

JC Wallace



Pink Lace
and Stolen Hearts

M/M Romance

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....3
Pink Lace and Stolen Hearts – Information.....5
Pink Lace and Stolen Hearts7
Chapter One8
Chapter Two.....12
Chapter Three.....17
Chapter Four21
Chapter Five.....26
Chapter Six.....31
Chapter Seven36
Chapter Eight42
Chapter Nine48
Chapter Ten.....52
Author Bio61

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

PINK LACE AND STOLEN HEARTS

By JC Wallace

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.

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

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Pink Lace and Stolen Hearts, Copyright © 2014 JC Wallace

Cover Art by JC Wallace

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

PINK LACE AND STOLEN HEARTS

By JC Wallace

Photo Description

A man leans heavily on the railing of his balcony with his back to me. His hands grip the metal railing tight. He has a long, lean back and slim hips. He is wearing a pair of sheer boy shorts, which show off his nice round butt. He has black hair, longer on the top and shorter on the sides. His head is bowed, and his shoulders slumped, showing the tension in his body.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is my roommate and best friend, Greg. He's been depressed, and maybe even suicidal, ever since his boyfriend found out that he likes to wear feminine underwear, especially the sheer styles like the one in the picture above. He was so in love with that loser. He even told me that he was holding off from having sex until they got to know one another, because he wanted it to be perfect. He's old-fashioned that way—a history major who's enthralled with the history of dating and romantic relationships throughout the centuries. He believed he could find his own Prince Charming and have a Happily Ever After romance. Because he's a bit embarrassed and unsure of himself about his underwear fetish, he'd always wear "tighty whities" when he was with Simon, or Simple Simon as I like to call him in my mind. Why Simon never questioned that a flamboyant gay man like Greg would wear simple white briefs, I'll never know.

When Greg started to feel comfortable in their relationship, and was ready to go all the way, he finally got up the nerve to wear his favorite pair of undies—a silky smooth, sheer lace, pink bikini with tiny embroidered roses. He was hoping to please Simon, but when he saw them, Simon became enraged, smacking Greg in the face, calling him sick, and storming out the door.

Now, there's Greg standing at the railing, looking at nothing in particular, lost, forlorn, sad, all the things that I don't want him to be. I love him—as a friend, and maybe even more, though I've never told him. I'm straight, at least I think I am, but when I first saw him in a pair of pretty powder blue panties, I swear my heart skipped a beat, and I think I even drooled a little. My reaction

made me question my own sexuality, but I haven't explored anything further with him. I'm happy that he trusted me enough to reveal his secret to me, but now my heart is broken for him due to Simon's rejection.

Greg is so special, so wonderful, please dear author, give him a love story, even if it can't be with me. He deserves to find happiness with someone who loves him unconditionally and appreciates all the facets of his personality.

Sincerely,

Barb ~rede-2-read~

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: best friends, friends to lovers, slimy ex, first time, fetish/toys, lingerie, phobias, gay for you

Word Count: 20,586

PINK LACE AND STOLEN HEARTS

By JC Wallace

Chapter One

Damn, the rain was coming down hard. I cursed my lateness as I ran to my truck. The wind drove cold drops into my face and across my arms, stinging my skin like dozens of biting insects. The temperature had barely cleared forty, but that was April in Vermont for you—warm one day, cold the next. Didn't matter. I'd drive through a hurricane to get to my roommate, Greg.

The sky had been ominous for hours, and I'd tried my hardest to leave before the first raindrop hit. Fuck that leaking pipe in 4C. Sure, I was the maintenance guy for the building, but why couldn't that pipe have let loose the next day? Greg needed me—not that he'd called or anything. Thunder and lightning storms always triggered some fear inside of him he'd never deliberately shared with me. Gentle rain soothed Greg, but if a storm raged relentlessly, violently, without a break, Greg would get restless, pace, mumble to himself, and even shake. I knew how to handle those moments, knew how to keep him grounded and in the present. Where he went at those times—when he looked lost and got that far-off, vacant look in his eyes—he'd never tell me. Wherever he went, it scared the crap out of him, and me as well. Simple Simon, his jerky boyfriend, wouldn't be there for him. He was never there when Greg truly needed him. Even though Greg claimed to love him, I was sure the feeling wasn't mutual.

Traffic slowed to a crawl. My chest tightened, and the rapid thumping of the windshield wipers beat steady with my heart. Everything outside of my side windows was blurred and wavy as the water streamed over the glass. Greg had been home from work for hours. He was a paraprofessional at the elementary school, and worked one-on-one with kids with disabilities, his patience and kindness awe-inspiring. By now, I knew he'd have worked himself up, probably even before the storm had begun. He was like a human barometer. He could announce a storm coming hours before it appeared. It was like living with a weatherman.

I pounded my fist against the steering wheel. Traffic inched along the freeway, churning my gut even further. Pulling out my cell phone, I called Greg, hoping he would answer, praying he hadn't hit that scary, hyperventilating stage yet. By that point... well, I just hoped it hadn't reached that point yet.

Two rings... Each second pushed my heart rate. Three rings... Each ring foreboding, telling... Four rings... "Pick up the phone, Greg," I mumbled beneath the sound of the rain pinging against the metal of my truck.

Shit.

“Hey.” The cheerful, upbeat voice threw me for a moment, and I almost pulled the phone away to check that I had the correct number. *What the hell?*

“Greg? Are you okay?”

Greg chuckled—actually chuckled—in the middle of a raging storm. “I’m good. Simon’s here.”

That was the last thing I’d expected to hear. “Simon’s there,” I repeated, lacking any other words.

Another chuckle and a muffled, “Simon, stop. Give me a minute.” A pause, and Greg said, “Yeah, he just got here. And... well, don’t rush home.” The innuendo in his voice was enough to roil my stomach. Thoughts of Simon making Greg smile and laugh and calming him during the storm stirred up my green-eyed monster. Just another of the many reactions my best friend had instigated over the last few months. Reactions that had totally unsettled me.

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to be an issue. Traffic’s backed up on I-89. I think there’s an accident up ahead.”

“Drive carefully, Law. Please.” The concern in Greg’s tone was always nice. At least someone gave a crap. Another chuckle and Greg exhaled noisily. “Gotta go, Law. See you later.”

I’d barely said “bye” and Greg was gone. Sighing heavily, I chucked the phone onto the seat, blocking out my disappointment that Simon was doing something I’d thought only I could do. I would have been the one making Greg laugh and relax during the storm if I’d been there on time. And didn’t that just confuse me more. No. It was good Simon was there for him. Greg wanted Simon, claimed to love his so-called boyfriend, and I wanted Greg to be happy. That was all that mattered, right?

The traffic inched along, and the rain fell harder. The hard knot that had formed under my breastbone all those months ago grew larger, denser, heavier. God, how was I supposed to get rid of it? I needed to distract my mind from what was happening at our apartment. That’s when I saw the sign for the next exit. I pulled off the highway and headed to my favorite pub.

The bar was surprisingly full for a Friday afternoon. Everyone had the same idea—beating back the bad weather blues and warming up with some alcohol. Percy’s Pub was off the main drag. It was popular with the locals, which meant

I knew most of the regulars. Right then, I needed some time to clear my head of the background noise threatening to encroach on my well-ordered life.

Tyson, the regular bartender, greeted me with a wide smile and a Corona already on the bar. He snickered. "Damn, you look like a drowned rat, Lawson. It's pretty nasty out there."

"That it is," I said as I snatched the beer and took a long swig. Ice cold and good. "How's it going with you?"

"Can't complain." Tyson wiped at the bar with a rag, grinning so wide his back teeth showed. "Molly's pregnant."

My eyebrows raised and I extended my hand. "Damn, Tyson. That's great. Wow!" They'd been trying for over three years without success. The stress had been starting to show in their relationship. Their last fight outside the bar had been hard to hear.

Tyson shook my hand. "Been a long road, but it's finally happened. She's due in August."

"Congratulations, man. Tell Molly I said so, too."

"Thanks. You need another?"

I shook my head. "Gotta drive home soon." Pulling out my wallet, I handed him a ten, waving off the change. "Add it to the diaper fund."

"Thanks," Tyson said, and went off to wait on another patron.

I headed to the back of the room and the empty tables, nodding and waving to those I knew along the way, but I didn't stop. The need for solitude filled me until I was sure I'd scream just to be left alone. Probably wasn't the best choice to seek solitude at a busy bar, however there was beer, so that was a plus.

Flopping into a chair, I pushed down on the gnawing in my gut that threatened to burst forth. Greg and Simon. What were they doing at that moment? Why the fuck should I care? I picked at the corner of the label on my beer with my thumbnail. If Greg were there, he'd be prodding me to remove the label whole, in awe when I accomplished the feat. He said it was good luck. Hadn't done me much good over the years.

Damn, I had to stop thinking about Greg. He was home, warm and safe, with Simple Simon to keep him happy, probably fu—

I slammed my beer onto the table with a *thud*. *Cut that shit out!* I focused

on the people around the bar. Months had passed since I'd last been there, and the same faces populated the room. Many I'd known since high school and some I'd met in the past few years since I'd started coming back to Percy's. Usually, I went to the bar whenever Simon was at the apartment, unable to stomach his aloof, better-than-everyone attitude. He was the opposite of Greg's warm, caring, altruistic nature. Greg was a dreamer, a believer in happily ever after, and Prince Charming. He was a history major, slowly working on his Master's degree. Name a time period and he could list great lovers of that era. Whenever Greg went off, speaking in-depth of those couples and his thoughts on their love, I could only smile because I could listen to Greg talk for hours. I'd never seen that behavior as odd, but now I questioned every reaction I'd ever had to Greg.

Again, he crowded my mind. I lowered my head and clutched strands of my black hair tightly, wincing at the pain, yet grateful for the distraction. The list of repairs at work, the state of the economy, the downfall of the Steelers, the goddamned weather... Grasping at anything and everything, I tried to get my mind off Greg. Hell, he'd overtaken most of my waking moments and even parts of my dreams for months, ever since I'd seen—

“Lawson? You okay?”

Shit. I released my hair and looked up. This night was getting better by the minute.

Chapter Two

“Stephanie. How’s it going?” This was the last thing I needed.

She shrugged and worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “I’m good. You?”

Fucking dying, ready to crawl out of my skin and bang my head against a wall to get my life back. You? “I’m good. Busy at work.”

She was the reason I hadn’t been to Percy’s in a while. *She* worked here. How could I have forgotten?

“I haven’t seen you around since... you know.”

I closed my eyes and opened them slowly. “About that, I’m...” *I’m sorry I took you home over a month ago and fucked your brains out and never called. Sorry I used you to forget, to prove to myself that what I’d seen hadn’t really affected me as badly as I’d thought it had.* That night with her had been all kinds of fucked up. “...sorry for not calling. I—”

Stephanie raised her hand to stop me and then sat down. Great. She was going to ream me out right there. She gathered her long, silky blonde hair in her hand and flipped it over her shoulder, a move that had mesmerized me before we’d hooked up. She was gorgeous—slim body, nice round breasts—and she wasn’t conceited like most good-looking women. Any guy would be lucky to have her, but I hadn’t been able to think past that Saturday night three months ago and what I’d seen.

Avoiding eye contact, I abandoned all attempts to keep the label on my beer intact and scraped large chunks off with my thumbnail as I waited for her to speak.

“I know this is probably the last thing you want to talk about...”

Got that right, I thought as my gut clenched uncomfortably.

She sighed wearily. “That night when we went to my place... I got the feeling you weren’t really in the room with me. I mean, you were there, but your mind was somewhere else. Maybe with *someone* else?”

I sucked in a breath, the air caught in my throat, and I coughed. Had I been that transparent? Did she know just who I’d been thinking about?

