

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 4

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance Anthology*

## Volume 4

### Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Volume 4.

### Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

### Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

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## Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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# CARTE BLANCHE

By Nash Summers

## Photo Description

Close-up of two men, both in monochromatic blues and high-contrast lighting. The man on the left is showing his side profile with his eyes closed, pressing his forehead to the other man's cheek. The man on the right is looking toward the viewer with striking, blue eyes.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've never needed anyone. People are a vulnerability I don't need or want. But then there was him. I couldn't get him out of my head, he was a distraction I didn't need. No matter how much I pushed him away, he kept coming back. One kiss and I know I'll never let him go.*

Sincerely,

Amanda

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** disabilities, mental illness, hurt/comfort, slow burn, tearjerker, self-growth

**Word Count:** 20,259

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# **CARTE BLANCHE**

**By Nash Summers**

## Chapter 1

I could hear it laughing at me from across the apartment, hiding beneath the kitchen cupboard. It laughed and taunted even as I lay in bed staring at the old stucco ceiling, trying to ignore its jeering. The sound resonated from the hollow space under the sink, ricocheted against the walls of the hallway, eventually finding its way into my bedroom and straight into my consciousness.

*"You need me,"* it called out. And I did. That truth was painfully hard to swallow. I did need it, but I wished with every ounce of myself that it wasn't true. I didn't want to think of it, I didn't even want to remember it had ever existed in my life. But it did, and that was my pathetic reality.

I was exhausted, completely vacant inside. I barely remembered the last time I'd slept without it calling to me, begging me for attention. I wanted to continue to lie in bed, ignoring it, pretending it didn't exist, but I wasn't that naive. We both knew that I'd come for it eventually, no matter how tired I was, no matter how deeply I detested it.

My heart sped as I tried to imagine what my life would be like if I remained in bed until I was physically unable to stay awake for another moment. The mere thought of ignoring it until the desperate need passed was exhilarating in an entirely different way. I wondered if I would feel a sense of pride or completion.

I pulled the sheets off of my body, tossing them to the side of the mattress. My feet dragged across the floor as I made my way into the dimly lit kitchen of my apartment. The light flickered on, illuminating the blankness all around me. The tiles felt like dry ice against my bare knees while I crouched down in front of the kitchen sink. I pulled open the wooden cabinet door, clutching the knob so tightly my fingers turned white. There it was, staring at me from behind the dish detergent and new boxes of rubber gloves. *Bleach*, it read, as if the word was used as an insult or a curse. The very word could send shivers down my spine, completing my feeling of desolation.

A new pair of yellow rubber gloves were extracted from the box then pulled tightly onto my thin hands. I wondered when my hands had become so thin. I tried to remember if I'd eaten that day, but I couldn't distinguish that day from the day before or any of the days before that.



I removed my accomplice from beneath the sink and stuck it under my arm. The main washroom was just down the hall—I decided to start there. Sighing deeply, I made my way out of the kitchen and down the hall. I flicked on the light. From that angle, everything looked perfect. It looked white and clean and perfect, but I couldn't take the chance that it wasn't. As I pulled a cloth out from under the cabinet and undid the cap on the bottle of bleach, that same familiar, clinically comforting smell filled the small space. Suddenly, I didn't feel like the task was quite as daunting. I felt like I was home.

Hours later, my hands ached and my knees were raw, but I could finally sleep, thinking of the infinite whiteness of my prison.

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I'd read the first two chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee exactly 2843 times. I knew the first two chapters of the book better than I knew the color of my own eyes, better than I knew my favorite food. My father had given me the book when I was fourteen years old and told me to read it because it might make me a better person. The first time I began reading it, I was sixteen, and I thumbed through those first two chapters gently, trying to absorb each and every word through the tips of my fingers. I wanted my father to think I was becoming a better person. Unfortunately, as time wore on, I developed a habit of reading the first two chapters, and only the first two chapters, every morning at the same time. If a day passed when I was physically unable to read the first two chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I'd suffer the entire rest of the day. This happened a few times when I was younger and my mother had *misplaced* the book. I wouldn't eat, I wouldn't move, I couldn't function until I'd had my daily dose of Scout and Atticus Finch.

"Why don't you want to read any further than the second chapter?" my mother would ask me. "Don't you want to know what happens next?"

I'd think about it each time she asked me, wondering if that particular time I would feel differently.

"No," I'd reply. "I'm too afraid it won't work out well."

That should've been foreshadowing for my dim future, but I don't recall my mother paying me much attention at all during those years of my life. My mother was too distracted by her constant misery.

So each morning at 10:12 A.M., I'd sit in the same reading chair my father used to sit in, and carefully make my way through the first couple of chapters in

my book. The chair was old, upholstered in some blue and red plaid pattern and made with some kind of itchy fabric. The chair was the only thing in my apartment that I never felt compelled to clean obsessively. Regular cleaning, sure, but any time I thought of reupholstering the chair, or even having it dry cleaned, I'd feel sick.

The night prior had been difficult on me, working on such a small amount of sleep and cleaning my entire apartment from top to bottom for the third time that day. Some days I'd only need to clean it once. Other days, like yesterday, I needed to clean it more.

I finished reading the two chapters, then made my way into the second bedroom, which I used as an office. I sat down at my desk and woke my computer from its sleeping state.

The desk was made of some sort of hard plastic that I'd ordered online and assembled myself after it was delivered. It was white and only comprised of five parts in total, making it simple for me to piece together on my own. The room was small and had one window that was usually covered with simple fabric blinds. I didn't have any curtains in my apartment because they were too difficult and time-consuming to wash as frequently as I needed. The floor was laminate, something new my landlord had installed a few years earlier. I kept it in impeccable condition. The walls had been painted white when I'd first moved in years ago. My landlord had said that I could paint them any color I wanted, but I didn't want them to be any color; I wanted them to be white. I wanted to be able to stare at their white nothingness, their perpetual lack of color, and feel a misplaced sense of cleanliness.

I had around an hour before my daily webcam chat with Amanda, a pink-haired girl who blew gum bubbles as big as her head and always talked to me like I had the I.Q. of a tin can. Amanda was the closest thing I had to a friend, but I had never really considered her one. I've never needed anyone. People were a vulnerability I didn't need or want. Still, Amanda had her own personal set of charms that added to her allure. She had the same types of *issues* I had, so each day we'd tell one another all about them and feed off of each other's negativity. It was a vicious cycle, but it was my cycle, and it worked.

I opened a web browser and started to do some research for work. One of my clients had taken me up on my suggestion to travel to Amsterdam in March for the annual Keukenhof Flower Festival. The festival starts off with a forty-kilometer parade route along the main roads from Noordwijk to Haarlem,

concluding around noon, in perfect time for an afternoon lunch. I'd convinced her to rent a bicycle with her husband and pedal to Weesp, which was around ten miles from the center of the city. They'd be able to cycle along the Amsterdam-Rhine canal and enjoy the countryside views along the way.

She told me they'd always appreciated simplistic beauty in nature, and that Holland sounded like somewhere they'd be interested in travelling. It was an anniversary surprise for her husband, so I planned out the most perfect trip imaginable, from the countryside villas, to the restaurants that would have her husband's favorite dish.

I was good at my job as a travel advisor and planner; customers usually appreciated my attention to detail and obsessive nature to plan everything and confirm twice that things were in order.

After confirming with the hotel that my customer and her husband would be checking into their first night in Holland, I stretched my arms high over my head and looked at the clock. It read 11:38 A.M., which meant I had two minutes before ringing Amanda. I sat in my chair for those two minutes, wringing the hem of my T-shirt with my fingers.

After those two minutes had passed, I flicked on my webcam, sent the invite to Amanda, and waited. Her picture popped up on the screen in a little square box. She had her hair tied in pigtails, which looked cute despite her being in her late twenties. Her eyes were lined with black and her jaw was moving rhythmically as she smacked the gum in her mouth. Not only did Amanda consistently look like a character from a cartoon, she also played the part quite well. Whereas my apartment was always spotlessly clean, hers always appeared to be in a state of disarray. She listened to bands I'd never heard of and knew odd lingo that sounded ridiculous even to younger ears.

"What a surprise," Amanda said to me from the little square window her face was in. This was how Amanda had greeted me every day for the past two years. At first, I thought she did it to be funny and ironic, but over time it became somewhat of an endearment, for her at least.

"Hi, Amanda," I said.

"Wow, you don't look so good, boss," she told me, leaning closer to her computer monitor to get a better look at me. I could see myself in another box on my screen. She was right, I looked exhausted. My brown hair lay flat and lifeless against my head, looking too long and beginning to slightly curl at the

ends. My bright blue eyes, which had once been called striking, looked dull and bloodshot from carrying heavy bags beneath them. My skin was much paler than I'd ever noticed it being before; even my cheeks had an awkward yellow hue to them. I looked on the outside exactly how I felt on the inside.

It seemed like a lifetime ago when people used to call me beautiful. Men and women would want to touch me, be near me, maybe to absorb whatever kind of beauty they'd once seen in me. But as the years passed by, even still being in my early twenties, I looked old and tired, like life hadn't been easy on me and I'd gone down fighting.

"I had to clean three times yesterday," I told Amanda. She always understood when I confessed my sins to her.

"Three?" she asked. "Wow. Yesterday I heard a bird fly against my window and I had a panic attack in the corner of my room. It lasted for the better part of forty minutes. My new psychiatrist gave me these breathing exercises; I think they've been helping. Maybe you should try them."

"Maybe," I said, not really listening to her. She continued to tell me about her day while I stared at the screen, watching her talk to me but not really seeing anything at all.

When our daily conversation concluded, I mentally prepared myself to grab my bleach from under the sink and get ready for an afternoon of cleaning. But just as I logged off my computer, I heard banging coming from outside my apartment door. It sounded like someone was taking a wrecking ball to the walls or hosting an African mammal parade.

I continued to listen, a little stunned, because banging noises never came from the hallway. Sweet Mrs. Smith, who lived directly across from my apartment, was a quiet widow who always kept to herself and didn't favor company, much the same as myself. She'd probably never made that much noise in her life.

Another bang and a crash were followed by a few swear words. With my heart beating almost through my shirt, I tiptoed out of my office and made my way slowly down the hall. I stood in front of my door to look through the peephole. Standing right outside my door were three men in plain view. Two of them were carrying a sofa, some dingy old thing, and the other was doing a poor job of navigating for them with two large boxes in his hands. One of the sofa movers said something to the man with boxes in his hands, and the man

with boxes suddenly dropped them, causing another bang, and began laughing. When he laughed, he looked like someone people would watch a documentary on just for a glimpse into his beautiful life.

He was taller than me, more muscular, with hair a darker brown than mine and tan lines visible on his arms. His golden skin was covered in sun freckles, and he had slight crinkles at the corners of his eyes. He must laugh a lot. His clothing looked worn and duller in some areas from sun exposure, but it didn't detract from his appeal. He appeared to be moving things into the apartment right across the hall from mine. Unless Mrs. Smith had a long-lost grandson, I knew that he was going to be my new neighbor.

I could feel the anxiety rising up inside me, like a fire starting at my toes and making its way toward the ceiling. This was the kind of change I hated, the kind I had no control over. Backing away from the door, I tried to calm myself. I thought that perhaps it wouldn't be so terrible. Perhaps he'd keep to himself and leave me alone.

Just then I heard the sound of his laughter again, and for some reason it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I turned to get my gloves and bleach from beneath the kitchen sink.

I knew it was going to be a long night.

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## Chapter 2

Someone was knocking at my door. I glanced at the clock on my office wall, then the one on my computer screen, then the one sitting on the side of my desk. It was 3:02 P.M. and I wasn't expecting anyone. In fact, I was never expecting anyone. I sat in my chair completely unsure of what to do with myself. Do I go answer the door to a complete stranger? No, even the thought of doing that made me want to vomit. Perhaps if I ignored it, it would go away.

The knocking started again, making me jump slightly in my seat. Then someone started hollering, nothing panicked, just inquiring. I decided that if this person was so determined, I would at least make a short appearance. After all, what if the building was on fire? What if someone had died in the hallway and this person needed the telephone to call an ambulance?

I padded my way through the hall and to my front door. I got up on my toes and leaned against the door to look through the peephole. It was the same man from a few days ago, the one with the smile. Instantly my heart sped up. Why was he at my front door? What did he want? What happened to nice, quiet Mrs. Smith, and why couldn't this man leave me alone?

He knocked again. He was definitely adamant. I didn't think he'd go away unless I answered the door and he resolved whatever he needed from me.

I undid the four locks on the door and slowly, carefully, pulled the door open. Then I watched him smile as I gazed up at his face, wondering if my heart was about to leap right out of my chest and into his hands.

"Hi, I'm Devin," he said. His hand stretched out toward me. I just stood there, latching on to the door and avoiding eye contact. After a few uncomfortable moments, he pulled his hand back and shoved it into his pocket.

"I just moved in next door. Thought I'd come by to say hello. Mrs. Smith told me you work from home and don't leave your apartment too much, so I figured you'd be home."

He looked me up and down, probably taking in the small thing I was. I was wearing a faded pair of blue jeans and an old white T-shirt. My bare feet felt clammy on the floor, but the coolness of it made me feel grounded.

"What happened to Mrs. Smith?" I asked him quietly.

“Her kids decided to move her into a nursing home, I guess. She was having trouble keeping up with the apartment all by herself.”

I drew in a deep breath. This Devin person wanted to be friends with me. I couldn't have that. He was too distracting to look at with his bright brown eyes and lopsided smile.

“Sorry, I'm not really in the market for new friends,” I told him.

He threw his head back and laughed as if I'd just made a joke. I couldn't help but stare at him.

“I didn't catch your name,” Devin said.

“Jude,” I told him.

“Hey, Jude,” Devin said in a singsong voice.

“Yes, very funny.”

He just smiled at me. I wondered if this man ever stopped smiling—Devin, the insistent neighbor, consisting mainly of unwarranted smiles and a multitude of fresh tan lines.

“Well, if you ever need anything, I'm right across the hall, okay? Even just to hang out,” Devin told me.

“Yes, all right, thank you,” I said to him as I slowly eased the door closed. Once it was finally shut, I took a deep breath. I could hear him singing “Hey Jude” in the hallway and then the click of his door.

My heart felt heavy for some reason, and I decided the best way to remedy that was to clean my small kitchen until the familiar scent of bleach stung my nostrils and made my tired eyes water.

I extracted the bleach and gloves from under the kitchen sink along with a sponge and two white cloths. I got to work, starting with the tops of the cabinets and working my way down, shelf by shelf, until I was scrubbing the floor on my hands and knees, pressing my fingers into the thin cracks between the tiles.

By the time I was finished cleaning, I felt much better. Cleaning was my therapy, always able to calm me down when my mind started running wild. Devin had sent me into a frenzy. There was something about him that I couldn't quite shake, no matter how hard I tried. Something about his constant grin and the crinkles around his eyes. Definitely something, but I had no idea what.

“Hello, Mr. Howard,” I said into my Bluetooth headset. It was around 5:00 P.M. and I’d been working all morning to make sure everything had been set in stone for his upcoming trip. “Yes, I just confirmed your flights for the day after tomorrow as well as the Japan Rail Pass that we’ve purchased. The hostels are all also confirmed so everything is taken care of. You just have to make it to the airport on time.”

Mr. Howard said a few thankful words to me before hanging up from the call. Most of my clients were particular, like me, about confirming their bookings and making sure everything was going according to plan. My client, Mr. Howard, had been working with me for years, and I’d always envied the amount he was able to travel. He’d go to beautiful places like Turkey, Japan, or Germany, whenever he was infected with the travel bug. This was his third trip to Japan and he wanted to try something different, something new, something exciting.

I pulled up a web browser and looked for imagery of cherry blossom trees. They were in full bloom by mid to late April and some ran the most beautiful colors of pinks and fuchsias. The trees hung so tall and wide, they could envelop hundreds of people in a hug. I wondered what it would be like to pluck a flower from a tree and smell it. I’d read online that it smelled very mildly like cherries, but more like a fragrant rose. I couldn’t even remember if I had ever smelled a rose.

For a few fleeting moments, I was jealous of Mr. Howard. I wanted to see the cherry blossoms bloom, I wanted to take the bullet train through the cities, I wanted to see the world through eyes other than my own.

I knew it would never happen. I knew that I’d be in this apartment, or another one much like it, for a long, long time. My fear kept me here. My fear of everything and everyone kept me in this small, dark bubble of my life.

A knock sounded at my door, breaking me out of my thoughts. I glanced at the clock on my wall, the clock on my computer screen, and the clock sitting on my desk. I wasn’t expecting anyone, but somehow I knew who it would be.

I stood up and made my way down the hall, silently cursing Mrs. Smith’s kids for putting her into a nursing home.

I undid the four locks on my door and slid it open. Standing in front of me was Devin, looking mighty proud of himself in his board shorts, bare feet, and tank top with a picture of a sun wearing sunglasses on it.



“Hey, Jude,” he said. “I made way too much food for dinner and I was hoping you’d join me or at least take some of it off my hands. It’s macaroni casserole.”

I stared at him, hugging the door to my side like it was my lifeline. When had I ever given him the impression that I was okay with him just stopping by whenever he wanted to use my body as an organic garbage disposal?

Suddenly, he reached out his hand to touch the side of my face. I stumbled backwards, flinching before his hand was close enough to touch me. I stood a few feet away from him, inside my apartment, probably looking like a deer caught in headlights.

“Wow, I’m sorry,” Devin said, holding his hands up. “I didn’t mean to scare you. You just had a bit of fluff on your cheek.”

I inhaled heavily, my heart beating fast. I pressed the heel of my hand over the skin covering my heart and looked at Devin.

“No, it’s fine. Sorry. I just don’t like to be touched. Or to have someone stand so close to me,” I told him.

“Oh,” he replied. “Well, uh, here, how about this?” He turned around and opened his apartment door wide and sat just inside his doorway. Devin’s back was pressed against one side of the frame and his bare feet were pressed against the other side as he looked up at me.

“Why are you here, again?” I asked him, trying to get rid of him.

“I made too much dinner, remember? And when I saw you the other day I just thought you looked like you could use a good meal. Thought that maybe you don’t like cooking or get too busy to eat, so I figured I’d see if you wanted to join me for dinner.”

“If I close my door, you’ll just knock again, won’t you?” I asked him.

He crossed his arms over his flat stomach and laughed. “Yeah, probably.”

I sighed and wiped my hands over my face. I decided if he knew how much of a freak I was, he’d finally leave me alone. I opened my door just wide enough to sit in the frame on the cool floor, with my legs crossed underneath me. The hem of my shorts rode up a little on my thin thighs and I momentarily thought I caught Devin’s gaze watching.

The carpet lining the hallway between our apartments had some old, vintage pattern of golden swirls and black dots on a dark red background. I’d never

taken much time to notice the carpet or the off-white color of the hallway walls, but at that time, my eyes seemed to keep drifting down to the carpet instead of looking at Devin.

“I’m not hungry,” I told him.

“Okay, that’s fine. Then how about you tell me about yourself? You’re a bit of a mystery,” Devin asked me, sounding nonchalant as if I could summarize myself in a few short words.

“Well, I have severe OCD and social anxiety disorder. I was diagnosed when I was fifteen and every year I get worse. I don’t like people, I don’t like outdoors, and I don’t like trying new things. I have a routine and when my routine is interrupted, like you seem to enjoy doing, I get extremely stressed and it becomes difficult for me to focus for hours afterwards.”

“Huh.”

I waited a few more moments to see if he had anything else to add. He just sat there, looking at me even as I watched the swirls on the carpeted floor. He didn’t even sound surprised when I’d told him, not like seeing me and assuming I had an anxiety disorder was much of a stretch.

“Huh?” I finally asked, looking up at him. “That’s it?”

“Well, you didn’t really answer my question,” Devin replied.

“What do you mean I didn’t answer your question? I told you everything about me. I told you something personal.” My jaw was slack and I was openly staring at him, more than a little shocked by his response.

“I asked about you. Your first and only response was to tell me about your disorder. You aren’t your disorder. You told me about all the things you don’t like and none of the things you do like. I just find it hard to believe someone like you is completely comprised of dislikes and not a single like.”

I blinked at him. I had no idea how to reply to that. I told him something huge about myself, something that made most peoples’ faces change and contort in sympathy. They usually pitied me when I told them of the weight I carried around each day. But not Devin. He looked at me like he was expecting more out of me, as if there was more. I didn’t remember the last time I’d talked to anyone about anything besides my disorders. It caught me off guard and made me feel vulnerable.

“I’ll tell you a little about myself then, how about that?” Devin grinned wide at me. “My full name is Devin Kidd, and I’m the oldest of three, with two

younger sisters. I'm a swim instructor for children and have been for four years, my favorite food is broccoli because I'm odd like that, I drive a piece-of-shit Taurus that rarely starts without a fight, and my favorite color is the same blue as your eyes."

My eyes narrowed at him but he just threw his head back and laughed. "What? It is my favorite color. I'm not lying."

Somehow, I couldn't help but smile at him. Devin was so full of life; he was shiny where I was dull, he was vibrant where I was bland. He seemed to make the world around him a little brighter, even if I didn't necessarily mind living in the dark.

"My name is Jude Allen. I work from home as an online travel planner. I don't have a favorite color," I said.

"Well, Jude Allen, it's very nice to meet you. Maybe one day you'll even shake my hand."

"I doubt it," I replied. He laughed.

"You're something else, Jude."

"Listen Devin, you seem like a perfectly fine person, but I don't need or want another person in my life, even a friend. I just don't have the space."

"Perfectly fine, huh?"

"Yes, perfectly fine."

"You could make the space, if you tried," he said.

I sighed heavily, suddenly feeling tired. I stood up and brushed some of the gathered lint from the carpet off my shorts.

"I'll see you around," I told him, then retreated into my apartment and began closing the heavy, white door.

"You bet," he said, sounding happier than I thought he should. If I knew Devin Kidd at all, I'd say he sounded like he had a trick up his sleeve. But that was just it, I didn't know him and I didn't want to. I kept reminding myself that I didn't want to as I made my way to the kitchen and opened the cabinet door under the sink.

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## Chapter 3

I heard a solitary bang against my door. Then, a few seconds later, another one. I looked at all three of the clocks I had in my office and sighed. Devin's constant reappearances during different times of the day were weighing on my nerves. If he was going to bother me, I'd at least prefer he do it at the same time each day, but I'm sure he knew that and was annoying me at random times to mix up my patterns.

Another loud bang against the door. I considered ignoring him and going back to work. I didn't have much left to do for the day; I'd spent a good amount of time that morning researching the most inexpensive flights directly to Venice.

Gorgeous pictures of the canals and handsome gondoliers had put me in a slump, causing me to stare at my computer screen for hours and imagine a life where I could be one of those delighted travellers venturing down the cobblestone sidewalks with a smile on my face.

A fourth loud bang dragged me out of my daydream. I left my chair and stopped momentarily at the bathroom to look at my hair. I had no idea why, since I didn't really care what Devin thought of how I looked.

Moments later, I was unlocking the locks on my door and opening it only to see Devin sitting in his doorway with a big grin on his face. His hair looked messed, like he'd just woken up, and his sleeveless shirt showed off his sculpted arms and T-shirt tan lines that circled his biceps. His shorts were old, ratty-looking denim things that looked like they'd lived a previous life as a washcloth. He also had a large bouncy ball in his hands. I didn't understand how he could be doing the most pointless things and look so proud of himself, like he'd just run a marathon and finished in first place.

"Yes?" I asked him, trying to look annoyed as I held the door open with one of my hands.

"Have a seat, stay a while," Devin replied, still smiling.

I made a big deal of sighing and rolling my eyes before sitting on the ground and leaning on my doorframe. I knew that he wouldn't leave me alone unless I entertained him at least for a few minutes.

“Look what I have,” he said, holding the large bouncy ball up with one hand. It was clear rubber with swirls of dark and light blue through it, reminding me of the waves I’d seen pictures of just off the beaches of Jamaica. The tendrils of color looked lovely enough that if I didn’t know it was a bouncy ball, I’d believe it to be blown glass.

“And?” I tried not to fidget or bite my nails.

“So, if you don’t feel comfortable with me too close to you, I can use this to knock on your door without physically coming over there. Plus, we can use it kind of like a conch shell and take turns using it to talk.”

“Why are you so intent on talking to me? Don’t you have someone else you can bother?”

Devin laughed. “Well, I guess. But none of them are quite as charming as you. Or polite.”

He rolled the bouncy ball over to me and sat there, staring at me with big eyes, waiting expectantly.

“So, uh, what am I supposed to say?” I asked.

“Tell me something about yourself. And make it good.”

“You certainly are demanding,” I said. He just kept smiling at me.

I glanced past him into his apartment. Mountains of cardboard boxes were lined against his walls with a few of them open and junk spewing out of the tops like a broken-down wood chipper. His apartment looked very similar to mine in layout, but that’s where the similarities ended. He had clothes thrown over furniture and a stand-up mirror, and junk laying everywhere on the Berber carpet floor. He had an old calendar up on the wall that had expired last year and a jar of spinach dip open on the counter with the lid off.

I swallowed hard. Just seeing Devin’s apartment in such disarray was making my skin itch. I wanted to leave. I wanted to go back into my apartment to clean and clean and wash everything twice as badly as I normally did. But something in his crooked smile and the way his eyes crinkled when he watched me made me want to stay, just this one time.

“Well,” I said swallowing hard, “I like cleanliness. I think like is an understatement. Things need to be clean for me to feel comfortable. Very clean. I clean my apartment at least once a day, sometimes three times a day. I go

through more bleach than I go through food, and nothing ever feels clean enough for me.”

“Do germs make you uncomfortable?” Devin asked.

“No,” I replied. “Not really. It’s not that; it’s just the overall cleanliness. I’m not afraid of contamination or germs like some other people with OCD. I think it’s just a ritual I have that somehow is linked to cleaning.”

“Have you always needed things clean? Even when you were a kid?”

I thought about it for a moment, looking at a water-damaged spot on the ceiling in the hallway. “No, maybe when I was in middle school it started. Although, growing up, I remember our house being remarkably clean. My dad liked things that way.”

“And does your dad still like things that way?” he asked. I rolled the bouncy ball over to him, and it hit him in the knee.

“Your turn,” I said.

He paused for a moment to look at me with an odd expression on his face, then picked up the ball and started bouncing it in front of him.

“Well, I’m a swimming instructor for kids, usually around the ages of three to twelve. I love kids; I blame it on growing up the oldest in a very active, loving family. I went through training to get my lifeguard certification and then it kind of progressed from there with more schooling and instructing classes. And I love the water. The ocean, rivers, lakes, swimming pools, doesn’t matter, as long as it’s water, I’m in love. My two younger sisters hate the water so our family likes to make jokes that I was adopted, but I’ve got my mother’s nose, so they can’t fool me.

“And the kids, Jude, they look at you with these big, bright, trusting eyes like they’d leap into your arms at a moment’s notice because they know you are there to catch them. It’s one of the most amazing feelings in the world, having someone look at you like that.

“How about you? Is Jude Allen a merman in disguise?”

Devin liked to talk with his hands. He used his arms and hands to make motions in the air and it was hard not to fall into whatever he was telling you and believe it like it was true to you.

I’d become so engulfed listening to him, I’d missed what he said to me.

“Jude?” Devin asked softly.

“What? Oh, sorry,” I said, stumbling over my words.

I turned my face to the ground and stared at the carpet, feeling the warmth heat up my cheeks. I could see through my eyelashes that he was looking at me, and he probably knew that I was looking right back at him.

“I was asking if you liked swimming. Our complex has a pool, you know. You ever been?”

“Nope,” I replied, shaking my head. “I’m not very good with public places, remember? I don’t think I’ve been swimming since I was in my teens.”

“So what do you like doing?” Devin asked before rolling the ball over to me. I picked it up and wrapped my thin hands almost the entire way around it.

“I like my job.”

“Travel planner, right?”

“Right. I do a lot of research online. It’s an easy job to do, working from home. I get to look at all these beautiful pictures of places that I know my clients will go. Today I researched the Yuan-Xiao Festival, the Chinese Lantern Festival, where they have firecracker launches and carnivals and a parade.

“I can’t imagine being around that many people, but for how amazing it looks, it might be worth it.”

“Why don’t you go?” Devin asked me.

“I could never go! It would be one panic attack after another for me. China is packed full of people; the people who live there barely have any space, let alone space for tourists.”

“Maybe someone from your family would go with you for support.”

“No,” I replied. “There’s just me and my mother, and she’d never condone me going. She knows about my conditions and my limitations. She doesn’t encourage me to do anything that will put me under any sort of stress, in fact, she says that I should avoid it.”

I looked over at Devin and he seemed deep in thought. He was looking at the rubber ball in my hands and I wondered what he saw. Maybe, for him, the bouncy ball was like a crystal ball and he was peering into it and thinking of his future, or worse yet, mine. Maybe he thought I was a charity case—his poor

neighbor across the hall who he felt bad for and decided to try to talk to so he didn't find me some day hanging from my impeccably clean shower rod. Not that he could ever bypass the four locks on my door.

"I should go," I said, standing up and dusting off my shorts.

Devin just stared up at me from his spot on the floor. It seemed sometime during our conversation, I'd managed to pull the smile off his face, and the thought of doing that made my stomach hurt.

"You don't have to go yet, Jude," Devin said to me quietly.

I bounced the ball on the carpeted hallway floor and he caught it in his hands. "Thanks for listening, Devin."

I went inside my apartment and gently closed the door. I relocked all four locks, double-checking them to make sure they were secure, then leaned my back against the apartment door with a gentle thud.

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes, wondering if later Devin would be able to smell the bleach from across the hall.

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My apartment was not big. My father's old reading chair sat in the far back corner of the living room, right next to the white bookshelf. Next to the bookshelf, hanging on the wall, was a large picture of a lake with the Rocky Mountains in the horizon, the colors of spring reflecting off the water's surface. A client of mine had taken the picture from Banff and sent me a large print. I had an elegant glass frame delivered and hung it right on the stark white wall, somewhere I'd see it every day. It caused me a lot of anxiety those first few weeks, wondering how much care it would take to clean it regularly, making sure all the streaks and dust weren't visible on the glass. But as time passed, I became accustomed to it, allowing myself the simple pleasure of its colorful presence on my dull wall.

I owned a plain white sofa that was uncomfortable and boxy and sat in the center of the room facing the outside window. Sometimes if I was feeling brave, I'd draw the blinds and look outside at the people walking by the park across the street from my apartment building. I rarely felt brave, so I could barely remember what the park looked like anymore.

My bedroom was plain. A queen-sized bed frame was pressed against the far wall, housing the mattress and white cotton sheets. I'd take the sheets off



and wash them each day, first thing in the morning. I was lucky enough to have laundry in my suite. It was a requirement when I was apartment hunting.

The carpet was some plain off-white color, but at least it was only in the bedroom. Laminate was in the rest of the apartment, and I was thankful for that for cleaning purposes. Even having carpet in the bedroom made me feel mentally exhausted.

I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor with a new cloth. No matter how many times I scrubbed one spot on the tiled floor, it never seemed to be quite clean enough. It was toying with my sanity, because I knew it was clean, I knew it was spotless and perfect and couldn't possibly be any cleaner, but still I felt a tug somewhere deep inside me, telling me to scrub harder, scrub more.

I thought of the first time I'd ever scrubbed the floor. It was back when I was much younger, after my father left. My mother stopped cleaning. There were piles of dishes in the sink, dust on all the plant leaves, and the floor was dirty with shoe scuffs and mud. I remembered standing in the kitchen doorway and listening to my mother crying down the hall, thinking that maybe if I cleaned up the kitchen just the way Dad liked it, he'd come home, and Mom would stop crying. So I found an assortment of cleaning supplies under the kitchen counter, right where I knew Mom kept them, and got down on my knees and scrubbed everything clean. That first time, I wasn't smart enough to wear gloves, and my hands were red and raw and felt like they were burning. But after the first time I cleaned everything in sight, from top to bottom, I felt a sense of calm, like if I kept trying my best at this, to make it perfect for Mom and Dad, then everything would be all right. If I just kept cleaning, kept things spotless and perfect, maybe Dad would come home.

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## Chapter 4

After that first day that Devin had knocked on my door using the ocean-colored bouncy ball, we continued meeting almost every day. We'd sit in our corresponding doorways and pass the ball back and forth, talking about ourselves and learning about one another. In the beginning, I'd tried time after time to avoid him or just ignore him, but he'd continue to bang that bouncy ball against my door until I finally opened up.

I began to look forward to it each day, even though I didn't know what time Devin would finally make an appearance. I tried to let the randomness become comfortable, and after a while, it began to get easier.

One day, Devin asked me if I liked to read. At first, I was hesitant to tell him about the worn, old book I read each morning. I was worried that he'd find me even more odd than he probably already did, but for some reason, it was difficult for me to keep things from Devin.

"I read the first two chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* every morning at the same time. Just the first two chapters. It started in my teens and now I can't stop and I can't progress," I told him.

The next day when he bounced the ball over to knock on my door and I answered, he was sitting on the ground with his own copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in his hands. He told me that he thought it might be fun to read it together.

At first, I'd declined, once politely, then frantically the following times. He just sat there and listened to me rant about the horrors I feared would happen to my beloved Scout through the progression of her story. Eventually, Devin just shrugged and smiled at me. He told me that if the book didn't have a happy ending, he'd make one up for me and never tell me otherwise. I laughed.

When he read to me, I leaned my head against the frame of the door and watched him. I watched his lips move, his fingertips touch the fresh pages of the book. His book looked much less used than my copy, and I wondered if he'd bought the book specifically to read with me. Sometimes he'd stop reading and look up at me to make sure I was paying attention, and I always was. It would be impossible not to.

After he'd read aloud the first two chapters and began on the third, my heart started to race. I felt wild and alive, all because the man across the hallway was

reading to me about an adventure. I knew how ridiculous it was, but I couldn't make my heart calm down. The way Devin pronounced the name Atticus like *Adicus* was enthralling, and the way his tongue flicked over his lips every so often was even more intoxicating.

The following morning at 10:12 A.M. when I picked up the book, I thought of the words flowing from Devin's lips and the way he'd laughed at me when I began fidgeting and leaned forward to be closer to him, even by a fraction. I still sat in my dad's old chair and flipped through the pages, but it felt like none of the words really mattered to me. They were all jumbled and didn't matter unless Devin was speaking them. When I'd told Devin that I'd begun skimming through the first two chapters and once or twice even forgot to read them until later in the afternoon, he grinned at me widely. He told me that I should be proud of myself, and for the first time in many years, I was.

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Every few weeks, I went through all of my books and reorganized them according to their cover color, alphabetically, publisher name, or publishing date. I rotated between all four forms of organization bi-monthly, without fail. This process had become very important to me years prior, and I'd never once missed reorganizing them.

But early the following evening, when I'd heard the knock on the front door, I'd set the books down on a side table and left them there, unorganized, without a second thought. I opened the door and sat down on the floor, waiting for Devin to tell me why he had a big smile on his face.

"Hey, you," he said, and I felt my cheeks start to heat.

"Hey, Devin."

"I made something for you. Well, kind of. I made too much of something for me and now I'm passing some on to you."

Devin reached off to his side and withdrew a skateboard, then set it down in front of him. The grip tape on the top was peeling in two of the four corners and one of the wheels was a brighter color and looked to be in newer condition than the rest.

I peered down at the worn skateboard and then back up at him. "If you think I'm going to get on that and go skateboarding with you, you're sorely mistaken."

He laughed and shook his head. On the floor next to him were a few plates that he pulled over and set on the skateboard in front of him. There was a small plate of pasta with a green sauce on it, a dinner roll, a side plate of ceasar salad, and shiny silver cutlery. He shifted and reached into his pocket to pull out an electronic, battery-operated tea light candle, which he flicked on and set on the skateboard near the salad.

Devin gently rolled the skateboard over to me, and I held out my hands to align it in front of me. I looked up at him, and the expression on my face made him laugh. He then pulled out his own few plates of food and set them on the ground in front of him before he began eating.

I looked at him, more than a little surprised. He'd obviously gone to a bit of trouble for this. The thought of him thinking of me in his spare time made me feel uncomfortable. I'd formed a comfortable relationship with him, this person across the hall, and I wanted to keep it that way. I didn't want to further our relationship by exchanging small gifts like prepared meals, I wanted to keep him at arm's length until he finally grew tired of me, so that I could go back to my normal, practical routine.

He watched me with that same, stubborn expression on his face, the one that let me know that he wouldn't let this issue go without a fight. So I picked up the fork and gently stabbed a few pieces of pasta and then popped them into my mouth.

"This is good," I told him before eating another bite. And it was.

"Thanks," Devin said. "I looked up a recipe online, but as I was boiling the pasta, my sister called so I asked for her cooking expertise. While I was trying to write down the recipe she was giving me, I completely overcooked the first batch of pasta and had to toss it. I chalk it up to practice."

"Oh, well, thanks for the food," I said quietly. He looked up at me and smiled.

I ate almost everything he'd put on the skateboard, and I felt more full than I had in a long time. I told Devin that I'd wash all the plates for him and return them the following day, insisting that it was the least I could do to thank him.

The next day I surprised Devin, and myself, by making a few sandwiches and putting them on the newly cleaned plates and sending them over to him via skateboard. Sandwiches were the most extravagant things I could make, given that each week I ordered all my food online and rarely ever ordered fresh

produce. He acted like I'd just put a chunk of the world on a silver platter and gifted it to him. I could barely focus that entire meal because Devin kept going on about how good the plain peanut butter and jam sandwich was, and because Devin had a little bit of jam in the corner of his mouth.

We carried on our routine almost every day by making one another some sort of food. Devin's meals were always better, likely because he actually went outside to the grocery store to get fresh ingredients. He never made us the same thing twice, and as the weeks went by, I actually found myself growing hungrier throughout the days, wondering what Devin was going to make next or thinking about what I'd make for him.

I was slowly beginning to gain weight and Devin told me so one day. I made a joke about looking terrible, being so thin, and he told me to never put myself down, even if I was joking. After that, I had an easier time looking at myself in the mirror. If someone as beautiful as Devin could look at me and think I was all right, maybe I wasn't so bad after all.

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"What a surprise," Amanda said. She was wearing a pink and white striped T-shirt and her hair was hanging straight around her round face. Her room still looked like a disaster, but less so than usual. It was surprising to see corners of posters actually sticking to the wall instead of peeling off.

It was close to Amanda's and my usual meeting time, except a few minutes later. Each day in the past few weeks, Amanda seemed to be later and later to our webcam chats. When I asked her about it, she just brushed it off to *this* and *that*.

"Well, well, look at you," she said.

"What about me?" I asked, feeling self-conscious.

The previous week I'd deviated from my usual schedule and decided to look online for some new clothing. I found a local website that delivered within a few days and decided to take a look. A cerulean-colored short sleeve, button-up shirt caught my attention. It reminded me of the bouncy ball Devin had so proudly displayed to me weeks ago. On a whim, I'd purchased it along with a few other colored shirts that I'd normally avoid because of the repercussions of wearing them when I was sure all I'd do that day was coat the floor in bleach. But now that I had someone to talk to, someone who would actually see me, it didn't seem like such a terrible idea.

I tugged at the collar of my shirt, suddenly feeling like it was too tight. Normally I didn't fold under Amanda's scrutiny, but she was looking at me a little harder than normal and it was making me sweat.

"You look different. I don't think I've ever seen you with a colored shirt on," Amanda said.

"Yes, well," I replied nervously.

"You've also gained weight recently. You look good. What's going on with that?"

"Nothing. Really," I told her.

She just continued to stare at me, her pixelated gaze lingering on my face.

"Fine," I said. "I guess it's because of Devin."

"Your neighbor you told me about? The one who won't piss off and leave you alone?"

"Yes, one and the same. Well, we've started to talk a bit from across the hall. He's a nice enough person. Sometimes we talk about each other's lives and he tells me about the outside world. His job as a swim instructor, his family, his trips to the farmers' market, what he's making for dinner that night, his erratically hilarious late-night phone calls from his younger sisters."

"Uh huh," she replied with a sly look on her face. "And what's he look like?"

"I don't know. Tall, tanned, dark hair. He's attractive, I guess."

"You guess?"

"All right, he is. Can we not talk about this? Please?"

My face was red hot as I began fidgeting with the lower buttons on my shirt. I stared down at the hem, regretting buying the stupid shirt and regretting telling Amanda anything about Devin. They both had a way of getting under my skin, and I didn't like that one bit.

"So, I met someone," Amanda said. "And yes, before you ask, it's completely platonic. Her name is Chelsea. She's really cool, in a valley-girl sort of way. Sometimes she calls or stops by to hang out. She actually convinced me yesterday to let another one of her friends come over. Can you imagine that? Me, hanging out with other people. Still not outside, mind you, but letting a stranger into my life is a pretty big step."

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Amanda started to laugh and my heart swelled up. I'd never seen her look so excited or so proud, and I was happy for her, genuinely happy. Her new friend Chelsea was likely the reason Amanda was late to our webcam chats lately, and I'd never hold that against her. She had every right in the world to spend time with new people in her life.

I thought about the baby steps Amanda and I were taking. Me and her, each beginning to branch out and try new things, without using one another as a crutch. She and I didn't need each other, and that was a good reminder to have, but it sure was nice having her around.

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## Chapter 5

“You’re doing great!” Devin exclaimed, giving me two thumbs up. Who gave people thumbs up anymore?

How Devin had managed to coerce me into going outside with him, I’d never know. He promised that the pool in our complex would be deserted and even assured me that the chances of us running into anyone in the hallways were slim to none. He didn’t try to touch me or hold my hand like I was a child. He talked to me like I was his old friend, telling me about a particularly bratty kid he’d began teaching recently and then proceeding to ask me about my day. He would encourage me when I’d complete small feats, like leaving my apartment and locking the door behind me, and going through the stairwell. Devin always seemed to know the right things to say, and how best to make me feel good about myself. I couldn’t help but wonder if he had done a bit of research on people with severe OCD and social anxiety disorder.

Devin was right when he’d said that we wouldn’t run into anyone in the halls or outside, near the pool. The weather was tepid, humid, and surprisingly refreshing. When he’d opened the stairwell door and waited for me to follow him through, I’d been hit with a blast of awareness. Awareness of the bright sun, the heaviness of the air around me, and the shine of Devin’s huge smile.

The pool looked old and rather small, but Devin insisted any body of water was better than no body of water. It was uncovered and had a few stray green leaves basking on the surface, soaking up the sun like they belonged there. The concrete around the pool was old with a few cracks in it, but looked secure enough not to send me into a fit. There were metal and rubber lawn chairs surrounding the pool, the metal white and the rubber bands were a multitude of pastels, faded by sun damage in some spots.

I heard a bird chirping off in the distance, and the quiet humming of car engines even further than that. There was a high fence around the outside patio area, likely to ward off guests who weren’t residents of the complex. Another safety measure that made me feel comfortable.

“Isn’t it beautiful out here?” Devin asked.

He held his arms open wide and squinted at me from a couple of feet away. I wanted to tell him that squinting caused wrinkles and not wearing protective



eyewear out in the sun, especially for someone like him who was constantly outdoors, was probably a bad idea. But he looked so happy and so serene, completely in his element and loving the fact that he'd managed to drag his vampiric neighbor out into the sunlight.

"Yes, it's very nice," I said awkwardly, wrapping my arms around myself.

"Come on," Devin called, motioning for me to follow him. He led us off into the corner and took a seat on one of the slightly rusted pool chairs. His hand was used as a makeshift visor over his eyes as he looked up at me and stuck out his tongue. It was hard not to laugh.

I took a seat in the chair right beside his, which seemed to surprise him. We hadn't been this physically close since the first day he knocked on my door and invaded my life.

Devin stared at me for a few moments, his pink lips slightly parted. I allowed him at first, thinking he was probably having a moment, like when a spectator watches a monkey in a zoo, but after a bit I tilted my face toward his and looked up at him.

"What?" I asked quietly. I was trying to avoid making eye contact.

He was silent and intent for a moment before putting a lopsided grin on his face. "Nothing. I like your outfit."

I looked down at myself and decided if he noticed any color on my face, I'd blame it on the sun. Among my most current order of clothing, I'd purchased a pale yellow T-shirt with a picture of waves inside a circle on the center of the chest. Along with that was a pair of light blue *boating shorts*, whatever that meant. When I'd purchased the outfit, somewhere deep in the back caverns of my mind, I'd hoped Devin would say he liked it, but I'd never admit that to him.

I leaned back in the chair, folding my hands over my stomach, and closed my eyes. I assumed Devin did the same because he began talking about the pH levels in our pool and the one he worked at and how he felt compelled to check on them regularly to make sure they were all good. They always were, he told me, but one can apparently never be too careful when it came to pH levels.

I liked listening to Devin talk. There was something supremely comforting in the tone of his voice, like the world had never, in its existence, suffered a single problem. When I was around him, sometimes my body would be filled

with this heinous idea that I wanted to touch him, sometimes in a friendly way, sometimes more romantically. I couldn't help myself, though. I assumed everyone liked Devin; he was impossible not to be drawn to. He was easy to be around, easy to talk to, easy to listen to, and even easier to look at. I'd never really been much of a fan of people, but if I had to be a fan of someone, I figured it would be Devin.

"Hey, Devin!" someone hollered.

My eyes shot open. I sat up quickly, looking around frantically for the owner of the voice.

"Jude," Devin whispered, leaning into me slightly. "It's okay. Just my friends. Sometimes they show up unannounced and uninvited. But you wouldn't know anything about that, huh?"

I appreciated him trying to joke about the situation and make me feel comfortable, but I was anything but. My heart was racing in my chest, and I could feel my lower back begin to sweat and dampen the back of my new shirt.

Devin's group of friends opened the gate on the fence and then began walking over to us. There were three of them in total—two men and a girl, all of whom were as attractive as Devin. I made myself stare down at the concrete on the ground and avoid eye contact at all costs.

"Hey," someone said, seemingly from right in front of us. I started to breathe hard.

"Hi guys," Devin said. "This is Jude, my neighbor from across the hall."

They all sounded their greetings toward me, and I lifted my head just enough to stare at their exposed knees and wiggle my fingers in salutations.

"Oh, so *he's* the neighbor!" one of Devin's friends said.

"Shut up, Mark. Seriously," Devin said hurriedly.

I'd had enough. I didn't care at that moment if I was being rude, but I knew I had to leave before the situation blew up into a full-blown panic attack and I started convulsing on the old patio furniture.

"Thavetogobye," I said, speeding through the statement like it was one word.

I stood up and kept my head down, rushing to the back door of the apartment building and swooping inside.

Devin didn't call out to me or ask me to wait. I heard him say he'd talk to me tomorrow as I was practically running away from him and his friends. Another thing I liked about Devin was that he knew when to push me and when not to.

By the time I was safely back in my apartment behind four very secure locks, I was able to breathe. I sat down on the floor and leaned my back against the door, letting my head fall and gently knock against the wooden surface.

I felt like today was a success, and it had been. I'd enjoyed the beautiful weather outside, listened to Devin tell me stories, and even had an encounter with strangers that didn't result in a panic attack. All in all, it was a good day.

I closed my eyes and smiled a little, thinking of the progress I'd made over the past few weeks. None of it had felt as overwhelming or ominous as I had once expected it to. It was becoming easier, almost feeling natural to know I would be pushing myself and trying new things. Not every day, of course, but slowly, at my own pace.

I heard noises in the hallway and listened to the sounds of Devin and his friends entering his apartment. A small part of me wished that I was normal, that I had the courage to get up and walk over there and join them, but I knew that wasn't possible.

A small, folded note was slipped under the door, right next to my hand. I unfolded it and read the words written on the paper.

*Jude,*

*You look good lying in the sun.*

*Devin*

I folded the small piece of paper and slipped it into my pocket with a smile on my face. I would keep this little note as a memento, a small reminder of the huge steps I'd taken and the notice that I'd received on behalf of my efforts.

Today was a good day.

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## Chapter 6

I lifted the transparent brown bottle off the skateboard and looked at the tiny droplets of water running down the sides. The bottle felt cold and foreign in my hand, but that made sense since I'd never had alcohol before. I pressed the rim of the bottle to my lips and took a tiny sip. Devin was staring at me from across the hallway, and I couldn't help but feel the heaviness of his gaze.

I set the bottle back down on the skateboard and licked my lips.

"It's all right," I said.

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Most people don't like beer right off the bat. Maybe next time we can make margaritas or try a cider."

I just shrugged and rolled the skateboard over to him. "Whatever you think."

He winked at me, then grabbed the bottle and took a huge gulp.

Devin looked good. He usually looked good. He was wearing a worn pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his usual wide smile. I had no idea what he was always smiling about. In fact, I thought it odd that someone could be so smiley all the time. Devin must've seen the world in a different light than I did. Where I saw vast expanses of nothing but whiteness and dull comparisons of reality, Devin saw things in the brightest forms of Technicolor, and constantly acted as if he'd basked in its glow during his sleep. I wanted some of his color to rub off on me. I wanted more of his smiles.

I heard a faint gasp from the far end of the hallway. My head whipped to the side, and I instinctively drew my formerly extended legs in close to me. Standing there on the shabby crimson carpet at the end of the hallway was my mother.

"Jude Allen," she screeched. "What in the world are you doing outside your apartment? Don't you know what this kind of stress does to you? Mentally? And who is this man? Did he make you leave your apartment? How many times am I going to have to remind you not to push yourself like this! It's unhealthy."

"Oh, um, hi Mom," I said quietly, looking down at the floor. "This is Devin, my neighbor."

Devin stood up fully and extended his hand out to my mother, but his lips were pressed together into a straight line and the crinkles he usually had in the corners of his eyes when he smiled, were missing.

“Nice to meet you ma’am. My name is Devin Kidd.”

She gave him a thorough look, examining him from head to toe. I wonder if she saw the same person I saw every day when I looked at Devin. I wondered if Devin would make her feel the same way he made me feel.

“You may call me Mrs. Allen,” she said curtly without extending her hand. Devin dropped his hand back down to his side.

My mother wasn’t necessarily stuck-up, but she had a certain aura about her that reeked of false superiority. She was a tall woman, much larger than me; I’d gotten my small frame from my father. She constantly wore knee-length coats in an assortment of rosy colors, and could easily be heard down the street because of the clacking noise her kitten heels made on the pavement. Her hair was much like mine, a light brown and usually kept up in a bun. Her face, however, wasn’t at all youthful in appearance. Her cheeks were much too hollow, her nose too long, her chin much too severe.

Sometimes I wondered if people could even tell we were related because of how different we looked. Sometimes I wished my father were still around so I could have a glimpse of the type of man I’d grow to resemble.

“Well, Jude,” my mother said, turning toward me. “Explain why you’re out here. Have you been having panic attacks lately? You know what happens when you leave your apartment. You suffer from panic attacks and it takes days to recover.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right,” I said softly. I stood up and brushed off my pants while continuing to stare at the ground.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Allen,” Devin said. “But Jude was doing just fine.”

She swiveled around on her heels and stared straight at him. “And what would you know about what’s right and wrong for my son?”

“Well, I know that people with severe OCD should be encouraged constantly to challenge the limitations they’ve set for themselves, and it’s important to acknowledge when they’ve made improvements, like Jude has.”

I had no idea how Devin knew about that. I didn’t even know that. My mother had told me years ago that looking too deeply into my OCD or my

social anxiety disorder would likely be worse for my condition. She told me that it would probably frighten me, so I'd never had the courage to question her or do any research of my own.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," she snapped at Devin. "And I think it would be best if you stayed away from my son."

My mother turned away from Devin then ushered me in through my apartment doorway. I looked back over my shoulder at Devin, and he looked like he was trying his best to smile at me.

My mother closed the door behind us and made sure all four of my locks were securely in place. Watching her fasten the bolts made me realize that I'd forgotten to close the bottom lock earlier that day. I wondered what that meant.

Later that evening, after my mother had finally left, I was completely exhausted. My mother had stopped by to check on me and spent the remainder of her visit ranting and complaining about my heathen neighbor, telling me that the corners in my kitchen looked dirty, and lecturing me about the wrinkles I'd left in the comforter on my bed.

And she was right. I had been getting sloppy, and I had begun slacking on my cleaning and folding and pressing and perfecting of things. Somehow, I hadn't noticed before she'd pointed it out. I'd been too busy recreationally looking on the Internet at foreign cities I wished I had pictures of, and thinking about what Devin would make us for dinner that evening.

Still, I couldn't help but feel a little guilty about the way she'd treated Devin. I decided I'd apologize to him. I felt brave, somehow, even after everything my mother had said. I knew that Devin would be proud of me if I marched over to his apartment and knocked on his door, but more importantly, I knew that I would be proud of myself.

I walked to my front door, unlocked the locks, opened the door, and then peeked out into the hallway to see if anyone was there. The coast was clear so I tiptoed over to Devin's door and reached out to knock.

Admittedly, it took me a few tries. I stood there with my clenched fist extended, likely looking like an idiot, trying to gather the courage to knock on his door. Eventually I pulled myself together and softly knocked on the door with my knuckles, trying my best not to run away and hide like a child.

Devin opened the door and stood there, looking at me with a smile on his face.

“Hey,” I said quietly.

“Hey, you,” Devin replied.

“I’m sorry about my mother. I know she can be kind of rude and come off the wrong way.”

“It’s all right, I’m not concerned about what she said to me. But Jude, you have to know that you have been making progress and you should be proud of yourself, despite what your mother might think. She might not always know what’s best for you; only you know what’s best for you.”

“Yeah,” I said, slightly nodding. “You’re right.”

“And I’ve seen you come out of your shell so much these past few weeks. I’ve seen you progressively smile more. I’ve watched you laugh and try new things, some you liked and some you didn’t, but you tried them anyway, and you should feel damn proud that you did.”

I looked up into his eyes and couldn’t help but grin at him. “Yeah. I have tried new things, and it is making me happier. I can sleep better at night, and I don’t panic nearly as much during the day. We’re even on chapter sixteen of *To Kill a Mockingbird*!”

Devin laughed and scratched the back of his neck nervously.

“I can’t remember the last time I felt so... free,” I said. “Definitely before my dad left. He left when I was fifteen, and my mom took it pretty hard; she cried for months afterward. My dad liked things really clean. I remember him lecturing me and Mom about the cleanliness of the house, always saying it was never good enough.”

“Parents aren’t always right, okay?”

“I know.”

“Here,” Devin said, holding out his hand, palm facing me. “You’re so much stronger than you know, Jude.”

I stared at his open palm. He wanted me to touch him. I knew if I didn’t, he wouldn’t be offended or angry or even judge me. I knew that if I asked him to stop trying to push me, he’d find other subtle ways to do it. But I also knew that I could touch Devin, if I wanted to. And I did want to.

Tentatively, I reached out and slowly, carefully, pressed the palm of my much smaller hand against his. My heart beat fast as I felt the warm flesh of his

hand touching mine, whether it was out of fear or desire, I had no idea. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so alive.

"Me Tarzan, you Jane," Devin said with a wide grin on his face.

I threw my head back and laughed. I kept my open palm connected with Devin's, relishing the feeling of real human contact, but I couldn't help the fit of laughter I was experiencing. I was completely and totally elated, flying high and fast and far, never looking down and never wondering what terrors might wait for me around the next corner.

When I finally calmed down, I looked at Devin. He was just staring at me. Staring at me with the most serious look I'd ever seen on his face.

Suddenly, Devin's fingers shifted and he closed his hand around mine. His other hand came up behind my neck and pulled me toward him.

And then he kissed me.

Devin kissed me, and the whole world, time, the entire fucking universe, stopped.

He pressed his soft lips tight against mine and kissed me. Devin wasn't tentative, he was free and rushed and passionate. His lips were closed, but they remained pressed against mine. Then I felt the wet tip of his tongue breach the gap from his mouth to my lips, slowly beginning to press at the seal of my mouth. Acting on their own, my lips slightly parted and Devin's tongue gently pressed its way in and slowly ran against mine, causing me to make a quiet moaning noise, one I had no idea I was capable of making.

I allowed myself that single moment to feel alive and wanted and desired. I allowed myself to want Devin all the ways I knew I wanted him, and all the ways I hoped he wanted me back. I allowed the universe to stand still, just for that moment, because I knew it couldn't last. And when that moment was over, I knew I had a price to pay for falling in love with a man from just one kiss.

I broke free from Devin and shoved him away. My lungs couldn't get enough oxygen and I began hyperventilating. My legs carried me back into the doorway of my apartment where I collapsed onto my knees and hunched over, pulling my head into my thighs while I tried to gulp the air around me.

I could hear Devin spouting his apologies like he was a fountain and they flowed like water, but I couldn't acknowledge him. He sounded far enough away for me to assume he'd stayed in his apartment and was watching me crumble in on myself from across the hallway.



I was breathing hard, continuing to try to press my forehead against my thighs while I counted in my head. Sometimes counting helped to slow down and regulate my breathing, but this seemed to be one of those times where it did nothing at all. I felt the walls around me begin to close in, locking me inside and leaving me in the dark. Everything felt hazy. I couldn't focus on anything other than trying to breathe deep and slow myself down.

It felt like hours passed when my breathing finally slowed and my body stopped trying to coil itself into a tiny, compact ball. I tilted my head and looked over at Devin's doorway. He was sitting there, staring at me intently, looking frantic and afraid.

"Jude, I'm so sorry," he said. "You were looking at me and I just—I couldn't—fuck! I'm sorry."

I was completely mortified. Devin had kissed me. He kissed me and I practically had to throw myself through my door to get away from him. It wasn't Devin. It was me. I wanted to tell him such, but I couldn't find the words, I couldn't find any words. So I just kept looking at him, watching him nervously rub his hands over his face.

Devin was too good for someone like me, someone so damaged, so broken. He deserved to be with someone else who could shine at least half as bright as he did, someone full of life and love to give him.

I stood up and closed my apartment door, even as Devin kept talking, too mortified and consumed with self-loathing to listen to another word. I secured all four locks on the door, then slinked down against the wall and listened to the silence that surrounded me.

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## Chapter 7

“What a surprise,” Amanda said.

I couldn't even crack a smile.

“Wow, you look like you didn't sleep at all last night,” Amanda said. She was wearing a light blue T-shirt with a picture on the front of a unicorn jumping over a rainbow.

“I didn't. I was up all night cleaning everything twice over,” I replied. I could see myself in the small window on my computer monitor. Amanda was right, I looked terrible.

“It's been a while since you've had to do that,” she said.

“Something happened yesterday.”

“What happened yesterday?”

“My mom came over. She caught me and Devin sitting in the hallway sharing a beer and she kind of lost it on Devin. I went over to apologize for the way my mother treated him, and then Devin kissed me.”

“He kissed you!” Amanda yelped.

It wasn't my first kiss, or even my first experience with another person, another boy, but it affected me so much more deeply than the previous times.

I'd had my first kiss when I was twelve. I kissed my old best friend, Johnny, and for a little bit he let me. Afterwards, he told me he'd rather kiss Carrie than me. After that, I was a little bit choosier about my kissing partners.

When I was fifteen, I would fool around with one of my neighbors, a cute, light-haired boy named Parker who always tasted like grape Kool-Aid. Parker actually kissed me first and after that, we'd always be looking for reasons to spend time together. He was the first boy I'd ever been with intimately. When he'd unzipped my pants and glided his soft hand down into my underwear, I came within moments.

But my kiss with Devin was something completely different. It had stolen my breath away, causing me to fall quick and hard into the pit of pure *wanting* that was Devin.

I wanted to tell Amanda about all the ways that Devin made me feel, but that was just another thing my fear kept me from doing.

“And then?” she asked.

“And then I shoved him away, ran into my apartment, and had a panic attack. And then, when I could finally breathe again, I slammed the door in his face. I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life.”

“You’re embarrassed? Think of how he must feel, Jude. He’s probably mortified.”

I leaned back in my computer chair and glanced over at the wall. It was white, so very, completely white. Everything around me was. I didn’t live in this stark white apartment, I lived inside my mind, a mind that I’d covered in coat after coat of absolute whiteness. And the only person who had ever really helped me peek through the infinite sea of white, I’d run away from.

“You’re right,” I said to Amanda. “I’m being selfish again. I should go talk to him, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes! Absolutely. But I don’t envy you.”

“I know. I’m mortified.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go!” Amanda said. She waved at me for a split second, then signed off, leaving me staring at my desktop.

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes. I knew I had to go apologize to Devin for the second time within twenty-four hours.

Pulling myself up and out of my chair, I left my office and made my way down the hall. I stopped in the bathroom to fix my hair and try to keep it swept off to one side, but it refused to cooperate. I gave up eventually, deciding to just brush my teeth.

I unlocked and opened my front door, peeked into the hallway to make sure the coast was clear, then slowly trudged over to Devin’s apartment door. It felt easier to knock on his door this time, even though I was more mortified than I had been previously. But I’d done this before, and I knew I could do it again. So I reached out and gently rapped on the door.

I waited anxiously, wringing my fingers and staring down at the ground. The door swung open and I looked up, completely taken off guard by the strange man standing in front of me.

He was tall, dark, and devastatingly handsome. Those qualities paired with the fact that he was dripping wet and wrapped only in a small, blue towel, dried my throat in an instant. I just stared up at him, completely horrified that this man was answering Devin's door.

If it were physically possible, I felt my heart break just then. It broke with the realization that I knew this was the type of man Devin deserved, someone handsome and confident and normal. Still, the selfish person I was mourned the loss of a love I'd never really known.

"Hey," the stranger said with a smile on his face. "Can I help you?"

I turned around instantly and ran back into my apartment, slamming the door shut. My hands were shaking, and my fingers weren't moving as quickly as I needed them to when I fumbled through each of my four locks. I heard voices from the hall, Devin and the strange man, then Devin's voice closer, and the sound of him knocking on my door.

"Jude?" Devin said frantically. "Jude, open up."

I shook my head without him being able to see me. I stumbled backward, staring at the door like I was the victim in a horror movie and the monster was about to break through the wooden door at any second.

I left the hallway, trying to ignore the sounds of Devin calling to me and banging on my door. I sat on my bed and stared at nothing but the blankness of the white wall in my bedroom.

I had no one but myself to blame. I shouldn't have allowed myself to get that close to Devin, to attach myself to him and let him sneak under my skin the way he did. I repeatedly reminded myself that my world was not ending just because Devin was sleeping with another man, but it still felt like it was.

My anxiety was prevalent as the hours rolled by. I continued to sit on my bed, staring, long after the rapping on my front door had stopped. My back was sore from leaning forward so long and my throat felt raw. My body was telling me it was time to rest, but my mind was telling me that it was time to clean. I didn't have the energy to try and fight with myself, not right then.

I made my way into the kitchen and extracted my old friends, the bottle of bleach, a few rags, and rubber gloves. I sat down right there on the floor and snapped the gloves onto my hands without realizing I was doing it. I unscrewed the lid from the bottle and just began to pour. The bleach beat down on the tile

floor, spreading itself out like it had been waiting to get free. It continued to pool and stretch, dampening the fabric of my pants and socks, but I barely noticed. I took the rag in my hand and began to scrub, trying my best to clean all the dirt in between the cracks in the floor. There was so much, I had no idea how I'd ever let it become so soiled. The dirt in the cracks, the specks on the tile, the stains on the cupboard doors. Even me. I looked at my arm and stared at the pale freckles that landscaped my skin. The dirt was on me. It was everywhere, and I hadn't even noticed. Everything looked so disgusting, so filthy, of course Devin wouldn't want me.

I wanted to pour the bleach onto my skin, to purify myself, to get off all the uncleanness that was on me. I wanted to scrub and scrub until my skin was red and raw. Until I felt clean.

I breathed in deep, smelling the familiar, comforting scent of the bleach. I had been living in a fool's paradise; I knew there was no amount of bleach on the planet that would make me clean enough for Devin.

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*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

It had been exactly nineteen days since I'd last seen Devin, and each one of those days, Devin had raised his white flag in the form of a bouncy ball hitting my door.

I never answered the door.

After the first couple of times Devin had bounced the ball and knocked on my door, I considered opening it and hearing him out, whatever he had to say. He didn't owe me anything, I knew that, but my own fear kept me from Devin.

I felt empty and alone most nights as I lay in bed, trying to ignore the way my mind wandered across the hall. Nothing seemed as bright lately; nothing seemed as wonderful or magical as it had before. My world was slowly starting to fade, to morph into that blank canvas it had once been long before I met Devin. I had no paints and no pigment, so that canvas of my life remained white, blank, unused, and I felt every moment of my lack of color.

Each day in the evening, Devin would write me a small note about what he did that day, and despite trying to tell myself that I didn't care, they were

always the highlight of my day. He'd write about his teaching lessons that day or a new recipe he'd looked up online, and he would finish the note off by writing something personalized to me at the bottom of the paper. He'd tell me to read another chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on my own, even if I couldn't finish it, or to try to rearrange my furniture, even if it was just moving the side table a few inches. And without ever planning on telling Devin that each day I'd follow his suggestions, I did, and each night, I'd sleep a little bit better.

