

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014.

FAIRE PLAY

Chris Cox

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

FAIRE PLAY

By Chris Cox

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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 these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

A dark haired man with a strong jaw leans forward into a cinderblock wall. He is shirtless, with his kilt settled low on his hips, revealing a thick dance belt. Every cell of his body screams of a tormented soul.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He slammed his fist into the wall as I rounded the corner. I jerked to a halt, staring open mouthed at the vision in front of me. His eyes were closed, nostrils flaring, chest heaving, every muscle tense.

Nerves failing me, I turned to go, but my movement caught his attention. Glaring over his shoulder, he snarled, "What the fuck do you want?"

Now was my moment of truth, and I hesitated...

Sincerely,

Aislinn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: undercover agent, little rich boy, Renaissance faire, first time, BDSM light, twink, age gap, coming out, kilts, voyeurism

Content Warnings: dubious consent

Word Count: 18,600

FAIRE PLAY

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Chapter One

“Let me get this straight.” Brendan ignored his boss’s smirk. “You want me to go undercover on the Renaissance faire circuit to drag home an adult who is fully capable of making his own decisions so he can be included in the fucking family portrait?”

“That about sums it up.” Harold Stinson leaned back, propping his clasped hands across his taut stomach and stared Brendan down.

Stinson might have been able to leave the Rangers behind but he hadn’t dropped the Major General mode. His ability to inspire cooperation among his bunch of outcasts from across all the services, despite their differences in training philosophies, was beyond genius.

He always said it was a matter of using the right tool for the job.

Today, apparently, Brendan Teague was his tool.

“The SEX team,” Stinson paused while Brendan winced at the acronym, “has been asked to take care of this because of our close connection with the Republican Party.”

The same party that had instituted DADT had indirectly caused the start of their off-the-radar organization. The Special Extraction team, SEX team to those few who knew of their existence, had been formed from all the Special Ops and Special Forces guys who had opted out of their military careers, either voluntarily or strongly encouraged, when DADT had been passed.

“Not helping.” Brendan didn’t know where their funding came from, didn’t need to know, didn’t want to know. But if either the Democrats or the Republicans made a request, the SEX team made their wishes come true.

“It’s not my job to make you feel better about your job, Teague.”

Stinson’s lifted eyebrow held enough scorn to put an immediate stop to most men’s bitching. But Brendan wasn’t most men. He was Stinson’s ex-lover, which gave him all the bitching rights he cared to take.

“Why me?”

“Because you’re his type.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” Stinson rubbed his hand over the offending eyebrow, then gave Brendan a look he never gave to anyone else. An apology. “Shit.”

“The twink might not be good for much, but he can dance.”

Through sheer willpower, Kevin ignored the man he'd sold his soul to, holding his tambourine high, hitting it with the palm of his hand, so that it covered his face.

The breeze through his sheer pearl-hued harem pants, side-slit and anchored only at his hips and ankles with tinkling bells, and his lack of a shirt, didn't help to cool the blood rushing through his body. Yeah, he was blushing with shame, head to toe and all points in between.

At least his penis was no longer trying to make a statement through the double layers of two white Speedos.

He would never make a proper poker player, his dad always used to say, always giving him a hug to show it wasn't a criticism.

Dad had always treated him like spun sugar. Always shielded him.

Hidden him.

Kevin had never understood that before now. How did a man get to be twenty-four years old and be totally oblivious to the machinations of the family that surrounded him?

He'd always taken such security in his father and mother and in his older brother and sister for granted. Always prided himself on the close, loving arms that gave him the love and affection he craved.

Until his father's aide had explained it all. Tina Marie had been meticulous in detailing how having a gay son would be a detriment to his dad's political platform. She'd gone into detail about the ways he'd been hidden in the past, but now that he was old enough to understand, he needed to take over that job for himself.

A teenaged boy, the kind with pimples and muscles, stood before him, ogling him.

“You're gay, aren't you?” He asked it as if Kevin was a koala in the zoo. Impersonal and vaguely curious.

“Ten bucks for a kiss, kid.” The man who held Kevin’s leash, literally, leered at the teen. “That way you’ll know if you’re—you know.” He held his hand out and wavered it as he sneered in Kevin’s direction.

Behind the tambourine, Kevin let his attention dart to the bills crushed in the kid’s hand then back to the boy’s face.

If the kid wasn’t so young, a part of Kevin could get behind that idea. The other part of him was appalled.

The jerk on his leash made the collar around his neck pull. With the reminder, he put a bit more swivel in his hips, feeling sexy, feeling outrageous, feeling so unlike himself that this whole scenario seemed like a dream.

Good dream? Nightmare? He wasn’t sure yet.

But it was as far away as his days at Washington and Lee University could be. No Masters in Elizabethan Literature could make him lose touch with reality like standing barefoot in the scuffed dirt between an apothecary’s shop and a stuffed dragon display.

Kevin focused on the human chess game being played across the field, letting the tights and feathered hats and sheathed swords and codpieces draw him into that place in his head where his family who lived in the exorbitantly expensive part of Virginia had no reality.

He breathed in, letting his immediate surroundings take over.

There was nothing now but the smell of acrid ash from the blacksmith shop, the scent of roasted cinnamon-coated pecans and the odor of bodies excited in the sun.

One of those bodies was his.

Feeling the weight of the pink leather collar around his neck, Kevin reminded himself that there was nowhere he needed to be, nothing he needed to do, no one he needed to become. Just himself, letting the flute and tambourine and drum drive his feet, sway his body, take away his pain.

Vaguely, vaguely, he was aware of the teen who had taken a step forward before turning to run. As long as they didn’t brush his skin, the other two dancers, women who actually knew how to belly dance while he only knew how to let the music run through him, were only part of the background.

He was the center of his universe, anchored to the ground by the thin leather leash that matched his collar. Without it, he would float away, leaving his conscious self behind.

Kevin willed himself to rise above the fake and poorly executed Middle English accents, the anachronistic eyeglasses of his keeper, the sound of gas-powered generators, and to sink into his puffy cloud world.

That out-of-body experience he'd found yesterday was close, so close, just an exhale away. If only the back of his neck hadn't started to itch.

Annoying. Crashing.

As if someone was staring with unkind intent. Dangerous intent.

Feeling his legs become heavy, his hands become clunky, Kevin executed a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn.

The kilt caught his attention, but the eyes held it. Brown verging on black, under intent brows that matched thick, dark, unruly hair, shorn short on the sides but long enough on top for grabbing onto for stability.

Stability? Why did that thought make him miss a step? Or was it the focus in those eyes that made him stumble.

The jerk on his leash reminded him of where he was, who he was. Just a performer in a Renaissance faire. Nothing special. But nothing fake, either, if he didn't count the belt of coins, the brass zills on his fingertips, the brush of gauzy material as light as a social kiss across the cheek.

Here, he was *not* the guy in the business suit escorting some indifferent woman to another political fund-raising banquet, brushing one of those social kisses across her cheek ever so carefully to avoid smearing her makeup and making it look sincere for the "candid" photos at the same time.

Not the guy whose family shushed him for giggling too loudly, or propping a hand on his hip, or gesturing when he talked.

The guy was still staring.

Kevin had thought all that activity and body language was too unrestrained, too improper for his family's stoic comfort zone. He'd never thought of what he did with his hands or his hips or his—whatever—as gay.

Another misstep. Another jerk on the leash.

He broke his unfocused stare—apparently he'd been staring, too—to turn forward again and glare at Max. But Max just grinned, jerked the leash again because he could, then turned away to shake the money box at the crowd that had gathered so flatteringly while Kevin had danced with his back to them.

He would like to boost his ego by assuming the enthusiastic bill-stuffing into the box was caused by his backside, but he was realistic enough to know that the ale-swilling college guys were more entranced by his companion dancers' boobs. Though truthfully, he wasn't sure how he would feel to have rolled-up money stuck in his crack like they were graciously accepting in theirs.

Damn it. He'd promised himself he wouldn't do that. Wouldn't pretend to himself anymore.

He would love to have a big paw stroke down his butt crack.

Did kilt guy have big hands?

A quick look over his shoulder told him why the itch was gone.

The guy was gone, too.

Chapter Two

Brendan stood behind a bank of Ye Olde Portopoties, the only place with halfway decent reception out here in the fields of nowhere, deep in the heart of nothingland.

“What the hell am I supposed to do, Stinson? The guy looks like he’s having the time of his life. I can’t go up to him, throw him over my shoulder and carry him away, can I?”

Brendan half-hoped Stinson would say, *Yes. Do it.* Then, this whole farce would be over.

“Charm him.” Stinson blew out a breath. “Seduce him.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

“You might try courting him.”

“What? I think our connection is bad. What did you say?”

“I said. Try. Courting. Him.”

That’s what Brendan thought Stinson had said.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

Of all the special training and practice drills Brandon had endured, courting an idiot twenty-four year old who had just left the closet had never been part of the curriculum.

“You still there, Teague?”

Brendan glared at the phone. For the first time in his whole career, he purposely broke contact with a superior without first being dismissed.

He was doing a lot of firsts.

Infiltrating a fucking bent-reality. Wearing a fucking kilt.

And apparently, fucking pimping himself out.

Damn. That kid made his thirty-three years of hard living feel too fucking old.

All hellfire and damnation, that kid made his thirty-three-year-old cock feel too fucking hard.

This was the best part of belonging to the belly dancing troupe, the afterparties when the faire closed the gates against the gawkers.

Kevin swilled a dark lager, no longer needing to swallow down his cough at the stoutness. In the three weeks since joining the troupe, he'd learned to be a less picky eater, too.

No big fire at this particular faire site, the burn ban was fully in effect. But plenty of battery-powered lanterns tried to push back the darkness from the overcast night sky.

The poker game was going on as usual. Max studied his cards like he studied his dancers, calculating, bluffing, analyzing profit versus risk. The players were quiet and intense in a circle of chattering chaos.

Many were still in costume, as he was. He had to remember to sit still on the plastic sack to keep the rough bark of the downed tree trunk from fraying the delicate gauze of his harem pants. He only had the pair of jeans, briefs, and white oxford button-down he'd arrived in, so he wore them as seldom as possible. Who knew when Max would finally decide Kevin drew in enough to pay for his costumes and his keep so that he could tuck away a little extra for himself.

But tonight, like all the nights before this one, that didn't matter. Who needed money when all his needs were met?

Well, almost all his needs. Across the circle sat kilt guy, but without his kilt. His Lucky Sevens strained at his thighs and bunched at the top of his combat boots. The boots were well-worn. His tight, gray discount store tee made the whole look perfect bad boy.

Kevin had never realized how he'd hidden his interest in guys before. It wasn't something he'd ever given any deep thought to, just like he'd never realized how casually, how pseudo-naturally, he'd circumvented questions about who he was dating or who he might like to date. The whole family was discreet that way, knowing every time a son or daughter of George Parker opened their mouths, whatever came out could be used as a sound bite, and not in a good way. Kevin had a huge repertoire of phrases that said nothing but packed a punch in print or as a recorded one-liner.

He'd never thought that he used them to hide himself, only that the whole family was cautious about revealing personal information.