No sense in denying anything. “That was shitty of me, Stephanie. I

shouldn't have gone home with you when I was upset." And I had been upset. And scared. And fucking lost... And questioning everything I'd ever known about myself. "Please forgive me," I said and laid my hand on hers. I truly felt like the scum of the earth. The thin line of her lips and furrow of her brow told me I'd hurt her. Yup, I was a dick.

She licked at her red lips. That alone should have made my cock hard, but my usually overactive member remained dormant in my jeans. If I truly wanted to get hard, I only had to think of—

She sighed and feigned a smile. "Actually, I was watching you that night, and knew you were upset about something, but I didn't realize you were upset about *someone* else." She paused and looked away, as if contemplating something, turned back and then pointedly asked, "Someone special?"

Looking down at the table, the need to nod hit me hard. "Yes," I whispered, that knot expanding and making it hard to breathe. I was going to pass out right there, or shatter into hundreds of pieces, too fragmented to repair. How much longer would I be able to hold myself together?

"That's a good thing, right?"

How could it be? But I nodded again. Someone called out Stephanie's name. Across the room, a dark-haired woman waited, a set of keys dangling from her hand. Stephanie stood. "That's my ride. I'm still pissed off, but if you need to talk, I'll listen." The pity and concern in her voice grated on my last nerve, but I tried to smile.

When she'd gone, stale air formed a suffocating sphere around me. The beer hadn't helped, having gone warm long ago. As I looked around at the smiling, carefree, and laughing faces, anger rose from a vile pit in my gut. I was going home. Fuck Simple Simon. If I wanted to check on Greg, then I would.

Any dryness I'd gained in the bar disappeared quickly as I ran through the rain to my truck. Within minutes, I was back on the highway, battling the weather once again to get home. The rain-slicked road and limited visibility kept me at a steady forty miles per hour. Luckily, I only had two exits to go. My phone, which I'd forgotten on the passenger seat, rang, pushing my pulse rate higher, nerves tighter. When Greg's number popped up on the screen in my truck, I sucked in a breath. I pushed the "answer" button on the steering wheel.

"Greg?"

"Law, where are you?" Greg's wavering tone lacked the giddy infectiousness that never failed to warm my heart.

Shit, that wasn't good.

"I stopped somewhere but I'm headed home now. I'm on the highway. Exit 13. The rain's really coming down. What's wrong? Where's Simon?"

Greg's breath hitched and echoed painfully over the phone. That sound raced anger through me, and I knew I'd be having words with Simon for leaving Greg alone.

"Simon... he..." Another painful hitch. "He left. Are you coming right home?"

"What did Simon do?" The words had barely escaped though my clenched teeth.

A tentative silence followed. I pictured Greg sitting in the corner of his room, casting wary glances at the storm through his window, silently reciting one of those damned wishes that he believed in, pleading for the storm to disappear.

"You're late," he finally whispered. Beneath those words was a silent plea for me to come home.

"You said not to rush home because Simon was there and I didn't want to intrude, so I stopped and got a beer." When you *needed* me, I got a fucking beer. Maybe I could distract Greg over the phone. What should have been a fifteen-minute drive from Richmond had passed the twenty-minute mark, and I still hadn't reached my exit.

"I should be there in fifteen minutes. So, today I had to fix a pipe in 4C, you know Mrs. Reynolds and her old, deaf Chihuahua?" Mrs. Reynolds couldn't see well, and her deaf dog couldn't hear, so she was constantly asking me to find him. Usually, he was sleeping right out in the open.

Nothing from Greg. Exaggerated breaths, laced with fear and secret wishes that wouldn't be answered anytime soon, were all I could hear. I clutched the steering wheel, finally edging up to fifty miles per hour in a sixty-five. *Lawson, you screwed this up. Greg needed you and you fucked it up.*

Well, Simon was supposed to be there.

"Did she lose Sweetums again?" Greg whispered.

Talking. Good. And the rain was letting up. I swerved into the left lane, which was clear of cars, and accelerated.

“Well, she had a leaking pipe under her sink. Looks like it’s been leaking for a while. But, while I was there, I did come to the rescue again. Lawson the super Super!”

A slight chuckle from Greg. A sigh released a metric ton of pressure from my chest, pulled my shoulders down from around my ears, and unclenched my jaw. I swore to God, if I didn’t learn to relax, my heart would give out before I hit thirty, only five years away.

Finally, I came to my exit. Our apartment was only two minutes away. “Greg, ask me where Sweetums was.” Again, nothing but jagged breaths. “Come on, play along,” I pleaded, my throat tight with both anxiety and anger. My Sweetums stories had become Greg’s favorites, so things had to be bad if he wasn’t playing along.

Greg cleared his throat. “Where was he this time?” Greg asked, his whisper competing with the pelting rain and squeak of the windshield wipers.

I pulled into the driveway of our apartment house and jumped from the cab, barely shifting into park before I did. The rain pounded against me, and the inky black cloud cover meant the end of the storm was nowhere near. I fumbled with my massive ring of keys. Why I kept my house key on my work ring, I had no clue.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I said, buying time as I ran up the back steps to our second floor apartment.

More silence and I swore I heard a sob. “Lawson, I don’t know if I can do this anymore.”

Greg definitely wasn’t talking about guessing where the dog was.

“Greg, what happened?”

No reply. No breathing.

“Greg!” My mind reeled, my nervousness edged with a nauseating fear. Getting the door open, I darted to Greg’s room at the back of the apartment. Reaching up, I grabbed the key stashed on top of the molding above the door. I knew the door would be locked to keep out—well, exactly what I wasn’t sure, but if a locked door soothed Greg, so be it. I would put a hundred locks on his door to make him feel safe.

“Coming in,” I warned so he wouldn’t freak-out. I stepped inside of Greg’s cocoon, and quickly closed the door behind me.

Greg wasn't sitting in his usual corner, farthest from the window. Also strange was the darkness in the room. Greg had three lamps placed strategically around the room, including an overhead light he used to negate any shadows. Greg's room was a shadow-free zone. Violent storms and shadows definitely topped Greg's list of things he hated most. All of that only served to escalate my fear that Greg might have hurt himself.

Movement of the heavy, maroon-colored curtains, which covered the doors to the balcony, caught my attention. The sliding door was open and that's when I saw Greg, partially sheltered from the rain and in the midst of the storm. I froze at the sight. Greg had his back to me, hands grasping the black metal railing, arms locked tight as if they were holding him up, head ducked down. He was practically naked except for a pair of sheer, black boy shorts. Disappearing between the round cheeks of his ass, the pink string of a thong. The sight slammed into me like a semi, hurtling me back in time to that night three months ago, the sight of Greg forever burned into my memory.

Chapter Three

Three months ago...

Greg had been acting strange for weeks—distracted and agitated, morose and quiet. No matter what I'd tried, that funk continued, until I'd been ready to rip out my hair. Finally, on a Saturday night, I convinced him to have a movie marathon, filled with some of his favorite movies. We were starting with *Cleopatra*, a movie that never failed to garner Greg's full attention. He'd sigh and *aww* over the love affair between Cleopatra and Antony. During each viewing, he never failed to note some historically inaccurate fact, such as the erroneous appearance of the Arch of Constantine, which hadn't been built until three and a half centuries after Cleopatra's visit to Rome. Or the appearance of philodendrons, which were a South American plant and unknown in Rome during that period. Over time, I'd come to look forward to his facts as much as watching the movies themselves.

Halfway through the movie, not a single fact had poured forth from Greg. Several times I'd caught him staring off into nothing, his eyes not even on the TV, and I was past worried. For me, asking someone what's wrong happened about as much as my getting a raise (next to never), but Greg's unease was cause for concern. Reaching for the remote, I hit pause. Thirty seconds passed before Greg noticed the movie was stuck on a single frame.

"What're you doing?" He glanced at me, and then to the screen and back again. That's when I got a good look at him and noticed the dark circles under his eyes, the deep lines around his mouth, and the sallow shade of his skin. My heart lurched with the thought that he'd been sick and I'd missed it.

"You can't sit still. You look exhausted, as if you're not sleeping. You're pale. Something's wrong, Greg."

He eyed me, a momentary defiance hardening his face, and then he looked away again. "I'm okay."

Greg and I had been roommates for over six years, since we were freshmen at Champlain Valley Community College. I'd made it through one year of classes before deciding that college wasn't for me. But since then, we'd remained roommates and best friends. I knew Greg better than I knew anyone else in my life. I knew when something wasn't right. I knew when he was hurting, and he was hurting now.

“We both know that’s not true,” I stated emphatically.

The rigid line of his shoulders sagged as he continued to avoid eye contact.

“Greg,” I said softly. Maybe he was having issues with the jerk. “Is it Simp—” I cut off the word as he turned glaring eyes on me. He hated when I called his boyfriend Simple Simon. “Simon, I mean.”

He chewed on his bottom lip. “Do you have any secrets, Law?”

“Secrets?”

Greg raked his fingers through the dark waves on top of his head. His leg bounced in a nervous, jerky manner. Just what was he getting at?

“Like a secret no one would understand, even though it makes you feel good, makes you happy?”

Thousands of possibilities ran through my mind. If Greg weren’t an out-and-proud gay man, I’d assume he was talking about liking guys.

“I don’t think so,” I said, unable to focus on figuring out if I actually had any secrets. Besides, I was pretty much an open book, mostly a “what you see is what you get” person—well, except for emotions. I rarely went around showing those off.

Greg nodded. He rubbed his palms together, every muscle in his lanky frame wound so tight I was sure he’d shoot off into the atmosphere at any moment.

“You have a secret?” What could I possibly not know about Greg? Except for the reason why he hated storms, which I knew went back to his childhood. Something bad must have happened to him during a storm. Maybe that was what he was referring to? However, that memory never made him feel good, and clearly distressed him to the point of panic.

I clenched my hands into fists, prepared to hear some morbid tale. Whatever Greg imparted, I only hoped I could handle hearing how someone had hurt my sweet friend and refrain from seeking retribution of my own. Anger was the one emotion I showed easily, especially if it was for a good reason.

“Yes,” he finally whispered. “It isn’t horrible, and it doesn’t hurt anyone, but people won’t understand. I learned that when—” He squeezed his eyes tight and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. But I think you should know about this. And if you want me to move out, don’t want to speak to me again, I’d understand.”

I frowned. “Greg, what’re you talking about? I don’t want you to move, and I’d never stop being your friend. I mean, unless you ate my last Swiss Roll—then all bets are off.” A tight chuckle emerged from me as I tried to shed humor on the tense conversation.

A tired smile tugged at the corners of Greg’s lips, but faded fast. “Don’t say that until you know. But, when I tell you, just say it’s over and walk away. Don’t tell me I’m wrong or...” He swallowed hard. “Or sick or anything. Okay?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Law, please, just promise me.” The pain in his brown eyes reached depths I’d never seen before. The crushing pressure in my chest felt as if a building had fallen on me. I could only nod when what I really wanted to do was wrap him up tight.

He stood, his motion so tentative I thought he might sit back down, but he managed to stand and walk a few feet from the couch. Emotions I kept deep down in the pit of my stomach expanded and churned, seeking release, and I clenched my jaw. What the heck was so awful that knowledge of it would send me out of his life forever?

His back to me, I saw his muscles quaking. *Please, don’t be crying.* I didn’t do well with tears. When they occurred in others, I did my best to handle them, but really, I had no idea how to react. I hadn’t cried since I was a teenager.

Greg turned, and I was relieved to see his eyes were dry. That relief was short-lived, as again, his defeated expression struck me hard, defeat like that of a man heading to the gallows. I tried to relax my body, appear nonchalant, accepting, open to anything. Maybe it would help. Maybe not. “Just tell me,” I encouraged. “We’re friends.”