The truth was, I missed Devin. I missed him in ways I didn't remember missing anyone for a very long time. I missed his companionship, his smile, his sometimes-inedible food. I missed the way he looked at me, and I missed the way I felt when I looked back at him. When I thought of Devin, I felt an ache in the pit of my stomach and a pull in my chest, reminding me that when Devin had kissed me, he'd taken a part of me for himself.

Everything in my life continued as planned, according to the schedule I'd previously set up for myself and worked on for so many years. Things were a little different with me trying to push myself and try different things, but not to the same degree that I had when Devin was around.

On day twenty-six, I began to worry about Amanda. I hadn't seen or heard from her in nine days and it wasn't like her to up and leave without a note or to miss our webcam meetings. They had become later and later as the weeks had passed, and some days she'd tell me that she had to skip our next meeting, but it was very unusual behavior to have her leave without a word.

I was sitting in my computer chair in my office, staring at the desktop wallpaper, a beautiful, clear picture of the ocean, when Amanda emailed me. At first, I was surprised. She almost never emailed me, and when she did, it was usually article links I'd never click on. But this time, it was a message she'd written to me.

*Jude,*

*I'm sorry I haven't been around much lately and I hope you haven't been worried. My new psychologist is pretty cool and he tells me to try to break some of my old patterns. I've been hanging out with my friend Chelsea much more lately, and we've become really close. This is the nearest I've been to happiness in a long time.*

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*Jude, whatever happened between you and Devin, you need to give him another chance. You need to give yourself another chance.*

*And for fuck's sake, find out what happens to Scout.*

*Amanda*

I sat back and stared at the words on the screen. All this time I'd been sitting at home, moping, feeling sorry for myself, Amanda had been out trying to make her life better. And she'd succeeded.

What had I done? I'd continued to sit around and wait for my life to happen to me. When Devin was around, he'd taught me that it was all right to try new things, and those new things that I had tried hadn't been as difficult as my mind made them out to be. I did them all on my own, sure, with encouragement from Devin, but that was me. I'd taken those steps, I'd challenged my routine, I'd done new, amazing things. I did it all.

The first time I met Devin, he'd told me that I wasn't my OCD, and at the time, I had no idea what he meant by that. But since meeting Devin, I'd learned so much more about myself. I learned that I enjoyed cooking, and eating, I didn't like beer, I enjoyed listening to pop music and jazz, my favorite color is yellow, and that I would be okay.

I would be okay.

I knew I wouldn't get better overnight, and I knew that if I ever wanted my life to change, it would be a lot of work. But in the end, wasn't it worth it? Wouldn't it be worth it to see Devin again, maybe even to touch him? Be with him? My disorders weren't something to be overlooked or ignored, but I was exhausted from making them what defined me.

For the first time in many years, I wanted to have complete and total control over myself, over my disorders. I wanted to be able to make a decision for myself, and not have my own fear stand in my way.

I stood up, walked into the kitchen, and took the notes that Devin had written me off the top of the fridge. Sitting on my uncomfortable sofa, which was now facing the large picture that hung on my wall, I unfolded and reread each of the notes. They were sweet, simple, and all written in Devin's chicken scratch writing.

After reading each note, I would set it down on my lap and repeat the small words of encouragement that Devin had written to me. He wrote that I was

special and that I was smart and that I'd come so far and should be proud. I knew Devin would never say those things to me just to make me feel better, so each time I repeated those words to myself, saying them out loud, they rang more and more true.

Remembering that there would be a note left from the night prior, I stood up and walked over to my front door. There on the ground was my small, folded reminder of Devin. I bent over, grabbed the note, and unfolded it.

There on the white piece of paper was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen contrasted against something so white and plain. He'd written a few small words that I never in my entire life thought I'd read, never thought I'd think, never thought I'd be.

*You are strong.*

I fell asleep that night with a smile on my face, thinking of the different colored swirls in the bouncy ball across the hallway.

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Amanda and I started webcam chatting at irregular times, and often only a few times a week, which seemed to work for both of us. Amanda had told me all about her new doctor and the recent additions to her growing group of friends. She was becoming more outgoing and vibrant, and I couldn't be anything but happy for my friend. We were beginning to help one another progress by encouraging each other to leave our comfort zones and to stop relying on our friendship to act as an excuse not to.

When Amanda first suggested I give her psychiatrist a call, I was nervous. I'd told her that I didn't want to chat with a stranger over the telephone and that it likely wouldn't do me any good. But I took a few deep breaths and tried to slow down my breathing, internally asking myself what I really had to lose. If talking to someone who understood her condition had helped Amanda so much, then I thought it would be worth it to give it a try.

The next day I called her psychiatrist, Dr. Wade Hamelton, but he allowed me to refer to him as Wade. We talked on the phone twice before switching to webcam chats, and I liked Wade even more. He was a middle-aged man with a kind smile and thin, wire-framed glasses. He smiled a lot and didn't insist on anything.

Wade usually just listened to me talk and had an easy way of explaining the things in my life that acted like triggers. He helped encourage me to break my



patterns and let down my walls. He was very motivating about branching out, trying things that were uncomfortable, but he never made me feel like it was a simple task. Some days he'd tell me how well I was doing, and when I was stressed he'd tell me that he understood why—because of the changes in my patterns. Wade would tell me I had every reason to be upset, but even more reason to try harder next time. Every time he told me he understood, I felt like a weight was lifted off my chest.

After only a few sessions with Wade, I'd made a decision that I would tell my mother.

"Hi Mom," I said quietly into the receiver.

"Jude? What's wrong? Why are you calling?" she replied.

"Nothing, I just wanted to tell you something."

"Are you all right? Now you have me worried, Jude. Don't do anything rash."

I sighed and closed my eyes. "No, Mom, nothing like that. I just wanted to tell you that I'm getting some help, help with my OCD and my social anxiety."

Silence.

"I called a psychiatrist, his name is Wade, and he's a nice man. He listens and gives me good advice, and makes me feel like I'm capable of doing more than I have been these past few years," I told her.

"Jude," she replied. "I don't think this is a good idea. I know how these types of things cause you stress."

"Yes, I know, but I have to face myself one day, so it might as well be today. I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of not being myself."

"It's that man who lives across the hallway from you, isn't it? I knew he was trouble from the moment I first laid eyes on him, and now he's gone and put all of these ideas in your head."

"No, Mom, this wasn't his idea, it was mine. I want to get help. I want to get better. I want more than I've allowed myself to have since Dad left. Wade suggested that thoughts of Dad were triggers for me because I never allowed myself to mourn his leaving. But he's gone; he left us and he isn't coming back. I've allowed myself some time to grieve and to be angry and upset and hurt, and I really feel like you'd benefit from doing the same.

“In the past few weeks I’ve only cleaned my apartment a handful of times, I finished *To Kill a Mockingbird* and there was one part I found so adorable, when Scout dressed up as a ham, that the milk I was drinking came out of my nose. I didn’t even know I liked milk. I went outside the other day, just to see if the park across the street from me has changed in the past few years. I left my bed unmade for two days straight and when I fell asleep at night, I barely even thought about it. I went to the home improvement store and purchased buckets of paint in so many shades of blue; I’m planning on painting every wall in this apartment within the next few months.

“Mom, what I’m saying is, I’m getting better. Not all at once, and some days I feel like I haven’t made any progress at all, but I am getting better. I am not my disorders. I am Jude, and I’m finally ready to be happy.”

My mom started to cry on the other end of the phone. She was sobbing like her heart was breaking, and I knew that feeling. I had cried like that the same night Wade told me I had to grieve the loss of my father and acknowledge that I couldn’t keep waiting for him to come back to me. I’d cried and cried and when I had no more tears left, I laughed. It was therapeutic, feeling like all those tears that were pooled inside me for my father were gone. I had nothing left to give him, not my time, not my thoughts, not my happiness. I hoped my mom would feel the same.

“Jude, I’m so sorry,” she cried. “I never meant to put you in a bubble, it’s just that I saw how unhappy you were and it was bleeding me dry. I couldn’t make him come back, so if I kept you safe, away from harm, you wouldn’t leave me either.”

My mother was only human, after all. We all had our flaws and we’d all made our mistakes. At least that’s what Wade had told me, and he’d know better than I would about the human condition. I didn’t blame her for my disorders, and I wasn’t upset with her in any way. I was an adult, and should’ve decided a long time ago that I wanted more for myself in this life than living in a perfect, little, white box.

When I got off the telephone with my mother, I felt lighter than I ever had. Something weighted had lifted off me and I was finally free.

I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror that was now in the corner of my bedroom. The flowers I’d gathered from a walk yesterday were sitting on my side table, smelling like fresh lilac and summer. Every time I passed by them, I smiled, reminded of my own courage and the things I was capable of.

When I looked in the mirror, I felt more comfortable with myself than I had in a long time. I'd finally gained some weight from beginning to eat better and more frequently, my clothes fit me better and were all gorgeous colors and patterns. My bright blue eyes finally looked like they matched the glossy cerulean color that swirled through Devin's bouncy ball.

I smiled when I looked at myself, and even my smile was better now than it had been before. I wondered what Devin would think when he looked at me. I wondered if he'd see someone stronger, more confident—someone happier.

I ran my fingers through my freshly cut hair, sweeping it off my forehead. I was nervous, but I knew there was only one way I'd really know how Devin felt about me. I told myself that if Devin was involved with that other man, it would be all right. There would never be another Devin in my life, but I'd be okay. I'd learn to find my own piece of happiness.

It was later in the evening, later than any time I'd ever been with Devin before. My palms were sweaty as I exited my apartment and walked across the impossibly wide hallway to Devin's door. I barely hesitated when I knocked on his door because I knew that no matter the outcome, I was grateful to have had Devin in my life.

Devin swung the door open and looked at me with a strange look set on his face, a mixture between happiness and sadness. He smiled at me sweetly, almost shy, and opened the door wide enough to let me walk in.

As I'd noticed before, Devin's apartment looked almost identical to mine in layout, but very different in furnishings. This time, instead of clothing everywhere and empty containers and dishes, everything looked clean. The counters had all been wiped down and the floor look perfectly swept, even in the small corners and creases of the room. The television in the corner was on a low volume with some sort of football game on the screen. On the coffee table, in front of the sofa, was a stack of books and printed pieces of paper that all seemed to be on OCD. The pieces of paper were too difficult to make out from where I was standing, but there looked to be pen and highlighter marks all over the pages and in the margins.

"Your apartment looks nice," I said shyly.

"I tried to keep it clean in case you ever came over. I was just hopeful that you'd give me a chance," he replied.

"Before I could give you a chance, I had to give myself one first."

“It’s not you, you know,” Devin said quietly. “You aren’t your OCD, but it is part of who you are, and I wanted to know more about you. It’s so hard for me, Jude, so hard to get you to open up to me.”

“I know,” I said just as quietly. “But I’m trying.”

Devin smiled at me, his usual, big smile, and I felt something squeeze in my chest.

I stared down at the floor, a hard habit to break. “A few months ago, that man—”

“No,” Devin said quickly. “He’s no one.”

“No one?” I asked.

Devin sighed. “He might’ve been, but he wasn’t. I couldn’t. Jude, it was so hard seeing you day after day, that fucking smile of yours, those eyes, that snarky sense of humor. I wanted you so badly, and not being able to even touch you felt like trying to breathe under a mountain of snow.

“I did make a mistake; I should’ve told you how I felt instead of throwing myself at you like that. And after you locked yourself in your apartment, I went looking for love in all the wrong places. Nothing happened, between him and I, and it wasn’t because you came over. I just... I couldn’t touch him. Not the way I want to touch you.”

There wasn’t a moment of hesitation when I reached out and put my hands on Devin’s arms. He remained perfectly frozen in place, like a warm, real representation of a marble statue, almost too beautiful to touch. But I did. I touched him, and I slowly ran my fingers down his exposed arms. I stopped and held his hands in mine. I looked up at him and pulled his arms back so they were wrapped around my waist. I reached up and looped one of my hands behind his neck, went up on my toes, and gently pressed my lips against his.

Devin was very still, barely opening his mouth to mine. I tried to encourage him by pressing the tip of my tongue into the open slit between his lips. I curled my tongue, licking the inside of his teeth, and I heard him moan. I grazed my fingertips up the back of his neck and then ran them through his soft, dark hair. Finally, his arms around me tightened and he pulled me closer and kissed me like he meant it.

It was everything I’d ever hoped for. The sparks, the lust, the heat, all of it.

I pulled back slightly and pressed my forehead against his.

“You know how I feel about you, right?” Devin asked me. I nodded.

“I felt the same way after that kiss. I knew then what this was between us.”

He smiled at me. “No, Jude. I knew since the first time you opened that door between us.”

Devin moved his head down, kissing my cheek, then my neck, then the muscle between my neck and shoulder. His fingers worked easily, slowly undoing the buttons of my shirt, then caressing his fingers up the bare skin of my chest.

This was new, and it was frightening and exhilarating at the same time. My heart was thudding against my rib cage and all the blood in my system was beginning to pool in the arousal pressing against the inside of my pants.

He slid my shirt off my shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Next, he lifted the bottom of his shirt up and over his head, tossing it near mine. Surprising him, I dropped to my knees and began undoing the buttons on the fly of his jeans. He continued to look down at me, and when I glanced up, he had a slack jaw look on his face that made me feel powerful.

I pulled down his jeans and underwear to his ankles, and then had him step out of them. When I leaned back and looked up at him, Devin stood stark naked, fully erect, and without a hint of shyness of his face. I was bombarded with a wave of lust, which left me staring at his entire bare body.

Devin reached down with one of his hands and stroked my cheek, pulling my chin up to look him in the eyes. He smiled at me, that gorgeous, intoxicating smile of his, and I was reminded all at once how badly I wanted to be with him, not only emotionally, but physically.

I leaned forward and cautiously licked the rosy head of his dick with my tongue. He let a quiet, choking noise slip past his lips right before I pet him with my tongue again. That time he moved his hand to the back of my head and wrapped his fingers in my hair.

I slowly leaned forward and swallowed him whole, trying to remember how exactly to make this good for someone else. It had been years since I'd done anything like this, but Devin's gentle pets encouraged me to carry on. I wrapped my tongue, as best I could, around his thickness, and moved my head slowly back and forth.

“Oh God, Jude,” he whispered.

I looked up at him, still with him in my mouth. His eyebrows knitted together as he stared right back and grunted, pulling my hair.

I placed my hands on the sides of his hips, trying to hold him still as I continued to suck and lick and hum, each time attempting to shove him deeper and deeper into my throat.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Devin said hastily. He pulled away from me and took a few deep breaths, then looked at me and smiled. “Sorry. It’s been a while, and I don’t want it to end just yet.”

He took my hand and helped me to my feet. Before I knew what was happening, he grabbed me and tossed me over his shoulder. I started to laugh and wiggle my feet, but he had a strong grip around my waist and held me on his shoulder.

He walked us down the back hallway near his kitchen and continued in through his bedroom door. I was flopped down on the large bed, and he swiftly crawled on top of me and undid my pants. I leaned up on my elbows and watched him, scared and excited at the same time. I trusted Devin, knew he’d be kind and gentle with me my first time.

Devin pulled off my pants, underwear, and socks, then tossed them aside without a second thought. He stared down at me, naked and spread open for him. I hoped I wasn’t still too skinny, too pale, too hollow. I hoped that when he looked at me, he felt the same longing I felt for him.

He reached down and ran his fingertips from the hollow of my collarbone, down to one of my nipples. He toyed with it, then moved down further to the adjacent hip.

“You’re beautiful, Jude,” Devin said to me, and for once, I believed him. I felt beautiful.

I rolled over onto my stomach and spread my legs a little wider, looking back at him over my shoulder. He looked perfect, kneeling on the mattress behind me, the overhead ceiling light illuminating his hard, toned figure and curving itself beautifully around his muscular shoulders and arms.

“Please,” I whispered. I wanted him to take care of me, just this one time.

Devin nodded then crawled over to the side table, opened one of the drawers, then took out a small bottle and a little foil packet. He positioned himself between my legs, and I heard the snapping sound of the lid on the bottle.

We watched each other in silence as he reached down and his cool, slick fingers began to pet the small opening between my cheeks. I inhaled sharply, surprised by the feeling, and nervous about the act. He used his dry hand to lean to the side and moved up to kiss the skin between my shoulder blades as he continued to gently pet me without pressing his finger inside.

I laid my cheek against the soft, pale cotton of the sheets and closed my eyes. I breathed deeply and willed myself to relax and take in the magnitude of what was about to happen.

I wasn't afraid; this was what I wanted, what I felt like I'd waited most of my adult life to feel. This wasn't just sex. We both knew it; I could feel it and I knew Devin could too. This was a statement, a bond, a promise.

When Devin's first finger breached my small opening and slid its way in up to his knuckle, I said his name softly. He kissed my hair and spoke soft, sweet words to me, telling me how amazing I was and how lucky he was to have me in his life.

Devin slowly pulled his finger out and pushed it back in a few times before a second wet finger stretched in next to the first. That time my breath caught when he curled his fingers inside me and gently bit the back of my neck.

By the time Devin was using three fingers, I was painfully hard, feeling the weight of my dick pressed up against the softness of the sheets beneath me.

I wanted more. I needed more.

When he pulled his fingers out, I turned my head and looked back at him over my shoulder. He was watching me as he slid the condom on. He crawled on top of me, pressing against me as close as he could, kissing the back of my shoulders, my neck, my hair, as the head of his cock gently started to press against me.

It was tight, and when he first breached the clenched hole he'd so carefully prepared, I let out a small cry. It hurt a little, feeling full and invasive. Inch by inch, as he disappeared further and further inside my body, I began panting.

"Shhhh," Devin said, licking the back of my ear. "I'll be gentle. It'll be good."

When Devin was all the way inside me, I pressed my forehead against the mattress. I was breathing hard, my face felt like it was burning, and my body was damp with sweat. Devin stayed still for a few moments to let me adjust

before he carefully rocked his hips, pulling out slowly and then gently pressing back in again. He groaned each time, soon breathing as heavily as I was.

Devin remained slow and gentle, often shifting his angle carefully to press the tip against the mound of nerves inside me that caused my back to bow and my mouth to dry instantly.

"I'm close, Jude," Devin whispered. He reached under me and wrapped his fingers around my swollen cock and began pumping his hand to the same rhythm he was pushing into me.

I cried out first and came, shoving my face into the sheets and fisting them so tightly I felt my dull nails dig into the palms of my hands. I began to soar and for once, my mind wasn't lost in some blank, desolate place. I was right there, with Devin and all of his beautiful colors, feeling every inch of him in my body, feeling the goose bumps on my arms and the sweat on my back. I'd never been so aware of myself, so aware of my body, and what having someone else touching me in such a tender way felt like.

Devin followed soon after me with a long, drawn out moan. I could feel him throbbing inside me when his big hands carefully pressed against my shoulders, pushing me into the mattress.

When it was over, Devin rolled off me, and I heard him walk over to the washroom. He was back within a minute and brought a cloth that he used to wipe my skin, being so careful it reminded me of how you'd polish a jewel. He tossed the cloth into a bin then lay back down on his side, facing me. When I looked over at him, he had a beautiful smile on his face, the biggest one yet, and that sight alone began to melt anything cold in my chest.

That was my smile, I decided right then, the one that Devin always wore for me. That was the smile that had made me realize that all the most difficult things in life would be worth doing ten times over, just for him.

"Hey," Devin said quietly.

He reached out and stroked his fingers through my hair, carefully moving the few strands off my face.

I smiled back at him. "Hi."

I felt loved. I felt whole, wanted, and loved. Nothing could ruin the experience I'd just shared with Devin, and nothing could take away the progress I'd made.



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We continued to lie there for what felt like hours, looking at one another, smiling, laughing, talking, but mostly just enjoying the closeness of being together. The large window in his bedroom had the curtains drawn, and we stayed there from the time the sun was still gently touching the sky, until it was gone and the night came upon us in gorgeous shades of blue.

“I want to go to Hong Kong,” I told Devin. “No, that’s not right. I will go to Hong Kong, one day. And I’ll go to Turkey, and travel through the spice markets. And I’ll go to Greece to see the Delphi Theatre. And Croatia for the beautiful trees and landscapes and the gorgeous blue shoreline. And then Italy for the museums, the Pantheon, Cinque Terre, overlooking the ocean...”

I fell asleep like that, telling Devin about all the amazing, wondrous things I was going to do in my life, all the gorgeous places I’d go. And each time I told him of some beautiful piece of the world that I was going to claim for my own, I knew he’d be right there with me.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Nash Summers is a fanatical, fantastical, completely impractical writer of M/M Romance.*

*She is a lover of wise talkers and things that go bump in the night.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# THE CASE OF THE INSUFFERABLE SLAVE

By Gillian St. Kevern

## Photo Description

Drawn picture of two men from the chest up. One brown-haired man is wearing a suit and smiling as he grips the chin of the second man, blond-haired, and bare except for the collar.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*In this society all detectives receive a slave as part of their job title. Their world is dark, rough, crime ridden and the job of a detective is incredibly difficult. A slave is meant to ease their burden at home by serving both as a house and a bed slave. Problem is, this newly-made detective does not want a slave, but he forced to take one or lose his job. So what happens when a beautiful and shy slave boy with a dark past arrives on his doorstep the following day?*

*AU (alternate universe—world similar to ours but with a few twists), Master/slave, Angst, HFN ending.*

*Sincerely,*

*Bree*

## Story Info

**Genre:** alternate universe, historical

**Tags:** noir, detective, slave, dub-con, hurt/comfort, sassy, hard-boiled, humorous, angst, dark, BDSM

**Content Warnings:** mention of past rape, violence, death

**Word Count:** 39,690

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# **THE CASE OF THE INSUFFERABLE SLAVE**

**By Gillian St. Kevern**

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## Chapter 1

Galapagos tapped his cigarette against the filing cabinet and considered how he was going to crush me. His sallow lips curled as he looked around my office. "You're only a few tin cans short of a dump," he said. "What customer's going to call on you here? You need green, Harry. You need it bad."

Galapagos had long fingers and expensive nails that didn't come from making an honest living. His cigarette was expensive, and he took it from an expensive case. Even the smoke he exhaled had a price tag.

The filing cabinet was not expensive. It came to me courtesy of an accounting firm that hadn't balanced their books. Those same accountants had provided the apartment, the carpet, even the desk currently propping up my feet. Just about the only thing in the room that didn't come to me second-hand was the name painted in big block letters on the door. Flint, it said. Private Investigator, it added. At a dime a letter, it had set me back two bucks sixty and I still thought they'd overcharged on the periods.

It was hard not to see Galapagos's point, but I resisted. I had to. I'd sunk not only the majority of my savings into the apartment, but my future, too. "No one trusts a dick with money. They think he's putting the squeeze on." I stretched my feet across my desk, deliberately projecting calm. "That's bad for business. The place suits me just fine."

Galapagos turned his head to look at me. He had a predator's instinct for weakness and he was probing mine. "I'm used to getting a return on my investments."

He wore his black hair oiled back against his skull and he had bathed liberally in cologne. His long face complemented the alligator-skin jacket he wore too well for comfort. The jacket was his trademark. He was called "the Crocodile," but never where he could hear.

I'd never seen the man without it. Frankly, I didn't want to see him with it.

"I don't owe you anything," I said.

"People know I fronted your start-up costs. They're going to wonder."

I picked up the newspaper I'd dropped on my desk when Galapagos walked in. I shook it out, then leaned back in my chair. "Let 'em."

Galapagos was not impressed. He rarely was. He shook the ash from his cigarette as though he was making small talk at a cocktail party. "Your failure will reflect on me. I don't want that."

I impressed him once. Accidentally saved the man's life and now I was paying for it. "You're breaking my heart here."

"I mean it. You need a slave."

I stalled. I was braced for my name on a loan agreement I could never hope to pay off. The slave angle took me by surprise.

I must have blinked. A flicker of a smirk crossed Galapagos's face.

Deliberately, I snorted. "I need a slave like a burglar needs a business card." It was hard to resist the urge to fiddle with the handles of my drawer, but I did it.

Galapagos watched me with all the predatory interest of a real crocodile. "I mean it, Harry. Maybe you have a point about the office, but who's gonna trust a dick that does his own dirty work?"

"A man has his pride." And his name. I should have given the painter another buck to have him paint "Flint" on my forehead, and then maybe Galapagos would have remembered it.

"Not in this gig he doesn't." Galapagos stuck the cigarette back in his mouth. "I got a little number I've been having trouble shifting, but I think he just might suit you. Been round the block a few times. Should fit right in with the décor."

"I don't want him."

"Think of him as a housewarming present."

"I'll send him back."

"You're a hard man to please, Harry." Galapagos put out his expensive cigarette on my filing cabinet, ignoring the ashtray sitting within his line of sight on the coffee table. "You want cases, you want a slave. Take it from me."

He didn't give me time to argue. I wasn't sure the effort was worth it. When it comes to ownership, Galapagos is what you might call *invested*.

He owned the man in the starched shirt that waited outside the door, brass knuckles hidden in the pocket of his jacket. He owned the man in the

chauffeur's cap who sweltered on the curb in gloves that made absolutely no concession to the aching Atlanta sun. And back in his expensive office, in his expensive filing cabinet, were the names and numbers of all the other people Galapagos owned.

He didn't own me, but damn if he wasn't trying. "I'll send him back, Galapagos."

He didn't give any sign that he'd heard me.

I waited until I heard the limousine containing Galapagos's chauffeur, Galapagos's bodyguard, Galapagos's jacket, Galapagos's cigarettes and Galapagos himself drive off, before I unbent myself from the desk. The safe above the bookcase would not stand up against any locksmith worth his salt. It sure hadn't done the accountants any good, but I thought it looked pretty nice. I opened the safe, took out the bottle of ten-year-old single malt and poured myself a finger of it. After I drank it, I poured myself a second.

Special occasion. I'd started my new life and escaped the crocodile's jaws all in one day.

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Business flowed in slower than day-old cement. I thought I'd give it the chance to catch up, so I took a walk down the sticky pavement to the Humane Society. Galapagos was weighing on my mind. He wasn't the type to make idle threats, so I figured I may as well explore my options.

The neighborhood I'd set up shop in was respectable. The holes in the buildings were patched with plywood, the graffiti was more or less spelled right, and no one attempted to mug me as I walked down the street. Then again, that might have had more to do with the platoon marching down the road in military order than the quality of my new home.

As the first row of soldiers drew level with me, I took off my hat. It was a sight that I'd seen many times before, and until the Union recognized our right to self-determination, would see many times again. It might have been approaching one hundred years since the decisive battle that halted hostilities, but the North refused to believe the war was over. Every couple of years, they tested our borders and every couple of years, we sent them packing. It was a war that benefited no one, least of all the men marching off to die in it. Like the other pedestrians, I scanned the faces of the men as they marched and wondered who would return with a Northern bullet lodged in them.



The soldiers were a mixed lot. You could pick out the volunteers easily enough. They were the ones with shiny cheeks, who looked straight ahead and wore uniforms that more or less fit. Idealists. They got what they deserved.

It was the others I felt for. The slaves and the conscripts. Miserable to a man, there was a similarity to the lines of hardship on their faces that transcended age and race, and made it hard to tell one from the other.

The trick was to look at their mouths. The conscripts' mouths drooped under the weight of the hard fate waiting them. They'd done everything they could to avoid service, but it had caught up with them at last. The slaves' mouths were set in a grim line. Surviving this meant freedom, however dubious that was. For the poor souls that had been born into slaving, this was perhaps their only chance at it.

For the rest, I wondered why they bothered. It was a truth we all knew—no matter your legal status there was no end to your drudgery. For that we could thank our founding fathers, who, in their infinite wisdom, had decided to address the Great Debt our Great Victory over the North had afforded us by selling into service the Northern Prisoners of War. Slavery had become first a legal state of being, and then a financial one. Your personhood was only ever as secure as your bank account.

Welcome to the South. We're all slaves here.

I watched the platoon hold up the traffic until they passed from view. Then I replaced my hat and continued on my way.

The Humane Society did not live up to its name. Just looking at the cracked paint was enough to depress me. That was before I set foot inside the building and met the smell. It wafted out to greet me, a mixture of bleach, despair and staleness. I would have walked out but the creature at the desk had seen me. I have a soft spot for lost causes.

I walked up to the desk.

The man straightened. He looked not at my shoulder but just over it, the mark of either a well-trained slave or one that had seen too much. It took the silence growing uncomfortable for me to realize he wouldn't speak until I did.

"How's business?"

He was somewhere in his late-twenties but looked a decade older, with stringy dirt-blond hair that was combed over his face and pursed, sallow lips.

“Looking to adopt or donate?” he asked with the excitement equivalent to a Catholic mother learning she’s been blessed again for the ninth time.

“Let’s leave it at looking. What can I cast an eyeball at?”

My guide waved me down a depressing dank corridor to metal doors as thick as my fist, but not locked. He put his skinny shoulder into it and with a grunt, got the door open. “After you.”

It may be the custom that a slave never enters a room before a freeman, but hell if I liked stepping into that prison first. It was cold and gloomy, made gloomier by its inhabitants.

There were sixteen metal cages on either side of that vault-like room; eight above, eight below. Most of them were occupied. Room to sit or stretch out but not to stand. Whether they belonged to the sitting school or the stretching out school, the slaves looked me over dully. They were male, female, black, white, old and young but there was a sameness to them that had nothing to do with the fact that their sarongs were cut from the same drab cotton. I wandered up and down the row and looked at the cages because it seemed to be expected.

If I told you my arrival created a stir, I’d be lying. You don’t get to be a down-and-out slave without knowing how to recognize a sinking ship, and a dick with no business and a cheap suit was going to struggle to keep himself afloat, let alone keep a slave.

I’d had all I could take of the stale taste of misery in minutes. I looked toward my guide, leaning against the cage nearest the door, and shook my head.

I put five dollars in the box at the front desk to ease my mind. “None of the cages were locked,” I said. “Why’s that?”

My guide shrugged. No longer looking over my shoulder, he looked at the desk, having mentally dismissed me. “Who’s gonna escape? There’s nowhere to go.”

I made it a twenty.

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I have a sensitive soul. Visiting the Humane Society distressed it, so I visited another benevolent institution to tend to my troubled mind. The Irish Lullaby was on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and West and they didn’t start watering down the drinks until after eleven. They tended to me so well that when I rolled back

to my office-apartment around twelve, I'd forgotten not only the sad eyes and hollow cheeks of the inmates at the Humane Society, but Galapagos's long face and pointed smile, too.

It took me a while to notice the knock at the door over the pounding of my head. When I did, I swore a little. That's the thing about business. It's apt to come when it's not wanted and stay away when it is.

"Lay off the construction work. I'm coming!"

I unwound myself from the bed and staggered into the bathroom. I splashed some water on my face and looked in the mirror. A man with brown hair and eyes the color of sweet tea stared back at me. He had lines on his forehead and around his eyes, and needed a shave, but that was all right—no one trusted a dick that was too clean-shaven. I ran my fingers through my hair, watched the man in the mirror do the same. I'd saved myself the trouble of dressing by sleeping in my clothes, so I straightened my tie, picked up my jacket from the end of the bed, and stepped into my office.

They hadn't knocked again. That's when I got suspicious. My morning routine was not overly long, but anyone calling on a dick before lunchtime was not in the waiting mood. I opened the door.

A cute little number stood shyly on my doorstep. He had blond hair that shone like the sun and skin as fair as a virgin's soul. His eyes were demurely downcast so I couldn't see the color, but I would have bet any money they were bright and sparkled. The crimson sarong that hugged his very lovely hips was the only clothing he wore. That indicated he was a slave. The metal-studded collar around his neck indicated that he came from Galapagos. The suitcase at his foot implied he was staying. I put the three facts together and came to a conclusion.

"Aw, hell."

The slave looked up startled. I had just enough time to see that his eyes were bright and blue as I shut the door on them.

I went straight to my desk and reached for the bottle of bourbon in the bottom drawer. It reached back. When it reached my tonsils, I recapped the bottle, returned it to the drawer and thought.

When I reopened the door, he was still there, still pale and lovely, but somewhat less sunny. I firmly ignored the droop of his mouth and leaned against the doorway. "Car left already?"

"I walked, Master," he said to my feet.

I leaned over and snapped my fingers in his face. When he jumped, I caught his gaze and held it. "Don't call me that."

The cute little mouth swallowed, then pouted. "But I—"

He was certainly game for it. "Galapagos sent you over here with strict orders, right?"

The slave's shoulders relaxed at the question. "Yes, Master."

"I get the general impression that you're not here to invite me to be the fourth in a game of Spades."

Unease flickered across the slave's face. We had deviated from his carefully prepared script.

"I don't—" He trailed off, twisting his fingers. He was nervous about something. Possibly the fact that I wasn't giving him any cues.

Fine by me. I can't stand being played.

I let him sweat. As he did, I noticed a couple of details that hadn't immediately registered. He had a strange sort of mark on his inner arm, a hollow that ended in a raised line either side of it. That puzzled me until I recognized it—a scar the length of my forefinger, concealer hiding the angry tissue but not the wound itself. And no matter what I thought of his enthusiasm to serve me, the dirt tracked into his sarong on his walk across town was real.

I decided to throw him a bone. "You're here because Galapagos decided I needed a slave, that right?"

"Yes, Master."

"If you're acting as my slave, whose orders are you following, mine or the Croc's?"

"Yours, Master." His smile was winning. Between that and his answer, he would have got best in show in any pageant in the entire state.

I was fresh out of blue ribbons. "So if I order you to stop calling me that?"

Unease flitted across his pretty face again. "I—" He trailed to an uneasy halt.

"That's what I thought. Any more of that, and it's out the door, permanently." I stood back and let him come inside.

He tensed as he stepped past me. It wasn't until he was in the center of the room that he dared glance around. I watched him look over the office. He was too well trained to let his first impressions show on his face, but I gathered they weren't good.

"You old enough to drink?" I headed for the kitchen.

I've been accused of being light on my feet. He startled as I passed him, and for a moment I saw alarm flit across his face. Immediately, he realized his mistake. His gaze dropped to the floor and his tongue flickered across his lips.

"Yes, sir."

"You're in that much of a hurry to walk all the way back across town?"

"No, sir! I mean—" His fingers twisted the fabric of his sarong. "I didn't mean—"

His distress might have been comical if it wasn't so real. As it was, I felt about as amused as a Madame finding she's been paid in Bible tracts. "Take a seat." And then, as it seemed necessary, I nodded to the sofa. "On that."

I went into the kitchen and poured bourbon over two glasses of ice. I came back to find that he was sitting on the floor in front of the sofa. Close enough, I decided, and put the second glass on the coffee table in front of him.

He kept his pretty head down, his eyes in front of him, and managed to convey the impression of being content where he was. That kind of composure didn't come cheap.

I placed my drink on my desk and reached for the phone. The click of the rotary dial snapping back into place as I dialed Galapagos's number sounded as loud as a bullet sliding into a chamber in my office. I didn't care if the slave saw me rattled. I needed to know just how badly I was in the red.

"I'm sorry, sir." Galapagos's secretary oozed obsequiousness and insincerity. "Mr. Galapagos isn't to be disturbed."

"It's Harry," I balanced the receiver on my shoulder so I could pick up my drink. "He's expecting my call." I leaned back against the desk and waited.

The slave hadn't touched his drink.

"Pick it up," I told him. "It's not a decoration."

He looked startled but made no move to take the drink. That bothered me, but before I could do anything about it, Galapagos was on the line.

"So the boy's arrived? Excellent. What's the matter, Harry—you can't tell me you don't like him?"

"I don't need him," I all but snarled. "I told you. I'm sending him back."

"Didn't the boy show you the papers? I signed him over already. Legally, you're obligated."

I rubbed my brow. The construction work was coming back with a vengeance. "You need my mark for that. I don't remember giving it to you."

"My secretary saved you the trouble of making the trip over here. He filled in the signature on your behalf."

"How thoughtful of your secretary. From where I stand, that's forgery."

"Not without an expert opinion, it's not. My secretary spent time in art school. Can you afford an expert, Harry?"

I growled. I didn't like how this was stacking up against me. "I can't afford him, Galapagos. You know I can't."

"Harry." Galapagos purred at me. I held the phone away from my ear. "You got me all wrong. The boy's on the house. I can't move him. Lord knows I've tried. Honestly, you'd be doing me a favor taking him off my hands."

"Boy's about as useful to me as tits on a boar hog. A dainty thing like that at my heels, no one's gonna take me seriously."

"So leave him at home. Stand him next to your collection of encyclopedias; he'll class the place up. Give your clients something nice to look at when they tire of your ugly mug."

It was the first solid point Galapagos had made. Pity it was wasted on me. "I'm not sold. You know how small my place is. Living with him underfoot all the time, it'll drive me nuts."

"Don't send me back."

I glanced over.

The boy was still sitting on the floor, fingers dug into the fabric of his sarong. He'd gotten a couple of shades whiter, and if he had been any less well trained, I think he might have hurled all over my second-hand carpet. "Please. Don't send me back."

“You’ll be out most of the day anyway,” Galapagos continued. “C’mon, Harry. Why not give him a try?”

I hesitated. I had no illusions about my appeal as a master. The boy was well out of my means, and I had a glimmer that he knew it. The fact that he preferred this sinking ship told me more about Galapagos than I wanted to know.

“A week,” I told Galapagos. “But if he annoys me any, he’s going back.” The click of the phone back into its cradle was more abrupt than I’d intended. Galapagos is not the kind of man you want to show weakness to. I had the feeling he’d seen mine.

An uneven hitch of breath drew my mind back to the boy. He’d sagged forward in relief at my announcement, but his body still shook.

I swore again, but this time I kept it to myself. “You didn’t know the papers were forged.”

He shook his head.

“You thought you were coming to a happy family, some place that wanted you.”

The boy swallowed.

I was feeling pretty sick myself. “See that door? You’ll find a bedroom on the other side. Go through it, you’ll find a bathroom. There’s a bath with a showerhead attached to it. I want you to make use of it. There should be a towel in there, somewhere. Make use of that, too. That should take you about twenty minutes. When you’ve done that, come out and see me and we’ll get introduced.”

It went against all his training but he was too sick to argue with me.

I took two aspirin for my hangover, lit my cigarette, and waited until I heard the water start. Then I opened his suitcase.

It was not a large case, but it was barely half full. Three sarongs, none as new or as bright as the one he’d worn to meet me. A couple of shaving razors, tweezers and a comb. A few bits of make-up, mostly concealer, in a drawstring bag. Two pieces of rope, a set of handcuffs and a key to the aforementioned. Vaseline. Two kinds of lube. Salve. The papers that Galapagos had mentioned.

No photographs, no letters, not even a postcard. I patted down the bottom; found that an incision had been made along one side. Beneath that I found ten dollars in one dollar bills, and a bracelet of polished amber set in iron squares. It wasn't going to fetch him a fortune at auction, but someone with an eye for his looks had chosen it for him.

I put everything back but the papers and leaned on my desk with my cigarette. After a moment's deliberation, I called in a favor from a friend of mine who daylights as an electrician.

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The slave wandered back into my office exactly twenty minutes later. He had found his composure again, and if his eyes were red-rimmed still, neither of us saw fit to mention it.

I'd replaced the glass of bourbon with my first aid kit. "Take a load off. Sit. Put your feet up, and that's an order." I patted the table.

He sat nervously. "It's not proper—"

"You let me worry about what's proper or not." I opened the first aid kit. "Let's take a look at the damage."

His feet were dainty little things and sensitive. The slightest touch made him shiver.

I felt the burn of his reddened skin and tried not to imagine walking two hours across the city on feet that had only known carpet and tile. "This hurt?"

"No."

"No jury in this town would buy it." I applied salve judiciously, before unrolling a bandage or two. "You were a domestic for Galapagos, right? What'd you do for him?"

"Waited tables. He does a lot of entertaining. Cocktail parties, entertainments." The boy licked his lips. "And extras."

They told stories about Galapagos's entertainments. He was once supposed to have had an entire swimming pool filled with champagne. Another time he'd handed out pearls as party favors. As a game, he'd draped a slave in precious jewels and promised her to whoever guessed closest to the combined weight.

They told other stories too, but none that I'd care to repeat.



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“Got a name?”

“Friday.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Loving and giving?”

“Born on one.”

I let it go. It didn't seem like he had much of a choice either way. “You probably saw the name on the door, Flint. That would be me. Private Investigator. Currently extremely private, though not so private as I was yesterday.”

As the slave didn't have much choice in that either, he stayed silent.

“Seeing as you're going to be staying here a week, we may as well find something for you to do.” I closed the first aid kit and took it back to my desk. “Got any skills I can use?”

“I can type.”

“So can I.”

“I can answer the phone.”

We looked at the phone. It didn't make a peep.

The slave licked his lips again.

“I'm running a detective agency here,” I told him. “Not a charity house. You got anything else?”

He stood and placed his hand over my crotch.

I slapped his hand away with more sting than might have been necessary. “No.” Maybe it was the construction work. Maybe Galapagos had rattled me. Maybe I didn't like his assumption that I was not above taking advantage of him. Maybe I just didn't like the fact that there was a base part of me that had reacted to the touch.

He looked distressed. Don't tell me he'd taken it personally? Then again, his composure combined with his looks, he probably didn't encounter rejection with any regularity.

Curse my bleeding heart. “You can read?”

“I can read.”

I crossed to the kitchen, retrieved my battered copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and put it into his hands. "Start by reading this."

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I'll give Friday this much. He read quietly enough, though he preferred the floor to the sofa. Apart from the occasional flutter of a turning page, I could almost forget he was there. I was working out the crossword. All of a sudden a knock at the door reminded me that I had bigger things to worry about than a nine-letter word for "very satisfactory" that started and ended with a "C".

Friday got to his feet as I did, looking up with uncertainty.

"The kitchen," I told him. I ran my fingers through my hair quickly, straightened my tie and opened the door to my first client.

She was a woman of medium height and looks. Brown hair that had been swept back into a severe bun and shoulders too wide to be thought properly feminine. Five years ago, in a dimmer light, she'd have been pretty. Today, in my office, she was simply tired and troubled.

"Oh," she said. "You're not as old as I thought you'd be."

"We have to start somewhere," I told her. "Come on in and take a load off, sister."

She sat in my consulting chair on the other side of my desk and refused the cigarette I offered her. She held her handbag on her lap as neat as a schoolteacher and thought about walking back out my door. "No one in my family ever hired a detective," she said and stopped.

"Times are changing," I assured her. "Soon we'll be commonplace. Like the record player. Once a novelty, now there's one in every house."

The kitchen door opened again and Friday came out. He held a tray with a coffee pot, two cups, two saucers, a jug, sugar bowl and tongs. I had not seen any of the aforementioned items before in my life. He took my astonishment as permission to serve us. He deftly set one cup and saucer before each of us then poured the coffee with all the aplomb of a sommelier.

I thought he was overdoing it, frankly, but my client drank it up along with the coffee. "Just the one lump please, and no cream."

Friday hovered at my elbow. He seemed to be curious about something. "Just cream for me."

A heel pressing into my shin indicated that maybe I wanted mine without cream.

“On second thought, I’ll take it straight.”

My client’s eyes followed Friday as he took the tray back to the kitchen. Something about him seemed to put her at ease.

I had what is known in the business as a bright idea. “I’m in the process of teaching Friday the ropes,” I said. “You mind if he sits in? I’ll vouch for his discretion.”

She looked flattered. “Not at all.”

Friday sat on the floor beside my chair and applied himself to looking pretty. I applied myself to looking tough. Between the two of us, we managed to convey some kind of an impression.

Our client held her coffee cup carefully and began to talk.

She called herself Anna Stokes, formerly of Bella Vista. She’d misplaced a sister. Her case was complicated by the fact that her sister was rather a hard nut to lose. “Katherine visits me every Wednesday. Never misses.”

I took a sip of coffee. A sip was enough. “Maybe she got a better offer.”

Anna shook her head. “I had ten dollars for her. She wouldn’t walk away from ten dollars. I think she might be in trouble, Mr. Flint.”

Ten dollars was three meals out at a decent restaurant. It was a new dress and enough left over for a haircut. It was a seat on a bus out of Atlanta and a good enough tip so the driver forgot seeing you. It was hard to argue with ten dollars.

“Let’s take a look at her.”

I handed the cup and saucer off to Friday, and picked up the photograph. The sisters were not much alike in looks. Katherine’s blonde hair was a tribute to the bottle it came out of, and she had curves in more or less the right places.

“Maybe she borrowed ten dollars from her fella.”

Anna shook her head. “Katherine has plenty of admirers,” she said. “But none foolish enough to give her presents.”

“Jealous owner?”

She nodded. "I guess you already know about Galapagos's temper."

"I heard a thing or two," I agreed. "That why you're talking to a dick and not going to the man himself?"

Anna hesitated. "If I'm wrong, if my sister isn't in trouble... well, she would be after I talked to Galapagos about her, you see?"

I saw. Anna thought her sister wanted the ten dollars to run away from Galapagos and didn't want to alert the man to her absence—if indeed she had gone.

"How do the two of you usually keep in touch?"

Anna gave me her particulars and then her sister's. I took notes, and Friday leaned against my leg and drank the coffee. We argued rates for a short while then came to a conclusion satisfactory to all.

"I'll have to tell my book club they were all wrong about you," Anna said as I held out her coat. "An unattached man, without even a slave... we thought you might be a Sexual Predator. I'm so relieved."

She swept out the door leaving behind a pronounced silence.

Friday quietly began to pick up the coffee things. I stopped him.

"Where did you find this miscellany?"

"In your cupboards." Day was surprised enough to look up at my face. From his frown, I gathered that rather than being struck by charm or good looks, he was wondering how the hell a hack like me had learnt the word "miscellany."

Generally, that's the reason I used words like miscellany—never hurts to keep a man on his toes. Right at that moment, however, I was preoccupied. Before signing the lease I had opened the cupboards, but I hadn't been particular about looking in them. "What's in the jug?"

"It's empty. We don't have any cream."

"And if she'd asked for some?"

"I'd have told her it was powdered."

I grunted. That was a better answer than I'd expected—but it did not mean that I was about to change my stance any. "That was a clever thought," I said. "But don't go making a habit of it. Clever stuff is my line of work."

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## Chapter 2

Mike wheeled himself up to the front steps a few hours later, wearing an electrician's uniform and carrying an official work order. The uniform was his. The work order was borrowed. I looked it over for benefit of Friday and the watching doorman.

"A couple of hours? I guess there's nothing for it." I handed the work order back. "Friday, we may as well get you registered. Get your papers and get ready to go out."

Friday obediently disappeared up the stairs. Mike and I followed at a more leisurely pace.

"You weren't kidding, he's a nice piece of work." Mike ignored my arm to lever himself out of his chair. "Totally wasted on you."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," I told him. "He's going back in a week."

"You're a cold man, Flint." Mike worked his way backwards up the flight of stairs, lifting himself bodily one step at a time. "Couldn't you have taken a first floor apartment?"

I followed, his wheelchair slung over one shoulder. "You want the second floor. Good advertising space in the window and privacy for when clients call."

"Typical dick. Clients over friends."

"You offering to pay my rent, I'll live wherever you want."

Mike snorted. "That'll be the day. Couldn't you have squeezed Galapagos for a place with an elevator?"

"Couldn't you squeeze your old lady for a kid to carry you about?"

"Blow it out your ass, Flint—"

We were still exchanging pleasantries when Day emerged from the bathroom. He'd taken my instructions seriously, having changed into a fresh sarong and combed his hair back in order. I locked the kitchen and bedroom up for show and then we strolled down the street, Friday keeping respectfully at my shoulder.

The station was a brick building with plaster flourishes, constructed for the purpose a couple of decades ago when the city felt optimistic about the

possibility of containing its growing crime problem. The optimism had faded about the same time as the paint on the door, but the windows weren't broken and the step was clean.

A man was engaged in scrubbing some rather scathing criticisms of the city's protectors from the front wall.

I recognized him by his bare shoulders. "Bit early for Valentine's, Roy?"

Roy glanced sideways at me. "Not when a man's got as many admirers as the Captain," he said. "Should've seen the one they left last week. Rhymed and everything."

"Fancy," I said. "Captain Maynard's going up in the world. He going places right now?"

"Matter of fact, he is."

"Shame. I'll leave my respects at the desk."

The desk was supporting one of the city's finest, but Darcy straightened up as he saw me. "Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in." He bellowed over his shoulder through the open door to the office. "It's only old Fred."

Any officer not currently employed upon the city's business promptly joined us in the lobby. By the looks of things, this was almost the entire precinct, slave and freeman.

"Private dick, eh? And here I thought you were the clever one."

"Get a load of his suit. You look halfway respectable, Fred."

"Think you're too good for the rest of us now you're a private citizen?"

I shook hands and tried not to wince under the barrage of shoulder pats. "You know me, Sam. Blue was never my color." I glanced over to see how Day was taking my apparent name-change.

Day clung to the wall, acutely uncomfortable. His gaze was downcast and demure, but his fingers twisted anxiously and he stepped back anytime someone got near. I had the feeling that my choice of appellation was the last thing on his mind.

"Hate to break it to you, gents, but this isn't a social call." I jerked my thumb over my shoulder towards Day. "I got one for registry."

"Hoping for the service discount?" Darcy meandered towards the logbook reluctantly and the rest began to disperse.

"Thought I'd liven things up a little for you. I know how things get in the afternoon without a larceny to pass the time."

Darcy took down my details. "Very giving of you. Didn't you only go into business yesterday? Like hell you're making enough to afford a piece like that."

"Friday's on loan," I explained. "As a matter of fact, I'd like to do a valuation while I'm here. For insurance purposes."

"That's no trouble," Darcy said. "Slow day. Maynard's got a conference."

"Thought it was unusually restful in here." I leaned on the desk as I had so many times before. The desk leaned back. It was a proper reunion. "Think one of the women could do the exam? Boy's not used to us."

"Needs a motherly touch?" Darcy beckoned Nadine back. "Fred wants a full exam—"

"And interview," I added.

"And interview. For insurance purposes."

Nadine nodded. She was one of the oldest slaves employed by the precinct, and she was worth three of the younger ones. Her face dissolved into lines when she smiled, and the effect was as good as a home-cooked dinner. That guileless smile got answers where the most intimidating of officers failed. She squeezed my hand as she passed. "You're looking better, Fred. You've put on some weight." She gently ushered Friday towards the examination room. "Come along with me, boy."

"Astaire in?" I asked as they left.

"Where else would he be?"

"Mind if I say hello?"

"You know the way."

Astaire's hair was cornfield yellow and clung to his skull with the desperation of a drowning man clinging to a life preserver. It had thinned since I'd last seen it, as had Astaire himself. "Fred!" He stood up to shake my hand. "I knew we hadn't seen the last of you."

"Of this bad penny? Hardly."

There was a woman sitting on the stool beside his desk. She was dark as coffee and twice as hot, hair cut close to her skull as if to compensate for her womanly curves. She glowered at me. I guessed that was how she said hello.

"Ginger. She does for me now." Astaire explained, entirely unnecessarily. As if the uniform blue sarong she wore didn't make her subservient position clear, there was only one explanation for her presence within the precinct. "Take a seat, Fred."

Ginger surrendered the stool to me without being told. As I took it, I reflected on the irony of her position. No free woman would be employed by the precinct, and if one had testimony to deliver, it'd be in the company of her father or husband. A free colored woman might bring her entire extended family and still not see the inside of the door. But strip her completely of the right to call herself her own person, sell her to an officer and no one batted an eye that she sat in on confidential police business, listened to highly sensitive conversations and took notes on the most ruthless criminals of our fair city.

Sort of like a coffee table that could walk and talk.

And glower.

"The Hewitt file," Ginger said. There was a faint note of warning in her voice.

"I won't keep him long," I assured her. "Matter of fact, I'm here on business." I stopped myself from taking out a cigarette just in time. "You remember Galapagos, Astaire. What would you say if I told you he had a charitable streak?"

Astaire snorted. "I'd ask who was mixing your drinks. And then I'd see their license revoked," he said. "I'd sooner believe you'd stopped drinking than I would Galapagos doing anything that doesn't serve himself."

"That's what I thought." I outlined the sequence of events that had led to Friday being examined by Nadine in the precinct, and Astaire listened. Even Ginger's glower took on an interested look to it.

"I don't like it," Astaire agreed. "Send him back. Have nothing to do with this, Fred."

"Knowing what the Croc's like? Kid'll be eaten alive."

"Better him than you. Galapagos owes you, Fred. You think a man like that can stand being indebted to anyone? You should've taken the money and gone North."

I shook my head. "Once you cross that border, there's no coming back. Better a Southern grave than a Yankee life. I got my pride, Astaire."



"I wish you had a bit less of it. But all right. You want me to see if Friday's been reported stolen?"

"And look into these papers. Signature's not mine. I'm thinking that he might have faked the rest too. I'm also interested in a Katherine Stokes." I filled him in on the details of the case.

Astaire glanced over the papers and nodded. "Ginger?"

She took them without a word, walked briskly into the records room.

Astaire waited till she was gone to take his flask from his drawer. "She's very good at what she does, Fred. Very good."

"Ambitious?"

"She got me back on the force within a week, and I was promoted a month later." Astaire shook his head. "Maynard. Promoting me after a month!"

"You're not kidding, she's good."

Astaire gave me the lid, took his straight from the bottle. "She's after Maynard's job. Thinks I could take over once he's promoted. I got the experience, she says." He sighed and looked mournfully at the flask. "What was wrong with being ship's detective, Fred? Run of the ballrooms and the casino, employee discount at the bar..."

"You know what they say about good things, Astaire."

"This Captain thing will end me. You know, she's got me doing exercises. And drinking less."

I snorted. "With your advanced years, you want to cut back. I have."

"You, Fred?"

"New Year's resolution. From now on, only one drink at a time."

Astaire's worried expression smoothed out, like a freshly ironed shirt. "That's the way, Fred. That's the way."

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Friday did not offer an opinion of the exam. I was not curious enough to ask. Still, as the upshot of it was that we left the precinct man and slave, I decided that I might look to my part of the bargain.

The household goods shop around the corner had a pallet that would do Friday. I got a couple of sheets for it, ordered them delivered. I was pondering a cushion when I realized that Friday was hovering unusually close.

"Friday?"

"There's a grocer's across the street."

"So there is."

"You are out of cream."

"I guess I am."

I waited, but nothing was forthcoming.

"You can tell me if there's something you want."

Friday's countenance became vaguely pained.

I decided he might need some time to adjust. "I suppose we could get some milk."

The grocer's was a genuine Ma and Pa outfit. Ma was out back, but I met Pa. He was an older man, and he wore his calico shirt buttoned to the last button and a tie underneath his apron. He was taking stock with a pencil and pad, but he stopped when I told him I wanted to open an account. "So, you're Flint. You're not what I expected from the sign."

"I'm growing into it," I assured him. "This is Friday. He might come by now and then for bits and pieces."

Pa nodded, making a note. "Added to your tab, to be paid at the end of the month? At least there'll be no confusion. He stands out, doesn't he?"

"Decorative," I agreed.

"People round here generally prefer something more robust." Pa took the basket that Friday handed him. "Making omelets, I take it, Friday?"

The milk had gained company in the form of a stick of butter, a bottle of oil and a carton of eggs.

Friday fidgeted.

I was beginning to feel some construction work coming on. "The man asked you a question, Friday."

"Yes, sir. I am."

I added a packet of Pall Malls to the basket. I could tell I was going to need them.

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I was pretty sore about the store. I was still sore when we got back to the apartment. When Friday vaguely hinted that maybe I wanted him to put the groceries away, I got sore at him, too.

“This ends now.”

Friday skittered back in alarm. “Sir?”

That irritated me further.

It was far from my finest moment. I’m not too proud to admit it, but I’ve never taken well to being played. “I seem to remember us having words on the subject of you calling me ‘sir.’ Well?”

Friday refused to meet my eyes, but I could see that he’d gone pale except for a vivid red flush in either cheek.

“Friday, I’m waiting.”

“You ordered me not to call you ‘sir’ or ‘master.’”

“I’m not going to give you very many orders, but the ones I do give, I want followed. Listen carefully, because I’m going to give you another one. Cut the crap.”

Friday was startled enough to look up at me.

I held his gaze. “You are smart enough to know that our client would say no to cream, you are smart enough to know the groceries go in the fridge or to answer when someone asks you a question. You understand?”

Friday grit the words out. “I understand.”

“You gonna do it?”

I was braced for fireworks. I was not prepared for the explosion that followed. Friday clenched his delicate hands into delicate fists. “You don’t know the first thing about being a proper master! Calling me by my name, not giving me permission to do things—I take serving seriously! I’m not going to lower my standards just because you’re an amateur—” Friday caught sight of my expression and checked himself too late.

I took a hold of his arm and pulled him after me into the kitchen. "Maybe I don't know the first thing about serving, but I'll show you what I do know." I let go of his wrist and flung the kitchen windows wide.

The paint-peeling heat of the sun crept in. Despite the muggy warmth, there was a slow but steady trickle of people down the road and on the footpaths outside. "Take a good look around, Friday. The city's not kind to her people. It's hard enough looking out for number one. You think anyone out there has time to waste thinking for two?"

The kitchen looked the worse for the direct light. All the cracks in the plaster ceiling, the faded blotches and the wallpaper and the discolored patches of the linoleum standing out in sharp contrast. Friday was the only thing in the room that looked fresh and new, and as he licked his lips nervously looking out over the road, the thought of what this place would do to him ate at me a little.

"In this city, a man's only as good as his reputation. That goes double in these parts. You, you're a high-class slave. You're too good to be here, and you're smart enough to know it. Me? I'm a low-class dick. I rake through other people's muck for a living. Next to someone like Galapagos, you're a trophy and your service is a credit to him and I'm sure, to yourself as well. But next to me..."

Friday turned back from the window to stare at me. I felt very keenly the cheapness of my suit and the dust on my shoes. "I stand out."

As it was the truth, I didn't attempt to dissuade him from it. "A man like me needs a serviceable model that can take care of itself. I don't have the luxury of wasting time playing up to the whims of a high-strung diva."

Temper flashed in Friday's eyes. "You don't have to worry about me making you look ridiculous," he returned. "You do a good enough job of that all on your own!"

I took a step towards him and angry as I was, I saw the fear in his eyes as he flinched back. I hadn't meant to get mad, and I felt sick at him, and sick at myself, too. "I'm going out. On my own, since we both agree I don't need the help."

Whatever momentary satisfaction slamming the door produces is pretty much invariably outweighed by the interest generated amongst the neighbors and the subsequent gossip. I let myself out with deceitful calm and started walking to clear my head.

By the time my head cleared and I stopped walking, I was downtown, only a couple of blocks away from the bar that leased Katherine Stokes. As it was about time for business, I found a diner that seemed like it might attract a chatty sort of waitress and got acquainted with the local gossip. I lingered over my coffee to give the bars time to fill up and then went to work.

The bar that Katherine Stokes worked in had seen better days, but to be honest, so had most of its patrons. I took a seat at the bar and looked like I'd seen better days, too. It worked; I didn't stand out. When the slave behind the bar noticed me, I intimated that I wanted Jack on the rocks and a word with Kat.

My drink arrived and soon after that a girl did. She suggested that she was a friend of Kat's and could maybe help me out. The neckline of her cocktail dress indicated that she was the sympathetic sort.

I bought her a drink.

Bit took her gin neat. She seemed like she had something on her mind. I played the part of an old flame looking to catch up on old times, and she seemed to relax even if she wasn't relieved. "Kat's been gone days now. No word to anyone. It's not like her."

"Kat's got more sense than to cause a stir," I agreed. "Still, I was looking forward to catching her up on the Bella Vista news. You think her boyfriend might know where she's at?"

Bit looked at me sharply.

I did my best to look harmless. "Kat always did have a boyfriend or three."

"Or three," Bit agreed and relaxed again. "I might be able to remember an address."

A second gin refreshed her memory. I copied down the addresses she gave me. "How's her sister doing?" I asked. "There was some bad blood between them, wasn't there?"

Bit snorted dismissively. "Was there! Kat gouged a neat twenty out of her on a weekly basis. They were both put up for auction you know, but the sister's price was so low she worked it off in years. She paid Kat part of her wages every week saying it was only sisterly duty, but between us, Kat always said it was shame, pure and simple."

"Shame's never pure and simple, though, is it?"

It was by way of being a rhetorical question. I have a bad habit of getting philosophical over a drink. Bit had a practical rebuttal that kept us occupied a while.

All in all, it was late when I finally returned back to the apartment.

"You've got lipstick on your cheek." Friday had waited up. It didn't seem to have improved his temper any.

"Do I?" I scratched my cheek, thus hampering Friday's attempts at removing my coat. He managed eventually.

"You do." He shook out my coat, returning it to the coat stand. "And you smell like cheap perfume."

"Fancy that." I handed him my scarf and hat.

"Very cheap perfume."

"*Carmen*," I told him. "Bottled in Mexico. Popular with the working woman because of its lasting tendencies."

"I've smelt it before," Day said, as I stumbled into the bathroom. "I didn't like it then either."

By the time I finished my nightly routine he was already in his cot, asleep or pretending to be, and I didn't have the chance to ask him when he'd had the chance to become acquainted with *Carmen*.

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My stomach woke before I did and I rolled out of bed in search of my usual hangover cure. I narrowly avoided stepping on Friday. For someone so flighty, he slept like concrete, not stirring at all as I staggered across the bedroom and into the office.

Luckily, I still had enough of the fixings leftover from my moving-in bender. Three-quarters a glass of tomato juice, a dash of Tabasco, a dash of lemon juice, a diced-up cucumber. My stomach rose up to meet it, but after a few minutes of sweating in front of the sink, my stomach relented and I was a man once more.

I rinsed out the glass and took a mouthful of water to get rid of the aftertaste. I thought about breakfast. Somehow, the thought did not appeal. A shower, I decided. Then I might go back to bed.

I was considering leaving out the shower part altogether when I noticed there was a place set at my desk. It contained a mess of eggs that vaguely resembled an omelet. Someone had gone to the effort of folding a napkin under the knife and fork they had so optimistically set out.

There was something really pitiful about that spread, and I ignored the heaving in my stomach to look at it a moment. Then a thought occurred. I went back to the kitchen.

The carton of eggs I'd bought at Ma and Pa's grocery had space for a dozen eggs. It now held nine.

"Aw, hell."

*Mastering the Art of French Cooking* recommends two to three eggs for an omelet for one person.

I lit a cigarette. Friday might have eaten before he left Galapagos's to walk to the apartment, but if he did it was the only thing he'd eaten that whole day. The coffee he'd drunk was the only thing he'd consumed in my presence, and a quick scan of my cupboards confirmed it was the only thing he'd consumed at all.

His stubborn pride in his standards was the most useless piece of quackery I'd seen pulled over a person yet. Even so, imagining how he'd felt waiting as the omelet got cold and I didn't return, I had to give him credit for his restraint. I'd not have stood it, that was for sure.

I didn't just owe him an apology. I owed him an omelet. I sat at my desk and applied myself to the knife and fork.

The cold mess of eggs was about the last thing my stomach wanted to deal with, and I had a hard time choking it down. There was a very tense moment where I didn't think I was going to make it, but remembering that I'd made Friday walk to the station and then go shopping on sore feet, I forced myself.

I was lucky—the eggs were over-dry. If they'd been moist, the way a proper French omelet was served, then I wouldn't have managed at all. There were browned patches where the eggs had crisped. Objectively speaking, even if I'd been home for it, it was a terrible omelet.

Friday pushed the door ajar, and stepped tentatively into the kitchen. He paused as he saw me.

I had the coffee made and my tools laid out. I beckoned him over before he could disappear as quietly as he'd appeared. "*Mise en place*," I told him. "Before you start cooking, you get everything you need set out."

Friday frowned at the utensils laid out in front of me. "What are you doing?"

"Showing you how to make a decent omelet," I told him as I cracked the eggs into the bowl. "Watch closely. This happens very fast."

As soon as the butter stopped foaming in the pan, the eggs went in. Once in, they required careful tending with the back of the fork. Friday blinked as the omelet was neatly tipped into the warmed plate waiting and placed in his hands.

"This is an omelet," I told him. "Eat it."

He blinked at me. "But your breakfast—"

"I already ate."

Friday's gaze traveled past me to the empty plate on the bench. His face took on a curious expression.

I did not stay to appreciate it. The proximity to the cooked eggs was making my stomach do uncomfortable things. I removed myself to the bathroom.

A diplomatic amount of time later, Friday came to sit on the end of my bed with a tray containing some slices of plain bread and coffee.

"It was a good omelet."

"Don't talk to me about omelets." I didn't remove the pillow from over my head. The smell of the coffee reached me anyway. After a bit, I sat up.

Friday's expression was difficult to read, but I was grateful for his silence, as I reached for the coffee. "Get me the yellow pages," I said. "And my notebook."

Friday watched me look up names with interest. I suppose there was not much else to do in my apartment. "Going to make some calls?"

"Yes, but it won't be my fingers doing the walking." I decided that if we were going to be living as man and slave, Friday should at least know the basics of the business. "Paid a visit to Katherine's place of work last night. I got the names and workplaces of her most frequent gentlemen callers."

"Is that why—" Friday caught himself quickly. "Sorry, Sir! I didn't mean—" He stopped. "I didn't mean that either."



