on a theme kept pouring out of the mouth of the man standing above me. His eyes looked crazed and I hoped everyone else in the room had gotten out; he didn’t seem to care if other people got hurt, not with the way he waved the gun around and randomly pulled the trigger. I heard sirens in the distance and wondered if an ambulance was coming for Jamie; he was completely still on top of me, but I could still feel his chest moving, so I hoped he was just passed out. I worried, though, that help wouldn’t reach us in time as the crazy man began kicking at us. He was trying to get Jamie off me so that he could have a clear shot, I suppose, but his manic movements were not having much effect. I stayed still and quiet, hoping to hear the police entering the room soon, wanting to protect Jamie but knowing there was nothing I could do. As the police entered through all the available doors, the stalker whirled around, shooting wildly again and again until the gun started to click uselessly. At that moment, three policemen charged from various directions and took him to the floor. As I watched from my prone position, they cuffed him, checked for more weapons and hauled him away. A sigh of relief left my lips, quickly followed by a cry for help.

“Please, someone check on Jamie!” I helplessly waited as an ambulance crew pulled him off me, onto a gurney, and away from the room. As the police detective asked me questions, my mind was on Jamie’s fate, wondering if his injuries were fatal or if he would soon be guarding another would-be victim.

The detective confirmed what the ranting man had said. My former roommate was deceased. Three years earlier he was found in a Chicago cruising spot, overdosed on heroin, and after the autopsy, found to be HIV positive. Apparently, Jeffrey went back to his old partying ways after school and ended up dead. Why his father fixated on me as the cause I might never know, but he decided that it was certainly my fault and that I needed to pay for his son’s death.

Certain that any secrets I had would be coming out in the newspapers or in a future court case, I took a proactive stance and went to Coach first. I explained my relationship with Jeffrey and now with Jamie, and let him talk to

the team owners as I went to the hospital to see Jamie. There would not be a game today, not after a shooting at the stadium.

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All the way to the hospital I worried. Would Jamie be all right? Would he want to see me now? I hoped last night hadn't been a one-off. If my secrets were coming out anyway, at least I would have a chance to be honest about what I wanted. In a way, my stalker had done me a favor. Without this whole screwed-up situation, I never would have found the courage to go for what I truly needed and I never would have met Jamie. I could feel a hole open up inside me at the thought of losing him. I needed Jamie more than ever now. I needed him by my side as I came clean with the fans and my teammates.

The receptionist at the information desk was kind and told me how to slip through a back hall to Jamie's room. She told me that visiting hours would be over soon, but to feel free to stay until asked to leave. With my heart in my throat, I slipped around the press downstairs and knocked on his door. The strength of Jamie's voice as he gave permission for me to enter gave me hope. The first words out of his mouth confirmed it. "I'm fine, just a flesh wound and a headache."

"Thank God! I was terrified that you were badly hurt." The first deep breath I'd taken in hours, it seemed filled my lungs. I sat down next to Jamie's bedside and grasped his hand. His mischievous smile and twinkling eyes told me more than his words; he was glad to see me, too.

"Beware! We will soon be invaded by my family—the hospital called them when I was admitted and the horde will soon be here, I'm sure. If you want to escape the inquisition, you probably shouldn't stay." His concern for me was sweet but unnecessary.

"Oh, no. I'm not leaving you alone. I told Coach and left it up to him to fill in the team, but by this time tomorrow I expect "Pro Athlete – GAY!" will fill the headlines. The press was all over the place as the police dragged Jeffrey's father away and I'm sure they are frantically filing stories as we speak. I don't think I have anything left to hide." I leaned over and kissed an unbandaged spot on his head. "As close as we both were to the end of life today, I think I'll take my chances with your family if it means I'm with you."

Jamie's sweet smile was all the answer I needed as he dozed off. I had no idea what tomorrow would bring, but for now, I was content. With Jamie by my side, I could face the world.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*I am a thirty-five-year-old stay-at-home mother that homeschools four children, so is there any wonder that I live in my head so much of the time? The characters in there are so much more interesting! Occasionally a few of them insist on leaving my head and being put down on paper, so others can meet them, too. I am grateful to the Goodreads M/M Romance Group for giving their stories a place to be told. You can find me reading frequently and on Goodreads all the time (I'm a reading challenge addict!) or contact me at the email below.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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# STRAIGHT MEN CAN'T COOK

By Anna Birmingham

## Photo Description

A cute twenty-something guy with damp blond hair chops vegetables in his kitchen. His only clothing is a towel wrapped around his middle.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I'm running out of time to prepare something delicious, errr... edible for my date. I mean, friend. I mean... Okay, okay, I had a bet with a friend, whom I've been infatuated with since... forever! We've been roommates in college. He's an out and proud and smart gay guy. But not so smart since he never figured out my secret or that I've been lusting after him all those time we've been roomies.*

*Anyway, we haven't seen each other since college days and yesterday I bumped into him at the supermarket. I was there helping my pregnant neighbor with groceries and he with his own list to buy. He just moved a few blocks down from my place. We talked while queuing to pay, and I don't know how he turned up challenging me to prove that straight men can cook. It just did. I'm not straight. And I can't cook. And why the hell did I have to prove anything to him?*

*Please help me out with this. And if you can somehow make him eat his words, or eat me, I would be delighted!*

Sincerely,

Didi

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** college graduates, light hearted, in the closet, secret crush, friends to lovers, clueless male, shameless use of pop culture references

**Wordcount:** 9,439

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# STRAIGHT MEN CAN'T COOK

**By Anna Birmingham**

“Nice melons.”

I jumped as the husky voice whispered in my ear and almost caused me to drop the fruit I held.

“Sorry?”

I turned to look at the owner of the voice and promptly did a double take: the last person on earth I expected to see in the produce aisle of my local grocery store. “Tristan?” I said in disbelief. “Damn, I haven’t seen you... wow, it must be nearly three years?”

“Two years and nine months.” Tristan flicked his long, dark hair out of his eyes with a grin. “But what’s a couple months between friends?”

We did the manly embrace thing—or actually he did, since my hands were occupied with two rather large cantaloupes.

“You’re looking good, Russ,” Tristan said, as his green eyes raked over my body.

I felt a familiar heat rush through me, a heat that I hadn’t felt for nearly three years and had hoped I would never feel again.

“Uh... thanks. You too.”

Tristan lifted an eyebrow and cocked his hip out. “Think so?”

He laughed at my expression and smacked the back of his hand against my chest. “Dude, I’m only messing with you. I know I look good.”

He was right; he always looked good, and nothing had changed. I first met Tristan during my sophomore year at college when we roomed together for six months. I recalled being somewhat nervous to meet my new roommate, because my previous one had been a complete psycho. Tristan had opened the door to me wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung, faded Levi’s. I had gawped at the vision of perfect manhood standing before me, all tall and lean with dark hair flopping into his eyes. I told myself that I wasn’t attracted, just

admiring his physique. I studied biology at college, so being interested in anatomy was natural, or so I had convinced myself at the time.

“You must be Russell,” he had said, extending a hand and breaking the silence. “Pleasure. I’m Tristan.”

The pleasure had been all mine, but I had never told him that. I had never told anyone what I truly thought of Tristan McDonald.

I had known who he was before I took the room. It was no secret that the guy was gay but even if I hadn’t known, the posters of half-naked men on the walls had been a bit of a giveaway.

“Do you mind?” Tristan had asked, gesturing at said naked beefcake.

“No, not at all,” I had replied.

And I didn’t mind, not in the slightest. But none of the guys on the walls had been half as hot as Tristan, in my humble opinion. The guy was plain gorgeous, and he knew it, and used it. He wasn’t one of those effeminate gays, he was simply... eccentric. It wasn’t unusual to find Tristan doing an impromptu strip tease in the student bar on a Friday night, twirling his shirt above his head as he gyrated on a table top. He drew the attention of every girl and guy in the place with his fun-loving spirit. That’s just the way he was. He was smart and cute and everyone adored him.

Me? I was just plain Joe Average. I played some football, but never made the team. I was kind of smart, but never won a scholarship or even a spelling bee. I liked computers but had never learned to program. I was average height with average dark-blond hair and average brown eyes. I would say that perhaps my body bordered on “good” and girls seemed to like me, but generally I just drifted along with the crowd and struggled to make my mark on the world.

Back in college, Tristan and I seemed to operate at opposite ends of the spectrum. Our worlds didn’t cross much and often the only times I would actually see Tristan would be first thing in the morning when I got up early to go for a run, and he was still sleeping. He was never in bed before two am, so I rarely saw him before I hit the sack.



We had coexisted perfectly happily for the months we roomed together. To be honest, I was a little in awe of Tristan. I'd never met someone so completely at home with who they were and where they wanted to be, gay or straight. The fact that he had a banging body, too, was just plain unfair.

Now as we stood in the grocery store, I was once more struck dumb while Tristan grinned at me. I stared blankly back, desperately trying to think of something witty to say to keep him here, talking to me.

"Do... do these feel ripe to you?" I thrust the two cantaloupes at his chest and he reached out automatically to grab them before they fell.

His hands ran over the rough flesh, gently squeezing and stroking them. It was pretty sensuous and I gave myself a mental slap. Since when had touching fruit become erotic? I was clearly not getting out enough. Tristan watched me watching him and his lips quirked in amusement. "You should know that I'm hardly qualified to comment on these things... but they seem fine to me."

"Thanks." I took the melons back and gently placed them in my shopping cart.

"You're welcome."

I watched him again, wondering what conspiracy had brought him back into my life. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Shopping," Tristan said, lifting up his basket.

I rolled my eyes. "I know that, dumbass. I meant *here* here."

Tristan smirked. "Yeah, like that's so much clearer. But I know what you mean. I live here now. Moved into a place off Philly Avenue a couple of weeks back."

"Really? You're not far from me."

"Excellent. So Russ, what about you? You working?"

"Yeah, down in D.C."

Tristan nodded. "Me too. Still playing football?"

"Sometimes."

"Married? Kids?"

“Nope. Neither,” I said with a smile, just as Lauren appeared at my side and dropped a bag of apples into the cart.

“Ah, you got the melons. Good,” she said.

Her eyes immediately locked onto Tristan and she gave him a slow up and down. I knew what she was thinking because I’d seen it a million times before. Yes, the guy was a walking wet dream. Think Adam Levine crossed with Channing Tatum, with a bit of Matt Bomer thrown in for good measure.

“Russ, who’s your friend?”

I made the obligatory introduction. “Lauren, this is Tristan. We roomed together at UMCP for a while.”

Lauren nodded and held out her hand.

Tristan took it and pressed it to his lips with a wink. “Pleasure.”

Lauren practically melted into the floor.

Tristan pulled back and his eyes dropped to her very pregnant belly. “Wow! Look at you, girl!” He cocked his head at me. “Are you guilty?”

“Guilty? What? No. NO! Lauren’s my neighbor. I’m just helping her out by being the chivalrous gentleman in her current situation, carrying heavy bags, you know.”

“I do.”

Lauren peered into Tristan’s shopping basket. “That’s a lot of healthy stuff you have in there,” she noted with approval. “You like cooking?”

That’s something I’ve always disliked about supermarket shopping: the way you can be judged for what you have in your basket. So I had a shitty day and have a cart full of Doritos and Ben & Jerry’s; that doesn’t make me a slob. Well, I kind of am, but that’s not the point.

“Russ here wouldn’t know a healthy meal if it jumped up and bit him on the ass,” Lauren continued, smiling up at me affectionately.

“Yes, I do seem to recall a lot of trips to Taco Bell when we were at college. Beefy 5-Layer Burrito with extra cheese, wasn’t it? Usually for breakfast,” Tristan added with a grin.

Lauren gave a mock shudder.

“And he can make a pizza last for three days.”

“Ugh. All that saturated fat.”

Tristan laughed. “Tell me about it. Terrible, isn’t he?”

“Terrible.”

My head swiveled between them, like I was watching a tennis match. “Uh, hello? I *am* here, you know?”

“We know. But come on, Russ. When was the last time you cooked? And I don’t mean reheating last night’s takeout,” Lauren said.

“Cook. You know, with a pan, ingredients, vegetables...” Tristan gestured at the produce around us.

Lauren snickered.

I bristled with indignation. “Hey! I can cook, you know.”

“Really?” Lauren said.

“Yes! I made... uh... pancakes the other morning.”

Lauren patted my shoulder. “Oh, honey. Mixing powder and water together doesn’t constitute cooking.”

“It doesn’t?”

Tristan laughed and shifted his grocery basket to the other hand. “Don’t worry, Russ, it’s a well-known phenomenon. Straight men can’t cook.”

“What? Hang on, I’m not... I mean I CAN cook!” I insisted.

Tristan bit his lip and looked at me thoughtfully. “Prove it,” he said.

I blinked. “I don’t have to prove anything.”

“Okay. If you say so.”

“I don’t. I mean, I do. I mean...”

Tristan just cocked an eyebrow at me. “Dude, I saw you eat a year’s supply of Ramen noodles in a month. Remember that?”

Well, they had been on sale at the local discount store. What was a poor student to do?

“That was food. Noodles are real food.”

“Not the way you ate them.”

“Fine,” I threw up my hands in defeat as Lauren and Tristan exchanged a triumphant look. “What do I have to do?”

“Make a real dinner. From scratch. No microwaves, no mixes, no pre-packaged meals,” Lauren said, ticking the requirements off on her fingers.

“Okay,” I sighed. “When should I make you this culinary masterpiece?”

“Not me.” Lauren pointed at Tristan. “Him.”

Tristan looked smug and winked at me. I’m not going to even begin to explain what that did to me.

“I’m game, Chef,” he said. “Your place or mine?”

“But... but...” I looked at Lauren helplessly.

She backed away with her hands in the air. “Oh, hell no, I’m not eating your food. Pregnant woman with heartburn? Not on your life.”

“I’m free tomorrow night,” Tristan said. “That’ll give me a whole day to recover.”

I gave him a withering look. “Glad you have so much confidence in me.”

Tristan put his grocery basket on the floor and pulled out his cell phone with a flourish. “Give me your number, Russ. No way are you ducking out of this one.”

I sighed again and reeled off my number. A few seconds later my own cell pinged in the back pocket of my jeans and I knew I had Tristan’s number, too.

“Oh, one more thing,” Tristan said. “I’m a vegetarian.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “Great, so I can’t even grill a steak. Can’t believe you don’t eat meat.”

Tristan dropped his eyes to my crotch and gave me a leer. “I didn’t say I don’t eat meat. I’m just a vegetarian.”

I felt my face flush and heard Lauren snort behind me. “Oh, I’m so gonna like you,” she said.

And so the challenge was set. Tristan had somehow invited himself over to my place tomorrow night and I had just over twenty-four hours to think of something *vegetarian* to cook for him. No pressure, then. I followed Lauren to the checkouts, taking one last glance at Tristan over my shoulder. He waved at me and disappeared in the direction of the deli counter. I couldn't believe that I had been maneuvered into this situation and had to spend an evening alone with Tristan, a guy that I had more than a passing interest in. And I wasn't into guys. I wasn't.

If I kept telling myself that then I was sure I'd be okay.

To be completely honest, Tristan wasn't the first guy who had made my body react in the way that it had, but he was definitely the one who had had the most prolonged effect. I'd managed to ignore my feelings during college and had dated girl after girl—it had been pretty easy, after all. Girls were cute and I liked being with them, so it was the obvious choice for someone like me. I fully intended to keep it that way.

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That night I had a dream about Tristan: a dark, sensuous and erotic dream, which involved the two of us writhing against each other, all hot and sweaty; naked limbs intertwined, heavy breaths ghosting across damp skin. I awoke with a start, my heart hammering as waves of pleasure rolled over me again and again. As I gasped for breath, I slid my hand down to my boxers and, just as expected, encountered wet and sticky fabric. Oh, hell. My other arm flopped across my face as I lay there in disbelief. I hadn't had a wet dream in years.

It was the middle of the night and everything was deathly quiet outside. I flung the covers off the bed and padded cautiously to my bathroom. I flicked on the light and tried not to notice the post-orgasmic flush on my cheeks or the slight tremble to my hands. I peeled off my damp boxers and flung them into the laundry basket before cleaning myself up. Damn it, I needed to find a new girlfriend, and fast. I didn't want to feel this way about Tristan, I really didn't, but it seemed like my body had different ideas.

I splashed cold water over my face and finally looked at myself in the mirror, taking in my messy dark blond hair and slightly hazy brown eyes.

Could Tristan tell that I had all these erotic feelings about him? That I thought about him naked and yearned to touch him, or have him touch me? Part of me desperately wanted to find out if the reality was half as good as the fantasy, but the other half of me was scared as hell, wondering if I dared to cross the line in the true light of day and dive into those dark, sensuous dreams for real.

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My disturbed night meant that I overslept the following day and didn't wake up until nearly noon.

"Fuck!" I scrambled out of bed and glared at the clock, as if it were somehow to blame for my tardiness. I was instantly on edge because I still needed to go back to the grocery store and pick up some stuff for dinner—that was, *after* I had decided what to make.

I flipped open my laptop and scoured the internet for easy vegetarian recipes. It wasn't as simple as I thought. Even the so-called easy ones looked complicated to someone whose idea of fine dining meant having wine with their chicken nuggets rather than beer. How much of asparagus was the tip? And what the hell did *al dente* mean? Scrunching my fingers into my hair in frustration, I admitted defeat and reached for the phone.

"Russell! How nice to hear from you. I didn't realize it was Tuesday?"

It wasn't, but I always called my mom on a Tuesday. Just one of things she seems to find amusing about me.

"No, Mom, it's Saturday. And I'm fine, thanks for asking."

We exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes before I finally got to the point of the call. "Mom, look, I need your help. I... uh... kind of agreed to cook dinner for a... friend tonight."

I heard my mom laugh, which she tried to disguise with a cough. Badly. "Cook? Oh my goodness, does this friend know what they are doing?"

I rolled my eyes at the ceiling. "Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence, Mom. Thing is, they're vegetarian and I don't know what to do. Can you help me?"

"Is this a date?" my mom asked hopefully. "It's about time you found

someone else. I knew that Stacey wasn't right for you. There must be plenty of lovely girls out there looking for a nice boy like you."

Nice boy, yeah, that was me. Just nice. "Uh... I'm sure there are, but no, not a date. Only a friend."

"Oh." My mom sounded disappointed. "Well, never mind. There's still time."

"Yes, anyway, what can I make?" I said. "Something simple that even I can't f... I mean mess up."

"Vegetarian pizza? Egg fried rice? Kebabs? You should be able to manage that; just chop up some veggies, skewer and grill them. Maybe make some rice, too?"

That sounded promising and not too tricky.

"This must be a very good friend if you're going to all this trouble, Russell," my mom continued.

"I... ah... well, kinda."

"I hope she appreciates it."

"Hope so." I didn't bother to correct her on her assumption. "So, tell me more about these kebab thingies. What do I need?"

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Some time later, I was back in my apartment with bags of groceries dumped haphazardly all over the small kitchen table. Tristan was due to come over around six pm, so I still had a couple of hours to prepare myself—and my culinary masterpiece.

I took the world's quickest shower and returned to the kitchen with just a towel wrapped around my waist. I chopped up the vegetables as my mother had instructed, then set about cleaning up the kitchen. I was assuming that Tristan would prefer to eat at the table, rather than sprawled on the sofa in front of the TV like I usually did.

Two hours to go.

I decided to vacuum the living room, just in case Tristan hung around after dinner. I figured I should really clean the bathroom, too, if I wanted him to

think I had grown up a bit since we had left college and didn't still leave my underwear on the floor. Even if I did, most days.

Ninety minutes to go.

I rummaged through my closet, trying to find something half-decent to wear. Where had all of my clothes gone?

Sixty minutes to go.

I scrubbed my hands through my hair as four discarded outfits lay crumpled on the bed. Why the hell couldn't I find something to wear? I finally decided on my favorite pair of jeans and a black henley. Didn't want him to think I was trying too hard. After all, this wasn't a date or anything.

Thirty minutes to go.

I went back into the kitchen and began stabbing skewers through the veggies I had chopped earlier. I nearly blinded myself when the juice from a cherry tomato squirted into my eye. Cursing loudly, I went into the bathroom to wash my eye, then swore again as I saw the splatter of seeds all over my shirt. I scrambled to change and the black henley got replaced by a brown one.

Ten minutes to go.

I realized I hadn't turned on the damned grill, so I rushed out to my tiny balcony to fire up the gas. Fuck, I needed a drink. I popped a can of Bud from the fridge and sank down into one of the kitchen chairs.

At exactly six pm, my doorbell rang.

I clumsily put the Bud down, not caring when the beer foamed over the top and spilled onto the table. I paused for a breath before opening the door.

Tristan was lounging against the doorframe, looking like he had stepped from the pages of *GQ*. He was dressed in snug jeans and a white button-down shirt, his dark hair all floppy and gleaming. He looked amazing as usual.

"Well, hello there, handsome," he said with a grin, taking in my appearance as he thrust a six-pack of beer into my arms.

I snorted in response and juggled the box while trying to prop open the door. "Hi yourself... want to come in?"



“Guess that’d be a good start.” Tristan winked at me and tapped the pack of beer as he passed. “Still drinking Bud, I assume?”

I nodded in the direction of the can on the table, swimming in its own little pool of beer. “Uh huh. Old habits die hard.”

I wrestled the bottles of beer into my fridge and watched Tristan out of the corner of my eye.

He pushed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and wandered across the kitchen to look out of the window, taking in the view of the park across the street. “Nice place.”

“Yeah, it’s okay I guess.” I lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Silver Spring, not far from where we had once gone to college. “At least I know the area. Where to go, where to avoid and so on.”

“True.” Tristan turned to look at me and flicked his hair out of his eyes. “Where did you put the beers, Russ? Can’t a poor thirsty guest get a drink around here? Do you know it took me all of twenty minutes to walk to your place? In this heat! What kind of a host are you?”

It couldn’t have been more than fifty degrees outside and I opened my mouth to protest, but on seeing the sparkle in Tristan’s eyes, closed it again. I laughed nervously and fetched him a bottle from the fridge, popping the cap before I handed it to him. “Need some liquid courage before tasting my cooking, huh?”

Tristan grinned around the top of the bottle before downing a mouthful and wiping his lips with the back of his hand. “Nah, if I was that worried I’d have brought tequila.”

A memory from my college days popped into my brain and I felt my cheeks flush in embarrassment. “Aw, hell.”

Tristan saluted me with his bottle and raised an eyebrow. He clearly remembered. It had been the night after my finals and there had been a tequila promotion in the student bar. I had taken full advantage of that fact and consumed at least one too many shots, eventually passing out on the floor of the men’s bathroom. Allegedly, Tristan and some of my football buddies had

carried me back to our dorm room, where I had promptly stripped naked, told everyone I loved them and climbed into Tristan's bed. No one had the heart to move me when I'd started snoring immediately and I didn't stir for fourteen hours. Of course, I don't remember any of this, apart from the waking up in a strange bed. My friends had gleefully filled me in, probably with countless embellishments, and I'd never touched tequila since.

A horrible thought suddenly occurred to me and my eyes snapped to Tristan's face. "I didn't... uh... throw up, did I? That night?"

Tristan cradled his beer in his hands and watched me in amusement. "Nope, don't think so."

"Thank god." I slumped against the kitchen counter. "I can't think of anything worse."

Tristan just smiled and took another mouthful of beer. "So, speaking of barfing, what delights are you cooking for me tonight? Tempted though I was to stop at Chipotle on the way over, I figured I'd give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Geez, thanks for the reassurance." I lifted the cover off of the kebabs and crooked my finger at him. "Come see. These look okay, don't they?"

I was achingly aware of how close he was as he leaned over my shoulder. I could smell the subtle scent of his cologne and feel the warmth radiating off him. I did all I could to ignore the flush of heat to my body and tried to suppress the urge to shiver. I moved slightly away to give him more space.

Tristan nodded in approval and poked a finger at a green pepper. "So far, so good, but you haven't actually cooked anything yet, pal."

"I'm confident," I said, although I wasn't. At all.

We talked a little about what we had been up to since college, people we had kept in touch with and so on.

"You ever see Kathy Conrad these days?" Tristan asked me.

"Oh, hell no. We only dated for a couple of months 'til she moved on to the quarterback. I think I was her in," I added, taking a swallow of beer.

“Oh, come on now, Mr. Optimistic! You’re not that bad.” Tristan slapped my arm and I felt the tingle all the way to my groin. He had always been a very touchy-feely guy. How could I have forgotten? “Apparently, your friendly quarterback got her pregnant shortly after graduation and they now live up near Baltimore. With twins.”

“Twins? Oh, boy.”

“Actually, two of them. Minor detail.” Tristan grinned at me.

“Great.”

“So, no girlfriend, huh? I always figured you for the type to be married with kids by twenty-five.”

“Me? I dunno. My mom would love it, but I don’t really see it yet. One day, maybe, but there’s still so much I want to do first.” *Like you*, said a little voice in my head. I quickly smothered it under a virtual pillow and sat on it, hard. “So, enough about me; what about you? I could never keep up with all the men you were or weren’t dating.”

Tristan leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. “What can I say? I enjoyed my college time very much.” He closed his eyes and smiled. “Happy days.”

He stretched his legs out and I was hyperaware that I only had to move my knee an inch and we would be touching. “So... you seeing anyone right now?”

Tristan opened one eye and squinted at me. “Don’t think so.”

I blinked. “You don’t think so? Don’t you know?”

Tristan shrugged. “I kinda had a thing going with a guy in D.C. for a while. You ever see them dancers, the DC Cowboys?”

“Weren’t they on *American Idol* or something?”

“Or something. Anyway, I dated one of them for a while. Just a casual thing. We hooked up here and there.”

My eyes bugged out. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“But those guys are smoking hot! How did you...?” I stopped suddenly as I realized both what I had said and what I had implied about him.

Tristan caught his lower lip in his teeth and held back a laugh. “Smoking hot, indeed, Russ.”

Crap.

“Uh... I guess I should start cooking?” I grabbed the plate of kebabs and went outside to check the heat on the grill before I said anything else to embarrass myself.

I heard the door slide shut as Tristan followed me and once again peered over my shoulder. “I have to say, they look pretty good,” he said.

“Yeah, say that after you’ve eaten them.”

He laughed and lounged on the railing, rolling his beer between his hands. “I have some confidence that even you can’t fuck this up. You did say you could cook—even if I don’t believe you. But what is there to do, anyway? Just grill them, job done.” He swallowed another mouthful of beer and nodded at me. “And get to it. I’m hungry.”

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Despite all my concerns, the meal didn’t turn out as badly as I feared. The peppers got a little too charred and the rice was a little too sticky—but it was edible and we ate it. I made a mental note to call my mom again the next day to let her know that I had pulled it off. Martha Stewart I may not be, but at least I hadn’t poisoned my guest. Tristan had even complimented me on how evenly I had chopped the vegetables. Okay, so he didn’t comment on how delicious the food was, but at least he didn’t gag when he ate it. I considered that a success.

Tristan stacked the dishes in the dishwasher after dinner while I washed the pans. As I lay the last one to drain and dried off my hands, I could feel the moment coming where he would either leave, or I could ask him to stay. It was almost nine o’clock so I could understand if he wanted to head off and hit the clubs or a bar, pick up some guy, and take him home. I didn’t want to think about that too much; I was enjoying his company more than I cared to admit, and I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to him just yet. Yes, I had cooked for him tonight as a challenge, but it wasn’t really about the food anymore.

I dropped the towel on the counter and turned to face him. Tristan had propped his ass against the kitchen table and was chewing on his thumb nail, watching me.

“So... guess we’re done?” I said.

“Yep, guess so.” Tristan replied. He pulled his thumb from his mouth and pushed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans.

“You gonna head out?”

Tristan shrugged. “Hadn’t planned to.”

I seized the moment. “Or... do you want to hang here for a while? Watch a movie or something?”

Tristan smiled and nodded slowly. “Sure. Sounds great. I’d love to.”

I almost sagged in relief that the night wasn’t over. “Great! Grab us some more beers and go in there,” I gestured over my shoulder at the living area. “I’ve just gotta go piss.”

I heard Tristan laugh as I went into the bathroom and shut the door. I took a deep breath and leaned my hands on the counter, looking at myself in the mirror. My eyes were too bright, my cheeks were flushed and I could feel my stomach squirming. Was I actually turned on by thought of watching a movie with this guy, in my apartment, sitting on the same couch? Or was it just the beer and my bad cooking making me feel that way? The anticipation was killing me, and it wasn’t like I had done anything, or he had done anything. I may have thought about it, but there was a world of difference between thinking and doing. Tristan may not even like me in that way, especially considering he thought I was one hundred percent straight.

I washed my face, then went back to the living room to see him sprawled on my black leather sofa, four beers lined up on the coffee table.

I cleared my throat and dragged my eyes away from the sight of his denim-clad thighs spread against the black leather. “So, what’re you in the mood for?”

He looked up at me through the hair falling into his eyes and I felt my stomach drop another couple of inches. He flicked his hair back and gave me a

stern glare, pointing a finger at me. “No mushy crap, no rom-coms and no animals. Just ‘cause I’m gay doesn’t mean I’m into chick flicks, babe.”

I smiled and sank down beside him, subtly trying to keep my distance. “Works for me. How about guns, cars and explosions?”

Tristan pursed his lips and pretended to consider this. “Are they big guns?”

“As big as you can handle,” I said, picking up the remote and turning on Netflix.

We eventually agreed on some space-aged, post-apocalyptic thing, which was entertaining enough, although I kept glancing over at Tristan way too much, watching the white and blue lights from the TV caressing his face. When the movie hero suddenly got attacked by an alien monster, it caught me off guard and made me jump.

Tristan looked over and caught my eye. “Scared, huh?” he said with a grin.

“Me? Hell no,” I scoffed.

He poked me with his foot. “Yeah, you are. I can tell.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Are too.”

I sighed and shook my head. “It’s like arguing with a five-year-old.”

Tristan looking pleased with himself, and wriggled around to get more comfortable in his corner of the sofa. I watched in fascination as his shirt rode up a little, exposing a bit of bare skin on his belly. I couldn’t take my eyes off it, wanting to stroke it and see if it was as warm and smooth as it looked.

I jumped again as Tristan suddenly snorted with laughter at something that had happened on the TV. “Shit! Russ, did you see you that? Oh boy, that was classic! I swear these people get more stupid. How the hell did they become space pirates?”

I blinked at the TV, having no idea what he was talking about. “I... no... I think I need more beer.”

I stood and went to the kitchen, my heart still racing as my mind turned over and over, refusing to ignore what my body wanted to do. I couldn’t stop

thinking about it, which was crazy. Tristan was clearly not seeing through me and was oblivious to all the turmoil I was feeling inside. Did I have the nerve to just take the plunge? I definitely needed more alcohol if I was going to even consider it.

I grabbed another couple of beers from the fridge, then hesitated, looking at the freezer. Despite only having eaten a couple of hours ago, I was starving again, so I pulled out a half-full tub of Ben & Jerry's ice cream before returning to the living room.

Tristan eyed me curiously as I put the beers down on the table, followed by the ice cream.

"What's that?" he said.

"Last time I checked, it was ice cream."

"Ice cream? With beer? Seriously?" Tristan said.

"Uh huh. Why not?"

"You are so uncouth," he said, leaning forward to peer at the tub. "Hang on, is that Cookie Dough?"

"Yep." I scooped a big lump out, curled my tongue around it and slowly sucked the ice cream off the spoon. Tristan watched me with a small smile.

"So where's my spoon?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Kitchen's in there."

He shook his head. "Some host you are... Hey! What's that?"

I automatically turned to where he was pointing, only to feel the spoon being swiftly yanked from my grip. Tristan dug into the ice cream with glee and winked at me. "Thanks."

I flopped back onto the sofa and watched as he licked ice cream off my spoon. I couldn't get over the fact that something that had been in my mouth a few seconds ago was now resting inside of his, his warm tongue sliding over where mine had been.

Tristan sucked the spoon clean and handed it back to me with a grin. "Filthy, but delicious."

I didn't trust myself to speak, just nodded and took back the spoon, pausing for a second before spooning out more ice cream and eating it slowly, savoring it with a shiver.

We watched more of the movie, quickly exhausting his supply of Bud and moving on to mine. He didn't seem in any hurry to leave, so I figured that keeping us both as fuelled up on alcohol as possible was for the best, if anything was going to... happen. On my next trip to the fridge, I pulled out some strong European beer I had been saving and dangled a bottle of it in front of Tristan's face.

He peered at the label suspiciously. "What is this shit?"

"It's Belgian. Try it."

"Belgian? Well look at you, Mister Cosmopolitan."

I laughed and popped off the caps, watching as Tristan took a small sip. "Like it?"

He smacked his lips together and smiled at me. "It'll do."

We watched the end of the movie, but I couldn't tell you what happened. Some things exploded, some bad people died, someone saved the world, yada yada. My mind was kind of occupied elsewhere. I knew that I had to do something since Tristan would no doubt be heading home soon. I was feeling a little buzzed from the alcohol and wanted it to continue. My stomach started to squirm again and as the credits rolled, I went back to the kitchen to get a refill.

Tristan eyed the beer bottle I placed in front of him on the coffee table. "Another one? If I didn't know any better I would think you were trying to get me drunk."

I laughed nervously, but didn't confirm or deny his accusation. I sat back into the sofa cushions and just looked at him.

"Well, are you?"

My eyes dropped to his mouth, lingering on the lush fullness of his lips. I couldn't stop myself from wondering what it would feel like to kiss him, hoping he would finally get the hint and make the first move.



“Russ...?” Tristan’s voice had lowered to a whisper and he licked his lips slowly.

I tore my eyes away and looked up at him, only to see him fixated on my own mouth.

“What?” I croaked. I barely noticed that I had unconsciously leaned in closer to him.

“Are you... are you trying to seduce me?” Tristan said quietly.

We locked eyes and, once again, I didn’t answer him. I couldn’t. I inched a tiny bit closer until I could feel the warmth of his breath caressing my cheeks. I closed my eyes and scooted my hand across the sofa cushion until my fingertips grazed his outer thigh.

“Oh my god... you are.” Tristan’s breath caught in his throat.

A second later I felt the sofa move as he leaned in and his lips brushed softly against mine for the first time. A low whimper escaped me as he moved his lips slowly, gently tasting me, sucking slowly and rubbing back and forth. It was intoxicating and I felt like my heart was going to explode. I slid my hand up his chest and wound it into his long, dark hair, pulling his mouth more firmly against mine. He opened his lips and I felt a bolt of lightning to my groin as our tongues swept against each other.

Tristan let out a strangled moan and pulled away slightly, pushing a hand against my chest. “Russ... wait. You sure you want this?” he asked huskily, breathing hard.

Was the guy crazy?

“Oh, hell yes,” I burst out, grabbing him back to me as fast as I could, plunging my tongue into his mouth. He kissed back with equal fervor and desperation and all I could think about was why the hell hadn’t I done this three years ago? I’d never been kissed like this in my life, with such hunger and passion. I came up for air and Tristan looked at me fiercely, eyes glittering with desire. At that moment he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and I raised my hand to cup his cheek, rubbing my thumb gently over his lips.

Tristan closed his eyes and swallowed hard before burying his face into my neck and biting, then sucking hard. He shoved me back onto the sofa and lay

on top of me, letting out an animalistic growl as he hooked a hand under one of my knees and hauled it upwards, so he could cradle himself between my thighs. He kissed me again and ground his hips down so that I could feel his erection rolling over mine. His weight above me turned me on more than I could ever have imagined. This gorgeous guy was lying on top of me, pressing against me and kissing me into oblivion. I was so aroused that I felt I could come any moment. I slipped my hands underneath his shirt, smoothing them over the warm skin of his back, moving down so that my palms slid into his jeans and caressed the top curves of his ass. His skin was so soft, but I could feel the hard muscles bunching below the surface as he moved against me.

Tristan lifted his hips up slightly, pushing his hand between us so he could grope at my dick. “Damn, Russ,” he moaned, caressing my hard length through my jeans. “I gotta see this. Can I?”

“Please,” was all I could manage as I arched up against him in invitation, shivering at the thought of him touching my flesh.

He undid my jeans with one hand and quickly shoved them down, curling his hand around me, hot and naked, stroking slowly.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned at the contact, squeezing my eyes tightly shut.

I felt the sofa move again as Tristan shifted his weight and slid his body down mine, his tongue licking across my stomach before raising his head to study my groin. I squirmed under his scrutiny.

“Russ...” he said again, my name thick in his throat. “You have the most luscious cock. Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to do this?” He licked the top of my dick and my hips jerked upwards in response.

“You... you have?” I panted.

“Oh, yeah.”

“Why? How?”

“Talk later...” he mumbled as he licked again and my hips thrust towards his face. He dropped his hand to caress my balls and took the whole length of me in his mouth, sucking me in deep, devouring me.

“Oh fuck... oh fuck...” I chanted, not quite believing the sensations as he swirled his tongue around me and sucked me long and deep. I held on to his

shoulders, trying not to come too soon, wanting to make this last and last. It was a pointless exercise; the feelings were too intense, too delicious and I couldn't do anything to stop the huge rolling orgasm that crashed into me and left me reeling, spurting stream after stream into his throat.

Tristan lay his head against my stomach and rutted against my leg. "Goddamn it, Russ. I want to fuck you so bad," he groaned.

I was feeling so high on emotion, and he looked so damned sexy that at the moment I almost let him. Instead, Tristan surged up my body to capture my mouth again and rolled his hips against my thigh. It didn't take long for him to jerk in pleasure, and I felt the wet warmth of him spread against my leg.

Tristan groaned again and kissed my neck as my fingers trailed over the damp skin of his back. It was only then that I realized Tristan hadn't even undone his jeans. I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed him tight, loving the heaviness of him on top of me and never wanting him to ever move again.

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I must have drifted off because I awoke some time later with Tristan's head resting on my chest, my shirt fluttering slightly as his breath huffed in and out. He was still asleep and I took the opportunity to slowly comb my hands through his hair, threading my fingers through the dark strands and watching them flop back down. I loved his hair; it always seemed so... strokeable.

"Mmm," Tristan mumbled sleepily and wriggled around a little to get more comfortable, not even opening his eyes.

I smiled down at him and gently ran a finger across his face, admiring the curve of his jaw, the length of his eyelashes and the rough stubble on his skin. I couldn't believe how amazing it was, just lying here with him; a quiet contentment that I'd never felt before. I liked this guy. A lot.

A bubble of affection burst inside of me and I couldn't stop myself from leaning down and kissing the top of his head, nuzzling my cheek against his hair as I wound my arms tighter around his middle.

Tristan stirred again and raised a hand to scrub at his face before opening his eyes and blinking up at me. "Russ?"

I nodded and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He smiled back. “How are you doing?”

“Good. You?”

Tristan yawned and cuddled himself closer into my neck. “Perfect. You smell damned good, you know. Feel even better.”

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure. Truly.”

I kissed the top of his head again. “Nah, at least half of the pleasure was mine.”

I could feel Tristan’s body shake as he chuckled. “Can’t believe you’re not freaking out over this.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to think about it.”

That made him sit up. Well, partially. He leaned on one elbow and watched me closely. “Yeah? So tell me about it, straight boy.”

“Well that’s it... I guess I’m not *completely* straight.”

Tristan raised an eyebrow and gave a pointed look to my still-naked groin. “No shit, Sherlock.”

“So I may have had these... thoughts. About guys. About you.”

“Really? Dirty thoughts? Were they kinky? I want to hear them!”

I just looked at him, not sure if he was making fun of me or genuinely wanted to know.

His eyes flicked over my face and he seemed to sense my uncertainty, as he sighed and leaned back down onto my chest, snaking a hand up under my shirt to caress my stomach. “I had them too, you know. About you.”

“Me?”

“Hell yes.”

“But *me*? I’m nothing special. You can have anyone you want.” My stomach muscles clenched as he hit a ticklish spot.

Tristan’s hand inched higher. “I wanted you. From the first day I met you. You were so cute and uncertain. I wanted to jump your bones, ravish and

corrupt you. But you were straight—or so I thought. I did catch you watching me sometimes and I wondered what was going through your mind—but it wasn't my place to question you. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, but boy, you made it hard. No pun intended."

"I did?"

Tristan pushed himself up on one elbow again and looked at me, his eyes dark with intent. "You just don't see it, do you? You're fucking gorgeous, Russ. You're so unassuming you never know when people are hitting on you. This hair"—he combed his fingers through the hair that curled below my ears—"these amazing dimples, your eyes, your body. It's all so edible. That night? You know, of the tequila incident? I couldn't believe you were naked in my bed. It nearly killed me. I had to go sleep on a friend's couch because I couldn't be in the same room as you. This..." He smoothed his hand down my torso to circle my half-hard cock. "...has tormented me since I saw it that night. So perfect. You have no idea how often I tried to sneak a look after. I dreamed about this cock."

His words, and his touch, were turning me on again. I squirmed under him and felt my breath hitch as he squeezed me gently. "Tristan."

"Right here."

"I wanted you too. Just didn't want to admit it."

Tristan hummed in approval and started to stroke me, a maddeningly slow up and down, up and down.

I huffed out a laugh. "Trying to talk here, but you're not helping."

The couch moved as he released my cock, but then he loomed above me and bent to kiss me hard. "Can't help it. You're too damned delicious. But go on... please."

I pushed against his chest, trying to give myself room to think. I felt I owed him some kind of explanation. "Stop it! Just sit there and don't touch me."

Tristan made a pouty face but obeyed and half sat up, his arms resting across the top of the couch.

"I knew I liked men—you—but I liked girls, too, and that was the easier option, you know? I just didn't expect to like you quite as much as I did. Also,

I didn't think I stood a chance. You were so damned popular and crazy and everyone loved you."

Tristan smiled and trailed a hand over my shoulder. "People loved you, too, Russ; you just didn't notice. You were this super cute boy next door who never had a bad thing to say about anyone."

I made a dismissive gesture. "Oh, please."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "Well, if you insist." And then he launched himself back on top of me, pinning my hands above my head. "Can I touch you now?"

I could see the desire burning in his eyes and could also feel the swelling in his groin. Heat flooded through me once more and it suddenly dawned on me that I had everything I ever wanted right here, right now. Only I wanted it naked.

"Yeah, you can," I said huskily, "but only if you strip first."

I'd never seen clothes disappear so fast. I watched in awe and mounting arousal as Tristan tore off his jeans and shirt. He moved to lie back over me, but I put a hand out to stop him. "No, stand there. I want to see." Now that my guard was down, I let my eyes feast on him; the sculptured planes of his chest and abs, his muscled thighs, the sexy trail of hair low on his stomach that led down to his straining cock. He was beautiful. I wanted to touch all of him at once and was suddenly a little overwhelmed.

"Russ, you're killing me here," Tristan almost whined, his hands twitching at his sides.

I slowly stood up myself, letting my jeans finally fall to the floor. I kicked them off and shrugged out of my henley, tossing it behind me. I stepped close to Tristan, our naked bodies a fraction of an inch apart. I could feel myself starting to tremble; the desire to wrap myself around him was overpowering. Tristan's breath was puffing over my cheeks and I knew he was struggling with his own self control. I finally gave in and pulled him to me, crushing our chests together and holding him tight.

Tristan groaned and clamped his hands onto my ass, grinding into me. The roll of our cocks against each other made me shiver and I pushed my hands down between us to grab onto his hard length.

Tristan groaned again and nuzzled my neck. “Please... do anything you want.”

I pulled back a little to look down at him, dropping to my knees to get a better view. I ran my fingers gently over his groin, marveling at the feel of his wiry pubic hair, the softness of his balls and the hot, tight skin over his dick. I leaned closer and licked the slick head of his cock.

“Look at me.” Tristan’s demand caught me by surprise and I raised my eyes to his, my mouth hovering over his cock.

“Oh, yeah.” Tristan’s eyes glittered darkly, the lust radiating off him. He blew out a breath and threaded his hands through my hair. “Fuck. I can’t believe you’re actually doing this.”

“Me either,” I said, licking him again. It felt as amazing as I had imagined it would. All those times I had secretly eyeballed Tristan when we roomed together, and now here he was, all warm and naked in front of me. I slid my hand up his thigh to grasp the base of his cock. “I want to do this right,” I said. “Help me?”

Tristan laughed shakily. “Damn, Russ. You could just kneel there and look up at me and I would explode. Anything is good, believe me. Just go with it.”

And I did.

That night I learned to suck cock, and boy was it fun. True to his word, Tristan didn’t last long, pulling out of my mouth at the last moment to shoot over my chest and his stomach. We must have fallen asleep again soon after, as I woke with my head on his chest, the both of us sprawling on the carpet, our limbs intertwined—much like the erotic dream I had had about him the previous night. The room was dark, the only light a faint yellow glow from the kitchen across the hall. I closed my eyes again and snuggled in closer, feeling the exact moment that Tristan woke up.

“What time is it?” His voice rumbled sleepily above me.

“The fuck if I know,” I said. “Can’t move. I think you broke me.”

I felt Tristan stretch and heard the rustle of fabric as he rummaged in what I assumed were his jeans. I turned my head to watch. The blue-white light of

his cell phone illuminated his face and I was once again struck with how beautiful he was.

“Three thirty,” he said, dropping the phone back onto the pile of clothes next to us with a soft thud.

“What?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“Uh huh.”

I laughed and stroked my hand down his chest. “Want to stay over?”

“I think I already have.” I felt his fingers thread through my hair. “But I wouldn’t say no to a more comfortable location. I’m not as young as I once was; these old bones need a nice mattress.”

“That I can do.” I pushed myself up and extended my hand. “Come on, bring your old bones to my bedroom.”

Tristan smiled. “Thought you’d never ask.”

We collapsed into my queen sized bed and huddled under the covers, lying on our sides, watching each other. I could see Tristan’s eyes gleaming in the darkness as he looked at me. He was biting his lip and holding back a smile.

“What?” I asked.

“You,” he said. “I can’t believe you never said anything before. Can’t believe I didn’t *do* anything before. We had our own room for months for Christ’s sake! I could’ve fucked you every night... and twice on weekends.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Wasted opportunity.” I shifted closer to him and hooked my arm around his middle, stroking his lower back.

“Never mind, I’m here now. In your bed. And a very nice bed it is, too, I must add. Does it come with breakfast?”

“Breakfast?”

“Yeah, I’ll need feeding up after all this excessive activity.” Tristan grinned at me. “Need to keep my strength up.”

“Dude, you want me to cook again?”



“Oh, hell no.” He gave a mock shudder. “Starbucks will do nicely.”

“Thank god for that,” I let out an exaggerated sigh. “Dinner almost killed me.”

“I know.”

My fingers stroked up his back to play with the hair at the nape of his neck. Tristan leaned in to kiss me, his lips soft and gentle against mine.

I hummed in contentment and he pulled me closer, enveloping me in his warmth. “Can I tell you a secret?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” I breathed.

“I’m not really a vegetarian. I was just fucking with you.”

I smiled. I really couldn’t bring myself to care. “I should’ve known.”

“You should. Breakfast on me?”

“Deal.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Originally from the UK, Anna Birmingham has spent the last few years in the USA and loves all things that come with living across the pond (pancakes, baseball, bagels...) She has been reading and writing m/m stories for around three years. It's a not so new guilty pleasure! Anna used to work in finance but is currently a stay-at-home-mom to two young children under the age of five, so free time doesn't come along that often. When it does, writing about hot guys doing sexy things is the perfect antidote to the "terrible twos"!*

## Contact & Media Info

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# TAKEN: A NORTHMAN'S SAGA

By Brannan Black

## **Photo Description**

He has long dark hair and a scruffy beard. His high cheekbones and lean face proclaim him a son of northern European lands. Piercing blue eyes stare out at you, full of sadness and menace, a warning to all. The hilt of a sword is just visible under his chin.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*They have burned his village, raped the women, taken the children. This is a fight his people have fought before, but this time it's different. They have taken his lover to torture and use against him. He is the one they want. But they have miscalculated... they took his soul when they hurt his lover. And a man without a soul will stop at nothing to get it back.*

*No paranormal please.*

*Sincerely,*

*Melissa*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** Viking-esque culture, established couple, slave, abduction, barbarians

**Content warnings:** graphic violence

**Word count:** 14,366

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# TAKEN: A NORTHMAN'S SAGA

By Brannan Black

## Chapter 1

### *Kolbrandr*

Nothing warned us of the devastation we'd find as we rounded the point into the small bay that held our village. Black jagged posts stabbed the sky where our houses once stood. No children ran to greet us. No wives or sisters called a greeting. Dead silence, save for the soft shush of waves on the shore.

"Run her up the beach!" I snarled, my berserker rage a growing heat in my veins. Had any survived? Oden's beard! Renshu? Fear for my lover fed the fire of my rage. *Who did this?* By all the gods above and below, I would make them wish they had never been born!

The Sea Wolf scraped the beach with her keel. Long axe in my hand, I jumped into the shallow water heedless of my men scrambling to catch up. I had one thought, find Ren. Without him I was nothing but the berserker fire burning in my veins. A gift my father called it. I called it a curse until Ren helped me cage the mindless rage within me and taught me how to turn it to my advantage.

The stench of burned wood hung thick in the air. I inhaled deeply, berserker senses on high alert. Gods above! The faint smell of burned flesh reached me. Burned in the houses or funeral pyres? Surely not all of our village could have perished in the blackened bones of our houses? I surged up the beach toward the nearest source of the stench.

"Ware, Kol, they might lie in wait." My twin sister, Kolla's calm tone pulled me back from my blind fury. A deep, calming breath like Ren taught me filled my lungs with fetid air. I coughed but still managed enough control to let go some tension on the out breath.

The silence of the dead lay heavy on our village. The sloshing of boots in water and crunching up the pebbled beach echoed oddly. The low clouds cast the whole of our world in grey and black ash.

The ever-present sea breeze teased around the ruins making eerie hissing noises and the occasional bang of some loose board hitting another. Nothing else stirred. No hounds. No cats. No distant lowing of cattle.

Styrkarr set his hand against the blackened remains of the closest house. “It’s cold. Could have been days since this happened or yesterday if they had a cold night.”

We spread out, ready for any attack while we searched for signs of life or bodies left to rot where they fell. I headed straight for my longhouse, farthest from the bay and on a slight rise. The charred ribs of the ceiling, what little was left of them, lay crisscrossed over the remains of our home. Nothing could have survived such a fire.

The company gathered, grim and silent. “No signs?” Kolla had to ask. I held onto my sanity by mere threads. Speaking seemed beyond me now. I took several more deep breaths, Ren’s voice reaching from my memory to coach me back from the edge.

“No bodies living or dead,” Alarr reported. Hope dared to glint in a few eyes. Only the living honored the dead. Vultures and raiders would leave them lie where they’d fallen.

Caw! A rush of wings and the black of a raven deserted its place among the ruins. My head jerked up to follow its path, straight for the tree-covered hills. Which is where any survivors would have gone. *Please, father Oden, let my Renshu be among them!*

Heart in my throat, I stalked toward the woods. My men in a fighting formation at my back. Whoever did this might lie in wait to ambush us. Or we could find our families and loved ones safe in the shelter of the hills. Either way, we had to be ready.

Movement inside the trees caught my attention. I stopped and my company lined up in a shield wall, ready, eager even for a fight. Rikulata, Styrkarr’s wife and head of my hall, stepped out of the shadows. The sigh of our relief sounded loud in the otherwise quiet air.

Bruises covered her face and she held one arm pressed to her side. Her eyes stared at us full of fury, anger melded with sorrow in the lines of her face, the tightness of her stance.

Styrkarr shifted the barest bit next to me but didn't drop his guard. No matter how much he loved his wife, Styrkarr would stand beside me until we knew it was safe. If our enemies were still here, our best chance against them was as one fighting unit.

"Thane Kolbrandr, welcome home." The formal greeting sounded angry and bitter.

I wished I had Ren here, with his gift he could see if someone forced her to speak or if others lay in wait. I had only my gut instinct backed by my heightened senses. I sensed no immediate threat. "Rikulata, what happened here?"

"Ballung!" Turning slightly, she spat on the ground. "That hairless worm stormed our village. Killed any who stood against them, even the old. Took what they wanted and burned the rest. Took our children!" Her voice shook with anger but tears gathered in her eyes. Behind me, my men stirred but held silent. The spice of their anger mingled with their fear, filling my nose. "He said it was a message."

"What message?" I snarled.

"They..." She drew a deep breath, drawing herself up. "They raped our women and left us. So our men would know that following a boy-lover like you would bring a storm of true Northmen down on all they hold dear."

A muttering of righteous fury rose behind me, sweet music to the fire burning in my blood. Renshu, gods above I needed him to help me cool the fire, keep my temper. "Renshu?" Did I dare hope?

Her eyes narrowed. "That hairless worm knew what he is to you. They took him and the children old enough to travel to sell at the slave market at Kayetan's Crossing." She spat on the ground again. "They warned you not to follow or they'd kill them."

Rage roared hot, drowning me in berserker fire. What little control I'd had snapped like a dry twig under my boot. *Kill, I would kill them all and bathe in their blood!*

Kolla's calm voice broke through the haze in my mind. "This is what they want, Kol. For you to give in to the rage and hunt them blindly. You'll need more than your berserker strength to save them."

A maelstrom of hate tore at my very soul. No, I had no soul. They'd taken him. "I need him, Kolla." Even to my ears I sounded barely human. Gods above, I wanted their blood. My knuckles ached, I squeezed the haft of my long axe so hard. I needed Renshu, my heart, my soul.

"And you will have him but only if you don't give into the rage. Fight it, for Renshu. You are stronger than your fire. For Renshu, remember who you are." Her even tone and gentle voice broke through the furious roaring in my head.

How had a slave I'd captured last year come to mean so much to me? To hold my heart and soul in his delicate hands? From the beginning he'd soothed the berserker fire in me while stirring a lust for him I could barely control. At first, I had so little control I'd hurt him more than once.

I drew a deep breath. The memory of the pain I'd caused him cooled my fire faster than water thrown on a hearth. I would never be that monster again! I nodded to Kolla. Between her and Ren, I'd become nearly tame. Nearly.

"I'm going after them. They will pay a blood price for this insult."

"Thane Kolbrandr." Rikulata stepped forward, her swollen lips in a tight grimace. "Afridh headed for her father's. Thane Saxolf and his war hounds will be coming soon."

Styrkarr set a hand on my shoulder. "We should wait then. Gather a force and show that hairless cur once and for all..."

My snarl shut them all up. "Wait if you want. I'm going after what's mine." My control hung by the thinnest line. I didn't dare sit idle.

"Kol, we should wait," Styrkarr cautioned. "Ballung's men are well seasoned and he has other kin he can call on."

Rage threatened to overwhelm me again. My company knew well what that meant and backed off. "Stay if you want. But they have taken what's ours. Ravaged our women and burned our village! How can any of you wait? Does it not burn your veins as it does mine? Have you grown soft over the winter?"

My nostrils flared, taking in the sharp odor of shame. I pushed through my men, headed for the Sea Wolf.

Rikulata grabbed at my cloak. “Promise me you’ll make them pay! Stake them down and pull out their guts and leave them to the buzzards.”

Ah, how sweet that would be. “You have my word.”

Styrkarr motioned me aside. “Kol, think this through. It could be a trap. They know you’ll come after them and if they’ve any brain at all they’ll set an ambush.”

Reason. I didn’t want to hear it at the moment but he was right. He clapped my shoulder, his eyes clearly seeing what darkness lay in my heart. “Let’s just be smart, huh? Not get ourselves or our children and Ren killed? Yeah? Think what Renshu would tell you.”

Oden’s beard! Focus, breathe deep, let the fire flow but not control me. *I control my fire. I am in control.* Just like he taught me. I could do this. I would do this!

Kolla’s smaller hand squeezed my other shoulder. “We’ll get him back and the children. Then you can let loose on those hairless worms. But first, we need to plan.”

My smile felt more like a grimace but I nodded. I turned back to the women. “Tell me everything that happened.” A delay but a necessary one. Victory often came not to the better fighters but the better prepared.

Rikulata counted at least sixty men. They had come overland by horse in a rush, only taking time to set fire to the two farms in their way and scatter the farm’s horses so they could not reach us with warning. The farm families had fled into the woods, making their way here only to find our village in flames. A few went to other farms, spreading the word. The rest hid in the hills with the surviving villagers.

By horse, they had a more direct route to Kayetan’s Crossing, but the children would slow them. If the gods granted us good sailing, we’d beat them. More likely, we’d row a good stretch up the river. It’d be a close thing, but by Oden’s beard I would not let those hairless worms get away with this nor let the village children be sold like cattle.

My control hung by a thread so I decided it best to work that energy off by heading overland, tracking Ballung and finding sneaky ways to slow them



down. No few of my men looked relieved not to be stuck on a ship with an angry berserker.

Kolfrosta would head for Saxolf's to redirect him. She'd gather what aid she could then ride hard to catch up. The rest of my men would take the ship and make haste to set an ambush for Ballung.

The hunt gave me an outlet for the energy trapped inside me. Though even with the legendary strength of a berserker, I would be hard pressed to make up the two days they had on us.

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## Chapter 2

### *Renshu*

Thundering hooves rose out of the mists of the morning. The twin buckets of water hanging from the pole across my shoulder spilled to the ground as screaming warriors fell upon our village like ravening wolves. In skilled hands, such a stout pole became the weapon my slave status denied me. A familiar fear cramped my stomach but I would defend this simple village that had become my home.

Using my special talent to see the colors of those around me, I had a scant few heartbeats to assess our attackers. I saw little fear and much blood lust. Hopefully their cockiness could be turned to our advantage. We held no hope of defeating these savages, not with Kol and his warriors away, but perhaps we could buy time for the mothers to get their children to the dubious safety of the woods. If it cost me my life, I would do what I could to protect my lover's people, slave collar or not.

A rider bore down on me, stained teeth bared in triumph, dirty blond hair flying wildly from under his helm. Foolish Northmen, they always assumed a small foreign-born man such as myself could scarce be a threat to them. I swept low, taking his horse's legs out from under him. I didn't turn to watch them crash into the side of the well but whirled to meet the next rider bearing down on me. The mist of color swirling around the next one turned an angry red. He would not be fooled my stature.

An old man, once a great warrior but bent with age, rushed to my side. The moment of satisfaction from having a warrior see me as worthy to fight beside died with the shower of his blood. Riders surrounded me now. I took another from his horse even as pain exploded across the back of my head.

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I jerked awake, the screams of the injured and dying echoed in my mind. The stench of burned buildings clung to me like a shroud. Or maybe that was just horsehair stuck all over my face. I jerked my hands up to brush it away

only to find my hands were tied to a rope around the horse's neck, my feet secured to the stirrups. I vaguely remembered being tossed on and feeling nauseated before passing out again. Not my idea of fun waking up facedown over a horse's neck. The rise of its neck bumping my face with every stride.

However, the lords of Heaven had looked with favor on this lowly one; I still lived. I looked around. Lords of Heaven! I'd found a whole new low to sink to. Never in my days serving as a Yueji among the most honored nobles of the Emperor of Heaven had I imagined men such as these.

Men! Ha, pigs lived cleaner lives. The stink of unwashed bodies overrode the cleaner smell of horse sweat. Greasy hair hung in ragged braids down their backs. Lords of Heaven, my brethren of the East would faint dead away to see beards crusty with the remains of everything the savages had eaten in the last month. These men embodied every bad thing I'd ever heard about Northmen. So very unlike Kol and his people. Our people. Yes, our people, and I had responsibilities to them despite my status as a slave.

I twisted around, searching for other captives. *Demons of hell curse these savage monsters!* They had the village's children tied two to a horse behind me. I counted nine mounts. Wait, the last one had three younger ones. Nineteen of our precious children stolen by these soul-sick bastards. At least they had paired the younger children with older ones who could help keep them on the swiftly walking horses.

Josurr, pale blond hair wild about his head, was the oldest at twelve years old. In front of him was a blond-haired girl no more than seven or eight whose name I couldn't recall. All of them young enough to manhandle but old enough to be useful and most of them girls. With their light-colored hair and eyes, they would be exotic pets sold to heartless bastards that liked children in their beds. Or worse, to whorehouses where they wouldn't even have a gilded cage to ease their suffering.

It would be a cold day in the lowest level of the underworld before I let that happen. So far, they all looked in decent shape, no more than a few bruises here and there. Josurr sported a large bruise on his cheek. I bet he put up a good fight.

A swell of pride filled my chest; not one of them cried though they had to be scared. Most of the older ones looked sullen and angry. Sefa, with her golden hair and green eyes, met my gaze, offering me a wan smile. I had nothing to offer in return save a small acknowledging turn of my lips.

Feigning semi-consciousness came naturally. I'd learned the hard way to play up my weakness when surrounded by burly bullies. Around us spread a thick, wild looking forest of giant oaks and other leafy trees I didn't know the names of. Some brush pressed into the trail, narrowing it in places so only a single horse could pass at a time. Other areas spread open and we rode in a broad column.

As the day wore on, I didn't have to feign weakness. My head ached and my tender backside protested the long ride. I tried to conserve as much energy as I could. Eventually we would stop and I would need my wits about me if I had any hope of surviving. This I knew from experience.

Ever since I had been betrayed, and taken as a slave West, I had been shuffled or stolen from one ignorant master to another even worse. Until I ended up in these barbarian lands among the wildest of savages, Northmen. How surprising to find my lover, Kol, and even more surprising that we could grow to love each other as we had.

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The raiders rode hard until dark after attacking our village. Not that I blamed them. They had to know the kind of unholy, inhuman rage that dwelt in my lover. Or perhaps they counted on it. I recognized Ballung from last summer. He wore his lank, filthy, blond hair in a messy nest of thin braids bound together by a dark leather band. From the end of each braid dangled a glass or metal bauble of some kind. I'd yet to meet another who wore their hair like that.

He had challenged Kol last summer and been slapped down hard. This attack had to be revenge, though why he kept me alive instead of disemboweled for Kol to find I did not yet know. I did know that my lover would come for the children and me and when he did, much blood would flow.

The long swift ride did little to ameliorate the ache in my head, so I was grateful when we at last stopped. A foul-smelling savage cut the ropes holding

my feet then yanked the rope binding my hands nearly toppling me from the mangy nag they'd tied me on. Before he could yank harder I slid off and into a bow far more suitable to the Imperial court than these wild lands.

Ballung's boot slammed into my shoulder, knocking me back. Men laughed, a few of the younger children cried. Maybe stopping wasn't such a good thing after all.

"Look at me, slave!" Ballung's voice held none of the strength that my master Kol's did.

I should be used to seeking a man's eyes but a lifetime of being hit for daring such familiarity with my betters still made it hard for me. Betters, ha! Filthy ignorant curs even a pig wouldn't claim as kin. These savages could pretend to be my better but nothing could ever elevate them even to the level of servant, much less a well-trained and respected companion to the highest lords of the Emperor's court.

Ballung yanked me up by my braid, turning my head this way and that to examine me in the fading light. "Oden's beard, never have I seen such a pretty little man. That is if you really are a man." He dropped me back to the ground.

"Maybe Kolbrandr's eyes fail him and he can't tell the difference!" some nameless cur snickered, eyes full of malice.

More jeers joined his but I ignored them and returned to my humble bow. Never would I let how I truly felt for Kol show to these dogs. In fact, the fate of the children and I might hinge on them assuming I felt nothing for the man I called lover. Let them believe I would serve whoever had me, because then they might trust me enough to leave me untied. Then I would do what I could to cause them trouble, making it easier for Kol to catch up to us and slaughter these worthless excuses for men.

Ballung snorted, toeing me once more. "I've a buyer willing to pay good silver for this girl-boy. Count yourself lucky slave. I'd just as soon let my men find their sport with you and leave your broken body for that sick man-lover to find." He sneered, "You'll even get to see him again. Right before I kill that hairless worm."

Excellent, knowing he needed me alive made all the difference in how far I dared go in my efforts. First, I would need to gain their trust, convince them

what I good slave I was no matter who held my leash. Moreover, the best way to do that was bowing and scraping for them as if they were Emperors of Heaven instead of filthy, ignorant savages.

Josurr's angry eyes followed my every move. Somehow I would have to let him in on my plan. A couple of the older children, Josurr included, spat on me whenever I got close enough. Ballung and his stinking mutts found that terribly funny. It did, however, re-enforce the notion I was nothing more than an obedient slave with no feeling for Kol.

Finally, they tied my hands and feet and shoved me down by the children. Now I had time to rest and heal. Tomorrow, I had much work to do. Josurr, also bound hand and foot, wormed his way between me and the other children. Righteous anger swirled around him in a thick miasma of dark colors. His bright blue eyes glared daggers at me while his fair face tried to look as hardened as the most seasoned warrior. Somehow, I had to make him understand I would never betray Kol nor his people while still tricking Ballung.

Gods, but I missed Kol, his strong arms, and gentle heart, warming me through the night. I let memories of our nights together soothe me into sleep. We would be together again, I was certain of it.

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My chance came the next day during a break to let the horses rest. They shoved water flasks at Josurr and me to fill in a nearby creek. I had the second one full and turned to climb out of the creek. A careful turn of my foot and I tripped right into the pig guarding us, splashing a good bit of water on him. His buddies laughed, making him even angrier. He struck at me, I twisted to miss most of the blow but made as if he knocked me into another.

The second man shoved me aside, yelling at the first. I caught Josurr's gaze, raised a brow, and winked. His eyes widened then a slight smile twitched his lips. The colors swirling around him settled. The slight tip of his head in return let me know he understood and wanted to help.

By this time, Ballung had stomped over and settled things by threatening to disembowel both men if they didn't quit. He glared with narrowed eyes at me

so I prostrated myself before him. “Forgive this graceless worm for being so clumsy.” Ballung scowled but remained silent. Lucky me, he didn’t even kick me before walking away.

That night, they took my boots, as well as those from the two largest boys, untied our hands and feet. “You three, help get the horses untacked, fed and watered. And be quick or there’ll be no food for you.” Ballung snickered along with his men who shoved us toward the picket lines.

Perfect. I knew a few tricks to play with their tack. A frayed cinch here, a loose buckle there, eventually it’d slow them down. Wouldn’t take much to work my tricks. Many of these savages had old equipment to start with.

I watched carefully to see which ones didn’t get along. Hmm, how to add to that tension?

They made the older girls fix their pots of stew. A couple of shoving matches between hungry men wanting to be first had to be broken up by Ballung and his second. Their appalling lack of discipline made my job so much easier. Letting me loose among them aided me far more than I helped them setting up camp.

A slide of my foot and one towering giant slammed into another, dumping a full bowl of stew on the ground. In the growing fight, more than one savage felt the need to knock me out of the way, adding to my bruises. I’d endure that and more if it helped slow them enough for Kol to catch up.

The village children fled to the edge of the camp where I joined them. Unfortunately, the fight didn’t distract this one guard. He stood between us and the brush, glaring daggers at me as if he knew I’d started it. Lords of Heaven, why couldn’t he have been as undisciplined as the rest? At least the older children might have snuck off.

For our dinner, we got to wipe the pots out with stale bread. In the process, I made sure I left a clear footprint in the spilled stew as a message to Kol that I was alive and well enough to aid him in our recovery. In my heart, I knew he followed. He had to be. I knew with all my being he loved me as much as I loved him.

After making sure all the children got equal shares of the meager food, I settled to sleep. Josurr kept up his part, glaring at me like before. Such a bright child, he did nothing to give my game away. My very dangerous game that, if discovered, could earn me a beating or worse no matter how much I was worth.

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## Chapter 3

### *Kolbrandr*

Two days I tracked them, mostly at a fast jog, slowing or resting only when my berserker strength waned. The meager trail led through thick forests of oak, ash, and beech dotted with meadows and copses of brush. Fields and pastures surrounded a couple of farms owned by my warriors and their kin. They looked to me for protection and I had failed them. Other than a few stray cows, I saw no signs of life as I passed. After I killed Ballung, I'd find the farmers and see what they needed to set their farms to rights.

Ahead, the faint smell of smoke slowed my headlong rush. Ducking behind some brush I cautiously approached the area. Not far off, a tendril of smoke curled up from an abandoned fire. I hovered in the cover of the brush, inhaling deeply and listening. I smelled nothing but old fire and the remains of a camp recently abandoned. A crow dove down to pick among the leavings.

Long axe at the ready, I stepped from my shelter. Nothing moved save the crow intent on what scraps he'd found. Boldly now I looked over the campsite. Here they picketed their horses; there they'd set a latrine. My sensitive nose wrinkled at the stench. Gods above, they could have at least buried it when they moved on!

The crow squawked and flew to a tree, scolding me for disturbing its meal. My lips curved in a smile. Bits of spilt stew littered the ground. In the middle of it, the bare print of a slender, delicate foot. Renshu! Laughter bubbled up. He was alive and well and up to his old tricks. Fools, they had no idea the wicked games that man could get up to! Spilled stew was just the start if he gave them half the trouble he'd given me last summer.

Now I could look fondly on Renshu's efforts to free his previous master but then, Oden's beard, that man made me see red. Like most, I'd discounted his strength based on his exotic, almost pretty face and slender build. But inside, there lay a man of great strength. Warmth swirled deep inside me. I loved the way his sly mind worked. Gods, how I missed him.

With a lighter heart, I took up the chase once more. They couldn't be far ahead now.

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The sun rode high overhead when I heard angry voices coming from up the trail. I darted under cover, crept closer. Thank the gods this stretch of forest had plenty of brush for cover. A cursing, red-faced warrior kicked his saddle, much to the amusement of his buddies. A man I recognized as Ballung's second knelt to examine the broken girth. The ragged edges looked worn through but I'd seen that trick before. My Renshu worked to slow them. My heart missed a beat. *Where was he?* I couldn't see him from my hiding spot.

The thunder of hooves shook the ground under me. I flattened softly into the dirt, holding my breath. Two riders with a rider-less horse in tow passed far too close for comfort. Either my dirty cloak hid me or Ballung's men lacked the discipline to keep a sharp eye out at all times. I breathed out a silent sigh of relief.

Ballung rode into view, issuing orders for the unlucky warrior to remain behind and fix his tack. Alone. The only protester ended up sporting a split lip from Ballung's second, after he jerked the fool off his mount.

The company, much quieter now, rode away leaving the two unlucky men. Oh yes, unlucky for them but not for me. As soon as Ballung was too far away to hear their screams, their lives were mine.

"What the hell, little brother. Didn't I tell you not to mouth off to Ballung? You're lucky all you've got is a split lip." The warrior struggling to mend his tack shook his head and sighed. "That man's got a wicked temper."

Thick sarcasm colored the younger man's tone, "You're welcome Gautulf. Anything for my favorite brother." The younger one dabbed at the blood on his lip. God's, did I want to spill more of that.

"Idiot! Now we're both at risk. What if Kolbrandr's company comes through here?" Frustration and disgust colored Gautulf's words. "You are too old to be following me around like a lost pup."

The younger one's jaw tensed, words ground out between clinched teeth. "I owe more loyalty to my older brother than Ballung any day."

The older glared angrily. “You swore loyalty to him and to him you owe allegiance first.”

“Maybe, if he wasn’t trying to get us all killed by attacking a berserker who just happens to be the son of a king. You think Kolbrandr’s the only one that’ll come after us for what we did? Taking children like that, it’s not right.”

*Maybe this kid gets to live.*

Gautulf threw his cinch down and stood to glare at his younger brother. “Right or wrong, Ballung’s the only one who offered us a chance at earning the money we need for the winter. Once you join a company, you do what you’re told. Unless you’d rather be digging in the dirt like any common farmer.”

“We could have joined Kolbrandr’s men. I’ve heard he’s a good leader who cares about his people.”

Gautulf jumped up and grabbed his brother by his shirt, growling into his face, “We join a beardless boy-lover and no other company would ever have us! No warrior worth his weight would fight for such a limp-dicked leader.” He spat to the side.

My fire flared, angry, hungry for blood. *The older one dies! Painfully.*

The younger warrior scowled but dropped his gaze from his brother’s, shoulders slumping in defeat. His brother shoved him hard enough he stumbled away. He turned his back to his brother. And me! I let my fire rise, ready to attack. A moment later, the older one dropped back down, pulling his tack back into his lap. Yes! Time to play.

Berserker fire burning in my veins, I surged up, swinging my long axe in a powerful arc. Gautulf barely had time to throw his saddle up in defense against my inhumanly fast attack. The snap of his arm breaking from the strength of my blow and his scream of pain and fear was music to my soul, filling the empty spot where Renshu should be.

I whirled to block the younger’s spear thrust, cracking the shaft. The younger stumbled, terror in his eyes and forming a pungent cloud around him. He jerked back, the broken shaft held in defense as he fumbled for his seax.

Sensing the kill, my fire flared, red tinged the edges of my vision. I lunged forward only to be blindsided by Gautulf. We tumbled and slid in a tangle on the forest floor. That impressed me despite what the cur had called me.

His broken arm cradled against his chest, my enemy rolled away from me. “Run! Ride! Go!” he yelled at his brother even as he staggered to his feet. The youngster whirled away, grabbing his horse. Oden’s beard! I couldn’t let him get away to warn Ballung.

But I couldn’t ignore the older brother, now armed and circling behind me with a throwing axe in his hand. He’d only get one shot. I fainted toward the younger, whirling and following my momentum around. The axe whistled past my head, a sharp sting along my ear. Close! *Damn good throw for a warrior no one would take on. Why would any company pass up a chance at such a warrior?*

The pound of hooves came up behind me; the younger hadn’t run but rather sought to ride me down. I dodged just enough for them to miss but grabbed at his leg as he went past. His attempt to kick my face only aided me yanking him off his horse. He landed with a satisfying thud flat on his back.

Finally, opponents to take my frustration out on! Even with my berserker speed, the two of them made me work to best them. Not many warriors could do that, especially not just two.

The younger lay trying to suck air back in his lungs. I leapt for Gautulf, my axe knocking aside the long knife he’d pulled, my fist connecting with his face. Why I pulled my punch at the last second I couldn’t say but it saved the man’s life, knocking him down and breaking his nose but not shattering his face and killing him. He landed on his broken arm, his scream rending the air. *Yeah, that had to hurt.* My fire purred like a well-fed cat.

I grinned, a vicious snarl more like a wolf’s growl than a smile I’ve been told. The younger brother rolled away. I let him stagger to his feet. No fun killing him while he lay helpless. His wild eyes darted, looking for any weapon to defend himself. My face stretched tighter, teeth bared and fire dancing in my veins. The boy gritted his teeth, his body loose and ready to dodge or strike.

The older brother's screams had died to whimpers. I leaned away, inviting the younger to move. He dove for his brother's axe. I beat him to it, kicking him away with a satisfying crunch of ribs. He howled his pain but rolled to his feet, staggering a bit.

His eyes darted to the axe by my feet. I smiled, toed it. Daring him to come get it. It was in that moment, he realized he would die. Seasoned warriors had broken and run when faced with death at my hands. Defeat filled his eyes yet he remained standing, ready to meet my attack as best he could. A true Northman to the core. Pity the brothers hadn't come to me; they were too good for a beardless whelp like Ballung.

I knew better than to pause in a fight yet I couldn't help savoring my soon-to-be victory. Like a cat with a mouse, I wanted to play with my prey, foolishly giving them time to recover and plan.

His eyes flickered behind me to the left where his brother lay still whining. A new resolve hardened his stance. He dove, this time for the remains of his spear. I leaped to block him but the older brother somehow managed to grab my foot, dumping my arrogant face into the dirt. I coiled and rose, spiting dead leaves and bark. Small twigs caught in my beard.

Together the brothers rushed me. I danced back, using the haft of my axe to thump the younger's broken ribs good. He tumbled, coughing on a scream of pain. I swung the head of my axe at Gautulf, who dodged, throwing himself over his younger brother with nothing to block my next attack.

"Kill me, Kolbrandr, as you will but I beg you, spare my brother. Joining Ballung was my mistake, not his. He's all our young sisters have left. By the gods, I beg you show mercy."

I snarled, "And what mercy did you show my kin? How many did you kill? Rape? You stole our children!" I spat with the fury building inside me.

He met my stare with truth in his. "There were too few men defending to even bother attacking and neither my brother nor I touched the women save to disarm them. We'd given our oath before we knew what Ballung planned so had to follow his orders but neither of us had a stomach for that kind of savagery."

Truth shone in his eyes alongside pain. I smelled no lie hovering around him, only fear. A true warrior's resolve lay in the tense lines of his body.

*A strong man shows mercy to those weaker.* Just the memory of Ren's words cooled my need for shedding blood. Renshu, my heart, my soul. I needed him, and every moment I toyed with these two he was taken farther away.

"Answer one question. How do the children and my slave fare?" I dreaded the answer but had to know.

He let out the breath he'd been holding, one hand keeping his brother still while he answered. "They are too valuable to allow any of the hairless curs Ballung dug from the lowest pits of hell to harm. Even your precious slave sports no more than a few bruises."

I stepped back, breathing deep, letting out tension and blood lust. Stowing my long axe in its harness across my back, I grabbed both horses, vaulting onto the saddled one. I looked back at the brothers. "If you want to live, don't follow."

Why had I left enemies alive behind me? Was it their too-lean bodies that spoke of few good meals? Or the shabbiness of their clothes that hinted they had no home? The mention of sisters depending on them?

Or maybe I'd spent too much time with my twin, the only shieldmaid I knew with a healing gift. She could be a demon in battle then turn around and offer mercy and aid to the man she'd just struck down.

I sighed. Our father would skin me if he ever found out. Maybe Ballung was right and I was too soft to lead. I should go back and finish them. I didn't. Ren needed saving before that flea bitten cur hurt him. Gods above, what would I do if they hurt him? I hastened my pace along the beaten dirt path.

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My berserker fire caused me such trouble most of the time I cursed it. Right now? I thanked all the gods for it. I could see in the dark nearly as well as a cat, smell like the best tracking hound, and fight with the strength of a bear. Even the dim quarter moon provided me enough light to continue the chase long after my quarry had been forced to make camp.

Soon the small trail joined the road headed for Kayetan's Crossing. Shortly after, faint camp sounds—horses shifting about, men talking, arguing and the rattle of gear—warned me to slow down and seek cover.

They'd set up in an open field with the horses on three spread-out pickets. Even the loss of one picket line would hamper them enough, I hoped. No way could I reach all three without being seen. I stifled a shudder at what Ballung might do to my beloved Ren if I was seen. Never mind if they caught me, even a berserker couldn't take on that many men and live.

A very familiar voice drifted on the still night air, music to my heart and soul. Renshu. I couldn't make out what he said but that groveling tone I remembered. When we'd first met, he used it on me in a desperate attempt to save not only his own life but that of his previous master.

What a sight he'd presented in his tattered silk robes, head bowed with his long blue-black braid hanging down in wild disarray. Gods, how I loved to run my fingers through its silken length. My eyes drifted shut in memory. His lean, lithe body under mine. The twist his foreign accent gave to his words. Ah, the sweet smell of his sweat when we shared bed sports.

My manhood grew hard and my berserker fire heated my blood. Nothing I would have liked more than to steal into that camp and take him back then and there. All my muscles tensed, ready to spring. *God's cursed berserker fire! Suicide.* For both of us. I focused on the cool night air filling my lungs. Gods, how I wanted him! *Patience, I had to play this right.* I sat with my head down, struggling for control for several precious moments before I could turn back to surveying my enemy's camp.

Two fires and no tents made up the camp. I spotted at least four guards on duty though they seemed far more interested in what was going on in camp than watching for trouble. No surprise at all that Ballung kept such poor discipline. After his defeat at my hand, I was surprised he could find *any* warriors to follow him much less any good ones.

I crawled back behind a clump of brush and made my way around to the picket closest to cover. A belly crawl wasn't the easiest thing, but if I could loosen even one end of the line, I could then spook the horses from a distance



and it should break. At the very least, the tied together horses would be dashing around in a panicked mass. If even a few escaped, they'd either have to take time to find them or force some to walk or ride double. All of which would slow their progress. Angering Ballung was just a bonus.

Horses snorted and stamped, dancing away as I rose to a crouch from the long grass. I spoke low. "Easy there, just a human. Nothing to worry about. Shhh, quiet now." The horses settled down but not before one of the guards rose from his place by the fire, craning his neck to see into the dark. I hugged the side of the nearest horse, blending my shape with its bulk in the dim light. The guard turned back to his place with a grunt. Good for me that Ballung had such lazy curs working for him.

Oden's beard, they'd staked the line solidly in four places not just the ends! Should I assume all the lines were so well secured or check another? Either way I risked discovery and I'd chosen this line for the best cover. I laid my cheek on the chilled earth, gathering my strength and offering a silent prayer to the gods for their aid this night. I would need it.

Careful of making noise, I tugged with all my strength, popping the first stake out. I hesitated, waiting to see what the horses would do. They continued eating like nothing had happened. Breathing out a sigh of relief, I continued down the line, using the dulllest part of my seax to fray the leads and part of the picket line almost to breaking as I passed each horse. Once the stakes were out, the horses would be able to break loose from each other and run freely. Smug satisfaction at the trouble that would cause Ballung filled me.

I'd reached the third stake when a loud clatter followed by shouts of anger rose from the camp. The horses on the far side whinnied and stamped, upset by whatever had happened. The horses around me picked up on the agitation of those across the camp, blowing, shifting nervously, and tugging at their ties. *Gods above, please don't let any of the cut lines break yet!*

Taking advantage of the distraction, I hurriedly yanked the stake out but the rope popped the nearest horse on its the nose. It jumped back, snorting, and setting off those around it. Horses bolted. Ropes snapped setting those horses free but the flapping remains whipped the bunch into a frenzy. Other ropes



held so the horses tied together jerked each other around causing even more panic. The last stake gave under the strain. Shouts rang out from the camp; some headed my way. Time to leave.

I chased after the nearest horse, made a grab for the mane, and jumped, swinging astride in a move straight out of a saga. Unlike a saga, I only managed to stay on for a few strides. The mangy nag bumped into another, stumbled and I flew from the horse's back. I had to let go of its mane or be dragged. I slammed into the earth with a loud whump.

Curled into a ball to protect my head, hooves struck the ground around me. A sharp pain exploded in my thigh where one clipped me. The thunder of their passing retreated into the night.

Firelight backlit the men running my way. Oden's beard! And me with only trampled grass to hide my bulk. I wormed into a slight depression, face flat and sprawled to distort my shape in the shadows. My heart pounded in fear and blood lust driven by my raging berserker fire. Gods how I wanted to spill their blood but the risk to Ren and the children was too great.

Two cursing warriors stopped not ten feet from me. *Great Oden, blind them to my presence.*

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## Chapter 4

### *Renshu*

It took me a few heartbeats to realize the faint red haze I kept seeing around one of the lines of horses had to be Kol. More accurately, the glow of his berserker fire that only ones such as myself could see. He'd need a distraction for whatever he was up to. I surreptitiously scanned the camp. *Hmm, which of these stupid savages could I goad into a fight? Or maybe some other distraction...*

Ah, Josurr and two others lugged the iron cook pots to the edge of camp to scrape them out. Stumbling over a savage got me yelled at, drawing the children's attention. I gave them a raised brow and wink, our secret code to get clumsy. Ballung and his men had started to think we were all lacking brains as well as having the coordination of newborn calves.

A loud clang of tumbling pots spared me from more harassment by the man I'd tripped over. Horses snorted, whinnied, and stamped. The shouts of anger from Ballung and his men as they rushed toward the fractious animals didn't help settle them but stirred them up even more. Elation rose in my breast. Yes, a good distraction for Kol!

I managed to trip over some gear and topple it into the cook fire. Men jumped up screaming, yanking things out of the fire, and stomping out any embers. The horses, already more than restless, started yanking at their tethers, whinnying and blowing. Pure satisfaction at the mess I'd created soared through me.

I rose, stealing a glance toward Kol. That entire string of horses broke loose and took off. And one of the mounts carried the fiery red haze of my lover. Only long practice kept the satisfied smile from my face.

Perhaps I didn't hide my satisfaction as well as I should have or worse, Ballung wasn't quite as stupid as he looked. After shouting at his men to catch the horses and round up the children, Ballung stomped over to me.

"You think I don't know what you're doing, slave?" He grabbed me by my throat. "Stupid ass-lover, I remember the trouble you made for that hairless cur

you call master.” Ballung leaned close with a smug smirk on his face. I nearly choked on his sour breath. “But I’m too smart for you.”

He shoved me away only to kick my legs from under me, dropping me onto the well-trampled grass. I could have dodged but didn’t dare enrage him further. I did roll to my knees, prostrating myself at the insipid savage’s feet. I’d take the beating if it came to it, wouldn’t be the first time. However, if a bit of groveling spared me? I’d grovel without hesitation.

“Too bad I already took money to deliver you alive and whole. Keep it up and I won’t care. I wonder how well you’d do without a hand or foot?” He jerked my head up by my hair. “Anything else goes wrong and you’ll find out.” He dropped me like a rotted cabbage. “Strip him.”

Burly hands grabbed me up while others roughly yanked my clothes off. Goosebumps bloomed across my skin in the chill night air. Fear coiled in my gut, though I had known the danger. Would they now take turns slaking their lusts on me? *Lords of Heaven, please protect me from their savage thirsts!*

Ballung uncoiled a length of leather strap, flicking it about in an effort to intimidate me. Ha! I’d been beaten with worse by men far better educated in the arts of pain. A beating I could endure, even turn to my advantage since they couldn’t beat me to death.

Two held my arms, stretching me between them. I gasped at the first strike of leather on the tender skin of my back. He and his men laughed. “That’s just a warm up, hairless man-loving cur.”

True to his word, his strokes bit harder with each one though not enough to draw blood. I allowed myself to cry out, struggle, and even beg him to stop. Men such as my captors expected me to be weak. If I showed strength they would only seek to break me. I’d rather they didn’t.

“Louder, slave, sing so your ass-loving master can hear you.” Ballung stepped closer, hot fetid breath swirling around me. “I bet he’s out there right now listening.”

I hadn’t missed how the rest of his men held their weapons ready, watching the surrounding night. I hoped Kol had ridden far enough away not to hear

them beating on me. *Lords of Heaven, keep my lover safe and sane. Keep him away, for unless his men are here, it would surely be his death.*

I slumped, moaning as if barely conscious. At last they let me drop boneless to the ground. Hard to believe the morons bought it. My first master near the inner sea beat me far worse just for fun. He'd inadvertently taught me how to realistically feign passing out. Beating an unconscious slave held no pleasure for him.

Ballung delivered a last kick. Pain bloomed across my ribs. "Either he doesn't care for you after all or he was smart and didn't follow. Pity, I was looking forward to killing him in front of you." He spat on me before striding away, satisfaction rolling off him.

A rough woolen cloak landed on my tender skin. Hissing in pain, I tucked it under me as padding against the hard, damp ground but couldn't bare it roughness on my tender back. Sprawled on my stomach, I made sure to moan in pain a few times. If I played it up maybe I could get them to delay leaving in the morning.

Sefa crept close with water for me to drink and to bathe my fiery back. Lords, that cool water felt good. It was only then I heard the soft sniffled crying from some of the children. I had forgotten my act would affect more than my captors. A sly wink calmed the frantic whirling of Sefa's colors. When she finished, she returned to the clump of children, soothing them with soft words. It was all I could do unless I wanted Ballung to realize I played him like a well-tuned instrument.

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## Chapter 5

### *Kolbrandr*

Watching them strip and beat Renshu nearly killed me. My fire exploded with pure killing rage. Muscles tensed to spring even as the first lash fell on Ren's silky soft skin. *How dare he touch what's mine? He will suffer tenfold for every bruise or welt he raises on my beloved's skin!* Red washed my world in a fury so intense rational thought stood little chance against it.

A shout behind me doused me in ice water before I'd broken from cover. *What if they killed Ren before I could get to him?* I shuddered, sinking back to the damp, cold ground. Deep even breaths. Listen. Had the caller seen me? His steps moved away, thank the gods. I could only listen to my beloved crying in pain, begging for it to end. Tears wet my cheeks and I bit my lips to keep quiet. With difficulty, I focused on the lessons he'd taught me to control my rage. Deep even breaths, focusing on staying calm, it had never been so hard.

Later, I managed to escape the area without being seen, but my close call and Ren's beating reminded me of the high stakes of this game. I'd done enough to slow them, I hoped. I didn't dare try again for fear they would do worse than beat the man I loved.

Now I needed to find my company and a place we could turn the tables on these hairless weasels. One of their loose horses would be very useful about now but I didn't want to waste time tracking one down. We couldn't be more than a day, maybe two, from Kayetan's Crossing and the slave market there. Time was short.

Even calling on my superior strength, I wasn't sure I could get far enough ahead of them to join my company in time for an ambush. That kick to my leg last night hurt like hell and slowed me. I might heal faster than normal men, but the nag had damn near broken it.

I ate the last of my jerky the following morning. Then stopped late in the day to finish the last of the hard travel-bread baked with nuts and dried fruit. Now I would run on what strength the gods granted me when they gave the

fire to my ancestors. Eventually even that would fail but not today. I couldn't let it. I started out once more.

I had scarce hit my stride when the thump and rattle of horses rose behind me. I dived for cover. Without my superior hearing, they might have caught me before I knew they were there. As it was, just a few moments after I found shelter in a hollow between an old oak's roots, the scouts from Ballung's troop rode past too fast to really scan the area around them. Ballung must be in a real hurry to set such a fast pace.

In the middle of the column, the children rode two or three to a horse. Warriors rode around and between them. Just in front of them, Renshu slumped in his saddle, his horse towed by one of Ballung's men. He looked completely cowed and barely well enough to ride. The way his head drooped might look defeated but I knew better. He would watch carefully for any opportunity to act against his captors. Pretending exhaustion or pain came naturally to him.

A subtle shift and I caught a glimpse of his face. I would swear he looked right at me and winked. Likely he had; his ability to see clouds of colors around people no doubt gave away my position. Relief and love flooded me. He was all right. They hadn't hurt him as badly as it had sounded.

I waited, not daring to follow too close. Back on the road, the sound of more horses had me diving for cover a second time. Ballung had five men riding far enough behind to alert him to any followers. Gods curse the man for getting clever, or more likely, listening to someone smarter than that hairless worm. I waited yet more before following.

Darkness forced them to stop for the night. I skirted the camp, pausing only long enough to watch Renshu moaning and stumbling around in apparent agony. I'd seen that trick before, too. He'd convinced us all he was too weak to run. Ha! He'd nearly gotten away and with his former master in tow. Despite having seen Renshu's act last summer, Ballung seemed to buy it. How stupid or vain must that man be?

Now I just had to find my company and take him back. That hairless worm would pay in blood and pain for all he'd done to my people but especially for

daring to lay a hand on my lover. The cover of darkness aided me as I slunk around their camp.

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The day dawned grey and damp. I'd had a few hours rest with only my berserker fire to keep me warm. I longed for the mornings waking warm and content with Ren wrapped in my arms. His hot little body pressed tight to mine. I shook off my melancholy along with the damp. No time to wallow.

I shook out my cloak and set as fast a pace as I felt I could sustain, ignoring the clawing need for food

Kayetan's Crossing squatted between two rivers. Ballung would have to cross the near river some lengths upstream at the ford. I wasn't sure but I thought I would reach it before nightfall. The track crossed some hills and became steep and narrow in places. The gods-cursed rain turned it to slick muck, slowing me to nearly a crawl. Frustration ate at my gut but two falls in short order forced me to slow down.

Midday I stopped under a tree to catch my breath and shake off the rain in my hair. The pounding of hooves echoing up the trail froze my heart. *Oden's beard, not again!* The gods-cursed beardless cur must have risen before dawn and be pushing his horses to exhaustion to move so fast in this foul weather.

I shoved off the tree and took off at a dead run to put distance between us. I had little hope of out-pacing them until the horses started to tire and he was forced to rest them. If the gods favored me, it would be soon. I slipped, nearly toppling but catching myself at the last minute. My fire flared and I kept going into the grey, ugly day.

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A raven's caw pulled me up short after I'd run a good distance. There! A second and third close together. For the first time since my enemies had caught up to me again, hope welled inside. My twin sister Kolfrosta hid nearby, hopefully with the rest of my company.

Out of breath, I slipped behind the brush lining the trail. She'd picked a good place for an ambush. The trail here was narrow, and steep enough to give

the horses trouble in the mud. The lack of room to maneuver further favored the men on the ground.

Only the sound of my twin's heartbeat betrayed her arrival behind me. Her lips rested just behind my ear. She whispered, "How close?"

"I can't hear them but they can't be far. They almost caught up to me a while ago," I answered softly.

"You've been running since?" Like she had to ask with my chest still heaving in air.

"Where's the rest of the company?"

"Just up around the bend. Thane Saxolf comes with a dozen men and war-hounds. He couldn't rush his hounds or they wouldn't be any use so I came on ahead. They should arrive within the hour." Kolla handed me some dried fruit and nuts bound with honey, quick energy for the battle to come.

I swallowed a mouthful settling my grumbling stomach. "Let's hope they reach us before Ballung." The sound of hooves in the distance answered that, too many to be Saxolf and his hounds. We were out of time.

"Gods-forsaken curs will be here first. Warn the company. At the rate they've been traveling, they should reach us all too soon."

Kolla chirped like a sparrow. Rustling leaves and then the soft thud of feet heading toward the company startled me. I was either more tired than I thought or whoever that was deserved praise for hiding so well.

She slipped me a leather-wrapped bundle, my chain mail, helm, greaves and gauntlets. I smiled my gratitude and started suiting up. Now that the time had come, I wished Ballung would hurry the hell up! A new surge of energy welled up inside me, chasing away any lingering fatigue.

Ballung's group outnumbered us. The bulk of the company would come at Ballung's group from the front and sides. Kolla had but three warriors well hidden up the hill from the trail. They'd counted on Saxolf's war-hounds to attack from the rear and hopefully get the children and Renshu out unhurt. Now, Kolla and I would have to do it. *Gods above, couldn't life give me a break now and then?*



The clomp of horses and the creak of leather wove in and out of the patter of rain. First sounding closer then farther. I stretched my constricted muscles as quietly as I could.

Down the trail, dark silhouettes formed in the mist. A nod to Kolla and she mimicked a crow once more. One caw to set everyone on alert and warming muscles gone stiff in the cold and damp.

The first pair of riders climbed the rise, heads swiveling while they raked the underbrush looking for trouble. A squirrel set up a chattered warning as the riders passed. We'd been so still, it had ignored us as it gathered food in the damp wood. The riders didn't even pause before urging their mounts around the bend and up the next rise.

The bulk of Ballung's company came up the hill, horses slipping and sliding in the mud. Rage coursed through my veins but I held as still as the forest shadows around me. There, Renshu's black hair hung dank and limp, dripping down the worn cloak he hunched under. What I wouldn't give to be able to warn him what was coming. His head dipped, chin tilted just the barest toward me. Clever man, he sensed us and would be ready.

The last one in the column passed without a backward glance. Kolla started to move but I held her back. Five more riders topped the hill after the main group, Ballung's rear guard.

A shout ahead, and two of the riders spurred their horses up the hill; one horse went down in the slick mud. I let my fire rise, leaping from cover faster than any normal man, ducking under a spear and taking his arm off with my long axe.

An arrow from our hidden archers took out the next one. Kolla had the other one off his horse as I sprinted past. I had to reach Ren before they could hurt him.

Total chaos reigned on the slick hillside, horses falling, men cursing and falling, blood spatters quickly washed away in the drizzle. I heard Styrkarr's bellowed orders over the din as I ducked and wove toward the knot of captives. With Styrkarr directing them, my men were in good seasoned hands.

Ballung's furious caterwaul fueled my fire. "Kill the girl-boy and the children!"

I ducked around mounted warriors using my axe haft to unseat riders and trip horses as I raced past. The familiar red haze colored my vision and rage heated my blood to boiling. Saving Renshu, nothing else mattered. Not even my own life.

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## Chapter 6

### *Renshu*

Seeing my lover's red haze through the trees gave me enough warning to be ready when they attacked. Anticipation with a thread of fear gushed through me. Whatever happened, I would do my best to protect the children.

A minor distraction might help. I shook my head, spraying water at the riders nearest me.

"Gods-cursed hairless whelp!" The one holding my horse's lead reined his horse sharply away, yanking my mount's head. A bit of heel on the opposite side and my nag obliged by jumping toward the jerked lead, slamming into his horse hard enough to make it scramble for footing, nearly unseating him.

The beastly war cries and curses spooked more than just the horses slogging up the primitive morass they called a road. I kicked the astonished face of the man holding my horse's lead. Grabbing my horse's mane and using all the skills I'd learned as a boy, I spun my mount around. Weaponless save for the horse, I was determined to help the children escape.

Ballung's words ordering my death chilled me but it wasn't the first time I'd been faced with imminent disembowelment. I kicked my horse at the savage turning to stab me. Twisting, the spear slid past me. I grabbed the haft, adding my strength to his and jerked the fool off his horse. I made sure to strike him in the face with the butt for good measure.

At a child's cry of warning behind me, I slid half off my horse, twisting to avoid getting skewered from behind. My weight threw that nag off balance and it skidded. The savage's horse slammed mine and I dropped, rolling away from the stumbling horses. I swung up, smacking the spear point against another horse's nose. Blood ran from the cut and the horse reared away, falling on the hapless barbarian.

The children, for reasons I had no time to fathom, joined me on the ground rather than trying to ride away. The largest boys stood with Josurr and Sefa to protect the younger ones. I tossed the spear to Josurr and whipped my cloak

off and into the face of the horse coming to ride me down. It shied and slipped. I whirled and struck out with my cloak again, keeping Ballung's men back by startling their horses.

Eventually, they got smart enough to come at me on the ground. *Lords of Heaven, here we go again.* Only this time I knew they would kill me. I firmed my stance regardless. They rushed me.

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## Chapter 7

### *Kolbrandr*

Red tinged everything I saw. The movements of others seemed slower, when in truth, I was moving faster. Being a berserker had its advantages.

A glancing blow to my leg nearly knocked me down. If it had struck true, he would have taken my leg off. I struck over my shoulder with the butt of my axe haft, shattering my attacker's face.

Much as I needed to reach Ren, it wouldn't help if I was too injured to save him. More careful of those around me, I pressed on, leaving men broken, bleeding or dead in my wake.

"Kolbrandr!" Josurr shouted. I glanced up to see Ren facing off two attackers. With a howl of rage, I rushed ahead, heedless of my own safety. I had to reach Ren before it was too late!

A second glance showed Ren twisting to avoid a spear but slipping in the mud and going down between his attackers.

The wall of warriors stood between us still. I struck one with the heavy head of my axe, sending him flying into his companions.

I jumped the tangled mass of men, reaching those who attacked my beloved. I swung with all my strength and shattered one attacker's head like a gourd. The other jumped back only to have Ren grab his foot, tripping him. Ren stole the man's spear and stabbed him with it.

More of Ballung's men rushed us. It was all we could do to keep them back. Ren handled the spear like a staff, knocking blades and spears aside. Kolla reached us, forming a triangle to protect the children against the press of warriors. Bless the little ones, the larger boys and one girl struck out from between us with spears dropped by the fallen.

A shield wall of enemies formed in front of me. Death whispered in my ear. Blessed by the gods or not, no man could stand long against so many. My only regret would be failing the children and taking beautiful Renshu with me.

A horn blast split the air, followed by the baying of hounds. Saxolf and his war-hounds came crashing up the trail. Each hound fought under the commands of a warrior handler. They flowed around us like a tidal wave. The shield wall in front of me collapsed under the weight of the mighty hounds.

“Ren, get the kids clear!” I shouted and pressed forward with Kolla on my right, Thane Saxolf on my left. With the hounds, what looked like a lost battle swiftly turned to victory.

Freed from the need to protect Ren and the kids, I surveyed the battleground looking for my nemesis. Few of Ballung’s warriors still fought, most surrendered or ran. But nowhere did I see Ballung.

“Kolbrandr! Over here!” Alarr waved me over.

Would have felt more satisfying if I’d left my foe broken and bleeding on the ground, but that honor went to Alarr. Bless him; he did save me the honor of the final blow.

My fire roared, demanding Ballung’s hot life’s blood be sprayed wide. He expected it; I could see it in his eyes. He struggled to stand, left hand clenching what his broken right could not. Ready for an honorable death on the field of battle.

NO! No warrior’s death for this beardless cur! A wicked grin tugged at my lips and spread like hate across my face. I had a much better idea. His efforts to stand only got him as far as his knees.

Defiant to the last, he glared. “Go on, or are you too weak to strike the blow, boy-lover?” He sneered and spat at my feet. “You and your beardless butt-lover may have won this day but all know you are without honor. They will finish what I started, wiping your sickness from the earth.” His gaze darted around, seeking support among my men. He found none.

Dusi stepped forward and spat on Ballung. “A man who steals children to sell to Midlanders knows nothing of honor!”

Ballung pushed himself upright with his sword, taking weight off his bleeding thigh. “How can you follow this boy-lover? A wild berserker controlled by a foreign slave? Are you all blind?” He turned hate-filled eyes to

me, disgust radiating through the pain on his face. “Tell me, does your precious girl-boy whisper orders when he’s fucking you? What’s it like to have a slave up your ass, boy-lover?”

I laughed. “Any who think my slave controls me doesn’t know me at all.”

“We all know you fled your father’s hall because you can’t control yourself, berserker.” Disgust, pain, and fear wavered through his words, stealing much of their impact, “Amazing how suddenly you’ve managed it after that girl-boy slave attached himself to you. Must be some potent magic he uses.”

Kolla snickered, “Berserkers are immune to magic. Not to mention only women can wield it. And as any of the company will testify, Renshu may be small compared to us, but he is all man.”

Ballung crowed in triumph, “Ho ho! So the shieldmaid is maid no more and by a slave’s cock!” He glared around at my men, settling his challenging gaze on Thane Saxolf. “How sick and twisted is a man who shares a bed and slave with his sister?”

Saxolf cocked a brow, uncertainty on his face. My warriors settled it by laughing raucously.

Alarr chuckled, “We’ve all seen the slave naked, more than once without bedding him. After all, he traveled with us all last summer and unlike you, we like being clean, even if just a dunk in the river. Oden’s beard, you’ve seen him yourself before you turned traitor and tried to kill him. Only running saved you the death you so richly deserved.” He spat on Ballung. “Hairless coward!”

That took all the fight out of my enemy. Even the men sworn to him damned him with their looks. It seemed few really knew how Ballung and I had become enemies. He took a breath, eyes cold and full of death, and struggled to raise his sword up as if to strike.

I smiled, a predatory look with my fire high in my eyes. “Oh, I’m not going to kill you, beardless cur.” With the haft of my long axe, I knocked his sword from his hand; toppling him back into the mud. Kolla grabbed it away.

Towering over him, I sneered my hate. “Never would I offer you that honor. No, you deserve the fate you would have sent our children to, slavery. Kolla, patch him up. That goes for any survivors. I doubt they’re worth what we lost but at least we can get something from their hairless hides.”

With the heat of my fire still burning me up inside, I turned to find Renshu. “Renshu?”

“Took the kids around the bend.”

I pointed to a couple of my men. “You two with me.” I needed Renshu, needed to see, to touch, to really know he was alive.

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## Chapter 8

### *Renshu*

I'd guided the children under the trees and behind a thicket of thorny growth. The trees cut the drizzle while the thorn bushes offered some small protection. I snorted to myself, thorns versus men in hardened leather and chain mail? Who was I kidding?

The sounds of battle dimmed to the cries and moans of the injured. But who had won? We didn't have to wait long to find out. I saw the faint red berserker haze before Kol came around the corner into view, bloodied, but with the confidence of a victor. My heart leaped at the sight of him.

"Renshu!" He froze, fear staining the clear red around him. His eyes widened, searching the empty road and brush lining it.

I stood. "Here, great and victorious warrior Thane Kolbrandr." In the brush, a bow of my head in respect would have to serve, though I'd have rather offered him the honor due him with a full court bow. "Come, children." They needed no other encouragement to break from cover.

I picked my way out past the thorns to stand, wet, cold, and elated, in the mud facing my master, my lover. The total shift in his aura from fear and anger to lust sent waves of want skittering up and down my spine.

The light rain barely dampened the joyful squeals of the littlest girl leaping into her father's arms. He and his companion herded the exuberant children up the road. The sounds of reunion blended into the moans of the battlefield.

"Forgive my forwardness, but should such young innocents be exposed to that." I waved my hand up the trail.

Kol shrugged, gaze locked on me with a heat that made it hard to breathe. "They're Northlanders, best if they get used to it young. Besides, they've a right to see the beardless curs who took them dead or defeated."

Further protests fled my scrambled brain as Kol stalked toward me. Pleasant shivers vibrated all over my skin. We crashed together, hands stroking, seeking any injuries, and assuring each other that we still lived.

Kol growled, pulling away enough to drag me toward the trees. “Need you.”

“Take me, master.”

He snarled in my ear, “Not master, not here.”

I darted forward to steal a kiss. Knowing he saw me as his equal, at least when we were alone, added the glow of love to the heat of our lust.

A lascivious smile curved his cold-reddened lips. He tugged me under the spreading boughs of an old oak that shielded us from the light drizzle. He shoved my back against the rough trunk. Pain radiated out from the welts on my back. I sucked in a breath, biting back a cry of pain. To Kol, I would show no weakness.

“Oden’s beard! How could I forget you were beaten? Here, let me see.” He pulled me around despite my protests.

“I’m fine, Kol. Just a little whipping, didn’t even break the skin.”

Ignoring me as usual, he tugged my tunic up, turning me toward the dim light leaking through the clouds. “Gods, how I wanted to kill him right then and there. I swear it was as if I felt each blow.” Pain filled his voice. “Your cries tore holes through my soul.”

I pulled free, turning to cup his face. “Forgive me, if I’d known you had to listen I would have been quieter. It was mostly a show for Ballung’s benefit.”

Kol snorted, “I figured but it still drove me nearly mad. Only forcing myself to remember how you pulled the same stunt with me made it bearable.” He chuckled. “I almost felt sorry for the curs knowing how you played them.”

I smiled broadly, “Like a well-tuned harp.”

“You may not wield a sword or axe but you are still one of the most dangerous men I know.” His eyes turned soft, his strong fingers cupped my face and stroked my cheek. I felt all the love I carried for him returned in kind.

A strange light shifted through his aura, a tinge of regret perhaps, or worry. “I remember when I first saw you. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kill you or fuck you.” He pulled me close. “Thanks the gods I didn’t kill you.”

I laughed softly against his chest. “I expected to die and when you dragged me behind that building, I figured you’d fuck me half to death and *then* kill me.” I smiled, brushing a hand along his handsome face. “Instead you gave me the first pleasure anyone had offered me in more years than I care to count.”

Kol tenderly brushed a thumb across my lower lip. “If that was pleasure, I hate to think what you consider pain.”

“May have been a bit... intense but still, I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” I focused all my need for this man in my gaze, locking my gaze onto his startling ice-blue eyes. My manhood ached with wanting his touch. “I’d love to do it again.”

He shuffled closer, hand fisting in my tunic. “Yeah?”

I smiled and pressed my hard length against him. “Oh, yeah, even in the rain and with you smelling like death.”

Our lips met in a scorching kiss. His hardened shaft ground into my belly. I slipped my leg between his to rub my own hard length on his muscled thigh. Pure ecstasy raced from my groin to all parts of my body. The cold, the pain in my back, even the fear and tension of the last few days, it all fled before the onslaught of Kol’s desire for me.

His strong hands, toughened with years of swinging a sword or long axe, gently stroked my body. Seeking ways under my sodden clothes and searching my skin for spots of pleasure or wounds in need of his gentle care.

All that tenderness was well and good, but I wanted more. I needed him to claim me once more. Remind me of his strength and need for me. I fought with the laces on his trousers. The length of his chain mail got thoroughly in my way. Snarling in frustration, I bent my head to see better the things that kept us apart.

He chuckled into my hair. “Eager for something, little one?”

I snarled up at him, “Are you not?” I gave his hard length a firm stroke. “Feels to me like you are.”

His sexy growl vibrated along taut nerves to flush my manhood with an urgent need for relief. Cupping me with his big hands had me moaning and

mindless. Swiftly, he spun me around, pressing me toward the mighty tree's trunk.

I dropped my woolen trousers and leaned forward, eager to feel him in me. The jangle of armor and creak of leather behind me added to the heat lighting me up inside.

Strong fingers spread my cheeks for the cool oil Kol always carried in a small water pouch on his belt. His after-battle lusts were legendary and I enjoyed every moment of them. His fingers breached me, I sighed out a moan of pleasure. His strong fingers stroked me inside with sure knowledge of my needs.

The heat of his body warmed my back. The broad head of his manhood replaced the fingers teasing me. So gentle at first but I could feel his need quivering in his grip. I pushed back, taking him in me in a single thrust. "Ahhhh, yesss, Kol!" Lords, it felt so good!

His control broke. Gripping me tight he gave me what we both wanted. Hot, hard and fast. I lost myself in the thrill of him against me, in me, owning me in ways no other could. His hot breath panted over my shoulder, sending tickling fingers along my heated skin.

"Gggaaa, yesss." My incoherent babble cued Kol to reach around and grasp my heated length. Each thrust of his mighty hips pushed me through his tight fist. Higher, hotter, the need spiraled out of control.

"Kol!" My body convulsed in pleasures too intense to describe. My hot spend splattered the oak's rough trunk.

"Ren!" His thrusts stuttered, then he buried himself deep, pulsing out his seed, claiming me completely.

He nuzzled into my neck, his breathing as labored as mine. We stayed there, catching our breaths, letting our hearts settle into a gentle rhythm. Cold rain dripped on my head to run down my back. I shivered and Kol withdrew his warmth leaving me shivering hard.

"Ren, beloved, did I hurt you?"

I turned, leaning just my undamaged shoulders against the tree trunk. "Never, my savage warrior." I ran a single finger down his cheek. "Never

could you hurt me.” My heart swelled with the love I held for this most improbable man, a barbarian burdened with a savage power whose heart and soul were most gentle and kind. I would love him to the end of my days. The shine in his eyes and clear tones of his colors proved he felt the same for me.

He smiled, a beacon of light in the lessening gloom of the day. “Come, Renshu, we’ve a lot yet to do today before we can travel home.”

Home, yes. Wherever Kolbrandr lay his head was now my home.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Dark Dreams, Forbidden Fantasies. What if...*

*Brannan writes books balancing gritty realism with a sprinkling of humor and leavened with love. Her critically acclaimed books include post-apocalyptic, fantasy, and paranormal genres. Gender is no barrier to love so you'll find m/f, m/m, and m/m/f couples sharing the adventures and romances of a lifetime. She loves to put average people in tough and unusual spots to see what makes them tick. OK, some are not so average and are from different realities but they are still as real to her as anyone.*

*Brannan can often be found writing out on her patio, while traveling with her hubby, or squirreled away in her studio. She lives on a small ranch in Colorado and enjoys traveling, making stained glass windows, and staring out the window overlooking her ranch wondering "what if?"*

*Come lose yourself in Brannan's worlds where passion and gritty action coexist.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# WORTHY

By Lia Black

## **Photo Description**

An agile young slave is bent backward over the knees of his doting master; his bindings are loose and their arrangement is “in the cards”.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*This is a dystopian class-based society where being a slave boy is a prized position. For those not born into the wealthy class, there are few options for work. A position as a slave boy means security and safety from a life of poverty and the danger of the streets.*

*Dystopian – set in a world similar to ours but with a few tweaks. Usually a bit darker or a more frightening version of what our society could become.*

*Thank you,*

*Bree Cheese*

*(who loves dystopian novels and wishes there were more out there!)*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** dystopia

**Tags:** master/slave, one-time threesome, cross-dressing, BDSM, acrobat, bondage/discipline, contortionist

**Word count:** 47,221

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# WORTHY

By Lia Black

## CHAPTER 1

The sun beat down, warming the stone of the high, white wall, and the young, hooded man who perched there. A sultry breeze blew in from the coast, flipping back Sev's dingy hood, and he closed his eyes, relishing the feeling of the light wind through his hair.

They had just arrived in Athena a few days ago—*the Golden City*—and already Sev was captivated by the place. He'd never imagined how beautiful such a big city could be; the dual golden towers that stood at the entrance could be seen for miles, welcoming in the procession of limousines that carried the aristocracy. Today was the opening day of the slave auction; something Sev had heard about, but had never dreamed he'd see. Although he would never be a candidate, he enjoyed watching the slow parade of wide-eyed, bright-faced young men and women heading inside to the promise of a better life. These were the fortunate few—fortunate to have been born to families who could keep them fed and cared for—fortunate to have found sponsors or parents who would pay for their safe passage once they reached the proper age—fortunate to have been born without flaw.

To Sev's back was the ghetto, and despite the brightness of the sun, the ghetto and its inhabitants seemed always in shadow. In sharp contrast to Athena's wide, white streets were the garbage-strewn pathways of the dreg's slum. Those who dwelled within were the unfortunates, the *unseen*; people born without name or title. Those who began life in the ghetto died in the ghetto. Sev had initially been born elsewhere, and he maintained the hope that it might mean some escape, regardless of how unlikely it seemed.

“Oi—what you doin' up there?”

Sev flinched at the sound of the familiar voice of his unfortunate guardian, Phineas, calling up to him from below.

“Get down here, mutt, you're wanted at the Palace.”



Sev grabbed the wall and swung his legs over the other side. The wall was at least two stories high, but Sev had always been good at climbing. With his lithe, acrobat's body, he could scale almost anything, and manage to get into the most difficult spaces with ease. It had been for this reason alone that he'd been able to stow-away on the boat that had brought them to Athena. Phineas had been able to bribe himself aboard the leaking freighter, while Sev hid inside small a crate, only able to come out for a few hours at night over the two-week journey. But when the alternative was to be a prison laborer, Sev was willing to put up with some temporary discomfort.

Through a series of impossible twists and tumbles, Sev leapt down off the high wall, landing in a graceful crouch in the dead-end alley below. A few people stopped to watch him, but turned away when he lifted his head. Even the dregs were uncomfortable looking at him for too long.

“Oi—put your hood back on—you’re scarin’ the locals.” Phineas clapped him on the back of the head, and Sev shook his sandy-brown hair down into his face, replacing his hood.

He followed the limping, smelly, old man back through the wide alley, past the derelicts sleeping in the sun and the dubious *physics* selling their cures. Around the corner, near the heavily guarded entrance to the slums, was the red door that opened to the Treasure Palace.

It was daylight yet, but on auction days like today the seedy club opened their doors early to entertain some of the *wealth* that might just happen to get lost and wander inside.

Today would actually be Sev’s first time performing at the club. Phineas knew the owners from his travels, or so he claimed; it was difficult to know the man’s half-truths from his lies. Initially, they didn’t seem too fond of the man; but once Sev became part of the deal, the owners began to at least tolerate Phineas. Sev had performed as an acrobat in a gypsy circus; dancing for a few drunks was a fair price for a place to sleep and possibly something like food in his belly.