Damn! No wonder he could never move ahead in his love life. He had never wanted to use the approved come-on lines his brothers or sister used to

encourage an appropriate member of the opposite sex. Because he was gay, damn it. Gay and okay with it.

Or getting okay with it, as fast as he could reprogram his own head.

The dark beer sloshed in his stomach, making it twist.

And his neck itched.

Yeah, the guy was staring again.

What should he do? Strangling the neck of his beer bottle probably wasn't going to get him very far.

Tentatively, he looked up, met the guy's stare, held it—why was that so hard to do?—and forced his lips to curve up, certain his smile was no better than Batman's Joker.

And that was it. He couldn't do it anymore.

He dropped his focus to concentrate on his hands, on his fingernails scraping at the label of his bottle.

The itching intensified. With everything in him, he resisted reaching up to scratch. Scratching in public wasn't polite.

Damn it. Defiantly, too exuberantly, he raised his hand to rub his neck.

And elbowed sans-kilt guy in the ribs as the guy squatted next to him.

Brendan suppressed his grunt as the kid's pointy elbow made contact, grateful he'd seen it coming and had lowered himself fast enough that the kid missed his groin. Yeah, that would have put a damper on this *courting* ritual.

He held out a fresh beer bottle in the kid's direction. Kid. A close look showed lines and shadows around those gray eyes that aged him. Those shadows had nothing to do with the lantern light.

"You look like you're ready for another one."

At first, the kid—he had to stop thinking of him like that—Kevin looked like he would wave off the gift.

But then, Kevin gave him a pained smile and held out his hand. "Thanks."

Fuck. This was as awkward as high school.

No. No it wasn't. Brendan hadn't come out in high school. Some would say he still wasn't out.

Fuck.

He took another swig of his own beer, wishing for the burn of a bourbon neat instead.

“I’m Brendan.”

He felt odd giving his real name, but his boss hadn’t thought making the effort to come up with an alias was necessary. In fact, his background information was mostly accurate, only faking his years since leaving the Navy with vague references to manual day labor. The file left Brendan feeling too exposed, but this was supposed to be a little in-and-out job. Nothing much more than a personal favor between two unnamed parties.

At first, the kid—*man*—the man hesitated. Finally, he held out his hand, fingers stronger than Brendan had expected. “Kevin.”

Brendan shook, unable to ignore how cold the kid’s—Kevin’s—hand was.

“Thanks.” Kevin’s voice was, well, normal, except for the part that made Brendan want to hear more of it.

Fuck.

Maybe he could blame this whole attraction thing on playing the role of a gay man—not playing, actually being the man he was. Maybe he could blame...

“My pleasure.” He knew the lines. He’d been flirted with on occasion, when he’d felt the need to frequent a gay bar. Not need. Want, not need. He didn’t need—

The kid, *Kevin*, interrupted that thought path by choking on his beer.

Brendan grabbed the bottle from Kevin’s hand, transferred it to the hand holding his own beer, and reached over to pat the kid—Kevin—on the back.

But that pat turned into a rub, circling that bare, smooth, slightly chilled skin. Circling and circling. Warming, warming. Making Brendan’s palm feel warm, too. Making his arm heat up, his need burn.

How long had it been? Any amount of time was too long. He shifted to make more room in the jeans that had no more room to give—because he wanted Kevin right now.

The desire in Kevin’s eyes only made his own need blaze hotter.

Want. Not need. He jerked his hand away.

The hurt in Kevin's eyes came and went as quickly as Brendan's hand had. But Kevin's shielded disinterest was too studied to ring sincere.

Brendan worked hard to make up the ground he'd just lost.

He peeled off his shirt and thrust it out to Kevin. "You're cold."

"I'm fine." The chill bumps coating his arms and chest proved he was lying.

Brendan lay the shirt down between them, closer to Kevin than to himself.

Leaning in, very quietly, very slowly, he asked, "Want to take a walk?"

As Brendan had hoped, Kevin leaned toward him to hear.

He reached out for Kevin's arm, only pulling back when Kevin flinched.

Fuck. Another misstep.

"No. No, I don't think so. Not tonight anyway. Maybe..." Every muscle in the kid's body trembled.

Brendan could push this, talk the kid into getting sucked into that passion he had seen in the way Kevin moved when he danced, get this assignment over with. "Okay. Maybe another time."

And he got up and walked away, giving the kid the space to feel comfortable, to feel safe.

Man. Not kid. Man.

Without realizing it, Kevin fingered the warm T-shirt as he watched Brendan walk away. He found himself on his feet, about to take a step toward that retreating broad, bare back.

Only stubbing his toe in the flimsy flip-flops he wore brought him to a stop.

He'd blown it. Totally chickened out and blown it.

"Damn it." He slipped the T-shirt over his head. Where it had fit tight on Brendan, showing off his pecs, it hung loose on Kevin. The residual heat from Brendan's body sank into Kevin deeper than skin level. The scent from Brendan's cologne had Kevin drawing in deep breathes and holding them as long as he could before letting go.

If he hadn't been such an idiot, he could have had Brendan's warm arms around him, in addition to Brendan's rapidly cooling T-shirt.

The fire ring held nothing for him. Might as well go to bed. What a cheerful thought, when his bed was a sleeping bag on a disintegrating foam pad, kept off the ground by a rickety metal and canvas cot that collapsed the first time he'd rolled over in his sleep. The pup tent stunk of mildew and claustrophobia, sleeping arrangements compliments of Max. To make it worse, Kevin was apparently paying rent for it. At least that's what Max told him the last time Kevin had tried to talk to him about his share of the money box.

Carefully stepping around the makeshift seating, he turned away from everyone, blinking into the darkness. The vastness of the black field, shadow upon shadow, made him nervous. The field wasn't well groomed. He could step in a hole. Or on a snake.

Nothing between him and the ground but tired, retread rubber, unlike Brendan's substantial broken-in boots that looked straight out of army surplus.

He was now moving so fast he had to scrunch his toes to keep his bits of sandals on while he strained to see the rise and fall of the depthless black ground in front of him.

A rustle of clothing had him slowing down to listen even though he knew, with every nerve cell, that it wasn't Brendan coming up behind him.

"Hey, you. Hold up." Max.

For half a second, Kevin pretended he hadn't heard but then his innate politeness, drilled into him from the cradle, had him slowing down, obeying.

Authority figures and respect. That had gotten him into trouble before.

Deliberately, he picked up his pace.

"Hey. I told you to hold up."

Max's grip on his arm took care of Kevin's spurt of rebelliousness.

Kevin came to a standstill with a jerk that had him toe-ing for the flip-flop that had taken a flying leap at his abrupt stop. "Sorry."

Where was that damned sandal?

"Sorry? Because you ignored me?" Max shook Kevin's arm. If he didn't have his newly-acquired tan, the bruises would have shown in the morning.

Why couldn't he lie and say he hadn't heard? But his throat closed on the untrue excuse and he just stood there, mute.

Max gave his arm one more shake, before letting go, shoving a little in the process.

Kevin stumbled, his sole brushing across the lost flip-flop. Anxiously, he worked it with his foot, angling it to slide his toes in to grip the thong.

“What did that new guy want?”

Kevin shrugged, realized Max couldn't see it in the dark then stood there, trying to think of what to say. *He was flirting with me*, was a gift too precious to give to Max.

Max ruined it for him anyway when he asked, “He liked you?”

Another shrug. Then Max's hand came around his arm again, in the same place, digging in.

“Answer me.”

“I guess.”

“He's queer?”

Kevin finally found his spine. “I didn't ask.”

“Doesn't look it, does he? But then, you would know, right? What's that they call it? Gaydar?”

Gaydar? Kevin hadn't even recognized himself as gay, much less anyone else.

Even though Max squeezed Kevin's arm again, Kevin had nothing for him.

“Where are you going?” Max added a twist to the squeeze.

“To bed.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes. That cot won't hold one, much less two.” Kevin pulled against Max's grip. Amazingly, Max let go.

Max patted him on the back, getting his grubby hands on the shirt that Brendan had given him. While Kevin was grateful the T-shirt kept Max from touching his skin, he still felt like Max was defiling the shirt with his touch.

“Might rain tomorrow. You'll really have to put out to get money from a damp crowd.”

Put out. Like a whore. “I need a cut from this weekend's take, Max.”

“After you’ve paid your expenses.” Max finally moved his hand. “Wear the orange tomorrow. With the overcast, you’ll need to make an effort to stand out.”

“Yeah, fine.” Kevin wanted to walk away, run away, right then. But he stood his ground. “I need to see the money on paper, Max. How much is my share. How much you think I’m indebted to you for.”

“Or what? You’ll pack your shit and leave? What are you going to do? Piss in your gas tank?” Max laughed as if he’d just told the world’s funniest joke. The menace underneath might have been from Kevin’s imagination inspired by the moonless night. “See you in the morning, Kev.”

Max patted him on the back hard enough to make him move. That momentum carried him in the right direction toward his rank tent. Snakes no longer seemed as threatening, in comparison to what he’d gotten himself into.

Why had he told Max he had less than a quarter of a tank and not a penny of cash on him? He had no idea.

Yes, he did, too. He’d been broke. Desperate. Max had seemed to care when he bought Kevin a meal and a beer. When he’d offered Kevin a job.

Why had he left his credit cards and checkbook on his bed when he left home? That one was easy. Pride.

Pride was the same reason he didn’t call his mother to come save him. Didn’t promise his soul for an extravagant meal and an ostentatious roof over his head. Didn’t go crawling home, denouncing who he was, agreeing to date a nice girl and fit into his father’s plans so he would be taken care of the rest of his life.

Family money was for people like him, his dad had told him often enough. People who were professional students who took jobs because the museum curator needed a docent or the art gallery owner needed a host at the front desk, or the country club pool manager needed a summer life guard and swim instructor. He was twenty-four. What makeshift job would his father or his sister find him when he was thirty-four? Forty-four?

Kevin squatted down to unzip the tent barely big enough for a cub scout. There was no walking in. Just falling flat on the cot, bracing himself for its collapse.

When it rocked but didn’t break, he carefully worked off the harem pants and Speedos, drawing in a relieved breath as the family jewels found freedom.

Family jewels. That's what his family called them. Much more genteel than calling them by their names. Testicles. Scrotum. Penis. He threw in anus for good measure.

Hell. Balls. Dick. Asshole. That's what Brendan probably called his.

He flung his wrist over his eyes, grimacing at the funk from his underarms. Rusty water dribbling from the clogged showerhead that stuck out from a cinder block wall would take care of the smell in the morning.

Fuck—that's a word Brendan would use. *Fuck*, he was getting punch-drunk. Too little sleep. Food that sat too heavy in his stomach. Dust and people and staring and...

And dancing. Moving the way his body called out for. Being just as gay as he wanted to be. Nobody ashamed of him. Nobody telling him how bad life would be if he didn't pretend better, harder, more diligently.

The faire folk had been here two weekends when Kevin had pulled into the lot, paid the entry fee with the last of the cash in his wallet and asked at each booth if they were hiring until Max had been so kind to him and hired him. Kevin had danced for four weekends plus Senior-citizen Wednesdays and home-school Thursdays. He'd watched those old ladies put quite a bit of cash in the box. *Not paid off my share, my ass*. But proving it was a different matter.