I closed the yellow pages. “The master thing, it means that much to you?”

After a moment, Friday nodded. “It doesn’t seem right not to. I compromised, decided I’d think it even if I didn’t say it, but it still... slips out.”

“I don’t mind a compromise either,” I told him. “You call me ‘Boss,’ I’ll call you ‘Day.’ That work for you?”

He snorted, but his smile was real. “Sure, Boss.”

It was not the worst thing I’d ever heard.

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## Chapter 3

The phone rang.

"Flint, Private Investigator," I said by way of greeting. "Flint speak—that's odd."

Day paused at my bookcase to look over his shoulder. "What is, Boss?"

"They hung up."

"Nothing odd about that." Day went back to his dusting. "They heard your voice. Let me answer the phone."

I snorted, retrieving the newspaper from my desk. "I got a feeling you'd attract a different kind of client."

Day shot me an amused look, but didn't make any reply. This was our new morning routine. I caught up on the news, he caught up on the housework. Day was getting used to me, taking my remarks in stride and no longer waiting permission to speak. Our compromise seemed to be working so far, though I didn't kid myself that it would last. It had only been a couple of days and there were a lot of kinks to work out yet.

Day slid the duster all the way to the far end of the shelf and moved on to the next. "Your name's not Fred."

"Astaire's idea. We were partners back in the day. He's a big fan of Northern movies. Fred Astaire, see?"

"And what musical is Harry from?"

"That's Galapagos's idea of a joke," I explained. "On account of the fact that we met over the body of a man named Thomas, in the company of a detective."

"Every Tom, Dick and Harry?" Day snorted, going into the kitchen. The sound of running water followed. "That's not funny at all. In fact, I think it's your worst crack yet."

I didn't reply. It hadn't been funny at the time. It wasn't funny now. I skimmed over the headlines, and applied myself to the police pages.

Day set down a bucket of soapy water on the floor. He knelt beside it, wrung out a cloth, and began to scrub.

I read the headlines. Then I read the obituaries. No one I knew in either. My attention wandered over to Day on his hands and knees.

He pushed the cleaning rag out in front of him with both hands, sliding in the soapy suds until his face almost brushed the floorboards, pert bottom high in the air. Then, with a soft grunt, he pulled back, the back of his head and bare shoulders coming into my view and that delicate ass swaying gently. I don't know that it did the floor any good, but it wasn't doing me any harm.

As I watched him twist the rag, he paused. In an unusually clumsy move, he'd somehow managed to dribble soapy water over himself. He splayed his fingers over his bare skin, lightly skimming over one erect nipple, but only succeeded in spreading the soapy bubbles. I thought of telling him there were towels in the bathroom, but as he seemed to be enjoying himself I shook out my paper and went back to the personals.

There were a couple of possibilities that might have alluded to our missing person and I circled them for further consideration before turning to the *Dear Abby* section. Abby had a lot to say about the foolishness of trying to reform your man, and some useful house-keeping tips for those new to the gig, but not a lot about what to do with a slave you didn't much want.

Day had not made much progress with the floor. Now his sarong seemed to be giving him trouble. Either it was coming undone or it kept dipping in the puddles on the floor. Day had to stop and refasten it. Each time he did, the sarong got hiked up higher on his legs, and traveled lower on his hips.

The fourth time it happened, I started to think that maybe Day had something on his mind other than my floor.

I put out my cigarette and set the paper down on my desk.

Day jumped as I knelt behind him, my hands caressing the firm globes of his ass. He immediately pressed back into my hands. I let my fingers roam, pretending I hadn't noticed his initial reaction or that he trembled. He didn't resist as I took hold of his hip, leaning over him. "That's no way to clean a floor, Day."

"Boss?"

"You got to put your back into it. Like this." I placed my hand over his, and brought it around in a circular scrubbing motion. He arched back against me, and I got the impression his attention was not on the floor.

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“Like this?”

“You’ll get it in time.” By way of encouragement, I gave his ass a quick pat before I stood. I didn’t stay to see how he took it.

In the bathroom, I splashed water over my face and frowned at my reflection. The kindest thing that could be said about my face was that it was nondescript. I was no saint. I would not be loved for my large fortune. No one would be dazzled by my wit. But I was there and clearly not the worst thing that had happened to the kid.

I brushed my teeth.

There wasn’t much that could be done about the bedroom. I pulled the sheets straight and fluffed the pillows anyway. As an afterthought, I lowered the blinds. The room looked all right in the half-light, if you pretended it was somewhere else. I stepped into the kitchen for a glass and some ice to fill it up.

Day had made remarkable progress on the floor in my absence. His cheeks were pink, and he scrubbed the floor with an energy that made me feel sorry for it.

I nudged him with my foot as I passed. “Give that a rest. Come into the bedroom a moment.”

Day paused in the doorway to take in the changes I’d made to the room. He was well-trained enough that I couldn’t read his reaction from his face.

“Sit on the bed,” I told him. I had a bottle of whiskey stashed in the medicine cabinet for emergencies. I carefully poured out a half glass. Not enough to get a man drunk, but enough to make him brave. I set it on the bedside table.

The room took on an intimate atmosphere, with just the three of us. Me, Day, and the glass of Jack.

“I want to talk to you.”

Day sat still. He didn’t flinch away as I sat on the other side of the bed, but that said more about his training than my charms. “Talk?”

“You’ve had a bad experience.” Day still did not look directly at me, but I could see his shock plainly in the tensing of his body. “I know the signs. Well? Am I wrong?”

After a long contemplation of the shadows on my carpet, Day shook his head. “I had a—bad experience.”

I was careful to sound only mildly interested. "You been touched since then?"

Day swallowed and nodded. There was a tightness to his mouth that I didn't much like. "Often."

"Didn't Galapagos know?"

"It was his idea. Said that if I dwelled, it would only make me—nervous. I had to learn to work past it."

I knew the answer, but I asked anyway. "It do you any good?"

Day chewed his lip. "Not so you'd notice." His hand stroked his arm, fingers coming to rest on the ridge of scar tissue.

"So with you shying away like a startled filly every time a stallion comes by you, Galapagos couldn't find anyone to take you off his hands. Then he thought of me." I felt in my pocket for the pack of cigarettes but thought the better of it. Smoking in bed is a filthy habit.

There was color in Day's cheeks again. "I won't be a charity case."

"Is making passes at me how you intend to pay your keep?"

"I—" Day bit down on the exclamation.

I reached out my hand. He shivered as it rested on his shoulder. "What if I told you it wasn't necessary? You're not going back to Galapagos."

"I'll still do it," he said. "I need to do it. For me." He was very pale, and his lip trembled.

I could see the sense in that. A slave's got to think of his future. A bedroom slave with an aversion to sex didn't have a future that bore thinking about. I put the glass of whiskey in his hand. "Dutch courage," I said. "Drink it and I'll tell you what we'll do."

Day sat on the end of the bed and toyed with the whiskey as I undressed. It crossed my mind to wonder how he would report this to Galapagos. People say I have a nasty, suspicious mind. I have a feeling they might be right about that. I got into the bed anyway, pulled the sheet up to my waist and placed my hands on the headboard where Day could see them if he chose to look up. "Now you."

Day threw back the whiskey and slammed the glass down with an abruptness that made the lover in me wince. That was no way to treat good

whiskey. Before I was quite over my dismay, he stood and freed himself of the sarong. It looked real good as it fluttered to the floor. I wondered if Day had learned that or if he'd made it up on the spot.

I barely had time to notice that he was even paler beneath the sarong, or that he was entirely shaven before he planted himself on top of me. Day straddled my waist with his smooth thighs. He did it so quickly, he didn't have time to think twice about it.

I could see his point of view, but I didn't plan on rushing this.

"Hello," I said by way of breaking the ice.

It was not the best opening, but it surprised Day into looking at me. "Hello," he said, looking down at me. His eyes widened when they reached my shoulder. "Is that—"

"You can touch it," I told him. "It's old. Doesn't hurt."

From the gentleness with which his fingers skimmed the scar tissue I could tell he didn't believe me. "A broken brand. You were—"

"Indentured," I told him. "Eighteen years hard labor. Would have been twenty but I saved a man's life."

Day stroked his fingers over my bicep. "I figured that you were a fighter."

I snorted. No need to tell him he wasn't that far from the truth. "I did a couple long stints logging, a few on shipping vessels or loading freight trains. Anything that involved physical labor and long hours. I didn't come to slaving naturally or early enough to learn respect, so they had to keep me tired."

Day snorted. "You'd make a terrible slave," he said before his sense caught up to his mouth. "Sorry, Boss! I didn't mean—"

"You're right," I told him. "My owners were only too glad to see the back of me. But you're not here to listen to my life story. Kiss me, Day."

Day went down like a good whiskey. Easy on the mouth, and then the mellow warmth that followed in my blood. I drank him in, enjoyed his taste and the smoothness of his youthful skin. Day was very good at it. If breathing hadn't been an uncomfortable necessity of modern life, I think we might have continued kissing all day.

We broke for air. Day was breathing fast, but it didn't seem like there was anything panicked about it. It took considerable self-control to keep gripping

the headboard, and not reach out my hand to see if his chest felt as good as it looked.

“Touch yourself,” I told him.

Day was an expert at this. He didn't reach for his deepening erection. Instead, his fingers skimmed across his bare chest, teasing reactions out of himself for my viewing pleasure. He licked a finger, trailed it across the surface of a rosy nipple. Then, once the moisture had cooled, tweaked it roughly before repeating the process with the other.

I needed to shift to settle my own erection more comfortably. Day didn't pause his show as I moved. I let one hand drift below the sheet to stroke my length. “You know, you're as good as one of those European flicks.”

“I got to wonder,” Day said breathily. “What European flicks you've seen.”

He had a point. The jerky reels of 16mm film that played in the backrooms of the dockyard watering holes were a world apart from the vision before me. Day deserved a better background than the faded wallpaper of my bedroom, just like he deserved a better audience than me. I knew it well, but damn, if he wasn't nice to look at.

He was as well-endowed down below as he was up top, his graceful build and striking features belying his considerable length. I imagined that didn't win him many fans amongst Galapagos's guests—no freeman wants to know he's smaller than a slave—but I felt my breath hitch as Day took himself in hand to stroke himself to full hardness. “You like that, Boss?”

“Yeah, I do.” It was hard not to draw him down for another kiss. “Get yourself off,” I told him. “Show me how you like to be touched.”

I wouldn't have minded owning a camera. He was beautiful, tongue running provocatively over his lips, doing his best to test my control even as he kept exactly to the letter of my orders. As he got close, his eyes fluttered shut. Focused on his own pleasure, he took himself over the edge. I didn't begrudge him that. How could I? For the first time in the few days I'd known him, Day was thinking of himself.

It didn't last long. As soon as the glow faded, Day's blue eyes sought mine. There was hesitancy in them as he sought my approval.

I gave it. “You're beautiful, Day.”

Pleasure gave an added glow to his already warm cheeks. "Would you like me to please you, Boss?"

"Already have." I removed my hand from the headboard to pat his thigh. As he shifted off me, I used the sheet to wipe myself off. "You're a piece and a half—"

The ringing of the telephone rudely interrupted my romancing. I ran for it.

"You've reached the office of Flint, Private Investigator. You're—for fuck's sake."

"They hung up again?" Day had followed me out of the bedroom, my shirt and trousers folded neatly on his arm. "I'm telling you, Boss..."

"I'll take it under consideration." I pulled on my shirt, stepped into my shorts and trousers.

Day threw my tie around my neck, stood in front of me to knot it. My cure had worked, if only temporarily. He seemed right at home, deftly arranging my tie and he let me plant a quick peck on his forehead.

"I'll have my jacket too."

"Going out?"

I slipped a fresh pack of Pall Malls from the desk into my pocket as I pulled on the jacket. "I have intentions along those lines."

"Will you be back for lunch?"

"Eat without me. And don't hold dinner either."

Day followed me to the door to hand me my hat. "Where exactly are you going?"

"Paying a call on our *Carmen*'s admirers."

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My first call was on Mike. He was not a fan of *Carmen*. He preferred his girls to wear *Southern Rose*. He was in the middle of repairing a television unit, but stopped to take a cigarette with me in his workroom.

"Nothing yet," Mike said. "I think your newfound freedom's gone to your head." He snorted, leaning over to light his smoke from my flame. "Seriously," he continued as he settled back in his chair. "What makes you think you're important enough anyone's gonna spy on you?"



Until his reformation, Mike had been one of the most persistent thorns in the side of the City Police. He was a drag racer of such notoriety that the license plate of his car, the Gray Lady, was known the length of the Confederated States. His reformation happened in a race that had taken place just outside Atlanta's city limits, where a combination of bad liquor and bad driving had driven Mike and the Gray Lady off the road and into the newspapers. Mike had lost most of one leg and his freedom, but he was sorer about the loss of his car. The Gray Lady's battered license plates still hung in pride of place over the workshop in which he toiled for the good of the state.

His owner was a thin, dry woman who smoked Lucky Stars and had a Texan drawl. She mainly spent her days in the apartment above the workshop, watching soaps and making long-distance calls to her daughter in Corpus Christi. Mike's electrical know-how kept them both in rent. Business was good enough that his owner could afford to turn a blind eye if Mike took on the occasional under the table job for a friend.

"I'm paying for your electrical expertise," I said. "Not your opinions. There was a call with no caller not an hour ago. I thought that maybe they were sounding us out."

"Trying to see if the slave was home alone?" Mike beckoned me into the back room. "Let's take a look."

The backroom did occasional double duty as a darkroom. It smelled generously of chemicals. As my eyes adjusted to the lack of light, I could make out trays of developing fluid and something that might have been a car engine, if the terms of Mike's release had allowed him to work on car engines. Since they didn't, I decided not to notice it.

Mike nudged a stool towards me. On a low workbench in the middle of the room, he had a machine that didn't look too dissimilar to the Precinct switchboard with what looked like an ordinary phone plugged into one of the jacks. A red light glowed above it and the record player beneath it was turning a disc beneath the cutter. "We're in business," Mike noted. He pulled a switch on the board, picked up the phone receiver. Suddenly, we were listening to the Croc.

"—orders clear."

"Yes, sir." Day sounded as mild as butter, but I thought I could detect a note of panic. "I'm looking, but so far there's nothing. He drinks too much but he

handles it all right. He's had no personal correspondence the entire time I've been with him and the only caller's been a client."

"Every man has a weakness," Galapagos said. "Harry's no exception. Keep looking until you find it." He paused. "What's his routine like?"

"Routine?"

"When could I call and find him out?"

I am sure that the thought of Galapagos calling on him alone sent chills down Day's spine, but his reply gave no indication of it. "He's usually in the office all morning, spends the afternoon on business."

"He like you all right?"

"We've come to an understanding."

"Good. Don't blow it, or I'll make what Mason's boys did to you look like a Sunday school picnic."

It was fortunate that Galapagos rang off then, as I'd had about as much of him as I could take. I breathed out, unclenching my jaw.

"So that's the Croc." Mike shook his head and stubbed out his cigarette. "Okay, I'll admit you were right. I guess that's why you're a dick and I'm not."

"I could take my business elsewhere," I reminded him.

He grinned at me. "But you won't." He settled his hands on the wheels of his chair, idly fingering the spokes. "The Croc's big time. What's he got against you?"

I frowned at the radio. "Saved his life."

Mike choked. "Why'd you want to go and do a thing like that?"

"Got caught up in the moment. Ship life could get dull, you see. Routine." I took a pull from my smoke, trying to shrug off Galapagos's lingering influence.

"What you wouldn't give for some routine about now."

"Tell me about it."

My cigarette butt joined Mike's in the ashtray and I stood to take my leave when all of a sudden, Friday's voice interrupted us again from the wireless set.

"You've reached the offices of Flint, Private Investigator. This is his assistant speaking." His voice sounded thick, like he might have been crying, but he made a game effort anyway.

The voice on the other end chuckled. "Listen to you. 'This is his assistant speaking'—you should be on stage."

"What are you doing, calling me? You know it's too risky!" That Day wasn't expecting this call was evident from his quickness of breath. "How did you even find me?"

The voice on the other end snorted. "Aren't you glad to hear me, Pretty? I'm calling you on my own dime and all."

"Well, of course I'm glad. I'm just—surprised."

"You're being very coy. What's the matter—your owner in?"

There was a moment's hesitation before Day replied. "No, I'm—alone."

"Then go ahead. Tell me that you're fond of me." The voice had all its teeth attached and the arrogance that came of not being old enough to know better. Day's age, I guessed, and free.

"Of course, I'm fond of you."

"How fond?"

"Very fond."

Mike snickered at me. "Young love, eh?"

"Shut your pie hole." This was no laughing matter. Affairs among slaves were common. What else were they to do? You had to be free to marry. A man with as many slaves as Galapagos could afford to overlook the odd tryst so long as it was discreet. A slave taking up with a freeman was a totally different matter.

For someone in my precarious position, with his reputation as yet unmade, it could mean failure. I felt for a second cigarette. Who'd trust a dick who couldn't handle a single slave to handle their cases?

"You still haven't told me how you found me." Day raised a good point, but he had to know the man well to know he could raise it to him directly.

"You worry too much, Pretty." Definitely free. No slave stayed that smug very long. "There was a gig up at the house last night. Asked where my usual assistant was and they told me. Had to ask the operator for the dick's number."

"I don't like that," Day said. "It's too risky."

"You let me handle the risks, Pretty." The pet name made me sick. The confidence made me feel sicker. This kid was playing a dangerous game putting the moves on someone else's slave, and the one copping all the danger was Day.

"I mean it. It's not just Galapagos now. Flint—" Day stopped.

"The dick? What's he like?"

Day hesitated. "I think he could be a problem."

"Possessive?"

"I don't know. He's—hard to read. You can't tell where his boundaries are, when he's going to explode at you. And he's quiet as a cat. Looms up out of nowhere at you. He might actually be scarier than the Croc. At least you know what to expect from Galapagos."

Mike cleared his throat. I avoided meeting his eye.

"He beats you?"

"The opposite. He's been weirdly gentle so far, but I know he's holding back."

"You sweet on him?"

"You're joking! Me, sweet on a hack like him? The only reason he's in business is whatever dirt he has on Galapagos."

"Hey, if he were on the level, we might be in actual trouble. Speaking of the Croc," the voice on the other end of the line took on a more intimate tone. "You still got it?"

"Course. Told you it was safe with me."

"Knew I could count on you, Pretty. Keep your head down and stay out of trouble. I'll be in touch." He rang off.

Mike coughed. "You've had worse reviews," he said, tone carefully neutral.

"A lot worse," I agreed. "Comparatively speaking, that was downright complimentary."

He sniggered. "You want I should hang on to this tape?" He asked, wheeling himself over to the machine.

"Trash it."

Mike glanced up at me. "Don't tell me you're rattled by a couple of kids."

"You're dreaming, Mike. You heard how riled Galapagos got over me doing him a favor. Now imagine ticking him off. He learns that we got a recording of him..." I let the implications speak for themselves.

He shuddered. "Point."

Despite my better instincts, I lingered in the doorway. "Give it to me straight, Mike. Am I scarier than the Croc?"

"I'm your friend, Flint," Mike said. "But I got to say, I wouldn't want to cross you."

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Rather than return to the apartment and risk bruising Day, I turned my steps downtown. I had the names that Bit had given me, and a job to do. I went through the motions at the workplaces and residences of the first two of Katherine's regular callers. None of their colleagues remembered seeing Katherine come by in the time period in question, and the men themselves had no explanation for her continued absence.

It was at the third caller that things started to get interesting.

He worked in a photography shop down on Peachtree Street, a prosperous business that covered everything from portraits, yearbooks to private parties and debutante balls.

I allowed the slave on floor duty to show me the samples of their work. As I flicked through a collection of glitzy gatherings, I began to have a premonition.

"Quite a bash," I observed to the girl at my side. "I've seen the man with the long face in the society papers, I think."

"Mr. Galapagos is a regular client of ours," the slave reported. She was young, and if she was of diminutive height, the ample folds of her sarong indicated that had nothing to do with any neglect on the part of her owners. If anything, she seemed pampered, looked upon maybe as a surrogate daughter. "Some of these photographs have been reprinted by the press. He gives swell parties, so they say."

"That's the life, isn't it." I turned over a few more pages. "Now there's a dame with class. She in the society pages?"

“Not at all,” the slave explained. “She’s a friend of Mr. Blake. He took the photograph for advertising.” And because a slave is a woman too, she added, “Our in-house stylist helps our clients freshen up before the shoot.”

That explained a lot about why Katherine Stokes’s managed to be so much more glamorous than her sister, even as a slave. “Who is Mr. Blake? One of the photographers?”

“The junior partner.” The slave was well-trained and proud of her job. She answered my questions promptly, with an excess of information. “He only signed on about a year ago. He’s keen to get more experience. Most of these portraits he did himself on his own equipment.”

I looked them over. Katherine figured a few times, as did my friend of the night before. “Is that usual? For a junior partner to own his own camera?”

“In photography it’s essential,” the slave assured me. “Though, Mr. Blake had a stroke of good fortune. He got all his equipment at auction after the death of an established photographer.”

“That’s the way to do it. You know, a friend of mine once bought a box of old books at auction. He’s not a collector by any means; he just thought they might add a bit of class to his abode. You’ll never guess what he found when he opened the box.”

I’m no weaver, but I can spin a yarn as well as the next man. I cemented myself in the slave’s opinion as a chatty aficionado of photography with too much time on my hands and no real purpose. Since business was slow, she was happy to fill me in on the general routine of the store. I got quite a bit of the ins and outs of the photography shop without her even realizing I’d pumped her.

It ended, as all things do.

“Can I be of service?” I recognized the voice at once.

“What excellent timing! This is Mr. Blake. He took the photographs that you admired so much, sir.”

The slave bowed herself out of the conversation and an attractive young man, built along the same lines as a Greek sculpture, took her place. He wore his black hair swept crisply off his godly brow in a fashionable style, had eyes that were clear of self-doubt and the kind of chin that stars in motion pictures. His clothing was cheap, and I guessed the photography gig did not pay so well as it might, but his cufflinks (genuine gold if I was any judge—and I’d like to

think I was) suggested things were looking up. Not that anyone would hold his suit against him. He had youth, charm and all the advantages of both.

“Blake, is it,” I said, giving him some skin. “I’ve been enjoying your work.”

Day’s young man returned my handshake with the sort of modesty that accompanies someone who knows a compliment is only his due. “It’s very kind of you to say so. Are you looking for a photographer?”

I managed to indicate that I was on the fence, and that by filling me in on his working processes I might be better able to make up my mind. “It’s important to me that the photograph is life-like,” I explained, turning back to the photograph of Katherine. “Take this dame for example. The shop slave tells me she’s a friend of yours. Underneath the lights and the make-up, would you say the photo looks like her?”

“Of course,” Blake said. “The camera can flatter, but it doesn’t lie.”

I hesitated. “She doesn’t happen to work in this area, does she? I could take a look at her for comparison, it’d put my mind at rest about this.”

“Matter of fact,” Blake said slowly. “Kat does work nearby. It’s too bad you lit on her though—she’s had to up and leave suddenly.”

“Up and leave? An illness?”

Blake shrugged his broad, manly shoulders. “I am pretty sure if it were an illness we’d have heard about it by now.”

“Are y’all friends?”

Blake’s tone chilled somewhat. “Kat is walking out with me.”

“Apologies, friend. I hope I said nothing that might be taken offensively. She is a—handsome woman, without any disservice to your skill with the camera.”

Blake thawed. “No harm done.” He persuaded me to take a business card and a brochure and invited me to call again when I had made up my mind.

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Day had attempted dinner.

“It seemed like this would be easy enough to start with,” he said, leaning against the base of my chair, his pretty head resting on my leg. “And because *vichyssoise* is meant to be served cold, it doesn’t matter what time you come home.”

I chased the soup around the bowl with my spoon, but neither my heart nor my stomach felt the thrill of the chase. "I'll tell you one thing," I said. "It's a darn sight better than your omelets."

"My omelets are improving," Day retorted. "I practiced this afternoon. You'll be surprised."

Did that mean he'd eaten? I reached down and patted his cheek. Maybe we were getting somewhere.

Or maybe we were just marking time. Unbidden, the memory of the phone call I'd listened in on came back to me. "Don't surprise me yet," I warned him. "I've had a long day, don't know that my nerves can handle it."

Day took the bowl I handed off to him with grace. He seemed to expect that he'd eat from my plate, and I wondered if that was how it was done in polite society, and if so whether I should hint that he needed to start making bigger meals. "Found any leads?"

I wavered. "One. But it doesn't get us any closer to finding Katherine."

"Not going to share?"

I patted his head as I stood. "Think I'll keep it under my belt for now, Day. Tell you what, I think I could do with a bath."

Day brightened. "On it, Boss."

The haste with which he disappeared into the bathroom seemed to indicate that he was anticipating a bath. He could have run one himself at any time, of course, but I hadn't thought to specify and he clearly hadn't wanted to ask. I shook my head as I headed into the bathroom. It was a strange tango we were dancing—one step forwards, one step back.

And then a shimmy side-ways.

The bathwater was still warm when I quit it. As I toweled myself off, Day came and knelt on the floor beside me.

"If you don't mind—"

I snorted. "Knock yourself out, Day."

I casually wandered into the bedroom, waiting for the splash of bathwater that let me know he would be occupied awhile. Then I searched his suitcase again.



Nothing had changed. I sat on my heels and thought about it. Day had ample chance to hide something in the apartment, particularly if it was a small, thin something. Then again, it was hard to imagine that I'd missed anything the first time I searched his suitcase. His clothing? But what sarongs lacked in modesty, they made up for in more practical morality. The argument in favor of adopting them as slave attire had been their lack of pockets with which to conceal either weaponry or stolen property, and Day's sarongs clung to his hips like a second skin...

Then illumination hit. I picked up one of his sarongs and felt along the end. Sure enough, there were a few stitches missing in the hem, and enough space for a small object to be inserted. I felt inside each of the sarongs, but came up empty-handed.

Which left just one.

I casually meandered back into the bathroom.

Day was still enjoying the bath. "So you do know how to shave," he observed as I helped myself to razor and soap. "I was starting to wonder."

"I could pull the plug on you," I threatened as I snagged a towel from the floor. "Very easily."

I don't think he believed me, but at any rate I was allowed to wander out of the bathroom again, unremarked. In the bedroom, I freed the sarong from the towel and felt along the hem.

This time I found something. A small, thin something that felt like photograph negatives.

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## Chapter 4

“If your name’s not Harry, and it’s not Fred, what is it?”

I glanced up from my crossword puzzle.

Day was dusting again, flitting from ornament to ornament as dainty as any butterfly. You couldn’t tell from his careless demeanor that he thought me a meaner proposition than the Croc unless I moved too quick or too quiet. Then he jumped.

“In this business, I ask the questions.” I shook out my paper in deliberate rebuke.

“Go on. It can’t be worse than Friday.” Day glanced back at me with his big blue eyes. “Can it?”

Amused, I snorted. You couldn’t fault his technique. “Flint’s good enough for the taxman, it’s good enough for you.” Day had his secrets. I had mine.

Day heaved a sigh that didn’t break my heart, and went back to his work. I went back to working out a nine-letter city in Europe and tried to ignore him.

Ignoring Day was a harder prospect than I’d anticipated. My eyes kept straying back to his thin shoulders. Regardless of what I’d told Mike, I was bothered. Galapagos I’d expected. He wanted Day to spy on me and he hadn’t given him a choice in the matter. I knew enough of Mason to know nothing he did bore comparison to a Sunday school picnic.

The photographer, though. He didn’t sit right with me. Now that I’d cooled down, it was easier to forgive Day the attraction. Blake was a regular Adonis, and he’d got in before I’d even been in the running. He and Day were equally matched in looks and youth. They’d make a swell pair, and it’d be easy enough to cut my losses, sell Day to Blake. Hell, I might even recoup my losses at the Humane Society out of the deal.

But something about the idea of turning Day over to the man didn’t sit right with me. For one thing, there was the fact that Blake was currently involved in a missing person’s case, investigated by me. For another, there was Day’s actions.

Galapagos’s mention of Mason had sounded like a threat, but what if Blake had been the one to hurt him?

Logic said no, but the heart was not logical. The heart—was Day fond of the man?

I tapped my pencil against flat of my desktop. I'd played and replayed the conversation over in my head so often that I could have repeated it verbatim—and I was still no nearer understanding it. If Day was sweet on Blake, why was he forcing himself to make nice to an owner that he wasn't interested in sticking with? Force of habit was strong, but I didn't think it was that strong.

But if he wasn't sweet on Blake, then why was he holding on to the man's hot goods?

The end of Day's duster intruded into my line of vision. It traveled the length of my desk, came to a halt at my stale cup of coffee. Day paused to pick up cup and saucer, and the duster continued its journey.

Maybe I was just sore about the comparison to the Croc? Like Mike said, I'd had worse reviews. Instead of letting it eat away at me, I should accept it as the twisted compliment it was—

Day's duster brushed over my shoulders, lingered over my neck. I lowered my paper to look back at him. Forget Anna Stokes and her missing sister. The real mystery in this case was right under my nose, doing a lousy job of dusting my desk.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Day, but I don't think dusting's your forte."

Day blinked at me guilelessly. "Did I disturb you?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Were you wanting my attention?"

"Now that you mention it, there was something."

I grunted to let Day know I wasn't buying it. "Out with it."

He set the duster down on my desk and leaned in. I thought he had something to confide in me, so I wasn't expecting the heat of his mouth. He put the scorching sun beating down on the shutters of my office windows to shame, and I could tell that first paycheck I got, I was going to have to look into acquiring a fan if we were going to have any hope of lasting out the long Atlanta summer.

Taken by surprise, I put my hand up on his hip before I'd thought about it. He didn't react, leaning in further to wind his fingers through my hair before pulling back.

“Your tie’s crooked,” he said. “I thought maybe you wanted me to fix it.”

“Why do I get the idea that your definition of fixing my tie involves me losing my tie altogether?”

“Maybe because it does.”

I hooked my finger through his collar, drew him down to mouth level. He gave easily, not resisting even when I kissed him. He hadn’t lost his fear of me, but he was learning to work past it. Learning fast.

The memory of the lost souls in the Humane Society cages came back to me, and I kissed Day a little more fiercely than was necessary. I might be sore, but not sore enough to begrudge him his cure. That was no place for anyone, let alone quality like Day.

“We’re gonna have to explore your definitions a little later,” I told him. “I’m expecting a call.”

Day did a pretty good impression of being disappointed as I let him go. “I still say I should answer the phone,” he said, picking up his duster again. “Also, it’s Barcelona.”

I looked down at my crossword and back up at Day. “Bedroom. Now.”

Day pouted as I made him sit on his cot. “It’s not like you were going to get it,” he complained.

“No matter,” I told him. “A man’s crossword is sacred. I want you to sit there and think about what you’ve done.”

I returned to my desk. I can’t speak for Day, but in the half an hour that followed, I certainly thought about what he’d done. And what I’d done. At the end of it, I was dissatisfied. Not with Day, but with myself.

Any man who takes out his own fears and insecurities on those who can’t do anything about it is not a man I would buy a drink for. Unless I wanted to give up drinking, this put me in a pinch.

At exactly thirty minutes to the dot, I opened the door. Day didn’t look at me. He maintained a sulky silence as I went and sat on the end of the bed. I wondered if he was more rattled by his crime or by his punishment. A slave could and did wear a harsh beating as a badge of honor. Being sent to bed like a child, however, that rankled internally. I would have taken the licking any day of the week, and I suspected Day felt the same.

“You’re pretty sore right now,” I told him. “I can see your perspective. In your place, I’d be sore, too. In fact, I very often was. Literally as well as figuratively.”

Day didn’t give any sign that he was listening, but I sensed the interest in his stillness. I felt for the pack of Pall Malls in my jacket and continued.

“Most of my masters weren’t what you could call academic. They got where they were by virtue of being the biggest man standing. When I tell you that my first Master was a man named ‘Bull’ and no one laughed when he introduced himself, you should get a mental picture of what I mean.”

Despite his better intentions, Day’s mouth twitched. “I kind of get a picture.”

“Bull had a hard deal in life. He wasn’t smart, he wasn’t handsome and he wasn’t rich. He coped with his misfortunes by doing his level best to make life harder for everyone around him. To give him his due, Bull succeeded at that admirably. I hated him with a passion. He didn’t like me much either, even before I lit on my revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“It happened accidentally. Poor old Bull was entertaining a female caller and I was waiting on the two of them. Bull made some offhand comment about the sad state of my general appearance and I complimented him on his perspicacious nature. Bull got to his feet, roaring that he was not going to be insulted in his own home, and I realized he had no idea what I said. The thought occurred to his date, too. She laughed. From then on, I had the power. I scoured the dictionary every night while Bull slept, made every day hell on earth for him. He could work me as hard as he liked, but he couldn’t curtail my mind and he wasn’t man enough to accept being bettered by a slave. Couldn’t sell me fast enough. I had other masters after him that weren’t as easily cowed by long words of many syllables, but the lesson I learnt with Bull stayed. They could wear out my spirit and my body, but my mind was my own.”

Day tilted his head curiously at me. “You jumped down my throat pretty fast when I displayed my mind.”

I smirked. Day was a sharp cookie all right. “Not because I dislike it when you use your mind. No, Bull might have been the worst as a human being, but he did one thing right. His buttons were obvious. When I rattled him, I knew exactly what I was doing and what waited for me when I did.” I toyed with my

cigarette pack, wondering how to put this. "I'm not an easy man to live with. I don't make a habit of making my buttons public knowledge. But so as we avoid any further conflagrations, I feel pretty strongly about watered-down drinks, people playing the fool, people filling out my crossword before I'm done with it, and smoking in bed."

Day's expression indicated he was trying to work out if I were serious or not. "That is a very particular list."

"I'm a very particular man when it comes to certain things." I offered Day a hand up to show I meant it.

He accepted it gingerly, letting me pull him to his feet. "It's the principle," he said. "And not the fact that I was right."

"The principle of it," I agreed. "It was Bucharest. You gonna sass a man, Friday, you make sure you have your facts right." But that wasn't exactly here and now. I cleared my throat. "Anyway. Seeing how I was the one at fault, I was hoping you'd let me make it up to you."

Day looked up at me. I'd definitely startled him, but this time he wasn't flinching away from me. "How do you intend to do that?"

"I was hoping I could persuade you to answer the phone."

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The phone did what phones do best. It rang.

Day answered it promptly. "You've reached the offices of Flint, Private Investigator. His assistant speaking." He paused. "I'll see if Mr. Flint is available to take your call, Mr. Astaire."

Since Day was currently sitting in my lap, it didn't take him long to ascertain that I was available. I took the receiver but kept my hand firmly around Day's waist. "Hello, Astaire. What's Ginger found?"

Day leaned comfortably against my shoulder as I took down notes. His hand had worked in between the buttons of my shirt and he gently stroked over my skin. Fortunately Astaire's communication was short and to the point.

"You're right," I told Day, as I set the phone down. "It does sound better when you do it."

Day seemed pleased. It might have been the compliment. It might have been my hand around his cock. Either way, whatever he thought of my qualities as a

master, he didn't seem to mind playing secretary for me. "What did Mr. Astaire have to say?"

I paused to suck at Day's neck before answering. "Astaire's been looking into reports of stolen property for me. Katherine's been gone five days now, and Galapagos hasn't reported her missing. You worked under the man, Day." I nipped at his skin lightly, and Day gasped, squirming in my lap. "Would you say that's typical?"

"No—not at all. Even when he rented us out, he didn't stand for any—insubordinohgod."

I smirked and continued to work my way down his neck. Day was uncommonly sensitive, and he'd barely been touched since coming to me. He was right about one thing, I decided, as I cupped his firm bottom through the sarong and stroked my rough fingers over him. My neglect of his body had been criminal.

We were making progress. Day showed me he was ready by unknotting his sarong. He didn't bat an eye as I lined him up against my desk.

I didn't want to rush things though, especially knowing what I did about his talents as a liar. "You got slick?"

Day pressed back against me as I unbuttoned my trousers. "I thought ahead." He nudged a small tube into my vision.

I grunted in acknowledgment as I coated my fingers. For all his failings in the housekeeping department, he certainly made up for it in other areas. "You insist on playing secretary, you're going to have to get a proper supply in. Second drawer down, I think."

Day gasped lightly as I took him in hand. "I'll keep that in mind."

I wasn't gentle, but he seemed to enjoy that. He thrust into my hand as I slid between his legs, my cock pressing against his balls with every push. His skin might have been too soft for hard labor, but it felt like silk against me. As I gripped his hip, pulling him against me with every thrust, I had to wonder if I felt like sandpaper to him. A glance at his expression put that fear to rest.

Day's cheeks were flushed, and his mouth moved as he watched me stroke him. He swayed, finding my rhythm and moving back as I thrust into him. He caught me watching him and grinned, leaning back to capture my mouth. "You like me playing secretary?"

Despite myself, I snorted. "I have to admit, this might be one of your better talents."

"I got a lot of talents you don't know about."

Maybe I was still sore about the phone call. I kissed him so roughly that he couldn't talk back, and stroked him until he came over my hand and his stomach.

He sat on my desk and leaned his forehead against my shoulder. I had to admit that as a decoration, he was very nearly perfect. The only negative was that breathless and glistening with exertion, his blond hair in enchanting disarray around his face and stomach streaked with cum, Day was conducive to only one kind of work.

I looked down at my hand, thinking of reaching for my handkerchief when Day stopped me. "Let me? Please—I want to do this."

He was asking me for something? I ran my dry hand through his hair. "Be my guest."

Day drew my hand to his mouth. I kind of thought he might attack it like a blowjob, but I was dealing with a sophisticated number. Day kissed my knuckles as lightly as a Victorian gentleman might kiss his gloved consort, before moving in tenderly with his tongue.

He gave each of my fingers the caring attention of a lover, making a soft appreciative noise that invited me to imagine what he might sound like wrapped around another part of my general anatomy. I did. It was quite a pleasant mental image. I was not that pleased when the phone rang.

"Flint, Private Investigator. Himself speaking—she what?"

"Katherine's sent me a postcard," Anna explained. "She's gone and smuggled herself across the border. The card must have been held up in customs, I only just got it this morning."

"Is that so?"

Day knelt beside the desk. I gave the top of his head an absent-minded pat as I applied myself to listening.

Anna kept her voice down. This hour of the day, she'd be at work, borrowing the phone surreptitiously. "Of course, I'll pay what I owe you up until now, but I no longer need your services."



“Before we close this account, I wonder could I borrow this postcard? I have a friend who works in the forgeries unit of the city police. He could compare it against a sample of your sister’s handwriting and do it quiet like.”

Anna paused. “Have you found something, Mr. Flint?”

“It’s early days,” I told her. “And it’s far from concrete.” I mimed like I was lighting a smoke, and Day took off in the direction of my jacket and Pall Malls. “Your sister had a fella,” I said. “The fella’s got himself mixed up in something. I don’t know what, but it’s hot and Galapagos is involved. Galapagos’s secretary went to art school. It may just be coincidence, but then again, it may not be.” Day was back. I took the cigarette and let him light it for me. “If I’m wrong, we’ll settle the account as of this phone-call.”

Anna took a moment to mull it over. I took a moment of my smoke. “All right,” she said at last. “I’ll stop by tonight to bring you the postcard and a letter written by my sister.”

Day watched as I attached coat and hat. He seemed unusually thoughtful, and I had to wonder what went through his head as I prepared to go out, leaving him to Galapagos’s tender mercies. “How are your feet, Day? Still attached to your legs?”

“They’ll do. You want me to come with?”

His relief was so evident that any doubt I had about letting him tag along was dispelled. “On the condition that you tell me if you need to rest.”

I preferred my feet on the tarmac to public transportation, but out of consideration to Day we took the bus to Fourth and cut across Fox Street.

The *Belladonna Club* was housed in a brick building. From the outside, there was nothing to bat an eye at. Housewives wearing neat pastel twinsets with pearl buttons chatted as they walked down the pavement outside it, followed by a domestic slave with the groceries. A couple of old gentlemen were gathered around the steps of the building next door. The sound of children playing drifted down from the surrounding tenement buildings.

The bellman was a woman, lipstick the same bright red as her uniform. Only that, and the way the old men went silent to scope us out as we approached, gave any indication that we were not paying a call on any typical address.

She took my card, glanced over it without interest. “I’ll see if your name is on our list.”

"It won't be," I said. "But see if Katherine Stokes is. I'm here on behalf of her sister."

"Is it okay to be that direct?" Day asked once we were alone in the lobby.

"We're in Bella's territory here. She's got her own set of rules. Rule number one—you don't get smart with Bella. We want any chance of talking to her we got to play it on the line. None of your fool behavior." My fingers ran over the cigarette pack in my pocket but I left it where it was. You don't smoke in the presence of ladies unless they give you permission.

The bellman returned. "She's busy."

It was a politer reply than I'd been expecting. I nodded, replacing my hat as I turned to the door. "Come on, Day. Let's not clutter up the lobby—"

"Day," the bellman repeated. "Friday? Galapagos's boy?"

Day licked his lips and looked at me.

I came to a halt. "Formerly Galapagos's boy. He does for me now."

The bellman hesitated. "Management might have a moment to talk to Friday."

I looked at Day. "You got a moment to talk to management?"

He nodded. I fancied that he was as uncertain about the turn the situation had taken as I was, but he hid it with his usual class. "Of course."

I patted his arm. "Anything worries you, you come right back out here." I watched as he followed the crisply uniformed bellman into the *Belladonna Club* via the employee entrance.

The *Belladonna Club* had a reputation for exclusivity and privacy. It had another reputation too, though that one was less well known. Bella felt strongly on the rights of women. Her flowers came to her to escape abusive masters, alcoholic husbands, lecherous fathers, and bullying police officers. She lavished her special brand of love on them, built them up and empowered them with lipstick, leather and whips, and then charged exorbitant prices to men who wanted to be debased. Bella's was not the only such club in the City, but her women had an extra something. It kept her clientele fiercely loyal to her and her flowers, coming back in droves for further punishment.

She did not always acquire her flowers legally, but when her clientele included the Police Chief and several prominent politicians, her detractors were

forced to turn a blind eye to her dealings—even when those dealings were rumored to include links to the underground railroad dedicated to getting unhappy slaves to freedom in the North. Bella was also one of the few people in the city who could hold her own against Galapagos. The two of them made hate look like a pretty word, from what I understood. There was no limit to their mutual loathing—or to how far they'd go to cross each other.

Katherine Stokes did not seem like the kind of gal that mattered much to Bella, but she worked for Galapagos. That might have been enough to tip the scales—if indeed our Kat really was drinking the Northern cream.

I had my doubts. Just as I doubted the wisdom of letting Day go alone into the club. Bella had no charitable interest in men. Was it the Galapagos angle? If so—

I paced the lobby, running my fingers over the pack of cigarettes. I should have gone in with him.

The bellman returned alone. “Bella would like to see you, Mr. Flint. Follow me.”

I also got the back door. I wasn't sure that was a compliment or not, but I took it anyway. “Where's Day?”

“The girls took him down to the dressing room for some fun. He'll be ready when Bella's finished talking to you.” The hall we walked down had faded floral carpet, and smelled vaguely like the back of a theatre, all greasepaint and powder. There was the occasional girlish exclamation or laugh. The sound of jazz being played over a record player drifted through the air.

We stopped in front of the door at the end of the corridor. The bellman knocked.

“Mama? Mr. Flint.”

“Show him in.”

I was shown in.

The room was decorated like a backstage dressing room rather than an office, although there was a telephone set on the dressing table along with the knick-knacks, make-up box and mirror. There was a rack of flimsy silk nightdresses, a coat stand draped with fur, an armory of earrings, rings and necklaces, and perfume so thick that it brought tears to my eyes. And in the

middle of it all, leisurely draped over a chaise longue with a girl at her feet and another massaging her broad shoulders, was a woman who could only be Bella.

She was old and had seen so much misery that it had left its mark on her. That was my first impression. My second was that with her pale, wobbly jowls and limpid eyes, set deep in her head, Bella looked somewhat like a frog. Then she spoke, and abruptly I saw why she was the most dangerous woman in the city.

She could have said anything. "How do you do?" or "On your knees" or "How'd you like to buy a bridge?" It wouldn't have mattered. Her tone was so precise that you knew that she wielded her whip like she wielded words.

"You look like a Gibson man," she said. "Are you?"

I answered in the affirmative.

Bella looked at the girl at her feet. "Daisy," she said, and waved me vaguely towards a stool in the corner. "Bring Mr. Flint and myself a Gibson."

I took the seat, aware that I was being paid a rare compliment, even if I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve it.

Bella picked up a long cigarette holder, and I leaned forward to light it for her. I took out my Pall Malls with relief. The tobacco smoke took the edge off some of the perfume.

"You're younger than I expected," Bella noted.

"That's by way of becoming a familiar refrain."

"I had Friday tell me about you," Bella continued as if I hadn't spoken. "You've made an impression." She paused, and I was aware of being studied very closely. "He's your first slave, isn't he?"

"First," I said. "And I will admit that I never saw myself as the owning type."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Bella said, but since it's not polite to argue with a lady, I let it go. "I understand Friday feels you have—potential."

My surprise showed.

Bella smiled her froggy smile at me and delicately tapped the end of her cigarette against her ashtray. "I won't say he gave rave reviews. But you could be exactly what that boy needs, Flint. I don't usually take an interest in men, but Friday is an exception. What do you know about him?"

“He’s told me a little. I’ve inferred more.” I decided to take a chance on Mason’s boys. I didn’t know Blake’s character, but I knew the Croc. “He was ill-used, by a group. Galapagos signed off on it.”

“That’s the basics,” Bella said. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard the full story. The whole city was wild with gossip when it went down. Must’ve been about a year ago now.”

“A year ago, I was still in service myself, working the cruise-ship line,” I said. “Only returned a few months ago. I’m still catching up.”

“That would explain it. The story never made the papers, Galapagos saw to that. But he couldn’t stop the talking, and he probably didn’t want to. He did a lot of business on the strength of it.”

I nursed my cigarette thoughtfully. “Suppose you tell me the story from the start,” I said. “I want to be sure I have it straight.”

Bella acquiesced. “You know Mason,” she said.

“By reputation.”

“He’s earned the reputation,” my hostess said. As she spoke, she toyed with a long strand of pearls around her neck. They were big and bright and gleamed like costume jewels. Odds were fifty/fifty on them being the real deal. “He’s a hard man. I’ve seen girls after he’s used them and it makes you long for a proper lynching. He and Galapagos were in competition. Mason said Galapagos’s prices were too high. Galapagos said they weren’t for the quality he was providing. Mason challenged him to prove the quality. They made a date.”

I had an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Friday was the guest of honor.”

“Galapagos said the boy would take anything Mason’s boys could give without complaint. Mason thought different. They put it to the test. It happened up at the house in front of a dinner party. As entertainment.”

The thought of Day, so sensitive and soft, being subjected to that didn’t bear thinking about. I stood, walked the length of the room.

Bella continued. “They weren’t at all gentle, but he managed to hold it together, until about the ninety minute mark. He yelped when they broke his arm.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Mason and Galapagos decided to call it a draw then, but the damage had been done.”

“And that was where they left it?”

“Any talk of pressing charges stopped when the boy refused to testify. Galapagos would never have allowed it—bad for business. As it is, he came out of it with his reputation for quality intact. Friday got the best medical care Galapagos could afford.”

“Like that makes a difference.”

“The mental scars are something different,” Bella agreed. “Sit down, Mr. Flint. My wall doesn’t deserve that look you’re giving it, and we need to talk about what happens to Friday now.”

I took a deep breath and tried to force myself into calm. I remembered my cigarette. It helped a little and after a moment, I resumed my seat. “What is your interest in Friday?”

“I like to think of myself as an expert at what I do,” Bella said. “I take pride in my work. I enjoy it. And I appreciate a fellow artisan. Friday—Friday is an artist. The sort of slave that deserves to be appreciated, to whom serving is an art form all in itself.”

“I agree with you there,” I told her. “But what do you want me to do about it? Fancy parties along the Croc’s lines—”

Bella interrupted. “That might be what Friday is used to, but between us, Galapagos has ruined him for show and for parties. With practice, he might get used to it, but the joy is gone. The trust has been broken. A slave without trust is a slave indeed.”

“Back it up, sister. I’m not sure I follow.”

“I expect you wouldn’t. You were in service—conscripted?”

“The old story—god-fearing parents with god-fearing vices needing to pay god-fearing debts.”

“And you didn’t have a master worth the name.” Bella sniffed. “It’s obvious by your aversion to calling yourself one. Let me put it to you a different way.” She took an elegant drag of her long cigarette.

Daisy returned. She was a cute little thing, her sarong of a soft pink fabric that clung to her curves with the attention of a lover. She had a tray with two cocktails, and gave the first to Bella and the second to me.

"Daisy," Bella said thoughtfully. "You'd do anything I asked."

"For sure, Mama."

"Even if I asked you to kill a man?"

"With pleasure, Mama."

"Even if I asked you to kill Mr. Flint here."

Daisy dimpled at me prettily. "No problem."

"You know the penalties for killing a man? And what the Bible says about it, honey?"

"I sure do, Mama."

"Why would you do an awful, godless thing like that, just because I asked you to?"

Daisy's answer was immediate. "Because Mama's good to me," she said. "I know Mama wouldn't ask me to do anything that I couldn't handle. That's not how Mama works."

Bella stretched out a bejeweled hand. She patted her large, pale fingers over Daisy's pert curls. "Thank you, pet. Marigold?"

The girl behind her continued the massage as if she'd merely been asked her opinion on the weather. "Mama's only got our interests at heart. She's always thinking of us."

"Do you see, Mr. Flint? This is how it's supposed to work. My girls will do anything I ask because they know that what I ask is right for them. They live to serve. They like a challenge. They know that I will push them to achieve their very best—and they know that I ask nothing more than they are willing to give me."

"I begin to catch a glimmer," I said. "But I am not certain I subscribe to your magazine. Say that you're right, that Day does live to serve. That stunt Galapagos pulled, landing him in the hospital. If that's not proof the man's not worth the breath he draws, what is?"

"You've got to remember that Day didn't grow up free," Bella reminded me. "The boy was born to it. He's been raised properly, taught to consider service the highest form of giving. He doesn't see Galapagos's actions as a reflection of his failure as a master. Day sees them—"

“As a mark of his own failure,” I said. “Don’t that just beat all.” The more I grasped of the situation, the less I liked it.

“The boy needs a firm hand, and a master worthy of him, one that’s willing to take the time to build him up and establish that trust. What he’s got is you.”

I was a busy man, with problems of my own—including the fact that Day was in cahoots with someone else. Two of ’em, in fact. Somehow, that didn’t seem worth mentioning. “I’m still not much for this master crap,” I said. “I got every intention of being kind to him. But the firm hand—taking to him just seems wrong.”

“A slave appreciates a firm master,” Bella said. “So long as he’s fair. Think about your own experiences. If a master was kind to you, you probably despised him. Didn’t you?”

I thought back to Astaire and how he always turned a blind eye to it when I mouthed back to him, or half-assed my chores. He always threatened to take a belt to me, but we both knew he never would. It had been my idea to take the job on the ship—just like it was Ginger’s idea that he make the Captain’s desk at the precinct. We were both of us fond of Astaire, I was sure, but neither of us respected him.

I couldn’t be sore at Day for not taking me seriously, not when I hadn’t given him anything to respect. “I see your way of looking at it.”

Bella smiled at me. “I hoped you might,” she said. “I like Friday. I want to see him happy.” She sighed, as if remembering what an impossibility that was, dusted off her cigarette and picked up her cocktail. “Now,” she said. “Let’s talk business.”

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Day was given the farewell normally accorded to a celebrity as we left the club. The girls had clearly enjoyed him, and we were waved off in a cloud of feathers, perfume and powder.

“They’ve given you a haircut,” I noted as we strolled down the street, on to our next call.

“Proper pedicure, a manicure too.” Day had clearly enjoyed the chance to be pampered. “And I got to hear all the gossip.”

He probably enjoyed that as much as the manicure, and I was reminded again how different the worlds we inhabited were. For him, the brief catch-up



had probably been the equivalent of a letter home. "Think they'd mind if you called again?" I asked. "I come this way for business every so often. You could catch up while I do the rounds."

"I guess I could find out." Day kept his reaction casual, but there was pleased curve to his mouth that lingered even after the perfume faded.

I caught Day up on the case over lunch. We ate at a lunch counter not classy enough to be expensive, but just classy enough that the meal I ordered came with a side-plate so that I could give Day his portion myself.

"If Katherine's really gone North, she didn't do it via your girlfriends," I said. My first instinct was to divide my club sandwich into neat halves but with Bella's words very much in my mind, I made it quarters instead and gave Day one. "She's got other contacts in the business of disappearing acts. She's gonna ask, but from the impression I got, she's thinking along the same line as I am."

Day picked up his sandwich delicately. "What line is that?"

"The line that goes about six feet down and stops."

Day started. "You think she's—"

"It's just a gut feeling," I told him. "I could be wrong. I'd like to be wrong." But I didn't think I was.

The rest of the afternoon was routine. I ordered a milkshake and pretended that I didn't like it so that Day had a decent meal, then we went to City Hall to look up the records of Katherine Stokes's service. She'd been sold by a collection agency through auction, and the records bore out what Bit had given me. Galapagos was Katherine's first owner and what he'd shelled out for her was five times the sum paid for Anna, who had been acquired by the same real estate office that now employed her as a freewoman.

No leads there, and I tapped my notebook thoughtfully. According to the clock on the wall, we were still in danger of catching Galapagos if we returned too early, so instead we returned to the bar that Katherine had worked in. They'd had a postcard, too. I didn't ask to borrow it.

I hadn't planned on going back to the photographer's but the postcard angle had me curious. Someone had got wind that Katherine's absence was felt.

Day said nothing, but I fancy he got interested as we started towards the store. No sign of Blake, but presumably he knew the name from the firm's visits to Galapagos's manor.

“You wait here,” I told him. “I got a question or two for the desk.”

I got a lucky break. The slave on the desk was my friend of the day before. “Did you make up your mind?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “And changed it. I sent my order to Mr. Blake yesterday on a postcard. I want to alter it—who collects the mail? You do? Swell. You remember seeing a postcard in there?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. Perhaps you’d like to leave a message—oh!” She brightened. “There’s Mr. Blake now.”

He’d just walked out of the backroom, wiping his hands on the apron he wore over his suit. Clearly he’d been working on prints because the distinctive odor of the darkroom accompanied him. He came to a halt as he noticed Friday.

When whether you make out the day with a licking or without one depends on the temper of your master, you get an idea of how to read a man very quickly. I watched Blake as closely as a suspicious wife. What I saw did not put my mind at ease. He was no open book but there was plenty of him to read in between the lines.

Blake’s mouth went perfectly still for a moment, then smiled. The delayed reaction put the lie to the gesture and as he leaned into Friday, all intimate like, it was all I could do not to march over there to interrupt.

Not that there was much to interrupt. Friday’s training was flawless. He stayed sedately looking down where I’d left him. Only his fingers, tightly clamped around each other to keep them from moving, gave any indication that he was nervous as Blake leaned over him.

Was he afraid of Blake himself? Or was it the knowledge that they were observed?

Much as I badly wanted to be able to answer those questions, I had a brain wave of a different sort. The slave’s attention was on Blake, and he and Friday were preoccupied with each other. In short, there was no one watching as I casually pocketed some of the negatives the slave had been trimming from the counter. I turned back to see that Blake and Friday had covered the “What are you doing here?” part of the reunion, and moved on to the “Why.”

Day looked over to me and as Blake’s gaze followed, that fixed quality came back to his face. I smiled at him, and walked over. I don’t know whether

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or not I would class myself in Galapagos's league, but at that moment, I certainly felt something of his power.

"On second thought," I told him. "I find I don't need any prints—for the moment. Come on, Day." I took his arm and steered him out of the shop.

Blake didn't follow.

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## Chapter 5

The doorman nodded in vague greeting as we reached the apartment building. I paused a moment. Behind me, Day was as tense as a guitar string about to snap.

“Any callers?” I asked the doorman.

“There’ve been a few.”

“Big, heavy types? Did they leave already?”

The man glanced at me surprised. “Matter of fact, they did. You expecting them?”

“Old friends said they might be passing through the neighborhood. I’m sorry I missed them.”

Day badly wanted to ask, but he’d maintained a frosty silence since we’d left the photography store. Maybe I do have a mean streak, because I let him stew as we made our way upstairs.

The apartment door was slightly ajar.

“Stay out here,” I told Day and opened the door.

They’d been nothing if not thorough. The office had been turned upside down. They’d drawn the line at taking up the carpet and the wallpaper, but everything else seemed to have been rearranged in their search. I gave the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom a brief once-over. They were in the same condition, but we were alone.

On my way back to the door, my ashtray caught my attention. I distinctly remembered seeing Day empty it that morning, but now it was half full. A yellow-ended butt nestled amongst the ash.

“Now that’s just amateur.”

“Boss? What’s happened?”

I glanced back to Day, anxious in the doorway. “Come on in and shut the door. On second thought, see if the lock still works? It does? Good. Lock it.” I picked the desk chair upright and hung my jacket on it, rolling up my sleeves.

Day delicately picked his way across the mess. “We’ve been robbed?”

"Searched," I said. "Doesn't look like anything's missing. Don't touch this ashtray. Everything else needs to be picked up. Don't worry about getting it perfect. We have half an hour before Anna Stokes arrives to drop us off her sister's postcard and letter. She's gonna see the office and if she needs to refresh herself, the bathroom and bedroom, too."

Day nodded, mouth pressing into a firm line. "Got it, Boss."

We got to work without any further words. Between the two of us we got the bookshelf lifted up and the files back in the filing cabinet. If it distressed Day to see the books he'd spent the day before dusting so lovingly sprawled all over the floor, he didn't show it. Instead, he replaced them as briskly and efficiently as any librarian. I rearranged the desk and chairs, pulled the covers on the bed straight and bundled what mess didn't fit beneath the bed into the wardrobe.

We were putting the finishing touches on the bathroom when the doorbell rang.

"Good of you to stop by," I greeted Anna.

"I've been thinking ever since we talked," she confessed. "There's a few things that don't feel right about the card. Katherine and I... we aren't exactly close."

I glanced at the postcard she held out. "Dearest sister—that's laying it on a bit thick," I agreed. "Let's have a gander at the letter."

The letter was brief and to the point. It was addressed to Anna, wanted to borrow five dollars, and reminded the reader that it was Katherine's birthday in three months. What it lacked in affection, it made up for with a sort of mercenary charm.

"Katherine ever expressed an interest in going North?"

"Not so's you'd notice," Anna said, smiling at Day as he laid down the coffee tray. "It might have come up in idle conversation, but it wasn't serious. We didn't have any friends up North, you see. My sister isn't the kind to act on her own."

Day's young man was looking less and less bright.

"I'll drop this off at the station tomorrow," I said. "My contacts should be able to get an opinion back to us within a couple of days, depending on

business. I'll keep looking into the leads I got, just in a general way while we wait. On my own dime."

Anna nodded. "I appreciate it, Mr. Flint. I've heard a little about Galapagos since the postcard arrived. I have to say, I'm starting to get concerned about Katherine."

"You have sisters?" I asked Day after she left.

"I might have half-sisters," Day said as he tidied up the coffee things. "But if I do, I don't know about them."

"Not worth the investment," I told him, the rotary dial rattling away as I tapped in Galapagos's number. "Hello? Yeah, I'd like to talk to Galapagos himself. It's Harry. I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Harry," Galapagos purred. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

"You know and I know that this is neither unexpected nor a pleasure call, Galapagos," I told him. "You that desperate for me to get out of business that you gotta help me along?"

"What are you saying?"

"Your heavies paid me a call today. They were noticed going in and going out, and then they went and left the door open."

"What makes you think they were my heavies?"

"They were smoking those ridiculous French cigarettes you give all your boys in lieu of a bonus," I told him. "Now, I know you don't like the way I do business, but this isn't amateur hour, Gally. I'm running a professional shop here. I won't stand for you taking cheap shots at my reputation by faking a burglary under my neighbors' noses."

I fancied that Galapagos relaxed. "I suppose that was coming on a bit strong," he conceded.

"What's the angle? You don't want me finding Katherine Stokes?"

"I had a call from her manager today. She's skipped town. Taking in the Northern Lights."

I snorted. "I'll believe that when I see it."

"You got a nasty, suspicious mind, Harry."

"Thank you," I said. "I certainly try. No more house calls. I won't stand for it."

I rang off before he could get in the last word.

Day hovered uncertainly in the kitchen doorway. "Is that really all right? He's your main suspect in Katherine's disappearance, isn't he?"

"A dick can't take a thing like that lying down," I told Day, as I took the bourbon from the bottom drawer of my desk. "Gimme a glass of rock."

Day complied. "So when you asked the doorman if there'd been visitors—"

"I had a good idea," I agreed as I added the bourbon to my glass. "It's only sensible. Galapagos hasn't invested much in me, but he's invested. He's bound to take an interest."

"That makes sense," Day conceded.

I glanced at him. "How are your feet holding up?"

They were sore but not as bad as they had been.

"Run a bath," I told him. "Make it a hot one."

The water was still a good temperature when I left the bath for Day. He sank into it with a soft little sigh that told me that he'd had a long day. I patted his head. "You didn't do half bad. Maybe we'll make a dick out of you yet."

He grinned up at me. "Now there's a terrible thought."

I removed my hand reluctantly and wandered back into the office, towel around my waist.

I called Astaire to let him know I'd need a second opinion on the postcard. Then I called Mike to see what state his darkroom was in. As I was contemplating my next move, the phone rang. The caller on the other end didn't leave a name, number, message or greeting. I was glad of it—I wanted a word with Blake, but I wanted to talk to Day about him first.

Before that, I needed the negative.

I opened the bathroom door and leaned on it. "Day, how do you feel about laundry?"

"There's nothing in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* about it."

I snorted. "There's a laundromat around the corner. I hear it's a good place for the neighborhood gossip. Course, no one wants to talk to a dick."

“You want me to go and listen in for you?” Day might still be sore about my treatment of his beau, but the thought of playing detective appealed to him.

I made a case for it. “You’re pleasant company and you got a good way with people. And you’re new. That makes you news.”

“You don’t think I’ll stand out?”

“We can spin that to our advantage,” I said. “Use it as cover in case you need to ask a lot of questions. Bat those baby blue eyes of yours and give them that cozy smile you do so well. They’ll be eating out of your hand.”

Day went a rather fetching rose color in the cheek department. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Listen closely for any comments on today’s visitors,” I said. “But don’t go leading the conversation that way. Play it subtle, like the sophisticated number you are.”

The prospect interested him, and Day mulled it over as I gathered up the towels and clothing from the bathroom floor. “I’ll see if I can rustle up a decent load for you to take down,” I told him.

Once the bathroom door was shut behind me, I quickly switched out the negative hidden there for the display goods I’d lifted from the shop. If I felt kind of low as I replaced them, I reminded myself firmly that I had to know just what kind of soup Blake was cooking up for Day. I wasn’t the only one who was on his trail. Galapagos’s actions seemed to suggest that he was not only aware, but also closing in.

“You’re coming, too?” Day asked as I locked the door behind us. “Thought you said your presence wouldn’t be conducive to conversation.”

“I got some research of my own in mind,” I said. “Down at the local watering hole.”

“I guess that means you don’t want dinner?”

“I’ll pick us up something on the way back. Now, you go, make friends.”

The laundromat was about three-quarters busy. The slaves already there mimed disinterest for my benefit. I mimed indifference back at them. Day safely occupied, I continued on my way to Mike.

“Keep this tight,” I warned him. “Don’t breathe a word of this even to your shadow. You got it?”



"It's that serious, huh." Mike wheeled himself over to take the negative carefully. "You can count on me, Flint."

"Good man. Send it down to Astaire at the station when it's done. Don't communicate with me directly."

"That hairy?" Mike stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I can find someone else—"

"Don't you dare, Flint."

I shook my head. "Sorry, Mike. For a minute, I forgot who I was talking to."

"You know me and risks." He thumped his lap where his leg was truncated. "I don't have an aversion to danger, Flint. These days, I just have to come by my fix second-hand."

We shook hands and I left him to the darkroom.

I ordered a steak dinner for two at the local greasy spoon and while it was cooking, went next door for a drink. My drink came with enough ice to rattle the Titanic, but not enough bourbon to drown a fly. By way of making small talk, I complained. The bartender was not overly impressed, but I got a few snickers out of the patrons propping up the bar, and after a second drink, with a slightly worse ratio of ice to liquor, a couple of the regulars unbent enough to say hello.

I gathered that the general impression was that having a dick in the apartment kind of lowered the tone of the area, but I indicated that I intended to play it as discreet as possible and they thawed. I sped along the defrosting process by buying a round. When I eventually excused myself to pick up dinner, the place was so hot we could have used some air conditioning.

Day parted from his new friends with every show of mutual reluctance. The three-quarters busy laundromat was now full, though I have to say that I didn't notice an increase in the amount of laundry being done. Day followed a modest distance behind me with the washing, and I have the feeling that between us, we presented a very reassuring picture to any of our neighbors on the fence about having us in residence.