Count Demetrie Silvastrano settled back into the seat of his limousine, letting the silver-white smoke from his cigar obscure the faces of the men in front of him as he exhaled.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been to the auction house in Athena,” said the older man to his left, Lord Walter Hammill. He had been one of Demetrie’s father’s most valued friends. Since the elder Silvastrano was gone, Walter fancied himself as having filled the imaginary void left in the young Count’s heart since his father’s death.

“I remember the day your father bought his first slave—Roger, do you remember his name?”

Roger Wendt, Demetrie’s father’s accountant, was a meek little man who looked like a rodent. Roger had been fortunate in that his own father had also been a successful accountant, as had his grandfather before him. It had kept his family at the lowest edge of the aristocracy; affording them a name but no benefit of title. The elder Silvastrano had done the family a favor by keeping Roger employed. He wasn’t very good at anything but numbers, and too ugly to have been a pleasure slave had he not been good at that.

“Was it the girl?” Roger asked. His voice sounded like a rusted hinge, even when he wasn’t sniveling.

Walter, on the other hand, always spoke as if he were giving a speech in an auditorium. His thick, white mustache billowed any time he said any word beginning with a *P* or an *F*.

“Ambree? Amabel? No, no... That was the boy—Aubrey.”

Demetrie sighed and looked out the tinted windows. He could see them coming up on the auction house, those rows of strapping young men and dazzling women, all very well-bred and well-trained and hoping for a chance to live a life of leisure as a domestic slave, pleasure slave, or—the worst-case scenario—as a labor slave. The very fortunate ones were given an opportunity to learn to read, to write, or to dance; to entertain their Masters and hopefully be cared for until the day that they died, almost as if they were family. Some slaves, after twenty years of service and upon their Master’s death, could become freedmen laborers and be able to go wherever they chose to serve, no longer bound by contracts of sale.

“Pull over.” Demetrie said through the intercom to the driver as they were driving past the large iron gate that kept the west end slums sealed off from Athena’s market district. Without waiting for the driver to open his door, Demetrie got out of the car.

“Demetrie, where are you going—we’re nearly at the auction!” Walter stammered, sliding across the leather bench seat after him.

“It’s a nice day. I want to take a walk,” he said, heading towards the guards at the gate.

“B-but, you’ll miss out on the best selection!” Walter sputtered.

“Then you go and pick one out for yourself. I want to walk.”

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Despite all the protesting, Walter and Roger followed Demetrie for a few paces as he gained privileged entry into the slums. It wasn’t completely unheard of for members of the aristocracy to seek out the kinds of forbidden entertainment that only the slums could provide. There were certain decency laws in effect, though men like Demetrie were never concerned about being considered indecent.

Walter and Roger did their best to keep up, but when they began to move towards the seedier district of the ghetto both men grew quieter, trying not to draw any more attention to themselves than necessary.

“Demetrie, why are we here?” Walter whispered harshly; his eyes darted nervously towards every passing glance.

“I wanted to buy a gift for someone,” Demetrie lied, stopping at one of the many booths full of strange—and likely stolen—wares.

This was the oldest section of Athena’s hidden slums, close to the docks, where the fishing boats once moored, before the water became polluted enough to burn. On the other side of the high, graffiti-covered wall, the water looked sparkling and clean, although that was itself only chemical. Just like everything else, the face Athena showed to the world was unflawed, so perfect and artificial that Demetrie found it boring. The old section was far more intriguing with its unwashed streets and equally unwashed inhabitants.

Walter moved up closer to Demetrie. “Your Lordship, I’m certain if you tell me what it is you’re looking for, either Roger or myself could acquire it someplace less... *dangerous*.” The last word was a whisper as Walter flinched from an old woman offering up a fur stole that looked suspiciously like a dead alley cat.

Demetrie ignored them, his attention drawn to a toothless old dreg calling out an invitation to “come inside the Treasure Palace and be seduced by drink and dance.”

“What have we here?” Demetrie mused and began to approach the barker outside the garish red door.

“Demetrie!” Walter grabbed his sleeve, and then, more quietly, “Count Silvastrano, I must object!”

Demetrie shrugged. “By all means, Walter; object away. Don’t let me stop you.” He brushed off the older man’s hand and made his way into the dark club. “Go back to the car, I just want to get a drink.”

The Treasure Palace was, as expected, a dump of epic proportions, yet somehow Demetrie felt more comfortable here. The place stunk of sweat, sex, and alcohol. Fortunately, most of the filth was hidden in shadows cast by the anemic red bulbs hanging bare from wires in the ceiling. A few lazy whores smoked hand-rolled cigarettes in a back corner. One smiled, gap-toothed, at Demetrie and scratched at the inside of her thigh.

Demetrie smiled back with a small shake of his head and found an empty booth that had an unobstructed view of the stage. Walter and Roger had reluctantly returned to the car rather than try and argue with him and risk making a scene. He’d assured them he’d only be a little while; long enough to have a drink, and then they could be on their way. Demetrie was not in the mood to buy a lovely blond slave. Even the pleasure slaves were sexually pent-up prima donnas whose flavors came only in vanilla. Demetrie’s tastes always ran decidedly towards a spicier appetite.

“Ah, Sir, what can I get you?” The bartender spoke slowly, as if enunciating his words would make the rich man forget he was in a place of dregs.

“Whiskey, top shelf if you have one. Tell me, is there any entertainment this afternoon, or am I premature?”

The bartender grinned; one of his few teeth was partially black and looked like a floating crescent moon in the dim light.

“You’re in luck—just got a dancer in from Nissim—it’s a boy, but don’t let that put you off. They say he has rubber bones.”

“*They* do, do *they*?” Demetrie raised an eyebrow.

Much to Demetrie’s annoyance, as soon as the bartender left to fill his order, a large man with a thick, grizzled beard and balding head limped over and sat down in the booth opposite him. “Name’s Phineas,” the man introduced himself, having only one name. Only the aristocracy could claim surnames, and this man was certainly not of his kind.

Demetrie declined the offer to shake his hand, glad that his drink had arrived so he could pay attention to picking out whatever was floating in the glass rather than looking at the old man’s pock-marked face.

“I manage the boy,” Phineas said, waving his arm towards the stage as if the boy in question was there. “His mother was such a beautiful ballerina. So lovely and pure, she danced like a dream...” Phineas gazed wistfully at the stage, “But she fell for the charms of a *foreigner* and became with child. The cad left her stranded, and in her last, dying breaths she gave birth to a foul, twisted creature. The boy was a stain left behind by his poor mother’s sins!”

“Whatever happened to her being so lovely and pure?” Demetrie muttered, wiping his fingers off on his trousers once he’d successfully removed the foreign object from his whiskey. He had not come in for a story, and he was considering getting up to leave when the stage lights came up and a strange angel appeared from the darkness behind.

The boy could very well have been the son of a beautiful ballerina. He was thin, his body mostly hairless, but lean muscle bunched under his skin, revealed by form-fitting black shorts, which was all the clothing he wore. It was difficult to be certain of his age, but certainly closer to a man than a child, or at least Demetrie hoped as much.

The shape of his face resembled a narrow heart, his lips full and curved, his nose slender and straight. His eyes had the exotic slant of a foreigner, and while his right eye was a lovely copper-brown, the other was a pale green, the color of mint tea diluted with cream. Had it not been for the darker ring of his iris, it might have seemed he had no color in it at all. And it was on this side of his face that his golden-olive skin was bleached, as were the eyelashes, and edged with a lacy port-wine stain like an intricate tattoo.

Demetrie sat mesmerized as the dancer did a high pirouette, arching his spine impossibly backwards. With one leg raised behind him, he reached back and grasped the ankle, pulling it up over his shoulder. His dance was almost painful to watch, his contortions so graceful yet erotic in the fantasies they inspired. The Count's mouth suddenly felt dry as he imagined the many ways he might bend and break this lovely boy.

"How much?" Demetrie's voice was hoarse as he remained unable to tear his eyes away.

"For an hour? An evening?"

"For him. I want the boy. How much?"

Phineas cleared his throat. "Er... how about a game of cards? If you win, you can have the boy."

Demetrie knew that it was a fool's game that most men would have no chance of winning, but the more he watched the boy on stage and thought about the man before him, the more certain Demetrie became of his winning hand. "How is it played?"

"Well, there are three rounds; you bet as much or as little as you like. You draw a card from the deck, and I draw a card. If you have the higher card, you keep your wager; if I win, I take it and we start again... doubling the offer on the next round. Whoever has the high card in round three keeps all his winnings and the boy..."

Demetrie smirked at the man's ignorant gaffe. Apparently Phineas had never lost even a round in this dubious game.

"...But whoever draws the joker loses it all. Ready?"

The boy on stage went up on his hands, first spreading his legs in a wide split, then going down on his elbows and bringing his legs over his head until his toes touched the stage in front of him. Demetrie kept one eye on him and one on the deck. “Ready.”

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As he danced and moved through his contortions, Sev watched the exquisite man gamble with Phineas. The man was much younger than his guardian, but older than Sev; his handsome face sculpted by firm cheekbones and a squared jaw. Black hair, trimmed close to his nape, settled in silky waves along the top of his head; his eyes were just as dark, and fringed by thick lashes. His flesh was clear and pale, with a light shadow of blue beneath the skin where he shaved his beard. The clothing he wore was well-tailored, without so much as a thread out of place, and it was clean—*he* was clean, his scent exotic and foreign against the sour sweat of so many dregs. *An aristocrat*; Sev had only ever seen them by accident, and he couldn’t help but wonder why such an elegant man would venture here just for a drink.

Phineas never lost this game because it was one he’d made up himself—there were several jokers in the deck and he knew exactly which cards they were. Sev had no idea that the prize they were playing for was him.

The aristocrat set down a gold coin and Sev’s eyes widened. He looked again into the man’s handsome face, and the man’s eyes caught his, holding them as he gave Sev a smile.

Sev felt color rise to his cheeks, and he smiled as well—something he had rarely done in his life.

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“You know,” Demetrie said, fingering his card before casting it, “when I was twenty, I traveled to Nissim with my father.” His voice was low, as if carrying on a casual conversation with Phineas, though his eyes continually sought out Sev. He cast his card, a two of clubs, and Phineas beat it with a queen of hearts. Demetrie sighed and shook his head, then pulled out two more coins, placing them where he’d set the first one, now on Phineas’ side. He drew another card, turning it through his fingers as he spoke.



“Nissim’s business district is not the sort of place that would hold the attention span of a brash young man for very long, and so I wandered to Low Town, hoping to find a tavern where I might be a little more... *entertained*.”

Again, Demetrie cast his card, and again, he shook his head when he lost. Briefly his eyes darted to Sev, who did a slow, standing backbend, grabbing his ankles and turning to the side, a maneuver that made Demetrie wonder if he was seducing him on purpose, or truly oblivious of his effect.

Demetrie’s gaze moved along the arch of Sev’s body, and his tongue played behind his top teeth. *No*, obviously the boy was following a practiced script meant to distract so that Phineas could manipulate the game.

“I never made it to the bar... there was a circus in the square. Really just a bunch of gypsies, but there was this peculiar little boy, doing the most amazing things with his body, and in between acts, I watched him pick several pockets faster and more nimbly than a monkey.”

“Mmph,” Phineas said, paying no attention to what the man was saying as he focused on the four gold coins now lying beside his three.

“I never really thought very much about it again until now, you see. Recently, about two weeks ago, a business associate of mine in Nissim suffered a break-in. An old man and a young contortionist were nearly apprehended for the burglary—the old man had actually taken a bullet to the leg; yet, somehow they escaped. And I was just thinking what an unlikely story that might seem, if I hadn’t once seen that little circus boy with my own eyes.”

Demetrie drew his card and smiled at it, then slowly laid it down. It was the joker. Phineas made a quick grab for the money but Demetrie snatched up his wrist and held it, his fingers wrapped around it so tightly that they squeezed the color out of the old man’s dirty skin.

It was then that Phineas realized what the other man had been saying. “Okay—fine—take your money back!” Phineas growled, still trying to seem threatening, though it was a pitiful attempt.

“That won’t stop me from telling the authorities that I have found the fugitives from Nissim... Or perhaps I should simply mention the reward to any of the *upstanding citizens* outside?”



The old man's eyes bugged. "What do you want?" His voice was high and hoarse.

"I've told you. Him." Demetrie pointed at Sev who dropped onto his back and sat up blinking stupidly.

"The boy? No—I won't..."

"I'm willing to let you keep the gold you have there. If you refuse you'll be headed to a labor camp and I'll take your boy anyway... unless you think you can outrun the guards."

Phineas ground his rotten teeth. "I want more."

Demetrie raised an eyebrow. "How much more?"

"Make it fifteen—no, twenty."

Demetrie kicked Phineas in his bad leg. The old man coughed and his face went white.

"You're hardly in a position to bargain, dreg, but since I'm feeling benevolent, I'll make it ten."

"Fine." Phineas' voice was barely a squeak as beads of sweat blossomed on his forehead.

Demetrie let go of the old man and stood up, dusting off his pants and he tossed him a few more coins. As a last consideration, he reached down and snatched up the deck of cards, tucking them into his vest, before holding his hand out to the boy still sitting dumbfounded on stage.

"Come with me, I'm taking you home."

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Sev walked quietly beside the man who held him by a hand at the back of his neck. Even if he weren't slouching, Sev's head would have only reached about the height of one of the man's broad shoulders.

At the gate, the guards called the man "Lordship" and allowed him to take Sev out without so much as one question asked. Sev couldn't help but wonder if it was something he had done many times before.

"Demetrie, really! Your father would not approve!" An older man gasped, his white mustache puffing, as they arrived at a black stretch limo.

*Demetrie.* Sev looked up at the man who held him. The name sounded exotic, offering whispers of dark promises and deep passions. Sev wondered how much of either he might come to know in this man's company. He blushed and lowered his gaze as Demetrie's stormy eyes met his own. After a moment, Demetrie's attention shifted briefly to the older man, as if he'd only just noticed they weren't alone.

“My father is dead, Walter. Take it up with him if you like.”

Sev had little time to process the cool delivery of this information before he was sent scrambling into the car by a brush of Demetrie's hand on his backside.

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## CHAPTER 2

Sev was doing his best to become invisible as he rode in the car with the three men. He knelt on the floor with his head down, but was acutely aware of Demetrie's eyes upon him. The cavalier aristocrat lazily smoked his thin black cigar while the man he had called Walter sputtered through his arguments. The other man stared at Sev, his thin lips twitching as he smiled.

"He is unclean!" Walter accused, jabbing his finger at Sev.

"I plan on bathing him."

"He-he's a mongrel! A freak! Look at him! He hasn't said a word! I doubt he can even speak!"

Demetrie raised an eyebrow, "Can you speak, boy?"

"Yes, Sir," Sev said in a small voice. His tone was smooth, his voice too low to be a child's and ringing with the vestiges of a lyrical gypsy accent. It made people turn towards him in a crowd, then look abruptly elsewhere when they saw his face. But Demetrie had yet to turn away from him. His eyes had scarcely left Sev's face since they'd entered the car.

A smile curled the corners of Demetrie's sensuous mouth, and Sev couldn't help but bask in the warmth it elicited.

"What is your name?" Demetrie asked him, his deep voice was soothing as it moved through him.

"Seven, Sir."

"Seven?!" Walter balked. "He's an idiot! That's a number, not a name!"

Sev bristled. He could handle being called a lot of things, but idiot wasn't one of them. "I didn't name myself, Sir. It's just what I was given. Most call me Sev."

"And what would you like me to call you?" Demetrie asked, sliding his foot across the deep pile carpet and nudging Sev's knee lightly.

"You may call me what you choose, Sir."

"What if I called you slave?"

“Demetrie!” Walter and the other man gasped in unison.

Sev felt the blood rise to his cheeks. “Sir, I am not worthy to be called such a thing.”

“You see?” Walter’s earlier agitation gave way to a note of triumph, “Even he knows it. Demetrie—play with him for a few days if you must to get it out of your system, then at the next reserve auction we’ll go out and find you a proper slave.”

Demetrie said nothing, but drew deeply on his cigar and looked out the window.

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It felt like they had been driving for hours. Sev was hungry and tired and needed to pee, but was afraid to upset someone by mentioning it, worried that they would drop him off in the middle of the Coldfields. He could tell they had traveled far outside the city center, and he knew only of the regions of Nissim, where the stretches of land between settlements were dead zones. He’d traveled through them many times with the caravans. When he was older he helped to light the way as they’d journeyed through darkness. He’d heard stories about wild creatures that would snatch up those foolish enough to wander the Coldfields alone. But more frightening were the things that he had witnessed: wild dust storms, extreme and sudden drops in temperature, and randomly shifting earth that would open up and swallow a man whole.

Walter was dropped off first at his home. He got out and shot a threatening glare towards Sev but said nothing to Demetrie before he went on his way.

As the car pulled away and they resumed their journey, Demetrie turned his attention to the remaining passenger. “Roger, what do you think of Sev?”

Roger licked his lips, his body visibly trembling. “I find him... intriguing.”

Demetrie smiled. “Do you now?”

“Might I ask what you intend to do with him?”

Demetrie shrugged. “As Walter suggested, I think I’ll play with him for a while.”

“Sir... might I... might I have him when you’re finished?”

Demetrie laughed. “Feel nice, does it? The thought of having something uglier than yourself to admire?”

Sev flinched at the cruel remark, delivered with such a cool smile. But Roger didn’t seem bothered, and his tongue kept wetting his thin, colorless lips. “Yes... yes it does.”

“Goodnight, Roger.” Demetrie laughed as the car stopped and the door opened.

Roger reached out to touch Sev’s hair but Demetrie smacked his hand away. “It’s not nice to touch other people’s property, Roger.”

“S-Sorry, Sir... Good night.”

When the car started up again, Demetrie sat quietly smoking his cigar for what seemed like several minutes as he looked his new acquisition up and down.

“Come to me, Sev.”

Sev crawled to Demetrie, stopping when he felt the Count’s powerful hand press against the top of his head.

Demetrie’s fingers carded Sev’s hair. “Your hair is very soft,” Demetrie said in a voice that vibrated through Sev and felt like a caress even more so than his hand did. “Dirty, but soft.” Demetrie frowned and pinched dead an insect.

Sev relaxed, sighing appreciatively under the contact.

“Tell me Sev, have you ever been with a man?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Ah... was it that old grifter?”

“Never, Sir.” Sev closed his eyes, his sounds close to purring with each long pass of Demetrie’s big hand.

“I would like you to let me have your body for a while, Sev.”

“As long as you wish, Sir... you may keep it and do with it as you please.”

Demetrie chuckled, and Sev worried that he’d said something foolish.

“Ah, Sev; I think you were born to be a slave.”

“I wasn’t, Sir. My mother was not a ballerina—she was a foreign whore from Ishmay. I don’t know my father. I was not born to be anything... I shouldn’t have even been born.” Sev said the words without emotion.

Demetrie pondered the younger man’s face for a moment. “That doesn’t make you cry?”

“No, Sir.”

“What a pity... I think I should like to see what you look like when you cry. I think you’d look lovely.”

Sev peered through his overgrown bangs, and Demetrie thought he saw fear there.

“What makes you cry, Sev?” Demetrie’s voice was husky, and he spread his legs, adjusting himself through his tailored slacks.

“I don’t know Sir.”

White teeth—perfectly straight—the canines slightly pointed, lit up Demetrie’s face when he grinned.

“Then we’ll find out together.”

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It was after dark when they reached Demetrie’s estate. Outside, the front of the mansion was lit up by a warm, artificial radiance that transformed the narrow columns and tall multi-paned windows into a stunning geometry of light and shadow. Inside, the home was no less impressive. From the high ceiling of the rounded foyer hung an enormous chandelier of smoky cut crystal and amber-colored lights. The floor appeared to be one huge slab of stone, only broken up along the borders by intricate tile inlays, and rising above was a wide, curving staircase with a deep, burgundy runner.

A Freedman domestic—no longer a slave—met them at the door. Like the driver and everyone else so far, the servant initially appeared unimpressed by his employer’s new acquisition, however, Sev caught the man offering several curious glances out of the corner of his eye.

“Stanley, take my new toy upstairs and have him cleaned.”

Stanley was a tall, pale-haired man in his early forties. Although not quite as tall as his Master, he still looked down upon Sev with a scowl. “Follow me please.”

Sev glanced back at Demetrie who had already turned, his attention moved to an older female domestic who had handed him some letters. Sev shrugged and followed Stanley through the foyer and up the stairs.

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“I must confess, I knew the young Count’s tastes ran counter to the norm, but I had no idea that he’d ever find anything like you.”

Sev frowned, but didn’t respond otherwise. He assumed this meant that Demetrie had brought home a lot of toys over the years, and that Sev was just another thing to play with then toss aside. Right now he didn’t care. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been clean.

His stomach growled audibly, and Stanley glared at him over his shoulder.

He led Sev through a door into a bathroom that was probably as big as the entire bar that he’d just come from. The floor was covered in dark granite tiles, and one wall was a giant mirror. There was a toilet and sink that seemed that seemed to have sprouted from where they sat, being made of the same dark granite, and a large shower enclosed in clear glass. In the center was a raised tub that could have easily accommodated two men the size of Phineas’ bulk.

“I suggest you shower first to rid your body of as much vermin as you can.”

Stanley went to a recessed cabinet and reached deep inside to pull out a bottle and a plastic garbage bag. “This should kill any pests.” He handed Sev the plastic bottle.

It seemed to be about half-full, with a white label and a line drawing of an insect crossed through with a red “X”.

“The elder Count Silvastrano kept hounds,” Stanley explained. He held up the bag, “All of your clothing will go in here.”

Sev took the offerings, such as they were, and set them down as he began to undress. Behind him Stanley turned on the shower.

“I will bring you some towels and start the tub when I return.” He turned around and looked at Sev, who kept his hair covering his face and his head turned to expose only his *good* side.

Sev was aware of the man’s gaze moving slowly over his body. He had always been thin, but his muscles had begun to atrophy from his time on the boat, and today’s contortions had left him feeling achy and weak.

“You’re very thin... When did you last eat?” Stanley’s voice was notably less harsh.

“I had some supplements the other day.”

Unlike many other places, the aristocratic government of Athena offered nutritional supplements to the derelicts registered in their ghettos. It was a small kindness, though so strictly controlled that the supplements were often used as currency. Some more unscrupulous individuals would rob or even murder others and hoard their meager rations—selling them for favors. That was how Phineas had acquired a portion for himself and Sev—although the favor he’d offered had been Sev’s body.

“I’ll make certain you get something proper to eat. Use as much of that as you need to.” Stanley jerked his chin towards the bottle in Sev’s hand, but his eyes were glued to the boy’s uncircumcised penis.

Sev looked down at himself briefly, then raised his face to look at Stanley, offering a lascivious little smile. “Do you find it obscene?”

Stanley swallowed hard, his eyes hesitantly rising to Sev’s face. “Extremely,” he muttered, then he walked out of the room, pausing briefly to catch a glimpse of Sev’s backside before he left.

Sev went and used the toilet first. It was the kind that flushed itself, and Sev was fascinated by the power of the miniature whirlpool. The spray in the shower was hot and strong and wonderful. Because Sev was considered lesser—even among the dregs—he was forced to wait on the days the public showers were opened, and by the time he arrived, the water was always down to just a cold trickle. Sev rinsed his body down, then crouched and scrubbed his head, watching the bugs and filth swirl with the foam going down the drain. He scrubbed the hair on his head three times, then used the rest of the



bottle to get the hair under his arms and the patch covering his groin. He never grew hair anywhere else—not like Phineas, who seemed more hair than man at times. He was glad to finally be away from him—for a little while at least.

Phineas had found Sev living among the gypsies. It was the gypsies who'd trained his body to bend, and dance... and fuck. Sev closed his eyes, remembering the humid summer evenings at the camps they made inside the various settlements between the Coldfields. Naked young bodies stretched out on top of the garish caravans while the adults slept on the ground below, because inside the enclosed space was like an oven. It was always the boys Sev liked the best. They passed him around like treasure, sharing in the spoils of his wealth. Sometimes he was so languid that he couldn't count how many hands were upon him, how many tongues in his mouth and on his dick... how many cocks and fingers shoving in and out of him at once...

Sev gasped, pressing his palm against the glass enclosure as he became painfully erect. God, he hadn't had a hard-on in so long. It felt raw, and claimed so much blood it made him feel dizzy. He bit his lip, feeling certain that he could come without even touching himself. Sev groaned softly, putting both palms and his forearms against the glass. His cock bobbed as he clenched his groin muscles, flinging a bead of precome against the glass where it stretched in a glistening thread like spider's silk. He looked down at himself, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Stanley in the doorway watching him.

Sev dropped down to his knees with a startled yelp. "Don't you *knock*?" Sev snapped, his face red. He didn't so much mind that Stanley had been watching him, it was that he'd been watching him without Sev's knowledge. That was one kind of vulnerability Sev couldn't manage. No matter how naked and exposed he was, he needed to have some control over his audience—to show them only what he wanted them to see. It was why he'd done so well with the circus; he could be a fantasy at a moment's notice, but only when notice was given.

"I've brought your towels," Stanley said, clearing his throat, "As soon as you are ready, you may enter the bath."

Sev swore under his breath and pushed his hair forward to cover the left side of his face. The shock of being discovered in such a compromised state

had caused his cock to shrivel back down with an unsatisfied ache. He stepped out of the shower and headed for the tub as Stanley passed him to turn off the spray.

From the tub rose steam scented with some exotic sweet and spicy fragrance, and when Sev dipped his foot inside, it felt like ribbons of silk embracing his skin.

Gingerly he settled into the hot water until it rose up over his chest, and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh.

“I will tend to your hands and feet now,” Stanley said, and sat on a low stool on the far end of the tub. On the ledge were two towels; one was folded while the other held numerous implements laid out side-by-side. It looked like Stanley was about to perform surgery.

“What’s all that?” Sev reluctantly offered one wet foot.

“Your feet are in terrible shape... the calluses on the balls of your feet and your toes...”

“It’s from dancing.”

“Dancing?” Stanley’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead.

Sev inclined his head in affirmation, his eyes watching Stanley’s actions but his mind someplace else. He missed the caravans. It was with the gypsies that he’d felt the most at home. They saw his unfortunate birthmark as a sign of something special—referring to it as an *angel’s kiss*. Sev would have stayed with them forever, but Phineas’ greed and Sev’s misguided loyalty took him away and into a life far beyond the petty crimes of the gypsies. It was why they’d had to leave Nissim so quickly, and why Sev could never go back. Demetrie obviously knew they were wanted fugitives, so Sev had no illusions that when the Count grew tired of him he’d be handed over and extradited for his crimes. If he was lucky, he’d die before he ever made it to the salt mines or whatever godforsaken labor facility they’d send him to for punishment.

“Ouch.” Sev flinched as Stanley accidentally cut a toenail too far down. Not considering the action, Sev brought his foot to his face—without using his hands—and sucked on the bleeding toe. When he chanced a look at Stanley, the man was gaping.

“Sorry,” Sev whispered, and returned his foot to the towel.

“Well your allure for the Count is no longer a mystery,” Stanley muttered and went back to work.

“What happened to the Count’s last entertainment?” Sev asked, though he wasn’t entirely certain he wanted to know.

“The Count usually goes out for his entertainment. He’s never brought it home, and frankly, I believe it should have remained so.”

Sev shrugged. “And just when I was beginning to think that you liked me.”

Stanley rolled his eyes.

“You were a slave—but never entertainment?”

“I belonged to the elder Count Silvastrano. Our personal arrangements before I became a Freedman domestic are *personal*.”

Sev offered a wry smile. “Even though the feeling isn’t mutual, I like you, Stanley.”

“Lucky me,” Stanley huffed, shaking his head as he did the best that he could with Sev’s long overdue pedicure. “I only hope for the young Count’s sake that he gets you out of his system and finds a proper slave soon.”

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By the time Stanley was finished with Sev’s hands and feet, the water was uncomfortably tepid and Sev couldn’t wait to get out. He never could have imagined he’d get tired of soaking in such a luxurious tub, but Stanley’s clipping and buffing had added just enough discomfort to want it over with. Sev dried himself with the towels, wrapping himself in their damp softness with a contented sigh.

Stanley looked past Sev, his body becoming a rigid line as he bowed his head unexpectedly, making Sev wonder why the condescending servant suddenly appeared so humble.

Sev glanced at him, then looked at the door and realized that the Count was standing in the open doorway. “Oh! Sir!” Sev dropped to his knees, still wearing the towel like swaddling.

“Stanley, I do hope that you are finished,” Demetrie said, looking past Sev as though he wasn’t there.

“Forgive me, Sir, I was just about to bring him in.”

“Never mind, I’m here now; I’ll take him.”

Finally Demetrie looked down at Sev. “On your feet.”

Sev quickly stood, peering up at Demetrie through his messy damp bangs.

Demetrie shook his head and slid his fingers through Sev’s hair, pulling it back from his face. “Your hair is very nice when it’s clean, but it’s your remarkable flaws I’d rather see.”

Sev felt himself blushing; somehow Demetrie’s words seemed like a compliment, whether or not that’s how they were meant.

“Come.”

Still wrapped in a towel, Sev followed Demetrie out of the bathroom and into the hall. They passed an open door that Sev assumed must be Demetrie’s room because of the brief glimpse of masculine opulence he’d seen—a massive bed covered with dark, sumptuous linens, heavy wood furniture, and thick, elegant rugs—but they did not pause here. Instead, Demetrie led Sev down to the end of the hall, around a corner, and to a long, narrow corridor. There were no doors or windows, and the floors here were bare wood rather than the thick runners on which they’d been traveling before now. At the end of this hallway was a very solid looking, dark paneled door.

Sev stood behind Demetrie, watching the Count pull out a brass skeleton key and work it into the lock. The door opened with a heavy groan.

“Go inside.”

Sev took a few tentative steps forward. The room was so dark, it appeared that beyond the threshold there was only a yawning black void. Sev yelped as he was shoved hard from behind, and, disoriented, he stumbled and fell down onto his side. When he looked towards the hallway, all he saw was the brief silhouette of Demetrie before the door was slammed closed.

Sev began to struggle to his knees, but he was grabbed around the ankle and dragged across the smooth wooden floor. He whimpered, instinctively

scrabbling with his hands for some safe hold, but there was not even a loose floorboard for him to clutch. And then he was flung hard and released, sliding easily across the polished floor and tumbling in a heap against some heavy piece of furniture.

A clink of metal and the scent of sulfur preceded the small flame that revealed Demetrie's face as he lit another thin, black cigar. Twin fires were reflected in his cold, dark eyes for a moment before he snapped the lighter shut.

Sev stared at the red cherry glowing at the end of the cigar, but it didn't come any closer. Finally Demetrie turned on a swing-arm lamp and angled the intensely bright bulb towards Sev.

Sev squinted, trying to shade his eyes.

"Beside you is a special piece of furniture. You will leave your towel on the floor, and stand up, facing this item."

Demetrie's voice sent a shiver through Sev that he couldn't claim was entirely from fear. Standing up, Sev let the towel fall. The furniture Demetrie had mentioned was more like a large, heavy block, bolted to the floor and covered with studded leather. On the far end was a smooth wooden bar with what appeared to be leather handgrips and open shackles. Sev blew out a long breath, waiting for the inevitable command.

"Spread your feet and bend forward to hold the bar."

The leather was cold against his thighs and chest but seemed to warm as he settled against it. It was firm without much yield, but a studded dimple in the diamond pattern fell in line with his crotch, giving him a slightly more comfortable indentation to rest against.

"Do I need to shackle you?" Demetrie's voice was closer.

"No Sir," Sev said, his voice sounding hoarse.

"Do you know why we have come here, Sev?"

Sev's mind cycled through several possible answers, but in the end he only answered, "No."

"No? Really? Well then, let me explain it to you so there is no misunderstanding."

Demetrie began to pace very slowly behind him, and Sev fought the urge to turn his head.

“You did something to which I object, and although you didn’t know the rules, I think this infringement deserves *correction* nevertheless.”

“Sir? What did I do to displease you?”

“You allowed yourself to be seen in a state of arousal without my permission, or my presence.”

Sev remembered his humiliating display in the shower and felt the blood drain from his face. He turned only enough to catch Demetrie out of the corner of his eye and saw that he was examining a long, narrow riding crop. Sev swallowed hard, his knuckles whitening on the hand grips.

“Sir, I think that maybe you’d better use the shackles after all.”

Demetrie made a soft sound that might have been surprise or approval. He came to stand beside the block and leaned down, looking into Sev’s face as he reached across Sev’s back and secured one shackle, then the other. They were lined and lightly padded inside to keep the metal rings from cutting flesh, but they were not simply for show. Even if he’d wanted to, there was no way to squeeze out of them without being released.

“Too tight?” Demetrie’s voice was soft, with just a hint of amusement.

Sev shook his head, suddenly finding himself unable to speak. He closed his eyes as Demetrie faded away again behind him.

“Rule number one.” The flexible riding crop came down hard across Sev’s buttocks and he swallowed a yelp of surprise. “A slave shall never flaunt his body outside the presence of his Master without his Master’s command.”

The crop came down again, sending an initial shock through his nerves that dulled for a moment, then suddenly flared up into a painful, stinging burn. It was the exclamation point on the end of a statement that Sev would be expected never to forget.

“Rule number two.” Another smack crossed over the first two; the intersection sent fire drilling down through Sev’s muscles and straight into his groin. “Until I release you from my service, you shall comport yourself as my slave.”

Sev gritted his teeth, waiting for another blow which never came. He startled slightly as Demetrie pressed against him from behind, rubbing the inflamed marks with his hand. The contact raised conflicting sensations and emotions in Sev. The warmth of Demetrie's palm caused the burning to rise, and Sev wanted to beg him to stop. But at the same time he relished the touch, and yearned for more.

"I think that is enough for now. Three should be sufficient to help you remember."

Sev shivered as Demetrie's breath warmed the skin behind his ear. The Count reached over Sev's head and unlocked the shackles, but did not give him permission to let go of the bar, so Sev continued to grasp it.

"Are you crying, slave?"

"N-no M—Sir." He fumbled between the two words.

The hand stopped, and Demetrie brought his head down to look into Sev's face. "You will not call me Master?"

"I would not dishonor you like that. It would be an insult to your status to have a *dreg* for a slave."

The hand on his skin began to move again in slow circles. The light pressure felt like a caress of broken glass each time it passed over one of the burning welts.

"You seem more concerned for my status than I am. Very well, *dreg* Sev; you may call me Sir for now, but in public it is Master. Do I make myself clear?"

Sev swallowed his protest, bobbing his head as emphatically as he would have argued.

"Your ass is striped, Sev; a few more strikes would have broken your skin. Did it not hurt you?"

"Sir, it did hurt me." Sev's mouth was dry.

Demetrie glanced back when he saw Sev squirming against the block. He slid his hand around Sev's hips from the back to the front and chuckled softly, finding him fully erect.

“It seems we’ll have to find a more suitable form of punishment in the event you break another rule... it appears this one constitutes foreplay.”

Demetrie squeezed Sev’s cock, and Sev groaned softly, unconsciously thrusting into his hand.

Demetrie moved his face away. A moment later, Sev felt the sear of hot breath along his backside as Demetrie kissed along each welt.

Sev bit his lip, stifling a whimper. He yelped and thrust into the block when teeth came down like a razor across one of the raw stripes. Demetrie’s other hand continued to squeeze and jerk him lazily, peeling back his foreskin and rubbing his thumb along the groove on his weeping head.

“I see I’ve made you cry a little,” Demetrie murmured. He moved both of his hands around to Sev’s ass once more, rubbing in slow circles on each cheek before he cupped one in each palm. Sev’s cheeks were parted and Demetrie’s tongue ran through the cleft.

Sev shivered, rising up onto his toes as the wet heat of Demetrie’s tongue found his tightly pinched entrance and began to make lazy, small circles. The Count’s big hands pushed harder against his backside, forcing Sev’s cock against the smooth leather. He pressed against Sev’s hole with his thumbs, pulling it open and spearing it with his tongue.

Sev whimpered, grinding his hips against the block as Demetrie fluttered briefly inside of him. Sev didn’t want to come, but there was no way that he could hold back. A shudder went through his body and every muscle locked. Sev cried out, his cock pinched between his belly and the leather block, as weak spurts of semen glazed the surface. It was too much—the burst of adrenalin from his whipping and the intensity of his orgasm left his body pitifully weak. His legs buckled and Sev felt himself slide down into a blissful, dizzying blackness.

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## CHAPTER 3

It was soft, the softest thing he'd ever felt, and warm, but not overly so. Sev stretched, arching his back. A delightful smell filled his nostrils as he breathed in, and his stomach growled, clawing at him from the inside.

Sev opened his eyes. He was lying in a big four-poster bed on top of a silky black duvet. Beside him on the bed was a tray filled with slices of meat and assorted cheeses, grapes, finger pastries, and a pitcher of water. Sev looked around, debating whether or not he should eat, when the door opened and Stanley walked into the room.

"Finally awake, I see. The Count wants you to eat your fill; I will discuss some rules for you as you are eating, then I shall take you down to meet him in his study, and with any luck we will not cross paths any time again soon."

Sev had stopped listening just after the words *eat your fill* and began to do just that, using his hands to shove food in so quickly, he barely tasted it before swallowing it down.

Stanley curled his upper lip and huffed in displeasure as Sev consumed the meal like a starving animal. "The rules are as follows, and certainly more will be added should certain situations arise... assuming he isn't sick of you by the morning," Stanley added dryly.

"On the floor, at the side of the Count's bed, which you currently occupy, you will notice a cushion. That is where you will go when the Count wishes to sleep." Stanley waited for the full effect of his words to reach Sev, but Sev never stopped eating; he simply leaned over the side of the bed to inspect the cushion, nodded, and stuffed a pastry into his mouth. Frankly, with the exception of the bed, the cushion would likely be the softest thing Sev had ever lain on, and he was surprised that the Count would want him—not just a dreg, but a thief—in his room while he was resting unawares.

Stanley droned on about Sev's place in the Count's home and in the world in general; how Sev should kneel, how often and the manner in which he should bathe, and on, and on, until Sev again stopped listening. This was

something that Stanley and other *acceptable* slaves did not understand: dregs already knew the rules of subservience. They knew never to meet the eyes of a better, never to let their shadows be longer or cross over a better man's sun. They knew that food, water, and health were luxuries, and that when they died, their bodies were to be pushed against the curbing for the street cleaners to collect with the road kill. Sev knew how to be less than nothing, and so any recognition at all—even punishment—made him *something* closer to human.

No doubt Stanley's family had worked hard to produce such a perfect son worthy of a Master, and it had probably taken many years, a great deal of money, and hours of painful correction to train Stanley in his proper role as a slave. Sev, in this respect, represented an insult to the system, an insect in Stanley's hard-earned yet sweet reward. And this was why, Sev assumed, Stanley—and many other slaves—hated him.

Although Sev struggled, at some point his body refused to take any more food, and he had to give up with a large portion left untouched. When Stanley wasn't looking, he'd started to shove a handful of grapes under his cushion, but realized that he would probably never be alone in the Count's room to eat them, and if he was thrown out, he couldn't very well gather them up as property. With a sigh he got up from the bed.

"Put that on." Stanley pointed to a small piece of white fabric folded on the end of the duvet.

Sev picked it up and realized it was a pair of very small, very clinging, shorts. He shrugged and stepped into them, thinking he looked more obscene with them on than without them. Their fit left very little to the imagination, but if that was what Demetrie wanted, Sev wouldn't object.

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"Sir, I've brought the *young man* for you."

Stanley announced Sev's presence, then left Sev standing just inside the room as Demetrie turned in his chair.

Sev dropped to his knees, bowing his head.

Demetrie smiled. "Stand up and come here, Sev. Let me look at you."

Sev rose to his feet and padded across the plush carpet to stand before his temporary Master. He liked to see him smile; it made him feel that he pleased the Count and his smile was the reward, his acknowledgement.

“Turn around.” Demetrie lightly touched Sev’s hips, guiding him as he rotated slowly.

Sev unconsciously clenched his buttocks when Demetrie’s hand brushed the curve of them.

Demetrie chuckled softly. “Does it still hurt?”

Sev shook his head. “No Sir.”

“The crop hurts immediately and leaves a sharp mark, but the pain rarely lingers.”

“I wouldn’t mind if it did, Sir,” Sev said candidly.

Demetrie turned him around to gaze up at him, taking his hands. “You are a very lewd boy. Now then, on your knees. Service me, as you managed to avoid it before.” Demetrie spread his legs wide.

Sev knelt between his thighs, bringing his hands to the fly of Demetrie’s finely-tailored slacks. The fabric was smooth against his fingers as he worked the metal closure then pulled down the zipper. Demetrie wore briefs underneath, looser in the pouch, black and made of the softest knit. The small area of visible skin above the waistband was pale, adorned with a narrow strip of silky black hair. Sev could already smell him faintly—warm, heady and slightly bitter, masked by layers of light cologne and scented soap. He hooked his fingers under the waistband and raised his eyes briefly to Demetrie’s face, looking up through his thick mop of hair, then he tugged down Demetrie’s underwear and freed his cock. Demetrie was flaccid; his penis was circumcised, as were all males above dreg caste, and it was very impressive in size. He kept himself neatly groomed, and the pale color of his skin became darker here as it flushed with blood. Sev began by running his tongue along the length of him, alternating feathery licks with long, slow strokes.

Demetrie sighed and his cock swelled, rising up towards his belly from its nest of dark curls. Sev caught it with his hand, pulling it downward as he

stroked the heated rod. Demetrie clenched his thigh muscles, giving a little jerk of his hips as he slipped his fingers through Sev's hair. He pulled up Sev's bangs, watching his face.

"Suck me." Demetrie's voice was a low growl, quickening the pulse of blood through Sev's own growing erection. Sev wrapped his lips around Demetrie's plum-colored head, savoring the clean, salty tang of fluid that leaked from the slit. He knew that Demetrie was watching his face, watching his eyes as Sev took him deeper. Sev wanted to please him—to show him gratitude in one of the few ways he knew how to express it.

Demetrie let out a low hiss as Sev swallowed him whole. It was not an easy feat, because of both length and girth. But being part of a circus allowed one to learn various useful skills—one of them was sword swallowing. Demetrie's penis was no sword, but still a weapon worthy of respect.

Sev worked his throat around Demetrie, pleased to feel the trembling hand pressing harder on his scalp as Demetrie fought to keep his restraint. Sev backed off slowly, drawing the remaining air from his mouth into his chest, hollowing his cheeks from the suction. He looked up through his eyelashes at Demetrie as he used his tongue on the thick vein pulsing along the underside of his shaft.

"Beautiful," Demetrie moaned, his stormy eyes sparkling through his long, satin lashes.

Sev made a ring around the base of Demetrie's cock with his thumb and forefinger, squeezing and releasing as he used the other hand to cup and caress his balls. Sev could feel Demetrie throbbing between his lips, the muscles of his groin contracting as Sev began a rhythm with his mouth. He blunted his teeth with his lips to protect the delicate skin as he bobbed his head up and down, his rhythm increasing with the pressure he felt building through Demetrie's body.

Sev's own cock was aching between his legs, causing him some distraction, but he didn't dare touch it without permission and did his best to put it out of his mind. He wanted to give Demetrie so much pleasure that the next person who attempted as much would pale in comparison, making Demetrie remember only him.

Demetrie's hand tightened against Sev's head as the other one dug into the leather armrest on his desk chair. His breath was coming in shallow gasps, and with a sudden upward thrust, Demetrie growled and released himself into Sev's mouth.

Sev felt the orgasm against his tongue and immediately swallowed as more hot jets stung the back of his throat. The Count must not have come in some time, because there was a lot of it, and though Sev managed to swallow quite a bit, some still managed to run from the corners of his mouth and dribble onto his lap.

Demetrie sank back into the chair with a heavy groan, his cock slipping from Sev's raw lips. His eyes were closed and his face turned up to the ceiling as his breathing gradually slowed to normal, and he began to laugh softly,

"Well done."

"Sir, it was my pleasure," Sev said, smiling, his head appropriately bowed in humility. Pride was something he'd never felt before, and he should probably have been reprimanded, but it appeared his effect on Demetrie was considerable enough for him to overlook it this time.

Demetrie tucked himself back into his pants and zipped up, then turned in his chair and began working through papers at his desk. Sev kneeled quietly, his hands resting on his thighs, though his eyes kept wandering to the right and left, his mind too active to be content while sitting still.

The study was a circular room, with curved bookcases flanking a large window, made of the same dark wood as the bench underneath. The desk was also a very solid-looking piece of furniture. Demetrie's chair was oxblood leather, and again, made with dark wood. Sev knew the decor was expensive, and not just because it belonged to an aristocrat, but because wood was such a scarce and valuable commodity. The few trees Sev had ever seen before coming to Athena were like scraggly weeds, half-dead and too spindly to survive anything stronger than a light breeze. In the Golden Corridor of Athena near the slave auction, he'd seen tall palm trees, and Sev would have believed that they were fake if he hadn't watched a worker early that morning, high on a boom-lift, cutting away a few dry leaves.

Sev's back itched and he tried to ignore it, but like any minor irritation ignored too long, the itching spread to other places—his side, the back of his knee, his nose. Then the wetness that had seeped into his shorts—from his arousal and the unswallowed remnants of Demetrie's orgasm—started to dry, and *that* began to itch.

“You're squirming,” Demetrie said without looking up from his writing.

Sev hadn't realized it until he'd mentioned it. “S-sorry, Sir... I...”

“Stanley!”

Sev startled at Demetrie's sudden volume, and a moment later, Stanley entered the room.

“Yes Sir, how may I be of assistance?” Stanley stood next to Sev, towering over his kneeling form.

Demetrie spoke without looking up. “Bring the restraints.”

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“Tell me Sev, can you hold this pose safely for some time?”

“Sir, safely, yes.” The unspoken admission that it would not, however, be comfortable, was entirely the point.

Demetrie was looking down at the young man who was bent in half and secured. Sev had begun in a cross-legged lotus position, then was rolled up onto his shoulders and his chin was tucked against his chest. His body was folded at the waist so his knees and shoulders were on the rug. Then his arms were brought around and bound to hold him tightly closed. Stanley had not gloated as he stood by to assist; handing Demetrie the leather restraints as he requested them, holding Sev in position when the buckles were pulled tight and secured. Yet Stanley was not entirely detached. Sev interpreted his reaction as a form of pity, and that in and of itself was humiliating.

Sev remained in this excruciating position—unmoving—for well over an hour while Demetrie finished his work. And Sev silently thanked him for the correction. It meant that Demetrie saw value in his discipline, whereas he could have easily just cast him aside. It meant that Demetrie wanted him to

succeed, to be worthy of punishment for even small infractions so that he could be better in the future. It meant, to Sev, that *he mattered*.

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It was well into the evening when Demetrie called for his supper. He ate at his desk, continuing to write letters, seal envelopes, shuffle papers. Sev was unbound at this point and given a piece of cold chicken and some greens to eat. It was not the feast that the Count enjoyed, but any meal for Sev was a banquet. His body was stiff from being held in the same contortion for so long, but he would not complain. Demetrie was a very kind Master—Sev doubted if other slaves being punished would even be allowed to eat.

When Demetrie was finally finished working for the evening, Stanley came to get Sev, taking him for a quick shower and giving him a clean tunic to wear. Sev was then shown to a bedroom that would be his own for those times when the Count preferred privacy, or was not otherwise in need of him. The room was very small, only having enough space for a bed and an armoire where Sev would store the garments he was provided. The bed was narrow, comfortable for one, and covered with simple, white linens with a small rug on the floor below. There were no windows but two doors; one that led to the hallway, and one that attached to the Count's room. A small bell hung near the door that Sev was told would ring should the Count decide he wanted him. Sev hoped he would be able to hear it in his sleep if Demetrie rang late at night.

He was then led into the Count's room via the main hallway. Stanley knocked at the Count's door, frowning at Sev and staring at the imperfect left side of his face. The Count had instructed that Sev should have his bangs secured to remain out of his face as much as possible. Although he hated showing his defects—and assumed others hated seeing them—it was Demetrie's decision.

“Come,” Demetrie's voice called from within the room.

Stanley opened the door and gestured Sev inside, closing the door behind him.

Sev began to drop to his knees but Demetrie stopped him. “Go to the bed.”

Sev walked to the bed, but wasn't certain if he should climb on or simply wait beside it, so he chose the latter, only scrambling into the center of the mattress when Demetrie jerked his head to indicate that was where he wanted him.

Demetrie wore a long robe, fresh from his own shower or bath. His hair was damp, and Sev could smell the clean scent of him as he dimmed the lamp near the bed, then removed his robe.

Although he didn't realize it until he saw Demetrie raise his eyebrow, Sev made a small whimper of approval when he saw the Count's naked body. He was a warrior—his shoulders wide, tapering to slim hips. His figure was sculpted and broadly muscled, indicating that his enviable genes were supplemented by regular exercise, if not medically enhanced. His torso, forearms, and legs were generously—but not superfluously—dusted with silky black hair.

Demetrie settled into the mattress, lying back into the pillows as Sev tried to remain kneeling beside him. His warm hand began to make slow circles on Sev's knee. "How are you feeling, Sev?"

"Sir, very fortunate... but... I am confused by your regard for me."

"Oh?" Demetrie's eyebrows rose, but he didn't look up at Sev's face. He simply continued to watch his own hand play over Sev's skin.

"Sir, I am a dreg... you shouldn't want to trouble or soil yourself by touching me..."

Sev took a sharp smack to the side of the face that sent him toppling and left his ears ringing. He cowered, immediately going to his knees and pressing his forehead to the mattress in supplication.

Demetrie's fingers carded his hair, but he did not raise his voice, "Do not presume to tell me what I should and should not do. Is that clear?"

Sev nodded, rubbing his face against the mattress as tears stung his eyes.

Demetrie slid his fingers under Sev's chin, raising his face so that he could see his flushed cheeks and the tears that flowed down over them. "Why are you crying?" he asked with mild amusement.



“Sir... I... I have disappointed you. I wish not to disappoint you. I want to behave as a good slave would, but... I have known all my life that I was not worthy of the title. I *am* not worthy of the title.”

“Sev, did you not see the slave auction?”

“Yes, I did Sir.” Sev bobbed his head, his chin still cupped in Demetrie’s warm hand.

“Describe one slave to me—only one.”

Sev opened his eyes, blinking. “Sir? I don’t understand...”

“Tell me which slave caught your eye. Tell me which slave you would like to be—which one you would like to *have* if you were someone worthy of choosing.”

Sev’s face pulled into a frown and his brow furrowed in frustration. Finally he said, “Sir, again, I disappoint you, because they were all so lovely, I could not remember just one.”

Demetrie’s hand moved to his cheek, stroking it. “You do not disappoint me, Sev. That is the reason why I chose to bring you home. All of them look alike to me... not a memorable face in the lot. But you, Sev... you intrigue me. Come, let me see you.”

Sev gnawed his lower lip, but crawled forward so his face was close to Demetrie’s.

Demetrie clasped the back of his head and pulled him down, running his tongue up Sev’s cheek and licking away his tears. “I was right.” He turned his head and whispered against Sev’s ear, “You are lovely when you cry... and your tears are delicious.”

He nipped Sev’s ear lightly, moving his hands to Sev’s shoulders. “Take off your tunic, find the belt from my robe, then straddle my waist—facing my feet.”

Sev did as instructed, aware that he was trembling, but not from fear.

“Hands behind your back—grasp your elbows.”

Again Sev complied, his heart beating harder in his chest and blood rushing to fill his loins.

Demetrie wrapped the silky sash around Sev's wrists, leaving it loose at first. But as he finished his slow, methodical swaddling, Demetrie jerked the smooth material tightly and bound his new pet. "Turn around."

Sev stood up and turned, settling himself back down astride Demetrie's midsection. His cheeks were flushed and his breathing was heavy; and despite his best efforts, his cock was pointing skyward.

Demetrie smiled. "Lovely," he said, and reached up to roll Sev's nipples between his fingers.

Sev's hips gave an involuntary jerk when Demetrie pinched them, and a bead of precome swelled from his unsheathed tip. He closed his eyes, his teeth pressing into his bottom lip. "S-sorry, Sir... I..."

"Shhh..." Demetrie moved one hand to Sev's lips, caressing them with two fingers. Sev opened his mouth and let them come inside.

Demetrie moved his fingers in and out, occasionally smearing Sev's lips with saliva. With his other hand he reached into the nightstand and pulled out a tube of lubricant.

Sev's eyes flashed as Demetrie flipped the top with his thumb and worked the opening so he could squeeze a few crystalline drops into his hand. He moved it around behind Sev and slicked up his own penis. "I want you to fuck yourself on my cock, Sev. Now."

Sev sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes glazing over. He let Demetrie's fingers slip from his mouth as he rose up in a crouch, rocking back until he was hovering over Demetrie's cock.

Demetrie held himself at the base, watching Sev's face as he moved into position. He shifted until the head pressed against his pinched star, then Sev bore down, contorting his face through the bliss and agony of impaling himself on the Count's steely shaft.

"Fuck!" Demetrie cried out, trying to catch his breath. He looked down as if he didn't believe he was completely inside, though Sev could attest to the strain as Demetrie filled him completely. After resting a moment to adjust to the pressure, Sev began to rock his hips, and Demetrie's eyes rolled up into his head.

The pain was incredible for Sev; Demetrie was much larger than he'd ever had, but he wanted to please him, and if Demetrie's pleasure came from his pain, then so be it. Demetrie's firm crown pushed deeper each time he moved, sending shockwaves through Sev that radiated from his insides and left him hanging on the sharp crest of impending orgasm. His own cock throbbed against his groin, bobbing as he pistoned up and down while the length of his channel gripped and squeezed Demetrie with each rise and fall. He'd never felt so full and knew he'd be sore the next day, but it was worth it to see Demetrie's face and hear the low sounds of pleasure that Sev was bringing out of him.

Demetrie rested his hands on Sev's slim hips, guiding; helping him to keep a rhythm. But then something in the Count's features shifted, and his expression changed from one of desire, to that of dominance.

Sev yelped in surprise as Demetrie pulled him off his cock and pushed him onto his back on the bed. Before he could get his bearings, Demetrie grabbed Sev's ankles and bent him in half with his ass in the air, then he slammed inside.

The hurt was shocking and intense but Sev endured, choking back his sobs as he struggled to accommodate Demetrie's punishing thrusts. A shudder went through Demetrie's body as Sev involuntarily clamped down around him, his body fighting against the sudden and violent invasion. Demetrie pulled out so that only the tip was nestled inside the constricting ring of Sev's anus, then he speared through him, releasing Sev's ankles to grab his pelvis for more leverage.

For a moment, Sev was certain he would die. He'd never known such pain before, and he believed that Demetrie meant to split him wide open. The angle of Demetrie's penetration was so deep, Sev could feel it in his stomach, and each pound against the gland inside made his own cock ache and his balls swell with sperm. It was a truly ecstatic torment; the irony of suffering and orgasm blending until Sev didn't know where one sensation ended and the other began. When he felt the thrusting becoming more erratic, he knew that Demetrie was going to shoot his load and the sensation pushed Sev to his own climax. He cried out, spurting white ribbons of ejaculate against his neck.

After seeing Sev cover himself with his own come, Demetrie roared through his own orgasm. The sensation started low in his spine, pulling his muscles so tightly that his toes curled and he nearly forgot to breathe. Demetrie's body twitched with spasms long after he'd emptied his balls. With a grunt, Demetrie managed to drop back onto the bed, and rolled to his back to catch his breath.

Sev was afraid to move; Demetrie had filled his insides with come, and as soon as Sev's ass became reacquainted with gravity, that evidence would be all over the bed sheets. Sev didn't mind being punished for such a thing, but he didn't want to make a mess and upset Demetrie. Sooner or later his novelty would wear off for the young Count, and he definitely wanted it to be *later*.

"Here."

Sev tensed briefly when he felt a towel pressed against his backside. Grateful, he bent his knees to hold it in place and rolled until he was kneeling upright on the bed.

Demetrie tugged at his elbow, coaxing Sev to move around so that he could untie his arms. For a moment after the bindings came off, he rubbed Sev's back in a gesture that felt like kindness, before he rolled over and went to sleep without a word.

Sev watched him, examining the long line of his body, the curve of his muscular buttocks. He wanted to curl up in the hollow of Demetrie's spine, he wanted to thank him for his attention, even if it was purely as a vessel for his pleasure. But his interpretation of the rules that Stanley had given him told him that when Demetrie slept, Sev slept below. He crawled carefully off the bed so as not to disturb Demetrie, keeping the towel pressed against him, and settled into his cushion on the floor. Exhausted, aching, yet still almost sated, Sev closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

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## CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Stanley took Sev to shower. He gave him a tube of ointment to rub on any injuries “*down there*” and brought him a new tunic, a pair of short leggings, and some soft slippers for his feet. It felt strange wearing something that covered his toes, so he decided to leave the shoes behind. The rest of his outfit was simple, casual, and—strangely—it made him feel as though he were at home. The servants were all dressed in uniform, but Sev was dressed like someone who belonged to the leisure class; the lazy, grown child of a wealthy man. Still, it was confusing to him; if he was being kept for entertainment purposes, it would seem that Demetrie would be far more entertained by the sight of him with a lot less clothing.

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At roughly ten o'clock, Sev was collected by Stanley from his lone musings in his small bedroom and taken downstairs to have breakfast in the kitchen while the Count's morning meal was prepared.

Excluding Stanley, there were three servants in the kitchen—all but one appeared to be Freedmen. There was a large, red-faced woman quite a bit older than Stanley, called Gerta; she was the cook. A much narrower woman, Mary, was a few years younger than Gerta but seemed ancient because of her graying hair and pinched face. The last was a young man in his late-twenties or early-thirties that also helped in the kitchen, though he seemed to handle the more menial tasks like dish-washing, heavy lifting, and generally banging things around. From his age and station, he was possibly a labor slave. Sev wasn't certain if the thick bracelet on his wrist indicated his status as such. While he knew a little bit about slaves, he'd never really been in a position to meet many. Those he might have come across during his late-night burglaries back in Nissim were sleeping or otherwise went largely unnoticed to him, except on the rare occasions they served as a threat to discovery. That was what had happened on his last job with Phineas. Sev had been dangling like a spider on a thin line, high above the exotic plants in the home's conservatory, when a couple of male slaves had wandered in for a late-night tryst. In the heat of

passion, one had thrown his head back and opened his eyes. Sev had actually felt strangely sorry for them because it meant admitting to their Master that they were not sleeping as they should have been, and had probably resulted in some painful punishment.

The younger laborer was neither particularly handsome nor particularly unattractive. He was sturdily built, but his face seemed set with a permanent scowl, and his forehead sloped low, his eyebrows too dark for his brassy yellow hair. He watched Sev enter the kitchen with a mix of curiosity and disdain.

“What the hell is this, Stanley?” Gerta snapped when he entered with Sev.

“The Count has found himself a temporary diversion. Just feed it, and ignore it otherwise, because soon it will be gone.”

Sev wasn’t bothered by Stanley’s use of the pronoun; dregs *were* “its” because they weren’t often regarded as people, if they were regarded at all.

“What’s wrong with it? Why is the face all like that? Is it blind?” the man asked.

Stanley sighed, “No, Laurence; the Count seems to think of the deformity as some sort of *enhancement*. Apparently the dreg has acrobatic skills that the Count finds intriguing for the moment.” Stanley jerked his chin at Sev. “Go ahead, show them something.”

Sev looked around at the impatient yet inquisitive faces around him. He set his hands on a stool near the table where they were preparing breakfast, then braced himself by locking his elbows into his chest and did a handstand. Mary opened her mouth, seemingly already impressed, then Sev arched his back, placing his feet on his own shoulders and lifted himself on one arm while stretching the other one out to the side. Gerta gasped and Laurence grinned, the gleam in his eye showing that he understood Sev’s obvious appeal. Mary clasped her hands to her chest and appeared to be praying, her face white like a ghost.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Stanley told Sev.

Sev gave himself a little push-off with his hand and flipped over, landing on his bare feet on the rough stone floor.

“It’s unnatural.” Mary shook her head, her gray-streaked ringlets bouncing.

“I’ll say.” Laurence licked his lips.

“Just feed the Count’s new toy and send him off when the Count is ready. I have things to do.”

For once, Sev was not happy to see Stanley go. He wished he had his hood or at least the ability to hide behind his bangs but, once again, Stanley had been told to secure them, pinning them back with a few hairpins. It was the compromise for not having them cut off.

“Well, sit down then,” Gerta sighed. “Mary, get some oats and I think we have a few sausages that are about ready to turn.”

Mary eyed Sev uncomfortably but went to make up something for him to eat.

“You a gypsy?” Laurence asked, leaning on the table across from Sev.

Sev’s stomach fluttered, perking up at the nostalgia experienced by the connotation. “I used to travel with them,” he admitted. He wasn’t a gypsy by birth, even though the tribes had considered him one of their own.

“Circus?”

Sev offered a slight nod, uncertain where Laurence was headed. But Gerta interjected before he could find out.

“Bah—thieves the lot of them. Between circus gypsies and dregs, I don’t know what’s worse.”

“Someone that’s all of that, I suppose,” Sev muttered, seeing no point in pursuing his defense.

Gerta grunted and Mary returned with Sev’s food, pushing it across the rough wooden table using a spatula. The others frowned at her.

“It’s unnatural is what it is—a devil. Mark my words.” Mary crossed herself and moved away, refusing to turn her back on Sev completely.

“Seems to have some sort of temptation to offer somebody,” Gerta grumbled, cuffing Laurence on the back of the head, “Get to work cutting those fillets. When you’re finished with that, there’s stuff we need from the cellar.”

Laurence rubbed his scalp, still leering at Sev, and wandered out of the kitchen.

“I’ll be keeping an eye on you, gypsy,” Gerta said to Sev. Her meaty fists rested on her ample hips. “Anything comes up missing, you’ll be the first suspect.”

“I always am.” Sev shrugged, not feeling particularly gracious at this point. The hard stool on his sore bottom wasn’t helping his mood any. He finally resorted to squatting as he finished a few bites of the gooey oats and ignored the sausage completely. Surprisingly, Gerta didn’t remark. She just gathered up the dishes once Sev appeared to be finished and scraped the leftovers into the trash.

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The Count was sitting outside on the veranda, sipping his coffee and reading a newspaper when Sev found him. He approached tentatively and knelt a few feet to the right of his chair.

“Come, Sev. Sit up here,” Demetrie said, patting the chair beside him without taking his eyes off of his reading.

Sev stood up and padded over, keeping his head low, then he sat down in the chair next to Demetrie, pulling his knees into his chest.

Demetrie glanced down at him briefly, then back at his paper as he held it up to fold it. “Where are your shoes, Sev?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Sir... I forgot them... I am not used to wearing shoes, but I will if that’s what Sir requires.”

Demetrie looked down at Sev’s feet. “No. Normally I might punish you, but as long as you promise to wear them the next time I tell you to, I will allow this mistake.”

Sev was almost disappointed that he wouldn’t be getting another lashing, but they’d already established that to him it wasn’t a punishment.

“Sir, thank you for the very fine clothing.” Sev knew he was speaking out of turn, but wanted Demetrie to know that he appreciated the gesture.

Demetrie set down the newspaper on the table and looked at Sev. “You’re welcome. Are you hurting from last night?”



“Sir, I am happy that my body could please you...”

“That’s not what I asked.” Demetrie’s voice lowered almost imperceptibly.

Sev pursed his lips. “It does hurt a little, Sir.” He perked his head up with a smile. “But I don’t mind it much.”

Demetrie stroked Sev’s head. “You’re an odd lad, Seven.”

Sev sighed, his shy smile becoming more natural. “Sir, I thought that’s why you chose me.” He was surprised to hear Demetrie laugh.

“Indeed it is.”

This morning the Count was wearing loose-fitting charcoal lounge pants, a narrow-ribbed, white tank top, and his black satin robe draped casually over his shoulders. He reached into the pocket of the robe and brought out a familiar deck of cards.

“Tell me Sev, how many cards are in this deck?”

Sev watched Demetrie place them on the table. “Sixty, Sir. I don’t think it’s a standard deck.”

“Very good. And of this sixty, how many are jokers?”

“Fifty, Sir.”

Demetrie raised an eyebrow. “So there are ten cards which are not jokers.”

“Correct, Sir.”

“How did Phineas know which ones were one of the ten?”

“The pattern on the back, Sir.”

“Show me.” Demetrie handed Sev the cards, and he sorted through them, pulling two out and showing Demetrie. One was a joker and one was the three of spades.

Sev flipped them over on the table and indicated the star design in the center. “Here, the star on the three has a shorter spoke on the bottom. When they’re being shuffled, that’s where the dealer’s thumb rests.”

Demetrie peered at the two cards and nodded. “Of course. When you point it out, I can see the difference. Interesting. Tell me Sev, what do these cards represent to you?” He picked up the deck and began shuffling.

“They used to represent failure, Sir,” Sev said honestly.

“Failure?”

“Phineas won me by swindling the gypsies with these cards, Sir.”

“Swindling the gypsies?” Demetrie balked, “But gypsies are thieves...”

“Sir, thieves, yes—but honest thieves. Those who have lost to a gypsy know they have lost something. If they’d been wise, they would never have lost it in the first place. A gypsy can’t steal a wallet unless he knows where it’s being kept, and a man keeping his wallet displayed is chancing fate. Just like a gypsy fortune-teller won’t lie unless she’s paid to. These are things most people are aware of, but choose to ignore out of arrogance, not ignorance.”

Sev worried that he’d babbled too much but Demetrie offered a small incline of his head.

“You said these cards used to represent failure... what do they represent now?”

Sev’s cheeks reddened and he bowed his head. “Sir, forgive me for not knowing my place. Now these cards represent hope.” He tensed, wondering if he’d receive a blow or an insult.

But Demetrie simply sat back in his chaise and said, “I see.” He stopped shuffling the cards and laid them on the table once more. “Sixty cards; ten of which are playable cards. We’ll cut the deck in half to thirty.” Demetrie fingered the cards, counting out thirty, then put the rest back into his pocket. “One card for every day you will stay at my request. Each day you will draw a card. If it is anything but a Joker, you may request something from me or ask me a question. However, I may deny either and you only get one opportunity. Additionally, if you don’t use the chance you have been given immediately, it must be forfeited. How does that sound to you Sev?”

Sev lifted his face slightly, offering a coy smile. “Sir, I mean no disrespect when say that you swindle like a gypsy.”

Demetrie laughed once more and ruffled Sev’s soft hair. “Each time you draw a Joker, you are to bring it to me in private and I will decide what it is that I shall have you do.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Demetrie tapped the pile. “Draw.”

Sev drew the top card and turned it over; it was the six of hearts.

“It seems luck is on your side today, Sev.” Demetrie smiled coolly.

Sev stared at the card, considering what he might ask of him. Finally he said, “Sir, I would like to ask if I am behaving as you would wish of me... if I am pleasing to Sir?”

Demetrie’s brow furrowed slightly as he raised his eyebrows. “You wish to waste one of your few questions on knowing whether or not you are pleasing to me?”

Sev nodded, his expression somber. “Yes, Sir. It is important to me.”

“What if I were to say no?”

Sev lowered his eyes, shrinking down in his chair. “Then I would feel ashamed, but try harder.”

Demetrie sighed and touched the young man’s cheek, encouraging him to lift his face. “You are pleasing to me. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try harder.”

Sev smiled, accepting the compliment for what it was; a confirmation that he was good enough and Demetrie would give him a chance to be even better.

“Tell me about your name. Why were you named *Seven*?”

“I was the seventh child born in the brothel, and the only one that lived. My mother didn’t believe in abortion, so she gave me to the gypsy midwife. The name seemed good enough at the time, I guess, so it stuck, Sir.”

Demetrie nodded. “When did Phineas take you from the gypsies?”

“Sir, he arrived when I was sixteen. He took me about a month later.”

“You stayed with him for protection.” Demetrie nodded. He sat back, looking out into the open garden. “And what did you give him in return?”

Sev fidgeted, bowing his head. “My talents, Sir—as an acrobat and a thief. Once we fled to Athena, he used my body to secure us lodging, and my

dancing paid for our room and board.” He was met with silence, and was certain the Count was having second thoughts about touching such a soiled body. When he lifted his face, Demetrie’s eyes met his own, and Sev felt shame heating his cheeks. He tried to look away, but Demetrie took hold of Sev’s hand, turning it palm-up.

“I should like to use some of your talents as well, Sev.” Demetrie ran his tongue over Sev’s open hand, then curled the boy’s fingers closed over the moist heat left behind.

Sev shivered even as his body warmed with arousal. “Anything, Sir.”

Demetrie leaned back in his chair and patted his lap.

Sev understood the silent command and moved forward, straddling Demetrie’s thighs.

“We’ll have to get you some new clothing, Sev,” Demetrie said, almost conversationally, while he lifted the hem of Sev’s tunic and reached down the front of his leggings, fishing out his already hardening cock. He ran his thumb around the ridge of Sev’s foreskin, where it opened over the sensitive glans. “What an exotic toy,” Demetrie mused and rolled the skin back, pressing his thumb against the exposed cleft and squeezing out a glistening bead of precome.

Sev’s face contorted with both shame and arousal. He pressed his teeth against his lower lip, and fought to keep his burning eyes from closing as Demetrie slid his hand up and down his shaft.

“You like this, Sev,” Demetrie told him rather than asking, but Sev nodded his head emphatically, his hands gripping the arms of the chair as he drew closer to orgasm.

“B-but Sir... Your clothes...”

Demetrie stopped, creating a tight ring around the base of Sev’s cock with his thumb and middle finger. “You are worried about soiling my clothing?”

Sev nodded his head.

“Do you want me to stop?” He gave a few squeezes with his fingers and Sev shook his head frantically. “N-no.”

Demetrie curled his fist around Sev's straining erection and began to pump once more. "What do you want Sev? Tell me what you want."

Sev's eyes squeezed shut as they rolled up into his head. "Please S-Sir... I want to come!"

Demetrie chuckled softly. "You want to soil my clothing with your wasted seed?"

The phrasing of the question was unexpected, and Sev gasped, panic flooding in with his arousal. The combination pushed him over the fragile edge of restraint. "Yes!" He yelped as Demetrie brought him to orgasm with his hand. Sev's come spurted out, streaking pearly lines over Demetrie's white shirt and dribbling over his fist to stain his dark pants.

"I—" Sev gasped through his aftershocks, embarrassed and afraid for what he'd done to Demetrie's clothing.

Demetrie chuckled again and wiped his hand on a cloth napkin, using the same to dab up what was left on Sev's cock.

Sev shivered as the rough square of fabric rasped his over-sensitive nerve endings. "S-Sir..."

Demetrie handed Sev the napkin. "Clean it up."

Sev slid off of Demetrie's lap, settling between his knees as he dabbed up the cooling globs of his ejaculate. He noticed that Demetrie was hard and raised his eyes. "Sir—shall I attend you?"

Demetrie reached down and adjusted himself behind his fly. "Not now, Sev. I want you to take that napkin and wash it in the bathroom sink; wash it well, and leave it in your room to dry. Then clean yourself up and meet me downstairs. We are going to buy you some new clothing."

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Sev had done just as Demetrie had told him, avoiding Stanley's frown and his attempt to take the napkin to have it *properly laundered* with the rest of the linens. Sev washed the white square of material very carefully, as if it were made of silk rather than coarse cotton, then he took it into his room and hung it neatly over his metal headboard to dry.

After Sev finished cleaning himself up, he headed back downstairs, where Stanley directed him to a large room at the front of the house.

This room was done in shades of pale blue, with large windows on one side. It seemed to be some kind of lounge or sitting room, but there was a large upholstered folding screen to one side that seemed out of place.

“There he is,” Demetrie said, turning from a conversation he was having with another man in the room. The man was older; small, balding, and red-faced. His tiny blue eyes looked like glass marbles pushed into his puffy pink cheeks, but they opened surprisingly wide when he saw Sev. Sev was distracted by some movement to the far left of the men where two very statuesque blonde women stood wearing only flesh-tone undergarments. Another, much less attractive female stood with them, dressed in a plain beige dress, with a tape-measure around her neck. Sev guessed she was a labor slave judging by her simple appearance and chemically-altered blonde hair.

Demetrie’s voice drew Sev’s attention back to him. “Talbot, this is Seven. Sev, this is Mr. Talbot. He is my clothing designer.”

“Oh my! When you told me to bring the lady’s mannequins I assumed you were entertaining a young woman!” Mr. Talbot’s voice made everything he said sound like an exclamation. The man grinned, his very small white teeth lined up perfectly like two strings of beads between his thin lips.

Talbot’s expression seemed more predatory than polite to Sev, and Sev looked away again to the two “mannequins”. The women were alternating their uncomfortable glances between Sev and Demetrie. When one made accidental eye contact with Sev, she looked away with a shudder, apparently unnerved by his strange appearance.

“I think a modification of some of the styles you offer women would be more appropriate for a body like Sev’s.” Demetrie smiled at Sev, and he felt himself relaxing under the Count’s commanding gaze.

Sev had worried at first that the mannequins were there for sexual activity. It had made him a little uncomfortable to consider that not only might Demetrie be more satisfied by their female bodies, but that Sev might be asked to perform with one or both of them. He would do whatever Demetrie asked of him, but his lack of enthusiasm would be obvious.

For his part, Demetrie seemed not to notice the beautiful semi-nude women as he looked through a catalogue of clothing options being offered to him by Talbot.

“Oh yes, I do agree.” Talbot swallowed hard, as if his mouth was too full of saliva when he gazed at Sev. “He would look *lovely* in jewel-tones.”

“White,” Demetrie clarified. “Everything you make for Sev must be in white.”

“Indeed... and very soft. I know just what you’re after.” Talbot snapped his fingers and the two mannequins stood rigidly waiting for his orders.

“Jessica, number A-five-oh-one-two-eight! Sasha, number H-nine-nine-six-two-five!” The two models scampered off like frightened gazelles through a door at the back of the room. “Monique.” Talbot gestured to the bland girl. “Measure.”

Sev flinched as the girl was suddenly behind him, pulling the tape measure taut. Close up he realized that she was much older than she’d seemed at first, her forehead creased by long, horizontal lines.

“What’s wrong with your face?” she asked Sev quietly as she began to pose his body so she could measure him.

“A witch’s curse,” Sev lied, annoyed by her lofty demeanor towards him. She was apparently another slave who had worked hard to earn her position and resented him for being invited into her world.

“What are you?” Monique practically sneered. “A dreg whore?”

Sev bristled at the fact that such an inferior slave was exhibiting an attitude of superiority over him. “Why, wanna buy me?” He glared at her.

“You’ll be even more worthless than you are now once the Count has had his way with you.” She roughly spread Sev’s feet apart by kicking his ankles.

Sev refrained from responding to her baiting. As a dreg he was the lowest life-form, even below that of a dog. He wouldn’t risk his opportunity to play slave with Demetrie just to fight a losing battle against someone else’s property, so he remained quiet and watched the mannequins emerge one after the other from behind the screen.

The first one was wearing a long blue satin skirt that settled low on her hips. The material was held together only by two very large gold rings, leaving her legs bare on either side all the way up. On top she wore a halter that laced up the back and left her midriff bare. The other woman wore thigh-high red socks with tiny, low-rise shorts, similar to what Demetrie had made Sev wear to his study. Her shirt was long-sleeved and of a very soft yellow furry material but rode up to sit just under her breasts.

Demetrie approached the two women, looking them over as if appraising furniture.

“This one.” He tugged the skirt. “And this,” he said flicking the halter. His eyes met the mannequin’s as she gasped in surprise. “But with this fabric.” He moved to the other woman, touching the sleeve of her soft shirt. “And those.” He indicated her hosiery. “All in white.”

“Of course!” Talbot smiled broadly. “He will certainly look lovely, indeed!”

“What do you think, Sev?” Demetrie asked him.

Sev felt all eyes upon him, and looked down at the floor. “If it is pleasing to you, Master, then I am honored to wear such fine clothes.”

“Wonderful!” Talbot clapped with glee. “When would you like it all?”

“These, and the other one we discussed, by Friday. The rest of the pieces by no later than next Tuesday.”

“Of course, Your Lordship!” Talbot’s face was so pink, Sev thought he looked like his head was going to pop.

“Monique, you have the measurements?”

“Yes, Master Talbot,” the plain slave said, stepping away from Sev.

“Wonderful! Then we shall be on our way!”

The doors opened from outside, and Laurence came in, waggling his eyebrows at the mannequins, who paid him no mind. He hefted up their portable screen and began carrying it outside.

Sev startled as broad arms wrapped tightly around him from behind and Demetrie nipped at his ear. “Is something the matter, Sev?”



He melted into the Count's strong body. "Master... Sir... I..."

"Let's discuss this after I see my guest out." Demetrie reached up and pinched one of Sev's nipples through his tunic then released him, following the progression of visitors out into the hall.

Sev stood alone in the room, trying to find reasoning in his thoughts. By the time Demetrie returned a few minutes later, he still had no answers.

"Now then, what is it, Sev?" Demetrie asked, raising Sev's chin with his fingers.

"Sir," Sev began, looking up into Demetrie's face, "would you prefer me to be a girl?"

"What?" Demetrie laughed. "Sev, if I'd wanted a girl, I could have had twenty, and if I'd wanted any other boy, I could have had at least as many. I wanted—and now I have—you."

Sev lowered his eyes, blushing softly at the compliment. "Forgive me, Sir... it is all so strange to me."

"Do you hate it, Sev?" Demetrie asked him seriously.

Sev shook his head quickly. "Oh no! No, no, not at all, Sir!"

"Good. Then you will wear what I tell you to wear, knowing that you are doing so because it pleases me."

"Of course, Sir." Sev lowered his gaze, ashamed for jumping to any unfounded conclusions.

"Shall I punish you, Sev, for doubting my motives?" Demetrie asked him softly.

"I think it would be best, Sir," Sev answered, just as softly. His heart beat in his chest as he thought about the possible punishment he might receive.

Demetrie looked him over thoughtfully for a moment. "Very well then. Go to your room and kneel while you wait for me. I will come for you in ten minutes."

"Sir, thank you, Sir." Sev bowed his head and left the room, looking only ahead towards his destination as his mind continued its crazy spiral.

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Sev knelt on the floor of his room, trying not to think about how uncomfortable the hard surface felt on his knees. He wasn't certain how long he'd been waiting until Demetrie opened his door from the one connecting their two rooms, but Demetrie had told him ten minutes, and so he believed him.

"Stand up, Sev, and come here," Demetrie said, his body filling up the doorway.

Sev rose to his feet and walked towards Demetrie, stopping roughly a foot away from him.

"Turn around."

Swallowing down the bitter taste in his mouth, Sev turned his back to Demetrie. He tensed when a blindfold was brought down over his eyes, masking out his world.

"Because you lacked trust in my motives, for the rest of the day you will be forced to trust me completely. Turn around Sev."

Sev turned towards Demetrie once more.

"Follow my voice. Walk six paces forward, and then stop."

Sev did not hesitate, but did as he was told, walking exactly six paces forward towards the sound of Demetrie's voice, and then stopping. He knew they were in Demetrie's room, and was trying to remember the layout to avoid banging into something.

"I want you to pour me a glass of water, Sev. If you spill a drop, you will be punished, but if you listen to my words—and follow my instructions exactly, that won't be an issue. Now, turn to your left and walk three paces. You will feel the edge of the table against your hips."

Again, Sev followed Demetrie's instructions, feeling the table brush against him just as Demetrie said it would. From that point until the glass was safely in Demetrie's hands, Sev focused on every instruction he'd been given and had behaved as a perfect myrmidon.

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For the rest of the day, Sev was guided only by Demetrie's voice, doing everything exactly as he was told, from pouring and serving water, to tending the fire, to cutting up his own meal at dinner. Never once did Demetrie mislead him or cause him to stumble in any way. Unfortunately, Sev had at one point anticipated an instruction before it was given. This had caused him to misjudge the staircase and he'd ended up with carpet-burns on his knees and elbows from falling forward onto the steps. But by the end of the day, Sev had built a strong wall of trust around the man who now—for a while at least—would control every aspect of his life.

“Come to my voice, Sev. Three paces, then stop.”

Demetrie had taken Sev into the bathroom, and the boy winced as a burning antiseptic was applied to his raw layers of damaged skin.

“There now, it hurts so you'll remember. You're just fortunate it wasn't the fireplace.”

“Yes, Sir.” Sev said in a small voice.

Demetrie left him there, and since he hadn't given Sev any instructions, he stayed put. But soon he heard Demetrie calling to him from the bedroom. “Good boy, Sev. Turn around to my voice, walk ten paces, then stop.”

Any time that Demetrie praised Sev, his heart felt like it was swelling in his chest. Sev carefully turned around, and counted out each step in his head, making certain not to vary his stride. Sev's breath caught as he sensed how close he was to Demetrie when he took his last step. His scent and the heat of his body filled Sev's awareness. Sev could hear the soft rustle of Demetrie's sleeve when he raised his arms to remove the blindfold, and the pounding of his own heart as his pulse quickened.

When the blindfold came off, Sev blinked several times, his eyes unaccustomed to even the dim light in the room. He was standing between Demetrie's knees as Demetrie sat on the side of the bed. There was a small fire—the one Sev had made earlier—burning in the fireplace adjacent to the bed, but otherwise the room was dark. Sev took a step back and dropped down to his knees. He pressed his forehead to the floor, “Thank you, Sir, for teaching me.”

Sev could hear the smile in Demetrie's voice, "Come up here then, Sev, and show me what you've learned."

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## CHAPTER 5

Several days went by, with Sev falling more and more into a comfortable routine with Demetrie as his temporary Master. Sev performed well, or was punished, but in either case, he felt secure in the knowledge that, for the time being, he was a treasured item to the young Count. Sev dressed in the clothing that most pleased Demetrie; not so much feminine, but made with expensive, soft materials and cut in a way that showed off Sev's body without being lewd. Demetrie often treated Sev like a beautiful objet d'art, posing him in various contortions and leaving him on exhibit while he worked in his study. This was enjoyable for Sev, because it allowed him to perform for Demetrie, and his performances always ended with them having sex.

Each day, Sev drew another card from his partial deck, and each day since the first it had been a joker, which had introduced Sev to several new bondage techniques and sex games. Sometimes Demetrie was rough, sometimes almost tender, and soon Sev realized that his feelings for the aristocrat were going beyond that of a rented toy.

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Sev had lived at the manor house for ten days when Demetrie met him after breakfast one morning with some news.

"Tonight, Sev, I will be attending a formal event with my mother. As you have no doubt heard talk, my father has passed not so long ago—three months to be exact. Tonight marks the official end of the mourning period. You will be coming and attending to me as my slave this evening, so you must address me as Master for the time being."

Sev gaped, his mouth moving over a protest, but he remained silent, understanding that it was not a request nor up for debate. "Y-yes, Sir... Master."

"Very good, Sev. My mother will be arriving here shortly. There is also a package for you in your bedroom. I want you to bring the package to me."

"Yes, Master." Sev got up from the chair and bowed, then quickly

scampered off towards his room, his mind a whirlwind of questions and worries.

When he arrived he found a white box on his bed. It was roughly six inches square, and Sev gave it a little shake, but heard nothing more than the crinkle of paper inside.

Demetrie was still sitting on the veranda when Sev returned to him, but he'd turned his chair to face the door and watched Sev walking towards him. It was an affective experience for Sev and caused him to feel strangely self-conscious. He approached with his head down and offered the box to Demetrie, kneeling before him.

"Come closer, Sev." Demetrie's voice was husky, and Sev's body warmed to it. He crawled forward on his knees, settling between Demetrie's thighs.

"I want you to open it. It's for you."

Sev glanced briefly up at Demetrie, then opened the box with trembling hands. Inside was a wide white leather collar with a gold hoop riveted to the front.

Sev stared at it, understanding the symbolism—for a pleasure slave it meant that his Master took pride in his ownership; *if only he were worthy of being owned.*

Demetrie took the collar out of the box and reached around behind Sev, fastening it around his neck. "Too tight?"

Sev shook his head, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

"Do you like it?"

Sev nodded emphatically.

"Then show me." Demetrie unlaced the drawstring on his pants, and then undid the buttons.

Sev could tell he wasn't wearing underwear. He set down the box and moved his hands to Demetrie's fly, spreading it open and pulling out the Count's stiffening cock.

Demetrie shifted in his seat and worked his sac out himself so that Sev could thank him appropriately.

Sev started by licking the delicate skin of Demetrie's scrotum; giving little sucking kisses that pulled the tender flesh taut. His hand stroked up and down Demetrie's hardening shaft as he carefully took one hard nut into his mouth, rolling it over his tongue.

"Yes... that's it..." Demetrie hissed, weaving his fingers through Sev's hair as he watched himself being pleased.

Sev continued to suck and lick Demetrie's balls as he pumped his cock almost leisurely. He brought his thumb to the tip, spreading the drop of precome that wept from the slit, and then stuck his thumb in his mouth, licking off the salty fluid. Sev raised his eyes to Demetrie's face, gratified to see his arousal there as well. He wondered how Demetrie would kiss, but it was something he would never know. Even pleasure slaves rarely were kissed on the lips by their Masters. There were apparently some intimacies that were sacred beyond sex.

Sev wet his lips and then wrapped them around Demetrie's glans, following the thick ridge with his tongue and pressing it into the salty opening. Fortunately, the lump in his throat had cleared, because Sev needed all the room he could to take Demetrie.

Demetrie held him in place for a few beats of his blood along his shaft, his hands pressing on the back of his head. Sev could feel him shudder with every flick of his tongue and twist of his lips. It wouldn't be long before Demetrie was spurting his thick come against the back of Sev's tongue. As Sev began to fellate him in earnest, Demetrie picked up on the rhythm and began thrusting his hips, lightly fucking Sev's eager mouth.

"Your Lordship, I—"

Sev heard Stanley's voice, and it startled him, causing him to jerk back for fear of embarrassing the Count, but Demetrie fisted his hands through Sev's hair and slammed him down hard over his cock. All Sev could do was blunt his teeth with his lips and try to keep his throat open as Demetrie pulled him by his hair and ground Sev's face into his groin. He shuddered hard and emptied himself down Sev's battered throat.

Sev's eyes watered as he tried not to choke. When Demetrie finally pushed him away, Sev swallowed, tried to take a deep breath, and began to cough. He

went prostrate before Demetrie, knowing he'd made another mistake, but he'd been concerned for Demetrie's reputation. It was one thing to believe he allowed a dreg to touch his noble body, it was quite another to witness evidence of it.

Sev wasn't certain how long he'd been kneeling with his face on the ground until someone nudged him under the ribs.

"Get up and stop sniveling, dreg," Stanley said. "We'll have to clean you up. The Count's mother will be here shortly."

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When Stanley brought Sev to the bathroom, Demetrie was standing inside, shirtless and holding something in his hand.

Sev couldn't tell what the item was, and was afraid to be caught looking too closely. He quickly dropped to his knees.

"You may go now, Stanley. If the Countess arrives, show her and her attendant to the blue lounge."

"Yes, Sir."

Demetrie waited until Stanley left before he considered Sev. "Stand up and come here."

Sev was trying not to cry, but he could feel his nose start to sting and his eyes burned. "S-Sir... I am sorry, I—"

"Turn around, pull down your pants, and bend over, spreading yourself for me."

Sev's eyes quickly glanced at the item in Demetrie's hand, but still had no idea what he was holding. He bowed his head, his face flushing as he came to stand directly in front of Demetrie, then he turned and pulled down his stretchy leggings, bending over and spreading his cheeks as instructed. He heard Demetrie utter a soft grunt.

"Have you applied the ointment?"

"N-no, Sir... It didn't hurt that badly."

"I won't be able to use you if it doesn't heal properly." Demetrie had been rough with him again the night before. It wasn't in response to anything Sev



had done wrong, just an unfortunate accident caused by too much passion and too little lubricant. Demetrie moved away and retrieved something from the medicine cabinet. When he returned, Sev felt something very cold being sprayed on his raw hole. It smelled pungent and somewhat minty, but it felt soothing and lightly numbed the skin. He barely felt the ointment being spread until Demetrie inserted a finger inside. Just knowing he was being cared for by Demetrie personally, even so much as valuable property, made Sev's heart feel like it was going to burst.

"Better?" Demetrie asked, bending over him to murmur in his ear.

"Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir." Sev's voice cracked with his gratitude.

Demetrie's finger remained inside Sev's ass not quite up to the second knuckle, and he thrust it lightly in and out. "I wish I had time to enjoy you... you look so delicious bending and spreading for me like this... but you must be punished for your lack of focus and discipline earlier. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, Sir," Sev whimpered breathlessly, trying not to let himself become aroused because that wasn't what Demetrie wanted, despite his actions. *Focus. Discipline.* These were things Sev lacked, and things he must learn to please the man he would hope to call Master. Sev whimpered softly at the loss of Demetrie's finger.

"Stand up now and pull up your pants."

Sev did as instructed, while Demetrie washed the ointment off of his hands in the sink. A moment later Sev felt his collar being removed and he let out a small whine.

"No," Demetrie told him. "You will get it back, but you need to wear a different collar for discipline." He slipped a heavy silver chain around Sev's neck; the rattle of metal links through the ring jarred Sev's ears as it was tightened briefly.

"This is a choke collar. I demand your full attention at all times. You are to focus only on me, regardless of outside stimulation. If your attention begins to wander without my direction..." Demetrie gave a quick jerk to the chain for demonstration, and Sev gasped as the chain tightened and his air was briefly cut off before he was released.

Demetrie's shirt was hanging on the doorknob, and he retrieved it, pulling it on as he watched Sev. "Do you find me too harsh, Sev?"

Sev again shook his head, "No, Sir, you are right to punish me as you see fit. It was wrong of me to lose focus. Thank you for teaching me." Sev went to his knees, pressing his forehead against the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. He swallowed a sob of gratitude; Demetrie would not discipline something he had no concern for.

"Stand up, Sev. Straighten your clothes. It is time for us to meet with my mother."

Sev stood up and felt Demetrie's hand brush under his chin. He lifted his head obediently, his eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

Demetrie's dark gaze shifted between them, then to Sev's softly parted lips. He ran the pad of his thumb over them, "God, you're beautiful... Don't ever show that face to anyone but me, Sev... never."

Sev shook his head, his eyes remaining fixed on Demetrie's face.

Demetrie took in a shuddering breath. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a leather leash, clipping it to Sev's collar, then together they went down to meet the Countess.

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The Countess was a harsh-looking woman, tall and rail-thin. Although only about Gerta's age, or so Sev assumed, she seemed to be fighting a losing battle for eternal youth.

Her face was white, enhanced by the powder she used to cover the lines in her forehead and the deep crevice between her brows, and her hair was unnaturally black. She wore heavy black eyeliner that offered her blue eyes a widened appearance like perpetual fright. Her thin lips were stained crimson and looked wet in contrast to her otherwise matte finish.

Beside the Countess stood her slave attendant. He was young, tanned, and blond. It struck Sev that he'd never seen anything but a blond slave—even labor slaves had their hair chemically lightened. Although Sev noticed all of this, he quickly returned his full attention to Demetrie, naturally inclining his head towards him as he kept his eyes downcast.

“Mother, how well you look.” Demetrie crossed to her, Sev’s leash still in hand, and he placed his large hands on her narrow shoulders, barely brushing her cheek with a dry kiss.

Her blond slave stared openly at Sev. Initially appearing startled by his strange appearance, the young slave now allowed his eyes to roam curiously over Sev’s lean, strong body.

“And what is this that you have?” The Countess scowled at Sev when Demetrie stepped back from her.

“This is my Seven.” Demetrie patted Sev’s head, resting his hand there and tugging his hair to give him the signal that he was allowed to move his focus for the purpose of introductions.

“Your *what?*” the Countess scoffed and transferred her glare to her son. Beside her, the blond slave giggled.

“He’s named after a very lucky number.” Demetrie smiled coolly at Sev. “Wouldn’t you agree, Sev?”

“Yes, my Master,” Sev said without hesitation or irony.

“Demetrie, if you’d wanted a dog, you should have gotten a four-legged purebred instead of this *mongrel*. There’s no telling what sort of diseases the thing has.” The Countess waved her hand dismissively, but the sharp edge of disapproval remained in her tone. She crossed the room and seated herself on the blue settee, her slave moving obediently and sitting beside her.

Demetrie followed and settled into the large wing-back chair across from the settee, and Sev knelt on the floor, sighing softly as Demetrie’s big hand rested on his head.

“And for god’s sake, Demetrie, at least get yourself a girl. Really, same-sex pleasure slaves are *unnatural*.” The Countess’s tight mouth formed into a half-smile as her slave nuzzled her neck.

Her slave’s eyes were focused on Sev.

“You mean you were jealous that my father preferred Aubrey and Stanley to you.”

Sev bit his cheek, trying not to react to the private information so casually disclosed between members of such an elite family.

The Countess's white cheeks mottled with red for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure, brushing off her slave's practiced affection. "What your father did and with whom was no longer my concern after I left."

"That was obvious," Demetrie said; Sev thought he saw the Countess flinch.

"Does your mongrel do any tricks?" The blond slave asked, seemingly oblivious to the tension in the room.

"Clayton, are you here as well? Still behaving as a proper slave should, I see," Demetrie mused and this time his mother's flinch was obvious.

"Clayton, know your place!" The Countess said shrilly, but her reprimand obviously carried no weight with her slave, who smiled in response.

"You see, Sev," Demetrie said, leaning down to speak softly in his ear. "My mother doesn't believe in discipline. That is why she lets her slave speak out of turn. That is why she was so willing to hand her misbehaving young son over to his authoritarian father..."

"Demetrie!" The Countess's voice grew louder, and her face twisted into a garish mask of anger, splotches of pink spread unevenly over her cheeks.

Demetrie sat back and smiled. "Forgive me, dear mother. You are right. It is not polite to speak so candidly about the dead."

The Countess smoothed out her navy blue silk dress and pressed her hand to the thick gold baubles at her throat, making certain she was fully composed before she spoke again. In the meantime, Clayton took her hand, stroking the back in a soothing manner; on his face was a sharp little smile.

Sev was doing his best to sit quietly and ignore any part of the conversation that was not in Demetrie's voice. He was beginning to know Demetrie's different tones, and the candid words of the young Count made Sev all the more interested in finding out about the man. It seemed he did not love his parents, and, from what Sev could tell, they had not particularly loved him.

Demetrie watched Sev carefully when Stanley and Mary came in to serve the small group some light snacks. All it took was a light jerk from the leash to

tighten the collar and Sev quickly returned his full attention to his Master. Demetrie casually reached to the tray where he grabbed a cookie and broke off a piece, feeding it to Sev. He allowed Sev to taste his fingers for a moment before withdrawing his hand. Demetrie was finding his mother more irritating than usual and wanted nothing more than to spend time playing with his favorite toy.

The Countess rolled her eyes at their uncomfortably intimate gesture. “You *will* be fine with Clayton and I staying here tonight after the party?”

Demetrie looked at her as if he’d just remembered she was there. “If you don’t have a problem with it. Will you be keeping Clayton with you, or should I have another room readied?”

“One is fine,” The Countess said sharply. “Now if you don’t mind, Demetrie, I have some personal matters to discuss with you before this evening. Send your pet for a walk with Clayton.”

Demetrie grimaced briefly. “Haven’t we had enough of these discussions already?” He rolled his eyes, “If we must.” Demetrie leaned down and looked into Sev’s face. “Go with Clayton. Do not disappoint me.”

Sev shook his head, “Never again, Master.”

Demetrie took off the leash and the choke collar and nodded to Sev as Clayton got up off the settee.

“Go out into the garden,” Demetrie directed them, and the two left the room.

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Sev hadn’t been outside other than on the veranda since his arrival, and he found the gardens to be almost magical. Everything was so green, and where it wasn’t green it was bursting in bright reds or purples or whites. The foliage lent a hint of coolness to the otherwise warm summer breeze that played with the ends of Sev’s shaggy-styled hair. A man had come in to trim Demetrie’s hair earlier in the week and had also given Sev his first professional haircut—a far more flattering style than what Sev had previously achieved using the blunt, rusted shears borrowed from Phineas.

There were a couple of labor slaves grooming the high hedges when Sev and Clayton walked past. Clayton flirted openly with the younger of the two, but Sev shied away from their unabashed and curious stares.

“So how old are you?” Clayton asked Sev as they wandered down one of the gravel paths between flowerbeds.

“Eighteen.” Sev wasn’t exactly certain, however—he was likely a little older, but since the only birthday celebrations he’d ever had were with the gypsies, and the day celebrated was the day they had taken him in—he’d been only casually marking the years that passed as he noticed them.

“You don’t look it. You’re still small and fragile looking.”

“I’m not fragile,” Sev retorted, though he realized it wasn’t much of a comeback. There were things he’d wanted to say and likely things he would have done had he not been concerned about disappointing Demetrie.

“I didn’t mean to insult you,” Clayton said, but the light dancing in his eyes belied his apology.

Still, Sev felt he had to give him the benefit of the doubt. Despite his time here, this was not his world, and the rules were very different as he’d already begun to learn.

Clayton’s smile was not at all reassuring. “I think we should be friends; I can teach you how to be a real slave so that you can find a new Master...”

“I don’t want a new Master.” Sev inched away from Clayton, finding him suddenly uncomfortably close. “Besides, I’m not part of the slave class so no one would take me. When Master is tired of me, I will return to the ghetto with the other dregs.” Admitting the truth out loud suddenly made it seem more real, and Sev found the prospect very depressing.

“How can I say this...?” Clayton pondered his phrasing aloud. “Athena tends to be *homogenous*.”

Sev frowned. “I don’t know that word.”

“Well, you are obviously not from Athena... in fact, I might guess one of your parents was from Ishmay or someplace where they have olive skin, slanted eyes, and filthy minds.”

Sev scowled. “So?”

“So, if someone reports you you’ll be collected, sent away to a labor camp, killed, or whatever they do to keep the ethnic balance in the ghettos. The government of Athena cares for even the lowest of its residents, but they won’t pay to keep other countries’ mixed-up garbage. You’re a mongrel. You’ll have no home in Athena because you have no single ethnicity.”

Sev was in no position to argue or question the accuracy of Clayton’s statement. He didn’t know much about Athena but had recognized that there were no children among the dregs, and certainly nobody who looked like him. He flinched when he realized that Clayton had inched up on him again.

“Let me help you, Seven... and you should help the Count. He’s already considered a loose cannon, and many in the aristocracy don’t like him. Count Demetrie needs to fit in, and to do that he can’t have a mongrel dreg as a pet. He needs to take a good wife from Athena. That is what they are discussing, you know.” Clayton placed a hand on Sev’s shoulder, and Sev pulled away.

“That’s none of my business.” Sev stopped and leaned against a tree, suddenly feeling weak in the knees and like he might pass out. It had everything to do with what Clayton had told him, and all of it made logical sense—*well, most of it*. “Why would you want to help me? What’s in it for you?”

Clayton’s smile was simpering; artificially sweet, and imbued with condescension, “Oh, Seven... your world is so different. I forget that you are not used to the kindness and civility of a higher caste.” His fingers feathered Sev’s hair gently, then moved to caress the birthmark on his face.

“Stop touching me.” Sev turned his head away. His voice trembled but not out of fear. He longed for the Count to treat him so kindly, but it was too selfish a desire.

Clayton sighed and stepped away. “I understand Seven. When you realize the truth, I will be here to comfort you. A slave’s comfort is truly only ever found in the arms of an equal... you, poor Seven, don’t even have as much.”

Sev shoved past him and went back towards the mansion. Demetrie might be angry with him for doing something other than what he’d been told, but



rather than spend any more time with Clayton, Sev just wanted to be alone right now, in his own room, no matter how temporary of a place it might be. If the Count wanted to punish him he would welcome it; in his selfishness he would take as much as the Count could give him, and when it was over, he'd resign himself to whatever fate may come.

When Sev came out of the garden, fighting back tears and temper, Demetrie was standing on the veranda. Sev stopped and dropped to his knees, staring down at the concrete.

"Sev, is everything alright?" Demetrie's voice was calm.

"It is as it should be, Master," Sev mumbled. Demetrie was silent, and Sev finally lifted his face, looking up into his deep blue eyes.

"I'd like to spend some time with you before the event this evening." Demetrie offered his hand to Sev and Sev grasped it, reveling quietly in its warm strength as Demetrie pulled him to his feet.

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Sev decided to push everything out of his mind that Clayton had tried to put into it. He knew it was foolish to dwell on the limits of things rather than enjoy the experiences while they lasted.

They were in Demetrie's room; the Count was spread out in his big bed, leaning against the pillows, as Sev knelt between his legs, relishing the taste of him. He loved to hear the low purr of Demetrie's pleasure, occasionally augmented by an intake of breath or a deep moan as Sev feasted on his cock.

"Sev, come here," Demetrie told him after a few minutes.

Sev stopped what he was doing and crawled up to straddle his lap. Demetrie lifted him slightly, pinching one tight brown nipple as he took the other into his mouth, teasing it with his teeth. Sev shivered, bringing his hands to Demetrie's head and threading his fingers through his silky, black hair. Demetrie paused and took hold of Sev's arms, lifting them above his head.

Sev looked up when he felt metal cuffs encircle his wrists. He worried that he'd done something wrong and was being punished, but Demetrie went back to enjoying his body, and soon Sev was lost again to the sensations of a hand



on his cock, teeth grazing his nipples, and a finger lightly fucking him from below.

“S-Sir... what about Sir’s pleasure?” Sev stammered as a shudder coursed through his restrained body.

“I’ll get mine, but first, I’d like to do something. It will be painful for you, Sev.” Demetrie pinched Sev’s nipple and was rewarded with an involuntary thrust of his hips.

“This body belongs to Sir,” Sev murmured breathlessly. “It is yours to do with as you please.”

Demetrie nuzzled Sev’s ear. “*You* please me, Sev. Very much.” Without changing his position underneath him, Demetrie reached into the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a blindfold. “I’m going to put this on you so that you don’t react to the threat of the pain, but to the pain itself.”

Sev’s world went dark as the blindfold was slipped on. His heart was hammering in his chest, and his breathing began to come in shallow gasps.

“Shhhh... relax, Sev.”

He felt something cool and wet being wiped over his nipple, then Demetrie’s warm breath as he blew it dry. A moment later there was a pinch, then a small stabbing pain. Sev forced himself not to flinch as he realized that Demetrie had just pierced him. The thought of being marked by him in such a way made Sev’s cock painfully hard.

“Lovely,” Demetrie sighed and kissed Sev’s chest just above his stinging nipple.

Sev shivered as Demetrie then wrapped a satiny cord around the base of his penis, knotting it tightly enough to control the flow of blood.

“I’m going to fuck you now, Sev.”

“Yes, please, Sir.” Sev felt Demetrie slide out from underneath him, then a hand caressed his hip from behind. Sev curled his spine, eagerly raising his ass, and groaning as Demetrie’s strong fingers slathered his hole with lubricant. A moment later, he felt the fat head of Demetrie’s cock probing. “Unnnnnghhh,” Sev groaned as Demetrie pushed inside. It stung just for a

moment as his raw muscle was stretched, then Demetrie's hands came around to grip Sev's constricted, weeping cock, and he fed himself in completely.

Demetrie paused as he enjoyed the heat of Sev's body gripping him. The boy's spine was being lengthened by the restraints, and the chains rattled as Sev struggled with the angle. "Don't pull—I don't want any marks on your body that I haven't put there," Demetrie cautioned. He began to move slowly in and out, his breath becoming ragged as he sucked on the cartilage of Sev's ear.

Sev forced himself to remain extended upwards so as not to put pressure on his wrists.

"You will not come until I tell you to come—then I will release you."

Sev nodded with a whimper. Keeping his position, minding his body's natural inclinations—all of it was going to require intense discipline, and Sev understood that was the point. His punishment hadn't been finished with the light tug from his choke collar. Demetrie was going to be certain that Sev was worthy of such a lesson, and that he'd learned to regulate his body's obedience. But Demetrie also wanted Sev to succeed, so he had offered the cord as an aid to his training. Although it would have been easiest to go inside of his mind and leave his physical sensations behind, Sev wouldn't insult Demetrie; it would lessen Sev's suffering, but that was the cheater's way out.

He endured as Demetrie's rhythm grew faster, his cock sliding in and out, the head mashing against the sensitive bundle of nerves inside. Demetrie's one hand held Sev's hip while the other slid the foreskin over his inflamed penis, pushing it up over his crown then sliding it back and tugging at the delicate tendons beneath.

Sev felt the pressure building in his balls and concentrated on holding it there, not letting it rise any higher, rather than trying to rely solely on the cord.

"Are you getting close, Sev?" Demetrie's voice was a growl as he was quickly approaching his own orgasm.

Sev could only nod his head as a crawling sensation started low in his spine and his balls began to ache. He squeezed his eyes shut, practically feeling the semen boiling and rising through his shaft.

“Just. A. Little. Longer,” Demetrie grunted between each thrust. Finally he said, “Now!”, as he ground against him, emptying himself inside Sev’s ass, and jerking the cord free of the intricate knot.

Sev cried out as he let go, his body wracked with spasms from the magnitude of his orgasm.

Demetrie wrapped his arms around Sev from behind, holding him as thin ribbons of ejaculate slicked the pillows. He reached one hand up quickly and released the cuffs as Sev’s body went limp.

Sev sagged as Demetrie held him. His mind felt shattered, still reeling from the punishing ecstasy, and he started to cry, unable to hold back the unexpected flood of intense emotions.

“You did well, Sev,” Demetrie soothed him and removed the blindfold, his lips brushing his temple. He sat back with Sev, cradling him on his lap until Sev regained enough strength and composure to quiet his small sobs.

Demetrie marveled at the young man; Sev was so imperfectly beautiful, easily bent to Demetrie’s immodest desires and unreasonable demands. But it was not out of weakness, desperation, or promises that Sev gave himself willingly to both passion and punishment. What it was, however, Demetrie wasn’t certain.

Sev was looking down at the platinum ring shining in his left nipple. It was inset with a tiny green emerald and was certainly worth many times more than the Count had gambled away for the pleasure of Sev’s company.

“It’s so beautiful...” Sev smiled up at Demetrie, his eyes still sparkling with tears.

Gazing into that trusting face, Demetrie felt his own heart give a strange thump. His throat suddenly felt tight, and he looked away. “Rest here for a few minutes. Stanley will come get you to make sure you’re cleaned up and dressed for the dinner this evening.” Demetrie lay him down on his bed, smirking at the mess they’d made in it. Poor, chaste Mary was going to throw a fit having to wash these sheets. *Good for her.*

Stanley hadn't spoken much to Sev after he'd woken him up from the Count's bed. He took him to shower and then to dress in the outfit Demetrie had chosen for him.

It was a form-fitting long-sleeved tunic that hung to his knees, but was slit high up to just under his arms, the sides being held closed by silver rings that ended at his hips. Underneath, Sev wore opaque leggings and on his feet, soft-soled leather slippers. A heart-shaped hole had been cut and edged into the tunic over Sev's new piercing.

Stanley rolled his eyes as Sev looked at himself in the mirror, "Why the Count feels the need to be so rebellious is beyond me; but now that he has you he doesn't have to try nearly as hard to disrupt the status quo."

Demetrie consistently dressed Sev in white. It did set off his skin tone nicely, and exaggerated the bleached birthmark over his left eye. Because of its cling, the fabric showed off the shape of his body, and for the first time, Sev didn't see only the hard angles of bone beneath his skin. Eating actual food had shaped his body into something more than a skeletal waif, and he admired his healthier appearance. Sev had never spent any time he could remember actually gazing at his own reflection. The gypsies were superstitious of mirrors used for anything but necessity, and dregs usually couldn't afford mirrors, or else had nothing about themselves they wanted to see. Sev had always been told he was a freak, that he was repulsive; people turned away from him when they saw his birthmark. But Demetrie seemed proud to show him off, and, regardless of the reasons, Sev was happy to be seen.

Gingerly, he moved the small ring in his nipple. The tender flesh was still a little swollen, which suggested an erotic appeal.

"Turn around, Sev. Let me have a look at you."

Sev felt the color rise to his cheeks as soon as he heard Demetrie's voice behind him. He turned, and although a good slave would have lowered his head, Sev wanted to watch Demetrie's face as he looked him over and see the approval in his gaze. He also wanted to look at Demetrie. The Count was dressed in a custom-tailored tuxedo with a vest of deep crimson, detailed and embroidered with black and golden silk threads. Instead of a tie, he wore a

cravat that was the same shade as his vest, and with his black hair and ivory skin he was the most powerful and elegant man Sev had ever seen.

“Very nice, Sev. I knew that outfit would do you justice.”

Sev smiled. “Sir—*Master*—is always correct... Master, why do you always dress me in white?”

Demetrie approached him and Sev started to go to his knees, but Demetrie caught his chin with his fingers, gently halting his descent.

“Because you are pure, Sev.” Demetrie told him.

Sev smiled shyly, his cheeks warming with the compliment.

Demetrie pulled the white collar out of his pocket and fastened it around Sev’s neck, then attached a sparkling golden chain. It was more decorative than restrictive, but the message it conveyed was absolute.

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“You’re bringing *that*? Really, Demetrie!” The Countess was sitting in a chair in the large foyer. She was wearing a long black gown, and blue sapphires sparkled at her narrow throat. Her hair was pulled up into an elaborate style, which had the effect of making her head look a little too big for the rest of her fashionably starved body. If it hadn’t been for her large, sapphire earrings on either side to balance her, Sev would’ve worried that the weight of her skull would make it impossible to keep her head upright.

“It’s staring at my jewelry.” The Countess scowled at her son.

Demetrie rolled his eyes, ignoring her suggestion. “Where is your boy?”

“Clayton?” Her expression shifted as the annoyance on her face changed slightly with the new topic, “I have no idea. He said he was going to the kitchen almost an hour ago.”

“Sev,” Demetrie said to him softly. “Go down and ask Gerta if she has seen Clayton.”

“Yes, Master.” Sev nodded, and Demetrie removed his chain so he could scamper off. He felt badly leaving Demetrie alone with his mother. Even though Sev never knew his own biological mother, he’d believed that most

mothers who had children did so because they liked them. The Countess didn't seem to like her own child very much; she seemed demanding and disappointed despite what a handsome and independent man Demetrie had turned out to be. Sev sighed as he remembered Clayton's words. It seemed independence was not what the Countess wanted for her son; she wanted him to have a wife, as did Walter, the man Sev had met in the car. The only one who didn't want it was Demetrie himself, yet his expressions of self-determination were ignored by his own class, just as if he were a dreg begging for a few coins.

Gerta was surprised to see Sev when he came into the kitchen to inquire about Clayton's whereabouts. She was actually blushing when she looked him over—especially the little bare heart over his new piercing. She didn't speak, but jerked her head in the general direction of a narrow corridor that led to some storage rooms.

Sev heard them before he saw them through the open door. Clayton was wearing a white shirt, black bowtie, and black socks. Other than that he was completely naked and lying on his back on a table with his legs up over Laurence's shoulders as Laurence—pants around his knees—was fucking him. They were rutting like animals, and instead of finding it arousing or embarrassing, Sev found that it made him angry.

“As soon as you're finished it's time to leave,” Sev called into them, startling Laurence in the middle of his orgasm. Sev turned and went to wait for Clayton in the kitchen, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms, his face set into a scowl.

Laurence was the first to come out, fastening his pants and looking red-faced and sheepish. He immediately put on an apron and began washing pots. After a few more minutes, Clayton finally emerged dressed in his tuxedo.

His eyes burned over Sev's body. “Well, don't you look lovely.”

“How could you?” Sev glared at him and began walking back towards the foyer where the Count and Countess were waiting.

“How could I what, Seven?” Clayton didn't seem to be the least bit embarrassed.

“How could you disrespect your mistress in that way?”

“In what way? By fucking Laurence?”

Sev nodded his head.

“You’re really not very bright, are you?” Clayton sighed, dusting a bit of flour off of his pant leg, “A slave doesn’t have to *like* his Master—in fact, it’s probably best if they didn’t. Believe me, if you had to screw that old hag, you’d be thinking Laurence looked pretty good too.” Clayton glanced down at Sev with a grin. “Of course, if I was Demetrie’s slave, as long as I didn’t mind being used, abused, branded, and beaten, I think I could be quite comfortable being exclusive. I’m certain he insists on it, doesn’t he?”

Sev remembered the first beating he’d gotten because Stanley had walked in on him in the shower. He crushed down the memory as soon as he felt heat beginning to rush towards his loins.

“That’s why he chose you. He can’t handle a regular slave who might be governed by any contracts or law. If he hurts you badly enough, or kills you, nobody will complain.” Clayton was still grinning when they entered the foyer where Demetrie and his mother stood on opposite sides of the room. The air was heavy with tension, but Demetrie seemed to relax when he saw Sev. He clipped Sev’s leash on, running his thumb over his lips briefly, then they headed to the car.

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Sev knelt on the floor again, Demetrie absently combing his fingers through his hair. The Countess glared at the two men across from her in the limo and Clayton—sitting next to her—just stared out the window in boredom.

“I’ll only say this: it’s a mockery, Demetrie, what you’ve done to this family’s name,” the Countess said bitterly. The comment hung in the air, unacknowledged by the man towards whom it had been directed.

Sev wondered if her words ever got through to hurt him. He didn’t know what argument had brought them to this point, but as Clayton had already informed him: their world was very different from his.

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The event was being held at a large banquet hall in the upper east quarter of Athena.

Sev was overwhelmed by the extravagance of the building and guests alike. The men all wore perfectly tailored tuxedos; the women were clad in beautiful shimmering gowns and adorned with gemstones and gold. Surrounded by such opulence reminded Sev that only a few blocks away, on the other side of the big wall, was the ghetto, and but for Demetrie's intervention, Sev would have been there tonight.

"You're mine now, Sev," Demetrie murmured into his ear as they exited the car; his deep voice carved another notch into Sev's heart.

"Always, Master," Sev answered breathlessly, looking up at him through his thick eyelashes. He saw a nearly imperceptible shift of Demetrie's eyes, the pupils dilating, and knew he had pleased him.

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Sev was aware that his outfit was vastly different from the somber black formals and generally dark-colored clothing of the other slaves and Masters present. Although he would have stood out anyway with his facial abnormalities and the fact that he was the only slave who didn't have blond hair. The other slaves also wore no obvious collars. The few females present had on, at most, dainty low-set chokers disguised as jewelry, and some of the males wore small bracelets on their wrists. There may have been other indications of ownership, but none so readily observable as Sev's. It seemed that all eyes were on him, whether disapproving, curious, or *something else*.

Sev followed Demetrie inside. The Count remained oblivious to the men shaking his hand and the women who greeted him with air kisses as he made his way to the head table. Sev watched the other slaves, following their example and doing his best to perform as well as they did. He made certain to seat his Master properly, then stepped back and waited for his next command.