This was the fifth weekend. That meant they had one more week and weekend left before they all moved on to the next faire site. Would Max take him with the rest of the troupe? Did Kevin hope the answer was yes, or no?

Yes meant he'd eat. No meant he'd...

Calling home was too hard to think about right now.

Instead, he snuggled deep into Brendan's shirt, breathing in, blocking the damp mold of the tent with the scent of musky man.

And he dreamed, those wet dreams he'd had since puberty. Of the heaviness between his legs, of the big strong hands that cupped him, held him, stroked him, made him cum.

This time, his dream-lover had a voice, a face. A name.

When morning came, Kevin's grogginess proved he'd slept deep and solid.

Today was going to be a good day.

Chapter Three

Kilts in the drizzling rain and muck weren't the most protective clothing Brendan had ever worn, but they weren't as bad as soaked camo. But the huge, white shirt with the full, long sleeves hung heavily from his shoulders, weighing him down.

He clenched and unclenched his fist to keep from fondling the hilt of the nine-inch dagger peace-tied at his waist. The dirk scabbarded to his sock pressed a reassuring dent into his calf.

This place gave him the creeps.

Not the day-to-day fronts of a renaissance village, but the behind the scenes machinations of the modern day money men. And Max, the keeper of Kevin, was one of them. The man made Brendan's skin crawl.

He wasn't too pleased to see Max hold Kevin on the end of that leash, either. Although, Kevin didn't seem to mind. So it wasn't any of Brendan's business, was it? And how much better was he than Max when the idea of *him* holding Kevin's leash didn't seem nearly as demeaning?

A glance at the big tower clock showed him his internal time was accurate. Ten minutes until the belly dancing troupe had to vacate their spot for a juggling act. If he walked over now, he could catch a few minutes of Kevin swaying to the music. He needed to hit the right tone. Cautiously but definitely, 'I'm interested in you'.

Shouldn't be too hard since he wouldn't have to fake a thing.

And that was another of his dilemmas. Ethics.

He'd done a lot of things to make his mission successful. A lot of things that wouldn't withstand the test of a judge or jury. And he'd never hesitated, never questioned. His job was to do his job. His boss's job was to sort out the mess he left behind.

But getting Kevin to fall for him—if it was even possible—would be a different kind of problem. Love 'em and leave 'em had never been an issue. He'd never gotten to the first part, much less the second part.

The ghost of Gerry flitted behind his eyelids followed by a more solid, yet fleeting, thought of Harold Stinson.

He squared his shoulders and walked around a wilted flower-boy who was shouting out in a mangled British-Australian accent to the handful of intrepid, poncho-covered attendees that his daisies would brighten their world better than sunshine.

On impulse, he backtracked.

“Those.” He pointed to a paper-wrapped bunch, artificially-dyed screaming-orange and vivid pinkish-purple.

“Five bucks.” No accent there, just an outheld hand. The guy had just sold a similar bouquet to a tonsured monk for three dollars. Brendan was definitely a rogue in this tight-knit family of faire players.

He reached for his wallet, remembered he wasn't wearing pants, and dug into the furry pouch that rested over his genitals. *Sporran*. He needed to remember that. He was supposed to be into this playacting thing.

A strong gust of wind picked up his kilt, showing the briefs he wore underneath.

The flower guy smirked. “Kilts are worn bare-assed. It's a skirt if you wear underwear.”

“Yeah. I know.” He gave the guy a conciliatory shrug. “Apparently, medieval Scotsman weren't hung like me. Hard wooden benches and swinging balls are a bad combination, in my brief experience. Or briefless experience.”

“We try for authenticity here as much as possible.”

So much for being friendly. “What are you, the anachronism patrol? Maybe you better work on that accent of yours before you start worrying about other people being in character.”

“What's wrong with my accent?”

Brendan shook off the question. Time was running out if he wanted to see Kevin dance. “The flowers. Please.”

Please was more of an order than a request. The flower guy responded, shoving the flowers at him. “Hope she enjoys them.”

“He.” Brendan surprised himself but anything else felt—dishonest? Untrue to Kevin and to himself. When did he start concerning himself with that? And why was he emphasizing the point when he reiterated, “Not she. He.”

Flower-boy dropped the smirk, instead smiling to show his dimples. “Oh? If it doesn't work out—”

Brendan didn't bother to answer as he turned away, sloshing through the puddles to see the last of Kevin's performance.

Kevin stood under the eave of the armory shop, avoiding the mist, but not the humidity.

At least today's harem pants, layers of sheer orange and pink and golden yellow, didn't turn translucent when wet like the white ones. The orange Speedo didn't need to be double-layered which was nice for freedom, but maybe a little too free and easy. His armbands, scarves in the same colors and material as the harem pants, wrapped sadly around his biceps instead of floating around his body like they were designed to do. Despite his toes gripping hard, his flip-flops kept trying to slide off the slick rubber surface. And his hair—ugh. It curled around his face in wild ringlets.

Wouldn't his professors be shocked to see him like this?

At home, he'd have used every product in his bathroom to try to constrain those curls. Here, he did well to stick his head under the dribbling showerhead and scrub shampoo through it, so *au natural* was it.

Sammy, his new best friend—maybe the only real friend he'd ever had, finished waiting on a customer and returned to the furthest corner of the rough wooden counter to lean on his elbow and continue their conversation.

Sammy played with the silver chain around his neck while he tried to explain once more. "It's not like belonging to my master is a hardship. It's an honor, a privilege. He takes such good care of me."

"But what if he stops taking care of you?"

"Trust is a big part of our relationship." Sammy pulled the chain tight, his thumb rimming the inside of it. "But it's in our contract that if either of us ever wants out, we... Well, that's private between the two of us, but I'll be okay." He dropped his hand to rub his stomach through the thin, tanned leather tunic he wore. "It makes me a little sick to even think of not being my master's boy."

Belonging. Kevin had always thought he belonged in his family. Now he felt unwanted. Untethered. Floating along with no one to give a shit about him.

They hadn't even come to look for him.

Kevin shivered, despite the wet humidity. "I can almost, but not quite, wrap my head around it."

Sammy pointed to the cheap pink dog collar around Kevin's neck. "That's a joke. What I have with my master is nothing like being on a leash for Max."

The way he said *Max* sounded like the worst expletive a person could say.

"No way do I think of Max as my master." The shivering hadn't stopped. Self-conscious, he rubbed his hand across his butt, brushing away who knew what.

"So you can just walk away from Max any time you want to?"

"Sure." But could he? He had no gas and no way to buy it. And Max wasn't paying up. According to Max, Kevin owed *him* a lot of money. Food money, costume money, accommodations money—although that tent and cot couldn't cost that much, could it?

Not for the first time, he thought of the credit cards and cell phone he'd left on his bed at home. *Maybe they couldn't find him?*

Was it better to not know?

Sammy leaned in close and whispered, although no one was around, "If you need help, let me know. Or let my master know."

Pride had Kevin saying, "I'm fine. Really."

Sammy's jaw clenched, making Kevin upset that he'd upset his friend.

"I appreciate—"

Sammy cut him off with a sharp slice of his hand. "I can't help you until you want help. Just ask me, okay?" He reached out like he would touch Kevin, before he dropped his hand. "Please?"

Electricity traced down his spine, urging Kevin to turn around.

Sammy looked past him and showed a forced smile, eyes slightly downcast and to the side.

That was how Kevin felt most comfortable meeting strangers, too, but he'd been trained, coaxed and harangued into looking into a person's eyes. After twenty-four years, it shouldn't be that hard, should it?

But he didn't have to do that here.

Tension left his shoulders, although that tingling only intensified.

Kevin felt the warmth of the body behind him right before Sammy took the smallest of steps toward the center of the counter, to separate their tête-à-tête from customer business.

“May I help you, sir?” Sammy asked, pleasant and slightly subservient. The perfect combination for sales.

A deep voice, Brendan's voice, said, “I found who I was looking for.”

Kevin gave into the need to turn around—he wouldn't have been able to resist without causing himself all kinds of anxiety.

“Hi.” Brendan held out a huge bunch of magenta and neon orange daisies toward him. “I missed your performance.”

“We switched with the knife-throwing act. He was hoping the weather would clear first. Slippery hands and sharp blades—you know?”

“I can imagine.” Brendan's eyes lit. Kevin felt extremely good about himself for bringing that bit of pleasure to Brendan.

Brendan held out the flowers. “These are for you.”

“Thanks.” His voice squeaked high like it did when he was excited. He was supposed to take a deep breath first. Regulate. But Brendan didn't seem to mind.

“I thought we might get something to eat?”

Kevin's excitement died a quick and painful death. “I don't have my wallet with me.” Like it would do any good if he did. He hadn't had spending money in weeks. Instead he had a collection of potted meat and crackers, dry cereal and granola bars and watery soup that he ate cold when desperate. Max did buy him the occasional turkey leg or apple, though, to eat around the circle at night.

“My treat.” Brendan looked sheepish as he looked down at the display counter. Then he swallowed hard and looked back at Kevin. “Like a date.”

“A date?” Kevin's voice hit those high notes again. He felt the need to explain. “My first.”

“A good-looking man like you?”

Being called a man by Brendan did something really intense deep down in his Speedos. He was generally called his father's son at best, or more commonly, the Parker kid.

“I've been set up on occasion, but never asked just for myself.”

“Then I'm glad to be your first.”

Yeah, that single layer of spandex wasn't really doing its job. At least the pants were full enough to—No, they weren't.

Brendan's quick glance down seemed to appreciate the effect he had on Kevin, as his furry sporran got a little fuller.

Kevin was feeling pretty cocky about that. He'd never realized before how ashamed he'd felt about so much. Not that anyone ever told him to. It had just been implied.

Things like, "Don't stare, son," and, "Isn't she pretty?" when it was plain he wasn't looking at *her* but at her companion, had taught him to hide—to hide so much. Maybe even everything.

He looked out over the bedraggled faire site. The environment definitely had advantages over the one he'd left behind.

"Where would you like to go?" Brendan's hand warmed deep into Kevin's bare back. His voice throbbed deep into Kevin's solar plexus.

After all these weeks of mouth-watering hunger, Kevin's mind went blank. Anxiety, his ever-constant nemesis, hit him in the gut as he tried to think and only ended up strangling his flowers.

He fell back on this standby, having to risk Brendan thinking poorly of his indecisiveness. "Wherever you'd like."

But Brendan didn't pull away, didn't look down at him as if he were a brainless monkey, didn't seem to regret the invitation. Instead, he just said, "Why don't we go to King's Tavern? I ate there last night and it wasn't bad."

The most expensive setup on the whole faire grounds. Real food, not pre-cooked and warmed-over steak-on-a-stake.

Kevin's mouth watered so much he didn't try speaking. He just nodded.

It must have been enough.

Brendan's hand coasted up and down his back. "Good."

Kevin paid no attention to where Brendan guided him with that strong, warm hand in the small of his back. Truly, at this moment, he would have followed Brendan anywhere.