"Think you could get used to this gig?" I asked Day as I poured us both a drink.

"I guess there are worse things a man could do." Day arranged our meal on a full-sized plate for me, gave himself a saucer.

The feeding thing did nothing for me, but I could see that to someone with Day's over-delicate sensibilities, the constant reassurance that he was appreciated and wanted counted towards his general wellbeing as much as the food did. I carved him up a good portion of the steak and gave him a general introduction to the vegetables and side. I waited to see what he ate first before dishing him up seconds, and was rewarded with a full account of the neighborhood gossip.

"If anyone thought it was odd your door was left ajar, the doorman's already put word out that you expected callers."

"Chatty," I noted. "He could be good for business. He ever need something found, you let me know."

"How mercenary."

"Rules of the trade," I told him. "We're not in the business of doing favors, you and me."

"You're doing Miss Stokes a favor," Day observed. "Looking into her sister free of charge."

"It's only free of charge if I'm wrong," I reminded him.

"It's still a risk. I've been with Galapagos most of my life. No one who stays with him stays out of love for the guy. I could name you ten slaves I know that would take a ticket North just to get away from him."

I loosened my tie, wondering at Day's use of the present tense. "In all the years you worked for him, could you name me ten slaves game enough to take the risk and run for it?"

Day blinked. After a minute, he shook his head. "When you put it like that—I kind of see your way of thinking, Boss."

Had he seen the link between Blake and Katherine? I reached out to stroke his fine blond hair. "Suspicious thoughts are my line. Leave 'em to me."

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## Chapter 6

Mike had apparently been hungering for some thrills. I got the call from Astaire as I was still on my first cup of coffee, and he sounded so rattled that I left without finishing it.

I knew it was serious when I walked into Astaire's office at the station to find he'd started on his flask in front of Ginger, and she wasn't stopping him.

"That bad?"

"You have no idea, Fred." Astaire slid the photograph across the desk to me.

I glanced down at it. The figures kind of leaped up at me, but they took a while to come into focus. The room seemed to spin a little, and I lit a cigarette before I remembered Ginger's presence. "Doesn't that just beat all?"

You can put your past behind you, but you can never really forget it. I had a funny sort of feeling, seeing it down in grainy black and white on Astaire's desk. A time that I'd much rather erase from my memory entirely.

You could just make me out in the background, if you squinted. I'd been asked to fill in on short notice for one of the wait staff who'd jumped ship without notice. It was my first time, and if I'd known the ropes better, I'd have known to get out of the shot. Still, I was there, glancing back over my shoulder, tray of drinks in hand, as the photograph was taken.

The attention was on the four gathered at the front. The late Mr. Markowtiz raised a cocktail glass to the camera, while the late Mrs. Markowitz beamed beside him. They'd been a glitzy couple on the wrong side of forty, but they'd tipped well and been popular with us slaves. Galapagos, smarmy as ever, trademark alligator skin jacket resting lightly around his shoulders. He had one arm around Mrs. Markowitz, his other around a third man, a chubby, jolly looking sort with a tinge in his cheeks that suggested the group was somewhat merry.

I knew him well.

His name was Thomas Dearing, and he was the only man I'd ever killed.

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“Hardly Galapagos’s best shot,” I said. “But I don’t see him coughing up the money we’re talking to keep it out of the papers.”

“Keep looking,” Astaire said. “You’ll know it when you see it.” His voice shook, but Ginger and I diplomatically ignored it.

I turned back to the photograph.

The photo did Galapagos no favors. His eyes were glassy, and his smile a little too wide. Dearinger was not the only member of the party to be the worse for wear. Then again, the Markowitzes had been his business partners of many years. They were old friends. Galapagos could afford the familiarity. Just like he could afford the arm around Mrs. Markowitz. It was business. It meant nothing.

As my guilty conscience led my gaze to wander across to Dearinger again, it fell on something. For the first time that morning, things began to make a sick sort of sense. “Astaire,” I said, tapping the photograph. “Isn’t this the medicine you found next to Mrs. Markowitz?”

“The very same.”

Of course it was the same. The ship’s dispensary used round plastic bottles. This was a pretty fluted bottle, designed to be mistaken for perfume. Perfectly suited for the society lady with an addiction, or a pillar of society concealing a breakdown.

Galapagos was neither a society lady, nor a pillar of society. “How did it get from Mrs. Markowitz’s bedroom drawer to Galapagos’s pocket?” I was longing for a turn at Astaire’s flask. “Or should the question be ‘how did it get back to Mrs. Markowitz and what did it contain when it did?’”

“Dearinger swore he’d never known her to take sleeping aids,” Astaire reminded me. “He asked for the bottle. Was thinking of getting it analyzed.”

“You don’t say.”

“In the excitement that followed it entirely slipped my mind until now.”

We looked down at the photograph again. Dearinger was tall as well as wide, and Galapagos had to reach to get his arm around him. His jacket had ridden up, exposing the hidden pocket within the lining. You had to look closely to see the bottle. I’d been waiting on their table that entire evening, and this was the first I’d seen of it.

“The question now,” Ginger said, “is how to find out who took the picture and how it got to Blake.”

“Forrester,” I said.

“The ship’s photographer?” Astaire blinked. “Of course! He was there—I remember, he gave testimony to Dearing’s depression.”

“Dearing must have asked Forrester to develop the film for him. Probably because it was their last night together,” I said. “He had that sort of a sentimental streak to him. When he did, he must have seen this. That’s why he attacked Galapagos. He knew the man had murdered his friends.”

Astaire patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t blame yourself, Fred,” he said. “You didn’t know any better.”

“Where’s Forester now?” Ginger asked. “He confirms this, and we might have something that could convict Galapagos.”

Astaire and I shared a glance. Ginger was ambitious, no doubt about it.

Still, knowing what I did about the man, the temptation to put him behind bars was strong. “We work this slowly,” I warned them. “No false moves. Galapagos is cunning. We have to make sure it sticks.”

Astaire nodded. “I kind of lost touch with the crew after we retired from that gig,” he said. “But no one’ll think twice of me wanting to relive a few memories. I’ll wire the ship, tell Forester to call me when they next get into port.”

Ginger nodded. “I’ll look into the Blake angle,” she decided. “See if I can work out how he managed to figure out what you two managed to overlook.”

Astaire and I shared another glance and let that go. This was in no way our finest moment. Not only had we failed to recognize a murder when it happened under our noses, but I’d gone and killed the only man who had figured out that the Markowitz’s deaths had not been suicides. It was not a good track record for us.

“I’ll play it cool,” I said, “and continue to investigate the Katherine Stokes angle. Something this big, Galapagos is probably keeping tabs on me to make sure I don’t find out too much.”

I stayed to see the photograph locked up in the station safe, then took my leave. I turned over the new developments on my walk home. *Play it cool*, I’d

said. Harder than you might imagine. I stumbled back to the apartment in a daze. My mind was racing at a mile a minute. I imagined that every second man was watching me. Suspicions drew tightly around me until I could feel them like a noose about my neck.

Somehow, I'd always known Dearinger would come back to haunt me.

I suppose it was the memory of that night that made me savage, because when I walked through my door and saw Day's delicate fingers trying to twist free of the muscular grip of the man pushing him against my wall, I didn't stop and check his credentials. Instead, I grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked him away.

Instead of coming face-to-face with one of Galapagos's trained monkeys like I'd expected, I found myself looking at Blake's glowering face, and then his fist. There wasn't time to dodge, so I hit it with my chin.

The force of that had me staggering back a step, and Blake, being young and cocky, thought he had me. He stepped in, and met eighteen years of hard labor under some of the hardest bastards that ever picked up a whip. I'm not proud of it, but I was no meaner than I had to be, and a few minutes later, the puppy picked himself up off my floor.

"You'll pay for this, Flint."

"Naturally. No such thing as a free lunch in this town."

"I'm no joke. Think you're smart—I'll show you." It seemed like Blake would not be buying me any drinks. He limped away, and I shut the door behind him. I drew a deep breath and turned to face Day.

He hadn't moved from the wall. His fists were white and shook, and he had a face on him like a kettle building to a rapid boil.

I forestalled the explosion. "I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Friday. When I walked in and saw him, I thought it was one of Galapagos's heavies putting the hard shoulder on you. I didn't recognize it was Blake until we were committed."

Day's mouth moved wordlessly. It was like he had so many things he wanted to say, he didn't know where to start. "You're apologizing to me?"

"Blake's not here to hear it, is he?" I stopped myself from stepping towards Day just in time. Last thing I wanted was to traumatize him further. Instead, I

planted myself firmly on the chair on one side of the coffee table. "I want you to make two cups of coffee. Heavy on the sugar in both of them."

Day escaped into the kitchen with alacrity.

Alone in the office, I took out a cigarette. My hand shook as I tried to light it. Damn, but I was a fool.

The time it took the percolator to boil was time enough for me to get my cool back and come up with a rough plan of action. I only hoped Day would go with it. He'd made the coffee in the kitchen and set the cups before me without ceremony.

"One of these is for you," I told him. "Sit on that sofa and drink it—and I mean *on* the sofa. We're going to talk man to man."

"Are we really?" Day sat stiffly on the sofa as if it pained him. He was rattled and then some if his time in the kitchen hadn't restored his composure.

Just as well. I needed to talk to him, not the act he put on for everyday consumption. "I mean it, Day. We need to get a few things clear and that's not gonna happen if we're not free to be honest with each other." I put out my cigarette and massaged my temples. "You met Blake while you were with Galapagos. He was kind to you, took an interest. I imagine you were at a pretty low point, and he helped you through it. That about right?"

"Watch your implications," Day warned. I had to applaud his grit. Not fifteen minutes after such a shock to his system, and he was telling me where to get off. Me, who was scarier than the Croc. "Blake's my *friend*."

"He's got to be more than that, Friday," I warned him. "For what he's got on the burner, you've got to be damned sure of him."

Day's fingers pressed against the edge of my coffee table with such force that his knuckles turned white. "What do you mean?"

"Blake has the Croc by his tail. He's blackmailing him, and you're helping. All the more power to both of you. Galapagos could stand to sweat a bit." I paused to draw from my cigarette. "Thing about crocodiles though, is that they're dangerous at both ends."

Day didn't comment.

"Blake was walking out with Katherine Stokes. He maintains he still is. I maintain that he's a—" I remembered just in time that Day was fond of the

man, or at least maintained that he was. "Maybe it's coincidence. Maybe Galapagos got sick of paying out and decided to send Blake the kind of message that strikes home. Maybe Blake didn't want to share his brand new cufflinks with his girlfriend. It's a very important maybe. You see?"

Day drew himself up magnificently. He should have been on stage. He could have re-enacted *Macbeth* solo, the way he looked daggers at me. "I choose to trust Blake," he said haughtily. "I'm not going to play games—"

"Does the pawn get a say in where he goes? You're not playing, you're being played, Day. When Galapagos searched the place, he wasn't looking for dirt on me. He was looking for your negative."

Day's eyes widened. He was starting to get it. "He knows—"

"He must have a pretty good idea," I said. Watching the fear grow with the understanding in Day's eyes made me feel sick, but if I didn't give it to him straight, who would? "As I figure it, Galapagos probably made a token attempt at shaking Blake up. Maybe that's what happened to Katherine. He wanted to see which way Blake would run when he rattled his cage." I looked to see if Day was following.

He was.

I continued. "Galapagos pays him off nice and quietly. Gives Blake enough time to start feeling secure. Then he starts looking closely at all of Blake's contacts within his house. Someone had to have given him the negative to start with."

"You're wrong there," Day cut in. "I never gave it to him. I don't even know what the picture's of."

"Why not?" I put out my cigarette. "That should have been your first move, Day."

"We can't all be dirty, rotten sneaks."

"Who knows? If everyone was a dirty, rotten sneak, either I'd be out of business entirely, or have so much I wouldn't know what to do with it. But that's hardly here nor there." The coffee had cooled enough it didn't scald me. I took a long sip, nodded towards Day's cup. "Drink. It'll do you good."

Surprisingly, he picked up his cup. By this stage, his fingers were nearly as white as the china cups, but he managed to steady his tremors so they were barely noticeable. "Go on."



"The picture's incriminating," I said. "But only to the right eyes. Blake had to be told about it by someone who knows what it means. Maybe you don't know that, but Galapagos can't be sure of that. All he knows is that Blake pays you a lot of attention, and that when he removes you from his service, Blake cares enough to make enquiries."

Day's coffee cup rattled in its saucer. He was going to chip it, or drop it entirely.

I stepped on and over the coffee table to take it from him. His hands latched onto my arm as I did. I don't think he was even aware that his nails dug into my skin.

"If I'd been home when his men had called—"

*I'll make what Mason's boys did to you look like a Sunday school picnic.*

I winced. "I'm sorry, Day."

"That's why you hit Blake. You were expecting to see—" Day looked up at me. It said a lot for his depth of character that still reeling from such a shock to his system, the gears of his internal system were still wheeling. After a moment he relaxed his death grip on my shirt. "How do you know what the photograph is of?"

His suspicion hurt but it was all I deserved. I felt old, suddenly. Older than I had any right to be. "Because I've seen it."

Day started back. "You—when did you—?"

"Last night," I said. "While you were doing the laundry." I took the negative out of my wallet and slid it over the table to him.

Day stood up very fast. "You had no right," he said. "None at all, to snoop around—" He began to call me every name he knew.

It seemed like it might be therapeutic for him. I listened, and wished I was drinking something stronger than the coffee.

Most of names had been applied to me before, but a few were new. I stopped him when he started to get repetitive. "Drink your coffee. You need the sugar." I waited until he did as I told him. "Better?"

"A little," Day said. "But I still think you're a low-minded crook."

I snorted at that. "Maybe I am," I said. "But I'm a low-minded crook who wants to look out for you. Let's talk about Blake. What's he offering you?"

Day didn't want to tell me.

I cast aspersions against Blake's character.

Eventually, Day couldn't resist correcting me. "For your information," he said. "Blake's designs on my person are all perfectly above board. He's going to use the money he makes off Galapagos to buy me from him."

Poor Day. He hadn't learned a thing from the Barcelona incident.

"Is he now?" I lit a fresh cigarette. "How's his fancy new cufflinks fit into that plan?"

Day was silent. So he'd noticed the cufflinks, too.

I patted his knee. "There's also the *Carmen* angle to consider."

"The *Carmen* angle?"

"Katherine Stokes's perfume. She's a *Carmen* lady." It felt wrong, building Day up just to break him down again. "You smelt it before because Blake spent time with her. Time they didn't spend walking out."

Day looked at me with dislike. "When I said you were a low-minded crook before, I was being generous," he shot back. "But so what. It's fine with me if Blake has girlfriends."

That gave me pause. His reaction when I'd come home wearing second-hand perfume hadn't been so forgiving—and he didn't even like me. "Is it?"

Day didn't meet my eyes, but his mouth got thinner. "If anything, it's an—advantage."

I saw his line of reasoning, and I wished I hadn't been so quick to drink my coffee. It rested uneasily on my twisting stomach. I wasn't imagining it. Day was afraid of Blake's advances. "You're not fond of him."

Day's smile was grim. It reminded me a little too much of the last-ditch expression on the face of the soldiers I'd seen marching off to fill Northern graves. "No," he said. "But I think in time, I could be. Blake promised—he'll give me time."

Is that what he was doing with me—learning to fake it?

I dismissed the thought. Day was not faking his situation. It took him both hands to lift the coffee cup to his mouth, and even then, the cup still shook.

"You're taking a risk," I told him. "A big risk."

"You don't understand," Day said. "I have to." He was talking rapidly now, like he'd reached the limit of his endurance and couldn't hold the words in anymore. "Galapagos says keeping me around sours the mood of his parties, but no one decent wants to shell out the money he wants. Everyone in his circle knows my reputation. I'm damaged goods."

It hurt me to see him like that, but I wasn't sure a hand would be appreciated, not with the story he was telling me. "From what I heard, your reputation does you credit."

Day didn't smile. "There's some of Galapagos's guests who saw my bad experience and liked it," he said, his hands clutched tightly around the coffee cup. "One who liked it so much he wants to see it again. If I don't cure me—" He came to a halt, unable to face that eventuality in words.

I could fill in the gaps. This time I did reach out and put my hand over his. "You're not going back to Galapagos," I told him. "I said that, and I meant it."

Day's eyes met mine without flinching. "You said yourself the papers are forged," he said. "He can take me back anytime he wants."

Curse the man. I'd not considered that aspect of it.

"Galapagos said when he sent me here that he was going to get his money's worth one way or another. So you see," Day explained. "It's got to be Blake."

I took out another cigarette. It was the last in the pack. I was going to miss it later when I didn't have a smoke, but right then it was that or a drink. Day's situation required a sober head. "All right. Let's talk about Blake."

Day listened carefully as I laid out my objections. Now that he'd spilled his feelings, I got the impression that he was giving what I said actual thought.

I tried as hard as I could to make him see the sense of my words. "If you're gonna build a future around a man," I said. "Then it's in your best interests—and his—that you know as much about him beforehand. How you gonna support Blake if you don't know where he's weak?"

"Listen to you," Day said. "You almost sound like you have a heart in there."

"None of your lip," I told him. "I got a reputation to think of."

Day smirked at me like he knew better. "What's your plan?"

"My plan?"

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“You got a look in your eye like you’re cooking something.”

I rolled the cigarette around in my fingers. “Matter of fact, I am,” I said. “I don’t mind adding my signature to that certificate you brought me for real. Or to adding my mark to a certificate Blake might happen to bring me—providing he proves himself first.”

Day looked at me sharply. “Proves himself?”

“Give him the negative,” I said. “That’s what he was here for, wasn’t it? Hand it over and if he sticks around, I’ll know he’s a keeper. If he doesn’t—” I shrugged. “You got some insurance of your own. Neither Blake or Galapagos know you have a copy.”

Instead of the spirited counter attack that I expected, Day was silent. His gaze went from the negative to where he’d been pressed up against the wall by Blake. He bit his lip.

Lighter halfway to cigarette, I paused. “Don’t tell me he was trying to force it from you—”

Day’s reaction was more immediate than convincing. “I have had it with your insinuations! Blake will prove himself—and you’ll have to eat your words! Wait and see!”

We spent the next half hour, working over what line we’d take before landing on something that satisfied both of us. Day outdid himself over the telephone, delivering a performance that would have made many a silver screen star eat his heart out. Hearing Day recount my various cruelties and the terrors he feared at my hands should I discover the negative was enough to turn even me against myself. No surprise then that Blake agreed to meet Day to collect the negative in a park nearby the apartment on his lunch break.

“Want to join us? You can lurk in the bushes and everything. I imagine you’ll feel right at home there,” Day said to let me know that everything had gone to plan.

I declined his generous offer. “I can spy on you all right from afar,” I said. “Besides, I’m sure you don’t want me cramping your style.”

“Jealous?” Day had his arms folded, hips jutting out at a provocative angle. He had never looked better.

I realized with a jolt that I would miss him.

Blake definitely laid it on thick when he came to collect from Friday. He did the sensitive boyfriend bit well. So well, in fact, that I was forced to question myself. Was I being overly harsh on the man?

I had a clear view of the action from the second floor bistro next to the park. The carved wooden paneling and paned windows of the pre-war building evoked a simpler, more idealistic time, but did nothing for my current peace of mind.

Day glowed with the attention, and if he froze up a little when Blake drew him in to kiss him, he quickly changed his mind and kissed back. Their ability to not come up for air would have made even a seasoned diver jealous. I did my best to think of a synonym for immaculate that had five letters, but I have to admit that there was very little in the way of crossword done until Blake put his tie straight and walked out of the park.

A few minutes later, Day sashayed over to join me at my window table, looking very much like that cat in the old proverb.

"We're out of cream," I told him.

He shrugged as he sat down. "I'll take my coffee straight. Were you trying to create a tobacco cloud in here for cover? It's suffocating."

If he was that bold, he had to be pretty pleased with Blake's comportment. I folded my paper in half and tossed it down onto the table. "All good?"

"He's gonna make you an offer tonight." No wonder Day was pleased.

"So soon?" I reminded myself it was for the best. With what I knew about Galapagos, the sooner Day was somewhere safe, the better.

"He's got to drop in on his bank, see about a loan."

I snorted. "Day, how much are you asking?"

He told me.

"Don't you like the man? What you want to bankrupt him for?"

"That's very generous," Day told me haughtily. "You have no idea how the market works. Besides, if you don't ask a good price for me, how will he know I'm worth his time?"

"He has eyes, doesn't he? And ears?"

Day blinked at me and his face took on an odd look, kind of like he was trying to work out if I knew what I'd said. "All right," he said at last. "You can accept up to twenty percent off—but any more than that, and it's no-sale."

I shook my head as I stood, placing the coins for our coffees on the table. "Pride in himself is a good quality in a man," I said. "But I got to wonder about you, Day."

Maybe Day had a point about his price tag. He proved his quality as soon as we returned to the apartment. Your typical slave who has made arrangements to leave his master wouldn't think of anything but of prepping himself to make the best impression for the new guy. Day, on the other hand, went to work cleaning my apartment with gusto. Maybe my dig at his asking price had annoyed his pride, as he seemed determined to prove that he was worth every dime Blake paid. The bed was made, the laundry done, the bathroom scrubbed, all the things in my office put in order. Finally, he applied himself to giving the kitchen a cleaning the likes of which it had not seen in years.

"You're out of eggs, cream and butter," he noted as he came to crouch at my feet, prior to receiving dinner. "The coffee's in the cupboard above the sink. Except for the cream, I've put all the coffee things together so it'll be easy for you to make it yourself."

"I have to hand it to you, Day," I said. "You've done a good job."

Day picked at the edge of his sarong. "I'm sorry about dinner."

"Cream has a tendency to separate like that. Still tastes all right." I passed down the plate.

"I know, but even so. I wanted it to be perfect."

"Look around you, Day. You see anything here that's perfect? Good enough is just fine." I took out my wallet, and unfolded a crumpled five-dollar note. "For emergencies," I said. "Anything happens, you can call me."

Day hesitated. He was trying to decide if I was taking pity on him.

I helped him out. "Or you can just call," I said. "Let me know just how wrong I was about Blake. I wouldn't be in the detective business if I weren't somewhat curious."

Day smirked and took the note. "You're not at all what I expected," he said. "And I know I wasn't what you wanted, but you've been decent to me. I won't forget that."

I reached out to stroke his hair. "That means a lot, Day." I wanted to tell him I was sorry I'd called him a diva, and that I knew his strength, but somehow the words stuck in my throat. That was no good for my reputation.

"There's a part of me that wishes that I'd met you before I met Blake. I might have liked being your assistant."

Despite myself, I snorted. "You could never be sweet on a hack like me."

"Maybe not," Day agreed. "You're not the sort of man that people get sweet on. But if things had been different, I think I could have been seriously hung up on you."

What did you say to that?

I remembered that I was out of cigarettes and walked down to the store to get a pack. When I got back, Day had cleared away the dinner things and was picking through the pages of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. I took out my crossword and we waited for Blake.

Blake was taking his time.

I glanced at my wristwatch. "Past seven," I said. "He's had time to visit the bank—and to stop by a pawn shop to put his lovely new cufflinks in hock."

"Maybe he's had an event job on short notice," Day said. "He'll call. You'll see."

Spending an evening waiting for the sound of Blake's footstep on my stairs, or his voice over my phone was not my idea of a good time. Day didn't enjoy it either. His attempts at reading got more and more half-hearted until eventually he closed the book entirely.

"I'm a little tired," he said. "I'm going to lie down. I want to be fresh when Blake arrives."

"You do that," I said. I waited until he'd shut the door behind him before I took out the new pack of cigarettes. I didn't like this. I didn't like it at all.

Minutes stretched by. After enough of them passed, they became hours. After several of those accumulated, it started to be late. It was already dark, but when the lights started going off in the buildings around us, I looked at my watch.

It was now past midnight and Blake hadn't called.

Time to face facts. I went over to where Day had set his suitcase so trustingly by the door and I picked it up.

Day sat up groggily as I carried it into the bedroom. He wasn't alone on his cot, he had company in the form of my bottle of medicinal whiskey. Maybe he'd been taking it medicinally. Maybe he'd not wanted to face the minutes as they went by without Blake. Maybe he just wanted out. Whatever the cause, there wasn't enough left in the bottle to salvage.

I took it off him anyway. Drinking from the bottle is not the mark of good company.

"Right," I said, putting the suitcase back in its usual position against the wall. "Let's talk."

Day's fist caught me unawares. It didn't slam into my chest with enough force to damage me, but I was surprised enough not to object to the next one. Day was after a reaction, however, and he figured he'd have a better chance of getting one by changing tactics. I did object to his taking hold of my shirt and ripping it apart so hard the buttons went flying.

"What wrong has that shirt done you?" I caught his hand.

"I don't care!" Day raked the nails of his free hand across my bare skin. "I hate him, I hate you, I hate everybody in this entire stinking city! You can all just rot in hell!"

My grip wasn't that tight, but he hadn't even tried to tug free. I got it then. Day was hurting and he needed someone to blame for it. Galapagos had hurt him. Blake had hurt him. I hadn't hurt him yet but the sooner he got that out of the way, the sooner he could get on to hating me.

"None of that," I said, letting go of his hand with a warning squeeze. "You're only going to get yourself hurt."

I hadn't been gentle, but there was no sign of doubt in his eyes. Day had passed fear, come out the other side. "Maybe that's what I want." He swung at me again, and I made up my mind.

Day grunted as I wrestled him onto the bed. He fought like a little wildcat, all teeth and claws under his perfect exterior, but I was older, meaner and heavier. He couldn't shake me off as I twisted his arms behind his back and secured them there with my belt.



I watched him struggle against the belt a minute to be sure he couldn't get free and then I left him.

I walked through the cloud of tobacco smoke in my office and poured myself a glass of water in the kitchen. What I really wanted was the bourbon in my desk, but one of us had to keep a clear head, and it wasn't going to be Day. I opened the kitchen window, and drank in the cool night air and thought about Bella and her advice. After about a half hour, I put down the glass and went back to the bedroom.

Being tied up tends to have a sobering effect. Day looked like he'd been crying, but he'd composed himself into a pretty good approximation of calm. He sat in the middle of the bed, arms still locked behind him, and glared as I returned.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't hate you any less, if that's what you're wondering."

"I was curious." I climbed onto the bed behind him, placed a hand on his neck.

He shivered, but didn't flinch. I guess he'd come to his own conclusions about what to expect from a hack like me who held him tight enough to bruise.

It stung a little that he thought so little of me, but I reminded myself that it wasn't the time to take it personally. Day needed to know what he was worth before he threw himself away. And for that, he needed a master worthy of him.

All he had was me.

I have to admit that my throat was dry. I'm usually pretty free with my words, but I couldn't think of a way to put it. Day was angry. Why not? He'd been given a poor deal by Galapagos, by Blake, and by me. Where did you even begin to make that up with words?

I planted my lips against the back of his neck in apology, and that's when it hit me. Blake had told Day he was worth something with pretty words and meaningless promises. I could show Day he was worth something without saying a word.

I kissed a path across his shoulder. Day didn't say anything, but I felt him shift uneasily. Anger and hurt he was braced for, but he didn't know how to meet gentleness.

I went extra soft, just for that. Deliberately slow, making sure to give loving attention to every inch of him, as I rounded his shoulder and knelt before him. Day was too stubborn to say it in words, but I got an indication of his shift in mood by the change in his breathing and the soft pink glow in his cheeks. He held himself back from anything but the odd surprised gasp as my tongue probed new territory. His body might have been with me, but mentally Day was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I decided to help him out and speed things along a bit. I coaxed Day out of his sitting position and got him kneeling before me, his thighs spread. I kissed my way down his length, drawing another soft exclamation from him. My guess that his previous partners had found his size disconcerting seemed to be on the money. I'm far from polished at it, but Day's moan as I took him in my throat made me feel like a goddamned champion.

Day didn't trust me enough to move, but I pushed his resolve to its utmost. His little moans became longer and more urgent, alternating between needy gasps and pleased cries that might have been words. He held back as long as he could, but using all the tricks at my disposal, I succeeded in pushing him over the edge.

I stroked his hair as he regained his breath. He didn't quite meet my eyes, but I saw his gaze drop to the erection visible through my pants. A knowing look crossed his face.

My cock ached, but I ignored it as I reached for him again. This was no simple tit-for-tat exchange. This was all about Day's needs.

He lifted his face to mine, but I didn't let him kiss me. Instead I used my tongue to wash away the salty tear tracks that still lingered. Not a trace of Blake was to remain, I vowed, working my way down once more. I paid special attention to the scar on his arm. If I could replace the memory of that night with more pleasant associations, then it would be all worth it.

As I continued my work, Day realized that I was putting his pleasure above my own. That was the turning point. He arched up unreservedly under my ministrations, no longer hiding his reactions. Then he began telling me. "More." "There." "Please." "I want—" When I took him back into my mouth, he did not hold back, thrusting shallowly with breathless abandon that made it impossible not to want to give him more.

This time, I let him kiss me. He wanted affection as much as the sexual satisfaction. I'm not good with the first, but I stroked his hair, and let him lean

against me. I lifted my arm around him, and found the hook of the belt between my fingers. Time to free his arms?

Day forestalled me by lying down. Before I'd realized what he was about, his mouth fastened over my neglected cock. My aching need was only barely kept in check already, and I pushed him back more roughly than I intended. "None of that, Day."

He looked up at me with wide eyes. "Don't you want me?"

"I'm not exactly flying this flag for anyone else."

Day licked his lips. "Then why—?"

I tugged at the belt as a reminder. "I'm not the master you want, Day, but I'm the master you have. I told you, I'm not sending you back to Galapagos, even if you don't pay your way with sexual favors."

"I don't understand."

I bent down to kiss his forehead, brushing his hair back to reveal his eyes. "Don't overthink it, Day. Try to feel it."

His mouth fell half-open in puzzlement. I took advantage of that to steal inside. He was pliable, giving at my touch, and he let me press him back down onto the bed without another word.

He trembled as I stroked him to hardness a third time. "Boss, please. I want—I need to feel you inside me."

His words spoke straight to my straining erection, and I struggled to play it cool. "You're sure about that?"

"So sure." Day jerked up into my hand. "Just thinking about it—I want your weight above me, your hands gripping my hips, your cock filling me... Please, Boss!"

He made a pretty strong case.

Day rolled over to watch as I eased myself out of my shirt and trousers. The attention he paid as I slicked myself was pointed enough that I felt confident that his need was unfeigned. "Ready?"

"Please." Day knelt on the bed, legs wide apart, spreading himself for me. He certainly looked the part, but I listened to his breathing as I knelt between his legs, and felt for his arousal before I pushed inside.

If Day's skin had felt good against me, it was nothing to being buried entirely inside him. His heat, his muscles, tight yet willing to give way for me, that illicit moan as he experimented with the feel of me inside... He felt so good that he should have been illegal.

I was in serious trouble.

"Yes, that's it—" Day immediately tried to press back against me.

I gave him a warning slap on his rear. "I move when I'm ready," I told him, and he obediently stilled.

Just as well. Another thrust like that, and I'd have come then and there. My erection was making up for the earlier neglect and then some.

We progressed slowly, more because every little thing Day did drove me dangerously close to the edge than out of concern for his comfort. He was no longer shy in letting me know what he wanted, and I fancied that he thought my frequent stops an exercise in slow torture. It was, but not for the reasons he thought. I just prayed I could last long enough to give Day what he needed.

When Day tightened around me in an effort to speed things up, I trapped him against the bed and held him still with a force that shocked us both.

"I warned you," I said to mask my surprise. "Do I need to make myself clearer?"

"No, Boss."

"Good." To show him I wasn't actually angry, I leaned over to stroke his cheek. "You want something, ask for it."

Day leaned into my touch, eager as a housecat. "Boss, please. I want—"

"Out with it."

"I want you to come inside me."

He almost got his wish right then. "Inside you?" I repeated dumbly.

"Please? I know I'm not the slave you want—"

I crushed him against the bed as I kissed him roughly. "You're my slave," I told him. "And as long as you're my slave, you are wanted. You got that?"

"Yes, Boss."

I helped him back onto his knees. "Ready for me?"

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“Please, Boss.”

I didn't last very long after that, but that was okay—Day beat me to it anyway. He smiled at me beatifically as I released his arms and hung my belt over the headboard.

“I don't mind so much Blake being all wrong now,” he said. “Because you're all right.”

I snorted, lifting up the bedspread so that I could climb in. “You don't just take the cake, Day. You steal the tablecloth too. Where are you going? You're sleeping with me tonight.”

I was still doubting the wisdom of my decision but the alacrity with which Day curled up against me made me think that maybe I'd done all right.

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## Chapter 7

When I woke, I was alone in the bed.

I sat up and smoothed my hair out of my eyes. My gaze fell on the empty spot by the wall. Something should have been there but wasn't. I frowned at the wall a long moment, and then it hit me. Day's suitcase was gone.

Time slowed down. For a long moment, the cars on the street outside, the chatter of slaves in the courtyard behind the apartment, the rest of the morning went on without me. I stayed behind, stuck on the fact that Day's suitcase was gone.

I took out a cigarette but the damned thing wouldn't stay still for me to light it. It was only belatedly that I realized my hand was shaking and I threw the cigarette down.

Some detective I was. Couldn't see what was right under my nose till it was gone.

My ears registered the faint sound of the front door being carefully shut. Galapagos back to make another point? Or was this a termination of his account? At that moment, I could not find it in me to care whether the Croc had sent me a calling card or a bullet.

It was only after a few minutes passed and no one burst through my door with a gun that I got curious. I shrugged on my bathrobe and went to take a look.

Day was at the coffee percolator. He glanced back over his shoulder at me, blue eyes shy beneath the golden fringe of his hair. "I was trying not to wake you. I wanted this to be a surprise."

I joined him at the counter, laying my hand on his arm. "I'm certainly surprised."

Day turned immediately, leaning against my chest like he belonged there. Only then did the weight that had been lying over me since I noticed the missing suitcase lift. "I had to borrow cream from next door. I forgot we were out, and Pa opens late on Tuesdays."

I stroked Day's hair. "Next door," I said thoughtfully. "He's a security guard, she sings in a choir?"

“Mm.” If Day had been any more content, he would have started purring. “Anyway, Marcel, who does for them borrowed an egg yesterday, so it works out.”

“Didn’t take you long to make friends.” I nodded towards a brown paper bag on the bench. “Marcel also loan you the pastries?”

“That was supposed to be a surprise!” Day batted my hands away from the bag. “Look, just go back to bed and let me wait on you!”

That was no way to talk to a Master. I had never been prouder of Day. “Yes, sir.” I paused in the doorway. “What’d you do with your suitcase?”

“It’s under the bed. I can move it if you’d like, but I thought if I was staying, I didn’t need to be looking at it all the time.”

Some detective. “Leave it where it is, Day.”

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Day’s idea of breakfast in bed didn’t end at coffee and pastry from the bakery down the road. It was approaching lunchtime by the time I next saw my office. Day sat at my feet with *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, as I took out my notebook and made a few calls.

I owed Bull another debt. I hadn’t been his only slave. Neither had I been the only slave to take a dislike to the man. He wasn’t kind on his underlings, and me and his other slaves had our revenge by ripping his slow drawl to pieces after he’d locked us in the stables for the night. Misery and frustration had polished our impersonations; mine had been especially good and stuck with me even now. The slave I’d made friends with at the photography shop answered the phone, but she didn’t recognize me.

“I’m sorry, sir. Mr. Blake isn’t in yet.”

I did my best to ignore Day’s stare. “Could you tell me what time I might expect him? You don’t know? Well, thank you kindly.” I replaced the receiver.

“What was that?”

“The accent or the call?”

“Both. But mainly the accent.”

I snorted. “Did I mention Bull owned a dude ranch? He lived life like it was a Sunset Carson flick. Heavy on the whip, heavy on the drink, just plain heavy.”

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Day considered this. "And Blake?"

I let my hand rest on the top of his head. "Like it or not, he's connected to whatever business got Katherine Stokes in trouble. I have to follow up. If you'd rather not be here when I do—"

Day shook his head resolutely. "I'd rather know the worst."

"That's the way." I patted him on the head again before picking up the phone for the next call, this time to the apartment block that Blake lived in. "He's not home," I said as I set the phone down. "Doorman said he didn't come home at all the night previous."

"You think that's odd?"

"I would have thought he'd at least take a suitcase," I said. "But that's not to say he might not have one waiting in a locker at the station." Though Blake hadn't known that Day would hand over the negatives when he'd left for work the previous day. He would have had to work fast to set up a meeting with Galapagos and get the money—perhaps he'd felt that speed outweighed stopping to pack and had opted to quit the city at once?

I still wasn't entirely easy. My fingers walked right back over to the telephone. "Ginger? Fred. You have yesterday's bulletins handy? I'm longing for some news of our friend Blake." I paused as Ginger helped herself to the record book. "Mid-twenties, black-haired, brown-eyed, last seen wearing a gray suit with a blue tie."

"Blake got impatient with Galapagos, decided to turn to a new get rich quick scheme?"

"Didn't go home last night or turn up for work this morning. I want to check that my missing person case is still in the singular."

"Give that here—" A familiar voice intruded in the background and a moment later Astaire greeted me belligerently. "You decided to cut out the middleman, just like that? Flint, I'm wounded."

"Astaire, you ham. We both know you don't got a soft spot to wound."

"This is how you repay me—me, who got you started in this business! Just for that, I've got half a mind not to tell you what we found out about Forrester's new wardrobe."

I paused. "New wardrobe?"



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“He was last seen wearing a pine overcoat.”

I choked. “Dead?”

“As the proverbial doornail. All of his effects were auctioned off by his family.”

“You’re kidding me. Galapagos?”

“Nothing so’s you could point a finger at him, but he was in the general area at the right time.”

I laughed without feeling the humor of it. “That teaches me to go around saving lives. What’s that bring his total to—three on that voyage alone?”

“Four. Dearinger wasn’t your fault, Fred,” Astaire said loyally. “Hang on, Ginger’s got something for you. Don’t be a stranger.”

Ginger was to the point. “Man of Blake’s description was picked up and taken to the Westward Hospital last night.”

I whistled. “Bruised?”

“Badly. Wouldn’t say who or why, but on the advice of the doctor, the hospital kept him overnight. You leave now, you should just about catch him.”

“Got it. Tell Astaire I appreciate him letting me use his car.” I hung up.

Day fetched my jacket without being asked to. “What’s happened?” he asked. “Who is dead?”

“The man Blake got his camera from,” I told him. “Blake’s in the hospital. From the sounds of things someone—or some three, more likely—worked him over pretty badly last night.”

Day’s mouth opened in a soft gasp. “Was he—?”

Injured badly? Maybe badly enough that he hadn’t been able to call on us as planned?

“I don’t know,” I told Day. “But I’m gonna find out.”

“I’m coming, too,” Day said determinedly.

I didn’t argue with him. I figured that he had the right. It was his future suddenly in doubt again.

Blake's face looked better bruised and swathed in bandages. The purple swelling really did something for his eyes. I felt that he could benefit from a few more bruises, but from the exclamation Day gave upon stepping through the ward door, I was alone in my opinion.

"Blake!" Day fluttered over to his bedside like an anxious moth. "What has the Croc done to you?"

"Pretty? What are you—" Blake caught sight of me, coughed and tried to draw himself into a sitting position.

I leaned against the doorway in a way that hopefully indicated that I had no immediate interest in adding to his injuries. "Just paying a social call."

Blake glared at me, then turned his attention to Day. He smoothed Day's hair out of his eyes. "I'm all right. The doctor says it's all superficial injuries. I'll be fit to leave in an hour or two—"

"You handed over the negative then," I noted.

Blake's mouth got very thin. "What choice did I have?" he said. "Galapagos's boys were waiting for me outside work. They took me across town to 'talk.' When I was not communicative, they switched to other means of communication. I guess I was knocked out because I woke up here without it."

That was Day's cue to break the good news about our copy of the photo. He didn't. Instead he brushed his fingers over Blake's cheek. "That doesn't matter. Without the negative, Galapagos has nothing against you. The important thing is that you're going to be all right."

From Blake's expression, he shared my opinion on the dubiousness of Day's reasoning. If I were him, I would be looking to change addresses at the first opportunity.

I didn't really want to stay and watch him and Day make up. Fortunately for me, I didn't have to.

A hand tugged at my shoulder, and I turned to see one of the hospital candy strippers at my elbow. "You're Flint? There's a woman on the phone for you, a Miss Stokes? Says it's urgent."

I took the call in the hospital office. "I don't know why you bothered to hire a detective, Miss Stokes. To track me down here you must have used considerable skill."

“Just luck that the nearest station to your office was the one that knew you,” Anna said. Her tone sounded forced. “Mr. Flint, this is urgent. I got a call from Katherine.”

“In the flesh?”

“She sounded scared, but it was definitely her. She told me that Galapagos has been keeping her prisoner in a warehouse—oh, it’s horrible!”

I lifted a pen and paper off the desk nearby, ignoring the glares of the office slaves. “She still there? What did she give you by way of locatable details?”

I had to revise my opinion of Katherine. The bottle-blond, despite having terrible choice of co-conspirators, had pulled it out of the bag this time. She’d managed to narrow down the neighborhood and type of warehouse she’d been hidden in. “I know the place.” I paused. “You’re *sure* it was your sister?”

“Mr. Flint, I know it was Katherine. I’ll pay all expenses—just help her, please!”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible,” I promised, and put down the phone.

“New developments?”

I looked up to see that Day had joined me in the hall. I was surprised to see him. I’d thought he seemed pretty intent on playing nurse with Blake. I folded the paper with the address into my pocket. “Tell you about it in the car,” I said. Not only were the hospital slaves all ears, but Blake had made his way out of bed to glare at us.

Day mulled over my information in the passenger seat. “So Katherine’s alive. That’s good news, isn’t it?”

“Right. And if a thing is too good to be true—”

“It probably is,” Day frowned. “That certainly fits with your suspicious way of thinking about people.”

“I don’t like the set up,” I said. “The warehouse is right in the middle of Mason’s territory. Galapagos has nerve, but nerve enough to hide a girl right under the nose of a man with no love for him?”

Day was silent. I glanced over to see that he’d gone pale. Shit—I’d not thought of that.

“Whether it’s a set-up or not, Miss Stokes is our client, and it’s important to her that I show up at this warehouse. I’m going to go. You stay here, keep an eye on Blake.”

Day still looked pale, but he didn't glance once towards the hospital where Blake was no doubt glaring at us from behind the shades. At last, he shook his head. "I'm going with you," he said firmly. "I'm not merely ornamental. You can't put me on a shelf and think I'll stay there."

I wasn't sure what use he expected to be to me, but I figured that maybe he needed the closure to complete his healing. "You're sure about this, Day? I won't hold staying here against you." I nodded towards the hospital. "Your young man will hold coming with me against you."

"I'm sure." Day's mouth was set. "Maybe Blake meant to front last night. Maybe he didn't. The fact is that he wasn't there, and you were."

I started the engine. "You didn't tell Blake that we had the negative developed."

"I've been hanging around you too long. I'm catching your nasty, suspicious habits."

I smirked. Leave it to Day.

The mood wasn't particularly chatty as we drove across town. Something about the situation rubbed me the wrong way. Day seemed preoccupied with the past, especially as we turned off the main streets towards the old industrial districts, and the men we drove past on the sidewalk stopped wearing ties, and started wearing overalls. His fingers found the scar on his arm and settled there.

The neighborhood that the warehouse was in had seen better days. The outside of the wooden shed was festooned with graffiti in three different languages, a testament to the drive of the city's business leaders: Atlanta, the city too busy taking your money to care what color you were.

There was a car a discreet distance from the warehouse, almost hidden by the disused holding pens. I'd seen it before.

Day recognized it, too. "Galapagos."

I parked the car a few buildings down. The warehouse was one of several, all in a similar state of abandonment, with bare sunbaked dirt between them. There was not another person to be seen.

"You stay in the car."

"Not a chance. If Galapagos is prowling around out there, I want to stick with you."

I could not fault Day's taste. We approached the warehouse directly, though I made Day keep a safe distance behind me, with strict instructions to run first, ask questions later should anything occur. I wasn't sure that he intended to listen, but he waited until I motioned for him to enter the warehouse after me.

"What is this place? A torture chamber?" Day looked over the cavernous interior with a shudder. A metal pulley system was set up from the ceiling, a long U-shape, dotted with unpleasantly sharp hooks at regular intervals. The concrete floor was stained, and there was a decidedly unpleasant odor that clung to the entire place, equal parts blood, dung and fear.

"Slaughterhouse," I said. "That explains the lack of houses."

Our voices echoed alarmingly. I looked around for something more intimate. There was an enclosed concrete square against one wall with a door that wheeled shut. I pointed it out to Day.

"Looks like the freezer. Anyone shut in there would have a hard time getting out."

"And that's where you want to go."

"It's the obvious place to start." So obvious it hurt. "Stay here," I told Day, and went to take a look.

The first thing I noticed was the smell of perfume. *Carmen*, of course. It's the sort of scent that a little goes a long way. This one went all the way through the interior of the freezer. Someone had broken a bottle of it, and it was strong enough that it was all we could smell.

Either Katherine Stokes had been here or someone was really anxious to convince us that she had been. There was a third possibility that occurred to me as I glanced down at the floor of the freezer.

I knew from my years on Bull's ranch that cattle and hay went together like beans and cornbread—even in the slaughterhouse where it was less about feeding the beasts than it was cleaning up after them. It would be lining the stalls that held the cattle.

The warehouse we'd walked through was strictly concrete, easily hosed down at the end of the day. No hay on that floor. There might have been some leftover in the holding stalls outside. But there was no reason for it to be in the freezer—unless someone had put it there expressly for a different purpose.

As my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, I caught sight of a large shape on the floor. It was a mattress and some empty cans of food. Not enough to feed a woman for a week, but I guess we were supposed to imagine Katherine Stokes had been mistreated.

She had been badly treated, all right, though not in the way the cans suggested.

She was lying on her side in the straw to the side of the mattress, her pretty blonde head at an odd angle to the rest of her. Instead of the cocktail dress of the bar she was rented out too, or the sarong that should have been her daily uniform, she wore a skirt-suit too broad for her.

I knelt down to take her pulse from force of habit. My hand came away bloody and warm. Recently dead. Head wound caused by a blunt object. There was an axe handle in the straw nearby, the right size and weight. I knew better than to touch it, or the delicate revolver that glittered in the light from the door. The heavy smell of Carmen mixed with the cloying blood and the straw, and it made me sick.

“Who’s that? Is it Miss Stokes?”

“Day, go back to the car.”

Day did not go back to the car. He did the opposite in fact, coming to join me in the back of the freezer. “Katherine—she’s dead?”

I couldn’t blame him. Death has a compelling aspect that gets in deep. I just wished he’d had better timing. “Day, I told you to go back—”

As I stood to meet Day, my gaze fell on the area behind the door. We weren’t alone with Katherine Stokes.

“You got some nerve, Galapagos. Offing my mark is no way to return a favor.”

“What can I say? I’m not in the business of doing favors.” Galapagos shrugged even as he sidled towards the door, wary as a circling dog.

Day skittered back in alarm at the voice. I was wondering what the odds of me reaching Galapagos before he got to the door when Day spotted the revolver and snatched it up.

“Freeze!” It’s a common habit amongst amateurs. Come up against a situation they’ve only seen in the pictures, they start talking straight out of a

screenplay. Day was no different, brandishing the gun with the certainty of someone who knows they are the hero of this matinee show. "You're not getting away this time!"

It was a fascinating performance. Too bad that reality had to interject.

"Day, put the gun down."

"But we have him red-handed and everything! He's just going to get away to go on to hurt more people—"

"I know, Day. But you have to put the gun down." As he didn't seem in any hurry to obey, I clarified. "That's an order."

"But—"

"Do it, Day."

Day didn't look my way, but I saw the tension in his shoulders as he remembered everything he'd suffered at the man's hands. I watched as he weighed revenge and my order and finally—unbelievably—set the gun down. I stepped forward and drew him back from it before he could reconsider.

Galapagos smiled his crocodile smile at us. When I'd stepped forward to seize Day, he'd gained the doorway. "That's twice now you've saved my life, Harry."

"Shame on me," I agreed. "There won't be a third."

Galapagos felt for the door behind him. "On that we agree. I'll pour a libation in your honor."

"I hope you choke on it."

Galapagos didn't bother with a response. He didn't need one. The slam of the freezer door behind him followed by the heavy click as it shut was the only retort he needed.

"Why did you stop me?" Day demanded immediately. "I had him."

"You had nothing." God, did I want a cigarette.

"Sure I've never held a gun before but at that range? No way I could have missed!"

I reached for Day's hand. "What do you smell?" I asked him as kindly as I could manage.

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“Only that awful *Carmen*.”

“*Carmen*’s a cheap perfume, like I said. Something like seventy percent ethanol. Rubbing alcohol,” I clarified as Day frowned at me. “They use it as a solvent. Highly flammable, but that’s generally not a problem unless you have it in high quantities.”

High quantities like the amount tipped over the straw surrounding us.

Day looked down. “This is a trap—”

“This is purely speculation,” I said. “But before Anna called us, Katherine might have called Galapagos. She hinted that she had something he wanted and that he should come alone to collect it. Our sister act sets up the welcome mat. All going to plan, Galapagos makes his way into the freezer, the girls shut the door on him and the scene is set for us to arrive.”

Day looked back to the door of the freezer. “And when we opened the door—”

“Galapagos takes it that I was the one to set this up, fires. Or maybe I take advantage of this toy they left us and fire on him. This mess ignites, taking with it two people who do not leave the world any poorer by their absence, and any evidence that Katherine Stokes was not held prisoner here for a week.” I looked down at the dead girl. “It’s too bad we won’t get to hear her cover story. I bet she worked real hard on it.”

“How can you be so callous?” Day demanded. He seemed pretty upset. “They wanted to kill you!”

“It’s not the first time,” I assured him. “I told you to wait in the car.”

Day’s needle seemed to be stuck in the groove. “No,” he said. “They wanted—”

I was ready when he sagged. I caught him by his arm, dragged him over to the far wall, away from the corner where Katherine Stokes was getting colder. “Put this on,” I said, shrugging out of my jacket. “There’s a handkerchief in the pocket. Wrap that over your mouth.”

There were wooden boxes stacked against the walls. I located a rake behind one, began sweeping the straw out of the way, making a clear pathway towards the door. Once Day realized what I was doing, he used his hands to help.

“But why would Anna and Katherine want to kill you?”



“When Astaire and I were still a double act, we took a job on a cruise ship,” I told Day. “Galapagos was a passenger, along with some pals of his. That’s where we met.”

“In the company of a dick and the body of a man named Tom,” Day said slowly.

“Astaire was acting ship’s detective. Dearing’s first name was Thomas. He seemed like a pretty swell guy, but we met under the wrong circumstances. Those circumstances being him swinging a knife at a man I took to be defenseless. I had pretty good reflexes and was holding a wine bottle at the time. It didn’t end well for poor old Dearing.”

“You *killed* him?”

“I have implied that pretty heavily.”

“That’s why Galapagos thanked you. It wasn’t because you wanted to help him—”

I snorted. “Hell, no. If I knew then what I know now, I wouldn’t have stopped Dearing, I’d have held the Croc down for him. Still, you can’t fault the sisters for jumping to conclusions. Given his interest in me, and the fact that he gifted me a very valuable slave—”

The freezer door clanged as someone outside started to turn the lock.

“Behind me.” I didn’t give Day time to argue, pulling him back into the corner.

Blake stepped into the freezer hesitantly. They’d evidently let him out of the hospital. He wore his day clothes over his bandages and stepped forward very carefully. “What’s going on here?” he demanded.

“Blake!” Day eagerly stepped forward. “It’s a trap! Katherine—” He stopped. I guess it had occurred to Day that Blake and Katherine had been pretty deep in planning together.

Blake had spotted Katherine’s body. “Don’t move,” he ordered, making his way to her side.

What did I tell you about amateurs and movie lines? I stayed where I was. Your amateur is easily spooked. Prone to doing things that gets them—or more likely, you—in trouble later. “Don’t go jumping to any assumptions here, buddy.”

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“She’s dead.”

“Galapagos killed her,” Day explained. “She was already dead when we arrived—”

“That’s a lie.” Even I was surprised at the vehemence in Blake’s voice. I had no real respect for the man, so it was a surprise to realize that he had depth of feeling. “That’s a dirty lie.”

Day reacted like it was a slap in the face. Maybe it was. “Blake?”

“This was a set-up. I was meant to follow you here, take the fall for this.” Blake had also seen the revolver. He snatched it up, pointed it directly at Day. “I see it all now. You and him—you planned this from the start.”

I readied myself to move.

Day protested. Having a gun turned on you is never a good feeling. That goes double for having a gun turned on you by someone you may or may not have been fond of but who professed to be fond of you. Day still managed to rally. “How can you say that? Blake, I promise you, this isn’t the situation you think it is. You have to put the gun down!”

Blake snorted. “Like I’m going to take orders from a slave so broken he has to be given away? No, Friday. This is good-bye.”

His fingers tightened around the trigger. I dived.

A lot of things happened at once. The explosion of the gun was followed by the roar of the sheer heat of the flame. Day’s cry and then our collision with the concrete floor. The stinging of my arm as something hit it. Blake’s scream.

I’m not sure how I managed to stagger to my feet, but I know that it was Day that got me out of there. He stirred sluggishly, the light from the flame illuminating the red pool spreading down his arm. It reached something dark and protective in me and without really thinking about it, I dragged him up into my arms and staggered towards the door.

The freezer was full of smoke so thick I couldn’t see my way. I lurched forward until I collided with the wall. It seemed to know where it was going, so I used that to guide me towards the door.

I got a glimpse of Blake as I passed. He seemed to be missing something. An arm, possibly. Seemed like the girls had wanted to be very certain that somebody died and blocked the barrel of the gun. When it blew, Blake had ignited not only the straw but himself.

At least, that's what I figured in retrospect. At that moment, I was preoccupied. Day hadn't moved, the freezer was getting hotter, and it was getting harder to breathe.

The urge to protect Day got us halfway across the warehouse before my legs gave out. I managed to stagger my fall so that I avoided falling on Day. He gave a soft moan as we hit the floor, and something in me caught at my heart—he was alive.

"Day!"

He stirred slowly, and I helped him sit. "Boss—"

"Where are you hurt?" I asked him.

"Everywhere."

Sticky liquid was thick where my hand rested on his arm. Some of it was mine, but the majority of it seemed to belong to Day. I pulled my jacket off him, discovered that we'd both collected some shrapnel courtesy of the rigged gun. Mine was minor, but Day's had left a deep cut. I placed his hand over it. "You'll live," I told him. "You might not enjoy it, but you'll live."

I don't know if my words didn't register or he didn't believe me. He blinked at me. "Blake?"

I looked back towards the flames reflected on the metal door of the freezer.

We could still hear him, but somehow the sound had been lost with all the other excitement. Now that we stopped to listen... we couldn't not hear him. He screamed, the sound becoming increasingly frenzied and raw until it stopped entirely.

"He shot me," Day said. "Blake. He said he was sweet on me."

I took him firmly by his good arm. "Outside," I told him. "I need to look at your arm."

It would take more than my expertise to stitch the wound. I settled for tearing a sleeve from my shirt and binding it tight enough to stop further blood loss.

"You don't shoot people you're sweet on."

"I wouldn't bet on it," I told him. "Love's cruel that way."

Day looked at me squarely. "I don't think I like it," he said very distinctly before he folded. This time I wasn't in time to catch him.

“Aw, hell.”

I really wanted that cigarette.

I propped Day up so that he was sitting against the outside wall of the warehouse. As I straightened, I caught sight of Galapagos's car, sitting in the building's shadow. I think I knew then. The man had no reason to stick around, after all. But I still walked over to the car.

There was a figure in the driver's seat, leaned over the steering wheel. He had one driving glove on, one glove off. His eyes were open and his mouth was slightly ajar. There was a neat hole in his forehead, and an untidy mess of blood and brains and bone all over the seat behind him.

Even missing half of his head, the jacket was unmistakable. No wonder that Blake hadn't believed that Galapagos had killed Katherine. He'd found the man dead.

The sound of sirens tearing through the air towards us was a welcome relief. I leaned against the car and waited for the police to arrive.

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Maynard was exactly how I remembered him. Officious, busy-bodying and with his eyes set on the next rung of the ladder. Galapagos hadn't exactly been a pillar of society, but he was powerful enough that the police hadn't been able to touch him. Presiding over the man's death was a feather in Maynard's cap, and he stepped onto the crime scene with the attitude of a man who has already been given the promotion. And why not? Maynard's blond hair was flecked with silver, but that only added distinction to his deceptively youthful features. A finely aged wine, was our Captain, though there was plenty of vinegar beneath the surface.

“Flint. How did I know you'd be at the heart of this trouble?”

“Observational skills like that, it's a wonder you're not Commissioner.”

He narrowed his eyes at that, but then caught sight of the inside of the car. “Is that—”

“Galapagos? It was,” I said. “I could have identified him even without the jacket.”

“Galapagos,” Maynard repeated, and we both considered his imminent promotion. “Well. How the mighty do fall.”

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“Regular David and Goliath story.”

“Out with it.”

The fact that it was Maynard and the boys rather than a nearer precinct indicated that Ginger and Astaire had already clued Maynard into our investigations. I held back a few details, of course, so that Maynard could bully them out of me. He wouldn't feel like he'd solved the case otherwise.

“An open and shut case,” he decided. “This fellow Blake and the girl, they cook up this scheme between them. The old story—there's a lover's quarrel, some sort of falling out. Maybe he's in it for the money, but she gets cold feet. Or maybe she was sweet on Galapagos and only thought up the scheme as a way of getting attention. You'd be surprised how often that happens—the crueler a master is, the more the slaves fawn over him. I see it a lot.”

“Strange,” I said. “It's almost as though there was some mechanism in place to force their affection.”

“None of your lip,” Maynard said. “I can't deny you've worked this case pretty thoroughly, but this is out of your hands now. We'll be in touch if we need you.”

I lifted my hat to him. “I'm entirely at your disposal, Commissioner.”

Astaire badly wanted to talk to me but knew better than to try. He sailed onto the scene barking orders like he expected them followed, and—amazingly enough—they were.

It was a crying shame that Ginger wasn't there to enjoy her hard work. To get Astaire to do such a convincing job of competence must have taken no end of coaching. But while slaves were fine behind the desk or doing back-breaking labor for the public good, they couldn't be seen to be out-performing free officers in public. She'd get to hear the highlights, no doubt.

I'd have to ring her later to congratulate her on Astaire's promotion. Currently, I had someone else on my mind.

Day stirred when I shook him awake. “What's going on?”

“Case closed,” I told him. “C'mon. You have an appointment with the closest hospital I can find.”

Day dug his heels in. “We should look for Galapagos! He murdered Katherine Stokes!”

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“We found him already.”

The Black Mariah had arrived to collect the bodies. It drew up beside Galapagos's car, and Day caught the fact. “He's dead—”

“Extremely dead.”

“I don't believe it.”

“Too good to be true,” I agreed. “But there you go. I guess the odds had to roll in our favor eventually.”

A fire-truck descended upon us without any further preamble. Day shivered as the men went to work on the interior.

“If only they could have rolled a little sooner.”

What do you say to that? I chewed my lip, wondering what comfort I had to offer when Day startled me. He turned, and leaned against me.

“Let's go home.”

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## Epilogue

Contrary to usual Hollywood practice, there was no rain at the funeral. Just the muggy air and overcast sky, as the priest leaned on his spade and mumbled. Anna stood beside me, her eyes red-rimmed and angry, and together we looked down at the wooden placeholder and tried our best to imagine its owner sleeping peacefully beneath. It was a relief when the priest put an end to those mental gymnastics and we could toss our handful of dirt in.

We came to a mutual pause on the footpath outside the cemetery. I replaced my hat. Anna took out a Camel and I lit it for her.

In return, she handed me an envelope. "That's all the money I can give you," she said. "Don't bother asking for any more, because I have none."

I opened the envelope. There was a wad of well-fingered twenty dollar bills. I counted out my fee from the day Anna Stokes first stepped into my office until I found her sister dead on the floor of a slaughterhouse freezer, and then took five extra. "I'm taking expenses," I told her. "To cover Day's hospital work and my legal fees. But the rest is yours."

She took the envelope but didn't put it back in her purse immediately. "I never pegged you for a generous man."

I snorted, tucking the cash away inside my jacket pocket. "If anything, I'm in your debt. You fixed my mistake after all."

It had come out again at the trial, my luckless involvement in the debacle that was Dearing's death. I couldn't be tried for it again, but a jury charitably decided to clear me of any prior association with Galapagos—helped in no small part by the touching evidence delivered by Captain Astaire.

"I'm sorry about that," Anna said. "All we knew was that you were the man that killed Dearing. In the circumstances, it looked—bad."

"Don't I know it." I paused to take out a cigarette. If Anna and Katherine had come to this via the Dearing angle, they'd have come after me more directly. The way they'd planned it made me suspect that their grudge was mainly against the Croc. "Forrester?" I guessed.

"We were engaged before I was sold," Anna said with a simplicity that hit home. "I was too proud to let Hubert buy my freedom. He promised to wait."

When I heard that he was dead—" She stopped. After a moment, she swallowed and went on. "Katherine met Blake when he wanted to take her picture. She recognized Hubert's camera and asked him about it. We hoped there might have been some photos of Hubert and I amongst his negatives."

"Instead, you found a murder."

That's the thing about men like Galapagos. They will plot and scheme and take precautions before murdering a pair of bankers and the business partner that knows the full extent of their debts, but they won't think twice before offing the little guy. It never occurs to them that the little guy has a mother, a sister or a sweetheart, too.

"A pretty woman can afford to lose a sweetheart," Anna said. "But she never forgets. A plain woman never forgives. Hubert was the world to me."

"He was a good man."

"A damn fine man."

And if a slave with a wine bottle in hand and reflexes faster than his mind hadn't been serving Galapagos in place of the regular waiter, the three of them—Dearing, Hubert, and Katherine—might still be alive today.

Irony's a twisted sister, all right.

"I guess the blackmail angle was Blake's idea?"

"Not entirely," Anna said. "We needed a strong incentive to get Galapagos to the slaughterhouse. When Blake stole the negative, we had to improvise."

"I have to take my hat off. You two did a damn good sister act. I bought the enmity entirely—I was pretty sure that we'd find Katherine in the police reports."

"And in the end, we did." Anna shook her head. "Katherine never could keep secrets when a man was involved. Blake was handsome and plausible."

"And paid for it in full."

"He was a fool. He had no idea what Galapagos was capable of," Anna said.

It didn't seem polite to disagree with a grieving lady. It also didn't seem smart to remind her that if I'd been in my office to take her call when she'd planned it, her sister might still be alive, especially when that woman carried a gun in her teacherly handbag.



Blake had been an idiot, but in the end his death had been of his own making. I couldn't say that he weighed heavily on my conscience. Not when Day would carry that scar for the rest of his days.

Anna came to the end of her cigarette and threw it down. "Well, Flint," she said. "I admit, I misjudged you." She held out her hand. "I'll definitely be recommending you to my Book Club."

"Much appreciated." I returned the handshake.

That was the end of our first case.

\*\*\*\*\*

I didn't take the direct route home. Ever since Galapagos had died, something had been weighing on my mind.

It took a couple of shops before I found the right one. Collars came in all shapes and sizes and strengths, but the current fashion for black leather and metal hooks was far too reminiscent of the collar Galapagos had given Day for my liking. The one I fixed on was a light tan brown that would go well with his hair and eyes. The maker had worked a pattern in it, an outspread pair of wings, and it buckled at the back, ornamental-like.

It cost a good chunk of gray, but Anna's banknotes were burning a hole in my jacket. Besides, I'd been trying to find a way to let Day know he was sticking around.

It seemed that I wasn't the only one with something to communicate.

Day didn't greet me when I opened the door. The desk he was tied to made it difficult. I wasn't complaining though, not when he wore it so well.

He was entirely naked except for the rope that tied him chest down against my desk, arms folded over his back. The rope made a neat pattern as it crisscrossed under the desk, keeping his legs spread.

I pushed the door shut behind me. Then I locked it. The message that Day was delivering here seemed important, so I thought it was only fair that I give it my undivided attention. I hung up my hat and jacket, making sure to weigh all the implications of what a stunt like this meant coming from Day, before I loosened my tie to walk over to him.

Day didn't move, but his eyes tracked my progress across the office and he shivered before I even touched him. Not fear this time, but anticipation. I let my

fingers trace across the path of his spine, to his arms, folded across his back and kept there by a rope that stretched the length of the desk. "That's some nice knot work."

"I was hoping you'd like it."

I snorted and put out my cigarette. "Marcel gave you a hand?"

"He was in the Navy."

"I can tell." I tested the bonds deliberately. Enough give that Day would not be hurt, but not enough that he could get out of them without help. "He was careful of your arm?"

"As I keep telling you, my arm's fine. Other parts of me could use some attention though."