"You see, Sev, how you control them all?" Demetrie said to him as Sev stood behind his chair at the wide dining table. "All of them think they have so much power, but really they are weak; they follow rules blindly, too afraid to do anything that might compromise the status quo." He reached around and



took Sev's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze, "What do you think, Seven; a dreg is the most influential man in a room full of aristocrats."

"Only beneath you, Master," Sev answered honestly.

Demetrie offered him a cool smile. "Very good, Sev. Never forget that." Demetrie kissed his knuckles and let him go.

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There were over a hundred people present, and a third of them were slaves. The event was to signify the end of the official mourning period for the deceased Count Silvastrano. Demetrie and his mother sat at the center table, and beside Demetrie was a portrait of his father. The image was of a man in his seventies, with the remnants of Demetrie's jet-black hair, and dark eyes. It was obvious he'd been an attractive man, though not nearly so much as Demetrie, and very stern. Even in the portrait he was scowling—punishing anyone who dared make eye-contact with his memory.

Sev watched the other slaves serving their Masters and tried to copy their gestures as the trolleys of food were shuttled by. Soup passed over the left shoulder, drink over the right; only once did Demetrie challenge him, and it was when he accidentally spilled a drop of wine on the rim of the glass. He thought that he would be pinched, as he'd seen happen to a female slave who had accidentally done the same thing; when she'd spilled a drop of water on the table, her mistress pinched the girl's wrist hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. Instead, Demetrie held up his glass, the red liquid running down the side.

"Lick it up, Sev."

Sev did as he was told, catching the drop with his tongue before it hit the floor.

Not surprisingly, the gesture brought a fresh wave of murmurs nearby, especially when Demetrie made certain to take a drink at the same side of the glass where Sev's tongue had been. In all, Sev had filled Demetrie's wine glass five times before dinner was even over. The Count was drinking a lot; something Sev believed reflected Demetrie's level of discomfort among his own class.

As soon as dessert was served, the slaves were excused to quickly have their own meals, and they headed in a mass exodus down the stairs to the lower level.

Although Sev wasn't fond of Clayton, he was glad to have a familiar face nearby.

"You are certainly causing a stir among the aristocrats," Clayton said as he walked beside Sev. Sev was lingering several paces behind the large group, not wishing to get caught up in their gossip. It was strange that so many seemed to resent their positions and their Masters. The girl who was pinched cried and was coddled by a few females her age who commiserated her cruel treatment. All of them, it seemed, had complaints about being woken up too early to tend to their Masters, being reprimanded for being too careless, and generally being told what to do. To Sev, they sounded like ungrateful children.

He dreaded the thought of having to be near all of these proper slaves. In the outside world he would've done his best to disappear, if he were even noticed at all. But here he was on display, and it wasn't in the context of the kind of performance he was used to. Some of the slaves continued to shun and ignore him as they would in any situation, while a few made lascivious comments. All of this was easy enough to accept, regardless of the level. But when a small group began saying very rude things about Demetrie, Sev became tense.

The slaves were all seated on two sides of a wide, rectangular table. Between every group of four was a large platter that held portions of meat, bread, and vegetables that they were to share between them. Although the food looked appetizing, Sev couldn't eat. He forced himself to nibble on a piece of warm bread as he tried to ignore the invectives directed at his Master.

It was a male slave in his mid-twenties who'd begun the discussion, but soon a small group chimed in, emboldened by their comrade's observations.

"Count Silvastrano has done some daring things in the past, but I never thought he'd stoop to something quite so low. He should have just gotten a couple of dogs—would have been a cleaner fuck, that's for certain." The slave looked directly at Sev as he spoke.

Soon another man joined the first. “And I’ve heard no women will have him—he doesn’t want children so he keeps sticking it in the wrong hole.”

“He’d stick it in anything—*obviously*,” a woman drawled nearby, rolling her eyes at Sev. “Just what is he trying to prove, anyway? He’s an insult to his title.”

Clayton leaned over and whispered to Sev as he saw his fists clenching on the table, “Just ignore them, Sev—if you don’t, you’ll always be a dreg and nobody else will want you.”

“*I am* a dreg,” Sev growled, “and I don’t care.” He stood up abruptly, using his chair as a platform to rise above the din.

“Oh, look, it thinks it has something to say,” the first slave said, sneering at Sev.

“I don’t care what you say about me, but you must not insult my Master,” Sev said, trying to maintain an even tone.

“Oh my, the little mongrel seems to be very protective...”

“It’s not worth it, Guthrie,” a female slave giggled nervously.

Guthrie turned to her. “*It’s* worth nothing, which is why I take its loyalty as an insult. It’s not a slave—it’s a little pet that thinks itself worthy of carrying *our* titles as slaves!” His voice had risen slightly, and anger flared behind his eyes.

Clayton shook his head, maintaining his attitude of indifference. “Guthrie, you are an excellent slave, so don’t demean yourself by starting a fight with this scrawny thing—it’s virtually a child.”

“I see that—so now the Count is a pedophile as well. Another noble item to add to the list of his indescr—”

No one expected Sev to move so quickly—especially not Guthrie. Sev launched himself over the table, springing on his hands in the center. Kicking Guthrie as he vaulted, he pushed him backwards, his chair toppling beneath him. Then Sev landed with his feet planted on either side of the slave’s chest as the shocked Guthrie looked up at him from the floor.

For a moment, time seemed to have stopped as the two men locked gazes, then Sev was grabbed on either side and hauled backwards by two male slaves.

Guthrie struggled to his feet, rolling up his sleeves. “You damn mongrel! You’ll regret—”

Sev leveraged himself using the two men holding him, curling his spine and bringing his legs up until he managed to rotate in their arms. The two men drew back, startled by Sev’s acrobatics, and let him go. He planted his feet on the table and finished uncoiling until he was standing upright on the edge of it, pointing a finger at Guthrie. “If you speak one more ill word of my Master, I will gladly suffer the consequences of breaking the law to have the pleasure of shutting you up.”

“Sev.”

Guthrie paled and the other slaves moved back to their seats, lowering their heads as Demetrie’s voice came in from the doorway behind Sev.

Sev felt his heart drop into his stomach. He turned around, hopping off the table.

Demetrie’s face was half in shadow from the darkness of the corridor, but Sev could feel his eyes boring through him. Regardless, he gave one final glare over his shoulder at Guthrie and the others, then went to answer his Master’s call.

Demetrie had started back down the corridor, his body pressed close to the wall.

“Master, why did you come for me?”

“Clayton thought you might be in trouble.”

“Clayton?” Sev hadn’t noticed that he’d slipped out. “Please, Master—punish me if you must, but...” Sev felt the emotions he’d been trying to control come rising painfully to the surface and he started to cry. “T-they insulted my Master—I don’t care what they think of me but—”

Demetrie turned suddenly and grabbed Sev’s face, spinning him around and slamming his back against the wall. He was so close the alcohol on his breath burned Sev’s lips. *He’d been drinking more than just wine.*

“You *should* care, Sev—you are mine; an insult to you is an insult to me.”

Demetrie still had his fingers pressed hard along Sev’s jaw. He stared into his face for a long time, rubbing Sev’s lips now with the pad of his thumb as he seemed to contemplate every nuance of his features. For the briefest of moments, Sev saw the hard light in Demetrie’s eyes soften, and he thought Demetrie might kiss him; but almost immediately it was consumed by anxiety, and then returned to stone.

Sev’s eyelids fluttered when Demetrie pressed his hips against him.

“Did they touch you, Sev?”

“M-my arms, Master; they held my arms.”

Demetrie’s hands moved down to grip Sev’s biceps and he squeezed, running down the length of his arms to his wrists. He closed his eyes and wavered slightly on his feet. “If I could, I would flay the memory from your bones.” Demetrie’s hand crept down and squeezed Sev between the legs. Sev was soft but immediately began to respond to his Master’s touch.

They were assaulted by the smell of bleach as Demetrie hauled him inside a public restroom down the hall. He took Sev into a large stall and began removing his belt.

“Strip,” he told him, pulling the belt so it snapped. “Leave on your collar.”

Sev did as instructed, carefully hanging his clothing on the hook on the door. It was very cold with the hard, white tiles; the bright florescent lights made the contrasts almost painfully sharp.

Demetrie grabbed Sev’s wrists and tied them behind his back to the metal safety bar that ran along the length of the stall. He took off his coat and hung it on the hook, then crouched on the floor and took Sev’s hardening cock between his lips.

Sev gasped as he was enveloped by the heat inside of Demetrie’s mouth.

Demetrie took him all the way in, running his tongue around the ridge under his hood, then drawing him out, sucking noisily as he pulled back.

Sev grasped the bar, his knees going weak as his eyes rolled up beneath his lids. He wanted to protest—to tell Demetrie that it was not necessary to

pleasure him, but he didn't want the sensation to stop. Demetrie would do what he wanted with Sev and that was as it should be.

Demetrie lifted Sev's legs up easily over his shoulders and began to lick the area behind his balls, and finally the tight star of his anus. He probed with his tongue, making Sev groan and wriggle as he was spread wider. Demetrie unfastened his pants and stood up. Keeping Sev's ankles over his shoulders, he slammed into him with his thick cock, grinding against him as he gripped Sev's hips.

Sev choked back a cry.

"Shhhh..." Demetrie soothed Sev with small apologies, "Forgive me Sev... that I mark you inside and out..." Demetrie swallowed hard, as if dizzy from the sensation of being so deeply inside of Sev's warm body. After a moment, he began to move.

"So... Tight..." Demetrie hissed between thrusts as Sev clamped down. He was now holding the bar behind Sev to maintain his balance and tempo. He shouldn't have drank so much, but he needed to escape, and Sev was fast becoming the one thing that could take his mind off of the rest of his miserable excuse for a future. He came, choking back a sob, just moments before the outer door opened and someone came into the bathroom.

"Demetrie! Are you in here?"

Sev recognized Walter's voice, but Demetrie didn't seem to notice. He was breathing heavily, his forehead pressed to the cool tile wall behind Sev. His breath was hot and seared the tears on Sev's cheek.

"Demetrie? Answer me!" Walter rattled the stall door.

"Maybe we should give him a minute?" The second voice was Roger's.

"It's not fair, Sev..." Demetrie heaved a heavy sigh, and pulled out, tucking himself into his pants before pulling Sev's legs into a more natural position.

Sev brought his feet to the floor slowly. He wasn't certain what the comment meant, but it appeared Demetrie would not elaborate.

"Get dressed." Demetrie stepped out of the stall, holding the door closed until Sev latched it.

“What do you want, Walter?” Demetrie sounded more tired than angry. He began feeding his belt back through the loops of his pants.

Walter sputtered some nonsense sounds for a moment, then recomposed and said, “We have been looking everywhere for you—your mother has been beside herself and you’re down here soiling yourself with that dreg?”

“Your point, Walter?”

Sev heard the familiar clang of Demetrie’s lighter, then smelled the scent of the heady, bittersweet smoke from his cigar. He imagined he would never know of those things belonging to another; whatever became of him, should he ever experience that sound and smell he would always think *Demetrie*. Slowly, he dressed, and tentatively peeked between the gap in the stall door.

Demetrie was leaning against a sink, smoking while Walter paced and Roger stared at the stall. Sev drew back as he thought he’d caught the man’s eye.

“This event is for your family, Demetrie! Have you no shame or honor?”

“This event is to commemorate the death of my father. It’s his apparent honor they are celebrating; it has nothing to do with me.” Demetrie’s voice never rose over its steady, cool timbre.

“But there are some very influential people here—might I add one of them may soon be your father-in-law?”

Sev felt the air being shoved out of his chest. Was Demetrie engaged? Sev leaned against the wall. *It was none of his concern*. He was only entertainment for as long as the Count would have him, and Demetrie had never led him to believe otherwise. Sev’s chest ached and his throat swelled around a sob. None of this should have come as a surprise; Clayton had even tried to warn him, but in his selfishness, Sev had chosen to ignore the message. Since he’d been with Demetrie, Sev was beginning to feel like he was worth something to someone—something more than a thief for selfish gains; *something a little more like a human being*. Demetrie made him feel safe—the punishments he inflicted were just. Sev would endure anything—do anything—for his strong and handsome Master.

“I’m tired, Walter, and unhappy because these ill-behaved slaves can’t seem to keep their hands off of other people’s property,” Demetrie said and knocked on the stall door. “Sev, come out.”

Sev hastily wiped his eyes on the backs of his hands and exited the stall, his shoulders drawn and head down.

“Forgive me Master.” he carried Demetrie’s coat, having retrieved it from the back of the door. He was aware of the other men’s disapproving gazes upon him as he handed Demetrie both his coat and the chain still attached to his collar.

Demetrie took his coat and fingered the leash, looking at Sev thoughtfully for a moment before he draped the coat over Sev’s shoulders. “Walter, if you see my mother, tell her I’ll be at the car.” Demetrie turned on his heel and led Sev out.

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The car ride home was even more uncomfortable than the ride there. The Countess was upset with Clayton for intervening when Sev was in danger and Clayton was brooding, frustrated by whatever light punishment she’d imposed. Demetrie stared out the window, his cigar smoldering, ignored, between his fingers. Sev reached up and caught the long plume of ash in his hands before it fell onto Demetrie’s pant leg.

Demetrie seemed to come out of whatever trance he’d been under and crushed his cigar out in the ashtray on the arm of the seat. He jerked his head towards it and Sev crawled on his knees to deposit the grey dust. He closed his eyes and sighed softly as he felt Demetrie’s hand resting gently on his back underneath his jacket. *So warm*; he could feel the heat of him through his clothing. The fingertips made a small circle against his lower spine, but he returned his gaze to the darkness reflected back through his eyes as he stared out the window once more.

Sev wondered what went on in Demetrie’s mind. Phineas had convinced Sev at one time that the high caste were only counting their investments when they seemed deep in thought, but Phineas was a liar. There was darkness there—uncertainty—and Sev would have given anything to be able to ease Demetrie’s burden.



Demetrie heaved a heavy sigh as the car stopped and the driver came around to open their door. He leaned close to Sev as his mother got out of the vehicle. “Tonight, Sev, tell me of the gypsies.”

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## CHAPTER 6

They lay together in Demetrie's big bed. When they'd gotten home, Demetrie had told his mother goodnight and taken Sev to the bathroom to clean him up and tend to any new injuries. Now, Demetrie was lying back against his pillows. His eyes were closed as he took another drink. The ice rattled against the side of his glass and he sat up with a frown, reaching over to the nightstand to refill his scotch. "Tell me, Sev, if you had the opportunity, would you return to your life as a gypsy?"

Sev sat quietly for a moment as he considered his answer. At one point he would have answered with a resounding *yes*, because he'd never imagined anything better, but now... "Sir, there are many things about that life that I miss..."

"Like what? Tell me."

"Like..." Sev took a deep breath, "the feeling, Sir, that I belonged, the love that was given and received freely... the gypsies were my family, despite the fact that we shared no blood."

Demetrie was silent for so long, that Sev thought he might have fallen asleep, but finally he said, "You never answered my original question."

"Sir, I suppose I would return to that life, if I could. But I believe I know too much now. I did not realize before that I am a dreg... and I am aware now that there is no security in any life that I might have."

Demetrie opened his eyes. "Does that sadden you, Sev?"

Sev took in a stammering breath, more affected by Demetrie's dark gaze than his question. "Sir, it is... unsettling."

Demetrie closed his eyes. "I suppose it would be."

"Sir... forgive me for speaking out of turn, but... is something troubling you?"

"Why do you ask, Sev?"

"Sir... because I have concern for your happiness... I want to please you..."

“Haven’t I told you already that you are very pleasing to me?”

Sev lowered his eyes. “Then why, Sir, do you seem so unhappy?”

Demetrie set down his drink, but did not release the glass. “What purpose would it serve for you to know?”

“B-because, Sir,... then... as unworthy as I am, I could share your pain.”

Demetrie finally released the glass and contemplated Sev, sitting with his shoulders hunched and head down. “Look at me, Sev.”

Cheeks reddened, Sev lifted his face, and Demetrie saw tears in his eyes.

“You cry for my pain but not your own,” he chuffed softly. “Why do you let me do these things to you, Sev? “

“Sir, it is an honor for me to be of service to you...”

“You’ve done enough for me tonight. Go to your room.”

Sev nodded, his chest aching as he pressed his forehead to the mattress in apology. He crawled off the bed and all the way to his room, where he sat on the floor and swallowed his sobs. He had insulted Demetrie, when all he’d wanted to do was to make him happy. It seemed that no one cared about Demetrie’s happiness, and maybe the Count had believed what Sev felt for him was pity. Or maybe he realized how selfish Sev was becoming, wanting to monopolize his time, wanting him to want him back.

“Why are you crying?”

Sev scrambled backwards as someone lying in his bed dropped a hand to his head. He realized it was Clayton as the other man reached over and turned the small bedside lamp on low.

“W-why are you in my room?” Sev wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his robe.

“I thought you’d be a little nicer to someone who saved your skin a few hours earlier.”

“I could have handled it myself.” Sev got up off the floor.

Clayton yawned, stretching out in Sev’s bed once more. Sev realized he was only wearing loose shorts.

“You would have had your hands cut off if you’d struck Guthrie. By the way, very interesting acrobatics.” Clayton rolled onto his side, propping his head on his hand.

“What do you want, Clayton?” Sev asked, standing rigidly in the center of the small room. It was just far enough away to be out of range of Clayton’s fingertips when he reached towards him from the bed.

“I was hoping for a ‘thank-you’.”

“Thank you. Now go back to your Mistress.”

“That old hag? I already nibbled her titties so all is forgiven... but there is something here I would truly like to taste.” Clayton had to roll onto his stomach to reach, but he managed to tug the hem of Sev’s robe. Sev pulled away and turned, pressing his back to the door of the wardrobe. “Don’t touch me—you have no right—”

“Ah, that’s where you keep getting confused. You’re the one with no rights, Seven. Remember? That’s why Demetrie likes you so much. Even if he breaks you, there is nothing anyone will do about it.”

“That is *his* right, *not* yours.”

“And why are you in here instead of there with him now?”

Sev’s jaw tensed and he slumped against the wardrobe. “Because it is also his right to reject me.” He longed to run back into Demetrie and beg for forgiveness for whatever wrong he’d done, but it was by his order that he’d been sent away.

“If you want to cry, it’s alright. I’ll hold you,” Clayton taunted.

“I want you to leave.”

“What do you think he’d do to you if he found me in your room?” With his knees bent, Clayton’s feet swayed back and forth slowly, casting long shadows on the wall behind him.

Sev bit his lower lip and closed his eyes, trying to focus pain anywhere but his heart. “Why are you doing this?” He tensed when he felt Clayton’s hand suddenly on the back of his head, in his hair, and felt his tanned body move against his, the heat of it apparent through the thin material of his robe.

“No one has to know...” Clayton breathed against Sev’s lips.

Clayton was not physically unattractive—not by any means—but he wasn’t Demetrie, and so the thought of being touched by him made Sev’s insides cramp.

“I’ll know...” Sev turned his face away. “Do you hate me so much?”

Clayton’s warm fingertips traced the pale mark on Sev’s cheek. “It’s not hate, Seven.” He sighed and backed off. “How can you be so loyal? You’re like a dog.”

Sev opened his eyes, seeing Clayton’s exasperated frown. “I... love him.” He hadn’t known he would say the words out loud, but now that he had, he wondered why he hadn’t admitted it sooner.

“Ha—you’ve barely even met him! I can assure you, Seven, if that is the case, your love will be one-sided at best.” Clayton ran his fingers through his blonde hair, pacing slowly. “You really are a perfect toy for him... you seem to crave the pain he brings you, yet you offer yourself for more.” he sighed, shaking his head. “I pity you.”

“Then please leave me to suffer alone,” Sev muttered, unconsciously pulling his robe tighter around him.

“Fine,” Clayton huffed, grabbing his own robe off the end of the bed and pulling it on. “We’ll be leaving in the morning, and I doubt I’ll ever see you again. I hope it’s all been worth it.” Clayton started out the door that led to the hallway.

Sev withered to the floor where he stood, feeling completely hollowed out. He’d had to fight back his tears in front of Clayton—he’d sworn to Demetrie that he’d never let anyone else see him in such a vulnerable state—and now he had nothing left but an uncomfortable weight in his chest.

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Sev hadn’t realized he’d fallen asleep until he heard the bell ringing into his room from Demetrie’s. He wobbled to his feet, his body stiff from sleeping on the hard floor, and rushed to answer his Master’s call. Demetrie was still in bed when he entered the room; even lying down, the Count was no less impressive or intimidating.

“Yes, my M-Master?” Sev came through the door and knelt, keeping his head bowed. Suddenly, calling Demetrie Master felt more necessary to Sev, and it seemed that hearing the word had lightened Demetrie’s mood.

Indeed, the Count was pleased to hear the word from Sev’s mouth. “You have another card waiting to be drawn.” Demetrie reached over to the bedside table and produced the deck.

Sev rose in one fluid motion and crossed the room. He drew a card and handed it back to Demetrie, who turned it over so Sev could see.

“A queen of clubs. Still very lucky, Sev. This card is yours to do with as you please right now.” Demetrie handed the queen to Sev who took it, peering down at the card.

“Master, I feel all that I would ask is too selfish...”

“Remember, I can always tell you no.” If Sev asked for his freedom now, Demetrie swore to himself that he wouldn’t deny it, but a sick sense of dread filled him with the thought that it might come to that so soon.

“Master, if it’s not too much to ask, I would like to request that I not be required to draw cards from this deck anymore.”

Sev wouldn’t meet Demetrie’s eyes when he said it, and the Count’s sense of dread increased. He held out his hand, accepting the queen from Sev.

“Very well, but I would like to know your reasoning.” Despite the turmoil of his emotions, Demetrie’s voice was its usual cool timbre.

When Sev met his eyes, Demetrie held his breath.

“Master, I can’t read or write, but I can count—a little—and I don’t like to be reminded that each card I draw brings me closer to the end of my time with you.”

Demetrie clung to Sev’s gaze until the boy became diffident and looked down at the floor.

Demetrie shuffled the cards once, then deliberately opened the bedside table and set them inside as if fitting them into a specific location. “I’ll grant that request Sev, but I wonder why you didn’t simply use that card and ask to extend your stay.”

Sev's eyes widened in and he shook his head. "Oh no, Master... I could never take advantage of your kindness."

"Come here, Sev." Demetrie said softly, tugging at Sev's wrist.

Sev knelt on the bed beside Demetrie, sighing and closing his eyes as Demetrie ran his big hand over Sev's hair and caressed his cheek. The young man seemed so willing to give himself over completely.

"You are too good, my Seven," Demetrie sighed. He rose slowly from the bed, sitting up on the side for a moment before standing up and heading towards his en suite bathroom.

"Stanley is seeing my mother off. I want you to attend to me this morning," Demetrie called without turning his head.

"Yes, Master." Sev followed after Demetrie, waiting outside the door for a moment so that Demetrie could use the toilet. The shower was already running, and steam gathered in a humid fog that blurred the otherwise gleaming surfaces. Sev took off his own robe and followed Demetrie inside the glass enclosure. His hands were trembling as he was closed inside. Even though the physical contact was purely as utility, Demetrie had never let Sev touch him for any length of time, and he watched the young man trembling through the hazy reflection of the glass as Sev stared at his back.

"Did you sleep last night, Sev?" Demetrie asked as Sev began soaping up a thick sponge.

"A little, Master," Sev admitted.

Demetrie grunted in reply.

Sev reached up and began washing Demetrie's back with the sponge, his hands still trembling as he did. Demetrie was about to ask him what was bothering him when Sev finally spoke up.

"Master... I feel I deserve punishment."

Demetrie glanced back over his shoulder at Sev. "For what reason?"

"Master, last night, after you sent me away... C-Clayton was in my room..."

Demetrie moved so swiftly, Sev had no chance to avoid him, even if he'd wanted to. He slammed Sev's back against the hard tile wall, squeezing his wrists until Sev undoubtedly felt his hands start to tingle.

"What?" Demetrie's voice was a low growl and his eyes bored into Sev's.

"M-Master... n-nothing happened... please, Master... punish me... please don't take it out on Clayton..."

Demetrie shoved his hard body into Sev's. "I'll *do* as I *please*," he growled. He examined Sev's face for any signs of dishonesty, though knew he'd find none. Satisfied, he released the young man and took a step back. "Nothing happened, you say?"

Sev shook his head. "No Master... nothing... I would never betray you."

"If nothing happened, why do you feel you deserve punishment?"

"Because, Master... I... I feel it is somehow my fault that he assumed I'd extended an invitation to my room."

Demetrie chuckled softly. Sev still didn't realize what effect he had on most people. He had no clue just how exotic and tempting a creature he was. "You'll never be a slave, Sev."

Despair drew lines across Sev's forehead and Demetrie was aware he'd misinterpreted his meaning of his words.

"I know this, Master," Sev said quietly.

"A slave wouldn't have told his Master anything," Demetrie clarified. "You could have kept it to yourself and I probably never would have known."

Sev shook his head. "Master, I could not lie to you. If that alone made me unworthy to be a slave, I wouldn't change it."

Demetrie touched Sev's cheek, bringing his thumb around to caress his lips. Sev's sharp pink tongue came out to press against it, and coax him inside. The sensation encouraged Demetrie's blood flow to his cock, and he began to grow hard.

"Please, Master, let me give you pleasure."

Demetrie said nothing, stunned by Sev's unusual request. He gazed down and braced himself against the shower wall as Sev took his stiffening cock into



the moist heat of his mouth. Sev's long eyelashes sparkled with crystal beads as the water rained down from Demetrie's wide shoulders. The drops could have been tears, and part of Demetrie understood that they were. This young man who had no place was working so earnestly to remain under his thumb. He couldn't understand it, but didn't want to let it go, as much as he realized that he should.

Sev's lips pulled tightly down Demetrie's shaft as he created a tight seal. He managed to take all of him, his lissome fingers caressing the heavy, smooth sac below.

"Touch yourself," Demetrie told him, seeing how hard Sev's cock had become just by fellating him. Sev glanced up, meeting Demetrie's hooded eyes, and Demetrie felt the blood surge hotter through his loins. He placed a hand on Sev's head, the other gripping the lip of a built-in shelf behind him, as Sev's beautiful mouth worked over his desire. Below, Sev used one hand to lazily pump his own erection. The sight of the glistening rose knob peeking up from the golden-olive grasp of Sev's fingers and cowl of his foreskin was incredibly erotic, but now it was getting too difficult for Demetrie to keep his eyes open.

Sev's hot tongue circled his head, and drilled into his weeping slit. His own hand began to pump faster along his shaft, and soon Sev was coming, the water mixing with his orgasm as it swirled down the drain. He took Demetrie deep, milking him against the back of his throat.

Sev's moans of pleasure vibrated through Demetrie's cock as he emptied himself with a deep groan inside of Sev's sweet mouth.

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Afterwards, Sev washed Demetrie with an almost shy reverence. As he was soaping his chest, Demetrie pulled Sev into his hard body, gripping his biceps tightly enough to bruise. "So fragile, and yet, I know what strength your body is capable of. Why, Sev? Why haven't you tried to escape?"

"Master, I did not realize I was your prisoner." Sev gazed up into Demetrie's eyes, and Demetrie could see his pupils were dilated with need.

He reached back and took the handheld showerhead from the wall. "Sit back and spread yourself."

The hot steam and recent activity had caused Sev's succulent lips to plump and his cheeks to flush. It lent to his features a beautiful androgyny, pushing him slightly more towards the feminine, but his body was very obviously male as his cock began to swell again.

Demetrie chuckled softly, thinking back to how good it had been when he was so young. Sev nearly made him feel like he was twenty again because of the amount of time Demetrie spent with a hard-on.

Sev leaned back on one of the built-in benches in the wall, clutching a set of safety bars on either side. His legs were spread and his feet pulled up onto the edge of the seat, tilting his hips obscenely so Demetrie had an unobstructed view of his most intimate parts.

"So dirty, Sev," Demetrie mused, dialing up a spray on the showerhead.

"Yes, Master," Sev agreed breathlessly. His grip tightened on the bars above him, and his cock throbbed, beginning to leak in anticipation. Demetrie aimed the jets and then he squeezed the button.

"Nnnuuh!" Sev cried out as the sharp, pulsing stream of a massage setting thrummed against his tender hole. His hips jerked as his body opened to the stimulating jets, the muscles of his groin tensing to make his cock beat against his belly. Sev moved up and down, as if the air alone might be enough to bring him release.

And then the spray was gone and it took Sev's heart a few stuttering beats to realize he was almost literally being left high and dry. "Mm-Master?" he moaned as Demetrie turned off the shower.

"You asked for punishment, Sev," Demetrie reminded with a sharp smile.

Sev groaned, squeezing his eyes shut with the agony of his arousal. Surely, this was the cruelest punishment he had suffered so far.

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## CHAPTER 7

Sev was kneeling, still naked, on the floor of Demetrie's room while Demetrie got himself dressed. He'd considered earlier that he'd have Sev do it, but in light of his punishment, the temptation was too great for either of them at the moment.

"I have some business matters to deal with which will be taking me away from home overnight and you will be left here in the custody of the house servants. This means that I won't be making use of your body for at least the next forty-eight hours; you need time to heal."

"I... understand, Master." Sev did not feel it was appropriate to ask if that meant Demetrie would also refrain. Just because he couldn't use Sev, that didn't mean he couldn't find someone else to make use of. The thought filled Sev with a possessive jealousy that he knew was wrong. Demetrie did not belong to Sev, and for the time being, Sev belonged to Demetrie only as property. Good property did not suffer envy.

Demetrie smiled as he read Sev's torment through his expressions. It was exactly as he'd hoped—to punish Sev by letting him feel the sting of what *he* felt every time he learned of another person coveting his lovely toy.

"When I return, I expect to have a very important guest with me, and I'd like you to provide our entertainment."

"Entertainment, Master?" Sev asked, looking up at Demetrie as he stood above him, finishing up the last few buttons on his shirt collar.

"We'll play it by ear." Demetrie smirked, acknowledging his enjoyment of Sev's unease. He crouched down, pressing his hands on Sev's shoulders as he moved his lips against Sev's ear, "Today, after I leave, I want you to remain here in my room, unclothed, for two hours. I will set the clock to alert you a few minutes before lunchtime when Stanley will come in and bring you food. You are not allowed to let him see your body. Do you understand Sev?"

"Yes Master," Sev answered, though he really didn't.

"After he leaves and you have lunch, I want you to pick out whatever

clothing you wish to wear today, and set aside an outfit for tomorrow. Then you are free to do as you please for the rest of the day.”

“As I please, Master?” Sev gnawed his lip. So much freedom had become foreign to him and he was concerned with his ability to handle it.

“There are a couple of rules which you must obey during this time that I am away.”

Sev nodded, relieved that Demetrie would be giving him some specific commands to follow.

“When you sleep, you are to sleep in my bed, and you are not to allow yourself to become aroused or bring on an orgasm in any way.”

Sev let out a small whimper. “Master... I...”

Demetrie smiled. “I realize this last requirement is going to be very difficult for you, so I have something that will help. Stand up please.” Demetrie understood that Sev’s body needed control as much as his mind, and trying to accomplish both feats by himself was often beyond his ability.

Sev stood up, his legs still a bit wobbly from the shower and his anticipation of his continued suffering.

Demetrie went to one of his drawers and pulled out a flat garment box. He opened it on the dresser, his body blocking Sev’s view of what he removed from the crinkling paper.

“Turn around, Sev,” Demetrie instructed before turning himself.

Sev did as he was told, trying to maintain regular breathing as he felt Demetrie’s approach burn through him. Sev felt Demetrie’s hands come around to the front.

Demetrie was looking over Sev’s shoulder as he slipped an open metal ring around Sev’s genitals, then clamped it shut so it encircled both his penis and scrotum. “Too tight?” Demetrie’s voice vibrated through Sev’s chest.

Sev shook his head, fascinated with the contraption that Demetrie continued to install around him. The next item was like a codpiece that conformed to Sev’s shape in his restrained position with a decorative metal

shell and an opening at the bottom to pass urine. It was actually quite attractive, and Sev felt flattered that Demetrie would let him wear such a beautiful item of security. A long, leather strap held the bottom of the metal cup in place, then expanded out to allow for any other necessities of elimination—the theory obviously being that any anal-play would result in such severe discomfort by its sexual arousal, it wasn't necessary to prevent it by means of a restriction. A belt around Sev's hips kept the whole thing together, attaching to a hasp on either side that fit over a thick metal staple.

“Now turn and face me.” Demetrie's expression was like stone, but his eyes lit up with pleasure to see how lovely Sev looked in his restraints. As the final touch, he slid a decorative, but functional, padlock through the curved staple and snapped it shut, removing the key. “Let's hope I don't lose this.” Demetrie held the key up for Sev to see before he slipped a chain through it and draped it around his own neck, feeding it down into his shirt. He took a step back and admired the workmanship of the chastity belt. “Lovely, Sev. I knew the silver would look the best against your skin.”

Sev lowered his head as a blush came to his cheeks with a flood of pride. “I am honored, Master. Thank you.”

“Come here, Sev,” Demetrie opened his arms in a rare display of affection and Sev eagerly came into them, pressing his cheek against Demetrie's chest where he could hear his heart beating through the layers of his clothing.

Demetrie circled him in his warm embrace and kissed the top of his head. He nearly said the words that came into his mind, but he pinched them back, squeezing them beneath the pressure of what he felt was right. The Count's voice was raspy from the effort of keeping his feelings withheld. “I have to go, Sev. Be good.”

Sev reluctantly remained behind as Demetrie withdrew, “I will, Master. Please return safely.”

“As soon as I can, Sev.”

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Sev had no way of knowing that some of Demetrie's business was easily handled from his study, nor did he realize that the Count's room was full of

cameras. They had been installed initially by the elder Count Silvastrano, who'd been paranoid about his slaves or other lovers stealing from him. Demetrie had been pleased to find that they gave him access to the entire suite, including Sev's room, which he could view from a forty-inch monitor hidden behind a painting in his study.

The resolution from the cameras was good enough to see that Sev's cheeks were flushed as he remained standing bewildered in the center of Demetrie's room, and Demetrie felt his cock stir in his pants. This forced chastity was going to be just as difficult on him as it was Sev—but this was his own punishment as well for being so rough with him at the banquet. At least Demetrie could jerk off; he unfastened his pants, bringing out his straining erection and slid his fingers down its length. He'd had no idea when he'd picked Sev up that the young man would be any kind of a match for his demanding sexual appetite. Perhaps carnal talents were inherited like many other skills; if that were the case, Sev's mother must have been a very popular whore indeed; and on the sinful island of Ishmay, that was saying something.

But there was more to this experiment than punishment and entertainment for Demetrie's voyeuristic urges. The young gypsy had likely been a thief since the time he could walk, and lately, Stanley and the other staff had been quick to blame Sev for anything that went missing. Demetrie knew Sev wouldn't do anything as ridiculous as creep out of bed under the cover of night just to swipe a spatula from the kitchen or Stanley's favorite pen, but still, he wanted confirmation for his own peace of mind before he committed to something he'd decided on only recently.

Demetrie sighed, his erection flagging as his thoughts rattled around his brain. At the banquet, he'd spoken to the friend whose house had been burglarized in Nissim, and heard that the authorities had made an arrest. If that was the case, Demetrie had no doubt that Phineas would start implicating Sev, and if the rest of the aristocracy caught wind of it, they could force Demetrie to hand Sev over for prosecution. But no one could do anything without an arrest warrant being approved by the victim himself—Count Michael Ferrier, and Michael wouldn't do so without having some compelling evidence.

For his own reassurance, Demetrie wanted evidence that his faith in Sev was not misplaced; that the respect Sev showed to the man whom he called

*Master* was not just a convenient way into his home, and ultimately, into his heart.

Demetrie tucked himself back inside his pants with a frustrated grumble. He would force himself to refrain, just as he'd demanded of Sev.

On the screen, he watched the boy's eyes darting towards the door several times as though he were waiting for a predator to come through and attack him, before he moved from the spot where Demetrie had left him. Finally Sev began to look around. There were several drawers, cupboards, and boxes that were just begging for curious, nimble fingers to examine their contents. Demetrie saw Sev running his fingers lightly over their surfaces, but also the bedding. The gestures were so deliberate, that Demetrie had to believe there was something behind it.

Sev moved to the window for a moment, but seemed to have lost the urge to look out. He went back to the bed and lay down, turning Demetrie's pillow vertically on the bed, then embracing it as he lay his cheek upon it.

The Count closed his eyes with a heavy sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. Sev's gesture with Demetrie's pillow was not something done at random; it was an expression of affection that worried him. Any time Sev had begun to touch him in a way that felt like tenderness, Demetrie had tried to discourage it by pushing him away. At first he'd believed that Sev was doing it because the boy felt it was expected of him. But witnessing Sev now, when he thought no one was watching, conjured up emotions in Demetrie that he didn't know how to manage. The longer he was with Sev, the more he found himself enjoying beyond what the boy could offer him physically.

"Damn it..." Demetrie murmured, watching Sev doze. Occasionally he'd stir and look towards the door, then breathe in Demetrie's scent from his pillow each time he laid his head down. False acts of admiration or affection were impossible to maintain for very long, and unnecessary when no one was watching. The time restriction he'd initially placed on their arrangement had seemed appropriate, and Demetrie assumed that even before that he would start to lose interest. Or that Sev would prove himself the same as any other dreg—hating the oppression of the aristocracy, but willing to do anything if it meant getting some benefit above everyone else in the ghetto.



Sev's honesty and loyalty had been charming early on; but now, especially after suffering punishments no slave would ever have to endure, and no dreg would put up with, Demetrie knew that they had crossed a line. They were developing a bond that defied any conventional rules of a Master-slave arrangement.

From the cameras, Demetrie watched Sev sit up quickly and look at the clock, indicating that he'd heard the alarm. He got up from the bed and hid inside the bathroom as Stanley came into the room with Sev's lunch. Demetrie watched the corner of the monitor that had a view of the bathroom interior, a small smile of amusement playing across his full lips as, from inside, Sev pressed his ear against the door, listening for Stanley's departure. He didn't come out until he was satisfied that Stanley was gone.

"Good boy, Sev." Demetrie rocked back in his chair, tenting his fingers.

A few minutes later, Stanley rapped lightly on the door to Demetrie's study. Demetrie switched off the monitor, pressing the remote button that slid the painting back into place, "Come in, Stanley."

Stanley entered the room, standing with his usual rigidity near the door, "Sir, the representatives from the Belarria family are here. I am having lunch sent to the lounge."

"Thank you Stanley," Demetrie said, and then, "Wait."

Stanley halted with his fingers on the doorknob and turned back to face the Count. "Yes, Your Lordship?"

"Stanley, do you miss my father?"

Stanley's jaw tensed slightly. "Sir, in what way?"

Demetrie sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Was he good to you? Did you feel that he loved you?"

Stanley shifted his weight between his feet. "Sir, you know he took me to his bed..."

"I don't mean that—I mean, did you feel that when he died, that you had lost something very special to you?"

Stanley cleared his throat, his discomfort deepened the lines in his face, making him appear much older. "Your Lordship, your father gave me a lot of



things, but love was not one of them. It was Aubrey he'd wanted, and Aubrey was dead."

Demetrie hadn't known Aubrey well before the young man died very tragically—caught up in a dred-riot during one of the rare uprisings. He'd never really learned the details, and couldn't remember much about the slave except that he'd had red hair, which was very uncommon; the only slaves Demetrie had ever seen had been either naturally or chemically blond. Perhaps when his father had bought Aubrey, red hair was more desirable for a slave, or maybe he'd dyed it himself.

"It was after Aubrey's passing that your father became so angry and distant. You did not ever know him as a kind man."

Demetrie met Stanley's pale blue eyes; the servant's words surprised him. "No. You're right, I didn't."

"It is a shame, Sir. Your father had many regrets that manifested into the anger you experienced growing up. But he did love you, and, I believe, wished that you would honor him by carrying on the family line. Now, Your Lordship, the Belarria representatives are waiting."

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Sev had gone around the room, touching every item to burn the memory of the rare objects into his fingertips. Wood was cool, smooth, but warmed to the touch; the curtains felt soft and rough at the same time depending on which direction he rubbed the fabric. He wanted to know these things, because they belonged to Demetrie, and Sev feared that these objects might be as close to caressing Demetrie as he would ever get.

He sighed and returned to the bed, reaching for Demetrie's pillow and breathing in his scent. He lay down with it, resting his head upon it as he would Demetrie's chest, if only he were worthy enough to do so. Any attention Demetrie paid to him, be it punishment or pleasure, Sev tried to maintain his initial contentment. But he was coming to realize that he was selfish and possessive when it came to Demetrie. Sev had never had these feelings before, and he didn't like them one bit. Perhaps Demetrie had noticed as well, and that was why he seemed so distant at times. Sev only hoped that

time and more punishment would be enough to rid him of these shameful emotions.

He tried to sleep, wishing there was a way to remain unconscious until Demetrie's return, but that, in itself, would be violating his commands. So Sev forced himself out of the big, empty bed and wandered into his own room, wondering how on earth he was going to pick out his own clothing. Since he'd arrived, Demetrie had commissioned several outfits to be made for him, everything from undergarments to a wrap of the softest yarn. Sev often wore that when waiting for Demetrie to finish the work in his study. Sev pulled out several pieces, laying them on the bed to try and decide which combination to wear today. Although there were a few pieces he hadn't worn yet, those that he'd taken out today were all very familiar, and seeing each one triggered a memory of the last time he'd had it on.

He dropped to his knees with a huff, feeling overwhelmed with something as trivial as picking out his own clothing. He wasn't supposed to have developed such feelings for his impermanent Master. Dependence was one thing, but this was something that went far beyond. Many times Sev had remembered how the other slaves had acted at the banquet—how they attended to their Masters with false smiles and dead eyes. And their Masters had returned the same expressions, all of it ingrained so deeply that there was no thought or emotion, only procedure. But when he looked at Demetrie, his heart expanded with what he read in Demetrie's dark eyes. No matter how cold his expression, there was always a fire there when he looked at Sev, and Sev couldn't help but feel warmed in response.

Sev scuttled backwards in surprise as Stanley suddenly entered into his room. "D-don't look!" He quickly reached up to cover himself with one of the items lying on the bed.

Stanley turned his head away, his face pale as his Adam's apple worked in his throat. "I've come to tell you some things that I think you should know."

"What is it?" Sev fidgeted into the short pants he'd grabbed with a frown. "Does the Master know what you have come to tell me?"

Stanley declined to answer him, sitting himself on the end of Sev's bed.

Sev snatched up a cropped fuzzy pullover and squirmed into it, then grabbed his white thigh-high stockings from the bed and sat down on the floor again to pull them on.

Stanley glanced at him, trying to retain his air of aloof detachment. When he'd first seen Sev, he was a scrawny, filthy, little creature with a dim mind and a dirty mouth. But somehow, he'd been transformed into a beautiful little concubine who bent willingly and easily to the Count's demands, and managed to rise above the rest of them in his gilded ivory cage. This lowly mongrel dreg, deformed so beautifully, had become more like a precious love to the Count than anyone who was not born an aristocrat had the right to be. And Stanley hated him—even more so because Sev seemed oblivious to the truth of his privileged existence.

“At this moment, the Count is meeting with the representatives of a very high-ranking family in the aristocracy. The family runs many government offices, nearly as many as the Silvastrano family, and is very well respected. It would serve the Count's best interests to marry the family's youngest daughter and begin producing some heirs. None of this is going to happen as long as you're here, so I am asking you nicely: how much money is it going to take to make you leave this house and never show your face here again?”

It took Sev some time to digest what Stanley had just told him, but it came as no real surprise. Demetrie's own mother had made it clear that she expected him to marry soon, as had Walter when they'd argued at the memorial dinner for Demetrie's father. The only reason, Sev had learned, that the pressure was suddenly on Demetrie after so many years was because with the elder Silvastrano gone, there was no possibility of even a bastard son being born to take over the line.

“I don't want any money. The Count has given me a length of time that he has asked me to stay, so I believe my dismissal is up to him.” Sev wasn't trying to sound impudent, but he wasn't going to leave any sooner than he had to without a very good reason. He was too selfishly in love with Demetrie to let him go without Demetrie telling him it was time.

Stanley ground his molars, his fists clenching and unclenching as he held in any display of temper. “Fine. If you won't leave for the sake of his family, then perhaps you will leave for the sake of his heart.”

Those words bit Sev considerably deeper than the less personal matters of politics. “What do you mean?”

Stanley smoothed his hair over the top of his head with a well-manicured hand; his ankle bounced slightly as he crossed his legs. “I served the Count’s deceased father, Renaldo Silvastrano; in many ways he was like Demetrie, though his rebellion was held appropriately in check. Except for Aubrey.”

Sev had heard that name before—when Demetrie and his mother were arguing. “Aubrey and you were his slaves...”

“Aubrey was *not* a slave. He was a dreg whom the Count tried to mold into a slave and it ended up ruining his life!” The older servant closed his eyes, his jaw tensing and releasing as he struggled to remain calm. After taking a few deep breaths, he began to speak once more, his voice low and steady. “Renaldo was so enamored with Aubrey that he wasn’t thinking clearly. Aubrey still had family in the slums and he convinced the Count to take him home so that they could see that he was doing well. Of course, the Count was so in love that he had no reason to suspect there might be another motive. He drove Aubrey there willingly, and Aubrey, together with his family, took Renaldo hostage and made their demands...”

“What sort of demands?” Sev interrupted, doubting the complete validity of Stanley’s interpretation of events. It was obvious that he’d harbored a strong dislike of Sev from the beginning, and perhaps him having to share his beloved Renaldo with a dreg was most of the reason why.

“What difference does it make?” Stanley stood up, annoyance darkening his pale face. “He betrayed Renaldo and was killed for it. The point is that the Count was never the same man after that!”

Sev wasn’t entirely certain how he should feel. The story was certainly a sad one, but it was unknown which party had suffered the most, or even what the suffering was all about. If Renaldo had truly loved Aubrey, and Aubrey had loved him in return, then they should have been able to come to a compromise long before it came down to matters of hostages and demands. “I don’t know why you told me this—”

“Damn it but you are thick-skulled.” Stanley shook his head. “I believe that you are a dreg—and you will always be a dreg—and should it come down to

matters of loyalty, your loyalty will lie with your own kind. I believe that Demetrie *thinks* he has... *feelings* for you, and that because of it, he will decline marriage and will end up dying penniless and alone in the ghetto! How long do you think you would stay by his side when he no longer has anything to offer you?"

"Why would that happen?" Sev narrowed his eyes, not bothering to offer a reply to Stanley's ridiculous question.

"Because if he doesn't begin to fulfill his obligations as an aristocrat, he will be stripped of his title and his assets will be seized. Because you are such a selfish little whore, it will be your fault if that happens!"

Sev drew back, affected by Stanley's characterization of him. Sev loved Demetrie, and wouldn't leave him even if he hadn't a penny to his name; but because of Sev's selfishness and desire to be loved by the Count, he risked causing Demetrie's downfall. Sev stared down at his feet, shame and heartbreak burning through him.

"Seven... please... if you truly care for the Count... then leave him... the Lady Belarria is a very kind and beautiful woman. He will be happy with her, and she will give him everything... even children... something you could never offer."

Sev heard the words, but it all seemed to be coming from someplace underwater. The lunch he'd recently eaten threatened to come up in his throat and he swayed, closing his eyes as he swallowed back the burning lump and tears stung his eyes. He was being foolish—he knew that Demetrie was going to send him away soon, yet he'd still clung onto the belief that something might change his mind and he'd ask him to stay. He never thought for a minute that if that happened he'd have to tell him no. "I have one obligation left to fulfill for the Count. After that, I will do what I must to ensure his happiness."

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Demetrie couldn't stop looking at the clock on the wall as he sat in the lounge with the uncle and the brother of Lady Tosca Nicoletta Belarria. They had brought one of the family's slaves and Demetrie was becoming annoyed

with each request they made of the woman: *Michelle, bring me the folder; Michelle, my glass is empty; Michelle, stand in front of the window, there's a glare*. And like most young women of any class, she seemed both aroused and afraid of the attractive young Count. He suspected her Mistress, the Lady Belarria, would be no different.

As was custom for these kinds of meetings that would ideally result in an offer of marriage, Demetrie was shown photos of the woman, along with the family's financial records and any investments that could be considered part of her dowry.

Lady Belarria was a lovely nineteen-year-old girl, who was just like all of the other lovely young women of her standing. She rose every morning at eight, began vocal lessons at ten, met with her contemporaries at one of the ineffectual ladies charity groups at noon, dance lessons from one until two thirty...

Demetrie stifled a yawn, handing the piles of paperwork back to the uncle. "All very impressive, gentlemen, but I fear I must decline and apologize for your wasted efforts."

The two men looked at each other, then at Demetrie with widened eyes. It was the brother who spoke up first. "Your Lordship, might we know why you are declining the Lady? She is a lovely young woman, active in the community, talented... and I believe you'll find our family's financial status more than sufficient."

Demetrie lit up a cigar, exhaling the smoke slowly as he leaned back in his chair. "I agree, she is a very good catch; but I am not interested in marriage to a woman, nor do I desire to produce offspring, and I won't pretend otherwise." He watched the two men fidgeting in the wake of his disclosure.

"Count Demetrie, are you saying that you are a homosexual? It is not unheard of for a husband to take a male slave to supplement that which he cannot get from his wife..."

"I am aware of this," Demetrie said. He balanced his elbow on the arm of his chair, watching the ash collect on the end of his cigar. He smiled a little, remembering how Sev had caught the ashes in the car—as if they were dangerous yet precious things.

“Yet you still decline?”

“Gentlemen,” Demetrie began, annoyed by the interruption of his reverie, “as I’m certain you’re aware, I have taken on a young man whom I find most suitable. He is not a slave, but a gypsy, a dreg, and a mongrel at that. I refuse to give him up for you, my mother, or the Lady herself. I’m sorry if you find that insulting, but I mean no insult to your family—just your politics.” Demetrie looked at his watch and stood up. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment in the city. One of my servants will show you out.”

Demetrie rose and left them, ringing for someone to show them to the door. He knew what he’d done would cause another uproar among the elites, but he was tired of playing these games.

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## CHAPTER 8

“I’m sorry we didn’t really get a chance to speak at the banquet last night,” Count Michael Ferrier said, sitting back on the sofa in his private hotel suite. His wife, the Countess Rebecca Holt-Ferrier, had already returned to their home in Paristad, the small noble district that ruled the northeastern regions outside of Nissim. The couple, like many others, had a marriage made for the sake of politics, and it seemed that the two hadn’t managed to form even so much as a friendship between them.

“It’s fine, I wasn’t exactly being sociable,” Demetrie admitted from the chair opposite him. The men had been classmates together in the private schools they attended growing up. Michael was a handsome man with wavy golden hair and an easy smile. It was only because Michael had gotten married and fallen in with the expectations of his title that they hadn’t gotten together as regularly as either man would have liked.

“Ah, well, it’s understandable. I was with Rebecca last night as it was.” Michael shook his head at Vera, the homely young female slave his wife had sent with him as she tripped and nearly spilled the coffee. Michael didn’t believe in keeping slaves. He had a few freedmen on staff, but it was his wife who seemed to be preoccupied with ownership. She’d left the female slave behind simply out of spite, knowing that her husband would have found some enjoyment in a male. Michael’s blue eyes followed the slave girl as if his gaze could keep her from fumbling again.

Demetrie wondered if his presence made her nervous; she seemed to be trembling and cast many blushing glances his way.

“Vera, you’re excused. I think that Count Silvastrano and I can manage from here.”

Vera curtsied, bowing her head with a blush, and scrambled out of the room.

“You do that to women, you know... normally she’s at least half-efficient,” Michael blamed Demetrie.



“They have all heard the rumors,” Demetrie shrugged.

“What rumors? That you’re a sadist? Really, Demetrie, you’re a masochist because you continue to make yourself suffer by not just accepting your lot and giving in.”

“Like you did.” Demetrie sipped his black coffee with a smirk.

“Yes.” Michael sighed, gazing out the window.

“So how is Rebecca—still hates me, I’m certain?”

“Oh, more than ever, possibly even more than we hate each other. She’s finally pregnant, *thank god*. I don’t know if it’s mine, but frankly, it’s a load off of my mind.” Michael waved his hand, leaning forward to pick up his cup and saucer. Michael was always elegant, very proper. He’d probably been attracted to Demetrie when they were children because of Demetrie’s rebellious streak. It had actually been Demetrie who had taken his virginity because Michael was too afraid to approach anyone else with the truth of his sexual preference. In their world, titles and politics meant everything. Marriages were formed strictly as a means of leverage and alliance, and offspring were produced to continue the cycle. “I envy you, Demetrie. Holding out as long as you have... I was never strong enough... I’m not a brave man.”

Demetrie gazed out the window over Michael’s shoulder. “Sometimes I wish I could just go quietly to the slaughter with the rest of the lambs.” Although he’d been too young at the time to have known of the word, Demetrie had realized shortly after coming to live with his father that their caste was all about *hypocrisy*. If his mother had waited until he was a teenager to send him to live with his father then it might not have been so obvious that their marriage was nothing but a sham. His father obviously preferred young men to women, and maybe that was the reason he was so cruel to his own son; maybe he hated the fact that there was a male under his roof who would be his competition.

“Still, my mother is trying. Fortunately for me, there isn’t a woman over the age of consent who doesn’t fear or outright despise me.” Demetrie smiled, knowing full well that by the end of the week, the news of his rejection of marriage would cause yet another uproar.

“Well, after seeing your attendant at the event the other night, you’ve definitely opened up the floor for a whole new set of rumors. What an exotic young creature... He isn’t a minor, is he?”

Demetrie shook his head. Not that it would have mattered, because dreg minors were not subject to any protections under the law.

“He was really striking—even without you dressing him up. Rebecca was appalled, just as everyone else who was secretly lusting after him. Am I right in hearing that you picked him up in the ghetto?”

“I won him in a card game, although I wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for you.”

“Me?” Michael drew back in surprise with a little laugh.

“Remember the break-in at your vacation home in Nissim?”

Michael sighed. “Ugh, yes. I knew we shouldn’t have built anything that close to the city, but Rebecca wanted to be able to do some shopping when we stayed there. So I relented and had it designed as an *impenetrable fortress*.” Michael made air-quotes when he said the word. “Fortunately, there wasn’t anything of any great value taken, but I’m still stymied by the way the guards said the thief gained entry. Scaled the wall like a damn spider, then managed to work himself in under the eaves. Well, the authorities finally caught up with the old man and there’s no way that ogre could work himself through a crowd, much less an uneven gap about this wide.” Michael demonstrated the size with his hands—something Demetrie could easily imagine Sev fitting into. “I’ve had to extend my stay in Athena because the old coot claims he’ll tell me the whereabouts of his rubber-boned accomplice. Frankly, I think it’s a load of crap. I suspect one of the guards might have helped the old man... but what does all of this have to do with your card game?”

Demetrie shouldn’t have been completely surprised that Phineas would talk once he was caught, which was why he’d been determined to speak with Michael before Sev’s name could come up. “Michael, that young man you saw last night—his name is Seven—it just so happens, I took him from Phineas—the ‘ogre’ currently in custody. Seven is an acrobat, or was until Phineas got hold of him.”

“What?” Michael laughed, “Demetrie, what have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“Michael, I care very much about this young man’s future. I intend to release him from our contract at the end of the month, and I want to be certain he is able to remain free.”

Michael stopped laughing, his brows tilted upwards as he examined the determination in Demetrie’s face. “Truly? So you have become smitten with this strange alien?”

Demetrie sighed, dropping his head. “Smitten... yes.”

“And what makes you so sure he’ll want to leave you?”

“I won’t be giving him a reason to depend on me. I have been liquidating my assets and depositing the funds into private accounts since my father took ill three years ago. At the end of the month, I am selling the property and I intend to live off of the proceeds until they are depleted.”

“But the other investments and deposits? Demetrie, if you become exiled... You have no family. Your mother—she’ll be given control over all of your assets!” Michael looked as though he wanted to jump out of his seat and smack Demetrie across the face, which was probably exactly what he wanted to do. But Michael could never imagine living below his means. Poverty of any sort terrified him as much as it did the rest of their caste, and the ways to avoid it were to play by the rules and accumulate as much wealth as possible.

“Everything, Michael; all of it is to be put into Seven’s name. I have already met with an attorney and declared Sev my legal kin. All I need is for you to sign the paperwork that proves this is being done of my own free will and I am of sound mind.”

“What? Demetrie—! Truly, you must not be of sound mind to—”

Demetrie held up his hand, quieting his friend. As usual, his face was unreadable, and his demeanor unnervingly calm. “I have already declined the Belarria family’s offer. At the end of the month, the aristocratic elites will put me into exile status in order to force me into compliance. I won’t comply, I will disappear. I already have an empty house in Ishmay. I don’t want a title anymore. I’m giving it to Sev, along with my name. Although he won’t have the official responsibilities or privileges of an aristocrat, he will have the security of being protected as a Silvastrano.”

Michael gaped, then realized he was doing so and closed his mouth, wiping at the corners in embarrassment. “Demetrie, do you know what you’re doing? You’re essentially making him your legal *wife*, and by giving him your title, a widow at that... I don’t know what to say... have you told him any of this?” Michael was trying to maintain his composure, but his body twitched as he held himself in check.

Demetrie shook his head. “I don’t want him to know until it’s time for me to leave. That way he’ll understand that for once in his life, he will truly have all the power he needs to make his own choices.” Demetrie smiled faintly, imagining how happy Sev would be knowing that for once and forever he was in charge of his own destiny.

“But Demetrie...” Michael pleaded, finally sagging under the weight of Demetrie’s determination.

“Michael,” Demetrie sighed, staring up at the ceiling, “we both know that I was never cut out for this. I am not my father, I’ll never be my father, and I don’t want to go through the motions just to maintain my tiny ledge on the high mountain anymore. Until I met someone with nothing, I never realized how precarious the balance of power was. If it is only having a name and a title that separates me from the bottom, then I am willing to give it to Sev and lift him up.”

Michael sighed and ran a trembling hand through his hair. “My god, Demetrie... I’ve heard you complain for years about the hypocrisy of the system, but never could I imagine that you would actually go this far...”

Demetrie’s eyes were downcast. “You know that until the dregs rise up against the aristocracy, this system will not change.”

Michael nodded. “I heard that Athena cleared out another section of her ghetto last night. What are they calling it these days? Oh yes, ‘*progressive beautification*’.” He shook his head slowly. Soon there would be no ghettos; the dregs would be buried under swimming pools, shopping centers, and *aristolitical* complexes. The sign of a thriving society was its lack of a lower caste, and since raising dregs up economically, socially, and politically would create a strain on the wealthy, it made far more sense to eliminate the problem more permanently by eliminating those who suffered it.

Michael finally raised his blue eyes to his friend's earnest face. "This boy has certainly done a number on you."

"Michael... please, do this for me..." Demetrie looked down at his hands clasped as if in prayer. "Sev is... different."

"I expect he would be." Michael shook his head. "Is this really what you want, Demetrie?"

Demetrie met his friend's eyes. "Absolutely."

Michael sighed and stared at the floor for a few minutes as he considered his response. Finally he returned his gaze to Demetrie. "Before I agree, I'd like to meet this young man for whom you intend to sacrifice everything."

Demetrie nodded. "Of course, I've already anticipated as much. Thank you, Michael."

"Save it. As much as I trust you, Demetrie, if I think for a moment that he has any clue about anything you have done for him, I will be forced to assume he's taking advantage of my dearest friend and I will hand him over to the authorities for his part in the burglary." Michael watched Demetrie's face for any hint of a reaction, but his friend remained stoic.

"I've told Sev to expect he will be entertaining my guest. Will you return with me?"

Michael sighed, looking around his room. "Fine, I'll pack a bag and leave Vera behind to deal with the rest. Rebecca will be livid if she learns that I am going out unchaperoned with my untamed ex-lover, but it can't be helped." The small smile told Demetrie that Michael really wasn't bothered by the situation himself.

Demetrie smiled and winked. "Maybe she'll divorce you for it."

Michael rolled his eyes. "No, she'll probably just make me leave my cock home in a jar from now on, so you'd better make this worth my while."

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Sev didn't remember falling asleep. He'd been wandering in a fog for the past two days since his conversation with Stanley. At one point the day before,

he hadn't noticed Laurence following him until the slave cornered him and tried to feel him up. The hard contraption Laurence clutched in place of the expected softness of Sev's flaccid cock had confused him and given Sev enough time to realize what was happening. Sev had punched him so hard he'd broken Laurence's nose, and so he'd run to the familiar comfort of Demetrie's room to await his final punishment. Sev couldn't be arrested without the Count's explicit permission, such was the power of the aristocracy; but the threat kept Sev crying in dread of his judgment once Demetrie came home. Last night he'd apparently cried himself to sleep.

Sev opened his eyes, the lashes stuck together with crusty remnants of tears, as he became aware of someone shaking him gently.

"My Seven, I'm home," Demetrie murmured.

"Oh Master!" Sev cried, wanting to reach for him, but instead he pulled away, curling into a tight ball. "I have committed such a terrible crime..."

"Crime?" Demetrie looked around the room, knowing that if Sev had stolen anything, he would have been a fool to stick around. Because Sev was sleeping unclothed in his bed, it was obvious he hadn't found a way to remove his chastity belt. Then Demetrie noticed the bruising on Sev's knuckles.

"Sev, what happened to your hand?"

Sev sucked in a trembling breath, knowing he had to tell Demetrie the truth. "Master—I didn't mean to—but he touched me and I—"

"Who touched you?" Demetrie was trying hard to keep the anger out of his voice.

"L-Laurence... he must have asked if it was all right, but I didn't answer, and then when I realized, I... I hit him."

Despite the fact that Sev was beside himself with dread, Demetrie couldn't help but smile. "You hit Laurence?"

"Yes, Master... in the nose!" Sev wailed.

"Why? Because you were afraid I would find out if he touched you?"

Sev shook his head. "No, because I belong only to you, Master! You are the only one I..." Sev stopped before he said too much. *Before he said the*

word 'love'. He was surprised to hear not anger from the Count, but laughter, and Demetrie pulled Sev into his arms.

"Good boy, Sev. He had no right to touch you and I am proud that you fought back." Demetrie brought Sev's battered knuckles to his lips, kissing them gently. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Master... I am now." Sev smiled weakly through the tears. He was so happy to see Demetrie and so relieved that he was not angry, that he allowed himself to forget the promise he'd made to Stanley—if only for a moment.

"Sev, did you remember that I was bringing someone here today?" Demetrie asked him softly, sitting on the bed and stroking Sev's messy hair.

Sev nodded, wiping his eyes. "Yes, Master. I will entertain for you."

"Very good, Sev... but not until later this evening. I want to spend some time with you alone before you are introduced... I've missed you very much." Demetrie kissed Sev's forehead gently, then began unbuttoning his shirt and fished out the key for the chastity belt.

Sev watched him release the small lock, and held his breath as Demetrie took off the straps and the plate, then released his genitals from the tight ring. Sev gasped as the blood flowed instantly to his cock.

Demetrie chuckled. "I've started a bath for us. Help undress me so we can make use of it."

Sev might have protested; but after two days of being held in the sweaty confines of his chastity belt, he certainly needed one. He worked at the buttons of Demetrie's shirt as Demetrie unfastened his pants. Once they had it all undone, Demetrie slipped out of his shirt and slid his pants and underwear down together, pulling off his socks as he stepped out of each leg. He held out his big hand to Sev. "Come with me."

Sev took Demetrie's hand and let him pull him out of the bed and against his body. He melted inside Demetrie's arms as the Count held him and kissed his neck.

"It feels like it's been weeks since I've touched you, Sev..." Demetrie didn't want to think about how much he was going to miss him once all was



said and done. He was going to Ishmay, where he could easily buy any companionship he might require, possibly even one who had a face similar to Sev's, but none of them would be the young man he held in his arms right now.

Fortunately they made it to the bathroom before the tub overflowed, and they rinsed quickly together in the shower before getting into the scented water.

Having Michael here willing to give Sev a chance was such a weight off of Demetrie's mind that for the first time, he let his guard down with Sev and allowed himself to enjoy Sev the way he deserved to be savored. Demetrie sat in the tub with Sev straddling his thighs. Their cocks pressed hard together underneath the water as Demetrie cupped the firm curves of Sev's ass in his hands and pressed his lips to Sev's ear. "Sev..."

"Master... please, may I touch you?" Sev asked him breathlessly, his hands gripping the rim of the tub to keep him from doing so without permission.

Demetrie smiled. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

Sev was so happy he nearly sobbed. He'd wanted for so long to touch Demetrie's skin, but such gentle caresses were as intimate as kissing on the lips, and now that Demetrie allowed one, he quickly succumbed to the other.

Sev sighed as Demetrie's mouth found his in a very gentle, yet hungry kiss. Sev felt the contact of their lips tingle all the way to his loins, and he throbbed against Demetrie's belly. Demetrie smiled against Sev's mouth, then teased his lips with his tongue, coaxing him to come out or to let him inside. Sev parted his lips against Demetrie's and the Count's tongue darted into his wet heat, savoring him, at the same time his finger crept up and pressed inside of Sev beneath the water. Sev whimpered softly, moving his hips as Demetrie finger-fucked him lightly.

"Master," Sev moaned into his mouth.

"What do you want, Sev?" Demetrie murmured, sliding his lips to his ear, nibbling along his throat.

"Your cock... I want your cock inside of me, Master..." and then Sev added, "Please?"



Demetrie chuckled and removed his probing hand, then clasped Sev around the waist and lifted him, helping him to settle back down and guide Demetrie's cock inside. "Is it okay, Sev?" Demetrie asked through gritted teeth as Sev's long-missed heat enveloped him.

"Master... it's so good..." Sev moaned, winding his fingers through Demetrie's slick hair.

Demetrie let Sev drive the force and depth of his penetration as he flicked the silver nipple ring with his tongue, sucking on the hard nub of flesh that held it. Sev cried out, arching himself against Demetrie as the thick cock filled him so completely inside. Demetrie left the ring alone, afraid that they might accidentally pull it out in the heat of the moment, and reclaimed Sev's delicious wet mouth as he curled his fingers around Sev's cock and pumped him under the water.

Sev hadn't felt so much as a caress of fabric against his cock for the last two days, and all of it was just too incredible to manage to hold back for long.

"Mm-Master! Coming!" Sev cried out, too late to stop it.

Demetrie sucked hard on Sev's neck, mingling the sensations of pleasure and slight pain as Sev climaxed, tightening around Demetrie's shaft until Demetrie, too, let go with a yell. "Fuck, Sev!" Demetrie buried his face in Sev's shoulder, his eyes squeezed tightly shut as Sev's ass milked him dizzy. He blew out a long breath as the aftershocks finally subsided and he drifted slowly back to reality. *Christ, it was going to be hard to give this up*, but it wasn't just the sex he was going to miss. "Sev." Demetrie raised his chin and kissed Sev softly, moved by the tears that glistened in the boy's eyes when he smiled. He was happy that he could do this for Sev, that he could give him a life free from harm, free from poverty and disease, where he could choose whatever he wanted, rather than suffer the choices others made in their own interests.

"Thank you Master," Sev murmured, hugging Demetrie. "Thank you for coming back home."

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Sev was not nervous as he stood behind the curtain on the small, raised platform in the room. Demetrie wanted Sev to perform for their guest before dinner, *so that they'd have something to talk about* while they ate.

“Are you ready, Sev?” Demetrie asked from the other side of the curtain.

“Ready, Master,” Sev whispered back. Demetrie peeked in and Sev smiled, blushing to see the pride in his Master’s gaze. He could tell that Demetrie and his guest had been drinking, but it wasn’t the same as the night of the memorial dinner for Demetrie’s father. Demetrie seemed lighthearted and happier since his return home from his business trip.

“Oh really, Demetrie, do get on with it!” Sev heard another man scold with a laugh.

Demetrie stepped back and Sev heard him addressing his audience. “Please allow me to proudly introduce you to my beautiful ballerina, Seven.”

The curtain was pulled away from the little platform and the visitor gasped when he laid eyes on the creature inside.

Sev was en pointe in black satin ballet slippers, with his spine curved back, his face tipped up, and his raised leg bent until his toes touched the top of his head. One arm was straight up from his body, and the other held out in front, working as a counterpoise to maintain his balance. He wore a black-and-white vertical-striped corset that stopped below his nipples, black-and-white horizontal-striped thigh-high stockings, and a small, flared black tutu that jutted out from his hips, doing almost nothing to cover the white satin thong beneath. His eyes were lined in black, as were his white-painted lips, and his cheeks and temples were streaked with shimmering red glitter. All of it made Sev feel like he was truly a performer once more. The look of pride and lust on Demetrie’s face as Sev slowly pivoted into another graceful, yet impossible, position was worth more praise than any words alone.

“My god, Demetrie...” Michael gasped. “He’s exquisite...”

Sev had barely noticed the man sitting next to Demetrie until he spoke. But he knew that he was Demetrie’s closest friend, and could see he was a very handsome man, though at the moment he appeared to be quite drunk. He was clutching Demetrie’s arm, exclaiming, “My god!” and “Did you see that?” each time Sev made a move.

Sev met Demetrie's dark eyes, and Demetrie smiled with pride, making Sev smile shyly in return. Michael watched the exchange between them, finally quiet, as Sev finished his performance by walking on his hands to meet the men, one leg dangling down over his head and the other bent so the shin was parallel to the ground. He stopped and brought both legs over his head until his toes touched the floor, then slowly unfurled until he was standing upright and facing them.

"My god!" Michael exclaimed once more and rose to his feet, applauding loudly. "Incredible! Absolutely incredible! If I hadn't seen it—"

"Michael," Demetrie laughed, standing up to pat his friend on the shoulder. "You'll give him a big head and I'll never get him to lie still after that!"

Sev blushed, smiling coyly as he realized Demetrie had likely explained their physical relationship to Michael, and Michael's small leer confirmed it.

"Indeed," he said, looking Sev over approvingly.

Demetrie moved to Sev and gently placed his hands on his hips, whispering in his ear, "Go to the kitchen and get yourself something to eat. I'll call for you later." He nipped Sev's ear, sucking on the lobe a moment before letting him go with a small, promising growl.

Sev nodded, his face flushing as he tried to keep from becoming aroused in an outfit that left no room to hide much of anything. He bowed to the two men then scampered off towards the kitchen, comforted by the hope that everything would be back to normal for a while now that Demetrie was back home.

Before Sev had dressed for his performance, Demetrie had brought Laurence to his room to apologize. From the way he moved, Sev assumed he'd been punished, but unlike Sev, Laurence obviously took no pleasure in it. He'd gone to his knees in front of Sev, his face red and eyes blackened from his broken nose and he'd apologized sincerely to him. Sev had felt badly for him, and accepted his apology quickly, not wanting to see the man suffer any more. Afterwards he'd begged Demetrie not to dismiss Laurence and Demetrie reluctantly agreed.

Gerta tsked and shook her head as Sev entered the kitchen for dinner. Mary's face turned crimson.

“What’s he got you wearing now?” Gerta huffed, but smiled nonetheless.

“You look beautiful, Seven,” Laurence said politely.

Sev smiled, happy to see that there seemed to be no bad feelings between them. “Thank you, Laurence.”

“Eh, Stanley, look at our ballerina!” Gerta called as Stanley entered the room behind them. Sev and Stanley hadn’t spoken for two days, but Sev wasn’t quite ready to end that arrangement.

“Excuse me,” he said softly and began to rise, but Stanley pressed a firm hand to his shoulder.

“Sev, stay. I have something I want to say to you.”

He must have indicated something to the others with his expression because the rest of the servants suddenly remembered they had other things to do outside of the kitchen.

“I told you, I’ll leave when...”

“Sev, I have come to apologize for the things that I said to you.”

Stanley released his shoulder, the touch softening to almost a caress as he came around to sit on the wooden stool next to Sev.

“What? Why?”

“I believe I was unfairly taking my own frustrations with the younger Count Silvastrano out on you. What Demetrie does is not controlled by anyone but Demetrie.”

Sev narrowed his eyes. “Then why bother apologizing?”

Stanley sighed and looked into Sev’s face. “Seven, I will be leaving with His Lordship, Count Ferrier, when he returns to his home tomorrow. I would like you to know that there is a chance you could come, too, when it is time for Demetrie to let you go.”

“Please.” Sev looked down at the table. “I don’t want to think about that now.”

“Alright,” Stanley said softly. “I just wanted to let you know, that you don’t have to worry. You can stay here to finish out your contract, and when it’s done, I’m certain that Count Ferrier will take you in as well.”

Sev closed his eyes, drawing back his emotions so that no one would see him cry. While part of him was relieved that he might not have to return to the ghetto, the fact that his time was still finite, and Demetrie would likely be getting married to fulfill his political obligations, was breaking his heart. "Thank you for telling me," Sev managed to force out, through his tightening throat.

"Good luck to you Seven. Perhaps I will see you again soon. I promise to be kinder to you this time." Stanley touched his back lightly, then rose from the stool and left.

It might have seemed like a miraculous coincidence that the rest of the staff returned to the kitchen in the wake of Stanley's departure had Laurence not said, "So Stanley's leaving too?"

Gerta whacked him in the back of the head with her meaty red hand.

Sev smiled, though it didn't make the hurt go away.

"But that's good news Seven! We'll all be together again!" Laurence rubbed his stinging scalp as he tried to cheer up Sev.

"What do you mean?"

Laurence ducked another smack. "Geeze, Gerta, will you stop it? Somebody had to tell him something!"

"That's up to the Count to tell him and not you!"

"Tell me what?" Sev insisted, standing up. "Is the Count letting you all go?"

"You—you, never you mind you little devil," Mary stammered, clutching her apron as if it were rosary beads. "Thank god I'm going elsewhere!" She huffed and stalked out of the kitchen, keeping one eye on Sev.

Laurence had moved out of Gerta's reach. "He's selling the estate... must be moving in with the Belarria's."

"Oh," Sev said softly, wishing he hadn't asked.

"Seven, Their Lordships are ready for you!" Stanley called in from the hallway, and Sev stood up, realizing he hadn't eaten a thing but couldn't possibly do so now even if he'd had an appetite.

He met Stanley just outside, pushing a large cart full of fruit and pastries. “What is all of that?” Sev asked him, noticing several bottles of liquor rattling underneath.

“Dessert, apparently. The two men haven’t gotten together since Count Michael was married five years ago. I dare say it appears they are trying to make up for lost time.”

The two men were laughing, and Sev could smell Demetrie’s cigar when Stanley rapped on the door to their room.

“Your Lordships, dessert is here!” Stanley called through.

“Thank you, Stanley; send it in,” Demetrie called back.

“Go on.” Stanley nodded to the cart and pushed open the door. Sev seemed uncertain, but took the handle and pushed it inside.

They were back in the lounge. “Ah! Dessert!” Michael exclaimed, looking Sev over approvingly.

The men were down to their shirtsleeves; Michael’s cheeks were flushed pink from the alcohol he’d already had and his smile was wide and genuine. Demetrie also smiled, but it was far more subdued and perhaps a little suggestive as he turned to Sev.

Sev felt oddly overexposed as he fought his body’s reaction, and longed for the safety of the chastity belt.

As if Demetrie heard Sev’s silent worry, he said, “Why don’t you change into something you can be more comfortable in... the halter top with the silver stitching and those short breeches with the sash?”

Sev breathed a small sigh of relief. “Yes, Master; I’ll return right away.” He gave a small bow to Demetrie and one to Michael, then scurried off towards his room.

He didn’t want to start ruminating about the gossip from the kitchen. Was this then a small celebration of his marriage acceptance? If it were, then Sev decided he should stop wasting the precious little time he had left with Demetrie by worrying.

He went to his room and dressed quickly in the outfit Demetrie had

specified, feeling a lot less naked. When he opened his bedroom door to leave, Michael was standing in the hall.

“Oh! Seven, thank goodness a familiar face!” Michael gasped, his speech slurring.

Sev couldn't help but smile; Michael and Demetrie were almost complete opposites in appearance and demeanor, but they obviously shared enough in common to be considered *true* friends.

“I was looking for the lavatory and ended up all turned around... not surprising considering how much I've had to drink,” Michael laughed.

“Your Lordship, Sir, I can show you the way,” Sev offered.

“Would you? Oh, you are really such a dear boy.” Michael put his hand on Sev's shoulder, and Sev led him a few doors down to the bathroom.

“Ah! It was here all along!” Michael stopped in the doorway and considered Sev once more. “Seven... what would you think of me offering you a very large sum of money to come home with me tomorrow?”

Sev felt his breath catch painfully in his chest. “Y-Your Lordship... the offer is very kind, but...” he sighed and his shoulders slumped as he bowed his head. “I beg your forgiveness, Lordship, but I would decline. I would like to remain by my Master for as long as he'll have me.”

“Even if that means when he lets you go, you'll have to return to the ghetto?”

Sev nodded. “I know it sounds foolish, Your Lordship, and I mean no disrespect, but if given the choice, I would rather spend every moment I can with my Master than sacrifice any of it for money.”

Michael was silent for such a long time that Sev had to look up at him to see if maybe he'd fallen asleep standing up. But their eyes made contact, and Sev saw an earnestness in Michael's gaze.

“Your Lordship, shall I wait here to be certain you find your way back?” Sev swallowed hard. He thought that it was something he should offer, even though he was aware he'd be making Demetrie wait.

“It's alright, Seven. Go on to your Master.”

Demetrie was standing by the window, smoking a cigar as he stared out through his dark reflection.

Sev wasn't certain what to tell Demetrie about the conversation he had with Michael. He didn't want to say anything that might insult his friend or anger Demetrie, but he knew he had to speak up.

“Master?”

Demetrie turned, and Sev saw him smile. “You look very nice, Sev.”

“Thank you, Master... I... I have something to tell you...”

“Can it wait until later tonight?”

Sev felt a bit of the weight being lifted from his shoulders. If they talked about it later, it wouldn't have a chance of spoiling the evening ahead. “Yes, Master.”

“Thank you, Sev.” Demetrie held out his hand and Sev walked towards him, ready to drop to his knees. Demetrie stopped him, placing his fingers under Sev's chin to tilt his face up, and kissed his lips softly.

Sev felt a sweet spark from the contact, which traveled down through his arms and torso, making his fingers tingle. He wasn't certain what to do with his hands, and Demetrie must have sensed it. He caught Sev's long fingers, threading his own with them until their palms met and they clasped hands.

“Hey, no fair keeping all of the sweets to yourself,” Michael said from the doorway.

Sev, remembering his lesson from Demetrie, did not draw away from the kiss.

He felt Demetrie smile against his lips. “Very good, my Sev,” Demetrie murmured and finally released him, looking back at Michael. “How long have you been spying on us?”

“It's hardly spying with you leaving the door wide open.”

Sev bowed his head, kneeling quickly to receive his punishment. “Master, it was me who left the door open...”

“Oh *my*,” Michael said in a low voice, “you certainly have him well trained.”



Demetrie patted Sev's head. "It's alright, Sev. No harm done." The Count walked over to the dessert cart and took a bottle from below. "I didn't have to train him. Sev is docile and submissive by nature... perfect in every way."

Sev remained kneeling, but his cheeks reddened. He could feel Demetrie's lust warming him from where he stood across the room.

"I'd say I have to agree with you there, Demetrie." Michael smiled at Sev, something that seemed almost reassuring.

"Stand up, Sev," Demetrie said to him, pouring some of the amber liquid from the bottle into a glass.

Sev rose to his feet and moved gracefully to his Master's side.

"Here, taste this, see what you think." Demetrie handed the glass to Sev, then poured one for himself and another for Michael.

Sev sniffed at it tentatively. It smelled sharp but sweet, and burned his nostrils.

"Sip it slowly, just take some off your lips." Demetrie dipped his finger in his own drink and spread the sweet liqueur over Sev's upper lip.

Watching Demetrie's face, Sev's pink tongue ran slowly over the wet amber shimmer. The flavor was like caramel.

Demetrie was breathing through his mouth. "Yes, like that."

"May I have some more, Master?" Sev asked, his eyes veiled, his voice low and seductive.

Demetrie grinned before taking a sip from his glass, then he kissed Sev, flooding his mouth with the sweet liqueur. It was smooth and warm and delicious with Demetrie's tongue, and Sev leaned into the kiss, seeking out more flavor from the Count's heated mouth.

Demetrie broke off slowly. "Forgive me, Michael, but this angel tempts me so."

"Does he now?" Michael chuckled and took his drink from the cart where Demetrie had left it.

"Master, shall I remove the items from the cart?" Sev asked, still breathless from the kiss.

Demetrie's dark eyes scanned over Sev's mouth, then up to his eyes. "I think that would be best." He stepped back to give Sev the space he needed to get past him and watched as the young man transferred the dishes and alcohol to the low rectangular table centered between two very large leather couches.

Gradually, Demetrie and Michael made their way over, sitting on opposite sides.

"Would you like to join us, Sev?" Michael asked.

Sev's gaze darted quickly to Demetrie who nodded and patted a spot on the cushion next to him. "Yes, join us. Have some dessert."

"Demetrie tells me you were a gypsy?" Michael prompted as he watched Sev take a seat.

"I was, Lordship..." Sev automatically drew his legs up, crossing them underneath him on the cushion.

"You may call me Michael, Sev." Michael sipped at his drink.

"Oh, Your lordship, it would not be right to..."

Demetrie interrupted with his compromise. "You may call him 'Sir', Sev."

"Yes, Master; and thank you, Sir." Sev inclined his head towards Michael.

Michael's eyes were on Sev but he was watching Demetrie as well. He'd never seen his friend so enamored with anyone—and that included him. Demetrie barely took his gaze off of the lovely young acrobat, and the attraction was not purely physical. Sev was someone who craved the attention he got from Demetrie, and from what Demetrie had told him, Sev took his punishments well. But far from feeling any kind of jealousy towards them, Michael was glad. Yet he was saddened that Demetrie felt the best thing to do for Sev was to leave him to start a new life of his own making.

"Seven, tell me, how long have you been able to contort your body so?"

Sev had been taking small sips of his drink since he'd sat down. Because alcohol was a new experience to him and he'd had his first tastes on an empty stomach, he was beginning to feel very warm, and when he moved his eyes, it seemed to take the room a few seconds to catch up.

“Sir, I believe since I was born... but I can’t remember that far back, forgive me.” Sev became distracted by contemplating the accuracy of his statement and the odd sound of his voice to his own ears.

“Slow down, Sev.” Demetrie coaxed the nearly empty glass from Sev’s fingers and offered him a small pastry.

Instead of taking the pastry with his hands, Sev nibbled it from Demetrie’s fingers, making certain to lick then suck them clean. He felt very lewd and sensual, forgetting his surroundings as he closed his eyes and uttered a soft moan.

“Michael...” Demetrie hesitated, holding himself in check.

Michael was breathless, already adjusting himself through his trousers. “Please, just pretend I’m not here.”

Demetrie did just that—for a while at least. He thrust his fingers gently inside Sev’s mouth while his other hand slipped down to cup the boy between his open thighs. Sev sighed and lifted his hips, pressing his growing erection to Demetrie’s warm, solid palm.

In one swift movement, Demetrie had pulled his fingers away and captured Sev’s mouth with his own. He pushed him backwards on the leather sofa, and it groaned softly beneath their weight. Briefly, Demetrie’s fingers held Sev’s jaw, feeling the movement as they fed from one another with tongues and teeth and breath.

Sev’s body felt strangely numb and overly receptive at the same time. It took his brain a few seconds to catch up with the sensations Demetrie was eliciting as his fingers caressed and explored, and clothing began falling away.

Demetrie was lying partially on top of him, kissing and nipping at his jaw and neck as one hand worked along Sev’s bare cock. Sev felt Demetrie’s words hot and moist in his ear. “Sev, look at him...”

Sev could only open his eyes to thin slits, but he watched Michael through his lashes, saw Michael’s lips swollen with arousal, and his hand rubbing his erection outlined in his pants.

“I used to make love to that man’s body; I want you to love him with your

eyes as I touch your body and make love to you. Will you do that for him, Sev?"

"I will, Master," Sev answered without reservation, pleased to share the pleasure Demetrie gave to him with someone who understood it well. Although, it was going to be difficult to keep from squeezing his eyes shut when Demetrie did things to his body that thrilled him down to his toes.

"May I come closer?" Michael asked Sev.

Demetrie was at Sev's nipple, lazily circling it with his tongue as Sev's hands stroked his Master's silky black hair. "Tell him what you want, Sev. It's up to you; whatever will bring you pleasure." Demetrie's voice resonated through Sev's chest, his breath blowing across the moisture his tongue had left behind as he spoke.

"Yes," Sev said to Michael. "Come closer."

Michael moved the table back far enough to sit down, but close enough that he could easily see, hear, and possibly touch everything. He spread his legs and unfastened his trousers, giving his erection some much needed space as Demetrie slid further down Sev's body, tasting him as he went.

"His skin... such a lovely color," Michael sighed, looking over Sev's bare body.

"Michael has a beautiful cock, Sev," Demetrie murmured as he laved the skin around Sev's navel.

"I want to see it..." Sev whispered, his eyes reaching Michael's face.

Michael smiled, almost shyly, and worked himself free from his clothing. He was attractive; not as large as Demetrie, but still a respectable size, with a slightly less prominent head set atop a pale shaft. His pubic hair was golden, a little darker than the hair on his head.

Sev momentarily lost focus as his own cock was caressed by Demetrie's skilled tongue.

Michael drew in a stammering breath, his hand beginning to work again between his legs.

“All of you... I want to see all of you,” Sev murmured, then arched his back as Demetrie took him deep inside his mouth.

Michael rid himself of his clothing, and stood near them, blushing like a virgin bride as his erection beat along his belly.

“Master, you as well.” Sev looked down the length of his body at Demetrie, who gazed back up at him, his lips encircling Sev’s throbbing cock.

“Let me help,” Michael volunteered, so that Demetrie didn’t have to move away from the object of his affection. Demetrie had already removed his shirt, and Michael worked him out of his pants, placing a tiny kiss in the small of Demetrie’s back.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen this beautiful ass of yours.” He smiled.

“Touch him,” Sev murmured, meeting Michael’s eyes.

“Really? It’s all right?” Michael’s tone was imbued with hesitation, but his eyes blazed with lust.

Sev gave a little nod and Michael caressed Demetrie’s back and buttocks, something that must have felt good because Demetrie’s soft growl vibrated through Sev’s shaft.

“May I touch you too?” Michael asked Sev’s permission.

Again Sev looked down to Demetrie who pulled his mouth away briefly, “It is all right with me, Sev, but this is all up to you.” Then he moved down to suck on Sev’s tight balls.

Sev groaned, his eyes rolling back as he nodded his approval to Michael.

Michael was not greedy or lascivious in his touching; he moved around the lovers on the sofa, his warm hands caressing their skin where their bodies came together, and where they were apart.

“Let’s take this someplace with a little more room,” Demetrie declared, pulling Sev up from the sofa.

Sev squirmed and giggled as the leather, made sticky by his light sweat, peeled from his back. He sighed as he was lifted against his Master’s chest and carried to the thick rug near the fireplace.

Michael was already seated and waiting. He had brought pillows and laid them down—one for Sev's head and one for his hips.

Demetrie smiled at his friend as he lay Sev down beneath him on the rug, resuming their earlier position. "Michael is such a good attendant, he would make a fine slave, don't you think, my Seven?"

Sev saw Michael's cheeks flush and his eyes flare with excitement. "Yes, Master, he would." Sev smiled at him as well, guessing that this was probably a secret fantasy of Michael's.

"Make him your slave tonight, my Seven; tell Michael what you'd like him to do." Demetrie's lips were against Sev's cheek as his dark eyes held Michael's pleading gaze. Michael looked imploringly at Sev, anxious for permission and instruction.

"Love us," Sev told him, and was rewarded for his charity by Demetrie's lips pressing down onto his.

Sev groaned into Demetrie's mouth, his hands running over his back. He met Michael's hand and gripped it, squeezing it like a lifeline as Demetrie's kiss sent him spinning below the waves.

Michael was a gentle lover. Where Demetrie was possessive and fierce in his passion, Michael was generous and soft. He lay down beside them, content to give light caresses, supplementing rather than invading their lovemaking. He knew instinctively where the lines were drawn, and never attempted to cross them.

Demetrie resumed his descent down Sev's body before he settled between his legs. He lifted the boy's lean, muscled thighs up, pulling them over his shoulders as he tilted Sev's hips and began to tongue his pinched rim. Sev moaned, curving his spine like a bow as the sensation traveled all the way up through his skull.

Michael was there, stroking Sev's face, moving fingers in feather-light caresses over his neck, his chest; barely pinching his nipples as Demetrie devoured him below.

Sev felt cherished, spoiled by these two men who were day and night.

Demetrie speared Sev's anus with his tongue, and grabbed hold of Sev's leaking cock.

"So exquisite," Michael murmured, and he clasped his hand with Demetrie's, both of them gripping Sev's shaft. Their hands worked in unison, stroking him; one firm, the other light, and together they were driving him out of his mind.

"Mm-Master!" Sev gasped, "not yet, please! Don't let me come yet!"

Demetrie paused. "Do you want the cord, Sev?" Both hands halted their movement, but had not yet released him.

Sev swallowed hard, nodding his head. "Please..."

"Michael," Demetrie said softly, "in my left front pocket, you'll find a red satin cord."

Michael nodded and retrieved the cord from Demetrie's discarded trousers, bringing it back.

Demetrie quickly wound it around the base of Sev's cock, again setting it with a quick-release knot. "Better, Sev?"

Sev nodded vigorously. "Thank you, Master; thank you, Sir."

"Does it hurt?" Michael's voice was soft, and he caressed Sev's hair.

Sev heard and appreciated the compassion he offered. "Yes, Sir... but it's good." He grunted with the effort to manage the tension already building in his cock.

Demetrie chuckled softly and took up his prior position between Sev's legs, tonguing his hole. Michael, fascinated by Sev's foreskin, examined him closely as he caressed Sev's swollen rod with one hand and himself with the other.

Sev's eyes rolled up into his skull.

"Sev," Demetrie asked between licks, "I would like to start fucking you slowly, but I want to watch you suck Michael's cock while I do... would you like that?"

Sev's cock thumped his belly as he throbbed with the thought of it. "Yes, Master... Oh yes."

Michael sat up, his eyes darting between them. “Is it really all right?” He wet his lips with his tongue, and Sev saw his cock twitch in anticipation.

“If Sev says it’s all right, then it’s all right.” Demetrie got to his knees, smiling reassuringly.

“Sir, on your back please,” Sev said with a smile but a tremble in his voice. His cock was red and engorged from keeping his orgasm trapped behind the silken snare.

Michael swallowed hard, blinking in disbelief, though lying back as he’d been told.

Sev rolled over and got onto all fours, crawling towards Michael as he watched Demetrie over his shoulder.

The Count’s chest rose and fell as his breathing quickened. He stroked his long cock, and watched Sev go down on his friend.

Just the brush of Sev’s warm lips on Michael’s shaft was enough to bring a trickle of precome from his head. He whimpered softly as Sev took him into the hot cave of his mouth and began to suck him.

“Oh Christ,” Michael let out a small sob, “it’s been a decade since... aaahhhh.” His thoughts dissolved as soft, pliant lips glided over his cock, and Sev’s hand gently massaged his scrotum. From behind Sev, Michael saw Demetrie approach, his eyes darkened with desire as he sandwiched his erection between the smooth globes of Sev’s ass.

Sev moaned into Michael’s cock and Michael made fists of his hands, clutching the plush rug beneath him. He could feel the instant that Demetrie fed his cock inside of Sev; the boy gave a soft whimper and sucked Michael hard, his face pressed against his groin.

Michael fought to keep his eyes open, wanting to watch Demetrie fuck Sev, as *they* had once fucked; knowing that *he* had never been so beautiful, so receptive, as this angel.

When Demetrie thrust from behind, rocking Sev’s talented mouth over Michael’s length, it was too incredible to hold back any longer. Michael came with a cry, his hips thrusting involuntarily upwards as he released the most



powerful orgasm of his life down Sev's throat. To his astonishment, Sev swallowed it all down, then smiled up at him, his eyes slanted and lips red like a perfect concubine.

"Oh..." Michael sighed, tears forming in his eyes before he closed them. He heard movement, and when he peeked through his glistening lashes, he saw that Demetrie was on his back beside him, and Sev was just lowering himself onto Demetrie's cock.

"Here Master, taste him," Sev murmured, leaning down to kiss Demetrie.

Michael blushed as his flavor was shared between them.

"Still delicious," Demetrie whispered to Michael as Sev sat up, but Michael was too stunned to speak. It was as close to a kiss as he'd ever get from either of them, yet he was honored to have felt like a part of it all.

He watched them together, Sev rocking and rising on Demetrie's cock, his face a mask of ecstasy. Demetrie's eyes were watching Sev's face; one hand pressed to Sev's thigh while the other very gently caressed his straining erection with only fingertips, knowing that his sensitivity was at its peak.

Whether it was a signal from Sev's body or a fortunate coincidence, Demetrie yanked out the knot barely a heartbeat before Sev's face contorted and his body spasmed through an incredible orgasm.

"Aaaah!" Sev felt like he'd been pulled taut then snapped back as his climax exploded out of him. It was intense to the verge of pain; his come jetted out of his cock, arcing upwards to land on Demetrie's chest.

Demetrie loved to watch Sev in the throes of climax, his body was tuned to orgasm like harp strings, and he felt every vibration of Sev's song. Demetrie held Sev's hips to keep him in place as Sev's ass clenched tightly around his cock. When Demetrie came, it was so powerful it brought tears to his eyes. He caught Sev, bringing him against his chest as he released inside of him, holding him tightly, and wishing he never had to let him go.

"My Seven," Demetrie murmured against his neck, breathing in the scent of him.

Michael dozed, listening to the soft sighs and murmurs they exchanged

afterwards. Demetrie was in love, and he was a fool if he considered letting this young man go.

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Demetrie and Michael sat talking quietly before saying goodnight. Demetrie had put on his pants, wrapping a sleeping Sev up in his shirt, and now sat smoking in a chair by the window.

“I’ll sign your paperwork in the morning,” Michael sighed, combing his hair with his fingers. “You know I never expected...”

“Neither did I.” Demetrie chuckled softly.

“Should we blame it on the wine?”

“No.” Demetrie shook his head. “Blame it on that boy.”

They sat in silent contemplation of the evening for a few moments, but it was Michael who spoke first. “Promise me you won’t walk out of his life without giving him the option to be with you.”

“I...” Demetrie faltered in his argument and pursed his lips, turning to look outside.

“You know,” Michael said, sliding one of Demetrie’s cigars out of the humidor on the table, “when you first came to me and told me about Seven, I thought you really had lost your mind.” He drew the cigar under his nose, inhaling the sweet scent of the tobacco before clipping the end and sliding it between his lips. He leaned over as Demetrie held his lighter for him. “After meeting him—even before this,” Michael gestured with his hand, “I’m certain you *are* crazy because you talk about letting him go.”

“Michael, he deserves to choose his own path...”

“Then give him the choice.”

Demetrie shrugged, but said nothing.

Michael took a deep drag on his cigar, then contemplated the glowing cherry as he made smoke rings from his mouth. “I would be lying if I said that I would give anything to have that in my life. I’m a coward, Demetrie; I wouldn’t know what to do with someone like Seven and I’d end up pissing it

away. That young man is in love with you, and I know you're in love with him. I never saw those kinds of looks that you were giving him when you and I were a thing."

"We were young," Demetrie mumbled, uncertain of how else to respond, so he changed the subject. "Seriously, it's been a decade since you've had a blow job?"

Michael tapped his ash into the brass tray on the table. "Well, let's do the math. I'm thirty, I married Rebecca five years ago. Five years before that was the last time you and I had sex."

"Hey, you called it off," Demetrie reminded him.

"Yes, I did. Because I was scared to death of what would happen if my father found out. You never seemed to have that problem."

"I'd spent most of my life being scared to death of my father; by that point I really didn't give a shit about who thought what."

Michael smiled, somewhere between arrogant and flirtatious. "I know; that's what made you so irresistible. You were—*are*—such a bad boy. And now you've got yourself a fallen angel. What did I get? Absolutely nothing; because I wasn't willing to risk losing what I already had."

"You mean your money and titles."

"I'll die a lonely man with the same hand of cards I started with."

Demetrie chuffed softly, thinking about the deck that had brought him to Sev.

Michael examined his friend closely, coming suddenly to a realization. "You're scared of being rejected, aren't you?"

"What?" Demetrie's eyes shifted towards Michael, towards Sev, then back to his own dark reflection in the window. He wanted to claim that Michael's observation was ridiculous, but couldn't bring himself to deny it. "Yes, Michael." Demetrie crushed out his cigar. "If given the opportunity to return to the gypsies, I think that's what Sev will do, and I wouldn't blame him. He was taken from them unfairly—the only family he's known. It would be wrong for me to keep him for myself. I worry that if I give him a choice, he might reject

me outright, or choose me because he feels a sense of loyalty, which I can't comprehend. Happy now?"

Michael stared wistfully at his oldest and only true friend. "No. I'll never be happy, but that's a decision I have made, and I must live without regretting it. Your decision to walk away without saying a word, that is something, I promise you, you will regret for the rest of your life." Michael crushed his cigar out as well and stood up, stretching his spine. "Thank you for tonight, Demetrie. Thank you both. You've given me some bittersweet and beautiful memories." His smile was melancholy as he turned and left the room.

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## CHAPTER 9

Sev woke slowly to the delicious warmth of a body wrapped around him from behind, and a splitting headache. He moaned softly.

“There’s some aspirin and water on the nightstand.” Demetrie’s voice vibrated against his back.

“Mm-Master.” Sev knew he should be on his knees to greet Demetrie, but his crushing headache and the heavy arm draped across him prevented him from moving.

“I’m sorry I got you drunk last night. I hope you don’t regret—”

“Master, no... it was my pleasure to serve you... both of you.”

Demetrie chuckled softly, his voice graveled from smoke and sleep. He sat up first, reaching across Sev to bring him the means to cure his hangover. “Here, take this, then have a shower and get dressed. Come downstairs by ten o’clock; Michael is leaving today.”

“Yes, Master,” Sev said and sat up with a measure of difficulty. He was aware of Demetrie watching him closely and was initially insecure, then Demetrie’s big hand brushed Sev’s hair out of his face. Sev turned to him, expecting he had something to say, but after a few moments, Demetrie sighed and got out of the bed,

“I’ll see you downstairs by ten.”

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Sev finally managed to get himself moving with little time to spare; just enough to say goodbye to Michael, who kissed his hand and thanked him for the wonderful evening before he said goodbye and Demetrie walked him out.

Sev followed the two men at a distance, wanting to offer them the respect and privacy that two former lovers deserved. He waited inside the foyer near the staircase, watching them walk outside through the open door.

“You’ll take him too?” Sev heard Demetrie ask Michael as they reached his car. A driver was waiting there to open his door.

Michael turned as they reached the back of the limo. "Of course. I'll be certain to take good care of him... all of them."

"Thank you, Michael."

Michael sighed and offered a weary smile. "If there is anything..."

"Thank you, Michael," Demetrie repeated; he took his friend's hands in his own, then brushed his lips over the knuckles. "Goodbye, Michael."

Michael sighed, his blue eyes sparkling with sentimentality. "Goodbye, Demetrie. Don't worry, I'll handle everything here. Please, promise me you'll contact me as soon as you arrive?"

"I will."

Sev leaned back against the wall, feeling like his heart had turned to lead and was trying to force its way up into his throat. It was true then; Demetrie planned to give him to Michael, sell the house, and marry. He should have been overjoyed that he'd have such a kind man as Michael to watch over him, but seeing his face every day would remind him of Demetrie, and Sev didn't think his heart could stand it. Worse than that, he wouldn't be able to handle knowing that his once powerful Master had given into the expectations of his title. Anger wound around his heartbreak as he tried to force back the vitriol rising to the back of his throat.

"Sev?"

Sev hadn't heard him come back into the house, and Demetrie's voice suddenly nearby startled him. Without considering the confines of status, Sev threw his arms around Demetrie and pressed his face into his chest. He was ashamed of his selfishness and anger, expecting that Demetrie would push him away for overstepping his boundaries to such an unforgivable degree. If he did that, then Sev would know he was truly unwanted, and would have no choice but to accept his rejection.

"Oh Sev..." Demetrie's voice was soft as he wrapped his arms around him, and the sound of it drained away Sev's anger. He heard the sadness there, the regret that he'd occasionally seen reflected so briefly in Demetrie's dark eyes.

"Master, you are sending me away..."

Demetrie sighed; he should have known better than to tell the servants anything. “What gives you that idea, Sev?”

“I-I heard about you selling the house... and speaking with Count Ferrier just now. Master, he is a good man, but I would rather not go to him.”

“Why not?” Demetrie was surprised; had he considered such a transfer, he would have thought that Sev would appreciate Michael’s gentle nature to his demanding one.

Sev shook his head. “Master, I would rather be sent to the mines than to be reminded every day that I was unworthy to remain with you...”

“What? Sev... no, no it isn’t that. It’s not any of that. Michael is giving Stanley a position in his household. You won’t need to go anywhere you don’t want to.” Demetrie kissed Sev’s temple. “I am leaving, Sev. I am going away. I’m not getting married and I can’t be part of the aristocracy any longer.”

“But—”

“Please, Sev, let me finish.” Demetrie released him, moving away, but not very far.

Sev bit his lower lip to keep from speaking out of turn.

“Sev, you have brought so much joy and comfort into my life that I have decided to do my best to offer you the same. From now on, you are Count Seven Silvastrano. You have my title and my name, and are now safe and free to do as you please. It means that you don’t need me—or anybody—to protect you anymore.”

Demetrie watched Sev’s face, waiting for him to absorb all of the new information. He expected shock, disbelief, but not the anger.

“No! I don’t want that!” Sev realized he must sound like a petulant child but he didn’t care.

“Sev... I thought... I thought this would make you happy... not having to ever worry again about depending on someone else...”

“Well it doesn’t make me happy! Master, all I want is to stay with you! If I am truly free now to do as I please then let me come with you!” Sev couldn’t

stop the tears as they ran unchecked from his eyes. He was biting his lip, his fists clenching as he tried to retain any last shred of stoicism. Finally, he shook his head, realizing that if he didn't express the truth to Demetrie now, he may never get another chance; consequences didn't matter at this point, because he had nothing else to lose, "How can I be happy without you? I love you!"

Demetrie felt his chest ache with Sev's confession. "Sev, I am going to live in Ishmay; the island is like a ghetto... there will be no luxury... are you certain that's what you want?"

"Yes," Sev said firmly as the tears still ran fresh from his eyes. "Master, if you love me, then that's all I could ever need."

Demetrie searched the young man's earnest and beautiful face. Michael was right—he understood Demetrie's heart better than he understood it himself. For the first time in the young aristocrat's life, Demetrie believed that he could achieve something beyond resignation; he believed that he could know joy. He nodded, swallowing the sensation of his heart expanding in his chest, and pulled Sev into his arms. "I do love you, Seven; you mean everything to me. If it's what you want, I'd be happy to live anywhere with you."

\*\*\*\*



## EPILOGUE

“Good morning, Master.”

Demetrie squinted up at Sev as he stood haloed by sunlight near the open doorway.

They’d been in Ishmay a little over a year now; the climate and culture seemed to have made Sev blossom into something even more beautiful than he’d been in Athena. His skin had darkened, and his pale brown hair was now highlighted with streaks of gold.

Demetrie had changed as well, his black hair much longer, and his skin now a deep coppery bronze after suffering the first sunburn of his life. While the sunburn had been a painful affair, Sev had nearly made it worthwhile by how well he’d taken care of Demetrie.

As usual, Sev was barefoot, wearing only shorts and a sleeveless shirt that he had rolled up and knotted above his waist. He had small bits of wilted flowers in his hair. The children—especially the girls—flocked to Sev and loved to pretty him up like one of their own. In this world, Sev was an exotic and beautiful angel, just as he’d always been to Demetrie.

“You don’t have to call me Master—if anything, little Count, I should be calling you Master now... and what have I told you about leaving the house like that?”

“Not call you Master?” Sev offered a mischievous grin. “But if you aren’t my Master, then you won’t be able to punish me for leaving the house dressed inappropriately... or talking back to you.”

Demetrie stretched out and grabbed Sev’s arm, pulling him down into bed and rolling on top of him. “You’re right, forget I said anything.”

Sev grinned and wriggled his body beneath him, running his fingers through Demetrie’s long, black hair. His smile faltered, and he licked his lips as he met Demetrie’s heated gaze.

“I love you, Sev,” Demetrie murmured. He couldn’t believe that he’d nearly been fool enough to let this young man go. If he ever saw Michael

again, he'd thank him for forcing him to reconsider. Demetrie took hold of one of Sev's hands, gently kissing the rope-burns accidentally left on his wrist from the night before.

"I love you, Master," Sev sighed, "now, punish me."

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Lia Black tends to do everything the hard way; beginning with being born ass-first into the world and now raising a pre-teen by herself in upstate New York. Her career choices are no less extreme, including occupations of fine artist, computer geek, firefighter, and mortician's assistant—just to name a few.*

*Black's creative mind has been lovingly described as a “glorious kaleidoscope of fuckedupery.” Her characters often suffer through the worlds she creates for them, which leaves them a little cranky and sometimes less lovable than others in the slash-fiction genre. Yet Black swears that someday, “there will be comedy.”*

*Black's first story was published in 2010, in Better Sex's Best International Erotic Fiction. Her first m/m romance novel, Spiretown, is available as a Kindle edition through Amazon and paperback via multiple retailers worldwide*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Blog](#)

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# STALKING DREAMS

By Leta Blake

## Photo Description

Two young men sleeping while spooned together in each other's arms.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've been scared for so long. I have a stalker who's sent me threatening messages and I've heard the person following me around campus. Last night, the stalker chased me as I was running and I thought I was going to die. Then I ran into him, my TA from my favorite class, literally. I always thought of him as kind of a jerk but when I smacked into him, he saw how scared I was and he walked me home.*

*The rest of the night is a blur, but I just awoke and he's wrapped around me. I feel safe in his arms, something I haven't felt in months. But why did he appear right then? Is he my stalker? I don't think so but it's still an odd coincidence. If he's not my stalker, is he in danger, too? And what the hell happened last night?*

*[I'd like lots of danger and fear and near-death experiences ending in an HEA for these two boys. Please no great age difference or BDSM.]*

Sincerely,

Kelly Maybedog

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** suspense, college, oral sex, rimming, fingering, established couples, PTSD, hurt/comfort

**Content warnings:** violence, possibly triggering descriptions for victims of stalking or similar violence

**Word count:** 9,991

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# STALKING DREAMS

**By Leta Blake**

My muscles ached deliciously under the rough water pressure of the gym's shower. Taekwondo had rendered me sweaty and tired. I'd been a student of the discipline for half a decade, in search of both self-protection and mental benefits, but since starting at Rose College a couple years back, I'd never found a Master who could truly challenge me. Until now.

Master Eun was demanding, exacting, and left my muscles feeling like limp spaghetti. I kind of loved it. If he wasn't a cranky straight man—old enough to be my grandfather—my boyfriend, Shane, might've had some competition for my complete and utter adoration. Though, come to think of it, pain and discipline weren't something I really got off on in bed. I was more of a gentle, fun, love-making kind of guy, which made Shane's style even more perfect for me.

Eventually I felt refreshed enough to soap up my hair and wash down my body. Taekwondo had made me lean and fit. I was slightly smaller than Shane, but my wiry muscles were just as strong as his bigger ones, and when wrestling in bed I almost always ended up on top. Unless I wanted Shane on top, which I did often enough to just give in and "lose". Which reminded me, I really did need to teach Shane more taekwondo just to keep things interesting.

I paused in front of the mirrors to run a towel over my hair, noticing the summer sun had added gold to the light brown, and I made some faces in the mirror. My brown eyes were dark-rimmed and I looked tired. The thought brought to mind all the very sexy reasons I'd failed to get a full night's rest, and I dreamily styled my short hair with my fingers and willed my dick not to spring a boner in the locker room. I must have lingered longer than I'd realized because, when I finally left the showers for the locker area, the room was empty. Hadn't there been a few guys still flipping towels at each other when I'd gone in?

Wrapped only in a wet towel, I stood and listened. The drip of water and the hiss of the air conditioner broke the silence, but otherwise it was entirely

still. A feeling of foreboding settled into my bones, like the music of a horror film warning me that something was amiss. I cleared my throat and told myself it was nothing, but even so, I couldn't resist calling out softly, "Hello? Max?"

Max always waited for me before leaving since we took the same route. His *fiancée* rented a small attic apartment across the street from Shane's house, and while I wouldn't have called us good friends, we were something like pals. It seemed unlike him to leave without letting me know.

*Not that you know him well*, my ever-suspicious mind told me.

*I know him well enough*, I told it back.

Trust. It was something I was working on, and trusting Max as a new friend hadn't been too hard. I was getting better at realizing not everyone was a psycho. So, I was surprised he'd left without me. Surprised enough that sweat prickled on my forehead, a sure sign of an impending panic attack. Stupid PTSD. I took some deep, slow breaths.

*It isn't a big deal. Nothing's wrong.*

I whipped the towel from around my waist and threw it in the receptacle. A noise from the back of the locker room caught my attention, and I swung around. Maybe Max was still here after all? I saw no one, but I noticed the combination lock on one of the lockers swayed as though it had just been brushed. The hair on the back of my neck rose and my breath came fast and shallow. I whirled around again, catching a glimpse of a dark jacket disappearing around the corner.

"Hello?" I called. Spots swirled in my vision and my mouth went dry. My heart pounded. I went cold all over. "Is someone there?"

The air conditioner kicked off and I strained my ears in the new silence, but only heard the dripping water and the buzz of the fluorescent lights.

*You're imagining things*, I sternly told my PTSD.

*Fuck you*, it told me back.

The low creak of a door closing, the snick of the latch catching, and then the squeak of tennis shoes against linoleum forced the air out of my lungs, and I went dizzy as adrenaline zipped icily through my veins.

“Who’s there?”

No one answered and rage filled in the hollow center of my fear. I didn’t want to feel this way. *Fuck* the asshole who’d triggered the panic attack slicing through my consciousness, tightening around my chest like a band. Fuck him.

*Calm down. It’s probably someone with ear buds.*

*Only assholes wear ear buds in the locker room,* my irrational rage screamed.

I waited but there was no other sound. Angry and eager to get the hell out of there before I freaked myself out even more and ended up passing out from hyperventilation, I jerked open my locker to get my clothes on. My heart lurched into my throat and a silent scream froze in my throat.

The inside was covered in black and white photographs of me and Shane, photos obviously taken by someone who’d been following us. Cut in the shapes of hearts, every last one featured brutal alterations drawn in bright red marker. Shane’s throat slit with blood dripping to the ground or Shane’s gut sliced open and intestines spilling out.

*He found me!*

I looked down at my naked body, my cock and balls shrunken tight against me from cold and fear. My gorge came up and I somehow grabbed my track shorts and T-shirt, pulling them on as I scrambled to get my bag and house keys and stumble away from the locker. Then someone coughed.

I peeked around the corner of the locker.

There stood a hooded man in black blocking the exit. His left hand was loose at his side, but in his right was a knife.

*It’s time.*

How many notes had my stalker sent me saying I’d know when it was time? How many text messages from untraceable phones? He’d found me. There was no turning back now. My heart raced, my mind whirled, and colored dots obscured my vision. I sucked in a breath, trying to stay calm. I was a second-degree black belt, I reminded myself. I could fight him. I could take him.

In my mind's eye, I leaped around the lockers and landed solid strikes that sent the man reeling and the knife flying. But all of my training told me to first seek another way out. I slowly, carefully, moved to the opposite end of the lockers. I looked both ways. Public spaces required at least two exits, didn't they? Weren't there fire regulations? I made a move toward the back of the locker room.

*But what if there isn't another exit? You'll die huddled on the ground, baby boy, awash in your own blood.*

*Shut up, I told myself. And don't spit his creepy bullshit at me. I can take him.*

*You can't.*

"Show me," I heard and felt the heat of breath against my neck. I didn't turn around. I screamed and scrambled over benches, lunging for the front exit. Impossibly, he was there too. I whirled around to check my vulnerable back, but there was no one behind me at all. There was only the hooded man by the door, his knife shining in his pale fingers.

*So here we are.*

After notes and gifts, threats and violence, after slashed car tires, broken windows, poisoned bird seed in our feeder and a yard full of dead birds, after death threats, rape threats, long violent passages about the things he'd do to my body, after emails, texts, valentines full of vitriol, after evil that seeped into me and filled me with fear and ruined years of my life, after the three years of hell he'd put me through—I'd left everything. I'd turned my back on *everyone* to get away from him, moving six hours from home to keep my family safe. I'd given up everything.

And now here we were.

*Finally.*

"I'm not afraid of you," I said, my voice shaking with every word. I moved into a fight stance and waited for him to make the first move. Another noise from behind me forced me to break eye contact and check my back. Again there was no one. I swung front again, crouching and ready.



My heart stopped at what I saw.

He held Shane—*my* Shane—by the neck, the knife pressed tight against his jugular.

“Shane, stay still,” I whispered, my throat tight and tears stinging my eyes. A rivulet of blood ran down Shane’s throat and his eyes bugged. Adrenaline like I’d never known nearly blew my head off, and I felt as though I might levitate from the rush of pure fear. “Please, you don’t have to hurt him. I’ll do whatever you want,” I said. “I won’t fight you. I’ll leave with you. I’ll go now. Please—just let him go.”

Shane struggled and the hooded man subdued him with a flick of the knife. I flinched as more blood cascaded down Shane’s neck and his terrified yelp echoed in the locker room.

“Please,” I said again. “I’ll do anything. I love him.”

The man’s grip tightened and my heart lurched. I’d said the wrong thing. Shane seemed to know it, too, his eyes going bright with terror.

“I love you, too,” Shane whispered.

And it happened as though in slow motion. Blood spurted from Shane’s neck, soaking me, splashing hot on my face, and I screamed, falling to my knees. Helpless, overwhelming grief and horror tore through me as he tossed Shane’s body aside and advanced on me. I knelt in Shane’s blood, still screaming. I lifted my arms out and closed my eyes, waiting for the knife—

“River, wake up! It’s a dream. C’mon, shh, it’s a dream. It’s okay. You’re here with me.”

I blinked in the semi-darkness of Shane’s room, sitting straight up in bed, sweat pouring off me. I couldn’t stop screaming. I’d just seen Shane die in front of my eyes. His arms around me, holding me as I thrashed and fought, and his voice in my ear were nothing compared to the reality of that moment when the stranger who’d hunted and stalked me for so long had slit the throat of the man I loved.

“No!” I covered my eyes, trying to block out the images.

“River,” Shane said, and this time his voice was stern, almost angry. I

wasn't sure I'd ever heard Shane sound angry before—not with me anyway. “It's a dream. Wake up.”