He nodded. “I think I should show you instead of tell you. Or maybe just tell, or...”

I sat forward, casually resting my elbows on my knees. “Whatever is easier for you.”

When Greg reached for the button on his jeans, a spasm tightened my gut. As he flicked the button open and lowered his zipper, my eyes widened and he paused, but his resolve returned. He peeled back the flaps of his pants, and in one motion, the blue denim was around his knees. I blinked once, and then again, my gaze stuck to his groin, a place my eyes had never given but a

passing glance on another man. Blue and pink lace? No. The color was powder blue, I knew this because my sister's bridesmaids' dresses had been powder blue. That fact had been driven home whenever one of us men had called them blue and... *So not the point right now.*

Greg wore women's underwear... panties... and I struggled to merge that image with the heavy bulge in the front where his cock and balls rested. On a woman, that area would be smooth. But on Greg... The sight of those panties, those powder blue, silk panties with the pink lace at the top, dried every bit of saliva in my mouth. I tried to swallow, tried to form a coherent sentence, tried to understand why pleasure warmed my groin, tried to pull my gaze from the sight of Greg in women's underwear.

I coughed, forcing my throat to relax. "I... um... you... Are you a cross-dresser?" It was the only term I knew, being uneducated past someone being gay. The deepening distress on Greg's face told me I'd gotten it wrong.

"I don't consider myself a cross-dresser. I like to wear this kind of underwear. I like how it feels. I've worn some other stuff, like stockings and a corset, but I don't want to dress like a woman. I also don't want to be a woman, so I'm not transgender. I think they're pretty, and I like them." A red flush filled his face, and it was the most endearing thing I'd ever seen. The image of Greg in stockings and a garter belt caused me to feel things I'd never felt for a man before. "You don't think I'm gross?"

Gross was the furthest thing from my mind. A hard knot, like a fist, shoved up under my ribcage, and I tore my gaze from his groin in hopes my own would stop reacting to the silk and lace and fucking pink.

The past twenty-five years of my life had sailed along on the status quo, been on course and avoided speed bumps and potholes, been the life of a normal, heterosexual male. I'd veered off that well-known road and sailed straight into the abyss.

Chapter Four

Present...

My gaze was plastered to that black, sheer fabric encasing a perfectly round ass. This was so unfair. I'd struggled for months, wishing away those thoughts and feelings, trying to ignore how my body reacted to memories of Greg in those fucking panties, yet here he was sporting another pair—another dick-hardening pair. My hands itched to touch that sheer material, longed to run them over his warm skin, and that wasn't right. I didn't think being gay was wrong. To me, love was love, but I wasn't gay. I just wasn't.

Suddenly, Greg turned, as if sensing I was there, and I caught a glimpse of the pink pouch of the thong cradling his cock. The only thing that came to mind seeing his hard, lean body was beautiful. I thought a man was *beautiful*. No, I thought *Greg* was beautiful.

When I caught sight of Greg's face, tears readily rolling down his cheeks, mixing with the drops of rain on his skin, all thoughts of that sheer underwear fled. A red mark covered his cheek, bright and highly visible despite the hazy, grey light of the room. Instead of feeling discomfort over seeing those tears, I felt enraged.

"What the fuck?" I growled and rushed to him, unable to avoid scowling. As I neared, he ducked his head, his shoulders shaking, the muscles of his stomach contracting with each jagged inhale and exhale.

Putting my hand under his chin, I gently raised his head. His eyes, desperate for something—I wasn't sure exactly what—searched my face. My focus was on the red mark on his cheekbone, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to hunt Simon down.

"What happened?" I asked, although I had a pretty good idea, with Simon missing.

With those words, he crumbled before me with sobbing gasps, his anguish so palpable I felt it in my very cells. He looked so lost, arms wrapped tight around his chest, trembling. I was sure that his shivering wasn't entirely caused by the cold water on his naked torso. He was about to fragment.

"Hey," I whispered and wrapped my forearm around the back of his neck, pulling him to my chest. "It's gonna be okay." Hell if I knew that was true, but I'd work hard to make it happen.

He shook his head, past the ability to verbalize his disagreement. He wrapped his arms in tight bands around my back, his warmth seeping through my wet clothing. My pants were soaked and the cold fabric tightened with each passing minute. I forced myself to focus on my anger for Simon, for daring to lay a hand on what was mine.

Mine? Fuck me. Every muscle in my body stiffened at once, and Greg noticed my reaction.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed, pulling back and swiping at his eyes. "I can't stop crying. I'm such a baby."

I shook my head vehemently and noticed his shivering had increased. Going to the dresser, I pulled out a pair of sweats and a fluffy sweater. When I returned to Greg, he shook uncontrollably. "What were you doing out there? It's freezing." I helped him into the sweater, and when I tried to help with the sweats, he took them from my hand.

"I'm going to wash my face," he muttered, and raced to his bathroom.

I sighed, shut the sliding door and locked it. A chill raced through me, and I knew I had to get out of my wet clothes. A warm shower would have been my choice, but I needed to find out what had happened between the time I'd talked with Greg earlier and Simon leaving.

Fucking Simon.

At the bathroom door, I heard the water running. Knocking, I said, "I'm going to change my clothes. I'll be right back."

A muffled "okay" was all I got in return. I changed in record time, as fast as I could peel off the wet denim. I stopped in the kitchen, prepping an ice pack for Greg's face. My anger built again, growing, blackening my insides. The howling wind slammed drops of rain against the windows with renewed vigor. Lost in my thoughts, I realized I'd been gone longer than I'd wanted to be, and within that time, Greg could have reverted to his normal storm reaction. Shit.

In his room, I found Greg sitting in that corner farthest from the window, knees drawn to his chest. I struggled to keep my concern, my worry, from my face. I gave him a gentle smile, my expression the polar opposite of the lump of dread taking residence in my chest. Greg surveyed me for a minute as he usually did whenever he'd been alone and scared during a storm. Without any distractions, Greg would go to a far-off place in his mind, possibly back to an awful moment in the past, which he'd never told me about. When he looked me

over with that critical eye, I assumed he was assessing if I was really there or not. That thought went far to freak me out. But then again, Greg wouldn't talk about it with me, so I wasn't sure if any of what I'd assumed was true.

Greg was silent. I could only wait, hoping he'd give me my due, and decide I was there in the flesh. His eyes widened slightly, and I swore the brown lightened.

“Did you find Sweetums on the brown pillow on the couch?”

For a moment, the statement confused me, and then I rolled my eyes. “Shit, I lost again.”

As I approached him, Greg said, “Get the pink blanket off my bed. The fuzzy one. It's warm.”

Complying with his request, I handed him both the blanket and the ice pack. I was about to sit when I realized in my haste to change, I hadn't taken off my wet socks. After I peeled them off, I took them into his bathroom and draped them over the side of the tub. Something pink in the trash caught my eye. I reached in and pulled out the balled up fabric of Greg's pink and black underwear. Just holding the fabric heated my skin and, instinctively, I placed the panties against my nose and inhaled deeply. The manly musk of Greg added to my visceral reaction. My eyes widened, when I realized what I was doing. I dropped the underwear onto the counter, but before exiting the bathroom, I hesitated. Without further thought, I grabbed the pink panties and stuffed them into the pocket of my sweatpants.

Greg huddled in the corner, covered by his pink, fuzzy blanket, holding the ice pack to his cheek. I longed to climb under the blanket and snuggle as we often did during a storm. Instead, I sat cross-legged before him on the floor. He frowned at the unexpected action. For some reason, I thought sitting close to him was a bad idea. Before he could say anything, I asked, “Did Simon hit you?”

He choked out a gasp and lowered his eyes. A slight nod confirmed what I'd already known. I also knew the why, too. Oh, the man was so dead. He'd never get within a hundred feet of Greg again.

“He had no right to touch you, and when I get my hands on—”

Greg reached out and grabbed hold of my wrist, eyes wide, cutting off my words. “No. No, you can't... He didn't mean it. I was wrong. I shouldn't have just sprung this on him. It's my fault.”

I couldn't stop the growl that escaped my throat. "It's not your fault, Greg. He had no right to touch you!"

Greg shrank back at the force in my voice. I rubbed at the back of my neck. Greg was too sweet, too nice, and Simon didn't deserve to be anywhere near someone so pure.

I lowered my voice. "I'm sorry. It's just... he had no right to hit you. You didn't do anything wrong."

I pleaded with my eyes for him to hear me, to believe me, but he shook his head.

"I just love him." He shuddered.

Those whispered words stabbed repeatedly into my chest, mortal wounds to my soul. I wanted to deny that Simon had an ounce of love inside him for Greg, insist that he was using Greg for sex, until Greg spoke, again.

"It was... this was going to be our first time—*my first time*." Another choked gasp. "I wanted it to be special."

First time? I'd known Greg was a virgin before Simon, but in the five months they'd been together, they'd never had sex? Simple Simon didn't seem like the kind of man to wait five months. Maybe he really did love Greg. But... *no*. You don't strike people you love.

Greg's tears fell again, and I grasped his hand. He held on and my anger relented.

"Tell me what happened."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter," he whispered. "He thinks I'm sick."

"You're not sick. There's nothing wrong with you. He's the one who's wrong." Greg wearing those panties was hotter than hell to me, but I couldn't speak the words out loud. For fuck's sake, I was straight.

The deep pain in his eyes, marring his face, was endless, and nothing I said could compete. Not now. Maybe in a week he'd hear me, but not now.

"Just remember, I think you're perfect."

Brown eyes met mine, and for a moment, the pain ebbed, mixing with confusion and hope, and then it was gone.

"Not perfect enough for you," he muttered, and instinctively I asked what

he'd said, even though I thought I'd heard every word. "Not perfect enough for him," he said louder.

Had I misheard the first time?

"He doesn't deserve you," I said, and squeezed his hand.

Greg rested his head against the wall. If pain had a name, right then, it would have been Greg Holden. He was swimming in it, trying to keep his head above the murky blackness, fighting to stay afloat. I would buoy him. I would be there, and we would get through this together.

Chapter Five

It was Saturday, and Greg didn't work on Saturdays, but I did. After what had happened the night before, I really wanted to stay home with him, but with a repair list a mile long at work, that was impossible. Before I left, though, I made sure his phone was charged, and that it sat close by, along with the house phone. When I started listing ten different ways that he could reach me, Greg smirked and told me not to drag my ass or I'd be late.

I downed coffee on my way to work, and once there, I kept the pot going. Sleep had been fleeting the night before, as I'd listened for Greg, telling myself that I was only doing so in case he needed something. Guiltily, though, I'd stayed in my room, as Greg had wept, out of fear I'd do or say something wrong. Well, not wrong as much as inappropriate. My thoughts had surpassed appropriate and were into downright pornographic visions of him in those panties. Worse yet, I'd added in a corset and nylons. The thoughts had caused a vicious stomachache and my head hurt and, truthfully, I would have been in the right to call off of work. However, keeping a safe distance from the vulnerable Greg was a smart idea. *Yeah, smart for me.*

Work wasn't much of a distraction, though. I took the time to text Greg often. If he didn't reply, I called. He caught on quickly and answered my texts, probably sick of the incessant ringing of his phone. The fear he'd hurt himself had bored into my brain, even though he'd assured me over and over he wouldn't do anything so rash. He was going to be okay, his reason being that once Simon thought about what he'd done, he would call and apologize for hitting him. To me, there was no fucking apology in the world to make up for striking someone like Greg.