It felt so good to trust. At least for a little while.

Court him. Brendan sat across for Kevin, watching the graceful movement of his wrist, the tilt of his head, the slightest straightening of his shoulders, and fought with everything in him to keep from becoming entranced.

“So, I really appreciate this.” Kevin looked over the menu like it held the key to salvation.

“My pleasure.” There was too much truth in that.

He'd never—not even come close to being attracted to a guy like this. All the other men had been, well, there. Convenient was too easy of a description. Desire factored into it. Desire factored into this attraction, too, but it was so different.

Fuck, he was a horny old bastard. Kevin was twenty-four. A baby.

“Are you ready?” The server, dressed in corset and braids, gave both of them a cheery smile then added a wink for him.

Fuck yeah, he was ready. Hungry as hell. Although food didn't even enter the picture.

“So many choices.” Kevin handed over the menu to their server, his pec flexing, his bicep tensing with the movement.

Not a baby. A full grown man.

Kevin looked to him, his gaze skittering past Brendan's eyes and ending up somewhere near Brendan's chin. “I'll have a cup of beef stew, please.”

It was the third cheapest thing on the menu, with only a grilled cheese sandwich or a corn dog costing less. Kevin didn't want to be any trouble. Why in the hell did this smart, sexy guy fail in the self-esteem department?

If Brendan had the right, he'd make sure Kevin knew every second of every day how much he was valued.

For the first time in his entire thirty-odd years, he had thoughts of having someone to come home to after a long mission. That someone had Kevin's face, Kevin's body, Kevin's voice.

He was getting way too into this role-play thing. He'd have to do something drastic to purge all this domestic shit when this particular mission was through.

For now, he'd have to settle for feeding the man.

And courting him. It was his duty.

“That's it? Stew is all you want?”

The slight hesitation before Kevin nodded proved Brendan was right. “I'm not really that...”

Brendan stared him down, daring Kevin to outright lie to him.

“Stew will be fine.” Kevin’s voice was barely above a whisper as he spoke to his clasped hands.

“The steak is really good here. I’ll feel like a pig if I eat one while you sip your soup. Will you consider adding the filet mignon to your order? It’s not that big.”

But it was full of protein. Kevin was beautifully lean, but a few extra pounds would keep him from seeming too fragile.

A flash of Kevin under him, Brendan letting loose, holding nothing back, had Brendan shifting in his seat. His tighty-whities had to do some stretching to accommodate him. He needed more control here.

How in hell did guys wear kilts commando without being charged for public indecency?

As the server walked away, Kevin did a quick glance up from contemplating his own intertwined fingers, then looked down again. “This is my first date.”

Brendan studied him. Hard. He had personal knowledge that Kevin attended at least two fund-raisers or charity banquets each month. “What do you mean?”

Kevin shrugged, then took a deep breath and looked Brendan in the eyes. The color in his irises almost swallowed by the black of his pupils. “I’ve been an escort.” He stopped and blushed. “Not like a paid—not that kind of escort.”

“Uh-huh.” Brendan should help him out, but the boy—man—needed to get himself out of his own messes on occasion, especially when Brendan was there to protect him.

“No. Really. I don’t... I never have... I’m a virgin.” He was starting to hyperventilate. Time for Brendan to step in and protect him from himself.

“Nothing wrong with being a virgin. I wasn’t much younger myself.” That was the solid truth.

Kevin leaned forward, his bare chest coming closer and closer. Brendan’s fingers itched to circle those little nips, make them peak, make them need.

Damn. He shifted on the hard wood chair.

“How old were you?” Kevin pulled back. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

Brendan wanted to reach out a hand to hold him. Tight. Skin-to-skin.

Instead, he told Kevin about a dark and scary night he'd never talked about before.

"I was in the military. In the field. I can't tell you where."

"What branch?"

"Special Forces."

Kevin's eyes widened at that. Then he leaned forward again, like Brendan had been hoping he would do. At a whisper, he asked, "You're gay? In Special Forces?"

Brendan thought about all the guys with secrets. "It's not as rare as you'd think. Ten percent of the population. That's a lot of us, whether we admit it to ourselves and others, or not."

Deep thoughts crossed Kevin's face. Then he nodded. "Okay. It will take a while for me to get used to that concept, though."

"You and a lot of other people." Brendan was stunned at the bitterness that laced his reply.

"So how did it happen?"

Before Brendan could answer, before he could find the right balance between censorship and shared confidence, Kevin held up a graceful hand.

"Wait. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. You don't need to... It's just that I've never had anyone to talk to about being—" Again the whisper, "—gay."

"Your family doesn't know?"

"I barely know." Kevin let out a big sigh. "They say things like 'late bloomer' and 'academic'. But I think they've known for a long time."

"And you?"

"I've tried not to think about it."

"Why?"

"Because—" Kevin's mouth tightened. "Because I must have subconsciously known that no one would be pleased."

"That's not right."

"That's just how my family is."

“I wasn’t talking about your family. I was talking about me. I’m damned glad you’re gay.” Brendan finally let his fingers do what they had been aching to do. With his left hand, he reached up and touched that taut little bud as it pebbled under his callused fingertip.

“Nipple rings.” Kevin leaned into his touch. “Dangling ones that move when I move.”

“So sensitive. They would look so beautiful with my rings in them.” It wasn’t a look Brendan had ever been attracted to before, but on Kevin, it would be so sublime.

Kevin groaned, long and low, just for Brendan, his breath picking up speed.

So did Brendan’s. Vaguely, he realized they were in sync.

And the server was standing next to them, holding a heavy tray of food.

Kevin sat back so hard, his chair rocked.

“Easy,” Brendan murmured. The server didn’t seem to hear him, but Kevin did. Kevin’s breath evened out as the tension dropped in his neck and shoulders.

“Your food, good sirs.” Her accent wasn’t even close to any known accent from any time or place on earth. But her discretion guaranteed a big tip.

With a curtsy, she was gone.

And so was the moment.

They ate, talking of how good the food was, talking of the misty weather, talking of the crowds and dancing, talking of nothing, a nothing that had never felt more comfortable to Brendan.

A comfortable that made remembering his mission all but impossible.

Chapter Four

The sun came out, turning the misty humidity into steamy humidity, but Kevin didn't care.

His belly was full—and he was about to dance for Brendan.

The meal had been good, he guessed. He wasn't sure what he ate, only that Brendan listened to every word that came from Kevin's mouth. No one had ever paid attention to him like that before.

Kevin didn't remember what he said either, just that he'd made Brendan laugh.

Vaguely, he recalled talking about his first time in front of the crowd, trying to sway his hips while not moving lewdly.

He might have felt Brendan's knee bump his, then rub along the inside of his thigh.

He thought he might have mentioned something about wanting nipple rings, so he could hang dangling beads and coins that rattled in time to the music. He might have remembered Brendan's eyes going dark as he leaned forward to inspect said nipples. Touched them. Made them ache for more.

And he might have gotten so hard he had to sit a while after they'd finished their meal before he could leave the cover of the table.

Turning the talk to his family—his mother's charity work, his sister's fiancé—had done the trick.

He'd almost been late for his performance.

As the music started, he wished they'd gone back to his tent and done the trick instead. He could feel himself growing hard again. In his single-layer Speedo. Not good.

Think of something else. Think of anything else.

Max had left off the leash today, otherwise Kevin would have made a misstep on purpose. A jerk of the leash always put him in the right headspace. *Headspace*. He'd learned that word from Sammy.

What if Brendan held that leash? What if he trusted Brendan like Sammy trusted his master?

He opened his eyes and saw Brendan leaning against a tree, too far away to touch. Too far away to look like one of the gawkers. But close enough to watch every move Kevin made.

Close enough for Kevin to see he had Brendan's total focus.

And just like that, he didn't care about the Speedo issue at all. All he cared about was making Brendan happy.

Caught in a daydream of what could have happened had they taken that trip to his tent, Kevin let his body move without thought, without intent, with only his fantasy to guide him.

The ache in his lower back, in the balls of his feet, in his thighs, made Kevin aware that he'd been dancing for a long time. The absence of music made the noise of the faire come crashing in.

The movement of the man leaning against the tree, of him leaving, made Kevin aware of the crowd of old ladies stuffing bills in Max's box while they told him how gracefully he moved.

"Erotic as hell," one of the women said. The others tittered, embarrassed, but most of them nodded their little white heads, agreeing.

A woman his sister's age handed him a twenty with her business card folded inside. "Call me," she said. "I'll make it worth your time."

One knight and two barbarians looked from him to her, then back again. One of the barbarians made sure he made eye contact, then reached down and adjusted himself.

Kevin had never had so many propositions in his whole life, much less at the same time.

His ego felt stroked. His penis wept to be stroked. And his conscience made him feel guilty, as if he was giving away something that belonged to someone else. Something that belonged to the man who had turned away and left without a smile. Without a nod. With nothing on his face, or in his manner to show that he'd been moved.

In fact, Kevin was almost sure he'd seen blank coldness on that chiseled face as Brendan had stridden away.

His stomach clenched hard enough he thought he might lose his lunch.

Like he'd lost Brendan? As if he'd ever had him.

But there had been flowers, flowers that he'd laid so carefully on the ground out of the way, but now lay crushed, trampled by Max or maybe one of the drummers or the flutist. It didn't matter who. They were stomped into the mud, not a single petal worth salvaging.

Like him.

"You got something going with that new guy? The one with the rope and swordplay act?"

"Rope and swordplay?" Kevin hadn't even asked what Brendan did. No wonder Brendan had decided Kevin wasn't worth sticking around for.

"No." He looked at the ruined flowers, wishing he could go back in time. How far was a question he couldn't answer right now. "Nothing's going on."

Max gave him a hard stare, as if he expected Kevin to change his answer. But Kevin had told the truth.

"Nothing," he said again.

Max held out his hand and Kevin flinched away.

Max glared at him, just a hair's breadth from a snarl. "The money that woman gave you, boy." He shook his hand. "You know my rules."

"Yes. Of course." Kevin handed it over, card and all. As soon as the bill left his hand, he felt empty. As empty as he'd felt when he'd left home with only a hundred forty dollars in his wallet.

Sammy was there, crowding Max, looking Max in the eye. So unlike Sammy.

"Kevin?"

Kevin hadn't thought of Sammy as a big guy, but right now, next to Max, he seemed to be inches taller, chest and arms developed from time spent at the forge.

Max took a step back. "What do you want, you little freak?"

Sammy turned his back to Max but kept him in sight when he asked Kevin, "I've got some free time. Want to walk around with me?"

Kevin tried not to hesitate, tried to just say, *yeah, sure*. But he found himself looking to Max. Looking for permission.

Just like he'd always done at home. There had always been someone there to answer to. Someone with a schedule. Someone to tell him where to be when.

He missed that, damn it. He didn't want to miss it, but he did.

Max gave Sammy a leery once-over before he jerked his chin at Kevin. "Go on, but be on time for the next show."

Two men to share his day with in one afternoon.

How long would it take him to screw up and run off Sammy like he'd done with Brendan?

How long would it hurt like this?