I pressed a hand to my mouth to keep the horror in, and my scream lowered to a soft wail.

“That's it,” Shane said, his voice soothing again. “Wake up, Riv.”

The door to our room burst open and our housemate, Mike, charged in with a baseball bat, his hair askew, and his underwear low on his hips. The wildness in his eyes finally convinced my still traumatized mind to fully wake, and my wail shut off like a valve.

“What the hell?” he said. “What's going on in here, Gross?”

“Bad dream,” Shane explained, rubbing my bare back. “Sorry. Go back to bed.”

Mike stared at me until I nodded. “Jesus,” he muttered. “Scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry,” I whispered.

“You going to be all right?”

“Yeah. I'm awake now so, yeah.”

Mike scrubbed a hand in his hair, yawned, and then said, “Okay, well, that must have been a shitty dream, man. I've never heard anyone scream like that.”

My throat closed up a little and I nodded. I wanted to say more, but couldn't.

“It's fine, Ghast,” Shane said, invoking Mike's nickname softly.

“Got it. Well, if you need anything—”

“Actually,” I said, knowing that I was asking for something a little unusual, but also thinking that it would definitely help me calm down, or at least fill up the space in my head currently occupied with silent screaming. “Could you maybe play that song you keep doing lately?”

“Knew you liked that one,” Mike said, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“Voice will be scratchy, but sure, buddy.” Mike yawned and nodded. Then he left the room without another word, leaving our door open.

Shane kept on rubbing my back, and I sat in the bed with my knees up, staring down at the pattern of my boxer briefs in the dim light from the ever-glowing laptop screen. Shane said nothing, letting me get it together, and shortly the sound of Mike’s fingers picking out the opening guitar riff of the song I’d requested drifted down the hall from his room.

He was right. His voice was scratchy and sleep-laden, but the song was still soothing. I took a deep shuddering breath. I leaned against Shane and let him pull me down next to him. Shane wrapped his leg around my waist and dragged me as close to him as possible. I felt protected and safe in his arms, as we both listened to the song until it was over. The silence following was broken only by the thump of Mike setting his guitar down and calling out, “Now go to sleep, fuckheads.”

However I was wide awake and the thought of dropping back into another dream of Shane’s throat being slit wasn’t something I could handle.

I thought Shane had fallen asleep and was trying to figure out how to extricate myself from his grip so I could go take a piss, when he spoke.

“It’s about the wedding, isn’t it? You’re dreaming about him because Reed asked you to come home for it.”

“I said I would,” I replied, irritably. “And I will. It was just a shitty dream.”

“Okay,” Shane said, but I could tell he didn’t believe me. He was letting me be stubborn because he was always kind to me that way.

I sighed and squirmed out from under his leg and arm. Of *course* it was about going home.

Home to my stalker.

\*\*\*\*

*Sixteen hours earlier*

“Hey Gross,” Mike called from where he’d set up his project in the shade under the sycamore tree. “You going to plant some of those cherry tomatoes I like?”

“Yep, Ghastly,” Shane answered. “Already planted two.”

I shook my head and grinned at the nicknames. Gross and Ghastly, former frat brothers, roommates, and best friends. I didn’t entirely understand their relationship, but I really didn’t have to and I truly liked Mike, even if he was a weirdo.

“Good, man, good.” Mike let out one of the massive farts which had earned his nickname back when Shane had actually shared a small room in the frat house with him. Shane told me that he’d become immune to Mike’s gas, which was good, or else he’d have been forced to murder his best friend in his stinky sleep.

I’d become pretty immune to them, too, since I’d moved in with Shane and Mike for the summer. Ostensibly the move had been to cut out the expense of staying in a dorm room between semesters, but I was pretty sure Shane’s offer and my immediate acceptance had a lot more to do with all the smoking-hot sex. Of which, I admit, I really couldn’t get enough.

But, beyond that, there was genuine and real love between us. I felt it every time Shane looked my way with his warm, blue eyes, and every time his lips curved into his beautiful smile. The cherry on the Shane-is-awesome sundae was that I hadn’t had a single incident of PTSD-related hyper-vigilance since moving in with him. I felt more like my real self than I had since before my stalker started making my life hell almost six years ago.

Mike joked that Shane and I were playing house. We were the parents, and he and Delphie Ann were the bratty kids—and while I laughed when he said it, he wasn’t too far from the truth. Today was a perfect example. We were all out in the backyard working on a kind-of-late garden. Or rather, Shane and I were. Delphie Ann was running around in spazzy doggie circles, excited that we were all home and in her territory. And Mike was hot-gluing rocks to Papier-mâché, futilely attempting to construct a river-rock-studded replica of the Millennium Falcon to go with his beer-can Death Star.

Shane and I’d both suggested that using beer cans for this project would probably work better for him, but Mike had just waved his hand dismissively saying, “When river rocks call you to make a Millennium Falcon, you make a Millennium Falcon out of river rocks, got it?”

Not really, but I didn't usually argue with Mike's harmless insanity. He'd never listen anyway.

Meanwhile, Shane and I wore dirty shorts and T-shirts, working our asses off to put in a garden. Though it was likely I'd spent more time enjoying the view of Shane's ass as he knelt on the ground, digging holes for the small plants we'd picked up from the nursery, than I had actually working.

His dark blond hair glistened in the sun and his blue eyes reflected the light like sparkling mirrors. I kind of adored him and his face. And his arms. And his thighs. And his smile—God, his smile! Big and wide like Texas or some other vast sunny land! And his hands! Oh, the size and shape of them were amazing, and they were capable of doing so many nice things. With the sweat glistening on his forehead, and his forearms flexing with each shove of the trowel, I considered taking him into the house for a little snack of my cock and ass, because our morning orgasms seemed far too long ago.

I brushed sweat out of my eyes and bent down to the job of straightening the railroad ties around the edges of the big square area we'd cleared with the help of a neighbor's tiller. I glanced toward Delphie, rolling on her back gleefully in the sunshine. "We'll need to add a few layers of that chicken wire I got, so she doesn't get in the garden. Otherwise, all our efforts will be solely to make Delphie Ann here a very healthy doggie, which of course we want. But I want some of the veggies too."

Shane grunted, listening to me. This was a joint project I'd concocted in part as a test of our compatibility. If we could overcome all my PTSD issues, it might seem we could manage basically anything together. My dick sure thought so anyway. It highly disapproved of my scheme to further test our compatibility with gardening. It was pretty sure I should just keep on testing it with sex.

But my mother had always said that a good relationship was built on three things—respect, friendship, and attraction—and the best way to make sure you had all three in full enough measure was to take on mutual responsibilities for something bigger than yourselves. Delphie was Shane's dog, so there was no true sharing when it came to that, even if I did help him out by feeding her

when he was at class, or walking her after he'd left in the morning so he could get some extra shut-eye. No, I decided a garden would be a fantastic thing for us to do together—with the bonus of the fresh vegetables I'd been missing since I left my hippie parents' home two years ago.

"We definitely still have time for cucumbers since we sucked it up and bought plants this year, but next year we really need to start the seeds." I realized what I'd said and bit my lip. Shane and I were boyfriends and exclusively so, we'd worked that out early on, but we'd never talked about the future farther than a month or so ahead. The plan was for me to move back to the dorm in the fall, and I didn't know what he'd make of my assumption that we'd be doing this again a year from now. I glanced over to see his face, but he seemed unconcerned, digging yet another little hole with his trowel.

"When do we start seeds?" he asked.

"February or early March."

"First things first, assholes," Mike said. "Why don't you see if you can even keep the garden going this summer before you start in on next year?"

The idea that maybe Mike was talking about more than the garden crossed my mind, but then again, Mike was never subtle. If he meant me and Shane and not the garden, he would have said so.

"We can handle a garden, can't we, Riv? And even if we can't, it'll be a learning experience, something to grow on, and we can try to get it right next year if we fuck it up."

"Definitely, HP."

The nickname had been inspired from the skinny jeans he wore while TAing for the class my best friend, Hayley, and I'd taken the prior fall. Or more specifically the way his perfect ass had looked in them. Hayley and I had called him T.A. Hottie-pants for months, and when we started dating, I just never stopped. Though, I'd quickly realized Hottie-pants wasn't something I could call him in public, so I'd shortened it to HP.

Most people, even Mike, didn't know the true reference. Sometimes, when Shane and I were being especially moony over each other, Mike would bat his

eyes and croon, “Oh, Hewlett-Packard, I love you so much, smoochy-smoochy-smoochy!”

Hewlett-Packard. That always made me snort. And no one, not even Hayley, had ever corrected him. And given how obnoxious it is to be around people who were newly in love, I couldn't blame Mike for his very occasional jabs at us.

In the bright sunlight, I skimmed my eyes over the T-shirt stretched tight over Shane's shoulders and chest, down to the loose-fitting track shorts he'd worn pretty much every day since it first got warm. I missed his skinny jeans, but the elastic waist of the track shorts did allow for easy access. I didn't have to work hard to get my mouth around his dick when I wanted to suck him off.

“When a garden gives you dead things, you figure out how to make it give you living things,” Shane went on, digging into the dirt with a look of determination. “You don't just give up so easily.”

I smiled at him and sat back on my heels, wanting to crawl over to him, grab his face, and kiss the hell out of his lovely lips. But Mike was there. It wasn't that we hadn't kissed in front of Mike plenty of times, but the rest of my fantasy involved rolling around in the dirt together, maybe crushing some of the baby plants with our bodies, and ending up with a load of Shane's jizz in my face—and that seemed like it was probably not really something Mike should witness. Or the neighbors. Or Delphie Ann. Really, I needed to get my libido under control, but why should I when Shane was more than eager to share his equally healthy libido with me?

“I like broccoli,” Shane volunteered, holding up a baby broccoli plant.

I grinned. “We totally have time for some good broccoli. It even gets a second wind in early fall. It's a true giver once it gets started.”

“Like someone else I know,” Shane said softly, giving me the eye, and I bit my lip, looking back flirtatiously. Maybe I should suggest we go inside to get some water and a Popsicle. It was kind of hot out and I could think of some fun things to do with a Popsicle.

My phone buzzed. I dusted the dirt off my hands and pulled it out of my pocket, fully expecting it to be Hayley texting me with questions about the

gardening soil and organic fertilizer I'd sent her and her latest girlfriend off to Lowes to buy. Hayley was many things—brilliant, feminist, lesbian, matter-of-fact, honest—but a gardener she was not.

I was wrong. It was my older brother, Reed. He texted me once a month or so, usually to insult me. I loved it.

*Dude, ur ugly.*

Just seeing his name and message pop up on the display made me grin so big that Shane asked, teasingly, "Who's that?"

"It's just Reed being his own special self," I said, using my thumbs to quickly type in a response.

*You're adopted.*

*But u'll still be my best man, right?*

*Your what????*

*Getting hitched. Need someone ugly next to me so I look extra good.*

I made a fairly unmanly sound—though Hayley would tell me that was misogynistic to even think that there were sounds that were 'female' or 'male' by nature—and threw my arms up in the air, shouting, "Yes!"

I'd yelled loud enough that Mike turned to look at me and Shane tilted his head obviously eager to know what I was so excited about. I punched the air a few times. "This is so awesome!"

"What is?" Shane said, grinning.

"Hold on, hold on. I'll tell you in a sec."

Delphie interpreted my enthusiasm as a sure indication that I wanted to play. She trotted over and dropped her ball at my feet, performing a play-bow with her tail wagging to and fro. I picked it up and threw it to the other end of the yard, hurriedly replying to Reed when she ran after it.

*Of course! Hell yes! Congrats! Tell Molly I send my love! So excited!  
So honored you asked!*

*Knew you'd be a girl about it.*



*Does Molly know you're incapable of expressing actual human emotion?*

*Yes.*

*Does she know you're adopted?*

*She knows ur ugly.*

*Does she know you pee sitting down?*

*Does Shane know u ate ur boogers until you were ten?*

*Does Molly know you peed in the bed at summer camp when you were fourteen?*

*She knows u busted ur first nut at same summer camp, while staring at ur counselor (her brother) all snugged in his bed.*

*You told her that?*

*No.*

*Good. Don't tell her that.*

*Okay.*

"So? What's up? You look so happy, I can't wait much longer to know," Shane said still grinning. He leaned against the shovel he'd brought out to loosen the dirt even more. "Besides, you're typing so fast your thumbs are going to fall off."

I did a little dance as I said, "He's getting married."

Shane laughed and gave me a high five. "Awesome. Tell him congrats from me."

"And me," Mike called even though he didn't know Reed from Adam.

*Shane and his roommate say congrats.*

*Cool. So, here's the thing. U might not like it.*

*I never like it when anyone says that. From you it's terrifying.*

*Molly wants to get married at home. Back in Sewanee.*

I didn't know what to say. I stared at the text for a long time and then turned my back on the garden, going to sit on the stoop that led in to the

kitchen from the backyard. Shane eyed me from where he knelt with his trowel.

*Ah. Okay. Let me think about that.*

I swallowed hard, the happiness of the previous moments dissolving like the clouds in the sky, becoming all formless, shapeless, panic-laced disappointment. Obviously, I'd have to let Reed know one way or the other, but I was on the verge of tears now, sucker punched by the past I just couldn't seem to shake. I rubbed the heel of my hand over my eyes and cleared my throat, trying to shake it off for now at least by forcing my mind back to the garden.

"I should call Hayley and have her get a hoe and a rake while she's at Lowes," I said, rubbing sweat out of my eyes, and fending off a wet nose in the ear from Delphie. I took her ball from her mouth and threw it for her, but she didn't leave my side, looking up at me with her big, golden eyes. Great, if Delphie Ann knew something was wrong, then Shane was going to notice too.

Sure enough, after a few more half-hearted digs with the trowel into the tilled earth, Shane threw it aside and strode over to me. "Okay, what's with the mood swing, Riv? I thought you were happy your brother is getting married."

"I am." I swallowed and confessed, "It's just I was a lot happier about it when I thought it'd be in Chicago."

Shane sat down on the stoop next to me, our legs touching. I rubbed mine against his just to feel our leg hairs catch. It was scratchy and distracted me from the mild sense of panic threading through and trying to take hold.

"Because they're both at Northwestern," he said, following my train of thought.

"I mean, not that I really ever thought *that* much about Reed and Molly getting married, but I'd just assumed they would one day and that it'd be easier for them to plan a wedding there."

"I understand that. But what? It's going to be somewhere else?"

"Home. It's going to be at home." I ducked my head down to my knees, curling in on myself. Delphie snuffled my ear and neck until I reached out to

pat her head reassuringly. Shane did the same to me, his hot palm resting on the nape of my neck and squeezing.

“So you think he’s still there?”

“Beats the hell outta me. If I’d known for even a second where—or who—my stalker was...” I trailed off because the wet sound of my voice and the anger mixed in wasn’t for Shane. I didn’t want to take it out on him. I sighed, sat up straighter dislodging his hand, and rubbed my face.

We’d caught Mike’s attention again, and I saw that he was listening, but as soon as I met his eye he went back to his work, although he didn’t glue a single piece of rock, just fiddled with the placements.

My phone buzzed again.

“That’s Reed,” I said, pulling the phone out of my pocket. “Probably telling me to man up or get over myself.” The wounds of those old comments still went deep. After the stalking had escalated to a point that Reed couldn’t deny it anymore, he’d never exactly apologized for the asshole things he’d said. Things like, “Who’d want to stalk *you*?” or “It’s just assholes at school trying to scare you because you’re queer. Get over it.” I’d forgiven him long ago, but forgetting wasn’t something I’d accomplished yet.

*Riv, I want you to be my best man. But I understand if you won’t be there.*

I stared at his words, the letters running together in a way that pissed me off. I dashed my hand against my eyes.

*That said, it’s been over two years, Riv. Are you really never coming home again?*

Shane read it over my shoulder and he made a sound that I couldn’t interpret. Another text came through.

*Are you going to let him take even more things from you? For all you know he’s dead, gone, or past it. Just think it over.*

I sat with the phone in my hand, watching Delphie roll in the yard, getting her dark coat dirty and then standing up to shake it off again. Minutes passed, and Shane shifted restlessly beside me.

“Are you going to reply to him?” he asked.

“Yeah. In a second.”

I wanted to ask why Molly didn’t understand, why her desire to have a wedding day that was exactly as she’d dreamed it her whole life should trump my physical and emotional safety, but then the selfish absurdity of that question was so entirely obvious that I just simply texted what I knew was the right thing to say.

*I’ll be there. I wouldn’t miss it.*

*Really?*

*Yeah, even if you are adopted and no one’s favorite.*

*Well, it’s hard to compete with ur shiny, Riv. Give a guy a break.*

*JFC, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said. Someone might think you love me.*

*Ugh. I know. I have to go vomit now.*

*I love you too.*

*This is Molly, Reed had to go puke up his entire life.*

*Shuddup Reed.*

*I’ll tell Mom you’ll be there. She’ll be happy to see you.*

*I’M HER FAVE.*

*I know. It’s why I hate you.*

We signed off with our customary *No Love* and I stuffed my phone back in my pocket with a heavy sigh.

“You guys are cute,” Shane said. “Makes me wish I had that kind of relationship with any of my siblings.”

My words were true, but I sounded as distracted as I felt when I replied, “What? Are you kidding me? The way those kids look up to you is adorable.”

Shane had four younger siblings from his father’s second marriage, and they all thought he’d hung the moon. Unfortunately, they also lived in Hawaii and Shane rarely saw them in person.

Several long moments of silence passed before Shane said, “So, that’s that.”

“Yeah. Guess I’ll need to get fitted for a tux.”

*It’ll be nice to die in a tux. Fashionable at least.*

I gritted my teeth against my traitorous mind. I was going to do this for Reed and it was going to be fine. I wasn’t going to let my stalker take away everything anymore. It wasn’t fair.

*Since when is life anything like fair?*

Shane put his arm around me and pulled me close. He was stinky from sweat and I didn’t care at all. I just wanted to roll into his arms and snug my face up to his neck to breathe him in. He asked, “Are you sure about this?”

I looked into his blue eyes and nodded, though my heart had yet to calm down. The very thought of going home filled me with a mix of emotions so strong it took my breath away.

Turning from his gaze, which always demanded so much honesty, I followed Delphie’s sniffing perusal of the fence line. Homesickness was something I dealt with occasionally and the thought that I might set foot on Sewanee soil shot me through with elation. The idea that Shane would probably be with me—because he’d surely be with me, right?—only added to the buzz of good anticipation.

My folks had met him on Skype and we’d talked about the possibility of Shane joining us on a family vacation in August if my father’s freelance work paid timely and fully. But the idea of showing Shane my childhood bedroom, or the tree I’d climbed trying to get away from Reed’s Nerf Ball assault (and then fallen out of breaking my collarbone), or the park where I’d learned how to pop a wheelie on my bike, or introducing him at the old dojang where I’d found intense support from my Masters—despite being obviously gay—was a new kind of thrill.

But if my stalker, so persistent and terrifyingly unknown, wasn’t dead, gone, or past it, as Reed had suggested, the entire horror show could start up again. I managed to escape town the first time undetected, but that had been a

miracle. And if I had to give up everything again? I looked at Shane, the sun kissing his skin and illuminating new freckles on his nose. Well, I just didn't know if I could do it.

Even now my folks and Reed took evasive procedures if they were going to see me. Family vacations included odd convolutions of travel arrangements to throw my stalker off base. And Reed was the only one who came to Rose College specifically and when he did, he always got off the highway a few times to perform the typical procedure of four right or left turns to make sure he wasn't being followed.

Still, the fact remained, if my stalker was out there and I took Shane home, not only would I be exposing myself to madness again, but I might be exposing Shane too. Given the fact that my first boyfriend ran off without looking back after the first threat from my stalker, it wouldn't be ridiculous to expect the same from Shane.

Yet that wasn't what scared me the most. *If* my stalker managed to get back into my life, he might focus on Shane. He could hurt him or worse. Maybe it would be best if Shane *didn't* come home with me for the wedding. That way, if the stalking began again, I could find a way to leave him out of it, even if it meant not returning to Rose. Even if it meant leaving him.

"Look at me, darlin'," Shane said quietly enough that Mike might not have heard him. It was his private name for me, something special for intimate times, unlike the nickname I used for him all willy-nilly no matter the audience. If he was pulling that out then he thought I was falling apart here.

I squared my shoulders and turned to him, trying to look confident, calm, and maybe flirty. A lot of stupid shit, like unwanted terror, can be covered up with flirtation. "Yeah, HP?"

"I'll support you whatever you choose to do, but I care a lot more about keeping you safe than about your brother's wedding. You can watch a video or see photos, or hell, watch it live by Skype, but if *he* gets into your life again..."

"I know," I said. "I can't let him take everything forever though. At some point, I have to be brave, don't I?"

“River, you’ve been incredibly brave. Don’t you know that?”

I called Delphie to me to keep from having to answer right away. I patted her head, admiring her weird face—half wolfhound and half poodle. She looked so much like a sea lion she could have won a prize for best sea lion impersonator. All I needed to do was convince Shane to host a party with a sea lion impersonation theme, get Mike to agree to be the judge, and maybe build a small stage for it in the backyard so everyone would show off their sea lion costumes. Delphie Ann would win hands down.

“Riv?”

I reluctantly forced myself to answer. “I know. It’s just that I ran away.”

“After three years of constant harassment and threats. You were brave, River.”

“Sounds brave as hell to me,” Mike called out from across the lawn where he wasn’t even pretending to place rocks anymore.

“Ghast,” Shane said. “This is a private conversation.”

“Then take it somewhere private. Otherwise it’s just another show in the great carnival of life. The River’s Stalker Ruins Everything show. And wow,” Mike scratched his groin, “it’s kinda a shitty show. I like the River & Shane Are In Disgusting Gay Love show better. Or the River & Hayley Are Up To No Good show. Or the Shane Cooks Something Edible For Dinner show. Or the—”

“Shut up,” Shane and I said at the same time. “Not the time,” Shane added warningly.

“Time’s the one thing that’s never on your side,” Mike crooned softly. “But I’m on your side, yes, I’m on your side... and it’s a very good side.”

It was a cover song he’d been practicing over and over—loudly—while drinking beer alone in his room. I wasn’t sure of its significance to Mike personally, but I’d heard it so much over the last week and a half that I’d found myself walking around singing it a lot lately. I kept meaning to ask him about the original, but it never seemed the right time. And now wasn’t the right time either.

“C’mon,” Shane said, standing up and dusting off his shorts, and motioning toward the kitchen.

I shook my head and stood up determinedly. “No, it’s okay. Hayley will be back with the stuff we need before long and I just want to get the garden done today. We’re late on it as it is.”

Shane’s eyes grew dark with frustrated concern, but he nodded and joined me when I strode over to the square of dirt. I wasn’t going to let my stalker ruin my life anymore—not when it came to my brother’s wedding, or my peace of mind, or my stupid relationship-test garden. If nothing else, hopefully we’d manage to grow some tomatoes or squash before I returned to my hometown and possibly walked right back into my stalker’s sights. It’d be good to eat some homegrown broccoli before he destroyed my life again.

\*\*\*\*

After the nightmare, I pulled out of Shane’s arms to take a piss. My sleep-addled legs stumbled as I walked to the bathroom we shared with Mike. Shane followed, and after I finished, he took his turn while I washed my hands. I hesitated when it came time to go back to his bedroom. I suddenly wished I *had* kept my dorm room over the summer so that I had somewhere I could escape to just to be alone. Not that I wanted to get away from Shane. It was just the image of what I’d seen in my dream came back to me every time I looked at him. And I loved him so much. So damn much.

Shane didn’t go through the door leading to his bedroom though. Instead he exited out to the hall and headed toward the kitchen. I followed him. Maybe a drink of water or some food would break me out of the dream completely and it would be safe to go back to sleep.

I sat down at the kitchen table, head in my hands, and waited for him to break out some midnight munchies that would be tasty enough to wipe away the memory of his eyes going wide when the knife sliced into his throat. When I saw Shane open the cupboard and pull out chamomile tea and honey, a smile spread over my lips effortlessly. He’d gotten me a cup of chamomile and honey when he’d taken me to Joe’s Coffee House the night he’d helped me finally manage to mostly shuck the burden of my virginity.



(*Whatever that means*, Hayley said in my head. *Virginity is a flawed concept that's really about keeping women in their place and defining them as chattel*. I rolled my eyes and apologized to her mentally. If there was sarcasm in my mental apology, Hayley in my head didn't seem to know or care. Still, I dutifully replaced the thought with *the night I got laid for the first time*.)

"Calms the mind," I murmured when Shane finally handed me a steaming mug and the big honey bear.

"Hayley left her jacket-thingy," Shane said, sitting down across from me and sipping from a glass of water.

Apparently, his mind wasn't in need of calming. That was the story of our relationship to a large degree.

I glanced over at the patchwork madness that was Hayley's latest fashion accessory. Her kinda-girlfriend, Lisa, made it in some Art of Design & Sewing class she was taking over the summer. I usually saw Lisa on her way to the art building on my way to the gym for the taekwondo class I'd been taking, and which now seemed tainted after my dream. How was I ever going to set foot in that locker room again without imagining a pool of Shane's blood by the exit?

I shivered.

"So, wanna tell me about it?"

I didn't. I really truly didn't, but I did anyway. As I relived the dream moment by moment, the tea did nothing to stop my heart from racing, the tears from stinging my eyes, or to keep a sob from hitching in my throat as I described the final moments.

Shane moved around the table and shifted down to the floor, kneeling between my legs, his arms around my waist, trying to get as close as possible. "Darlin' it was an awful dream, but it was just a dream."

*For now.*

"I love you," I told Shane, gripping his face. I needed him to know and understand that much at least. "I love you so much. I could tell you every day for a month and you wouldn't know how much. I could say it endlessly from now until next March, only stopping to sleep, and to chew up bites of food,

and maybe swallow some water, and you still wouldn't know how much I love you."

It wasn't the first time I'd admitted how I felt for him, but it wasn't like we went around saying it all the time, and I'd never put it quite so vehemently.

Shane kissed the tops of my thighs, then my stomach below the navel at the edge of my boxer briefs. He kissed along the crease that pointed in a V down toward my now-stirring dick. He pulled me closer to him and rubbed his scratchy face all around, tickling me with his whiskers until I was laughing helplessly.

"Love you," he whispered before pressing wet kisses to my nipples, and then reaching up to pull my head down for a deep kiss.

My ever-eager dick was already ready to go. I could almost hear it cheering as it snapped to attention so fast I felt light headed. The kissing grew messy and desperate. Shane got his hands under the elastic of my underwear and jerked them off. He sucked down my cock, taking me deep and fast into his throat before I could bring up the question of whether or not we should take this somewhere more private.

Still, it lingered there on my tongue, a taste of restraint for just a few moments and then evaporated completely in the wet, eager suction of Shane's mouth. He pulled my briefs off entirely, tossing them over his shoulder, and spread my legs in the chair far enough to get access to my asshole. He rubbed it with the pads of his fingers while he sucked me, and I moaned, forgetting about private and just wanting somewhere close and comfortable.

"Couch," I said, gripping his hair and pulling him off my cock. "On the sofa. Now."

Shane followed me into the living room, looking down the hall toward Mike's room. "What if he wakes up?" I asked.

Shane shrugged and muttered, "He won't," as he tumbled me to the sofa. Mike's broken chip crumbs stuck to my back but the discomfort didn't last longer than it took for Shane to get his mouth on my dick again. Lying back, I dropped one leg off the side, making more room for his fingers to explore my hole. I toyed with his short hair while he sucked, concentrating on the feeling

of his mouth, so alive and warm and busy on my cock, blotting out worry and fear.

Shane pulled off my dick to push my legs up, licking my ass with a fervor that made my legs tremble under his big hands. I held his head in place, moaning into a sofa cushion to stifle my noises. He shoved a few fingers in his mouth, and then pressed two inside me, slowly twisting them so that he could get in far enough to hit my prostate. My legs kicked a little whenever he rubbed against it, and he sucked on my balls as he worked.

Finally, he slid up my body, fingers still hooked into me, and kissed my lips. I grabbed my own cock and jerked myself as he took hold of his dick and worked to get off too. Kissing, nuzzling, smelling his sweet neck, I found myself moving quickly toward orgasm.

“I’m going to come,” I murmured and he redoubled his efforts in my ass with his fingers.

I spread my legs as far as I could on the narrow sofa and his fingers moved inside me a little roughly with only spit for lubrication. Orgasm—a hot, gripping pleasure starting in the base of my cock, impossible to ignore, commanding my attention and then ripping through the rest of my body—exploded from my dick.

“Fuck,” I cried out, arching toward Shane, shooting my come on his stomach, my chest, his arm, and a little on the back of the sofa.

“So hot, darlin’,” Shane moaned and then I felt a volley of spurts, his jizz landing hotly on my abs and pecs. One large glob covered my left nipple completely. Shane shuddered through small aftershocks, and then bent to kiss and lick the come off my nipple before teasing it lightly with his teeth.

We kissed tenderly for a long while, a sense of peace descending on me. I knew we should get up, clean the come off the back of the sofa and get back to Shane’s room, but it was too perfect half under Shane’s weight and shivering through small aftershocks in his arms.

“Mike might come in,” I whispered.

“Let him. I promise he’ll turn around and walk right back out.”

I chuckled. Shane was probably right, but still. I didn't really want to be seen.

"It's the middle of the night," Shane reminded me. "I'm pretty sure unless you start screaming again, he's going to sleep through everything and anything."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Why be sorry? I just want you to be honest with me."

"Okay."

"Are you in danger? If you do go back?"

"I don't know. I might be." I ran my fingertips up and down the small hairs on his forearm. "I don't want you to go, though. I can't risk you. I need to do this for myself, but I can't put you in the position of—"

"I'm going with you, River."

"It's just... Shane, it might be dangerous and remember how much I love you? More than I can say? And I just can't risk your safety by exposing you to the possibility of him. I just can't do that."

"If it's so dangerous that you don't want me to go, then you shouldn't be going either. No matter what Reed wants."

"He's my brother."

"You need to talk to your parents about this. They might not want you risking this guy taking over your life again."

"It's not about them, Shane. This is my choice. My stalker and my life and my home and my brother. My everything. And you're not going with me. As much as I want to show you my home, it's just—"

Shane put his finger on my mouth and helped me up. He stepped into the kitchen, returning with my underwear, and a rag to spot clean the sofa. After, we walked down the hall together to his room.

"Shane, here's the thing," I started, but he didn't let me go on.

"I'm going." He climbed into the bed and patted the space beside him. "You can't stop me any more than I can stop you. So, together we'll go and we'll deal with whatever happens because of it."

I got in next to him, dissatisfaction with his words cutting through me, but he tugged me to lie down with my head against his shoulder. In the near-darkness he whispered, “You’ve got me. I’ll be your secret weapon.”

\*\*\*\*

I came out of the showers, a towel wrapped around my waist. A sense of déjà vu filled me as I realized I was alone. I walked quickly, sparing little thought for Max or anyone else. I knew what this was. This was the dream again, and while my heart thudded wildly in my chest, I had come prepared. There was no way I was going to see Shane killed again.

I opened my locker, ignored the horrific decorations inside, all designed to terrify me and lock my mind up so that I couldn’t think. I grabbed my jeans and T-shirt, pulled them on, and zipped open my gym bag. I heard the creak of the door as I reached inside.

The cough was exactly the same as before—a low rattle in the chest and then a violent explosion at the end.

I wrapped my hand around the handle and pulled out the knife. It was just a kitchen knife, but recently sharpened. I made sure of that by touching my finger to the edge. It sang sharply against my skin.

I took a deep breath, slowly in and out, and I nodded to myself. My mind whirled madly. I’d trained for years but I’d never hurt anyone beyond a bruise or two. This was new. I knew I had to stay ahead of my dream, or else it would change on me, and my plan would be destroyed.

I came around the corner of the lockers, head held high, and the knife behind my back. There he was by the exit, just like last time. His dark hood hid his features, his left hand dangled, and in his right he held a knife.

“Hi,” I said, calmly as I could muster, and the cold chill of my voice shocked me. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

He stepped forward and I tucked the knife into the back pocket of my jeans. I spread my arms wide. “I wondered if you’d forgotten me, but I knew you’d never forget your baby boy.”

The words were like acid in my mouth. The endearment had been in almost

every note, no matter if it was filled with creepy declarations of love or ruthless, horrific descriptions of the torture he was going to visit on my body.

“Because you love your baby boy, don’t you? And I’ve waited a long time for you to come and make me love you too.”

His hooded head dipped to the side, and I didn’t dare look away to see what he was doing with his knife. I needed him to come closer, to come forward to me. If he went out the door, he’d be back with Shane and I couldn’t live through that dream again.

“Slut,” his voice echoed in the locker room. “Filthy slut.”

“I am filthy, it’s true. I need you to clean me up. Show me who I belong to.”

He took a step closer to me and then, like so often happens in dreams, he was right there, in my face. The cold of his blade tore through my shirt and bit into my skin. But I didn’t hesitate—a quick step back on my right leg, and then a big step back with my left. My powerful crescent kick landed on his wrist, knocking the knife out of his hand and sending it skittering. Executing a series of moves that had been drilled into me during my years of training, I twisted his arm behind his back, and pulled the knife from my back pocket with my left hand.

“This is where it ends,” I said in his ear, my knife tucked up against his throat. “Because I’ll never let you take him from me. Never.”

I slit his throat in a quick move. It was fast and terrible. Blood arced onto the floor of the locker room, and gurgled as it poured out of him. I felt the connection between us sever deep inside like a line snapping. I lowered his body to the floor, blood soaking through my sneakers, and splashing on the floor. The scent of iron filled the air. My trembling fingers went to his hood. I had to know—who had done this to me for so long? Who’d taken my home, my family, my friends, and my life from me?

The hoodie was soaked with hot blood. My breath stopped in my lungs. I jerked the hoodie back.

I bolted up in bed, my heart wildly thumping. I'd woken before I'd seen my stalker's face. After all that, I was still no wiser as to who had stalked me for three years than I was before. I rubbed a hand over my face, and looked down at Shane sleeping beside me. His lips were parted and his eyes moved rapidly beneath his fragile lids. He was strong, with Midwestern handsomeness inherited from his father.

I took a steadying breath and turned my attention inward. Where before there had always been a taut thread of fear running from me, across the country back to Sewanee, to the mystery stalker, there was now a loose sensation of a cord cut. I wasn't his puppet anymore. I'd killed him.

Shane shifted and I lay back beside him, putting my head on his chest. I listened to his strong heartbeat thumping in my ear. I closed my eyes, imagining his heart beating steady as a drum. The sound of his life reached into me like a living thread and wound itself around that loose cord, binding us even more firmly together. Strength to strength. Heart to heart. Love to love. Here in the safety of his arms, I was certain we could overcome anything. And if we couldn't, there was still the truth that love was forever stronger than fear.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*While Leta Blake would love to tell you that writing transports her to worlds of magic and wonder and then safely returns her to a home of sparkling cleanliness and carefully folded laundry, the reality is a bit different from that. For as long as Leta can recall, stories have hijacked her mind, abducting her to other lands, and forcing her to bend to the will of imaginary people. This absence from reality results in piles of laundry and forgotten appointments. In between abductions, Leta works hard at achieving balance between her day job, her writing, and her family. When not spirited away by demanding imaginary people, Leta lives happily with her husband, her kid, and one too many dogs in the Southern United States.*

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# CREST RIDGE VACATION

By A.L. Boyd

## **Photo Description**

Two men clad only in jeans are standing face-to-face surrounded by large boulders. The shorter man with a tattoo on his bicep has his hands on the boulder behind the taller man. The taller of the two men is looking down into the face of the shorter man as they are about to kiss.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*See the guy on the right? The one with the tattoo? He's an arrogant prick, and I've hated him since high school. The thought of him has given me nightmares ever since he humiliated me in front of our entire senior class. Ten years later and I can't believe I've run into the douchebag during my mountain vacation. I may be taller than him now, but he still knows how to make me feel small. Will I ever discover why he was so mean to me? Please help!*

Sincerely,

Anna

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** military, celebrity, enemies to lovers, law enforcement, vacation, sweet no sex, closeted, HFN

**Word count:** 7,795

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# CREST RIDGE VACATION

By A.L. Boyd

The knock on his door startled Rob as he dozed on the couch. No one knew he was here. Why was someone knocking? He had bought this house in secret and used it to hide away from his fans and the paparazzi. He'd only told his agent that he would be vacationing in New Mexico without giving any specifics. His vacation had barely started here in his new home-away-from-home. The house sat in the middle of a five hundred acre ranch next to a national forest, so it wasn't likely the next-door neighbor was popping by just for a chat.

The knock came again, a little louder this time, followed by, "National Guard here. Anyone home?"

Rob's heart sped up as he stumbled his way to the door, and cracked it open. "This is private property, what's the Guard doing here?"

"The Crest Ridge fire is headed this way, and your house is directly in its path. Mandatory evacuations are in place. We are here to inform all residents and escort the evacuees out of the fire zone."

That voice! Rob knew that voice. The Sergeant Major, high school. Crap! Crap! Crap! Just hearing that voice made his heart beat even faster and his palms sweat. Memories of high school humiliation resurfaced from hearing that voice.

Trying to keep calm, Rob replied, "Mandatory evacuation? When did that happen? I just got here this morning, and there weren't any signs or anything like that on the roads." He opened the door wider and looked out at the Guardsman on his doorstep. Driven by his memories, he started to look up, but dropped his gaze until the muscular man came into his line of sight. Shorter than him now, but the sight of that face transported Rob back to high school and memories of Sergeant Major Johnson. That dark brown hair, always cropped short by military school rules, was now slightly longer but remained within regulations. Those hazel eyes, as sharp and piercing as ever, weren't

even looking at Rob as the man was busy inspecting the exterior of the house. Rob knew he'd had a growth spurt in college, but he couldn't believe he was now taller than his high school tormentor.

They had both been seniors at a military prep school. The difference was that Johnson had been at the school for all four years, but Rob, then known as Owens, R. K.—as the nametag on his uniform read—was a new transfer-in for his senior year. Technically, he'd been forced to go. Military school wasn't his cup of tea. Being a new cadet, Rob was a recruit-at-training, better known as a RAT; Johnson, on the other hand, having been there three years already, was an old cadet.

The insignia on his National Guard uniform displayed the rank of Staff Sergeant, but he still carried an unmistakable air of authority, even if he no longer held the school rank of Sergeant Major. "Evacuation orders were posted about an hour ago when the winds changed and drove the fire in this direction. We are here to ensure the safety of the residents. Please prepare to evacuate." Johnson's words jerked Rob back to the present. What was his first name again? Dale? No, Dane? Yeah, Dane, that's what it said in the yearbook. Not that Rob had ever been allowed to use that name. New cadets were not allowed to fraternize with the old cadets.

A female voice screamed out from behind Johnson, "Oh my God! You're Robert Owens, the actor! What are you doing here?! Holy cow!"

At that, Johnson's eyes finally reached Rob's face and narrowed in recognition. "Owens," he snapped. And just like that, Rob felt like he was back in school being bossed around again by Johnson. Sharply, Johnson turned toward the woman and ordered, "Private Briggs, no time for autographs. We have an evacuation to deal with. Go check in with the evacuation center. Inform them that we have arrived at our last stop and will be returning to the staging area."

She immediately snapped to attention with a quick, "Yes, Sergeant." and hurried off to the vehicle.

Johnson turned back to Rob and said, "Owens... um... good to see you, but really, we need to get moving. I see you've got your place set up in

accordance with the Firewise guidelines, and you have a good, defensible space for the firefighters. The winds, though, have become erratic and unpredictable. For your own safety, you need to go and let the firefighters do their job.”

“I’m still packed. It was a long drive, and I fell asleep after I got here.”

“Good! Grab your gear and let’s get moving,” Johnson commanded.

“Yes, sir!” Rob snapped, thrilled when he saw that flash of anger cross Johnson’s face as he’d said “sir”. Johnson had hated that at school. Rob also hated how even now he felt like a kid when Johnson ordered him around.

Just like back at school, Johnson bristled and tapped his stripes as he said, “Ain’t no sir here.” Then Johnson and Rob said at the same time, “These are sergeant’s stripes, RAT, and you best not forget it.”

Rob was actually surprised when Johnson laughed and said. “Man, Owens, just like in high school. I think you always called me ‘sir’ on purpose to rile me up.”

Rob turned to him with a hint of a smile. “Yep, it was fun to watch you get mad.”

Rob noticed the expression on Johnson’s face slip slightly, less confidence, more uncertainty as Johnson said, “Hey look, I know we... uh... we didn’t get along very well at school, but—” Johnson was cut off as Private Briggs rushed back to the porch.

“Check-in completed. Dispatch reports that the roads are smoky but passable, Sergeant. We’re ready to move out.” Just like that, Johnson switched back into his arrogant know-it-all attitude as he snapped out orders.

“Owens, let Briggs here drive your car down. The road can get dicey with all the smoke. You ride with me.” Johnson marched out the door, leaving a stunned Rob and Private Briggs in his wake.

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Rob sat in the Humvee staring at the smoke as it rolled past his window, but he wasn’t thinking about the fire roaring away nearby. He was back in high school. Hazing incidents in military school were sometimes hidden under the

guise of “tradition”. And Rob had been the recipient of several “traditional” hazing rituals.

The zoom broom. For being caught smoking in the communal latrines, Sgt. Major Johnson had instituted the zoom broom punishment. With his pants pulled down, Rob was ordered to bend over and grab his ankles, bare-assed. Five swats with a broom to his naked backside without falling over. Saber swats, push-ups, running the box—

“Hey, Owens.” Johnson’s voice dragged Rob out of his memories. “Look, I know—”

“We’re not in school anymore, you can call me by my first name. Rob or Robert, but stop calling me Owens,” Rob snapped. Every time someone called him by his last name, Rob felt as if he were back at the school he’d hated for so long.

“Sorry, Rob. Um... As I said, I know I was hard on you at school. For a while now, I’ve thought about trying to contact you. I’ve wished I could talk to you, to... um... to explain some things. But I don’t have time right now with this fire deal. Will you be going back to California, or are you sticking around for a few days until they lift the evacuation?”

“Uh... D-D-Dane, right? That’s what’s in the yearbook.”

Dane nodded. “Yeah. I know you never got to use it, but yep, it’s Dane.”

“Well Dane, I was up here on vacation and sort of trying to hide out from the paparazzi, but with all the media attention this fire’s going to get, I’d better head out. I don’t have anywhere else locally to go. Checking into a local hotel would be just asking for more attention.”

Dane looked over at Rob, and uncharacteristically, gently, said, “Yeah, I read about what happened with your boyfriend. Sorry to hear about that. Must suck to be humiliated like that in public.”

Rob looked over at Johnson now, wondering what was going on. Was Johnson apologizing or setting him up for more humiliation? But he replied icily, “Well it’s not quite the same as being carried across campus naked for the whole school to see.”

Ten years ago, Dane had humiliated Rob publicly so many times that Rob had lost count. Now he's "sorry" that Rob had been humiliated yet again in public? Rob's ex-boyfriend had dumped him in front of the cameras at a movie premier and was then photographed the next day on a date with his new flame. Dane, well, he'd done far worse. The zoom broom and saber swats weren't even half-bad since most new cadets were on the receiving end at least once. They were considered an initiation, and mild in comparison to the time Dane and the rest of the squad stripped him naked, taped his hands and feet, and carried him fully exposed across campus before dumping him in the female latrine.

"I-I said I wanted to talk about some things," Dane stammered, "And... that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Please, just... just give me a chance to explain?" They pulled into the main staging area for the evacuation, and Dane found a parking spot. Rob was still trying to find the door handle when Dane's hand on his forearm stopped him. "Here's my business card. It has my personal cell number on it. Please think about what I've said and give me that chance."

Rob grabbed the card and roughly shoved it into his shirt pocket without even looking at it. "No promises, Dane." He had been frequently bothered by Dane's actions during high school, and now Dane managed to cross his path on his vacation, dredging up all those bad memories once again. No, he wouldn't make any promises at all to Dane.

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Dane couldn't believe his eyes. Owens, Robert K. That short, scrawny boy was all grown up now. Instead of the shaved head he remembered, the black hair was longer but still respectably short and well styled. Rob had put on muscle and looked fitter than he'd expected—even after he'd seen every one of Rob's movies. But the thing that most amazed Dane was how tall Rob had grown. Dane probably would have to stand on his tiptoes just to look into those golden brown eyes. Dane knew he'd been rough on Rob in school. He had his reasons, and now he was ready to admit them to both himself and to Rob. He needed to apologize—if only Rob would let him.

The Humvee door opened, and Private Briggs hopped in. “Hey, Sarge, you know him or something?”

“Yep, we went to school together.”

“He went to that military school in Wells? Wow! Did you know he was gay then?”

“No, not then. Not at that school. He was sent by a judge. It was there or juvie. He wasn’t happy at school.” Dane sighed as he remembered Rob’s sad face back then. “He doesn’t seem much happier these days either. We have work to do now, Private. You want to drive for a while?”

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Rob’s parents had never been very affectionate, even before he came out to them in his freshman year. Seeking the attention that he never received for being a well-behaved, straight-A student, Rob finally told his parents he was gay. He’d told them because he wanted some kind of acknowledgement from them. He’d been willing to do anything to get them to talk to him, even if it was yelling at him. Yelling was better than the silence. Being good in school and getting straight As hadn’t worked—nor had telling them he was gay—which was why he’d rebelled and gotten into trouble. Drinking and smoking, joyriding after curfew—things that should have gotten his parents’ attention. It didn’t. Instead, he got caught by the local police.

The judge made a deal with his parents—military school and no record, or juvenile detention and a juvie record. Boom, off to the military school it was. His parents were friends with the judge, and figured it would be beneficial for him and would also “cure his homosexuality”. He believed that a big plus for him being away at a boarding school—in another state—was that his parents wouldn’t have to look at, or talk to him.

As they put him on the bus to send him off for the year, his father told him, “I don’t want to hear from that school. If you get into trouble there, you’re on your own. If they kick you out, don’t bother coming home.”

The abandonment by his family initially hurt Rob so much that he didn’t realize until years later that it was the best thing his parents had ever done for him. At the time, all he thought was that it was the cause of the pain and



humiliation of his entire senior year. He never went home for school breaks, and his parents never came to any of the school events—not even his graduation. He didn't have an answer for the other cadets when they asked him why he was spending his break at the school-appointed, host-family home instead of his own.

But even with all the embarrassment, he'd made friends at that school. The most important being Jess. Even though Jess was an old cadet, she was in many of the same classes as Rob. They were allowed to study together. If anyone ever questioned why the two of them spent most nights in the school library during night study hall, Jess would say "This is a tutoring session, move along. We need to study." In between all the studying, Rob and Jess developed a friendship that was still going strong ten years later.

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Rob was glad to be back on vacation again. He had returned to California for a few days, but was back at the ranch, and his vacation, as soon as the evacuation restrictions were lifted. At least while he was back in California, the paparazzi had found a new scandal to follow. Rob's love life was no longer on the front page of every tabloid in town. But being back in California hadn't helped Rob relax.

Now that the fire had died down, and the smoke cleared from the air, Rob started hiking around to different parts of his new property and the surrounding national forest. The realtor and the previous owner had told Rob about all the natural attractions near his new mountain retreat—the cliff-face in the forest with occasional waterfalls during the rainy months, and the hiking trails through the trees to the north.

Two weeks passed, and Rob still couldn't get his conversation with Dane out of his mind. Was Dane playing some game? Why would he want to talk now after all the harassment at school? The wondering and worrying made Rob's nightmares come back. Hazing incidents were relived, his loneliness reinforced. *Decide, Rob. Call Dane, don't call him? Let Dane "explain" or wonder forever?*

Looking back, Rob recognized that not all of his interactions with Dane Johnson had been bad. He remembered how, every few weeks, Dane would run his fingers through Rob's hair. It seemed it was almost a caress at times, before Dane would attempt to grab his hair instead. If Dane could hold and pull on his hair, it meant that it was too long, and Dane would say "Barber shop time, cadet." The times when he couldn't grab a handful of hair, he'd gently pat Rob on the back of the head and give him a, "Good job, cadet."

Rob recalled that Dane, in his own way, had shown more affection than Rob's parents had. That was why the hazing incidents had bothered Rob more. Rob had shrugged off being abandoned and ignored by his parents, but to be embarrassed by someone he thought might care a little about him was the worst thing Rob had ever experienced.

Rob decided to call his best friend, Jess. She knew everything. She'd been the one to rescue him from the female latrine that day in school. Even though she was one of those old cadets, she hadn't treated him the same as all the others had. From that day on, she was always there when he needed advice. Without Jess, he might have never made it out of high school.

Rob set his alarm to wake him up at four a.m. because Jess was stationed overseas in Korea or Okinawa. Rob could never keep her duty assignments straight. Either way, Rob was going to have to call her at some ungodly hour in order to actually reach her at a decent time. They usually communicated by e-mail when Jess was overseas, but this time Rob couldn't wait for a reply. Besides, it wasn't as if he would be getting much sleep with the nightmares anyway.

Groggily, Rob started dialing the international prefix 011 and then Jess's number. Three times he messed up on a part of the number and had to delete and start over. Finally, after concentrating closely, he got through and her phone rang.

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"Deputy Johnson," came the dispatcher's call over his radio.

"Johnson here," he responded.

“I know you are about to go off duty, but you are the closest officer we have. Can you do a welfare check at the old Perkins place? We got three 911 hang up calls from there.”

“Welfare check. Perkins place. Got it. I’m on the way. Johnson out.”

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“Why don’t you just call him, Rob? It can’t hurt just to listen to him. Maybe he truly is sorry for being a jerk,” Jess was saying.

“I don’t know, Jess. Maybe it’s better that I just go back to California and return to work, but I like it here. You have to come for a visit. It’s very pretty here.”

“Well, send me photos. I’m not going to be back stateside for at least another six months, but I’d love to visit then.”

“You’re welcome any time, Jess, you know—” Rob started, but stopped at the loud banging on his front door. Groaning, he muttered, “Now what?”

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Jess, someone’s banging on the front door. Hold on while I go check.”

“Ok, just don’t hang up. We still have some talking to do.”

Rob grabbed his robe and struggled into it as he walked through the house, phone still in hand. The knocking on the door was louder this time, followed by “Sheriff’s office.” His heart started pounding as he recognized Dane’s voice again. What was he doing here this time? It was almost as if the man was stalking him or something. That thought made Rob angry.

Rob yanked the door open and gruffly said, “What now?” without even stopping to look through the peephole to double-check.

“Wow, Owens, is that any way to open a door? Did you even check to make sure I wasn’t some crazed, stalker fan or the paparazzi?” Dane said as he looked over the rumpled man in front of him.

“I told you to cut out that Owens crap. My name’s Rob. What the hell are you doing here at four thirty in the morning?”

“Well, Rob, I’m one of the county deputy sheriff officers, and you called 911 three times this morning. I’m doing a welfare check to find out why.”

“I didn’t—Oh, shit—Hold on.” Rob pulled away from the door, leaving Dane on the doorstep, put his phone up to his ear, and said, “Jess, you’re not going to believe this.”

She was laughing. “It’s him, right?”

“Yep, did you hear?”

“Yeah, you probably screwed up the international prefix and called 911 on yourself again, right?”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Well, put Johnson on the phone. I’ll talk to him.”

Rob walked back to the door and motioned to Dane to come in. As Dane stepped into the room, Rob handed him the phone and said, “Jess wants to talk to you.”

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“Jess?” Dane looked confused as he took the phone then said, “Hello.”

“Johnson, are you picking on Owens again? After all these years, I figured you’d be over that by now. Shame on you!”

“Uh... Who’s this?”

“Come on, you don’t remember me? I’m Jess. Jessica Jones. Your old squadron commander. Really, Johnson.”

“Oh Jay-Jay! Hi, been a long time. What are you doing now?”

“Stop calling me Jay-Jay, it’s always been Jess—except for you. Why are you always so stubborn? And don’t you try to change the subject on me, Dane. I told you to quit picking on Rob.”

“I’m not picking,” Dane protested. “He’s the one who called 911 and initiated the welfare check.”

Through her laughter, Dane heard her say, “Yeah, he did that the last time he tried to call me. That international code can be tricky sometimes. Just don’t

go too hard on him.”

“I won’t. Just needed to do a follow-up on the calls.”

“Good. Now be nice to him. He’s already upset over you wanting to talk to him. He’s worried you’ll pull another one of your stunts. Now put Rob back on. I’ll say goodnight and you boys can have your chat.”

“Okay, Jess. Bye.” Dane handed the phone back to Rob. “She wants to talk to you again.”

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Rob took the phone back. “Hey, Jess.”

“Rob, since he’s there now, you might as well listen to what he has to say. No more worrying about the crazy stuff, okay? It’s supertime here, and I’ve got a hot date. Gotta go. Send me an e-mail after he leaves and let me know how the talk went. Okay? Bye now.”

Jess hung up the phone before Rob could agree or even say good-bye back to her. Dane cleared his throat, and Rob realized he was standing in his living room wearing nothing but his boxer briefs and his robe, which was hanging open. Standing in front of him, Dane was staring intently as Rob hastily tried to tie his robe shut again. The look on Dane’s face was a mix of wonder and surprise. *Is he checking me out?*

Rob was blushing as he said, “Um... About those calls. I didn’t... I wasn’t trying to call 911. It was an accident. If that’s all—”

Dane cut him off. “I understand. Look, I realize it’s probably not the best time, but since I’m here, how about that talk?”

“I guess so. But let me go put something else on and start a pot of coffee.”

Dane nodded, “I’ve got to call this in as a false alarm and sign off duty for the night. Meet you back here in five?” he said as he gestured towards the sofa in the living room.

Rob nodded and shuffled off to his bedroom to change, while Dane went out to his patrol car to report in. After putting on a fairly clean pair of

sweatpants and a T-shirt, Rob went into the kitchen to make coffee. He looked up when he heard the sounds of Dane returning from outside.

Rob's breath hitched when he saw Dane, who had removed his uniform shirt plus his tactical vest and belt. He was standing in Rob's living room in his uniform pants and a sleeveless Under Armour compression T-shirt that clung to every curve of his chiseled frame. A tattoo was visible across the upper part of his left bicep. Rob wanted to reach out and touch the strong chest. Run his hands down those tight abs towards the—*whoa, Rob, remember who you're dealing with here.* Rob was already hard just from looking at that beautiful body, but he needed to get it under control. Instead he said, "Hey, how do you take your coffee?"

Dane turned to him with a smile and said, "Stout and black is just fine with me. I've still got a bit of a drive to get home. That ought to keep me awake."

Rob placed the cup of coffee on the kitchen table in front of Dane and said, "You're a deputy?" as he turned back to get his own cup.

Dane looked confused. "Yeah. Didn't you look at the card I gave you? It's my official business card. My duty with the National Guard is only weekends or declared emergencies. I still need a job that pays the bills."

Sheepishly Rob replied, "Sorry, I'm not even sure where the card went. It's probably still in the pocket of the shirt I was wearing. It might be in the laundry, or it might have gone through the wash already."

Dane sighed sadly, shaking his head slightly. "You weren't going to give me a chance?"

"Not at first, but Jess talked me into it. I was going to look for your card later today and work up the nerve to call. But you're here now, go on, explain it to me."

"Rob, I know I hurt you. Embarrassed you. Harassed you. I'm sorry. Really sorry. I was actually the one who was embarrassed. Ashamed even. Seeing you in the movies and on the news—how out and open you were—made all those old emotions resurface. Back then, I wasn't prepared to admit that I was gay and attracted to you. Seeing you in person again

reinforced those feelings, and made my attraction to you even stronger than before.”

Rob had been staring into his coffee cup but snapped his head up at that last comment. “What! You’re gay? And—and attracted to me?” Rob couldn’t believe it. All the humiliation, all the punishment because Dane liked him. “Seriously—” Rob didn’t finish, watching a single tear roll down Dane’s face.

“We were still kids. I didn’t know how to deal with it then. I couldn’t tell anyone that I was gay. Even now, I’ve never—” Dane shrugged, avoiding Rob’s gaze. “For a long time, I was too afraid. My dad would have killed me. The Army wouldn’t have—well, you know how it was. Things were different then. Even *you* weren’t out at that school.”

Rob nodded at that comment. “Yeah, well my parents sent me there hoping it would ‘cure’ me of being gay, but it didn’t. They disowned me after it became public knowledge. Told me they never wanted to talk to me again—couldn’t be associated with my immorality.”

“But you had the guts to come out. I didn’t. I’m still not sure if I can go through with it even now. I haven’t told anybody—I don’t have anyone to talk to about it. I’ve always felt alone. I guess my defense mechanism has been to push people away by any means necessary.”

This arrogant prick was really covering up being scared? He was afraid to admit he was gay and had liked Rob since high school? Rob couldn’t think of a single response.

Dane noticed his stunned expression and stood. “Look, I know this is a lot to take in. I just wanted you to know. It’s been a long day for me, and I need to get home. If you ever want to talk to me again, I guess you know where to reach me now.” Dane chuckled a little as he continued, “Just don’t make it a habit of ‘accidentally’ dialing 911, though.” Dane dropped another business card on the table. “Just in case you don’t find the other one.” And walked out the door.

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Rob had been thinking about Dane ever since his early morning confession. Rob couldn’t walk into the kitchen anymore without seeing Dane’s

toned body and intriguing tattoo. He'd left the card on the table right where Dane had dropped it. Every time Rob thought about tossing it in the trash, he was reminded of how sad Dane looked that morning. He wondered if all Dane really needed was a friend who understood.

Rob still hadn't made the hike out to those cliffs the former owner had bragged so much about. He needed some help with the map reading. Military school had provided some training, but not enough for him to be sure about going off on his own. Maybe he could invite Dane on a hike. Test the waters. See if they could become friends.

A week passed before Rob finally plucked up the courage to make the call.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dane, it's Rob."

"Rob. Hi. Didn't expect you to call. Is everything okay?"

"Fine. I called because I need—well I have—you're good at reading maps, right?"

"Yeah, I can read a map. Why?"

"I want to go out to the cliffs everyone tells me are close to my land, but I can't figure out how to get there. I can't find Red Cliffs on the map. Do you know where it's at?"

Dane laughed. "Oh, you'll never find Red Cliffs on the map. That's just what the locals call it. When the water runs over the edge, the mineral deposits leave red streaks on the rocks. On the map though, it's called Crest Ridge. That fire a few weeks back was named Crest Ridge because it started there by those cliffs. I'm off in an hour if you want me to swing by and show you how to get there."

"Um..." Rob was stuck for words again. This was the reason he'd called Dane. Why did he still get tongue-tied around this man? There was silence on the line for a moment as Rob tried to think of something to say.

Dane spoke first. "Hey, Rob. If you want to go out there, I'm a great guide. I've been there hundreds of times. The Perkins family used to let me hike all over that place."



“Oh. Okay. I mean, it would be okay if you came by to show me on the maps. Thanks.”

“Great. See you about six? That will give me time to swing by my house after work and change my clothes.”

“Sure, six it is. See you then.”

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*God this was a stupid idea*, Rob thought as he paced the room. He'd grown more nervous over the past couple of hours while waiting for Dane to show up. He considered making something for supper, but he had only been to the store once since he'd arrived. Cooking for one was generally too much of a hassle, so he didn't usually cook much of anything that didn't come pre-packaged. Dane had said he was going to go home first. Maybe he'd eat before he came over. Besides, he was only supposed to show Rob how to get to the cliffs. This wasn't a date or anything like that. Why was Rob nervous about it then? Was it worth getting better acquainted with the man who used to torment him in school?

Just before six p.m., a train whistle, announcing an incoming text, sounded from Rob's cell phone.

*Missed lunch, stopped to pick up pizza. On the way now.*

Rob laughed in relief. Fifteen minutes later, Dane showed up with a pizza box and a six-pack of cola. “The little deli in town has an awesome pepperoni and green chile pizza. I remembered you like green chiles.” Then he gestured to the sodas. “No beer tonight, I'm still on call. Can we eat first? Since I missed lunch, I'm starved, and I don't want to get pizza sauce all over the maps. We can go back over some of the basics while we eat.”

“Sure, let's go to the kitchen. I've got the maps all spread out on the dining room table.”

The kitchen had a small island with pull-out stools, and as they sat down around it, Dane asked, “What do you remember about map reading?”

“Well, I remember that each little box on the map is one mile long and one mile wide.”

“That’s a good start. Those boxes are called sections and contain six hundred and forty acres each. Your ranch is almost a section. Do you remember what different terrain features look like when drawn on the map?”

Sheepishly, Rob shook his head. He’d never paid that much attention in the orienteering class because his classmates always helped him.

“Okay, well, the cliff—”

Rob listened quietly as Dane continued to reteach him Map Reading 101. Rob watched that beautiful face light up as Dane talked about the maps. Dane’s expression was more relaxed than Rob had ever remembered seeing it at school. It was as if Rob was finally seeing the real Dane for the first time, and not the severe mask he usually wore.

They finished off the large pizza, and Dane reached out to pick up the empty box. “Hey, I’ll finish cleaning up since I brought the mess. Why don’t you go look over those maps?”

Rob moved into the dining room and sat down at the table with the maps spread out in front of him. He was so lost in concentration that he never heard Dane walk up behind him. He started a little when Dane ran his fingers through Rob’s hair just as he’d done many times before in school. This time, though, there was no grabbing and pulling of hair. Softly, Dane said, “I always liked your hair longer. I liked running my fingers through it, but the school rules had to be followed.”

With a sigh, Dane moved his hand to the back of Rob’s chair, leaned over his shoulder, and found the location on the topo map needed for Rob’s hike to the cliffs. They were so close together that Rob could feel the heat from Dane’s body, his arm and shoulder brushing Rob’s back while Dane continued describing the trail and terrain.

“Here’s the ranch house. This house has been here long enough that it’s one of the few man-made features that show up on the topos.” Dane moved his finger and pointed again. “Up here is Crest Ridge. By counting the sections, you can see it’s about two and a half miles as the crow flies, but the trail is longer.” Lightly tapping the map about halfway between the two points, he

continued, “You have to skirt this big hill. That adds another half-mile to the trip. Then you still have to come back. It’s a full six miles round-trip. Are you up for a six-mile hike?”

Rob nodded “Yes, I’ll be fine. I need to go to town tomorrow for supplies, then I’ll head out there the day after.”

With a concerned look on his face, Dane said “Rob, it’s not a good idea to be hiking alone. Things happen out there. What will you do if you fall and break your leg? Then there’s the issue of the wildlife. Because of the recent fire, the animals are moving into the unburned areas. You could run into something dangerous like a rattlesnake or a mountain lion. I’m on call until tomorrow afternoon, but after that I’m off duty for three days. If you want me to, I can be your guide.”

It felt right to have Dane standing so close behind him. Rob was starting to think they could be friends. Maybe more than friends. Dane was gorgeous and not as unapproachable since he’d shared his secrets with Rob. He nodded and said, “I think I’d like that, Dane. Thanks for coming to help me with the maps.”

Before Dane said good-bye, they arranged to meet on Friday morning. After Rob went to bed, and finally fell asleep, the dream about Dane came back. It was no longer a nightmare of teenage Dane humiliating him as he was carried on the embarrassing nude trip across campus; this time it was a good dream about adult Dane and his incredibly toned and sculpted body.

*Rob was sitting at his desk in his old room at school when Dane walked in and sat on the edge of the desk facing Rob. Dane reached out and ran his hands through Rob’s hair. A gentle, caressing touch as he let the hair flow through his fingers. “I like the feeling of your hair running through my fingers, but I really love being able to do this.” Dane then gently grabbed hold and pulled Rob over for a kiss.*

*Dane was wearing that skin-tight sleeveless T-shirt again, and Rob reached out to trace his tribal design tattoo. Rob pulled Dane closer, until the shorter man could straddle his chair before settling in Rob’s lap. Rob ran a hand up to Dane’s head to pull him in for another kiss—*

Rob woke in the middle of the night, confused and aroused. He tossed and turned the rest of the night, trying to get his muddled thoughts in order.

\*\*\*\*

The next morning, Rob drove in to town to pick up his supplies for the hike. He headed first to the local diner for breakfast, since he didn't have much to eat at the house. Just as he walked into the diner, he saw Dane and an older woman sitting down at a nearby booth. As soon as Dane saw him, the relaxed expression slid from Dane's face.

Rob watched how Dane's face transformed from relaxed to stone-faced and emotionless in a heartbeat as Dane waved Rob over to their table.

In a cool manner, Dane said, "Hi Rob, didn't expect to see you this morning."

"Well, since I needed to get those supplies for our hike, and I don't really have much left in the pantry, I decided to try the local fare." Rob noticed Dane's quick wince at the mention of "our hike", before that emotionless mask covered Dane's face again.

"Let me introduce you to the woman you hung up on." As if to change the subject, Dane said it quickly, while gesturing to the heavy-set older woman on the other side of the booth. "My aunt, Elizabeth Johnson, is the 911 dispatcher who was lucky enough to answer all your 'accidental' calls. Aunty, this is Robert Owens. We went to school together."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Johnson," Rob said, as he shook her hand.

Rob noticed how stiff and uncomfortable Dane was acting and was about to take his leave when Dane scooted over to the far edge of the booth and patted the empty space. "Might as well join us, Rob. We haven't ordered yet."

All through breakfast, Dane kept his distance and avoided any conversation directly related to their time in school, or how they'd become reacquainted all these years later. Small talk about the weather, local sights, and Rob's job were the main topics of conversation. Rob was again reminded of the aloofness Dane had presented during their high school days. It was as if Dane was two different people. Here now, in the diner, was Public Dane, the arrogant prick who showed little emotion. Last night, however, Rob had

finally seen Private Dane, the gentle, caring man whom he wanted to know and understand better.

After leaving the diner to finish his chores, his train whistle text tone blew.

*I'm sorry. I know I was being an asshole again. I need to work on that.*

Dane's text left Rob more confused than ever. However, Rob didn't have much time to think about Dane's actions, when his phone rang again. Looking at the caller ID, he saw his agent's name.

"Hey, Steve."

"Rob, I know you didn't want to be disturbed on your vacation, but this just couldn't wait."

"Steve, I—"

"Wait, Rob." Steve cut him off. "Just hear me out. I know you really wanted a break, and you wanted to stay in New Mexico for a while. This deal I need to tell you about will keep you there. It's for a new TV series, and the film company is based in Santa Fe. The director himself already called me to see if you would be available."

\*\*\*\*

As Dane watched Rob walk away from the diner, he couldn't believe he'd finally met his goal and told Rob everything. Yesterday he'd laid all his cards on the table and walked away because he didn't want to push; just let Rob decide what to do next.

After seeing Rob again, Dane knew his feelings for Rob were stronger than ever. He needed to make up for the hurt he caused Rob in the past, but he didn't know how, and he still had his own issues to deal with. Ever since he'd met Rob in high school, he had never thought about anyone else. At the time, though, he didn't want to be attracted to Rob—or any other guy for that matter—instead of cultivating a friendship, he pushed Rob away.

There were things about himself that Dane wanted to change, and he knew there would be many difficulties ahead of him. Apologizing to Rob had been his number one challenge for years. Dane had taken a chance and contacted

the Alumni Association to see if they had a record of Rob's current address. They'd told him that it had never been updated, so he'd started gathering the addresses of people he knew had been Rob's friends at school. He didn't want to use the fan mail contact address, because he didn't want his personal mail to Rob read by anyone else. By a stroke of luck, Dane hadn't needed that information after all. He hadn't had to go into "crazy stalker fan" mode either, and dig through all those entertainment and tabloid websites. Accidentally running into Rob once during the fire evacuation could be considered a miracle, but then to "accidentally" run into him a second time felt like—fate? destiny?—whatever it was, Dane wasn't going to take it for granted.

At least Rob hadn't completely shut him out. He'd called Dane back, asked for help, and accepted Dane's offer to guide him to Crest Ridge. Then back at the diner, Rob seemed to sense his discomfort in public and hadn't pressured Dane. He finally believed Rob might accept him as a friend, and at that moment, a friend was what Dane needed most.

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## *Epilogue*

One year later, Rob and Dane were back at their favorite spot. Crest Ridge was the place they'd made peace with each other, became friends and, eventually, lovers. This year at the cliffs, there had been rain, instead of fire. They played, well, skinny-dipped, under the waterfall for a time, before making love and falling asleep in the grass at the edge of the creek.

Rob woke up a short while later, pulled on his jeans, and leaned back against one of the many large boulders near the stream. As he watched Dane sleeping, he thought about all the changes that had happened over the past year. Rob took the role on the TV series so he didn't have to travel. The bonus that staying local gave him was the opportunity to get to know Dane better.

Dane finally told his family about his feelings for Rob and officially introduced Rob as his boyfriend. His Aunt Elizabeth turned out to be the most supportive of his family, but Dane was surprised that his mom and dad hadn't turned him away. Now he could be Private Dane—as Rob called him—more often.

Public Dane still existed and had that don't-ask-don't-tell attitude when they went out in public. He was still coming to terms with himself and wasn't sure about outing himself to the world yet. When they went places, they introduced each other as old friends from high school. Every once in a while though, Dane would do something that would surprise Rob. The other day they went to the little deli in town to pick up one of those famous green chile and pepperoni pizzas they both liked. For no apparent reason, right before they walked through the door, Dane grabbed Rob's hand for a second and smiled brightly up at him. Dane dropped Rob's hand almost immediately after, but at least it was a start on the public affection.

Rob watched as Dane finally woke up, ran his fingers through his already rumpled hair, and slipped into his jeans. Dane finally must have noticed he was being watched, and walked toward Rob. Before Rob could move, Dane blocked Rob in by putting his hands on the boulder on either side of Rob's body, then rose up on his tiptoes and gently kissed him.

“I love you, Rob. I’m really glad you came back into my life.”

“I love you, too,” Rob replied, as he leaned down for another kiss. He remembered a year ago when he’d asked himself if it was worth getting to know Dane better, and he only had one response. *Yes, it was worth it.*

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*A cartographer by day, A.L. Boyd spends most of her free time with her horses, gardening, or reading. She never intended to be a writer, but stories like this one sometimes just pop into her head. The writing came about as a way to get the stories out.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# PLAYING THE FIELD

By Penny Brandon

## **Photo Description**

An athletic, muscular man, aged about twenty-seven, with short, dark hair, is looking sideways at someone only he can see. Tribal-type tattoos adorn his shoulders and biceps, and a large scroll tattoo covers his ripped abs. He's wearing white briefs and nothing else.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*He was the one that finally broke through the walls of one of the most successful young soccer coaches, who was secretive with his personal life. The coach was seen a few times with women in public, but no one really knew about the coach's secret true desires... until he came along and there was no denying the sexual tension between them.*

*Contemporary, with no paranormal or shifters.*

*The other M/C is open to the author, preferable would be someone also in the sports industry. HEA please, with lots of sexual tension and sex, of course... lol.*

Sincerely,

Shiri

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** sports, soccer, coming out, tattoo, athlete, first time, two alpha males

**Word count:** 8,029

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## PLAYING THE FIELD

**By Penny Brandon**

“Hey, Ref! Are you serious? You’ve gotta be blind, man!” Danny looked up through spiked lashes, seeing red, literally. “Fuck, I’m bleeding!” Swiping away at the flow coming from the cut in his eyebrow, Danny faced the referee who was holding up a yellow card. “I didn’t do anything! That motherfucker elbowed me!”

“Danny!”

Glancing left toward the sidelines, Danny grimaced. Rick stood there, looking as furious as Danny felt, but his fury was aimed at Danny, not the ref. Shoulders slumped, Danny let his anger drain away as he realized why. Swearing at the ref would earn him a red card if he wasn’t careful. He glanced back at the balding guy in his black jersey and ridiculously short shorts, and pulled in a deep breath. The ref didn’t look as if he’d be open to an apology, but Danny tried one anyway. “Sorry,” he mumbled, dabbing at his eyebrow again.

“Another one of these and you’re off, Bateman. Now get the bleeding stopped or you’re off anyway.”

Danny just nodded and trotted over to the sideline, averting his gaze from the man he’d been trying to impress the last few months. Losing his temper on the field was embarrassing enough; what was worse was Rick had witnessed it.

“What the hell are you trying to do, Danny?” Rick’s deep voice stopped Danny from wincing as the medic slapped on some gauze to stem the flow of blood before peeling it away and smearing some muck over the cut.

“Win the game.”

“Well, you’re not going to do that by getting yourself sent off.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll be careful.”

“You’d better, or I’ll pull you off myself, and you won’t be going back on for the rest of the season.”

“Coach!” Finally drawing enough courage to look Rick in the eye, Danny had to stop his normal response of sucking in a breath and letting it out on a soft moan. Every time he saw those deep-brown eyes, Danny wanted to grab the man and devour him. Mouth, cock, ass, Danny didn’t care as long he had a chance to taste the man who was quietly driving him insane.

“Six more wins, Danny. That’s all we need to sit at the top of the league.”

“I know.”

“Then get back out there and reduce it down to five.”

As the medic stood back after doing his job, Danny started to turn to trot back onto the field. A light touch on his arm stopped him. “It doesn’t look bad. You won’t need stitches or anything.” Danny wasn’t concerned about the cut. He’d almost forgotten it, though he’d probably be reminded of it later when the game was over. What concerned him was that Rick was touching him; his warm fingers almost a caress as they rested on his forearm.

Body tightening in a way he couldn’t control, Danny mentally wondered what would happen if he leaned in toward Rick and breathed in his scent. That might last him a few nights of fantasies, or it might wreck his chance of proving to Rick he was a good pick for the team.

Being gay and a sportsman didn’t often go hand in hand, but Danny had decided being one wouldn’t hinder him from being the other. Out, and proudly so, he nevertheless had to push himself harder than most when it came to proving himself on the field. Not that he wasn’t a good striker, but opinions about his sexual orientation still wavered, and though he was never openly judged, he felt that sometimes he wasn’t taken as seriously as others with his skill. That was, until Rick had chosen him above everyone else trying out for the position, and forever made him an idol in Danny’s eyes.

However, Danny knew the difference between idolizing a man and wanting him in a bed with his ass in the air. It seemed Rick did, too, but Rick definitely didn’t want anything to do with the latter, and he pretty much disregarded the former, which left Danny not knowing how to react to the man. He wasn’t allowed to flirt, and he wasn’t allowed to idolize, but every time he was close to Rick, Danny needed to do something.

Clearing his throat, he dared another look into those bedroom eyes and smiled. "It's all right, Coach, it's not my face guys think about when I've got them where I want them." With that, Danny turned and ran onto the pitch, feeling the burn in the middle of his back as Rick stared after him.

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Eyes closed, breath heaving, Rick Saunders silently counted repetitions, all the while trying to forget the look in Danny's eyes, the words he'd said, and the smile that promised so much. No way could he give in to the desire burning through his body, or to the need tearing a hole in his heart. As the coach responsible for his team's successful rise in the A-league, he couldn't indulge in personal needs. The team came first. The game came first; everything else was secondary. And anyway, no one knew he was gay.

Maybe Danny did.

"Shit!" Losing count, Rick flopped back on the bench and threw an arm across his face. Of course Danny knew he was gay, it was in every glance, every touch, every smile he gave. He knew, and it was also obvious Danny was interested in him. Obvious to Rick anyway. Thankfully no one else had noticed; at least in that Danny had curbed his usual exuberant self and hadn't made an actual move on him.

Wiping the sweat off his face, Rick remained lying on his back. He didn't need to open his eyes to know he was alone in the gym. He only came here when everyone had gone home to their families, their lovers. It was easier that way, because then he had no one to distract him, to remind him he didn't have anyone to go home to. So he kept them closed and instead indulged in a fantasy he knew was as dangerous to him now as it was three months ago when he'd first surrendered to it.

Picturing Danny was easy; the man's image was printed permanently on his mind. However, what was a little harder was visualising him naked. Not because Rick had a problem with Danny standing in front of him with no clothes on, but because he had no way of knowing how long Danny's cock was, how it would look when hard, how Danny would wrap a hand around it and stroke himself. All that was pure imagination. Thankfully his imagination

was pretty vivid, so he drew upon it now and pretended Danny was straddling him, his cock already dripping, that smile on his face, and the same desire in his eyes Rick had seen aimed his way more than once.

Reaching into his shorts, Rick pulled on his dick, getting it hard, which didn't take more than a few seconds, not with the way he could almost see Danny leaning over him, closing the distance between them, bringing their cocks together.

Groaning, Rick pushed his shorts out of the way and moved his hand faster. He arched his back, muscles tensing, his feet planted firmly on the floor. Danny's scent seemed to surround him, that fresh tang which came from hard exercise, mixed with a dark musk Rick assumed would be the way Danny would smell when turned on. He licked his lips, tasting salt, and wondered if that would be the way Danny would taste. He also wondered how Danny would feel, but before he could imagine more than just the tip of Danny's cock sliding into his mouth, his body tightened, his orgasm imminent.

Having never experienced anything other than the touch of his own hand, Rick still wanted to believe it was Danny's palm gripping him, pleasuring him, and it was that last phantom impression that tipped him over. A familiar tingle shot down his spine just before another familiar sensation hit his stomach and chest. Holding back on a cry of completion, Rick still moaned, softly whispering Danny's name—cutting it off abruptly the instant he heard the distinct click of the gym's door falling shut.

Snapping his eyes open, Rick almost fell off the bench as he hastily sat up, scouring the room to see who had entered. The room remained empty of everything but him and the gym equipment. No one else was there, yet Rick quickly realized someone had been.

Cursing, with fear pumping adrenalin into him far faster than any cliff-hanger of a game ever had, Rick scrambled to his feet. Ignoring the sticky mess on his skin, he threw on a T-shirt, then grabbed his bag and headed toward the door. He dreaded opening it, positive his silent witness would be waiting for him. Summoning up the courage, Rick pressed his hand against the door. It swung open easily, revealing no one on the other side or lingering in

the passageway. His relief, however, was temporary. He had no idea who had been in the gym with him, or what their reaction to what they'd seen or heard would be, but whomever it was, whatever it was; it wasn't going to be good.

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Danny sat on the bench massaging his calf muscle while trying to discreetly eye up Rick. The coach was giving last minute instructions to Lawson, the goalkeeper, while everyone else filed out. Danny waited, knowing he would get his chance the second Lawson left for the training field.

Rick glanced his way, then deliberately turned his back. Danny grinned, until he spotted the frown on Lawson's brow. Lawson didn't like him. Usually that wouldn't bother Danny. They played on opposite sides of the pitch, and they very rarely trained together, even though Danny was the team's best striker, but the dislike wasn't professional. Lawson disliked Danny because he was gay, so that made it personal.

Focusing on his calf, though in reality there was nothing wrong with it, he nevertheless knew the moment Rick stood alone in the changing room.

"You okay, Danny?"

Rick's concern, though unwarranted, had Danny smiling. "Yeah, just a knot." He stood and shook his leg, then put all his weight on it for emphasis. "It's fine."

"Are you sure? I don't want you going out there and tearing up a muscle." Rick took a couple of steps toward him, coming eye to eye.

Stomach flipping, though he managed to control that hitch in his breath as he met Rick's warm gaze, Danny nodded. God, he wanted to kiss him, more so after he'd caught him in the gym the other night. It had been pure torture walking away from the most erotic sight he'd ever seen, but he hadn't wanted to alarm Rick, hadn't wanted to confront him about the name Rick had whispered during his climax. Not then anyway. Now was a different matter.

He'd had time to think over the past couple of days, and time to consider his options. If he kept tiptoeing around Rick, letting the man pretend they didn't want each other, then it would remain that way forever. Someone had to grow some balls, and if Rick wasn't going to, then Danny knew he must.

“I think I’d like to come round to your place tonight,” he said, forcing himself to keep his gaze steady and not allow it to drop to Rick’s mouth.

“Pardon?”

“Your place. Tonight. I think it’s time.”

“What the fuck are you going on about?” If he hadn’t just spotted Rick licking his lips a split-second before his eyes filled with desire, Danny would have believed Rick didn’t know. As it was, Rick’s cheeks tinted a light pink and he took a step closer, not further away.

“How about eight o’clock, after training?”

“You’re not coming to my house.” Rick’s dark gaze raked Danny from head to toe and back again. The look in his eyes this time was fear. Danny knew that fear; it was the fear of discovery, of being found out. He’d got past it. Rick would too.

“Then come back to mine.”

“I don’t know what you’re playing at, Danny, but whatever it is, stop it.”

“I’m not playing at anything. I want you, and you want me—”

“No.”

“I’m not blind, Rick; neither am I stupid. If you didn’t want me, you would have walked away by now. You wouldn’t be standing here, waiting for me to convince you it’s okay.”

“Convince me that it’s okay to lose my job and the respect I’ve earned as coach? Not in a million fucking years, Danny.”

Blowing out a breath, Danny fought back a grin. At least Rick had finally admitted to being gay, even if it was in a round-about way. “It’s not like that, and you know it. You can’t get fired from your job because of your sexual orientation, Rick. And would you want to lead a team of men who couldn’t respect you for who you really are?”

Shaking his head, Rick ran a hand through his hair, but he was mute as he stared at Danny. There was a war going on inside that head, a war of desire and denial. Danny waited to see which one won, not sure how much more he



could push. When Rick started to walk away, disappointment tore at Danny; not because he wasn't going to get what he wanted, but because Rick wasn't.

"No one will know why I'm there," he challenged as a last resort.

Rick stopped, but he didn't meet Danny's eyes. "Everyone knows you're gay."

"So? That doesn't mean they'll automatically think you're gay. Even if you are." Danny waited to see if Rick would deny it again. It really was pointless. Danny only needed to remember Rick in the gym, hard cock in his hand, body tight, moaning out his name, to know how pointless it was.

Jaw tight, uncertainty written in every line of his body, Rick stood motionless. Realizing they were at an impasse, Danny sighed. "I'll be at your front door at eight. It's up to you if you want to let me in."

\*\*\*\*

Despite expecting it, Rick jumped when he heard the bell ring. He didn't need to check his watch to know it was dead-on eight o'clock. If nothing else, Rick had to admit Danny was punctual, and persistent.

He glanced at the door, as he had every night for the past week. He wasn't going to open it. He couldn't. To do so was to admit he'd lied to Danny. He didn't fear losing his job. What he feared was losing his heart.

Three minutes after the first ring came a second. Rick closed his eyes and tried not to imagine Danny standing outside his door, waiting patiently, or impatiently.

It had been impossible to avoid him during the week. Their work day was intricately interwoven, but Rick had done his best not to be alone with him, or to look at him directly. Yet he'd felt Danny's gaze on him whenever they were together, as hot and as potent as a physical caress, causing his skin to pebble, his heart to beat faster, and his groin to tighten in ways he couldn't control.

"Dammit, Danny, stop. Please stop." His whispered entreaty came after Danny rang for a third time. Another minute and Danny would walk away. In the week he'd been trying to persuade Rick to allow him in, that had been his routine. That minute was always the longest, because that was when Rick was at his weakest.

He wanted Danny—wanted to kiss him, hold him, touch him, wanted to plunge into his utmost fantasy, one which had continuously built over the past few months, but one which he knew could never be fulfilled. Insecurities kept Rick rooted to the spot, even when he heard Danny's retreating footsteps. It took every ounce of willpower not to go after him, to not succumb to the need that tested every personal restraint he'd ever inflicted upon himself. But this wasn't about a physical need; it was about an emotional one.

When his phone beeped to indicate he'd gotten a message, Rick picked it up, hesitating only a second before reading what had been sent.

*Can we just talk, please?*

It was from Danny. For some reason, Rick wasn't surprised Danny had changed tactics, but this could only be a delaying one. Danny's interest in him wouldn't last. Eventually Danny would find someone else to play with, and then he'd leave Rick alone. That, however, wasn't the comforting thought it should have been.

Rick knew it was best to ignore the message, but there was something about it that implied desperation, as if Danny really didn't understand why Rick was saying no to him. Giving in, he typed back.

*There's nothing to talk about. You've got my answer.*

*It's the wrong answer, Rick. Just talk to me. Tell me why.*

*Because you'll hurt me.*

Seconds later there was a loud banging on the door. Startled, Rick dropped his phone, even before he registered what his subconscious had given away.

"Rick! Rick, let me in."

Panic flooded Rick's limbs, and in reaction, he quickly pulled open the door to stop Danny from shouting any further and alerting the neighbours. "Shut up!" he said, grabbing Danny by his shirt and yanking him into the house. He slammed the door and leaned up against it, cursing as he realized what he'd done. Danny stood inches away, his eyes wide, confusion etched upon his face.

"What do you mean I'll hurt you?"

Shit! How could he have been so stupid? What idiotic thing compelled him to answer Danny so honestly? “You have to go,” he said, pushing himself away from the door. Expecting Danny to move back, he was surprised when Danny stood his ground.

“I’m not going anywhere.” As if to prove his point, he threw his keys on the table situated next to the wall.

Rick wished that were true, but he’d already said too much, and he wasn’t going to make it more difficult for himself. “You have to. You can’t be seen here.”

“You’re kidding.”

Holding onto his excuse of earlier, Rick forced strength into his voice he didn’t really feel. “You know what will happen when people find out.”

“Yeah, they’ll say it’s about time. Rick, I don’t know if you’re aware of this or not, but people have already begun to talk, and it hasn’t all been negative.”

Looking straight into bright-blue eyes, eyes he’d been dreaming of staring into just as he was about to come, Rick found it hard to concentrate on what Danny was saying. “What?”

“It doesn’t matter. What does is why you think I’ll hurt you.”

Feeling his skin prickle as heat rushed from head to toe, Rick thought back to every single reason he’d thought Danny wouldn’t be right for him, but he wasn’t sure how he was supposed to voice them now. Danny needed to hear something, however, so Rick gave him the one he reckoned Danny couldn’t argue with.

“I don’t do casual.”

“Who said I wanted casual?”

“You have a reputation for it, Danny.”

“Years ago, maybe, but that’s changed as I’ve gotten older.”

“You’re twenty-seven.”

“Exactly, and I’m ready to settle down.”

Settle down? Yeah, as if that was likely. Just before Danny had transferred from his old club, there had been rumours in which Danny had been caught in a three-way in the dressing rooms. Rick didn't try to hide the sarcasm in his voice as he mocked Danny's statement. "So you're looking for Mr. Right?"

Danny's eyes locked on his, and the inches that separated them became a chasm. "Yes, I am. And I think I've found him."

"No." Rick didn't want to believe what Danny was telling him, *if* that's what Danny was telling him. He didn't want to believe it, because he didn't want to start hoping.

"Yes. God, Rick, I've been waiting for you to come round, to admit you want me." The light lift of Danny's mouth showed both warmth and slow understanding. "But you wouldn't, because you thought I only wanted sex, didn't you?"

"What else was I to think?"

"You could have asked me. Could have opened up to me. Instead you've made me constantly question whether I was good enough for you." Something in Danny's eyes darkened. "*Am* I good enough for you?"

Heart not beating to a rhythm Rick was used to, but knowing he couldn't give Danny the answer he wanted, what he probably deserved, he prevaricated. "I don't know you."

"No?" Danny's smile widened, and he closed the chasm between them. Being this close to Danny, Rick's body had a mind of its own. Instead of pulling away, he allowed Danny to gently draw him closer.

"You picked me," Danny said. "You've studied my game, my tactics, my reactions. You know how I work in a team, how I lead, how I play. You know I don't like to let anybody down, that I try my hardest to do the right thing. You know I've struggled, I've hurt, I've triumphed." Danny lifted his hand and placed it at the back of Rick's neck. Rick shuddered at the light touch, leaned into it. "You picked me, Rick. You know me."

Maybe, but did he know all of him? The most important part of him? Scared beyond measure, afraid to give in, Rick still couldn't push Danny away, not anymore. The thing was, Danny knew it too.

“Have you ever kissed a man, Rick?”

“No.”

“Do you want to?”

Rick was sure he didn't need to answer, but he gave Danny one anyway.  
“Yes.”

“Me?”

“Only you.”

Still scared, though knowing it was do now or forever regret, Rick didn't move as Danny brought his mouth to a bare millimetre away. Anticipating his kiss, wanting it more desperately than he'd wanted anything in his life, Rick almost whimpered when Danny didn't close that final, infinitesimal gap.

“You're trembling.” Danny's breath whispered across Rick's lips. He licked them, but tasting Danny second hand wasn't enough. He moaned, right before he pressed his mouth to Danny's, and understood why it was he had to make that ultimate decisive move.

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Surprised at how much effort it took to stop his legs from collapsing beneath him, Danny also had to stop himself from devouring Rick's mouth. God, he never thought he'd taste that good, or feel so right. Though tentative, the way Rick parted his lips and slid his tongue against Danny's had him groaning and allowing Rick inside.

Slanting his head just a little, helping Rick, Danny hesitated before pushing up against the man's hips, not sure how Rick would take it. Rick sucked in a short breath and awkwardly pulled back to look at him.

Brown eyes suddenly narrowed, and Danny thought Rick was going to start denying this was what he wanted again. Instead, Rick moved toward a short hallway that turned off to the right. Danny noted a large room on the left which he assumed was the living room. On the opposite side were the bedrooms, and as Danny followed, nerves fluttered through his stomach.

Though he'd anticipated this moment for so long, he also dreaded it. He'd been serious when he'd asked if Rick thought he was good enough. Rick

hadn't answered, not in the way Danny needed, and he worried he'd never really be what Rick wanted.

Entering the bedroom, he paused at the sight of Rick slowly peeling off his shirt. Mesmerised, Danny watched, half-wanting to go to him, but enjoying the show as each patch of skin, each long limb, each cord of muscle was revealed.

When Rick finally stood beside the bed, naked, Danny managed to pull himself out of a lust-induced stupor and, without any preamble, pulled off his clothes and let them pool around his feet. Rick turned to look at him, nervousness written in every line of his body.

Closing the distance between them in just a few short strides, Danny placed his hand on Rick's arm. Muscle bunched beneath his touch as Rick almost flinched. Not all that surprised, he slid his hand up to Rick's shoulder—mostly to steady him, but partly because touching Rick was something Danny needed to do.

Rick's skin was so soft, but it barely held in the tension that stiffened his body. Slowly curving his arm around Rick's waist, gently sliding their hips together again, Danny was all too aware of how careful he had to be, how cautious. One wrong move, one wrong word, and all this could be over.

However, the feel of Rick, the hard length of him pressed alongside Danny's own aching cock almost had him throwing caution to the wind. He released a slow groan and tightened his hold, grinding up against Rick a little harder. Rick's low moan had Danny ready to push him down to the bed, but he held off—just.

Instead, he leaned in to kiss Rick, relieved when Rick kissed him back. At least he was okay with having their mouths joined. All Danny needed to do now was convince Rick to get their bodies joined.

Rick's lips were warm, and soft, and this time more demanding. Once again Danny opened up for Rick, feeling that silky glide of his tongue and losing himself in the sensation of it. When he felt Rick's arms sliding around him, holding him, Danny couldn't help but relax a little, until Rick pulled back to stare at him. Uncertainty still lingered in Rick's eyes, something Danny was experiencing himself, but his uncertainty lay in a different place.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said, offering a way out, even though it would hurt like hell if Rick changed his mind.

“No, I want to. With you.” Danny wasn’t going to ask Rick if he was sure. He only had so much restraint, and having Rick in his arms like this was pushing it to the limit.

“Then can we get on the bed?”

Rick’s smile was answer enough, so Danny hauled himself into the middle of the firm mattress, lying on his back. Rick slowly climbed on after him, but he did it self-consciously, as if he worried any move he made would be the wrong one.

Spreading his thighs, Danny urged Rick between them. “Touch me,” he instructed. Rick’s gaze flicked to Danny’s cock, just before he licked his lips and took a deep breath.

Expecting Rick to shyly reach for him, he was pleased when the hand that wrapped around him was both firm and confident. Precum already oozed from the tip of Danny’s cock, and as Rick slid his thumb across the top, they both groaned.

“You feel so silky, and hard, and I can’t believe I’ve denied myself this.” Rick’s low tone rumbled through Danny’s body, causing his stomach to tighten and his heart to trip. Or maybe it wasn’t Rick’s tone, but the look in his eyes as he lined up their cocks and gripped them both in his callused palm. “Want you,” he said. “Wanted you so much for so long, Danny.”

“I know,” Danny whispered, instinctively pushing up into the tight grip. “I’ve wanted you for a long time, too.”

Dark eyes, blown with both lust and a much deeper need, regarded him carefully, then Rick nodded as if he finally accepted the inevitable. Danny pulled him down for another kiss, relief making him a little rougher, but Rick didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he squeezed them both hard, before starting to rock his hips.

Perfect friction—as well as a sharp tingle racing down his spine—had Danny closing his eyes and arching his back.

“Don’t. Don’t close your eyes. I want you to watch me when I come.”

Under that directive, Danny had no choice, but he didn’t want Rick coming yet. Not like this. He slid his fingers into Rick’s short, thick hair, stopping him. “Do you have supplies?” he asked.

Rick’s low curse told Danny two things. One, Rick knew why Danny was asking, and two, no.

“I’ve got some in my bag,” he offered.

“Your bag?”

“In my car.”

“No. You’re not going out to your car.”

“Because someone might see me?” Danny asked, knowing exactly what was putting that look of fear back in Rick’s eyes.

Rick moved out of Danny’s hold, sitting back on the bed. Danny instantly felt loss and regret. Rick wasn’t going to continue this, not now, not ever.

“Rick—”

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Rick shook his head, silencing any argument Danny might have. “Just give me a second.” He hadn’t thought of that, hadn’t realized Danny would want to fuck him, which was stupid, really. Danny was the type of man who would take others, not allow himself to be taken. The thing was, so was Rick. He’d only ever envisaged himself inside Danny, not the other way around. Shit. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Staring at the man who looked both stricken and resigned, Rick knew he had to make a decision. A new one.

He slid off the bed and grabbed his jeans. “Stay there,” he said to Danny as he headed out the bedroom door.

The moment he let Danny in, he knew it was over for him. Resistance was as futile as him thinking he could ever play soccer again. He had accepted one; he may as well accept the other. Danny wanted him, and he wanted Danny, and no matter how much he thought he could deny it, or hide from it, he couldn’t.



Grabbing Danny's keys from where he'd left them, Rick ignored the prickle down his spine and opened his front door. The house was secluded to some extent, but an unknown car in his driveway would garner some attention, and if it was left there all night it would start speculation. It wasn't as if he was newsworthy, but with the team so close to winning the league, reporters were looking for interviews, and it wasn't uncommon for one or two of them to be waiting in the morning for him to arrive at the stadium. It also wasn't out of the question for someone to be waiting outside his house, and if they saw the car...

Pushing back the fear of discovery, and the look of disappointment he'd seen in Danny's eyes when he'd moved away from him, Rick opened up Danny's car and grabbed the bag sitting on the front seat. He almost laughed as he realized Danny had packed for an overnight stay. Even after a week of Rick not opening the door to him, Danny hadn't given up. Rick should have known he wouldn't; he never gave up when playing a game.

Pausing, bag in hand, Rick had to stop himself from taking that last thought to heart. Danny had said he wasn't playing with him, that he wasn't just after a casual affair, that he was after something more. Rick wanted to believe him; he had to, because if he went through with this and was dumped, he wasn't sure if he'd ever have the strength to try this with anyone else.

Trusting his instincts, trusting Danny, Rick locked Danny's car and headed back to the house.

Danny was still sitting on the bed where Rick had left him, tension etched across his face. Rick smiled, feeling his own tension drop away.

"Here." Rick dropped the bag on the bed and waited while Danny took a moment to stare at him before opening the bag and rummaging through it. He produced a bottle of lube and a box of condoms, and put them beside him.

Slipping off his jeans again, Rick crawled back onto the bed. "How do you want me?" he asked.

Danny's blue eyes widened. "What?"

"I assume you want to fuck me."

Danny laughed, the sound as full and as genuine as Rick had ever heard it.

“Oh, I want to fuck you all right, and trust me, I could really make it good for you, but I think, this time, my ass is yours.”

Rick almost fell off the bed. Danny was giving himself up? For him? Before he could question it, Danny pressed a condom in his hand. “I’ll get myself ready for you,” he said.

Not able to move, awestruck, he watched as Danny snapped open the lube and poured a generous amount of it onto his fingers. He nearly let his draw drop open as Danny started to thrust his fingers into his own ass.

“Jesus!”

Danny’s grin was augmented by his groan. “Glove up, Rick.”

Quickly changing focus, Rick ripped open the condom packet, and after a couple of seconds of fumbling managed to roll it on.

On hands and knees, Danny waited.

Realizing what this meant, what Danny was showing him, giving him, Rick laid a hand on Danny’s back. “I won’t hurt you either,” he promised.

Danny looked over his shoulder, the light in his eyes bright and as beautiful as Danny was proving to be. “I know.”

Changing his position to put himself behind Danny, lining himself up, Rick had to work hard to stop his knees from giving way. “Danny.”

Danny was still looking at him. “Go for it.”

Not sure how he managed to control the urge to simply thrust in hard and deep, Rick took subtle directions from Danny and slowly eased inside, praying he wasn’t going to fuck this up. About halfway there, Danny’s low groan stopped him.

“Are you okay?”

“Fuck, yes. Don’t stop, keep on going.”

Gripping Danny’s hips, following Danny’s order, and grinning, Rick pressed in harder, until he didn’t have another inch to give. He looked down at where they were joined, not quite able to believe he was buried inside Danny, or that Danny allowed him to be there. He felt so tight, so hot, and better than Rick ever imagined.

“You going to move, or just admire the view?” Danny quipped.

“Move,” he answered, but as he pulled out slightly, he couldn’t help but be distracted by the long length of Danny’s back, and the way it arched when Rick slid home again. Danny was in top physical shape. Fit, athletic, perfect, and as Rick explored the contours of that smooth expanse of tanned skin and hard muscle, he decided he wanted so much more of him.

Picking up on a rhythm that seemed to suit them both, Rick continued to move, sometimes slowing when the incredible feelings mounted too quickly and threatened to overwhelm him. However, it was just a matter of time before an all-too-familiar tension started deep, expanding until Rick knew the end was closer than the beginning.

Suddenly stopping, he forced a surprised grunt from Danny. “Don’t stop, I’m fucking close!”

A hard, fast rush of pleasure rippled through Rick, but this wasn’t what he wanted, what he needed. Without warning he pulled out and pushed Danny onto his back.

“Want to watch you coming, Danny. Want you to watch me.”

Danny’s eyes lit up, and a warm smile curved his mouth. “Yes.”

He hooked his legs over Rick’s shoulders, putting himself into position. Rick took a moment to eye Danny’s impeccable chest and abs, and the unusual tattoo that was inked there. He would have to ask him about it later. For now, all he was interested in was the tight heat waiting for him. He slid smoothly inside, quickly picking up where he left off, noticing as he did so that Danny was tightening up around him.

“There! Oh, shit, Rick!” A shudder ran through Danny. Rick grinned, making sure he stayed at the same angle, but thrusting harder, faster. Danny curled his hand around that impressive cock, matching Rick’s pace, which only encouraged him to speed up.

“Fuck. Fuck, Rick I’m coming.”

So was Rick. As Danny groaned, Rick leaned over him putting his weight on his arms. He stared into those bright-blue eyes, eyes that stared into his own, and knew then that no matter what, he would never regret this.

That was pretty much his last thought, except to acknowledge that every fantasy he'd ever known had just come true. As Danny stiffened beneath him, Rick emptied himself. Not just of seed, but of every doubt, every fear, every repressed dream.

Strength gone, Rick collapsed, not caring if he squashed Danny. Anyway, Danny could take it.

“Get off me you big oaf.” Danny’s hard hands ineffectually pushed at his shoulders. Rick hardly noticed, until Danny punched him. “Seriously, Rick, you’re fucking heavy.”

Feeling freer than he ever had in his life, Rick laughed, shifting to the side, but not before he swooped in for a quick kiss. “I weigh the same as you.”

“As if. You’re all muscle. I’m all lithe sleekness.”

Rick had to concede the point. Danny was built for running fast, which made him a great striker. Rick’s career had been as a defender, and his mass usually helped when it came to putting strength behind a tackle. That was before his knee blew out.

On his back, he contemplated his life and the changes he’d had to make to it, and the ones he may still have to make.

“Just so you know, I usually like to fall asleep after sex,” Danny remarked, turning on his side. The blue eyes regarding him were wide-awake, however, and Rick couldn’t see Danny falling asleep anytime soon.

“So what’s different this time?”

“This time it was with you, and you’re interesting enough to keep me awake.”

Not hiding his contentment—there was no point—Rick smiled. “Interesting how?”

A frown formed between Danny’s brows before he reached over and ran a finger down Rick’s chest. That simple touch was enough to have him wondering if Danny really intended to stay the night, and if he wasn’t, how he could ask him.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Expecting to be asked why he'd never admitted to anyone he was gay, Rick nodded.

"What made you want to be a coach?"

"Really? You want to ask me that?"

As if he was reading his mind, Danny smiled. "I don't need to know why you've stayed in the closet, Rick. I understand how difficult it is to come out, especially in our profession. So don't worry about it."

With no hint of censure in Danny's tone, Rick had to take him at face value, but he wondered how long Danny would continue to allow him to keep his orientation hidden. Surely, if Danny wanted a relationship he'd eventually want to make it known? Unless Danny didn't want a relationship, and everything he'd said had been nothing but bullshit.

Not sure how to broach a subject like that, not sure he wanted to, because he didn't think he was ready to out himself, Rick answered Danny's question. "I loved soccer too much to leave it completely. And you know what they say, if you can't do, teach."

"So when you were told you could no longer play, you just decided to coach?"

"Pretty much."

"I'm glad. If it wasn't for your passion to stay in the game, I would never have met you." Danny's rich smile eased a little of the tension that had seeped back, but Rick still wasn't sure where he lay in Danny's plans. It was difficult, not having that control, not calling the shots. Danny was dominating everything between them, and Rick felt adrift, unanchored. Not a feeling he liked at all. Then Danny reached over to grab a condom from the box that had fallen to the floor. "I want you, Rick." And Rick forgot about anything else but being back inside Danny, until he realized what Danny meant.

"Oh."

"You don't want to?"

"Yes, yes I want to. I want to do everything with you." Rick moved to pick up the lube, but Danny took it off him.

“I’ll do that for you,” he said. “I want to do everything with you, too, Rick.”

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“I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing here, Bateman. Why don’t you look for a transfer? Or better yet, get your faggot ass out of soccer altogether and leave it to real men.”

Danny stared at Lawson, not quite believing the man had just said that to him. Over the past few weeks, Lawson’s attitude toward him had been appalling, but tolerable. This, however, was way over the top and unacceptable.

About to say something, he stopped as Rick stormed over to Lawson and faced him. “You’re off the team, Lawson. Pack your stuff.”

“What? We’ve got a game. It’s the final!”

“And you’re not playing in it.”

“You can’t do that. I have a contract.” Lawson’s face turned a nasty red, and he clenched his huge hands into fists.

“I’m breaking it. I’ll not have that kind of bigoted insolence in any of my players.”

“He’s gay,” Lawson declared, pointing at Danny.

Danny watched the exchange, not surprised by Rick’s defence of him, but he was surprised he was doing it in public and with so much animation. He could have taken Lawson into his office and done this in private, but instead he was showing that homophobia was not going to be something he would tolerate. More than that, however, he was showing that being gay was okay.

“So? That’s no one else’s concern but his. He doesn’t hit on you or anyone else on the team, so why should you care?”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you. It’s wrong.”

Though fifteen men stood in the locker room, it went quiet as Rick turned to look at Danny. Danny thought his heart was going to stop. He hadn’t pushed Rick into announcing their relationship, such as it was. They’d spent most of

their nights together, but Danny always had to be careful he wasn't seen, and he was even more careful not to show any sign of how he felt whenever they were around anyone associated with the club. It hadn't been easy, but he was willing to do as Rick wanted, simply because if he didn't, he might lose him.

But the way Rick was looking at him right now, with affection and, Danny didn't want to say that was love, but he was sure it was damn close, then maybe he didn't have to be so careful in the future. Rick smiled at him, then turned back to Lawson.

"It's not wrong. It's perfectly normal. And in case you haven't noticed, I look at him the same way."

Danny was sure he would have been able to hear the proverbial pin drop if it hadn't been for one of the officials breaking the silence by wondering why the hell no one was on the pitch. Sudden pandemonium ensued as everyone made a mad dash to the tunnel that would lead them out to the final game of the season, the one that would determine if they won the league or not.

Taking one last look at Rick as he ran out with them, Danny grinned. He and Rick were due for a talk, and Danny was seriously looking forward to it. He honestly hadn't expected Rick to reveal he was gay, certainly not yet, and he hadn't intended to make Rick feel obligated to do so. But if Rick loved him, Danny wasn't going to question it, or put off making their arrangement permanent.

Just over two hours later, with cheers and congratulations still ringing in his ears and hard slaps still stinging on his back, Danny was only interested in one thing. Finding Rick.

It took a while, but he managed to corner Rick in his office. There had been a lot of celebration going on, but now most, if not all, had gone home, or to celebrate somewhere else. Rick glanced up at him as Danny entered, his smile turning into a full-on grin.

"Danny!" Rick hugged him, nearly pulling Danny off his feet. "That last goal, man! It was beautiful! The way you did that scissor kick, it won us the game, you know that don't you?"

Danny grinned back, but he wasn't here to talk about his final goal of the

season. “Yes, I know. But I don’t care about the game. I care about what you said in the locker room.”

Rick’s smile dropped a little, but it was only a little. “I meant it.”

“And what are you going to do about it?” Danny asked.

Something dimmed in Rick’s eyes before he let Danny go. “That depends on you.”

Surprised by Rick’s answer, it took Danny a couple of seconds to respond. “I told you I wouldn’t hurt you, Rick. I told you I’d found the man I wanted.”

“You really mean that?”

“You know I do, otherwise you wouldn’t have admitted you were gay to all and sundry. You came out because of me. Only because of me.” Danny put himself back into the circle of Rick’s arms. “You love me, don’t you?”

Rick’s gaze didn’t shift as he nodded. “Yes, but I wasn’t sure you’d want a man who still hid behind closed doors.”

“You’re not behind closed doors any longer.” Danny laughed, leaning in to kiss Rick, tasting the man he’d lusted after for months, and now had forever. “You should have seen Lawson’s face,” he said as he released Rick’s mouth.

“I did, but I didn’t care about Lawson’s reaction. I only cared about yours.”

“And what reaction were you hoping for?”

Rick’s smile gave Danny his answer, but Rick told him anyway. “I saw how proud you were of me. How much my coming out meant to you. I don’t want to hurt you either, Danny, remember?”

“You won’t. You haven’t.” Sliding his arms around Rick’s neck, Danny laid claim to Rick’s mouth once more, knowing this was the man who was giving him everything he ever wanted, and he no longer had to try and impress him.

Then again.

“You really liked my goal?”

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Penny's been a lover of books since before she could read and a maker of stories before she knew how to talk properly, so it was only natural that she started writing when she could hold a pen. From fairy tales to teenage romances to the hot, erotic stories she writes now, she's always held the same belief—to love what she puts down on paper, which means she doesn't love cooking, cleaning or weeding the garden. She does, however, love to travel and has lived in England and Ireland and now resides in Australia, where she intends to stay and discover all that she can of this beautiful country.*

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# FLOATING ON AIR

By Aimee Brissay

## **Photo Descriptions**

Photo One: A room, with an antique mirror on the wall and a settee underneath it. A toned and fit man, naked save for skimpy black leather briefs and black riding boots, has his back to the camera as he braces one foot on the settee to adjust a boot strap.

Photo Two: A tattooed, sculpted bear stands in profile, his eyes shaded by the hard brim of a black hat or cap. His ginger beard matches the hair on his powerful chest. He wears an elaborate glove on the hand closest to the camera, and the nipple visible is pierced.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*Tonight's the night. I'm heading for my favorite club to play tonight. I'm looking for a Dom to give me all I need and I NEED. Oh, GOD, HE is here tonight. THE Dom. I've never been with him but I've heard and seen, oh have I seen, what he can give. Will I catch his eye tonight? I'm going to do all I can to get him to pick me. Will he keep me if he does? Author help me get the Dom of my dreams if only for one night!*

Sincerely,

TJ

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** reunited, age gap, BDSM, fetish, public activity

**Word count:** 3,313

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## FLOATING ON AIR

By Aimee Brissay

So the rumors were true. Douglas was back in town. And looking hotter than ever. On the way to the bar, Adrian glanced again at the man who had caught his eye in the first place, swallowing around his dry throat, hundreds of butterflies dancing madly in his stomach.

Yep, Douglas looked good. He had gained a few pounds from the last time he'd seen him, but to Adrian that wasn't a flaw. Just the opposite in fact because he had always liked his men big. And the man was big. Granted, he'd never had sex with Douglas, nor had he ever played with him, but he'd seen him in action enough times to know he was big everywhere. And damn it, they were perfect for each other.

He shrugged just as he reached the counter. Whole load of good that knowledge had done him five years ago when he'd embarrassed himself by practically throwing himself at the man.

"What can I get you, Handsome?"

"Hey, Nick. Just a water, please. Sparkling."

"No alcohol?"

"No, not tonight."

Waiting for his drink, Adrian turned around and leaned his back against the counter, scanning the crowd. It was a slow night, highlighted by Nick's availability to take his order that fast, but it was to be expected on a Monday. And yet there he was, looking his best, hoping to get laid. He looked down at his clothes and scowled. He was indeed a bit overdressed for a Monday night. He shifted on his seat, his underwear sticking uncomfortably against his ass. He did hope he'd see Douglas tonight, so perhaps he subconsciously tried to present himself in the best light possible, but really, leather underwear? What was he thinking?

"Here you go."

A cold water was placed in front of him on top of a paper napkin with the club's logo.

"Thanks, Nick."

Sipping his drink and fighting the urge to look back to where Douglas was sitting, Adrian took in the crowd, his nose wrinkling as he perused the faces around him.

Hmmm... Let's see. Nope. Not him. Been there, done that. Uh-uh. Nope. No way, no how. Nope. Oh, not him again.

He sighed. He didn't want any of them. He didn't want to top, to be in control, and most of the guys there were seeking just that. Any other night, this would have been just fine. But not tonight. Tonight he wanted to lose himself in his senses, to put himself in another's hands, to hand over his hard earned control to someone else.

Two sips later and another perusal of the patrons, he gave up. There was only one man he wanted, the same guy he'd been lusting over, for over half a decade.

His eyes returned to Douglas, only to find him staring back at him, a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

"He just got back."

Grateful for the distraction, Adrian turned around to face his friend. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Douglas."

"I'm not interested."

"Yeah, right. I watched your face when you came in through that door and saw him sitting there. Besides..." Nick raised his hand, stopping Adrian's incoming protest. "Besides, I was here five years ago. I remember how you pined over him."

"You're wrong."

"Am I? Go talk with him."

Adrian pursed his lips, shaking his head. "Nope."

“Oh come on, I’m sure he doesn’t remember the incident.”

Adrian’s cheeks burned with renewed embarrassment. “Drop it, man, I’m not going over there.”

“Suit yourself. But I have a feeling you won’t get out of talking to him.”

“And why not?”

A quick jerk of Nick’s head pointed behind Adrian. “Because he’s coming over here.”

Unable to stop himself, Adrian glanced over his shoulder and swore. “Oh, man, I can’t believe this.” Meeting his friend’s eyes, he scowled at him. “You suck, you know that?”

Nick’s laughter was his only answer.

A tanned arm joined his on the counter. Adrian took a swig of his drink, his eyes glued to that arm, watching the play of muscles beneath the smooth skin, the strong wrist and the long, powerful fingers. Oh, those fingers... He could see them holding a whip, pinching his nipples or wrapping around his cock, teasing him out of his mind. His mouth went dry, his dick throbbing furiously behind his fly, and he realized he’d been hard since he first laid his eyes on Douglas.

“May I join you?” The low rumble broke the spell that had taken hold of his mind and sent shivers down Adrian’s spine.

He nodded, his heart beating frantically in his chest. Vinyl and leather creaked as Douglas made himself comfortable on the stool next to him.

“How have you been, Adrian?”

The man’s voice was rich and warm, evoking images of satiny sheets, candlelight, leather and hot sex in Adrian’s mind. He dry-swallowed and pushed the images away. First things first.

“You know my name.”

“Yes. I do. You told it to me five years ago. Remember?”

So much for not remembering.

“You’ve been away.”

“Yes, I was. In London.”

Adrian lifted his head, meeting Douglas’ eyes. “Are you back now?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why what? Why did I leave or why did I come back?”

“Either. Both.”

Oh so gently, Douglas reached out and brushed Adrian’s cheek with his knuckles. Adrian bit back a moan and fought the urge to lean into the touch.

“You.”

“Me what?”

“You are the reason for both.”

Adrian jerked and the hand caressing him fell away. “Me? You’re blaming me for your leaving?”

“No, I’m not blaming you, but you were the reason behind it.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“No, it’s not. I left because I couldn’t get you out of my mind.”

“That’s bullshit. You barely spoke a word to me.”

Douglas broke into a large grin. “I couldn’t afford to talk with you. You were too much of a temptation.”

That couldn’t be true. Douglas was the most handsome man he’d ever seen. Surely he could have any man he wanted. So why was he telling him these things?

“Screw you.”

“Watch your language!”

“Bite me!”

In a blink of an eye, Adrian found himself nose to nose with Douglas, the older man having wrapped a hand around his neck, pulling him forward. His nostrils flared as he took in Douglas’ scent. Leather and a faint hint of

after shave, just enough to inflame his senses, and beneath it all the warm scent of the man, more arousing than all the colognes in the world.

“Listen to me, and listen carefully. First, I don’t care for foul language. Never have, never will. Secondly, I never lied to you, and I have no intention of starting now. Are we clear?”

The voice, while not louder in any way, held a distinct tone of command. He opened his mouth to speak, but as his eyes met Douglas’, he couldn’t find his words.

The hand cupping his neck increased the pressure. Adrian’s eyelashes fluttered and he gasped, his body shuddering and relaxing against the hold.

“Are we clear?”

“Yes. Sir.” The last word came out in a gasp, but Douglas must have heard it because his eyes sparkled with amusement.

“The title is not required, but feel free to use it if you wish.”

Adrian nodded and tried it out again. “Sir.” Yes, it feels right.

Douglas’ hand on the back of his neck started a slow rubbing motion. Adrian’s eyes closed of their own volition and a low rumble rolled through his chest.

“Are you free?”

“Huh?”

“Are you seeing someone?”

Oh my God! Is it really happening or am I dreaming? Oh God, I better not be dreaming.

“Adrian?”

“Oh, sorry. No, I’m not.”

“In that case, may I offer you a drink?”

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why would you offer me a drink? Five years ago you could barely be

in the same room with me.” The hand massaging his neck retreated and Adrian mourned its loss.

“Five years ago you were barely of age and just coming into this lifestyle. I was fifteen years older and far more experienced than you. I had hoped for more than a one-night stand, but you were so young and had so much to discover. I had to leave.”