As I replaced a faulty electrical socket in one of the empty top floor apartments, I sat back and rubbed at my forehead, willing the headache to subside. Impossible. Greg had told me he was going to change who he was for Simon, stop wearing the panties, deny what made him happy to get back that bastard he claimed to love. That wasn't love. Love wasn't about changing who you were. Love was about acceptance, flaws and all. Sure, love might make someone want to be a better person, but not a *different* person. I'd never ask Greg to change who he was, and when I'd told him so, he'd smiled gently, cupping my cheek. The summersault flip my stomach had accomplished with that one touch had been unprecedented, and I'd pulled away. At that point,

Greg informed me about his need to be loved, to be in a relationship with someone, to find his Prince Charming. Grinding my teeth, I'd wanted to say fuck Prince Charming and his square jaw and impeccable hair and fancy clothes and fucking white horse. No one was perfect, no one was everything someone needed, but Simon wasn't even close. He didn't know Greg as I did, he couldn't love him like—

That was the thought that had knocked me on my ass and sent me back to Percy's after work, another Corona in my hand. The sky was clear, sun shining, and I was hiding from Greg, like a slimy coward. Tucked behind the same table I'd sat at yesterday, I downed beer after beer, lost in thoughts of pink lace and silk, a gorgeous, wide smile and foreign ground. No map, the language unknown to me, and me just wanting to go back home to what was familiar.

My phone rang. I fumbled to pull it from my jacket pocket. I was slightly buzzed.

Greg.

"Hey," I said, raising my tone a few octaves to sound upbeat.

"Law, you done at work?" Greg sounded better than when I'd spoken with him earlier. For a moment, I contemplated lying and saying no, but I'd never been good at even half-truths.

"Yeah. I stopped at Percy's. I... um... wanted to congratulate Tyson on Molly finally getting pregnant." The lie surprised me. Go figure.

"Oh my, God! That's wonderful! I have to come and congratulate him myself. Stay there. See you in twenty minutes."

I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at the screen. Greg was coming to Percy's. He'd been there plenty of times, most of those times with me, but tonight, so soon after asshole Simon dumped him?

Shoving the phone into my pocket, I wandered back to the bar for another beer. Maybe it was a good thing Greg was coming since I was going to need a ride home. A local band was setting up on the stage. Stephanie was behind the bar with Tyson, prepping for the Saturday night crowd, which would easily swell past a hundred with a band playing. I'd be gone by then, luckily.

"Lawson, back so soon?" Stephanie asked. Her harsh tone told me that her seeming forgiveness from the other day was about to be retracted. Maybe, once she'd had time to think about everything, she'd gotten pissed again.

I nodded and placed the empty on the bar. “Just waiting for Greg. Can I get another one... Please?”

She swiped the bottle away. “Greg hasn’t been here much since he started dating Simon. Can’t wait to see him.” Her grin was wide and genuine.

I wished I felt as confident about seeing Greg. A hard pit of nerves irritated my stomach while I waited. A shrill shout startled me. Greg lay across the top of the bar, arms clutching a red-faced Tyson in a bear hug. When Greg finally pulled away, I was taken aback by Greg’s beaming smile, twinkling eyes, and damn, he’d worn those skintight jeans. I had to suck down a long swig of beer as visions of what he could possibly be wearing beneath them hit me. No. Greg had said no more panties. He was going back to the tights-whities he’d worn previously when he’d feared either Simon or I would find out his secret. Clenching the neck of the bottle tightly in my fist, I imagined it was Simon’s neck. That brought me some self-satisfaction and a grin to my face.

A hand rested on my shoulder, the fingers massaging my muscles. Greg gazed fondly down at me then narrowed his eyes. “How long have you been here?”

I cleared my throat. “Not long.”

Stephanie appeared before us and set a Heineken down for Greg. “About four beers ago,” she said with a wicked grin and walked away.

I’d be paying until the end of time for using her, which was only fair. Maybe I could repair something at her place as penance.

Greg continued to watch me, and I squirmed on the stool, wishing for a black hole to engulf me. What was Greg thinking? Damn, I hope he didn’t think I was avoiding him—even though I was.

“How’re you doing?” I asked, trying to point the spotlight on him.

He sighed heavily and sat next to me. He’d showered recently, his coconut body wash tickling my nose. Whenever he showered, I always made up reasons to get closer to him, loving that just-showered smell. Clean and innocent, pure. Shit, Greg was purer than I’d thought after he’d admitted he was still a virgin. Of course, he’d saved himself for that one special person. It was so Greg to do just that.

Stop it. You’re not gay.

The smile Greg had worn minutes before fled. “I don’t know. I’m not okay,

but... I think this will work out. I'm thinking Simon feels bad about what he did and he's afraid to call me."

I suppressed my snort. Wishful thinking was more like it. "Did you call him?"

Greg pushed his beer around on the wood surface of the bar, the sweat from the bottle leaving wet trails. "I tried earlier, but I got his voicemail. I left a message. I told him—"

The door opened, and the loud chatter of voices cut off what Greg said. Suddenly, he squealed—actually squealed—and darted off to the group. Immediately, I recognized Christy Jacobs, who Greg had pulled into a hug. Stan Wilton, her boyfriend, stood behind her, peeling off his jacket. They had another couple with them I didn't recognize. Greg and I had gone to college with Christy and Stan, but I hadn't seen them in over a year. Greg dragged them both to me, and after quick hugs and admonishments for not keeping in touch, we all sat at a table. The other couple, Tasha and Niles, was visiting from out of town.

I settled into a good conversation with Niles about new construction versus old, since he was a general contractor. Despite the distraction, my eyes were glued to Greg, watching for any signs of distress, any inkling he was overwhelmed or needed me. The band had begun playing, and I couldn't hear what Greg and Christy were saying. Once, Greg's lip quivered, and I thought he said something about a fight and that everything would work out. I was sure he'd modified the truth about what had happened with Simon.

Stephanie stepped up to the table, bumping my arm with her hip. She pointed to the empty bottle I clenched tightly, my knuckles white.

"You done with that?" she asked wryly.

I frowned and handed her the bottle. She started to gather the empties, and there were a lot of them, so I rose and grabbed an armful, too, as part of my atonement. Carefully, I deposited the bottles onto the bar, waiting for Stephanie or Tyson so I could order another round. My gaze wandered back to Greg, who laughed out loud at something Tasha had said. I couldn't help but smile, grateful he had the distraction tonight, and equally grateful that I didn't have to try and cheer him up alone in a darkened apartment.

"Oh, shit."

When I turned back to the bar, Stephanie had her hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

I actually looked down at myself, expecting to find a big bug crawling on me. When I frowned at her, she finally dropped her hand.

“What?” I snapped, not bothering to hide my irritation at possibly having screwed up again. Stephanie gazed over to where Greg sat and then back at me. I instantly hated the knowing look in her eyes.

“It’s Greg, isn’t it?”

My brow furrowed further. “It’s Greg, what?”

Stephanie’s features softened, reminding me of my older sister, Ann, who still gave me that caring, motherly look. “It’s okay. But I have to say, it hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

Truthfully, she’d lost me. “What never crossed your mind?” Her vagueness was beyond annoying. Besides, I’d been irritated when I’d walked into the place, and the beer hadn’t even touched it.

“Does he know?” Damn, she was bold.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I braced my hands on the bar, the noise of the music and voices suffocating me as I waited for her answer.

Seconds ticked by, as she seemed to contemplate her words. She leaned forward, a challenge sparking in her narrowed, blue eyes. “Does Greg know you love him?”

Chapter Six

Does Greg know you love him?

That statement circled around my head like a dog chasing its tail, a dizzying motion, helped along by the half-dozen beers I'd imbibed. The song ended, but the sweet sound of Greg's laughter was clearly audible, a laugh I would crawl on my knees through glass to hear. Of course, I loved Greg. We were best friends.

"He's my best friend," I muttered and wanted to expand on that, but instead said, "I'm not gay."

Her look of pity and the sound of Greg's voice crawled under my skin, and I needed air. Rushing away from the bar, I slammed past bodies, needing to escape, needing to breathe, just breathe as I'd done for the past twenty-five years.

Twenty-five years of breathing as a heterosexual male.

Busting through a side door, I forced the cold night air into my lungs. The sharp burn of the cold cleared my head momentarily, enough to realize everything in my life was in flux—a tilting, twirling ride that had started the night I'd seen those damn panties.

A fetish. It had to be a fetish. *Sure, Lawson, lie to yourself some more.* After that night, I'd gone online more than once, seeking out gay porn featuring men in panties, and one thing had been clear. While I'd popped a boner, I hadn't obsessed about those men, hadn't lain awake at night thinking about every part of them. Not how their full, pink lips would feel, how their smooth skin would taste, how it would feel to glide fingertips over their hard pecs and tight abs, how it would feel to push into tight, hot heat. No, those men were nothing compared to Greg.

Oh God, I couldn't handle this anymore. I was ten seconds away from disintegrating into atoms and floating away if I didn't do something. That knot pushed farther into my chest and expanded into my gut and throat, taking over who I was. Chaotic, confusing thoughts bounced against my skull, crashing into one another until they were a tangled mass equaling that in my chest.

Short, heaving breaths, and I couldn't find air or apparently hear anything either because suddenly someone was rubbing soothing circles on my back. I jumped up and there was Christy, her eyes wide.

“Lawson, chill. You’re hyperventilating.” Her steady, monotone voice calmed me as I struggled to regain control. “What’s wrong?”

A half-deranged chuckle exploded from my throat and I almost slapped my hand over my mouth. “What’s wrong? I’m losing my fucking mind, that’s what’s wrong.”

I paced and pulled at my hair, yanking on my collar to give the lump more room. “I’m not gay” raced with my thoughts, although right alongside—giving them a run for their money—were intense doubts about that single truth. All the while, Christy watched and waited. She’d always been such a pain, trying to get me to open up and talk about my feelings. I sneered at her.

“When you’re done with the self-flagellation, could you clue me in as to what this hissy fit is all about?”

Hissy fit? This was a nuclear blast, an atomic bomb of epic proportions, an asteroid ready to plunge the world into darkness and death and—

“Lawson, just stop!” Christy commanded.

My body stilled, which surprised me as much as it seemed to surprise her. “You’re ready to implode. Just talk to me.”

Shaking my head, I tried to move away from her, but her bony fingers grabbed my bicep, digging in tight. The momentary flash of pain was like a wake-up call for my brain.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Christy,” I spat with more force than necessary. She’d only ever been my friend, and I was taking my anger at myself out on her, but at that moment, it was all I had.

“Tough shit. From the moment we sat down at the table, I could feel the tension wafting off you. If you clench your jaw any tighter, you’ll break a tooth. Stan noticed it, too. Please,” she pleaded. Her green eyes were dark in the dim light, but the worry in them shone bright.

“I don’t... I don’t know. What do you want from me?” How could I even begin to tell her what was wrong when I had no idea myself? *Another lie, Lawson. You’re lusting after your roommate. Your male roommate, your best friend.* Shaking my head didn’t rid me of those thoughts, and involuntarily I muttered, “Greg.”

A deep, heavy sigh escaped from her lips. “I always wondered what would happen when you finally accepted the truth.” She crossed her arms. “I was right. Total and complete meltdown.”

My head snapped up. “What?”

She smirked. “We all knew, Lawson. Me, Stan, half the people who ever hung out with you and Greg. We all knew he was special to you. Shit, the way you treated him, looked at him, like he’d hung the moon and stars just for you.”

A sharp pain hit me between the eyes, as if an ice pick had been shoved into my brain, and my hand searched out the wall. Leaning back, I steadied my shaking legs.

We all knew.

“Knew what?” I gasped out, those thoughts back, pinging around my head like an evil pinball game—lights flashing, bells ringing, whistles, and tilts. Yeah, I’d tilted all right.

“That you are in love with him, stupid.”

“B-but... I’m not gay,” I whispered almost to myself.