Brendan was *not* in the mood for this.

He scowled at the crowd, letting his mood bleed into his act as he flipped his dagger over and over, not needing to watch it to catch it.

"Volunteers?" he ground out.

A cute little chickie, unnatural blond by her roots, unnatural boobs by her bustier, giggled forward. Unattractive to him, all the way around, although many men would disagree. She would be perfect except—

"Me! Pick me!" Her breath smelled of beer. Lots of beer.

Nope. He didn't do inebriated, no matter how harmless this display might be.

But the crowd didn't hold many other prospects. Bedraggled parents with sodden children, an arthritic couple clutching their handbags and canes.

The little old lady who'd stuffed money in Kevin's costume. Maybe her?

No, he didn't take out his frustration on little old ladies. He was ashamed of himself for even thinking it. Even if this little old lady was an undercover agent who could slit his throat in his sleep without blinking. Today, she was there only to deliver information.

But she was his best prospect.

She gave him a look, warning him off.

The flash of flame-colored harem pants caught his attention. Off to the side, halfway behind a cart selling astrology sign posters, Kevin peeped through the cart's supports while his friend Sammy stood free and clear of any obstacles and stared at Brendan as if willing him to stare back.

It worked. Brendan stared.

“Volunteers?” he called, knowing that even if his voice wouldn’t carry over the sparse crowd, his intent would be loud and clear.

He could lie to himself. Tell himself that it was just his horny prick that wanted Kevin. Tell himself that he was faking attraction for the job. Tell himself that the thought of having Kevin willingly at his mercy didn’t set off a blooming pleasure he hadn’t known he could even feel.

Sammy hooked his arm around Kevin’s and pulled, knocking Kevin off balance enough to get him moving.

Kevin’s steps weren’t quick, weren’t enthusiastic, weren’t eager.

And that blooming began to wither.

Sammy kept up the pace, hauling Kevin behind him, right through the meager circle, right past the overdue dye job, right into Brendan’s grasp, literally.

Because Sammy didn’t let go until Brendan’s grip was in place around Kevin’s sexy bicep.

“Your volunteer, milord,” Sammy rang out in a showman’s voice that startled Kevin enough to make him tense. Then Sammy executed a theatrical bow, backing away the whole time until he bumped into the growing line of people.

“Easy,” Brendan murmured as he pulsed his grip on Kevin’s arm.

Kevin took a breath, obviously trying to follow instructions.

Brendan turned Kevin to face him, put his finger under Kevin’s downturned chin and lifted until Kevin had to meet him, eye-to-eye. Even then, Kevin’s focus kept darting away.

Quietly, Brendan explained, “I’d like to tie you up, demonstrate some knots, then I’ll cut you loose. Are you okay with that?”

“Why?” Kevin asked, his focus on Brendan’s throat. “Why did you leave me?”

Brendan didn’t insult either of them by pretending not to know what Kevin asked. But he did search for an answer he could give without revealing too much.

Because I felt too much. Because I wanted too much. Because I needed too—“Because I needed to get ready for my performance.”

Performance. He let his hand drift down Kevin's chilled arm as Kevin shivered. Would this be too much? For Kevin? For him?

"You're cold?"

"You'll warm me up?" The words were right, but Kevin still kept himself apart, not leaning toward Brendan like he'd done earlier.

Brendan needed his trust.

"I'll take care of you." He meant it, on so many levels. On too many levels. How could he expect Kevin to trust him when he didn't mean what he said?

But he wanted to mean it. The depth of his protectiveness went way beyond any mission he'd ever been a part of.

Kevin pulled away from him, and Brendan realized he was grimacing down at the beautiful boy. *Man. Not boy.*

Kevin's eyes changed, his pupils growing big and dark, his breath coming soft and quick, his skin warming under Brendan's touch. *Desire.*

A reflection of Brendan's own emotional transformation.

"Okay." Kevin's whisper was husky and thick. Too easy to imagine that whisper as a prelude to lovemaking.

Sex. Brendan didn't make love. He had sex.

He fucked.

He reminded his cock that Kevin was a virgin.

No help there. In fact, that made it worse. That Brendan could be the first, *the only*—

Not real. Can't be real. Can never be real. Just a mission in fantasyland.

A mission it would take a fantasy to accomplish.

Court him. He had permission from the boss himself.

Kevin shifted toward him.

Because the temptation was too much, Brendan ran his hand, the one holding the dagger, down Kevin's back. His boy's skin was smooth and supple against the back of Brendan's fist.

"Okay," Kevin said again.

“Okay.” Brendan looked up at the crowd that had more than tripled, the crowd he’d forgotten about. Dangerous.

They weren’t restless, just expectant. Not much time had passed. Just a lifetime.

This act didn’t need patter, not the way Brendan did it. Not with Kevin.

He spread his tartan over the mud and uncoiled his length of rope.

Kneeling on the thick woolen tartan, Kevin could feel the cold of the mud underneath seep into him. But the moisture made the ground soft, made the time spent on his knees comfortable—as comfortable as he could be as Brendan’s hands brushed across him.

Instead of feeling restrictive, the ropes felt—

Safe.

Even with all those people watching him, Brendan was there, between him and them.

He stayed focused on Brendan, on his face when Brendan was in his line of sight, on his smell when Brendan moved behind him. On his touch, all the time.

And on the ropes, which Brendan had touched, had wrapped around him and secured, the ropes that represented Brendan, holding him tight.

Taking away the confusion, the indecision, the worry. The ropes that left him without choice, that left him free to simply be.

Kevin had never felt so light, so unhampered by responsibility that threatened to wreck him should he make a mistake. Should he fail. According to his family, he was a total failure.

“Shh. You’re okay. You’re doing great. You’re perfect.” Brendan spoke for Kevin’s ears only as he tied off Kevin’s ankles with the rope that spanned Kevin’s hips, making it impossible for Kevin to rise even if he wanted to.

But he didn’t want to—because Brendan was okay with Kevin just as he was. More than okay. Brendan said he was perfect.

He’d never been perfect before. Never even been okay, being who he was.

Always, he’d been the Parker without ambition, without savvy, without a clue about the politics floating around him. Naive.

Not protected, but hidden.

But not with Brendan. Brendan had him on display and he was perfect.

And high.

No drugs involved. Not a drop of alcohol.

But high on the timbre of Brendan's voice. On the nod of approval as he relaxed into Brendan's touch. On the pride in Brendan's eyes when he held out his arms, indicating he was done, inviting the crowd to look, to see his beautiful boy, chest out and arching.

"My beautiful boy." That's what Brendan had whispered in his ear, as he had secured the final knot binding Kevin's wrist to his ankles.

And Kevin was. In that moment he was both beautiful and Brendan's boy.

There were no other moments, not while he was bound, not while he was under Brendan's control, under Brendan's mercy. Under Brendan's protection.

Beautiful. Perfect. Safe.

Perfectly safe.

And the happiest he'd been in his whole life.

The crowd had grown while Brendan had worked. They were a quiet crowd, watching as if Brendan performed a sacred ritual.

Would that explain why Brendan had lost total touch with everything outside the confines of the tartan Kevin knelt on? His whole, complete focus totally on the man who knelt before him.

What had happened? Brendan had never in his long memory become unaware of his environment.

That kind of inattention was not only dangerous, it was irresponsible in this time and place.

At his feet, Kevin's breath hitched ever so slightly.

Brendan was so tuned-in to Kevin that even that subtle change had Brendan on alert to any unease Kevin might be experiencing.

"Easy, boy," Brendan murmured, knowing Kevin was equally tuned to him and would feel as much as hear the quiet reassurance.

He was right. Kevin immediately settled, his eyes flickering up to Brendan then hazing over with unfocused, total acceptance.

No one but the two of them would have seen any difference from one moment to the next, but they did, the air between them rife with a current that only the two of them could detect.

Brendan had seen power exchange done before. He had an acquaintance or two who had dragged him to a few leather bars, sure that the scene would appeal to him. One of those acquaintances had even insisted that Brendan would find true contentedness when he finally embraced his dominant side.

He'd told her she didn't know what in hell she was talking about and that had been the end of that budding friendship.

He owed her a huge apology.

Brendan had never understood, hadn't even begun to imagine how being looked at like Kevin looked at him would make him feel. That Kevin was giving up and giving over, trusting Brendan with every cell in his body, every breath, was an honor that made Brendan feel huge, powerful, and so very important.

He'd been a key player before, many times before, for his skills, his training, even for his expediency. But now, as Kevin knelt before him, watching him with eyes calm and serene—maybe even adoring—for the first time in his life, Brendan knew what being valued felt like.

If only it was real.

But it couldn't be, could it? The boy—and hell, yes, at his age and with his innocence, Kevin was a boy compared to Brendan's age and experience—was caught up in the excitement of being the center of attention. According to Kevin's dossier, he wasn't used to being noticed much by friends and family much less being cheered for by a crowd of strangers.

Fuck. How had Brendan gotten caught up in this fantasy as well? This mission, this empty, pointless, political mission, was going to hell in a handbasket.

Standing before Kevin, he pulled out his dagger and surveyed the artwork of knots that bound the boy, neck to ankles. Kevin didn't move, didn't flinch, barely even blinked. Brendan had never seen the boy so calm. So complacent. So at peace.

Kevin looked up at Brendan with such open trust, like everything in his life was just fine because Brendan stood between him and the world.

And it felt damned good.

But nothing lasted. Good or bad, nothing stayed the same.

“You’re okay, boy,” he said to Kevin before putting an end to this show by spreading his arms wide, inviting the crowd’s admiration.

They held bills out to him, but he made them wait. He wouldn’t leave Kevin, so vulnerable and helpless at his feet, for any reason and certainly not for money.

Instead, he flourished his dagger, examined his knotwork and chose a point across Kevin’s bare chest.

“I’ve got you.” His lips brushed Kevin’s ear.

Kevin gave a deep sigh, the corners of his mouth lifting so slightly the movement was more of a suggestion than an action.

The trust his boy gave him filled a place so infinitely dark and empty it had no beginning or end. But now, Kevin’s light chased away all the shadows.

Slicing through the thick knot, Brendan watched as the rest of the ropes fell away.

Still, Kevin remained motionless, awaiting Brendan’s permission to move.

Brendan knelt down himself, ran his hands along the sides of that elegantly arched frame, felt the quivering of Kevin under his palm, then wrapped his arms around his boy, pulling that compliant body into his, feeling the synchronization of their heartbeats, feeling the warmth of Kevin’s breath against his neck, feeling right in his own skin for the first time in his life.

The knife sliced sharp. Clean. Cold.

As the restrictions fell away, Kevin was afraid to move, afraid to breath, lest he explode into a million slivers that could never be put back together again.

And then there was Brendan with his big hands sure and strong, stroking him, assuring him, holding him together.

Being pulled into Brendan, chest to chest, heartbeat to heartbeat, made Kevin’s world spin in place, tighter and tighter, until he felt cocooned. Safe. Loved.

Loved? God, he wished—longed to be loved. And by this man. This man who he had just met, barely knew.

As Kevin tensed, Brendan spread those huge, assuring hands along his bare back.