“Did it occur to you to tell me all that?”

“No, not really.”

Adrian regarded him coldly. “You idiot.”

A dark eyebrow shot up mockingly. “I’m listening.”

“I didn’t want to explore.”

“So what is it you’re saying?”

“You should have come and talked with me. I wanted you, not to play the field.”

“Is that so? In that case, tell me, what’s it gonna be tonight? Will you submit to me? Will you open yourself to me?”

There, that was his chance. Heart in his throat, Adrian found himself gasping for air. There was just one answer, just one option, that would bring him what he needed the most. What he craved.

“Yes.”

Douglas smiled and wound a hand around Adrian, pulling him close. He climbed down off the stool and brushed his lips against Adrian’s in a ghost of a kiss, but even so, the caress sent shivers down Adrian’s back.

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Douglas had taken him down to one of the four dungeons the club offered, the newest of all and one he hadn’t yet had the chance to visit, and asked him to strip. Adrian would have preferred to be completely naked, but that went against the house rules, so he kept on his boots and underwear.

Once he was naked, the older man had asked him to wait for him in the center of the room, eyes closed. So there he was, in the middle of a dungeon cell, exposed and vulnerable, aroused beyond measure at just the thought of it.



Something brushed his shoulder and with a jolt he realized that Douglas had returned.

“Sheesh, it’s just me. Relax.”

His eyes fluttered closed again and he heaved a sigh in relief.

Hands teased his skin, every inch of his exposed body, until he thought he couldn’t take it anymore. Warm lips teased his nipples until they pebbled out and clamps were fastened tight around them, pain shooting through his body, his cock throbbing furiously.

“So beautiful,” Douglas whispered in his ear, just as his palm descended on Adrian’s buttocks again and again.

Leather caressed his face, sliding over his cheekbones, before being fastened securely behind his head, covering his eyes and ears. With these senses diminished, the others heightened.

He could feel Douglas’ body heat as the man moved around him, circling him like a feline stalking his prey. He could picture the look on the older man’s face, having seen it so many times when he’d watched Douglas play—just as others were probably watching them now. How often had he fantasized about being on the receiving end of such a look? He’d been so jealous of all the guys Douglas had taken as play partners. Or to his bed.

Small touches rained across his back and shoulders, his skin breaking out in goose bumps, all thoughts of other play partners leaving his mind. Callused palms wrapped around his hands, lifting them, bringing together behind his neck.

“Keep them there.”

Douglas’ breath tickled the soft skin of his nape, igniting his senses. Padded cuffs were fastened around his wrists. A leather-clad foot pushed itself between his legs, nudging them farther apart. Warm fingers caressed his body, traveling down his spine, over his buttocks, brushing against the sensitive skin of his inner thigh. Adrian fought the need to clench his muscles. More cuffs were fastened on him, secured around his ankles and thighs.

Why this many ties? But he kept the question to himself.

Something colder, sharper, brushed over his shoulder and he shivered in anticipation, bracing himself for the first bite of pain.

Is that a flogger? Is it braided? Is it suede? Oh, let it be suede.

But the stroke didn't come. Instead, a thick leather strap was wrapped around him and fastened securely against his chest. Taking his time, Douglas placed two more cuffs on Adrian, this time around his upper arms, and with a quick jerk he tested each bond's resistance and placement on Adrian's body.

"Are you okay? Not too tight?"

The soft, warm breeze of the man's breath ruffled the hair on the back of Adrian's neck, Douglas' goatee tickling his skin. With a gasp, Adrian's head tilted to allow for better access, his body shaking and cock throbbing.

"Well?"

Suddenly his head was jerked backwards by the scruff of his hair. Adrenaline surged.

"I asked you a question."

Oh, fuck!

"No. I mean yes, Sir."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'm comfortable."

"When I ask you a question, you answer. Is that clear?"

"I'm sorry, Sir. It won't happen again."

A hard smack landed on his already reddened ass, making him jerk.

"You still haven't answered my question. Is that clear?"

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Adrian bit back a cry. "Yes, Sir."

"Good."

The heat of Douglas' body disappeared and Adrian bit back a protest. Without the older man's presence, he felt vulnerable, exposed.

In swift moves, locks were attached to the cuffs' safeties and with a last check, Adrian felt himself being lifted off the ground.

The pressure on the cuffs increased, restricting his movements. He felt the older man arranging his limbs in a more comfortable position. Breath caught in his throat. For a second, the walls closed in on him and the tightness of the bonds became almost unbearable. Douglas' reassuring hand settled on the small of his back and just like that, Adrian felt liberated, like the whole world was his. And this time, when the warmth of the hand disappeared, it didn't matter, because it was replaced by the sweet bite of the flogger.

He was flying, floating on air, his senses high, acutely aware of Douglas' presence. His moves, his scent, the warmth of his body, they all spurred Adrian higher.

Soft blows landed on his back, sending shivers down his spine. Slowly, the lashes of the flogger descended to his ass cheeks, avoiding the tender area protecting the kidneys, their strength increasing as they reached his buttocks. Douglas moved around, brushing his groin against Adrian's, the heat of his arousal burning his flesh, and the soft cords of the flogger were replaced by the hard string of the whip.

Head thrown back, Adrian let himself feel.

"That's it, Baby, go with the pain. Embrace it."

The licks of the whip ran deeper than the flogger's, spreading warmth throughout his body. His mind opened up, each blow taking away some of the pent-up stress and frustration.

"You look so beautiful like this, all soft and mellow."

Hard lashes landed expertly on his already sore ass and then down his thighs, until the pain turned to pleasure and everything else but Douglas disappeared.

The string bit deeper, catching the soft skin of his inner thigh, just under his sack. His balls drew tight, his breath coming out in pants, as the blows zeroed in.

"Work through the pain, Baby. Let it flow."

His breath settled into a rhythm similar to the throbbing of his dick and nipples, the lashes catching him straight against the scrotum and the base of his cock. The strength behind them leveled out, his excitement growing and his skin tingling.

“Still with me, Baby?”

Douglas’ voice, low and gruff, increased Adrian’s arousal. He nodded, his head lolling lazily on his shoulders.

“Talk to me, Baby.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I can’t hear you, Baby.”

The whip bit harder, the blow stinging just right.

“Oh God, yes!”

“You like that, don’t you?”

“Yes, oh God, yes.”

Tension gathered under the skin, body shaking. A quick succession of sharp blows against his balls culminating with a couple of hard, full lashes across his ass and thighs and he exploded. Nerves zinged, muscles relaxed, his body sagged against the bonds, but his mind soared.

The strokes decreased, dropping just often enough just to prolong his flying.

Through a haze, he felt Douglas’ hands caressing him, bringing him gently down from his rush, whispering sweet nothings in Adrian’s ears.

When he gathered himself enough to open his eyes he found himself cradled in the older man’s arms, the hood and clamps gone, the dull ache in his nipples the only reminder of their earlier presence.

“Hi there.”

“Hi yourself. How are you feeling?”

“Great. A little tired.”

“I never realized you were so responsive to pain.”

Adrian could feel the heat rising to his cheeks. He had wanted to make it last, but as it turned out his body had other plans. He tried to stand up but Douglas' arms tightened around him, holding him where he was.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Maybe to you. But you didn't go up in flames at the slightest touch.

"May I ask you something? Two things actually."

His heart sank. Was he going to be asked to leave? "Uhm, sure."

Douglas smiled down at him, his fingers tracing small circles against Adrian's chest. "May I take you home, and how do you like your breakfast?"

The younger man's mouth broke out in a huge grin just as Douglas' lips descended on his.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Born in Romania, land of the Iele and Vlad the Impaler, she'd spent all her life surrounded by books. She rode side by side with d'Artagnan and The Three Musketeers to retrieve the Queen's diamonds, set sail on the Erasmus in search of the Japans, fell in love with Rhett Butler and roamed the Wild West along Old Shatterhand. She walked in the footsteps of the Olympian Gods and searched for Zalmoxis' sanctuary in the Carpathians. In her mind, she'd never been the damsel in distress but rather the knight in shining armor fighting for a cause.*

*With a background like this, turning to writing was no surprise. She discovered erotica early on in life and never looked back. Now she can write anywhere, even in a crowded room or a busy subway station, but she loves solitude.*

*When she's not at her evil day job, she can be found writing or playing with her cat. She welcomes messages from readers and promises to answer all of them as soon as possible, which, knowing herself, won't be that soon.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE CANDIDATES

By Bette Browne

## **Photo Description**

Black and white, two sexy twenty-somethings in suits. The slightly shorter man is reaching up to kiss other, and his left hand, just hovering over the taller man's collar, is tentative. There is an uncertainty there, but an obvious desire. You can almost tell he is wondering whether he is doing the right thing.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*After hating each other as college rivals, now they meet again at a job interview and it is not hate sparks that are flying now.*

*Or whatever you can come up with... enemies to lovers... please HEA!*

*Sincerely,*

*Kimberly*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** rivals to lovers, businessmen, two alpha males, reunited

**Word count:** 17,300

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# THE CANDIDATES

By Bette Browne

## CHAPTER ONE

“Thank you, Mr. Howard, we’ll be in contact,” Mr. Price’s deep voice commanded, finalizing the interview with the brief comment.

“I look forward to it,” Reece said and smiled, outwardly projecting all of the confidence he possessed in spades. As long as he hadn’t come across as too cocky, he had this job in the bag. He was sure of it. He pushed up from the chair and stood, reaching out his hand to Geoffrey Price, the managing director of Price & Associates. He shook it, then each of the other board member’s in turn, saying each man’s name as he did. “Thank you, gentlemen,” he finished and turned for the door, making sure to walk calmly, assuredly; even though, with everything in him, he felt like screaming out “Hell yeah!”

The murmurs and soft discussion had started before he even closed the door behind him, but he didn’t turn back around; instead, he kept his composure, pulling the heavy door of the boardroom closed gently behind him. As soon as it was shut, he fist-bumped the air and shouted a silent *woot*, not caring who was there to witness his display. His confidence would surely work to unnerve his competitors, and that was a good thing, but he darted his eyes around anyway to check if there was anyone still in the small waiting room.

A set of pale blue eyes met his, and Reece faltered for the split-second it took him to process who those eyes belonged to. It couldn’t be. But it was. He pulled himself together and continued walking, passing the owner of that glacial glare, not sparing him a second glance as he passed. Instead, he slung his satchel over his shoulder and strode from the room.

Jesus Christ!

Cameron Fielding, the goddamned fucking bastard.

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Reece hurried from the building, and once he was out of sight, stormed to his car, pulling open the door and throwing his satchel onto the passenger seat. He climbed in, slamming the door closed behind him and just... sat there, his heartbeat and breathing more erratic than they had a right to be. He was rattled, there was no denying it. What the hell was going on? Cameron Fielding? Really?

He could count on one hand the times since they'd left school almost six years ago that he'd thought of the guy. He'd come up in conversation, of course, but only when he ran into other alumni they'd both gone to school with. Other alumni who loved to play the bragging game so typical of young urban professionals—lots of crap where they rubbed each other's noses in anything they could, spouting person-specific taunts like: "Did you hear about Fielding?" or "I heard Fielding got a choice job in Baltimore," or "Fielding's dick's bigger than your dick..."

Okay, he was being ridiculous now.

The simple fact was that Cameron Fielding had always rattled him.

Reece closed his eyes, an image of ice blue ones, totally unlike his own, immediately coming to mind. He slammed his hand on the dash. "Fuck!" He didn't want to be thinking of Fielding's eyes—never again.

Fielding was hot, about the most handsome guy he'd ever seen, in fact, and Reece had never had a problem admitting that—even if those admissions had been made very quietly in the dark of night in his dorm, in his own bed, alone. But that hadn't stopped Reece from knowing straight away that the guy was a Grade-A prick. From their very first class together as freshmen, they'd gotten off on the wrong foot, and things had never improved. "Rivalry" was too polite a term, and "friendly" just never came into the equation. A constant four-year back-and-forth of "one and two" or "two and one"—that was what had defined them.

Reece sat up straighter: That was what *had* defined them—then. Yes, then.

He smiled, finally getting a handle on his emotions. He was being ridiculous. Six years had passed since school, and that was a lot of water under the bridge. He was older now, and hopefully wiser, and that hard-fought

maturity had taught him that the so-called “rivalry” between them had been good for him; it had pushed him to succeed back then. He’d always been a focused kid for sure, but he’d never had such a worthy competitor before Fielding. And if he was honest, Fielding had been the “competitor” who’d helped shape him into the man he was now.

Reece let out a huff. Maybe he should thank Fielding for providing that competition. Instead of sitting there like a dickhead, he could go back and shake the guy’s hand, finally say thank you. And then tell Fielding not to bother with the interview—the job was already his anyway. He chuckled out loud at that. He wasn’t being conceited, just realistic. He’d been headhunted for the position, and the interview had gone well; he was certain the job was his.

He rolled his eyes at himself. It didn’t seem like he’d grown up too much after all.

*Good luck, Cam,* he thought as he started his car. *You’re gonna need it.*

Determined not to spend another moment wasting thought-space on the guy, he exited the parking garage and headed home.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Friday arrived quickly. Two days had passed since the interview on Wednesday, and Reece hadn't heard a thing. Rationally he knew two days wasn't very long, not in the grand scheme of things, but he'd expected the call on Wednesday afternoon—or Thursday morning at the very least. He was so sure the job was his, so why was it taking so long? Numerous things could be causing the delay, he knew that, but it didn't make not hearing any easier. He knew he tended to be... impatient. It wasn't one of his better traits.

"Reece." His personal assistant's voice came through the intercom. "The conference call is set up for five minutes."

"Thanks, Bec," he replied. "I'll be ready in two."

He stared at his computer monitor, the calendar open for the day. He had far too much to do to spend time worrying about a phone call that would come if it was going to come, so he decided to let it go. He'd hear soon enough.

When Simon had called late in the afternoon, it hadn't taken much for his best friend to convince Reece to join him and a few of their friends for beers at the bar. The long August days seemed to make everyone testy, his clients included, and he'd been eager to tear off his tie and share a few cold ones with his friends.

Two beers and a shared plate of hot wings had turned into a cocktail marathon. Reece hadn't eaten near enough for the amount of alcohol he'd consumed, and it was showing. He'd have thought he was old enough to know better: It seemed not!

When had the music gotten so loud, he thought as he finished some overly-sweet concoction—his fifth drink. "Don't want any more of these," he mumbled, not sure who'd heard. "Too fucking sweet."

Conner was talking to Toby on the other side of their table—they hadn't heard him. He peered at them, noticing how close his two friends were... really close. He chuckled and turned to seek out Simon, who'd know what was going on. Simon wasn't in his seat, and Reece wondered how the hell he'd

missed him getting up and leaving. He'd been there a moment ago, so where was he now? He looked around, his eyes settling on their other friend, Tim, and focused, and he sighed. Now that was a nice sight! Tim was talking to a young guy, his hand resting gently on his shoulder, their faces close. The guy was probably only about twenty-one or so, dressed casually. He looked intelligent but relaxed, probably a student on summer vacation. Reece missed those carefree undergraduate days. Not having to worry about anything more important than if your mom would be pissed that you came home so late the night before.

That's how it had been for him. He'd been lucky; he knew that. He'd lived at home over summer breaks, not having to worry about working to pay off student loans. His parents weren't what you'd consider wealthy, but they were comfortable and had been able to support him through school. Paid for his student fees and accommodations. During term, he'd worked a few hours a week to earn spending money, but that was all. It had been easy. Sometimes he craved those days again.

Thinking of school made him think of Cameron Fielding, and it was just as he did that Simon returned, next round of cocktails in hand. Reece picked up a glass, studied the deep red drink with what looked to be pomegranate seeds, and then swallowed it in one gulp.

"Settle down, sweetheart," Simon chided, pushing the remaining glasses toward their other friends. "What's got you upset?"

The invitation to divulge was all he needed. "Did I tell you who I saw on Wednesday—at the interview?" Noting that Tim hadn't returned for his drink, Reece reached for it, taking a sip to claim it as his.

Simon quirked a brow, shook his head, and then leaned in, intrigued. "No, you didn't. Who?"

"Well..." Reece started, gesticulating with his hands—a sure sign he'd had a few drinks. "I'd just finished the interview. It was fucking awesome, man... went down like a dream, you know." He could hear that he was rambling but didn't care. "I was stoked, so sure the job was mine... in the bag, you know. Anyway, I walked out of the boardroom..." Reece picked up what had been Tim's glass and took another mouthful, "What the hell is this?" he protested.

“It’s Tim’s drink, not yours. If you didn’t like the first one, I don’t know why you—” Simon stopped talking when Reece rolled his eyes, and took a deep breath. “You were saying.”

“You won’t believe who was there as well.” Reece pressed, his slurred words insistent.

“Not unless you tell me, no. Now spit it out.”

“Fielding.” Reece almost hissed out the word. Simon narrowed his eyes, and Reece guessed he was trying to recall who that was. “You know. Cameron *fucking* Fielding.”

A light seemed to go off. “From college, that Cameron Fielding?” Simon asked.

“You’d better believe it,” Reece sneered.

“Well fancy that,” Simon added, a hint of humor in his tone. “It’s been a while since you’ve mentioned him. He used to rile you up.”

“I couldn’t believe it, seeing him in that room.”

Simon’s eyes sparkled. “Did you say hi?”

Reece eyeballed his friend. “Hell no!”

That caused Simon to chuckle. “Why the *hell* not?”

“Because... because...”

Simon was shaking his head now. “Reece, it’s been what... seven or eight years? Don’t you think it’s time to get over it?”

“Hell no!” he repeated. Fielding had made his life miserable; he’d never forget that.

“You’re a big boy now, Reecy. Time to put on your big boy tighty-whities and... Get. Over. It.”

Reece could hear that his friend was laughing at him, but he didn’t care. “Never!” he protested. There was enough alcohol in his system that every stubborn bone in his body was holding defiant. “Never!”

Simon guffawed loudly. “I think Reecy doth protest too much.”

“Fuck you,” Reece sneered, picking up the cocktail and downing the rest. “Fuck you.”

Simon was still laughing as Reece stormed from the bar. At least he found a cab easily.

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Reece opened a bleary eye to the bright sunlight of a ridiculously clear August morning. Grumbling about the injustice of it all, he pulled the light sheet that was barely covering his torso over his face to block out the headache-inducing rays. It was already hot and he didn’t want to be covered up, but the sun was hurting his eyes. Why hadn’t he shut the fucking curtain the night before? Oh, he knew why—because he’d been too drunk to care.

He pulled himself out of bed a half hour later, the stifling air under the sheet finally getting to be too much for him, and he dragged his hung-over body to the shower. Vowing to never again drink cocktails, and then laughing at the hypocrisy of a pledge every hung-over bastard in the world made only to renege on it at the next opportunity, he luxuriated in the tepid water of his shower—not too hot this morning because he needed to cool down.

When he emerged from his bedroom, clean and refreshed, wearing only a pair of soft, worn cargo shorts to provide a bit of modesty for his neighbors, he felt okay. Some aspirin and two large cups of strong coffee and he felt even better. He got on with his Saturday morning, his chores at least keeping his mind occupied and away from Simon’s taunts. He was just putting a final load of washing into the dryer when his cell rang, and he hurried to his stereo to pull it off the dock and answer it, not bothering to read the caller ID.

“Yo,” he called out, over-compensating for the music, even though it had stopped as soon as he removed the phone from the dock.

“And a good morning to you, too, sweetheart.” The voice was almost too joyous.

“Simon,” he growled, for a split-second considering hanging up on him.

“Don’t be like that, Reecy. Surely you’re not *still* angry with me.”

He wasn’t really angry with Simon at all. His friend’s taunts had been playful, if a little close to home. He was angry with himself.

“No,” he answered, “even if you are a jackass.”

Simon burst into laughter. “That I am, sweetheart, that I am.”

Reece rolled his eyes at Simon’s endearment, deciding not to comment. It was better that way. Commenting generally only added fuel to the fire, resulting in more use of the name Simon had gifted him, in a very tongue-in-cheek way, when they were juniors in high school and just realizing they both liked guys... just not each other.

“And to what do I owe the pleasure of a phone call so soon after being in your illustrious company?” Not that multiple phone calls over the course of a weekend were unusual between the best friends.

“I thought I’d tempt you to dinner, my treat, and you can tell me all about the interview, seeing as we kind of got off track. And I’ll listen without judgment, I promise.”

Last night was the first time he’d seen Simon since the interview on Wednesday, and even though Simon was usually the first person he’d have bragged to about the success of the interview, he wasn’t feeling so confident now. He felt like he was on a roller coaster: up one minute and down the next. “Thanks for the offer, man, but I’ll take a rain check. I’m gonna head over to Mom and Dad’s and have lunch with them, maybe a swim, and then have a quiet night at home. I need to wind down.”

There was a moment’s pause before Simon spoke. “Okay, but before I go, you said that the interview went well.”

“It did. I felt over the moon when it was finished.” Saying those words pumped him up a bit, and he stood a little straighter.

“Well, if that’s the case—and forget about any of the other candidates—then the job might be yours. If ‘someone else’ gets it, then it wasn’t meant to be.”

Reece smiled at his friend’s words. “When did you get so wise?”

Simon chuckled, and Reece could almost visualize him preening like a peacock. “I have my moments.”

“You do, my friend.”

“Does that mean you’ll come out to dinner?” Reece could hear the slight imploring tone to Simon’s voice.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I need the down time.”

“Okay. Say hi to the folks for me.” Simon had known Reece since grade school and had spent as much time at the Howard house as at his own.

“I’ll give Mom a big kiss for you.”

“And your dad too... please.” The “please” was drawn out and sultry.

Reece rolled his eyes but played along. “Eeeeeeeew. That is just all kinds of wrong.”

“But he’s soooo handsome.” Simon kept ribbing.

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Love you,” Simon added.

“Love you too.”

Reece ended the call and chuckled. Simon had indeed lifted his mood. His friend was right. If the job was his, then he’d get a call, probably on Monday; if it wasn’t, then he’d keep working where he was. He really liked his job; he’d only been interested in the other because they’d come after him. And he wasn’t too proud to say it had stroked his ego. It would be a new challenge, with a very attractive pay increase, but he’d live without it. And if he got it, then he’d celebrate. And whether it was his or not, either way he’d never have to bother about Cameron Fielding again.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Reece picked up his keys and sunglasses off the hall table then opened the front door, pulling it closed behind him as he walked out into the fourth-floor hallway of his apartment building. The space was quiet, no noise at all coming from behind any of his neighbors' heavy doors, and it reminded him how much he liked the privacy this complex afforded him. His apartment wasn't huge, but the two bedrooms and combined living and dining rooms were more than enough for him. The modern kitchen and well-appointed bathroom, even if they weren't large—it was less to keep clean as his mother often reminded him—and having his own car space in the underground parking garage were what he loved most. He could see himself living there for years, as long as the owners didn't decide to sell. Choosing to use the stairs instead of the lift, he pushed open the door at the end of the hall and began to jog down. He was halfway down the stairwell when his cell rang again. Thinking it was probably Simon begging him to reconsider dinner, he pressed the answer key without looking at the display.

“Yo.” He breathed loudly as he kept moving.

“Ah, Mr. Howard...?” The voice and an uncomfortable pause made Reece stop in his tracks. *Shit!*

“Yes, this is Reece Howard.” *Fuck, fuck, fuck*, he cursed silently.

“Mr. Howard, this is Geoffrey Price. Do you have a moment?”

Reece's heart was beating a thousand miles a minute, but he forced himself to take a few deep breaths and focus. “Of course, Mr. Price.”

“Sorry to phone you on Saturday, but we wanted to move forward with this position as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Mr. Price,” Reece repeated, silently smacking himself on the head at being so lame. “I mean, sir, that is not a problem.” He rolled his eyes. *Get a grip, dude.*

Geoffrey Price chuckled, instantly easing Reece. “Mr. Howard—Reece—the panel was very impressed by your interview on Wednesday. You are definitely the front-runner for the position.”

So, this wasn't a job offer, but Price's words made Reece feel confident—he was the *front-runner*. If there wasn't a real chance the job was his, he wouldn't be getting this call now.

Mr. Price continued, "We do have another candidate who impressed us as well." Reece's heart dropped at those words, sure of who Geoffrey Price was referring to. "I realize this is extremely short notice, but if you would be willing, and able, to take vacation time next week, I have a task I would like you to complete. Think of it as a trial of sorts."

Reece wasn't sure what to say. Next week? Monday? Could he wangle that? His head was spinning with what he had planned for the upcoming week.

"You would be financially compensated of course, in lieu of vacation-time lost," Mr. Price added. "I realize this may prove difficult to arrange seeing as today is Saturday, and it is not an ultimatum by any means, nor is a test of your commitment to the job—old or new." Mr. Price chuckled again. "But this opportunity became available on Friday, and in my opinion, it is the perfect way to see if the job would suit you like I think it will."

Reece listened to everything Mr. Price had to say. He'd heard his assurances that it was not necessary that he do this, but he knew if he really wanted the job it was. Not only that, he wanted to do it—whatever "it" was. He wanted a chance to prove he was the better candidate. He'd been told he was the front-runner, but if he said no to this and Cameron Fielding was offered the chance to go instead, and took it, then the job was gone. Mr. Price could make all the assurances in the world, but if Fielding got a chance, he would prove himself, and then the job would be lost.

"I'll do it," he blurted out, sucking in a breath before repeating in a more literate way, "I'll make myself available, sir."

"Are you sure you don't need a few hours to make sure you can get the time off?" Mr. Price asked, but there was a happy tone to his voice that Reece liked.

"No, sir, I'll make sure I'm available. What do you need me to do?"

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First, Reece called his mom to tell her he wouldn't be over for lunch. Then he called Bec, to discuss the upcoming week and work out a plan so that she could survive it without him. He admitted to her what had happened with Mr. Price and, happy that he had her full support and confidence, called his immediate manager, lying through his teeth about why he needed the time off on such short notice. Finally, Reece opened the favorites on his phone: Simon.

"Reece, my man, have you changed your mind about tonight?" Simon's voice was hopeful, and Reece had no intention of disappointing him.

"Well, actually..." he started, quickly running through the conversation with Geoffrey Price and how he'd managed to snag a week's personal leave at such short notice. Simon was impressed.

"That definitely calls for a celebration!" He was filled with enthusiasm now. "I think dinner *and* dancing are required. I'll rally the gang. The cab will pick you up on the way. Seven thirty?"

"I'll be ready." Reece was excited, any trace of his hangover long gone, and ready to celebrate.

He'd already done his laundry for the week and cleaned the house, so all he needed to do now was pack a bag for the next week and spend the rest of the afternoon working to lessen the load for Bec. The hours disappeared quickly, and only when the sun was low enough in the sky to shine into his living room and across his computer screen did he realize it was almost seven PM. He turned off the laptop and hurried to the bathroom.

When Simon texted at 7:25 to say the cab would be there in ten minutes, Reece was dressed and swallowing the last mouthful of a cold beer—it wasn't his first. He trashed the empty bottle, turned off the lights, and for the second time today, picked up his keys and pulled his front door closed behind him, deciding to use the elevator to get downstairs rather than the stairwell this time.

The cab had just pulled up when he walked out of the building. The back door opened and Simon leaned out. "Let's do this!"

Reece climbed in, said hi to Toby, who was next to the driver in the front seat, and clapped Simon on the shoulder. "Yeah, let's do this."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Thick ropes of come shot from Reece's dick as Cameron continued to stroke him. He blinked open his eyes, expecting the other people around them to realize what was happening and be looking at him in horror, but now, with his eyes open, there was no one, and the music wasn't music at all, but the incessant drone of his alarm, and the hand stroking the orgasm from his cock wasn't someone else's.

There was no club crowd, no dance floor. The dim light was nothing more than his bedroom at dawn, and he was alone, alone and naked in his bed, a pool of semen cooling quickly on his belly.

"Jesus Christ," Reece said to no one as his breathing settled, his thumb swirling in the come on his belly, and his head beginning to throb.

He got out of bed and went straight for the shower, his head pounding with every step. He needed to wash off the evidence of his dream, and fast. He replayed the night before: the cab, dinner with his friends, the clubs, the *many* drinks, and no sight of Cameron Fielding at all. He'd been discussed, joked about even. Reece had relished Simon's taunts about the man he was victorious over again—well almost. How that had led to a dream, he didn't know. The sooner he completed his assignment and got the job for certain, the better. He needed to be rid of Cameron Fielding once and for all.

The water, warm this morning, sheeted over his shoulders, relaxing him, but his mind wouldn't let him forget. He cringed as memories of the dream came to mind, hating that he'd had it, hating more that a demanding dream-version of Cameron Fielding calling him "baby" had made him come.

*"I know you want me," Cameron whispered close to his ear. The voice a mere breath in the loud room, but still he could make out every word... every syllable. The heat radiating off the body behind him was too much... too close, even in the over-heated, over-crowded, over-sensitized environment that the club crowd around them was generating. "You've always wanted me."*

*He had. Oh god, he had. So. Fucking. Much.*

*“Yes. God yes,” Reece moaned, his body instinctively pushing back. The hard length he could immediately feel pressed against the crease of his ass like an invitation for carnal pleasure making him push back even harder. He wanted Cameron desperately—had wanted him then, and he wanted him now.*

*“So if you wanted me, why were you such a prick to me?” Cameron inquired.*

*Had he been? Yeah, he supposed he had. A real bastard. But then so had Cam—*

*“I couldn’t blame you. I wanted to hate you most of the time too”—Cameron nuzzled his nose against the sensitive skin behind Reece’s ear—“but... I didn’t.”*

*Reece’s breath hitched and his voice cracked. “You didn’t?” He knew the response sounded pathetic, needy.*

*“I couldn’t hate you and still want to fuck you as much as I did, Reece. And holy shit did I want to fuck you—” Cameron cut off his own words when he began to suck on that same sensitive skin. Reece let his head fall to the side, offering up every muscle, every nerve ending, to whatever Cameron would give him.*

*“You did annoy the shit out of me though,” Cameron continued. “Always right there with me, competing with me for top marks, for all the best projects... and now even jobs.” Reece felt a hand cup his cock through the front of his dress pants and squeeze. “Maybe I should thank you. I should thank you and give you just what you want. I should thank you for making me work harder to stay at my best—to be the best.”*

*Everything in Reece wanted to reject that—he was the best—and he tensed, causing Cameron to chuckle. But even though he wanted to turn around and tell Cameron Fielding to fuck off, he still wanted the guy with every cell of his body.*

*“You hate that don’t you? You hate me reminding you that I’m your competition.” Cameron subtly thrust his hips again, keeping his hand firmly cupped around Reece’s erection. “I am the best, Reece. Let me show you, let me show you just how good I can be.”*

*Cameron's other hand moved off Reece's chest to join its twin. Together they undid his belt, unclasped the closure of Reece's jeans, slowly pulling at the zipper until the fly was open and he was exposed. He had no underwear on and his cock popped out, eager, pointing at the crowd. He didn't care. He didn't care as long as Cameron touched him. His eyes closed as he leaned his head back against Cameron's shoulder, Cameron's hot breath still there against his ear, his throat, the side of his face.*

*"Gonna make you feel so good..." Cameron purred as he took Reece's erection into one hand, pushing the other down into his jeans to cup his balls, rolling each between his fingers.*

*"Jesus!" Reece exclaimed, the feel of Cameron's hands on the most private parts of his body sending what amounted to shooting explosions of pure pleasure through him. The man had magic hands. There was no way he would last long. "Jesus!" he said again.*

*"You like that, don't you, Reece?" Cameron squeezed both hands harder. "And right here in front of all these people, just like the little slut I knew you would be."*

*Cameron was right; Reece couldn't care less if he came right here, right now. He didn't care if he shot his load all over the pretty blonde and her handsome, very straight, boyfriend dancing in front of him. He didn't care if the whole crowd saw him do it. All he wanted to do was come, and he wanted to come because Cameron was the one to make him.*

*Cameron's hand kept moving over his now-slick erection. Long, strong pulls that ended at the overly sensitive head, a quick but firm squeeze before he'd run his thumb over the tip... and then do it all again.*

*So fucking good. As good as he knew being with Cameron would be.*

*"So close." Cameron's teeth nibbled at Reece's earlobe as he muttered encouraging words, urging him on. "So hard for me, baby. Such a dirty slut. You gonna come here now, right here in front of all these people? Show them what a slut you are. And then after you come, I'm going to pull these jeans down and ram my cock in your ass. I'm gonna fuck you right here, baby. Right here in front of all these peop—"*

Reece laughed out loud. There was nothing in the world he hated more than being called fucking *baby*!

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## CHAPTER FIVE

Reece pulled to the side of the road. He hadn't wanted to stop, but the choice had been made for him when the front right wheel of his car began to shake violently. Instead of getting out immediately, he looked again at the screen shot he'd taken from MapQuest on his tablet before he'd left home, then compared it to the live version on his phone, pinching the screen out to where the flashing dot said he was on the map. When Mr. Price had filled him in briefly on the task, he'd jumped at the chance to drive his own car. He didn't get many opportunities to take it out on the road, but was now regretting his decision. At best he had a flat tire, at worst, it was something more serious, maybe an axle. He glanced up the long road, shaking his head in disbelief at the poor condition of it. At least he was only ten miles or so from where he needed to be.

He got out of the car and walked cautiously around the bright red body of his vintage '67 Mustang, hoping that if the problem was a flat, the spare wasn't flat, too. The tire was like a pancake, the rim sitting precariously, just missing the gravel. "Fuck," he swore—loudly—a bird of some description taking flight at his outburst. "Fuck, fuck!" At least it was the tire—something he could hopefully fix easily.

The sun was still hot, he could feel the rays licking at his neck already, and he'd only been out of the car a couple minutes. He didn't want to be out in the heat longer than necessary, so he hurried to the back, pushed open the trunk, and pulled out the medium-size suitcase he'd packed his life in for the next couple days, placing it beside the car in the shade. Leaning into the back of the car, he pulled back the carpet covering the spare, praying to whatever deities might listen that it be okay. "Yes!" he shouted when it seemed his prayers had been answered. Now he just had to change the thing. He wished it wasn't five thirty in the afternoon; he'd rather be sitting beside a pool having a drink, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Of course, he *could* get his act together and change the tire instead of bitching about it. If he did that then he could be on his way.



Reece had the jack in place and the lug nuts already loosened when he heard the sound of a car approaching. It was the first since he'd stopped, and he hoped the driver would at least slow down to pass him; a mouthful of dust wasn't something he wanted to deal with on top of the flat tire. He looked past his car toward the sound of the approaching vehicle but couldn't see anything for the low-setting sun. Not that it mattered, he wasn't exactly going to wave them to help or slow down, so he began to wind the jack, lifting the front of the car so he could get the damaged tire off. He'd gotten the front end of the car to the right height and was removing the previously loosened lug nuts into his hand when the approaching car slowed down, pulling in behind him.

*Here we go*, he thought, pushing himself to stand only after he'd pulled off the damaged tire, pushing it out of the way.

Reece heard the driver's door open and close. He glanced in the direction of the car again, but all he could see was the silhouette of a person moving his way. The sun was too bright, and he couldn't stand to look at it, so he turned back.

"Nice wheels," a man said, his voice low and deep, and at a guess, about Reece's age. Reece looked again. Now he could make out a tall frame, possibly jeans and boots, and what seemed to be short hair on the guy's head. Not much really.

"Thanks," Reece muttered and turned again to look away from the sun, returning to his mission of changing the tire.

"A '67?"

Usually Reece loved to talk about his car; today he couldn't be bothered. But not wanting to seem rude, he answered anyway. "Yeah, she is."

"I've always wanted one myself... beautiful machine. I had my eye on a '65 Hardtop a few years back but decided against it. Of course, one of the first Shelby models would be cool..." The man's words petered out, and it was a few moments until he spoke again. "You had this one long?"

Reece had the wheel on now and was hand tightening the lug nuts. "Couple years. She's a hobby really—" He began to lower the jack. "Did a lot of the work myself."

“Impressive.” The guy’s voice sounded like he meant it.

“Thanks.”

The guy hadn’t offered to help, but he was appreciative of Reece’s car and seemed genuinely interested. Now that the tire was on, some of Reece’s anger at the situation had diffused. It probably wouldn’t hurt to let the guy fuss over his car for a bit—and he could hardly discount a fellow Mustang enthusiast. The stranger had moved behind Reece to stand near the hood, and as he stood up so that he could finish with the lug nuts, he looked toward the guy again, hoping to finally put a face to the voice.

Reece’s eyes moved up the guy’s body as he straightened, lingering a little more than was possibly appropriate, but he couldn’t resist; the guy’s body was gorgeous. A hot guy who liked his car; that was a very appealing combination. Careful not to linger too long, he certainly didn’t want to offend some straight guy who was merely interested in his car, he smiled as he reached the guy’s face—the smile disappearing as quickly as it had formed.

“You have got to be fucking joking.”

The guy raised a brow and smiled back.

“Reece. Good to see you, man.”

*What the fuck?*

“I can’t say the pleasure is all mine.” Reece turned back to his car, using the wrench to finish securing the nuts to the wheel—with possibly a bit too much force. He needed to get a grip or he’d strip the nuts.

His mind was racing. What were the odds of Cameron Fielding appearing in his life twice in less than a week after not seeing him for years? About zero to nothing, he decided. It seemed his competition had been tasked with a trial run as well.

“This obviously isn’t a coincidence seeing you again, Fielding. Geoffrey Price asked you here for the week I assume.”

“Well not here, not to the side of a dusty road for sure”—*smart ass bastard*, Reece hissed in his mind—“but to the country club? Yes, yes he did.”

Reece made note of Fielding's mocking tone, determined to change it, and change it quickly. It wouldn't be mocking for long, no, it would be desperate, anxious... Reece would make sure of it.

The spare wheel fitted, he picked up the tools and carried them to the trunk, then walked back to get the flat tire, rolling it back and quickly placing it, the tools, and his suitcase inside. He closed up, checked the ground for anything he might have missed, then seeing nothing there that shouldn't be—except for Fielding's feet—made his way directly to the driver's door. He considered not saying a word and just driving away, but he was better than that, and didn't want to give Fielding the satisfaction of him acting like a brat. Instead, he looked Fielding in the eyes and said, "Enjoy your time away on Mr. Price's dime, Cameron, because that's all you'll be getting out of him."

Fielding curled a lip and his eyebrow lifted again, as if in defiance.

"I want this job, and I intend to get this job," Reece told him.

"I'm glad you want this job, Reece, and I'm glad you intend to win this job." Reece didn't miss the use of "win" as opposed to "get," and he had to admit he was kind of impressed by Fielding's tenacity. "I hope that means you'll give it your best."

"I always give my best, Fielding."

"So I recall."

Reece wasn't sure what it was about Fielding's tone, but the words were a challenge if he'd ever heard one.

"So what you're saying is: Game on!" Reece didn't form it as a question. The intention was clear.

"Oh yes, 'game on'."

Reece was almost excited. That "rivalry" he'd recalled—maybe he didn't resent it at all. Maybe he missed it. This could be fun.

"Bring it."

He climbed into the car and started it up, checked to make sure he wasn't about to drive over the guy, then accelerated away. He was probably being

childish, and it was probably too fast, but the thought of dust settling all over that bastard made him grin.

*Game on!*

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The room Reece had been allocated on the third floor of the Riverdale Country Club's main building was comfortable and tastefully decorated with a plush looking bed. He jumped on it, the action bouncing him like a trampoline, and he laughed, feeling like a kid. No matter how many hotels he stayed in, if they had a comfy bed, he jumped on it—he doubted he'd ever change, nor would he want to. He looked around, taking in the decor and level of amenities, filing it all away for future reference. He briefly considered a shower and then an early dinner in the main restaurant, but it was still light outside. It wouldn't be for long, the sun was close to setting, but there was enough time for him to have a swim instead, then maybe a drink by the pool. It would be a good opportunity to see that part of the complex and assess the staff, especially at this time of day, and it would give him a chance to unwind as well, as long as he managed to avoid Fielding.

His decision made, Reece opened his luggage and pulled out his brand new Andrew Christian swim shorts. They were bright red with a white waistband and had only arrived last week. They were a more conservative style than he might wear in other circumstances, but he'd bought them for just this type of purpose—although the sexy model who'd been wearing them on the website had possibly helped his decision. Reece looked at his image in the mirror, deciding he looked almost as good as that guy had. The shorts fit his trim figure like a glove and made him very appreciative of the early morning workouts he forced his body to complete four days a week. Instead of using the hotel-supplied robe, he grabbed a clean tee and pulled it over his head, running his fingers through his hair to settle any stray strands. He chuckled when his fingers barely got any purchase. He was used to having a bit more hair than his current, and very recent, haircut afforded him.

It was a nice pool, large and rectangular, and surrounded on three sides by the hotel. Floor to ceiling glass windows and doors opened onto the space,

allowing easy access and views from the sitting areas and one of the restaurants. Large stone pavers covered the ground, the artfully placed potted plants and comfortable wicker furniture the perfect accompaniment. It was even better by the far side of the pool, where an infinity edge made it seem like the water was touching the deep green of the golf course beyond, as well as the horizon, which right now was a beautiful palette of gold, orange, and pink.

He found a pool chair, kicked off his flip-flops, and laid down the blue-and-white striped towel he'd picked up as he'd entered the pool area. There were more people at the pool than he'd thought there would be, most of them only sitting to have a drink, but it was a hot evening, and it was an almost perfect setting to spend it in. He'd only been sitting two minutes when a waitress approached to see if he'd like a drink. He ordered, impressed by her attitude and efficiency, and noted that in his head as well. Designing a marketing plan for this place was going to be a piece of cake if things kept on as they were.

The margarita he'd ordered was faultless, and after a few sips of the tart beverage, he placed it on the side table and stood up. He pulled off his tee and walked over to the pool, dipping a toe in to test the temperature. It was perfect.

Reece turned left and made his way to the deep end of the pool. He stood there for only a moment before diving into the clear water, swimming to almost the other end without taking a breath before popping his head up again. He swam to the edge of the pool, fascinated by how the water fell over the edge, his more technical side intrigued enough to lean over and look at how the illusion worked. Then he leaned his arms on the edge and watched the sun, fascinated just as much by the fiery orb falling in what seemed to be fast motion for the last bit of its journey.

As if on cue, the pool lights turned on, turning the water an ice-blue hue. It was almost ethereal. Reece ducked under the water again, popping up after a few feet and then swimming the pool from edge to edge until he'd had enough. His margarita calling him, he climbed the ladder and got out, picking up another towel on the way and scrubbing it roughly over his face and shoulders, then through his hair. He was almost at his chair when he noticed Cameron Fielding sitting on the deck chair beside his.

*So much for a relaxing drink.*

“Water good?” Fielding asked as Reece got close.

“Yeah. You going in?”

*And soon hopefully, so that you’re not annoying me,* Reece added to himself.

Fielding was dressed in swim shorts, so he must have planned to swim, why else would he be poolside? But Reece couldn’t help his eyes falling to the man’s chest; even under a T-shirt, the very defined muscles of his pectorals were noticeable. Reece dragged his eyes away—he didn’t want to notice.

“Not sure. Is it worth getting wet?” Reece wondered why something about that sounded sexual. He chose to ignore it—well, sort of.

“You should. It’s very nice.” Reece smiled thinly as he sat on his chair and picked up his glass.

“Well, after that glowing recommendation I suppose I should.” Fielding stood up, reached for the hem of his tee, and pulled it off. Reece swallowed hard. The guy looked good in a tee, but Jesus, he looked sensational without one. “See you soon.”

Fielding walked away toward the pool, and Reece couldn’t pull his eyes away. If the man had looked good when he was twenty-two, he looked damned sensational now at twenty-eight. He might be the candidate in direct competition for Reece’s job, but that didn’t mean Reece couldn’t admire the visual, did it? Was there really any point in all the animosity? He was the “front-runner”, which meant if he did this task well, the job would be his. Why stress himself out about it. He still intended for it to be “game on”, and that would be fun and keep him on his toes and performing his best, but that didn’t mean he had to stress over it. Fielding was just some guy he knew years ago. He was smart and talented, but Reece was better.

Having determined that in his mind, Reece decided to appreciate the views while they were available—all the views. He brought the salt-rimmed glass of his margarita to his mouth and was just about to take a sip when Fielding looked back over his shoulder in Reece’s direction, and winked.

This was not going to be an easy week.

“Don’t take a breath before you go under,” Reece muttered, maybe a little louder than he’d intended. Fielding turned, a curious expression on his face, then shrugged and continued to the pool. He dived in like a professional.

Reece sighed and downed the remainder of his drink. He’d have liked to ask the waitress to keep them coming, but it seemed he was going to need every bit of his wits about him if he was going to best Fielding.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“Is this seat taken?”

Reece looked up from his newspaper. “Fielding,” he said, his tone disinterested.

Fielding’s smile was wide, his eyes almost sparkling with mischief. “Does that non-answer mean I’m welcome?”

“No.” Reece looked back to the article he was reading.

Fielding chuckled. And Reece continued to read, or was it just *look*, at the page; he couldn’t seem to find the right paragraph. He could feel Fielding hovering, not bothering to move away. Finally he looked up, raising his brow in a silent question, no words needed.

“Come on, man, we’re both here. We’re not exactly strangers. Why eat alone when we could catch up?”

“I like to eat alone,” Reece replied, as if that was all the response required. Fielding’s expression of calm disbelief prompted more before Reece could consider his words. “And besides, I eat alone every morning.” He almost instantly regretted it.

“That’s a shame,” Fielding said, placing his hands onto the back of the chair opposite Reece and leaning his body forward. Reece didn’t want Fielding’s pity. “Must be lonely.”

“It’s only ‘lonely’ if it’s not your choice,” he almost spat back. “I can assure you, it is my choice.”

Fielding nodded as if he understood, but the tilt of his head and confused expression rejected that. “You choose to be alone?”

What the hell was going on?

“Who are you?” Reece asked, his tone full of frustration. “The fucking dating police?”

Fielding seemed to consider this. “Okay, so not only do you choose to live alone, you don’t date either?”



Reece hated that Fielding was right; he didn't date. He had lots of sex, fucked a lot of hot guys, but date? No. He couldn't even remember the last date he'd been on. But there was no way in hell he'd let Fielding know that. "Not that it's any of your goddamned business, but I date. I date plenty."

Fielding only smiled. "Well good for you."

Reece wasn't quite at the boil stage, but his blood was definitely beginning to simmer. This guy! He felt like he was nineteen years old again, frustrated to the point of distraction by Cameron Fielding.

"Do I get to sit down now?"

"No!"

Fielding shrugged. "Your loss." Then he turned and walked away, choosing a table on the other side of the room, his back to Reece.

His loss? Not likely.

A waitress stopped and refilled his coffee; he thanked her and looked back at his paper. He could barely focus on the words, and when he finally gave up trying, he slapped the paper onto the table. The motion caused Reece to look up and across the room—well, he could tell himself that. Fielding sat there, calmly sipping his coffee and looking out at the view of the golf course, seeming to not have a care in the world. Reece clenched a fist, stood up, and as quietly as possible so as not to make a scene, stormed from the room.

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The day progressed well. Reece met with various members of the Riverdale Country Club's management and marketing teams, looked over reports and budgets, took tours of the grounds and facilities, then retired to his room mid-afternoon to work on his presentation. He was happy with his progress, and the hours passed by quickly. When he closed his laptop just before five, he was ready for a break. He was having dinner with the club's General Manager and his wife, but not until seven thirty. As tempting as it was to visit the pool again and have a swim, he was cautious about doing so; he really didn't want to run into Fielding again—he'd done his best to avoid the guy all day and had succeeded—but he needed to get out of the room and

move. He usually exercised in the mornings, preferred to in fact, but a visit to the gym now was probably just what he needed.

Ten minutes later, he was dressed in his gym clothes and starting up a treadmill. He couldn't be bothered with weights, deciding instead to jog. It *was* just what he needed, almost feeling the tension drain away as his feet paced out mile after mile.

While he jogged, Reece watched people come and go, each doing their own thing—it was fun to people watch, relaxing him more. The gym overlooked the pool area through more of the large glass windows and was a nice spot to be, and would have been even if he wasn't working out. He felt a bit envious of the people using the pool. More were in the water today, some just paddling around and others swimming laps. He could imagine the feeling of the water on his body, and he wanted it.

Screw Cameron Fielding. He was going to the pool.

He'd worn his Speedo under his gym shorts in case he felt like a spa or sauna, so he didn't even have to go back to his room. He stopped the treadmill, not bothering to cool down, thinking he'd swim some laps instead, and left the room, going straight for the pool area. He found a pool lounge close to the outdoor shower, and as tempted as he was to just strip off and jump in the pool, he was very sweaty and didn't imagine he'd be real popular if he did. Instead, he took off his shoes, socks, shorts, and tank, placing them neatly under the chaise. The shower was nice on his skin, cool, and he took a moment to run his hands over his body and rinse away the perspiration from his workout. His heart rate was dropping though, so he didn't linger. He needed to get into that pool.

Reece turned the water off, not bothering with a towel; he was about to get wet again anyway. He walked instead to the edge of the pool and readied himself to dive in. A strange feeling passed over him, and he looked across to the other side of the pool. Fielding was sitting at a table, beer in hand, watching him. Actually, watching wasn't the right word; Fielding was leering at him. Reece shivered, and it had nothing to do with the temperature of the air. The beer was half empty, which mean Fielding had been there a while,

long enough to see him shower. Reece wasn't sure how he felt about that—weird for sure. He wondered how he'd missed seeing him there. If he had, he would have turned around as soon as he entered the pool area and left—wouldn't he?

It seemed like minutes passed, but Reece knew it was only seconds, as Fielding continued to watch him, and he stood there and let him. *What the hell?* Almost shaking himself out of his daze, Reece readied himself again to dive into the water, but he allowed himself one more glance across the pool. Fielding smiled, his lips curling almost seductively, and then lifted his beer.

Reece dived into the pool.

His heart was beating crazily in his chest as he pushed himself through the water, and he knew exertion had little to do with it. Stroke after stroke, lap after lap, not once allowing himself to look again in the direction Fielding had been sitting. When he finally completed twenty-five laps of the pool and stopped at the edge, Fielding was nowhere to be seen. And Reece couldn't help but wonder when he had left.

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"I'm glad you are enjoying your stay, Reece." Mrs. Richards using his name brought Reece back into the conversation, and he smiled, hoping it would seem as though she'd had his full attention.

"I am, thank you." He avoided flicking his eyes to the table across the room—he'd done enough of that tonight. "The club truly is a credit to all involved." She beamed and looked at her husband, obviously very proud of him. It was a treat to be around such a warm and loving couple. "I believe I can put together a very forward-thinking proposal. One I hope will impress Mr. Price and your board."

"We wish you the best of luck, Reece."

"I'm not sure luck will have anything to do with it," Reece replied, full of confident cheek, and then he winked at Mrs. Richards.

"Something tells me to believe you, dear."

They all chuckled.

Mr. Richards rubbed his wife's hand on the table. The move was sweet and reminded Reece of his own parents—he wondered if he'd ever have something like that in his future.

“Reece, I hope you don't mind if we call it a night,” Mr. Richards said. “It's been a big week for us, and we're still waiting on that phone call.” The Richards had explained how they were waiting for their only daughter to go into labor any time.

“Of course I don't mind,” Reece replied honestly. “I hope you hear something soon. I don't envy women having to go through childbirth.” He shared an anxious look with Mr. Richards.

“You men,” Mrs. Richards chuckled. “Abigail will be fine. It's her father and husband that I'm worried for.”

“Tate and I will be fine.” Mr. Richards rose then pulled out his wife's seat. “Let's get out of here; we'll call on the way home.” Mrs. Richards seemed to like the sound of that idea. “Thanks again for joining us, Reece. I do wish you the best,” he said.

“Thank you.” Reece hoped he'd get a chance to work with Mr. Richards again, he was a good man. “If you don't mind, I'll finish my coffee then be off to bed as well. I'm having a round of golf in the morning, so I'd best be rested for it.”

“Come and see me if you get a chance and tell me how you found the course,” Mr. Richards offered. “I'll tell you a few of my more *humorous* anecdotes over that drop of Scotch I was telling you about.”

Reece could wait for that—Scotch was definitely not on his list of fabulous things!—but he nodded agreement and stood to see the couple off. As soon as they were out of sight, he beckoned for the waiter. “A refill please,” he asked, indicating his coffee.

“Certainly, sir.” The waiter hurried away.

Reece finished the coffee left in his cup and settled back in his chair, then allowed his gaze to drift. He really should have left, but he was intrigued enough to stay. Fielding was still sitting at the table. He was with another man,

a good-looking guy about the same age. They seemed comfortable together, had talked and laughed during most of their meal. Reece knew that because he'd struggled to keep his eyes to himself, glancing their way at almost any opportunity. He'd been able to get away with it though because Fielding had his back to him.

The waiter returned with the coffee. "Thanks." The man nodded and left.

Reece wondered about the draw he felt, wondered why he was still sitting here when he could have left the room with the Richards. Was he curious in a business sense, or was it something else? He certainly felt unsure of his motives. Since that look this afternoon at the pool, he'd been out of whack. Not like before, when he had been just annoyed, but something different.

Fielding laughed, the sound was deep, joyful. Reece felt warmed by the sound, but he stopped himself when he felt his lips lifting. Fielding's dinner partner laughed, too. There was no smile for that; instead, there was a growl in his gut that made the coffee he'd just swallowed sit uncomfortably. Reece lifted his cup, deciding when the smell of the strong brew reached his nose to not finish the rest; instead, he pushed out his chair and stood, leaving the room as quickly as was possible.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

The ninth fairway curled easily around the bottom edge of the country club's main building, ending at the green, which when completed, left the players only fifty feet from the Player's Bar. Reece liked this setup a lot.

The three men he'd played the first nine holes with were nice guys, two on the board and one a member of the club. They were all older than him, in their fifties at a guess, but they were interesting and had kept the conversation current. Plus they'd offered a lot about their experiences with the club. A lot that Reece could use in his quest for this job.

"You played well, Reece, it's good to see some young blood out there on the course."

"Thanks, Tom. I wish I had more time," *and inclination*, he thought. "I might be able to improve my handicap if I did," he schmoozed expertly as he took a seat and picked up a glass of cool iced tea. All the men laughed at that and he joined in, liking how his morning was playing out.

That was until board member Robert called out in a loud hearty voice, "Here they are," as he looked over Reece's shoulder.

Tom and Pete had glanced that way too, large smiles on both their faces, and Reece turned to see who was joining them. "They" were another foursome, obviously just finishing the ninth as well, their hair damp around their foreheads as they came out from the sun. Three of the men were older, like Tom, Robert, and Pete, the other not. Fielding. Why should he be surprised? It seemed par for the course at this place—bad pun definitely intended.

"Join us," Tom offered, "I'll call for more drinks." He motioned to the hovering waiter.

The men sat in the available seats, Fielding in a rush to lay claim to the chair beside Reece. Reece sighed.

"Have a good round?" he asked as he sat, leaning ever so slightly toward Reece; his words so polite they almost oozed from him. Reece could hardly ignore the man when six others were sitting and listening to their conversation.

“Sure.”

Not put off by Reece’s simple response, Fielding added, “Me too. Would have liked a few less on the card but didn’t do too badly—twelve. Hopefully, I’ll find a few on the next nine.” Fielding laughed at his own joke.

Reece took a drink of his iced tea as he digested Fielding’s words. He didn’t answer immediately, but the man had been so self-effacing that he couldn’t help reply. “Twelve over par isn’t too bad. It’s a difficult course. I don’t like your chances of gaining them back though; I’ve been assured the second nine is even harder.”

“So they say.” Fielding’s voice was soft and calm, as if his words were meant only for Reece’s ears. “And how did you go? Any under par.”

“I wish.” Reece smiled, his words sincere—he’d love to better his handicap even if he barely found time to play golf these days—and nodded his head at the possibilities. He automatically turned his head in reaction to join the conversation, bringing his eyes to meet Fielding’s—they were bright, the corners touched by tiny laugh lines. “I did hit par on the second and sixth though.”

“Nice.” Fielding actually seemed impressed. “What did that leave you with at the end?”

“Seven over.”

Fielding’s eyes widened. “Impressive.”

That was the second time Fielding had used that word to Reece, and he wasn’t sure how to take it, but for some reason he didn’t doubt its sincerity.

“Maybe we’ll get a chance to play a round together some day,” Fielding said. He almost sounded hopeful.

Reece shrugged. He wasn’t ready to say that maybe they would, but he wasn’t ready to say no either.

The conversation went on around them, Reece conscious all the time of the man sitting beside him, so conscious, in fact, that he was paying little attention to what was being said until he heard his name, followed immediately by, “Good idea, Robert. I’ll swap with Cameron... give the boys a chance to compare their long drives.”

Reece sat up straighter and looked at Tom. He was about to refuse the offer when Fielding beat him to it. “As long as you don’t mind, Mr. Johnson.”

Tom clapped Fielding on the shoulder. “It’s Tom, Cameron, and no, I don’t mind at all. I’ve been wanting to show off my new clubs to Greg since I got them.” The older men laughed as if that statement was the funniest thing in the world. Reece looked at them all like they were mad, then he looked at Fielding.

Fielding was faced away from Reece, but then he turned his head, looked at Reece, and smiled. He didn’t drop his eyes—Reece felt the moment drag out—but then seemed to realize it and shrugged as if apologetic. About what, Reece wasn’t sure: golf maybe, but he guessed not. It was almost as if the guy didn’t want to put him out... in any way. Reece shrugged back. It couldn’t hurt to play nine holes of golf with the guy.

“Let’s get to it then, the day waits for no one.” He surprised himself with his forceful direction, standing up rapidly and moving toward the bathrooms for a quick break before they began play. It almost felt like a self-imposed time-out.

A few deep breaths and a silent pep-talk to his image in the mirror and Reece was ready to rejoin the group. He had his hand on the door, ready to pull it open, when it opened before he had a chance. Robert strode into the room.

“Ah, Reece, my man. Ready for some golf?” Robert clapped him on the shoulder but didn’t move away. He was a little close, and it was Reece who took a step back to provide some space.

“Sure.” He smiled, trying to make his words seem sincere. “Hopefully, I can lose a few strokes off that scorecard on the back nine.”

“I hope you do,” Robert said pleasantly, but his eyes lingered a little longer than was polite.

The appraisal was flattering but unwanted, and Reece decided to remove himself from the situation. “See you out there,” he said as he moved to leave the room.



“You will,” Robert replied as Reece walked out the door. When it shut behind him, Reece breathed a sigh of relief. Now he’d have to keep an eye on Robert *and* Fielding. So much for a relaxing morning of golf.

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It was hard to stay annoyed with Fielding, though. It was as if he knew how to break down Reece’s walls with just a smile. Reece remembered his mother often telling him as a child to smile at people, regardless of whether they smiled at you. No one could resist a smile, or so she’d said. He wondered if Fielding’s mother had said the same thing to him. No matter how often their eyes met, Cameron would smile at Reece—over and over. Reece was finding it hard to resist.

Reece spent a lot of the morning trying to figure the guy out. None of the antagonistic Cameron he remembered from college was to be found now. He’d determined that Fielding was either very confident in his capabilities to get the job and that’s why he was so relaxed this morning, or he couldn’t care less. Even though Reece doubted that to be the case, he wasn’t going to let it bother him. Tomorrow they’d have their proposals completed and be back home. Today he was going to enjoy a game of golf.

Having Cameron smile at him was one thing, watching him hit a golf ball was another. He had an amazing swing, strong and controlled; combined with the image of him in his navy polo and dark-grey slacks, it was quite a picture.

And Reece wasn’t the only one noticing. How he hadn’t discerned that Robert Johns was gay right from the beginning he’d never know. Whether morning tea or a change of partners had warmed him up or not, the man was sure making his preferences known now. Reece began to watch the man flirt, both with Cameron and himself. It was an interesting study.

Robert was a nice guy. Reece liked him well enough; he certainly didn’t have an issue with him, or the flirting. He’d been hit on in much more aggressive ways than what Robert was doing before, so that was fine. But what he began to notice was an almost desperation about the man, and it affected him.

He remembered back to Mr. and Mrs. Richards the night before, and how he’d compared them to his parents. When he looked at Robert, he wondered if

he'd ever had something like that in his life. Pete spoke about his own family, as had Tom before he had changed to the other group of four, but Robert made no mention of anyone. Reece knew he might only be single now, and being single was certainly not an indicator of happiness, but Robert—probably the first person to ever do so—made him question it all.

Did he want to be a perpetual bachelor? Maybe he was being ridiculous, he was only twenty-eight after all, but was he becoming like Robert? Did he want to? Hell no, he didn't. One day he wanted something more, something like his parents had. He wondered if it was time to stop screwing around and look for something more serious. He could go on a date, or two. It wouldn't be the worst thing. Might even be fun.

Reece found himself looking at Cameron. He'd just hit the ball, driving it far along the fairway, the ball going straight and long. "Well done," he said as he passed Cameron leaving the tee. He bent down and placed his own ball, readying himself with a few practice swings. He looked at Cameron before he took the swing, gaining yet another smile. He might have to take him up on that offer of a game of golf some other time—now that could be fun.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Mind if I join you?”

Reece lifted his head from his book and looked at Cameron. He wondered when he’d gone soft, or maybe he *had* grown up; he sure couldn’t seem to hold on to his grudge anymore.

“Sure.”

Cameron threw his towel over the chaise’s striped cushion and sat down, keeping his feet firmly on the ground. His elbows were on his knees, his hands hanging loosely between his legs, and he was looking straight at Reece. “Big day. Big few days actually.”

Yeah, it had been. Between the meetings, the research, the dinners, and the golf, he was exhausted. It wasn’t anything he wasn’t used to, these things went down that way, but he’d pushed himself that little bit extra this time. Oddly enough, the person he had to thank, or curse, for that was Cameron.

“You all ready to finish up tomorrow?” Cameron seemed genuinely interested.

“Yeah, all ready. Finished my presentation this afternoon.” He wanted to let Cameron know he was organized. “You?”

“I’m right where I need to be.” That was an odd way of putting it, but it meant the same thing Reece supposed.

Reece studied Cameron, the handsome face, the huge smile, and decided he really didn’t want to talk about anything to do with Riverdale Country Club any more today. There were far more interesting topics at hand.

“I was trying to decide whether to do laps first or have a drink, but I’ve probably had enough drinks for today.” He spared a quick thought back to lunch and wondered if Cameron was doing the same, considering the grin on his face. “Do you have a preference?”

“I think a swim sounds perfect.” His smile was warm as he added, “You did twenty—or was it thirty laps yesterday?”

*So he had been there watching the whole time.* The realization made Reece happy.

“Twenty-five, but I had been in the gym first—didn’t want to push myself *too* hard.” Reece liked watching Cameron swallow his emotion, his face shifting at the words, or was it at his tone? “I was thinking maybe fifty today. That’s not even a mile in this pool. You game?”

Cameron’s blue eyes looked determined. “Let’s do it.” Reece liked his intent, it was sexy. And he had no doubt of Cameron’s ability; he wasn’t just blowing hot air. He’d seen the guy dive and swim the pool, and he’d sure taken note of his fit body. He’d keep up.

“Okay.” He let his actions say the rest, standing and pulling off his tee, allowing a moment for Cameron’s eyes to move up and down his body—liking the feel of his appreciative eyes. Maybe a bit too much; he could feel his dick stirring. He abandoned his mini-striptease and turned for the pool, not waiting once he got to the deep end.

Cameron matched Reece stroke for stroke as they powered up and down the pool. Each time he took a breath he could see long arms cutting through the water at his side, urging him on. It was nice to have someone who kept up with him; although, when he thought about it, that’s what Cameron had always done. They were both overachievers. In fact, they were very alike.

Fifty laps over, Cameron met Reece at the edge of the pool. Both men were breathing deeply, and Reece watched with interest as Cameron’s chest rose and fell with each deep breath. It was an attractive sight. When Cameron shook his head and then pushed a hand through his short but very thick hair, it took everything in Reece not to reach out and do it as well. He wanted to touch the dark spikes; in fact, he wanted to touch every part of Cameron’s body.

“The sun’s about to set.” Reece wasn’t expecting the words, and he looked to Cameron’s face. Cameron’s smile was wide, inviting; Reece smiled back. “Let’s move over there and watch it,” Cameron said, tipping his head in the direction of the pool’s infinity edge.

“Sure.” Reece didn’t know what else to say, but he allowed Cameron to swim the few strokes to that edge of the pool and then followed him.

“It really is a nice spot here.”

“Hmm,” Reece agreed, but he wasn’t really watching the sunset. It was Cameron’s profile that had his attention: strong jaw, straight nose, lush lips.

Cameron broke the spell when he turned and smiled. Reece decided he really liked Cameron’s smiles—a lot—but when Cameron turned back for the last moments of the setting sun, he did too. The view was magnificent, with similar colors to Sunday night, but somehow even better, brighter, bolder. A bit like how he felt. Like a rolling stone, gathering moss as he rolled down the hill—but it wasn’t moss he was gaining, it was attraction, every smile and laugh building the feeling inside him.

Feeling bold, he let his arm float through the water, his elbow grazing against the skin of Cameron’s arm. He could deny it was on purpose if Cameron’s reaction was negative, but he hoped it wouldn’t be. Reece had held his anger in too long, and he wanted to finally let go of it. That didn’t mean he had any intentions of renegeing on his determination to get this job, but he didn’t have to resent Cameron for wanting it as well. He didn’t want to compete any more, and he didn’t want the last night he might ever see him go to waste either.

Goosebumps broke out over his skin at the contact of their arms, his confidence boosted by the hitch of Cameron’s breath. It felt right. Reece could feel that Cameron hadn’t turned his face, and that was okay, neither had he. But the moment had made him feel brave, brave enough to angle his body toward the man beside him. He let his hand drop, moving his fingers close to Cameron’s arm, their tips glancing across the skin near Cameron’s elbow. Finally Cameron turned, and when Reece saw his face, he realized it was about the best damn face he’d ever seen—a study in near-perfection.

Cameron, Cameron, Cameron... When had his thoughts changed from him thinking of this gorgeous man as the impersonal *Fielding* he’d been growling at in his head for the last week to *Cameron*? He laughed. He’d been a fool.

Cameron looked puzzled, the expression on his face more gorgeous than the moment before, and feeling even braver, Reece leaned in and touched his still pool-wet lips to Cameron’s. It was just a touch, a gentle caress, but it was

just what Reece needed. Every bit of animosity he'd ever held disappeared. Feeling philosophical, Reece decided that life was too precious to not take every moment you were offered... and this was his and Cameron's moment.

Reece reached up, pushing his fingers into the almost-there hair at the base of Cameron's neck; his first feel of the soft, silk-like strands. He didn't even need to urge Cameron forward, the man already tipping his head to meet Reece's lips more closely. The kiss was soft, a mere touch, and Reece let himself luxuriate in it, his eyes closing as he fell into the moment.

Cameron pulled away, leaving Reece disappointed; he hadn't wanted the moment to end, but when he opened his eyes and saw Cameron's soft smile, he knew there was no negative reason for it. And when Cameron glanced over Reece's shoulder, it reminded him they were still in a very open and very public area.

"Ready for that drink now?" he asked.

"Sure."

The men swam slowly to the pool ladder, Reece motioning for Cameron to go first—he wasn't stupid, he knew the advantages of being chivalrous. Cameron seemed to as well, because when he began to climb there was a definite exaggeration to the sway of his hips. Reece swallowed hard—this guy was gonna kill him.

"You know, I think we should order a bunch of appetizers and stay here," Cameron suggested, their first margaritas were finished and they were waiting on their second. "I don't really feel like bothering with the restaurant tonight—this is too relaxing to leave."

Reece looked out over the pool. The hills in the distance were a very dark shadow now, it was almost completely night, soon the only view would be of the night-lit pool—he didn't care. It was warm and they were comfortable, and he didn't want to leave either. "Sounds like a plan."

Over plates of sushi, Reece's favorite, and Spanish tapas, Cameron's, they caught up. It was easy to talk with Cameron, and Reece was surprised—or maybe not—by how much they actually had in common. It also seemed Reece had heard right. Cameron had been in Baltimore, deciding to come back to the

Bay Area for the same reasons Reece stayed—he wanted to be close to his family. That seemed reasonable to Reece, and he liked it. It also meant that whatever happened with the job, Cameron was likely to stick around, even if he had to keep looking for something else, and Reece liked that even more. But he didn't want to discuss that now, so he left it alone—they didn't need the negativity.

By the time the staff were closing up the outdoor bar, Cameron and Reece had consumed their fair share of margaritas, and were rather pleasantly buzzed. And neither of them was ready to say good night.

“Do you have a really plush bed in your room?” Cameron widened his eyes at the question, causing Reece to chuckle and bring a finger to his lips as if to shush himself, continuing in a softer voice. “No... I meant, my room is really comfy. I always decide that depending on the bed. If the bed's comfy then the room, by association, is too.” Reece seemed to consider what he was saying then added, “Maybe you don't... you know, have a comfy room like mine. I am the *front-runner* after all.” Reece wagged his eyebrows as if he was the funniest and the cleverest person on the planet. Cameron was still looking at him as if he was mad—at least that's what Reece thought Cameron's expression meant—but he was still smiling, and that was a good thing. “Forget I said that. Let's just go to my room. Decision made.” Reece turned, ready to walk.

It was Cameron running a light finger across his jaw that stopped him in his tracks. Even with the close proximity, Reece could almost feel his body bending in an attempt to get closer. “I'll *walk* you to your room, not too sure about checking out any beds though.”

Reece pouted.

“You're adorable,” Cameron continued and Reece swooned, “but you've had too much to drink.”

“So have you!” Reece insisted, but didn't deny anything.

“Yeah, a bit more than I should have, but I'm sober enough to—” Cameron stopped himself and took a deep breath. “Come on, let's get you up there.”

Reece huffed, but cheekily added, “Okay. Reject me, I can take it.”

“I’m not rejecting you, Reece, far from it.” The words were low, a little disappointed, but full of heat at the same time.

Reece’s mind was racing. Maybe by the time they got to his door he could persuade Cameron to think differently. *Persuasion*. He could be persuasive. But a little more time would certainly help... “We need to go that way.” Reece pointed down the hall in the opposite direction to the rooms.

Cameron grinned. “Reece, the gym is that way, and the elevator to the luxury suites is that way. I know you’re not sleeping in the gym, so you must be in a luxury suite.” Cameron’s lips had gotten very close to Reece’s ear; he could feel warm breath with every word. “Are you in a luxury suite?”

“No.”

Cameron pulled back and Reece missed his nearness immediately. “Neither am I.” But then he smiled, the smile compensating for the loss. “So let’s go the other way, toward our *real* rooms.” Crap, Cameron was onto him.

“Okay.” He knew he sounded petulant, but Cameron chuckled again so maybe he hadn’t blown it. That was reaffirmed when Cameron reached out and took his hand, entwining his fingers through Reece’s. Reece couldn’t remember the last time he’d held someone’s hand. Maybe Simon’s when Simon was dragging him somewhere, or away from something, but Simon didn’t count—Cameron *counted*. He followed silently, for some reason not wanting to break the spell that Cameron seemed to be weaving around him. Spell? He laughed, couldn’t help himself. He really had become a sap. Cameron just looked at him, shook his head slightly, and smiled—and Reece liked every moment of his attention.

When they reached the door to Reece’s room, it only took a moment for Reece to open the small satchel he was carrying and pull the room card he’d been using as a bookmark out of his book. “Shit!” he exclaimed, realizing he’d lost his spot.

“You really are adorable.” Cameron pulled him close, bending his head to breathe at the soft skin of Reece’s neck.

“So, does that mean you’ll come in?”

Cameron took a deep inhale, pausing as if to contemplate. “Not tonight.”



“I’m really not that drunk.”

“I know,” Cameron kissed his neck softly, “and that’s why I’m not coming in.”

Reece straightened, pulling out of the relaxed slouch Cameron had him in. “So you’d come in *if* I was drunk?”

“Put it this way, I’m sober enough to know it wouldn’t be the best thing to do.”

Reece recoiled as if slapped. “Ouch!” He felt surprisingly sober all of a sudden.

“That’s—Shit. That’s not what I meant.” Cameron held Reece’s hand tightly, not allowing him to pull away. “I meant that if I come in, looking at your bed won’t be enough for me—”

Reece couldn’t see the problem. “So?” He wasn’t letting Cameron get away with that. He pushed his satchel around and out of the way, moving closer to Cameron and edging him against the doorframe. “I really don’t see the problem.” Reece knew that his voice was low, seductive, and he played every bit into the words that he could. He was horny and he wanted some action—he wanted some action with Cameron Fielding.

He pulled their entwined fingers up to his chest, clasping Cameron’s hand close. With his other, he braced himself on the wall beside Cameron’s head, bracketing Cameron’s body as close as he could. The slight difference in their heights didn’t matter; Reece could feel every ridge and plane of the firm body pressed against his. He stared into the blue eyes before him, losing himself in their intense gaze before tilting his head and capturing Cameron’s lips. The little gasp as their lips met encouraged the kiss, and Reece kissed him hard, grinding his torso seductively into the other man’s. With his leg pushed between Cameron’s, Reece could feel Cameron’s erection against his thigh, and he started to rock—

“Stop,” Cameron said and pushed Reece away. Reece didn’t believe him though—he could see Cameron’s dilated pupils, the slight flush to his cheeks... he’d felt that hard cock.

“Come inside,” he insisted. Holding Cameron tight by the hand still linked with his, reaching for the keycard he’d slipped into the door with the other.

“I can’t. Not tonight.” Cameron wriggled out of Reece’s grasp. “I’m sorry.” Cameron’s ragged breaths belied his words.

Reece wasn’t sure he understood. “But you want to,” he pushed the point, using his low tone to gently encourage.

“You have no idea.” Cameron surprised him when he gripped the back of Reece’s neck and pulled him close again, letting his lips graze over Reece’s then deepening the kiss. But it was over as quickly as it started. Cameron broke the kiss, and the contact, and stepped away. “You have no idea,” he repeated.

“So don’t go, Cam.” Reece pushed open the door, holding it wide. “Come in.”

Cameron was torn, Reece could clearly see that, but it didn’t seem he was going to give in. He took another step back. “I really must go.” He was so serious, but then he smiled; it was shy, even hopeful. “I hope there’s another chance to get together, Reece.” Cameron began to walk, took half a dozen steps, and turned back. Reece felt his heart begin to beat faster—he’d changed his mind. He stepped right back into Reece’s personal space and cupped Reece’s face. “Please let me see you again... soon.” He followed that with another firm kiss. The action took Reece’s breath away. But as quickly as he was there, he was gone again, disappearing around the corner at the end of the hall only moments later.

Reece stood there stunned for a moment. He had no idea what the hell had just happened, not that his body seemed to care. His traitorous cock was hard and aching... and extremely dissatisfied. Reece shook his head, blinking away his confusion, and walked into his room.

Fucking Cameron Fielding!

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## CHAPTER NINE

The phone call asking him to be at the offices of Price & Associates at nine AM on Thursday had come when he'd been returning home from the country club on Wednesday. Reece hadn't lingered Wednesday morning. He'd ordered a light breakfast to his room, had checked over his proposal to make sure he had everything he needed, and had then checked out. He'd been in his car and driving out the grand entrance gates by eight AM.

Reece knew why he'd run—and he wasn't too proud to admit he was running. He hadn't wanted to see Cameron again, not before he found out who won the job anyway. He'd woken up still confused about Cameron's decisions the night before. Confused and still horny. Not a good combination. There'd been so many mixed signals; the guy had wanted him, but then he didn't... Jesus! Reece knew he couldn't deal with it again before he found out whether he'd been successful for the position.

He was about to find out.

Geoffrey Price's executive assistant had just handed him a cup of coffee, and now he was waiting. He looked around the room, taking in the rich wood furniture and opulent colors of the furnishings. This was the office of a successful man, one who had worked hard and had succeeded. Geoffrey Price's success was something to aspire to.

He heard voices and stood as the door opened, surprised when Geoffrey Price entered the room—and not alone. Shocked into muteness, he faltered briefly when Mr. Price walked over to him and held out his hand in greeting, recovering quickly enough, he hoped, to not seem rude.

“Morning, Reece. I hope Charlotte looked after you?” Mr. Price stood for a moment and then moved to his desk, gesturing for Reece to sit down again.

“Yes, sir, thank you.” He held up his coffee cup to substantiate his words.

“Okay,” Mr. Price started, his voice full of authority as he sat down, “let's get this show on the road. Seeing as you already know Cameron, I don't imagine introductions are necessary.”

Reece looked at Cameron, who had taken the seat beside him. He was sure he must have looked confused, but Cameron smiled—as Cameron always did—and Reece calmed... for a moment. The next words out of Geoffrey Price's mouth had him even more confused.

“Reece, Cameron and I have spent the last hour looking at your proposal.” Reece's head almost spun on his shoulder's as he turned to look at Cameron. What the fuck was going on? Why would Cameron Fielding be going over his proposal with Mr. Price? Mr. Price continued—hopefully he would answer that question—“We are very impressed with your ideas. You dealt with the brief in a way that gels very much with our philosophy here at Price & Associates, and we believe you would continue to deliver similar results on other, more varied projects. Cameron had lengthy discussions with Edward Richards and other board members while he was at the club, and I spoke to Edward at length, too. He asked that if you come to work for Price & Associates that you handle their account from now on. That is how impressed he was with you.”

Reece was struggling to accept the compliments with his mind spinning in confusion. He was really no nearer to knowing what Cameron's involvement in this was, but he managed. “Thank you, sir.”

“Cameron, maybe you should fill Reece in on your role in this.”

*Yes, please.* Reece almost wished he'd said it out loud.

“Reece, I haven't been totally straight with you.”

Reece glared at him. *You think?*

“I left Baltimore almost twelve months ago and have been working here at Price & Associates since then.” *What?* “I've managed to acquire multiple new clients over that time, but with the firm's growth exceeding all our predictions in the last two quarters, we felt the job was too big for me to do alone. When Geoff suggested hiring to meet our needs, I immediately thought of you. I knew you were still based locally, and of course I knew your capabilities, so—”

Reece interrupted. “So you're the reason I was contacted directly. You headhunted me.”

“Well, after I mentioned you to Geoff—”

Cameron was cut off for the second time, this time by Mr. Price. “Yes, Reece. Assuming you decide you’d like to work for me, you can thank Cameron that you are here.”

Reece’s head was a muddled mess as he went back over every moment of the past week. Cameron in the waiting room after his interview; Cameron meeting him when his car had the flat tire; Cameron leading him to believe he was a candidate as well... This was ridiculous. He felt like telling them both to go to hell, but he was professional enough to take a breath and listen to what they had to say. Things said at the spur of the moment never ended well. He’d have plenty of time to tell them—both—to go hell when he had calmed down.

Reece directed his attention to Mr. Price. “Can I assume from what you are saying that you are offering me a job?”

“Yes, Reece. I would very much like for you to join the team.”

“And my role...?”

“You would be employed in the same capacity as was discussed, the only difference being you would work beside Cameron.”

“Not under him?” Reece was too angry and far too astounded to even consider the humor in that remark.

Mr. Price shook his head, seemingly oblivious to the possible innuendo as well. “I’m not expanding my management team at this point. But I do believe in placing staff where staff is needed. Cameron’s job was too big for one person, so I have created two equal positions. You will each have your own clients and work independently. Of course, I would expect you to utilize each other as valuable reference and each client will be discussed in weekly meetings or as required.”

“Sorry if this seems naive, Mr. Price, but you mentioned me as the front-runner for the job. Is there really another candidate?”

“Firstly, I ask that you call me Geoff, Reece. We’re rather informal here in that respect.” He glanced at Cameron, then back to Reece. “But yes, there is. He was actually at Riverdale as well. A very capable young man, who, if you

don't take the position—even though I hope you won't disappoint me—we would contact to see if he's still interested."

"I met with both of you while we were at the club, Reece." Cameron met Reece's narrowed eyes evenly. "And as mentioned, I spoke with the board. I then gave my recommendation to Geoff." He almost looked sorry, Reece thought. Was that for deceiving him?

He had a lot of questions, but not for Geoffrey Price. He was too blown away by the events of that last fifteen minutes to think clearly, but he was lucid enough to know that he needed a moment to think, maybe even twenty-four hours. He also knew that he needed to speak to Cameron, privately. They had a lot to discuss.

"I am definitely interested, Mr.—Geoff, but I'd like to request some time to consider my options. Is that possible?"

"Of course," Geoffrey answered. "Would twenty-four hours be enough?"

Geoffrey was being so gracious—he would be a great boss, Reece was sure. What he wasn't sure about was whether he could work with Cameron.

"I appreciate that, sir." Reece stood. "Hopefully I'll have an answer for you later today, but definitely by the morning."

Geoffrey stood and came around the table, shaking Reece's hand warmly. "I look forward to it."

Farewells were made and Reece left the office, his head still in a spin and unsure of where to go. Deciding that home was as good a place as any, he walked for the elevator and the same parking garage he'd stormed into just a week ago.

"Reece." Cameron's voice was not unexpected. "Please wait."

Reece pressed the elevator button and waited, very aware of Cameron once he was standing beside him. They didn't speak, and when the elevator arrived and Reece stepped inside, Cameron followed him in.

"Ree—" Cameron started, but Reece stopped him by holding up a hand. He needed a bit longer to process what had just happened.

The elevator descended, arriving quickly at the basement parking garage,

and Reece stepped out, Cameron again following him. “I need longer to think about this.”

“I’d really like to explain.” Reece couldn’t see his face but he could hear the sincerity in Cameron’s voice.

“I’m sure you would, but it will have to wait. Do you know where I live?” Expecting yes, he wasn’t surprised by Cameron’s reserved agreement. “Come over when you finish work. I may have made a decision by then, but either way I would like to hear what you have to say.”

“Reece, I...”

“Save it for later, Cam.” He was surprised by his use of Cameron’s shortened name; it seemed far too personal considering what had just happened. And after what had happened on Tuesday night, so full of disappointment. He began to walk to his car, already beginning to weigh the pros and cons of accepting the job, and he could feel Cameron’s eyes on him the whole way. He didn’t look back when he climbed into the Mustang and drove away.

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The knock on the door wasn’t unexpected, but it made him flinch anyway. Reece looked at his watch. It was five fifteen; Cameron hadn’t wasted any time in getting here. He opened the door. Cameron stood there, obviously having come straight from work and still dressed in his suit and tie, making Reece realize he hadn’t even taken his jacket off since he’d been home. Not that he’d been home long. He hadn’t gone straight home when he’d left Cameron earlier, instead detouring via Simon’s office—his best friend imparting the wisdom that Reece had counted on.

“Hi,” Cameron said. His blue eyes looked worried, and even though Reece hated to see him look like that, the guy deserved it. Reece invited him in, holding the door open for him to pass. Cameron looked longingly at the sofa. “Should I sit or will this be quick?”

“Sit down, Cameron.”

“Geoff said he hasn’t heard from you yet.”

“Not yet.”

Cameron seemed to think on that. “Have you made a decision?”

“I think so.” Reece walked past Cameron and into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a couple of beers, holding one up to Cameron in question. “You want one?”

“Sure, thanks.” Cameron reached for the offered beer from Reece, taking a long pull once he’d twisted off the cap.

Reece needed to get this over with, so he started. “The job is a great job—I obviously don’t have to tell you that—and I am very interested in working for Geoff, but I gotta say, Cam, the fact that you lied to me while we were at Riverdale... that really bothers me.”

“I’m sorry, Reece, I really am. I never meant to deceive you, I mean, that was never my intention, but when you snapped at me on the side of the road after I’d stopped when you blew that tire, well, I panicked. I thought you’d just turn around and go home if I told you the truth. So when you assumed I was up for the job as well, I sort of... I sort of let you believe it.”

Reece remembered that moment when he’d realized Cameron was the man in shadow. He had been rude. “And once we got there? You had a captive audience then, you could have come clean to me numerous times.”

“Yeah, I didn’t play it well at all,” he admitted. “I think a part of me hoped you’d mellow toward me, and you did. And it got harder to admit the truth.”

Reece considered all of that for a moment. “And Tuesday, at the pool... at my room?” He moved over to the sofa and sat down, not close, but not too far away either. “That was pretty intense.” He took a moment. “Is that why—why you didn’t want to come in?” Reece had pondered that, tying together everything that had happened that night and concluding that Cameron was acting on his conscious.

“I had to, Reece.” He turned his body on the sofa to face Reece. “I wanted to, Jesus, I wanted to, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t compromise my professional integrity that way—I was already pushing the line.”

Reece laughed. “Oh yeah, you pushed the line, buddy.”



“I suppose it comes down to this,” Cameron started. “I really want you to take the job. Some of that’s because I’m selfish and I want to see you, but mostly it’s because I want you to work with me. Geoff is a great boss, and the company is awesome—there’s so much scope for growth—but it’s too much for me. I need someone I can trust to take us forward—and I trust you, Reece.” Reece was tempted to reach over and touch Cameron, but he held off. Hopefully, there’d be another time for that. “I honestly suggested Geoff look into you for a reason—you’re good. And apart from that, you make me work harder to be good. You always have.”

Reece chuckled, that was exactly what he’d decided, almost immediately after the interview. “I do get it. I get why you let me believe it. If I’m honest, and things had played out the same for me, I probably would have done the same. The job isn’t our biggest issue though, Cam. Can we work together knowing what’s happening between us?” Reece had no intention of not addressing what he considered to be the most important part of this. “Is there something happening between us?” Reece thought there was, but maybe Cam didn’t—he had to find out.

Cameron answered the question by shuffling closer on the sofa. His thigh was now touching Reece’s, and he was sure he could feel the heat of Cam’s skin, even through two layers of fine wool.

“Would it be cliché to say I was pretty hot for you back in school?”

Reece shook his head and chuckled, looking to the spot where their knees touched.

“Reece?”

At Cameron’s tone he looked back. “Not cliché at all.”

“It’s true.” He seemed to want to convince Reece, but there was no need.

“I know.” And he did. He remembered it very well—his own memories at least. “Do mutual hard-ons make for a good working environment? We haven’t got a great track record.”

“I think we can make it work for us—the competitive streak, I mean.”

Reece reached up, his hand hovering close to Cameron’s face. “You game?”

“Absolutely—game on.”

Cameron closed in the final distance, tipping his head to meet Reece. Their kiss a tentative taste of what was to come.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Bette Browne is wife to an extremely understanding husband and mother to two very tolerant children. In her mind they are the most accepting family in the world, allowing her the freedom to indulge her passion for fiction, whether it is reading or writing it.*

*She enjoys traditional male/female romances, but male/male is her passion. In her mind nothing is more erotic than two (or more) beautiful men finding love together.*

*For Bette, the fight for tolerance in all its guises is an important one, and hopefully her contribution, even if it is only in the form of the occasional love story, is one she will continue to happily find the time for.*

*Bette's story, Dirty Martini, is part of the Second Chances Anthology by [Bottom Drawer Publications](#).*

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# MAKING A LITTLE WRONG INTO SOMETHING RIGHT

By LL Bucknor

## **Photo Description**

Two shirtless men are writhing on top of one another on a hardwood floor. Personal effects seem scattered around in the men's anxiousness to be with one another. The guy on the bottom has a massive tattoo spanning his rib cage and the guy on top seems to be in raptures.

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*WTF! One minute I'm making dinner (for one), the next there's some incessant banging on my door and the next, I'm on the floor with him on top of me, kissing, rubbing, grinding... something happened... something must have happened. I've never seen him look like that. I've never seen him look at ME like that! And never in a million years did I think he'd be kissing ME! What is going on!*

*Hopefully I did this right... so preferably no BDSM & no paranormal... overall, the MC's should be on—or get to—a place of equal footing. GFY, angst okay, but not necessary... really wherever the story goes (or whatever led to here), wherever you want to take it... I'm good with.*

Sincerely,

Alison

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** blue collar, butt virgin, interracial, men with pets, tattoos, piercings, apadravya

**Content warnings:** cheating

**Word count:** 13,285

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# MAKING A LITTLE WRONG INTO SOMETHING RIGHT

By LL Bucknor

“The black one, darling.”

“Nita, I think I know how to dress myself.”

Gabriel looked at his reflection again, running his hands down his torso, turning at different angles. “Shit. Give me the black shirt.”

Nita lifted Elton by her face and winked for the mirror. Elton looked at his owner and then licked Nita’s face.

“Bitch.”

“You’re going to suck off Javier with that mouth? If I were in your shoes, I most certainly would. I bet it’s nice. Bet you’ll find out tonight. Oh God, just let me know if he’s hung.”

With bulging eyes, Gabriel turned to stare at Nita, who was licking her lips appreciatively. Gabriel wasn’t ready for all of that. Virgin he was not, though his dry spell was over a decade long. His drawer of sex toys and porn helped throughout this period. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to, it was just Javier and him... they weren’t there yet.

Their third date was tonight. Gabriel hoped Javier wasn’t expecting much. Gabriel’s nervousness kicked into overdrive thinking about Javier wanting Gabriel to suck him off when he could barely tolerate Javier’s kisses, though he didn’t let Nita in to that factoid. He thought he did a good enough job faking it with Javier—aka Nita’s “dream guy”. He agreed that Javier was too good to be true at times, but they were still in the beginning stages.

“Gabe, how do you contain yourself from mauling Javier each time you see him? I really wouldn’t.”

Gabriel threw the shirt off and picked up the black shirt Nita had selected from the beginning of the date prep. “Hmm...” He figured if he went for more of a noncommittal tone, she wouldn’t notice his weirdness over the Javier and him situation.

“He’s young, has a great job, and is fucking handsome as fuck. I knew you’d meet someone once you came out of your shell, Gabe.” She put Elton back in her lap and leaned against Gabe’s pillows.

Gabriel smoothed out the imaginary wrinkles and had to agree with his best friend. The black shirt did look good on him. He would always have lingering body issues, ever since he lost those ninety-seven pounds last year. He was so used to his dog and living vicariously through loudmouth Nita and his other friend, Lucas.

He met Javier during a late night trip to the supermarket. Gabriel was shocked when Javier pursued him and wouldn’t leave without giving him his cell number. Men coming up to Gabriel—far and in between. Men who looked like Javier? Closer to never. Javier was sexy, an inch or two taller than Gabriel’s six feet, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Thankfully, Gabriel was able to carry an actual conversation without over-analyzing himself into silence, and hit it off with the slightly older Javier. So far, they had been out to public places; a lounge for the first date and bowling on the second. Tonight, he was having dinner at Javier’s house. Nita had offered to watch Elton, his dog/fur-son tonight.

“You were right. The shirt’s perfect.”

“Don’t sound so happy about it.” She rolled her eyes. “I knew I was right, though. If I was a dude, I’d do you.”

“Appreciate your vote of confidence, love,” He sat on the edge of the bed, with his back to the pair, to put on his shoes. He had a few minutes before he left to drive over to Javier’s home.

“And you said he has a cousin that’s his roommate? Do they look alike?”

“His cousin looks like he’s an ex-convict. He’s a giant. Probably like six foot five, tattoo-sleeved, heavily muscled. He just stares a lot and speaks to Javier in Spanish. I don’t think he likes me. Probably hates gays,” he muttered as he finished.

“That makes no sense being that he lives with his gay cousin. Maybe he’s shy. *You* are for the most part. And sometimes you have that serious face so people never know what to say to you, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Gabriel was thirty and never had a boyfriend. Gabriel’s only sexual partner had been Greg, a neighbor from down the street when he lived at home with his mother. At the time, Gabriel was seventeen, overweight, insecure, horny, and shy. Greg was forty-nine, average looking, and recently divorced from his wife. He seemed worldly enough to the low-self-esteem bookworm Gabriel had been back then. Greg would buy Gabriel little gifts here and there, rent motel rooms in a different borough and have Gabriel fuck his brains out. Gabriel never bottomed with the older man. Greg seemed nice enough—he wasn’t out of the closet and had an appreciation for Gabriel’s dick—he’d tell him each time they had sex how much he “couldn’t wait to sit on his fat cock.”

Unfortunately, their lust affair only lasted a little over a year. Greg’s company transferred him somewhere in the Midwest. Greg seemed more disappointed about not having the teen topping him on a weekly basis than actually missing Gabriel, so he was not really cut up about their separation. Reserved Gabriel did not have so much as a wink from any other men (well, men he’d want to do anything with—he had enough of older, creepy men, thank you very much), his mother’s friends tried setting him up with daughters or nieces—somehow missing the memo that Gabriel was gay. Luckily, the “setting gay Gabriel up with a nice girl, it must be a phase” movement had waned in recent years.

“Your Daddy is going to get some ass tonight. Aren’t you excited for him, Elton?” She plied Elton’s face with kisses. He in turn licked her mouth.

“Get a room, you two.”

Nita winked. “You probably will do this and more later on tonight. Leave us alone.”

“Bonita, I think I need to reconsider you taking care of Elton.” Gabriel got up to stand in front of her.

“Don’t call me Bonita.” She hated her full name, which Gabriel liked to tease her with. “You’re just jealous your dog loves me more.” They both knew that was not the case. “Clothing? Check. Looking pretty fine if I do say so myself. Breath?” She motioned for Gabriel to come closer for her to sniff.

“Check.” She slipped her hand into Gabriel’s jeans’ back pocket. It was a tight fit. Even though Gabriel had lost weight, his butt didn’t lose a thing. It was as plump as ever.

“Why are you copping a feel?”

“Slipping in a condom, dick. Gotta make sure you’re prepared on all counts.”

“While I appreciate your concern over getting me laid, Bonita—” He deepened his tone when saying her name to make sure she knew this time he was not kidding. “I’m an adult. I can handle this. Thanks.”

“Well, in all the years I’ve known you, you haven’t been on a date. I’m not judging, just saying. So, I don’t want you to mess up... in the heat of moment. I care, asshole.”

“I think there was an ‘I love you’ moment somewhere in there. Besides, Lucas already beat you to the sex talk.” Lucas being his gay, younger coworker and resident sexual extrovert. “He was very willing to give me... tips.”

“Oh I am so sure he was.” The trio of friends got along swimmingly when together, Gabriel being the more introverted out of the three. Yet it worked. “Well, Gabe, me and your boy are going to mosey back to Brooklyn. I think a walk might be on the menu. I’ll leave the window open for Elton to sleep over, in case you’re sleeping over at Javier’s, okay?”

As Nita got up with Elton in her arms, Gabriel turned his face for her kiss on his cheek. He didn’t tell her that he was not planning on spending the night with Javier.

Not any time in the foreseeable future.

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After giving himself a brief pep talk, Gabriel somehow found himself ringing Javier’s doorbell. He panicked his way out of his Altima in front of Javier’s house and onto the doorstep. “Hey,” Javier smiled and wrapped an arm across Gabriel’s back in greeting. He moved away to let Gabriel enter his home. Gabriel murmured a salutation in return, wiping his sweaty palms on his



dark blue jeans. Even though the two had been on other dates, Gabe still couldn't lose the jumpy nerves.

Javier looked Gabriel over and shut the door. He leaned close to Gabriel's back and spoke into his ear. "A slight change of plans. I thought we would have had the place to ourselves, but Mateo's home." He left a hand on Gabriel's lower back.

A deep "hey" came from behind Gabriel. Damn it. Gabe tried to give himself an internal pep talk before facing Javier's cousin.

"Hello, Mateo." He turned to call out to the taller man. He tried smiling, but Mateo's ice blue stare was intimidating. "How's it going?" No response. Mateo spit something out to Javier in rapid Spanish. Gabriel couldn't help but think Mateo was talking about him, though the words that Mateo did say didn't seem to include Gabriel's name. If he and Javier lasted, Gabriel considered investing in Rosetta Stone or something.

Mateo blinked his eyes maybe twice, and went off to another room in the townhouse. Today was the first time Gabriel had seen the other man without a fitted cap on his head. He first thought it was the shadow from the brim, paired with the tall muscular frame, tattoos, and rough-around-the edges vibe that seemed to exude from Mateo's pores that scared him. But the man was even scarier without a cap. Gabriel shook his head and turned to look at Javier and himself in the hallway mirror. Gabriel was used to his face—dark brown hair, clean-shaven, peach-tone skin and brown eyes. Nothing extraordinary or model-worthy, just average in Gabriel's eyes. Javier's hazel eyes met his in the mirror, and he moved closer behind Gabriel. "I missed you." He leaned his chin on Gabriel's shoulder.

"Me too." And he did. The two had some great conversations in the past weeks since they started dating.

Javier was thirty-three, and had been single for a few months since getting out of a long-term relationship. Gabriel followed Javier's relationship cues since he definitely had more experience. One thing that took time getting used to was that Javier liked to touch. Nothing over the top, but usually he loved holding Gabriel's hand. Or a brief touch on a shoulder or his back, something

Gabriel was slightly leery of in the beginning. Gabriel was not an outwardly affectionate person in general, but it was becoming something he could get used to.

Javier smiled into Gabriel's ear and murmured, "A good thing about my cousin being home? He made dinner. He's definitely a better cook than me. I was going to order out and play it off."

Cooking was something Gabriel was actually good at. He'd have to file it in his head for the future, to make a meal for Javier to try.

Gabriel returned the smile as Javier held his hand to give him the grand tour of the shared home. Javier was a pharmaceutical rep, and was out in the field commuting a lot. He was trying to apply for higher position at the moment. His free time being very limited, so when he could, he tried to make enough time for a date with Gabriel.

"Your house is really nice. How long have you lived here?"

"Actually not that long. Once I had my breakup, Mateo offered to let me move in. After everything with work settles down, I'll start looking into a place for myself."

Gabriel was surprised. "Oh, I thought it was the other way around."

"Nah. Mateo's house. Though with my job, I'm rarely here." He looked Gabriel in his eyes and held his hand. "I might need to see if I can slow it down a bit, now that I've found some inspiration." He winked.

The two men were in the downstairs hallway, outside of the kitchen, when Mateo called out something in Spanish. Obviously not for Gabriel to know. "Dinner's ready." Javier led Gabriel into the kitchen where a bombardment of spices hit Gabriel's nose.

Mateo even set the food out on plates for the three of them. Another shock for Gabriel; maybe he was just being too judgmental. "Thank you, Mateo. It smells great, looks even better."

Mateo stared and grabbed his own plate, grunted, "*Gracias*," and hightailed it out of there. Gabriel stared briefly at the back of the taller man. Okay... maybe not.

The two men ate their dinner in the kitchen, talked, drank wine and talked some more. Gabriel did not notice time flying by as he and Javier held hands in the kitchen. He noticed Mateo did not come from the basement to at least drop off his dirty dishes. “Uh, are we in your cousin’s way?”

“No, he’s probably working out in the basement, watching TV or something. He can get caught up. Why?”

“I just wondered, since he left in hurry and he made us dinner. I know nothing about him other than he cooks like a dream and this is his house.”

Javier shrugged, “He’s not much of a talker. He thought I’d make a better impression with a home-cooked meal instead.” He smiled, “Unfortunately, I can barely make oatmeal.”

“Impression made.” What a nice gesture.

Maybe Gabriel’s preconceived notions about Javier’s cousin might be a little wrong. The hulking, muscular, blue-eyed, dark-haired giant might have made his stomach feel... off. Not anxious or nauseous, just a little funny. During this date, he got to learn more about the quiet dinner creator—he was not a convict (color Gabe surprised), but a mechanic, with a shop opening soon with a few of his friends.

Javier and Mateo were first cousins that were close, but became even closer when Javier came out of the closet as a teen. Javier let Gabriel know about his and Mateo’s background. How his family continued to slowly accept the fact that Javier was gay. Mateo was his number-one supporter. So when Javier broke off his last long-term relationship, Mateo offered to have his cousin live with him until he found his own place. There was no big rush on finding a place.

Javier kissed Gabriel’s hand. “I’m guessing we’re calling it a night soon. I know we both have early mornings tomorrow. Maybe I’ll see you at work.” Gabriel was an office manager for a dermatology practice. Javier recently received the medical office district which included Gabe’s job.

Javier leaned in closer to kiss Gabriel goodnight, tongue included, but Gabriel still was not feeling it. He squeezed his eyes tighter and started to feel the back of his neck tingle. *Finally... something.* Still in Javier arms, he leaned

away and turned towards the door. Mateo was standing there with a straight face.

“C’mon, I’ll walk you to your car.” Javier smiled.

Gabriel couldn’t help but blush. “G’night, Mateo. Thanks again for the dinner.”

Mateo didn’t speak until Gabriel walked by him. “You’re welcome,” he muttered deeply. Gabriel could feel his words in his gut it was so deep. He walked behind Javier and looked over his shoulder.

Mateo was looking their way.

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“You two fuck?”

“No, Luke.”

“Suck him?”

“No.”

“He suck you?”

“Negative.”

“Touch anywhere in the genital vicinity?”

Lying in bed, Gabriel heavily sighed into his phone and played with his dog’s tail. He moved his head deeper into his pillows. He might as well get comfortable for Lucas’ disdain. He could almost see his younger friend pouting at his current pace of dating. Lucas was barely home from his vacation and he had called Gabriel to find out the details of his date. He was surprised Lucas waited to call until he arrived home and not when he plane touched down at LaGuardia Airport.

“Gabe, what are you two doing? Waiting to go steady?”

“Don’t be an ass—”

“Guess what, Debra Jean, I think Jimmy likes you, so open your legs already.”

“Lucas, it’s not—”

“What? I saw his Facebook page. You’re not a troll. I don’t understand what the holdup is.”

“Well for one, his cousin was home.”

“What? He likes to watch? If he looks anything like your guy’s profile pic, you should be welcoming this. Threesome’s are fun. It usually involves some work to make sure everyone gets off, but certainly fun. What’s his name? Does he like his men flexible?”

“There was a reason for this call. And it did not include my sex life—”

“Your nonexistent one!”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “And Mateo is most likely straight, so I don’t know how he would like his women.”

“Oh well, his loss. So why you and Javier no fucky-fucky or licky-licky?”

“I don’t know. We’ve kissed. It was nice.”

“Nice? Nice is getting an extra shot of espresso in a latte. Nice is finding a dollar on the street. Nice is generic.”

“Fuck you very much.”

“No, Gabe. It’s supposed to be you fucking Javier very much, or the other way around.”

“I don’t know. We just didn’t have the opportunity.”

Lucas sighed heavily. It sounded like he was gearing up for a long-winded rant on the joys of gay sex and why Gabriel needed to get back on that pony or horse or whatever euphemism floated his fancy. Gabriel sometimes tuned out his well-meaning friend. He heard a beep signaling an incoming call.

“Someone’s calling, gimme a sec.” He thankfully switched over, not even screening the call, happy for the interruption.

“Hello?”

“Hey babe. What’s doing?”

“Javier.” Gabriel automatically smiled like a teenage girl getting a call from the popular boy. He took a deep breath away from his phone and put it

quickly to his ear. “Nothing much, just relaxing with Elton.” Javier made a noncommittal grunt. He didn’t like animals and had yet to meet Elton. Gabriel was sure Elton might change his mind. He was the world’s coolest cucumber. He just had to slowly warm Javier up to the idea. “How are you?”

“Better now that I’m talking to you. So listen, Mateo’s friend is opening his restaurant over in Long Island this Friday. I was wondering if maybe you and a friend wanted to come along.”

Gabriel and Javier hadn’t seen each other in almost a week, since Gabriel was at the older man’s house for dinner. “Sure.” He wondered if he should even bother to ask Lucas. He would probably take one look at Mateo and offer to mate on any nearby flat surface. Gabriel quickly discussed the details of meeting up because Javier was working. He switched over back to Lucas.

“Lucas?”

A heavy sigh answered Gabriel back. “So where was I?” He could hear Lucas clicking his tongue ring on his teeth over the phone. “Oh yes... why you will have gray pubic hairs by the time you and your man finally get it on.”

“What are you doing Friday after work?”

“Hosting a Passion Party. Why?” Lucas had a lot of side jobs besides being a medical assistant, one being a sex-toy party host. It was quite lucrative, and Lucas made quite a bit of money from their co-workers at their job.

“Darn. Guess you can’t come with me and Javier to a restaurant opening that evening. His cousin was going to be there as well.”

“FUCK ME!”

“No thanks.” Gabriel and Lucas would probably end up killing each other if they ever attempted to touch each other in a sexual nature. “Guess I’ll ask Nita.”

“Shit, shit, shit!” He knew Lucas couldn’t and wouldn’t back out of a Passion Party; those were his big money makers. “I guess I’ll be watching Elton. He can stay in the back room.” Gabriel could just visualize the epic pout on the younger man’s face about missing an opportunity of meeting Javier in the flesh, along with Mateo.

“Thanks.”

“I’m coming over right now, so get that juicy ass out of bed. We need to find you some pants that will make your boy throw you against a wall!” Knowing Lucas, he wouldn’t rest until he got his friend laid.

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As a way to maintain his weight loss, Gabriel stuck to the old diet and exercise approach. The food part wasn’t so bad because he loved preparing healthier foods. The exercise part... well it was a love/hate relationship. He hated doing the work, but loved the results. He wasn’t ripped by even the loosest of standards, or a hulking mountain of muscle like Javier’s cousin. His body was somewhat toned, soft in some spots, a little defined in others. He was happy with it, or trying to be. He usually tried to work out after work three times a week. But his office changed their hours, giving him Wednesdays free.

Gabriel figured he would try to switch to working out in the morning on his newly free day. A totally different vibe, surrounded by older women and the stay-at-home set. Or so he thought.

He couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw Mateo in his six-foot-five ripped glory using the elliptical machine by Gabriel’s favorite treadmill. A machine he planned on starting with... but not now. He couldn’t help but feel self-conscious. He never noticed him at this gym before. Gabriel would have definitely remembered. He watched the other man, the black sleeveless T-shirt barely covering his sweaty chest. Gabriel smoothed his hand down his own white T-shirt and put his hands into his dark-colored sweats’ pockets nervously. Maybe Mateo didn’t see him.

Gabriel slowly backed away. Of course, he backed into gym equipment and made a loud *oof*, drawing the eyes of people within the vicinity, including Mateo. A deer in headlights had nothing on Gabriel as Mateo stared directly at the embarrassed man. Mateo nodded his head in greeting and continued exercising. Gabriel’s stomach did a quick jump—out of which emotion was still to be determined. Nerves seemed to be winning.

Maybe it wouldn’t be too awkward. Maybe Gabe needed to get his head out of his ass and quit acting like Mateo did something to him. They were both

adults. And if the other man didn't like him, he looked like the type who would do something about it.

So Gabriel went to the treadmill directly in front of Mateo's machine, and got to work. He thought he might have heard a grunt or some form of rumble from behind him, but Gabriel chose to ignore it. Hell he'd grunt too, if he worked at the incessant pace that Mateo set. Gabriel planned to get in about forty-five minutes, but somehow it stretched into over an hour. Gabriel did not want to look around for Mateo and skipped his usual shower at the gym. He would just shower at home. He picked up his bag and caught Mateo's eyes in the mirror in front of him. He waved awkwardly and hightailed it out of the gym.

He rushed to his car, put the key in the ignition and... nothing. After a number of tries, Gabriel had to accept the fact that his car was dead. Fuck! He tried calling Nita and Lucas but all he got was their voicemails. He didn't even try to call Javier because he knew he was in New Jersey for a corporate meeting. He really had been meaning to invest in Triple A. He was contemplating his lessening number of choices when he heard, "Car won't start?" directly behind him.

"Mateo, hey. Nope. It's dead." Gabriel wasn't even going to pretend to guess what the hell the problem was.

Mateo held his hand out in front of Gabriel's face. Gabriel stared at his wrist where his tattoo sleeve started. "Your keys?" Mateo asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "Sorry." He dumped them in the other man's hand. "Please don't feel obligated to help. I mean, I—"

Mateo left Gabriel talking to himself because he already popped the hood of Gabriel's car and was checking the engine out. "Has this happened before?"

"Uh, no. It's my first time. I mean the car's first time. I mean you know what I mean." *Oh, just shut up already.* "I mean to say, no. It's never died before." Gabriel couldn't help but babble.

"Did you leave a light on?"

"Well, no. The car is kind of not working, so I—"



Mateo looked above the hood to look at Gabriel with a small smirk. “I meant before going to the gym.”

Gabriel wanted to smack himself. “No.” He could feel his face lighting up. Fuck. “I’m sure I didn’t.” With the word vomit Gabriel spewed and couldn’t seem to stop, he doubted Mateo believed him.

“Let me get my cables. See if I can jump you.” Gabriel watched Mateo saunter towards an all-black truck. He drove his vehicle closer to Gabe’s, hopped out with the jumper cables, and connected both cars. Nothing. He tried again after checking the connections. But Gabe’s ride still was dead.

“Hmm. I’m pretty sure you need a new battery. See the corrosion on the top?” Gabriel just nodded. “See?” Mateo pointed to the white matter. Apparently he was paying close attention to Gabe’s clueless face.

“Corrosion equals bad.”

Mateo smirked again and then went back to his ever-present poker face. “I can get a battery for you, if you’d like. An inexpensive one, if you don’t mind waiting a little. I have a friend who can give it to me for real cheap.”

“Really?” Gabriel needed a friend like that, especially now.

Mateo looked at him and pulled out his phone from his pants. He dialed someone and spit out rapid-fire Spanish. The conversation took only a couple of minutes. “My friend’s on lunch but he’ll be back at his store in about forty minutes. Can you wait that long?”

“Sure. I don’t have much of a choice. It’s either you or the bus.” He widened his eyes. He sounded like a jerk to his own ears. “I mean—yes—”

“I understand. We can wait in my car.”

“Actually, could we go to my house? I don’t live far from here. I need my wallet.”

Mateo hopped into his truck and propped open his passenger side. Once he got in, other than directions, neither man had much to say. Mateo found a parking spot in front of Gabriel’s building. Mateo looked slightly flushed. “Can I use your toilet?”

“Of course. Follow me.” Gabriel figured it was the least he could do. He

walked Mateo through the security door, and into his elevator, keeping his eyes forward, but he could just feel Mateo's presence next to him.

As he stood in front of his apartment door, he turned to face Mateo, who seemed to be scoping out the hallway. "Fair warning, I have a dog."

Mateo didn't even flinch. "Okay. I love them." He shrugged.

Gabe was surprised. Javier seemed to be afraid of the idea of canines. Anytime he asked Javier to join him for a walk with Elton, he always declined. Once his dog heard keys jingle in the lock, he could hear Elton's happy, excited scratches behind the door. He called out to his furry boy as he slowly opened the door. Gabriel bent down to receive the exuberant kisses, since the Shih Tzu-Maltese mix couldn't reach his face any other way. He picked up his black and white fur-ball who excitedly sniffed his chest, licking whatever inch of skin he could reach.

"Mateo, Elton." He chuckled when Elton reached a ticklish spot behind his ear with his tongue. "Elton, Mateo."

Mateo held out both arms towards Gabriel, and the personable dog leapt into his arms as if he and Mateo were long lost lovers. Elton ignored his owner for the new man. *Typical*. Mateo turned the dog over on his back in his arms and let Elton lick away. "I think he likes me." He was currently rubbing the dog's stomach, and Elton shamelessly spread his legs wide open while continuing to lick Mateo's face.

"He has that effect on people." Gabriel led Mateo inside his two-bedroom apartment, happy he thought to clean before leaving for the gym. He did a brief look around for any surprises from Elton but did not find any.

"He's a good boy. Aren't you, El?" Apparently Elton was a fan of his new nickname. He damn near pushed his tongue into Mateo's mouth. Thankfully, it seemed Mateo did not mind. Not everyone was a fan of dog displays of affection.

"Let me show you where the bathroom is." He moved to lock his door, but Mateo beat him to the punch and put Elton down. Elton ignored his master and stood adoringly at Mateo's feet. Gabriel pointed to his bathroom, which was

right off the hallway, and Elton followed closely behind Mateo. Gabriel prepared to bend to pick his pet up.

“It’s cool,” Mateo said with a smile. That was the first time he’d ever seen Mateo smile. Stunning wasn’t the right word, but it was close. Mateo’s eyes sparkled, and he had deep dimples on both cheeks. Gabriel was a sucker for dimples.

“Don’t bend over for me,” Mateo told Gabriel with a straight face. Gabriel on the other hand couldn’t seem to not think of Mateo hovering behind him, while bent over. *Stopping those type of thoughts right now.* He tried not squirming under Mateo’s stare. Mateo went to the restroom with Elton acting as the man’s shadow. Luckily Elton wasn’t much of a barker, stalker... yes.

*Dear Lord, don’t let this man even guess what I’m thinking,* Gabriel thought to himself. He’d end up telling Javier what a perv he was dating and it would be all over. Mateo seemed like a nice enough guy, but who knew if he’d want to kick Gabriel’s ass for thinking gay thoughts about him. While Gabriel was picturing all types of mind warfare in the hallway, Mateo flushed, washed his hands, and stood in front of him with Elton in tow.

“So, you ready?” He seemed to be asking the dog. Elton had added another victim to his crew.

Gabriel shook his head at himself and went to his bedroom for his wallet. He expected to hear nails clicking against the hardwood floor behind him, but Elton didn’t remove himself from Mateo’s eyesight which was surprisingly for him. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind as he got his wallet. He did a quick rub with deodorant because he didn’t want to knock Mateo out with his sweaty pits.

“Can he come for the ride?” Mateo asked.

“You don’t mind?”

“I wouldn’t have asked.”

Gabriel moved to grab Elton’s harness and leash. Now the dog turned to follow his owner. He knew what that leash meant. He put the harness on so they could leave with Mateo. By the time both men got in Mateo’s truck

(Elton opting to sit in Mateo's impressive lap—okay Gabriel couldn't help but look at the muscular thighs—he looked like he could crush someone's skull with those things), paid for the battery, and had it installed, it was late afternoon.

Gabriel smiled after starting his car and hearing the engine actually turn over. Elton perched on his passenger seat, his adoration funneled Mateo's way. Mateo closed the hood and grinned at Elton.

"Thank you so much for all of the help. I apologize that I messed up your day."

"Never said you did. I didn't mind." Mateo wiped his hands on a cloth he pulled from his back pocket. Gabriel couldn't help that he secretly ogled the other man throughout their time together today, that black sleeveless tee just drew his eyes to those arms. And the fluttering sweatpants drawstring emphasized Mateo's torso, begged for peeks from the general public, Gabriel included. Mateo leaned over the now-open passenger window and rubbed his hand on Elton's head, looking at Gabriel. "See you this Friday."

Gabriel totally blanked. He thought he'd finally got over his awkwardness around Mateo. Not as if the two of them had meaningful conversations... But there he went again. "Friday?"

"Saul's opening. The restaurant? Javier invited you, right? I told him to." This was the first time Mateo had brought up his cousin's name today to Gabriel during their time together.

"Yes, I will. Or, I should say, my friend and I will be there. I looked up the directions already."

"Later, El." The dog gave a resounding lick to Mateo's face. "See you then."