I ran my fingers over his bare ass, noticing how he quivered at the light touch. Had I been too considerate of his injury? As Day delighted in reminding me, he was tougher than he looked. I wondered how long he'd been waiting, anticipating my return. "There something you want, Day?"

The phone rang before he could clue me in. I held the receiver out so that he could answer it.

"You've reached the offices of Flint, Private Investigator. This is his assistant speaking." Friday listened a moment. "Flint is occupied right now, but if you call again in two hours, we should be able to accommodate you."

"Two hours is it?" I said as I replaced the phone.

"I hope that's not a problem, Boss."

I tangled my fingers in his hair none too gently so that he gasped as I lifted his head up to kiss him. "You got a funny idea of what constitutes a problem, Day."

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Bree's prompt had me from the word "detective." I read my first Agatha Christie at age eleven, and had read all her stories by my mid-teens. Arthur Conan Doyle was next on my list, and rereading The Complete Adventures of Sherlock Holmes kept me sane during exam revision at University. A chance encounter at a book store in Japan led me to pick up Strong Poison by Dorothy L. Sayers, quite possibly my favourite mystery author—but this story really owes the biggest debt to Raymond Chandler and his mastery of the hard-boiled genre.*

*The Case of the Insufferable Slave is my first published story, but it won't be my last! Writing this story and working with other LL Event authors on their stories has been such a rewarding experience that I already know I'm going to do this again. Until then, I teach English to about 200 school children in extremely rural Japan, knit and drink copious amounts of tea. So far, I have yet to murder anyone.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# CATACLYSMIC EVOLUTION

By Alicia Nordwell

## Photo Description

He stood there, fingers twisted into the chain-link, a challenge in his eyes as he stared me down. His curly hair framed his face, but even with the hair you could tell he was all guy. His canted hips and tight pants hid nothing. He wore a giant watch and a ton of bracelets. The brightly colored twisted cord, leather, and braided string stood out against his honey skin.

I was in so much trouble.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*There he is again. What is his problem? Whenever our paths cross he has that same mix of wariness and anger on his face. I'm not searching him out... I don't even think I know him, do I? ...and yet it seems that every time I turn around he's there, watching.*

*Dear Author, please help me. Do I know him? Have I wronged him? Why can't I remember? And how can I get him to look at me with a different, more positive expression?*

*Thank you most sincerely!*

*Bookbee*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** teens, bullying, post-apocalyptic/ELE, disability, hurt/comfort, space travel, mutation, first love

**Word Count:** 40,417

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# **CATACLYSMIC EVOLUTION**

**By Alicia Nordwell**

## Chapter One

"Everyone have their slipcards? You're going to need them." Barron ignored the lecturing teacher. Everyone waited in the parking lot, at his request, while he went over all the rules. Like they didn't all know them already.

Well, maybe not the new kid.

Who dressed like that? He was obviously trying to attract all sorts of the wrong attention. Guys around here did *not* wear their hair long and flowing, curling around their shoulders. Jeans were meant to fit relaxed and held up with a belt, not tight and barely reaching sharp hipbones just begging to be squeezed in a bruising grip.

Barron could see the new kid's hip bones because his shirt was rucked up under his black jacket. Black on black, how original. Emo brat with the dark clothes, flaring nostrils, and narrowed eyes. The only thing he couldn't ruin were his soft lips, somehow a much darker red than he would have expected from his honeyed skin. Those lips had been haunting Barron for more than a week. They didn't have classes together, thankfully.

"Barron."

He strutted when he walked. Cocky bastard.

"Mr. Pernell!"

Barron jerked. He scowled. "What?"

"Excuse me? You want to rephrase that." The *now* was unspoken but hung clearly in the air. His teacher could have his dad on face-to-face conference in seconds. It wouldn't be the first time, either.

"Sorry." Barron abandoned his slouch against the fence, snapping to attention fast enough to make the muscles in his back protest. "Yes, Mr. Hodge?" He'd better straighten up and fly right. The same words his father enjoyed snapping at him on a damn near daily basis echoed in his mind.

"Your permission?"

Barron dug the frayed slipcard out of his back pocket. They were supposed to last the entire school career from their very first day, but his saw a lot of mileage. Demotions, detentions, parent notes... they'd probably have cut down

an entire forest just for him if they still sent letters home. "Got it." He handed it over to his teacher who stuck it in his reader, eyeing the screen until it beeped.

"Oh good, not forged for once."

"Who'd do that? It's a field trip to a cave." He frowned. Barron saved his forges for important things, like covering for when he had to skip. He didn't want anyone knowing he took off school to head over to the used bookstore to attend seminars by Erink Brogherd. The guy was local, but he was going to be a big-name author one day. Barron followed his blog and always attended his talks.

"One never knows, Mr. Pernell." Mr. Hodge handed back his slipcard. Barron shoved it into his pocket, already back to watching the new guy. He leaned against the fence, hanging on with his hands above his head; a chunky watch covered one wrist and the other was layered with leather, yarn, and cord bracelets.

How old-fashioned.

"Time to go!" Mr. Hodge shouted. "Two to a seat."

Barron barreled on to the first bus to nab the last seat. He hated feeling knees in his back from idiots behind him. "Hey, Creed, sit with me." His friend was skinny as a rail. Barron would get more of the seat if Creed sat with him.

Thavin and William sat in front of them. Barron reached up and yanked on Thavin's hair.

"What the hell, man?"

"It's getting too long." Barron tugged on it again. "You need a cut." He'd only get to keep his friends as friends if they toed the line his dad made him toe. So he put pressure on them when he had to. He needed his friends. Luckily, they'd been listening to him for years and didn't really question it anymore.

"Whatever." Thavin turned sideways in the seat. "I'll do it tomorrow."

"Man, can you believe they're making us go on this trip again? How many times have we seen the Doestrin caves?"

"Every other year since we were old enough not to piss our pants in the dark." Creed pulled a pack of gum out of his pocket.

"Nah." Barron shook his head when Creed offered it to him.

“What kind?” William was a mooch, but he was picky about the kind of gum he’d chew.

“Café Mocha.”

“Kick ass. Gimme.” William had a thing for retro sayings. Had to match the name his parents had saddled him with. He snagged two pieces.

“Hey pig, just one,” Creed objected.

“I am.” He offered one square to Thavin.

“You know I don’t like that caffeinated crap.” Thavin shook his head.

“Guess I’ll just have to keep both squares.” William popped them both in his mouth and chewed quickly. “Hmm... good.”

“Dumbass.” Creed smacked him upside the head. “Those better last you all day.”

“Yeah, well, I’m gonna need them to stay awake. I’m sick of these cave trips too. Thank God we graduate next month.”

“Let me have your attention, please.” Mr. Hodge stood at the front of the bus. “We have an hour-long ride to the caves.” He rolled his eyes at the groan. “Followed by a four-hour tour of the caves.”

“What?” Thavin frowned. “Tours are two hours.”

“Hey, Mr. Hodge, what gives?” William shouted over everyone.

“I will explain if you guys can shut your traps for a few minutes, so stop talking.” Mr. Hodge was actually a pretty cool guy for an older teacher. He wore jeans and button-up shirts over a tee most days. None of the suits and loafers some teachers wore. He had a sense of humor, too.

Most of the time.

“This trip to the caves is for the senior class. I know you guys have been to the Doestrin cave system and really enjoy it”—he rolled his eyes at their boos—“but there are some very delicate crystalline structures down a tunnel at the back of the caves you’ve never seen. We hope that by now, as seniors about to graduate, you can be trusted into an area of the caves not generally open to the public. You have no idea how much the fines will be if we’re wrong. Fines that the school will not pay, by the way.”



Mr. Hodge sat in the seat behind the auto driver controls. As soon as their scheduled departure time hit, the bus started up and began the drive out of the city to Doestrin National Park.

Buses weren't all that different from the ones his grandpa told him about. Kids were still crammed into uncomfortable seats, the buses were loud, and they bounced a lot more than anything with hover air tires should. Barron wished he could've driven his car. It'd taken him three summers to earn the money himself, but he was determined to have some freedom over the summer when he wasn't working for his father's firm.

Barron sat back and listened to his friends bullshit each other about the party last weekend. He hadn't gone. His dad had grounded him for the less-than-perfect grade on his trig exam. Not that it mattered what he got. Barron was going to Parks University in the fall, tuition already paid for the first semester.

His friends were all going too. Barron idly scanned the bus. The preppy girls all sat together a few seats in front of them, their squeals audible over the hum of the anti-grav motor under the bus.

What were they squealing over? Abbe and Hazea had their heads together, leaning forward to talk to the people in front of them. He could tell it was the twins by their garish purple hair. One ducked down and Barron stiffened.

The new kid sat with his back to the window, talking to the girls seated around him. They were all fascinated by him, of course. Barron hadn't seen him get on their bus. The guy flicked his hair back over his shoulder. Barron ground his teeth together.

"Hey, Bar, what's up?" Creed followed the direction of his gaze. "Ahh, the new guy. Who moves right before graduation?"

"Someone who shouldn't be happy. Of course he's surrounded by all those girls, so of course he's probably giddy as a pig in shit."

Barron blinked. "What the hell did you just say?"

Creed grinned. His orange hair, pale skin, and gap-toothed grin always made him look like a jack-o'-lantern to Barron. The guy was stick thin, but he had a round face. He shrugged. "William, of course."

"Hey, that's a good one!" William snickered. "My gram taught me it. She grew up on a farm. Back when they actually had farms, that is."

“Whatever.” Barron went back to staring at the new guy.

“His name’s Revi Pore-something or other.” Thavin frowned. “I don’t remember exactly. He moved from Alabama? I think.” He worked in the office and often got them information before everyone else got it. “I processed his ID file yesterday for his slipcard. Wherever he lived last was super slow sending the data.”

Revi.

“He looks like a girl,” Barron muttered.

“Yeah, you and your obsession with hair. He’s gotta set your OCD on fire.” Thavin snapped his fingers. “Porter. That’s his last name.”

“Or maybe other parts of him are on fire.” William raised his eyebrows and leered at him. Barron reached up and smacked him upside the head.

“Knock it off. He’s not my type.” Barron sank down, wedging his knees against the seat in front of him. “Wake me up when we get there.” He closed his eyes, but he didn’t sleep. If he listened hard, and filtered out all the other sounds, he could hear him. The new guy.

Revi.

His drawl stood out against the clipped tones of the guys and high-pitched gabbing girls. His looks might drive Barron crazy, but his voice was very... nice. Shit.

Not part of the program. Barron was going to find a nice jock boyfriend who liked sports and beer and could hold a conversation with his dad.

Barron’s irritation spiked as he ended up standing behind the kid as everyone shuffled off the bus. He should have made William and Thavin go first. Two of the girls had stepped into a seat by their friend so they could get off together. Of course he waved them ahead of him with a campy limp wrist wave, removing the buffer between Barron and the annoyance that was Revi Porter.

The guy didn’t even shuffle like the rest of them. He might as well have minced down the aisle. Barron clenched his hands into fists. They approached the steps, and he couldn’t take it anymore. When Revi went to step down, Barron kicked his back foot, pushing it off the edge of the step.

Revi stumbled down the steps, yelping as he twisted and then fell onto the rough gravel parking lot. Barron smirked, and then glanced over his shoulder at his friends.

“Whoops. I’m so clumsy.”

Thavin frowned, but William and Creed both snickered.

“Sorry about that, new guy,” Barron said. He grinned. “I thought you’d already pranced down.”

“Mr. Porter, what happened?” Mr. Hodge asked. “Why are you on the ground?”

“I tripped.” Revi grimaced as he picked at his palms.

“Oh really?” He looked at Barron and crossed his arms over his chest. “What did you do, Mr. Pernell?”

“He tripped Revi on purpose. I saw him.”

Barron sneered at Kiena. She was such a snotty goody-goody, to use one of William’s phrases. She flicked some of her bright red hair away from her ugly freckle-face. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I did not. It was an accident. I even said I was sorry, didn’t I?” He directed his last comment at the new guy who was getting up with help from the twins, Abbe and Hazea. Of course they were right there to help him out, wiping the dust off his pants while he balanced on his left leg.

“Was this an accident?” Mr. Hodge asked Revi.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be dandy in a few. Just need to clean my hands up a bit.” The bloody scrapes he flashed were full of dirt and tiny pebbles. He stepped gingerly forward, grimacing when his right foot supported his weight. “Ankle’s a bit sore.”

“We have a long day ahead of us. If you can’t walk, you can’t go into the cave. There’s a first aid station by the gift shop. You can have your hands cleaned and your ankle checked out there.”

“Okay. And that’s...?”

Mr. Hodge smiled. “Barron can help you over to it. As I recall, he fell climbing last year and had to spend an hour waiting for the rest of the class to finish the tour. It’s the least he can do, seeing how sorry he is and all.” Mr. Hodge stared at Barron—waiting for him to object, he just knew it. “And if he can’t go on the tour, neither can you, Mr. Pernell.”

"I'd be happy to," Barron said through clenched teeth. "Do you need to lean on me?" Barron held out his arm. He didn't really want to go on the tour, but he didn't want to spend four hours with this... poofy guy, either.

"No." Revi didn't look any happier than Barron. He took a hopping step forward. "Which way?"

"Left." Barron continued with his one word directions until they reached the first aid station. He leaned against the wall outside when Revi went in. Walking beside the kid, Barron had started to feel bad. He limped along without saying anything, no bitchy comments or complaints.

Maybe he was tougher than he looked.

"I can find my own way back," Revi said when he came out. He had a soft wrap bandage on his ankle, over his pants. Barron grunted, but followed the slim boy back to the crowd of seniors waiting to start the tour by the entrance to the Doestrin cave system. Guess they were going into the cave after all.

Barron's respect for Revi went up a notch—until he slid a rubber band hiding among his bracelets off his wrist and pulled his hair back into a ponytail.

"Ahh, Revi and Barron. All good to go?" Mr. Hodge checked his reader. "Good," he said when Revi nodded. "Okay, everyone. We will stay together as a group, but should anyone get lost"—he looked at Thavin, who'd 'wandered off' the last trip—"I want to remind you to stay put. I have everyone's card in my reader with active tracking enabled."

Barron, Creed, Thavin, and William walked at the back of the group. There were a couple of guys behind them, but all the girls were up near the front, and Revi stayed with them.

"Man, your prank backfired," William said. His face was shadowed in the dim cave, his dark hair almost black in the lack of light. "The girls are all over him, instead of thinking he's a clumsy oaf."

It was true. Barron didn't care, though. "I said it was an accident."

Creed snorted. His pale skin stood out, even in the cave. Some of the features in the open spaces were lit up. They cast enough light to walk along the path but threw interesting shadows and curves on the rock. Creed stepped closer to a light. "An accident." He made quotes with his fingers.

Barron rolled his eyes.

“What-ev-er.” William was such an idiot. Barron shrugged.

“I couldn’t care less what bitches like Kiena and the twin twits fucking think.” One more month and he never had to see them again.

“You better cool it; here comes Mr. Hodge.” Thavin cleared his throat. “Oh yeah, I can’t wait to see the new cave. I always wondered what was beyond that gate.”

They’d come up with all sorts of ideas every tour. When they were kids it was ‘the bat cave’, after William had found copies of old comics in the attic—to the last time’s ‘deep, dark chasm that had no bottom’. It was almost disappointing that it just led to more caves, even if they’d known those ideas were stupid. The competition to come up with the craziest reason to cordon off the dark corridor had been the only thing that made the trip anything but mind-numbingly boring.

“I know you’ve all seen this before, but please give our guide some respect. He might actually share something you don’t know, but if you’re talking”—he shot a glance at Barron and the guys but mostly focused on the group behind them—“you won’t hear him. Besides... I might give you a test.”

What the hell? A test? On rocks, no less. Barron crossed his arms over his chest. It was going to be a very long day.

They reached the entrance to the back caves faster than before. The tour guide was giving them a different run down on the history of the cave, and moving faster than on previous tours. The entrance was narrower, forcing them all to walk singly or in pairs at the most, along the rough path. It grew darker the farther they went.

“What’s with the lack of light?”

The question passed up and down the line of hushed students. The tour guide stopped them. “Can you all hear me?” His voice was faint and sounded flat compared to the echo in the big cave chambers, but in the eerie stillness of the tight cave corridor, it was enough. “Good. I know it’s dark, but the path is safe as long as you walk. The cave we’re going to is quite unique. The lighting has to be exact, or you won’t be able to appreciate it. Too much light is just as bad as too little. The space between the panels on the ceiling allow for your eyes to gradually adjust to the ambient light needed once we arrive.”

“Can he be more cryptic?” Thavin asked. He shivered. “I’m cold.”

"It's not cold. You're just scared," Creed said.

"I am not." Thavin elbowed Creed.

"Ow! Knock it off, you made me smack my shoulder on the wall."

Barron growled. "Both of you knock it off." He shrugged out of his windbreaker and handed it to Thavin. "Here. I'm hot anyway." It was weird, the way there was no wind. The smell of rock and dust hung in the air.

Someone poked Barron in the back. "Hey, move."

The class had started walking again, and they hadn't noticed. "Fuck off." Barron glared at Pyl, the guy who'd poked him.

"I don't want to get a lecture for getting lost like your idiot friend last time, so either start walking or move."

Temptation teased Barron to show Pyl just who the idiot was, but he restrained himself. Barely. "Don't touch me again." They started walking once more.

Even Barron's skin was beginning to crawl in the dim light and seemingly endless tunnel by the time a glow at the end of the tunnel began to grow. He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened and shielded them as he stepped behind the semicircle of his classmates.

Long, thin crystals hung down from the roof of the cavern like milky icicles. Sheets of the stuff covered the ground, like they'd dripped and refrozen. The light from the corridor and a few dim spotlights sent sparkles dancing around the room every time Barron blinked.

It was amazing.

He ignored the guide's speech and stared up at the ceiling. The stone up there gleamed. Barron had never seen anything like it.

Then the lights went out and he couldn't see anything at all.

Girls screamed, and guys shouted. No one could move in the pitch black. It was as if the yards and yards of rock above them seemed suddenly about to collapse upon them if they moved. One of Barron's friends grabbed his shoulder. Barron reached for William, who'd been standing on his right. Thavin or Creed grabbed on too, digging their fingers deep in a bruising grip.

"What the hell just happened?"

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

“Calm down, please, calm down.” Mr. Hodge attempted to restore some calm in the darkness. When the girls didn’t stop shrieking he shouted, “Girls!”

That shut them up, though a few whimpers didn’t stop.

“Thank you.” There was a low murmur. “Okay, Mr. Brasher has a small light. We’re going to turn it on and get the emergency lights out of the storage box. No one else is to move until further instruction.”

The tour guide’s tiny light lit the room like a strobe. It bounced off the hundreds of hanging crystals and reflected around the room. Being in the cave must be like standing inside a giant gemstone, all angles and light beams bouncing off the tiny spikes sticking out of the walls and ceiling.

“Wow.” Barron couldn’t help the comment. He could just imagine how this must have appeared to an early American armed only with torchlight. It was probably even more beautiful with the twining orange and yellow flames. Having the lights go out was pretty damn freaky, but no one else had probably seen the cave like they were in a long, long time.

Mr. Hodge walked through the students, who were crowded together in tight clumps. The storage locker was just to the left of Barron’s group so they were second to receive their light. The teacher handed it to Thavin. “Here, son. Don’t point this up at the ceiling or directly at the crystal sheets, if you can avoid it. Don’t need to go blinding everyone.”

“O-okay.” Thavin flicked on the light. Barron could see the faces of his friends. They stayed in a tight clump, not holding on to each other anymore, but leaning close together. Soon the room lit up, even brighter than when they’d first come in. Barron tried to keep his eyes down; not everyone was following Mr. Hodge’s directions.

There were more hurried whispers between their tour guide and teacher. Some of the students murmured to each other, and some of the girls were still crying. Barron just wanted to leave. He didn’t know why the lights had gone out, and he didn’t care. Maybe this would finally be the end of their school’s ridiculous routine of making students visit the caves.

“Okay, class, attention please.” Mr. Hodge waited for everyone to fall silent. “Mr. Brasher is going to lead us back out of the caves. This will take a

while if the lights have gone out through the entire system. Unfortunately, my reader is no longer working either. That means extra precautions. If someone gets lost we might not be able to find you." Someone gasped, and one girl wailed. Her friends quickly hushed her, hugging her from both sides.

"Don't panic!" Mr. Hodge said. "To ensure everyone gets out safely, we're going to link ourselves in a chain."

"So we're all going to h-hold hands?" William asked. "Can we s-sing folk songs too?" His voice was shaky, but he was making jokes. A few guys chuckled.

"No, smartass, I want everyone to use one hand to hold on to the person in front's shoulder. We'll stop every ten minutes to take roll call. Anyone loses their grip, or feels the person behind them stop touching their shoulder, they're to call out. If you get separated, for any reason, do not move an inch. I will come back for you, even without the reader. Does everyone understand?"

The chorus of yeses was loud compared to the quiet. The silence felt even more oppressive afterward. Mr. Hodge organized everyone into order, sending the guide down the hall a short ways until they could all manage to line up single file. The signal to walk forward or stop was a squeeze on the shoulder.

Agas came and went as they all shuffled out of the deep cave, toward the entrance. Barron had no idea how Mr. Hodge was telling the time, but at regular intervals the squeeze came to stop and the teacher would call out the names of everyone in the senior class 'til they all responded. Barron was sweating through his thin T-shirt by the time they got back to the gate.

They'd stopped nearly twenty times.

The lights in the larger cavern weren't on, either. The formations and sculptures nature had formed out of the rock over the eons were invisible outside the tiny spheres of their lights. "From here forward there are branches and a lot of open caverns. It is imperative everyone stay together. I know you're probably tired, hungry, and thirsty. Just be patient, and we'll get out of here soon."

The train of students stopped three times after that for people who tripped or lost their grip. At least their system was working, even if it was a slow-assed system. They hadn't lost anyone, and they were halfway to the mouth of the cave.



By the time they neared the mouth, Barron's feet hurt, and his hand and arm muscles had cramped. There was sweat dripping down his sides, even in the cool of the caves. "I gotta take a piss," Creed said in Barron's ear.

"Tough. Hold it. We're old enough not to piss ourselves anymore, remember?"

"Ass." Creed squeezed him. Barron fought the urge to shrug him off.

"We'll be out soon, and you can use the bathroom in the gift shop. Just stop whining." Stiff upper lip and all that. Barron was never sure what that really meant, but like straighten up and fly right, it was another dictum that often echoed through his mind in his father's voice.

*Be a man.*

*Don't whine.*

*Don't cry.*

*Toe the line, and live up to the expectations placed on you, or else.*

College really couldn't come soon enough.

"Shouldn't we hear someone by now?" Barron heard someone ahead of him ask.

The only one who knew where they really were was the guide. "I'm sure the cave mouth was evacuated and everyone grouped in a central location until whatever caused the electrical malfunction can be repaired. Don't worry. One more cavern, and we'll be out." Their tour guide spoke in an overly hearty voice not nearly as confident as he seemed to think it was.

The mouth of the cave let enough light into the central cavern that the teens could let go of one another. Barron shrugged his shoulders and shook out his hands. The muscles tingled with small, fiery pins as they relaxed.

When the first scream broke the silence, it surprised even him. Barron jerked, his heart racing, and spun to find out what was wrong. Soon, more screams echoed off the high stone ceiling, rebounding and buffeting them until nothing else could be heard.

Mr. Hodge shook the girls, even striking a few on their cheeks. "Stop it!" he bellowed. 'It' repeated, fainter and fainter, echoing over the cries, but the normally mild-mannered teacher's shout broke the group hysteria.

"Girls, turn around or close your eyes."

Barron couldn't see what had set them off. It was probably some small scaly or furry creature. There was a fetid stench in the air. Maybe it had dragged in something dead or something.

He edged toward the area where Mr. Hodge and the guide argued in hushed voices. Others were moving away, making it easier to get close.

Bodies lay near the mouth of the cave. The reek of shit filled the air when a small breeze swirled the dust near the stairs leading out. There were at least ten, their bodies contorted and collapsed on the steps and to the sides, like they fell off the small slope up to the parking lot.

"Holy fuck," Barron whispered. He gagged, covering his mouth and nose with one hand. What the hell happened? The breakfast shake he'd had before he left home threatened to come back up, and he was glad they'd missed lunch. From the sounds behind him, others weren't able to hold onto the contents of their stomachs. The sick odor of bile set off even more people. The cries and demands to have someone tell them what happened barely filtered through his shock.

"Everyone, I need your attention." Barron turned his head slowly from the dead men and women, the first he'd ever seen, to Mr. Hodge. "Students!" he snapped. "I know this is horrific." He swallowed hard. "I don't know what happened, and I can't explain it. We need to move back, away from the bodies, while Mr. Brasher checks in with the park management and finds out what's going on."

"I want to go home," Abbe whimpered. She clung to her twin sister who had tears streaming down her face.

"We'll get back to the school and notify all your parents as soon as we can. Right now my scanner's still not working and neither is Mr. Brasher's communication device. I need everyone to stay together, in a group, for just a little bit longer." He started to usher the students toward the dim shadows at the back of the big cavern, near the grouping of rocks many younger kids used to climb on and sit.

Barron sank down to the floor when they stopped. The bodies were out of sight, but not out of mind. He could still see their pale faces. It hadn't been a peaceful death, whatever had happened. Their eyes and mouths had been locked open, a rictus of pain and death stamped over their face. One man's arm had stuck up in the air, the fingers curled. Barron's stomach churned at the memory.

He swallowed convulsively to stop from gagging until the urge passed.

“What does that?” He wiped his hands over his mouth, unsure of the answer and not really wanting to know. He didn’t say it, but Barron wanted to go home too. His friends huddled around him, close enough to touch, but not really touching. None of them replied.

Ages seemed to pass before they heard footsteps hurrying toward them. The tour guide’s light beam played over the group. Barron shielded his eyes from the spotlight, but wasn’t fast enough. Afterburner images, little round circles, floated in front of him.

“Damn.” He rubbed his eyes.

Mr. Hodge’s mouth dropped open when the other man began gesticulating wildly. He shook his head. Mr. Brasher took a step back. He shook his head.

“—can go out and see for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

What? What could he go see? What in the hell was going on?

Barron watched. He was used to listening to what wasn’t said, knowing how to judge a mood by the details. When his dad came in with rigid shoulders, taking deep breaths, Barron knew it was time to disappear.

But the tour guide wasn’t angry.

He was scared. Really scared.

“What the hell happened?” William asked.

Thavin pointed a shaking finger at the area just out of sight where the bodies had fallen. “I saw one of those guys on our way in. H-He had kids with him.”

Creed’s usual smile was gone. He shook his head. “My guess would be an attack. Like a bomb. Something knocked out everything electrical. The lights are off and so are the fans.” He pointed at the air duct fans which weren’t quietly forcing fresh air into the caves. “We should get satellite service here, but my com is dead too. I mean, it’s on, but it’s not connecting to anything.”

Barron’s dad had his communicator, the consequence of not getting the grade he was expected to achieve on his trig test. The CD was locked in his desk drawer. “Maybe it was something chemical.”

Some girl overheard them. “A chemical bomb?” she shrieked. “Mr. Hodge, Mr. Hodge!” She jumped up and ran to their teacher. “What’s going on? Are we going to die?”

"Trielle, calm down." Mr. Hodge put his hands on her shoulders. "You need to slow your breathing down before you hyperventilate."

She wasn't listening, and other people were catching her hysteria. Frankly, Barron was surprised it hadn't happened sooner. Half the guys were crying too!

"Listen to me, everyone. We can't help these people. Mr. Brasher is coming with us, and we're going to go back to the school. You're all going to line up and get on the bus. I want everyone back in the exact same seats they sat in on the way here. Make sure your seat mate is here. This is not the time to fuck around, people.

"On the bus. Now."

Everyone stood up and began to shuffle to the cave entrance. Some of the girls let out sobs as they edged around the fallen bodies, but they kept moving. After so many hours in the dark, the sunlight was intense. Barron's eyes watered. He shaded them with one hand.

There were a few cars on the road, stopped at random spots, but he didn't want to see inside them. What kind of bomb could do this, could kill so many people so quickly? There were kids outside on the small play structure near the picnic tables.

After that, Barron tried his best not to see anything.

He was afraid to breathe or touch anything, but they had no choice. Barron hadn't prayed in years, but as he made his way down the aisle of the bus to the back seat, he sent a fervent prayer to whatever entity might be listening to protect them all.

With no electricity, the bus was on full manual. Mr. Hodge forced the doors shut and sat in the folded seat in front of the controls. Never, in all the years Barron had been in school, had anyone actually had to drive the bus. They'd had drills, of course, but he never expected it to actually happen.

Could Mr. Hodge even drive something as big as this? He clenched the back of the seat in front of him and wished for a seat belt as the teacher actually pushed a button to turn the bus on using the backup independent power system.

It didn't work. Mr. Hodge smacked his hand on the panel. "Damn it!"

What the fuck else was going to go wrong? They lived an hour, by vehicle, away from the park. It'd take forever to walk. What if whatever had actually

happened were to happen again? Apparently anyone in the open had been a sitting duck.

“No, wait. Blue button, three times, prime the system to switch to gas manual, then the green button.” The eerie silence on the bus magnified Mr. Hodge’s tense mutters. He followed his own directions, and the bus finally rumbled to life.

Now they had to make it back. Some people talked once Mr. Hodge managed to get them out of the parking lot and onto the highway, their hushed whispers barely audible over the incredibly loud engine. They couldn’t go very fast, even on the highway. Cars were all over, like they’d died just as surely as the people Barron occasionally caught glimpses of.

He tried to face forward and not look. By the time they approached Mission Flats, the sun was nearing the horizon. Barron should’ve been starving, but his stomach was twisted in knots. The town was just as bad as everywhere else.

There were a few people outside the police station. Mr. Hodge stopped the bus. “Everyone stay in your seats. I know you’re all anxious to get home and find your families, but I can’t let you off this bus until we know more. I’m going to go inside. Mr. Brasher is going to stay with you. Sit tight, and don’t panic.”

Mr. Hodge quickly jumped out of the bus and then shut the doors from the outside. He trotted over to the young couple standing outside the station. Everyone watched, but the windows wouldn’t go down, and they couldn’t tell what they were saying.

They gestured toward the station. Mr. Hodge looked back at them. He held up one hand and then folded all but one finger down. He disappeared inside the police station then.

“Do you think our parents will be at school?” William asked. He huddled in his seat, with his arms wrapped around his chest like he was cold, even though the air on the bus was stifling in the early evening warmth.

“Could be. They survived.” Thavin tilted his head toward the shaking people standing beside their car.

After a few minutes, Mr. Hodge finally reemerged from the station. An officer was with him.

“That’s Harvey.” William stood up, pounding on the window. “Harvey!” His older brother had been given a name even more unfortunate than William’s. His brother looked up. A look of relief lightened the suddenly aged features.

Harvey jumped up the steps. William stumbled as fast as he could down the center aisle of the bus. They crashed together, arms wrapped tight around each other. Harvey pushed William back, peered into his face, and then pulled him close again.

Not a word was said as everyone watched. Barron wondered where his dad and mom were. Everyone else was probably thinking the same thing. Mr. Hodge stood silently at the front of the bus, his mouth a grim white line.

“Thank God you’re okay.”

“Harvey.” William was shaking almost uncontrollably. “What happened?”

Harvey hadn’t been a cop long enough to see much, and it showed in the fear Barron could hear in his voice. “We don’t know. Not yet. A lot of people died all over, though. Everyone outside was affected almost immediately, and a lot of other people...” Harvey looked up, scanning the bus. Shocked silence met his words.

Not even the girls were screaming. The tears he could see streaming down the faces of so many of his classmates fell silently, as if any response would mean what Harvey said was real and actually happening.

Barron wished William’s brother would stop talking. He wanted to clap his hands over his ears and not listen, but he was just as numb as everyone else. It was too much to deal with for anyone, even him.

Of course he wasn’t done. Harvey swallowed hard, then went on in a thick voice. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have all the answers. The most we can figure is there was some sort of attack. The machinery in the basement went crazy at the station, then everything went dead. I was stuck in the evidence locker for over two hours. By the time someone came into the station looking for help and found me, people were already sick. Some were dying or already dead.

“The planetary satellite system seems to be down. Most electrical devices are shot. So far, less than twenty adults and a handful of little kids have been found. Those who are healthy and capable are going around the town, door to door, to find survivors. We have to help each other or more people could die.”

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Harvey took a deep breath. “I know you’re high school kids. I know you’re scared too, but... I need some volunteers.”

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## Chapter Three

"I found three kids in a treehouse today. The stink was awful, even from the ground." William dropped onto the cot beside Creed. He rubbed the back of his neck, then winced. The skin was already pink, and rapidly turning red. "How did we get used to this shit so fast?"

"Necessity."

That word was beginning to have an evil overtone to Barron. They should all be living it up, planning a graduation party to end all parties... instead they were searching houses for dead people.

"That why you got burned?" Creed picked at peeling skin on the back of his hands. He was sitting on his cot, next to Barron's.

"Yeah."

Barron got up and went to the locker room. He wet a washcloth and twisted out most of the water. It dripped on the gym floor as he headed back to the cots. Coach would've had a fit... before. "Here." He wrung out the last of the chilled water on the reddened skin, and then draped the folded rectangle across William's neck.

"Ooh." William hunched his shoulders and shivered. "It took less than three minutes out in the sun. I mean, the treehouse wasn't up very high."

"That's why we have the covers over our hats. Keep it on from now on." Barron sank down on his cot. He lay flat, propping his head up on his arms. There were windows near the roof, covered with mesh to keep them from breaking. Even with the windows, the light in the gym was dim.

The backup power grids were spotty, and the light of the sun didn't penetrate the dirty brown clouds blocking the sky, even at noon. The UV rays did, though, and too many people had been burned before they realized the problem. Barron had spent the second half of the week lying on his stomach to avoid the pain of a burn he got *through* his T-shirt.

It took forever for him to find a comfortable position on his back that didn't irritate the sensitive skin still healing from his exposure. Barron had never had such a bad burn before, and he hoped to never have one again.

William shook his head. "I couldn't keep it on and get up in the treehouse. I had to check."



He'd ask why, but he already knew the answer. Barron closed his eyes. Anyone not in a thick concrete basement or building, far from windows, had died. Most within hours. They were the lucky ones. The ones who weren't lucky raved wildly, screaming in pain, before they collapsed.

Most of the folks dying like that were already gone. Finding the decomposing bodies, bloated and reeking in the late spring heat, wasn't any better.

But what else were they going to do? No one wanted to assume and miss a survivor. They had to check anywhere a person might have been.

They'd cleared the cars first. Coach found Barron's mom in hers near the bulk goods store. His dad had died where he spent much of his life—in his office.

Mr. Hodge had organized pallets for his class and any other kids found alive. There were just a few. Not nearly enough had made it, outside the senior class members out of town on their field trip. The first night Barron went home despite Mr. Hodge urging him to stay. He needed time to himself, to come to terms with the fact that he'd lost his parents in one day.

No more micromanagement. No more demands to shape up or else. No more hugs and no more knowledge that, for all their faults, his parents wanted the best for him. The silence in the big house was enough to drive him crazy. He'd retreated to his room when the sun went down. He lit a camping lantern they'd had in the garage and huddled under his favorite blue quilt.

The silence was too complete. No fan whirring from the computer. No TV. No cars humming past on the road. It was that quiet, coupled with the stress of wondering if whatever it was that killed everyone would come back when he was all alone, that drove Barron out of his bed.

He packed a backpack and kept it in his gym locker. Clothes, a few pictures, his favorite Brogherd novel—the author's first, a signed edition Barron kept under his bed—plus all the cash his father had tucked in the family safe filled the pockets. He already had his parents' wedding rings, but he'd grabbed his grandparents' rings as well.

Then he'd walked back to the school. The darkness was absolute, all the streetlights out. His lantern only lit up a small circle around him, but he'd made it. William and Creed were already set up in cots next to each other. William's brother Harvey slept at the station in case someone needed help, but he wanted

William to stay at the school. Thavin still had his older sister; he was staying at her apartment by the community college at night to protect her. During the day, they all searched. It was that or sit in the gym doing nothing and helping no one.

Without any answers.

With the grid completely wiped out, there was no news over the television or radio. Mr. Hodge led their small group, watching over his kids, as he called them. He made sure they got food, and he chivvied all the boys into taking a shower—even though the water was cold. It was better than living with the stink.

After the first day of moving dead bodies, no one had argued about showering.

“Hey”—William kicked the leg on his cot—“I heard you found a kid.”

Barron closed his eyes. The little girl’s mom must not have been inside when whatever it was hit. She’d made it back in, but sometime after that she died on the floor of the bathroom. Marya had been on the counter when he came in, rummaging in the cupboard for another box of cereal.

She shrieked when she first saw him, screaming about strangers. She’d chucked a dirty cup at him, and he’d had to dodge the plastic missile. It’d been hell to get her to trust him enough to come down off the counter, but once she did...

Her little pink backpack had smacked against his back as he walked her to the school. He’d packed her some clothes, then grabbed a picture of her and her mom and a fuzzy unicorn blanket to cover her while he got her out of there before a reclamation crew came back. She’d insisted on carrying a lop-eared stuffed bunny clenched in one arm. The blanket had to be over them both, and the extra layer killed Barron in the late evening heat, but it kept her safe.

Her other arm clung to the back of his shirt as he hustled them both to the school and out of danger from the sun.

“Yeah, I did.”

“That’s it, that’s all you have to say?”

Barron sighed. “Her name is Marya. She’s three, I think.” She never shut up. He kinda liked that about her. It was like white noise to cover up the silence he’d grown to hate. All he had to do was say uh huh, then smile, and she

beamed. Eventually, she conked out with the other preschooler staying in the kindergarten room.

“You going back out this afternoon?” Creed asked.

“Of course.” First he needed a nap. Barron could sleep with the noise of the other people in the gym. The footsteps, squeaking shoes, and creaks of the cheap cots lulled him to sleep. He only woke up twice from the nightmares.

After the second, a real doozy of a mind trip as William called them, Barron sat up. Thavin lifted his head off his pillow, blinking sleepily. “You okay?” He’d arrived sometime while Barron slept.

“Fine.”

They didn’t ask each other about the dreams themselves anymore. They all knew what horrors they held. Barron sighed. He’d watched far too many zombie movies before... whatever had happened. The uncertainty of what exactly went wrong ate at him. It always seemed like everyone knew what went wrong when the world was coming to an end in movies, but they didn’t know shit.

In Barron’s dreams, the people he found were trying to eat him. Getting back to sleep after the corpse of Marya’s mom latched on to his ankle, trying to get to the little girl he held in his arms, had felt so real. He didn’t get any more sleep before it was time to go back out. He grabbed a sandwich, just some peanut butter slapped between two slices of limp bread, and a bottle of water for his backpack. He checked his map. His assigned section was highlighted in red, and it was filled with far too many little x marks.

It was still hot outside. The cloth hanging on his hat helped cover his face and neck from damage. That, along with the UV fishing shirts and gloves, kept him safe from being burned again as he walked house to house looking for survivors and marking the location of bodies on his map. His sunglasses were the kind that wrapped around, but they didn’t keep the sweat from dripping into his eyes and making them sting.

He was exhausted by the end of his second shift, dragging his feet as he walked back to the school along Main Street. He’d nearly finished his latest quadrant, but it took him out to the edge of town. Walking took so much longer than driving; he’d never spent so long on his feet. All he had time to do was look for survivors, eat, and sleep. He barely had the energy to talk to his friends. After just a week, it felt like this new reality had been going on forever, with no end in sight.

When he got back to the school, the parking lot was lit up. Not by the streetlights, but from the headlights of cars. Camouflage Humvees filled three spots next to the gym entrance and a large truck was alongside the short wall around the corner. Barron hurried inside to check in with Mr. Hodge and Harvey. He'd finished his quadrant and needed a new one. When he made it to the coach's office, two guys in green fatigues stood outside the door.

"You can't go in, son," one said when Barron approached.

"I have to check in," Barron protested. He crossed his arms over his chest.

The other soldier produced a slip of paper and a pencil. "I have a list of volunteers here. Name?"

"Barron Pernell."

"Got you." The soldier ticked off a mark next to his name. "Your teacher said for all you boys to clean up and hit your racks."

Did Mr. Hodge really expect them to just ignore the soldier's appearance? They were supposed to shower and sleep, like the prospect of some explanation for the deaths all around them didn't haunt them all?

Barron sneered. "Whatever." He knew he wouldn't get anything out of the two guys standing *outside* the door, anyway.

The other kids staying in the gym were huddled in small clusters throughout the room. Sweat trickled down Barron's back as he peeled off his UV layers and hung them up, along with the ridiculous head covering that made him feel like he was a woman from the Middle East.

"Barron!" Thavin came bounding over with Creed and William behind him. "Did you see them?"

"The soldiers?" Barron flapped his shirt, trying to get some air moving, to dry the sweat dripping down his spine.

"Well, duh." William rolled his eyes.

His friends had changed, they all had, but some things stayed the same. William still liked his weird old sayings. Barron shook his head at the goofy teen, but he smiled too. "Yeah, I saw them."

"Do you think they know what caused all this?"

"Probably. There's that big base about four hours west of here, remember? They probably had all sorts of equipment monitoring, just in case. Not like they're going to come running to tell us, though. We're just kids."

Creed was quieter than usual. "Do you guys still think this was a bomb?"

Barron raised an eyebrow. "What else could it have been?"

"Actually, a lot." Thavin rubbed his hands together. "I've been looking some stuff up, at night. The doors to the college historical library don't lock, with the school shut down and all, so I've been sneaking books out for research. It takes forever doing things the old way. Creed and I were talking about how this sickness spread, and how the power went out right when it first started."

"So, what was it?" William asked.

"I don't know. No, really, I don't," he said when William scoffed. "But I do know I can't find a single description of any bomb or chemical weapon that could kill people like this, yet be completely harmless in hours."

"Plus the sky." Creed looked up, like he could see the murky atmosphere through the ceiling. "That's not normal." The blue sky and puffy white clouds they'd stood under before they went to the Doestrin caves were gone, replaced by a brown layer blanketing the sky as far as they could see.

"You're right. A bomb doesn't fit." Barron fought off a yawn, but it won. It was so big, and so long, that his eyes watered. "But you don't have any answers. I don't have any answers. We're certainly not getting any out of them"—he pointed over his shoulder with one thumb—"until they're damn good and ready to tell us. I'm gonna go shower."

Maybe getting cleaned up and crashing on his cot wouldn't be quite so difficult after all. Barron could barely keep his eyes open. He braced himself with one hand on the cold tiles, letting the water beat down on his head. It didn't help.

After a few seconds, the water began to feel like icy needles on his skin, so he rinsed and got out. At least his dad's insistence that he keep his hair short had been good for something. Three minutes in and out was all it took to finish cleaning off the dust and sweat from another long day tagging bodies.

Tomorrow they'd finish checking the town, and then they'd haul more bodies and dig more graves. The survivors had all looked for their families first, along with the victims who'd fallen in public. That day had been horrific, for all of them. A strange numbness fell over him when he looked for bodies, but another day like that... He tried not to think about it.

That didn't stop the dreams. This time his friends threw Barron into a grave. He couldn't move, couldn't speak, as his body slumped limp over his parents'

rotting corpses. He couldn't breathe, couldn't beg them to stop like he desperately needed, no matter how hard he tried. Then they began to cover him with dirt. It fell into his open mouth, clogging his throat, and he couldn't get it out.

"Shit!" Barron's shout was garbled. He spit out the corner of his sweat-soaked pillow, pushing it off the cot onto the floor. He flipped over in his cot and swiped one arm over his damp face. It wasn't tears. His parents were already buried, and his friends would never do that to him. Concentrating on the small sounds of the teens sleeping all round him, Barron did his best to slow his breathing.

He'd give anything to shut his brain off. His whole body ached for rest, but his mind wouldn't let him. Everyone else was in the same boat. How long would it be until one of them snapped?

The black depths of the night were slow to fade. Desperate for a distraction, Barron got up and began to roam the school. The brick building was laid out like a square with a courtyard in the center. With the sun still below the horizon, Barron could safely go outside in his shorts and tank top.

Barron picked a wilting rose off one of the bushes beside the double doors to the cafeteria. Dew coated the picnic tables and benches. He sat down anyway, shivering at the contrast of the cool droplets against his sweaty skin. He slumped against the table, propping his cheek against one fist.

He shook the flower, top down, over the table. Drying petals flew all over. A few stubborn central petals clung to the bud, but he plucked them off, just tore them away from the stem until nothing was left of the red rose but a pile of pieces.

"What are you doing out here?" a man barked. "Identify yourself."

Barron jumped. He smacked against the leg under the picnic table and grunted. His knee throbbed. He was probably going to have a pretty bruise; he'd managed to find the end of the screw.

"Fuck that hurts. What's your problem?" Barron spun sideways on the bench. He glared at the soldier behind him.

"Why are you out here?" the soldier asked again. He fingered his rifle but didn't point it at Barron. That was probably something of a minor miracle; the guy looked barely older than Barron himself, and he was definitely spooked.

"I couldn't sleep." Barron bit the words out, still rubbing his knee. No way would he tell the guy why he couldn't sleep. "In case you haven't noticed, this isn't a military base. I live here. I woke up early, so I decided to come out here so I wouldn't wake anyone up. Now go away." He turned his back on the soldier, expecting him to leave.

"We all get them." The gun made a solid thunk as he set it down on top of the picnic table near the pile of ruined flower parts. "Bad dreams."

Barron snorted. "What do you know about it?"

"Plenty. I was about to ship out after basic training. Got a unit and everything. Some of the guys had seen action before, and they had nightmares. One guy told me it was a burden we bore to protect our people."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a soldier."

The soldier dropped one hand on Barron's shoulder. "You might not wear a military uniform, but you're protecting your people just the same."

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## Chapter Four

None of them were issued new quadrants the next day. They all got a new group assignment.

And no answers.

Barron spent two days tracking down every bit of metal that could be scrapped and piling it into a huge trailer. The soldiers took over the body detail. He felt almost guilty at the surge of relief when he found out he didn't need to dig any more graves and watch dirt cover people he'd known for most of his life. He needed a break from the new reality; they all did.

The only teenager not scrapping metal was the new kid. Barron had forgotten all about him until he showed up... in a uniform. His long hair was fastened at his neck. He ran around doing things for the soldiers; most of them treated him like a kid brother.

It made sense when Revi ran after an older man, yelling, "Dad!"

He was a military brat. Barron never would've figured it, not with the hair and bracelets. Barron had too much to do, and was far too exhausted, to worry about one random guy he barely had time to notice. Maybe before he would've continued to go out of his way to give Revi a hard time, but Barron had far too much to do trying to survive to indulge in petty animosity toward the girly boy.

Dawn on the third day brought a whole new ballgame. Two girls had tried to go out and burned right through their UV coverings. All their sunblock measures, and they didn't protect them for even a minute.

"I'm telling you, our ozone is gone. That's the only thing that can explain all this!" Thavin kicked his backpack. "I just can't figure out *why*. I've read twenty books, all with different possible originating events. What I wouldn't give for even a basic reader right now."

Barron twisted around on his cot and balled his pillow up under his head. "What kinda things?"

"Global warming—that was a big thing like eighty years ago, apparently—but it's not a problem now, with the new air scrubbers. Massive volcano eruption, except there'd have been some sign of it beforehand, I figure. Chemical bombs seeding the upper stratosphere to ruin the chemical balance—"



“Could that have caused the sickness?” William asked.

“I don’t know. Nothing seems to fit.”

His frustration was palpable. Thavin was the smart one, the one who’d been going to college on a full blown academic scholarship on a fast track doctorate program. But he was operating outside of everything they’d ever known. Long before they’d entered school, paper books were replaced by readers, and online libraries were searchable with a flick of the eye.

“What do you think’s gonna happen now?” Creed asked. He’d grown very quiet and barely spoke after his last shift. He asked the question they were all thinking, though. They couldn’t go find scrap metal during the day. The bodies were all buried.

William, Thavin, and Creed all watched him, like he still had all the answers. Barron didn’t know shit about what was going on.

“Mr. Hodge, Harvey, and the military guys have been pretty tight for days now. Something’s going on. They just aren’t telling us shit. You hear anything, William?”

The normally chatty teen shook his head. “Harvey told me to stay here. I might as well not have a brother still living,” he said bitterly.

“Hey.” Barron swung his legs over the edge of his cot and sat up. He reached for William, tugging on his shoulder to avoid his still tender neck. “You still have him. He’s trying to keep us all alive, whatever that takes. You know he loves you.”

William shrugged.

“Besides, you have us.” Barron squeezed his friend’s shoulder. “It doesn’t matter what else happens, we’ll face it together, all four of us. Just like we always have.”

“Yeah.” Creed crouched between Barron and William’s cots, and Thavin leaned sideways and bumped William’s other shoulder. For a second they were all touching, communicating without saying a word.

Their little bromance knot broke up, not because someone noticed them, but because no one was looking at them, no one at all.

Mr. Hodge stood behind the guy Revi had run after. Harvey stood beside him. There was a line of military grunts behind them.

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“What’s going on?” Creed asked.

Barron shook his head. “Dunno.”

“Can we have your attention?” The adults in the room moved forward but most of the teens stayed where they were, grouped with their friends.

“My name is Lieutenant Colonel Porter. I was stationed at the Markez base three hundred miles west of here. I’m sure everyone has questions, but I have few answers. The base was working on establishing communication outside the area, but we were sent out prior to that being accomplished.

“We do know every town was hit the same way. Whatever the event was that claimed the lives of so many, and damaged the basic infrastructure of our country, seems to be widespread. Our climate has been affected. Going out during the daylight hours is no longer feasible. I’m afraid there’s nothing more we can do for those who haven’t already been saved. It’s been too long, and if they haven’t been protected from the sun by now—they’re dead.”

Scattered protests came from the small group of adults. He said what no one wanted to admit.

The colonel overrode them. “I know this is hard, but we must be pragmatic in these times. We need the metal and other circuitry. I have my orders to retrieve these materials, and assist as many survivors as possible to relocate to Markez base.”

“What if we don’t want to go?” Mr. Vass used to run the bowling alley. He’d been down in the ball return area under the lanes when the power went out. He’d gotten stuck down there when the electronic lock froze. “My family has lived here since the turn of the century.”

Mr. Hodge stepped forward. “What kind of life will you have here? Something has gone seriously wrong in the world. We can’t hide from that and pretend life goes on as usual.”

A woman from the middle of the group spoke up. “I buried my husband and my sons.” Her voice broke, but she went on. “How does anyone hide from that?”

“I’m not saying anyone is ignoring their loss.” Mr. Hodge took a deep breath. “But what Harvey and I haven’t been telling everyone is big.”

The kids began whispering.

“I knew it!” Thavin said.

“Shh.” Barron hushed him. He wanted to hear.

“Fresh water stores are running out. The reclamation plant is shut down, and there’s about a week’s supply of dry rations. We won’t survive here on our own. We’re not equipped. They are at the base. No one will be forced to go... but if you stay, you’ll probably die.”

Silence fell over the gym. Mr. Vass slumped down in his chair, covering his face. His shoulders shook. A woman began to cry and another hushed her, rubbing her back.

The twins, Abbe and Hazea, clung to each other.

Barron couldn’t believe things were that bad, and yet they hadn’t told anyone. What right did they have to hide the truth from people?

“When are they leaving?” Barron had stood up and spoken before he even realized he was going to. “How long do we have to decide?”

“We were leaving tomorrow morning, but the situation with the sun has complicated matters. We have to go back tonight.”

“So... hours. You expect everyone to pack up and move their entire lives... in a few hours?”

“We can spare two hours after sundown when it’ll be safe to leave the school to gather up any stragglers not here. After that, we’ll move out and head back to Markez. I know this is hard”—Lt. Colonel Porter looked grim—“but other towns have faced this same decision.”

“We have three buses available. We have to limit everyone to one bag. Harvey will help ferry people out to their homes in the outlying areas in the buses to gather any belongings they haven’t already packed.”

Barron sank down on his cot. He already had everything he needed, but...

“We’re going to go, aren’t we?” Creed asked. He looked scared.

“I don’t plan to die in this town.” Barron sat up straight. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to us, but we can’t stay here.”

“I gotta talk to my sister.” Thavin twisted his hands together. “She’s not here. We can’t leave without her.”

“They won’t bail on anyone,” William assured him. “You need to calm down. You heard Mr. Hodge. He and Harvey will help everyone after dark. We’ll get her. I’ll go with you. I have a bag already packed.”

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Creed glared at William. “And you didn’t tell us?”

“No!” William protested. “I just... I got what I needed before. I didn’t want to go back home more than once.”

“You know he would’ve told us if he knew, Creed.” Barron shook his head. “I have all my stuff, too.”

Hushed arguments broke out all over the gym. Barron sipped his bottle of water over dinner, conscious now of how precarious their society really was.

“Mr. Hodge?” Barron went up to the beleaguered teacher when he finally spied the man alone—probably for the first time since the announcement.

“Yes, Barron?” Mr. Hodge sounded weary. He rubbed his forehead.

“I don’t need to go back to my place. I thought, if the people watching over the nursery kids needed to go, I could stay with the little kids.”

Mr. Hodge eyed him. “You’re sure?”

He nodded. “I am. I don’t know if anyone checked, but I packed some mementos for Marya, the little girl I found, too. I don’t know about the other kids, but I made sure she had some stuff that was her mom’s.”

Barron blinked when Mr. Hodge rested a hand on his shoulder. “You’re a good guy, Barron. I know you haven’t always acted like one, but I always knew inside you cared for people, other than your friends.”

That was corny. Barron felt his face flush. “It was common sense,” he protested. “She won’t remember her—I didn’t want her to grow up without something.” He might not have the best memories of his parents, but he had them. Barron knew exactly where he came from and who his family had been. He couldn’t imagine growing up without that comfort. He’d never tell anyone, but his heart ached for Marya.

She was innocent.

“Well I’m glad you volunteered because Jenn does need someone to take over for her tonight. The little ones should be asleep soon, but if you can just make sure they stay in the kindergarten room and don’t go wandering off if they wake up, I’d appreciate it.”

“I can do that.”

Barron told the guys he was going to stay at the school, and headed to the makeshift nursery. Jenn, a woman he didn't know very well who'd worked at the post office, was waiting inside the open doorway.

"They're all asleep," she whispered. "But Marya and Polluck might wake up to go to the bathroom. Just help them out the best you can, okay?"

"Got it." Barron had never helped a little kid go to the bathroom. He wasn't really sure he would know what to do, but it couldn't be that difficult. He'd been a little boy once.

It was dark in the kindergarten room. The only light came in the windows from the moon over the trees. Barron sat in one of the tiny plastic chairs and leaned his head against the wall.

How in the hell had the world come to this?

This was not supposed to be his life.

"Gotta go pee." The high, piping voice coming out of the dark startled him.

"Ow." Barron rubbed the back of his head. A little kid was standing in front of him when he opened his eyes.

"I need the potty."

"Marya?"

"Now," she whined. There was a little light in the bathroom. Barron flicked it on and the cold, white light made more shadows than anything else, but it was enough to make out the toilet. "I need help."

Marya pushed down her pants, but needed help getting on the toilet. Barron's face felt like it was on fire when he lifted the little girl and helped her balance when she swayed sleepily. She held up her free hand. "Tissue, please."

Barron passed her a small handful.

"All done?" Barron lifted her off the toilet and steadied her when she nodded. She pulled up her own PJ pants, thankfully. "Back to bed, okay?"

"I want Mama to kiss night." Marya looked up at him, like he could make that happen.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie. I can't get your momma." Her lip wobbled, and Barron's heart broke. He swooped her up and squeezed her tight. Her little body was so light in his arms, so tiny. He was an adult and had the ability to at least understand what was going on... if only they knew, but what about her?

Damn it. His throat burned, and he couldn't speak. She laid her head down on his shoulder and wrapped one arm loosely around his neck. Barron rocked Marya until her little sniffles faded and her body went heavy against him.

He put her back to bed and sat back down in the little chair. He buried his head in his hands and fought off the fear and anger swamping him. It wasn't fair—not for any of them. His dad's voice still floated in his head, demanding to know when he was ever promised life would be fair. Barron clutched the short strands of his hair and tugged. The pain helped block out the voice in his head, but for how long?

When Jenn came back, she had a few more adults with her to move the kids. Barron went back to his cot and grabbed his packed bag, ready to go on his cot. One by one they filed out of the gym for the last time. They'd sat around all day, but the stress of leaving for the unknown pressed down on all of them.

No one on the buses spoke. Barron found himself at the back, his friends around him, once again. This time they weren't heading for any cave. And they wouldn't be coming back.

Watching the streets fall behind them was the last thing Barron wanted to do. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the seat.

Tomorrow was a brand new day.

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## Chapter Five

Barron wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm. He'd never worked so hard—not even looking for supplies and survivors. Of course, he wasn't likely to come across any dead bodies here.

The metal scavenged from all the towns was dumped into a giant pile and had to be separated. By hand. Even more barbaric, by the time they were done moving the metal into the giant underground bunker each night, they barely had enough time to wash... in the lake.

He whistled to get his crew's attention. He had Creed, Thavin, and William, plus several other guys from his class he'd never really been on more than nodding terms with. He also had four guys from Winchester. They mostly kept town people together in the bunk areas but the crews were mixed. Probably to foster cooperation, or some other such crap.

"Time for our au natural soak and dinner." The sun would be up within the hour. The fast approaching summer didn't leave much nighttime, but they'd worked hard and almost finished the sorting. A soldier stood outside the bunker. He marked off Barron's group chits.

Some people had protested contributing to the group effort to stay alive. They didn't work, they didn't get a chit. They didn't get a chit, they didn't get food or water. There was a lot of shock and grumbling, but no one outright rebelled. Where would they go? The surrounding countryside had been stripped clean by the military crew, so there was no way a human would survive a single hour once the sun rose.

The martial discipline wasn't hard for Barron to accept. He'd lived with his father's version most of his life. Do what was expected of you and keep your trap shut. He could do it. William needed more reining in, but his friend had far fewer jokes to tell than before.

There wasn't much to laugh about.

Mess Hall was full with late shifters shoveling in their rations. MREs. Yum. Barron shuddered at the idea of eating reconstituted mac and cheese yet again, but when he was handed the mud brown packet he kept his mouth shut.

"Oh yuck, powdered cheese again. These things are from the stone ages," Creed complained.

Barron elbowed him in the ribs. "Eat it." He took another bite out of the packet and tried not to taste it.

"I'd kill for something fresh."

Barron swallowed. "There is nothing fresh. Did you see those trees by the lake? Dead. All the plants are gone. I'm just glad there weren't any fish in that lake."

Small animals died in droves.

Thavin opened his mouth, but Barron scowled at him. "Just eat it and stop bitching."

"No, it's not that." Thavin stared out the double doors. Barron looked over his shoulder. A steady stream of people filled the hall—all headed toward the huge bunker hanger. "What do you think's going on?"

"I don't know." Barron shoveled the last few bites of his pasta down, then grabbed his bottle of water. "Let's go see."

The crowd gathered around a man standing on top of a Humvee. He was leaning down, speaking to someone on the ground. He waved a hand, then nodded.

Barron could see the shiny emblem on his collar when he stood, reflecting the makeshift lights set up around him. Someone important then.

"I hope most of you can hear me," the man shouted. "My name is General Keene. This is my base. I know life has been very hard in the last month, with few answers as to what happened on the seventh of May, or why.

"We've discovered a way to communicate with other bases. It's beyond archaic, but the military has the equipment for Morse code. We've learned this wasn't just our area, or state, or even country. The entire Western Hemisphere experienced the light event that knocked out our power."

"Was it a bomb?" someone shouted.

"Will there be more?"

"People, people,"—the general held up his hands—"please listen, and I'll tell you everything I know."

"Yeah right." Thavin snorted.

"Shut it," Barron snapped.



“The light was not a bomb, or an attack on the West from the East. They’re starting to experience the same environmental die-offs we’re seeing here, on a larger scale too. Our real answers came when we received a broadcast by the Joint Space Venture. Orbiting craft and sensors showed a burst of gamma radiation of deep space origin.”

Dead silence greeted his words. Barron wasn’t the only one confused, apparently, but Thavin must have understood where the general was going because he swayed on his feet, reaching out for William’s shoulder blindly.

“The scientists postulate that a star collapsed, and when it did, it emitted a ray of gamma radiation capable of traveling at unprecedented speeds... and Earth was in its path. This is an extinction level event, people. Life on Earth as we know it will cease to exist very soon.”

Soldiers began wading into the crowd, trying to calm the shouts, screams, and panicked sobbing. Barron could barely feel the ground beneath his feet. Nothing felt real, not the bodies pressed around him, or—most of all—the news the general so bluntly stated.

“Citizens, please calm down!” General Keene roared. “There’s more!”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” a man in the front shouted. He shook a fist at the soldier in front him trying to get to him to be quiet. “No I will not quiet down. How can you expect us to be calm when you said we’re going to die?”

“I said life on Earth was going to end... I didn’t say we plan on sticking around for it.” General Keene’s shout finally made its way through enough of the crowd. Panic was replaced by confusion. “The gamma radiation has already begun a life cycle die off. Any humans exposed to the ray died within moments, or hours, depending on the amount of shielding. Half the ozone layer on Earth has disappeared, and the brown clouds now blocking the sun don’t actually block the harmful UV and UVB rays—hence the extreme damage to anyone exposed to the light. In short, the surface of the Earth will soon be unlivable.”

Barron shook his head. He didn’t mean—

“This base was built around the manufacturing center for deep space craft. A carefully picked colony plant—the first ever—was going to be sent to a habitable planet found by the JSV. Now that colony ship is going to be a life raft. Our life raft.”

Barron had never considered military service or space travel. They'd all heard of the colony slated to leave in the next two years, but it seemed like such a far off event. He'd not paid much attention, but he knew the details shared had been vague.

"How will any of us survive long enough to reach another habitable planet?" A woman cradled a baby against her hip. "Will my son even see it?"

"Are you talking about cryosleep? I heard the last mission went horribly wrong, and no one survived."

The general placed his hands behind his back. "Under ordinary circumstances, this information would not have been shared until the colony was successfully entrenched on Paradise. The most classified secret in this project was the new fold technology engines. With a special antimatter field, we'll be able to shrink space, in essence, in front of the ship. This will allow space travel at an unprecedented speed. For it to work, though, the hull must be formed with an interlocking carbon nanotube coating, filled with fluid to block radiation from space and stand up to the pressures of the space folding."

"The metal," William whispered.

"Your efforts to bring the materials we need, and the work done over the last few weeks, means we've nearly completed the ship. Fortunately, the computer systems were not yet operational and the gamma ray didn't fry them like most of the other operating tech in the hemisphere. Another week and the entire CI would have been a smoking ruin. But that didn't happen, and we're going to make it. We number in the hundreds now, but we've sent out the call to anyone who can make it under the cover of darkness to congregate here. We will leave no one behind if they can make it."

"What about supplies? What about water and food? How will there be enough?" Barron recognized Mr. Hodge's voice. After leaving their homes because there was no way to survive without supplies, it was something many of them had to be privately wondering.

"Not all the metal, plastics, and other fabric gathered are intended for the ship hull. Another classified secret is a large scale replicator that can break down objects to their basic molecules and then reassemble them into needed items—like food, clothing, and other necessities.

"Obviously, there will be some reduction in raw molecules over time, but with vigilant recycling, it'll last a long time, certainly long enough to set up the

colony and begin to appropriate material to replace our stocks. Now, I will attempt to answer questions—if they are presented in a calm fashion.”

“You claim to not know about the gamma thingy. But, if that’s true, how come this ship is so conveniently prepared?”

“Do you really believe that, if we knew this was coming, we’d send a mission to a new planet filled with civilians?” the general scoffed. “No.”

“Earth has been doomed for far longer than the month since the UV gamma radiation ray. Scientists have studied the world, and there were signs for decades that we’ve been wavering on a knife point with destruction of humankind on either side. Anyone could know that; it was recently beamed through the news feeds, in fact.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “This is not some grand conspiracy. Life doesn’t work out like that. This is a goddamned tragedy for the human race. One that just might spell extinction for all of us, if we’re not careful.” The general kept talking, but Barron wasn’t really listening.

Space.

A new planet.

“We’re gonna be aliens,” William said. He grinned and ran a hand through his curling hair. “I wonder what it’ll be like.”

“Different.” Thavin looked up at the ceiling of the hanger, as if he could see beyond it to the disappearing stars. “I read a lot of science fiction stories. People always try to relate to the new planet like it’s just a new part of their own, with some strange plants and creatures. But the truth... it could be anything. Probably way different than anything we could dream up.”

“Come on, let’s get some sleep. I’m sure we’re all going to be swamped with things to do until they shove us in their tin can spaceship.” Barron was wiped out and longed for the oblivion of sleep.

In the ten days that followed, Barron found out just how right he was. He knew why basic soldiers were called grunts after that. His group saw more of the ship than most, ferrying around supplies, carting tools and crates, and passing messages.