“Shh.” The deep rumble settled deep in his solar plexus. Heavy. Anchoring. Cherishing.

There was no time. No ticking clock. No crowd waiting for them to move on so the next act could begin. Just Brendan, keeping out the worries of the overwhelming, overpowering, judgmental world, making a perfect place for Kevin inside those strong arms, against that warm chest. Safe.

Kevin gave over, gave up, gave in. And floated in bliss.

Forever.

Until Max cracked through. “What the hell are you doing, boy?”

As Kevin crashed, Brendan tightened his grip. “Steady.”

Steady. Brendan’s command was the only force keeping Kevin together.

Steady. He pulled himself apart from Brendan, leaning back, blinking, looking beyond the two of them to the crowd that was still stuffing bills in Brendan’s plastic bucket.

Too much time couldn’t have passed. Brendan wouldn’t have allowed it to.

Just like he wouldn’t allow Max to—

But keeping him safe from Max wasn’t Brendan’s responsibility. Not that Kevin needed to be kept safe. Not that Brendan needed to be responsible for Kevin. Not that... Not that this was anything more than an aberration that was quickly turning into an embarrassment.

How could he have let himself go like that? In front of all these people. With a man—a *man* he didn’t even know.

His parents would—

Twenty-four years old and worried about what his parents would think.

That’s why he’d left. To figure out what *he* thought. What *he* felt. What he was.

Kevin stumbled to his feet, ungraceful in the way he pushed himself up.

Brendan held out a hand. Kevin almost refused—almost wanted to refuse. But then his knees tried to fold and he found himself not only grasping Brendan's hand but also his shoulder. That broad, steady shoulder.

While Max stood by, arms crossed, foot tapping.

Max's glare skidded off Kevin to land on Brendan who was powering to his feet with no sign of the clumsiness Kevin had displayed.

Brendan stood in front of Kevin, shielding him, as if Kevin needed protection from Max.

Max was the man who had taken Kevin in, given him a job and an advance on payment so Kevin could afford his costumes and his little pup tent. Max had even given him enough food to live on, bought him the occasional turkey leg when the money was good.

"Come on, boy."

Boy. So different when Max called him that than when Brendan did.

Max made him feel immature. Stupid.

Brendan made him feel—loved.

Deluded.

There was no way a man like Brendan would fall in love with a man like him in so short a time.

In any amount of time.

Kevin stepped around Brendan. The chill against his bare skin made him cross his arms. His own grip was not even close to the same as Brendan's touch. No touch had ever affected him like Brendan's.

Max pointed behind him, a clear indication of the place he expected Kevin to occupy.

But Kevin couldn't seem to make himself move. Instead, he looked to Brendan, waiting for—asking for—something?

Brendan assessed Max. Then did the same to Kevin. A shadow crossed his face.

He looked away from Kevin and remoteness hardened his eyes.

With a jerk of his head, he nodded, cutting Kevin loose from whatever tie was between them.

It hurt. Beyond all reason, that curt dismissal, that easy release, hurt.

But wait. There was the clench of Brendan's fist echoed in his tightened jaw. The pulling in, pulling back, the shallow harshness of his breath, barely different than the slow, deep pulls of air when he held Kevin tight, but so very obvious to Kevin in his hyper-awareness of everything Brendan.

But Brendan had released him, dismissed him. And Max waited.

Three steps. Off the tartan, into the mud, behind Max. Three steps that seemed as great as the distance that separated him from his family.

Max ignored him. Instead, he zeroed in on the bucket of bills. "My boy brought the money in."

"Yes. He did." Brendan scooped up the bucket, sorted through the cash, folded over a roll that was just a little under half, and moved around Max to thrust it at Kevin.

Kevin took it before Brendan dropped it in the mud.

"Thanks." A few fives peaked out of the roll of mostly singles.

"You earned it."

Then Max, showing off, held out his hand.

Kevin knew he owed Max, fair and square. Still, handing over the money felt like humiliation.

With a lot of will power, Kevin began to loosen his grip on the money—probably enough money to fill his gas tank to get him somewhere safe.

Safe. He was safe here. Not the kind of spiritually safe Brendan gave him, but physically safe. And emotionally safe from the family that thought of him as less than them.

Safe.

Until Brendan's hand descended, claw-like over his, trapping the money inside his palm.

Max elbowed Kevin, trying to put himself between Brendan and the money. "The boy owes me."

Brendan cocked an eyebrow at Kevin, asking him to confirm.

"I do. I owe him."

"How much?"

Feeling foolish, Kevin shrugged. He really should know that answer.

"I'll have to check my records." Max saved Kevin from having to admit that he didn't know.

"Tell me tonight."

"Not your business."

Again Brendan looked to Kevin, asking. Kevin nodded, giving permission.

"Tonight." Brendan's growl settled deep in Kevin's stomach and raised the hair on the back of his neck.

With his threat delivered, Brendan turned his back on them, scooped up the bucket and his soggy tartan and strode through the crowd, fingering the dagger at his waist, the dagger that had set Kevin free.

Even though that wasn't what Kevin had wanted at all.

Chapter Five

The afternoon passed with the grand parade around the faire grounds. Usually, the dancers were supposed to skirt the edges of the parade route, darting into the crowd for photos and to hand out flyers promoting their show times. But this time, Kevin's dance partners kept him trapped in the middle between them. He didn't try to subvert them no matter how much he wanted to hang back for a glimpse of Brendan marching with the other Highlanders. By the way Max had bruised Kevin's bicep with his punishing grip when he'd escorted Kevin back to their little corner of the fair, Kevin knew he'd pushed Max far enough.

After the parade, Kevin had had one more performance before the day was over. He'd moved mechanically, even having to count the beat to stay in step. It was the first time he couldn't find his soul in the music and the movement.

His soul.

Had he left it safe with Brendan?

Had he left his mind as well, being that fanciful?

Or was falling for the guy in the kilt part of the fantasy of this grand adventure, something he'd hold close when he was back with his family?

Because the reality was he would have to go back some day. If nothing else, this adventure had proved to him that he needed his family, needed them in a way a man didn't want to need them. Needed them for their wealth, for their ability to provide him with the basics of food and clothing and shelter.

Okay, so he had his own shelter, as crude as it was. He trudged back toward his tiny, smelly pup tent.

Who was he kidding?

His father's assistant had been right. He couldn't take care of himself.

There was no fantasy he could make himself believe, including the bigger-than-life fantasy of Brendan—kilt or no kilt—big enough to hide the fact that he needed to be taken care of. He didn't have it in him to take care of himself, just like his family had always teased. But they hadn't been teasing. They'd been telling the truth.

Truth played hell with fantasy.

Any last sense of fantasy left him when he saw his tent, collapsed onto itself with damp splotches bleeding across the canvas.

Two hours later, as the sun took its meager light and warmth beyond the horizon, his harem pants were filthy. The stained restroom sink and bar soap weren't the best for laundry, but that's what he had. He hoped to the heavens they weren't ruined. He hadn't even paid Max back for them yet—probably.

Hope mixed with shame when he thought of tonight when Brendan had promised to get an accounting from Max. Kevin should be able to do that himself. But whenever Kevin tried, Max would loom over him, growl in a scary tone that threatened violence, and then, when Kevin was properly cowed, Max would remind him that no one else had been willing to take a chance on an inexperienced little twink.

As Kevin rammed his knuckle into the faucet, tears filled his eyes. He shrugged them off on his shoulder, marring the T-shirt he wore. Brendan's T-shirt.

The shirt and his other pair of harem pants had been under the sleeping bag, so they had escaped the seeping moisture.

His jeans were a little damp. His socks, which had been stuck into his sneakers, were dry.

The rest of his meager wardrobe had been soaked through.

So Brendan's shirt, which he had foolishly tried to keep to himself like a precious secret, was what he now wore as he swished water through the gauzy pants.

Echoes of the fun around the fire ring bounced off the cinder block walls of the restroom.

This was not going to be a fun night for him, not with Brendan confronting Max. But it would be a turning point, a step toward becoming more financially independent. At least, he could now make plans to return to his parents, return to pretending to be whatever they thought best for his father's career, for his family's social standing, even for his best interests. Because pretending was protection.

Brendan would protect him without any pretense.

Yeah, back to pretending about Brendan, just in a more unrealistic way. Was it really that bad to let go and fantasize a little if it saved his sanity?

Reality could wait just a few more minutes. Just a few more hours. Just a few more days until he loaded up his little car, and drove back to Virginia.

But Virginia was another day. Today, tonight, was the reckoning. Putting it off only made it grow bigger in his mind.

How bad was it going to be? Brendan was going to get a financial accounting and Kevin was going to work his ass off to set it all to rights.

Brendan kept his attention divided between Max, playing poker, and the darkness that had swallowed up Kevin.

Where the hell was he? Another ten minutes and then he'd go looking for the boy even though it would be the wrong card to reveal. This high stakes game he and Max were playing had nothing to do with poker and everything to do with gambling.

Brendan had made some calls. Some maddening calls.

Still, he was on his own. Not unexpected for a political mission that should be the easiest of his whole career.

What he'd found out was that Max's involvement changed this from easy to dangerous.

Max was a dirty deck. Brendan's sources had pulled up too many suspicions of human trafficking a few years back, then his disappearing act until Brendan ran across him here.

Different name. Different game, on a lot smaller scale. But the same level of depravity.

The two women who danced for him, the flutist and the drummer were all part of a prostitute/theft ring. Cash and midrange jewelry only because they were untraceable. The men Max glared at over his hand of cards were money launderers.

What was he doing with Kevin? Indenturing him. Slowly, ever so slowly, adding him to the ring. Oxycontin was how Max kept the drummer and one of the dancers close. The flutist had been with him since the kid was about thirteen and knew no other life than this one. Brendan didn't know the story behind the other dancer, but he'd bet it wasn't pretty.

Odds were high Max didn't know Kevin was from a political family or he wouldn't have started recruiting him.

Odds were twice as high Max didn't know Kevin's hidden strength. It was a strength that would take a lifetime to explore.

Fuck it all. Brendan wanted to be part of that lifetime. Foolish. Impossible. As real as the knife tucked into his waistband and possibly just as lethal as Brendan's desire for Kevin.

The boy made him hard just by being in his thoughts.

It had never been like that for him. Never. Not even with Adam, his first.

Fuck. Kevin was still a virgin.

Would anyone believe that he'd been one at Kevin's age?

Where in hell was the boy? Boy. As long as he kept thinking of Kevin that way, he could keep his distance, right?

Giving into his instincts, Brendan turned to stare into the darkness.

There he was, Brendan's boy. Jeans and Brendan's T-shirt. The first time Brendan had seen him dressed in street clothes. The normal, everyday look made Kevin appear less vulnerable, older, very much a man albeit a young one.

How could Kevin look so sexy with twice the amount of clothes on that he usually wore?

How could Brendan stop himself from imagining his hand on Kevin's zipper?

Kevin focused in on him immediately, heading straight for him. As if a moonbeam struck him in the eyes, they seemed to glitter and sparkle for Brendan.

"Hi." Kevin was too far away for the sound to carry but the sentiment was there on his face.