Gabriel checked Mateo from the side of his eyes as he made his way back to his truck with his tool kit. Gabriel blinked once the other vehicle pulled away. It was time to stop the straight boy fantasies. He thought he outgrew them, but apparently not.

Elton whined towards the open window.

“Yeah, yeah. I know you like him. But Daddy’s not dating him.” *Damn it*, Nita was rubbing off on him.

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“That’s him?”

Gabriel nodded and took a deep breath. He bumped Nita’s pointer finger which was pointing towards the Vargas men. Both were clad in jeans, Javier’s a lighter blue than Mateo’s. Javier had a button down shirt like Gabriel’s, Mateo was wearing black. It seemed to be his signature color. He did not wear a hat that evening, so the ice-blue stare was out in full force, meaning Gabriel’s stomach tried to leave through his chest.

“Sweet Jesus, do you know if the cousin is single?”

“Nita, I beg you. Try to not maul either one of them, at least not until dessert.”

Gabriel and Nita walked towards the front of the Colombian restaurant where both men appeared to be waiting for them. Gabriel didn’t feel nervous. Who was he kidding? The moment he looked past Javier’s left to where his cousin talked to another thuggish-looking guy, he felt his stomach jump. He looked back towards Javier. He pasted a smile on his face, praying it looked authentic.

He might have developed a minor crush on the cousin. But he kept that factoid to himself. He couldn’t even imagine what Nita would say, much less Lucas. Actually, he knew whatever Lucas would have answered, it would have needed to be censored.

These past two nights, he might have stroked himself off while thinking of Mateo. It usually started off with Javier in his mind but somehow, Javier kept getting shoved away by his cousin. Mateo would pop in there wearing jeans and a cap covering his dark curls. Then a slow strip tease would commence. Ending with hands covered in semen.

*Javier. Javier. Javier!* Maybe if he repeated the name, he could get his head wrapped around the concept of the man he was actually dating. He must be suffering from some repressed feelings. He remembered staring at the “bad

boys” when in high school. He already knew nothing would come from it. Hell, he might have worn out a DVD or two with the “straight boy” theme. But that was just fantasy.

Time for his reality. “Hello, Javier.” He smiled. “Mateo.” He nodded.

Mateo murmured a quick “hey”, rapidly introduced the guy he was talking to as “Saul,” and the two went inside Saul’s restaurant. The Latin music was loud inside the restaurant. Nita started to sway her hips to the beat.

“Nita, you look gorgeous as ever.” Javier gave a kiss to her cheek, which she returned.

“Thanks. What about my boy?” she countered.

Gabriel had come directly from the barber, and had a stubble-free face, and his hair resembled an overgrown crew cut. He and Nita had barely made it here at the time specified.

Javier wrapped his arms around Gabriel. He pecked his cheek quickly. “He always looks good.” Gabriel still felt not a thing. Javier directed them inside the restaurant and towards their table, his arm casually slung around Gabe’s shoulders. A makeshift dance floor had been created for the night close to their table, giving the restaurant a lounge ambience. Mateo made his way alone to their table and sat in front of Nita, who was sitting next to Gabriel. Javier seated himself across from Gabe.

“Aren’t you tall, dark and handsome.” Nita preened at Mateo. Gabe nudged her leg with his to signal to her to simmer down.

“*Gracias.*”

“It’s Nita.” She winked at him. “*Oh, de nada.* You must drive your girlfriend insane with those eyes.”

“No girlfriend.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Really?” she drawled. “Don’t mind me. I’m in the psychology field. I love to learn about new people. Ask Javier, I practically had him give his life story the first time we met.” The cousins glanced at one another then, and smiled.

A waiter came to their table, which was divine intervention because Gabriel was just about to pinch the hell out of Nita’s arm under the table. Once

they all searched the menus, and gave their orders, Nita would not be deterred. She didn't get much of Mateo's family history due to the fact the man barely spoke more than ten words at one time. He didn't look mad. He looked like he almost wanted to smirk. The service was fast, their meals delicious. Once all were finished eating, the cousins excused themselves to congratulate their friend.

"He's not straight."

"Of course not. Hello, we're dating."

"No dummy. Not Javier—who's really into you, by the way. It's cute. But so is his cousin."

Gabriel whipped his head to stare at Nita. "Why in the hell would you think that?"

"Because both men were eye-fucking you pretty much the entire time." She patted his hand. "Though I must give it to Mateo—he's subtle. Almost didn't catch the bugger. This sucks though, because I was hoping he was straight. He looks like he'd be a fun ride."

Gabe could only process the first part, which was Mateo being gay. *Impossible*. "No. He does not, Bonita." To Gabriel, Mateo gave off an "I'm your man, you're my woman" vibe. How Nita did not notice it boggled Gabriel.

"I'm just reporting what I see. You wouldn't have noticed it. Hell, I barely did. But each time he spoke to me, his eyes first landed on you, then me. He doesn't look for long, but I see it."

Gabriel refused to acknowledge what Nita told him. Even if it was remotely believable, nothing could come from it. The two could barely talk to each other and—it just wasn't a possibility. Gabriel was not going there. Nita was wrong.

"Ooh, maybe you could have a ménage party at their house? Could you imagine? You'd go from zero to full throttle in the sex department." Gabriel couldn't even think how to answer her back. "I doubt either would like to share." She looked at both men returning to the table. "Hmm... no, I don't think so. No sharers in the Vargas home."

Nita thankfully dropped the subject once the men were in listening range. “Would either of you men want to dance? I want to pretend I’m working off some calories.” She lived to dance. The salsa was pumping from the live band.

Gabriel didn’t dance, not in front of people anyway. Nita knew better than to ask him. Javier held his hand out. “I love to dance, and don’t mind working off the excess calories with you. Not that you need it.”

“Careful, I might think you’re flirting,” Nita saucily replied as she put her hand in his, standing in front of him. Mateo sat down back in his seat.

“Gabe, you want to dance?” Javier smiled as he started to move to the rhythm.

“Our Gabe is more of a wallflower, Javier.” She turned to look at her friend and loudly whispered for him to hear, “But if you get enough liquor in him, he can cut a rug.” She winked.

Gabriel tried not to remember that wondrous night of Nita’s birthday celebration. The night was a blur, but Nita and Lucas had a great time with a super-drunk Gabriel.

“Hmm maybe on our next date, Gabe? Who knows what might happen?” Nita and Javier laughed loudly as they moved towards the dance area.

“You and a heavy-liquored Gabe? I’d like details, please.” Nita turned to look at Gabe and mouthed “Oh my God,” for Gabriel’s amusement before turning back to Javier.

Great, Mateo probably felt obligated to keep him company. “You didn’t have to stay behind with me, Mateo.”

“I’m not. I don’t dance much either.”

Gabriel had nothing to add to that. He looked down into his lap, now even more nervous thinking about what Nita said. Maybe his cousin wasn’t a homophobe. His friend, Saul, danced with another man on the dance floor for all to see. But that didn’t mean that Mateo wanted him. Gabriel watched Nita and Javier dance effortlessly, both laughing. He could imagine the stories she was telling the man. “They look great together, huh?”

Mateo turned to face the dancing couple and nodded. Gabriel studied Mateo while watching their friends dance. Not at any point did Mateo turn



back to look at him. He knew it. Nita was just delusional. Gabriel would have known if Mateo was gay, he didn't ping on his gaydar.

He would have known.

Right?

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The next week, Javier managed to fit in another date with Gabriel, this time alone to see an off-Broadway play. Afterwards, they walked around Times Square like tourists, holding hands, enjoying each other's company. Gabriel even initiated a make-out session, which he could tell surprised Javier a little by the way he widened his eyes before smiling. It seemed Javier might have been waiting for some signal from Gabe, because after that his touches lingered. He would nip Gabriel's ears at random times, whispering naughty things in his ear. Javier leaned his front on Gabe's back on the crowded train ride home, letting Gabriel feel his erection through their pants.

At the end of the night, Gabriel invited Javier back to his place. He figured he'd just see where the night would lead and play it by ear. Elton was home, much to Javier's dismay. The two did not hit it off. Javier tried to act like he wasn't afraid, but Gabriel could see he was. Gabe tried chasing his dog, who was spry that night. When he finally caught Elton, Gabriel felt bad for putting his pet inside his bedroom, but he could tell Javier was uncomfortable. The mood the two struck earlier that evening could not be reignited and they called it a night.

The following day, he joined Javier and Mateo at their house so he could drive Javier to the airport for two weeks' training in Ohio. He drove to the airport alone with Javier. But before they left, Javier said something to Mateo to make him look stern. He had glanced at Gabe briefly and walked back into the house. Gabriel wondered what happened, but before he knew it they were leaving for the airport, and the thought was soon forgotten.

That night was a free night. No pseudo-boyfriend—Gabriel didn't know what else to call Javier at this point. No dog, since Nita wanted her "Elton-time" and had kidnapped his pooch for the weekend. Gabriel got the ingredients for a stir fry ready, a little disappointed that Elton would not be

there to share some nibbles of chicken with him. “I miss my dog,” he said to himself as he cut up the vegetables, not caring if it sounded pathetic. He showered and changed into a pair of boxers, and after he finished cooking his lonely meal, he was ready for a DVR *Vampire Diaries* marathon.

Just as Gabriel was plating his stir-fry for one, a loud booming sound came from his front door. “What the hell?” He dropped his utensils on the counter and ran towards the door. He was not expecting company, and from the sounds of the incessant knocking, he might not want whoever was at his door for company. He meant to look through the peephole, but the other person began another barrage of pounding. Gabe did not need to have his nosy neighbor from across the hall alerting the police.

He swung the door open and nearly choked on his tongue—looking at the last person he expected to ever see on his doorstep.

“What are you doing here?” Gabe croaked. He wondered how Mateo even got in his building without buzzing him in.

Mateo scowled from the open doorway. He looked Gabriel slowly from toe to head, stopping around his facial region. Mateo was breathing heavier than normal, staring from under his black baseball cap. He was starting to freak Gabriel out.

“Mateo? Is something wrong?”

Mateo started to walk forward, making Gabriel back up. Once Mateo cleared the doorway, he kicked the front door closed, still not speaking a word as he leaned against the only means of escape. His eyes seemed to be glued on Gabe.

He didn’t have to put up with this. It was his apartment. Gabriel glared at the tall man and walked towards him. “Listen, I know you don’t like me or whatever but—” Gabriel didn’t get another word in because Mateo silenced him with his mouth. What the fuck just happened? He opened his mouth more out of reaction than want, and in went Mateo’s tongue. Mateo licked every crevice of his mouth. He couldn’t believe this was happening, a weird surreal moment.

“Mateo?” he blurted, once Mateo raised his mouth to breathe in much-needed air. This entire situation was wrong but it felt... so good.

“I can’t do it anymore.” Mateo traced his lips with his tongue. “Pretend.” He threw his hat to the floor. “You are all wrong for Javier.” Mateo held Gabe by his chin lightly, looking him earnestly in the eyes.

“How so?” Granted, the two were taking the slow path, but they weren’t about instant gratification. Or, at least, he thought they weren’t.

“Did you know you squint your eyes before kissing Javier?” It wasn’t as if Gabriel would have been able to tell. “You didn’t when I kissed you.” Mateo grinned. He traced a callused hand down from Gabriel’s neck to his chest. He lightly caressed Gabriel’s hardened nipple. “Usually when my cousin is with a man, by this time in the relationship, he’s already fucked them.”

“How would you know if he did or did not?”

Mateo quirked his lips and snorted. “I know he didn’t. When he told me that he’s planning a getaway with you later this month before you left for the airport, I couldn’t handle it. I tried to ignore it. But I just can’t deny this feeling. And before you deny anything, your dick is speaking the same language I’m speaking.” He looked at Gabriel’s tented underwear to make his point crystal clear. “I figured I should stop whatever you two thought you were doing. Call it dating if you want. You two together, it’s a joke. You want me. I can feel your eyes on me. Every time. It feels right.”

Even if Gabriel could refute his attraction to Mateo, it would be a moot point when his penis was very happily pointing north. He never in a million years thought to act upon it. Or to actually do so now. He put his hands on Mateo’s arms, which were staying thankfully above the waist. He spoke too soon, because Mateo placed his hand on the edge of his boxers’ waistband. That thing he felt when Mateo looked at him grew into a sledgehammer in his gut. The pulsing desire Gabriel tried to force himself to feel with Javier was turned up full throttle with Javier’s cousin. “Tell me no and I’ll stop.”

Gabriel couldn’t. Based on that feeling, he couldn’t form the words necessary to stop what both of them would be wrong for doing. Mateo looked back to make sure Gabriel saw there was no force. They both wanted this.

Gabriel stared back. He couldn't drum up enough guilt to put on the brakes. Mateo took this as acquiescence.

He pushed Gabriel towards the living room floor, rolling them so Gabriel was on top. He dragged his nose down the column of Gabriel's neck. "You just got out of the shower?" Mateo asked while sucking on his Adam's apple softly.

"Yeah." Gabriel was caught up in the sensations.

"Wish I had known." He rubbed his hard dick into Gabe's thigh. "I would have come by earlier. Helped you out." He dragged a hand over Gabriel's ass and squeezed his bubble butt.

"Might have been nice," panted Gabriel before they rolled again, this time with Gabriel underneath Mateo.

Mateo threw his shirt off and pressed his chest against Gabe's. Gabriel was temporarily stunned by the glittering nipple rings. He never would have guessed Mateo had piercings. Mateo rubbed his nipples across Gabriel's, groaning when the stiff peaks finally touched. Gabriel grabbed Mateo's head, breathing the other man in, sipping heavily from his mouth, savoring his flavor. While kissing, Mateo moved his hand to the front of his boxers, grabbing Gabriel's stiff cock. Gabriel had never been so turned on before.

Mateo pulled down Gabriel's shorts and made a low groan. "Definitely going to ride this in the future." He threw the underwear somewhere in the living room, neither of them really caring where they landed. He pressed a light kiss to Gabriel's ever-beckoning cock head and stared Gabriel in the eyes. Gabe probably crossed them from trying not to shoot at that point. Never in a million years did he think this scenario would ever play out.

Mateo sucked on Gabriel's wide mushroom-like head, flicking his tongue down his slit. Gabriel knew this time his eyes did cross because it felt so good. Mateo put his hand by Gabriel's mouth. A deep growl to "lick" was commanded from somewhere around Gabriel's nether region. Mateo used his other hand to trace the V of his groin, making Gabe's toes curl while Mateo sucked his cock head voraciously. Gabriel held onto the proffered hand, licking Mateo's palm and wetting each finger. Once he finished, Mateo took

his saliva-coated hand to Gabriel's shaft, rubbing the appendage in an up and down motion while keeping his mouth on just the tip.

Gabriel jump-started his mind—he should be reciprocating the pleasure he was receiving—so he placed a hand on the edge of Mateo's pants. He groped the erection, hesitating a little when he thought he felt something hard on Mateo's dick. Mateo finally let up off Gabe's penis to quickly remove his pants and underwear. Now both men were fully naked. "El?" Mateo asked.

His doubts about this situation were disappearing once the other man asked about his pet. It warmed him even more. "He's gone for the weekend."

"You had plans this weekend?"

"Not really."

"Me neither. I'm sure we'll be able to figure something out." He smiled at Gabriel's erection, returning his hand to grip and rub Gabriel, oh so right. Gabriel looked towards Mateo's penis and did a double take. Not only was it quite large, it looked intimidating. He did feel something hard earlier. Mateo had an apadravya, which shocked the shit out of Gabriel. He thought the nipple piercings were a pleasant surprise but the penile piercing downright scared him. He worried about how he could fit any of it in his mouth.

"Don't worry, babe." Mateo grazed him with his lips, hovering over his mouth and placing the impressive erection against Gabriel's. "I just want to taste you is all." He ran his other hand against Gabriel's furrowed brow.

"I've never bottomed before." He might as well get that out of the way. Because if the other man thought he was going to be able to even fit half of his cock inside of him, he had another thing coming. He hoped there was no look of pity in Mateo's eyes.

Gabriel didn't have to worry. "That's okay, Gabe. I didn't plan on even going this far. I actually wanted to talk to you first but I couldn't stop myself." Still water runs deep. "Will you let me?" He puckered his mouth and leaned in further. "You taste so good, Gabe."

Gabriel rubbed himself slowly against Mateo, not used to feeling a piercing run along his dick. It was odd, but if Mateo kept this up, he'd get used to it.

Both men rubbed themselves languorously, both slicking their hands with their precum. Their hips moved in tandem, heightening the pleasure. “You never answered, Gabe.” Mateo grabbed both of their dicks in one hand. Blazing blue stared down at him when Gabriel looked up. “Tell me. Let me hear it.”

Gabriel was getting so caught up in the motions. He was prepared to say whatever Mateo wanted to hear as long he kept that up. “Yes. T-taste me,” he cried out as Mateo tightened his grip. Mateo started licking his way down his neck, sucking again on his Adam’s apple. He slowly moved down his chest, moving to suck on the right nipple, pulling on the dusky bead and nipping around his small areola. Gabe grunted and humped harder against Mateo but the man frustratingly kept moving his torso away, only grazing and teasing him.

“Not yet,” Mateo murmured into his skin. He moved to the other nipple, applying the same oral tricks while not giving Gabriel’s cock the stimulation he craved. Mateo finally descended to the area that wanted most of his attention. He flattened his tongue straight down Gabriel’s belly, giving little kisses to the soft mound. He kept his tongue flat against Gabriel’s groin, licking softly against his shaft, much to Gabriel’s frustration. He groaned out loud once he looked down to see what new tortuous move Mateo was going to do to him now. Mateo seemed only to be waiting for his gaze before swallowing his penis whole, tip to root. Mateo’s nose nestled in his pubic hair, making Gabriel bow his back. Mateo dragged his mouth away from the shaft, leaving only the head lying on his tongue. He took a deep breath around the stiff penis and added tight suction as he moved the shaft back towards his throat.

Gabriel had to avert his eyes for several seconds so he wouldn’t shoot off. He could feel the need to come begin to build. He wanted to last longer, or at least help Mateo out with something, instead of shouting out his pleasure from Mateo’s wicked mouth. Mateo removed his mouth from Gabriel’s dick, for which, Gabriel was thankful for a reprieve, but Mateo then moved to his balls, sucking on each testicle. He played with the first, then the second. Gabriel wound his left leg across Mateo’s back, opening himself for more of Mateo’s teasing.

Mateo moved further down, his tongue fluttering swiftly over his perineum, moving directly towards the Promised Land that was Gabriel's anus. He used both thumbs to hold the area open and used the rest of his fingers to hold Gabriel's fluffy behind.

"Please," Gabriel breathed out. Mateo spit on his clean asshole. He licked around the area, never penetrating. Gabriel was not even cognizant of what he was saying, he just went with the feeling. Mateo used his thumbs along with his tongue to stimulate the already stimulated area. He pierced his tongue inside the rim, flicking his tongue gently, apparently taking Gabriel's constant guttural moans as approval. He moved in as deep as his tongue would let him until Gabriel added his other leg to his back adding to the frantic movement his hips made. "Yes, Mateo. Right. There."

Mateo pulled his tongue out, hopefully wanting Gabriel to come in his mouth. Mateo mouthed his way back towards the leaking shaft and resumed swallowing Gabriel whole. He moved his head back and forth, twisting his tongue around the sensitive slit. Mateo sped up once he figured out Gabriel was trying to hold back, or so it seemed. Gabriel couldn't stop his semen from shooting once Mateo's tongue played with the underside of his cock. He shot into Mateo's mouth, grunting and biting his lip as his hips seized into Mateo's hungry mouth. Mateo swallowed all that he had to give.

Or not. Mateo left some come in his mouth and spit it back into his hand. He looked askance at Gabe, who got the message. Together the men brought Mateo off. Mateo burrowed his head in the crook of Gabriel's neck, guiding Gabe's hands on how to grip him with the apa. Gabriel learned how sensitive Mateo was around the piercing sites, how much pressure made Mateo curse "fuck" loudly. He moved his mouth towards Gabriel's, trying to reach his tonsils with his tongue while humping into their hands. Mateo growled into Gabriel's mouth as he shot his load, grinding his hips into Gabriel's already messy front. Once finished, both men gently kissed each other as they came down from their orgasmic highs.

"See what I mean?"

Gabriel surely did. Shit, what was he was going to tell Javier once he came back to New York?



“We’re going to have to tell Javier about us when he comes back,” Mateo said, as if reading his mind.

“How do you even know if we’re going to be an ‘us’?” Gabe replied.

“Give me a couple of minutes and I’ll show you.”

“I’ll tell him. I’m dating him. Let him hate me.”

“I’m his cousin. What do you think he’ll do, give me a high five?”

“I think he’d handle it better from me.”

“I’ve known him longer. Believe me, whichever way you want to handle it, he’s going to be pissed. I think in the future he’ll get over it because he’ll see you two were forcing something that wasn’t there.”

“I think that’s the most you’ve ever said to me.”

Mateo grabbed Gabriel’s butt cheek and pinched until Gabriel squeaked.

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During the two weeks Javier was away, both men couldn’t keep their hands off of one another. Mateo was over at Gabriel’s house if he wasn’t working. The two grew closer on more than just a sexual level. In fact, they had blown one another often. Gabriel was rusty at first (especially mouthing that apadravya the first time) but it was like riding a bicycle. They didn’t try anal yet, although they wanted to. They had fun doing everything in between. When the two weren’t pawing at each other, they spent time cooking or going to the gym together. Elton enjoyed the extra walks and attention from Mateo, and he also did not mind the extra treats that somehow found their way from Mateo’s pockets. Gabriel didn’t want to jinx the feeling. It might have been something close to the “L” word. But he tried to push that to the back of his mind for later analysis. He’d define it in the *strong like* category with a forecast of this growing into something special.

He didn’t tell Nita about him and Mateo yet. He almost slipped telling Lucas at work the other day. Once he told one, the other would know just as quick. He was slightly afraid of their reactions.

Now their Javier-less days were over. Javier had returned home from Ohio late last night. Gabriel had planned to pick the older man up, but delays and a



taxi ride changed that. When Gabriel spoke to Javier over the phone, he just couldn't find a way to say, *it's over*. Especially to something that never really began in the first place. He preferred to tell him face to face like an adult, instead of over the phone. Tomorrow. Gabe lay in bed trying to plan his speech for the next day but somehow spent the time worrying himself until he was too tired to stay up.

A loud piercing sound woke Gabriel abruptly out of his deep sleep. Phone... the cell phone was ringing. "Hello," he breathed into his phone. He could barely crack his eyes open to see who was calling him at "it-better-be-a-fucking-emergency" o'clock.

"Gabriel."

"Mateo?" He tried rubbing his eyes. "Hey," he murmured. He tried to wake the rest of his body up. His dick was making itself present at the sound of Mateo's deep voice.

"You didn't tell him yet." Gabriel didn't need a description of the "yet" Mateo was referring to.

"I kept meaning to—"

Mateo cut him off. "But you didn't. I don't want to sneak around. I want to be able to feel you up whenever I'd like, in front whoever I want."

"Tomorrow, I will. I don't want to tell him over the phone. It's bad enough."

"You and I aren't bad together. We're great together."

"I wish you were lying next me."

"Really? How bad?"

"Bad enough. My semi is getting pretty hard."

"Buzz me in."

"Where are you?" A loud buzz coming from the front of his apartment gave him his answer. He ran to buzz Mateo inside. He held the front door open in anticipation like a loser. But he couldn't help it. Once Mateo walked off the elevator and turned his way, Gabriel's stomach fluttered in delight. Mateo

grabbed him and licked into his mouth. Both battled their tongues for dominance but Mateo won, this time.

“Missed you.”

“You saw me earlier today.”

“I wanna be next to you at night.” The two walked in the apartment, arms wrapped tightly around one another. Elton looked up from his dog bed in the hallway. He saw it was his new favorite person and walked over to Mateo for him to acknowledge his presence. Once Mateo rubbed his head, Elton gave a halfhearted spin and went back to his bed. “Show me your bedroom again.”

Gabe laughed softly. “What, you forgot how it looked from the last time you were here?”

“You might have painted or something. Let’s go find out.”

He brought the man to his bedroom, throwing his clothes haphazardly off onto the floor. “Too many clothes on you.” He grabbed the hem of Mateo’s plain T-shirt and threw that on the floor next to his shirt. Gabe drew his hands down Mateo’s torso, flicking his nipple piercings along the way. When it came to his pants, Mateo pulled something out from his back pocket and threw the items on the bed.

Gabriel looked to see a small bottle of lube and package of condoms against his pillows. “Someone was pretty sure of himself tonight.”

“Doesn’t have to be tonight. Think of it as for future use.”

Gabriel pulled Mateo closer, wanting another taste of the mouth he was becoming addicted to. Both men lost their pants and briefs, respectively, now fully naked.

“Uh-huh.” Gabriel wrapped his arms around Mateo’s neck, drawing him in even closer, savoring the feel of their naked bodies pressed together. The two had been working themselves to this point during the past days, and it was becoming harder to stop before this final point each time.

Mateo pressed Gabe backwards towards the bed, the two tumbling down with Mateo on top. “You know I dream about your ass. Love feeling it in my hands. You fill them up. It’s my second favorite thing about you.” He pressed

his mouth to Gabe's jaw. He pulled Gabriel's ass cheeks apart, their sweat helping him glide across the soft skin.

His hand ran through Mateo's curls. "I'm afraid to find out what's the first." Gabriel pulled Mateo's face across the short distance and sucked on his tongue. Mateo groaned when Gabe slid his other hand in between their bodies and held onto his firm dick. He played with the barbells on the top and bottom of Mateo's penis and then fisted his thick shaft.

"Babe?" Mateo licked his neck. "I really have been dreaming about your ass. How you sound when I lick your taint. How I can make you purr when I put my tongue inside you. You taste so good." He rubbed against Gabriel. "Feel even better," he whispered.

Gabriel licked a spot close to Mateo's ear and then lightly bit the man. He sucked on the spot with his mouth. Both men grappled with each other, pulling and pressing passionately.

Mateo's right hand found its way back to Gabriel's behind, "Let me—"

"Fuck me."

"You sure?"

"I said it, didn't I?" Gabriel smirked, channeling his inner Mateo. He rubbed their erections together, holding onto his man tightly. Mateo reached for the bottle and a foil packet and brought the items closer. Mateo leaned away and signaled for Gabriel to turn over. Gabriel obliged. Mateo pulled on Gabriel's torso for him to rise onto his hands and knees.

Gabriel had played with butt plugs, but never tried to use a toy anywhere close to the size of Mateo. He wasn't sure Mateo was going to fit, but he knew Mateo would make sure they had fun either way. Mateo fondled Gabriel's cock, using some of the lube to glide over his shaft, firming his already stiff penis. Gabriel moved along with Mateo's hand, pushing his ass closer to Mateo.

Mateo must have seen Gabriel wasn't in the mood for too much foreplay tonight because he moved his hand off his dick, making his way to Gabe's rear entrance. He squirted more lubrication on his fingers, and played with Gabe's

anal walls, starting out with one finger and stretching and lubricating along the way. Mateo gradually inserted another finger, and Gabriel's erection hardened to pike-like proportions. He reached behind him to play with Mateo's hands, taking some of the lubricant to use while stroking himself.

Gabriel watched Mateo reach for the condom and roll it on, taking care with the apadravya. Mateo smoothed the protection on and placed the head in between Gabe's cheeks. He rubbed up against the bottom of Mateo's dick, craving the feel of him. Mateo didn't penetrate Gabe just yet, he let him work his way closer to the thick cock head, rubbing his anus against Mateo as he stroked himself off.

"Babe." Gabriel kept backing into Mateo's cock but no penetrative relief was offered. "I'm hurting here. I want to feel you inside me."

Mateo held his asshole open and Gabriel moved back on instinct. After a few thrusts, Mateo finally breached his inner ring. Mateo held steady and murmured into Gabriel's ear. The burning sensation overtook any pleasure Gabriel felt. He breathed out slowly, trying to get used to the feeling and ignoring his cock. Mateo reached over and helped fondle Gabriel's cock, which had waned slightly since Mateo pushed inside. The two of them together helped bring Gabriel's cock to the hard length it originally was. Mateo played with Gabe's balls while Gabe continued a firm stroke on his shaft, rubbing his thumb across his head on each upward stroke. He thrust back to try to fit more of Mateo inside of him, ignoring the burning sensation. Mateo slowly sank inside, not fully pulling out, thankfully letting Gabriel become accustomed to the feel of him.

Gabriel pressed harder into Mateo's next stroke. Gabriel started getting into the act of bottoming. "Faster," he cried. Mateo answered by increasing his speed, keeping his thrusts even and deep. Both men grunted loudly when the ball of Mateo's piercing pressed against Gabriel's prostate. They gradually sped up, sweat dripping down their faces and bodies, pooling in the arch of their backs. Gabriel made his distinctive high-pitched moan-whine.

"That's it."

"What?" Gabriel could barely keep up with the thrusts, much less a conversation.

“Favorite thing,” Mateo growled and pushed faster. “Sounds you make.” He growled again, fiercely. “Right before you come.” Mateo mouthed the back of Gabriel’s neck as he came, thrusting erratically into Gabriel. Gabriel didn’t come as yet. He was almost to that glorious point. Mateo pulled out and turned the other man on to his back.

Mateo sucked Gabriel’s cock and tongued his piss slit. All Gabriel needed was two suckles to finally come. And boy... did he ever. Gabriel came hard, thrusting his hips into Mateo’s warm mouth. Gabriel couldn’t help his hyper movements as his cum continued to shoot off like a fountain. From the loud slurping noises and encouraging tongue movements, it seemed to Gabriel that Mateo did not mind.

The two lay next to each side by side, catching their breath, enjoying the post-orgasmic high.

Mateo turned his face and smirked, “Next time, I’m going to ride you.” After removing the spent condom and wiping themselves off, they cuddled into one another, burrowing under the messy sheets.

\*\*\*\*

The next day, the two lovers told Javier about the two of them. They calmly discussed the feelings they had for one another. Javier noted their faults but couldn’t deny that both men looked more of a unit than he and Gabriel did. He wished the two luck, and all three lived happily ever after.

Sound too good to be true?

It is.

Here’s what really happened...

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“You are fucking kidding me!” Javier’s face turned a mottled red as he jumped up from the couch to yell at the two men standing across from him. He balled his fists and refused to look at Gabriel. “I thought we were fucking family, Mateo!” He finished the rest of his thoughts in Spanish and argued with Mateo, who answered in English each time for Gabriel’s benefit. “You fucked Gabriel! You and me are supposed to be like brothers, man!” Javier finally switched back to English. “Fucking can’t believe this bullshit!”

“I have never done this to you before, man. I would have never done this to you unless it was worth it.”

“Don’t you think I felt Gabriel was worth it?” Javier looked like he wanted to leap over the coffee table. “And you?” Javier finally looked at Gabe.

“Why didn’t you ever push for more?” Not saying that Gabriel minded, he was just curious.

“You weren’t ready for that.” Javier looked disdainfully at the pair. “Or at least I thought so.”

“Don’t even say it,” Mateo growled. “If you want to talk shit, direct it to me. I pursued him.”

“Oh yeah? Well, he still fell for you, didn’t he?” Javier stared angrily at his cousin and Gabriel. “Fuck the two of you.” He kicked the coffee table and broke off a wooden leg so the table fell over to the side. Gabriel jumped but Mateo stood firm. “I thought blood was supposed to be thicker than water, man.”

Mateo shook his head. “As fucked up as it sounds, I did choose you. You two weren’t right together. You’ll make better friends. When you and Lee were together, you fucked him the same night you met him. I would have to go on long drives—you two were so loud.”

“Fuck this shit!” Javier stalked out of the room, slamming his way out the back door of the house.

Gabriel looked at Mateo. “That went well.” They didn’t call after Javier, knowing he was not in a rational state of mind.

Both men left messages and text messages on Javier’s cell phone later that night. The messages went straight to voicemail, while the texts were ignored. They continued trying to contact Javier to no avail. Two weeks passed with nothing from Javier. He must have found someplace to stay temporarily, because Mateo had not seen his cousin around the house. Friends said they saw Javier around their old neighborhood, so at least they knew he was alive. During the third week, Javier’s things started to slowly disappear. He came when he knew Mateo was out of the house.

A month had passed since Javier moved out from his cousin's home. Gabriel was surprised when he called Javier's cell phone number and the other man actually picked up.

"Javier?"

"Gabriel." Javier was a lot calmer this time around. "You both don't give up, do you? How did you think this would end?" Javier sighed.

"Truthfully, with you hating our guts," Gabriel replied. "But I thought we were at least friends. Me, I'm expendable. But—"

"I fucked his ex," Javier interrupted. "I didn't feel as good afterwards as I thought I would."

Gabriel listened calmly, waiting for him to say more.

"You can tell him that the next time you see him," Javier gloated.

Gabriel sighed into the phone. "I don't think it's going to have the same affect that you think it might."

"I don't either. But the fucked-up part of me still wants to feel on even ground," Javier threw back at him.

"Okay."

"I want to hate you—the both of you—but I don't. I trust neither one of you."

"So why you did pick up?"

"Mateo's my family. I know him. He would have never done this unless he thought you were worth it. I can think rationally now that I've cooled down."

"And you fucked his ex."

"And I fucked his ex." Javier laughed. "It didn't hurt." He exhaled slowly, "This doesn't mean we're friends."

"I didn't expect you wanted to be."

"So why did you do it?"

"You know when you look at your lover and the pit of your stomach tightens each time you're with him? It might be from a glance. Or the moment he walks in a room?"

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t feel that with you. Did you with me?”

“We could have gotten to that point.” Javier’s tone did not hold much conviction.

“Do you really think so? I think that’s why you answered my call.”

Javier didn’t speak. He breathed into the phone as did Gabriel. Gabriel knew his actions were wrong but what he and Mateo had was worth it. He hoped in the future to be friends with Javier. He was a good guy—just not for Gabriel.

“Let my cousin know you both don’t have to call so much. I’ll speak to him when I’m ready.” He hung up without saying goodbye.

\*\*\*\*\*

Weeks passed as Gabriel and Mateo grew closer. They eased up on the phone calls as Javier requested. Mateo arrived home one night, surprisingly without Gabe and Elton, due to the fact that tomorrow was Gabriel’s early day at work. Mateo was feeling pretty mellow after receiving an enthusiastic blowjob from his boyfriend. He’d be dreaming about that ass tonight. As he put the key in the lock of his front door, he noticed someone waiting off to the side.

“Cousin.” Javier walked closer into the light to stare at Mateo.

Mateo opened the door. “Javier.” He pointed with his chin for the man to come inside. Both men sat down calmly and looked at each other. There were small changes to Mateo, Javier noticed. His eyes seemed to twinkle. He looked happy. He looked good. Javier couldn’t think of a time he ever saw his cousin look this way.

“You got my message?”

“That you fucked my ex.” Mateo shrugged. He didn’t care, an ex was an ex for a reason. “Who was it?”

“Jackson. Who else would it have been? The others were women.” Jackson must have enjoyed it too. He was bitter after their breakup.

“I still love you. You were the one person I looked up to.”



“And I you, cousin.”

“I am happy Gabriel isn’t here. It’s still too soon.” Javier looked around and stared at a dog bed that was never there before. “You got a dog?”

“No, that’s for Elton when he’s here.”

Javier made a face. “Better you than me, I guess.”

“I can’t believe you’re afraid of him. He’s the tamest dog I’ve ever met.”

“To each their own.” Javier stood up and held out his hand. Mateo reached across to shake it, knowing the man wasn’t ready for hugs as of yet. “I got to head out of here, anyway. Maxine from work is dragging me to some Passion Party.”

Mateo looked stumped. “What the hell is that?”

“A party where they sell sex toys. She told me the host was cute. Figured I check him out.”

“Um, have fun?” Mateo was pretty satisfied in the sex department.

Javier turned to walk towards the door, stopped and looked back. “You love him, don’t you? That’s what it is. You have this vibe around you now.”

Mateo put his hands in his pockets and muttered something that sounded like a “maybe”. He thought he hid his feelings about the younger man fairly well. Guess he didn’t.

“Good luck with that. Even though I still can’t stand to think of the two of you together, you’re both decent. You could do much worse.” He turned to leave. “Night.”

Mateo stood up and looked at his wall like it had the answers to the questions of life. He thought of Javier and their future. It was salvageable, most likely with time. He thought of his boyfriend and grinned. He was going to call him right now and talk dirty to him before going to bed.

He knew he’d pick up.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*LL Bucknor loves to read... a lot, drink caffeine (coffee and tea the best, yum) and has been known to do some things for chocolate (there might or might not be a case pending—j/k, maybe). She writes sometimes too. She used to write slash fan fiction for the masses many years ago. She figured it's time to get back into the game. A staunch believer in happy endings and the various paths one can take to get there, she does. She lives with her own real life Elton (minus the name) and her lively family (they're a laugh riot).*

*Did you like what you read? Want more? Less? Just want to give a shout? She's not a fan of Facebook—she has a page but barely goes on but she has Twitter (@BooksForShe). To best reach her, email her at the email found below.*

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# ARES PURPOSE

By H.A. Caine

## **Photo Description**

This is a drawing rather than a photograph, and not a manga-style cartoon but a more realistic depiction. A muscular, naked dark-haired man lies face down on a bed, his pale butt cheeks contrasting with the rest of his tanned, cut body. Another equally muscular naked man is coming through the doorway next to the bed, carrying a loaded breakfast tray at exactly the right height to hide anything interesting.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*This image really needs a story. It's so intimate. Maybe he is being pampered by his lover. Supporting him through a difficult time. I would really love to read a story about a career, and how that sort of responsibility affects them and their relationship. I think these two are an established couple.*

*No BDSM or dub con for this please.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sarah*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** sweet no sex, established couple, homophobia, fighting

**Word count:** 4,038

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# ARES PURPOSE

By H.A. Caine

The music in the bar was so loud; he almost didn't hear the insult when it came. Fortunately for him, the man standing next to him stumbled and his drink spilled. Unfortunately for the asshole, Stumbling Joe was his boyfriend.

Gripping Zarek's arms, he waited a second until he was sure of his feet and then turned to face Asshole. Ares had been waiting for this jerk to approach them for the last hour.

All night, the idiot had sat in a corner, pointing at them and whispering with his buddies, Dumbass One and Dumbass Two. Evidently, Dumbass One and Two had stroked Asshole's ego enough that he finally felt capable of doing some damage.

Ares smiled.

"What you smiling at, fag? Finally spotted a rainbow you want to skip along?" That was Asshole; his buddies started snickering behind him.

Now, Ares had nothing against rainbows, but he had to wonder, where the hell did the guy get that one from?

Looking in the mirror that ran the length of the bar, he assured himself that no, he was not three feet short in an orange tux with a tall hat on.

He was, in fact, six feet four inches and dressed in leather. And if anyone ever even thought of putting such a stupid hat on him, he'd probably break their arm. Maybe even both.

Okay, so yeah, maybe Ares had anger problems. At least he could admit it. He even apologized for it.

Sometimes.

His smile widened. "You pushed my boyfriend." He kept his volume low, his voice rumbling out the words. Unconsciously, Trio Prick leaned in to hear what he was saying.

Behind him, Zarek sighed, tugging on the sleeve of his jacket. "Ares, no. We promised Phil you'd stay out of trouble tonight." Phil was the owner of the

bar and a longtime friend of theirs. Since the last time they were here, Ares had caused a couple hundred dollars in damage to the bar top and maybe a few stools, not to mention the tables that were broken, Phil had asked him to keep a lid on his temper.

But even Phil wouldn't expect him to just stand by while people picked on Zarek.

Ares dug in his pocket, pulling out his wallet. Flipping it open, he pulled out a wad of bills and turned to the bar.

The bartender, having sensed the tension building all night, was already on the phone. No doubt calling Phil. His next call would be to the police.

Tossing the money on the counter, Ares turned back to Asshole as he spoke. "Give that to Phil for any damage, would ya?" He could practically feel the eyes rolling behind him.

"That's not what I meant. Now, come on. They aren't worth it." Again, Zarek tugged on his jacket trying to get him to move.

Considering the fact that Zarek was just as big as him, and neither of them wanted for muscles, Ares knew damn well that Zarek wasn't really trying to move him. He also knew that for his own peace of mind, the man had to at least make a show of attempting to dissuade Ares. While not as bad as Ares, Zarek was no angel, despite what he'd have people believe.

"Yeah, listen to the fairy princess and run along. This bar is for men, not little girls." Once again Asshole opened his mouth and the Dumb Jock duet giggled.

Seriously, they giggled and yet he was the one being called a little girl?

Looking at the men in front of him, Ares had to figure they were still in school, maybe college. They weren't small guys, which was most likely the only reason they felt brave enough approaching him and Zarek in the first place. Maybe they were all dumb jocks? Ah well, didn't matter, he was still going to hit them.

No one made fun of Zarek and got away with it. Just because the man was quiet and wore glasses, idiots like the three standing in front of him always assumed he was an easy target.

Asshole, whom Ares was thinking of promoting to Jackass, leaned forward, pushing Ares back a half step. “What, you deaf? I said get out of here! No gays allowed!”

The hand on Ares’ arm tensed. “Ares...”

“Yeah, babe?” He grinned; he already knew what was coming.

“Go for it.” With that, Zarek stepped around him, reaching for Dumbass One. When Dumbass Two would have intervened, Ares punched him dead in the face, knocking him to the ground and following him down. He punched him again for good measure and turned, reaching for Jackass as he grabbed for the back of Zarek’s shirt and attempted to yank him off of the now unconscious D.O.

Before he could do more than toss the man against the bar, a fist came flying from over his shoulder and Jackass’ hands flew to his face as blood started spurting from what Ares figured was a well-deserved broken nose.

“Dammit! I thought you said you were going to behave?”

Grinning at the irate voice behind him, Ares helped Zarek up and turned to face Phil. Opening his mouth to make a comment, he saw Phil’s eyes widen and heard Zarek yell his name as something unbelievably hard slammed into his head.

Vaguely, he registered the sensation of sweat sliding down the side of his face as the floor rushed up to meet him and his vision darkened.

\*\*\*\*

Slowly, Ares woke, his head throbbing with a pounding headache. Opening his eyes, he realized the gentle rocking that had woken him was the vibration of the car as Zarek drove.

Groaning, he lifted his head. Quickly reaching out a hand to the dashboard, he steadied himself as dizziness hit and his stomach threatened to revolt.

“Unngh. What the fuck hit me?” he mumbled, cradling his head. Deciding sitting up maybe wasn’t the best idea, he slouched back against the window, but kept his eyes open.

“That would be the business end of a beer bottle.” The quiet answer startled him and he quickly swung his head towards Zarek, without thinking about the stab of pain such a movement would cause.

“Fuck!” Yeah, he wouldn’t be moving that fast for some time. And seriously, a beer bottle? Ares was pretty certain that only happened in movies. At least, he thought it only happened in movies. What kind of punk-ass actually did that? Mentally, he raised his hand. He knew that answer. Punk-ass college boys, who had bigger egos than muscles, did that.

He must have made some kind of sound that showed his incredulity at the fact because Zarek chuckled beside him, before patting him on the thigh reassuringly.

Ignoring the laughter, he lifted a hand and prodded at the spot above his left ear, where the throbbing pain was the worst.

He felt the stickiness of drying blood and grimaced. Sifting through his hair, he flinched when his fingertip made contact with his scalp. Poking around, he determined it wasn’t anything serious but he still needed to wash it.

Some swabs of alcohol and a few butterfly stitches should do, he decided.

“Jeez. I need to lie down. How much longer ’til we get home?” He leaned back against the headrest, turning to face Zarek when the man didn’t respond right away.

Narrowing his eyes, he watched as Z nibbled on his lower lip, the pink flesh shiny with spit in the dim light of the dashboard.

“Zarek.” He dragged the name out, waiting to speak until Zarek sighed and flashed his eyes to Ares before returning them to the road.

“Yeah?” he asked, pretending he didn’t hear Ares question.

Yeah, well two could play this game. “Where are we going?” Ares asked. As if he didn’t already know.

There was no damn way Ares was going to the hospital, damn sure not for some little nick that had already clotted over. Zarek was off his rocker if he thought Ares was just going to sit back and let him take him to the hospital.

Of course, knowing him like he did, Ares was sure that Zarek had probably been hoping that he slept through the ride and didn't wake until it was too late to back out.

Fortunately for him, that didn't happen.

He grinned when obvious frustration crossed Zarek's face and had to fight the urge to fist pump in victory when Zarek sighed in defeat. Of course, he was too cool to fist pump. He settled on just considering himself lucky enough that his man was smart enough to not fight a lost battle.

"I was hoping you didn't wake until we got there and a doctor helped me convince you to get checked out." Zarek sighed again and Ares chuckled.

"I know you were. But as it is, you might as well turn around and take us home." He gestured with his thumb at the back window.

Shockingly, Zarek shook his head and kept to his course.

"Nope. You need to let someone take a look at that wound." His voice was stern but Ares could easily see stubbornness starting to rise in his body language.

"We both know that's not going to happen. Besides, the blood clotted. You can take a look at it at home. Isn't that why you purchased that big-ass first aid kit in the first place? I promise, you turn around and take us home, and for the first time since you bought that stupid thing a year ago, I'll let you use it on me." He mentally crossed his fingers, praying that Zarek took the offer. It wasn't every day that Ares promised to let him play doctor with him, at least not without the promise of a sponge bath, and he could see Zarek thinking about it.

The throb in his head was becoming painful and keeping up the discussion wasn't helping to lessen the pain. Ares knew if he couldn't convince Zarek to drop the matter and deal with it themselves, he would end up agreeing to go to the hospital, if only to get a doctor to give him pain meds that would be stronger than anything he had at home.

He wouldn't mind passing out again, to be honest.

"Look, you can patch me up and put me to bed." He grinned, turning up the puppy dog eyes. "I'll stay put, promise."



He watched as Zarek's eyes flickered back and forth between him and the road before that beautiful, shy smile that Ares first fell for crept across those gorgeous lips and stayed there.

Shaking his head, Z laughed lightly. "Fine, you win. No surprise there." Slowing, Zarek checked the empty road behind them and executed a U-turn, heading back the way they came. "No hospital tonight. I'll take a look at it when we get home." Zarek reached over, skimming his hand over Ares' hair without really touching him.

Unsurprisingly, the touch started as a check to make sure Ares was no longer bleeding and ended up as a caress that trailed down the side of his face, skimming along his left arm before Zarek finally settled his hand over Ares' left knee, giving a gentle squeeze. Ares fought a shiver, placing his hand on Zarek's. He smiled when Z flipped his hand up, twining their fingers together.

They were quiet for a while, enjoying the clear night and simply being near each other. The pain lessened and Ares exhaled a breath, relaxing into his seat and closing his eyes. They'd be home soon and he could lie down, pull Zarek to him and get some much needed rest.

He was just starting to drift when Zarek spoke quietly beside him. "You know, some day you're going to have to explain your aversion to hospitals to me."

Ares didn't reply, simply squeezed Z's hand.

Right, he'd do that when the Devil himself bent over for the fuck of his very long life and invited them for front row seats. With the promise of a YouTube video.

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Half an hour later, Ares pushed open the door of their one bedroom apartment, blinking his eyes as the motion sensor light turned on, momentarily blinding him after the almost black of night. Zarek pushed him forward, moving him out of the doorway. Stepping inside, he locked the door and grabbed Ares' hand, wasting no time in dragging him into the bedroom. For a minute, Ares forgot what had happened that night, as an image of Zarek naked, legs spread lewdly and arms open in welcome as he reached for Ares, popped

into his head. Ares imagined Zarek's body glowing in the faint moonlight that would seep in from the cracks around the curtains, the faint light washing over his golden skin and creating an ethereal mood.

His mind snapped back to the present as he was shoved onto the bed, Zarek pushing Ares' jacket off his shoulders as he reached behind him with one hand to turn on the bedside lamp.

Seeing him struggle to do both at the same time, Ares took over removing his jacket, easing his shirt off carefully as well when he finished.

Rolling his shoulders, he stretched his arms above his head. Leaning forward, he rested his head against the hard muscles of Zarek's stomach and murmured softly in pleasure when fingers began running through his hair.

His body was so relaxed, Ares found himself a little slow in realizing the fingers were sifting through his hair with a purpose. Again he sighed, this time in resignation.

He was going to have to deal with Zarek's babying before he could make good on any fantasies he wished to play out.

"What are you doing?" Zarek was holding up chunks of his hair and pulling at it randomly. While it didn't hurt, Ares wasn't all that comfortable in his current position either. Maybe if he told Zarek that, it would speed things along, he thought to himself. What the hell—it was worth a shot.

"You're giving me a hard-on, love. And while I love the feel of your hands in my hair, I'd much prefer them somewhere else." He ran his hands beneath Zarek's sweater vest, rubbing his rough palms along the waxed smooth ridges of his abs, wondering how long it would take to have them both strip and get his tongue against that fantastic skin. Maybe he could convince Z to put off the checkup until the morning.

Suddenly, his hands were batted none too gently away, and Zarek was tugging his sweater back into place.

"Or maybe not," he muttered, frowning up at a glaring Zarek. "What? I didn't do anything," he defended himself, laughing inside. An angry Zarek was a sexy Zarek as far as he was concerned.

“What happened to staying put?” Zarek muttered, tilting Ares’ head down.

“I am staying put. You don’t see me trying to get up, do you?” he pointed out helpfully, grinning openly now. “No, you don’t,” he answered before Zarek could make a smart comment back. “And I never promised I wouldn’t try to get you in bed with me.”

“No, god forbid you do that.” Although the words were sarcastic, Ares didn’t have to see Zarek’s face to know that he was grinning; he could hear it clearly in his voice.

“Now, now. You wouldn’t want me to start making promises to you I have absolutely no intention of keeping, would you?” He wrapped his arms around Z’s hips but kept his roaming hands in place.

He’d let Zarek do what he wanted. But all bets were off the second after the man finished.

Just ’cause Dipshit and Dimwits ruined their evening, he wasn’t about to let them ruin their night as well.

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Rolling over, he reached across the bed, frowning when his hand fell onto cold sheets. He blinked his eyes open, squinting when the sunlight blinded him. Waiting for his eyes to adjust, he moved to lean up on his elbow and peered around the room, but Zarek was nowhere in sight.

Mumbling, he flopped onto his back, groaning when his head protested. He glanced at the clock on the wall, his mumbling growing louder when he saw it was a quarter to seven.

“Zarek?” he yelled. His voice was extremely loud in the quiet morning.

He could hear shuffling outside the room door and then it was pushed open, Zarek’s face popping around the corner, smiling.

“Yeah, love?” Zarek shouldered the door open, and Ares was able to see the serving tray the man held. He took in the view, loving the fact that Zarek hadn’t put on any clothes when he got out of bed that morning.

“What’s that?” he asked, thrusting his chin out at the tray.

“I thought I’d bring you breakfast in bed this morning. What do you think?” Zarek blushed, ducking his head so Ares couldn’t see his eyes, as he walked to the bed and set the tray down next to Ares’ arm before sitting cross-legged at his naked hip.

Ares smiled, loving this shy Zarek. He was so beautiful with his face flushed red, his bangs tickling at the top of his full eyebrows and his white teeth nibbling on lips that Ares wanted to bite, as he waited for Ares to say something.

He pushed himself up into a seated position and reached for Zarek, drawing him closer. Dipping his head down, he forced Zarek to meet his gaze and smiled lovingly, brushing a soft kiss against those luscious lips. “I think—” He paused, kissing him again, never mind the morning breath. “—that you are perfect.” Pulling back, he smiled again and turned to the tray, lifting the damp napkin from on top of the plates.

He looked at the plate of eggs, scrambled with feta cheese, just the way Ares liked them. Next to it was a dish with a mix of bacon and breakfast links, as well as a bowl of diced fruit. Zarek had also toasted some bread, slathering it with enough butter that it was beginning to sag in the middle. He had placed a mug of black coffee and a cup of orange juice on the tray, too.

Ares grinned, turning back to an expectant Zarek.

“It looks great. Smells wonderful, too.” When Zarek beamed with happiness, Ares leaned in and captured his mouth with his own, loving how happy his man got over the simplest things. That was one of the qualities he loved most about Zarek. He took joy in the little things in life and appreciated what most people took for granted. He gave Ares a new outlook on things, and he loved how easy it was to make Zarek happy.

“How’re you holding up?” Zarek handed him the cup of juice, picking at a piece of fruit.

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Ares bit into a slice of toast, swallowing it down with the OJ. “I’m fine. I told you, it’s nothing. I’ve had worse.”

Zarek frowned and didn’t say anything. Shaking his head, Ares held the buttery bread to Z’s mouth. “You worry too much,” he murmured when the man reluctantly took a bite.

“Someone has to.” Smiling at the snippy comment, Ares picked up a fork and started feeding them both some of the eggs.

“I care about myself, I’m just not going to allow some dickless dorks bother you and let them get away with it. If it means a few cuts and scratches, well, then, it’s a good thing you think scars are sexy.”

Smirking, Ares put down his fork and reached between his legs, grabbing a hold of his dick and fingering the slightly paler skin beneath his bulbous head. As he expected, Zarek’s breath caught in his throat and for a minute it seemed he couldn’t look away as Ares continued to fondle himself, growing hard under Zarek’s heated gaze.

When Zarek finally looked back up, his eyes were shining and his face was bright. “It’s not your job to protect me. I can take care of myself—I don’t need you to do it for me.” Ares knew he wanted to sound serious, but the husky note to his voice gave away Zarek’s excitement.

Nonetheless, Ares released himself and nodded his head. “You’re absolutely right.” And Ares knew damn well he was. As he mentioned before, Zarek was just as big as he was. But where he was tough and always ready for a fight, Zarek was understanding and diplomatic. The only time he condoned fighting was when he thought someone was attacking Ares or when his sexual orientation was used against him.

But the same way Zarek wanted to keep Ares from getting hurt, Ares never wanted him to get hurt. Next to Zarek’s happiness, it was the most important thing in the world to him.

“I know you don’t need me to protect you. I know you can take care of—and care for—yourself. I get that, I do.” He reached for Zarek’s hand, trying to communicate his sincerity. The last thing he wanted was Zarek thinking he didn’t believe he could look after himself.

“But I want to protect you. I live for it. It gives me purpose. It’s like when I make you smile. I know I’m doing something right when you wake up in the morning and the first thing you do is smile at me.” Zarek blushed, dropping his head forward. Ares continued. “When you do that, it makes me feel like I’m here for a reason. So yeah, I know you can take care of yourself and I love

that. It means I never have to worry about you getting hurt when I'm not around. But when I am around—" He lifted Zarek's head with his free hand. "When I am around, you shouldn't have to protect yourself. You don't have to worry about anything happening to you because I will never let that happen. I love knowing that I can keep you safe. Let's face it; fighting is all I'm good at. And there's a reason for that."

When Zarek opened his mouth to object, Ares swooped forward, silencing him with a kiss.

When he pulled back, he smiled, seeing Zarek lick his bottom lip. "It's so that I can keep you safe. And I live for that."

Cocking his head to the side, Zarek studied Ares. Ares remained quiet, knowing that Zarek was thinking on what he had said. "You live to keep me safe?" It was meant to be a statement but Ares could clearly hear the question in it.

Smiling, he shook his head and raised his hands to cup Z's face. "No, babe. I live for you."

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*H.A. Caine remains in her hometown of Brooklyn, NY. She has hopes of opening her own bakery and is currently in school working towards that dream. She has self-published From Love and Pain and is working on multiple works at the moment, including two series.*

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# **REDESIGNING OLD DREAMS**

By **Dana Cavallon**

## **Photo Description**

Two men embrace, eyes tightly closed. Light gleams off their brown skin, highlighting solid muscles and prominent veins on strong arms. The man in the foreground is wearing a white tank-top, his face pressed against his shirtless lover's shoulder. A twilight-blue background contributes to the somber feeling of a poignant moment.

## **Story Letter**

*Dear Author,*

*I can't stay. This city is no longer my home. I am constantly reminded of what has been lost. All I have left is him but I'm afraid he won't come with me. How do I ask... beg him to stay by my side? Will I be strong enough to walk away if the answer is no?*

*Sincerely,*

*Lexi*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** family drama, grief, established couples, friends to lovers, blue collar, Hispanic, romance, HFN

**Content warnings:** death of a parent

**Word count:** 14,004

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# REDESIGNING OLD DREAMS

By Dana Cavallon

## CHAPTER ONE

Mateo knocked loudly, determined to get an answer tonight. Something was clearly bothering Eddie, over and above having lost his mother a few months ago. That would be reason enough to worry about him, especially since he'd been taking care of her for years, but in the last week or so, something more seemed to be simmering. Mateo needed to know what it was so he could fix it.

Eddie had grown up as an only child, and Mateo was still teaching him that sharing applied to problems as well as toys. Actually, Eddie was really good at sharing the fun stuff. Mateo felt his cock, already half-erect with anticipation, harden a little more at the thought. It was always eager to see Eddie, but tonight it would have to wait. His top priority right now was to find out what was going on.

Eddie flung open the door. "Seven o'clock on the dot. Does Greenwich use you to track time for them? I swear I could set my watch by you."

Mateo rolled his eyes. "That'd be hard to do when you don't wear one." He stepped inside and kissed Eddie, still amazed that he had the right to do that whenever he wanted. Well, whenever he wanted and they were in private, but still. They'd always acted differently, more macho, in public than when they were alone, so that part was nothing new. The rest, though... It was even more satisfying when Mateo considered how he'd been hiding his feelings since they met in high school. Ten long years he'd stupidly believed he was the only one who wanted more. "Do you even own a watch?"

"I think so. I used to have one, but without kids to take care of, I don't need to keep track of time down to the minute like you do. It's probably around here, somewhere..." Eddie trailed off, like he'd forgotten what he was saying. That wasn't like him, and it increased Mateo's concern.

“You okay?” The question obviously startled Eddie back from wherever he’d gone. It was definitely time to find out what the problem was.

“Yeah. Especially now that you’re here.”

“That’s sappy. You don’t need to butter me up to get laid tonight.”

“But it’s true,” Eddie swore. “The world really is brighter, shinier, when you’re around. Since we’ve been dating, I’m suddenly understanding all those old love songs.” He started to sing one, so Mateo kissed him again. There was more than one advantage to being able to do that.

“You’ll never guess what I found.” Eddie looked pleased with himself, but sad too.

“What?” Mateo couldn’t imagine what would cause that sort of reaction.

“Guess.” But Eddie dragged Mateo into the dining room, where the table was covered with paper.

Mateo swallowed hard past a lump in his throat as he realized what they were. “This is the house you were going to build for your mama.”

“Yeah. It’s, like, every draft I ever drew. At least the ones I gave her.” He’d laid them out in order, from the roughest early versions to the nearly-professional more recent ones. Eddie’s talent was obvious, especially when seeing them all together like that. His love for his mama was too, shining in every line of the beautiful home he’d drawn for her.

“I’m not surprised she kept them, she was probably planning to show them in a gallery after you became a famous architect.”

Eddie ducked his head, looking uncomfortable.

Mateo glanced around, looking for something to change the subject. “Are those what I think they are?” He pointed to drawings of people on the other side of the table.

“That depends what you think they are,” Eddie teased.

Mateo walked around the table to look at them more closely. “I think they’re drawings of your mama and me.” He picked them up one at a time, his breath hitching a little at the memories. Eddie had drawn them cooking

together, watching television, spending time together in various ways over the years. Eddie's mama had taken Mateo under her wing, and he ached with how much he missed her.

"Then they're what you think they are. My two favorite human subjects."

"Your two favorite humans, you mean."

"That too." Eddie said shortly. He clearly didn't want to talk about it anymore. He kissed Mateo and it heated quickly, going from distraction to "fuck me now" in zero-point-three seconds. Eddie took charge and slammed Mateo against the wall as they devoured each other's mouths. *Oh yeah.* He sucked on Eddie's tongue, loving the way Eddie thrust his hips into him. They were almost the same height, so everything lined up perfectly.

Eddie released his mouth to kiss down his neck, and Mateo tilted his head back for better access. He'd meant for sex to wait until after he'd learned what was bothering his boyfriend, but Eddie was very persuasive, even when he wasn't trying. Just his presence was enough, especially when Mateo hadn't seen him for a few days. Besides, Eddie would be more relaxed after sex, and more likely to spill the beans.

Mateo gasped when Eddie bit the sensitive spot at the junction of his neck and shoulder. "Just how hungry are you?" Eddie murmured against his skin.

"Starved, but not for food." Mateo claimed Eddie's mouth again.

Now that he could have Eddie, even one day without him was too long. They had years of catching up to do. Grabbing Eddie's magnificent ass, he enjoyed his right to touch. That butt was a work of art, and felt even better than it looked. His hold on it enabled him to get more friction right where he wanted it. Win-win.

Eddie pulled away and spun Mateo around so his chest pressed against Mateo's back. "Bed," Eddie growled into his ear, lightly nipping the lobe and then licking it as he walked them a few steps in that direction.

"Mmmm hmmm," Mateo moaned, resting his head back against Eddie's shoulder. He knew Eddie didn't like to get naked in his mother's dining room. It felt weird to Mateo, too, when she'd only died a few months ago. He still expected her to walk in any time.

He was ready to go—in more ways than one—when Eddie rubbed his erection against Mateo and slid one hand down his body to cup his straining cock. They both started panting as Mateo rocked back into Eddie's hard-on, feeling it press against his ass, then forward into Eddie's hand, increasing the pressure and friction on his own cock. A little harder, a little faster. *Oh God*. His breath sped up to keep time with his hips as Eddie urged him on.

Mateo groaned in frustration. So close, but he wanted *more*. He started to turn around, wanting to grind together until they came. Eddie stopped him, pinning his arms. Mateo's dick got even harder. He'd never been into bondage before, and still wasn't sure he'd ever want to do anything hard-core, but being with his best friend made all the difference. It was exciting when Eddie restrained him. Hot. Eddie pulled him to the bedroom, and Mateo's desire increased with every step.

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“So... Hi.” Eddie smiled as he ran his fingers through Mateo's thick, black hair, enjoying the rumpled bed-head look, especially because he'd helped create it. They hadn't exactly gotten around to saying hello until now.

“Hi yourself, Wrigley. That's a helluva way to greet a guy.” Mateo mock-glared. “Do you welcome every man who comes through your front door like that? To make sure they come again? Or just the ones you want to distract?”

“Only you. I want to make you come again and again.” Eddie ran a teasing hand down Mateo's body. “And again, Fuente.” He'd started calling Mateo that in high school, after he'd spouted fruit punch out of his nose and mouth like a fountain. Mateo retaliated by calling him Wrigley because he chewed the gum all the time. It was silly, and hardly a nickname one might expect to make him go all tingly, but the names had become oddly affectionate over the years. And Mateo wasn't exactly the sort to use cutesy nicknames. Thank God. Even if it meant never telling him that Eddie privately called him *My Teo*, he would take “Wrigley” over “Snookums” any day. Reason 5,643 why he loved this man.

“Thank you for these.” Mateo ran a hand over his chest, where a few spots looked like they were going to bruise. “Are you finally starting to believe I like it when you use your teeth?”

“Believe, yes. Understand, no. I want to give you pleasure, not pain. Though with my oral fixation, I can hardly complain.”

“I’m not into pain in general, but that particular pain *is* pleasure,” Mateo insisted. “I love it when you mark me, you toothy bastard. It feels good when you do it, and I love seeing the marks later.”

“Yeah, your thrashing and moaning makes that clear. I’m always happy to use my mouth on you.” Eddie displayed his teeth in a shark-like grin, and Mateo shivered.

It still astonished Eddie that something as wonderful as them becoming lovers had come out of the devastation of losing Mama. Without grief to break down the barriers between them, would they ever have ended up in bed together? He still couldn’t believe they’d wanted each other all that time and never known the other felt the same, too afraid to risk the friendship. He could mourn the wasted years, but mostly he thanked God they were together at last.

That was great, amazing, but it also made it so much harder for Eddie to leave. He didn’t want to leave Mateo, couldn’t imagine life without him. If their roles were reversed and Mateo had the chance to realize a lifelong dream, Eddie would go anywhere in the world with him. But relationships were never perfectly balanced, he knew that.

“For some reason, I seem to have worked up an appetite.” Mateo’s teasing voice brought Eddie’s attention back from his worries about the future to this very nice present.

“I made dinner. You ready to eat it now?”

“Oh yeah.” Mateo grinned at him, then grimaced. “Wait, when you say you ‘made’ dinner, does that mean you cooked or did you get a pizza or something?”

“Just because I burned breakfast that one time...” Eddie stuck his bottom lip out as far as he could, giving Mateo his best pout.

“And the other time. And the one after that. We won’t even mention what you’ve done when you’ve attempted dinner. How Rosa Lopez’s son never learned to cook...” Mateo flinched, obviously debating whether that mention of Mama was okay or not.

Most of the time, hearing her name was fine. That's what made it all the more disconcerting when, with no apparent rhyme or reason, the grief consumed him so completely that he thought he must surely burst. It seemed impossible that a measly human body, even one as big as his, could contain so much pain and survive.

Yeah, he was muscular after years of working construction, but what use were muscles when fighting grief? In an effort to demolish the pain, he'd been working out more and harder since Mama passed. The endorphins never lasted long, but Eddie figured it was better to seek temporary relief in a gym than a bottle.

"I got pizza," he conceded, "but you wonder why I never learned to cook? Really? With you and Mama around, why would I even try?" Eddie didn't want to make a production of it, but he wanted Teo to know he was fine hearing her name. At least right now, though post-coital bliss could have something to do with that.

He had cried in bed with Mateo once—God, could he ever live down the humiliation? Mama hadn't even been mentioned that time, but it was right after she died and Eddie seemed to spontaneously cry for a while there. Teo had held him and stroked his back as he soaked Teo's shoulder in snot and tears. And then, to Eddie's everlasting gratitude, Mateo never mentioned it again.

"You flatter me. I can only dream of cooking as well as your mama someday." Mateo rolled out of bed and slapped Eddie's ass. "C'mon, slugabed, let's eat."

Eddie thought Mateo was a better cook than Mama, but didn't waste his breath saying so again to a man who refused to believe him. He lay there a few minutes longer, appreciating the view as Mateo bent to pick up his jeans. His smooth, brown ass flexed, practically begging Eddie to bite one round cheek. Of course, he just had, not more than an hour ago, but Teo's ass was made for biting. And nibbling, licking, and... Eddie groaned.

If he kept thinking along those lines he'd drag Mateo back to bed, and they really should eat first. He didn't have much interest in food since Mama died,

not even when Mateo prepared it, which was quite a statement. So he tried to eat something healthy whenever he felt hungry. He realized Mateo was right, they'd worked up an appetite. Eddie was actually hungry now.

Mateo headed downstairs to take care of dinner while Eddie dressed. Even when it was something as basic as pizza, and Eddie's turn to provide the meal, Teo liked tinkering with it. He added herbs and spices, or combined ingredients Eddie would never have thought would taste good together, but always did. Mateo turned every meal into something special. Eddie hated that his talents were wasted in his dead-end job at the diner.

As Eddie put on his own jeans, he steeled himself to tell Teo his big news, and ask the all-important question, "Will you leave your family and come with me?" He'd submitted the college application at Mama's urging, in her last few months. She'd wanted to help him with it, to see him realize at least that much of his dream. At that point he'd still believed his love for his best friend was unrequited, so asking Mateo to go with him hadn't been a consideration.

Then their relationship changed, and the last thing he'd wanted to do was talk about leaving. Especially when he didn't know for sure if it would happen. He didn't want to discuss something so difficult when they were still so new. Why borrow trouble? He wanted time to enjoy it to the fullest, and to build a foundation. He hoped that if and when it became relevant, the relationship would be strong enough to withstand the upheaval of moving to another state.

He was about to find out how well he'd succeeded. Now that the house was sold, he had to move out anyway, so the time had come. No matter how much he dreaded this conversation, he needed to know the answer. He had to start looking for a new place to live, a thousand miles away, and Eddie didn't know whether he should look for himself alone or for both of them. If Teo decided to go with him—*God, let him say yes*—he would need time to arrange for his own departure too.

Eddie needed to man up, stop procrastinating. Maybe after dinner...

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Mateo could see Eddie gnawing on whatever was bothering him along with the pizza. He waited until he'd finished his own mouthful and then asked, "What?"

"What what?" Eddie looked confused. Mateo figured he had good reason, since they'd been eating in hungry silence, stuffing their faces.

"Talk to me."

"About what?"

"About whatever you're chewing on. You look like a cow with its cud. Spit it out."

"Gee, thanks. If I'm a cow, what does that make you, Farmer Johnson?" Eddie grumbled. "I'm chewing on pizza, and it's quite tasty. I'm trying to figure out what you did to it that makes it so good. I'd rather not spit it out. Why waste perfectly good pizza?" Eddie had a pretty good innocent-face, but Mateo wasn't buying it.

"Ha. Ha." Mateo winked as he said it, so Eddie would know he was teasing. Eddie sometimes took things the wrong way since *Señora* Lopez died. "Seriously, we're eating by candle light, which has happened exactly once before. That night, you told me you love me, but this doesn't feel romantic. This feels like..." He waved his hands and wished he was better with words. "It's like a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down. I'm getting indigestion worrying about what's on your mind."

"Do I look like Mary Poppins?"

Mateo cocked his head and didn't bother to answer that.

"Okay. Fine." Eddie's gaze dropped to the table, and stayed there. "I planned to tell you tonight anyway. I, um, I need to talk to you about... um..."

Mateo waited patiently. At least, he hoped he *looked* patient. Not that it mattered how he looked, with Eddie staring down at his plate as if he expected it to jump up and perform tricks. What was Eddie so scared to tell him? He must know that Mateo would be there anytime, shovel in hand and ready to bury any bodies necessary, literal or figurative. He'd do anything for Eddie, surely he knew that.

Eddie took a deep breath, then finally looked at Mateo. “I got an offer on the house yesterday. They met my asking price. I didn’t think it would happen so fast.”

“That’s great! Well, rough too. I know I’ll miss this place, so I can imagine how hard it is for you...” Mateo knew that couldn’t have been what Eddie was so reluctant to tell him. He hesitated, then asked what he thought—hoped—was the cause of Eddie’s nervousness, “Do you want to move in with me?”

Now it was Mateo’s turn for nerves. It was a little soon, but with their long history, and how much they already loved each other, he thought moving in together was an obvious, natural next step. They’d only been dating a few months, but since Eddie had to move, why not do it now?

Eddie looked too shocked for that to be what he’d had in mind. Did he not want them to live together? At all, or just not yet?

Mateo still worried that he’d taken advantage of Eddie’s grief that first time. That Eddie might have preferred to just stay friends. He hadn’t been thinking of sex the night Eddie’s mother died. He’d only meant to offer comfort when he wrapped his arms around Eddie, a physical reminder that even with his mama gone, Eddie wasn’t alone in the world. Mateo was there for him, and always would be.

He was blown away when somewhere along the line it stopped being about comfort and turned sexual. Eddie had stopped crying but continued to hold onto Mateo like he never wanted to let go. Then he’d looked up and suddenly they were kissing. Mateo didn’t know who started it, or if they both had. He just knew it was explosive, the realization of every fantasy he’d barely dared to dream since high school.

When they’d talked about it the next day, and every time since, Eddie insisted this—Mateo—was what he wanted, what he’d always wanted. But Eddie was obviously destined for great things, was going to be somebody someday, and Mateo was... not. He was a decent cook, would always make an okay living, but he had no special abilities to deserve somebody like Eddie. Eddie must know that, and if he’d been in his right mind, would he have chosen to tie himself to Mateo?

“Yes, I want to live with you. I really want that.” Eddie’s words pulled him from his grim thoughts and eased his fears, but before he could relax too much, Eddie continued, “But I don’t want to move in with you. Well, I do, but—”

“You want me to move in with you? That doesn’t make sense when you just said you’re selling the house.”

“I want us to move in together. Somewhere else.” Eddie took a long drink of his beer, Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed.

Mateo felt the tension that had knotted his shoulders release. “A new place for the two of us to start a new life together? I like that idea.” He smiled, to reassure Eddie and because it was true. “A lot.”

Eddie still looked anxious, so Mateo reached across the table to hold his hand.

“Yes, but...” Eddie paused again.

“Dodo-head. Spit it out already.”

“Dodo-head? Did you seriously just call me that? What are you, five?”

“Yes, I did. And no, I’m not. You’re the one acting twenty years younger than we are. Stop stalling and just tell me what you’re thinking.” Mateo could hear the frustration in his own voice, so he tried to soften it as he said, “I love you. Talk to me, Wrigley.”

He hoped the reminder, and especially that nickname, would help Eddie relax and fucking *talk* to him. The name was almost more intimate than “I love you” because it was unique to them.

“I love you, too.” Then Eddie stuck his tongue out. “Fuente.”

“Don’t stick it out if you don’t intend to use it.” Mateo leered. They’d had countless similar exchanges since high school, but it was even better now that the taunt could be—and sometimes was—backed up with pleasurable action.

“You know how I’ve always wanted to be an architect?”

Was Eddie changing the subject or was that a real question?

Either way, Mateo went along with it. “Of course. You’ve only talked

about it eleventy-billion times since I met you. Plus, we had to clear your drawings off the table before we could eat, remember?”

All in a rush, Eddie said, “Well, I finally applied to schools last winter because Mama insisted I do it while she was still around. One of my top choices accepted me, and even gave me a scholarship. A generous one that will cover most of my expenses.”

The words ran together enough that it took Mateo a moment to be sure he’d understood. “Congratulations! Of course they accepted you, they’d be crazy not to. And a scholarship too—that’s awesome!”

He lifted his bottle, and then held it there, waiting. Eddie didn’t move, and Mateo was about to set his beer down, or take a drink to cover his embarrassment, when Eddie finally lifted his own bottle to clink them together.

Mateo considered how nervous Eddie was. This seemed like it should have been a straightforward, celebratory conversation. There must be more to it, something big he hadn’t said yet. “Wait. Where are you going to school?”

He had a funny feeling the answer was somewhere other than “here,” or even anywhere in New Mexico. He gritted his teeth to avoid saying anything more until he’d heard Eddie out.

“Um. California. San Francisco, actually. It’s a five-year professional program, which means I should be able to get a job without having to do graduate school after the Bachelor’s. I’ve already waited so long, I hate to spend any more time in school than I have to. You know patience has never been one of my virtues.”

Eddie laughed at himself, a little uncomfortably. “It seems like I’ve been waiting forever, and now that I have a chance, I can’t not go. Schoolwork will give me a new focus, help me stop missing Mama all the time. Everything is the same, except she’s gone. I’m not sure I can handle being around to see someone else living in Mama’s house, but I have to sell it to pay her medical bills. It will be good for me to start fresh somewhere new.”

Eddie finally paused for a breath, but raced on before Mateo could think of how to respond. “San Francisco seems like a good place to live, which is why

it was one of my top choices. Talk about gay-friendly! We can be really ‘out’ there, even walk down the street holding hands or do other ‘out’, couple-y things. Definitely in The Castro. Maybe even all of San Francisco, and Berkeley, too. I’m not sure.”

Eddie looked at Mateo with big, pleading puppy-dog eyes as he continued, “I know there’s a real foodie community in the Bay Area. Which means lots of great farmer’s markets. Fresh ingredients of all kinds for you to play with in the kitchen. In our kitchen, the place we’ll live together. The weather is temperate pretty much all year round, and—”

The other shoe dropped as Mateo realized that Eddie was pitching San Francisco to him like some used-city salesman. “Move in together, in San Francisco?”

“Yeah, if we can afford it. We might have to get a place with roommates, or in one of the nearby cities and commute if—”

“Okay, maybe not San Francisco, fine.” Mateo waved that off impatiently. “But in California, yes?”

Eddie nodded. “Yes. Please. I know it will be hard to leave your family, but—”

“Leave my family?” Mateo was horrified.

“Well. Yeah, but don’t you think maybe the little ones are old enough now that it’d be okay?”

“Be okay?” Mateo sounded like a parrot, but he couldn’t help it.

“You could still send money home to them, that part wouldn’t even have to change. I have the scholarship, and I’m sure we could both find work there. There are lots of construction jobs because they’re always building more homes and offices all over the Bay Area. And there are tons of restaurants, so maybe you could even be head chef somewhere nice and get to design your own menus and whatnot.”

Eddie kept talking, but Mateo heard it as a buzzing in his ears rather than distinct words.

“You really think I could walk in and get that kind of job in a foodie area when I can’t find one here?” Mateo was stunned, though he shouldn’t have

been. Eddie was an optimist, always seeing the bright side or silver lining in every situation.

“Well—”

“Never mind. That’s not the point,” Mateo heard himself say harshly. “How could you think I’d leave my brother and sisters when they need me?”

“I wouldn’t.” Eddie protested. “You wouldn’t. We both put family first, even when it means hardly having lives of our own. That’s how it should be, but I want us to have a life together too. I think this could be good for your siblings, to have a little more independence. Dolores has flown the nest, Angelia is about to, and the other two are in high school.”

“Rafe’s not. He’s only thirteen.” There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room, and Mateo felt close to passing out. “He doesn’t start high school for another year.”

“I’ve always wondered why your aunt never helped more, but maybe she could now?” Eddie sounded so hopeful. Did he really think it was that easy?

“They’re *mine*. My family, my responsibility. *Tia* Isabella can barely take care of herself. No way would I trust my brother and sisters to her care.”

“Still, they need you less than they used to.”

Mateo felt like Eddie had kicked him in the chest. Almost his whole life had been devoted to caring for his family. Ever since he was eleven and his own mama died after giving birth to Rafael and his father fell apart.

Mateo didn’t understand how his mother gave birth to four kids with no problems but then the fifth one killed her. The *how* wasn’t what mattered. Mateo had long since stopped asking *how* or *why* and simply accepted his responsibility. His dad couldn’t or wouldn’t take care of them all on his own. With no other capable family nearby to help, it was for Mateo to do. And he had. He did. He closed his eyes and tried to stop hyperventilating.

“Teo, are you okay? What just happened here?”

No, he wasn’t fucking okay.

Having Eddie as his best friend all these years, and now his boyfriend, was the best thing that had ever happened to him. With Eddie he could be himself,

could have fun, let go. He didn't have to know all the answers or make all the decisions with Eddie. Much as he loved his family, he'd treasured those moments of escape.

Now Eddie wanted him to leave them entirely? Abandon them for his own desires?

"I—" Mateo stumbled to his feet. "I need to go."

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## CHAPTER TWO

*Oh, that went well. Not.*

Eddie threw his beer across the room. The sound of the bottle hitting the wall was darkly satisfying. Even knowing he was going to have to clean it up, he liked the spray of beer foam on the wall. To hell with it.

Mateo had left. Just got up and walked out the door, as if he didn't even see Eddie trying to stop him. Trying to apologize. To do something—anything—to make it better. Eddie had known telling him wouldn't be easy, but it had gone far worse than he'd ever imagined.

He eventually cleaned up the mess, and it felt good to have something to do. He forced himself not to call, to give Mateo as much time and space as he needed. He sent a text though: *I'm sorry. I love you.*

Mateo texted back a few minutes later: *Luv u 2. Need some time. Talk soon.*

So Eddie waited.

And paced.

And waited.

He tried not to throw more shit, but it was tempting. He picked up a vase he'd never liked and considered how it would shatter. One less thing to pack or donate... He reluctantly set it down and made himself walk away.

It was reassuring that Mateo still loved him, and Eddie clung to that. He also knew that love wasn't enough, and that terrified him. People who loved each other broke up all the time, for many reasons. Eddie had never dreamed they might break up. Not that he was sure that had happened. But he also couldn't be sure it hadn't.

Probably they weren't over. Mateo just needed some time, like he said. Then they'd talk and figure out a way to make it work. Probably.

Eddie decided to try being productive instead of destructive. Pack vases instead of break them. But he had trouble concentrating, and realized how



useless his efforts were when he went to the refrigerator to get another beer and discovered one of Mama's favorite necklaces lying next to the milk. Then he spent ten frustrating minutes ransacking the kitchen in search of the bottle opener. He and Mateo had used it a couple of hours ago, so he knew it was there somewhere. He finally gave up and opened his beer on the edge of the counter.

He found the missing bottle opener when he returned the necklace to Mama's jewelry case. What had he been thinking when he pulled that odd switcheroo? Unless the house had suddenly acquired a poltergeist with a strange sense of humor, it was obvious that Eddie wasn't even close to thinking straight.

He gave up and went to the gym.

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Mateo drove around after he left Eddie's house. Turned left here. Another left. Right turn there. No rhyme or reason. Just the need to keep moving.

It wasn't the safest thing, to drive in that state of mind, but he did it anyway. It was one of the best ways for him to think. Growing up with a houseful of kids, the car was sometimes the only place he could grab time for himself. He made sure he didn't hit anything or run over anyone. He spared that much attention for the road. Most of his focus was inward. His conversation with Eddie replayed on a constant loop in his head. Eddie had asked him to move to California. It was a big commitment. Eddie had often talked about them growing old together. This was a strong statement that he meant it. That was the good news, and it was excellent. Mateo tried to focus on that for a moment.

The problem was the rest of it. How could Mateo choose between the family who'd needed him since he was eleven and the man he'd loved since he was fourteen? Talk about "damned if you do, damned if you don't." If it were anyone but Eddie, there would be no question—he'd have laughed in their face and blown it off. Eddie was different. Special. He couldn't blow Eddie off. Blow him... Oh yeah, he could definitely blow Eddie. Often, and with great pleasure. Not that this was about sex. Except that it kind of was. If they were

still platonic friends, he wouldn't even consider moving to California with Eddie. Once sex was involved, it changed everything. Suddenly, one plus one became a whole lot more than two.

Glowing eyes and a dark shape appeared in the road ahead.

Mateo slammed on his brakes. Adrenaline flooded his system. The car screeched to a stop as the deer ran off.

The silence that followed seemed loud, filled with the rapid beats of his heart as it tried to pound out of his chest. Mateo slumped in relief, and waited for his pulse to settle down. There was no one else around, so he took his time. That could have been really bad. He should be paying more attention to the road. He took a deep breath and counted to ten before continuing on.

God. How could he even think about leaving his family? They depended on him. Rafe more than the girls, because he was the youngest and because he needed Mateo to show him how to be a good man. Was abandoning his family to run off with his lover the sort of example he wanted to set for his baby brother? Their father had essentially abandoned them when their mother died, despite being physically present. Could Mateo somehow do the opposite, and be physically absent but still there for them?

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Eddie was much more productive on Saturday. Faced with a choice to keep busy or go bonkers, he made more progress on the house in one day than he had in two weeks previously. That was good, but it didn't stop him from missing Teo.

The house was filled with almost as many memories of Mateo as of Mama. The big stain on the carpet in front of the television was the origin of their nicknames. Eddie just happened to say something funny right as Mateo took a big gulp of fruit punch. That was his story and he stuck to it. He certainly hadn't expected Mateo to spray red stuff out of his nose and mouth like a demented fountain. It made a huge mess and stained quickly, as they discovered when trying frantically to clean up before Mama saw it.

There was no way she wouldn't notice it, so Eddie had nervously confessed when she got home. He was afraid she'd ground him until he was

thirty, but instead she'd said something about knowing better than to worry about unimportant things like carpets. Then she asked for details, and laughed when he described Mateo-the-fountain, thereafter known as Fuente. Eddie's "punishment" had been to take over doing the laundry, now that he'd learned something about how fabric stained.

Eddie caught himself standing there, staring at the carpet and remembering happier days. He shook it off and got back to work.

At least some decisions were easy, like getting rid of the mountain of old *TV Guides*. He'd never understood why Mama insisted on keeping them. But when he saw how empty the living room looked after they were gone, he was tempted to pull them back out of the recycling bin. He stood there indecisively, then forced himself to walk away.

He went through the pantry next, finding and tossing cans and bottles that had gone bad years ago. That included a jar of his favorite pickles, with an expiration date of February, 2005. A bottle of olive oil that expired in June, 2003. What a waste. Those weren't even the oldest things he found. All the way at the back corner of the bottom shelf he found a can of Cream of Mushroom soup. It had a date he couldn't quite read but seemed to be sometime in the 1990s. He wondered why Mama had bought that in the first place, since neither of them liked mushrooms. He set the can in the trash gingerly, afraid it might explode.

A few minutes later, Eddie stumbled across a cardboard box that brought his frenetic momentum to an abrupt halt. The word "Decorations" in Mama's elegant writing was surrounded with designs drawn by his own childish hand. He vividly recalled the day he'd put them there.

He'd been seven years old and wanted to contribute his own decorations as Mama worked on a cake for a holiday party. She'd given him markers, then praised his artistic ability. He hadn't known about architecture yet, but that was the first time Eddie could remember planning to have a career that involved drawing, and Mama encouraging him to pursue it. Between that and all the special occasions it had been used for, the box held a lot of good memories.

He set it reverently on a counter, unwilling to pack it away yet with the other stuff to keep. He decided that was a good time to take a break and go for a run. He didn't want to empty Mama's house too quickly. The more he did, the less it looked like her home. He needed to get away for a while. It was unlikely, but maybe this time he'd finally succeed in outrunning the grief.

Eddie returned home feeling refreshed enough to tackle the house again. He took a shower and decided to clear out the file cabinets. That was a way to do something useful without altering the appearance of the house. He expected it to be brainless busywork, but quickly discovered it required making decisions. Did he need to keep these papers or not? What about those? If they were important, what exactly did he need to do with them? Mateo was so much better with real-world things like that, Eddie ached anew at his absence. He wished Mateo were there to offer advice, but a hug would have been nice too. Even disposable papers required another decision, whether to toss them in recycling or shred them. What sort of personal information did you have to protect for someone who was dead? Eddie cringed at even thinking that word in connection with Mama.

He made a start sorting her clothes a few times before he managed to stick with it. He felt guilty, like he was invading her privacy. It was also the most painful task, because her closet smelled like her. He buried his face in her favorite sweater and hugged it close, aching with the knowledge that he'd never feel her arms around him again. He finally made himself fold the sweater and put it in a box, but his eyes kept straying to its bright colors. He decided he wasn't ready to pack it away just yet, so he set it on the dresser where he could see it easily. He could also pet it there when he walked by, feeling the soft fuzziness under his hand, so familiar from the million times she'd worn it.

Eddie stopped again when he found a scarf Mateo had given Mama for Mother's Day the year they were fifteen. Eddie had helped him pick it out, after Teo said he wanted to do something to thank her for her kindness to him. She'd given him more parental love than he'd gotten since his own mama died. Eddie stroked it between his fingers, enjoying the silkiness of it and remembering how Mama had treasured that scarf. He thought Mateo would

probably want to keep it, so he set it aside in the growing pile to ask him about. He knew Teo missed her too, maybe almost as much as he missed Teo.

He was discovering a sentimental attachment to all sorts of ridiculous things. He added a few bent hair pins to the “keep” box, along with slips of paper Mama had used as bookmarks, stashed in a pile on her bedside table. When in doubt, he kept stuff. Better to err on the side of keeping too much, even if it meant moving things he’d eventually decide he didn’t want. He might have to rent some storage space for what seemed like junk, but it was worth it. He could always get rid of things later, but there’d be no getting back anything he threw away or donated now.

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After a sleepless night, Mateo got up early Saturday morning and went for a run. It felt good to move his body, to feel his arms and legs and lungs all pumping together, moving him forward. His thoughts pounded in rhythm with his feet on the hard-packed dirt. His feet took him somewhere, but his thoughts made no more progress than a hamster on a wheel.

He’d hoped a run would clear his head, but he only came up with more questions and confusion. He finally gave up and went home to shower, then tried driving around some more. Wasn’t there a television show or something with a tag-line about the answers being out there? Maybe he’d find some if he drove around long enough.

Hours later, Mateo found himself in front of his sister’s place. Dolores had been Mateo’s closest friend until he met Eddie. He still shared a lot with her, so it wasn’t surprising that random driving-while-thinking would end up here. But he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to her about this. Did he want his sister to know he’d even considered leaving them? And, worse, that he was still considering it. Hanging out with her would be a good distraction though, if they talked about other things. That decided, he got out of the car and knocked on her door.

He realized it wasn’t going to work out like he’d planned when Dolores took one look at him and led him straight to the kitchen. She started making tea without saying a word. It was what she did when she thought any of her

siblings needed taking care of. They'd all learned to shut up and drink it, whether they wanted it or not. Dolores was bossy and hardheaded, and a hot beverage wasn't worth fighting about, not even on a day as warm as this one.

"Do you miss the ivory tower at all?" Mateo asked as he sat at her tiny table. He wouldn't argue about the drink, but that didn't mean he couldn't try to distract her.

"Nope, I like the real world. Making money is nice." She stopped what she was doing to look at him. "That wasn't a half-bad attempt to change the subject, but it won't work."

"Hey," he protested, "That's a valid question. I thought you might want to go to graduate school. You could be regretting that you hadn't. Or maybe thinking of going after all. Are you?"

"Uh-huh. It is a valid question, but it's also one we talked about a few days ago." Dolores arched an eyebrow at him.

Oh. Right. No way now to convince her he didn't have something major on his mind. It'd take something big—like Eddie's bombshell—for Mateo to have forgotten her telling him how much she loved her new job, loved making money. And, oh yeah, was glad to be done with school.

Dolores sat at the other side of the table and set a mug in front of each of them. "What happened, honey?" If she was calling him "honey", Mateo must look a lot worse than he thought.

She wouldn't back off until he told her, so he might as well get it over with. It was easier on his pride to think of it that way, rather than admit he went to his little sister when something upset him.

"Eddie is moving." His voice broke on the last word, so he took a gulp of tea. Big mistake. It scalded his mouth and throat. Duh. Of course it was hot. But the physical pain almost felt good in contrast to what he'd been feeling since running out of Eddie's house.

"I'm not surprised Eddie is moving. The big 'For Sale' sign in front of his house was kind of a clue. Since you have your own place now, tiny as it is, I thought he'd move in with you, actually. Oh, no!" Dolores dropped the

sarcasm as her eyes widened and she brought her hand to her mouth in the classic gesture of horror. “Did you ask and he said no?”

“No. Well, yeah. No. Sort of.” Mateo fumbled to a stop, realizing he was making no sense. He took a deep breath, like Eddie always did, and tried again. “Yes, I asked him to move in. He didn’t exactly say no but he also didn’t exactly say yes. He...”

This was where it got hard to explain, probably because Mateo didn’t understand it himself. “Eddie is going away to college. In California. He wants me to move there with him.” It sounded simple when he said it like that, and yet it was anything but.

“He wants you to move to California? Now?” Dolores was as shocked as Mateo.

“Yeah. Well, soon. After he packs up the house, I guess.”

“What’d you say when he asked?”

“I left.” That sounded bad. “I just... I didn’t know what to say. What to think. So I left. Drove around for a while. Went for a run this morning. Drove around some more, and now I’m sitting at your table drinking tea. I still don’t know what to think.”

Mateo pounded his fist on the table hard enough to make his sister, and the tea mugs, jump. “Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit.” He pounded the table in time with the words.

“He’s supposed to be my best friend. To love me. How can he not know what a question like that does to me? If he does know, how could he ask it?” His chest ached, and his heart felt like it was in little pieces. With sharp edges.

“Hmmm...” Dolores twisted her long, black braid, running it through her fingers and wrapping it around her hand. Playing with her hair was one of her tells, a sign she was thinking deeply. Mateo hoped she’d come up with something amazing, some way to avoid breaking Eddie’s heart along with his own, because he was stumped.

“Eddie loves you, there’s no question of that. And he knows you better than anyone. Even me, I think, and I don’t say that easily. So he must



know..." She trailed off and they considered that for a moment. Dolores continued twirling her hair and Mateo resisted—barely—the urge to pound the table again.

"Then—"

"Eddie loves you," she repeated, interrupting him. "So naturally he wants you to go with him. That makes sense, actually. If you didn't have a family to look after, it would be easy. Obvious. Of course he'd ask, and of course you'd go with him."

"Yeah, that would be awesome. Plus, I'd love to live in a foodie area like California. I wouldn't mind the opportunity to try for a great job there, even though I don't have Eddie's faith that I would actually get one. But I *do* have a family to look after." He'd always thought Dolores was the smart one, but now he had to wonder. The family wasn't exactly a minor detail.

"Yeaaaaah..." she said slowly. "I'm finally done with school and making some decent money. Angelia's basically done with high school, and I'm pretty sure she's planning to get a job rather than go to college. So it's really just Elena and Rafael to consider." She took a sip of her tea and seemed to collect her thoughts. "You know, Rafe is older now than you were when you started taking care of us."

Mateo hadn't thought about it that way before, and it made everything look different. He felt a sudden spark of hope, a lightbulb going off over his head. "Would you..." He trailed off, unsure how to put such a radical thought into words.

She waited a few beats, then prompted him. "Would I what?"

"Maybe..." He tried again. "I don't want to ask any more of you than you can comfortably do, but... The kids are older, like you said. They don't need as much supervision as they used to, and you have more time now that you're just working, and not going to school too..."

Mateo took a deep breath and tried to decide if he was really going to ask the question, the incredible possibility that had occurred to him.

"I wish it wasn't so hard for you to ask for help." Dolores shook her head,



but she was smiling. “That was my point, that it’s not all on you. You’re not the only *responsible* adult in the family anymore. Let the rest of us help.”

“Really?” Mateo felt like he’d just fallen down the rabbit hole and everything was topsy-turvy. Could it really be that easy? “Do you think the others would want to? Enough to make a difference? I’m not about to drop it all in your lap.”

He realized he’d overlooked some important things in his excitement. “No. I can’t go. I didn’t have a choice about losing my childhood, but I don’t want to take Rafe’s away. I wouldn’t feel right making the kids grow up sooner than they have to just because I want to play house with Eddie. And you deserve some time to be carefree after finishing school. You should be out having fun, not taking care of your siblings.” Mateo was supposed to take care of them, not let them take care of him.

“And what have you been doing all these years, hmm? Also, you wouldn’t be ‘playing house’ with Eddie. Don’t diminish it like that, when anyone can see you two are the real deal.” Dolores poked him in the chest. “You know how you have that really annoying tendency to feel guilty about all sorts of stupid things you shouldn’t even remotely feel guilty about?”

“Um...” He mulled that over, but came up with no response. She wasn’t expecting one, was she?

Dolores rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying that I know you won’t drop it all on me. On anyone. That’s not who you are, but I wish you’d share at least a little of it. I’ve wanted to help more for years and you’ve been so busy being Macho Protector that you haven’t let me. I’m not sure you’ve even heard me asking.”

“You’ve asked? What? When? How did I miss it? Are you sure?”

“Ha. I *knew* you hadn’t heard me, and you just admitted it. You owe me, and it’ll be a doozy. Big Bro, have you ever known me *not* to ask for something I wanted?”

He had to laugh at that. “That would be a big, fat ‘no’, Sis.” He reached over and tugged her braid, but then sobered as he considered what that meant.

“Okay, so ask me again? Slowly, in small words so I can understand. I promise I’m listening now.”

“I want to help out. I hate that you’ve taken the whole burden of caring for our family on yourself. When you were eleven and I was only nine, it made sense. But I’ve been asking you to let me help more since I hit my teens.”

She sighed. “You insisted I needed to go to college, and I’m grateful you made that possible for me. Because of that, I have a career I love. I don’t make a lot of money, but it’s enough. It’s my turn, Mateo. I don’t want you to lose the first real thing you’ve had for yourself. I hate how much you’ve always sacrificed, and that you wouldn’t let us help more.”

That... was possible, actually. When they were kids, he’d had to maintain tight control in order to keep the family safe. He’d been afraid one wrong move could make it collapse like a soufflé. It was sturdier now, more like a quiche, but he’d been so caught up in the details he’d missed the bigger picture.

“I...” Everything was changing so suddenly. It was making him a little dizzy. “I’m sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“I know you did, and it was, for years. We’re lucky to have you as a big brother. You *always* do the right thing.” Dolores spoke soothingly. “Or what you *think* is the right thing, which isn’t necessarily the same anymore.” She blew a raspberry at him.

He laughed, but couldn’t resist pointing out, “That’s hardly the best way to convince me you’re a mature adult.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re listening to me now, right? And you’ll let me help.”

That last definitely wasn’t a question, but he answered it anyway. “Yes, I’ll let you help. Thank you. I’m sorry I was so...”

“Pig-headed? Macho? Annoyingly stubborn?” She offered helpfully, eyes innocently wide as she batted her lashes at him.

He sighed, and yanked her braid again. “Those weren’t the words I had in mind, but I guess I can’t argue with them. I think it’s time for a family meeting.”

Mateo wasn't sure they could really make it work so he could go to California with Eddie. But even if he couldn't go, he needed to hear his siblings out. He might even give them some of the control he'd held so tightly for so long. Clearly, it was time for some things to change.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Eddie called Dolores on Sunday afternoon. They'd never been as close to each other as they both were to Mateo, but she was a good friend. He needed that right now, and he wanted to talk to her about Mama's things. He wondered if Dolores had talked to her brother since Friday, but he was determined not to ask.

"Hey, Eddie. What's up?"

"Hi, Dolores. I, um, I've been going through Mama's clothes and stuff. I thought you and your sisters might like to see if there's anything you'd want to have. I sold the house, so I need to clear everything out."

"I heard. I'm not sure whether to say congratulations or I'm sorry. Both, I guess. And thanks, it's generous of you to offer. Have you already picked out what you want to keep? Do you want some company for that, or would you rather be alone? I'm pretty good at pretending not to notice men cry..." She trailed off, obviously afraid she'd offended him and unable to see his smile over the phone.

Eddie imagined her sitting with some sobbing guy, prattling on as she looked anywhere but at the man in tears. She'd make him some tea and give him time to pull himself together. Nice as that might be, Eddie would prefer not to be that guy.

"Nah, I'm good, but thank you. I'm keeping almost a full box of her clothes. Which is kind of insane, since it's not like I can wear them. Especially since some of it is stuff like that fluffy, garishly-colored sweater she wore all the time. It was her favorite, but I think it's hideous." Eddie laughed nervously.

"It's not crazy at all. It's good to keep some of her things, maybe even especially that sort of stuff. But I bet you never told your mama you thought her sweater was ugly."

"Oh, God no. I wouldn't have dared. She wore it all the time and I never said a word. Well, except to tell her she was beautiful."

“You lied to your mama, Eddie?” Dolores chided him. “Tsk tsk. You bad boy.”

“No lie. *She* was beautiful, even if the sweater distracted the eye from her beauty a little.”

“Oh, you charmer. Mateo is a lucky man.”

“Uh...” That caught him off guard. He asked, cautiously, “Have you, um, talked to your brother recently?”

“Yeah. We had a little ‘come to Jesus’ talk yesterday. I’ll let him tell you about it. Or not, I guess, but I think he probably will. He just needs some time to get a few things straight in his head.”

“Not too straight, I hope.” Eddie was relieved Dolores was so unconcerned. That made it easier for him to joke, and a little deflection helped him resist the temptation to pump her for information.

“Nope, Mateo is wonderfully bent. That’s what makes you two perfect for each other, you—” She choked, then giggled. “I was about to say ‘your kinks fit together’ but then I realized how else that could be interpreted. I really don’t want to know anything about my brother’s kinks. Or yours. Eww. Let’s just say you’re two pieces of a puzzle and leave it at that. I need some brain-bleach now, please.”

Eddie enjoyed Mateo’s kinks, but didn’t need Dolores thinking about them, or his own. “You’re the one with the Psych background, you should know, is brain-bleach even possible? So how’s work going, are you still enjoying it?”

“Well, people have a wonderful, terrible ability to block out things they’d rather not remember. So you could say that’s a form of brain-bleach. Let’s change the subject now, please, because while we’re talking about it I can’t forget what I want it for.”

She paused. “You dirty, sly boy, that’s why you’re still talking about it. You *like* thinking about Mateo’s kinks. Duh.”

“Wait a minute,” Eddie protested. “I asked a legitimate question because you brought it up and I was curious. Then I tried to change the subject by asking you how work is going. I’m totally innocent.”

Dolores laughed. “Innocent you’re not, but fair enough. *Mea culpa*. Work is going great, thanks. I love it. Hey, I need to get going now. Is it okay if the girls and I come by next weekend to look at your mama’s stuff? Is that soon enough? That works best for my schedule, and gives you more time to go through things again and see if there’s anything else you want to keep.”

“Sure, that’s fine. And, Dolores,” He cleared his throat. “Thanks.”

He hung up feeling a lot better than before he’d called. Dolores was almost as happy as they were when they got together. She said she’d been waiting years for them to figure it out. So if she’d talked to Mateo and wasn’t worried about them... It was no guarantee, but it gave Eddie some hope.

He still wasn’t quite ready to face more packing, so he went out to get more boxes and some groceries. He might not be a cook, but he was capable of putting peanut butter and jelly on bread, and he did so when he got home. That was perfect food for an iffy appetite because he could eat a few bites here and there. He’d eventually finish a whole sandwich that way. Though he realized he’d put too much jelly on this one when he took a bite and it squirted all over his chest. He grumbled to himself as he set the sandwich aside and stripped off the sticky shirt impatiently. He rinsed it off in the sink, flung it across the back of a chair to dry, and got back to work.

This whole horrible project would have been easier with Mateo’s help. Not easy, never that, but less difficult than doing it by himself. Eddie had thought—hoped—they’d be deciding together what to keep for their new home. He was romantic enough to have thought that love built on years of friendship, as theirs was, could overcome anything. That together they would build a future that worked for them. He’d thought Mateo felt the same way, wanted the same things Eddie did.

He really shouldn’t be doubting Mateo yet. He’d never seen him that mad, that’s all. Or gone a whole weekend without talking to him. That’s why he couldn’t help feeling worried despite his assurances to himself. Worried. Ha. What a pallid word to describe the dread twisting his intestines into heaving knots.

Looking around the kitchen made those knots twist tighter as he considered questions like whether he should keep Mama’s waffle iron or not. Eddie

certainly had no need for it by himself. With Mateo it was another story, as he could see them having decadent brunches on weekend mornings.

They'd walk to a farmer's market and pick up some fresh strawberries. Eddie would wash and prep them while Teo made waffles and worked his kitchen magic. Then they'd sit at a sunny table and feed each other bites messy with whipped cream...

A familiar, long-awaited knock at the door interrupted his fantasy. His pulse leaped and he almost jumped out of his own skin, but he managed not to drop the waffle iron. He set it carefully on the counter, then gave it a little pat for luck. *Please let that dream of brunch come true.* He didn't know about making wishes on kitchen appliances, but figured Aladdin hadn't expected a genie in a lamp either. What the hell, he rubbed it three times for good measure.

Taking a deep, calming breath, he forced himself to walk slowly—so difficult when he wanted to run—to the door. Another breath, and then he opened it to see Mateo on his doorstep. At last. This was only Sunday night, but it felt like an eternity had passed since he was here on Friday.

He was a gorgeous sight, despite looking like he hadn't gotten any more sleep the past two nights than Eddie had. His cheekbones were even more pronounced than usual and, tightened with tension, his lips and jaw appeared more chiseled.

They stood there looking at each other in a silent stand-off.

Mateo stayed outside and made no move to come in. Did he think Eddie wouldn't let him in, or did he not want to enter? If he didn't want to come in, was he here to break up rather than work things out?

Then Eddie realized that he was standing defensively in the doorway, blocking it. He opened the door wider and stepped aside, in an unspoken invitation.

Mateo came in and shut the door, but he stood awkwardly in the foyer rather than kissing or embracing Eddie as usual.

"I'm sorry." They spoke in unison, breaking the strained silence.

Eddie saw a small smile on Mateo's face, the corner of his mouth quirking up slightly, and felt his own face mirror the expression.

Then Mateo said, "I shouldn't have walked out on you. I overreacted when you suggested moving so far from my family. It's no excuse. I heard you say they didn't need me, and I just... just lost it, I guess."

"Mateo, no. I didn't say your family didn't need—"

"I know you didn't. That's what I heard, though. It took me a few days to realize the difference. I kept wondering how you could possibly say such a thing. Of course, you hadn't. You wouldn't. I'm stupid, and it takes me a while, but—"

"Teo, stop. Just stop. You're not stupid. I hate it when you say you are. And you know I feel the same way about family that you do. I could never have left Mama," Eddie's voice caught and he had to swallow around the lump in his throat before continuing, "when she needed me."

"I do know that, and I walked out on you anyway. That *was* stupid. I finally figured it out, but it took so long and I was afraid I'd lost you. I—"

"You didn't lose me. You're stuck with me. And it wasn't that long, it only felt like it because you weren't talking to me. Dumbass."

"I know you are, but what am I?" Mateo sing-songed, playing along with Eddie's attempt to lighten the discussion. He grinned, as Eddie had intended him to, but it faded quickly. "Seriously, can you forgive me, Wrigley? I should at least have talked to you instead of running out like that."

"You're right, you should have."

"Should I apologize again? I am sorry."

"I know you need time to think things through, but it sucked not hearing from you for so long. Please don't do that again." Eddie didn't like how desperate he sounded, but he let it stand.

"I'll try not to. Sometimes I just need to get away, to drive and think for a bit."

"I know, but try to talk to me first next time, okay? I'll try to explain things better, but don't shut me out if I screw up."



“Eddie—”

“We’re better together. Without me around to encourage you to get out of your own head and take the damn leap once in a while, you’d sit around thinking all the time and never actually *do* anything.”

“Oh, nice, like you’re one to talk, Mr. Impulsive. You’d have gotten into a lot more trouble over the years if I didn’t make you look before you leap sometimes,” Mateo protested.

“I know, that’s my point. We complement each other, but it’s hard to do that if we’re not talking to each other. And yes, of course I forgive you, Fuente. It was my fault too.” With the ritual exchange of stupid nicknames completed, everything was okay again. Mostly, anyway. Eddie didn’t know exactly how it would work, only that it would. That was what mattered, the rest was just logistics.

It felt like he’d waited forever, but at last Mateo’s arms were around him again. Mateo squeezed almost too hard, but Eddie reveled in it. He buried his face into Teo’s neck and breathed in that beloved scent. *My Teo.*

\*\*\*\*

Mateo held Eddie tight, half-afraid if he let go it would turn out to have been a dream. It had only been two days, but there was no “only” about it. If this was a dream, he wanted to enjoy it before he woke up. He kept his eyes closed as he pressed a kiss to Eddie’s bare chest and slid one hand up his ribcage. He stopped with his thumb just below Eddie’s nipple, teasing a little. Mateo didn’t know why Eddie had answered the door shirtless, but he was happy to take advantage of it now. Eddie caressed his back, and Mateo’s white tank top was suddenly in the way. He wanted it gone, and raised his head intending to remove it, but then they were kissing, messily, hungrily, trying to make up for lost time. Eddie started making needy little whimpering sounds that turned Mateo on even more. He thought how much better that vibration would feel on his cock. The heat and slick wetness. The tight suction, and that thing Eddie did with his tongue... Mateo wanted that. Now. But not here.

He decided it was his turn to take charge for a change, so he wrapped his hands around Eddie’s biceps and shoved him back a few inches. Mateo

enjoyed Eddie's startled look. His eyes were wide, pupils dilated, and his breath came in short, panting gasps. His lips were parted and shiny, and Mateo couldn't resist licking them before spinning Eddie around so they both faced the stairs. As soon as they reached the bed, he pushed Eddie onto it and started pulling off his shirt even before Eddie landed. He wanted them naked, needed to feel Eddie's bare skin against his, so Mateo toed off his shoes, then knelt to remove Eddie's.

He looked up to see Eddie looking as desperate as Mateo felt. He was sitting at the edge of the bed with his belt open and hands shaking as he fumbled with his fly. That put his crotch at eye-level, pure temptation and no reason to resist. Mateo buried his face in it, inhaled deeply through his nose, and felt his dick get painfully hard at the musky smell of Eddie's arousal.

Mateo's mouth watered with the desire to feel Eddie's bare cock. He wanted to taste skin, not denim. To lick the satiny head, feel the heat against his tongue. He needed Eddie to fuck his mouth, filling him. To have Eddie's talented mouth on his own cock at the same time.

He started to rise off his knees to make that happen just as Eddie grabbed him and hauled upward. They were both startled and off balance, so romance quickly turned into slapstick. He ended up on top of Eddie, which was good. But they nearly landed on the floor in the process, saved only by a mad flailing of arms and legs which kept them, somehow, on the bed. Barely.

Balanced precariously at the edge, tangled together and shaking with laughter, they nearly fell onto the floor anyway. Eddie saved them just in time with a quick tug. He rolled them safely to the middle of the bed and straddled Mateo, pinning his arms above his head. That lined their cocks up nicely, and the laughter provided arrhythmic friction. Not what Mateo had intended, but he liked it.

"You want to wrestle? I had something else in mind." Mateo thrust his hips up to make his point, then did it again because it felt good, as he arched his back to suck on Eddie's bottom lip. It was difficult, because they were too aroused not to kiss, too amused not to laugh. Not a combination Mateo would have thought possible before, but with Eddie everything was different, better.

Sex with his best friend was the most incredible thing Mateo had ever experienced. All the joys of a new lover—the excitement, the nervousness, the thrill of discovery—combined with the deep love, ease, and tenderness that came only from many years together. Most people were lucky if they got one or the other. Mateo felt humbled and blessed to share both with this beautiful man.

Arousal overcame amusement as they kissed, tongues sliding together. Eddie's hips ground down, Mateo's pushed up, and they rocked against each other in a slow, steady buildup without the earlier urgency. Mateo still wanted their jeans off, wanted to feel skin against skin from head to toe, and knew Eddie wanted the same thing. But right here, right now, was too perfect to change.

A few times they'd spent hours doing nothing but kissing, lost in the textures of lips and teeth and tongues. After coming so close to losing each other, this seemed like a good time to do that again. Mateo wanted to take his time, to touch and taste every part of the man he loved.

Eddie clearly had other plans. "Naked wrestling could be fun." He yanked open Mateo's button fly as he spoke, making it difficult to focus on his words.

"Huh?"

"You asked if I wanted to wrestle. I'm answering your question." Eddie was a man on a mission as he rose up a little to shove Mateo's jeans down.

"Oh, right." Mateo gasped as Eddie's weight pressed back down on him, with a thrust of hips that pushed Eddie's cloth-covered cock against Mateo's nakedness. "I was thinking... Mmmm, yeah... Sixty-nine."

"I like the way you think." Eddie hurriedly shoved his own jeans out of the way.

While Eddie got naked, Mateo lifted his head to lick one nipple. Eddie didn't like teeth as much as he did, but the brown nub got firmer when he closed his teeth gently around it as he continued lashing with his tongue. Eddie pressed his chest into Mateo's face, silently asking for more. Then not so silently, as he made those needy noises again. Mateo wondered if he could make Eddie come like that. He made a mental note to try that another day as

Eddie pulled back and turned around. His thick, gorgeous cock waved hello above Mateo's face.

Mateo moaned as he felt Eddie's hot breath on his own cock, teeth gently sliding the length of it. No actual biting, just the promise, the exciting possibility of it. Mateo's hips jerked, seeking more, and his breath sped up. Eddie's tongue swiped across the head of Mateo's cock, and then suddenly swallowed him down. Christ, that was good. His eyes closed as he lost himself in the heat of Eddie's mouth, until he felt something bump his nose. He looked up to see Eddie's cock begging for attention. Mateo was happy to oblige. He licked the head, savoring the slightly salty taste. Then he wrapped his lips around it and Eddie cried out as Mateo sucked for all he was worth. He put his hands on Eddie's hips and pulled down, encouraging Eddie to fuck his face.

With Eddie's cock in his mouth and his own in Eddie's, it was a perfect circuit of suction and pleasure, and he gave himself up to it. There was no beginning or end. No Eddie and Mateo. Just them, one being with one goal. Pleasure.

\*\*\*\*

Eddie slowly came back to Earth. Mateo's head was on his shoulder, their legs twined together. It should have been a perfect, lazy moment. It had been until the post-orgasmic stupor wore off. Now, for as close as they were, awkwardness still lay between them. Sex was wonderful, especially make-up sex, but it didn't actually solve anything. Those pesky logistics were waiting to be addressed.

Mateo kissed his chest, then mumbled into it. "I guess we need to talk."

"Yeah," Eddie agreed, reluctantly. They hadn't done too well with the talking so far.

Mateo sat up against the headboard and crossed his arms. Eddie sat too, so they were still touching from shoulder to hip. He needed to keep Mateo close while he could.

"First of all, I don't understand why you didn't tell me about this a long time ago. You've obviously been planning this for months, and you're the one

who just said I should've talked to you sooner. Doesn't that go both ways?" Mateo looked hurt and confused, and it made Eddie's heart ache.

It was his turn to cross his arms, clamping his hands tightly over his ribs. Eddie needed a hug right now, if only from himself.

"Yes, of course it does. You're right. I'm sorry. We both need to get better about that, so I guess this has been like a wake-up call." Eddie smiled ruefully at Mateo. "I didn't say anything because I didn't know if they'd accept me, or if I could afford it. I know how much you love your family, how hard it would be for you to leave them. I didn't want to tell you until I knew if it could really work, and I only found out for sure last week. Why upset you and risk *us* if it wasn't going to happen anyway?" Eddie felt like he was pleading for his life. In a very real way, he was.

Mateo opened his mouth, but Eddie wanted to finish before he said anything, so he kept talking. "I looked into other options, like asking the school about delayed admission. They were willing, but said they couldn't hold the scholarship, and I can't do it without that. I wouldn't have asked you to go if I saw another way. I knew it would be difficult, maybe even impossible." Eddie's voice broke on that word, because it was exactly what he feared. "Can you forgive me?"

*Can you love me as much as your family? I didn't want to make you choose between us, but if you have to and they could be okay without you, do you love me enough to leave them for me?* That's what he was really asking, but there was no way Eddie could say that out loud.

"Yeah." Mateo uncrossed his arms, then pulled Eddie's free to twine their fingers together. "I wish you'd talked to me from the start, but I understand. I want a life with you, want to go with you. You're my future, but I can't leave until I know the kids are alright. I think I've figured out a way to go with you, eventually."

Eddie sagged against Mateo. He hadn't realized he was holding himself so rigidly until suddenly he wasn't. Mateo joining him in California later wasn't as good as them making the move together, but it was a whole lot better than Mateo not coming with him at all. It was a good compromise, and he'd take it gratefully.

Mateo grinned. “It took a couple of family meetings, but we came up with a plan. Dolores helped a lot. Each of them will start taking on a little more responsibility. Well, except our useless excuse for a father. He doesn’t count.”

It seemed like he should say something in response to that, but Eddie couldn’t think of what. He was still speechless with relief, so he settled for squeezing Mateo’s hand.

Mateo winked at him. “I think Rafe kind of liked the idea, it made him feel more grown up or something. I do see how it could be good for all of us. If all goes well, I’ll try to join you right after Christmas. I can’t promise that, though. It might be much longer. If it is, I’m sorry, I don’t know how long it could be. I don’t know if you want to wait for me. After all, you’ll be in San Francisco with your choice of gorgeous gay men.”