It was a big ship, but there were a lot of people coming to get on it. Thousands had already come, with more arriving each night. They were crammed into the base anywhere it was safe—a lot of the space was

underground. Thankfully the ship was in a separate chamber built into the side of the mountain. He had no idea how in the hell they planned to get it out to launch.

No one would tell him either. Like it would really matter, when they were all leaving Earth for good in the floating tin can anyway. Barron wasn't good trapped indoors. He liked staying busy, seeing and doing new things.

How was he going to manage a space flight?

Barron tried not to think about it too much. He couldn't change it. He just had to live with it. He knew how to do that better than most.

The exodus into the ship began two weeks after General Keene's revelations. Barron made sure his stuff was all secured in his bag, and settled it firmly on his back. They were loading folks on the ship by town. His was one of the first in the order.

The hanger was a zoo by the time he got there.

"Where were you hiding?" Mr. Hodge asked when Barron slid through a knot of people to check in with him. Each town had a head who would liaison with the ship staff. Before everyone crashed, exhausted from prepping for launch manually, the chain of command was shared in a last announcement. General Keene introduced the ship captain, the man who held all their lives in his hands.

Captain DeLeon was a lean man, Hispanic, with grizzled hair and a face that would likely crack if he ever smiled. Barron was more than willing to stay away from the man and the hulking security staff, but he wasn't hiding.

"Just getting my stuff," he told Mr. Hodge.

"Well your friends already checked in. We'll head over to the ship as soon as the sun goes down far enough. We have to move before the light completely fades, so make sure you stay under the UV shaded walkway rigged up. It's not big, so stay in line."

Barron snorted. Graduation would've come and gone the night before, and here he was, still walking in lines and checking in with the teacher. "Got it, Mr. Hodge."

There were about thirty people from his town in a clump by the door. The sunset couldn't break the cloud cover, but the light was fading. There was a

nice breeze occasionally gusting in through the door, bringing the smell of hot dust and concrete.

He missed the scent of green things, but Barron closed his eyes and tried to memorize the feeling of the warm air caressing his face and ruffling his hair.

“All right, everyone. One last time. Single file, stay in line, and don’t move from under the UV shade. We’re in D section on the third level on the ship. Each room sleeps eight. We split based on gender.” Not a single couple had made it through the gamma radiation.

“Let’s go.”

Barron shuffled along in the middle of the group, just behind the kids and Jenn. Dread coiled in the pit of his stomach. He was consigning himself to a tin tube. Well, not tin—a carbon-nano-filled-with-funky-fluids—tube.

“Bunny!”

“Marya!”

The cries startled Barron out of his funk. Jenn stood at the edge of the shade, one arm reaching for the little girl racing out into the sun. Barron dropped his bag and yanked off his windbreaker, running after Marya who began shrieking as she tried to find her stuffed bunny.

He scooped Marya up, covering her with the jacket. She flailed, knocking off his hat and exposing his face to the sun.

“Bunny! Bunny!” she sobbed.

“Barron, get back under the shade!”

Barron squinted, trying to see through the tears streaming down his face. It felt like the skin was peeling off his arms, neck and face. Her pink bunny was rolling away. He lunged for it. He stumbled but managed to grab one of its ears.

Marya was still crying and squirming, but Barron managed to hold onto her and the bunny and scramble back for the waiting crowd under the shade. He stumbled, unable to see anything but bright-white light, and fell to his knees.

Barron whimpered when they dragged him under the shade. His entire body felt like it was on fire. Someone took Marya and the bunny, and then grabbed his hands.

Agony from the touch lanced up his arms. He screamed, jerking away. It felt like his skin tore off in their grip, exposing his nerve endings to the biting air.

“We have to pick you up, Barron. I’m sorry.”

Barron shook his head. “Don’t touch me!”

“You can’t just lay here, we have to get you to the med bay.”

“No,” he moaned. His protests didn’t stop them from reaching for him. Hands lifted him under his shoulders and along his sides and legs. They didn’t touch his bare skin, but it was too much.

The pain overwhelmed him. He wanted to scream, but he couldn’t breathe. Dying shouldn’t hurt this much.

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## Chapter Six

“We need to get him stabilized.”

“The tank won’t work on his eyes.”

“Either we worry about those now and risk him dying from infection, or we worry about them later and save his life at the expense of his short-term sight. This is my ward. Do as I say.”

Barron could hear them speaking, he even understood them, but it was like a layer of cloth separated him from the rest of the world. Bright white cloth that surrounded him, painful in its purity. Someone blocked it, trading the light for dark, and he sighed in relief.

The disassociation between his mind and his body was ripped away the second he was moved again. This time Barron didn’t lose consciousness, though he wished he had, as he slid into a tingling fluid. Chills raced up and down his spine, and shivers wracked him. It felt as if his skin split in uneven cracks all along his limbs with every shake.

He moaned.

“He needs more meds.”

“No. His body is already in shock. More pain meds could push him over the edge. Get him in the tank and let the fluid do its job.”

Barron wished the people arguing over him would just shut up. He really wished he could tell them that, too, but it was all he could do to hold in the screams as more of his body was lowered into the stinging fluid.

He didn’t want to go in the tank. The tank hurt. Barron tried to pull away from the grip on his arms, but he couldn’t break the hold. He just slid into the tank faster. Barron’s panic rose as the fluid seeped into his ears and began to cover his face. How was he going to breathe? Were they drowning him?

The fluid echoed with his gasps for air. There was no scent to it as it lapped at his nose and then closed over it.

Trying to hold his breath was futile. Barron gasped... and air filled his lungs. He wasn’t breathing the fluid. His heart began to slow from a frantic drum beat to a slower pace. The tingles began to spread and join until his whole body might’ve been vibrating for all he knew. It felt like it.

Garbled voices spoke around the tank, but he couldn't understand them anymore. Exhaustion dragged at Barron's limbs. He let go of the almost subconscious tension in his muscles and let the fluid in the tank cradle him.

It felt good. The pain was gone or maybe it was just hidden. Barron didn't really care.

He was so tired.

So tired.

Barron jerked when a hand reached into the tank and touched his face. At regular intervals, someone kept doing that—touching his mouth—and it was fucking pissing him off.

"Leave me alone!" he snapped. Except, he didn't. There was something in his mouth he hadn't even felt before. It was round and hard and covered his lips, dipping between them to invade his mouth. "What the fuck?"

That came out garbled too.

Barron reached for his mouth, but the goo in the tank was too viscous. He couldn't reach through it to his mouth—he could barely move at all.

The next time Barron woke the hands weren't touching his face, they were tugging on his shoulders. Barron kicked his legs and dislodged one hand from an ankle. His feeble struggles didn't stop them. Why wouldn't they let him sleep? He wanted to sleep.

"Hey, calm down, young man. We're taking you out of the tank; if you struggle, we could drop you."

His skin felt far too tender to take a drop on the floor. Barron fell still, other than a fine tremor he couldn't stop. The anticipation of agony when they placed him on a soft surface consumed him, but it didn't hurt.

Thank God it didn't hurt.

"C-c-cold," he said through clenched teeth. Air flowed over his body. Did they have him in some sort of freezer? All he could see was a pale blur.

"Just a minute."

Barron heard a beep, and then warm air enveloped him. "Ahh."

"Here." A rough cloth settled over his body up to his armpits. "There, now you won't get cold."



The cloth was scratchy. It irritated his ribs and nipples with every breath. "What did you put over my eyes?" Barron reached up to touch his face. Someone grabbed his hand.

"Please don't do that."

"Who are you? What's going on?"

Another voice spoke on the other side of the bed. A woman. "My name is Dr. Aya Samuels. The other person is one of my medics, Nolu. We've been caring for you after you were involved in an incident on your way to the ship. Do you remember?"

A bunny. A little girl with her hair in a ribbon... "Marya! Was she hurt? Is she okay?" Barron reached for the doctor with one hand. "Please tell me."

"Calm down." Dr. Samuels grabbed his hand and gently rested it back on the bed. "Your body took a lot of damage, and you went into shock. You need to remain calm and try not to stress yourself."

Why was she avoiding his questions? "Where is Marya?"

"She was here. She had a severe sunburn on her hands and face, but you had her covered up in seconds, which helped protect her from the amount of damage you received. I treated her and sent her back to your ship quarters with her caretaker—and her bunny. She was going on and on about B saving her bunny. I guess B is you."

Barron nodded. He sank into the pillows and let go of the doctor's hand. "Thank you," he whispered. Marya was okay. Barron closed his eyes. They were sore from straining to see the doctor.

"You're welcome." Dr. Samuels patted his hand.

"You, on the other hand, were out in the sun for about twenty seconds without protection. You sustained severe burns over most of your face, back, and arms, with minor burns on your stomach and legs. The tank healed most of the superficial skin damage, and we were able to rehydrate you while you were in there as well.

"Unfortunately, the damage to your skin was not the worst injury you sustained. Marya knocked off your sunglasses, leaving your eyes unprotected. The eyes are far more delicate tissue than the dermis layer of your body... one I'm unable to heal with the tank. I'm sorry, Barron, but until we get to the new planet and I can set up a full clinic, I can't fix your eyes."

“Fix my eyes? What happened to them? I remember the stinging, and them watering so bad I couldn’t see. What happened to my eyes?” Barron reached for his face again, jerking his arm away when the doctor tried to stop him.

He slid his fingers up his cheeks, expecting to find some type of healing goop over his eyes, but they were dry. He opened his eyes, but the milky clouds were still there.

“Barron, remember what I said about staying calm. Nolu!”

“How do I stay calm? I can’t see. *I can’t see!*” Barron shook his head. “This can’t be happening. I can’t be blind. No one goes blind anymore!”

A hiss and a cold sting bit Barron high on his neck. “What the—”

“When you wake up, we’ll talk some more.” The doctor’s voice came to him through a long tunnel, echoing distantly.

Huh. Just like in the cave, when the whole world came to a crashing halt.

“Barron?”

“Mphm.” Barron didn’t want to wake up. He couldn’t remember why in his sleepy haze, but he remembered he didn’t want to wake up. “Ngh.” He grabbed the blanket before it could be yanked off the bed.

Ouch. It hurt to move his hands, like his skin was tight.

“Barron, you must wake up now. We’re about to take off.”

“Okay. See you later.” He yawned and shoved the pillow under his head better. It was flat. He hated that. He’d have to ask his mom to get him a new one. He ignored his parents’ whispers.

“Dr. Samuels said get him up.” A cold, wet cloth smacked Barron in the face.

“What the hell?” Barron jerked upright. He blinked repeatedly. It didn’t help. “Oh, damn.” He wasn’t at home. His parents weren’t bugging him to get his ass up for school before they left for work. “What?”

“Hello, Barron. I’m Nolu, if you don’t remember me from before. We need to get you back to your bunk. The ship’s going to take off soon, and for the twenty hours we’ll be in-system everyone is confined to quarters. Dr. Samuels says rest is best for you. She contacted your group leader, a Mr. Hodge, and he said your friends were anxious to see you.”

“Okay.”

Barron reached down to push aside the blanket. Only then did he realize he was stark naked. He couldn't see her, but he'd heard a female voice. No way was he flashing his dangly bits. “Can I get something to put on? And some privacy?”

“Oh, right, sorry. I have a pair of pants and a shirt right here. Mejia stepped out.”

Barron fumbled with the cloth, trying to figure out how to put them on. He grit his teeth.

“Here. Feel for the waist, then slide your hand around the band until you feel the ties. That's the front.” Nolu guided Barron's hand by the wrist. Barron nodded curtly. He grabbed the sides of the waistband and pulled it up and over his legs, then stood up, pulling the pants up all the way. Standing was more challenging than he thought it would be.

Unable to really see anything more than light, and a faint shadow that had to be Nolu, he had a hard time staying balanced. “Does the doctor think my sight might come back on its own?” Barron grabbed the bed, then slid his free hand over the top, looking for the shirt.

“You might see some improvement.” He coughed. “I'm sorry.”

“For what?” Damn it, the guy was an idiot. He couldn't even explain anything without sounding like he had no fucking idea what to say. “Just say it.”

“You damaged the cornea, as well as your retina. Injuries like that don't spontaneously heal.” Nolu sounded regretful, but he didn't sugarcoat the matter. Barron appreciated the lack of bullshit. He might be hesitant, but...

Barron snorted. No wonder why the guy apologized. Seeing anything in the near future wasn't happening. “Thank you.” He found the shirt and spread it out, checking the openings. Sleeve, sleeve, neck, bottom. It didn't seem to matter which side was front or back, so he slipped it over his head. He'd stumbled into his clothes with his eyes closed before school enough to know how to get a damn shirt on—sight or no sight.

At least it was comfortable.

A single claxon warning echoed through the ship. “I'm sorry I can't give you more time to get used to this, but we have to go. Mejia,” Nolu called.

The door slid open with a hiss. "I'm going to take one arm, and she's going to take the other. We'll have you walk between us. We won't let anything happen to you."

Like a damned invalid, Barron was forced to lean on the two medics. He was woozy, and without his eyesight, he'd never make it. He knew the D section on the third level was just four levels down from the med ward, almost directly in fact.

But he'd never find his way around the ship like this. "Just walk normally," Mejia said.

Normal walking did not involve holding on to two strangers like a damn cripple and praying he didn't fall into anything. Barron grunted and closed his eyes. The strange effect from the light made him dizzy; he kept straining to make things out, too. His head began to hurt, a steady throb in his temples.

"Keeping your eyes closed is a good idea. I think your glasses were lost, but you can requisition a new pair when we're done with the launch and in-system travel. They might help reduce the white glare."

"Thanks," Barron muttered. The trip down the magnetic lift was silent. The quiet broke as soon as they entered D section.

"Barron!" William reached him first, pushing the female medic away and taking her place.

"Oh my God, man, you're okay! They said you would be, but..."

"You looked like you'd been barbequed man." Barron frowned. Now he had an image of himself on a platter with a fruit in his mouth or something.

"Creed! Shut up," Thavin hissed.

"But he looks fine now, perfectly normal—other than a little pale."

"Christ on a cracker, Creed, *shut up*." William's hand tightened on Barron's arm.

"Okay, okay, fine. Shutting up."

"We're glad you're back, Barron." Barron swung his head around toward Mr. Hodge's voice.

"Thanks," Barron muttered.

"Boys, Barron should be in his bunk—Doctor's orders—and so should you—Captain's orders. The ship will launch soon."

“Yes, sir. C’mon, we’ll get you all set up.” Thavin took Nolu’s spot. Barron swallowed, trying to get rid of the bitter taste in his mouth.

Barron’s stuff had been shifted to a bottom bunk, apparently. He went to climb in and smacked his head on the bottom of the bunk above him.

“Ow! Shit.” He rubbed at his forehead.

“Oh, stellar job guys. Let him get hurt again, why don’t you?” Creed snorted. “How about, ‘duck your head, Barron, there’s a metal beam here’?”

“Bugger—”

“That’s enough,” Barron snapped. His head hurt, his skin still felt like it was stretched too tight over his body, and everyone was probably staring right at him. “Just get out of the way.” He shook off his friends and slid his hand along the bottom of the bunk, feeling a number etched in the metal at the corner, then reached down to find his mattress. He could crawl into his own bed, damn it.

“Get in your bunks like Mr. Hodge said.” Barron rolled over, finding his pillow and then the small buttons on the headboard. Which one was it again?

“Hey,” he said quietly. “Which button’s for the stasis field?”

“Third from the left.” The answer sounded like it came from the bunk across from Barron. He squinted, trying to see who was talking, but he didn’t recognize the harsh whisper. All he could see was a shadow.

“Thanks.”

The guy rolled over. “Whatever.”

What was his problem?

Barron pressed the third button and the stasis field activated down by his feet, slowly moving up toward his head. Before it could reach him, he settled back into the bed. The stasis fields would be shut off when they reached space.

Until then, Barron would nap. It’s not like he had anything else to do.

Napping was pretty much all he did for the next three days. He got up for meals, but he hated the fact that someone had to guide him there, help him figure out where his food was. Even then, he spilled half of it. He started asking for blended meals, like a toothless old person. Then he had to sit there and wait for someone who had the time to take him back to D section.

Screw it, Barron was tired of fucking waiting around. The cafeteria was empty. Thavin had to run down to Security, but he said he’d be back in a few

minutes. He could make it down two straight corridors. Of course he smacked his shins against three chairs.

All in all, Barron was feeling very bitter, except for when Marya would climb up in his bed. He always sat up, letting her squirm around on his lap as she jabbered on. He didn't regret running after her, he just wished...

"Ow!"

He stumbled and fell. The metal grate on the floor sliced into his palms and skinned his knees.

"Whoops. I'm so clumsy."

Barron clenched his teeth together. Why hadn't he expected this? He'd heard the whispers and knew what they were probably saying.

*Weak.*

*Victim.*

*Worthless.*

*Annoying burden.*

He couldn't even avoid a twerp trying to get back at him. Barron knew exactly who tripped him.

"Revi Porter!"

Barron jerked back against the wall.

"Front and center, young man. Now."

Someone else was in the corridor with them.

"Did I just see you just trip Mr. Pernell?"

"Yes, sir." Revi's drawl made it sound like he said, 'suh'. "But Dad—"

Shit, it was Revi's dad, the lieutenant colonel. "No buts. You committed assault on a fellow survivor. A young man who was severely injured, and could've died, after he selflessly ran after a little girl—one he'd already saved once before. Yet you felt it was acceptable to knock someone down who is unable to protect himself.

"Maybe you need to spend some time helping Mr. Pernell about his daily routine, so you can make up for your disgraceful behavior."

Barron cringed. Why not put a sign on his back that said, 'useless cripple'. He slid a hand across the floor, looking for his glasses. He didn't like anyone seeing his eyes—not after several people had gasped when he looked toward them. And the voices were always aimed at his chest, like just looking at him made people uncomfortable.

Finally, he found his glasses and slipped them on.

"I'm fine." It was time to stop this whole thing before it got even more humiliating. "It was an accident."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm wrong? That I didn't see what was clearly visible?"

Barron snapped. "Yeah, maybe you're as blind as me. I said I'm fine, and it was an accident."

"He did the exact same thing to me the first day we met, Dad. He's a disrespectful ass, clearly, because he didn't understand what you meant at all."

"I don't fucking care what he meant, or what he says. I don't want you helping me. Just stay the hell away from me." Barron lost count of how many steps he'd taken. He'd have to feel the letter plates on the sections. "I don't need anyone."

Barron was done relying on other people. He could manage on his own. It wasn't forever; just until they got to the new planet and Dr. Samuels could fix his eyes. He took a few steps forward and then his hand reached open air. He stumbled sideways and slammed into the edge of the door.

He grunted, biting his lip.

"Oh yeah, smooth," Revi taunted him.

"Son!" Lt. Colonel Porter had a bark on him just like Barron's dad had—before he died. But Porter wasn't his dad, and Barron didn't need to listen to the overbearing jerk.

"Sorry, Dad."

"Apologize to him, not me."

Even though it clearly galled him, Revi apologized. "Sorry, Barron."

"Whatever. I don't accept your apology, just like I don't accept his opinion that I need your help."

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“That, Mr. Pernell, is clearly untrue. Further, whether or not you care what I meant previously, I’ve spoken. As an officer on this ship, I can dictate the responsibilities of the civilians on board. You, Mr. Pernell, will have an aide until such time as your eyesight can be restored. Revi will assist you during your waking hours. This is not up for debate. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Revi sounded as furious as Barron felt.

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## Chapter Seven

“Dinner.”

“Fuck off.” Barron wasn’t that hungry. Certainly not hungry enough to be seen with Revi. At lunch he’d expected one of his friends to come get him. Creed had come to his bunk and whispered the news they’d been ordered—*ordered*—not to help him.

That was Revi’s job, and his dad wouldn’t let anyone else do it. Creed apologized profusely, but Barron knew it wasn’t his fault. It was the Porters’, both of them.

Well fuck if he was going to allow it.

“If you don’t go eat, I can’t go eat.”

“Sucks to be you.” That was one of William’s favorite lines.

“Hell no. No way.” His bed jerked. Revi must have kicked it, judging by the cursing and hopping thuds he could hear. That slow drawl got stronger when Revi got pissed.

Barron snickered.

“I’m not going hungry because you feel like being your usual asshole self.”

“You don’t know me.” Barron turned onto his side. Revi’s dad had moved fast sticking them together—the ass was in the bunk next to his now. “I’m busy. Go away.”

“I know everything I need to about you. You’re an overbearing bully who isn’t worth a hill of beans without his friends backing him up. And you’re just acting lazy. *Now. Get. Up.*”

“No.”

Annoying little twerp, meet immovable object. Barron knew Revi couldn’t make him get up, and he wouldn’t dare touch him again. Barron let his whining fade into the background. He didn’t really have anything on his mind. If he could’ve, he would have read his one precious book. He couldn’t even enjoy his favorite Brogherd novel.

What he wouldn’t give to get lost in a horror story that went away when he tapped the off button. Why didn’t life have an off button? Well, it did... but he wasn’t willing to push it.

Barron fell asleep. He woke a few times when everyone came in from work before leaving in groups to go eat, but he didn't feel like talking. Everyone knew about Revi being saddled with him, the lazy cripple, so why shouldn't he go with it?

D section was quiet when Barron finally woke. The dormitory-style room housed everyone from his hometown and then some. He'd been in and out of the dorms when they packed the ship. Over half of them were empty.

So many people had died. Barron still saw them in his dreams.

Thinking about it would bring on nightmares. He sighed. He couldn't go back to sleep. He heard a lot of snoring, but no one was talking or walking around. A way to tell time would be really nice, but Barron figured it must be the middle of the night.

The perfect time for a snack. Barron slid his hand into his pocket. His chit was still there. Good. Barron sat up, and his bed creaked. He froze and listened.

Nothing.

Two steps to the end of his bunk. One more to make sure he was in the center of the corridor. Turn. He had to go thirty steps to the door. He slid his foot forward just above the floor. One. Another. Two.

By the time he got close to thirty the tension made his muscles tremble. He held up one hand so he wouldn't run into the wall with his face. Thavin had suggested he try orienting by counting steps, and it was working, but the uncertainty of not knowing what was around him rattled his nerves. What if someone dropped something? He wouldn't see what everyone else could avoid. Plus, he probably looked stupid, shuffling around with his arm out.

Barron breathed a silent sigh of relief when he made it to the smooth metal exit from D section to the corridor. The door opened soundlessly. The corridor was silent in a way the room full of sleeping people hadn't been. Barron could feel a hum through the floor, vibrating into his feet. Maybe it was from the engine turning the sections around the core, creating the artificial gravity they all needed to keep from floating up to the ceiling.

He imagined it could also be the engine, something they'd been told about but never seen. He'd gotten close enough to the engine bay to see the two gigantic soldiers armed to the teeth standing outside the access door. Like they needed weapons with all their genetic modifications.

The idea they were going to shrink space... it boggled his mind. Barron was a bit of a math whiz, though he didn't really share it around school, but he couldn't imagine the computations needed to figure the amount of power needed to create the field around the front of the ship they'd need to move through space faster than the speed of light.

Barron jumped when the door slid shut behind him. Damn things were on a timer at night so they'd stay shut if someone forgot to turn off the proximity sensor. He'd been lost in the strange sensation of the ship itself and nearly got his heels chopped off. He had to pay attention. Now that he wasn't worried about physical objects in his path, Barron set out. Three smooth metal doorways—all shut—broke up the textured bands waist high along the wall. He slowed, searching for the last door. The cafeteria served processed foods made from the raw molecules broken down from the collected scrap.

It was kinda weird if he thought about it. His burger might have once been someone's car door or bicycle. He couldn't tell the difference between the replicated food and what he remembered eating, though. It smelled the same, too.

He could smell tomatoes and garlic in the hall. He had to be close to the cafeteria. Barron slid his hand along the door and felt the seam in the middle. Double doors. He'd definitely found the cafeteria.

Spaghetti with his lack of sight would be a disaster, but Barron knew they kept ready-made snacks and other foods on hand. He groped his way through the cafeteria, trying not to bang into any tables or chairs. They'd had lunch in there every day when they helped load the ship; he remembered where the cold storage was, along the right-hand wall.

He managed to knock over a chair and kick a table leg so hard he could've sworn his toe audibly popped—and was probably broken—by the time he felt the smooth doors with their sleek handles. Below those were cabinets.

Barron opened one storage unit and began sliding his hand over the shelves inside. He was looking for a triangle package... Aha! He'd found it. His stomach grumbled. Barron slid to the floor, crossing his legs. He opened the sealed top of the package of food and grinned when he took a big whiff. He'd found a ham sandwich—or a toaster masquerading as a ham sandwich—but he didn't care. It was so good.

Wolfing down two took less than five minutes. Barron barely chewed, just shoved it in his mouth. He'd acted like he wasn't hungry, but all it had taken

was one bite for his stomach to prove him wrong. If he admitted it—and he never would—he'd been starving. Ramping Revi's temper up until his accent thickened, and he was ready to blow, was too much fun. He should get something to stash in his pillow.

That took longer. Barron didn't want something easily crushed, like crackers, or anything in a lot of packaging that would leave any evidence behind he couldn't get rid of without getting busted. He picked up packages, investigating different foods in the cupboards, then carefully set them exactly where he found them until he finally found an apple. He didn't really like the seeds, but he could eat pretty much all of it.

And wouldn't that piss off Mr. Southern High-and-Mighty of the long, curly hair?

Barron grinned. He palmed a second apple, and then slid the cupboard shut. He tossed the packages from his sandwiches in the recycler. Armed with his snacks, he made his way back to D section, reversing his direction and counting his steps. The apples went into the pockets of his loose jacket so he could walk with his right hand brushing along the wall.

In far less time than he expected, Barron made it back to D section. Barron actually traced the section plaque twice, just to make sure. Now his stomach was sated, he was beginning to get tired again. Barron crept quiet as a mouse through the corridor to his bunk, counting the steps exactly in reverse.

It worked.

He didn't need Revi, and he was going to prove it.

The next morning he yanked his blanket over his head when everyone got up. Everyone but him. Barron snickered into his pillow as Revi raged at him. The smooth lumps in his pillow reassured Barron he, at least, wouldn't go hungry.

Apparently he'd pushed his new guide past his limit. Revi started smacking him in the head with a pillow.

"Get up, get up, *get up!*"

Barron rolled over, shoving his blanket down. He stared toward the side of the bed where Revi stood, breathing hard, and said, "You have to be kidding me. A pillow? What are you, ten? A girl? That's it, you're a girl aren't you? Shoulda known with that hair."

"*You* have to be kidding *me*," Revi mocked him. "Is that what all this has been about? My hair? You don't like me because you think my hair is girly?"

Barron didn't answer him.

"That's it, isn't it! Now who's ten? Didn't your parents teach you better than to judge a person by their appearance?"

Baron swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He pushed off the thin mattress and stood up, facing Revi. "My dad taught me to look and act like a man, not a girl." He flexed his hands into fists, grinding his teeth. "Even blind I'm more of a man than you'll be on your best day, girly boy."

"Well this girly boy is going to knock some sense into your blind ass."

Barron targeted the sound of Revi's voice and jabbed. His fist was swept aside by a block, and Barron barely managed to protect his face. His left arm throbbed from the punch he'd taken in return.

Revi didn't say anything else, but Barron heard the slide of his feet on the floor to his left, away from the bunks and toward the center of the room. He turned with the sound and stepped forward—straight into a kick to his gut.

"Ugh," Barron grunted, bending into the blow. He swung but the edge of his fist barely glanced Revi's body. His teeth clacked together from a sharp blow that felt like it came from an elbow. The iron tang of blood filled his mouth from the tip of his tongue. He'd damn near bit it off.

That was it. Barron couldn't exchange blows with someone who could freaking kick like that. He couldn't see them coming to duck under or step back, and he was going to get his ass kicked if he didn't do something else. He had to get an advantage... and he knew just how to do that.

The next blow smacked into his jaw again, but Barron let it rock his head sideways, going with the strike instead of against it. Then he lunged, wrapping his arms around Revi's slim body with one shoulder into his ribs. They struck the floor, and Barron grinned fiercely at the choking sound Revi made when he landed on top of him.

Wrestling he could do.

Or he thought he could. "Son of a bitch." Revi was as slippery as a water weed. All that hair would've been a great handle, but he couldn't feel it loose like he'd always seen it before. "Did your mommy do your hair for you? Make you all pretty?"

They rolled around, grappling with each other, trying to get on top and stay there. “Was not,” Revi gasped. He slammed his head against Barron’s mouth, battering his lips against his teeth.

“What?” They hammered at each other, with their elbows and shoulders. Barron’s whole torso was throbbing. If Revi thought he could distract him... Barron spit out the blood in his mouth. He felt Revi’s legs fold, and quickly spun them, flipping his opponent face down with one twist of his hips. He locked his ankles around Revi’s legs and spread them, using his weight and height to stay on top. He wound one arm under Revi’s shoulder and against the back of Revi’s head, trapping his arm and smashing his face into the floor.

“*My mom*”—Revi’s voice was garbled, but Barron understood him—“*was not a bitch, you bastard.*” He shuddered, and then went limp.

Oh shit.

The frustrated rage that drove Barron since... well, since forever, faded just enough for his conscience to begin screaming at him. Barron hadn’t liked his parents alive, but he still missed them. Even though he’d longed to be on his own, he’d never expected it to happen like it had, with the entire world going tits up. He’d been holding on to a stereotype, one he knew was wrong and hated since he turned twelve—when his dad caught him trying to do his hair with some glitter gel for a party—just because he felt like such an unfeeling traitor.

Because, in the depths of his heart, he was relieved his dad was gone. He didn’t have to be a carbon copy of the man who’d raised him, not anymore.

So why was he still trying to hurt someone who was different, just because his dad would’ve approved? No one deserved to be in the amount of pain he’d heard in Revi’s voice.

He’d loved his mom. No one could sound like that if they hadn’t had their heart ripped out by loss.

And Barron made it worse.

He scrambled away from Revi until he slammed into a bed. Barron pulled his knees up. He swiped one hand across his mouth, smearing warm liquid—probably blood—over the back of his hand.

Damn it. Damn the whole fucking world, and the ship, and Lt. Porter. Damn his brain for getting logical when all Barron wanted to do was take out his pain and fear on someone else. But he couldn’t do it. He didn’t want to be that guy. He hadn’t wanted to be a bully.

Saying sorry wasn't something he was used to doing. Barron had to do something. What if Revi started crying? Barron hated that shit.

He slid one hand along the bunk. The numbers etched into the bottom corner of the bunk were wrong. Odds, when his was even. He was across the corridor from his bed. He was sixteen. Barron stood up, groaning as the muscles in his shoulders, back, and stomach flexed.

Black and blue bruises were probably already forming all over his body. He shuffled down, away from the harsh sound of Revi's breathing. He stretched out his hand, unsure of the space and unwilling to smack his face into anything again.

He had to backtrack to his left because he'd swung too wide, but finally he found his bunk. He grabbed his pillow and reached into the pillow case, pulling out the apples he'd stashed there. He took a few steps to the end of the bed, then held one out.

"Here."

Silence.

"Hey. I said here."

"What?" Revi's voice was still muffled. Was he crying or was his face still against the floor?

"Take the damn apple." Barron shook his hand. "Just... take it."

"Why?" Revi's voice got clearer. "What'd you do to it?"

"Nothing. You said you were fucking hungry. Take the damn apple, or I'm dropping it. You can eat it off the floor."

If Barron was Revi, he'd get a cheap shot in when he wasn't expecting it. Or he would have ten minutes ago. Whatever. But Revi plucked the apple out of his hand, not touching him, and didn't hit him either.

Revi didn't start eating it. Barron still held the other apple, but his mouth fucking hurt. He wasn't sure he could take a bite without dislodging some teeth that had to be loose after the last head-butt. He licked his lip, wincing when his tongue slid over the split on the bottom.

The apple made a crunching sound when Revi bit into it.

"You're a pretty good fighter," Barron said quietly. He shuffled backward and sat on his bunk. Barron rolled his apple between his palms, looking down. He wondered what color it was. His stomach was still flipping around.

Maybe it was a good thing he couldn't eat.

It was too quiet. Revi hadn't taken another bite. Barron was relying on his other senses more and more. The less he tried to see and the more he tried to hear and feel, the easier it was to get a sense for what was around him.

And right then it felt like he was being stared at.

By Revi Porter.

Who'd just beat the crap out of him—and maybe knocked a little sense into his head at the same time. Barron was so tired of the act.

“Where'd you get the apple? One of your friends sneak them in for you?”

Barron shook his head. “I got up after everyone was asleep last night and ate some sandwiches in the cafeteria. I brought the apples back myself.”

“No way.” Revi snorted. “You're blind.”

“Doesn't mean I'm weak,” Barron snapped. His temper flared. “I don't need you, you know, no matter what your dad thinks. I'm fine on my own.” He didn't need his friends to lead him around either. Barron would damn well learn to deal with his nearly nonexistent life until his eyes healed on their own or could be fixed.

“What happens when we get to the new planet? What then, huh?”

“Then Dr. Samuels fixes my eyes, and I do whatever I have to do.” He could maybe help build the habitats. He was good with his hands.

“What if she can't?” Revi asked quietly. Most of the belligerence in his tone faded.

“She will.” Barron couldn't think otherwise... but the words of the general about people dying from exposure kept flashing in his head. He wasn't going to die, the tank saw to that, but *what if* the damage was too bad. Could they make him new eyes?

Or would he be stuck in a blinding fog of light forever?

“Sorry.”

Barron didn't know what to do with that. What was Revi sorry for? Taunting him? Hitting him? Making him think about what would happen if he never saw again?

Was it payback for making him think about his mom?



Or maybe he was just... sorry.

Barron let out a big sigh. "Yeah. Sorry."

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## Chapter Eight

“Are you going to get up for lunch?”

Barron turned his head toward Revi, but didn't sit up as he considered the question. His face hurt, and chewing would probably make his jaw throb worse, but earlier his stomach had growled loud enough to hear over the sound of the little kids leaving after their morning naps. He and Revi had been lucky to not get busted for fighting—Jenn had brought them back into the dormitory from the nursery to nap a few minutes after they'd come to an uneasy truce.

At least it'd broken the awkward silence between them. Barron sat up and reached for his shoes. Revi's bed creaked. “Don't.”

Barron didn't know if he was going to try to help him, but he didn't want Revi to.

“Don't what?” Revi had moved, but he was standing too far away to be reaching for Barron's shoes.

“Nothing,” Barron muttered. He grabbed his tennis shoes where they were tucked under his bunk and shoved his feet into them. “Can we sit next to my friends? I won't sit next to the girls. No fucking way.”

“So it's not just my girly hair you hate, but actual girls too?” Revi sounded amused.

“They're shrill and talk too much. Not to mention, they're annoying as hell.”

“Jeez, Pernell, is there anyone you don't hate?”

“My friends.” Barron stood up. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I've known them since we started school as kids.”

“Fine. We'll sit by your friends.”

Barron started counting steps. He made the turn into the center corridor between the dormitory bunks. “Where the hell are you?” He hadn't heard Revi move.

“Behind you.”

Good. No way did he want to look like Revi was leading him around or something. He walked toward the door, pretending confidence he didn't feel.

He knew how many steps it was. He'd made it the night before while everyone slept. He could do it now.

Twenty-nine. Barron put up his hand and the door was literally right in front of him. He'd barely avoided smacking into it. The door slid open when he touched it.

The humming in the corridor was muted. He couldn't feel it in his feet. People moving around. He could hear their steps and snatches of conversations. Barron turned, a little hesitant. He knew which way to go, but crashing into someone would be embarrassing. Revi would probably laugh. Barron would've... before.

"Everyone's on the other side of the corridor, leaving the cafeteria to head back to work." The living quarters were on several rings orbiting the center ship area. People were heading to the lift or to use the central no-grav tube.

Made it easier for him, at least. He walked, trailing his hand along the wall. He didn't want to miss the doors by miscounting again. The hall fell silent. There must've been a lull in the eating schedule.

The cafeteria doors slid open as they approached with a quiet snick. Even after just a few days, Barron was noticing a lot more sounds around him than he'd ever heard before. The buzz of everyone talking in the cafeteria was a dull roar as their voices blended together. He'd once walked into a flock of birds and set them off, squawking, and it was almost that bad.

He paused before going in.

"The line is on our right. Maybe nine of your steps." Revi's voice came from right behind Barron's shoulder. He was close, almost touching. That let him speak quietly so Barron could hear him but no one else could. They joined the line. Revi actually pulled him back a little before he bumped into the last person before them.

"Thanks." Barron casually slid his hands along the bar at the counter tray area. It was empty. He reached up to the counter above the slide and picked up a tray.

"Pizza, sub sandwich, or salad?" a woman asked.

Oh, pizza. Warm and cheesy. "What kind of pizza?"

"Three cheese or pepperoni." Okay, so they weren't exactly original in the topping choices, but Barron wasn't going to complain. He didn't want another sandwich, and no way was he eating rabbit food.

“One of each.” His mouth watered. He was really hungry and could smell the doughy crust and cheese, along with the sharp tang of tomato sauce. A vibration between his hands let him know the plate with his pizza had been set down on his tray. “Thanks.”

“Cheese only, please.”

Barron didn't wait for Revi. He slid down the line slowly. When the back of his hand hit another tray he stopped.

“Drink?”

“Milk, please.”

“Milk?” Revi sounded amused.

“It's good with pizza. I like milk. Made me big and strong. Obviously you didn't drink enough of it growing up.”

“Uh huh. Your size had nothing to do with your genetics and everything to do with nutrition.” Barron could almost hear Revi roll his eyes.

“Well, I'd say yes if I were still acting like an ass, but I'd be lying. Genetics for an average, white male dictate about eighty percent of a person's height, with another twenty percent influenced by environmental factors like nutrition and lifestyle. Lack of protein and Vitamins A & D, like milk and meat—Mr. No Pepperoni—are two of the main nutritional contributors to growth, or lack of it. So yeah, I drink milk.”

“Holy shit. You're a geek.” Revi's voice rose.

His face heated at Revi's audible shock. “I'm not stupid, no. But I am *not* a geek.”

Revi didn't say anything else. They finished getting their food. Barron paused after he picked up his tray.

“It's pretty busy in here. Let me lead you.”

Barron ground his teeth. “No.” Just... no.

“Do you know where your friends are?”

“No. And since your dad said they couldn't help me, they can't exactly come and get me so I will know, either. But you're still not leading me around.”

“Shit. Why did you have to mention him?” Revi muttered. “He's here, and he's looking right at us.”

“Well, let’s stop standing here.” Barron suppressed his urge to snarl and scowl.

“Fine, but if something happens it’s your fault—not mine. Turn left, then walk about six steps and make a right.” Revi was right behind him again.

Barron tightened his fingers around the tray. He hated this. Not being able to see, depending on someone else to guide him around like a baby. Revi wasn’t touching him, but his breath puffed against the sensitive hair at the base of his neck, and Barron almost swore he could feel the heat from Revi’s body along his back.

It was almost as bad as it would’ve been if Revi took his hand. Barron tried to suppress the thoughts chasing circles around in his brain. He had to pay attention. He counted and turned, taking deep breaths through his nose.

“Not so much, turn a little left or you’ll bump into the end of a table with a bunch of the dreaded girls at it. They might think you want to sit with them—God forbid!”

“Oh, shut up.”

Revi snickered. “Wuss. Afraid of a few girls.”

“Do you think, if I turned around right now, tripped over nothing, and dumped my food all over you that your dad would buy it was an accident?”

“Do you want him to come over here? *You* shut up,” Revi hissed. “Your friends are at a table about twenty steps straight ahead.”

When they got close, William called out to him, “Hey Barron!”

“Hey.” Barron winced when his legs hit the bench attached to the table. “Ow.”

“Be careful! Here, let us help you.” Someone took his tray and then grabbed his arm.

“Damn it, guys, if you take my tray I don’t know where it is. And I can sit down on my own. *Someone* didn’t tell me we were at the table.”

“I said twenty steps.”

He had. Barron made a face. “I lost count when William distracted me.”

“Sounds like that hurt.” A tray smacked down on the table beside him, and the bench shook.

"Dude. You're an asshole," Creed snapped. "Why don't you go somewhere else? Like out an airlock or something."

"Lay off, guys. I'm stuck with him, so no airlock treatment tonight." Barron was kinda starting to enjoy the verbal sparring with Revi. He was a real smart ass.

"Here." Thavin grabbed Barron's hand and put his milk in it. "I stuck a straw into it."

"Damn it." Barron put the milk down. "You know, I think I actually like Revi's guiding me around. He tells me where stuff is, and he doesn't move me around like a doll."

No one spoke.

"I'm blind. Temporarily. I'm not incapable."

"We're just trying to help," Thavin said.

Barron sighed. "I know, I know. I just... I don't like needing it." It was a lot less awkward having a stranger helping him than his friends, now that he'd actually let Revi. Besides, he didn't get his feelings hurt when Barron acted like an ass, he just flipped him shit right back. "Sorry."

"You should be." Creed bumped his shoulder. "You're lazing about, and we're all working our butts off."

Barron groped the table, finding his tray and the plate. "I'd rather be working," he muttered. He took a bite of pizza and groaned. He was so hungry. No more skipping meals.

They were all quiet as they shoveled food in like they hadn't eaten in weeks, instead of hours. Barron tried not to make a mess. Good thing they gave him extra napkins, because he wasn't sure he was successful.

Someone burped.

"Gross," Revi said.

"Hey, better out than in." William snickered. "Who knows what end it might come out then?"

"You're a pig," Thavin said.

"Yep." He clearly didn't care. Barron snorted. He never had.

"Bet I can burp louder than you." Creed tried but failed.

“Heathens! I’m surrounded by heathens!”

Barron ignored them as he started his second slice of pizza. He began to eat the pepperoni off first.

“You have weird friends,” Revi said.

He did, but they were his friends and had been since they were little. “Yeah, so?”

“Nothing. Just saying.”

“You two are getting along now?” William asked. “So we shouldn’t replace his shampoo with dye or anything?”

“Where in the hell did you get dye?” Barron wanted to know.

“I cannot give up my sources,” Creed intoned. “Confidentiality and all that.”

“Dye, pfft. I got some of that instant hair gel the girls use on their legs.”

“No shit?”

Barron had to stop them before Revi ended up bald or looking like he had doll hair.

“Yes, we’re getting along now, so no, do not make him bald or turn his hair whatever color you found.” It was probably bright purple or green or something. Barron shook his head. “I was an ass for a stupid reason. I shouldn’t have tripped Revi that day at the caves.” Looking back, it wasn’t funny. He knew why he’d really done it, even if he still didn’t want to admit it.

“Yeah, well, he tripped you too. We all heard about it. And you’re blind!” Thavin snapped.

“I am not blind! I just... temporarily can’t see. And—”

“Shh!” Barron couldn’t tell who was hushing him. “What?” he asked.

“Some military bigwig is coming over here, and he looks pissed.”

“Fuck, it’s my dad.” Revi shoved a napkin in Barron’s hand. “Wipe your face; you have sauce on your cheek.”

Barron scrubbed, then winced. Damn it, his face still hurt.

“Mr. Pernell. Revi.”

“Sir,” Revi said. Barron stared up toward the voice. Revi’s dad was standing off to his left, maybe at the edge of the table. He did not sound happy.

“Care to explain yourselves?” Oh no. That tone of voice didn’t fly with Barron.

“We’re eating lunch.” Barron waved a hand over the table. “Pretty sure that’s what’s going on, but I can’t exactly be sure. Or are we not allowed to have lunch with my friends?” If the ass tried to tell him who he could and couldn’t hang out with, Barron was going to blow a gasket.

Revi elbowed him.

“Ow.”

“Something wrong, Mr. Pernell? Perhaps one of those bruises is throbbing.”

More like his ribs. “Nah, those are fine.”

“Revi?”

“I’m fine, Dad.”

“So the two of you show up with battered faces and expect me to believe... what, exactly? Nothing happened? I told you before—”

“Revi had to help me out. Well, he’s doing that. We’re here, aren’t we? I’m eating lunch, he’s eating lunch, and no one’s on the floor—here at least. We had a bit of a tangle earlier figuring out how to make this ‘helping me out’ thing work. It was an accident.”

“A tangle? And did any of you see this?”

“No,” chorused Barron’s friends.

“We *told* you, and I’m saying it again. We’re fine.” Barron crossed his arms over his chest. His dad was dead. Revi might have to answer to his dad, but Barron didn’t. He stared obstinately forward, waiting.

“We were alone, sir,” Revi said. “It was just an accident in the dormitory. That’s why we missed breakfast.”

Guess Revi wasn’t such a daddy’s boy. Or maybe he didn’t want to get into trouble.

“If that’s what really happened...”

Barron wasn’t going to crack. He hoped Revi didn’t either. Silence reigned at their small table.



“Fine. But don’t let any more ‘tangles’ happen. Since you two seem to be fine, and you’ve shown you can manage together, I’m putting you to work. We should be planet-side in a week. Until the habitats can be set up, all nonemergency medical care will be on hold. I’m putting you in charge of sorting materials for the housing units. You still have two good hands, Mr. Pernell, and the more work you do now, the sooner you get to see later.”

What a douche. Barron narrowed his eyes. Work or don’t have his eyes fixed... basically a threat. “Yes, sir.” Revi sighed.

Barron wasn’t that upset about the work, just the asshole’s way of telling him what to do. He’d been going crazy in his bunk. He knew they were being punished, though, and that pissed him off. “Whatever.”

Revi’s dad must have been a drill sergeant at one time. He barked, “Report at 0600 tomorrow. You can get oriented to the housing hold before breakfast when the workroom is empty. Since you didn’t seem to mind missing breakfast today, it shouldn’t bother you to miss it tomorrow either.”

Damn, Revi’s dad was a hard-ass. Barron scowled. Who did he think he was? Barron ground his teeth together on the response he wanted to give. He waited until he heard the heavy stomp of boots on the metal floor fade away. He wouldn’t forget that sound again.

*“That’s your dad?”* Creed whispered. “Oh, my god, that must suck.”

“Tell me about it. Why do you think Mom and I moved four hours from the base he worked at?”

A buzzer went off.

“Lunch is over. Gotta head back to work,” Thavin said.

“You’ll be back for dinner, right?” William asked.

If they had to miss breakfast the next day? “Definitely.” Barron began to make plans while his friends got up. Creed took his tray for him. Barron made sure to thank him to make up for his crankiness earlier.

“I can’t believe you talked to my dad like that,” Revi said.

Barron shrugged. “Why not? I’m not in the military, and I’m not his kid. He has rank, and shit’s all fucked up right now... but I’ve had enough with my life being dictated to me. My dad was like that. Always on my case and telling me what to do, how to act, how my friends had to act. I don’t have to take it anymore, and I won’t. A new world means things are going to change.”

He took a deep breath. "I'm going to change."

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## Chapter Nine

When they first met, Barron couldn't have imagined he'd laugh and shove Revi unless he was knocking him down or taunting him. Becoming friends? Never.

But he'd spent every waking moment of the last few days with Revi, and they got along pretty well, actually. Revi's accent always got heavier whenever Barron was driving him nuts, and he poked and prodded in return to try and set Barron off.

His dad, Lt. Colonel Ass, popped up far too regularly. He hovered over them. Revi acted just like Barron had before he lost his parents. Well, most of the time.

"So he's the reason for the hair and stuff?" Barron gestured over his shoulder with one thumb. Revi's dad was stomping away after he bossed them around some more. Barron replied with the word 'whatever' whenever he could.

The man really hated that word, so Barron loved it.

"No. I like how I look." Revi paused. "Okay, I do like how much it bugs him that I refuse to cut my hair." They laughed. Revi slammed another box on the table in front of them. "Screws this time."

Barron cursed. He couldn't feel the differences in the screw with gloves on, but the threads chewed up the tips of his fingers when he sorted them. Vegging on his bunk didn't seem so bad anymore.

They sorted through that box, and three more after lunch. Barron shoved his glasses off his nose. He was sweating, and the nose pieces were irritating him. They usually got a break, but they were pushing hard. This was the last day before they dropped in-system of their new home world.

"Why don't you take those off?"

"My eyes..." Barron shrugged.

"They don't bug me."

Taking off his glasses showed off his eyes, which always started people whispering. Like he couldn't hear them say his name. He didn't care what they were whispering about—saying he got what he deserved, or fawning over him

for saving a little girl at the cost of his sight, and nearly his life. Barron hated it. Working together in the holds, Revi didn't have anyone to whisper to about Barron's eyes, though.

He was just Barron.

Ex-bully, not-quite-reformed jerk when he wanted to be... the guy who snapped at his friends and got surly when people tried to help him. He wasn't good for anything but the most menial of tasks. Separating out different sized screws was getting fucking old. Revi seemed to be the only one who—

“Shit!”

“What?”

“Something in that fucking box just cut the shit out of my hand.”

“You're bleeding!” Revi grabbed his wrist.

“Yeah, kinda what I just said.” Barron fought the urge to yank it back. His palm burned. He tried to keep it still, but his fingers twitched. “Is there something *in* my hand?” he said through his gritted teeth. He didn't want to touch it, but it felt like there was something in there.

“Uh-huh.” Revi's hand shook.

Barron hissed. “That fucking hurts. Stop moving.”

“I'm not trying to. There's a-a piece of metal through your hand. Like all the way.”

Okay. Revi was good at a lot of things. Clearly, he was not good with medical emergencies. Blood was pooling in Barron's palm. He could feel it dripping down the side and hitting the floor.

“Is there a cloth or something around?”

“Uh...”

“Revi. Find me something to wrap around my hand. I don't care what it is.”

Barron cradled his hand when Revi let go. “Here. We can use my shirt.” He helped wrap it around Barron's hand.

“Medical.” Barron panted. The thing in his hand felt like a heated spike. He couldn't seem to make his fingers stop twitching, and every heartbeat felt like a giant fist squeezing his hand. “Now.”

“Right. Right! Let’s go.”

Barron waited. Revi started to walk away. “Revi?”

“What? Why aren’t you coming?”

“I don’t know if I’m up to counting steps.”

“Oh, shit. Yeah. Sorry.” He hurried back and touched Barron’s good arm, still cradling his palm, now swathed in Revi’s shirt. “Um, how do you...?”

“Just hold on to my elbow and help guide me.” Revi helped Barron to his feet and led him away from their work table area.

“You can talk to me.” Barron focused on walking. When he’d gotten burned getting Marya out of the light, it’d been over fast. Even driving some jagged piece of metal through his hand didn’t begin to approach that pain, but damn, it hurt.

“About what?”

“I don’t know, Revi, just anything. Fuck!” Did he have to think of everything?

“Um, have you heard about Paradise?”

Barron grunted. “Stupid fucking name for a planet. Could it be more cliché?”

Revi slid closer to him. “Door.”

Bare skin. Revi’s side was pressed against Barron’s arm. He was shirtless.

Touching him.

If only it wasn’t because Barron was a cripple who needed help walking because he’d just stabbed the shit out of himself.

“...it’s like some sorta lover’s landscape or something.”

“Huh?”

Revi pulled him to a stop. “Are you going into shock? There’s a lot of blood on that shirt.”

“What? No. Just, keep going. I was thinking.”

He snorted. “Only you would be thinking at a time like this. I was saying Paradise is some sorta tropical wonderland. Near Earth standards for just about everything. It’s perfect for us.”

Barron had striven for perfection every single day of his life. "There's no such thing as perfect."

Revi shrugged, his arm bumping Barron's shoulder and jostling his right arm. Barron hissed.

"Sorry. Let's take the no-grav." The tube in the center of the ship, where it didn't rotate and had no gravity. It was a quick way to travel between levels.

Revi stepped in front of him. "Let me do all the work, okay?"

When Barron nodded, Revi stepped behind him. He held onto one arm and slid his other one around Barron's waist. "God, you're big."

"Thick, not big." Big made it sound like he was fat.

"You just have to argue with me, don't you?"

Since he'd stopped fighting his attraction to Revi, the feelings that had flared up the first time he saw his wavy hair and casual, arrogant walk as he strolled through the school, were back—stronger than ever. He didn't have to worry about his dad. There was no one to disapprove if Barron didn't date a strong, conservative man who liked sports and plotting to take over the world one business at a time.

But even if he'd admitted Revi was exactly his type to himself, he had no idea how to even begin to approach Revi. He liked to think they were friends.

Maybe when he got his eyes fixed.

The drop into freefall in the no-grav lift startled him. "Whoa."

"It's okay. I can see the entrance to the medical level. I've got you." Revi squeezed him in his arms. No one had hugged Barron close like that, full body, since he was little. In the weightless environment of the no-grav, the only thing he could feel, beyond the sensation of air brushing past his face, was Revi's body against his.

Barron liked it.

Too much.

"We're here." Barron let Revi reel them in with the level's tow line. Mass and momentum still mattered.

The medical wing was quiet—even quieter than the levels holding the materials for the new habitats where Revi and Barron had worked.

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“Can I help you?”

“He got hurt.”

“I can see that. You’re kinda accident prone, aren’t you, Barron?”

“Nolu?”

“Yeah. Guess you just had to come back and see us, didn’t you?”

“Well, I can’t have you forgetting about me. Out of sight, out of mind, right?”

Nolu chuckled. “Somehow I doubt you’re easily forgotten.”

Was the medic flirting with him? While Barron was standing there with a chunk of metal in his hand, and Revi, shirtless, next to him?

“Only crippled blind guy on board, huh?”

Revi dug his elbow into Barron’s ribs. “You’re more than that. You’re the crippled, blind smartass on board.”

“Ow. Shit, Revi. Really? Don’t I hurt enough with this thing in my hand?”

“Sorry,” Revi muttered. He rubbed Barron’s side. “There. All better.”

Barron swallowed. Hard.

Nolu chuckled. “All right. Let’s take a look?”

The examining bench the medic made Barron sit on was hard. He could hear squeaking and something rattling. “Rest your arm up here.” He guided Barron to slide his arm across a table in front of him. It shifted under his arm, and he froze.

“Ahh.” Sweat beaded up on Barron’s forehead.

“Let me get you something for that.” Cold metal clicked over his right wrist, and Barron lost feeling in his hand completely. He sighed and slumped in relief from the absence of pain. “There, that should be better.”

“It is.”

“Okay. Time to take a peek.” Barron couldn’t feel him doing anything. It was oddly surreal, having a body part unfeeling, like it was gone and his wrist ended in midair. “Nice bandage you made here.”

“We were working. It was cleaner than everything else.” Revi was right beside Barron.

“Swift thinking.”

“Actually”—Barron could hear Revi shuffle his feet against the textured floor—“Barron told me to get something to wrap up his hand with. I just stripped.”

Barron squeezed his eyes shut. Without anything to distract him, with the pain gone and no way to see Revi in person, all Barron could see in his mind were Revi's sharp hips jutting above his low cut jeans as he lounged against the fence. That small strip of flesh had teased Barron into losing control.

He'd pretended to trip Revi that day getting off the bus because Barron didn't like feminine guys. Really, he'd had to get him away before he gave into the urge to curl his hands around Revi's hips, slotting his thumbs right into those two dimples on his back, just above his ass, and sliding the tips of his fingers into the front of Revi's tight pants.

Shit, shit, shit. His pants weren't nearly loose enough to hide an erection. Barron tried to imagine what Nolu and Revi were looking at—his hand splayed out on the table with a shard of metal jabbing through the palm, blood oozing around it.

That helped some.

Nolu made a sound. “Looks like you did a number on yourself. I need to get Aya. She can determine if you've damaged the tendons running through your hand. Just wait here.” Nolu walked away.

It was silent for a few minutes. “I'm sorry,” Revi said.

“What?”

“I'm sorry. I should've checked that box.”

Barron snorted. “You didn't stick it in there on purpose or anything, so why would it be your fault?”

“Still—”

“No. You help me around and stuff. You don't have to babysit me. Besides, I'll be able to see soon. So don't worry about it.”

“Oh.” Revi sounded off. “Okay. I get it. I'm just helping you around. Guide-dog-r-us, that's me, courtesy of my dad.”

Damn it. Barron always said the wrong thing. “That's not what I meant.”



Before he could explain, the doctor came in.

“What’s this I hear about you damaging yourself again?” Dr. Samuels asked. “Who were you saving this time?”

“No one. Just doing my part—the crap I can do.”

“He reached into a box of screws he was sorting and jabbed this piece of metal through his palm,” Revi explained.

“That’s a lot of damage for reaching into a box.” She sounded suspicious.

“I was angry.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be sorting things out of boxes you can’t see when you’re angry.”

Barron snorted, then laughed. “Yeah. That’s one way to look at it. Of course, if I could actually *look* in the boxes, I never would’ve done it.”

She sighed. “I’d hoped you’d regain some vision naturally. Unfortunately the damage was more severe than we originally thought. Once the new settlement is functioning, I want to try some new procedures.”

“Procedures? I thought you could fix me.” Barron’s heart pounded. He couldn’t live like this forever. He couldn’t be blind.

“Hey, calm down. I’m sure I can help you. Take some breaths. Your hand is bleeding worse because your heart is racing.” Dr. Aya covered the hand Barron could still feel. “Just take some deep breaths.”

“I want to see.” It was stronger than want. “*I need to see.*” Barron wasn’t going to lose his cool again, as much as he wanted to shout and rage at the doctor. At the whole unfair crapstorm that had become his life. The only thing that got him through each day was knowing that it was one day closer to the day he’d be normal again.

The room was silent for a moment. “I know. I promise, I will do my best.” The doctor cleared her throat. “Okay, let’s get you patched up. Nolu, why don’t you get this other young man something to put on, seeing as he apparently gave up his shirt as a bandage.”

“Sure. Why don’t you come with me? We have some scrub tops in the locker room.”

“You going to be okay?” Revi touched the back of his shoulder.

"I'm fine." He wasn't going to freak out.

"All right. I'll be right back."

A door opened and then shut. Barron was alone with Dr. Samuels. "I wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"Why?" Barron asked suspiciously. What other news did she have for him that could be so bad she'd need to send the others away?

"Your young man."

"He's not mine. His dad is making him help me as a punishment because we were acting stupid."

She scoffed. "He didn't hover beside you with his hands clenched together because he's forced to be here. When someone is hurt, the people who care for them hurt too. Don't shut him out. I think he needs you, just as much as you need him."

"He what?" Barron blinked.

"He cares about you. The way you are *now*. You can't see it, but I can. I just thought you should know. You don't have to see for it to be true," she said gently.

"Maybe I do." He couldn't even sort parts without screwing it up. What use would he be, even on a new planet?

The door slid open, and Barron stopped before Revi could overhear him saying something he didn't want him to know. Yet.

"So, this is a pretty bad puncture, but I've pulled out the metal and stimulated all your tendons. Your hand function seems to be fine, but this will hurt while the tissue regenerates. I can't do full treatments for something that isn't life-threatening, so you'll have to heal the old-fashioned way. I can numb it for a few days, but that means no more working."

"But we'll be in-system tomorrow. There will be a lot of work to do when we land on the planet," Barron protested.

"Tough. You can distract some of the kids with stories or something. You don't need to be doing manual labor." Dr. Samuels slid the band off his wrist, and Barron grunted. The pain was different, but it was still there. "I'll numb you up in a second. First, I need you to wiggle each finger. Tell me if the pain is more severe with any one digit."

Barron clenched his other hand into a fist in his lap, but he did what she asked. The pain stayed strong, throbbing like his heart rested in the palm of his hand, but it didn't get worse.

"Good, good." He heard a spray and then his hand went numb again, all through the palm, but he could still move it.

"I want you to keep the hand still, so I'm going to splint it. I don't want to seal the wound because that metal was pretty dirty. I've cleaned it, but if you develop an infection, I don't want to have to dissolve the faux tissue." She muttered under her breath, "Damn barbaric conditions."

She just finished wrapping his hand when an alarm went off. "That's the light-speed alert. We must be close to Paradise."

"We need to get back." Revi touched Barron's elbow. "We missed another meal."

"Good thing I've got snacks stashed."

Revi laughed. "Of course you do."

"You two go on now," Nolu said. "I'll clean up here, Aya."

"Thank you for fixing my hand," Barron said.

"You're welcome. We'll see you soon." Dr. Samuels patted his shoulder. "Think about what I said."

"All right." Barron slid off the table.

He certainly had a lot to think about.

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## Chapter Ten

They'd reached Paradise, but things were not the idyllic scene Revi described it as. No one would tell them anything concrete, but everyone knew something was wrong. Barron discovered if he sat quietly in the lounge, people seemed not to see him any more than he could see them.

As if losing his eyesight meant his ears didn't work anymore either.

Idiots.

"Hey, ready to head back?" Revi entered the lounge where Barron had spent most of the day. He'd been ordered to finish the sorting, but he still came back every meal and got Barron. He put a hand on Barron's shoulder.

"Shh." He tugged Revi down onto the bench next to him. "They mentioned something about Paradise. Something about a golden locks or something."

"A golden lock? That doesn't make any sense?"

Barron shrugged. "I just overheard it; I didn't say it."

"Well it looks like they're leaving, anyway. Let's go talk to the guys." After the first day, Revi had fit in with the rest of Barron's friends, as if there'd always been a spot for him in the group.

They congregated on Revi and Barron's bunks. Barron shared what he'd overheard. There were enough people in the room to drown out their conversation, if they kept their voices down. He had to trust the others to keep an eye out for anyone paying too much attention to them.

"Really? Golden locks. That doesn't make any sense."

"Goldilocks!" Thavin had been lounging on Barron's bed behind him. He sat up. "That's why we're still traveling in-system. It makes sense now."

"Why don't you explain it to the rest of us?" Creed huffed.

"The Goldilocks Zone is like 'just right'. Like the old story? Not too close, not too far, but just right."

"I don't get it."

"I do," William said. "It's a story my grandma used to"—everyone groaned—"tell me. Little blond chickie goes into some bears' house in the

woods while they're gone, and the mom and dad bears' stuff is always wrong, but the baby's stuff is just right. What does that mean for a planet, though?"

"Planets in a solar system's Goldilocks Zone have a moderate temperature and liquid water. Essentially, the shit we need to survive."

Revi kept tapping his hands on his legs when he was thinking, which he seemed to do a lot. The sound drove Barron nuts. "So, Barron was right. Nothing's perfect, much less this tropical Paradise they keep telling us will take the place of Earth."

"An alien planet across the universe? Is that so surprising?" Creed snorted. "How old is the damn data? If this ship is the first one ever built with faster than light speed capabilities that means what they *think* they know about Paradise was—at best—years old. It could be decades old. Look how fast Earth died. Hundreds of millions of years, and it was ruined in seconds."

"Maybe the human race is destined to die," Barron muttered.

No one argued with him.

Tired after a long day, everyone drifted off to their own bunks. Barron hadn't done shit, so he rolled onto his stomach and fished around under his bunk for his backpack. Reaching inside, he fumbled through the clothes and albums until he felt the sleek cover of his favorite book. He pulled it out.

The letters were raised on the cover. Barron traced them. He'd give his right arm for a distraction. His hand was already useless anyway.

He snorted.

"What?"

"Nothing, just a thought." Barron opened his book and ruffled the pages, just to hear and feel them.

Revi's bunk squeaked. "What do you have there?"

"A book." Barron slid a finger back and forth across a page. Tiny little scratches marred the slick page.

"You mean, a real one? Paper?"

Barron nodded.

"Wow. What is it?"

"A novel by Erink Brogherd."

"Never heard of him. What's it about?" He sat on the edge of Barron's bed.

"Horror. Death, murder, mayhem. The usual gory thriller with a bit of mystery to find out who done it before they do you into the grave."

"Why am I not surprised?" Revi chuckled. "Is it any good?"

Barron shrugged. "He's my favorite."

"Can I read it? I mean here, so you can listen, too?"

Revi wanted to read to him? Horror in a southern accent... that'd be new. "Sure."

"Scooch over so I can lie down." Revi pushed on Barron's shoulder.

He wanted to lie down? On the narrow bed Barron barely fit in? "This'll be interesting."

"Well, this way you can hear me, and we won't bug anyone else," Revi said. Barron rolled onto his side on the edge of the bed. He stuffed a pillow under his head. "Oh, let me get mine."

Barron leaned back when Revi crawled onto his bed so he wouldn't tip forward. He wobbled. "Whoa, be careful." Revi grabbed his arm and kept him from falling off.

"Thanks." Barron took a deep breath. He could smell the chemical scent of the shampoo and body wash in the ship shower, plus the scent of Revi's body underneath. It was just the lightest whiff of sweat and skin.

Good thing his sleep pants were loose. Revi's shoulder brushed against his chest and their feet tangled as he got comfortable. "Okay. So. No Surrender."

Barron settled in to listen. Revi's voice was a smooth drawl, just hard enough to understand he had to listen, but he'd read No Surrender at least five times. He knew it well enough to listen without having to work at it.

*"You're not like the others. You're special, one of a kind." The knife point was all he could see as it traced down Kith's cheek. "So beautiful." Silver flashed in the light of a single bulb dangling from the ceiling. "Not anymore." Cackles filled the room as...*

Barron blinked. His glasses were gone. He'd fallen asleep listening to Revi read aloud, but he was still on his side, and he wasn't alone. How long had he slept? Barron couldn't hear anyone moving around. It felt like night. Was Revi still reading?