God, it felt good to have someone care that he was there. Sure, as far as Kevin knew, Brendan was going to handle a little problem for him, but Brendan wanted to believe—

Fuck. It didn't matter what he wanted to believe. The reality was, Brendan was being paid to do a job. Get Kevin home, safe and sound. Then clear his head and get ready for the next assignment.

Brendan glanced over to Max and his cronies, then back to the boy. That might not be as easy as anyone at SEX Team headquarters had first thought.

Kevin followed Brendan's glance, the light in his face turning to shadow.

Brendan wanted to grab Kevin by the shoulders, turn him around and order him to get the fuck out of there, now.

Or throw Kevin over his shoulder and take him by force. Legally though, that was called kidnapping and against the law.

Still, Brendan would try it if he thought he could get away with it. *Would it work?*

Hell, no. There was that little problem with Kevin's free will getting in the way. That and Kevin's honor. Kevin thought he owed Max. He wouldn't leave until Max was paid.

Kevin would be a valuable property in Max's eyes which meant their getaway wouldn't be problem free even if Kevin agreed to go.

"Hi." This time, Kevin's shy whisper reached Brendan's ears.

The kid turned Brendan's insides to mush. "Hi, back."

"I shouldn't bother you to stand up to Max for me."

"Not a bother. I don't like bullies." Fully aware of the hypocrisy of all the times he had bullied, justifying it as for the greater good, Brendan pushed down all emotions. Now was not the time for self-examination or for Kevin-examination, either.

Brendan had a mission to accomplish. That's all that mattered right now.

Chapter Six

Looking over the top of his cards, Brendan had to admit that Max was a damned good card player. No tells, not involuntary tells, anyway. A couple of fake ones that had taken too much of Brendan's cash to figure out.

But then, he hadn't started with very much to gamble with, just a couple hundred in pocket change. With guys like the ones at this table, bluffing didn't take him very far.

The other two men and one woman played like this was a life or death game.

Maybe it was.

They were playing for people. They couched it in terms like queen and deuce and ace, but they meant the henna artist and the blacksmith's boy and Kevin. Kevin was Max's ace in the hole.

While Kevin had been occupied putting his tent back up, Brendan had made his proposition to Max. "I want your boy. How much does he owe you?"

Max had brushed him off with "More than you can afford."

Brendan had fifty-three dollars left in this game of seven card draw.

As the betting made the rounds, the woman and one of the men folded. The other man upped the ante and Max met and raised.

Brendan's turn.

"I've been thinking about what you asked about." Max stared at him until Brendan met that stare.

"Yeah?"

Max cast his glare toward Kevin then brought it back to the table. "I could go with a side bet between you and me."

One knife thrust and it would be all over. No video. No Max. No losing this shitty hand of a pair of threes, King high.

No getting out of a prison sentence with all these witnesses.

Then where would the boy be?

Home where he belongs. Why did Brendan's brain scream against that logic, *my home.* Where *my* boy belongs.

The thoughts were so loud in his head, he worried about letting his need show.

Max already knew he wanted the boy. Brendan didn't have the advantage of pretending otherwise.

This had to be the most fucked-up mission he'd ever run.

"The side bet?" he prompted.

"Ever want to be a porn star? With that body of yours, you would do well."

Brendan didn't have to force his laugh. "I'm a little old for that, aren't I?"

Max shrugged. "There's no accounting for fetishes. You two would be perfect for the experienced Dom/virgin sub market that's so strong right now."

"What the fuck does this have to do with poker?"

"My hand beats yours, I keep the boy and get a nice little video out of it. Him and you. Your hand beats mine and I cancel his debt."

"You never did say how much that debt was."

Max nodded to the small pile of bills next to Brendan's hand. "A hundred times that amount."

Slowly, Brendan counted out his stack. "Fifty-two dollars. You're saying Kevin owes you fifty-two hundred dollars."

"Close enough. Doesn't matter, though. You don't have it, do you?"

Brendan could get it, but out here, it would take a day or two. The pot had that much, but he'd have to win it to claim it. Odds weren't in his favor there.

"Hey." The woman who had folded leaned forward, her face twisted. "You've already promised the boy to me."

"Promised? I don't make promises, I make deals." Max grinned at her like he was pulling off a practical joke. "You want to outbid the man? Do I hear six thousand?"

Fuck. Now or never.

Brendan looked over at Kevin, sitting next to his friend Sammy, sending him covert glances and shy smiles.

Some things were worth incarceration.

Instantaneously, he had a plan on how to take out Max in under three seconds. The woman might make hostage status if she cooperated and the

others stayed put while he ordered Kevin to his truck and they made their getaway.

Not an elegant plan, but an effective one.

High alert made Brendan clip his words. "Are we playing poker or conducting an auction here?"

He turned away from Max, dismissing him as if their side bet met nothing to him. It was the only way Brendan could stay in control.

Fucked. Up. Mission.

If the adrenaline coursing through Brendan's system hadn't given him acute senses, he wouldn't have seen the sleight of hand that had the dealer giving him cards from throughout the deck instead of off the top.

Brendan lifted the corners just enough to see. A king. He had two pair and a chance.

"Call," the dealer said.

Brendan flipped over his cards.

Next to him, a smile bloomed on Max's face. "Full house, fours over sixes. Your ass is mine, boy. On video, anyway."

So that's how this was going down. Slitting Max's throat while he slept would draw the least attention.

The other man, the one who had barely breathed through all this, turned over his cards, one at a time. "Flush, King high. I win."

His win didn't matter to Brendan. The side bet was all that mattered.

The winner pulled in the money, counted some out, then extended it toward Max. "I'll give you fifty-five hundred for the boy."

Max looked like he wanted to refuse, but he'd already offered the deal. This wasn't a crowd a smart man backed down on.

"Anyone want to top that?"

Everyone else shook their heads and pushed away from the table with mumbles of "done for the night" and "not the stakes I play for".

Brendan made and rejected violent plans in his head as he tried to read the man with the money. What was he going to do about this wild card?

He'd try the less messy way first. "I'll give you seven thousand for the boy. I can get the money for you on Monday."

The man looked him over, then nodded. "Monday. Cash only."

That was easy. Too easy. "I want him in the same state he's in tonight. Untouched."

That made the man frown. "Can't do that."

"What do you mean?" Brendan clamped down hard on his racing pulse. "He's not as valuable to me if he's been passed around."

This time, the guy smiled, the kind of smile that sent ice down Brendan's spine. "You lost the bet to Max here. You owe him a video."

Brendan's mind froze. *Think, damn it. Think.*

He could fight his way out but there would be a body count in his wake.

Collateral damage. Still, Stinson and the SEX Team wouldn't support him on this one.

Outcome? Prison.

And he'd never see Kevin again.

Why was that the deciding factor?

Focus, asshole. He searched for inner calm and certainty. With it came rationalization.

Hell. Whether he fucked Kevin or not, he'd still end up delivering the kid to his parents. That was the mission. It was almost over. Almost a success. He just had to be practical and take misplaced emotion out of the equation.

He had to keep Kevin as safe as he could.

"The lighting's better under that big oak by the bathrooms." This from the woman who had no stake in the game.

"What props do you need," asked the other guy who had folded early.

Max seemed to consider before he said, "No props. Down and dirty. Rough as hell. That's what I want."

Brendan looked over at Kevin, listening intently to something Sammy's Dom was explaining to him.

Abruptly, Kevin turned to Brendan, his forehead creasing.

Brendan forced reassurance into his body language, projecting calm at the boy. *I've got this.*

As if Kevin heard Brendan's thoughts, the boy's shoulders relaxed.

Man. Not boy. Considering what Brendan was about to do, he damned well better remember that Kevin was a man, able to give willing consent.

If he didn't, if the boy—man—objected, then Brendan would do what he must, consequences be damned.

Every muscle in Brendan's body clenched. What the hell was wrong with him? No mission, not in all his years in the military and all the years afterward, had ever been this personal.

He stole another look at Kevin, the man who'd stolen his heart.

That was it. That was the answer to the question that had plagued him since puberty, would he ever fall in love?

And now he knew.

Yes. He had.

Double fuck.

Brendan had to laugh at that. A single fuck would be enough to take care of this problem.

He couldn't make this go away. The best he could do was to make it as painless as possible for Kevin.

Yeah, he could do that.

"Take the damn pill." Brendan made his voice harsh. If there were any other way...

Kevin opened his mouth, popped in the Viagra Max had supplied, then took a healthy swallow of bottled water to wash it down.

Brendan had inspected the pill.

He had made sure the bottle had been unopened, made sure Kevin was aware he was breaking the seal when he cracked it open. He didn't want any question of roofies or any other drugs—nothing but the penis pill which was a necessity to get them out of this.

What a way to break in a virgin—*his* virgin. *His* boy.

At least he had convinced the shitheads that they hadn't specified who topped whom. No way would he let Kevin's first time being breached take place in front of this growing mob.

Brendan would do everything he could to make this okay—hell, there was no okay about being videoed by a group of avid voyeurs first time out.

He'd thought his first time had been bad. At least it had been private. And the guy who'd fucked him had been saving his sanity at the time.

Looking into Kevin's wild eyes, Brendan wasn't sure that he wasn't taking Kevin's.

More than a little anxiety was keeping Brendan tense all over. Not the best way to get this party started. But he'd be vulnerable, so very vulnerable with Kevin buried deep inside him. Unable to physically protect Kevin should anyone make a move against him. But physical injuries could heal.

Suppressing his own anger, his own fear, Brendan breathed in calm.

“Look at me.”

Kevin did, his eyes swimming in unshed tears. He opened his mouth, hesitated.

Before he could find his words, words Brendan didn't want to hear right now, didn't need to hear ever, Brendan put his hand over those sweet lips.

“Shh. Just do what I tell you and you'll be okay.”

Behind Brendan's palm, Kevin managed to ask, “What about you?”

“It's my job to take care of you. It's your job to do what I tell you.” Brendan would need to explain that one later. Would need to make Kevin understand that he was just doing his job, nothing else. But for now, he needed Kevin to have a different understanding.

He moved his fingers to caress Kevin's cheek. The slightest of stubble marred the softness of Kevin's skin, giving Brendan a much needed reminder that Kevin was a grown man. Tonight, Kevin would be his man.

“This doesn't have to be bad. Trust me and I'll make it good for you.”

Kevin nodded against his hand, then his eyes darted left, to the audience that kept growing.

“Look at me. Nowhere else. Just at me. Got it?”

Kevin nodded again, this time focusing only on Brendan.

Brendan could feel it, could feel himself becoming the most important person in Kevin's life right now.

The honor poured through him. He let it make him hard.

Someone had come up with a vial of oil with the apothecary shop's label on it. Someone else had passed over a handful of condoms. In the meager light, his fingers felt for tears in the packaging and found it to be unorn.

Come on, man. Keep yourself together. For Kevin.

Fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, Kevin watched, intent. His pupils were blown, even under the floodlight's harsh glow. A glance down showed the Viagra had definitely kicked in.

Brendan leaned forward, putting his lips on Kevin's as he reached under his kilt to pull down his wide dance belt. He'd started wearing the thing for more constraint than his briefs had given him under the airy kilt. Kevin's fault that he needed the restriction.