As closely as they were pressed together, Eddie could feel Teo holding his breath as he waited for Eddie’s response.

“I’ll miss you, but of course I’ll wait for you. However long it takes. You’re the one I want.” That was the most important thing, so he said it first, wanting Mateo to start breathing again.

Eddie still needed to clarify a few things. “Other people make long-distance relationships work, we can too. I’d planned to say that the other night, but you left before I could get the words out. Maybe it won’t even be for that long, if you can join me in January. And I don’t have to leave right away, so if I can live with you—”

“Wait, what? Live at my place?” Mateo interrupted. “You said you want us to live together in California.”

“I do, but school doesn’t start until August and this is only April,” Eddie reminded him. “I also said I’ll need to go this summer to find a place to live and get settled, but that’s still a few months I could be here with you and not having to do the long-distance thing. If you want.”

“If I want? Of course I want you to live with me. I asked you, didn’t I? When did you say you would? I think I’d remember something like that.”

“On Friday night, during dinner. I’m not surprised you don’t remember, I got the impression you stopped listening to me somewhere in there.” Eddie

tried to sound matter-of-fact, because he understood, and it was at least half his fault for not saying it better.

Mateo looked abashed. “I’m such an idiot—”

“No.” Eddie spoke over him. “You’re not. I was so nervous, I totally screwed it up. I’m sorry. Us being together is awesome but it does make things more complicated. We will have to do the long-distance thing for a while, maybe five or six months. Even if it’s more than that, what matters is that it won’t be forever.”

“I’m sorry,” Mateo said again.

“It’s okay. It’s my fault too.” Eddie meant it, and if he hadn’t been so damn relieved, he’d have been frustrated that Teo couldn’t seem to understand that. “Just stop saying you’re sorry. I want to redesign my old dream together, make it work for both of us.”

“I’m sorr—” Teo cut himself off. He laughed, a little self-consciously, then snorted as he tried to contain it.

“You sound like a bull. *Olé!*” Eddie got on his knees to wave a pretend cape, then jumped off the bed and danced away as Mateo lunged for him.

“Who’s snickering like some cartoon villain?” Mateo taunted back, chasing him around the bedroom. Eddie realized it was true, that was exactly what he sounded like.

That had them both howling, and they finally gave up fighting it. Eddie knew it was stress release rather than real humor, but it felt good to laugh with Mateo. They staggered back to the bed, sitting down before they fell.

Long, long moments later, his laughter started to die down. Mateo seemed to be getting himself back under control, too. Until they made the mistake of making eye contact.

“*Olé,*” Eddie mouthed, and they started whooping with laughter again. Eddie’s stomach was starting to hurt, and he wrapped his arms around it. He realized his cheeks ached, as well, and his eyes were streaming.

Mateo stopped laughing abruptly, though his breaths were still quick and uneven. He wrapped one strong arm around Eddie’s shoulders, pulling him

close again. His other hand was shaking as he wiped the tears of mirth, of relief, from Eddie's face.

He was so gentle, for a second Eddie was afraid he was going to start crying for real. He kept it together, mostly, but a few new tears escaped his control. Mateo kissed them away without comment.

Then he slid his mouth from Eddie's cheek to his lips, sharing a salty kiss that started tender and turned passionate. The love and relief they both felt was almost tangible. They were still together, and they'd find a way to stay that way.

**THE END**



## Author Bio

*Dana Cavallon is an aspiring author who loves to travel and will take any excuse to learn new languages and other ways of seeing and being in the world. Like most people reading this bio, she has always been a voracious reader. Books have opened up even more travel possibilities, unlimited by the constraints of physics or reality. Just as with physical travel, revisiting old favorites is as wonderful as finding new ones.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# HEART IN A BOTTLE

By Wendy Clements

## **Photo Description**

Shot of man from the pecs down, very nicely toned, wearing nothing but a fairly large, thick snake covering most of his groin area—on further inspection, it is possible to see some dangly bits. Hmm. Is this a man hiding his snake behind his snake, or is it an ultimatum: love me, love my snake? Whatever the case, the man who makes peace with the sideshow performer's snake is one lucky guy!

## **Story Letter**

Dear Author,

*The man in this photograph works as a sideshow performer—I leave it up to you whether he's with a travelling circus, a carnival, or simply some kind of amusement park. His snakes are his pets, his companions, and his livelihood. He has never found anyone who understands his love and fascination for them... except maybe the compelling man lurking at the back of the crowd for several performances in a row. No shifters, no vampires, and no angels, please.*

*A happy ending is a must, although I don't mind if the way there is a little dark. On second thought, I think it would be better if it was a bit dark...*

*Sincerely,*

*J.J.*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** historical

**Tags:** time travel, sideshow, snakes, magic, psychic ability, non-explicit

**Word count:** 13,565

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# HEART IN A BOTTLE

By Wendy Clements

The light was waning into that perfect time photographers love—right before sunset, when everything is bathed in the shade of golden yellow impossible to describe, but most people recognize, as it glows over trees, houses, old hydrangea blooms—turning things that usually wouldn't be considered worth a second glance beautiful.

Conall McGuire gleamed in the light—his honey-blond hair and well-toned body shining. He was nude save for scandalously tight shorts, showing off the definition and lines of his muscles to their best advantage. He looked touchable—in stark contrast with the three large snakes coiled around his torso. Each sported a different color but the same diamondish-square patterning: palest grey with mottled black, light brown with darker chocolate brown, and ivory yellow set off by the deep maroon of her pattern. They hung luxuriantly off Conall, basking in the remaining sunlight.

“And here is the man himself, the Incredible Constrictor,” Henry Sharpe, the sideshow talker standing near Conall on the front stage called out. Conall shot him an annoyed look. He hated being called that.

“I'm afraid that honor goes to my darlings,” he quipped. “Unless you'd like to try out their constrictive capabilities yourself?” he asked innocently, causing the expected laughter from the audience as Henry stepped back, hands up.

“I'll leave that to the professional and stick to my own specialty, gabbing about what I love most, *Gillian O'Flannery's Fascinations and Wonders of the World!* If you'll look here, ladies and gentlemen, to see the fine quality of performers in our show—all the way from Russia, Piotyr the knife thrower and his beautiful assistant Roziska—she puts ‘fascination’ in the name of the show, folks. I don't know how Piotyr manages to concentrate...” Henry kept talking as he led the crowd into the tent housing the sideshow itself.

Conall chuckled to himself at Henry's spiel—they'd had three full houses today already—this would be the last show of the day. He was tired of

standing and his girls were getting heavy. Individually they didn't weigh too much, maybe seventeen pounds at the most, but altogether... He'd swear Sadie was getting heavier, and he wasn't feeding her anything extra. He was going to have to check the cage for escape holes—if she was getting out, Stella and Cleo weren't going with her, and Sadie was always there in the morning.

There had been no children in that group, to his relief. Conall, despite being drop dead gorgeous and the epitome of masculinity, somehow always managed to attract at least a few children each week wanting to know more about his snakes, and he always patiently indulged them. The rest of the camp teased him ceaselessly about it, and he always pointed out that he already tutored Risiki, Ruthanna and Nikolaos' twelve-year-old daughter. Jugglers from Austria, sometimes they included her in their show, which made for an interesting act as they were both presented as midget jugglers and she was mostly "normal" sized. He also included two more of the show's younger performers, Patrick and Liam, when he managed to get them to keep still long enough. He muttered that it was because he was an older brother who had taken care of his siblings, and somehow children just knew that.

Conall shifted his shoulders. What he really wanted was to settle Sadie, Stella, and Cleo for a while and get something to eat. He focused on Henry, who was herding the last group of audience members into the sideshow tent. Conall breathed a sigh of relief.

Cleo saw the man first. That in itself wasn't surprising—she was an attention glutton and loved the crowds, turning her head so her glossy scales would shine perfectly. Conall could forgive her that—she was younger than Stella and Sadie, who had obediently returned to their places the first time he murmured their instructions to them. Stella's thick body curved loosely around his neck and hung on his sun-bronzed chest like an exotic necklace, Sadie wrapped herself around his right arm.

Cleo ignored him, instead rising straight up into the air, waving back and forth slightly as if hypnotized, her muscles thickening to keep her balance. Her tongue darted in and out of her mouth quickly, her head tilting back and forth slowly.

Conall watched her, puzzled. In all his years with his snakes, none of them had ever done anything quite like this before.

“Cleo,” he whispered, pulling his arm down slightly in the hopes she’d follow. “Down!” She stayed put, her attention fixed on something—outside the gates of the show? Conall looked in the direction her head was pointed toward, the magnolia tree that stood slightly apart from the copse of trees behind it, off to the left of the stands for Circus Maximus.

Stella, becoming bored, was starting to edge her way around his chest, heading downward.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he reprimanded, gently pulling her back up. Stella nudged Cleo, then looked toward the tree herself. “Not *both* of you,” he muttered. Sadie bumped her head against his chin, and Conall finally saw what they were looking at—a man in a black derby hat and black duster stood underneath the tree, staring intently in their direction. At him? He felt a prickle down his spine, unsure if it was unease or interest. Or both. He had a distinct impression of very blue eyes, but in the space of a blink the man was gone.

He walked down the stage stairs, wondering if he’d been in the sun too long. Suddenly, Roshana was at his side, carefully unwinding Cleo from his arm, and he gratefully put an arm around her shoulders.

“Are you all right?” she asked him, with only a slight trace of the native Romani accent she thickened considerably for her customers.

“Just tired and hungry. Thank you for your help. I’m feeling a bit odd,” Conall admitted.

“So are your darlings,” she agreed, briefly touching noses with Cleo. “She says there was a man watching you.”

“I think you saw the man and are putting the blame on Cleo,” Conall protested as they reached his long trailer—he needed space for the snakes’ cages. When he removed his arm from her shoulders, she snorted.

“You are stealing gold dust from the circus girls again,” she accused, brushing off her black lace shawl.

“Not the girls,” he responded with a grin as he left her to put Cleo in her tank while he put Sadie and Stella in theirs.

Roshana had water on for tea by the time he returned.

“Feeding today,” he told her, and she grimaced.

“They are beautiful creatures,” she replied, “and I know it is nature, but still... it unsettles me to see them eat. It is so... violent. And they are normally such gentle girls.”

“I know. That’s why the curtain’s down, so you don’t have to see them.”

“Thank you.”

Conall took a towel and began to wipe the gold dust off, while Roshana considered him thoughtfully.

“You are a beautiful man. Why use that artificial stuff?”

“A moment ago you called my snakes beautiful, and now I’m beautiful. In the same way?” he asked her, smiling mischievously.

“Do you just use it as an excuse to visit Harek and his brother?” she replied, tilting her head much as Cleo had earlier.

“You know you’re the only one who could get away with asking questions like this,” Conall reprimanded.

“That is why I do. I worry about you, that is all. You do not want to be alone, Con. Visiting Harek and Check is fine as long as you expect the same things from each other. You are not the type of man to sit and wait while you think the right man might show up. What if the right man shows up and you are too busy with the wrong man to notice?”

“I don’t think there *is* a right man,” Conall told her, more sharply than he’d intended. “Sorry. It’s meaningless with Harek—I don’t see Check.” He gave her a pointed look, which she ignored.

“And with him it is satiating but not fulfilling,” she answered. “You cannot let yourself go completely. You don’t fully trust him, or any of the others.”

“Ro, this is downright... wrong to be discussing my intimate life with you. We don’t talk about you and your men.”

“That is because there are no men. There is only Milosh. I love Milosh and have no desire to be with anyone but him. It is a good thing you only like men,

though, or he would be in trouble. Except you are too... cavalier.” Roshana raised an eyebrow at him as she brought tea over for both of them. “And I already bring you tea—it is a good thing Milosh is so patient, and knows nothing will happen between us.”

“He’s a good man,” Conall admitted. “Not as handsome as you deserve. Maybe he’d like some gold powder?”

Roshana made a “whuffling” noise remarkably close to that of a horse, and Conall laughed, then grew serious.

“How do you know all this?” he asked her.

“You are admitting it is true, then? And Cleo did see a man who sparked your interest?”

“Wait, wait, wait. You are *not* going to believe Cleo over me?” Conall paused, his mug halfway to his lips.

“Yes. She is a smart one, even if she is young. She listens to Sadie and Stella. I see you during the day between when I give fortunes—your eyes roam the crowd, looking for... something. You want *love*, Conall.”

“Didn’t work so well last time,” Conall muttered.

“*Next* time do not fall for a magician who uses small live animals in his act,” Roshana suggested. “It was doomed from the start, and then the two of you decided to live together. I think it was perfectly natural for Richard to be upset. It was upsetting. A massacre of innocent—”

“I don’t need to relive that, thank you. It was bad enough at the time.” Conall’s lips twitched, though. After a year, it was a little easier to see the humor in it—most likely because it hadn’t been his darlings who’d been eaten. And Stella had looked awfully funny with the dove feather stuck on top of her head like a showgirl.

Roshana frowned slightly, and Conall sighed. He knew what that particular frown meant. Gillian needed someone or something retrieved from sometime. He drained his mug quickly, waiting for Roshana to finish with Gillian. Roshana shook her head to clear it.

“Gillian needs you to get some medicine for Dr. Tork,” she told him.

“She’ll give you the specific instructions. I’m going home. She’s in a mood,” she added, rubbing her temples.

Conall opened the door for her, standing on the top step and looking toward the giant kitchen tent for Milosh, the head chef. He was in luck—Milosh had just stepped out for some air, and Conall waved his arm, catching his attention and pointing at Roshana, then his head, then Gillian’s huge wagon. Milosh nodded and headed toward them, intercepting Roshana as Conall headed to Gillian’s. Conall teased Ro about Milosh, but he really was a good man, and treated her like she was the most precious thing in the world to him. Ro sometimes doubted it, but Conall knew it was the truth.

Gillian’s wagon was actually two wagons attached. It had been quite a while since they’d moved, and they were all growing a little—rooted—here. He knocked on the door before entering.

Gillian called him to the back of the wagon, to the small room only three people, himself included, knew existed. Panels with lights covered the walls around her small desk, and he perched on one of the two stools, waiting for her to finish writing her notes.

The first time he had met Gillian O’Flannery he had kept from laughing with an effort. She was too tall to be a midget, too short, under five feet, to blend in with others of average height. She looked fourteen, with a wild tangle of dark-red curls and deep-green eyes whose expression belied her youthful appearance. She glowed a little, which she said was just the angle of the light. Slender and lithe, she had once been a trapeze artist until she fell one day and developed an extreme fear of heights. Conall wasn’t sure how she’d become the owner of the sideshow, or any of... this. He looked around the room, scanning the map for any red lights, but all were green. One was flickering, which was odd. He’d never seen one do that before.

“Sorry,” Gillian said in her soft, lilting voice. “Roshana told you about Dr. Tork?”

“Yes. You gave her a headache. What’s the matter?”

“I did?” Gillian’s brow crinkled. “I didn’t mean to. I *am* a little unnerved. You see the light?” She pointed at the one he’d been watching. “I don’t know



what this means. It's not anything wrong with the light. I checked. It's not showing any sign of changing color—it's been like this all day. Never once a flash to amber or to red."

"So nothing's *wrong*, something's just off?" Conall asked.

"That's what I'm hoping. But look at the map—it's near us. That's what has me worried. We've been here for so long—we've grown lax. When we moved every year, we could pack up and leave quickly. Now it would take us days."

"Even with all of your power?" Conall teased, and she tried to smile.

"I wanted us to have a home, and this is the closest we've come. This seems to be a good time for us. The early 1800s weren't such a good idea, but 1903... This seems to be working out all right, don't you think?" She rarely needed reassuring.

"I do think it's a good time for us, and a good place. I wasn't sure when you said Circus Maximus wanted us with them, but you were right. It *is* safer than being on our own, which helps tremendously when I bring someone here," Conall said firmly.

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing with that."

"Why would the map light up and give you the information, and Roshana the details, if you weren't supposed to do something about it? And why would I be here? I only ever used to travel to get myself out of trouble, and was afraid to go too far back or forward for fear of getting lost or stuck. It could still happen, I suppose. In which case you have to feed the girls, because it would make Ro ill."

Gillian laughed. "You're not going to get stuck. You have enough reference points that you won't. I wouldn't let you go if I didn't have enough details. You are all my family now. It's my duty to protect you."

"I know they're grateful," Conall said quietly. He cleared his throat. "You just want me to get the penicillin tonight?"

"Yes. Dr. Tork is almost out and he came pounding on the door demanding more of the 'special medicine' this morning. Betsy's ill, and she's his baby. As

long as he leaves her on Maximus' side. The last thing we need over here is an elephant."

"I'll go as soon as it's dark," he said, rising.

"Thank you, Con," Gillian replied with a small smile, returning to her notes.

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Conall didn't eat before leaving. Dinner smelled delicious as always, but traveling often made him feel ill, and he didn't want to risk it. Piotyr and Roziska apparently weren't in the mood for dinner either, and he almost told them to go to their wagon. There *were* children around. But then Roziska giggled and he didn't have the heart. They were both so much better than when he'd brought them back, terrified and bloody, from 1918 Russia, where they'd been with a travelling circus in Yekaterinburg. That was their official story, according to Gillian. If Roziska bore a resemblance to anyone from that area, it was pure coincidence.

Conall stepped quietly out of the camp gates. He'd checked earlier to make sure they were well oiled. After giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark, he headed toward the copse of trees he always used—there was a small clearing in the center, and the copse was thick enough to hide it. Something felt different, and he paused before he entered. He couldn't identify what it was, and he headed into the clearing cautiously.

Someone else had been here. He felt the residual traces of another's magic brushing up against his own. It was the same spell he used to travel. It shouldn't be possible, that there would be another traveler here without him knowing, that someone was using magic like his and he hadn't felt it. Thoughts racing, he almost went back to the camp without traveling anywhere. Whoever it was could have set a trap, but the magic felt benign. Now that he'd been standing here for a moment, it actually felt a little pleasant. There was a definite masculine edge to it—a confident, self-assured man whose magic tasted a little like cloves and spices. He breathed it in, determining it had been hours ago, maybe even yesterday, that the magic had been cast. It was safe for him to go, he decided. He was a little heady from the scent—how could it linger so strongly when the magic had almost completely dissipated?

Just go to one of the hospitals he knew—there were ten he rotated through—and come back. He closed his eyes and took a few breaths to calm himself before beginning the spell that would take him traveling. As he felt his weight dissolve, his physical form start to unravel, there was the sudden shock of arms wrapped tightly around him, but it was too late to stop...

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Conall rematerialized in a familiar hall off the main hospital corridor. As usual, it was deserted this time of night... except for the man who had traveled with him, and Conall rounded on him in anger.

“What the hell do you think you were doing? Who are you?” Conall growled, grabbing the man’s shirt front and shoving him against the wall. The flash of blue was there again, and Conall realized it was the flash of the man’s eyes he’d seen from the stage. They regarded him warily, and Conall narrowed his eyes. He was stronger than the stranger, this other man who smelled of cloves and the odd sharp scent that always came with traveling.

“Me? What are *you* doing? Why are you in a hospital?” The other man was genuinely puzzled.

“Why did you follow me? Attached yourself to me, more like it. You’re going to get me caught! And yourself, for that matter.” He heard footsteps in the main corridor, and pressed himself against the man, molding them to the wall, hearing the man’s quick intake of breath. Conall felt a stirring in his groin at the man’s response, keeping his own breathing even.

“I wanted to know where you were going,” the man confessed in his ear, his voice hoarse. “Today isn’t the first day I’ve watched you, I’ve been around for nearly a week. Mostly on the circus side.”

“Hush,” Conall hissed, just keeping himself from covering the man’s mouth with his hand until the footsteps died off. He stepped back, breathing a sigh of relief. “*What?*” he asked, the man’s words finally sinking in. “A week? Why?”

“I’m, um, a private investigator, a detective. I’m looking for a young woman, and the circus was the last place she was seen. I’d asked all the routine

questions. She *had* been there, but she'd left. I thought maybe she'd gone to the sideshow side. I've taken a few tours through. You never noticed."

Conall let up some of the pressure on the man's chest, eyes still narrowed. "And did you find her?"

"No, but your show is rather... interesting, to say the least. I've been to other sideshows. Yours isn't fake, is it? I started to suspect when I realized you were a traveler as well." He was watching Conall closely. "The whole atmosphere in your camp is different than the others I've seen—I haven't been roaming through, don't worry, just walked around the perimeter of the fence—there are distortions there that shouldn't be. You do know you have to be careful, right? Too many things from too many different times can cause complete instability for everything within the boundary."

Conall let go of his shirt. "Who are you really?" he asked quietly.

The man hesitated. "Galen Hereford. I'm from about one hundred fifty years in the future from when you're settled now. There are more travelers in the future. It's more controlled there than it is in your time—we can't just pop off to anywhere we want at a moment's notice. I know my way around, so I manage to keep off their radar for the most part."

"Radar?"

"A way to track things," Galen replied. "I know how to stabilize the boundaries in your camp before anything bad happens. I knew I had to get you alone to talk to you—you never leave the camp except to go to the circus side," he added, clearing his throat. "I didn't think you wanted to be interrupted."

Conall flushed. "Are you going to start passing judgment on me now?" he asked, remembering Galen's reaction, with his back to the wall, and how he'd felt against Conall. Galen hadn't protested. Conall wondered if he would welcome more intimate contact... There was something about Galen that appealed to him—the combination of his scent, his skin, the color of his hair and eyes. He wondered if his lips tasted of cloves.

"No," Galen said firmly, bringing his mind back where it should be.

“You’re the traveler, you’re the only one I could talk to there who would understand. I shouldn’t have even interfered—”

“This isn’t a very good place,” Conall told him. “This hall isn’t used often, but still...”

“Why are you here?” Galen looked around them.

“Penicillin.” Conall decided there was no need to hide the fact. Galen seemed to know much more than he did. Conall eyed Galen impatiently.

“Okay,” Galen said. “But I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not,” Conall answered, bringing back his fist and driving it forward, knocking Galen out before he saw what was coming.

Feeling guilty, Conall slipped off to the apothecary, although in this time the sign on the door read “Pharmacy.” He dropped bottles of the drug he was seeking into the bag he’d brought with him, freezing when he felt the press of sharp steel on the back of his neck.

“That was completely unnecessary. Now I have blood on my shirt, and this is one of my favorite shirts,” Galen bit out the words. “We were getting along so nicely, too. If this is how you want to play, fine.”

The familiar sensation of traveling took over as Galen held Conall’s arms tightly, although he did make sure Conall didn’t drop the bag. Galen wasn’t completely inconsiderate, after all.

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This time they materialized in an alley. From the angle of the sun, Conall guessed it was eight or nine in the morning. Galen took him tightly by the arm and walked him forward, until the alley opened into the street.

“Are those what *automobiles* look like here?” Conall asked, astonished, as one swept by them. He gaped as he examined their surroundings. “Where are we?”

“Oxford,” Galen told him, tucking what turned out to be a short knife into his belt before leading Conall to a small café and ordering tea.

“I don’t want tea, I want to know why I’m here and what you are doing with me,” Conall hissed angrily.

Galen shot him a look obviously intended to silence him. Conall sat back, taking the teacup warily when Galen handed it to him. Galen leaned his forearms on the table, hands cradling his cup of tea as if he were seeking warmth. Conall watched him, taking the time Galen stared into his cup to examine him more closely—long, delicately crafted hands that still looked strong. He emanated strength for someone with such a narrow frame. Black curls framed his light complexion, the perfect foil for those eyes, hair Conall wanted to sink his hands into, lips with a hint of crimson, seductive and full. Conall found himself wondering what they'd feel like under his own, remembering the noise Galen had made in the corridor of the hospital when he had pushed him against the wall. The way it had felt to be pulled against Galen's chest as they'd traveled here, whenever they were.

"More rules have been established now, about traveling, than there are in your time," Galen started out slowly. "The things you've done wouldn't be allowed in my time."

"Why? We save people. What's wrong with that?"

Galen sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Every action you take as a traveler in time effects things at some point later down the line. It is a question of morals, ethics. Many terrible things have happened between your time and mine, so many wars, so many people killed. Travelers thought we could fix things by preventing key events from happening, yet we made things worse." Galen stopped abruptly. "There were two world wars after your current time—you have seen at least part of one of them, I think, with one of your retrievals. The family of little people and their daughter, from 1914 in Austria. The beginnings of the First World War, supposedly started because of an assassination." He swallowed hard. "We prevented the assassination. The man was killed by another assassin later we didn't know about, because we'd altered history. It was a terrible war. But I think the reason you were sent to take people back is because they're necessary for some reason we don't know yet."

"I've thought that as well," Conall said quietly. "There still *is* a world when you live?"

Galen laughed dryly. “Oh, yes, there is. We have technology you can’t even imagine, yet the same technology draws us more and more into ourselves. We can access information on just about anything we want at any time of the day or night. The advances in medicine and science, in so many other things... But we went too far with changing things about twenty years from your time. There was a man in Germany trying to fight his way to power. The things he proposed were terrifying... We had a council that governed travelers by then. They determined this man was enough of a risk that he should be eliminated. They sent a traveler back to take care of him. We were triumphant when our traveler returned, sure that everything would be all right in the future.”

“And was it?” Conall asked.

“Another man took his place, a more... charismatic man, who seemed to hold people under a spell. His name was Adolf Hitler, and he was far, far worse than the first man, who history doesn’t even remember. Under Hitler, people like those in your sideshow, were sought out and killed. Jewish people—so many I don’t even want to think on it—the Romany, Roshana and Milosh’s people, all killed. Anyone who opposed him, killed. People like us, killed. Unspeakable atrocities were committed in his name.” Galen took a deep breath. “And the world is always filled with conflict. I wanted to warn you. I know from the magic around your camp you are strong enough to keep all of you there, if not indefinitely, then for a very long time. I can tell it’s not just yours, though. Who is responsible?”

“How do I know I can trust you? You come to me and tell me of all the terrible things that will come to pass, warn me to keep the entire camp from moving forward in time—do you have any idea how hard that is? I don’t know if I have the strength for that,” Conall burst out. “I am responsible for the safety of my family,” he added, “They expect that from me.”

“So you really do more than stand around looking gorgeous and holding snakes?” Galen smiled slightly. He held up his hand as Conall started to protest. “The snakes have a purpose, did you know?”

“How can you know so much more about this than I do?” Conall asked in annoyance. “I’ve just always liked snakes, ever since I was a boy—”



“When *were* you a boy?” Galen asked, and Conall blinked, then furrowed his brow in concentration.

“The 1760s,” he replied quietly. “I was born here, wasn’t I? In Oxford.” He looked around. “When are we now?”

“1921.” Galen pulled a pendant out from under his shirt, showing it to Conall. The design was a complicated Celtic knot consisting of three intertwined snakes, their heads meeting in the center. Conall leaned forward, taking the silver pendant in his hand, still warm from lying against Galen’s chest. Galen moved forward himself. “It’s still attached, you know,” he whispered, and Conall looked up, startled, loosening his hold on the pendant. His eyes were inches from Galen’s, close enough to feel his breath on his cheek. Galen’s eyes were a deep blue right now—Conall had realized they changed color. He closed his eyes, dropping the pendant and sitting back quickly.

“Why snakes?” Conall asked hoarsely.

“Symbols of immortality, rebirth, wisdom, sexuality, fertility... depending on which culture you look at. And we *are* immortal.”

“I was beginning to wonder about that,” Conall admitted.

“A hundred and thirty-six-years-old and you *start* to wonder,” Galen said, trying not to laugh. “I’m *trying* not to overwhelm you. You’re young yet for a traveler.”

“*Oh*,” Conall snapped, “and how old are you?”

“Five hundred and seventy-seven.”

“Oh.” Conall crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, looking anywhere but Galen. “So basically I don’t know anything?”

“I didn’t say that. No one taught you?”

“No. Gillian helped some, when I met her. She’s not a traveler, but she... knows about them. She’s in charge. If you want to know anything, you have to ask her. I learned through trial and error. And my snakes. They... speak... to me. There are only a couple of other people who can hear them. One of them seemed quite taken with you—it’s unusual for her to single someone out she doesn’t know.”



Galen looked uncomfortable. “I’m terrified of snakes,” he confessed, clutching his pendant. “I used to even be afraid of images of snakes. This,” he said, waving the hand holding the pendant, “doesn’t bother me anymore. I feel odd not wearing it now. I watched you, on stage with your snakes. They teased me for being afraid, said they’ll only squeeze a little.”

“They talked to *you*?” Conall tried not to gasp. “All of them?”

“Sometimes. Mostly the youngest one. Cleo?” Galen took a sip of his tea.

“She was the one most interested in you, who *knows* what she told my friend Roshana about you. Sadie and Stella are older, better behaved, but Cleo’s a minx sometimes.”

“They have different personalities?”

“Of course they do.” Conall was surprised at Galen’s question. “All animals have different personalities, what makes snakes any different?”

“I suppose I just thought of them being reptiles—not really thinking creatures,” Galen admitted.

“These are a traveler’s snakes,” Conall countered. “But even on a larger scale, they’re different.” He smirked at Galen’s expression of mingled disgust and fear. “How do I know I can trust you?” he asked again. He let out a sigh. “My girls talked to you.”

Galen searched his face. “Let’s just say I have a vested interest. One that’s very close to me. And another who *might* be?” he asked hesitantly, and Conall raised his eyebrows.

“You’re very forward. More than I’m used to.”

“More than you’re used to?” Galen laughed. “Says the man who covers himself in gold powder, then stands on a stage wearing nothing but shorts leaving very little to the imagination and three snakes?”

Conall squirmed in his chair. “When you put it like *that*... That’s my outside personality—my stage persona. The one Henry calls *The Incredible Constrictor*. I hate it, but once he’s stuck on something, it’s very hard to shake him. I could have strangled him. You’d think I was the one doing the constricting.”

“Do you?” Galen asked with a half smile. Conall blushed, his tan hiding some of it, but not all.

“Only when encouraged,” he finally muttered back, and Galen laughed. “Gillian is going to worry. This doesn’t usually take me very long.”

“I can adjust for the difference,” Galen told him. “When I take us back.”

“Who said *you* were going to be the one to take us back?” Conall raised his eyebrows. Galen smiled slowly.

“I did,” he answered, watching Conall intently.

“You don’t trust me, yet you want me to trust you?”

“I never said that. I do trust you. More than I should,” Galen added, taking a sip of his tea and catching a drip down the side of the cup with his tongue. Conall quickly averted his eyes when Galen glanced at him. “You are a shy one, not what I expected at all, given your public display.”

“That’s not me,” Conall repeated. “You assume everything. And I’m not necessarily shy in public, maybe it’s just you.”

Galen smiled more openly. “I don’t need to assume what your body tells me. We’ve already figured out about each other, no need to be embarrassed by it now.”

“It’s not something I discuss from the stage,” Conall retorted.

“I’m sure people in the camp know. Would it make a difference if they did? They seem to accept everything else,” Galen asked him softly.

“You’re right. They know. They’ve seen me with other men. They know I go to the circus at night...” Conall traced circles in the drop of tea on the table with his finger.

“Have you ever been in love?”

“Love?” Conall smiled briefly. “I don’t know. I’ve rarely been with someone long enough to form a meaningful relationship. And before you ask, I’ve been the one who’s managed to end them. Why are you asking all these questions? Usually the only one who interrogates me is Roshana.”

“You’re afraid to,” Galen stated with certainty. “You have the capacity to, you simply won’t. How ironic. You’re surrounded by people who know you’re

gay, who love and trust you, yet you hide. Amazing. Do you realize how lucky you are?”

“That I’m happy?” Conall asked in confusion.

Galen stared at him for a moment, just as confused. His face cleared as he realized their misunderstanding. “The meaning of the word changes,” he explained. “In my time, gay means a man who prefers to be with other men, has relationships with men instead of women.”

“I see,” Conall replied, nodding, before he grinned a little mischievously. “And are they happy in your time?”

Galen shook his head at him. “You’re ridiculous. You do realize that?” he asked, but he found himself smiling. Conall was unselfconsciously attractive when not on stage. It made him even more alluring. Galen wasn’t immune to the effects, which surprised him a little. Usually he managed to keep his mind strictly on the business at hand, but he was distracted now in his interest in Conall and this strange protection he and the others had cast over their camp. *Right, his mind told him. And that’s a banana in your pocket that just happens to perk up every time he meets your gaze, smiles, looks your way, breathes... you’re five hundred and seventy-seven, and this young man is going to make a fool of you.*

“I’ve been told. Too impetuous, too impulsive, I could do better... Roshana has a whole litany she goes through.”

“Is she right?”

Conall sighed. “Unfortunately. But she usually is. She truly does have the Sight.”

Galen dropped a bill and some change on the table. “So do I, to an extent,” he said, rising. “Let’s go.”

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They returned to the alley Galen had first brought them to, Galen indicating that Conall should step up into the doorway first and turn with his back to him. Galen’s arms weren’t as tight this time, and Conall relaxed, leaning into him and noticing Galen was a little taller than he was. Galen’s

scent surrounded him, and he felt Galen's hardness pressing against him. Conall reached around, holding the bag with one hand, pulling Galen against him more tightly. Galen moaned softly as Conall reached between them, stroking the bulge in Galen's trousers. Galen leaned his head forward and kissed the back of Conall's neck.

Conall dropped the bag and turned to face him, cupping the taller man's face in his and tracing his lips with his thumbs. Galen's lips parted, leaving Conall to watch him as he turned his head into Conall's hand, kissing his palm. Pleasure sparked through him.

"You have the Sight," Conall groaned. "Is this a good idea?"

"I have no idea. Yes," Galen amended, the vibrations of his chuckle passing through Conall's chest.

"Take us somewhen else," Conall gasped as Galen fluttered little kisses on his lips.

"Bag," Galen reminded him, and Conall snatched it up before they dissolved.

They reappeared in the copse of trees near the sideshow camp, lying on the grass. Galen had one leg looped over Conall's, and one of Conall's hands pressed against the small of Galen's back, pulling him in closer for a kiss. His other hand sank into Galen's curls, marveling at how soft they felt between his fingers. Their kisses had started almost chastely—now they were hungry, open-mouthed and fierce. Murmurs of pleasure turned to moans as lips slipped to the hollow of a throat or to nuzzle behind an ear. Conall felt exhilarated and half-mad with desire, desperate for the feel of Galen's skin against his. Galen's thoughts echoed his, as Galen began to undo Conall's buttons with trembling fingers, and they sank into the cool grass.

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Conall made sure his buttons were straight, then looked up to watch Galen, who returned his gaze, his expression warm. He held out his hand to Conall and they made sure they were both appropriately foliage free. Galen pulled Conall into a lingering kiss before Conall picked up the bag and they headed back to the camp.

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Gillian's narrowed eyes went from Conall to Galen and back. "I asked for medicine, and you return with a new lover as well. Another traveler. I find this extremely disconcerting, Conall. You've let someone else know about the camp."

"In his defense," Galen argued, "I already knew, Miss O'Flannery. It was the reason I wanted to talk to him. To tell him it can't continue. The more points in time intersect, the more unstable the node where they meet. Conall and whoever has helped him have done a good job with the protection spells, but they need fixing. I can help, if I know how many lines cross."

Gillian stood with her hands on her hips. "Conall? You're being awfully quiet. You brought him here. You're the only one he has to vouch for him."

"Cleo likes him. Stella and Sadie are neutral, Roshana told me."

"We need Roshana here as well," Gillian muttered, sending her a quick mental message. "I tried not to give her a headache this time," she added for Conall's benefit. "Now." She turned to address Galen. "You want to meet the people involved? You'll need Conall with you. They trust him. Roshana should go with you, and Conall, you should take at least Cleo with you. Pick her up on the way over."

Gillian watched them closely, her attention finally distracted by Roshana's entrance.

"Ro, this man Conall has returned with would like a tour of the sideshow. Specifically, who Conall has brought here. Mr. Hereford believes our protection spells are lacking."

"I didn't say they were *lacking*, I said they needed repair," Galen said quietly, and Roshana glanced at him in amusement.

"I'll go with them, Gilly. See what's going on." Roshana patted Gillian's shoulder and led them out of her wagon, walking straight to Conall's trailer. "You need Cleo?" she asked him innocently. Conall nodded, opening the door and disappearing inside. Roshana put her hand on Galen's arm, startling him. "Do not hurt him," she told him fiercely.

"How—there's nothing yet, just—"

“You mean more to each other than either of you realize.” She moved her hand to his heart. “It may take you awhile to admit it.” She paused. “And why *don’t* you like snakes?”

“It isn’t that I don’t like snakes, I’m terrified of them,” Galen whispered as the door opened and Conall returned, Cleo wrapped happily around his chest and right arm. She glided out toward Roshana, who let Cleo flick her tongue against her fingers, then went to Galen, who kept himself from stepping back with great effort. Roshana raised an eyebrow at him and he lifted a tentative hand, holding it toward Cleo. She flicked her tongue across his fingers, then made an odd noise that almost sounded like purring.

Conall looked at her. “What are you so satisfied about?” he asked her as they headed toward the entrance of the sideshow. She raised herself up and put her head against his cheek, then settled down. Roshana laughed quietly as she pulled back the curtains to the sideshow. Every person from every act was there, waiting.

“You’re all here. Why are you here?” Roshana asked, looking around the long, wide tent. All of the performers were gathered in chairs in a semi-circle, waiting.

“We don’t know,” Wren, the bearded lady, said, squinting at Galen. “I forgot my spectacles. Come forward, you there with the embarrassed look.”

Galen did as she asked after casting a look at Conall. Conall just shrugged. Galen walked up to her, and she leaned forward. As she did, the dog-faced boy joined her.

“Liam,” she scolded lightly, but Galen was looking at him intently. “You’ve been through here, what, three or four times now?” Wren asked.

Galen blushed. “Yes. How did you remember me out of all those people?”

“You felt like Conall, which I thought was plenty odd. That smell that he gets when he’s been out. I’m Wren, and this is Liam.”

They both shook his hand, and Galen hesitated, putting a hand on each side of Liam’s.

“It’s very soft,” he commented. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?” he asked Liam, who turned a wide-eyed look to Conall.

“It’s all right, you can tell him,” Conall reassured him.

“You sure your blood hasn’t all moved south?” Liam asked him, and Wren tapped him lightly on the top of his head. Liam grinned. “I’m from Ireland, about what, Conall? 1845?”

“That sounds about right,” Conall confirmed, and Galen looked Liam squarely in the eye.

“The Irish Famine?” he asked, and Liam nodded.

Piotyr stood to the side with a protective arm around Roziska, and Galen turned to them next. “And you, both of you?”

“Russia, Yekaterina—1918. I was in the White Army. I’m Piotyr, and this is Roziska,” Piotyr said firmly, daring Galen to say otherwise. Galen looked at Roziska for a long moment, before nodding his head slowly and turning away thoughtfully.

A woman wearing a long, slinky black dress, legs crossed, cleared her throat. “Might we know why you are doing this?” she asked, her voice sultry. Galen judged from the expression on the face of the man standing behind her, one hand possessively on her shoulder, that he didn’t appreciate her overt attempt at seduction. Not that she wasn’t gorgeous—long, black curling hair, skin the color of creamy tea, kohl-lined eyes...

“Sananda, he’s here to try to help us,” Roshana interjected. “He’s another traveler, like Conall. He’s noticed some problems and is just trying to find out how many timelines Conall has crossed, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” another woman asked. She was one of a pair of midgets, holding on tightly to the arm of the man standing next to her. He stroked her hair reassuringly. She looked up at a girl sitting in a small wagon. “Now someone else knows all about us, he could expose us, he could *destroy* us.”

“Mama,” the girl said quietly, rubbing her mother’s back gently. “It’s going to be fine.”

Galen hesitated for a moment—their daughter was of normal size. On the small side, yes, but still nowhere near the size of her parents.

“I have no intention of destroying you. Anything but. I want to help you. I want to keep you safe. I’m from the future—you don’t know what happens to

sideshows. People outside—” He pointed toward the gate. “Decide that you’re being taken advantage of, being treated with no respect, less than human, by the people running the shows. Do you feel that way here?”

There was silence.

“From some of the people who come in, sometimes,” a boy covered with spots said, moving to sit next to the girl in the wagon. “It’s why Ruthanna and Nikolaos try to keep Risiki out of the performances,” he added, taking Risiki’s hand.

“Patrick,” Nikolaos murmured, and Patrick dropped Risiki’s hand with a sigh. “Another two months and she’ll be sixteen. You will survive.”

“I won’t,” Risiki declared. “If the world is coming to an end why shouldn’t he be able to hold my hand now?” she asked her father, who let out an exasperated sigh and gave Galen an annoyed look.

“Do you have children?” he asked Galen, who shook his head. “Unfortunate. I was hoping you would have to deal with this someday.”

Patrick had snuck his hand to touch the side of Risiki’s arm, and Galen noticed Conall smiling slightly, trying to remain serious.

“The world isn’t coming to an end,” Galen declared, ignoring the look Risiki gave him. “Not this moment. I need to know how many of you came from different times, so I know how many lines are crossed.” He listened to the litany, not sure if he should be proud of Conall or dismayed. India, 1857; Austria, 1914; France, 1798; Massachusetts, 1862. “And that’s *all*?” he asked, looking around the room. He rubbed his eyes, and Roshana patted his shoulder.

“There is the one last thing,” she reminded Conall, who sighed. Everyone stirred with excitement, starting to talk at once. Cleo looked pleased, if a snake *could* look pleased.

“You’re so fickle,” Conall whispered to her. “No, you may not. Not right now, and you know why. Her parents are afraid of you. I would be if I was their size as well. I’ll take you to lessons.”

Everyone parted to let him lead the way, Galen and Roshana behind him, the rest following at a polite distance.



Past the last exhibit there was a cordoned-off room. The curtains were blue velvet with silver stars. Conall hesitated, then turned to face Galen.

“This is the blowoff, the extra attraction you get to see if you pay more. Henry is generally successful in convincing people.”

“Is it worth seeing?” Galen asked. He had been through it before, but hadn’t paid it a great deal of attention. It was the one thing that had seemed out of place when everything else had seemed real.

Conall paused. “That’s up to you to decide.” He pushed the curtain aside and let Galen in first. Conall and Roshana followed him quietly.

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Galen’s eyes adjusted to the light, which was centered on a heavy, circular bottle, surrounded by small animals made of stone, wood, and crystal. He moved closer, until his nose was nearly against the glass. “A heart. You have a preserved heart. And here I was thinking that everything you had was real. What on earth are you doing with a heart—eeeyaa!” he shrieked as it beat twice, jumping back toward Conall and making a small noise when Cleo put her face up to his, as if inquiring if he were all right. His heart pounded against his chest, and Roshana unwound Cleo and took her from Conall so Conall’s arms were free. He circled them around Galen, murmuring softly in his ear until his heart slowed. Conall didn’t laugh at him—Galen had expected he would.

“It still gives me the willies if I’m not expecting it,” he told Galen. “I don’t come in here too often. Mostly just to make sure it’s all right. I have to be in the proper mood. Read the sign behind it.”

Galen hadn’t even noticed the sign. He’d been concentrating too hard on the heart. “Heart of St. Francis of Assisi.” He looked at the animals around the bottle again. Some were crudely made, other so fine in detail you could see claws on cats and whiskers on mice.

“None of us put them there,” Roshana said softly, touching one of them with a fingertip. She stroked Cleo’s head. “Someone will put a snake there someday,” she murmured consolingly.

“I need air,” Galen said suddenly, stumbling toward the exit. Roshana and Conall exchanged glances, and she nodded for Conall to follow him. Galen hadn’t gone far—he was leaning against one of the huge trees, head back against the trunk, taking deep breaths.

“Are you all right?” Conall asked him.

“You know I’m not. How could you—how could you have a saint’s heart? I’m not a particularly religious man, but that just seems... wrong.” He didn’t lower his head to look at Conall, who sighed.

“He wasn’t a saint when I took it. No, I didn’t kill him,” he added quickly as Galen did look at him. “It was when they were preparing the body. They didn’t make him a saint until two years later. I just had to go back—”

“Oh dear gods,” Galen breathed. “You went back—how far?”

“Twelfth century. If it’s any consolation, I was sick for a week, and I’m never doing it again.”

“No, you’re not,” Galen snapped. “You could have been lost so easily.”

“I chose,” Conall replied. “Gillian let me choose who I wanted. I was against the whole idea from the start, and the only way I’d agree was if I got to choose whose heart we got. I’ve always liked St. Francis, always liked animals.”

“You couldn’t have picked someone a little closer? A little less... religious?”

Conall smiled. “I was younger then, more impetuous. What’s done is done, Galen. Tell me, though, what did you feel when you saw it?”

“Love,” Galen replied without thinking. He tilted his head. “Everyone leaves feeling that, don’t they?”

“Or something like it.”

“You think you’re a pretty clever bastard, don’t you?” Galen asked him, and Conall grinned.

“Sometimes. Let’s go back to my trailer, you can think there. Roshana will just be leaving.”

“You don’t—you don’t *sleep* with them, do you?” Galen asked anxiously.

“I was a little afraid they might wake up and mistake parts of me for breakfast.” He leaned forward and kissed Galen lightly, about to step back when Galen caught his shirt in both fists and pulled him closer, tracing Conall’s lips with his tongue. Conall welcomed him in as one of Galen’s hands moved to the back of his head, pulling him even closer. Conall leaned against Galen, legs feeling a little weak. Galen held him firmly, keeping him upright. “How do you do this to me?” Conall whispered. “I’m not this... easy.”

Galen laughed quietly. “Neither am I, trust me. It’s a joke at work that I’m celibate. No one stirs me the way you do. I don’t just mean there,” he added as he strained against his trousers. “You make me *feel*, and I haven’t felt anything but detached for years. I thought I’d just lost the ability to experience it anymore. I’d given up, honestly.”

They stumbled back to Conall’s trailer, locking the door behind them. Galen pushed Conall to the bed, straddling him and holding him down, their fingers interlaced as he raised Conall’s arms above his head, leaning in for a light kiss. Conall bit his lower lip gently.

“This is *my* bed,” he murmured as Galen nuzzled his neck behind his left ear. Conall closed his eyes and let out a soft moan.

“So? Is that supposed to mean something?” Galen replied breathily in Conall’s ear, sending shivers down his spine.

“It did at the time. You took over,” he remembered. Galen lowered himself on Conall, bracing some of his weight on his elbows.

“You want to be on top?” he asked Conall, briefly touching his nose to Conall’s. “You don’t like it when I take over? I’m older, that’s why I’m on top?”

“That’s not fair, you know I can’t remember all of that when you have my brain reeling,” Conall muttered, and Galen smiled and kissed him. “It’s new. It doesn’t matter that you’re older. Quite a lot older. Are you sure you have the energy to be up there?”

“It depends on whether you wear me out talking first, when there are very clearly other things I’d rather be doing with my tongue,” Galen replied,

touching Conall's lips lightly with the tip of his tongue. "Do you always talk so much? I don't believe you did before." He rocked his body back and forth slightly on Conall's, and he half moaned, half sighed.

"I'm used to being in charge."

"I know. I'm curious to see what you're like when you're not. When you just let go. I don't think you ever just let someone else take care of you. Relax, Con. Do you trust me?" Galen stared into Conall's green eyes, watching the conflict there as Conall searched his face.

"Yes."

"Good. I trust you. May I continue now?"

Conall smiled crookedly and moved against Galen in response. "Clothes," he said, and Galen released his hands. Conall began to unbutton Galen's shirt as Galen reciprocated. There was no more talking as they slowly learned each other.

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For several days now, Conall and Galen had been working on the protection spells. They had walked the circumference of the camp with Gillian and Roshana the first day, learning where all the rips, tears, and holes were.

They were used to having an audience now as they worked. It unsettled Galen but Conall was used to it. The camp adults wandered by at times, but it was the children who stayed. Galen thought it was one of the funniest things he'd seen when Nikolaos lectured Conall about keeping an eye on Risiki and not letting Patrick get away with anything "unbecoming for a young woman." Even Risiki tried not to laugh. Conall assured him a close eye would be kept on Patrick, which, to Patrick's disappointment, was.

"I'm not having Nikolaos come after me. You know the rules he's set out, Patrick. When she turns sixteen," Conall told him. "Liam, you're going to have to help me, since I'll be a bit occupied."

Liam had smiled, disturbing Galen with the fact that he really did have canines like a dog, a feeling heightened when he growled and let out a short bark. Conall rolled his eyes.

“*Without* teasing,” Conall added. “Ro will be coming by to check.”

The other discovery Galen had made was that Risiki had no legs. She was perfectly formed down to her hips, it appeared, and then—nothing. Everyone else was used to it, and by the end of the day, he was as well.

He and Conall took turns feeding lines of energy to each other. Mending the holes was just like sewing them with a tight thread of time, then smoothing them out and blending them into the rest of the spell until it wasn’t even noticeable there had been a hole.

“You couldn’t have done this yourself,” Galen said. “You’re exceptionally gifted, but these protective spells are so strong it truly does take two. Was that never taken into consideration?” he asked as they took a break for lunch, separated from the children by the large mesh cage Conall had brought out for his snakes. There was a large branch inside, and they draped themselves indolently over it. Galen watched them cautiously. Conall caught where his gaze went.

He wished Galen wasn’t so afraid of them. He was coming to find, even over this short period of time, that he was growing very fond of Galen. So far, he was everything Conall had ever wanted in a partner. He was accepting the occupants of the camp—they were accepting him. There had been a few titters when Conall had first put his arm around Galen, but it was mostly from the children, who seemed amused by anything having to do with being fond of anyone. A few days later, no one said anything, and even the children had tired of making fun of Conall having a new boyfriend, as they called Galen.

Gillian had determined long ago that the children be educated and taught them herself when she could. She’d taken ill and, to Conall’s surprise, Galen volunteered to take her place so Conall could continue to work. He knew the original protective spells better than Galen did, and could fix some of the smaller holes on his own. The original magic would fill in the holes more smoothly.

The children studied on their own while Galen and Conall worked, with Galen and Conall taking a few extra breaks each day when it became obvious Galen was in no hurry to rush away from the camp. He told Conall it gave him

more time to work with the children. When Conall took a rest, though, the children knew it was more likely they'd get a respite themselves rather than more studying.

Today, Risiki sat with her head in her hands, Patrick and Liam already finished and talking around her.

"You two, go off and find something to do while I help Risiki," Galen told them, waving them away. They hooted and ran off while Galen shook his head. "Look at me," he said softly to Risiki, and gradually she lowered her arms. There were tears in her eyes, and Galen frowned. Conall restrained his instinct to go comfort Risiki, curious to see what Galen would do. "What's wrong, love?" he asked her. She shrugged. "I doubt very much it has to do with your shoulders, which look perfectly fine to me today. I *know* you know how to do this." He looked down at her page of division. "You haven't even started. Why?"

"What's the point?" Risiki burst out. "What's the point of any of this? I keep telling my parents that we aren't in Austria anymore, it's not necessary that I marry someone when I turn sixteen like Mama did. They want to look outside of here, outside of *my* home, to find a young man for me, when I have a young man right here. They mentioned the circus."

At this, Conall did move to sit next to Risiki. "Your father hasn't mentioned any of this, Ri. Why all of a sudden?"

"He thinks Patrick is below me," she muttered, stroking Cleo as she glided down Conall's shoulder to Risiki's, trailing around her neck and flicking her tongue at Risiki's nose. She smiled a little, stroking Cleo and cuddling her to her face. Galen paled, but didn't move away. "They think Patrick is stupid. He's not stupid. He said there are chairs with big wheels—I could push myself around instead of being dependent on everyone else. Including him! See, he's thinking of what's best for me, even more than Mama and Papa. They want to push me down, he wants to pull me up. I have two perfectly fine arms. They would be strong enough! I can make more animals—" she cut herself off quickly.

"*You're* the one putting the animals in the blowoff," Conall mused, surprised. "You made those?"

“I made six, and asked Patrick to put them in for me. How many are there now?”

“Dozens,” Galen replied, and Risiki smiled.

“More came.”

“Which did you make?” Conall pursued.

“There was a mouse, a cat, a bear... I don’t remember the others exactly. I make them out of the stones Patrick and Liam find at the creek. They’re just right for carving.”

“They’re beautiful,” Conall told her. “You do know you could sell those?”

She scrunched up her nose. “No, not yet. I’ll know if the time comes.”

While they’d been talking, no one had been paying attention to Cleo, who had crossed the table to Galen and curled up in front of him, looking up at him. Conall saw her and tried not to smile.

“Galen,” Conall said calmly. “Look down slowly.”

“Oh, you think Patrick and Liam haven’t tried that one enough on me?” Galen asked, and Risiki giggled.

Conall sighed, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “Do I resemble either one of them? Would I pull the same prank a teenager would?”

“Yes,” Galen and Risiki responded simultaneously.

“Thank you,” Conall muttered. “Would you please just do as I asked? Remember, I’m right here, and so is Risiki,” he added with a slight grin.

Galen looked down slowly, turning so pale Conall briefly feared he might suffer lack of oxygen to his brain. His mouth moved but no sounds came out. Cleo was perfectly still, and he started to relax a little, some color returning to his face.

“Cleo,” Galen finally managed. “How unexpected. I had a feeling you’d be the one to eventually provoke the attack on my heart.” He paused, then frowned. “Yes, you’re right, I haven’t had one yet. It’s just a matter of minutes. Maybe even seconds. Don’t mock me! I was once told I would die of murder by snake.”



“Murder by snake?” Risiki snorted. “That’s one of the silliest things I’ve heard. Cleo wouldn’t hurt you. Neither would Stella or Sadie. So now you still have to worry, because there’s another snake out there with your name on it.”

Conall burst out laughing, and Galen glared at him.

“If you love me in any way, shape, or form, you will come and take the most beautiful Miss Cleo to somewhere her charm can be more fully appreciated,” Galen said quietly. Conall rose, walking around the table and scooping her up, but not before she got in a tongue flicking at Galen’s nose. “Thank you,” he told Conall, who sat next to him a little further down the bench.

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In bed that night, their breathing evening out, Conall’s head rested on Galen’s chest, Conall’s arm around him. Galen’s arm pulled him closer, and Galen kissed Conall’s hair contentedly.

“I didn’t mean for it to sound like I was forcing you to do something because you loved me,” he told Conall awkwardly. Conall laughed quietly, turning his head and moving to circle Galen’s nipple with his tongue. Galen gasped. “I’m trying,” he whispered, “to have a serious conversation with you. Please.” Conall innocently blew on the wetness he’d left behind, smiling in satisfaction as Galen’s skin immediately shivered into goosebumps.

“I’m listening,” Conall told him, raising himself up on his elbow and looking intently at Galen’s face. “I wasn’t going to torture you with Cleo. I’m impressed with how well you did, after I was fairly certain you weren’t going to lose consciousness.” He lowered his voice. “I didn’t think I’d get to know you, I thought you were just passing through, checking on this girl, and you were going to leave. But you didn’t. You stayed. It’s been a little over a week now, and you’ve managed to insinuate yourself into our camp almost by magic. As soon as the children trusted you, and the adults passed through... They’ve told Gillian you’re all right. It’s not just because of me. They wouldn’t hesitate to tell her if they thought someone was with me that might hurt me.” He ran his free hand up and down Galen’s chest. “I don’t know what you’re going to do. You said you didn’t find who you were looking for. I love this, us, here, like this, but I don’t know when you’re just going to leave.”



Galen put up a hand to touch Conall's face. "I did find who I was looking for," he finally said. "She wasn't in the circus side, she was here. By the time I put everything together I was already drawn to you. I liked your camp, and I didn't understand why I would have been given orders to kill such a pretty, innocent young woman." Conall started, but Galen dropped his hand to Conall's shoulder. "Listen to me. I'm an agent from the future, not a private investigator. It does take investigative work, I suppose. I serve in a very small force that goes back to fix mistakes in time. Before I even found her I argued that the chances of eliminating her here would most likely have absolutely no change on the outcome in the future. If you stay here, now, especially, there's no chance she'll ever end up where she is in the future. Talking about this makes my head ache. I need to tell the agency I won't do it, and then I'll need to leave the future, quickly. I need someplace safe to stay. I hate to ask this of you—I came here to kill one of the people you protect. I lied to you about that. You probably don't want me near you." He sighed. "I've lived a long life, and to have found you at the end of it has made it so much better. Being here has given me a little redemption, I hope. There's one last thing I want to do before I leave for good, though."

"You would leave?" Conall asked quietly, his heart plummeting. "I thought you were just saying—you felt something for me?" He rushed on before Galen could answer. "Who is it you were supposed to kill? I should know so I can protect her better in case someone else comes."

Galen lay an arm over his eyes. "Roziska. I would have probably ended up having to kill Piotyr as well. Her father—he did some heartless things, cruel, to his people. The people had a revolution, captured her father, a tsar, and the rest of the family. They were all killed on hastily given orders. Except for her, because she had disappeared. You have been in so many dangerous places. Did you even know that?"

"No," Conall admitted. "I didn't know anything except that she was the one I was supposed to bring. Piotyr wouldn't leave her side, so I ended up bringing both of them. But you're truly going to leave them alone?"

"I have no heart for that work anymore. My life had been lonely until I was sent here on this mission, when I saw you for the first time and started to meet the people around you. I don't want to go back to my old life."

“Then don’t.” Conall found the words coming out in a rush. “Stay here with me. Help us. I don’t want you to go. The important thing is that you found your better nature and you didn’t kill Roziska. And you told me, and I know you won’t. *Stay here*, Galen. Even if my snakes make you nervous, scare you—you’ll get used to them, over time. They need to get used to you as well, you know. They have to learn to share again.”

Galen found Conall’s hand and squeezed it. “Doesn’t Gillian get the final say?” He paused. “And you’d forgive the reason for my being here so easily?”

“You’re not that man. It’s in your eyes. You don’t want to do it anymore. You want to belong. You want to belong *here*.” Conall spoke with such fierce intensity Galen couldn’t help but smile. “Here, come to bed. Enough of this tonight.” Conall pulled Galen under the blankets with him, curling up with him tightly and falling asleep more quickly than he’d thought he would.

Galen slipped carefully out of the bed once he was sure Conall was truly asleep, gathering his clothes and dressing quietly. He stood and watched Conall for a moment, drinking in the sight of him, before opening the door, stepping down, and closing it behind him gently.

A few minutes later, there was a flash of blue from the copse of trees beyond the gates of the sideshow.

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Conall woke with Gillian on one side of the bed, Roshana on the other, and Milosh at the foot, looking apologetic but still upset. The women were both berating him soundly *and* simultaneously. Milosh remained quiet and went to fix some tea.

“You could let him wake up a little,” he interjected from the stove, and Conall shot him a grateful look.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Conall told them, feeling the absence of Galen keenly, wondering where he’d gone. “Could *one* of you please tell me what is happening?”

Gillian threw her hands in the air. “Cleo talked to you. You tell him.”

Roshana glared at Conall. “Cleo told me about your conversation last night with Galen. She was worried. She didn’t think he was lying about not going

through with what he was supposed to do. She... likes him. She is worried for you. She heard him leave last night, and from your conversation, I have no idea where he could have gone based on what the two of you talked about. Is he coming back?" Roshana asked Conall, who was still letting her words sink in, a sharp pain starting in his chest. He put his hand where it hurt, pressing against it in the hope the pain would lessen.

Milosh brought him some tea, and Conall murmured his thanks. Milosh considered him critically, then Roshana and Gillian, who still had their arms crossed angrily.

"Both of you, out," he ordered firmly, and they both looked surprised.

"But we don't know—" Gillian started to say.

"And you won't. Go. Now!" Milosh opened the door for them, making a sweeping motion with his hand.

They were too surprised at Milosh's actions to do anything but what he asked, and Milosh closed and locked the door after them, muttering. He returned to Conall's side, sitting on the bed next to him.

"Roziska is one of Roshana's best friends," he told Conall. "Roshana was horrified. She was also furious to find out how much danger you'd been in. She loves you like a brother. All of hers are gone."

"All this time and I never knew she had any," Conall said quietly.

"Now you know. She likes Galen, Conall. She thinks he's been good for you. So do I. You've been smiling more. Acting more alive. He's not even comparable to Richard. He deserved to get his animals eaten as snacks. You were never this happy with Richard. Is it because Galen is a traveler as well?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He's sort of like a burr that gets stuck on your sock. It's annoying at first, but you get used to it—that's not a very good analogy. You don't fall in love with the burr."

Milosh put his arm around Conall's shoulders, laughing softly. "All right?" he asked, and Conall nodded. "*Is he coming back?*" he asked, and Conall could tell from his tone that this wasn't Milosh trying to get the answer for Roshana and Gillian—this was Milosh asking because he knew Conall was in

pain. Milosh didn't advertise the fact, but he was extremely empathetic, and Conall realized he must be causing Milosh quite a bit of suffering to be so close to him. "Don't worry about that," Milosh told him. Oh, and the mind-reading. Milosh didn't let many know about that either. To most he was just the head chef in the kitchens.

"I honestly don't know. He said there was one more thing he needed to do before he went back, but he sounded like after he went back to... I don't know, tell his employer he couldn't find her... he wasn't expecting to live. That's horrible. He really likes it here, Mil. And yes, I think I am falling in love with him. I don't know for sure. I've never been in love before. It can't be like this. I hurt inside, and I know it's his fault, but all I want right now is to see him, ask him what the hell does he think he's doing. We're not finished fixing the rips, for one thing. How dare he leave me to do this alone? How dare he come in here with his blue eyes and make me want him?"

"The absolute nerve," Milosh agreed. "And be kind and gentle as well, I suppose, and a good lover, I imagine. He talks tough sometimes, but he's a kitten underneath, isn't he?"

"Not always," Conall said, blushing, and Milosh laughed again.

"They're calming down," Milosh told him. "Galen's back. He's brought something that has them a little flustered because it looks too much from the future. Pull on some trousers and let's go out."

Conall did, nervously. What could Galen have done to raise Gillian and Roshana's ire? Milosh didn't seem upset. When Conall opened the door and left the trailer, pulling on a shirt, Galen didn't seem overly upset either.

He was standing with his head tilted, hands on something in front of him. "And just how many people do you have around here who are geniuses at finding a way to fix that?" he was asking Gillian. Conall looked down at what Galen's hands rested on—the handlebars of a chair, sleek with black metal tubing, cushions to make a seat, a straight back, also cushioned, enormous wheels—he looked up at Galen, heart near to bursting. He had taken Risiki seriously. How would they explain this to her parents?

"He thinks it will just *blend in*, Conall." Gillian turned to him in protest, frowning when she saw the expression on his face.

“It will, by the time Patrick and Liam are finished with it,” Conall assured her, walking up to examine it more closely. “This is amazing, Galen.”

“She may be frustrated at first, she’s going to have to build up the strength in her arms, but she certainly has motivation enough to do it,” Galen told him, smiling a little. Conall set a hand on one of the handles, just touching Galen’s hand. He looked up, returning Conall’s probing gaze.

“Are you going back?” Conall asked him, more sharply than he’d intended.

“No. I obliterated the path here and when behind me so they can’t follow. It’s safe here now. I think they’ll find other things to distract them and keep them busy. I crashed their computers with a pretty nasty virus before I left. It’s too hard to explain, but they’ll be busy a good long while.” He chuckled to himself. “And I permanently deleted all their agent files.”

Conall shook his head. Whatever it was Galen had done, he seemed awfully pleased with himself.

“Miss O’Flannery?” Galen asked Gillian, who regarded him skeptically. “I wondered if I could beg a favor of you?”

“Begging might do it,” Roshana snapped.

“Cleo reported our conversation to Roshana,” Conall told him. “She likes you,” he added hastily. “She was afraid you were going to hurt me.”

“That’s absolutely the furthest possible thing on my mind, unless Conall has other ideas?” He looked at Conall with a questioning expression.

“Just stop,” Conall muttered.

“I would plead that you allow me to stay here—I have many talents, I know there are things I could help with.”

“You helped tremendously with the protection spells. They’re the best they’ve ever been. I never thought having two travelers would be anything other than a headache. It turns out you’re good for something after all. But tell me, what’s the *real* reason you came back?” Gillian asked him, her green eyes snapping.

“I promised Risiki I’d bring her a wheeled chair?” Galen responded uncertainly.

“The *real* reason you came back,” Gillian asked him again. “I swear, you’re more annoying than Conall.”

Galen covered Conall’s hand with his own. “You stated the obvious yourself. Travelers are better in pairs.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*Wendy Clements is in a state of transition at the moment (which translates to: doesn't have a job but is working on finding one that fits her and vice versa). She lives in Oregon, in a generally pleasant city that has grown on her. She is very interested in advocating for individuals with disabilities and anyone being suppressed for any reason. She has wanted to be a writer since the age of nine, when she wrote a very sad poem about a swan (unfortunately [cough] lost to the ravages of time). She has written many things since then, none containing swans, and only one mentioning her earlier childhood desire to be a pig. She self-published one novel, Aithin, and believes it is in serious need of revision, but is torn by the ethical dilemma that it should be left alone (much like a certain trilogy of movies), and the fact that it really needs a good edit.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# AN INTREPID TRIP TO LOVE

(Little Bite of Love #1)

By Charlie Cochet

## Photo Description

An adorable picture shows a man with short, light brown hair wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, holding his large, dark gray and white Husky in his arms. The Husky's ears are flattened back and his paws are on the man's shoulders. The picture's tag reads: *OMG Dad kill it. I swear it was as big as my head! I hate spiders!*

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*It is just the two of them after he fulfilled his obligation to have a pup. But they need someone who will kill the spiders infesting their house. Please send help!*

Sincerely,

Nikyta

## Story Info

**Genre:** shifters, urban fantasy

**Tags:** humorous, family drama, Husky-shifters, fantasy, sweet, men with children, fugly spiders

**Word count:** 34,451

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# AN INTREPID TRIP TO LOVE

## (Little Bite of Love #1)

By Charlie Cochet

### PROLOGUE

*Centuries ago, the delicate veil between the mythical world and human world crumbled, dawning an age of chaos. With the two worlds no longer hidden from each other, fear for the unknown spread like wildfire, culminating in the War of the Fallen. It was a vicious war with no winners, each clan battling for its own purpose. Some fought for self-preservation, while others sought to conquer. The loss on all sides was vast, and it became clear that in order to save what was left of their people, clan leaders would be forced to unite and coexist under common laws. While each clan lived by its own rulings, the World Law governed all. Humans and mythical beings agreed to live among their own kind, divided by borders which would remain uncrossed.*

*In time, alliances and kinships were formed between the humans and creatures. With peace came the amendment of many World Laws, allowing for clans to travel beyond their borders and settle among other species. While many embraced the human world, there were those who believed themselves above such frail creatures and refused, turning away not only from humanity but from their own kind. Poisoned by their hate, their spirits blackened, and the Likho were spawned. They were creatures dark and wild, devouring and infecting all with their poisonous touch.*

*Once again, the clans united to drive these creatures of darkness deep into the forests. The Likho soon became nothing but the stuff of legends, used to frighten children and keep them obedient. The worlds once again found peace, and many ancient clans thrived. One such noble clan was the Hagan Clan, whose strength lay with its pack members, their undying loyalty, and its strict adherence to old world traditions. Traditions which remained firm and unchallenged. Anyone who did not conform to the ways of the clan was banished or in some cases sentenced to death via the dark forests. Those who*

*did not wish to face such punishment from the Hagan Council maintained their silence, their secrets locked away within them forever.*

*Until the day Tristan Hagan changed everything.*

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*Our story takes place in the town of Perin, located in the Provence of St. Veles, a heavily wooded land mass situated between Maine and Nova Scotia. It is largely occupied by shifters of the Canidae family, though some humans and Felidae shifters are known to live in the area as well.*

## CHAPTER ONE

“Oh no.”

Trip knew that sound all too well. Claws scratched against the hardwood floors and something in the living room fell over with a loud *thunk*. Preparing himself for what came next, Trip spun on his heels and braced himself. Seconds later, Robbie landed in his arms, paws scrambling to wrap around Trip, who struggled to keep hold of the large pup.

“Robbie, you’re getting far too heavy for this,” Trip groaned. As the next Alpha, Robbie was already larger than most pups his age when in his Husky form, and Trip’s human muscles pulled under the weight.

*Dad! Robbie whined, his little voice clear as day in Trip’s head. There’s a spider in my bedroom and it’s ginormous!*

Gods help him. “A spider? You’re about to snap my spine over a spider?”

Robbie’s ears flattened back and he lowered his head, his nose nuzzling Trip’s temple with a whine as his tail wagged hopefully. *It’s real big, I swear. I’m not making it up.*

“All right, I’ll go see, but how many times do I have to tell you not to change inside the house?” Carefully, he lowered Robbie to the floor, and waited for his son to shift back into his human—and much more manageable—form. Trip didn’t bother to look down at his clothes, which were probably now in the same state as the rest of the house. He was going to have to vacuum. Again. Not that he didn’t shed—his kind were notorious for that sort of thing—but his pup seemed to shed enough for half the clan. How the kid still had a coat left after all the shedding he did was beyond him. Any other canine would have been bald by now. Nope, not his little ball of fur.

When Trip turned his attention back to Robbie, the pup was still sitting at his feet, wagging his tail and gazing up at him with those big dark eyes.

“Absolutely not. What have I told you about staying in your Husky form?”

*If I’m not careful, I’ll get stuck that way.*

“Exactly. Spending too much time in our true forms is dangerous enough as it is for us grown-ups.”

*But you and the Devil Dogs have stayed in your true forms for weeks and nothing's ever happened to you.*

"We've had a lot of practice, and even so, it's not something that's easy to master. It takes a lot of control. The Devil Dogs are different, they're half wild, and it's part of their nature, so for them, they have to work extra hard to hold onto their human side. That's why they're Enforcers. You're an Alpha and still learning, so be patient. Now come on, or I'll have to break out the hairbrush."

Robbie leapt back, shaking his furry head with a bounce before his ears perked up and his form started shifting, his mass decreasing and his body changing to that of an average seven-year-old boy, one who had a talent for shedding as much in his human form as he did in his canine form. Trip was sure he hadn't bought Robbie the number of socks he seemed to find everywhere on a daily basis. Finished with his transformation, Robbie ran up to him and grabbed hold of his hand, pulling at him.

"Come on, it's in my room."

"All right, let me just grab something from the kitchen to catch it with." Making a quick stop in the kitchen, he rummaged around one of the bottom cabinets, and pulled out a medium-sized plastic food container and the cardboard backing of an old calendar he kept for just such an occasion. "Show me to this beast."

The moment he stepped foot in Robbie's room, he stifled a curse as his socked foot was all but impaled on a piece of LEGO architecture. To top it off, the place looked like a war zone. "Robbie, why is every toy you own scattered all over the floor? You're not even playing with them."

"I was," Robbie protested from behind him.

"Yeah? Then why is your PS3 on 'pause'?"

With a sigh, Robbie gave him an impatient nudge. "Because I haven't gotten to a save spot yet, obviously."

"Obviously," Trip muttered. Because that *obviously* answered everything. "I'm surprised you even saw the spider in all this mess."

“It was the only thing moving.” Robbie carefully tiptoed around him, looking for the demon spider.

His son, the next Alpha of the legendary Hagan Clan, was afraid of a spider. Where had he gone wrong? “So? Where is this hideous creature from another world?”

“It went under the bed,” Robbie murmured, pointing at the bed across the room—which had yet to be made at six in the evening. Leaving that gripe for after he corralled their unwanted arachnid guest, Trip weaved through the valley of toys and made it to the bed unscathed. He’d lost count of how many times he’d stepped on those angular little landmines that were supposed to be building blocks. It was as if they lay in wait beneath the surface of the carpet, knowing just where he was going step or kneel. Testing the fluffy rug for any impaling objects, he got down on his knees and lifted the comforter hanging off the side of the bed.

“For crying out loud, Robbie, there’s more stuff under your bed than out here. Did you leave anything in the closet? I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a nest under here.” Robbie let out a whimper and Trip rolled his eyes, shaking his head at the pup and trying not to laugh at his little worried face. “Relax, there’s no nest.” He returned his attention back under the bed and saw something move. “Aha! I’ve got you now you little sucker. I don’t know what you’re so scared of. It’s not that big.”

“It is so! It’s like one of those *facehuggers* from *Aliens*. What if I’m asleep and it jumps on my face and tries to lay eggs in my tummy and then it bursts from my chest all argh!” Robbie dramatically threw himself back against his desk’s chair, his tongue poking out one side of his mouth as he made gurgling noises, his body twitching.

“That’s the last time I let you stay up to watch a sci-fi marathon.” The movement stopped. Taking the cardboard, Trip slowly slipped it under the bed toward the black lump, only to poke it and find it was a balled up sock. What the hell? Something scuttled beside it—something much bigger. It turned and darted right for him.

“Holy fudge!” Trip shot away from the bed, managing to curb the copious amounts of colorful swear words ready to roll off his tongue. Scrambling, he

climbed onto the bed in a manner which could only be described as astoundingly undignified, losing one of his socks in the process. Getting to his feet, he wobbled on the bed a moment before finding his balance, his plastic container out in front of him like a shield and the piece of cardboard brandished in his right hand like a sword. He was ready for battle.

“There it is, Dad!” Robbie squealed and Trip gave a start.

“Where?”

Robbie frantically pointed at the huge hairy black spot in the middle of the blue carpet. “There!”

“Oh my Gods,” Trip gagged. “What is that? That is the most revolting thing I have ever seen.”

“What about when Grandpa Hagan lost his swim trunks at the lake?”

“You’re right. This is the second most revolting thing I have ever seen.”

Robbie swiped a book off his desk, ready to hurl it.

“Hey, don’t throw your math book.”

Dropping his math book on the desk, Robbie swapped it for Trip’s tablet.

“Throw the math book! Throw the math book!”

Robbie obliged, picking up the hefty hardback and chucking it across the room. It landed like a teepee over the spider. They held their breaths. Pages ruffled, and seconds later the spider leisurely crawled out. “It’s still alive, Dad! What do we do?”

“What is that thing made of? All right, that’s it. Ain’t no eight-legged creep gonna get the best of Tristan Hagan.”

“Go, Dad!” Robbie cheered him on.

Trip inched closer to the foot of the bed when the beast turned toward him and leapt forward. “Holy shit, it jumps!” He scrambled back until his back hit the wall behind him.

“You said a curse word,” Robbie admonished, wagging a finger at him.

“Yeah, I know, I’m sorry. But, did you see that?” Trip’s smartphone rang in his pocket and he shuffled his weapons into his left hand to grab it, pressing it against his ear. “Brook?”

“Trip? What’s wrong?”

“Put her on speaker phone,” Robbie demanded. “Mom! Mom! There’s a huge spider in my room and it looks like one of the *facehuggers* from *Aliens*!”

“What have we told you about watching those sci-fi marathons?”

“You sound like Dad. Why are you fighting with me when you should be fighting the *Aliens*?”

“It’s a spider,” Trip clarified.

“A mutant spider that probably has mutant babies,” Robbie added.

Brook sighed. “He gets that from you, you know.”

“No, but seriously, Brook, the thing is fugly.”

“No one says fugly anymore.”

“I just did.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a nerd.”

“Aw, thanks, babe. I gotta go now. Got aliens to kill. Don’t worry, if I end up an incubator for mutant spider babies, I’ll remember the good times we had.” When Brook next spoke, he could hear the smile in her voice.

“Do you want me to send Deacon over? He’ll be home in about fifteen minutes.”

“Hm, do I want to emasculate myself further by having my ex-wife’s husband come kill a spider for me?”

“Dad, it’s moving again!”

“Fifteen minutes you say? That’ll work for me. He can let himself in. Tell him to bring his shovel. And a blowtorch.” By the sound of Brook’s laugh, it was clear she wasn’t taking this as seriously as he was. Didn’t she know they were in mortal peril?

“What are you, the mob? You’re gonna whack a spider?”

His gaze went to the eight-legged freak. “Oh, and a garbage bag and some bleach.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Love you.”

“Yeah, yeah. He’s going to end up in your bed tonight.”

“Who? Deacon? I didn’t know he swung that way.” Trip wriggled his eyebrows, making Robbie giggle.

“Our son, dummy.”

“I’m already plugging in the night-light.”

Brook said her goodbyes and Trip slipped his phone back into his pocket.

“Is Deacon coming to rescue us?” Robbie asked cheerfully.

“Deacon is coming to *assist*.” Trip scanned the room, trying to work out the best way to get around the spider. Living with a forest behind their house meant all sorts of creepy-crawly things managed to find their way inside, but this nasty piece of work was a first. He’d seen horseshoe crabs that were prettier, and if he didn’t know any better, he would say the *facehugger* had it out for him.

“It’s okay, Dad. No one’s going to think any less of you for not being able to kill a spider.”

Trip arched an eyebrow at his son. “You’re the next Alpha, why don’t you kill it?”

“Because I’m seven.” The “duh” wasn’t said but it was certainly implied. “But you, you’re old.”

“I’m thirty-five! In human years, anyway.”

“That’s, like, still super old. Even in human years.”

“Why am I bothering? I have underwear older than you.”

“Gross.”

“They’re clean. And if I’m old, what’s your great-grandpa?”

Robbie looked stumped. “What’s older than ancient?”

“Ha!” Trip couldn’t help but laugh as he climbed off the bed. “I’m making a run for it.”

“What about me?” Robbie shifted anxiously from one foot to the other.



“I don’t know.” Trip hunched over and put a hand to his back. “I’m too old to carry you. My feeble bones may crumble to dust.”

Maybe Robbie did get his overactive imagination from Trip, but the huffing and planting of fists on hips was definitely a trait his pup got from Brook.

“That’s not funny.”

“I beg to differ, and just to show you, I am now going to let out a hearty laugh.” Which Trip did.

“Daaaad,” Robbie whined.

“Yeah all right. As long as we agree Deacon is only coming over to assist.” Slowly—and as far away as physically possible from the spider, Trip edged toward Robbie.

“Fine. He’s not coming to rescue us, only assist.” Robbie’s dark eyes suddenly widened. “What if Deacon can’t kill it either! What if the spider babies come out from hiding and attack him?”

“Well then, I’ll make sure a statue is put up in his honor in Perin Park. Pre-burst chest obviously. Out of respect for your mother.” He managed to make it over to the chair without getting mauled.

“Not funny.”

“Again, I beg to differ.” He noticed the Spiderman T-shirt Robbie was wearing and grinned broadly, giving him a poke in his belly. “That right there, son, is called ‘irony’.”

“I can’t believe I’m related to you.”

“I know. How is it you inherited *none* of my amazing genes?”

Robbie shrugged. “Lucky I guess.”

“Oh, you impertinent pup. You’re gonna get it now.” He grabbed Robbie and threw him over his shoulder before descending with a one-handed tickle attack. Robbie squirmed and giggled while trying to bat his hand away.

“Stop! I’m not a baby,” Robbie said through his laughter as Trip dashed out of the room, stopping his assault long enough to close the door behind him.

Not like the spider couldn't crawl under it, but he'd rather not think about that, or the possible spider babies lurking around somewhere, undoubtedly waiting to strike at the most inappropriate moments—like when he was on the toilet or in the shower.

They made it to the living room safely. He dropped Robbie on the couch with a bounce when there was a heavy pounding on the door. For a moment, Trip thought whoever it was, was going to break it down.

“That doesn't sound like Deacon. Stay here.” Trip made his way to the front door, sniffing the air on his way there. It was a familiar mix of scents and he quickly rushed over and threw the door open.

“Bo—” Trip had barely gotten the name out before Boone grabbed a hold of his upper arms and practically lifted him off his feet.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

Hunter came barreling in behind his brother, looking equally alarmed. “What happened? Where's Robbie?”

Boone put Trip back on his feet and checked him over before seeming satisfied he was in one piece. With a curt nod to affirm his visual assessment, the brothers marched past Trip into the house, looking around and sniffing the air.

“Boone?” Trip closed the front door, following the destructive duo.

“I don't smell anything out of the ordinary,” Hunter told his brother, going off into the living room where Trip heard Robbie's cheerful shout as he greeted Hunter, followed by Hunter's equally enthusiastic reply.

“That's because it's just me and Robbie. Do you two want to tell me what's going on? You're kinda freaking me out here.”

Boone stopped in his tracks and turned with a deep frown. He tilted his head to one side, looking endearingly puzzled. “I got a text from Robbie saying there was an emergency. We were down at Perin Park and got here as fast as we could.”

“Emergency?” What—*oh*. “Robbie! Get your little butt out here right now.”

Robbie poked his head out from the doorway. “Yes, Father?”

“Don’t you ‘Yes, Father’ me, and don’t you even think about pulling those puppy eyes. I taught you that trick. Come out here and face the music.”

With a pout and his head lowered, Robbie shuffled out into the hall, stopping in front of Trip.

“What did you think you were doing?”

“You always say if we need help or if there’s an emergency to call Boone. You said he’s the biggest, strongest, bravest, most honest, most reliable...”

Trip felt his face burning up as Robbie proceeded to list every one of Boone’s virtues off his little fingers. With a nervous laugh, Trip threw a hand over his pup’s mouth. Mortified didn’t begin to cover it. Boone, on the other hand, seemed thoroughly amused, and his lips quirked up on one side.

“Is that so?”

“Well, you know, you are an Enforcer.” Trip shrugged, doing his best to sound like it was no big deal. Boone gave him a nod, his somber expression betrayed by the playful gleam in his eyes.

“Of course.”

“The house is clear,” Hunter declared, coming to stand beside Boone, his hands on his hips. “What’s going on?”

“False alarm.” Boone crouched down in front of Robbie, his six-and-a-half-foot, two-hundred-and-ten-pound frame eclipsing the pup. “All right, little man, what was that message about?”

Robbie moved Trip’s hand away from his face, his eyes going big. “Aliens!”

Boone’s eyebrows shot up and he exchanged glances with his brother before turning his gaze up to Trip’s. “I’m sorry, what?”

Wonderful, because he clearly hadn’t been humiliated enough. “He means spiders.”

“The size of aliens!” Robbie threw his small arms out to his sides, stretching them as wide as they could go to denote the newly mutated size of their recent arachnid invaders. Apparently they’d quadrupled in size.

“They’re not that big, but they’re definitely freakish,” Trip said, putting Robbie’s arms down.

“Spiders. That’s why you called.” Hunter shook his head in amusement.

“Technically, he called,” Trip pointed out, putting his finger in Robbie’s ear and wiggling it just to annoy him. Mission accomplished. He quickly moved his hand away before Robbie could swat it.

Boone chuckled at their antics and stood to look around. “So you didn’t get rid of them?”

“Nope.”

“How come?”

“Did I mention they were freakish?”

“Are you saying you’re scared of spiders?” Boone narrowed his eyes at him, probably trying to deduce whether Trip was being serious or not. It wasn’t the first time. Trip got that a lot from folks, even folks who had known him since he was a pup.

“I’m not scared—”

“He screamed and jumped on the bed,” Robbie offered with a wide grin.

Unbelievable. His own son. “Traitor. And I didn’t scream. I expressed surprise.”

“Of course.” Hunter crossed his arms over his beefy chest, making Trip wonder yet again what the Devil Dogs ate that made them the size of Redwoods. Trip wasn’t even small. He was of Alpha bloodline, and at six foot two, and one hundred and ninety pounds, he was still considered small when standing next to these two.

“I was caught off guard.”

Hunter pointed behind Trip. “Is that it there?”

“Where!” Trip jumped and darted behind Boone, using him as a shield.

“Wow.” Hunter shook his head in disbelief. “You didn’t even hesitate. Just threw my brother right into the line of fire.”

“He’s trained for combat.”

“You saying the spiders are going to face off against us? Do they know jujitsu? Because I gotta tell you, I’m a little rusty. Hand to hand, we can probably take ’em, but... Would it be hand to hand? Hand to leg?”

“You know what, Hunter, bite me.”

Hunter wriggled his eyebrows. “Is that an invitation?”

“I don’t have to take this from you. I’m going to address the sensible one.”

“Sensible?” Hunter let out a bark of laughter. “Do you know what Mr. Sensible did this morning?”

Boone cast his brother a warning glare. “Shut up, Hunt.”

“What did you do?” Trip turned to face Boone and held back a smile. Boone might look like the sort of guy you didn’t want to meet in a dark alley, but Trip had never been afraid of him. He was like a big ole cuddly teddy bear. Well, unless someone did something stupid, like get on his bad side. Then he wasn’t so cuddly.

“Nothing.” Boone frowned, his gaze going to his boots in embarrassment, and his hands shoved in his back jean pockets.

“He chased a squirrel into Vucari Woods and got his head stuck in a tree.” Hunter broke into laughter and soon he was doubled over, laughing so hard he was in tears.

“Don’t laugh at your poor brother.”

“Are you kidding? It was the funniest sh—”

Trip cleared his throat loudly, motioning to Robbie who was listening intently, and Hunter caught himself. “Uh, I mean, that was the funniest thing I’d ever seen.”

“Don’t listen to him, Boone. Those little suckers are nasty.” Trip instinctively reached up and gave Boone’s ear a gentle tug, making him smile. In return, Boone gave him a playful bump with his hip.

“Aw, aren’t you two adorable,” Hunter teased, receiving a scowl from both of them. He quickly put his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I just call ’em like I see ’em.”

Self-conscious, Trip withdrew his hand. “Uh, you guys want a beer or something? Deacon’s going to be along soon.”

“Sure, I’d—”

“No thanks.” Boone grabbed Hunter by the arm, giving him a tug. “We gotta go. Sorry to have bothered you.”

Trip wondered why the sudden rush to leave. “We were the ones who called.”

“What about the aliens?”

All three men stopped to gaze down at the wide-eyed pup and his quivering bottom lip. Hunter took a step behind his brother, whispering hoarsely.

“He’s doing that lip thing, Bo.”

Even Boone didn’t stand a chance. It was over and they all knew it. “All right. Point us to the aliens.”

“You sure you don’t want to wait for Deacon?” Trip asked, following them through the living room and down the hall toward Robbie’s bedroom.

“He’s bringing a shovel,” Robbie pitched in excitedly.

“A shovel? You sure that it’s a spider and not like, a Jersey cockroach, because I don’t do cockroaches,” Hunter stated adamantly. “Those things are indestructible. I hit one with a brick once, and I swear it put itself back together and just sat there facing me, like it was waiting for me to apologize or something.”

“You are so full of it,” Trip muttered.

Hunter smacked his brother in the arm. “Tell him.”

“It actually happened. Don’t think it was waiting for him to apologize though, more like sizing him up. Must have found him wanting because it scurried away after that.”

“Gee, thanks, big bro.”

Boone gave his brother a charming smile. “Anytime.”

“Ouch.” Trip laughed at Hunter’s pout and grabbed the two brothers by their collars before they could open the bedroom door. “Shoes off and watch out for the LEGOs.”

“Are you serious?” Hunter groaned, toeing off his biker boots.

“Hey, if you want to get impaled by tiny little bricks of plastic hurt, that’s your choice, but I don’t want you tracking dirt onto my carpet.” Trip followed Boone’s amused gaze down to his feet. “Crap.” This night just got better and better.

“What happened to your sock?” Boone asked, toeing off his own boots.

“It became a casualty of war.”

“He lost it when he was running away from the spider,” Robbie said, hiding behind Boone. He looked up at the mountaneousque man with a bright smile, bringing out the dimple in his cheek. “Can you carry me, Uncle Boone?”

Oh, the kid was good. Trip wondered if he showed his dimple, Boone would carry him, too.

With a deep rumble of a chuckle, Boone lifted Robbie up with ease, depositing him on muscular shoulders. “Hold on then.” He opened the door and stared. “How’d you even see it in all this?”

“Thank you.” Trip cast his son a smug smile. “See, I’m not the only one.”

“That’s because he’s a grown-up. Hunter, you understand, right?”

Hunter frowned at him. “Hey, I’m a grown-up.”

Robbie studied him before coming to his conclusion. “I don’t think so.”

Trip burst into laughter, and donned his best gangster voice. “Oh, you just got owned by a seven-year-old, son.”

“Well excuse me, Snoop Dog. I don’t think I asked for your opinion.”

“Just go kill my spiders.” Trip shoved Hunter into the bedroom, smiling contently when he heard Hunter growl and curse under his breath. “I told you to watch out for the LEGOs.”

This was going to be fun.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Scratch that. This was going to be a disaster.

What on Earth possessed him to ask the Devil Dogs to catch a creepy-crawly inside his house? Boone had put Robbie down on his chair, and with his brother at his side, started toward the spider which had remained serenely in the center of the room. The moment they stepped toward it, it leapt straight at them. Trip had been watching from the safety of Robbie's bed, which he was sure wasn't meant to hold the weight of the three large men now occupying it.

"What the hell, Trip," Hunter yelped, trying to shove both him and his brother in front of him. "I thought you said it was a spider?"

"It is. I told you it was freakish."

"That's not a spider. It's evil. I can feel it trying to steal my soul."

Robbie let out a whimper and Trip smacked Hunter in the arm. "You're scaring him. Robbie, monkey, it's not going to steal your soul. Remember, Hunter isn't the brightest pup in the litter."

Hunter cast him a daggered look before turning to his brother. "That ain't right, Bo." He took a deep breath and nodded toward the spider. "All right, Mr. Sensible, go get it. Go on, boy."

"You're lucky there's a seven-year-old present." Boone gave Hunter a nudge forward, nearly making his brother lose his balance. "You're always harping on about how fearless you are. Now's your chance to prove it."

Puffing up his chest, Hunter edged toward the foot of the bed when Robbie yelled out, "Don't let it lay eggs in your tummy!"

Hunter turned around and marched right back. "Nope."

"Oh come on!" Both Trip and Boone protested, trying to shove Hunter back toward the foot of the bed.



“Are you insane? Didn’t you hear that? It’s going to lay eggs in my tummy!” Hunter crossed his arms over his chest and dropped down onto the mattress, refusing to budge. “Nope. You think you’re such a tough dog, you do it. I’m pretty sure it’s got spikes all over its grossly bulbous butt.”

Trip nodded somberly. “He’s right, it does.”

“This is ridiculous. Three grown men can’t get rid of one spider?” Boone huffed, yet Trip noticed the larger man hadn’t actually moved.

“Hello?”

“Deacon!” Robbie bounced on his chair, calling out, “We’re in my room! Did you bring the shovel?”

Deacon laughed as he approached the room, the moment he saw the spider he nearly tripped over his own feet trying to step back. “What the hell is that?” He looked over at Trip, his brown eyes going wide. “I thought you said it was a spider?”

“It is,” Trip replied calmly, taking just a tiny bit of satisfaction in seeing Deacon cower along with the rest of them. Order had finally been restored to his world. At least it would be once the spider-beast was gone.

“I’m sorry, but that, that *thing* is not a spider.”

“What’s going on?” Brook appeared behind Deacon, looking around the room, her gaze landing on the three of them on the bed. “You called the Devil Dogs to get rid of your spider? Really, Trip?”

“Robbie called them. And the Devil Dogs are getting their tails kicked, FYI.”

“Hey,” Hunter protested, only to have Brook shush him.

“I don’t even have words.” She looked around the room and spotted the spider. “Oh, that’s disgusting.”

“See,” Hunter hummed smugly.

“Unbelievable.” Brook marched in past Deacon who threw a hand out to try and stop her but failed. She ignored all their protests, picked up the piece of cardboard and plastic container, then walked up to the spider, ignored their

cries as it flung itself at her, and smacked the cardboard over the container as soon as it landed inside. The whole process took mere seconds.

The room sat in silence.

At least until Robbie jumped off his chair and started running around waving his arms. “Oh my Gods, did you see that! That was *awesome*! It was all like ‘Argh, I’m going to lay eggs in your tummy,’ and you were like, ‘Not today, butt-head.’ Woo! Go, Mom!” He ran over to the foot of the bed and stopped in front of it, his expression grave. “I can feel your shame.”

“You little—” Hunter lunged at him and Robbie let out a yelp, darting from the room with Hunter on his heels. Trip turned to Boone and put his fists up.

“All right, come on, I need to restore my manhood.”

Boone chuckled, and in a swift move, grabbed Trip’s leg, pulling it from under him and knocking him onto his back. With easy grace, Boone stepped off the bed and followed Brook out of the room. Trip lay there, staring up at the ceiling. Seconds later, Deacon stood over him, a big smile on his too-handsome face.

“It’s just not my day is it?”

Deacon shook his head. “Nope.”

“I can’t believe you let your wife make me look like a dork in front of my son.” Trip sat up and glared at him.

“Oh, you mean like the time you went running through the school halls like a lunatic, burst into his classroom, and then handed him his lunch box? His *preschool* lunchbox?”

Trip frowned pathetically. “I couldn’t find his new one.”

“Because he had it on him, along with his lunch. The poor kid nearly died of embarrassment. Face it, you don’t need anyone to make you look like a dork, you do a pretty fine job of that on your own.”

“You know, just because you’re a music teacher, you think you’re *so* cool. I don’t like you anymore. Get out of my house you traitor. Everyone’s a

traitor!” He threw his arms up and headed for the door, a sharp object knifing his bare foot. “Damn you, LEGO!” Why would anyone make such tiny sharp toys?

Deacon laughed, following Trip as he limped all the way to the living room where everyone had already made themselves comfortable.

“The beast has returned from whence it came,” Brook said cheerfully, Robbie sitting beside her on the couch, his legs swinging back and forth and a huge grin on his face. Trip was never going to hear the end of this.

“How did you do that?” he asked her. “You didn’t even blink.”

“Trip, I’m a pediatrician, remember? I’ve had pups cough up uglier things than that.”

Hunter’s brows shot up. “Gods, Brook, whose pups you been treating, the *Exorcist*’s?”

“More like your sister’s,” Trip muttered.

Everyone burst into laughter except Hunter, who was always being told his sister’s little hell hounds were just like he’d been when he was a pup. Ravyn and Corbyn were twin boys, ten years old, and in Trip’s humble opinion, made the kid from *The Omen* look like the Dalai Lama.

Trip headed for the kitchen wondering if he could get them drunk. He could convince them it had all been a hallucination brought on by one of Brook’s homemade stews. They would totally buy that. Robbie he’d just have to bribe. Opening his fridge, he grabbed five beers, setting them on the gray marble counter before rummaging around the drawer for a bottle opener. How was it there was one of everything in there, even a... With a frown, he lifted the little plastic figure with hollow eyes and decomposing entrails. Why was there a zombie in with the cutlery? Sometimes he worried about that boy.

The moment the scent hit his nose, Trip froze. It was a gut reaction he thought he had long ago cured himself of. At least that’s what he kept telling himself in the hopes it might actually one day prove to be true. Whenever his mate was near, it was as if everything around Trip stilled, as if the rest of the world blurred while only they remained in focus. Trip swallowed hard,

shoving the action figure into his back pocket, and returning to his rummaging as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Yet no matter how hard he tried to push it all away, it came flooding back, over and over, like rolling waves against the shore. His thoughts went back to that day, the beginning of the end, when his world as he knew it had turned into something new and terrifying.

Trip had been fifteen, small and insignificant for his age, standing in his father's oversized and imposing study. He had reached maturity and therefore would be entrusted to his guardians, who would remain loyal by his side, pledging their undying fidelity to him, their next Alpha. The study door had opened and a scent so strong, so intoxicating, wafted in, Trip feared if he didn't keep fierce control over his feral side, he would lose it right there in front of his father. It had been the moment he'd been both dreading and hoping, the source of his nightmares and wet dreams. It wasn't the first time he'd come across that scent, or felt that presence, but any time Trip had so much as caught a whiff, he bolted in the opposite direction, too terrified to follow it to its source. He'd known for some time it was someone in the pack, but after spending the last few years attempting to deny what he was, having his fears confirmed on that day of all days, had been excruciating.

It was as if he were back there now, fifteen years old, staring down at a future he had never asked for, feeling his heart all but ready to beat out of his chest for a mate he could never have.

"Trip?"

Even now, it was so very hard to meet those eyes... those amazing eyes. The scent grew stronger, and Trip's heart beat frantically in his chest. In all the commotion, with the mixture of scents in the air, Trip had managed not to home in on the one that drove him crazy.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah," Trip answered, annoyed by his breathlessness. He finally found the damn bottle opener only to drop it. "Shit." He turned around, his gaze meeting intense eyes. Boone gave him a little smile and handed him the bottle opener.

"Thanks."

“You sure you’re okay?” Boone asked gently, taking another step toward him.

When Trip had turned around in his father’s study that night twenty years ago, and seen Boone standing there, the fire in his eyes burning despite his very stoic and well-trained posture, Trip had wanted to flee. Not only was his mate a male, but an Enforcer. Any hope he had ever had of being with the beautiful young man was dashed, and worst of all was the heartache Trip could sense coming off his mate. Boone had known it too, yet he remained by Trip’s side, never bitter, never angry, always kind, fiercely protective, and forever hopeful.

“Yeah, just been a long day. Help me take these in to those ingrates, will you?”

Boone nodded, though his expression told Trip he wasn’t buying the performance. Luckily, Trip could always count on Boone not to press matters. Boone reached over Trip to grab the bottles when he came to a halt, and Trip did his best to appear unfazed, pretending he couldn’t feel the heat coming off the sexy male.

“New aftershave?”

Trip nodded. “Yeah, uh, Brook got it for me. They stopped making my old brand and you know what I’m like with change.” He tried to laugh but it fell flat.

“Yeah. You know, change isn’t always a bad thing,” Boone said quietly. Even without his heavy boots, he was still a good few inches taller than Trip. Damn he was gorgeous. Pitch-black hair just long enough to curl around his ears, thick black eyebrows, full lips, chiseled jaw... Heterochromic eye color was a common trait among their kind, especially in Enforcers, which explained why Boone had one blue eye and one brown. Trip had always found it sexy.

Had Boone stepped closer, or had Trip gravitated toward him without realizing? Either way, Boone was suddenly too close. His hand went to Trip’s side, and he leaned in, nuzzling Trip’s temple as he occasionally did when the opportunity presented itself. When there was no one around, they had a bad habit of giving into such stolen moments, and although Trip knew it would

only make things worse in the long run, he wasn't strong enough to turn Boone away.

Trip nodded, closing his eyes and feeling the muscles in his body tightening with the same anticipation he always felt when Boone was so close. He could smell Boone's own aftershave, his shower gel, shampoo, the desire that radiated off of his firm body. "Sometimes change can be dangerous."

He could tell Boone wanted to argue the point, but instead he nodded somberly, took all five bottles, and walked away. Trip's body pulled him forward, every fiber of his being wanted to follow. He forced himself to stay, backing up against the sink and gripping the edge so tight his fingers ached.

"Hey, sweetie, Robbie wants some snacks." Brook walked in, took one look at him and rushed over.

"Trip, honey, you have to stop doing this to yourself."

"It's getting harder," he admitted, rubbing a hand over his face. He didn't know when it had happened, but being around Boone had become some kind of endurance test, one he seemed to be getting worse at with each passing day.

"Then why fight it?"

"Because you know the Council. They already curse my birth as it is. If they find out who Boone is, they won't hesitate. You know them as well as I do, Brook. I can't even begin to think about what they'd do to him. Hell, have you forgotten what they did to Deacon?" Tears welled in Brook's eyes and Trip immediately regretted bringing it up.

Trip had been born to be the Hagan Clan's next Alpha, a position of honor and nobility, a position he never wanted and was all too happy to pass onto his younger brother Aiden. But when the doctors discovered Aiden couldn't have pups, the responsibility of continuing the Hagan line fell back to Trip. For the second time in his life, his world had come crashing down around him, and at the tender age of eighteen, he had given in under the weight of the Hagan Council's demand for him to fulfill his duty. Trip married Brook, who had been his high school sweetheart, and although he had always loved her, he could never be *in* love with her, a fact he had never hidden from her.

The peace brought on by his and Brook's union had been short-lived when Trip struggled to uphold his family's traditions, especially once discovering he wasn't the only one harboring a secret, or several. Like himself, Brook had a true mate within the clan, one she kept to herself in order to do her duty, enduring a broken heart. There hadn't been much he could do about himself and Boone, but he was sick and tired of having Brook and Deacon denied their happiness. With Boone's silent strength to aid him, Trip found the courage to do what no other Hagan Alpha had done in the history of the clan: he came out.

A whole year after their divorce, Trip and Brook believed enough time had passed for her to finally be united with Deacon. The day after they bonded, Deacon missed his lunch date with Brook. In a panic, she called Trip, who wasted no time in going off to search for him with the Devil Dogs at his side. They found Deacon in Vucari Woods. Someone had attacked him, leaving him so weak he hadn't even been able to shift back into his human form. There was no doubt in any of their minds who had ordered the attack.

Trip had done everything to assure the Council that the divorce had been his decision, yet they still felt the need to send Brook a message, letting her know they were displeased with her. Trip had been furious, confronting the Hagan Council, warning them to leave Brook and Deacon alone. He knew they would listen, if only for the fear Trip would pack Robbie up and disappear with him. On his worst days, when the walls seemed to be closing in on him, Trip thought about it, but his heart never allowed his thoughts to be more than that. He could never do that to Brook, or Robbie, and the thought of leaving Boone, no matter how painful it was to be around him... He just couldn't.

"If you had it to do over?" Brook asked, her soft voice interrupting his thoughts and he realized he had drawn her into his arms.

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat. There's nothing in this world or any other that would make me give up Robbie. The moment I saw his little wrinkled face, I knew everything I'd endured or would ever endure was worth it." Trip had fought viciously to remain by his son's side when the council had tried to run him out of the clan, and thanks to Brook, Deacon, and the Devil Dogs, they won that particular battle, but the war was still raging, even if things

seemed to have settled. He couldn't let his guard down for even a moment, not when Matthias Hagan and the Hagan Council had it out for him.

He ran a hand soothingly over her head, knowing she felt the same where Robbie was concerned. "I'm sorry, sweetheart." At least he could be content that, for the most part, Brook had the love of her life and was happy.

"It's okay." She drew back with a sniff, and brushed a tear away before giving him a sad smile. "Your father's an asshole of epic proportions."

Trip chuckled. "Eloquently put."

"Shut up. Tell me you have ice cream." She went to the freezer, opening it wide and rummaging through.

They made their way to the living room when a feeling of emptiness washed over him, bringing him to slow his steps. He didn't know which was worse, feeling Boone's closeness, or the overwhelming hollowness that took over when the man was gone.

"What's wrong?"

"Boone left." Trip couldn't help the disappointment in his voice.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. It can't be easy for him either."

He nodded, knowing Brook was right. It was for the best anyway, even if his heart mourned the loss each time.

Hunter sat on the floor next to Robbie and Deacon, watching the large flat screen TV and what appeared to be yet another sci-fi flick. Hadn't they gotten enough of that today? Hunter looked up at him innocently—never a good sign. "Hey, Boone said he had to go. Probably went to jack off or something."

"Hunter!" Deacon sputtered, throwing his hands over Robbie's ears.

"What's wrong with you?" Trip joined in with Brook and Deacon's glaring.

"Are you kidding me? Look at him. He shuts down when he's in front of that thing. Watch." Hunter turned to Robbie, picking up each small arm and waving it. "Hey, Robbie, the *Men in Black* are here to take you away."

Robbie's attention remained glued to the TV screen.

"It's official. Your son is a couch potato. Make that a floor potato."



“He is not,” Trip griped. A commercial came on and Robbie blinked a few times before turning to the adults.

“Why has Uncle Boone gone to jack off?”

“You see what you’ve done?” Brook smacked Hunter in the back of the head.

“Ow! What? Have you stopped to wonder why he hasn’t asked what that means?”

Trip opened his mouth and closed it. Damn it, the Annoying One had a point. He addressed his doe-eyed son. “Robbie, do you know what that means?”

“Yeah, it means when you masturbate.”

Under normal circumstances, everyone’s gaping expressions would have been comical. Instead, Trip donned his serious-dad voice. “And just where did you learn about that, young man?”

Robbie looked down at his toes. “Um, TV?”

“Nice try. Both Mom’s TV and ours have parental control on them, and you know it. Truth now.”

“Ravyn and Corbyn.”

“I knew it! Those little scoundrels.” Trip shot Hunter an accusing glare. “I blame *you*.”

“Me? Are you insane? Do you know what Ivy would do to me if I taught them something like that?” Hunter looked genuinely alarmed. “When we were kids, I bit the head off one of her dolls, and the next time I fell asleep in my canine form, she shaved my tail from root to tip! Besides, they’re boys. They’re going to do a whole lot worse.”

“Not Robbie.” Trip grabbed Robbie, ignoring his protests and hugged him tight against his chest, stroking his head. “Not my little angel.”

“Dad! Stop. Argh! Mom, make him stop.”

“That’s what you get for listening to those pups. Mm, Trip this ice cream is good. And it’s supermarket brand?”

Robbie continued to flail and struggle in Trip's unyielding paternal embrace. "Yeah, can you believe it? It was on sale, too."

Brook leaned over to Deacon and held out a spoonful. "Try this."

"Mom!"

"I can't hear you. I'm too busy enjoying my ice cream."

"Mm, that *is* good," Deacon agreed, making a move for the bowl.

"Don't even think about it. Get your own."

Robbie continued to struggle while Deacon tried to sweet talk some ice cream from his wife. Neither of them were getting anywhere.

"Resistance is futile and will only make it worse," Trip told Robbie, starting to rock him while humming an old lullaby.

"Oh my Gods, you're such a dork!"

"Hear that? Your son called me a dork."

"Hey, I just call 'em like I see 'em." Robbie's smartass remark was all too familiar and everyone's gaze went to Hunter, who jumped to his feet.

"Hey, wow, look at the time. I'd love to stay but I got things... you know, laundry in the oven, stuff... uh..."

Trip narrowed his eyes and Hunter bolted from the room like it was on fire. Seconds later the front door slammed.

"Do you think he dresses himself, or does Boone have to do it for him?" Deacon asked thoughtfully, before making another swipe for Brook's ice cream. He wasn't quick enough.

"We're talking about a man who sleeps in Dr. Who boxer shorts," Trip informed him.

Brook got that wicked gleam in her eyes that told Trip he should have kept his mouth shut. Now it was too late. "How do you know?"

"Remember that night Robbie turned six and the Children of the Corn were here for a sleepover?" Brook nodded and Deacon cringed. "Well, Robyn

nearly set the kitchen on fire microwaving popcorn, and the Devil Dogs rushed over in their jammies.”

“Seriously?” Brook finished up her ice cream and handed the bowl to Robbie. “Honey, wash this up for Mommy.”

“You’re just trying to get me to leave the room.”

“Clever boy. Now get.”

“Ugh,” Robbie huffed and stomped out of the room with the bowl.

“Well?” Brook sat forward, her face propped on her hands, and her big brown eyes sparkling. “What does Boone sleep in?”

Trip fingered the frayed end of his hoodie’s cords. “Clothes.”

“What kind of clothes?”

Trip looked over at Deacon, waiting for him to jump in. Deacon just shrugged. Coward.

“I’m not going to leave you alone until you spill.”

“Boxer...”

“Boring.”

“Briefs.”

“I’m listening.”

“Boxer briefs. Black with a gray band and a charcoal gray V-neck T-shirt. Snug.” He would never be able to see another pair of boxer briefs again without picturing Boone’s finely-toned ass. The image had been seared into his brain.

“Ooh, I bet he fills those briefs up nicely.” She wriggled her brows and made a grabby gesture with her hands. “He has an exceptional ass.”

Deacon’s lip jutted out in a miserable pout. “Hey, what about my ass?”

“You also have a fantastic ass.”

“Not as fantastic as Boone’s,” Trip said, earning him a scowl from Deacon. “His ass should be in a museum. Seriously, it’s a work of art.”

“Who says my ass isn’t worthy of a museum?”

Trip did his best not to laugh at Deacon's slighted expression. "I do. I know about these things."

"You haven't even seen it."

Trip rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. "All right then, let's see it. The things I do for my friends."

Deacon made to get up and Brook grabbed him by the arm, yanking him back down. "You are not dropping your pants in my ex's living room."

"But—"

"Seriously, is everything a competition with you males?"

Trip and Deacon replied in unison, "Yes."

Deacon mouthed the word *later*, making Trip laugh. He couldn't have picked a better mate for Brook if he'd tried. Deacon was a standup guy, sweet, gutsy, and madly in love with Brook. If anything ever happened to Trip, he knew Robbie would be in good hands. Deacon protected the pup as though Robbie were his own, and even though Trip had never asked, nor felt he had earned it, Deacon was always ready to jump in to Trip's defense.

Brook and Deacon suddenly burst into laughter and Trip noticed the change in the air. He narrowed his eyes, not needing to look behind him. "If you tell your brother, so help me, I will inflict serious bodily harm upon your person."

Hunter put his hands up as he walked over to the couch. "Forgot my hat. Didn't hear you talking about my brother's ass. Please tell me you don't use that as a pick up line."

"Get out."

"Going."

Robbie came back into the room, and dropped down onto Trip's lap with an *oomf*. He wrapped his little arms around Trip and smiled wide. Gods above, what now? "Out with it."

"Can I go home with Mom and Deacon tonight instead of tomorrow night? Pleeeeeease?"

“I thought we agreed you were going to clean your room before you left for the weekend?” He would not give in. He would not give in. Discipline. Fairness. Firmness. Discipline. Fairness. Firmness.

Robbie nodded, his hand going to Trip’s head and petting it. “You’re absolutely right. We did agree. You’re such a good dad. The bestest, really.”

Trip pursed his lips, his gaze shifting to Brook and Deacon who were trying their hardest not to laugh. “I’m not giving in.”

“I know,” Robbie said, cuddling up to him, his head resting on Trip’s shoulder. “I love you, Dad. You’re always such a good dad, and you always do what’s best for me, even when you brought me the wrong lunch box at school, or when you showed all the parents at the last PTA meeting a picture of me as a pup with my butt in the air. I know it’s just because you try very hard. Or when you forgot to take your red shirt out of the washing machine and I was the only angel in a pink robe for the Christmas play. No one minded. And for the bake sale you bought store cupcakes instead of homemade cupcakes and then fought with Mrs. Harriet demanding to see the ‘Bake Sale Handbook’ and—”

“All right! Geeeez, I get it, fine, go pack your weekend bag.”

“Yay!” Robbie jumped out of his lap, hugged him tight, and whooped all the way to his room.

Brook shook her head at him. “Wow, you caved in after the bake sale. It used to take you until the school assembly when you sat in the only broken chair in the whole auditorium and landed on your ass. That’s a whole six embarrassing events early.”

“That boy is too smart for his own good,” Deacon said. “It’s scary. He scares me.”

“I know.” Trip wiped an imaginary tear from his eye. “My baby’s going to rule the world one day, you’ll see.”

It wasn’t long until Trip was standing in the middle of his living room all on his lonesome. He had a whole extra day and a half to himself before he joined Robbie and the others for a play date in Vucari Woods. Now what?

Should he run around in his underwear? Get drunk in front of the TV? Have an orgy?

Trip headed over to Robbie's room and started clearing up, hoping their arachnid problem was resolved for good. The excitement of the evening was underwhelming. He really needed to get a life at some point, preferably before Robbie reached maturity. After cleaning Robbie's room, he wandered around the house and tidied up a little before making himself a sandwich, grabbing some chips and a beer, and settling in front of the TV doing his best not to think about Boone in his boxer briefs. He wasn't so successful.

This was going to be a long night.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Boone stood beside his brother on Trip's front porch doing his best not to turn around and make a run for it. This was a bad idea. Last night had been hard enough, but a whole evening alone with Trip? Of course his brother would be there, but when Hunter sat down in front of a movie he was about as conscious as a throw pillow.

"Relax, big brother. It's not like we haven't done this a million times."

"Yeah, but usually Robbie's home," Boone muttered, frowning at his brother's wicked grin.

"I know."

"I hate you."

Hunter laughed, turning toward the opening front door. Boone stifled a groan at his brother's goofy grin as he held up the six-pack of beer in one hand and the pizza box in the other.

"Movie night!" Hunter waved the six-pack in front of Trip, whose expression was rightfully leery.

"I don't remember agreeing to this."

Hunter scoffed. "Like you have something better to do. Let's face it, Robbie's with Brook and Deacon, which means you'd either be spending all your time cleaning or moping."

"What if I had plans?" Trip crossed his arms over his chest looking unimpressed when Hunter burst into laughter. Boone swiftly elbowed his brother in the ribs, groaning when Hunter stopped and stared at Trip.

"Oh, shit, you were being serious?"

"Just get in here."

"We're going to watch movies where they use cars and helicopters to blow things up. Completely ridiculous but it's in HD and loud!"

"You know what else is ridiculous and loud?" Trip asked, receiving a diva-esque toss of the head from Hunter as he sauntered toward the living room,

his voice going low and gruff as he quoted lines from *Die Hard*. With an apologetic smile, Boone stepped inside, waiting for Trip to lock up.

“You ever find the mute button on him?”

Boone shook his head. “There isn’t one, I’ve checked. He even talks in his sleep.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

Boone followed Trip to the living room where Hunter had already popped in a DVD, turned on the surround sound, and was on the floor stuffing his face full of pizza by the time Trip sat down on the couch. Boone unzipped his black and gray hooded jacket, tossed it over the armrest, and joined Trip. He hadn’t even realized how close he was until their knees touched. If Trip thought anything of it, it didn’t show.

It wasn’t as if Boone had done it on purpose. By now it was just instinct, and when he really thought about it, Trip had a habit of doing the same. Whenever Trip walked in somewhere, if Boone was already seated, Trip walked over and sat next to him. No matter where they were or what was going on, they gravitated toward each other without thinking.

About half hour into the movie, Trip managed to swipe some pizza and beer away from Hunter before they were left without. His brother could easily eat a whole pie if left to his own devices. Boone put his arm on the backrest, holding back a smile when Trip casually let his head fall back against it. Somewhere in the middle of Trip and Hunter’s argument over whether shooting at a car’s gas tank would be enough to make it explode, Boone dozed off.

When he woke and stretched, he inhaled deeply, a soft moan escaping him when he was met with Trip’s scent. He looked down to find Trip fast asleep on him, his arm around Boone’s middle and his head nestled on Boone’s shoulder. With a sleepy smile, he carefully wrapped his arms around Trip, pulling him closer. These moments were rare, and getting to hold Trip like this was a gift, one he wasn’t about to let go of just yet. He let his cheek rest against Trip’s head, feeling his soft hair, and catching a subtle whiff of Trip’s citrus shampoo. He instinctively gave a gentle squeeze, his heart swelling when Trip nuzzled even closer.



Had Tristan Hagan not been his true mate, Boone still couldn't picture himself loving anyone else. Trip was of Alpha bloodline, strong, fearless when he needed to be, yet at times his vulnerability tugged at Boone's heartstrings like nothing else. Sure, Trip would deny it until his dying breath, using his humor to distract anyone from discovering the truth, but he couldn't fool Boone. He only had to look into those pale blue eyes to know when Trip was trying to hide.