“Does it matter whether you are or not? You love Greg. *Love* him. You can lie to me all you want, but you’re really only lying to yourself.” The smugness in her tone, the self-righteousness, rubbed my fur the wrong way. She’d always been a know-it-all, a know-it-all who’d always spoken the truth to me, challenged my misconceptions, forced me to deal with shit. Damn, I’d missed her.

“I can’t be gay.” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

She huffed. “Is that what your problem is? I never took you for a homophobe, Lawson.”

“What? No! You know I don’t care about that!” I’d marched in Gay Pride parades with Greg, had attended rallies in other states with him to help legalize gay marriage, and fought alongside him for LGBT rights. I’d done it all for Greg.

“Oh, so it’s okay for other people, but not you?” The anger in her tone bordered on beat-the-crap-out-of-me pissed.

“I don’t know how!” I shouted. “I don’t know how to be gay, all right? All proud and out and shit.”

Hands on my hips, I stared down, seeing the past six years of my life. Six years of lies.

A suppressed snort and I saw Christy bite her lip, a smile forcing its way

out. She raised her hands and then the laughter rolled from her. Hearty and loud, she was laughing at me.

I crossed my arms over my chest, glad she found my mental breakdown so amusing.

“I-I’m s-sorry... you... you...”

I pursed my lips and might have found her laughter infectious, but I’d just come to the realization that possibly I was gay... If not outright, then for Greg? Was that even possible? Maybe I was bi? I so didn’t do well with labels.

I waited her out, because while laughing, she was unable to ask me questions about my feelings and crap. Although, this was the least unsettled I’d felt in months. I was no longer dangling over the precipice of some deep, black hole. Now I was just close to the edge, which was crumbling slowly.

Christy gathered herself and swiped at the sparkling tears in her eyes. A final amused sigh and she said, “I love you, Lawson, but sometimes you can be such a guy.”

What the hell did that mean? I was about to ask when she stepped toward me, her hand resting on my forearm. “There’s no way to be gay. It’s no different than loving a woman.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Okay, yes, the sex part can be different, but anal with a guy isn’t much different than anal with a woman.” Seeing the shock on my face, she sniggered. “Yes, I said ‘anal’ and, yes, I’ve done it plenty of times.”

I groaned. “I so don’t want to hear this.” Now I was going to have to scrub my mind clean.

“Does having sex with Greg gross you out?”

Thoughts of Greg stretched out on my bed, naked, hard, in those damned panties, and I immediately had a stiffy. Visions of leaning over him, watching his bliss-filled face as I fucked him... No way was I grossed out.

“It’s dark out here, but I can practically hear you blushing. And you know, not all gay guys have anal sex. Sex is more than penetration.”

“What’s with the Sex 101?” And how could I get it to stop?

She squeezed my arm. “I just don’t want something else to get in the way of you or Greg finding happiness, and you Lawson, make him happy. He watches

you, and every time I speak to him it's Lawson this and Lawson that, and it's the sappiest shit I've ever heard and seen. Enough to give me cavities."

"Greg talks about me?"

She barked out a laugh. "To anyone who'll listen, sweets."

"No. He loves Simon. He said so."

She furrowed her brow. "Greg needs someone to love, someone to love him, and Simon is there because Greg doesn't think you ever will be."

Why didn't she just rip my heart out with her bare hands? It would have hurt less.

I'd pushed Greg to that fuckhead Simple Simon because my own head had been stuck up my ass.

"Ahh, shit, Christy."

She nodded. "The plight of the ignorant." She raised her arm, looking at a non-existent watch. "And it only took you six years to realize it. Must be a record for a Neanderthal like you." The words would have been harsh, if her tone hadn't been so caring. "And look, you're still breathing. My work here is done." She rubbed her hands together as if she'd just completed a messy job. Too bad my work was just beginning.

Chapter Seven

The time had come for action. Too bad I had no clue what that entailed. Since that night at the bar, Greg had been more upbeat, yet I still heard him up the next couple of nights. When he didn't think I was looking, he'd let his defenses fall, and that sad, mournful look that twisted deep in my gut reappeared in his eyes. He was trying so hard for me, trying not to be sad and mopey, and that wasn't okay. That's when I started to plan. I'd nixed coming right out and telling Greg I had feelings for him, that those panties had pushed me to realize I'd loved him for years. Also, I had definitely decided that I wasn't even going to think about coming out gay to anyone else besides Greg. That was an entirely different set of fears, which would most likely lead to more meltdowns. One heart-stopping hurdle at a time.

Terrified wasn't the word for admitting I wanted to be with another man. Yet, I had a bigger fear. What if Greg didn't take me seriously? What if he thought I was doing this because of what Simon had done to him? I hadn't brought up Simon all weekend and neither had Greg. Even if I thought Simon was a douche bag, Greg still loved him, or thought he had to because I was never going to love him. He was wrong about that.

My brilliant plan was to court Greg on the sly. Yes, court him. Take him out, have fun, show him I cared for him as more than a friend. In essence, date him without telling him. When I'd informed Christy of my idea, she balked, wanting me to tell Greg the truth. She had a bad feeling about my plan. I had a bad feeling about all of it, but I kept that to myself. I could mess up anything with a little effort.

Monday night, Greg went to a study group thing for one of his master's classes. He'd slowed down his studies, choosing to work so he could pay for his classes and not rack up a ton of student loans. His family had never been supportive of his dreams to get a degree in history, but they wholeheartedly accepted him being gay. I'd always thought their disappointment over his degree choice and not his sexual orientation had been odd.

Taking advantage of Greg's absence, I combed the internet for anything romantic to do in Burlington. Shouldn't be too hard to do, right? My hands froze on the keys. I was planning an actual date with Greg. The gradual unfurling of that knot in my chest was amazing as I thought about an actual

future with Greg. Was it possible to be happy and out and gay? I didn't know, but I was going to find out.

"We're going where?" The bottle of water Greg had been lifting to his mouth froze halfway to his lips. His brow furrowed and he eyed me with something akin to suspicion.

I cleared my throat, my stomach once again performing acrobatics. I pushed the paprika chicken Greg had made for dinner around my plate. I couldn't even look him in the eye. *Don't blow this.* "Someone at work mentioned the Essex Theatre was showing *The English Patient* Friday night. I thought we could, you know, go... and then maybe have dinner on Church Street. Something to do."

He continued to eye me with disbelief, lowering the bottle to the table. Now I knew what they meant about being in the hot seat. Silence prevailed, and I could only wait. Greg's lips pulled into a thin line. "I don't need you to feel sorry for me."

My frown was immediate. "I'm not feeling sorry for you."

"Then I don't need you to entertain me. Don't think I haven't noticed you trying to distract me every chance you get." His tone edged on annoyance, and doubts that I was doing the right thing slammed into me.

I picked up my plate and turned to the sink, hiding my disappointment. "I just thought you would want to see the movie. It's one of your top ten favorites, and instead of watching it on a small TV screen, I thought you'd want to see it in a theater. Sorry if you think I'm crowding you."

I dropped the plate into the sink with a clatter and went to leave when Greg blocked my exit.

"Wait," he said. The weary sigh escaping from him went a long way to diminishing my anger. "I'm sorry. You've been great this week, and I don't know how I would have gotten through it without you. I'm so touchy and I hate it. I hate all of this."

I knew how much he hated that he hadn't heard from Simon. Unfortunately, he still held out hope that Simon felt bad and was afraid to call him. Who was I to break his heart further with what I thought of Simon's silence?

I yearned to hold Greg, pull him in tight, and say everything I needed to say, but that knot in my chest was still a tangled mess. Until I could pick apart the pieces and unravel my thoughts and feelings, nothing would come out right.

“I know you do,” I whispered.

He wrapped his arms tight around his stomach as he always did when he felt vulnerable. “You know what I wish?” he asked, looking away from me.

Oh, God, the wishes. When he was happy, they were filled with hope and optimism and joy. When he was sad, they were pitiful pleas for the world to stop beating him up.

I touched his arm. “What?”

He hesitated before answering and closed his eyes. The hum of the fridge and sound of the traffic outside filled the gaping quiet.

When he opened his eyes, he said, “I wish it would all stop hurting so much.” With that, he turned, leaving me too speechless to reply. When I heard his door click closed and the snick of the lock, I felt as if he was closing me out with the rest of the world.

Greg and I made it through the rest of the week without incident. So far, I'd dragged Greg to the park to throw the Frisbee, to the river to hike, and to the rec park to shoot hoops. Each time, he went graciously after I'd taken the time to nag, and cajole and, yes, sometimes, trick him. But once we were out of the apartment, he'd opened up, actually laughed, and, for the most part, had a good time. A few times, I'd caught him checking his phone, no doubt looking for texts from Simon, and my heart died a little each time. But I reminded myself that he needed time to let Simon go and trust that I was serious. I mean, to him I was straight. Truthfully, I'd decided, for the sake of my sanity, not to overthink the label thing. I needed what brain cells I had to focus on Greg.

Unfortunately, the last few nights Greg had spent studying and working on his thesis, which was a never-ending project. I was pretty sure he was hiding from me and my overenthusiastic need for him to smile and be cheerful. Christy—in one of those rare moments when I actually agreed with her—had said Greg was mourning a loss and needed to work through the pain. Apparently, there were no shortcuts for that. So I backed off, hanging in the periphery, waiting to be needed. I never realized how much I'd thrived on Greg needing me. When that disappeared, I'd become totally lost and pretty sad myself, which is why I held up two tickets to the movie, hoping he'd finally agree to go with me. I hadn't mentioned the movie the entire week but now it was Friday night. I'd be damned if he was going to stay home feeling sorry for himself one more night.

“Come on. You know you want to go.” *Please go with me.*

Greg sagged into the corner of the couch and, while he looked tired and rumpled, he was gorgeous all the same. I'd given up, no longer trying to stop my thoughts of Greg. What I'd found was those thoughts and feelings weren't as scary as I'd thought they would be. One hurdle down, a hundred or more to go.

Greg rubbed at his temple. “I'm tired, Law.”

If anything, I was persistent. “It's a movie. You get to sit in a darkened theater and just chill. And come on...” I grinned and pushed at his leg. “Ralph Fiennes, right? I know what you think of him.”

My heart thudded in my ears as I waited in the silence, watched as a myriad of emotions crossed Greg's face. In the past, waving two tickets to *The English Patient* would have had Greg rushing about all flustered and as excited as a kid on Christmas morning. Now he was still and silent. When a smile tugged at the corner of his pink lips, I knew I had him.

“Okay, you've got thirty minutes to get ready and we hit the road.”

I would have sworn that coming to terms with the idea that I might be gay was going to be the hard part of all of this. Not by a long shot—not yet, anyhow. First, I had to get the guy, and I was pretty sure that was going to kill me before it ever happened.

As Greg and I entered the lobby of the Essex Theatre, a man exiting a movie caught sight of Greg and smiled wide. His grey-blue eyes sparkled. His strong nose and chin and perfect white teeth were the fodder of movie stars. His blond hair was thick and perfectly styled. His wireless glasses gave him that smart, distinguished look. He was probably in his mid-thirties. Confidence and style oozed from every pore, like a shield against slumpy, uncouth peasants like me. I smoothed the front of my blue, plaid shirt. Face it, this man was a member of a league in which I'd never belong.

Greg embraced the man who, in my opinion, held on a bit too long. When he finally relented, Greg said, “Miller Boyd, this is my roommate, Lawson Myers.”

The man gave me a sideways glance, as if unwilling to take his eyes from Greg. That's when I noticed the lust and want in Miller Boyd's eyes. The man had it bad for Greg.

“Miller was one of my undergrad professors.”

Great.

Smart, educated, and most likely well-off. I looked down at my faded jeans and hiking boots, realizing I hadn't even tried to look nice when taking Greg out, hadn't even made an effort. Greg wore an expensive, grey button-up shirt and a pair of black dress pants with black loafers. Me, I looked like I was ready to chop wood.