Kevin's fault that his cock now sprang free, reaching, aching, needing.

Kevin's lips parted, his tongue tracing Brendan's mouth. When Kevin groaned, unknowingly giving as much strength to Brendan as Brendan was trying to give to Kevin.

Kevin took a step closer, his hard cock trapped in his jeans rubbing against Brendan's cock, free and responding under the kilt.

Here we go. Brendan made enough room between the two of them to open the oil. His fingers trembled as he coated them. Sandalwood. The scent would be imprinted on him forever, for good or for bad.

He could make this good. For Kevin's sake, he *would* make this good.

He stoppered the vial then tucked it in his waistband. "Undo your zipper."

With more grace than Brendan could have mustered, Kevin pulled down the tab then pushed both his jeans and white cotton briefs down his lean legs to his knees.

Brendan wrapped his oil-covered hand around Kevin's cock. Longer and thicker than Brendan had expected, it pulsed in his hand.

Kevin moaned, low and needy.

Mouth against Kevin's ear, Brendan whispered, "Not yet, baby."

He handed the condom to Kevin. "Sheath up, sweetheart."

Baby. Sweetheart. He'd never used pet words until now. What in Kevin called out to Brendan that made him want to protect and cherish?

Watching Kevin roll the rubber up that beautiful dick, Brendan's mind splintered.

The mob that ringed them stayed on the edge of his conscious. The throb in his cock ached for attention. His boy, so heavy and hard with desire, took center stage.

Reaching behind him, Brendan willed himself to relax as he sought to open himself.

It had been years, and then, less than a handful of times, since he'd bottomed.

Another deep breath.

"Let me." The warmth of Kevin's words on his neck made the tightness in him grow and grow until that hard expanding knot of emotional turmoil was on the edge of exploding.

Brendan surrendered to Kevin. That first seeking finger rubbed across his hole, making it ache to be filled.

Hesitantly, cautiously, Kevin's fingertip traced his rim.

His own groan filling his ears, filling his whole body, came from a depth he didn't know he had.

Without thought, he let his weight fall against Kevin. His boy didn't disappoint. He stood firm.

"More," Brendan demanded. The need in him made him greedy.

Gently, Kevin pushed his finger in. Not able to stop himself, not even trying, Brendan sank down on that slim digit, searching, searching.

"Another one."

Kevin held him tight while he added another finger.

The pinch brought Brendan back to himself. Then those fingers moved inside him, brushing across his prostate, sending sparks through his solar plexus.

“Ahhhhh.”

“Okay?”

“Yes.” Brendan rode Kevin’s fingers one more time before he pulled himself off and turned around, leaning against the rough bark of the oak. “Fuck me.”

Too lightly, Kevin’s hand pushed up the kilt and rested on Brendan’s ass. Brendan twisted around to make his point clear.

He stared into Kevin’s eyes, seeing so much desire, he almost came right then. “Now, baby boy. Now.”

Kevin’s grip tightened, fingernails digging in. *Fuck, that felt good.*

Then, the head of Kevin’s cock rubbed across Brendan’s hungry hole.

Brendan pushed back, as Kevin pushed in.

And it burned. By all the powers in hell, it burned.

Brendan panted through it, remembering, knowing that the fullness inside him was Kevin. And then he wanted more. Had to have more.

He shoved backward, impaling himself deeper on Kevin’s cock.

Kevin whimpered, and Brendan tried to take control of himself until his baby pleaded, “Can I move inside you? Please?”

“Yes. Fuck, yes.”

As gracefully as he danced, Kevin fucked. Rhythm, in and out, driving into Brendan, driving him higher and higher. The sounds from his baby, groaning, whimpering, pleading, desperate.

Brendan’s vision grayed. Nothing mattered but the impending—

“Kevin, cum now!” he ordered.

Then he went over the edge himself. Cumming, cumming where nothing mattered but the throbbing in his asshole, the pulsing of his cock, the moans of his love as Kevin splayed himself onto Brendan’s back, holding on. Holding on.

The bark of the tree pressed into Brendan’s flesh as he hugged it to keep himself on his feet. He fought the urge to sink to his knees, to pull Kevin into his chest, to lick the sweat from Kevin’s skin.

Just on the outskirts of his reality, stood a noisy, laughing, cheering mob. Against his back, Kevin's breathing slowed, then hiccuped.

Make it be okay, you bastard. Marshaling his discipline, Brendan moved forward, disconnecting them. Turning, braced against that damned tree, he caught Kevin in his arms and pulled him in, chest to chest.

He wasn't even sure what he was crooning, but it seemed to be working as Kevin nuzzled his wet face into Brendan's neck.

Then, too close, within arm's length, Max entered his peripheral range.

"Nice. This little jewel will make you both famous," the bastard said, breaching Brendan's mental hold on Kevin.

Kevin stiffened against Brendan's arms. "I forgot."

He looked up into Brendan's eyes as if Brendan could keep reality away.

All Brendan could do was take the man home and hope his family would keep him as safe as possible in the real world.

Take him home. Fuck.

Brendan opened up his embrace and let Kevin go.

Hurt showed in every part of his boy's body, from the way he put a half-step between them, to the way he crossed his own arms over his body, to the slump of his shoulders.

Pain pierced Brendan because he couldn't spare Kevin this crashing aftermath.

Kevin reached down, scooped up his T-shirt—Brendan's T-shirt—and pulled it on over his head, his hands clumsy and shaking. He swallowed, not quite meeting Brendan's eyes. "Now what?"

Brendan couldn't stop his harsh bark and shake of his head.

"That's it?"

Anger, hope, desire, possession, and a wrenching despair sent adrenaline coursing through him. He had to move. "I need some space."

He whirled around, heading for the cinder block toilets. Shitty, too-well-used crap holes. There was a statement on reality.

The further he walked away, the hotter he could feel Kevin's stare burn into him.

Fuck.

From heaven to hell in a heartbeat. Dizziness threatened to bring Kevin to his knees.

But he had to go after Brendan. Had to—to what?

The lassitude he'd felt, the *love* he'd felt, was over now. All that was left was a limp dick, empty balls, and fear.

Not fear because of the people around him. Fear that he was losing Brendan before he'd ever really had him.

His shaky legs, his trembling body, followed the path Brendan had just taken, not waiting for a conscious command on his part. His body knew, his soul knew he should be with Brendan.

But that wasn't up to him, was it?

What was he going to do when this was all over? Go back to being the dutiful son and brother he used to be? Could he force himself back into that box?

What choice did he have?

None of that mattered right now. What mattered was the man who had done everything he could to save Kevin's sorry ass. Literally.

From inside the echoing concrete cave, Kevin heard harshness of breath. An indrawn sob, sucked in to keep the world from knowing.

As Kevin rounded the corner, Brendan slammed his fist into the wall. Kevin jerked to a halt, staring open-mouthed at the man in front of him. Brendan's eyes were closed, nostrils flaring, chest heaving, every muscle tense.

Nerves failing, Kevin turned to go, but his movement caught Brendan's attention. Glaring over his shoulder, Brendan snarled, "What the fuck do you want?"

Now was the moment of truth, and Kevin hesitated...

Then, as if the box that held all his wants and desires, all his needs, split at the seams, they all came tumbling out.

"I want to never, ever, go back to what I was, who I was. Who I wasn't. I want to be exactly who I am, everywhere I am. No more pretending. To

anyone, including myself. I want to stay with you. I want to love you, nothing held back. I want you to love me back the same way.”

Shit, what had Kevin just done? The man was hurting and all Kevin could do was dump on him. What kind of lover, what kind of partner could he be when he couldn't even carry his own weight? Nothing but a burden. Nothing but—

“Okay.”

Trying to take in Brendan's answer, trying to comprehend the fullness of it, made Kevin's mind go blank. Too much. Too much overload to process, to think through, to *feel* through.

Brendan pinned Kevin with a look so piercing Kevin couldn't look away. He could barely breathe. “Anything else?”

Kevin couldn't have lied, couldn't have said, ‘no’, if his life was in the balance. He had to answer with the truth. There was no other option when Brendan looked at him that way. “I want to be your boy, your man. The D/s thing. I want to do that.”

A muscle in Brendan's jaw jumped.

There was his answer. Kevin had just fucked up. Fucked it all up. As his eyes filled, he felt certain that he would throw up.

“Okay.”

“What?”

“Okay. We can try it.”

“Okay.” A lightness filled him. *So this is what joy feels like.*

“Come here.” Brendan held his arm out, making the perfect place for Kevin by his side.

Kevin snuggled with his face pressed into Brendan's bare chest as Brendan held him close, wrapped him tight.

“Breathe, boy.”

He hadn't realized he'd stopped until he gulped in a mouthful of air, flavored with the scent of Brendan. Of him and Brendan. Of them together.

“I've got you. You're okay.”

Against Brendan's chest, Kevin nodded. “Yes, sir. You've got me, so I'm okay.”

For a few minutes, Kevin thought of nothing but the comfort Brendan gave him. But he needed to say it. Now.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Kevin. I love you, too.”

Epilogue

“What do you mean, you’re keeping him?” Through the phone line, Stinson’s growl was not only pissed, but shocked.

“Exactly what I said, Harold. Mission failed. I’ll not be returning Kevin Parker to his family. I’m keeping him.”

“As in—”

Brendan couldn’t help the grin that spread over his face. “As in, to have and to hold, from this day forward.”

Next to him, Kevin nuzzled into his neck. Brendan always felt like the king of the world when Kevin did that to him.

He kissed the top of Kevin’s head. Kevin turned up to look into his eyes. Well, almost. Kevin was sometimes shy about eye contact. But his boy was never shy about the way he leaned into Brendan, trusting Brendan to hold him tight, to keep him from falling.

He *was* the king of Kevin’s world.

And Kevin was the axis that Brendan’s world spun on.

Stinson’s sigh came through loud and clear. “Someone’s got to tell his parents.”

“We’re on our way to do that now.”

“I guess you’re going to need some of that time off you’ve been accumulating.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Brendan?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.” For the first time in his life, Brendan said, “I’m feeling pretty happy myself.”

That warmth. That fullness. That completeness. Brendan hadn’t even been able to imagine it. And now he would be living it. Every day.

After breaking the connection, he again kissed Kevin on the top of his head, absently noting what Kevin was researching on his phone. Wedding locations.

“Sir? Do you want to do this at a Renaissance faire?”

“That sounds perfect, baby. Just perfect.”

The End

Author Bio

In Chris Cox's stories, men climb steep mountains of emotion and brave treacherous valleys of personal growth on a journey to love. Chris Cox is the author of the Bayou Boys series, about deep relationships, about finding yourself as well as your soul mate, and about learning to feel right in your own skin, and the SEX Team series, about daring men, covert rescues and risking hearts.

Sexy and complex, Chris' writing delivers the stories that touch readers' hearts. Born and raised in Louisiana, Chris worked as an electrical engineer before chucking the corporate ladder and becoming a full-time writer. Chris resides in Louisiana, where the gumbo is hot... but the men are hotter.

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