He didn't know which was harder, being this close to him and having to let go, or being away. Boone had taught himself long ago to accept their fate. He loved Trip, always would, but if Boone wanted to remain in this clan, by Trip's side, he would have to do so with the knowledge that he would always be incomplete. Before he reached maturity, when his father had been alive and one of the fiercest Enforcers of his time, he had been taught the difference between Trip's kind and his own. Alpha lineage was like royalty to their Husky-shifter race, and Boone was a soldier, a servant. Back in the day, his kind had been knights and royal protectors. Now, they were glorified guard dogs.

"You two are real sweet together."

Hunter's voice interrupted his thoughts, and Boone frowned at his brother. He had completely forgotten he was there. To his surprise, Hunter's usual mischievous expression had been replaced by one of tender sadness.

"I mean that, Bo. You two... I can see why he's your mate. You're like two puzzle pieces, completely different on your own, yet together you fit perfectly."

He didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't like his brother to be so sentimental. He wondered what was bringing this on. "You okay, Hunt?"

Hunter shrugged. "Ari got into another fight with his Mom."

"About Addison?"

"Yeah." Hunter shook his head, his arms coming around his drawn up knees. "I'm worried, Boone. How long do you think he can hold out against her? Everyone's afraid of her. Skyrax's a real piece of work. With Brook costing them their link to the Alphas, she's depending on Ari to get it back."

“You know Ari cares about you too much.” He and Hunter were the only ones who knew the truth about Brook’s younger brother being gay, and Boone had only found out about it because he had mistakenly walked in on his brother and Ari making out in the living room after coming home early one afternoon. To say he had been surprised would have been the understatement of the year.

Hunter didn’t look convinced. “Yeah? What about Brook and Deacon, you and Trip?”

“Brook got her mate in the end.”

“So you’re saying there’s hope?”

“I’d like to think so.”

“But Deacon’s not an Enforcer.” Hunter fell onto the carpet on his side sighing like he used to do when they were pups, and it broke Boone’s heart. No one knew Hunter like he did. On the outside he was this whirlwind of boundless energy, loud, shameless, foul-mouthed, trouble with a capital *T*, but when things got too much, he curled up on his side and turned to his big brother like he used to do when they were kids. “The Hagan Council isn’t going to change its laws for a couple of half-breeds, Bo. Our kind used to mean something. Now we’re easily replaced.”

“You know that’s not true. Do you really think our friends would replace us so easily?”

“No.” Hunter rolled onto his back, his expression troubled. “But you don’t know Skyrah like I do. She’s manipulative, Bo. She’ll do whatever it takes to get her family that connection, no matter what it does to Ari.”

“At least he has Brook. She gives him strength.”

“What if he does something rash? As relieved as I would be for him to come out, who knows what his mother would do to him. Everyone already blames you and me for Trip coming out. Like we infected him or something.”

“What about Addison?”

Hunter chuckled, rolling back over to face him, and propping himself on his elbow. “Hell on four paws, that one. Everyone says she gets her

stubbornness from Trip. She's got her sights set on a certain Enforcer and ain't no one gonna change her mind about it. Matthias is all but foaming at the mouth. Of course he doesn't know which Enforcer it is and Addison isn't about to tell him. She knows too well what her father's like."

Boone was surprised. He wondered if Trip knew his little sister was in love with an Enforcer. "Who is it?"

"Cy."

"Shit." And not just any Enforcer, one of Matthias's. His heart went out to the poor girl.

"Exactly. She told Ari, who told me, but you can't say a word. The Council finds out and Cy's gone."

"Does Trip know?"

Hunter's gaze went to Trip and he shook his head. "I doubt it or he would have said something to us. The only reason no one else has found out yet is because Matthias thinks it's an embarrassment. This clan is fucked up six ways from Sunday." He tilted his head, his gaze still on Trip. "What're you gonna do, big brother? You're not gonna find another one like him."

"Don't you think I know that?" Boone sighed, his hand going protectively to Trip's head. "I don't want to either. I don't know what we're going to do."

Trip let out a sleepy groan before he pulled away, his hair sticking up on one side. "What happened?"

"Hey. We dozed off," Boone replied, chuckling at Trip's hair. He reached out and smoothed it down for him.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry. I didn't drool on you or anything, did I?"

"Yeah, you left a big wet patch. Had to dry it out with a blowdryer."

"Jackass." Trip poked him in the ribs, making him squirm. "Holy shit, don't tell me you're ticklish. Why didn't I know this?"

Boone was about to protest when Hunter piped up. "Oh, you have no idea. The ribs, under his arms, his feet, his neck."

"You are a dead man," Boone growled, lunging off the couch and tackling his brother, pinning him underneath him. He could always count on his brother

to drive him to distraction by being an annoying pain in the ass. Speaking of pain...

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Trip sat back on the couch, watching the brothers wrestle. Boone was obviously the stronger of the two, but Hunter was the craftiest. He knew just how to squirm out from under his brother's grip like a true escape artist. Trip's cell phone vibrated in his pocket and he cheerfully answered.

"You have to stop calling me like this. Deacon's going to get suspicious."

Brook laughed. "I highly doubt that. Robbie's getting his jammies on and wants to say goodnight. What's that noise?"

"The Devil Dogs are wrestling in my living room."

"So you're watching gay porn."

"Basically," Trip said, tilting his head to get a better view of Boone's ass as it came right into his line of sight.

"Why do you get to have all the fun?"

Deacon's voice rang out somewhere behind her. "I heard that."

"I know," Brook said with an evil laugh. "So who's winning?"

Trip grinned broadly. "Now that's a silly question. I am, obviously."

"All right you dirty dog, here, say goodnight to your son."

"Hi, Dad!"

"Hey, Champ. Whatcha been up to?"

"Deacon and I obliterated the Zombie hoards."

"I bet your mom loved that."

"She said we were disturbed."

"Sounds about right."

"What's going on?"

"Uncle Boone and Uncle Hunter are up to their shenanigans again."

"Who's winning?"

Trip looked over to find Boone and Hunter had somehow both lost their shirts in the brawl, and now Boone had Hunter against his bare chest, his arm around his brother's neck holding him in a headlock. Trip's gaze went to the matching Devil Dog tattoos the brothers had, Boone's on his left shoulder, Hunter's on his right. They were tribal-style silhouettes of a growling Husky's profile with a 'D' incorporated in the design, each one with slight differences to make it personalized. The designs were simple and damn sexy.

"Oh come on," Trip groaned before turning his attention back to Robbie. "Goodnight and sweet dreams, Kiddo. Daddy loves you. Daddy has to go now." *Before he embarrasses himself.*

"Night, Dad," Robbie replied cheerfully before they both hung up.

"All right you two, break it up."

Boone and Hunter stilled, released each other, and sat back on their heels to watch Trip. Hunter cocked his head to one side, his eyes narrowed as he studied Trip.

Crap.

His eyes widened before he fell over in a fit of laughter.

"What?" Boone asked with a frown.

"Your boyfriend is into some kinky shit."

Boone looked from Hunter to Trip and back. "I don't understand."

Trip braced himself as Hunter shot up and whispered in his brother's ear. Just the thought of what Hunter might be telling his brother made Trip cringe. Boone's mouth dropped open and he gazed up at Trip in disbelief.

Double crap.

"Whatever you two are thinking, you couldn't be more wrong."

"Yeah? Move your hands," Hunter said.

"Why?"

"Because you have a raging hard-on right now." Hunter licked his index fingers and circled his nipples. "Admit it, you think I'm hot."

"You're embarrassing both your brother and yourself. I do not have a hard-on. So what if I think two half-naked, tattooed guys wrestling in my living

room is hot? You know how much people pay to watch that sort of thing? I bet you do. You have like, what? Three subscriptions?"

"Fuck off. With a body like this, I don't pay for squat." Hunter jumped to his feet and started wiggling his ass in front of Trip. "You think I'm hot. Oh yeah."

"I think you're a jackass, is what I think."

Boone put on his shirt, and dropped down onto the couch beside Trip, his arms crossed over his chest and a deep frown on his face.

"It's not like that," Trip assured him, wondering why he was defending himself. "If you're going to sit there and tell me you never got turned on by another guy, I'm going to call bullshit. I will shout it from the mountain top."

"Yeah, but none of them were your brother."

"That's because my brother's King Dick, ruler of all Dicktopia, and no one has the hots for him, not even his wife."

Hunter wedged himself between them on the sofa, and threw an arm around each of them, his attention on his brother. "Aw, look at that pouty face. He's all jealous."

"I'm going to kick your ass when we get home."

"Yeah? Make sure to invite Trip over, you know how much he loves that kind of thing."

Boone growled and Hunter darted off the couch, swiping up his shirt and rubbing it all over his chest as he walked out of the living room, laughing all the way to the kitchen.

"You think that's hot?" Boone asked, arching an eyebrow at Trip.

"Truth?"

"Always."

"I begrudgingly admit, he is somewhat physically attractive, in the same way you might be walking down the street and think the same of any other guy or some Hollywood actor. It doesn't mean anything, and it sure as hell would never lead to anything." Trip shuddered at the thought. "Anyway, if I got

turned on at all, it was because of you.” He played with the cord of his hoodie, surprised when Boone turned to face him, his hand slipping behind Trip’s neck and his fingers starting to stroke his skin. Trip swallowed hard, concentrating on the frayed little cord. “So, you know, don’t get all pouty.”

“Okay,” Boone said, a charming smile spreading across his face. “I was just messing with you. It’s my brother we’re talking about.”

Trip shuddered again. “Ew.”

Boone edged closer, his hand slipping underneath Trip’s collar, making the butterflies in his stomach go nuts. Maybe Trip hadn’t had a raging hard-on before, but if Boone kept stroking the back of his neck the way he was, or if the hand that just landed on his knee travelled any further up, it was only going to be a matter of time.

“Trip—”

The doorbell rang and Trip jumped off the couch. “I’ll get that.” Without looking back at Boone, he quickly made his way over to the front door, surprised when he found Ari out on the porch. He was dressed in black from head to toe, from his Vans to his jeans and hoodie. Ari was a sweet guy, just turned twenty-six. He had light brown hair and big brown eyes like his sister, though unlike his sister, Ari was somewhat on the shy side and didn’t possess the talent for cursing like a drunken sailor.

“Ari? Everything okay?”

“Hey, Trip. Yeah, um, mind if I come in?”

“No, of course not.” He stepped aside, and closed the front door after him, wondering why Ari had come to sudden halt. When Trip turned around, he found Hunter looking equally surprised.

“Hunter...” Ari cleared his throat and shoved his hands into his hoodie pockets. “I was looking for you. I tried calling your phone, but it kept going to voicemail. My sister said you were here.”

Hunter checked his pockets, cursing under his breath. “I must’ve dropped it while making Trip’s porn vid with Boone in the living room.”

Ari’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You’re a real douche bag, you know that?” Trip turned to Ari with an apologetic smile. “It’s a long story.”

“A sexy story.”

“Not a sexy story,” Trip assured Ari.

“Trip thinks I’m hot.”

Ari’s expression was somewhere between puzzled and alarmed. “Uh, okay.”

“Let me get my jacket.”

This time it was Trip’s turn to look surprised. “You’re leaving?”

“I know it’s going to be tough, letting go of all this,” Hunter said, circling a hand over his chest as he walked backward toward the living room, “but I got plans.”

Trip turned back to Ari. “For the record, I think many things about him, but I promise you, him being hot is not one of them. In fact, most of what I think about him revolves around his being an idiot. I can’t believe you voluntarily hang out with him.”

Ari shrugged and averted his gaze. “He’s fun.”

There was something in the slight fidget, in the faint coloring of his cheeks, that told Trip maybe Hunter was a little more than just “fun”. Trip had always had his suspicions about Ari, but whenever he extended an invitation for Ari to confide in him if he ever wanted to discuss certain things, Ari would shyly thank him and nothing would come of it.

Hunter came back, started to slip into his jacket when he stopped to look down at himself. “Crap, my shirt’s on backwards.” He shoved his jacket between his knees and pulled off his shirt before proceeding to put it back on the right way around. Trip did his best to pretend he couldn’t see the lustful way Ari was watching Hunter’s every move, the way his tongue darted out to lick his bottom lip, or the way he tugged down on his hoodie. Holy shit, Ari didn’t just have the hots for Hunter, he had it bad.

“Ready,” Hunter declared, walking up to Ari and throwing his arm around his neck. He gave him a playful squeeze, but for all his chummy behavior, Trip



knew that look too well. It was the same look reflected in Boone's eyes when it involved Trip, and that left him with a heavy heart. Hunter glanced up at him and realizing he'd been caught out, reached over and gave Trip's cheek a gentle nudge, his voice void of its usual brass.

"Take care of my big brother."

Trip nodded, watching stupefied as Hunter led Ari out of the house, his arm slipping from around the younger man the moment they were out on the porch. It was like nothing Trip had ever seen. The way Hunter's entire demeanor changed spoke volumes. He smoothed out Ari's hoodie, giving the ends a playful tug, and when they walked down the steps, Hunter hunched over just a little so he was closer in height to Ari as they talked. They walked so their arms brushed each other, Hunter's tone gentle, and he used any excuse to touch Ari. It was sweet and heartbreaking.

Trip closed the front door and stood there for a moment, wondering how long this could go on. He had fought hard to be where he was now, no matter how difficult it was at times, but as an Alpha, he had been allowed certain exceptions, exceptions that would never be made for Hunter or Ari... or Boone. Was it really worth fighting to be in a clan that didn't want you? Then again, he knew full well that if it hadn't been for Robbie, Trip would have probably left a long time ago. It would have broken his heart to be away from his sisters, Brook, and Deacon, but he would have made the sacrifice. Pushing those thoughts aside, he headed for the living room to ask Boone a few questions.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

The moment Trip entered the living room, Boone knew there was something weighing heavily on his mind, and he had a feeling he knew what that something was. He remained quiet while Trip dazedly took a seat beside him on the couch, fiddling with the cords of his hoodie like he always did when he was nervous or thinking.

“How long have you known?” Trip asked him.

“Known what?”

Trip turned toward him with a sigh. “You know what. About Hunter and Ari.”

“Oh.”

“A while then.”

“A year.”

Trip’s jaw dropped. “A year?”

Boone knew Trip wasn’t going to ask why he hadn’t known about it. It was obvious. Much like Boone and Trip, there was nothing that could be done, and unlike Boone and Hunter’s mom who had always been caring and supportive, Ari and Brook’s mom was a complete psycho. When Trip and Brook divorced, they had made certain Skyrh wouldn’t find out until it was done. The woman made it her mission to make Trip’s life miserable, instigating hostility among the clan’s members. Boone really felt for Ari. As if coming out wasn’t hard enough, he also had Skyrh to contend with—if and when he decided to. Boone was fully aware of how both Addison and Ari were fighting with everything they had to refuse the marriage both families kept trying to push on them.

“This is bullshit.”

“What is?” Boone blinked up at Trip, surprised by his anger.

“That we have to live like this. You, me, your brother, Ari. You think I didn’t know how bad you were hurting when I got married? When Brook got pregnant—”

Boone quickly put a hand up to stop him. “Hey, I wouldn’t give Robbie up for anything.” He loved that kid, and no matter what had happened, Boone would never wish he weren’t around.

Trip’s eyes welled up and he quickly blinked the tears away. “I know. Believe me, I know. What I’m saying is, I hate how much you’ve suffered by staying at my side.”

“I’m not the only one who suffers. Besides, you know I couldn’t be anywhere else.” Boone pulled Trip into his arms, relieved when Trip allowed it. At times the man was soft and affectionate, while at other times he did his best to stay away from Boone, not that Boone could blame him. Sometimes it got a little too much for him, too.

“I feel like I’m letting everyone down. Like if I stood up to my father, we might all have a chance.”

“It’s not like it was before, Trip, and no one knows that better than me and Hunter. We were there. You were brave as hell, and at the time, your father hadn’t been expecting it. He certainly hadn’t been prepared for the fight we put up. Plus, our numbers were pretty even. Now, he’s got the Trevyn Clan behind him, not to mention Aiden and the rest of the clan. We’re outnumbered.”

“We can still fight.”

Boone put his hands on Trip’s shoulders and moved him away so he could meet his gaze. “Absolutely not. You have Robbie to think about. So whatever crazy notions might be swirling around that head of yours, just forget it.”

Trip’s gaze shifted to Boone’s lips before moving back up to his face. “Robbie’s not the only one. I have you to think about.”

Boone had to admit he was surprised, though not as surprised as when Trip took hold of the back of his neck and pulled him forward, their lips meeting in a hot and needy kiss. Boone wasn’t about to question it. He gave himself over, returning Trip’s kiss, and loving the feel of Trip’s lips, the taste of him, the—shrilling sound of the doorbell.

“Are you kidding me?” Trip pulled back, pushing to his feet with a frustrated growl and heading for the front door. Maybe his brother had

forgotten something. When he sniffed the air, he cursed under his breath and jumped to his feet. He got to the front door just as Trip opened it. Ashley Kelsey stood on the other side.

Ashley was one of Matthias's Enforcers, tall, slim, hard as nails, and a thorn in all their sides, especially Hunter's, seeing as how she and her father had gotten it into their heads that Hunter would make a perfect mate for Ashley. After all, according to them, Hunter was merely trying to emulate his big brother, he wasn't really gay.

"Why hello, Ashley. What brings you to my humble abode this fine evening?" Trip's smile was wide, but Boone knew his mate too well by now. Trip was merely biding his time, waiting for Ashley to make the first move. It didn't take her long. She glanced over Trip's shoulder at Boone and let out a noise of disgust.

"Can't you two find a motel or something? You have to bring the whole neighborhood into your seedy little homo world?"

Boone crossed his arms over his chest and came to lean against the door frame beside Trip. Oh, this was going to be fun. Ashley might be a nasty piece of work, but if there was one person who could put her in her place, it was Trip. When Trip gasped dramatically, Boone knew he was in for a show. He held back a smile and watched as Trip rushed passed Ashley, down the porch steps, and whirled around, gazing up at the house. His hand went to his chest and he let out an exaggerated sigh.

"You had me worried for a moment there, but nope, this is indeed my house. So I'm going to flash you my *I-can-do-whatever-the-hell-I-want-in-it* badge." He unzipped his hoodie and opened one side. "Hm, must have left it in my other hoodie, but this is where I usually keep it, right here, next to my heart. Now is there something you wanted, because Boone and I were about to"—he held a finger up and shouted the rest as loud as he could—"have wild, hot, dirty gay sex with lots of thrusting and moaning and inserting of penises! There will be lots of gay sex, here, in my house! Did you hear that Mrs. Liebermann? Gay sex! Lots of it!" He headed back toward the house, looking over at Boone. "Is that the plural of penis or is it peni? No, that doesn't sound right."

Boone chuckled and shook his head. The horrified look on Ashley's face was priceless. When she finally managed to find her voice, she sputtered indignantly at Trip. "You're a disgrace to the Hagan name!"

"Yeah, well, and you're a bitch, but you don't see me coming to your house to chat about it. Next time, save yourself the walk and send me an e-mail. It's trippyhagan at kiss-my-perfectly-rounded-ass dot com."

"Tell Hunter I'm looking for him."

"Nope."

"Then go to hell."

"Already there, Tootsie Pop. Nope, that's not right. Even a Tootsie Pop has a soft, gooey center whereas you're just a cold hard bitch." He spun around, waited for Boone to move before slamming the door in her face.

"That was impressive," Boone marveled.

"Gods, she pisses me off. It's like they all took the same 'how to be an asshole' course in college." Trip's icy blue eyes glowed dimly, his pupils dilated, and his canine teeth slightly elongated. Boone drew him into his arms, running a soothing hand over his head.

"Easy there, sweetheart. You're getting all worked up, and you know how much you hate shifting inside the house."

Trip took a deep breath and released it slowly. "You're right. Sorry about the whole sex thing."

Boone shrugged. "It's okay. It was worth it to see the look on her face."

"Not that I don't wish it were true."

"Not helping."

"Right. You know what's the most fucked up part about all this? Half the town probably thinks we're fucking and they go out of their way to pretend otherwise, yet if we bonded or they found out you were my mate, they'd bust out the pitchforks and paddy wagons."

"Sounds like a country song."

"Doesn't it?" Trip let out a sigh and let his forehead fall against Boone's shoulder, his arms slipping around Boone's waist. The closeness was

welcomed, even if Boone did wish the encounter with Ashley hadn't left Trip all riled up. He led Trip back into the living room and resumed his seat on the couch, pulling Trip along with him. He needed to calm his fiery little Husky before the man ended up grumpy and shedding all over the furniture. As it was, Trip's eyes were back to normal, but Boone decided to be on the safe side. He pulled Trip against him and covered his mouth with his.

It didn't take long before they were back to their previous hot kiss. Whatever the reasons for Trip's eagerness, Boone was all too grateful for it, and they were soon both fighting for dominance. Boone's instincts told him he was the bigger of the two, but Trip's blood told him he was Alpha. In reality, their tussle never led to anything other than getting them even more turned on, and in the end, Boone's instincts eventually conceded that Trip was top dog and he submitted.

He enjoyed the feel of Trip's muscles under his hands, Trip's scent, and the faint taste of beer on Trip's tongue. He nipped at the stubbly jaw, his hand feeling his way down and finding the hem of the hoodie. Boone didn't hesitate in pulling it and the T-shirt up off him, and dropping it to the floor beside the couch.

"Boone," Trip gasped his name, his hands hastily finding the hem of Boone's long-sleeve shirt and pulling it off him before grabbing Boone's neck and dragging him down on top of him, his hips pushing against Boone's thigh. He could feel how hard Trip was, feel his need, the heat coming off him as he fought to keep control. His fingers dug into Boone's shoulders as Boone settled on him, their crotches lined up and rubbing against each other.

"Oh, Gods. Boone, we shouldn't be doing this," Trip breathed, even as he fumbled with the buttons of Boone's Jeans. "Zip fly, man. How many times do I have to tell you? What is it with you and button fly jeans?"

Boone chuckled, swatting Trip's hand away and undoing all four buttons of his jeans with one hand. "I like them better."

Trip grumbled at him before unzipping his own jeans. "I feel like a teenager."

"Do you want me to stop?" Boone spit on his palm and grabbed Trip's cock, giving it a gentle tug. Trip arched his back and groaned.

“That’s a stupid question I won’t dignify with a response.”

“Okay then, quit your moaning.”

Trip arched an eyebrow at him, his hand taking hold of Boone’s dick and making him groan. “Yeah? Who’s moaning now?”

“Smart ass.”

“It’s not my ass you should be concentrating on.”

Boone lowered himself closer to Trip, his lips inches away from his ear. “Maybe not now, but one day that ass will be mine.”

“That day can’t come soon enough.”

“Speaking of coming...”

“And I’m the smart ass?”

Boone laughed and covered Trip’s mouth with his own again. He allowed Trip to jack him off while he returned the favor, his tongue circling Trip’s as his hand picked up the pace. It had been a long time since they’d had the opportunity to enjoy each other like this. As if reading his mind, Trip spoke up, his voice sounding breathless.

“I’m sorry we don’t get to do this more often.” Trip’s free hand found its way onto Boone’s left ass cheek where his fingers dug into his skin.

“I’ll take what I can get,” Boone replied, and it was the truth. He counted himself lucky that they managed these little stolen moments at all. In truth, Trip could have any guy he wanted. He was sweet, funny, sexy, yet he was content to be with Boone. When they’d been younger, they both had their fair share of random hookups, but the guilt after each sexual encounter had started weighing on them heavily; they decided even if they couldn’t have sex, it didn’t mean they couldn’t make love to each other. They just had to be extra careful.

“Boone,” Trip warned, thrusting into Boone’s hand, his movements growing more erratic.

“It’s okay, we’re okay.”

Trip nodded, his bottom lip between his teeth before he let his head fall back, exposing his neck. Boone took advantage, his lips pressing to all that

soft skin, his canines grazing when he opened his mouth. Instead of following his instinct to bite, Boone let his tongue lick a trail up to Trip's jaw to his ear before taking the lobe gently between his teeth.

"Boone, I'm gonna come."

Boone nodded, thrusting repeatedly into Trip's hand. His free hand went to Trip's hair, grabbing a fistful of it as he felt his muscles tightening and his orgasm barreling through him. He covered Trip's mouth with his own before Trip could cry out and let loose with all the swear words he usually released. The man had a talent for it.

Trip groaned, and his body relaxed under Boone, who shifted so he was now half on, half off his mate, their legs intertwined and their arms wrapped around each other. He nuzzled Trip's neck, planting small kisses and loving the way it made Trip shiver underneath him.

"You're so beautiful."

"You're so cheesy," Trip laughed, still somewhat breathless, his face flushed, and his hair sticking up at all angles. Boone chuckled and tried to tame Trip's short locks by running his fingers through them.

"Dick. I'm trying to be romantic here."

"You want romance?" Trip cupped Boone's face in his hand, his voice soft. "I'm just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her."

"Oh, okay, so it's like that, huh?"

"You had me at hello."

"Trip," Boone warned.

"I wish I knew how to quit you."

"Oh my Gods, shut the fuck up."

Trip threw his head back and laughed. "One more. Come on, one more," he pleaded.

"One."

"I have crossed oceans of time to find you."

"Are you shitting me? *Dracula*? Really?" Boone refused to laugh. He wasn't going to encourage him.



“What? It’s romantic.” A truly malevolent gleam came into Trip’s bright blue eyes. He opened his mouth and Boone put a finger to his lips to stop him. He knew what was coming.

“So help me, if you quote *Titanic* to me, I will *never* jerk you off again. You know I can’t stand that movie.”

“Shutting up.” Trip pressed his lips together, fidgeting under Boone.

“Look at you. You can’t hold still. You’re about to burst.” Boone shook his head and reached over Trip, swiping his shirt off the floor.

“I may not be a smart man—”

“But I am going to kick your ass if you don’t stop.” Well, at least it wasn’t *Titanic*.

Trip laughed and sat up, planting a sloppy kiss on Boone’s cheek. “I think driving you batshit crazy might just be my new favorite hobby.”

Astounding. “How do you do it? It’s like some kind of super power.”

“And I choose to use it for evil.” Trip wriggled his eyebrows and Boone just couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“You are such an asshole,” he laughed.

Gods, how he loved this man.

Trip grabbed his old T-shirt, used it to clean them both off before snatching Boone’s shirt away from him and putting it on. “No one gave you permission to cover up those abs.” Trip lifted up Boone’s shirt—which was about two sizes too big on him—and patted his stomach. “How come I don’t have a six pack? I work out.”

“First of all, it takes more than running around in your Husky form to work out your abs.”

Trip frowned at him. “Running on four legs is way easier than running on two.”

“Clearly. Second of all, following said runs with half a liter of soda and a bag of macadamia nut cookies is not helping.”

“Who told you about the cookies?” Trip narrowed his gaze at him.

Boone held his hands up. "I've been sworn to secrecy."

"I'm surrounded by traitors." Trip fell back onto the couch with an exaggerated sigh, making Boone smile. He wondered how many of his shirts Trip now had. Every time they were intimate, Trip ended up keeping Boone's shirt.

"What do you do with them?" Boone asked, his hand coming to rest on Trip's soft belly.

"With what? The cookies? I eat them, you silly goose."

Boone rolled his eyes. "The shirts."

"Oh." Trip cleared his throat, his fingers going to his neck before he realized he wasn't wearing his hoodie and hence there were no cords to fiddle with. "Promise not to laugh?"

The rising color in Trip's face was sweet and Boone held back his smile, nodding. "Promise."

"I wear them to sleep or, uh, when I have a meeting with the Council or my dad, I'll wear one under my clothes."

"Wow." Boone didn't know what to say. He had been expecting some smartass remark or a joke, he certainly hadn't expected this.

"I know, it's stupid. I'm a grown man and I'm walking around with a security blanket."

"They're your security blanket?"

Trip rolled onto his side, burying his face in the couch cushions. When he spoke, his voice was so muffled, Boone had to lean in to hear him. "I know, I know. I told you it was stupid. I'm sorry your mate is such a dork."

"We're not in high school, Trip, and even so—" He settled in beside Trip and ran his fingers over Trip's head. "Hey, look at me." With a grunt, Trip turned toward him, his whole face red. "I wouldn't want you any other way. The fact that you wear my shirts for comfort is the sweetest thing I've ever heard, and it just reminds me of how lucky I am to be in love with someone so amazing. So we're good, right?"

Trip nodded. They were both quiet for a moment when Boone made to get up and Trip stopped him. “Stay?”

“The night?” Trip had never asked him to spend the night before, not on his own anyway. There were plenty of times when he and Hunter had crashed over at Trip’s, usually after days out with Robbie, but he’d never stayed over with just Trip.

“Yeah. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course.” Boone lay back down, rolling carefully onto his side and pulling Trip against him.

“Boone?”

“Hm?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For being a great guy.”

“I’m not great. I just... love you.” A lump formed in his throat and he smiled when he felt Trip squeeze him.

“I love you, too. But if you tell anyone what I told you tonight, I *will* kill you.”

Boone chuckled and kissed Trip’s temple. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” He slipped his hand into Trip’s back pocket, frowning when they met hard plastic. He pulled out the object and stared at it. “Trip? Is there a zombie in your pocket?”

“No, just happy to see you.”

“Ass.” Boone laughed and tossed the little plastic figure onto the carpet before settling back down with Trip. “Robbie’s...”

“Weird. I know,” Trip muttered, snuggling closer to Boone. “But if the zombie apocalypse ever comes, he’s the one who’s gonna make sure our brains don’t get eaten. You remember that. Now shut up and hold me... because I love you. You’re my only reason to stay alive... if that’s what I am.”

“Oh, fuck no.” Boone shoved Trip off the couch, ignoring his mate as he

lay on the floor on his back in a fit of laughter. “You did not just fucking quote *Twilight* at me.”

Trip jumped to his feet, his eyes narrowing at Boone. “I have a seven-year-old who’s obsessed with vampires, werewolves, and zombies. What’s your excuse, tough guy?”

“I have a thirty-six-year-old brother who’s an idiot.”

“Touché.” Trip got that mischievous gleam in his eyes and Boone thrust a finger at him.

“Unless the next quote out of your mouth is something from *Mad Max* or *Back to the Fucking Future* I am going to kick your ass.”

Trip rolled his shoulders and took a fighting stance. “Challenge accepted.”

“I’m serious, Trip. Don’t do it.”

Trip opened his mouth and Boone took a step closer. “Trip, I’m warning you.”

“I’m the king of the—”

Trip landed on his back with a painful *oof*, Boone straddling him. “You’re in for a world of pain.”

“Sexy pain?”

Boone shook his head. “Try again.”

“You wouldn’t hurt me,” Trip said, running a finger down Boone’s chest. “You love me too much.”

“Hm, you’re right.” The light bulb went off and he grinned wickedly. The moment Trip’s eyes widened, he knew his mate was onto him.

“No, not that. Please, anything but that. You can kick my ass. I won’t even fight back.”

Boone got off Trip and stepped back. Before Trip could protest he shifted, leaping out of Trip’s grip just as he made a grab for him. With a pounce, he landed on the couch and rolled around. Trip fell to his knees, his arms raised to the heavens.

“Noooo! The hair, so much hair!”

Boone leapt off the couch and ran around the living room, rolling around wherever he could, leaving a trail of fluffy black hair behind.

“My vacuum won’t be able to take it!” Trip’s hands went to his head, looking around the room before his gaze landed on Boone. “Bad dog!”

With a series of short howls, Boone made for Trip’s bedroom, Trip scrambling after him.

“Not my white sheets! I just washed those! Boone!”

By the time Trip caught up to him, Boone was laying serenely on Trip’s bed wagging his tail. The sheets were a disaster zone, pillows were strewn on the floor, and Boone wasn’t done. He jumped off the bed and dashed into Trip’s bathroom, jumping in the tub. Trip stood at the door, his finger pointing menacingly at him.

“Don’t you dare.”

With his paw, Boone hit the cold water faucet. The shower turned on, Trip screamed, and Boone got soaked. Knowing Trip all too well, he waited for Trip to run over and turn off the water before he let loose. He shook himself from nose to tail, water and fur splattering everywhere.

Trip took in the state of the bathroom, looked down at his soaking wet clothes, then curled up on the floor in a fetal position. Boone shifted back, sitting in the middle of the bathtub in his damp jeans. He leaned over the edge, propping his chin over his crossed arms as he watched Trip rock himself back and forth.

“Something you want to say?”

“I underestimated the power of the dark side.”

Boone laughed and snatched a towel off the rack. He removed his socks and hung them up to dry along with the towel after drying himself, followed by his jeans. He climbed out of the tub and sat on the edge of it in his boxer-briefs.

“Lend me sweatpants and I’ll help you clean up. Then we can fool around. Will that make it better?”

Trip sat up, his gaze on Boone's only piece of clothing. He nodded. "Yes please."

"Okay then." He stood, helped Trip to his feet, and planted a kiss on the tip of his nose. "You're the only canine shifter I know with an aversion to dog hair."

"It goes everywhere!" Trip exclaimed. "If I wanted to wear black and be covered in hair I'd just drape you around my neck , but I can't, because you're too heavy."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know! I'm too traumatized to quip coherently!"

"Okay, calm down." He kissed Trip on the lips and led him out of the bathroom. This was going to make for an interesting night.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Trip and Boone reluctantly left the warmth of the hairless couch—after taking care of a little morning stiffness—and showered together in the pristine bathroom, changed, had breakfast, and headed for Perin Park to wait for Brook, Deacon, Robbie, and Hunter. They had decided to get there before the others and enjoy the peacefully quiet park, walking along the bike trail.

St. Veles was surrounded by Vucari Woods on all sides, with plenty more forests and parks in between, and in the fall it was gorgeous, a sea of yellow, orange, and red. The sun was bright, but the temperature was in the fifties. Soon their Husky winter coats would grow in, and trying to keep Robbie indoors would become a battle of wills. The pup's feral instincts and love of playing in the snow made the long winter months interesting to say the least. Not that Trip didn't enjoy the snow, but they still had human lives to keep up with. Homework and chores waited for no pup.

As they walked, Trip did most of the talking, which was nothing new, but having Boone at his side felt right, it always had. After a nice walk, they sat on one of the park's many stone benches near Vucari Woods where they would all be burning some much needed energy by having a good run. Running was in their nature. It's what their kind were bred for. Now of course, it was just fun. Speaking of running...

"Well, look who it is. Dorothy and Toto."

"Oh my Gods," Trip squealed, "That is so adorable. Oh, you're so clever." He turned to Boone and slapped his arm playfully. "Isn't he just so clever, Toto."

And the start of a great day just went to shit.

Boone narrowed his eyes at Aiden and Summer Hagan. "No."

"Tell me brother, what brings you two out here to the Land of Oz on such a glorious morning, other than to gift us with your witty observations," Trip said brightly, a big grin stretched across his face. Sometimes he just wanted to

punch his brother square in his smug nose. It didn't help that he also looked just like their father.

"Jogging. And it was glorious until I saw you two." Aiden leaned into his wife with a sneer, his gaze on Boone. "How likely do you think it is he has fleas?"

"About as likely as your wife coming home without the stench of another male," Boone grunted.

Aiden took a step toward Boone, his teeth bare. "Fuck you, you half-breed piece of shit!"

Trip jumped to his feet, planting himself between his brother and Boone before the fur started flying. "You started it, Aiden. Is there a reason you came over, or are you just being your usual charming self?"

"Dad's having a barbecue tomorrow night to celebrate another ten years as clan leader. He expects you and your Devil Dogs to be there. Make sure they take a bath first. Not that you'll be able to remove the nauseating reek of filth."

"Watch it," Trip warned him.

"Maybe if you started thinking a little more with your head and not your dick, people might not think you were such a degenerate."

"I guarantee you, if those people got laid every once and a while, they might think a little differently. Or they could just mind their own damn business. That could work, too."

"Everything's a joke to you, isn't it?"

Trip looked his brother over. "No, but I'll tell you what is, that outfit, man. You really need to swap the whole Executive-Douchebag-out-for-a-run look. I mean, who wears cologne to go out jogging? I bet with all the fancy moisture-wicking fabric and Body Glide, the rain never even touches you."

"Much like your wife," Boone added with a grin.

"That's it you son-of-a—"

"Daddy! Uncle Boone!" Robbie came running, putting all the tension on ice as he launched himself into Trip's arms, and gave him a great big hug. "Oh



my Gods, Dad, you should have seen the way Deacon—” Robbie came to a halt and looked up over his small shoulder. His son had always been very perceptive, not to mention a good judge of character. The smile he had on his face now was the same one he used with every other adult Robbie didn’t like but was forced to put up with. “Hi, Uncle Aiden, Aunt Summer. What are you doing here?”

“Hi, Robbie. We were jogging.”

Robbie tilted his head to one side, sniffing as he looked Aiden over. “Oh. Why are you wearing cologne?”

Boone and Trip both started laughing. Robbie looked puzzled, but didn’t comment as he was too busy watching Aiden muttering to himself. His brother stalked off with Summer following along, though not before she glared at Boone.

“Why was he mad?” Robbie asked, finally turning back to Trip who gave him a big squeeze for being the best kid ever.

“Because the sky is blue, baby. It’s your uncle, he was born that way.”

“A jerk?” Robbie asked thoughtfully.

“Now, Robbie, you know you shouldn’t call him that, even if it is true.”

“Is it because he can’t have babies or because he can’t be Alpha?”

Trip’s expression fell and he sighed. “Either. Both. I don’t know.” To his surprise, Boone shook his head.

“No. If your roles had been reversed, you never would’ve become bitter, and you sure as hell wouldn’t have taken it out on him.”

Robbie nodded in agreement, his nose wrinkling. “He’s always so mean to you.”

“Aw, my two tough guys defending my honor.” Trip put Robbie down, waving to Deacon who shifted as he ran over, the sun reflecting off his copper-red fur. How Summer and Deacon could be related was beyond him. Deacon was awesome, whereas Summer was striving to steal Ashley’s title as St. Veles’ Biggest Bitch. Deacon stopped in front of Trip, his tail wagging before

he started hopping playfully around Robbie, nudging him with his nose, and making him giggle. “Where’s your mom?”

“She stayed home. Said the house was a mess and unfit for neither human nor beast,” Robbie recited. “She was going to make us clean up first.”

“When did she give in?” Trip asked.

“After the time she made me wear that dorky Christmas sweater with the fluffy snowmen on it, but before the time she picked me up from school with her skirt stuck in her pantyhose.”

“Ha! Last month she made it to the pantyhose. You’re wearing her down, kid. Slap me five.” He held his hand out and Robbie cheerfully slapped it. Trip was determined to beat Brook, and if he couldn’t hold out, it meant Robbie would just have to try extra hard to wear her down. He was a scoundrel, there was no denying it. Deacon whined and nuzzled Trip’s hand. “Hey, you’re a married man. Stop hitting on me.”

Deacon started mewling and howling at him and Trip held his hands up. “I can’t understand you, you know that.” Trip turned to Robbie and motioned over at their silly friend. “Go on before he pops a spleen or something. He knows you’re the only one I can hear when I’m human, yet he always does this. We’ll catch up.”

Robbie laughed and with a loud *woot* ran off with Deacon bouncing along after him. Robbie shifted in midair, the little show off. His pup was nearly Deacon’s size, and if it weren’t for his Alpha scent, most of their kind would mistake him for a full grown Husky. And then of course there was Boone. The Devil Dogs were a special breed of Enforcer, half black and white Husky, and half wolf. Hunter’s eyes matched his brother’s, only where Boone’s left eye was blue and his right was amber, Hunter’s left eye was amber and his right was blue. When they stood together in their Husky form, they made one hell of an impressive pair, their look and size alone was enough to intimidate most anyone. They were also the only Enforcers who were bigger than Trip in his Husky form.

Trip turned to look at his grumpy mate who seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. “What’s the matter, tough guy? You’re usually a lot better at not letting Aiden get under your skin.”

“I know. I just kept thinking about how nice it was this morning, waking up next to you, and I guess I was still buzzing from that when he showed up. Then all I could think about was how assholes like him are what’s keeping us from being a family.”

Trip’s heart slammed against his chest. Most of the time he didn’t let himself dwell on what he didn’t have, and instead concentrated on what he did have. It wasn’t as if they were new to their clan’s antiquated laws, but the thought of having his own little family with Boone and Robbie, it made his heart swell and break at the same time. What he wouldn’t give...

He tried to think of a joke, something to take both their minds off a dream that would most likely never come true, but for the first time in his life, he couldn’t. He slipped his hand discreetly over Boone’s and gave it a squeeze, a shaky smile playing across his face. “I need you to keep it together for me, Boone. I’m not wearing one of your shirts right now so that means you gotta do the job instead.”

Boone looked up at him, swallowed hard, and nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.” Boone brushed his knee against Trip’s, making him smile. When Boone cursed under his breath and moved away, Trip looked up and spotted the reason why. Kristoff Trevyn and his brother were heading straight for them.

Everyone was afraid of the blond man with the amber eyes, but not Trip. Kristoff was Alpha of the Trevyn Clan, a white wolf and one of the fiercest around, yet the only indication was in the man’s penetrating gaze. For some strange reason, Trip never had a problem with him.

Kristoff was tall, slender, of Scandinavian descent, and very refined, like one of those models you saw in men’s fashion magazines wearing a three hundred dollar scarf, a pair of tighty whities, and nothing else. Trip was hardly friends with the man but they were on pleasant terms. Merit, however, was a different story. Trip didn’t trust the guy.

“Hello, Tristan.” Kristoff bowed his head before doing the same with Boone. At least Kristoff acknowledged Boone, unlike Merit.

“Kristoff, hey. Merit, how’s it going?”

Merit gave him a nod and remained stoically beside his brother.

“Could we have a moment in private? Merit will leave us as well.”

“Okay.” Trip turned to Boone and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Why don’t you go off with Robbie and Deacon? I think that’s your brother coming this way, so he can join you. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Boone nodded, giving Kristoff and Merit one last uneasy glance before getting up and running toward his brother, shifting along the way. He landed gracefully on his paws and turned to look at Trip before running off, Hunter shifting and darting off after him.

Kristoff watched Boone and Hunter disappear into Vucari Woods. “Exceptional specimens, I must admit. And those eyes... We don’t get that with our kind.” He turned back to Trip with a smile and motioned to the bench. “May I?”

“Of course.” Trip shifted over while Merit wandered away, though Trip noticed he hadn’t gone too far.

“What can I do for you, Kristoff?”

“Actually, it’s more about what I can do for you. Ever since your clan and mine have become associated, I’ve been privy to its activities, and I have to say, I’m saddened by what I hear.”

Trip hadn’t been expecting that. It was true he often saw Kristoff and Merit in his father’s company or sitting in with the Council, but that was expected when clans came together as the Hagan and Trevyn clans had, but he didn’t expect Kristoff to care about what was actually going on with individual clan members, especially one who had been declared a disgrace.

“And what have you been hearing?”

“The way your own kin have shunned you. Granted, if anyone knows the importance of rules, it’s me, but then I wholeheartedly believe in knowing which rules to invest in.”

“I heard you run your pack a little—lot differently,” Trip admitted. He had been shocked—as most of the other clan members had—when his father had

declared a pact with the Trevyn Clan, who were not only wolves—which his father believed were beneath them—but because Kristoff ran things far differently, leaving a good deal of the Trevyn family's old ways behind.

Kristoff nodded. "Yes. My clan has been around for a very long time, yet I believe if we are to evolve, we must embrace the world around us and move forward. It's one thing to honor your history and another to get stuck in the past."

"I don't understand, and no offense meant to you, but why would you want to associate with a clan like ours?"

"Despite your father's stubbornness, the Hagan Clan is an ancient one. Your name carries a great deal of weight behind it. You may not be wolves, but you're still an ancient breed and therefore have the fewest genetic differences from us. Your predatory instincts are solid, your endurance is astounding, and you're strong-willed. If Matthias wants to strengthen his pack by having our numbers behind him, I'm not opposed."

"So, what does that have to do with me?"

Kristoff chuckled. "I like you Tristan. You're bold. Which is why I'd like to offer you a place in my clan."

"What?" Trip blinked at him, wondering if he'd just heard correctly.

"Your father is a good Alpha, but I'm afraid he allows himself to be influenced by the Hagan Council far too often. It's been instilled in him and he isn't one for change. Denying you your title was a foolish decision on his part. I can offer you the freedom you deserve. My clan is far more accepting and I know they would welcome you."

"I don't know what to say. I'm flattered, really." Not to mention surprised and confused. Why the hell would an Alpha wolf as powerful as Kristoff want Trip in his pack?

"But?" Kristoff's smile was friendly as he gracefully crossed one leg over the other and placed his laced fingers over his knee. Trip couldn't think of a time when he'd seen Kristoff anything but calm and collected.

"I can't leave my family."

“Robbie would be well taken care of, and I’m certain Matthias wouldn’t be opposed of you coming to visit him.” Kristoff’s gaze went to the woods before returning to Trip, his sharp gaze knowing. “Or is there perhaps someone else you don’t want to leave behind?”

Trip wasn’t about to lie, but he wasn’t about to discuss his complicated relationship with his Enforcer either. As tempting as it was to be given a chance to start over somewhere where he didn’t have to be looking over his shoulder every time he left the house, he would never leave Robbie or Boone. It was unthinkable. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“I understand. If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks. I genuinely mean that.” He stood as Kristoff did and they shook hands.

“You better get going. Your Enforcer has been watching me since I sat down. He’s very protective of you.”

Trip followed Kristoff’s gaze to the opening of Vucari Woods and saw Boone lying in the grass, his head on his paws as he watched Trip and Kristoff. It made Trip smile. “Yeah, he is.” When Trip waved, Boone’s head shot up and his tail started wagging. “I’ll see you around, Kristoff.” He ran off toward Boone, shifting mid-leap, and bounced excitedly around Boone when he reached him. He walked up to his mate and nuzzled him under his neck.

*What did Kristoff want?*

*Do you really want to talk about that now?* Trip asked, his instincts telling him it was time for running. He loved running. Well, in his Husky form he did. Running in his human form sucked. He lowered his head to his paws, stuck his butt in the air, and wagged his tail.

*Really? You’re going to try and distract me with your ass?*

*Is it working?* Trip asked hopefully.

Boone let out a low growl before running off, Trip cheerfully running off after him. They sped through the woods, jumping over fallen trees, over shrubs and stumps, stopping only for a quick play. They ran for miles until they picked up Robbie and the others’ scents and headed that way. The three

Huskies were by the shallow creek, pouncing, and playing. When Robbie saw Trip, he ran over, head-butting him and knocking him over.

*Oof! You little furball.* Trip rolled over onto his belly while Robbie jumped over him a few times, nipping at his ears. *What have you been up to?*

*I chased a rabbit, but he got away because Uncle Hunter fell into the stream and scared him off,* Robbie grumbled, taking hold of Trip's tail and tugging.

*I didn't fall,* Hunter griped, *Someone tripped me!* He looked over at Deacon sitting innocently nearby.

*How many times do I have to say it was an accident? I'm sorry, okay. I saw something small and furry, so I chased it.*

*You know what else is small and furry?* Hunter loomed over Deacon whose ears flattened back as he looked up at the much larger Husky.

*Leave him alone, Hunt.* Boone lay down next to Trip, unfazed when Robbie threw himself at him, pawing and nipping. Other than the occasional ear twitch, it was as if Boone didn't even feel the pup using him as a chew toy. At least until Robbie bit Boone's tail—hard. Boone yelped and got to his paws, turning and snapping at the pup. Robbie darted behind Trip with a whimper.

*What have I told you about the tails?* Trip said.

*Don't bite,* Robbie murmured, poking his head up from his hiding spot behind Trip. *I'm sorry, Uncle Boone.*

Boone returned to his position beside Trip. *It's okay. You have to be more careful, Robbie. Playing is welcome, but biting always leads to trouble.*

*Yes, sir.*

*Now why don't you get Uncle Hunter to teach you how to fish?*

*Yay!* Robbie bounded out from behind Trip, bouncing over to Hunter.

Trip gave Boone's muzzle a lick. *You could have caught him. Someone else would have nipped him, just to show him.*

*I know, but he's still a pup. He'll learn. Besides, Robbie's a smart kid. You just have to show him you're serious and he gets it.*



Trip got up and took hold of Boone's ear, tugging at it. Boone shook his head, got to his paws, and pounced on Trip. They played for a good while, each giving as good as they got. Trip loved playing with Boone, who was always aware of his size and strength around Trip. Then again, there wasn't a whole lot Trip didn't love about Boone, and when they were in their true forms, the pull toward Boone was always at its strongest.

*Hey, fellas, it's getting late and I promised Brook I'd bring her lunch. Hunter, you mind dropping Robbie off in a couple of hours?* Deacon headed toward the more condensed area of Vucari Woods, pausing for Hunter's reply.

*Sure thing, Deacon. Say hi to Brook for us.* Hunter went back to his fishing lesson with Robbie, who seemed more interested in pouncing around in the water than actually catching anything. They all said goodbye to Deacon, and Trip continued to hassle Boone.

They rolled around, each one trying to get the upper paw, when Trip rolled onto his back and stayed there. Boone stopped in his tracks. He stood over Trip, his head cocked to one side as he looked down at him. Trip pawed at Boone playfully, licking his muzzle when suddenly Boone snapped and latched onto Trip's shoulder.

Trip let out a yelp at the abrupt, sharp pain. To his astonishment, Boone didn't release him. There was something strange in the air around him, something different coming off Boone. Trip stayed very still, for the first time in his life scared of what might happen next. He slowly rolled over, noticing how Boone moved with him, not letting go. Carefully, Trip lowered himself onto the grass, unwilling to fight. Had it been anyone else, he would have retaliated, and his feral side couldn't understand why he wasn't doing exactly that. His human heart wouldn't allow it. He could never hurt Boone. Instead, he let his head rest on his paws, a low whine escaping him. Hunter and Robbie came running, slowing when Boone let out a low, feral growl.

*Robbie, you stay right there,* Trip said calmly, fully aware of his pup's anxious whimpers.

*What's going on? Why is Uncle Boone hurting you?* Robbie paced nervously, walking behind Hunter and back, peering out from behind the safety of the larger dog, his fur bristling.



*Bo, what are you doing? Let go of him.*

There was no reply from Boone, making the whole situation far more frightening.

*Bo? Can you hear me? It's Hunter, your baby brother. You have to let go of Trip. You're hurting him. You don't want to hurt him. You love him, remember?*

There was a low, soft series of whines and Trip realized it was coming from Boone. Suddenly he was released and Boone backed away, his ears flattened back against his head and his tail lowered between his legs. Without a word, Boone darted off.

*Boone, wait!* Trip tried to go off after him, but the moment he moved his shoulder, he yelped, the pain shooting through him. And then Boone was gone.

*He'll be fine,* Hunter said, walking up to Trip and nuzzling him gently. *Come on, that wound's going to hurt like a son-of-a bitch when you change.*

His wound wasn't the only thing hurting at the moment.

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## CHAPTER SIX

“Shit-mother-fucking-pissbunnies!”

Hunter shook his head. “Why do you have to bring the bunnies into this? What did they ever do to you?”

“Your brother nearly bit a chunk off my shoulder! It fucking hurts!”

“I get that.”

“He ever sink his teeth into you?” Trip asked, trying not to press down on his wound too much. It had healed enough not to need stitches, but he couldn’t understand why it hadn’t healed completely. His blood should have sped up the process, but something wasn’t right.

“No. I mean, he did once, by accident when we were pups, but his teeth weren’t deadly at the time.”

“You are no help at all.”

“Sorry.” Hunter went back to pacing the room, his mood growing somber.

“Have you heard from him?”

“No. I tried calling home, his cellphone, our mom, Deacon, and no one’s seen him.”

“I need to go find him. He’s probably beating himself up over this.” Trip sat writhing in the middle of a room that was several shades of blue and covered in an array of colorful sea creatures from fish to seahorses, swirling seaweed, and sparkling chests of treasure. The serene murals were doing nothing to ease his anxiety, but then again, he wasn’t a toddler, only acting like one. He wasn’t about to go to the hospital or his own doctor for this. If he did, it would be all over town by morning, and he had enough troubles on his hands. So he went to the only doctor he could trust, even if he was a little too old to be sitting here.

Brook walked into the room, took one look at his bloodied hand pressed over his bloodied shoulder, and peered at him warily. “Should I even ask what mess you’ve gotten yourself into this time?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Trip grumbled, feeling miserable. Boone had never been this aggressive with him during their roughhousing before.

“We were all playing, and suddenly Boone bit him,” Hunter offered. Brook’s eyes widened, and she quickly went through the cabinets and drawers pulling out supplies.

Carefully, Trip moved his hand, wincing at the sting. “And it hasn’t healed. Not completely anyway. I don’t get it.”

“Of course it hasn’t,” Brook told him, walking over with disinfectant, sterilized pads, gauze, and bandages. She set the supplies on the examining table beside him and looked the wound over. “You’re going to have permanent scarring.”

Trip gaped at her. “But... how? I mean, why isn’t it healing?” It was true that in his human form, the healing process was slower, but it should have been a lot farther along by now. Brook’s inability to look him in the eye told him this wasn’t typical. “You know something. What is it?”

“It’s not good news. Or maybe it is, I don’t know.” Biting her bottom lip, Brook slipped her pediatrician’s coat off one shoulder, followed by her shirt. Trip stared in disbelief. Hunter hovered beside them looking equally stunned. There was a very visible bite mark on her shoulder, not all that dissimilar to his, only slightly smaller.

“What the hell, Brook? Deacon bit you?”

Brook fixed her clothes and sighed. “Don’t tell him you know. He’s never been able to let go of the guilt, even if it’s nowhere near as bad as yours. It happened during... well, when our bond was sealed. It was scary, for the both of us. We didn’t really understand what was happening. Deacon has always had a good grip on his feral side, but that night, he just seemed to struggle with it. I think... I think he lost himself for a few seconds. That’s when it happened. His fangs have never come out when he’s in his human form. The day you boys found him, he’d been out for a walk trying to deal with it. I spoke to Cora that morning and she explained it to me.”

“My mom?” Hunter looked puzzled. “What would she know about it?”

“She has experience.”

“Experience?” Trip wondered what the hell was going on. He was still trying to get over the fact Deacon had bitten Brook.

“She and my dad had been true mates,” Hunter explained, though he still looked confused.

Brook nodded. “It’s such a rare occurrence, most of us don’t know what to expect. Cora said to seal the bond, the more feral of the pair bites the other, but it always happens during mating, because that’s when the least feral partner is at his or her most vulnerable. I don’t know why Boone lost himself while you were in the woods, but I’m guessing whatever set him off, his human side never stood a chance. Don’t forget, Boone’s still a half-breed.” She gave Hunter an apologetic smile. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

“Shit,” Trip muttered, wincing when Brook started to clean his wound. “I um... I think I know what happened.” Both Brook and Hunter exchanged looks before turning their attention back to him. “We were playing around, got a little, you know, sappy, and I sort of...” Gods, Brook was going to tear him a new one. She arched a perfectly shaped brow at him and he decided the hell with it. “I submitted.”

“You submitted to my brother?” Hunter actually reeled back.

“Yeah, well, one thing led to another and I trusted him. You know I trust Boone like no one else. On top of that... Come on, you two know how I feel about him. I just let go. Some part of me wanted to show him what he meant to me, and before I knew it, I submitted, he responded, and then it happened.”

Brook put a hand to her head. “What were you thinking? You’re an Alpha, Trip. What you did, that’s as vulnerable as you can get, even more than any sexual position. I’m sorry to say it, but you set Boone off. His instincts kicked in, and he was ready to give you what his feral side believed you were ready to take. You started the bond.”

“I’ve really fucked up this time, haven’t I?” Despite all the questions and worries running through his mind, he could only think about one thing: Boone. His mate was out there somewhere feeling like shit for having hurt Trip when Trip had been the one to set things off. But how was he supposed to have

known what it would lead to? It wasn't as though there was some manual for true mates. Brook hadn't been kidding when she said it was a rare occurrence. It was so rare, unless a clan kept up with their old world traditions like theirs did, most creatures didn't believe true mates existed. "What do you think's going to happen? I mean, I don't feel any different. What happened after you and Deacon bonded?"

Brook went back to disinfecting and bandaging his shoulder. "Like I said, it's different for every pair. With Deacon, we can communicate with each other no matter what form we're in."

"Ah." Trip finally understood. "No wonder he's always trying to talk to me in my human form when he's in his Husky form. He's used to doing it with you."

"Yeah, he's always forgetting," Brook said, smiling tenderly. "Plus there are lots of other little things. We can speed along each other's healing process. We can sense certain things in each other."

Hunter leaned against the examining table with a chuckle. "So no more stealing your snacks and trying to cover it up."

"Exactly." Brook's smile faded and she gave Trip a hug, mindful of his shoulder. "I'm sorry, hon, I don't know what comes next, but we all know what will happen if you seal your bond. You won't be able to hide it. With Deacon, we're both Huskies, but you're an Alpha and Boone's a half-breed. Who knows what the end results will be. There's no record of a situation like yours in the Hagan history books and if there ever was, they hid it well."

Trip nodded. He touched his bandaged shoulder, his heart beating rapidly in his chest. "Whatever happens, I'm not going to let them touch him."

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Boone sat in the grass, a beer in his hand, and his back against the large pine tree, the shadows keeping him company. He wasn't one for big social gatherings, especially not one of Matthias's, but to blow off his Alpha's party would only result in getting him pushed up to the very top of Matthias's shit-list, and it was bad enough being on there to begin with. Boone had spent the whole night out in Vucari Woods in his Husky form. After running for miles

to clear his mind, he had veered back, but he just couldn't face anyone. So he'd curled up in a mossy thicket and gone to sleep. Today, he'd waited until early evening when his brother had headed out for the barbecue, and used the opportunity to shower and dress. Now here he was, doing his best to avoid Trip, who didn't know he was here.

From this distance, he had a clear view of Trip standing beside Brook and Deacon, his sisters, Addison and Kyla, along with Kyla's husband Rhys, all of whom were in fits of laughter over whatever story Trip was sharing with them. By his gestures, it was the summer Matthias attempted to be one of the common folk by showing off his cannon-ball at the lake and ended up losing his swim trunks. He doubted Matthias would find the story so amusing.

Boone took another long gulp of his beer as he watched Trip, taking in every inch of him, wondering what it would feel like to walk up to him, take hold of the scuffed little silver pull of his hoodie and slowly unzip it. He would slide it off those strong shoulders, run his hands down the front of the faded band T-shirt he was undoubtedly wearing just to piss off his father, and slip his hands underneath, his fingernails scraping against soft skin before they followed the thin, soft trail of hair he knew would disappear into the waistband of Trip's jeans. The way they rode low on his hips, begging to be pulled down had Boone getting hard, and what's more, he didn't care. He had always wanted Trip, but right now, his body felt like it might burn itself up if it didn't have him. Ever since yesterday afternoon, his human side and his feral side were battling it out, and he just didn't know what it meant. Something told him he would soon find out.

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Trip felt a fierce heat erupt within him, blazing a path from his toes up to his face. He was grateful everyone was focused on Deacon and hadn't noticed Trip shoving his hand into his hoodie's pocket while he attempted to hide the painful erection pushing against his jeans. What the hell? It felt like he was going to burn from the inside out. He smiled at something someone said, but found he was having trouble concentrating. It was as if he could feel Boone on him, could feel his hands running down his chest, his warm breath against his ear as he tugged at the waistband of Trip's jeans. Boone's scent was making

him dizzy, and the pull to his feral side was aggressive, demanding his attention. He tried to keep his head down, but his body was scorching, the canine inside him demanding he answer the call. This had never happened to him before, and it was pretty damn scary. The intense feelings had come out of the blue, slamming into him.

Finishing what was left of his beer, he cleared his throat. "I'm gonna go get me another. Anybody else want?" Thankfully no one was in need of a top-up, and he discreetly looked around as he headed for the gazebo where the iceboxes were situated. The turnout for his father's barbecue was extensive as there wasn't anyone in town who would insult their Alpha by not showing up. Most folks were gathered in little groups either around his father or mother, the rest around the pups or other family members, all distracted and enjoying themselves. Trip knew Boone was here, he just hadn't caught sight of him, nor had he caught his scent. If he was in his Husky form he'd be able to see into the dark corners better, but he could hardly shift right in the middle of the party for no reason at all.

"Tristan."

Trip turned, groaning inwardly. Now really wasn't the time. Kristoff smiled widely and stretched out his hand. With a smile, Trip took it. He shouldn't be rude. It wasn't Kristoff's fault Trip was—whatever it was that was happening to him.

"Lovely night, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah, it is actually. Having a good time?"

Kristoff gave him a playful smile. "I am now."

"Oh, um, okay."

Kristoff took a step closer and Trip took one back. Before he realized it, his back was against the gazebo. How was it the place wasn't littered with guests? It's where most of the booze was.

"Kind of running out of personal space here." Trip gave a shaky laugh, surprised when Kristoff put his arm to the side of Trip's head and leaned forward.

“I was thinking about our little chat yesterday, and I realized that I should have been more honest with you.”

“Honest? About what?” He had no idea what the deal was with Kristoff, but it was making Trip a little uncomfortable.

“About my invitation. See, in truth, I don’t merely want you to join my clan. I’d like you to join me.”

“I... don’t understand.” Why was he feeling so dizzy all of a sudden?

Kristoff reached out, his hand going to Trip’s waist, and making him jump. He tried to play things off, wagging a finger at him. “You keep that up and people are going to talk.”

“Tristan, I want you to be my mate.” Kristoff’s hand slipped under the hem of Trip’s hoodie, his fingers finding skin.

“What?” Before Trip could do anything, a dark shadow spread across them. Boone grabbed a fistful of Kristoff’s shirt, and nearly lifted him off his feet.

“He already has a mate. *Me*,” Boone growled, his eyes glowing and his canine teeth showing.

Trip’s jaw nearly became unhinged, but he wasn’t given a moment to find the appropriate expletive to express his shock before Boone released Kristoff and gave him a shove. It was bad enough his mate was challenging an Alpha, but one as powerful as Kristoff? What the hell had gotten into him?

Kristoff smoothed down his shirt appearing unfazed, but his glowing amber eyes betrayed his calm exterior. He gave a sniff, his eyes widening and going from Boone to Trip. Then the strangest thing happened. Kristoff’s eyes returned to normal, and he bowed apologetically at them. “Forgive me, I wasn’t aware. I wish you the best of luck, Tristan. I am, of course, at your service.” With another bow, he turned and walked off.

“What the...?” Why? Who? Where was he again? Trip turned to look at Boone. “Gods almighty, what the hell was that?”

“That’s me going out of my fucking mind,” Boone snapped.



Trip had to admit, he was taken aback by his mate's aggressive behavior, but he wasn't given the time to argue. Boone grabbed his wrist and started dragging him toward the woods.

"Boone, we need to talk about this." Trip pulled at his arm, frustrated when he couldn't get out of Boone's steel grip. "For fuck's sake, can you please just tell me what the hell is going on?"

Boone came to a halt just inside the woods, and spun around to face him. His hand went to his chest, the anger still coming off him in waves. "I can't do it, Trip. I can't feel what I just felt again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I could feel him touching you. His fingers on you, on your skin, the heat he was giving off for you."

"What?" Trip gaped at him. Things had just gone from weird to *what the fuck?*

"That's right. I felt it, and it was agony. I don't want anyone touching you."

"What, so now I'm supposed to live like the boy in the plastic bubble?"

"Don't joke about this, Trip, not this."

"It's my defense mechanism and you know it. I'm freaking out here, Boone. Yesterday I opened Pandora's Box and I don't know what the fuck is going to come out of it. I'm scared, so I need you to be my mate, and my best friend, and the one who can tell me that everything's going to be okay, just like you always have, because I need that right now. My brother, Ashley, all those other assholes, I can deal with, but this," he motioned between them, "I don't know which way is up anymore, Boone. Please, we gotta figure this out together."

Boone clenched his jaw, and he stood there for a moment. He seemed to be thinking about something. Then he took a step back, his eyes brighter than Trip had ever seen them. "Follow me."

Before Trip could reply, Boone shifted and was off, disappearing into the woods. "Shit." Without giving it anymore thought, he shifted and followed, his

canine vision making it far easier for him to see through the darkened woods. He ran as fast as his paws could carry him, the only light around him coming from the rays of moonlight filtering through the pine trees. Vucari Woods always looked so beautiful during the day, but at night, it was pretty creepy, and all those stories grown-ups told their pups about the Likho living in the darkest parts of the woods waiting to snatch them up to take them to their caves at the Drekavac Falls seemed all too plausible. His fur was bristling, and every snapping twig, every flutter of wings, or rustling of leaves his ears caught the sound of, started playing tricks with his mind. After all, at one time humans had believed his kind hadn't existed. Who was to say the Likho weren't real? He really needed to watch less TV.

Finally he caught up with Boone who had changed and was pacing in a moonlit clearing surrounded by trees and shrubs. Trip shifted, ready to ask his mate what was going on, but it was clear Trip was going to have to wait until Boone got whatever it was that had him so worked up off his chest.

"Why did you do it?"

Not what he was expecting. "Why did I do what?"

"You submitted, to *me*. I just... something snapped. When I got hold of you, I was so afraid to let you go. This fear of losing you took over and I couldn't let go. I knew I was hurting you, somewhere deep inside, but my body just wasn't listening. All my body wanted was to claim you and if Hunter hadn't gotten through to me... I don't know what I would have done."

Trip could see the torment Boone was in and he slowly made his way over, doing his best not to make any sudden movements. He had no idea how much control Boone had over his feral side at the moment. He only knew he was responsible for it.

"I'm sorry I've put you in this position, but I'm not sorry I submitted."

Boone's head snapped up and he marched up to Trip, shoving him up against a large tree. "Why?"

"What do you mean why? You seriously have to ask that? Because I love you, you big idiot. I love you, I saw a chance to prove it, and I took it. I know I fucked things up and our DNA or whatever the hell is going screwy, but I'm

not sorry I submitted to you. Fuck being an Alpha and fuck the clan's laws. You're more than just my Enforcer, and if you try and tell me you didn't know that, so help me I will kick your ass, or at least try."

"Trip, stop talking," Boone said quietly.

"I mean, I know we don't get to do as much as we want to do with each other, but that doesn't mean I love you any less. It's not just about the sex."

"Trip," Boone grumbled.

"If anything, it just—"

Boone cut off Trip's rambling with his mouth, and the moment their lips touched, a spark of heat shot through Trip like a firecracker going off. He threw his arms around Boone's neck, eagerly returning the fervent kiss. Boone grabbed him by the waist, lifting him, and wrapping Trip's legs around him. Trip didn't bother to question what would come next. He was too far gone. So when Boone got on his knees and lowered Trip onto his back on the ground, Trip didn't protest. His senses were ablaze, every one of them filled with the taste, sight, scent, and feel of Boone. He felt his shoes come off then the cool breeze as it hit his bare legs.

"Take off your clothes," Trip demanded, unzipping Boone's jacket and pushing it off his shoulders. He grabbed the hem of Boone's long-sleeve shirt, pulling it off and dropping to the side, followed by his own shirt. Next thing he knew, they were both completely naked, the evening chill barely cooling their heated skin, and Trip was gasping for breath, his back arching up off the ground as Boone's slick finger entered him. A second finger soon joined the first and Trip couldn't help but writhe beneath Boone in his desperation for more. His hands slid up Boone's thighs, around to his ass, his fingers digging into his flesh. "Fuck me, Boone. Right now." He had waited so long for this, he just couldn't wait anymore. He heard a cap open and he chuckled. "I see you've come prepared."

Boone gave him a sheepish grin. "I had a feeling." He sat back on his heels to apply the lube, purposefully stroking himself from root to tip ever so slowly, and Trip was all but ready to come from just watching him. Gods his mate was sexy, and damn frustrating.

“Dick,” Trip grumbled, deciding two could play that game. Of course when Trip played, he went all out. He drew his knees up, started stroking himself with one hand, while inserting his finger into himself with the other. The expression on Boone’s face was a cross between predatory and helpless. He grabbed Trip’s wrist, and moved his hand away, lining himself up as he leaned over him, his lips covering Trip’s. Slowly he pushed himself into Trip, inch by agonizing inch. Trip groaned and wrapped his legs around Boone, his fingers sinking into Boone’s shoulders. At first Boone moved slowly, a tender rocking motion, but it was driving Trip out of his mind. He grabbed Boone’s face and growled at him.

“Now’s not the time for romance, tough guy. I’ve been fantasizing about this since I was fifteen so I suggest you fuck me like you mean it.”

Boone arched an eyebrow at him. “No pressure then.” He snapped his hips forward and Trip thought he saw stars. Well, actually he could see the stars seeing as how he was lying on his back in the middle of the great outdoors. He closed his eyes for a moment, his body clenched around Boone who wrapped one arm around his shoulders while the other grabbed a fistful of his hair. His thrusts came hard and deep, and Trip knew he wasn’t going to last long, especially when Boone hit his prostate.

“Fuck!” Trip grabbed Boone’s face, kissing him hard and sloppy. He could feel every muscle in his body tensing, his toes curling as he jerked himself off. He cried out against Boone’s lips as white burst in front of his vision, and then a sharp cry tore from his throat as he felt Boone’s canine teeth sink into his other shoulder the same moment Boone came inside him. Everything after that was an indiscernible haze of pain, pleasure, and sedation before everything went black.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Sweetheart, wake up.”

Trip groaned and rolled over, a shiver going through him. He was cold. Why was it cold? He blinked open his eyes and saw it was dark. It was dark and he was in the woods. He looked down at himself. And naked. “Boone?”

“Oh, thank Gods.” Boone wrapped Trip in his arms as they lay in the grass. “I thought you fell asleep, but then when I tried to wake you up, you wouldn’t. You scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m okay,” Trip looked up at Boone’s worried face and smiled. “That was... amazing.”

Boone chuckled and kissed him tenderly before pulling back. “I’m glad you approve.” A mischievous gleam came into his eyes and Trip peered at him warily.

“What?”

“So um... my ass is museum worthy, huh?”

Trip buried his face against Boone’s chest, feeling it rumble with his chuckle. “Oh my Gods, I’m going to kill him!” Trip pulled back, looking up at him. “He’s adopted right? You can tell me. I swear, I won’t say a word.”

“Sorry.” Boone’s smile faded and he sat up suddenly, pulling Trip with him.

“What is it?”

“I bit you.”

“Oh yeah, you did.” Trip looked down at his other shoulder and frowned. There was nothing there. “Didn’t you? I’m pretty sure I wasn’t imaging nearly losing my shit from the pain.”

Boone tenderly ran his fingers over Trip’s shoulder where the wound should have been. “What the hell? I mean, not that I was hoping I’d left another scar but... it’s like it never happened.”

Trip couldn’t understand it. He took the bandage off his right shoulder, surprised when there was only the clean faint scar of Boone’s teeth from the

original bite. It wasn't red or swollen or anything. "Okay, so the weirdness clearly isn't over."

"Do you think it has to do with what we just did?" Boone asked worriedly, standing and helping Trip to his feet.

"Who the hell knows? Which is another thing I don't get." He swiped his clothes off the floor and started getting dressed. "How come no one knows anything about what happens when an Alpha and an Enforcer bond? It has to have happened at some point. We can't be the only Alpha/Enforcer true mates in the history of our clan."

"You think someone's trying to hide something?" Boone asked, following Trip's lead and getting dressed.

"Would it really surprise you if the Council was keeping secrets?"

"I'd be more surprised if I found out they weren't."

"Exactly." Trip walked over to Boone and wrapped his arms around his waist, loving his scent. "Mm, you smell like sex and sweat." He planted a kiss on Boone's jaw and took hold of his hand. "Come home with me?"

"Yeah?" The boyish lopsided grin on Boone's face was adorable and Trip couldn't wait to get him home.

"Robbie's decided to stay with Brook and Deacon until mid-week, so until then, I am going to have sex with you in unimaginable, filthy ways. I have this insatiable urge to ride you." Boone's eyes widened and Trip couldn't hold back his laughter. "Come on, tough guy."

"You know, you're dad's going to have a major shit-fit we left the party."

"I think when he sees us, the last thing he's going to be thinking about is the party," Trip replied somberly. He told Boone what he'd learned from Brook about the bonding and the changes it brought her and Deacon. "Do you think your changes will be noticeable?"

"Well, nothing's happened yet, so maybe it's not as big a deal as we thought?" Trip sure hoped so. It wasn't like they were prone to the same illnesses or ailments as humans. Either way, they would eventually have to leave Trip's house and face the clan. Whatever happened, they would have to be ready, because Trip wasn't about to give up Boone.

That night, Trip did his best to live out his sexual fantasies, and Boone was more than happy to give Trip full control. They'd had sex until they were so exhausted that every muscle was screaming in protest, and Trip was unable to do anything but lay there on top of Boone, sweaty and trying to catch his breath. As far as he was concerned, they were making up for lost time. He fell asleep sprawled over Boone sometime before dawn. When he woke, he expected soreness and achiness. Not only did he feel none of those things, he felt amazing.

"Morning." Trip rolled over, his smile fading when Boone's eyes widened. "What? Morning breath?"

Boone shook his head and swallowed hard. "I think... I think those changes are going to be a little more noticeable than we thought."

Trip scrambled over Boone, hitting the floor with a painful *thud* but too freaked out to care. He got to his feet and ran to the bathroom, hitting the sink and gasping when he saw himself in the mirror.

"Holy fuck!"

What the hell had happened to him? He was nearly as big as Boone, less wide perhaps, but taller, his muscles more defined, his hair was darker, and his eyes... There was bright amber around his pupils, as if the color had burst out from the center, spreading into the blue. He'd never seen anything like it. He took a step back, looking himself over. His body looked like he had just spent the last year doing intensive training.

*What. The. Holy. Living. Fuck.*

The moment Boone neared the bathroom, Trip knew. He didn't just catch his mate's scent, he could *feel* Boone approaching. He turned, watching Boone stop short at the door, his jaw dropping as he looked him over.

"Say something," Trip pleaded.

"Uh..."

"I was expecting more syllables."

"You... you look hot."

Trip opened his mouth then closed it. He crossed his arms over his new chest. "So what, I wasn't hot before?"

“Don’t be an ass, of course you were. This is just... wow.” Boone walked over, pressing his finger into Trip’s bicep.

“I would be insulted if you weren’t talking about how fucking amazing I look.” He turned back to the mirror, unable to believe it. “They’re definitely going to notice.”

“How do you feel?”

“Stronger.”

“Want to put it to the test?” Boone asked, wriggling his brows.

They quickly slipped into sweatpants before running out into the backyard. Boone positioned himself and motioned for Trip to advance. “Take me down, tough guy.”

“I don’t know about this, Boone.”

“Hunter told me about the picture of me you carry in your wallet.”

“That bastard!” Trip let out a growl and made a run for Boone, ramming into him, and knocking him off his feet before grabbing him around the waist and slamming him into the grass. It wasn’t until it was over that he realized what he’d done.

“Oh my Gods, Boone, are you okay? I’m so sorry.” He took hold of Boone’s arm and helped him sit up.

“Holy shit,” Boone wheezed, his hand going to his chest.

“You okay?”

Boone nodded. “Just give me a moment to catch my breath.”

Trip dropped down onto the grass beside him, and looked down at his hands wondering why their bond would change him like this. What was the purpose? Not that he was complaining, but there had to be a reason.

“Trip, not even Hunter can do that to me, and he’s had practice.” Boone leaned over and took hold of Trip’s chin, turning his face toward him. “Whatever the hell happened, you’re stronger than I am.”

Trip wracked his brain trying to understand, but he couldn’t. “We need to go see your mom.” He got to his feet and pulled Boone up, still unaccustomed to how close in height they were now.



“My mom?”

“Yeah, if she knew about the true mate bond, she might know more.” He headed for the house with Boone on his tail.

Boone nodded his agreement. “I should have told her you were my mate years ago.”

“You were trying to protect us, and the less your mom knew the better. You know we can’t trust the Council.” He went to his closet and pulled out one of his T-shirts, slipping it on, or at least attempting to. “Oh, come on, man.” He pouted and turned to Boone who tried his best not to laugh. “My clothes don’t fit.”

“Would it help if I said you look sexy?”

“Would it help if I said you’re buying me a new wardrobe?”

Boone stared at him. “Why me?”

“Because your stupid DNA did this to me.”

“Well I’m sorry my DNA made you a fucking sex God.”

“You’re forgiven.” He turned back to his closet and pulled out one of Boone’s black long-sleeve shirts which fit perfectly. “Looks like you won’t have to buy me a new wardrobe after all,” Trip declared, turning to Boone. “I’ll just wear yours.”

Boone rolled his eyes and finished getting dressed. They snuck out of the house through the back and shifted. Trip started for the woods in the back when he noticed Boone wasn’t with him. When he looked back, he found Boone was still by the back porch. He ran over wondering what the hell was wrong now.

*You gonna stand there all day?* Trip asked.

Boone’s ear flattened and he slowly approached Trip, his head slightly lowered. Wait, Boone’s head wasn’t lowered. Shit, Trip was looking *down* at him. Trip ran over to the glass doors, stunned by his reflection. Next to him, Boone looked like just a regular sized Husky. Opening his mouth, Trip saw his teeth were bigger, too, especially his fangs. It seemed like it wasn’t just his human form that had changed.

*We need to go see your mom. Right now.* He turned and sped into the woods behind the house which would connect to the woodlands behind Cora's house. As he ran, he could feel how much faster he was. Not only could he keep up with Boone, he could actually outrun him. In minutes they were behind Cora's house and they quickly shifted back before sneaking into the backyard. They couldn't afford to let anyone see them. Looking around, Boone carefully opened the back porch door and slipped inside, Trip following him.

"Mom?" Boone called out, closing the glass door behind them.

"There you are, sweetheart. Your brother's been looking for you. You know how worried he—" Cora stepped into the kitchen, gasping when she saw Trip.

"What you told Brook wasn't even the half of it, was it?" Trip said, stunned when he saw the tears well in Cora's eyes as she slowly took a seat at the kitchen counter.

"Oh, boys. I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

Boone rushed to her side, taking her hand in his. "Mom? What is it?"

"Why didn't you tell me Trip was your true mate?" Cora's hand went to Boone's cheek. "I knew you loved him, I just... I had no idea."

Trip watched Boone with his mother, unable to hold back his smile despite their situation. It was sweet to watch his rough around the edges mate and the loving way he looked after his mom. In reality, Boone and Hunter were very protective of Cora. They were good sons, and everyone in the clan knew not to mess with her. Not if they didn't want Boone and Hunter pounding at their doors. Boone had always told Trip he could deal with any hostility that came his way, but he wouldn't put up with it where his mom was concerned.

"I'm so sorry, Mom. We were afraid the council would find out."

Cora's head shot up and she looked worriedly at him. "Do they know?"

"Not yet. We came straight over. Mom, what's happening to Trip? The Council always claimed Enforcers would taint pure-bloods if we mated. Is that... is that what's happened?"

Cora nodded. "Yes. Your blood has infected him." When Trip dropped down into the chair to her side, Cora quickly waved her hands. "No, you don't understand. Usually if a half-breed mates with a pure-blood, the pure-blood does get infected, but nothing really happens other than the pure-blood picks up a few traits from his mate. But... that's not why the Hagan Clan forbids the mating. It's because if a true mate pair exists where one is half-breed, when the bond is sealed, the pure-blood will not only inherit the traits of his or her mate, the pure-blood will become stronger than the Alpha himself."

"Wait, are you saying, I'm now stronger than my father?" Trip sat, confused, as Cora cupped his face in her hands, her gaze intense.

"Trip, you're stronger than Kristoff."

The air seemed to have been sucked out of the room, and pretty soon, Boone ended up sitting down as well. Trip was stronger than Kristoff? "But how can that be? He's a wolf shifter."

"Sweetheart, the changes your body has undergone have been in order to lead you to your true purpose. We're an ancient breed, Trip. There's a lot the Hagan Council has kept from us. Mother Earth does not make mistakes in her true-mate pairings. Brook was born to nurture, while Deacon was born to inspire. You were born to lead, and Boone was born to protect. Individually you are strong, but together, you are a great force."

The more Trip thought about it, the more everything started to make sense. "That must have been why Kristoff apologized, why he offered his services. He knew somehow. He must have sensed the bonding had started and knew what it would mean. Why else wouldn't he respond to your challenge, Boone?" He turned back to Cora, taking her hand in his. "So the Enforcer Law isn't about keeping our blood pure at all, is it? It's to prevent anyone from challenging the Hagan Alpha." That's all it had ever been about. "I'm guessing this happened at some point, or there wouldn't be a law to begin with."

Cora nodded. "In the time of our ancestors it happened more often than it does now, but our numbers were greater then. When it happened, the Hagan family would come together and kill both the pure-blood and the half-breed. It was kept secret and out of all scriptures. Soon, the law was passed. The fact you're of Alpha blood only makes you stronger."

“How do you know all this?” Boone asked, and Trip could tell his mate was as shocked as he was.

“Your father. The knowledge was passed down through his family in order to protect us. It had happened to one of his Enforcer ancestors.” She looked up at Boone with a sad smile, her hand going to his cheek. “It’s why the Council never attempted to run you and your brother out of the clan for being gay. They knew I wouldn’t hesitate to reveal their secret.”

So that was what it was like to have a parent protect and sacrifice for you. Trip had never had that, though he wouldn’t hesitate in doing the same for his son. Everything he and Brook had learned about good parenting, they had learned either on their own, together, or from Cora. He couldn’t imagine his mother ever protecting him like that. Boone hugged Cora tight when the telephone rang, making the three of them jump.

Cora excused herself to answer it, and Trip mulled over everything he had just learned. All this time he had believed that stupid law had been in place out of arrogance, because his father and the Hagan Alphas before him believed themselves to be so much better than everyone else. Instead, it was to ensure their positions, no matter how slim the chances. The more he thought about it, the angrier he found himself growing.

“Trip, sweetheart...” Boone ran his fingers softly down Trip’s cheek, snapping him out of it.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Your eyes... they were doing this freaky glowing blue thing.”

“Our eyes always get brighter when our feral side speaks up.”

“Yeah, but not like this. Yours just kinda... disappeared.”

“They what now?”

“Your eyes, they kind just glowed this whitish blue and I couldn’t see your pupils or irises or anything.”

Trip covered his face with his hands and groaned. “Gods, what’s happening to me?” He felt Boone come to stand beside him. He drew Trip into his arms and Trip melted against him, allowing Boone to comfort as he always

did. He hummed and snuggled closer. “You’re so warm.” Boone chuckled, squeezing him tight and making him feel a hundred times better. Whatever happened, he knew with Boone at his side, everything would be all right.

“Trip?”

They turned to Cora who was looking terribly anxious. “Your father has called a council meeting. He expects us all to be there.”

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

When Trip walked into the small four-columned courthouse, he did so with his head held high and his hand proudly in Boone's. He didn't know what this meeting was about, only that his father was surely going to work in his disappointment regarding Trip and Boone's disappearance from the party. His father was going to be in for one hell of a surprise.

Trip headed toward the Hagan Council's chamber, a monstrosity of white marble that resembled an Ancient Greek temple three sizes bigger than it needed to be but that his father loved—no doubt because it meant he could hear himself speak in surround-sound.

Outside the room, Brook sat with Deacon and Robbie, and the moment they approached, Deacon jumped to his feet in front of Brook and Robbie with a fierce growl. He sniffed the air and froze. "Trip? Is that you?"

Trip chuckled as he reached them. "Yeah, it's me."

"Daddy?" Robbie looked up at him, his little face uncertain. His gaze went from Trip to Boone and back. Trip knelt down before him, hoping his new look didn't change things between him and his son. In truth, he hadn't given it much thought until now. Maybe it was because deep down, he was too afraid his pup would reject him. The thought terrified him like nothing else. Hell, he'd shaved his head once after getting gum stuck in his hair and Robbie refused to talk to him for a week. Robbie, much like his dad, wasn't very good with change, and well, his appearance alone right now was more change than they'd had since the bubblegum fiasco of 2010.

"Hi, baby, it's me. Still your goofy, embarrassing dad. You're not scared are you?"

Robbie bit his bottom lip and reached out to touch Trip's face, his hand moving up to Trip's hair, ruffling it a little as he pulled away. With a finger, he poked Trip's arm. "You got muscles."

"Yeah, I kinda do."

"It's weird."

“Yeah, it kind of is.” Trip waited for Robbie to make the first move. Robbie looked into his eyes, staring so long Trip was about to go blue in the face from holding his breath. Then Robbie threw his arms around Trip’s neck, squeezing fiercely. Gods, he felt like such a blubbering baby. Tears welled in his eyes and he shut them tight as he hugged his son. How could he have ever doubted his amazing pup?

“I love you so much, kiddo.”

“I love you too, Dad.” Robbie pulled away with a big smile and petted his head, his eyes going wide suddenly. “You’re as big as Boone now, so you can carry me on your shoulders!”

Trip chuckled. “You bet.”

Robbie took Trip’s hand in his, then reached out and took Boone’s, beaming up at him. “Hi, Boone.”

Boone’s eyebrows shot up, and Trip knew it was due to the fact that for the first time, there was no “uncle” attached to his name.

“Hey, little man.”

“You’re going to live with us now, right? Because you and Daddy are bonded, like Mommy and Deacon.”

“Um...” Boone looked over at Trip who couldn’t help but puff up a little at his two beautiful boys.

“Daddy’s going to try his damn hardest to make that so, champ.” Trip gave Boone a wink, and together they walked down the wine-red carpet inside the council chambers, stopping in front of the Hagan Council, each member sitting in their respective seats on the dais. Matthias sat in the center with Trip’s mother, Vita. To the left were the Hagans, and the Holts—Trip’s mother’s family—were on the right. The rest of the families were situated either to his immediate left, or to their right in long jury boxes. The Hagan Council thrived on public displays of power using this chamber from everything to making arrests to organizing the town’s Christmas play. Brook kissed Trip’s cheek, wished them luck, and took hold of Robbie who reluctantly went with his mom.

“Well look who decided to grace us with his presence,” Ward Hagan sneered. It was clear where Trip’s father got his charm from. Trip didn’t respond, though he’d noticed his mother had already caught onto something. Trip loved his mom. She had always been good to him, as good as could be with a husband like Matthias around, but as the Alpha’s wife, her duty to her husband and her clan took precedence over everything else, so she had turned her back on him as well, though from that day, she barely ever smiled. The thought saddened him.

“I hope you’re here to apologize for leaving the party.” Matthias sniffed the air and shot to his feet. He stared at Trip, his expression horrified. “No. It can’t be.” The room fell silent as Matthias came down from the stage, marched up to Trip, grabbed a hold of his face, and looked into his eyes. His head shot over to Boone before he quickly stepped back, shaking his head.

“It’s not possible. How dare you keep this a secret from me!” He backhanded Trip across the cheek, but Trip was too busy holding Boone back to worry about the sting left behind or what his father had just done.

“Boone, please, easy.” He motioned for Hunter, relieved when the younger brother darted over. Initially Hunter had done a double take when he saw Trip, then he just grinned knowingly and took hold of his brother’s arm.

“Easy, big brother. We got pups in the room.”

Reluctantly, Boone settled down, though his steely gaze remained on Matthias, who sneered at him. “You and your mongrel of a brother are fired. Your job was to keep an eye on my son, not sleep with him.”

“Wow.” Trip couldn’t believe the nerve of the man. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, you little heathen. How long have you known he was your true mate?”

“Since I was fifteen. Do you realize the hell you’ve put us through because of your stupid law? If we hadn’t started the bonding by accident, we might have never known. We’d probably still be living in fear for who knew how long. I’ve loved him for twenty years!”

“You shouldn’t love him at all! Isn’t it enough we allowed you to stay,



turning the other cheek at what you are? Now you're setting out to break every tradition that has made this clan great?"

"Great?" Trip let out a humorless laugh. "Our great clan is built on lies and deception, on fear and control."

"It was your duty to inform us the moment you knew!"

"So you could kill him? Because that's how the Hagan Council has always dealt with their little true mate problem isn't it, Dad? Kill off anyone whose true mate is an Enforcer. Unless they're a Hagan Alpha of course, then you just kill the Enforcer to keep your dirty little secret, but not before you've taken their strength, of course."

"Matthias?" Trip's mother stood, looking stunned. "What's he talking about?"

"Didn't you know, Mom? That's what the Enforcer Law is really about. Any pure-blood whose true mate is an Enforcer, if bonded, will become more powerful than the Alpha. Our family couldn't have some newly infected nobody become head of the clan, so they killed them. If they'd found out about Boone before the bond took place, they would have killed him and covered it up."

Isa Hagan shot to her feet, her bony finger jutting out at Trip. "Matthias, this is too much. Have you no control over that beastly spawn of yours?"

"Thanks, Great Grandma. Shouldn't you be off knitting booties somewhere? By the way, no one says 'spawn' of anything anymore, unless it's attached to Satan, even then it's old hat. But then again, if anyone knows old, I guess it'd be you." Trip delighted in the way her face went red and she turned, sputtering to her husband, who of course didn't hesitate in giving his two cents or tuppence, or whatever the hell currency was around in his day.

"Your faggot son is making a mockery of this clan, Matthias! He has no respect for his elders."

"Yeah, because you're all about respect," Trip replied heatedly. "You've respected the hell out me for years. Oh, wait no you haven't. In fact, you've gone out of your way to tell everyone how unfit I am to breathe the same air as them."

Briana Holt jumped on the bandwagon and Trip did his best to suppress his groan. “He should have been dealt with in the same manner as all the others before him. He should have been banished, and if he refused to leave, killed!”

“Mother!” Vita gasped. “Whatever your opinion, you’re talking about my son.”

“It’s not our fault you gave birth to an abomination! We should have rid ourselves of him long ago.”

“No!” Robbie ran up to Trip, throwing his arms around Trip’s leg and holding on for dear life. “I won’t let you hurt my dad!”

Trip’s hand went to his pup’s head, soothing him. “Robbie, it’s okay, buddy. Why don’t you go with Mom?”

“No. They want to hurt you and Boone just because you’re different.” Robbie glared at his grandfather, his small hands balled into fists at his sides. “Boone’s my friend. He’s always protected us, and Hunter, too. They love us and they’re good guys. They’re family.”

Matthias gave Robbie a placating smile, yet his tone was nothing but patronizing. “Robbie, you’re a child. One day you’ll understand.”

“I might be a little kid, but I understand the difference between right and wrong, and you’re wrong. You’re selfish and pigheaded and mean. You should want your clan to be happy, instead you do everything to make them miserable just because you can. You’re nothing but big bullies!”

Matthias bared his teeth, taking a step toward Robbie. “And you are an impertinent little whelp who clearly needs a good thrashing.”

Trip’s growl stopped him in his tracks. “Don’t you even think about laying a hand on my son.”

“You bare your teeth at me? Make threats? Do you know who you’re dealing with?”

“I know exactly who I’m dealing with, and you might be able to hide from the others, but you can’t hide from me. Not anymore. I can smell your fear.”

Matthias reeled back, nearly tripping over himself. His father had always been a daunting man, towering over him, using his strength and power to

intimidate him. Everything Trip had ever done in his life had been a disappointment, and Matthias made certain to flaunt his failings in front of the whole town at every opportunity. The poster boy for disgrace, he'd been called. For a time, Trip had even started to believe it, but thanks to Robbie, Brook, Deacon, Boone, and Hunter, Trip learned he was none of the things his father proclaimed him to be. Trip might not be perfect, but he was a good man, a good father, and a good friend. He could hardly say the same about Matthias.

"My whole life, you've looked down on me, simply for not living up to your expectations, yet you and your council have murdered in the name of power. Who's the real depraved one here?" He felt his father's Enforcers moving closer and Trip shook his head. "Call them off. We both know they don't stand a chance against me and the Devil Dogs."

"I'm willing to make the sacrifice," Matthias spat out.

"Oh, I bet you are. However, I doubt some of the others feel the same." Trip turned to look at Boone and Hunter's younger sister huddled together with her pups, their worried gazes on Duncan who stood with his brother, Cy, his father, Logan, and his sister, Ashley. "The council is prepared to leave your pups without a father, just to teach me a lesson. Let me tell you right now, Duncan won't win. I don't want him hurt, but if he attacks me or my family, I don't have a choice."

Ivy looked from her brothers to her husband and shook her head. "Duncan, don't. Please." Her twin pups whined and whimpered, clutching their mother.

Trip hated putting Duncan in such a position, but he had to be honest with Ivy. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but he would protect his loved ones. Trip knew his father too well, knew how he would have no problem giving his Enforcers the order to attack. Trip had been in this fight before. The first time had been to keep the council from taking Robbie away from him, and Trip had fought fiercely beside the Devil Dogs, but in the end, although they each collected their fair share of battle wounds, the fact remained that they had all managed to walk away. He couldn't make that promise now.

To his surprise, his little sister ran out and threw herself into Cy's arms. "You can't!"

“Addison?” Trip looked from her to Cy, realization dawning on him. “Oh, baby. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m sorry, Trip.” His blue eyed sister held onto Cy, whose arms wrapped around her protectively. He could see the challenge in Cy’s amber eyes, but Trip gave the younger Husky a tender smile. Cy was a good guy. It wasn’t his fault he was related to Ashley or that their father was as big an asshole as Matthias.

“Addison, go back to your seat,” Matthias demanded. “This is not your concern.”

“Not my concern?” Addison rounded on their father. “You’re trying to force me to marry someone I’m not in love with for what? To keep your ego intact? I love Cy, and I love my big brother. I won’t let you make them fight.”

“He’s a soldier. His life belongs to the clan,” Matthias replied through his teeth.

Ivy came out from behind the juror’s box, her glare on Matthias. “My husband may protect you and this clan, Matthias, but he isn’t your personal chew toy. It’s not bad enough you’ve always treated my brothers like dirt under your shoes, but now you want to send my husband to his death to prove your stupid point?”

Logan turned to his eldest son. “Duncan, control your wife before I do.”

“You lay a hand on her and you’ll have me to deal with,” Duncan growled. “I’ve kept my mouth shut long enough. I’ve stood by while you tried to force Ashley on Hunter. He’s gay, yet neither of you care. Like he’s going to change just because you want him to. It’s embarrassing, not to mention ignorant.”

“All right, that’s enough!” Matthias turned to Trip, his gaze hard. “You see what you’ve done to this clan? You and your mutt are a stain upon our noble name.”

“Then we don’t want to be in this clan anymore!” Robbie declared. “We subj—abjucate, um, abdicate! We abdicate our positions in this clan!”

A collective gasp went around the room and everyone turned to Robbie who stood looking every bit as determined as the rest of them. Trip kneeled down in front of his son, taking his hands in his.

“Robbie, sweetheart, you can’t say that unless you mean it. It’s a very serious proclamation.”

“I am serious. I don’t want to be part of this clan anymore. You’re an Alpha, and now you’re stronger than Grandpa and any of them, so you can protect us. You can have your own clan. You’d make a great Alpha.”

“Robbie, you’re in school and—”

“And I can make new friends at a new school.” He walked over to Brook who was standing anxiously by with Deacon and took her hand. “You can get a new job, Mom. Towns always need doctors and teachers.” He faced the rest of the room. “You can find new jobs. We’ll help each other. My dad’s clan will be much better. He’s strong and brave, and he has Boone. No one will challenge them. We can be a real family.”

“I’m in!” Hunter threw his arm around Trip’s shoulder. “You lead, I’ll follow.”

The council laughed derisively. “A pack consisting of two queer mongrels, an Alpha and one pup? Absurd. You’ll be the laughing stock of St. Veles”

“They’ve got us, too.” Deacon took Brook’s hand, gave her a reassuring smile, and led her over to Trip’s side. “We’re coming with you. Any clan stupid enough not to want you in it is a clan I don’t want to be a part of.”

Brook nodded her agreement. “I go where my boys go.”

“We’re going, too.”

Trip was stunned as Duncan, Ivy, and their pups joined them. Logan looked like he was ready to pop a blood vessel.

“Duncan, you get your ass back over here. You go with them and you’re dead to me.”

The hurt and anger was evident in Duncan’s blue and brown eyes, but he pulled his family close, his head held high. “Remember that was your decision, not mine. You brought this on yourselves.”

Kayla took her husband’s hand, each holding onto one of their pup’s hands, and they joined Trip. “We’re with you big brother.” Rhys nodded, giving his own brother a playful nudge.

“You know I can’t leave you, D. Who knows what trouble you’d get into?”

Deacon chuckled, giving his younger brother a squeeze. “Thank you.”

Addison soon followed, pulling Cy along with her. Cy looked embarrassed as he held his hand out to Trip. “I know we’ve never talked much, but Addison thinks the world of you, and that says something. I won’t let you down.”

Trip couldn’t believe what was happening. He never expected this. Hell, he had never known how much support he’d actually had until now. But become Alpha of his very own clan? Boone must have sensed his apprehension, because he turned, and placed a reassuring hand on his side.

“I know you never wanted to be Alpha, but that’s when your only choice was being Alpha under the Hagan Council, and you had every right to turn away from that, but now you have the chance to lead a family who loves you, supports you, and has always respected you. You know I would follow you anywhere.”

Trip didn’t know what to say. He threw his arms around Boone, hugging him close. “Thank you. But only if you lead with me, at my side as my mate, and my equal.”

Everyone cheered—well, almost everyone. The Hagan Council, along with Logan, Ashley, Deacon’s parents and Brook’s parents all shot daggers at them, but they remained seated. There was nothing they could do. At least until Kristoff walked out onto the floor. The room went quiet and everyone took a wary step back. Someone in the council must’ve called him. The truly malevolent look on Matthias’s face made Trip feel sick to his stomach.

“I don’t think anyone’s going anywhere,” Matthias said smugly.

Kristoff made his way over to Trip, stopping before him. His head cocked to one side and he reached out to take hold of Trip’s chin.

“Well, look at you. You finally sealed the bond.”

Matthias smoothed down his expensive suit, his grin full of self-satisfaction. “A whole lot of good it’s done him. It’s over, Trip. All Kristoff has to do is call his clan and you and your Devil Dogs will finally be out of our hair for good.”

Trip's gaze went to Kristoff, who was still holding his chin. When Trip spoke, it wasn't a threat, but a heartfelt appeal. "I don't want to fight you."

Kristoff blinked and released Trip. "Who said anything about fighting?"

"But, that's what my father is saying, isn't it? That's why you're here?"

To his surprise, Kristoff threw his head back and laughed. "My dear, sweet Tristan." Kristoff patted his cheek gently and smiled. "I control my clan, not your father. I meant what I said earlier. I'm at your service, and unlike your father, I know my place in the food chain. Also, I'm not a bigoted asshole." With a wink, he turned and headed toward his brother, waving a hand dismissively at Matthias. "Your request is denied, Matthias. I will not waste my wolves on one of your whims. Call me when there's a genuine threat. Tristan, good luck with your new clan, I have no doubt you will be the best Hagan Alpha yet."

Matthias ran after Kristoff, but obviously begging was beneath the Hagan Council. The elders quickly put a stop to it, snapping at Matthias.

"You're right, Dad. It is over." Trip took Boone's hand in his and turned to his new clan. "Let's go."

They heard Skyras's growl and turned in time to see her grab Ari's wrist and yank him back.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Ari looked from his parents to Hunter, the heartache on his face palpable. Trip's heart went out to them. He knew Hunter would leave the decision to Ari, no matter how it pained him. Ari remained by his mother's side, his wrist in her grip and his head down like a scolded child. It was painful to see the effect Skyras had on the young man. Hunter took a step forward and held his hand out.

"Ari, you belong with us."

Trip knew Hunter wasn't about to out Ari, yet for those who knew him well, the complete and utter adoration in his eyes for the younger Husky was unmistakable. Poor Ari looked torn, and a part of Trip sensed Hunter would be walking away from this with a broken heart.



Skyrah gave Ari's arm a tug, drawing his attention away from Hunter. "Now you look at me. You forget about them. Addison can rot with her fag brother. We'll find you a new girl. Then you can settle down, have pups, and maybe one day—"

"Just stop it!" Ari jerked his arm away. "I am so sick and tired of you treating me like a child! And stop badmouthing Trip. You're always calling him all those horrible names."

"Well that's what he is." Skyrah shrugged and tried to get closer to Ari, but that only resulted in him moving farther away. "What's gotten into you?"

"Trip is gay, Mom, and guess what, so am I."

"Shit," Trip and Boone exchanged glances. "Brook, sweetheart, I think your brother's about to wake the sleeping bear."

"With a Taser," Boone added.

Trip turned to his new clan who were looking on worriedly. Skyrah's reputation was all too well known. This wasn't going to be pretty. "Why don't you all head to the park with the pups, and we'll come meet you. We can talk about what comes next soon as we get there, okay?"

They all nodded, quickly ushering their pups from the room. Trip gently pushed Robbie toward Deacon. "Robbie, kiddo, you go with Deacon."

"But I want to stay with you," Robbie replied anxiously.

"Not this time, tough guy. Don't worry, I'll be along shortly. Promise."

Reluctantly, Robbie allowed himself to be lifted into Deacon's arms and carried away. Trip headed toward Boone, Hunter, and Brook only to have Aiden get in his way.

"You think this is over? You've destroyed this clan you selfish—" Trip held a hand up, his voice grave.

"I don't have time to put up with your nonsense right now." His growl was enough to have his brother retreating for the first time ever. Hearing Skyrah's scathing laugh, Trip quickly joined the others.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not gay."



“Yes, I am,” Ari insisted.

Skyrah’s gaze went to Hunter, her eyes glowing dangerously. “This is your doing isn’t it, you half-breed filth. First you and your brother infect Tristan, now you’re trying to infect my son?”

Ari threw his hands up in frustration. “Are you listening to yourself? No one’s infected me. I’ve always been this way, but I was too scared to stand up to you. Enough is enough, Mom. You drove Brook away. Dad doesn’t even get to see Robbie because of you, and now you’re about to lose me, too.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” The wild look in Skyrah’s eyes concerned Trip. There was no telling what she would do when cornered.

“I’m not staying here to lead the life you want me to lead!” Ari started to walk toward Hunter, his hand stretched out to him when Skyrah shifted. Her heavy mass landed on Hunter’s human form, knocking him off his feet. She clamped down on his shoulder just over his heart, and the pained cry Hunter let out echoed through the cavernous chamber. Boone was immediately at his brother’s side, his canine teeth bare as he growled at Skyrah in his Husky form. He towered over her, but Trip was all too aware why Boone didn’t make a move. With Hunter still in his human form, and his body between Skyrah’s powerful jaws, all it would take was one sharp bite lower down and she would pierce his heart.

Skyrah’s gaze went to Ari and she shook her head. A painful cry tore from Hunter’s throat and he shut his eyes tight, the fingers from his free hand grabbing a fistful of Skyrah’s fur in desperation. Trip knew Skyrah was crazy, but he hadn’t expected her to attack any of them while in their human form. It was an act of dishonor, and something only cowards resorted to. It went to show how fraught she was.

“No! Please, don’t.” Ari got down on his knees beside his mother, his hands clasped together in front of him. “I’m begging you. Let him go.”

Trip took a step toward her, only to have her drag Hunter back with her. He held his hands up and took a quick step back. Damn it. “Sorry, I’m staying put.”

Ari’s gaze went to Hunter, a tear rolling down his cheek, and his voice barely audible when he spoke. “Forgive me.” He turned his gaze to his mother.

“I was lying. I’m not gay. I just thought if I said that, you’d let me go with them. I’ll stay, I promise. If you let him go.”

Skyrah’s jaws unlatched and Trip quickly went to Hunter’s side to help him up. Boone shifted and joined him, throwing an arm around his brother’s waist for support as he and Trip pulled Hunter to his feet. Ari stood dazedly beside his mother who was growling fiercely at them, the fur around her muzzle stained with Hunter’s blood. Boone’s muscles tensed and Trip put a hand to his shoulder.

“Your brother needs medical attention, Boone. Another time.”

Boone nodded, and with Trip’s help, they kept Hunter on his feet. He was losing a good deal of blood and his face was pale, though it was clear from the clotting under Hunter’s torn shirt that his body was doing its best to heal itself. Despite that, Hunter turned his body as best he could in their grasp, his voice fierce.

“This isn’t over, Skyrah! If you hurt him, I’ll kill you!”

“Hunter, please calm down,” Trip said, but Hunter was practically vibrating with anger.

“Did you hear me? I’ll kill you with my bare hands!”

They managed to get Hunter outside and away from the courthouse. The moment his body healed itself enough to stop the bleeding—even if he was still weak from the blood loss—Hunter fought against Trip and Boone’s hold to get back to the courthouse.

“I can’t leave him there!”

“Hunt, you’re hurt. You can’t help him like this.” Boone struggled with his brother, dropping to the grass when Hunter could no longer hold himself up.

“I can’t leave him with those sons-of-bitches! Please, Bo, you gotta let me—” Hunter choked on his words, his fingers digging into Boone’s arms. The struggle only lasted a few seconds longer until Hunter’s strength gave out. Then he buried his face against his brother’s chest, his shoulders shaking as he gave in to his grief. Boone sat with his brother wrapped tightly in his arms as he offered comfort. He looked up at Trip, his eyes bright with unshed tears,

and Trip could feel the pain his mate was in, pain Boone was feeling for his heartbroken brother.

“This isn’t over,” Trip assured Boone. He knelt down beside him, his hand going to his cheek. “We’ll get Ari back. I swear we will.”

Boone nodded. He buried his face in Hunter’s hair, and simply held him. It wasn’t over. Not by a long shot. Somehow they would have to get Ari away from Skyrh. There was a lot to do. They couldn’t stay in Perin anymore. It wasn’t safe. Although most of his generation and those that came after were leaving with him, Trip knew the Hagan Council was a resourceful bunch. Whether they convinced Kristoff to go to war against Trip, or allied themselves to another clan, Trip would have to be ready to protect his own. He prayed he could be the Alpha everyone expected him to be.

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## EPILOGUE

*Four months later*

Trip rolled over, snuggling up against his warm, cuddly pillow. He blinked open his eyes and smiled. His big, warm, cuddly, *sexy* pillow. Boone let out a soft hum as Trip slipped a hand under his mate's T-shirt and ran it slowly up his chest. He leaned forward for a kiss when something heavy and painful landed on them.

"Robbie!" Trip groaned as Boone let out a low rumble of laughter before rolling over onto his stomach, Robbie rolling with him to end up sprawled on Boone's back. "What have I told you about knocking?"

Robbie waved his arms and legs trying to make a snow angel on the sheets, on Boone's back. "Um, that I should do it?"

"Yes, that you should do it."

"But I was getting bored waiting for you two sleepy heads to get up. I want pancakes," he moaned.

"What do I look like, your butler?"

"No. If you were my butler you would have unpacked all my toys by now."

"You know, ever since Boone moved in, you think you can get away with anything. You're not that cute."

Robbie sat up on Boone's back and started playing with his hair, trying to make it stick up. "Boone, can you make me pancakes? I think pancakes will stop Dad from being such a grumpy puss." He wrapped his small arms around Boone's neck, giggling when Boone got up with a roar. With his arms held securely in Boone's grip, Robbie hung off him, giggling his little head off every time Boone swung around.

"You spoil him," Trip grumbled.

"I spoil you, too." Boone leaned over and gave Trip a kiss.

"Ew, it's too early for kissing. Kiss after pancakes," Robbie demanded.

Trip grunted and crawled out of bed to stretch, jumping when Boone

slapped his ass as he walked by. Robbie found it particularly hilarious for some reason.

“Boone always gets you,” Robbie chortled.

“Yeah, he’s a sneaky one.” Not that he was complaining, though Boone always managed to get him by surprise, whereas whenever Trip tried to do the same, Boone somehow knew, dodging and getting Trip instead. Completely unfair. He was Alpha, surely it was his right to get in a couple of butt-slaps?

They headed into the kitchen, pausing when they found Hunter sitting silently at the kitchen counter twirling his butterfly knife. Lately, Hunter never left home without it.

Boone put Robbie on the floor and gave his bottom a playful pat. “Why don’t you go change out of your pajamas, kiddo? Your dad and I will make those pancakes.”

“Okay.” Robbie skipped over to Hunter and petted his leg. “Good morning, Uncle Hunter.”

Hunter leaned over with a small smile and Robbie kissed his cheek. “Morning, trouble.”

With a cheerful smile, Robbie dashed off to his room. Trip exchanged glances with Boone and started on the coffee, watching from the corner of his eye as his mate leaned on the kitchen counter across from his brother. Ever since they’d left Perin and moved to Iarilo, all the way on the other side of St. Veles, Hunter hadn’t been the same. He still joked with them and messed around, but that mischief he’d always carried with him, that light in his eyes, had dimmed. In truth, Hunter was a shadow of his former self. He was a lot grumpier, preferred to be on his own, and had a habit of disappearing for days on end. There were dark circles under his eyes, and if it weren’t for Trip making sure he ate, his friend would have lost more weight than he already had.

Trip poured a mug of coffee and placed it next to Hunter. “Have you had breakfast?”

Hunter took a sip of coffee before shaking his head.

“Hunt, you’re barely eating, you hardly sleep...” Boone came to stand beside his brother, his hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got us worried sick.”

“I’m fine.” Hunter shrugged Boone’s hand off his shoulder, never a good sign.

“Right, because this is fine.” Boone snatched the twirling knife away from Hunter who growled at him. “Don’t you dare. I’ve told you how I feel about you taking this out with Robbie around, so don’t you go giving me attitude. Not in this house and not to me. I’m your brother. I love you and I’m worried.” He handed the knife back to Hunter, his expression softening. “Don’t push me away, little brother.”

Hunter shoved the folded knife into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, and got to his feet. His eyes were glowing and Trip could see his teeth growing out. He really hoped Hunter and Boone weren’t about to get into another fight. It seemed to be happening more often than not lately.

“You’re not going to fight are you?”

The warbled plea caught them off guard and they turned to find Robbie standing in the doorway in his Spiderman pajamas, his bottom lip quivering, and tears in his big brown eyes. He looked from Hunter to Boone before the dam burst, the high-pitched wail giving them all a start.

Trip dropped everything and made for his pup, aware of Hunter heading for the front door when Robbie cried out Hunter’s name. Trip stood stunned, his gaze going to Boone, who looked equally surprised. To Trip’s astonishment—and relief—Hunter stopped in his tracks. He stood with his fists at his sides for a moment, before turning, marching back to the kitchen, and scooping Robbie up, hugging him close, his voice gentle when he spoke.

“It’s okay, little man, don’t cry.”

Robbie let out some garbled sounds that Trip knew were supposed to be words, his small arms wrapped around Hunter’s neck. Trip and Boone followed Hunter as he carried Robbie into their new living room and sat down with him on the couch. He ran his hand soothingly down Robbie’s back,

murmuring words of comfort. When Robbie had calmed down enough to speak, he sat back, his pout at maximum capacity.

“You want to tell me what the waterworks are for?” Hunter asked quietly.

“You were going to go away and not come back,” Robbie replied with a sniff, his cheeks flushed and his lashes wet.

“Who says?”

“You’re always angry and you don’t spend time with us like you used to. Do you not want to be friends anymore?”

Hunter’s face went pale. “What? I would never *ever* not want to be friends with you, kiddo. I love you, you know that.”

“Then why are you acting so weird and always fighting with Boone?”

“I’m sorry... I just.” Hunter’s eyes welled up but he blinked back his tears. “I love someone very much, but they’re far away, and I don’t know if they’re in trouble, and I can’t help them, or be with them, and I miss him so much.”

Robbie petted Hunter’s hair and cocked his head to one side. “Don’t be sad. Daddy and Boone can do anything. They’ll help you.” Robbie looked up at Trip and Boone, his eyes wide with innocence and that heart-wrenching look filled with the belief and trust that his parents really could do anything. “Right, Daddy?” How the hell could anyone not do their damned best to prove the pup right?

Trip walked around the couch and positioned himself at Hunter’s left while Boone took a seat to his brother’s right. “You bet. I know you think you have to face this alone, Hunter, but you don’t. You’ve always been there for me, Robbie, and Boone. You think we won’t be there for you?”

“But it’s not your fight,” Hunter began, only to have Boone slip his arm around his brother’s neck, bringing their heads together.

“We’re family, Hunt. Of course it’s our fight. I’m not saying it won’t take a little time to figure things out, but I promise you, we’re going to get Ari back to you. Have I ever let you down?”

Hunter shook his head. “No.”

“And I’ll say it again,” Trip insisted. “You can stay with us as long as you want. There’s plenty of room.” Hunter had been so lost since their move, Trip and Boone had insisted the younger Devil Dog move in with them until he felt ready to find his own place.

“Thanks, Trip.”

Trip snuggled up to Hunter and started making purring noises. “Promise me, if you start feeling like everything’s coming down on you, you’ll talk to us?”

Hunter chuckled. “Yeah, all right, you weirdo.”

“So you’re going to stay and be Hunter again?” Robbie asked hopefully.

“Yes. Though I reserve the right to be grumpy every once and a while.”

Robbie patted Hunter’s cheeks with a big grin. “That’s okay. Daddy is grumpy *all* the time.”

“You little rascal!” Trip made a grab for Robbie who squealed and jumped off Hunter’s lap, running around the living room. Hunter jumped off the couch, lumbering after Robbie like a zombie.

“Brains!” He stopped behind the couch and latched his hands onto Trip’s head. “No brains,” he grunted before chasing after Robbie who was squealing and laughing. Trip slid over and wrapped his arms around Boone as Hunter and Robbie wreaked havoc around the house.

“You know, I was really starting to miss him,” Trip said, smiling when Boone chuckled and kissed his cheek.

“I heard that!” Hunter called out from somewhere in the house.

“Crap.”

Boone threw his head back and laughed. “You are so never going to hear the end of that one.”

With a grumble, Trip scanned the living room and the remaining boxes that needed unpacking. He couldn’t believe that pup still hadn’t unpacked everything. “Robbie, one of your toy boxes is in here,” he called out. “Boone, you know if we don’t get it out of the living room, there’s going to be toys



everywhere.” He got up and walked over to the box, tearing the tape off and opening it. “There’s clothes in here, too.” He looked closer. “Or at least socks. Wait a minute...”

“What is it?” Boone asked.

“Call Brook.”

“What?”

Trip slowly backed away from the box, spun on his heels, threw his arms up, and ran screaming for Robbie’s room. “They’re back!”

He heard Boone laugh behind him, followed by a string of colorful expletives, and soon Boone was standing on Robbie’s bed with the rest of them. As Trip cowered with his boys, he had to smile. Their little family might be unconventional, but they were an intrepid bunch. Most importantly, they loved each other, and no matter what they faced, they would face it together, through thick, thin, and... freakish mutant spider babies.

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*M/M Romance author by day, artist by night, Charlie Cochet is quick to succumb to the whispers of her wayward muse. From Historical to Fantasy, Contemporary to Science Fiction, no star is out of reach when following her passion. From hardboiled detectives and society gentleman, to angels and elves, there's bound to be plenty of mischief for her heroes to find themselves in, and plenty of romance, too!*

*When she isn't writing, she can usually be found reading, drawing, or watching movies. She runs on coffee, thrives on music, and loves to hear from readers.*

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