I shook Miller's soft, uncalloused hand. He was shiny and clean and, in the car world, he'd be a Cadillac, while I would be a rusted-out, economy car. I looked at Greg—polished, almost regal, and shiny, *so shiny*—as the two of them spoke about Greg's thesis and debated the merits of his hypothesis. They referred to famous papers published by people I'd never heard of. And Greg glowed—fucking glowed—whenever Miller declared something Greg had said to be brilliant. To me it had all sounded brilliant, and way above my level of education. And that's when I realized that Greg was a Cadillac, too, and what the fuck would he want with an economy car?

I tuned out the rest of their conversation, waiting with an outward appearance of interest and patience when inside I had a clawing need to escape the torture. Finally, Greg realized we were going to be late for the movie and told Miller good-bye. Another sideways glance and a terse, “Nice to meet you,” and Miller Boyd left along with every ounce of hope I had that Greg and I should be together.

Getting popcorn and soda, we made our way into the darkened movie theater. The moment the first scene flashed on the screen, Greg was enthralled. Surreptitiously, I watched from the corner of my eye as Greg smiled and sighed, as his breath caught even though he knew every line, knew every second of the movie. Tears rolled down his cheeks as Laszlo left Katharine in the cave, desperate to get help, and then again as he carried her lifeless body to the plane. I longed to reach out and wipe away those tears, but no longer felt I had the right, no longer felt I had a chance in hell with Greg. Not with people like Miller Boyd wanting him. How many other perfect people wanted Greg? The thought roiled my stomach.

Greg turned to me as the last scene played out. Lost in my head, I thought how perfect he was and how he deserved someone so much better than me, someone who could feel deeply and love as honestly and openly as he did. Someone who was sophisticated and could show him things in the world I had

no interest in. Someone he could have deep, meaningful conversations with. As a human being, I was so underdeveloped and stunted, not even close to what Greg could be, *would* be, someday.

We stared at one another, our eyes locked, and when I came to my senses, I reared back in my seat. Greg's eyebrows lowered and he reached over and squeezed my hand. The scalding burn raced up my arm and set my blood on fire and my heart racing. I stood, mumbling about the bathroom, and bolted from the dark theater and into the blinding light. Safe in the bathroom, I locked myself in the last stall and leaned my forehead against the cold metal, bemoaning what a fool I'd been. I'd never be good enough. Never.

Chapter Eight

After the movie, I requested a rain check on dinner. Food was the last thing I could stomach at that point. The ride home was silent, no commentary on the movie, none of the comfortable banter Greg and I usually shared. If not for the relaxed, partial smile on Greg's face, I would have thought he was upset or pissed off. Nope. He actually appeared content, satisfied—maybe even happy. Possibly, I'd managed to pull him from the Simon funk. Maybe he was thinking of Miller Boyd. At least the disastrous night may have been good for something.

"So, whatever happened between you and Stephanie? You seemed pretty interested in her," Greg said, freezing my blood.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my focus on keeping the truck on the road after the abruptness of the question.

Greg turned his upper body toward me, as much as he could while wearing his seatbelt. He stretched his arm over the back of the seat, his hand resting close to the back of my neck. Even though his hand didn't actually touch me, the hairs on the back of my neck rose from the proximity.

"You slept with her, right?"

My hand jerked slightly on the wheel and I shifted in my seat. "Uh, yeah. Once."

In my periphery, I saw him nod, and the smirk on his face was disconcerting.

"And?"

Shit, why was he pushing this? My humiliating, failed attempt to put Greg out of my mind was the last thing I wanted to share with anyone, much less him. Especially tonight.

"And what?"

"And what happened?" Greg's lilting tone was almost teasing.

Seriously? "I really hope you aren't looking for details or anything."

A boisterous laughter rolled from Greg and filled the truck cab. I couldn't help but smile for a moment.

His hand bumped against my neck and a jolt flashed through me. Suddenly, I wanted, needed him to touch me. I shook my head imperceptibly. No. That wouldn't be a good idea.

"Please, no details. I just wondered what was going on between you two."

I shrugged. "Nothing."

"That's what I thought."

I glanced sideways at him, his face partially shadowed, his wavy hair calling for me to run my fingers through its softness.

Now his hair was getting to me.

"What does that mean?" My irritation grew at my inability to stop the thoughts of touching Greg, and suddenly the cab was way too small. I cracked the window for some air.

"What ever happened to Melanie?" he asked, apparently no intention of stopping his inquisition.

I frowned. Melanie was last fall, and lasted all of two dates before she decided our auras clashed or something. I think it had more to do with her comment that she'd had more conversations with her goldfish. "Didn't work out."

This was quickly turning into the ride from hell.

Again, he nodded. I'd never been so grateful to turn onto our street. Just in time, too, as a drop of rain hit the windshield.

"And Terry?"

I pulled into the driveway and slammed the truck into park. "What is this? A walk down the memory lane of my failed relationships?"

My barked words hadn't even fazed Greg as he continued to scrutinize me with an annoying smugness. I'd had enough and I reached for the door handle. Greg's hand on my shoulder stopped me and the warmth raced straight to my groin. I tried hard to stifle my groan.

"Law. Why didn't they work out?"

I sighed, my hand still on the handle, unable to look at Greg. "I guess because I couldn't give them what they wanted."

"What did they want?" he asked without hesitation, his voice quizzical but still light, despite how heavy this conversation weighed on me.

What had they all wanted? My heart, of course, but Greg had stolen that long ago without me even knowing he had.

I shrugged again, being the great orator that I was. "When I figure it out, I'll let you know."

Without hesitation, I exited the truck. The wind had kicked up, and a few stray drops of rain fell. The back gate banged in the wind. I went over and had to work to hook the latch, which had bent.

I froze as Greg stepped up behind me, too close to my body. He peered over my shoulder, watching as I worked to bend the latch back into place.

"Can you get it?" His warm breath ghosted across my ear and cheek, and my hand slipped off the latch. "You need help?"

"No. Why don't you head inside? I've got this."

For the love of all that is holy, please, go inside.

I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath, and with great will was able to bend the lock and latch the gate despite Greg practically sprawled over my back.

"Got it," I declared and turned to find Greg unmoved and still too close.

I raised my eyebrows and shifted uncomfortably, trapped between Greg and the gate. We were near the same height and, despite the darkness, a light shone in his eyes from the large halogen lamp lighting the driveway. I swallowed hard, working to keep all reaction from showing on my face. I wanted to touch him, wanted to pull him into my arms and feel his hard chest against mine, so different from the women I'd been with. Instead, I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my jeans, which reminded me of Miller Boyd and his tailored perfectness.

"Miller was nice. He seems to like you."

Greg's frown and blinking told me that my comment had caught him off guard. "Yeah, he's nice, but we are talking about you."

"We are?" I asked, wishing he'd step back. The wind whipped his hair about his head, and occasionally, a raindrop hit us. Greg was so focused on me, he didn't even notice.

He nodded slowly, surveying my eyes, my mouth, my fucking soul. Damn, my gaze kept going to that mouth, wondering how his lips would taste. If I closed my eyes, and kissed Greg, would those lips feel different from a

woman's lips? I'd come close to finding out, but now, I couldn't pull Greg down to my level, couldn't make him become something less than what he deserved.

"Yes, we are. Your relationships never last. What was the longest?" Greg tapped his finger against his chin as he thought of the answer. Of course, my answer wouldn't match his. Greg had been my longest relationship.

"Laura. Three years ago. Two months, right?"

I didn't answer, my ability to speak hindered by the tightness in my throat. That feeling of being trapped, like a cornered animal, filled me and the need to escape clawed its way up from my stomach.

Greg pursed his lips and nodded again. "I've always wondered why none of them ever lasted. I thought you just hadn't found that one special person, the one who could capture your heart. But you were distant with all of them. On the surface there was an attraction, but your heart was never in it." He paused, and when his eyes locked on mine, he was there, totally open, bleeding raw hope. But hope for what? It couldn't be me.

"I don't know what you're getting at," I managed to croak out. Sweat coated my palms, my hands clenched tight into fists in my pockets. And in my head was the chant to protect Greg, make Greg happy, help him get everything he deserved. They were silent, unconscious promises I'd made over the years. He was going to be a brilliant historian, teacher, human being, and he didn't need me to drag him down. I didn't have high and lofty goals in life. I was content with my job with no desire to climb any ladders, make more money, or become something more than I was right then. And that was okay for me. Not for Greg. Not by a long shot.

Greg gave me a half-hearted smile. "I wondered why it had failed with all of them. They wanted you, wanted you to fall in love with them. But they couldn't have you. And then I thought, maybe they couldn't have you because you already belonged to someone else."

I flinched and hoped he hadn't seen the subtle movement. "Wh—who would I belong to?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," he whispered, his eyes softening with more hope. "Is there someone special? Maybe someone you want, who doesn't know?"

Thoughts crashed about as panic filled my head. It was as if he already

knew and was goading me into saying it out loud. What if he laughed at my declaration or thought I was fucking with him? What if he thought my motives were born out of pity over what Simple Simon had done to him? What if I lost my best friend? My only friend.

Immediately, I shook my head as bile climbed into my throat. I swallowed over and over until I was able to answer and say the words that would burn worse than that stomach acid on my tongue. "There's no one."

He stared back, absorbing my words, probably searching for any indication they might be untrue. I refused to look away, clenching my jaw tight, unblinking. I saw the moment he realized he wasn't going to hear anything different from me, and that kicked up my need to flee from what quickly resembled a life or death situation.

"It's gonna pour any second. Let's get inside," I said and stepped to the side. Before he could speak, I was taking the stairs by twos. As I unlocked the door, I heard his footsteps behind me. When I entered the apartment, I continued to flee like the coward I was, until I locked my bathroom door. Without stopping, I turned on the shower and stripped from my clothes, desperate to scrub the filth of lies and deception from my skin. No matter how hard I scrubbed, how hot the water was, the guilt and need covered me.

What was I doing? No matter what I did, I would hurt Greg. I had to talk to him, had to say something, and not just leave him hanging.

I shut off the water, quickly toweled off, and grabbed sweatpants and a sweatshirt from my closet. The house phone rang. People rarely called that phone unless they couldn't get us on our cells. After two rings, the machine kicked on, Greg's cheerful voice, loud and clear, announced that we were both sorry we'd missed the call and to leave a message. When I heard the muffled sound of Simon's voice, I froze. What the hell? I couldn't understand the words, and went to open my door when I realized I was still naked. I struggled to pull on my sweatpants over my moist, freshly-washed skin. I heard Greg's voice as I shoved in a second leg and tipped over against the door. I still struggled as I managed to open my door and stumbled into the hall.

The apartment door slammed.

"Greg!"

No answer.

"Greg!" I raced into the kitchen in time to see the lights of his car as he backed out of the driveway. "Fuck!"

I replayed Simon's message.

Greg, if you're there, please. Pick up... I've been calling your cell all day. I'm sorry, baby. Please... I miss you. I never—

Greg's voice came on and, since our machine never seemed to recognize when someone had picked up, it had kept recording.

What do you want, Simon?

I want to apologize. I never meant to hit you. I was surprised. I mean... you were wearing women's underwear.

You slapped me, Simon.

The tightness in Greg's voice riled my anger fast.

I'm sorry. Can we talk, please? I'm home. Come see me.

Oh, fuck no! I waited out the silence until Greg audibly sighed heavily. *I'll be there in ten minutes.*

Chapter Nine

Greg had gone to Simon. The possibility of Simon wanting anything to do with Greg again had never crossed my mind. But Simon had said he missed Greg. Christy's words filled my head.