Reaching out tentatively, Barron touched Revi's back.

"Mmm." The sleepy sound was muffled. Barron flattened his hand, soaking up the warmth of Revi's body.

He jerked his hand back when Revi shifted. He wiggled around and then slid against Barron, chest to chest. Revi slung an arm over Barron's side and snuggled against his shoulder. He sighed and went limp.

Holy hells.

There was no way his pants would hide what was going on down there. Thank God everyone was asleep. Barron tried to will his erection away, but with nearly head-to-toe contact between him and Revi... yeah, so wasn't happening. He grimaced and tried to relax anyway.

Who knew what the next day was going to bring? Probably a lot of shit from the guys, but Barron didn't really care. If Paradise wasn't sustainable, they were all going to die anyway.

He'd overheard whispers he hadn't dared share about the state of the engine when they dropped back to light speed.

There was nothing like global disaster followed by a potential death sentence floating through space to learn life was too damn short to worry about stupid shit. He was going to enjoy something Barron never thought he'd get to have.

He buried his face in Revi's soft hair and curled his arm around him. When he woke up, neither of them had moved. His arm was numb and his nose itched, but Barron was too happy to move. Faint sounds from the front of the room distracted him. That must've been what woke him up.

"...going down in..."

"...civilians last."

He could only pick up snatches of the conversation, but it looked like they'd arrived at Paradise, a full day later than expected. He wondered how far that was in terms of distance. He was distracted from the conversation when Revi's breath caught, and he froze.

In his distraction, Barron hadn't realized he was playing with Revi's hair until it slid through his fingers. "Hey," he said. Wow, raspy. He cleared his throat.

“Hey.” Revi still hadn’t moved away. He’d moved his head, but the edges of his curls still twisted around Barron’s fingers. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep here.”

Here was his chance. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Without his sight it was hard to know how Revi was reacting to waking up in his arms, but his voice was calm, and he hadn’t jerked up and out of Barron’s bed like it was on fire. Barron cleared his throat again.

“I didn’t mind. I mean, I liked it.” He closed his fingers around those curls, not tight, but enough Revi had to feel it. He wanted to lean down and kiss him, but how awkward would it be if he kissed his nose or something?

Or worse, if Revi didn’t want to be kissed. Barron licked his lips. Maybe he should ask? But who did that?

“Revi,” he whispered, “Can I—” He started to lean down, and apparently, Revi had the same thought. His forehead hit Revi in the nose.

“Ow!” Revi jerked back, then winced. Barron loosened his hold on Revi’s hair.

“Sorry. Damn it. Just...” Barron clenched his jaw. If he could just see what the hell he was doing! He wanted to growl in frustration. “Sorry. My stupid eyes.”

“I had my eyes closed. It’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

Don’t worry about the kiss? Or kissing in general? Was his awkward fumbling a complete turn-off or something—

Those soft pinks lips Barron couldn’t keep out of his dreams landed on his as Revi took control, obliterating Barron’s internal freak-out. Barron’s fingers clenched tight again. He wasn’t holding Revi’s head still, he was holding on for dear life as they pressed together, lips to toes. Revi controlled the pressure, moving his hand to Barron’s cheek and cupping it. He licked at the seam of Barron’s lips and then sank his tongue inside.

No one had ever taken control as they touched him that way. Barron relaxed into the kiss and let Revi lead, touching and tasting, and then he sucked on Revi’s tongue.

Revi pulled away with a gasp. “Damn.”

“Damn what?” Barron asked. His heart raced, and he fought the urge to hold Revi tighter in case he tried to get up.



But no, Revi had kissed him.

“That was amazing.”

Barron's face warmed. He relaxed. “Yeah.”

“Too bad everyone's going to get up soon. I don't want to stop, but I don't think we should put on a show either. There are little kids in the room.”

His heart sped back up. “Do you... does that mean you want to get up?” He reluctantly slid his hand out of Revi's hair. After all the snarky comments he made about it, he loved having it wrapped around his fingers.

“No. Not if you want me to stay.”

Barron nodded, unable to speak through the lump of pure relief in his throat.

The last bit of tension went out of Revi's body, and he rested his face against Barron's shoulder and neck. Barron smiled. He didn't have to see to know things were okay between them. He could feel it. His arm was still numb, but the rest of his body was so amped up, Barron didn't care.

“Well lookie here. The two of them finally quit dancing around each other.”

“Uh-huh. And now they're doing the dance with no pants.”

Barron growled, woken up by his friends' idiocy when he'd been having a very good dream. He tried to stretch, but then he remembered.

Not a dream.

“We have pants on,” Revi said. His breath puffed against Barron's neck.

Barron shivered. His neck was very sensitive. Revi made a small noise and then blew deliberately across his neck and ear.

“Why are you guys... ugh... waking us up?” Holy shit. Barron had not expected this sort of thing from Revi. He was outgoing and funny, but there'd been a distinct space between them until Barron had shoved a piece of metal through his hand. There'd been a lot more touching since then.

It felt really good. Okay. There was no way Barron was standing up.

“There's an announcement in thirty minutes. We're supposed to go to the lounges on each level.”

Barron shivered when Revi kissed his neck and then scooted back.

“Oh, my arm. Damn.” His fingers tingled like crazy as the blood finally returned to his arm. Revi grabbed his palm and rubbed it. Barron groaned. “That’s good.”

“Would you two get a room?”

“Your grandparents taught you way too many stupid sayings, William,” Thavin said.

“Whatever.”

Revi snickered.

“If you’re going to get ready and get something to eat, you should get moving. Mr. Hodge wanted us to warn you two.”

“I overheard him, last night. Or maybe early this morning.” Barron remembered waking up and hearing talking. “We must have arrived at Paradise. I heard something about going down and civilians last. Maybe we’re going to land.”

“I bet they use shuttles. That way they can leave the ship in orbit. It takes a lot of fuel to liftoff. And if the planet isn’t viable...”

That was a buzzkill. Barron sat up on the edge of his bed. “Can you hand me my glasses?” he asked Revi. He had no idea where they were.

“Sure.” Revi didn’t hand them to Barron; he slipped them on his face instead.

“Thanks.”

“Wow, zero to one ten in a single night.”

“Guys! Enough commentary. You did what Mr. Hodge asked. Now. Go. Away.” They scattered. When Barron got irritated, they knew better than to stick around. “I’m gonna go get changed. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

They grabbed breakfast and then headed down to the lounge. It was weird, holding hands, but it was a lot easier getting around. He didn’t have to keep count. It was easier to pay attention to their surroundings, because he knew he could trust Revi not to let him smash into a wall or get snicked by a closing door.

The lounge was nearly silent when they got there. Barron sat on the floor and Revi sat beside him. They leaned against the wall near a lot of other teens,

while the adults took the furniture. Revi leaned in close. "The little kids aren't here. That's probably a bad sign," he said in a low voice.

"Attention." The speakers crackled to life before Barron could respond. "This is Captain DeLeon. We have arrived at the planet dubbed Paradise. As rumors have been flying, I'm sure many of you know the mission parameters have changed. Paradise is no longer a green planet within a safe distance to the double suns of this solar system. Some cosmic event has pushed the planet beyond that distance.

"However, we do not have the resources at this time to locate and travel to another viable planet. We are currently scanning, and while temperature averages are far colder than expected, there is a temperate region on each continent surrounding the aquatic regions. These are not frozen, as expected, and life forms have registered on the satellite scans taken over the last twenty-four hours."

Barron slumped against the wall. Cold, but livable.

Maybe the human race wasn't doomed after all.

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## Chapter Eleven

“Did you get a jacket?” Barron asked Revi. He’d been helping hand out cold weather clothes they’d remade from turned in lightweight clothing people had packed. The ship’s resources were strained, but no one had come prepared for cold. It was late spring, nearly summer, when they left Earth, and they’d headed for a tropical planet—or so they thought. Barron shook his head. Like expect the unexpected shouldn’t have been drilled into all their heads.

“Not yet.”

“Good.” Barron pulled one out from under the counter where he was taking chits and scanning them into the computer. “I thought you might like this. It’s black, I’m told.” The coat was slim, but with the interlocked heat wave that would capture and hold Revi’s body heat, regulating the temperature with a small control panel on the base of the front seal connection.

“It’s really soft.”

“Reminded me of your hair.” Barron felt his face heat. He braced himself against the counter, fighting the urge to hide behind it.

Revi grabbed Barron’s hand from the edge of the counter, forcing him to let go. “Relax. You’re so tense. I like the jacket a lot. Thank you.”

Barron smiled. “You’re welcome.”

“Here’s my chit.” He pressed it into Barron’s hand. Barron scanned and handed it back after he heard the machine beep.

“I’ll come back later and get you before dinner. Right now we’re assembling parts of the habitat housing that will fit into the shuttles.” Thavin had been right. The scientists and top military officials went down in shuttles to verify that living on the planet was feasible before beginning the process of building the habitats. “I need to talk to you. Alone.”

That would be hard to manage. “We might have to skip dinner then.”

“Maybe.”

Working through the afternoon with a ‘we need to talk’ type of conversation hanging over him made Barron nervous. Talks were never a good thing.

Finally, he was able to shut down the scanner. He slid his hand around the counter as he walked to the front, then hopped up on the bare edge to wait. The

lines had all disappeared, and other than the workers creating more clothing and gear and stowing it in the appropriate bins, it was quiet. Barron appreciated the feeling of space, and the solitude.

“Barron.”

He jumped.

“Careful. Don’t fall off.”

Revi worried a little too much. Barron snorted and hopped off the counter. He’d felt the area in front and knew how high it was. He was fine. He was getting more comfortable in his inability to see, and that made his life easier physically, if not mentally.

He still struggled with Dr. Samuels’ caution that his eyesight might not be repairable. He reached out his hand and held his breath until Revi took it. If their talk had anything to do with the kiss, and sleeping in the same bunk, surely Revi wouldn’t hold his hand. He’d be back to guiding Barron by counting steps.

Right? Barron couldn’t answer his own question. They headed back to D level. Everyone on their section was in the cafeteria or working, so they actually had some time alone.

“You’re wearing the coat. Did you go down to the planet?” Barron asked.

“I did.”

Why was he back? “I thought only military was going down. How’d you manage that?” He worked hard to keep any accusation out of his voice.

“My dad, of course. He tried to make me stay, but I reminded him that he’d paired us up. The captain’s in charge, ultimately, and he insists that everyone have a partner for safety. Since my father paired us up through the disciplinary board, he couldn’t get away with separating us.”

Barron frowned.

“Why are you frowning? This is good. It means we stay together.”

“It means you’re stuck on the ship with me, instead of on a new planet getting to experience things firsthand.” That’s what it really meant. How long before Revi resented the burden Barron represented until his eyes were fixed?

*If* they got fixed. Barron tried to erase that thought as soon as it popped into his head, but it was too late. He’d tried so hard not to even think about it.

"No, stupid, that's not what it means." Revi pounced and shoved him onto his back on his bunk. "It means to grab your stuff and the book. We go back down on the first shuttle in the morning."

Barron stared up toward his face. "Really?"

"Yup." Revi leaned forward and removed Barron's glasses. The light blinded him at first, but not completely like it had at first. He could make out the vague outline of a shadow, but the only place he saw Revi's face was in his memory. "Really, really."

Oh. Kissing Revi sent his heart racing. Barron bent his legs, and Revi settled between them, their lips never separating. Barron cradled Revi's face and thrust his tongue in Revi's mouth.

"Mmm." Revi wiggled closer. Their erections rubbed together. Barron grunted and thrust up, starting a rough rhythm. His feet slid on the smooth blanket.

Revi moaned and tore his mouth away. He pressed his head against the pillow next to Barron's head and panted. His breath tickled the short hair on Barron's neck.

"Damn!" Barron ran his hands down Revi's back and palmed his ass. Toned, just enough to grip in each hand... definitely as nice as he'd imagined.

"We're... We're gonna get busted." Revi ground down, rocking his hips. He wrapped an arm under Barron's and held onto his shoulder.

"Don't care." It'd been so long. Revi squeezed Barron's hip. Barron was primed and ready to erupt. He fought to hold off, but it was no use. "Gonna come."

Revi nodded. "Uh-huh." They ground together. Barron needed just a little more. He braced his feet against the mattress and thrust, pulling Revi down so hard it nearly hurt.

"Ugh." His breath caught, and his toes curled. Barron shot into his pants, his hips stuttering. Revi moaned, but kept moving.

"Close." Barron fought off the fog threatening to descend. He reached around inside Revi's pants and palmed his bare flesh. Hot and throbbing, Revi's slender prick was sticky and dripping.

He stroked down to the base, then slid his hand up to the head and squeezed.

“Fuck.” Revi drew out the word. Hot cum spurted over Barron’s hand. It made a huge mess. Barron grimaced and slid his hand out carefully, wiping it on his shirt.

Revi went limp on top of him. They rested, trying to catch their breath.

“So we’re going to Paradise?”

“Weren’t we just there?”

Barron snickered. “Oh, that’s awful. You shouldn’t make jokes.”

“Stop laughing, you’re jiggling me. I’m trying to relax here.”

“I don’t jiggle.”

Revi poked Barron in the side. “Sure you do.”

“Do not. And I’m not ticklish.” Barron laughed when Revi growled. “Bet you are, though.” Revi squirmed and tried to get away but Barron held him close, holding him down with one arm across his back and used the other to mercilessly tickle Revi’s ribs and side.

Barron grunted when Revi flailed and smacked him in the head with his arm. “Ow!”

“Serves...” Revi panted. “Serves you right!”

“Okay, okay. Truce.”

Revi dropped a firm kiss on Barron’s lips. “Truce.”

“Do that again.” Barron hadn’t been in a relationship in over a year. Having someone to touch, and be touched by, felt amazing.

“Mmm... no.” Revi scooted back. “We should go clean up. Kissing you is the exact opposite of what I should do, unless we want everyone to know what we were doing.”

“No way. Can you imagine the field day the guys would have with this? They were bad enough this morning when we hadn’t come in our pants like preteens.” Barron swung his legs over the side of the bed. He found his pack. “Pajamas?”

“Sounds good. I’m not very hungry.”

“You sure?” Barron found a pair of sleep pants and a sleeveless shirt.

“Yeah.”

Barron balled up his clothes in his clean hand. "Okay. Ready."

They went into separate showers. Barron couldn't wait to see Revi, though he loved touching him too. Until then, a little privacy didn't hurt.

Good thing, too, because when they got out of the shower people were coming in.

"Hey, Barron, Revi. You guys missed dinner."

"Bet I know why."

"William, shut up." Barron refused to blush. He wouldn't blush. Creed, Thavin, and William started laughing.

He was so blushing.

"Go do whatever. Just stop bugging me." Barron didn't need to see them. He could hear William just on his left. He cuffed him on the shoulder. "Jeez, William, cackle much? Let's go," he said to Revi.

They went over to the bunks. Barron had dumped his clothes in the cycler in the bathroom to get them clean. He didn't bother folding them, just shoved them into his pack. He checked everything else. It was all still there, so he was ready to go to Paradise. "You wanna read?"

"I could do that."

Barron settled on the bed, holding *No Surrender*. "Before you start, why don't you tell me about Paradise? You haven't mentioned it at all."

Revi climbed in beside him. He didn't leave space between them this time, curling in close from the start. "It's cold. There's nothing living on the surface. Literally... nothing. Where we landed was rock, loose soil, and more rock as far as I could see."

"So utter desolation." Barron sighed. "Can we survive there, do you think?"

He didn't say anything.

"Revi?"

"I don't know. At least it's a planet. The air isn't toxic, though there's a really weird smell. I could hear the water moving, but the wind was whipping like crazy. Kinda spooky, the way it was whistling. Everyone going down will be issued glasses to cover their eyes to keep the dust out. The air was full of it."

At least his sunglasses wouldn't be so out of place. "So you didn't see any plants?"



"Not one, but I didn't get out of the shuttle. It was too damn cold. I just handed things to people who were already equipped to handle the weather."

That was strange. "Huh."

"You wanna keep talking, or should I start reading?"

"You can read now." Revi turned over onto his back, and Barron leaned against him, sliding one hand across his stomach.

Revi squeaked. "Stop that."

"Sorry." Barron grinned. He hadn't been *trying* to tickle Revi.

"Do you want me to read or not?"

No way did he want to miss out on hearing that voice, especially since he'd read *No Surrender* so many times. He could listen to Revi without having to pay much attention to the words' meanings. "Read, read." Barron was drowsy and close to falling asleep in no time. He slid a leg over Revi's and sighed. No way was Revi getting away now.

A hand on his shoulder woke Barron.

"Mr. Pernell. Mr. Porter."

Barron lifted his head. "*What?*"

Mr. Hodge chuckled. "You haven't changed that much."

He had, just not in the way Mr. Hodge could tell.

"Colonel Porter put out a call for those going down to Paradise. That's you."

Barron rubbed at his eyes with the heel of one hand. Revi mumbled against his neck and then rolled over. "Okay." He yawned. "We're up. Thanks."

Revi slid off the other side of the bunk and Barron rolled over. He grabbed his bag. Groping around on the bed, he found the book and stuck it inside. "I'm going to go get changed."

He made it to the bathroom before he realized they never talked to the guys last night. They'd be pissed if Barron left without telling them. Damn. Barron ran a hand through his hair. He put on a set of sturdy jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. He'd get his coat out of the compression pocket on the side later. It'd be too hot on the ship and shuttle, otherwise.

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The door slid open. "Revi?"

"No."

"Thavin?"

"Yep. You figured you'd head on down to the planet and not say good-bye? Thoughtless asshole." Thavin's voice lacked any real heat.

"I was just going to wake you guys up."

"Revi beat you to it," Creed said.

"Yeah, he's considerate of what friends mean." William was there too. Revi woke all of them up. Barron smiled. "He's not abandoning his best friends."

"I'm not going that far, and you'll be down before long. Suck it up, you saps. Besides, you get to stay up here, where it's warm and there are showers and shit. We're gonna be camping on an alien planet, freezing our nuts off. You think I wouldn't make you guys suffer through that with us, if I could?" Barron's voice was rough. He reached out and grabbed whoever was closest, pulling them into a hug. "Come on. Group thing." He'd hugged the guys in the last few months more than he ever had before, but they all needed one another. Barron wasn't going to pretend he didn't need his friends.

They were his family, after all.

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## Chapter Twelve

Barron took a deep breath and coughed. "Oh damn, you weren't kidding about the smell! What is that?" Rotting plants? Animals?

"Funky, huh? You get used to it pretty quick, though."

"Ugh. Don't know if it's really a matter of getting used to it or my ability to smell burning out from toxic fumes."

Revi bumped his shoulder. "Poor Barron."

"Damn straight." He fumbled with the latches on his seat. He grit his teeth, but finally managed to get them undone. "Lead on, McDuff. Your dad was quite insistent I not be a burden down here."

Revi made a noise in his throat. "You know you're misquoting a hundreds-of-years-old guy who is still famous, right?"

Barron shrugged. "You think we're not going to have to fight to keep me down here?"

"No. I do." Revi sighed. "It's my fault he doesn't like you, unfortunately. Well, really it's still your fault—but not all the way."

Okay. Barron blinked. "That made no sense." They sat, waiting for the people to shuffle past on the shuttle so Barron could get out safely. "Explain." They had time. The shuttle carried four hundred people who were going to start building the habitats to house the new colony.

"You know you were an ass when we met, right?"

Barron's face warmed. "Yeah. Sorry," he muttered.

"It's good. I had a talk with Thavin last week, and he explained about your dad. Guess yours wasn't a very nice guy, either."

"He wasn't a bad dad, but he was very rigid." Barron wasn't mad that Thavin had told Revi about his dad's expectations, though he hadn't really realized Thavin had known how bad it was. Out of his friends, though, Thavin was probably his best friend and spent the most time at his house.

"Yeah. My dad would probably really like you, actually. You fit his ideal son benchmark more than I ever will—or want to—but I told him about the shit

you used to say and do. He hates bullies. I know what you did wasn't that bad, more juvenile teasing because you liked me—"

"Wait!" Barron interrupted. "You knew that?"

Revi snickered. "You stared at me, a lot. It wasn't hard to figure out."

Barron's face felt like it was on fire. He shuffled his feet. "Damn, that's embarrassing."

"Yes, it should be, you dork. I thought you were a weird asshole for a long time, until Thavin and I talked." Okay, Barron really had to thank Thavin. He smiled. "But I'm pretty capable of looking after myself. I'm smart, plus I run and swim. I can fit in to some groups. My cousin didn't fit in anywhere."

That didn't sound good.

Revi's voice got thick. "He had Gaoschevin syndrome. They couldn't fix it genetically in utero, and when he was born it was too late. He had brain damage, plus some deformities to his face. The kicker was that my aunt and uncle put him in real school instead of letting him stay home or going to a special academy. My uncle was real old-school about being a man." That sounded really familiar. Barron swallowed.

"Bullies tormented Castillo for years. It broke him. He was usually happy around me, and we had a lot of fun growing up, but he hated school days. One day his dad made him go when all he wanted to do was stay home.

"Turned out, they started swimming in gym that day. He couldn't stay up in the water, so Cas had to wear floats. Some fucker took them away, and when Cas tried to get them back from him and his loser friends they shoved him around. Then one of them missed catching him, and he slammed his head into the side of the pool."

"Oh God, did he die?"

Revi sighed. "No. He ended up a vegetable. Cas would've been better off dead, but my uncle couldn't let him go—not after it was his fault Cas was in school that day. He died when the gamma ray hit."

He stopped talking. Barron shook his head. "I don't know how you can't hate me."

"I kinda did. But that was before I realized you were just an idiot who wanted my attention but hated wanting it." Revi slid his hand down Barron's arm and then intertwined their fingers.

"I didn't hate wanting you. I was afraid," Barron said quietly. "Not as afraid as your cousin, but my dad would've gone apeshit if he knew I even liked you, much less tried asking you out. I'm sorry I was a coward. I'm really sorry." He sniffed.

"Hey, I didn't tell you all that to make you feel guilty. You weren't like those guys. You didn't go out of your way to torment me physically—you just said a bunch of stupid shit. Besides, why do you think I let those girls go ahead of me on the bus that day? I wanted to see what you'd do."

"I hated that you ignored me. And I did hurt you, remember?"

Revi squeezed his hands. "Yeah, but then you had to help me to the first aid station. I liked that."

Barron lifted his head, staring toward Revi in shock. "What now?"

"Well, I'm much better at hiding things than you are, obviously, but I might've had a thing for you too. I like the brooding jerk type. What can I say?" He laughed.

"Thanks. Thanks a lot," Barron said drily. "Is it clear yet?"

"Yeah, our area's empty."

Barron stood and felt his way down the row of chairs and into the aisle. "So your dad's coming down on me hard because he thinks I'm an asshole. Why'd he pair us up, though, if he was that worried about me bullying you?"

"Well..." Revi muttered under his breath.

"What?"

"He saw me. I tripped 'a blind cripple'. I didn't really mean to. I'd planned to catch you and then make a smartass comment, but he came around the corridor right then, and I froze."

Barron stopped dead in his tracks. "Oh, fuck no. You did not just call me a cripple."

Revi sighed. "Those were his words, not mine. I knew you'd get stuck on that part of what I said. I know you're not crippled. You're just temporarily unable to stare at my handsome face." His joke fell flat. Barron was angry, and he wasn't hiding it behind any fake laugh.

"My dad thought Cas should've been in a special school—not to keep him safe, but to keep him out of the way. He respects a person who works hard and

is useful. Cas couldn't do much for very long, or he got headaches. He was quiet. You're not him, but you'd been on medical leave. Dad considered you useless."

Barron clenched his hands into fists. He winced when the motion pulled on the healing wound on his palm. "Then I hurt my hand sorting, proving him right."

"No. He's wrong, and we both know it. I'm sorry he's been acting like a jerk." Revi put his hands on Barron's shoulders and squeezed them. "You can help out. I talked with Mikelos. He's in charge of the building. Someone has to man the delivery system. You'll have a communicator and when the loaders finish filling a cart with parts, they'll signal you. You'll send it down to the build site. Apparently something went wrong with the wiring and it can't be done automatically."

"Sounds fun."

Barron was right. It was a real hoot. He sat in a small, freezing cold booth erected from hastily connected spare panels. Revi didn't tell him, but once when he was bored, Barron felt over the walls. There were no windows, and the whole thing was maybe four foot square.

It was like an upright, metal coffin.

His job consisted taking a call on a handheld communicator, pushing a button and pulling a lever, and then making a call to the crew at the build site. Then he did it in reverse once they'd emptied the cart.

By the end of the first day, Barron was tired, his hands ached with the cold, and he was stiff from not being able to move around much.

The metal wall shook when Revi jerked the door open. Damn thing kept sticking. "Early dinner down here. Ready to eat?" Barron was starving too.

"I could eat a horse."

"It's the cold. Makes your body work harder to stay warm."

Someone had fixed hot stew, and Barron went back for two bowls. He didn't care how he looked when he ate it by picking up the bowl in his hands and drinking it down instead of using the spoon. He got more of it, he didn't spill, and it warmed his hands through his gloves. He could practically feel the heat returning to his body.

He sighed when he finished his second helping. "I could eat more, but I'm not sure it'd fit."

"Me too." Revi burped and laughed. "We need to give up our seats, anyway." Everyone was eating in shifts in the assembled mess hall. "Want to go for a walk? We can take a detour on the way back to the shuttle." Lucky them, they got to sleep in their chairs.

"Yeah." Moving would work out some of the kinks in Barron's body from sitting so long.

The chilly wind slapped at them as soon as they stepped outside. Barron grunted, then pulled up the scarf he'd requisitioned. "Damn, I hope it gets warmer than this here."

"It should. I overheard some of the scientist guys scurrying around say that it's winter right now. Apparently there's still some seasonal effect in the areas around the water."

"Then why the hell didn't we go where it was summer?" Barron growled.

"I wanted to know that too. There's more vegetation and open water here, even though it's colder, apparently."

"Well, this is an alien planet. Maybe the plants need cold to grow, not warmth."

Revi slid his hand into Barron's. "Or light. The main sun's going down right now, and the sky's all yellowy gold, but I can already see the stars. The sun is so much farther away than Earth's. It's dim here."

"So you're trying to say I'm not missing all that much?"

Barron knew he was. They were on an alien planet, and he felt like there was so much he was missing because he couldn't see. They were the first people to travel so far beyond Earth, and this was his new home.

Would he ever get to see what it looked like? He covered his maudlin moment by hip-checking Revi. "You can wax poetic over the sunset enough for both of us, Mr. You Quoted Shakespeare Wrong."

"Oh, whatever." Revi pushed him back, and it was on. Barron grunted and tried to block, but not being able to see made up for their size difference. Revi caught him by surprise as they goofed around a few times, but whenever he got close Barron managed to get hold of him to push him back.

Their laughter drowned out the sound of the waves hitting the rocks. "You're not going to win," Barron taunted. "I am the immovable object!" He tried to plant his feet, but a rock rolled under his heel. Just then, Revi darted in for another shove. Barron toppled over backward.

"Holy fuck nuts!" Barron landed on the ground with one arm all the way into the water. It soaked his sleeve and glove. "Shit. Cold. Cold, cold, cold."

He scrambled to his feet, holding his arm out to his side.

"I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

"I'll b-be fine," Barron said through gritted teeth. The wind, which had died down, picked right then to gust. It felt like his entire arm was encased in a slab of ice. Every part of his arm ached.

"You need to get inside before your coat freezes." Revi grabbed Barron's dry hand. "We'll run. Just make sure to plant your feet so you don't roll a rock under you again." They ran carefully to the shuttle. Barron hissed when they made it inside and started to get his jacket off. Some of the fabric had frozen to his arm.

"We need some help. I don't want to tear your skin."

"I d-d-don't want to go to medical again," Barron objected. "Your dad will use it against me. You kn-now he will."

"Fine." Revi heaved a sigh. "Just, grit your teeth. This might hurt."

"What—"

Revi yanked his sleeve off his arm in one swift jerk. Barron clenched his jaw shut around the yelp trying to escape. He breathed hard through his nose. Revi grabbed Barron's hand and squeezed it.

"Oh damn."

"Now what?" Barron held his breath, trying to prepare for... whatever.

"Your hand is so damn cold. I'm trying to warm it up before I get this glove off," Revi said. "I stuck it in my armpit."

"Now my hand's gonna reek. Th-thanks!"

"Hey, eau de Revi. Every guy should be so lucky."

Barron shook his head. "Feels warm enough."



“Let’s see.” Revi slid his fingers under the edge of the glove around his wrist. “I’m just going to peel it down inside out. Hold your fingers out.” Barron stiffened his fingers.

The glove slid over his palm. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Your hand. The bandage is soaked. Does it hurt?”

“No. It’s cold but doesn’t hurt. Maybe the water made it numb. Just finish getting the glove off. Dr. Samuels gave me more material to bandage it. I have it in my pack.”

“Seriously? You need to have this looked at, Barron.” Revi finished getting the glove off. “Hold still. I’ll get the bandages so you can cover it. You don’t need to get dust in the wound.”

“I don’t need to go see the doctor. It’s even colder out there now and my jacket’s soaked. Is the wound bleeding?”

“A little.”

“Well, there you go. Blood will flush out any dirt and shit. It’ll be fine. I’m *not* going.”

Revi sighed. “Fine.”

They bandaged his hand and laid his coat across the top of his chair. “At least these recline, but it sucks we don’t have bunks.” He’d miss sleeping with Revi tucked in close to him.

“It could be worse. My dad used to make me go camping with him, just what we could pack in. We slept on the ground with a bed roll and our packs for pillows.”

Barron snorted. “No way would my dad have done that. Five-star all the way was his motto. He traveled executive class—round-the-clock room service and a full bar. Always.”

“You don’t seem that stuck up.” Revi handed Barron an extra blanket. He’d changed into dry clothes, but the shuttle’s temperature controls were set cooler than the ship, and Barron was still half-frozen. “I mean, you just do okay outside of a city.”

“William’s brother, Harvey, used to take us camping all the time. They lived near the edge of Doestrin Park. We’d hike into this big meadow about

forty-five minutes from their house by this little creek. It even had fish. Nothing big enough to eat or anything, but they were fun to catch.” Barron smiled, remembering their last trip. They’d planned another one before everyone went off to college. They hadn’t needed Harvey to keep an eye on them for a few years, so they were able to sneak out some drinks and other party supplies.

“Maybe we can fish here. At least once the scientists figure out what everything is and all that.” Revi yawned. More and more people were returning to the shuttle from the late dinner shift. “I’m beat. The panels for the sides of the habitats are heavy, even if all we’re doing is guiding and holding them in place for sealing.”

“Go to sleep, then. I’m not going anywhere.”

Barron still hadn’t gone anywhere over a week later. Dr. Samuels had come down to the planet, along with everyone but the essential ship personnel and the families with young children. Barron missed talking to Marya, but he was glad when Thavin, William, and Creed were dropped on the planet to freeze along with him and Revi. By that point, they were staying in one section of the habitat already finished and sealed off.

Of course they were sleeping on the floor in blankets just like Revi predicted. Outside structures had to come before creature comforts. The daily work schedule was accompanied by all sorts of ‘work for a better life for all’ propaganda.

How much of a reminder did the head honchos think they needed that the fraction of humanity they saved were all necessary for survival?

It was mind-numbingly boring, but Barron kept his job. His hand was feeling better, but since he wouldn’t take time off from pushing a damn button to see the doctor, he couldn’t do anything else. They weren’t even allowed to walk down by the water anymore. The security guys had cordoned it off for everyone’s safety so no one fell in.

Barron and his friends put their heads together and figured there was something they weren’t being told. Creed overheard some guys talking about the life in the oceans being unique—something or other unlike anything the scientists had ever seen—and the possible ramifications could be dangerous. They’d clammed right up when the sealer in his hand banged against the panel he was securing until they passed him.

They’d stayed up late the night before, whispering in a huddle in the corner they’d claimed. Creed and William were insistent that there was something big

that could come out of the water to chomp on human flesh, but Thavin pointed out the lack of prints of any kind or any sightings.

Revi backed him up. He hadn't seen any when they walked along the waterline, and they'd been so close Barron actually fell in.

Barron had no freaking idea. He was consumed by other thoughts and had only paid half-attention to the conversation.

"What?" Revi rolled over in his arms and faced Barron. "You're thinking so hard it woke me up." They'd combined their sleeping rolls so they could sleep together again. There hadn't been much touching below the waist. Working out in the cold from morning until dinner exhausted them both. If Barron wasn't so distracted he'd probably be far more frustrated than he was.

"I can see you." Barron reached up and ran his finger from Revi's forehead to the tip of his nose. "Not perfect, everything looks wavy, but I can see you."

Revi grinned. "Really? That's great!"

"Is it? I'd be happy if it was just my eyes, but look at my hand." A week before he'd still had an open gash on his palm from the thick chunk of metal that had actually stuck in his hand. Barron held his hand up so Revi could see it.

"It's healed! Not even a mark."

"Tell me, shouldn't that wound have left a scar? Plus, I itch all over, all the time. It's getting worse, Revi." Barron swallowed. "What's happening to me?"

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## Chapter Thirteen

“You need to go see the doctor.” Revi stared at Barron. The night before he’d been able to see the oval of Revi’s face, his hair shoved back into a ponytail. Barron hadn’t said anything—afraid it was fluke or something—but he could see even better when he woke up. Everything appeared as though he was looking at it through a veil of water, but the bright white radiance was gone.

“What if it goes away?” His chest was tight, as if he couldn’t draw a deep breath, and the itching had intensified.

“What if it doesn’t? I’m happy you can see again, but Barron, something *really weird* is going on with you. I don’t care what the hell my dad thinks, and you shouldn’t either.” Revi scowled. “Get up, get dressed, and get the hell over to see Dr. Samuels!”

“I know. I know you’re right. I just... I’d hoped the look on your face when I saw it again wouldn’t be you glaring at me still.” He’d never gotten to see Revi’s smile directed at him. Other people, sure, but he’d never gotten to see that happy look just for him.

Revi leaned in and kissed him. He held on to the back of Barron’s neck, pressing their foreheads together. “Really look in my eyes. I’m not mad at you; I’m worried. So please do what I ask. Go see her.”

“Okay, I’ll go.”

Those gorgeous pink lips captured Barron’s attention as Revi *finally* smiled just for him. “Good.”

“God, you’re hot.” Barron brushed his thumb across Revi’s full bottom lip.

“Yes, I am.”

Barron laughed. “So modest, too.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault you’re stunned by your first sight being the vision of the hunky manliness of me.”

Barron wrinkled his nose. “Ha, ha. Well, I’m definitely not into you because you’re funny.” He smacked Revi’s ass.

“Hey!” someone objected sleepily. “None of that when I’m a foot away from you.”

Barron leaned up on one elbow. "Like I haven't heard you doing far worse over the years out camping when you thought we were all sleeping."

Creed was always horny. It used to be even worse when they were younger. He was their main source of porn and other illicit material. William's brother was too straitlaced, and Thavin only had one sister. Creed had lived with his dad, and he was a pretty cool guy who didn't worry about the sort of thing he said normal teenage boys were into.

A slap on the ass? The tamest of things Barron had seen in Creed's video collection topped it.

"Well, hit him quieter then. I'm sleeping here."

Revi shook with suppressed laughter.

"So glad we could amuse you," Barron said. "I'm getting up." The itching was getting to him. He could deal with pain, but damn... feeling like he wanted to peel his skin off to make it stop crawling was the worst.

"Do you need me to come with you?"

That was right. With Barron's vision back—at least somewhat—he didn't need a guide. "Maybe you should. I wouldn't want your dad to think he can separate us." He might anyway, if the damage was fully repaired, but Barron would soak up every minute of Revi's time that he could before then.

"He can't separate us. We're from the same section, and we're together now. I'm not going to abandon you. We are together... right...?"

Barron knew he was committed for as long as he could keep Revi. He opened his mouth to tell him exactly how he felt, sappy sentiment and everything.

"Oh my God, yes. He's so into you it's disgusting. Now go away!" Creed flopped over, turning his back to them.

Barron and Revi snickered. So much for a magical moment.

"He's right. I'm into you." The heat Barron put in his voice made those five little words so much more important than they sounded.

"Good," Revi whispered.

"I'm just gonna go like this." Barron snagged his jacket. "You can change if you want."

"I'll be quick." Revi took his bag and went to the makeshift bathrooms set up off to the side of the room, with changing stalls and some cleaning cloths. They didn't have running water, but medical and the cafeteria did. Everyone else used the shuttles for personal needs.

By the time Revi came back, Barron was digging at his arms. He couldn't stop scratching. The skin on the back of his shoulders, down to his fingertips, was tingling, and it felt like millions of little biting bug were crawling on them. He spun on his heel. "Let's go."

"Whoa." Revi grabbed his jacket from where he dropped it. "You need this."

"No, I don't. I'm fucking hot." He couldn't wait to get outside. "Let's go," Barron repeated.

By the time they made it to medical, Barron was doing his best to writhe while staying on his feet. He could only breathe in pants. He couldn't get enough oxygen, couldn't stop scratching. He barely felt the wind that had Revi hunching his shoulders and burying his face in the collar of his jacket.

"Is someone here?" Barron shouted when he got inside. Most of medical was still dark. A figure hurried around a panel.

"Shh. There are people sleeping in here."

"Well, I can't. I swear to God, I'm going nuts here." Barron dug at his arms.

Revi gasped. Barron looked down. He'd dug furrows in his arms and skin was sloughing off in strips. "Holy fuck. What's wrong with me?"

"Dr. Samuels! I need you out here, *now*!" The guy rushed over to Barron. He hissed when he touched his skin. "You're already burning up. Fuck."

"Nolu? What's going on?" Barron recognized Dr. Samuels' voice. The tall woman had her white hair pulled back into a neat bun, even though it was the wee hours of the morning. She looked older than Barron expected from her voice.

Nolu looked a lot like he'd expected, though. His skin was dark, nearly as dark as his hair held back in tiny braids. Barron wondered absently how long it took to braid hair that long as he did his level best to rip his skin off.

It itched so bad!

"Is he okay? What's going on?" Revi followed them as Dr. Samuels and Nolu grabbed Barron by his elbows and wrists, forcing him to stop scratching.

They pulled him back toward the screened area where the lights were blazing bright.

“He needs to get into a tank immediately,” Dr. Samuels said.

“A tank?” Those were reserved for people with life-threatening injuries or illnesses. Barron twisted his fingers, trying to itch between them.

“We need to bring down your fever and keep you from getting worse. We can deliver what you need to breathe far beyond what Paradise’s atmosphere can provide. You’re going to need it.”

“He’s going to stop breathing?” Revi’s voice rose. Barron wanted to take Revi in his arms until he calmed, but the urgency with which the doctor reacted to his appearance scared Barron, too.

“Strip.” They stood before a tank. Dr. Samuels turned and tapped furiously on the control panel. Nolu and Revi helped Barron get his clothes off. They had to fight him as he kept trying to scratch. Barron knew he needed to stop, but he couldn’t seem to, no matter how hard he tried.

Revi leaned up and captured Barron’s face with both hands. “I’m not going anywhere. Remember that. You can’t leave me either, no matter what’s going on. You fight it.”

Barron nodded. He was gasping and couldn’t talk. He rubbed his cheek against Revi’s hand, staring into his eyes.

“Good.”

He stepped back and let Nolu and Dr. Samuels insert Barron into the tank. By that point, Barron’s head was spinning and he needed their support so he wouldn’t fall over. Barron opened his mouth for the breathing tube, swallowing when he was told. The influx of pressure forced his breathing to slow and deepen.

The dizziness started to fade. His arms and legs grew heavy and then the feeling in his limbs went away. The loss of sensation in his entire body usually would’ve freaked Barron out, instead of a localized pain blocking like the bands provided, but in this case it was a relief.

“Barron.”

He blinked.

“Can you hear us? Blink twice for yes, once for no.” Dr. Samuels’ voice filtered through the fluid in the tank.

He struggled to do what she asked.

“Good. Feeling better?” He blinked once, then rolled his eyes. Then he blinked them twice.

“Okay. I’m guessing that’s a smartass remark about feeling... and yes, you feel better. Or at least you don’t feel anything, right?”

Barron blinked twice again. Lifting his lids took monumental effort. The tank made all but the tiniest movements impossible. He couldn’t even twitch his fingers.

“I need you to stay calm. I have a few questions. Revi’s still here, just like he promised. If he knows something about what I ask you, do I have permission to talk to him about your health?” she asked.

Blink. Blink.

“Thank you. That helps. Now, Barron, I need you to answer this question honestly. The water’s cordoned off. Did you sneak past the markers?”

Barron blinked once.

“Are you sure?”

Two blinks.

“This is important, Barron. You won’t get in trouble. Wait. Revi says you fell in the water before it was cordoned off. You fell into the shallows. Did you get your wound wet? I noticed your hand is healed.”

Yes! Finally, she was getting to the damn point. He blinked twice for yes, again.

“Damn it.” Now she sounded tired. “I was afraid of that. There’s something out there, something in the water. When it infiltrates a wound, even a tiny one, on a person’s body they begin to display all the symptoms you do. Usually much sooner, though.” She paused. “The itching, breathing, and fever... did those start this morning?”

Barron blinked twice.

“Have you noticed anything else?”

Barron blinked twice. He fluttered his lashes and waited. He knew Revi would explain.

Dr. Samuels’ voice came through the tank again. “You can see again?”



It took all he had, but Barron managed two more blinks.

“I know you’re tired. I need you to stay relaxed, okay? The monitor will alert us to any change. If you need anything, we’re right here. Feel the tube in your mouth? On the underside is a small button. If you press it even a tiny bit with your tongue, an alarm will go off, and we’ll be over in seconds. For now, just rest.”

Barron couldn’t do anything else. Time in the tank meant very little. Every speck of skin on his body was immersed in fluid infused with whatever medicine the doctor deemed necessary. He caught flashes here and there, but nothing understandable.

Even though he shouldn’t have been able to feel anything, slowly the pressure inside Barron’s body changed. It felt like the tube feeding him oxygen was failing. Breathing grew harder.

He forced his eyes open. Barron could see in the tank, a first for him. He shouldn’t have been able to see through the murky fluid, but it was easy. Two figures stood on either side of his tank. They wore security uniforms and had weapons.

*What the hell?*

Using his tongue like Dr. Samuels told him, Barron set off the alarm. The doctor appeared in front of his tank by the monitor.

“Would you please move? You’re in the way!” Dr. Samuels snapped.

The security guard moved when she prodded at him with a tool of some kind that looked pretty pokey. “Thank you. Barron, are you okay?”

He blinked once.

“What’s wrong? Do you hurt?”

Barron shot a look side to side at the guards, and then blinked once for no. Dr. Samuels bit her lip. “How’s your breathing. It looks a bit labored.”

Blink. Blink.

“I can help with that.” She tapped the monitor. Barron watched her. The other night her hair had been immaculate, her clothes tidy. It was a far cry from how she looked now. Her shirt was wrinkled, and she’d tucked several strands of loose hair behind her ears.

What was going on?

The pressure in Barron's chest eased. A man appeared behind Dr. Samuels. "What did you do?" he asked.

"I increased the hydrogen again."

Again? Why were they giving him hydrogen? Barron tongued the button again, setting off the alarm. He fought to move, but he couldn't.

"Barron, calm down. You're stable at the moment. I know you want answers, but don't panic. I don't want to have to increase the hydrogen mixture so soon." She looked so worried Barron knew that was something she *really* didn't want to do.

"This is Dr. Lunquist. He's one of the scientists from the ship. We've been monitoring your condition. Barron, you're undergoing a metamorphosis, and it's almost complete. We believe this began when you landed with your injured hand in the ocean the first night you were down here."

"I still don't believe it could've happened that early," Dr. Lunquist argued.

Barron blinked twice deliberately.

"And I told you my theories on that. He was blinded back on Earth rescuing a little girl, and he had a severe gash on his arm. Deep tissue UV damage, plus the eye and palm injuries, slowed down the replication and repurposing of the cells in his body until he was reasonably healthy enough to make a suitable host." Dr. Samuels' voice took on the tired tone of someone who'd repeated themselves, a lot.

"There's no proof of that supposition."

"God damn it, what else is there? We can see it happening, healing and changing him, but at a much slower rate than the others. They all changed so fast we couldn't keep up. And. They. Died. He's alive. There's a reason for that!"

Dead?

They'd had other people in there who touched the water? Who'd been changed?

Who died?

Barron slammed his tongue against the alarm again and again. He wanted out. He wanted out of the tank right that second. He strained and finally managed to move one hand. He pressed his palm to the glass below the monitor.

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They had to let him out. Where was Revi? He'd know.

He'd get him out.

"I'm sorry, Barron. I didn't mean to say all that in front of you." Dr. Samuels pressed her hand against his on the outside of the tank. "I'm doing my best for you. I swear. Try to stay calm."

Calm?

She wanted him to stay calm!

Barron blinked once, squeezing his eyes shut.

Out.

He... wanted... out.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Barron woke up again. The process was more gradual than before. His breathing sped up. He could move. He curled his fingers into fists, then spread them back out.

Weird. There was... skin between his fingers. He waved them and the tank fluid rippled. Bluish tissue ran down the outside of his hand. And his arm too! Barron lifted his arm. It fanned out like a wedge and was attached from just above his wrist to his armpit. Barron reached for it. It gave under his fingers, thin, slick.

And it glowed. His arms were limned in a faint shimmering light. He couldn't tell what color it was, just... sparkly.

The sensation of his fingers on it sent a shivery quiver up the nerves of his arm. Barron arched his back and shuddered. He grunted around the mouthpiece. Okay. No touching.

He triggered the alarm on the tube, but didn't hear anything. Where was the alarm? He thrashed in the fluid. He could move, but he felt drunk, uncoordinated.

Tap. The sound on the tank echoed through the fluid. "Barron," Dr. Samuels whispered.

Barron jerked his head up. "Mmm." He gestured toward the tube, blinking rapidly.

"I know, I shut off the alarm. We have to get you out of there."

We? Barron blinked twice. The guards were gone, but he could see two shadowy figures behind the doctor. The lights were low. It must still be nighttime.

"You must remain silent when we pull you out. Stay calm, okay?" She spread her fingers on the tank.

What was with her thing insisting he stay calm? She was a doctor. She was supposed to have a good bedside manner, right? Who in their right mind thought telling a person to stay calm would make them anything but calm?

Revi came out of the shadows. "Hey, it's us. I promised I wouldn't leave you alone, remember?" Barron blinked twice, firmly. He slid forward, pressing both hands against the tank.

The fluid level began to drop. Barron started to slip to his knees, but Revi reached in and grabbed his arm. Creed grabbed his other arm.

They lifted him up the rim of the tank. Barron squinted. The world was wavy and fuzzy, like a he had a film across his eyes. Barron blinked several times, and it went away. Dr. Samuels grabbed the mouthpiece. She pressed a button on the end, and it retracted. It slid up Barron's neck until the flat disk sealed around his lips popped off.

Barron panted. "What's going on?"

"Shhh. We'll explain, just wait."

It was so hot outside of the tank. Barron was dizzy. He couldn't climb out on his own. Creed and Revi got him out. Revi propped him up from the front, holding his hips, while Creed got him a thin robe.

"Let's get out of here." Revi looked up at Barron. "Just stay with me, okay?"

Dr. Samuels led the way. Creed and Revi held Barron around the waist and at the wrist, avoiding the weird skin that had somehow curled up into a thin tube along his arm. He stumbled between them. His skin was so sensitive, every tiny thing on the floor dug into the soles of his feet.

Barron jerked back when the door to medical slammed open. "Someone's coming!" William hissed.

"Who's coming?"

"It doesn't matter. If anyone sees us, we're screwed," Dr. Samuels said grimly. "We have to run."

They burst out of the door in a knot. Thavin waved from the edge of the partially finished...

Wait. The habitat was complete.

Creed dropped his arm. "You guys get back to your bunks," Revi told him and William. "You can't be caught up in this right now." Dr. Samuels grabbed his other arm. What the hell? Barron did his best to run, but questions ran through his mind as his uncoordinated limbs fought him.

"Stop!" Shouts behind them spurred everyone to run faster.

"To the water," Dr. Samuels panted. "It's his only hope."

Barron gasped for air, heaving, trying to get enough oxygen to keep running. Darkness began to creep in at the sides of his vision.

"He's not going to make it." Revi squeezed Barron's wrist.

"He will. We're almost there."

Boots crunched on the gravel as they were pursued down toward the edge of the ocean. Barron's feet took a beating but the cool, waterlogged sand soothed them as soon as they stumbled onto the rim of beach along the pounding waves.

"We will shoot if you try to enter the water!"

"Go. I'll hold them off."

Dr. Samuels held her arms out, sheltering them as she turned to face the pursuers behind them. "I'm the only trauma doctor the colony has. Are you really going to shoot me to get to these boys?"

Revi ripped off the robe. "In, in, go in the water."

He was so hot and the water looked so good. Barron looked at Revi, hesitating.

"Come on!" He waded into the water and a shot rang out.

"No!" Barron shouted. He jumped forward and caught Revi. A dark wound on Revi's shoulder was already bleeding through his shirt. Blood dripped into the water. Barron slapped a hand over the wound, pressing down. "Dr. Samuels! Get him out." Revi couldn't stay in the water. The thing might get him.

Shouts broke out on the beach. The shots stopped, but the damage was done.

Dr. Samuels darted a look over her shoulder. "I can't. It's too late, Barron. Go. Swim. Keep pressure on the wound." She pointed up the beach. "Don't go that way. Go toward the suns."

"Revi!" a man shouted from the beach. "Son, wait!"

Barron wasn't a great swimmer, there was no way he was going to stick around. The doctor thought they weren't safe, and Revi promised he wouldn't leave him. Barron wasn't going to leave Revi either. He waded out farther into the water until he was chest deep.

"Go, Barron," Revi begged.

He curled an arm under Revi, shuddering when the skin under his arm unfurled. His chest eased and Barron took a deep breath. He pressed his hand against Revi's wound and used his arms to keep their bodies pressed together.

Then he started swimming.

Leaving Dr. Samuels behind made Barron feel bad, but whatever was going on, she and Revi had wanted him to get away from the habitat. It took a few minutes to figure out how to get a good rhythm going, but the longer Barron was in the water the easier it was.

Revi shivered in his arms, but the water slowed the bleeding. "C-c-cold." Revi's teeth chattered.

"I'm sorry. Should we get out?"

"N-no!" Revi jerked. "Stay in the water!"

The million questions Barron needed answered would have to wait. He pushed wet tendrils of Revi's hair out of his face and started swimming again.

"Can you kick? It might help you stay warmer," Barron asked him.

Revi began moving his legs, small kicks at first, and then more. The rough fabric of his jeans rubbed against Barron's bare stomach.

The suns were beginning to rise in front of them. They'd been going down the shore long enough for the full dark to fade to a steely gray. The stars never fully went away as the distant suns rose in a mix of colors. "If the sunset is anything like this, I can't wait to see it."

"Better." Revi panted. He was taking another break, letting Barron tow him.

"Are you doing okay? We need to get you out, Revi. You're going to get hypothermia or something." His body should've shut down from the cold by then.

"I'm fine. Warming up every minute."

Barron stopped. They bobbed in the water. "What?" If Revi felt warm then he was hypothermic. "That's it, you're getting out." He didn't suggest getting out. Barron didn't want to get yelled at again.

Revi rested his head against Barron's shoulder. "I'm fine. We can take a break over there, though, if you need to stop. The plants aren't toxic. If my dad gets a shuttle, he might come looking for us, and we'd be hard to spot there."

A huge snarl of plants floated in the water to their right. Barron had avoided several smaller patches. It was strange, comparing the lush tangle of plants to the completely barren shore on their other side.

He struck out for the edge. The closer to the plants they got, the warmer the water was. Barron frowned. "Am I imagining it, or does the water feel hot?"

"It does." Revi sighed. "That feels good. Wonder if these plants are the reason why there's still water here? Hmm... you know what, I don't care. It's nice here."

"Damn it." If Barron hadn't avoided the plants earlier, then Revi could've gotten warm. "Can you hold on with your good arm?"

The plants were an odd scarlet hue in a variety of shades. Long stems looped and knotted together, and some hung over into the water like handles.

"Yeah." Revi grabbed a vine, and Barron let him go. He shook out his arm, the muscles sore from holding Revi so tight.

"I'm going to check your wound, okay?" Barron looked at Revi's shirt, then shook his head. He ripped the hole wider. It was the best way to see the wound without removing the shirt and exposing even more of Revi's body.

The flesh around the raw wound was pale, but rather than a hole, there was a furrow taken out of the top of Revi's shoulder. It wasn't as bad as he thought. "Thank God."

He peered closer. "Is that... are you already healing?"

"Probably." Revi rested his head on his good hand and sighed. "The symbiont is very efficient."

Barron jerked back. "Symbiont?"

"Yeah. Lucky for me, I have exactly what it needs to flourish. You and the three soldiers that died back in the habitat weren't so lucky."

Was he delirious? His lips weren't blue. Barron touched Revi's forehead, but he felt okay. Barron frowned. Before, the skin between his fingers had been blue, but now it was a flushed pink. He lifted one arm out of the water.

The weird flap of skin was pink too.

"What in the fuck happened when I was in the tank?" Barron snapped. He couldn't wait anymore. He had to know.



Revi blinked slowly. "I don't know everything, exactly. I know what Dr. Samuels told us and what the guys and I could overhear. You're good at that science and math crap, so maybe it'll make more sense to you."

"Just tell me." Barron wasn't mad at Revi, but he was so sick of everything—all the drama had to stop.

"Basically, these plants aren't plants. They're alive kinda, but only when they're not yet plants."

Barron closed his eyes. "That makes no sense."

Revi frowned. "They have... spore parasites? Yeah, parasites is what they said. They release into the water and are basically living organisms that seek out hosts." Revi pointed at Barron and then his chest. "We're hosts."

"These plants have spores they release that seek out living organisms? That symbiont you mentioned."

"Yeah!" Revi looked pleased. "I knew you'd get it."

Little bits of information began to fall into place. "The thing they were worried about—it was the symbiont. Not some of the animals living in the ocean."

"Exactly. The military guys were freaking out about securing the colonists, the science guys were freaking about study and understanding, and Dr. Samuels was fighting to keep you guys alive. She couldn't save the three soldiers, but the symbiont didn't work as fast on you. She was able to keep changing your tank settings just enough to keep you alive."

"I almost died?" Barron shook his head. "How long was I in the tank?"

"Nearly a week."

Barron gaped at Revi. "That's insane."

He nodded. "Your body needed hydrogen rich water. Cold, hydrogen rich water. Without it, your body kept shutting down." He pointed at Barron's arms. "Then you grew those, and it got worse. Dr. Samuels couldn't keep up with the demands your body had for hydrogen, and the tank couldn't filter out the massive quantities of carbon dioxide you were putting out."

"So you guys broke me out of the tank? Why did you have...?"

"The scientists and General Keene wouldn't stop arguing. They were going to fight over what to do about you until you died." Revi stared at him. "We weren't going to let that happen," he said simply.

Barron swam closer. "And you got in the water, knowing the risk of this parasite getting in you, like it did with the wound in my hand. Knowing it would change you like me. That you might die, like the soldiers."

"I wasn't going in a tank. I wasn't going to die. Dr. Samuels took some of your blood. She had Mejia study it, down to the cells. The parasite invades the cells and becomes a symbiont. It's changing your body, but it helps you too. Why do you think every living creature on this planet is in the water?"

"There shouldn't be anything living on Paradise. It's too far from the sun, Thavin said."

"Exactly!"

"So this plant has something to do with keeping everything alive?"

"Yep." Revi smiled. "And it fixed your eyes, too!"

"Yeah, but now I'm a freak." Barron waved the shimmering flaps under his arms in the water.

Revi let go of the tangle of the plants. "Well, I'm going to be a freak, too. It's already in me. The water was freezing at first, but now it feels good. I'm already acclimated to the water temperature. It'll start changing my body soon too—the new tissue in my hands and feet, the stuff under your arms, that clear shit that grows over your eyes underwater... Dr. Samuels said your body was adapting to both breathe and live underwater."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't want to live underwater. We're humans! Mammals."

"Whales and dolphins lived in the water on Earth before they went extinct, and they were mammals, too," Revi pointed out.

"What are we going to eat? Are we going to sleep on the plants? What about the other animals? Is something in this water going to try to eat us?"

"I don't know for sure, but I think they're vegetarians. From what we figured out, everything in the water revolves around these plants. Dr. Samuels said she was going to try to meet us to take samples. Thavin, William, and Creed are going to sneak food and stuff to a spot we found away from the habitat. There's one or two scientists who seemed reasonable. Mostly, they want to study you... well, and me now too."

“Great. We can be lab specimens swimming around and letting them poke and prod us for food.” The plants drifted close enough to shore he could stand up. Barron let go of the floating bundle.

“You’re so negative.” Revi sighed. “Do you have any idea how much planning and work went into getting you out? So you could live? Do you have any idea how I felt when I thought you were going to die?”

Barron swallowed. He relived the moment when Revi was shot, again. “Yeah,” he said hoarsely.

Revi reached him and wrapped his arms around Barron’s neck. He hissed when he moved his injured shoulder, but he didn’t let go. “Then stop. We’re alive. We’re together. Plus, we get to be the first aliens humans have ever met!”

Things were never going to be the same, for either of them, but Barron couldn’t change that. Freaking out about it wouldn’t stop Revi from changing, or make Barron’s body stop glowing like he was some freaky nightlight. “You’re right.” Barron leaned forward and pressed their lips together. Revi was warm, so warm in his arms.

Revi grinned. “Of course I am.” Revi kissed him back. Barron slipped his tongue in Revi’s mouth and got a mouthful of hair.

“Ack. Okay, so maybe your hair might be a little bit long for living in the water.”

“Well, I might cut it for you. Not all the way off though.”

“No, not all the way.” Barron like Revi’s curls.

“Besides, it might make my dad too happy.”

Barron pulled Revi closer. “Can’t have that,” he murmured. He began kissing Revi’s jaw. He’d missed so much, unable to see the look of pleasure on Revi’s face as they touched.

Revi wrapped his legs around Barron’s waist. “My dad’s an asshole, but he was actually on the doctor’s side about letting you out of the tank, you know.”

Barron jerked. “He was?” He figured, from the colonel’s appearance on the beach, that he’d been part of the security team trying to stop it.

“Yeah, well, I might’ve hinted we’d break you out, and I’d go with you if he didn’t convince the general.” Revi shrugged, then hissed. “Ow. He didn’t like the idea.”

“Well, I love it.” Baron pushed the wet hair away from Revi’s face. “I’m glad we’re together. One way or another, we’ll figure everything out. But can we please stop talking about your dad while I’m working my way up to finally getting to see you with your clothes off?”

Revi smirked. “You’re definitely feeling better.”

“The sunrise looks like gold spreading across the sky. We’re alone, on a planet called Paradise, and pretty much guaranteed to be alone out here. What else are we going to do to keep ourselves occupied?”

A grin spread across Revi’s face. “What, indeed?”

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Alicia Nordwell is one of those not so rare creatures, a reader turned writer. Striving to find something interesting to read one day, she decided to write what she wanted instead. Then the voices started... Yep, not only does she talk about herself in the third person for bios, she has voices in her head constantly clamoring to get out. Fortunately for readers, with the encouragement of her family and friends, she decided for her own sanity to keep writing. Now you can find her stories both free and e-published! Oh yeah, she's a wife, mom of two, and lives in the dreary, yet ideal for her redhead complexion, Pacific Northwest. Except for when she disappears into one of the many worlds in her head, of course!*

## Contact & Media Info

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# CENOTAPH

By Gabbo de la Parra

## Photo Description

Anime-style drawing of two men. One, dark-haired, lies on the floor with his semiautomatic trained on the chest of the blond-haired one who looms over him. The blond has a really large sword ready to pierce his adversary's chest. The frozen image debates between black and white and sepia; it speaks not of hesitation but of controlled fury. Both their gazes scream things that cannot be spoken.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*Consider this particular moment, an intense expression of love-hate, the joy of a fight, violence, and yet also something stopping us from outright killing each other; a connection, a passion, admiration, respect, love, a past, a future? How did we get to this moment? Were we friends before a betrayal? Or enemies who despite a connection were destined to fight on opposite teams? Or was it something much more complex? Is this where it ends or is it just the beginning? Things do tend to get confusing when time traveling.*

*Who are we, whether we live in an alternate, sci-fi, dystopian, or contemporary reality (just no fantasy, paranormal, supernatural, magic, etc.), what we look like (bonus points for at least one being an ethnic minority), and our personalities are completely up to you. At its core, our story revolves around this particular moment where we aren't sure whether we want to murder or shag each other (or both); a moment of elation and joy of fight that only comes from dark pasts, a life where there is a blurred line between passion and violence.*

*Graphic sex is not necessary but very welcome (no BDSM but they can fight it out to determine who gets to top). HFN is fine but not necessary (no HEA, please). Author, get in touch with your darkly violent passionate time traveling side and have fun.*

Sincerely,

Alicja

## Story Info

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**Genre:** science fiction/near future

**Tags:** enemies to lovers, spies/secret agents, interracial, switch/versatile, time travel, reunited

**Content Warnings:** no HEA/HFN

**Word Count:** 18,548

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# **CENOTAPH**

**By Gabbo de la Parra**



## 1. NOTHING WRONG WITH PUNCHES

AURORA CITY.NOVEL CALIFORNIA.YEAR 2089

CLEPSYDRA PROJECT.BUILDING G

"I don't know why they had to bring him back."

"'Cause Singh's the best."

"Fuck you, Jagger. I *am* the best. That idiot forfeited the title when he quitted four years ago."

"Oh, boohoo. Spare me your whining, Fondant. I still don't understand why you hate your ex-partner so much."

"I have my reasons."

"Well, you gonna have to swallow your reasons 'cause the president specifically asked for him to return."

"I'm pretty sure there was a lot of money and cocksucking involved..."

Quinn Fondant knew this to be more than BS since it was precisely due to Veer Singh's religious beliefs that their whole partnership (and whatever that partnership was becoming) had gone to the frigging toilet.

They were watching Veer talk to Ramsey, their team leader, through a two-way mirror. In any other facility this would have been a place for questioning suspects, but in Clepsydra Project it was just a way for team members to learn about their coworkers unobtrusively. Team Aegis was a six-member unit even though they were partnered in pairs. Unluckily for Quinn, his partner, Len Faludi, had died in a car accident the previous month, leaving the team incomplete.

"We all know you're a perv and resolve everything with sex, but don't put your methods on other people," Jagger huffed, annoyed. He inserted a finger into the collar of his ill-fitting shirt and pulled as if the thing was strangling him.

Quinn's demeanor was all a facade. It was his way of keeping his team at bay regarding his private life. If they thought he was a pervert, they wouldn't try to fraternize with him and thus leave him alone to nurse his aggravated heart. Being part gypsy helped a lot since, in Aurora, many of his quote

unquote cousins had amassed great fortunes catering to the darkest pleasures of their fellow citizens. Although, he was the odd man out since his mother's people looked at his fair hair (a gift from his *Frenchy* father) askance.

"You got that one right."

"Huh?" Jagger looked at him perplexedly for a second (a half movement away from scratching his head) and hissed, "Fucking queen of non-sequitur."

For him it was a joke that every time his teammates wanted to make him feel special they used queen instead of Quinn. "At least I am not a size queen, like you, hotshot."

"There's nothing wrong with loving big boobs." Jagger was a big guy, six-foot-two and brawny; known for his lack of fashion sense, his persistence in keeping those few sparse hairs on his head, and his love of petite women with giant chi chis.

*A total wiener but good at his job.*

Quinn chuckled, making a gesture like squashing massive breasts. "Sure, especially when you put them together and they look like a hunk's ass."

Jagger rolled his eyes. "We need to pay attention to their conversation."

Inside the not-interrogation room, Veer laughed at something Ramsey said. Blinding white teeth and a complexion so fair (what was that they called it in India, wheatish?) that he didn't exactly look Hindu. His dark hair was still thick and frigging wonderful, although a bit shorter than the last time they had seen each other. And that little, almost pencil thin mustache paired with the hair neatly trimmed on his chin was pissing Quinn off, triggering all kinds of things he shouldn't be thinking of.

"For shits and giggles? It's not like we don't know him already," Quinn growled at Jagger. The big man had joined the team a year before Veer abandoned them.

Before Jagger could come up with a suitable response, Veer and Ramsey stood up and shook hands.

"Thank God they've finished. Five more minutes around you, and I'd have punched you in the face," Jagger murmured under his breath.

"And the crowd roars. Ahhhhhh, 'cause you don't have Hollander and Russo to cower behind... ahhhhh." Quinn had his hands around his mouth, making the far away noises of an agitated mob at a baseball game.

He was the one with a punch (or three) reserved for Veer Singh.

\*\*\*\*

## 2. THE DELICATE BALANCE

Same long, blond hair, same lean, muscular body, same mesmerizing, gypsy eyes. Quinn Fondant hadn't changed much since the last time Veer had laid eyes on him. The permanent scowl on his face was new though.