Greg needs someone to love, someone to love him, and Simon is there because Greg doesn't think you ever will be.

Fuck me twice to Sunday!

"Lawson, you're such a fucking idiot!" I screamed out. Pushing Greg away, I'd pushed him right back to Simon, someone who'd not only emotionally crushed him, but physically hurt him as well. Even if I thought I wasn't good enough for Greg, Simon was the bottom of the barrel.

Racing back to my bedroom, I finished dressing. I dialed Greg's cell as I left the apartment in a another pouring rainstorm, terrified of what Simple Simon would say and do to further hurt Greg. More than that, I was terrified that Greg would buy every word.

On the road, I continually called Greg and left pleading voicemails for him to call me. At a stop light, I texted him and waited. Nothing. If he got hurt, I'd never forgive myself. I loved him, had for years, and the next time I laid eyes on him, I would tell him just that. No matter the consequences.

A crack of thunder rumbled the air and lightning streaked the sky. As I drove, I tried to recall where exactly Simon lived. I knew it was on the same street as the golf course. It shouldn't be too hard to see Greg's car in the driveway, right? But as I drove up and down the street several times, I had yet to spot either Greg's or Simon's car. The dark night made it hard to see anything that wasn't directly under a streetlight.

My jaw clenched so tight, my ears hurt and my gut had that just-off-the-rollercoaster feel. Thoughts of Greg submitting to Simon, agreeing to anything if he'd just love him, brought the sting of tears to my eyes. It was the closest I'd come to crying in over ten years.

I turned my truck around at the end of the street for another pass when my phone rang. I answered with a terse, "What?"

"Well, that's a nice greeting. I was just calling to see how your date went," Christy said, her voice thick with her annoyance.

"I can't talk now. I have to find Greg," I growled.

"What do you mean find Greg? Where is he?" Her accusing tone already blamed me for whatever had happened.

I scanned the driveways, but many of them disappeared around the backs of the houses. I was going to have to drive into each one.

"Simon called Greg after we got back from the movie and wanted to talk to him. Greg left before I could stop him."

A car came slowly in my direction on the road.

"He went to Simon's? What the fuck?"

"My thoughts exactly," I said.

As the car came closer, several flashes of lightning lit up the entire area, allowing me to see inside the car as it passed by my truck. It was Simon and he was alone. "Shit, Simon just drove past me and he's alone! I don't know where he lives!"

"Corner of Turner Avenue. The white house with a red door. Go find Greg, Lawson, please."

"I will," I said and ended the call.

The next road was Turner Avenue, and there was the white house with the red door. I followed the driveway around the back and found Greg's car. That fuckhead had left Greg alone in this storm.

I pounded on the door, listening for any sound. "Greg! It's Lawson!" When there was no response, I turned the knob and the door opened. "Greg!"

Without pausing, I entered the darkened kitchen of a house I'd never been in before. I followed the light spilling out of the next room. "Greg, answer me!" I entered the living room. There was a crash of thunder and a whimper caught my attention. Greg was huddled in the corner, eyes glazed over with fear. Had he even heard me?

"Fuck, Greg," I said and knelt before him. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry," he mumbled, "I won't ever wear them again. Please let me in, please." He wasn't seeing me again. "Please, Uncle Ted."

Those words froze me. I cupped Greg's face in my hands, as I always did when he was off wherever. This time was different, however, because he'd

mentioned his uncle. Greg's father had died when he was eight. His mother had married his stepfather, Harry, when Greg was ten. In between those times, Greg's uncle had lived with them. He'd died over five years ago. Over the years, I'd only heard snippets about his uncle, and they'd never been nice.

"Greg," I said softly, rubbing my thumbs over his cheeks, hoping the contact would bring him back. He gazed out of the window at the storm as his breath hitched with sobs. "Greg," I said with more force. "Hey, it's Law."

Greg blinked and frowned and then his eyes focused. When he turned his head and looked at me, I waited as I always did for the recognition. When he sighed, I forced a smile.

"Hey," I repeated.

"What're you doing here?" Greg asked as he took in his surroundings, finally seeming to remember where he was.

"Coming to get you. I had a feeling you needed me."

Another sob and he lowered his head, but I kept my hands on his cheeks. "Simon wanted to talk to me. I was hoping..."

I forced the words from my mouth. "Hoping what?"

He shrugged and raised his head, tears swimming in his eyes. "Hoping he'd realized he was wrong."

I knew he hadn't. If he had, Simon would have been there. "But he didn't."

Greg shook his head and when another crack of thunder rumbled and shook the house, his hands grasped my wrists. "He said he'd take me back, love me, if I didn't wear those 'things' ever again. My uncle..." Greg took in a deep breath. "I never told anyone this before." The raw pain in his eyes gutted me, and I pressed our foreheads together.

"Tell me, please. Tell me what happened. Is it why you hate storms?"

His eyes closed and squeezed more tears out that ran down and clung to my fingers resting on his face.

He chuckled morosely. "My uncle," he said with such vitriol that the hate hung in the air. "When I was nine, he caught me wearing my sister's underwear, parading around my room, showing off in the mirror. He lost it. His eyes, I'll never forget how wild... and so filled with rage they were. He backhanded me hard and ripped the underwear off me... He carried me outside

and threw me on the ground.” He stopped speaking. His chest heaved with his need for air. I held on, willing him to use my strength to tell me everything.

“It was fall, and we were getting the tail end of a hurricane that’d made its way up the coast. It was raining so hard. Thundering and lightning. My uncle told me I was sick. He said I needed to repent and suffer. Beg God for forgiveness. He locked me out of the house. Left me out in the storm. I banged on the door. I pleaded with him to let me in. But he wouldn’t. I was so scared. I ended up curling up in an old doghouse. Freezing. Half-naked. Wet. I cried all night. In the morning, he let me back in, and didn’t say a word.”

“My God, Greg.” His terror now made perfect sense. “What about your mom? She couldn’t have let him do that.” Not his sweet, accepting mother.

His lips shook, but he sucked in a deep breath and then spoke. “She never knew. Back then, she was so lost after my father died that she had to take pills so she could sleep at night. My sister was at a friend’s house for the night, so no one ever knew and I never told them. That was almost fifteen years ago, but when it storms, I feel like I’m back in that doghouse, alone, and I sort of get lost in my head.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He smiled morosely. “I was embarrassed... and ashamed... and scared you’d think the same as my uncle.”

I made sure he looked right at me, made sure he listened. “I’m so glad you told me. You can tell me anything, and I’ll always think that you are the best thing in my life.”

Another tremble in his lip. “Really? The best thing?”

I had to tell him. I had to come clean no matter the consequences.

Chapter Ten

I gasped out a laugh. “You’ve been the best thing in my life since the moment we met, and I’m sorry I didn’t realize that. I’m slow and practically need to be hit over the head to realize something. That’s what you did, you know, when I saw you in those panties.”

His eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

I pushed his knees aside and I worked my way between his legs, getting as close as I could. He looked up into my face with a stark vulnerability that made me feel as if his hopes and dreams and future were in my hands. Way to put pressure on a guy. But this was what I wanted, had taken on long ago. Despite thinking that I wasn’t good enough for him, I was the one who’d always been there for Greg when no one else had. Why didn’t that make me good enough? Isn’t that what Greg needed most... someone to be there for him? Time to man up and grow some balls.

“I mean, sweetie, that seeing you in those panties... You were beautiful, and I was so hard, I had to go and blow my load in the bathroom. And I’ve been jerking off to that image ever since.”

Greg gasped. “But—”

“Just listen,” I said cutting him off. “If I don’t say this, I’m going to lose my nerve.” I took his hands and grasped them tight. When he clutched mine back, I grinned. “You’ve been my life since the first day we met. You’ve always needed me, and I never realized how much I loved that, how much I thrive on someone needing me. But it’s not just that. You get me, you accept me as I am. You don’t push me to do things I don’t want to do. I mean, you were thrilled for me when I got the maintenance job. My family... they were so mad that I wasn’t going to get a college degree and make tons of money but—”

“But that wouldn’t have made you happy, Law.”

I shook my head. “No, it wouldn’t have.”

“I want you to be happy. I want you to do what you love and you love working in that building, fixing stuff, and finding Sweetums. You like talking to people and helping them. You’re a helper and that’s what’s important.”

I raised my eyebrows. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Of course, I am. What more could I want for you besides love?”

There was that word again. I closed my eyes, my heart rate kicked up, my mouth as dry as the desert. "You said... earlier... you wanted to know why my relationships never lasted. You wanted to know who had my heart so that I couldn't give it to anyone else."

Greg nodded as he chewed on his bottom lip.

I placed my palm on the back of his neck and licked at my lips. "You, Greg. You have my heart. I need you to believe that you're the only one I want. I know there is this whole straight thing, but I've been thinking about this for months, actually wrestling and struggling with it, and beating myself up as well. What it comes down to is this. My heart wants you and only you, but I've been too stupid to realize it until now. I know I'll never be like Miller Boyd, never be successful or refined or cultured, but I'll be here no matter what, support you in everything you do, and I'll love you with every fiber of my being."

The words hung heavy between us. I'd spoken my heart and could only wait.

After a few stunned moments, Greg smiled, coyly. "I think that's the most I've ever heard you say at one time since I met you," he said teasingly.

I smirked. "I haven't had anything important to say until now."

"You definitely are a man of few words and because of that, when you have something to say, I always listen." Greg rested his palm over my heart. "Tell me," he whispered.

I clutched his hand against my chest. "I love you, Greg Holden. You stole my heart long ago, and it's yours."

I lifted his hand and he watched, mesmerized, as I laid a kiss on his knuckle.

Greg, being Greg, sucked in a sob, his eyes glassy. "I love you, too, Lawson. I always have."

I rested my cheek against the back of his hand. "I'm so sorry I didn't know."

He shook his head. "Stop. Now is what matters. Will you kiss me?"

I urged him forward and gently pressed my lips to his. The air I'd held in my lungs rushed out through my nose. Lights burst behind my eyes as I moved slowly at first, learning his mouth, my tongue swiping out and touching his.

The tingling in my lips danced like static electricity, and I expected to hear that familiar crackle. My hand tightened around the back of his neck, as I leaned him against the wall, dominating his mouth. He clutched at the front of my shirt, holding on to me as if I might disappear, but I wasn't going anywhere. This was where I belonged, with Greg.

When I'd been kissed breathless, I pulled away, already missing the moist heat, the feeling of home. Greg peered up at me, chest heaving, eyes dilated, lips red, face flushed. If ever there was anyone more gorgeous, I had yet to see them.

After a moment of gazing into each other's eyes, Greg released my shirt, and the look of utter amazement on his face confused me. "You're not freaking out. I expected something more than this," he said, waving a hand at my calmness.

The roar of laughter that poured from me was unexpected. "Oh, believe me, there was tons of freaking out. I'm sure Christy will enjoy telling you about my meltdown at the bar last week." Greg smiled and touched my cheek. "I freaked out about suddenly wanting a guy, but I've realized that nothing about this was sudden, and I decided what's important is that you make me happy."

More tears. The man was like a damned faucet, and I wouldn't have it any other way. "You make me really happy, too," Greg whispered.

I sat back on my heels and looked around the room, suddenly uncomfortable in Simple Simon's house. I tensed. "He didn't hurt you, did he?" Visually checking Greg, I didn't see any marks or bruises.

"Not physically. He couldn't have hurt me any more emotionally than when he'd slapped me. He told me that he forgave me." Greg barked out a dry laugh. "Forgave me for wearing women's underwear and, if I promised never to wear them again, he'd take me back."

"What did you say?" I gritted out. If not for Greg, I'd be out searching for Simple Simon and giving him the beat down of his life.

"I told him to fuck off."

My eyes widened and I smirked. "You did?"

Greg beamed, the pride in his actions shining bright. "I did. I thought, what would Law say right now? And that's what came to mind."

I grinned wide. "You know me so well."

“Then I thought, what would Law do right now?” His smugness told me it was going to be something good.

“Oh? And what did you come up with?” I asked.

“I punched him in the gut. He went down like the weenie that he is.”

I couldn't help laughing, and Greg joined in. Tugging on his hands. I encouraged him to rise onto his knees, and we knelt before each other. I nuzzled into his neck, the smell all Greg and so familiar. “I'm so proud of you.”

He wrapped his hands around me, holding me tight and we both sighed. “I said I loved Simon but I don't think I really did, not like I love you. I just wanted someone to love me, and I wanted to be in a relationship so bad. I'm pretty sure Simon didn't love me, either.” He paused. “You sure you want to do this?” he asked, resting his cheek in my hair.

Wrapping my arms around him, I lifted my head and moved until our mouths were almost touching. “I am *very* sure.”

Our lips came together into a scorching, earth-moving kiss that curled my toes.

Greg pulled back slightly. “Let's finish this at home,” he murmured against my lips.

I was so on board with that.

After we'd both parked our vehicles in our driveway, we came together at the bottom of the stairs to the apartment, soaked with the rain, hands grabbing and lips grinding, sucking and licking. Slowly, we made our way up the stairs, attacking each other with great fervor. My heart soared and I couldn't get enough of him. What had I done to deserve him? Would he get bored with me? Find someone better? Eventually find my lack of motivation to better myself annoying?

Greg pulled back abruptly and I sought his warm lips. When I opened my eyes, he was scowling. “Stop,” he commanded.

I raised my brows.

“You're thinking too hard. I'm sure every doubt you can conjure is flying around inside that handsome head of yours right now.”

Still clutched tight in his embrace, I nodded mutely.

“I know you, and you’ve never thought you were good enough for anyone. You’re one of the good guys, Law. People like Simon and Miller Boyd are shiny on the outside, but inside they’re marked and scuffed and aren’t so pretty. You shine from the inside. You, Lawson Myers, are my Prince Charming.”

Fuck if that didn’t choke me up a little. Since I’d known him, Greg had gone on about his prince who would one day swoop in and whisk him off to a fairy tale existence.

I snorted. “Not quite looking the part.”

His brown eyes softened, and what looked back at me I could only describe as love. “Prince Charming isn’t about what’s on the outside.” He pulled back and perused my upper body with his gaze. “But damn, love, you have the looks and the body to go with that heart of gold.”

Heat rushed my face and I looked away, definitely embarrassed at his seeing my discomfort.

“Don’t worry about it,” he insisted and grasped my chin, turning my head. “Once I’ve told you a couple of hundred times, you’ll start to believe it.”

More kissing followed. I got the door open and we stumbled inside. My bedroom came first, and I pushed Greg through the door. He backed up until his thighs hit my bed. He bit at his bottom lip as he watched me stalk closer, peeling off my wet jacket, then my shirt. When I stopped moving, he frowned. I turned to my dresser and opened the top drawer, reaching into the back until my fingers found what I was looking for. Pulling out the silky, pink panties with lace and a bow that I’d stolen from Greg, I rubbed the smooth fabric between my thumb and forefinger. Turning back to Greg, I raised the panties to my nose, inhaling deeply what was left of Greg’s scent.

Walking slowly, I approached Greg who stared intently at the panties I still held to my nose.

“Those are mine,” he whispered.

Nodding, I held them out and said, “Put them on.” My voice was low and growly and I didn’t recognize it. “Nothing else.”

He took them, no doubt wondering how I’d come to have them. Staring intently, I watched as he disappeared into the bathroom. Quickly, I stripped off my remaining clothes and chucked them into the corner. From the same dresser drawer, I pulled out condoms and a new bottle of lube. Buying that had been quite an adventure.

Climbing onto the bed, I leaned back against the headboard and waited, stroking my hard cock slowly. Butterflies with razor-edged wings scraped at my gut as I waited to see Greg wearing those fucking pink panties that had consumed my thoughts for months. To say I was obsessed was an understatement, but pink panties or not, Greg was what I wanted and needed.

The door to the bathroom opened and I sucked in my breath, my hand ceased stroking and squeezed at the base of my dick, waiting... waiting...

When Greg stepped into the bedroom, the first thing I noticed was his face, flushed pink, maybe from embarrassment, definitely from arousal. My gaze trailed over his chest, his small, brown nipples, his flat stomach, his dark treasure trail disappearing beneath lacy pink swirls. My gaze stopped at his erection, hard and proud in those panties, shifted to the side. At the base of his cock, his balls were encased in satiny goodness. My throat tightened as Greg walked slowly toward the bed, tentatively, until I told him to stop. I licked at my dry lips, my eyes unable to move away from his stunning beauty. Releasing my aching cock, I climbed off the bed and stepped in front of him. Instantly, I was on my knees, my hands clutching his hips, my lips and tongue tracing his silky cock. Greg gasped and his hands were on my head, his fingers in my hair.

The fact that I was mouthing another man's cock kept surfacing in my mind, but when I looked up and saw Greg gazing back through hooded eyes, everything was so right. Sucking a ball into my mouth through the panties, he moaned out loud, his head falling back. A surge of pleasure rushed my own balls as I remembered that Greg had never actually had intercourse before. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure.

When I stood, he raised his head and the look of bliss on his face was heady. I asked, "You've never done this before. Are you sure?"

He snorted. "I've done more than you with guys. I may have been saving myself for my future husband, but believe me, I'm not a true virgin. I've had plenty of things in my ass before. But now that he's here, I want it all."

I didn't know if that made me feel better or jealous. Wait... "Future husband? He's here?"

Greg wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and pushed down the front of his panties. His cock sprang out and he wrapped his hand around both our cocks. He stroked us, long and hard. Groaning, I pushed into his hand, our skin sliding together, his hand squeezing our heads.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I want to get married. I want it all, the ring, the wedding, the kids... I want it with you, Law. If you’ll have me.”

“Damn... Greg... I will always want you.” If he kept stroking us, no one was going to be fucking anyone. Pulling away, I pointed to the bed as I grabbed a condom and tore it open. “I need you to tell me what to do.” I’d never had anal sex with anyone, and I didn’t want to hurt Greg.

As I rolled on the condom, Greg knelt on the bed, crawling seductively and then stopping and leering over his shoulder at me, a cocksure look on his face. “I may have done some prep in the bathroom,” he said and wiggled his butt at me.

Stepping up, I grabbed the lacy top of his panties and pulled them down his ass far enough to see the red plug in his butt. My eyes closed of their own volition as pre-cum dribbled from the end of my cock. An evil chuckle came from Greg and I was definitely sure now that he was trying to kill me. “Second hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” I said and, in retaliation, I pushed on the base of the plug. Greg arched his back, groaning as I continued to move the plug in his ass. Soon, his noises of pleasure had me on the edge.

“I can’t wait any longer.” I carefully pulled the plug from Greg’s ass, my eyes widening at its width.

“I think you overestimated what you’re getting from me.”

Greg rolled onto his back, pulling his legs up to his chest, his gaping hole on full display. “I think it’s you who’s underestimating. Law, make love to me. Now.”

Never one to argue, I knelt between his legs, and pushed the pink fabric aside. No way was he taking those panties off. I pushed the head of my cock against Greg’s hole, surprised by the tightness. Watching his face intently, I stopped, waiting for any sign I was hurting him. Greg pulled his legs tighter against his chest. “Damn, you’re big. Just go slow.”

He took in deep breaths, as I pushed forward at a snail’s pace, thinking how different he felt from a woman, how much I loved that he wasn’t anything like a woman, except for the panties. I glanced between us, at my cock disappearing into his ass, the pink of the panties, and was mesmerized. Finally, after a blessed eternity, my groin rested against him. He clutched at my arms and his breath came short and staccato as I leaned down for a kiss. Pulling out slowly, I pushed back in, fucking him in short jabs for a while and then burying myself

all of the way in. Whimpers and moans from Greg spurred me faster. He wrapped his arms around the back of my neck, his chest arching, angling against me until he was panting loudly, calling out my name. "I can't believe you're fucking me. It feels so good," he moaned.

"Good" was an understatement. I swore the edges of my vision were greying out, and all I could see was Greg gazing up at me, his face twisted in the pleasure we shared.

"Not going to last long," I groaned, kissing Greg's lips, his cheeks, and his forehead. A jolt in my chest went straight to my cock. Greg pinched at my nipples and the sensation was overwhelming. No one had ever done that to me before. "Oh, God, do that again," I begged, moaning as he squeezed and pulled. I pounded into him, skating toward orgasm. A few more pinches would do the trick.

Bracing myself on my left elbow, I attacked Greg's lips as he continued to fondle my nipples. Damn, he could do that anytime he wanted. Reaching between us, I grabbed his cock and jacked him hard and fast. His whimpers were swallowed between us. His hole clenched tight and his body went taut beneath me. His fingers clamped harder, and I practically shouted into his mouth as I climaxed, flying higher and higher in the bliss-filled moment. Over and over my cock spasmed as his hole grabbed me. My balls were about to be turned inside out when I finally stopped cumming. Releasing his cock, I went to wipe my cum-splattered hand on the sheet, but Greg grabbed my wrist. I exhaled noisily as he lifted my hand to his mouth and sucked his cum from my fingers.

"Shit," I murmured as my cock valiantly tried to rise again. When he pushed my hand towards my mouth, I tentatively licked at his white jizz. Salty, bitter. Must be an acquired taste.

"You, Lawson, are a sex god," Greg said, still dazed with his orgasm.

I grunted. "Good enough to keep around?" I whispered, running my fingertips along his jaw.

He nodded. "For a very long time," he said stretching his neck to get a kiss, which I obliged. My cock was half-hard, still inside him, and I was content to stay that way as long as I could.

"I love you," Greg whispered.

The words squeezed tight around my chest. "Damn, I love you, too, Greg."

He grinned and his hands caressed my chest. "So what happens next?" he asked, his finger tracing around pecs.

"I was thinking you need some more panties, maybe a corset or two."

His entire face brightened and his eyes widened. "Oooh, I saw a red silk corset with black bows online with matching panties, a garter belt, and fishnet stockings that have black bows up the back of the legs. What do you think of red high heels?"

I choked and coughed, as the image hit me hard. "Fuck, you *are* trying to kill me."

He laughed. "Can I take that as a 'yes' then?"

"Damn straight, yes. Do they have overnight shipping?" I waggled my eyebrows.

He chuckled. "Hey, Law?"

"Yeah?" I asked cupping his cheek, amazed he was mine.

"Do you know what I wish?"

This time, I didn't dread hearing what Greg wished. I was pretty sure whatever it was, I could give it to him.

"What do you wish, sweetie?" I asked, pecking his lips.

"I wish we'd live happily ever after." He smiled, because he knew as well as I did.

"I think that's one wish you don't have to make." That was a given.

The End

Author Bio

JC Wallace started writing from a young age, but took a break for marriage, kids, and college (in that order). He recently rediscovered his passion and ventured out into the brave new world of publishing with his short, Waiting for Snow, and his first novel, Curiosity Killed Shaney. At night and on the weekends, JC writes about all things men, believing there is nothing hotter than two men finding and loving one another, whether for a night or forever. An avid reader of M/M romance, JC loves a good twist of a plot, HEA, HFN, or tragic ending. He also writes what his bestie calls HUNK (Happy Until the Next Kidnapping). In his daytime hours, JC works with individuals with autism and behavior problems. He is owned by three kids, one grandchild and one on the way, two dogs and one cat. He lives in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains in Northern NY.

Contact & Media Info

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Smashwords](#)