*Four long years.*

"Well, boys, you know Veer Singh, so introductions are unnecessary," Ramsey commented in his crisp tone. He looked at his watch. "Russo and Hollander are about to return. Let's go to the time chamber."

Veer shook Jagger's hand. The tallest of their team gave him a warm smile.

"Can I talk to you for a sec, Ramsey?" Quinn asked, giving his back to Veer as Veer moved to shake his hand.

"We're talking." Ramsey arched an eyebrow but didn't stop walking. Building C wasn't that close.

"It'd be in the best interest of Team Aegis if you partner Mr. Singh with one of the other guys."

"And why would I do that? You're the one without *your other half*."

The growl that came out of Quinn was one Veer knew well.

"Yeah, that answers my question." Ramsey didn't even look at Quinn. "I'm not going to disrupt the delicate balance of each pair just because you feel whiney today, Fondant. Besides, you were partners with Singh before. You can pick it up where you left it."

"Let's be professionals." Veer offered his hand again as they entered the elevator. This time Quinn could not avoid it without being blatantly rude.

The murderous look Quinn gave Veer as they shook hands would have made any other man shake. The only thing it did to Veer was make his resolution to go through this ordeal firmer.

*I can do this. I know I can do it.*

The creepy background music felt like the soundtrack of Veer's partnership with Quinn. One part *Carmina Burana*, two parts *Phantom of the Opera*, two pinches of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and a hot lot of *Gladiators Gone Wild*.

Metal doors slid open with a soft whoosh, and Quinn hurried as far as he could from Veer without separating from the group. Veer sighed inwardly. They walked through the crowded lobby, people moving fast in all directions, an organized chaos—completely different from the one inside Veer. Still in silence, they crossed the tall glass entrance into a sunny morning. It should have been a starless night full of gray storm clouds for the way they mutely moved toward the building where the most treasured jewels of the government changed the course of history.

All seven buildings (from A to G) looked like the headquarters of any corporate business, but unlike most reflective glass towers, these were not just heavily armored but could withstand an actual nuclear explosion once their doors were closed. They were in the middle of the city, and this was not a military complex, but the powerful weapons and shields protecting those jewels were so subtle; regular citizens had no clue of what was happening in it.

Fingerprints and retina scanners acknowledged their identities, and they boarded another elevator inside Building C. The three time machines were on the seventeenth floor. One minute into the four-minute ascension, Jagger asked, “So Singh, what have you been up to?”

“Worked with Mossad as a consultant for two years, then went back to Punjab to help my grandfather manage some business.”

“Your grandfather the Maharaja!?” There was a bit of fangirl tone in Jagger’s question.

“Yep,” Veer said.

Quinn snorted.

The doors opened with a ding.

“You’ll know all about Singh’s princely adventures as soon as we finish our meeting,” Ramsey offered casually as they were fingerprint and retina checked once more outside the middle time chamber, Octo. The other two, Septem and Novem had their exterior red lights on.

Quinn snorted again.

Guards in Kevlar body suits nodded at them somberly.

*Enough.*

“Do you have a problem, Fondant?” Veer poured all the things tormenting him into his aggressive tone.

“No. Do you?”

They were nose to nose, eyes narrowed, fists closed, and chests puffed.

“Hey, you two, stop it.” Ramsey pushed them apart. “I have no doubt that Fondant might have a boner for you, Singh, but I know your religion forbids extramarital sex. So unless you two gonna hitch it, fucking cut it out. I don’t have time for BS.” He pushed a thick finger into Quinn’s forehead. “Behave. The rumors that Faludi’s death wasn’t an accident but a suicide will not help you if Singh issues a complaint. *Capish?*”

“Yes, sir.”

The people inside the chamber, which was a vast circular space covered in computers and monitors and all kinds of giant gadgets, had been looking at them as if they were ready to place bets. As soon as Quinn and Veer separated, there was some sort of collective telepathic, “Boooh” within the chamber.

An alarm went off, and, thirty seconds later, the time capsule’s titanium door slid upward, expelling hisses and fumes. Russo, naked, covered in sweat, with his reddish hair plastered to his forehead, stood up from his squatted position and staggered out; the door closed behind him with a bang. An assistant put a robe over him and gave him a bottle full of rehydrating liquid. He was somewhat thinner than how Veer remembered him but looked fine.

Two minutes later, Hollander was puking all over the entrance of the time capsule as he crawled out. Veer was surprised by the two massive red dragon tattoos covering Hollander’s arms. Those were new.

“I told you not to eat that effing lamb!” Russo yelled from where he sat like a prize fighter between rounds, and the assistant massaging his shoulders reinforced that image.

“Oh, shut up.” Hollander cleaned the dribble on his mouth with the back of his hand as another assistant helped him to walk toward Russo.

Team Aegis was back together.

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### 3. IT'S AN ORDER, CABASH

Byron24 Saint, one of Clepsydra Project's Linchpin Analysts, entered the conference room, ready to explain their mission. Ramsey had warned them the guy was new and might seem a little odd, advising them to go easy on him. Quinn was happy his parents hadn't jumped into that wagon of adding numbers to names. People were getting stupider by the minute with them. An actress had named her child Emma348756 because that was her great-grandmother's high school locker combination.

Saint wasn't the bespectacled, skinny geek Quinn expected. He only got one thing right and that was the skinny part. Black spiked boots, black ripped T-shirt advertising Catskull Band, and manliner for days, all topped with a mat of dark blue hair strategically covering one eye. He had a cute little bubble butt though; unfortunately, Quinn was too busy trying to keep his hands from Veer's neck and his mind from that frigging Punjabi, kickass form.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Saint moved the hair covering the one eye with a flick of his head. The sepia photograph of a handsome forty-something man, dressed in the manner of explorers of the nineteenth century (khaki everywhere, including his quasi-helmet hat) appeared on the half-wall screen facing their long table. "Jean-Luc Bilodeau was one of the biggest promoters of a civilized Algeria, but he was killed by a male dancer slash prostitute in an Algiers gentlemen's club in 1938." Now the image changed into a recently taken picture of the same man, wearing nice Victorian clothing, most probably taken by Russo and Hollander a few days ago. "We have determined that preventing his death would stop the taking of Algeria by the Germans and thus give us a strategic advantage during WWII to shorten it."

They were used to this seemingly random linking of events that unleashed others, but he couldn't understand why they kept changing things from WWII instead of completely avoiding it. Quinn understood the idea of saving perhaps millions of lives with the shortening of the war, but wouldn't it be better if the war hadn't happened at all?

Russo voiced Quinn's thoughts. "We go through this every time Upstairs sends us to change something to impact WWII, why not just kill fucking Hitler?"

Saint chuckled and gave Russo an angelic smile, belying his darkness-related ensemble. The kind of smile one would give a cute toddler asking a silly

question. "The key to using time travel effectively is to change something that seems random, almost unimportant. You don't go and kill Hitler—or the Christ, you kill their grandparents. Nevertheless, every major event in history occurs for a reason. If we erase them, we might awake in a completely different world. I'm pretty sure you all have watched the *Back to the Future* trilogy since it is mandatory for all involved in Clepsydra Project."

They all murmured in agreement.

"All right. Your mission is to save Bilodeau." Another picture popped on the screen. The man looked a lot like Veer, but the eyes were wrong. Well, it was something Quinn would notice, he doubted the others did. "The killer," Saint informed them.

"Wow, Singh. That could be your great-great-granddaddy!" Hollander guffawed.

"Precisely." Ramsey rose to his feet. "Veer would take the place of the assassin. He and Quinn would be dancers at the club, it wasn't named a club then anyway, but you get the idea."

"Aren't we too old and big to be dancers of that era?" Quinn was confused. Men of that time, especially these type of European business men, preferred boy-looking whores. Although, there was nothing boyish about the killer.

"This club catered to men with a taste for something a lot less delicate." Ramsey grimaced. "Singh will fit right in because he looks like the killer. *You*, due to your long, blond hair and sexy ass. And you already speak French."

"Well, I'm glad I have impersonated a stripper before. If not, this would be devastating. Ten years of military training for nothing," Quinn stated, waving his head like a crazy person.

All catcalled and wolf whistled, including Saint. Veer kept his mouth shut, averting his gaze from Quinn.

*Good.*

"Okay, now that we've all let our inner children breathe for a moment, let's continue." Ramsey did a calm-down movement with his hands.

"May I ask why this man was killed?" Jagger interjected.

"The details are sketchy. Some accounts mark it as a crime of passion. Nevertheless, we have to consider all possibilities, including business rivalry or an impatient heir. The procurers will figure that one out if needed."



The procurers were Russo and Hollander; they scouted the terrain before every mission, securing locations and making contacts. Ramsey and Jagger were the muscle and logistic coordinators. Quinn and his partner were usually the ones in contact with the target, unless the physical needs of the mission called for something closer to the other members of Aegis, in which case they'd switch roles.

"Hollander and Russo have secured a location in the Cabash as operation base. They will contact the assassin and convince him to take his manliness somewhere else. If he doesn't cooperate, well..." Ramsey shrugged.

They tried their best to avoid killing people while in the past. As Saint had mentioned, killing grandparents might erase the life of someone important and unintentionally mess up history in immeasurable ways.

"Jagger and I," Ramsey continued. "We'll go after Singh and Fondant to be their backup at the club and assure that everything with Monsieur Bilodeau goes smoothly."

"Hold on a sec. What you mean with smoothly? We're just impersonating dancers. No assassin, no murder." Quinn didn't like where this conversation was heading to.

The answer came from Saint. He coughed first to call their attention to him. "As of yesterday, there is a new directive enforcing the minimal change in events. In this case, for example, since we know Bilodeau was killed while being intimate with the dancer, mister Singh most probably would have to at least give a *handjob*." Saint's shrug attempted to be an apology, but it felt like he didn't give a rat's ass if Veer had to let the man go all the way.

All eyes landed on Veer.

*Come on say something, you can't have sex before marriage.*

"If it's an order..."

"That's all you have to say, Singh?!"

All eyes landed on Quinn this time. His outburst had been accompanied by him springing to his feet and slamming the table.

"Fondant! If Singh doesn't have a problem with the new regulation, why are you screaming like a damn lunatic?" Ramsey shouted at him.

Quinn had locked eyes with Veer, but now his gaze moved around the room. The others were staring at him agape. He growled, "I don't know." He

really didn't know and didn't want to analyze the reasons for his sudden explosion.

"Then sit down and shut the fuck up!"

"Yes, sir."

"Now." Ramsey closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "We have a week to learn everything we need to know about time and place. We have trackers following our players' movements to learn their routines." He sighed, clearly exasperated. "Since this day appears to be heading the wrong way, go home and rest. Come back tomorrow acting like adults and ready to work like mules."

All arched eyebrows were aimed at Quinn, except one. Veer's face was effectively blank.

*Shit.*

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## 4. NOT A DAY FOR THAT

After that disastrous first meeting with his old team, Veer had been trying to hail a cab unsuccessfully for the past fifteen minutes. Cyprus West was always busy. It was the divider between the ten blocks that formed the business district of Aurora, five 24/7 money-making blocks on each side of it; the Clepsydra Project Complex was located between 9th and 10th South, right in the middle of it. Perhaps if he walked to Circular Park Four (only two blocks north) getting a cab would be easier.

Veer would arrange for a driver with the concierge of his hotel. He wasn't against walking; he walked almost everywhere while he was back in *Ambarsar*, but it was better when you knew the vehicle was there waiting for you in case you needed it.

As Veer waited for the light to change to cross Cyprus West and get to the park, the soft purr of a bike settled beside him. He turned to look at it. He would recognize that bike anywhere in the world.

*Quinn.*

Taking the helmet off and shaking his glorious, blond hair, Quinn simply said without smiling, almost scowling, "Hop on."

His first instinct was to move toward the bike. Veer knew Quinn had an extra helmet in the box, but a different kind of caution stopped him. "Planning on murdering me?"

"Not today." Quinn opened the box and offered the helmet to Veer. "You have been flailing your arms like an idiot long enough. I'm just being a decent partner."

"Are you stalking me, Fondant?"

"Hell no."

Veer still resisted. "These are not riding pants." He pointed downward with both hands.

Arching an eyebrow, Quinn zeroed in on Veer's crotch.

*Damn it.*

"What is that, leather and silk blend?" Quinn's eyes were still caressing Veer's package. It was distracting the way his head was tilted a little sideways, like a puppy deciding whether to pounce to get the toy or not.

“Er...”

Quinn rolled his eyes and shoved the helmet against Veer's chest. “Just put this shit on and get moving.”

Veer adjusted the helmet and straddled the bike. “Do you already know in what hotel I'm staying?”

With a snort for an answer, the bike roared to life, and they zigzagged through traffic.

The voice of his mentor, Sutlej Singh, emerged from the turmoil in Veer's head. ***The only way to conquer temptation is to face it until it doesn't entice you anymore.*** And that was why Veer had accepted the reinstatement when it was offered. Unfortunately, his guru hadn't told him what to do with temptation when one was holding his waist, swaying amid fast-moving cars. For some unethical design of Fate they hadn't hit a single red light, therefore Veer was never able to take his hands off Quinn's body. Petrified, he resisted the urge to lean onto that wide back, covered in a royal blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves.

All expectations of surviving the day died when Quinn turned onto Capitol West en route to one of the bridges over the San Joaquin River connecting the west and east sides of the city. His hotel was in Spain West, very far from where they were heading to—because Veer knew where they were going, straight to the one place that was worse than a mine field. Quinn's apartment. In Tarot Towers.

Instead of turning left to go to Tower Eight (where Quinn lived), they turned right, rounding Circular Park Three. Soon the Pegasus Fountain was visible. The five circular parks of Aurora were designed to look like the Yin and Yang symbol in bird's eye view with the fountains located where the contrasting color dots would fall. They entered a multi-level parking space facing the park. On the uppermost level, Quinn thumbed a scanner, and an enclosed parking spot opened; they entered it and the engine went silent.

“So this is where you leave my body to rot.” Veer didn't know what made him say something like that. He knew how quickly Quinn's temper could flare.

Quinn was quiet as he put both helmets in the box. Once they had moved out of the secured space and closed it, Quinn turned to Veer. “If you want me to kill you, just say it with all its letters.”

“Not today.”

“Good.”

“May I ask why do you leave *Morena* here?” Veer asked, confused, because one knew a man loved his bike when he gave her a pet name meaning “dark-skinned” for the black chrome surrounding her.

“You Sikhs are not superstitious and don’t believe in rites and stuff, but there are things out there, man, and when you live in a place like Tarot Towers you have got to be alert. Six months ago, I found some white powder over *Morena* and didn’t think much about it, but then all kinds of crazy things started happening with her.” Unabashed, Quinn started walking with his head high. “I called one of my aunts to do a cleansing and decided to keep *Morena* away from the building and those fuckers.”

Okay, they worked time-traveling; of course there were things out there that logic alone couldn’t define. What men considered science now was supernatural only a couple of hundred years before. Veer would have worked a different solution though. “Why don’t you move if you don’t feel safe?”

“That was my mother’s apartment. I wouldn’t leave it for all the money in the world.”

“I forgot about that, sorry.”

They crossed Circular Park Three in silence. It was high noon, but it wasn’t hot, and a soft balmy breeze followed them. A beautiful spring day that should have assuaged the shadows and murky thoughts roaming furtively inside Veer. Quinn flipped a coin into the Pegasus Fountain as they passed it.

The real name of Tarot Towers was Fanning Complex. The ten towers had been built resembling the curve of a fan. They were infamous throughout the city (and even the country) because ninety percent of all the spiritual workers of Aurora lived in them. Veer had only been here once, a little before he resigned from Clepsydra Project when he’d helped Quinn move after his mother’s death. His partner hadn’t been especially close to the gypsy lady, but her demise had snapped something inside him, and Quinn was seriously devastated.

They had almost trespassed then, stepping into a forbidden threshold.

Veer shuddered.

And it didn’t have anything to do with how cold it was inside Tower Eight. They did a one-eighty inside the elevator to face the door, and, before it could close, a little old lady (the kind you’d see down the streets of Barcelona or

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Istanbul or Sicily) emerged out of nowhere and entered. She stared at Veer all the way up to the twentieth floor. Quinn and he exited the elevator, and he couldn't resist turning back to look at her. She gave him a rather creepy "good-bye" wave and mouthed something Veer seriously hoped was "Cute."

They stopped in front of Quinn's clover-green door. "Spooked enough?" Quinn asked as he thumbed the lock's recognition pad.

"Asshole."

Quinn wagged his eyebrows. "Not today."

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## 5. BLOOD AND STRIPPERS' WARDROBE

"Welcome, Veeru," the house computer said.

Veer staggered. "Why did she call me that?"

"The last time you were here, we were friends. I hoped more than friends, but you quitted on me." Without thinking, Quinn smashed Veer against the wall closest to the door, sending a portrait to the floor with a loud crash, both hands pressing on Veer's hard chest. "I would've never abandoned you."

A roar emerged from Veer, and he pushed Quinn. They struggled, hands around throats, knees threatening soft parts. Quinn swept his foot under both of Veer's, and they landed together, rolling on the carpet, knocking aside chairs and knickknacks, destroying the living room in their fury, growls and curses the soundtrack of their battle.

"Should I call 9-1-1, Quinn?"

"Don't you dare, I'll handle this," Quinn yelled to his house computer.

That momentary distraction gave Veer the opening he needed, and a solid punch in the jaw made Quinn's brain rattle in his head. "Fucker!" He grunted, and Veer's eyes went wide like someone discovering something really gross and alive in his salad.

Veer sprang backward and scuttled away from Quinn in a perfect imitation of a startled crab, his face distorted in a wild mask of horror. A leather couch curtailed his escape, and he hissed, "Why did you bring me here?"

"I want answers."

"We were partners for three years. You knew me better than some members of my own family. You knew all the answers before you even had the questions."

True. They had been partnered as soon as they entered Clepsydra Project at twenty-one, after four years with the Marines. Quinn, the child of two colliding words: superstition against science, and Veer, raised to be a saint-soldier but wanting to be so much more. They had become fast friends easily.

"You didn't say good-bye."

Using the arm of the couch to pull himself up, Veer didn't say a word until he was at the door. He opened it and, with a foot outside the apartment, murmured, almost in a whisper, "And I'm not going to say it now."

The door closed with a sad click. Quinn stared at it for an entire hour. His mind not blank but so jumbled with confusing and contradicting thoughts, it was impossible to find a single thread of coherence to use as a lifeline.

As Quinn resurfaced from his catatonic state, he noticed a large blood stain over his shirt. Had Veer stabbed him? Impossible, neither of them had drawn any weapons. Quinn touched the side of his jaw and his fingers came up smeared with dried blood. Then he remembered Veer was wearing the square, bloodstone ring Quinn had given him for his twenty-fourth birthday, a couple of months before their inconclusive separation.

Quinn had thought for a second the ring was a signal, a silent message when he saw Veer wearing it, sitting with Ramsey. Yet his enragement had incinerated that silly idea the minute Veer stepped out of that room acting like he had just gone on vacation for a few months and was ready to pick up right where he'd left off as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

He didn't know how, but Quinn found himself in front of his bathroom mirror. The amorphous blood stain created by the long, dripping cut was right over his heart. *How fitting*. Any normal cut would have trickled along his neck, but no, the mark of the fucking lion had to mess with his wardrobe and his brain.

Quinn chuckled against his better judgment. Singh meant Lion, and for some absurd reason or because of the plain stupidity of his mind, four years ago, Quinn had thought Veer Singh could be *his* lion. They were both lions even if for different reasons, if he believed that his birthdate made him a Leo.

*What a fucked up Monday.*

April 11th. Shit, Veer's birthday was next Friday. Quinn ran a hand over his face, and the blood from his reopened wound left him looking like a barbarian after an epic battle. He rolled his eyes. "Computer?"

"Yes, Quinn?"

"Contact the store and request two cases of Moongoddess beer to be delivered this afternoon."

"At once, Quinn."

His hangover wasn't as bad as it could have been the next morning.

"Geez, Fondant, didn't know you'd changed to the *ladies*." Russo made a rude gesture with hand and forearm and then pointed at Quinn's jaw. "That's gonna leave a pretty nasty scar, hope it was a nasty battle too."



"I don't see ladies involved. Maybe he adopted a big pussy!" Hollander followed without missing a beat.

"Or he was trying to do us a favor and kill himself, but he was too drunk to aim at his jugular correctly," Jagger counterpointed, guffawing.

Quinn noticed how Veer flinched at the words kill and drunk. He locked eyes with his partner, refusing to be the first to look away.

They would never know who would have won because Ramsey yelled, "Enough." And they both moved their eyes together to look at the team leader. "You two—" Ramsey pointed at them "—three hours of dance lessons."

"Oh, Fondant is not gonna have trouble with that," Hollander commented. "Don't you remember how he *flamenco'd* the fuck out of that mission we had in Madrid during Franco's dictatorship?"

"Yeah," Jagger joined. "I'm not into dudes, and I was all hot and bothered when he was strutting over that table in that seedy joint. The crowd went wild."

Russo elbowed Veer. "You missed a hell of a show. You could have learned a thing or two."

"He *can* dance," Quinn blurted before his brain could censor his mouth or stop the blood rushing to his face.

All eyes landed on Quinn.

Before he was forced to offer an explanation for his comment, Ramsey rescued him. "We'll do the *fangirling* later. This is a different kind of dancing. Singh and Fondant need to try on outfits and everything else, so move along. Conference Room Alaska, fifteenth floor." Before they could move toward the exit, Ramsey added, "And Fondant?"

"Huh?"

"You can't take your sword on this mission. We can't let you run around Algiers with that thing. This is not *Kill Bill*."

"You only need one kind of sword for this mission!" Russo yelled.

Veer and Quinn left Team Aegis headquarters amid catcalling and wolf whistling. Their destination was within Building D, five floors above their offices. They hadn't even said good morning to each other, and, in silence, they entered and exited the elevator and found the conference room. A man and a woman awaited them. The man was their dance instructor. The woman was in

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charge of their costumes? Uniforms? Quinn didn't know what to call the gauzy, translucent genie pants, thong, slippers, and jewels he donned.

Quinn got out of the cubicle where he'd gotten dressed for the lady to check him and do alterations if needed. He wasn't happy about the string teasing his asshole. The clothing was all shades of red and purple, and it went well with his fair complexion. He was fussing with his satin slippers when he looked up and saw Veer.

His partner was a vision in gold and green.

*Fuck me.*

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## 6. A TIMELESS BIRTHDAY TRIP

Today was his birthday, and, after he divested himself of the fluffy maroon robe, Veer was as naked as when he came into the world. With an ominous hiss, the titanium door slid upward, inviting him to the gullet of a dragon, its spasmodic lights dissimulating their true purpose softly. He wasn't afraid; he had prepared for this. What he hadn't prepared for was the torment of five days around Quinn, exchanging only the bare minimum of words necessary to do their job. They were not acting like partners, and they were about to embark on a mission that seemed easy enough but with many unknown variables. Their lack of true communication made the situation all the more straining.

Veer was mentally prepared to touch and let Bilodeau touch him inappropriately, but the idea of Quinn seeing these acts suffocated him. It was his job, but it would be like spitting on Quinn's face. The only way to avoid that affront was to entice their target to a private area of the club, away from Quinn.

"Are you ready?" The assistant's voice was comforting, similar to a loving father asking if you had your hot milk before bed.

Lost in his own machinations, Veer hadn't noticed he was stalling in front of the door. "Yes. I am." He looked back slightly, and an also-robed Ramsey gave him a thumbs-up. Veer smiled and, with a nod, entered the time capsule.

The bang of the closing door didn't startle him as he crouched, the metal floor feeling warm against his fingers and feet. Veer understood the concept of crouching to start the process; this position mitigated the sensation of being pleated into a million folds as if the machine was preparing you to be stuffed into a match box. But this time the action had a sexual connotation that Veer couldn't shake. He didn't think it had anything to do with the fact that both Quinn and he had been utterly waxed, something that wasn't part of time travel procedure, but a requisite of this particular mission. He tried not to look between his legs at his flaccid cock and hairless balls, but he did, and temptation seized its opportunity, sending a mental image of Quinn's strong fingers caressing his shaft, cupping his sac, teasing his hole.

His traitorous body liked the idea and shivered and hardened in response.

The alarm signaling the beginning of the countdown went off, swallowing his moan. Veer closed his eyes, but that was worse because Quinn's laughing

face jumped at him. An image Veer loved and couldn't seem to be able to provoke since his return. No, Quinn hadn't laughed with him or at him, he had been nothing but cold and distant when they were alone and his usual grumpy but passable self when around the team.

"Two, one."

Veer was reduced to nothing for an infinite second. Lightning zapped him, folding and compressing him. All of a sudden, he was pushed out of the womb of the time-space continuum onto a cold mosaic floor. They were allowed just one second of disorientation, since what or who awaited them on the other side was never an absolute given. Veer tensed, opening his eyes.

"It's all right, buddy. It's all right," Russo and Hollander intoned together. They stood, one on each side of Veer, neither of them touching him.

But Veer's eyes went straight to Quinn, who was seated in a high-backed wooden chair, splayed like a king and wrapped in a black silk *robe-de-chambre*, disheveled and glorious, drinking from a metal goblet.

A growl escaped Veer.

"I think he's in shock." Hollander shifted uncomfortably, stopping his attempt to reach Veer.

"But he did fine in the trial capsule," Russo whispered.

Hollander arched an eyebrow. "You noticed his growling, right?"

"I'm okay," Veer growled again.

"Then stop making those sounds, man," Russo chuckled, pushing a silk robe in front of Veer.

Veer pulled himself up on his own, without his head spinning or his balance being lost. He donned the soft garment and tied it.

"Here, drink." Hollander offered him a goblet. "Happy birthday! We have a surprise for you!"

"We got an Indian cook!" Russo clapped like an excited child. "She's not from Punjab, but she knew what not to cook, and we have a feast for you!"

A table was laden with bowls and trays of dishes, and it smelled delicious. Well, in this moment any food would smell wonderful after twelve hours without any solids. Here is where Veer realized Russo and Hollander were dressed like proper Victorian gentlemen, even their ascots folded to perfection.

He didn't know whether to laugh or commend them. "Thank you, guys, this looks magnificent."

"Don't thank us. Fondant told us where to find her." Hollander pointed with his thumb toward Quinn, who hadn't moved a muscle since Veer arrived. Now, he made a toasting gesture with his goblet toward Veer.

*How?*

Neither Quinn nor Veer had been to this time before. Was this a truce offering? Veer tipped his goblet. "Thank you."

Hollander drew out a pocket watch and, in a perfect imitation of a train conductor, said, "All right, Ramsey will be here in three, two, one."

With a crackle, Ramsey emerged as if inflated out of thin air. Whooping, he stretched up. "I love it." Of the six of them, Ramsey was the only one who ever came out of the time-travel process like a rollercoaster enthusiast.

The group chuckled, and Russo offered him a robe. "Well, boss, we were waiting for you to start eating."

"Let's dig in then." Ramsey grabbed a plate and started shoveling food onto it. "I haven't eaten Indian in ages."

"Me neither," Quinn grumbled, without moving from his king's chair.

"Then come and get some, you idiot," grumbled Jagger, who had just entered from a different room, still shaking rain (that Veer hadn't heard until now) off himself.

"We weren't expecting you so fast." Hollander handed Jagger a plate.

"And miss my friend Singh's party? Never!"

Four men laughed.

Two only stared at each other.

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## 7. SAVING MISTER PERV

The quote unquote club was a series of large tents along the beach. The dancers of the Sazeel tent were congregated in a smaller tent from where they would enter at the appropriate moment to show their assets and entertain and possibly accompany their wealthy clients for more intimate endeavors later. Twenty men in different stages of undress prepared for the night, helping each other to accommodate jeweled armbands, ankle and wrist bangles, studded leather vambraces, cocks in pouches, precious metals chains around their necks, and other myriad things to enhance their muscular bodies.

Strangely, they didn't oil themselves because they were supposed to only smell of manly sweat, which was fine with Quinn; he wasn't a big fan of being slippery unnecessarily. He did notice some of the guys applying some oil in their holes, perhaps to ease the customers' trial of the goodies. If Veer hadn't appeared back in his life, Quinn wouldn't have had any problem trying some of the goods himself. This was a fine lot of prime meat.

The dancers were programmed to enter the tent first one, then two, and then one again until the last two groups were a pair each. As agreed with the club owner, Veer and Quinn would be the sixth set. Ramsey, Jagger, Russo, and Hollander should be in place by the time they came out of the thick velvet curtain separating both tents.

A tall, brawny, tanned man (Quinn had nicknamed Ringmaster) entered their tent and clapped his hands, calling for attention. "Ten minutes to go." He spoke to the group in heavily accented French, then focused on the first dancer. "Akham, you ready? No hashish, right? Good boy." He walked around the tent, checking that the guys were ready and asking questions to some of them. He gave Veer a particularly nasty leer and straightened some of the chains falling over his chest. "Nice, very nice."

It took every ounce of control Quinn had not to pounce and pummel the son of a bitch. Fists clenching, he reminded himself worse things would probably happen once they were outside amongst the men who had come to see the dancers of the Sazeel, "the strong" tent.

Music started outside. Applause followed immediately. Akham positioned himself by the curtain opening, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck; he jumped a little in place. From Quinn's time perspective one would think

Ahkam was about to perform some Olympic gymnastics routine, not play stripper for a bunch of lusty men. On cue, the handsome man opened the curtain and was swallowed behind it amid roars, cheers, and whistles.

Quinn wanted to peek through the curtain to see if his teammates were there already. The dancers did fifteen minute sets with brief intervals, so Veer and Quinn would have to wait a bit more than an hour and a half for their turn. The men who left the tent didn't return because they were encouraged to mingle with the customers, and before the smell of the ocean and the roasting meats outside their tent could do a number on Quinn's stomach, the minutes flew by, and they were standing by the velvet curtain.

"You good?" Veer asked Quinn as they both did their own shoulder-rolling beside the curtain.

"I'm pumped."

"So am I."

"We got this," Quinn said, his uneasiness lifting a little. The original assassin had been sent with his family out of Algeria, his teammates were surely outside, and, even if he hated Veer's guts, Quinn knew they could depend on each other.

Their music started, and they pulled the curtain aside. With grinding pelvic movements, they advanced toward the low, circular stage amid fifty or so gentlemen reclined on fluffy, ornate cushions. Quinn gyrated toward the right side, Veer in the opposite direction. The hubbub of the tent quieted as they embraced their routine, soon it was only the music, sensual and tormenting, and the many eyes trained on them, as if they were otherworldly visions. Moreover, the seven previous dancers (now seated on men's laps or reclined along them) stared in a mixture of envy and awe. Undulating, gyrating, twisting, Quinn let the enticing voices of *mizmar*, *tabla*, *riqq* and other instruments guide his body, while his mind remained alert, assessing his surroundings.

Veer danced in front of Jean-Luc Bilodeau, and the man was frankly on the verge of drooling. A stab of jealousy almost doubled Quinn, but a hand pinching his ass startled him.

"*Zut Alors*, that's hard," said the man, and Quinn rounded, ready to punch him, only to discover it was fucking Jagger.

*Two can play that game, asshole.*

Instead of moving away from Jagger, Quinn (armed with a sensual smile) backed and squatted until he was on Jagger's lap, moving as if Jagger was fucking him, which brought cheers and applause from the men around them. He even brushed his lips over his teammate's before returning to the circular stage, leaving Jagger with ninety hues of red on his face and a possible erection.

Their set was nearing its ending, but their target was already hooked. Bilodeau stood by the edge of the stage (which was truly only a round wooden platform rising five inches from the floor), clapping with the stupidest, most loving grin a man could muster up. The music ended with a bang, and cheers exploded from the crowd. Veer and Quinn bowed in the center of the stage. They had a five minute interlude before the next set, so they could approach customers and stay with them.

Bilodeau jumped to the platform and held Veer's hand. That prompted whistling and catcalling from the chatting men. He whispered something into Veer's ear, and Veer's laughter came out deep and teasing like syrup dripping over pancakes.

"Mark," Veer called Quinn. They weren't using their real names. Quinn was Mark, and Veer used the assassin's name, Aarzam.

Quinn moved toward the two men with his most becoming smile. Veer put his hand on Quinn's shoulder and stroked it. Thank goodness for his training because he was a frigging puddle of need. "Monsieur Jean-Luc wants us to go home with him." Veer purred in Arabic-accented French, one hand trailing Quinn's arm, the other doing who-knew-what behind Bilodeau.

"Is he sure he can handle the both of us?" Quinn traced one finger along Bilodeau's chiseled jaw. He had to admit the man was handsome. That helped because it was hard not to look down to try to figure out what Bilodeau's hand was doing *behind* Veer.

"I'm extremely capable, handsome." Bilodeau gave Quinn a disarming wink.

"Then let's have some fun," Quinn exclaimed merrily.

The three of them laughed, descending from the platform, catcalling and cheers from the men in the tent followed them.

Quinn wondered if he'd get fired by blowing the mission and killing Bilodeau himself.



## 8. THE BLESSING OF CAUTERIZATION

“That was a fucking mess.” Jagger slammed the table back in their rented house in the Cabash.

“Son of a bitch.” Russo threw himself onto a purple sofa.

“That’s why the motherfucker got killed before.” Quinn kicked a weaved basket, scattering figs all over the mosaic floor. “He’s so lucky I didn’t have my sword with me.”

Hollander drew out his pocket watch. “Guys, we have eight hours before transportation starts. If any of you want to get some shut-eye, this is the moment for it.”

Five pairs of eyes landed on Veer.

“Are you all right, buddy?” Ramsey asked.

Veer scrubbed his face with one hand and nodded, closing his eyes. He had known the night would be a disaster the minute Bilodeau asked him if he and Quinn would mind going with him to his apartment. In theory, it should have been better if they stuck together, but something in his gut told him it would be the opposite of good.

The idea of having Quinn near if he had to do things to their target was unnerving enough; still he’d caught something else altogether in Bilodeau’s eyes the moment he suggested the threesome. It had stopped raining at some point while they were in the “strong” tent, and the cloudless sky with one of the biggest full moons Veer had ever seen seemed an ominous sign of the things to come as they wound along the deserted streets from the beach to a group of white, five-to-six-story-high buildings. This was the area where most of the privileged French bachelors lived. Bilodeau was married, but his wife was more interested in the latest fashion of Paris than in her husband’s endeavors on this side of the planet.

The first alarm inside Veer went off the moment the two bodyguards who accompanied them through the city (broad-chested men with thick handlebar mustaches and broken noses) stayed inside the room where Quinn, Veer, and Bilodeau retired to get acquainted. Another duo of bodyguards had greeted them upon arriving to the apartment, but those ended up outside the entertainment room.

Bilodeau offered drinks to Quinn and Veer, and they both pretended to drink them. Both had taken powerful pills to counteract the effects of alcohol and most mind-altering drugs, but as a rule they avoided drinking or eating anything that came from a target if they could get away with it, just in case. Some records of music very similar to the one they had been dancing to were quickly summoned, and, in no time, Bilodeau was undressing as Quinn and Veer danced.

Sitting on a high-backed chair (uncannily similar to the one Quinn had been sitting on when Veer arrived at the Cabash forty-eight hours earlier), Bilodeau ordered them to get closer and take each other's clothes off while kissing. They had donned coats to walk to the apartment, but they were still only in their translucent genie pants and jewelry and nothing else. As long as they were covered on their way back to their base, they shouldn't run into trouble, and their teammates were to be located strategically close by.

Quinn brushed his lips over Veer's and murmured in French. "It's all right. I'm here for you."

Not exactly the thing one'd say to a partner when they were about to start undressing each other for a mission. Veer kept telling himself this was for the greater good, that saving Bilodeau's life tonight would save thousands of lives during the war. Nevertheless, Temptation whispered sibilantly, dripping arousing venom with each word, *"Ah, deep inside you hoped for something like this to happen. You want his hands on you. You've dreamed of his hands on you, his lips, his body pressing against yours..."* Veer shuddered, and Quinn took it for a signal of nerves. "Shhh, let me take care of you."

"How magnificent his devotion," Bilodeau uttered throatily, palming his engorged cock through his short drawers.

Quinn's hands roamed over Veer's torso, but his mouth never touched Veer's again. Quinn's lips followed his hands as he carefully took each piece of jewelry with ceremonial patience, his body moving sinuously around Veer.

Paralyzed, overwhelmed, on fire, Veer was only able to close his eyes and let his body respond to Quinn's attentions. Yes, Bilodeau had told them to undress each other, and, yet, he didn't seem bothered by Veer's stillness. Soon (too soon), Quinn was unlacing Veer's pants, his lips on the small of Veer's back. He covered each revealed inch of skin with a soft kiss that was a feather and a knife, contradicting and embracing—sin and redemption.

Hard and jutting in Bilodeau's direction, Veer's cock was proof of how little control he had. Quinn helped him to step out of the pooling pants, and quickly stood up, shielding Veer from Bilodeau's predatory eyes.

"Beautifully done, Mark. Come and sit on my lap. Let's see what Aarzam can do with that wonderful cock of his." Bilodeau patted his leg and offered a hand to Quinn.

Quinn hesitated only a second and then moved toward their target. He sat sideways, resting the back of his knees over the chair's arm but taking care to purposely grind on Bilodeau's crotch. The man hissed, his eyes rolling backward.

"Go on, handsome. Show us how you milk that nice piece," Bilodeau said once he had recuperated from Quinn's move.

Taking his cock in hand, Veer peeled the foreskin. The head glistened, and a drop of precum emerged from the slit. As his eyes moved toward the two men in front of him, a moan slithered around him. It hadn't come from Bilodeau but from Quinn.

Temptation hissed inside Veer, "*Hiiiis haaands...*"

Veer stroked his cock slowly and intently, back and forth, back and forth. His free hand found his neck, and he caressed his collar bone, wishing his hand were Quinn's; his eyes only on his partner, this sinful effort only for him.

Infinite seconds, perhaps minutes later, Bilodeau snapped his fingers. Before Veer could completely shake the sexual haze around him, Bilodeau's bodyguards were bodily lifting and positioning him on a large sofa, his ass in the air and exposed to their host. "Boys," Bilodeau said, and the one word came out hungry and menacing. The other two bodyguards entered. Veer saw over his shoulder as one went straight for Quinn and held him in place over Bilodeau's lap, the other moved behind Veer, unbuckling his pants. "Now we watch." The same hungrily disgusting tone wafted around the room. Veer bucked and struggled, but the two men holding him wouldn't budge. He and Quinn were spitting out curses in several languages, their voices rising with each crude epithet.

A bang like a nuclear explosion sounded outside the room; they all stood petrified for a second that was eternal and suffocating. Veer used that moment to elbow one of his attackers on the nose. The man howled, snapping all the others out of their daze. Ramsey, Russo, Hollander, and Jagger barreled into the room, huge guns drawn, yelling for all to freeze.

Bilodeau and his goons stopped the fight, raising their hands in surrender. Quinn, who had been literally trying to strangle the bodyguard restraining him, knelt the man. Doubled, the man fell to the floor. Like lightning, Quinn swiveled and clocked Bilodeau square on the face. "You motherfucker," he yelled in French.

"Stop," Ramsey ordered. "Calm down."

"They were about to rape him." Quinn flailed his arms.

Ramsey just nodded. He walked toward Bilodeau. Veer knew the expression on their team leader's face. If they weren't supposed to keep this man alive, this would have been his last night on Earth. Ramsey stood in front of Bilodeau and slapped him. "You listen and listen well. You'll stay in Algeria and conduct business as usual. You're gonna be a good boy and behave. If you leave the country or try to pull another one of these numbers, I'll come back to take care of you, 'cause shit like this don't happen on my watch. Agreed?"

Veer had heard that tone before and still goose bumps were erupting all over him.

"Jagger," Ramsey called over his shoulder. "Toe."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm gonna leave you something to remember me by. Well, actually I'm gonna take something off, so you can remember this night every day for the rest of your fucking life." Ramsey growled. Perhaps if the exchange were in English instead of French the situation would be a lot less truculent.

Russo, Hollander, and Quinn, who had gotten a weapon from one of their teammates, cocked their guns as Bilodeau's men tried to react to the threat.

"I'll be good. I'll be good," Bilodeau sniveled.

"Of course you will," Jagger chuckled, lifting Bilodeau's ankle. With two skillful moves and a bloodcurdling scream, Bilodeau was divested of his left little toe and the wound cauterized.

"Hey, partner, this'd help." Quinn shook Veer and offered him a goblet, bringing Veer back from the denouement of the previous hour to the safety of their base in the Cabash

"Would you hold me?" Veer's voice sounded small and fragile, but he didn't care what anyone else thought. He just needed Quinn's arms around him.

Quinn didn't say a word. He sat and pulled Veer toward his chest, quietly stroking his hair.

The other four men in the room politely looked the other way.

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## 9. NEW MISSION FROM MONTREAL

“You’ll stay with me until you get your own place. End of discussion,” Quinn said.

Veer opened his mouth, probably to come out with some lame excuse.

“If you argue, you’re gonna get punched.” Quinn closed his fist and showed it to Veer.

“Just stay with him for a bit, Singh. You shouldn’t be alone for a couple of days.” Russo patted Veer’s back.

A rush of jealousy ran through Quinn. Holy fuck, his obsession with Veer was becoming stronger every day.

They were getting dressed after returning from 1938. Hollander pulled down a neon orange long-sleeved Henley. “Yeah, buddy. Fondant has the most decent place, but if you want to stay with anyone else, we will accommodate you.”

Quinn didn’t have time to scowl because his eyes were watering thanks to Hollander’s blinding top. He wanted to growl, though. Veer wasn’t going anywhere but to frigging Tarot Towers.

Veer nodded, finally accepting defeat. “I’ll stay with Fondant.”

“Good boy.” Jagger ruffled Veer’s hair.

*Where is my sword, where?*

His teammates shouldn’t be touching Veer. That drove Quinn alarmingly nuts. What was Veer saying?

“...so I’m gonna go get my stuff at the hotel and meet you at your place later.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be there waiting for you.”

“Thank you, guys,” Veer said in the general direction of the other men and left the locker room.

“Have you noticed Fondant hasn’t wielded his stupid non-sequiturs since Singh arrived?” Jagger said, donning his canvas jacket.

“You’re right!” Hollander punched Quinn in the shoulder. “Afraid Singh is gonna smack you?”

“Leave the man alone, perhaps he found the light, and he’s just rectifying his annoying ways.” Russo pulled the other two by their collars away from Quinn.

“Assholes,” Quinn hissed between gritted teeth.

“Wishful thinking, babe. It’s never gonna happen.” Jagger blew a kiss as Russo tossed him out of the locker room along with Hollander, all three of them laughing like high school kids.

His wristwatch beeped. The screen read: INT CALL. Quinn tapped it. Iven Fondant, his grandfather, appeared. “Hi, Grandpa. What’s up?” Quinn asked happily; he hadn’t spoken with his father’s father in ages. The old man was eighty-three but looked like he was sixty and in top physical condition. After a life of *kenjutsu* and frugality, it was expected.

Iven arched an eyebrow on the tiny screen.

*Oh shit.*

“What’s going on, sensei?” Quinn was not going to say he was sorry for calling Iven *grandpa*. His mentor needed to accept that he was *ancient*.

“We need to talk. I need you here ASAP.”

“What? You know I can’t just take a hovercraft and go to Montreal.”

“This is very important. You need to figure it out. Forty-eight hours, no more.” Iven scowled really hard at Quinn and ended the call.

Quinn stared at the 11:07 on his wristwatch. It wasn’t even noon, and it was already another Hades Monday. Ramsey chose that moment to enter the locker room. Good. That way Quinn could ask for a LOA right away.

“The mission was a success. Bilodeau died in his eighties, killed by his third wife after she found him with a lover.”

“Well, we knew it was really improbable that man dying of just old age.”

“True.” Ramsey grimaced. “We saved a lot of lives.”

“That makes me feel real nice inside, boss. By the way, I need a couple of days off.”

“Shaken by what happened to you guys in Algiers?” Ramsey looked at him quizzically.

Something in the back of his mind told Quinn not to tell Ramsey the true reason for requesting LOA. "No." Quinn rolled his eyes. "One of my aunts just called and asked me to help her with some gang stuff."

"Isn't it for these things that Police Departments exist?"

"Hey, we are Romani. We deal with this kind of shit ourselves."

"As long as you don't do anything illegal, and I have to haul your ass out of jail..."

"I can promise no murder, but I'm not gonna hold on the blood."

"Fine. Just be sure to be back by Friday." Ramsey took off the robe he had been wearing since they arrived from 1938 and started to pick things out of his locker to change.

"Thanks. You're the best." Quinn turned around and exited the locker room. "House." His wristwatch dialed his house.

"Hello, Quinn," the house computer answered.

"You still have Veer's fingerprints in your database, right?"

"Yes, I do."

"Perfect. Give him access to everything. He's staying for a while."

"Complete access granted, Quinn."

"All right. I'll be in touch."

"Good-bye, Quinn."

"Veer Singh," Quinn said and the connection was made thirty seconds later.

Veer appeared on the screen. "I haven't reached the hotel yet."

*Is he annoyed?*

"Uh, I'm just calling to let you know you have access to the apartment. I'm going out of town for a few days to deal with a family situation."

"Oh. Okay. See you when you get back."

Quinn opened his mouth to say good-bye when Veer spoke again. "Be careful."

"I will. You too."

Veer nodded. His image dissolved.



Seven hours later, Quinn was entering 1250 René-Lévesque in old downtown Montreal, the part of the city where buildings look short compared to the ones built after the 2035's height limit of three hundred and fifty meters. He took the elevator to the thirty-fifth floor. It was 21:15 hours, but that was nothing when an office ran 24/7.

Hiromi, his grandfather's personal assistant, showed Quinn to the ample Asian-inspired office. He was glad the assistant didn't have a *kinagashi* ready for him. His old man was known to be a little excessive in his love for everything Japanese. Well, Quinn was not going to grumble about that because all those swordsmanship teachings had saved him from more than one tight spot. *Swords to grandpa. Fire arms to the Marines.* His street smarts were honed before his parents' divorce, prior to everything going to Hades and him getting carted off to live with Iven Fondant.

His grandfather stood, looking at the recently darkened sky over Montreal, those old hands clasped behind his back. He wore a navy blue kimono, his sword hanging from his waist as if just waiting for a signal to draw blood. His short blond-and-white hair shone with reluctant intensity thanks to the city lights outside the floor-to-ceiling window.

"Hello, sensei," Quinn said, striding toward his silver fox grandfather. He really hoped he looked as hot when he was that age.

Iven turned to face him, his brow furrowed. "Your next mission will be to kill a man. Be sure only one man gets killed."

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## 10. FIFTY-FOUR WAYS TO SCREW IT

“Good morning, gentlemen.” Byron24 Saint, their Linchpin Analyst, said in a cheerful tone that didn’t have anything to do with his gothic clothes. “Your next assignment is this man.” A burly fifty-something, balding man appeared on the screen in front of the table where Team Aegis sat at, sipping coffees and relaxing. “His name is Dacian Marmion. He is, I mean *was*, a Canadian arms dealer and responsible for supplying the National Liberation Front of Chad. This time we are authorized to eliminate him, but we need to do it on a very specific date to take advantage of a situation.” Byron24 paused, expecting questions, perhaps.

It was a Thursday, and Quinn had come in late the previous night. He and Veer had only chatted a little before climbing onto *Morena* to come to work. Veer looked around, but his teammates didn’t seem concerned by the fact that they were assigned to do something they usually didn’t do: terminate a target.

“When and where is this specific situation?” Quinn asked, looking absolutely bored.

Byron24 grimaced. “July 30th, 1978, in the back alley of Studio 54.”

Quinn’s flinch was almost imperceptible, but Veer was expecting it; they were going to kill a man on Quinn’s birthday even if this was eighty-some years before his birth.

“Oh, fuck. I hate the Disco Years.” Hollander flailed his arms, “The clothes are stupid, the music is ridiculous, and those mustaches, gosh.” He looked at Veer. “No offense, man.”

Veer chuckled. “None taken.” Hollander hadn’t been around some of Veer’s more orthodox relatives; *those* were scary mustaches.

“The only good thing about that era is its porn. Man, hairy pussies, you don’t see those anymore.” Jagger had a silly, faraway look on his rugged face.

“Ladies, enough about body hair.” Ramsey said. He made a “continue” gesture at Byron24.

“During that night, Marmion got stabbed in a back alley scuffle. He went to the hospital, but he didn’t die. We need to make sure this fight brings his death.” The picture on the screen changed to Marmion and two younger men,

one blond and the other red-headed. "These are Marmion's bodyguards. The redhead is Adair Wilson and the blond is Marcus Townsend. Townsend stabbed Marmion. Apparently, he wasn't happy the boss was fucking his girlfriend, a waitress at Studio 54."

"Go figure." Russo rolled his eyes.

"All right," Ramsey said. "Fondant and Singh will be inside the club to shadow Marmion. The rest will be doing outside surveillance and make sure Townsend finishes him."

"More detailed information is in your stations. Thank you." Byron24 turned off the wall screen.

"You know you're doing inside duty 'cause you're the pretty ones on the team." Jagger sneered at Quinn and Veer.

"Hey, I'm nice looking too," Russo whined.

"He said pretty, but he really meant H-O-T." Quinn grimaced.

Russo blew a raspberry.

"Um, Singh. The president wants a word with you before you go to your station," Ramsey said, looking everywhere but at Veer.

Everyone wolf whistled, and someone singsonged, "There goes an Indian in trouble." Veer didn't know who said it because he was already at the door.

The office of the President of Clepsydra Project was located in building A, an inner sanctum most members of the project only saw once, as President Holden Alicja made it his business to personally welcome each employee when they became part of the system. Veer had seen him twice because he received a commendation six months before he resigned. He had received a phone call from the secretary of the president the previous month, telling him a position had opened in his old team, and that Alicja wanted him to come back if it was possible. Now the man was requesting his presence.

Veer wasn't nervous, but he didn't know what to think.

He identified himself and was ushered into the president's office.

"Ah, welcome, Veer, welcome!" President Alicja stood up and rounded his desk, shaking Veer's hand as he reached him. "Can I offer you anything: tea, soda, coffee?"

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“Thank you, sir. Water would be just fine.”

“A bottle of water for Mister Singh, Meredith, please.” The president gestured toward a round chair. “Make yourself comfortable, Veer.” He took the opposite chair, a square empty coffee table between them. “How do you feel? I heard about the incident in Algiers.”

“I’m all right, sir. I’ve faced gunshots, stabbings, and many other things. I just see that snafu under the light of my duty.”

“Very well then. I have an assignment for you.”

“Sir?”

President Alicja punched a button on his side of the coffee table and its surface turned into a screen. The picture of a blond man appeared on it. “Do you recognize this man?”

“I do, sir. This is Adair Wilson, one of the bodyguards of our current target.”

“Excellent.” The president was a tall, lanky man in his early fifties, the image of the consummate politician. He smiled in the way a proud parent would smile. “Your mission is to make sure this man dies along with his boss. It must look like an accident, and none of your teammates should know of this side-assignment.”

“Sir? Two deaths? Wouldn’t that change the timeline too much?”

The smile turned beatific. “We’re doing this for the greater good, like everything Clepsydra Project does. You don’t need to worry about the timeline. We’re saving lives.”

Veer nodded. He had been raised to not question his superiors. He had to have faith that what he was doing was for the greater good, for the benefit of mankind. “Yes, sir. That man shall not survive the night.”

The thought of finding out who Adair Wilson was and what would be his future evaporated as duty emerged and filled Veer’s entire being.

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## 11. DANCING WITH SPICES

“Is that what I think it is?” Quinn asked as a delicious aroma welcomed him upon entering the apartment.

“If you’re thinking Butter Chicken, yes it is, according to my sensors,” the house computer informed almost cheerfully.

“I just thought to regale you with your favorite dish before you went out, since it’s Saturday night and all that.” Veer came to the living room, drying his hands with a kitchen towel and wearing a lemon green and fuchsia apron over a brilliant yellow shirt. At least his jeans were dark.

“You look like Bollywood exploded all over you.”

*And so frigging adorable, I don’t know if I want to smack you or push you against a wall and kiss you until you can’t breathe.*

“Really?” Veer said, but he was smiling.

Quinn nodded, a grin blooming. He moved closer to Veer. “What’s this?” He swept the brownish powder with his forefinger from Veer’s right cheek. “Mmm, garam masala.”

Veer rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t know why that always ends up everywhere.”

“Is the stove off?”

“Yes. Why?”

“So I can do this without messing our dinner.” And Quinn pushed Veer into the navy couch; they bounced together. “You really thought you were gonna be under my roof without some harassment?”

Instead of growling or pushing Quinn away, Veer laughed. The laugh was a throaty thing, a hundred times hotter than that syrupy noise Veer had made in Algiers. It made Quinn’s cock grow hard in a flash. It also came accompanied with the aroma of his favorite beer, Moongoddess Dark. “You were drinking!?” Quinn inspected Veer at arm’s length.

Veer didn’t drink; he wasn’t allowed to drink. He made a V sign, still chuckling. “Just two. They were sitting in the fridge looking sad and abandoned. I felt pity for them and ended their misery.”

“You frigging lightweight. Now how am I supposed to know if you’re doing this because you want to or thanks to beer-induced disinhibition?”

His partner shrugged. “Maybe I needed the dark goddess to give me courage.” His eyes were half-lidded and zeroed in on Quinn’s lips. They screamed *I want it*.

“What goddess? You don’t believe in goddesses.”

With a huff, Veer rolled his eyes again. “Talking about the beer, you moron.” He pulled a strand of Quinn’s hair and said in a voice that was sultry and dreamy. “Do you know how many times I sat on the opposite shore of *Harmandir Sahib* at night, and the lights illuminating the golden temple reminded me of your hair, of how it sparkled in the sun when you laugh. I haven’t seen you really laugh since I came back. Why?”

This is what Quinn had been wishing for so long; to feel Veer’s body beneath him, that thick, square hand resting on his lower back; those dark eyes on him, drowning in desire, in acceptance. “I don’t know how to do it anymore. You took that knowledge when you ran.”

*You left me broken.*

Veer pushed his face upward, brushing his lips over Quinn’s, and murmured, “I’m sorry.” He released the hair he was pulling and grabbed the back of Quinn’s head, smashing their mouths together, making the kiss hungry, desperate, violent.

But the contest wasn’t just in their upper bodies where hands had joined the battle and clothing had started to fly in all directions, their covered crotches rubbed, pressed, wiggled, vying for domination. They rolled from the couch with Veer landing on Quinn; laughter erupted again, only interrupted (no—muffled) by Veer’s nibbling at neck and shoulders, his hands roaming frantically over Quinn’s torso.

They had seen each other naked many times—at work. This was different, they could touch, they could taste. They made quick work of their pants and socks and shoes to end up only in unnecessary underwear. Veer was straddling Quinn, doing his best to keep him pinned to the floor and rocking over his strained cock. “I don’t care where my soul will go tomorrow, but tonight I want you to fuck me. To let me finally feel all the things that have been consuming me since that night you kissed me, so many fucking centuries ago.”

“No.”

What sprouted in Veer's face was not shock but pure terror. “Why not?”

“Cause if any cock is going places, it's yours inside me,” Quinn growled, grabbing Veer's narrow hips. He was almost sure that the minute Veer climaxed, this magic bubble would explode, making him run again, so Quinn was going to at least get well-fucked before that happened. “Computer, lube.” A door opened and closed with a click, and a wheeled tray zigzagged toward them, a bottle of lubricant on top of it. Quinn tapped a solid lower cheek. “Get rid of those briefs and sit your ass on the couch.”

Veer sprang to action, and in less than four heartbeats he was on the couch, legs spread and towering cock dripping fluently. He was a freaking vision, all spicy butterscotch skin and square, honed muscles. Scars (that made him more beautiful) were scattered about his body telling the stories of their travels through History. Confusion was gone, and anticipation radiated from every pore of his amazing form.

In a kneeling position, pushing Veer's legs apart, Quinn leaned forward. He nuzzled the sweet pole, inhaling, drowning in the piquant, manly aroma of Veer's desire. Tentatively, his tongue traced the exposed frenulum after Quinn pulled the foreskin down. Veer hissed and trembled, and the sound was like the slash of a sword through the air, frightening and magnificent, hardening everything that wasn't already hard in Quinn's body. He took his first taste of Veer's cock and knew that he was not just broken but irreparably lost. With each inch he devoured, every cell of his body hummed and thrummed, primed for the final surrender.

A hand touched his cheek, and Quinn looked upward. He found Veer's eyes. They shone bright and watery, and their silent prayer was, *never stop; never let me go*. Eye contact remained unbroken as Quinn found the bottle of lubricant and readied his hole with one hand, while the other helped his mouth to prepare his destination.

Quinn surged upward, his hands memorizing every surface in case this was a onetime occurrence, a blind man reading a tale in each scar and branding it into his soul. Yes, he'd still have the recording the house computer would save, but it wasn't the same; his tactile memory would certainly enhance the recollections later. But now, he was about to impale himself on this wide, uncut phallus he'd dreamt of more than a thousand nights.

And as the first ring was breached, Quinn trembled, and Veer moaned. All restraint shattered, and Quinn's growl emerged, encompassed by the stretching of his most personal space. "Fuuuck yeeeeesss."

"Quinn..." Veer groaned. "I never knew... this could be so..."

There was no day nor night, not before nor after, just one blinding moment of unadulterated bliss, setting all of Quinn on fire, turning each molecule upside-down. And hands. Veer's hands traveled down, settled on Quinn's hips and encouraged him to move. And eyes. Infinite eyes shouting a million truths that were forbidden to sound.

Impaled and happy, Quinn rocked and squeezed until he didn't know what hands were his, what mouth was Veer's, what chest was whose because they were entwined harder than wild ivies; grunts, moans, and groans their soundtrack. Climax came and conquered them, leaving them drenched and panting, sated and smiling.

Quinn rested his forehead over Veer's and murmured, "If you're here the next time I wake up, you'll know more."

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## 12. FACING TEMPTATION AND KISSING IT

Veer didn't run. Running wasn't an option anymore.

True, he'd been a coward and used alcohol to give himself a boost. Nevertheless, as the influence of the beer evaporated, all the things that his heart (and let's not forget his body) underwent with each kiss, with every caress, eroded the fortress where he had locked the temptation to surrender to the passion Quinn offered.

Veer hadn't run, and it was Thursday night; Quinn was inside him once again, stretching, destroying, commanding. All the mayhem that Quinn's body wrapped around Veer's unleashed within his moral consciousness was nothing compared to the euphoric freedom he experienced when, sated and exhausted, they slept in each other's arms.

"I don't know how I lived every day without you." Quinn grasped Veer's face with both hands, never altering the tempo of his piston, of his conquering. "*Shukriya*," he whispered, touching noses with Veer.

Quinn had said *thanks* in Hindi, and that made Veer's heart dissolve into something he was afraid to call Love. "It's me who should be saying that. You never yielded, and that's why I'm here."

These words wrenched a groan and a hard stab from Quinn. On his back, Veer almost hit his head against the headboard, but Quinn was quicker and used his hand to protect him. Those little, inconsequential things were the ones that made Veer almost fall the first time, and now, were taking him irrevocably to a land from where he didn't want to ever come back.

"Oh Veeru, my Veeru." Quinn's rhythm faltered, and he came with a howl.

Veer thrashed as Quinn, still inside him, took him in hand and pumped his ready-to-burst cock. Just a few strokes, and Veer erupted in spunk, joy, and stars.

Slowly, with the utmost care, Quinn left his body, and Veer hated his absence immediately. He fell on his back, pulling Veer on top of him. "Tomorrow we go to the 1970's."

"Even the 2070's were horrid, and we lived those." Veer chuckled.

"You're gonna look striking in those wide lapels and bell-bottoms."

“Shut up and kiss me.”

The kiss lasted until they fell asleep.

*Friday, 0915 hours...*

“See you on the other side, guys.” Hollander disrobed and waved, the stupidest grin all over his face. He entered the time capsule and crouched.

“I seriously don’t understand why he’s so cheerful every time he enters that thing,” Jagger murmured, pulling his robe around him as if he were very uncomfortable.

“Aww, you’re just scared because when you emerge behind him he always has a raging hard-on.” Quinn guffawed and punched Jagger in the shoulder.

“And what’s making *you* so happy lately?” Jagger arched an eyebrow. “You’re acting almost like a normal person, not your usual giant-hemorrhoids-ass self.”

“Maybe that ass is getting some dicking...” Russo elbowed Quinn with a chortle.

If they hadn’t been men trained to disguise their emotions and reactions, Veer was sure he’d have been blushing like a recently-betrothed maiden.

“What I put in my ass is none of your business.” Quinn laughed and jolted Russo.

“I like assplay as much as the next man, but enough of this ass-talking.” Ramsey pushed Jagger toward the capsule. “Your turn, big man.”

Veer had been so preoccupied following Quinn’s reactions to the taunting he hadn’t paid attention to the alarms coming and going signaling the readiness of the capsule for the next traveler.

“I can’t wait for my first look at 54,” Russo said, moving his shoulders and hips in some kind of dance move. “We’re going tonight, right?” His bedroom eyes expectantly settled on Ramsey.

Ramsey looked upward, perhaps asking for divine intervention, and hissed, “Yes. You and I will go tonight so you can get your groove on.”

The thing with time traveling (and of course the scientists were never going to give them the whole story) was that they needed to do it on the same weekday of the date they would travel to. In this case, the event was on Sunday, July 30th, 1978, so they were traveling to Friday, the 28th.

They usually went a couple of days before to acclimate to the time and the area where they would be operating. Veer still remembered a story of a failed mission where a lone operative had been sent to Italy on Friday, October 5th, 1582, a logical mistake if you saw that the day before was Thursday, October 4th. But that was the day when the Gregorian Calendar (the common time-frame the machine used) was implemented, jumping from October 4th to the 15th. That woman was never found. Because of this, Clepsydra Project decided to forbid any mission to dates before the 1800's, which might seem a little extreme, but would essentially secure a more unified time-frame around the world since the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar had been gradual.

In all honesty, Veer mentally shambled through this trifling knowledge not just to avoid externalizing his romantic situation with Quinn but his growing apprehension regarding his side-mission. Something kept nagging him in the back of his mind, pushing him to tell Quinn about it.

"Hey, are you all right?" Quinn touched Veer's arm.

The alarm went off again. Only Quinn and Veer were left of Team Aegis.

"Yes, I'm good to go." Veer smiled. It was hard not to grab Quinn and press him against his body.

"Okay, see you in New York." Quinn nodded and moved toward the capsule. He gave his robe to the assistant.

A rush of desire enveloped Veer as Quinn crouched and winked at him. The image of Quinn straddling him, moaning and panting, almost toppled Veer.

*Poor Jagger, he's about to see another unwelcome stiffy.*

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### 13. THE TRUTH ABOUT LIARS

They were gonna get caught. Quinn sighed as he buttoned his shirt up. Veer was in a different room of their base in the Upper East Side getting presentable too. They had come up with the most absurd excuses since their arrival on Friday to stay behind in the apartment while their team members moved around New York. It was so freaking difficult to keep his hands (or his mouth or his cock) off Veer, it was verging on an addiction. So many quickies in the last forty hours, they were worse than newlyweds.

Focused on getting in Veer's pants, Quinn had not come with a plan of action to keep Adair Wilson alive. He couldn't include his lover. One of the first things his grandfather had told him as he explained the disturbing reasons for this side mission was to avoid involving any of his teammates at all cost because Quinn would need to stop one of them from killing Wilson.

More than one life was in his hands, and Quinn wasn't acting like a soldier but as a pimple-faced teenager enjoying his first piece of tail. Only, Veer wasn't just a piece of tail, he was bigger than mere release, and that made matters far worse and extremely complicated.

Quinn heard the door of the apartment open, followed by laughter. Ramsey, Jagger, Russo, and Hollander had gone to eat and retrieve one of the special boxes with stuff for them sent from the future.

"Care to share the joke?" Quinn smiled as he entered the living slash dining area where the others were gathered around the dinner table.

"You know how we're not supposed to have sex with people when we're working?" Hollander said, using his hands to make his point, as usual.

Quinn flinched inwardly. They were not to have intercourse with people of the time-frame where they worked to avoid impregnating somebody and changing the lineage of any offspring. Just on principle they didn't fuck guys, either.

"Well, this lady practically put her pussy on Jagger's lap as if saying 'are you gonna do it or what?' We had to wrestle the big guy to keep him at our table and... You missed a good show. We almost got thrown out of the restaurant." Hollander snorted, and all three jostled Jagger, calling him perv names.

The toilet flushed in the half-bathroom; Veer came out of it a moment later with a wicked grin that made Quinn's knees tremble. "You were dreaming about it, Jagger, and Fate brought it to you. You wanted a hairy one, and you got it!"

"Damn right you are." Jagger had a silly grimace that made him look more like a person and not a boulder of muscles. He had finally decided to shave those stupid four or five hairs on his head so he seemed more in tune with the times; the 2080's times, anyway.

"Okay, I have gifts for you, kids." Ramsey said, opening the box on the table. He drew Quinn's sword and tossed it to him.

Catching it, Quinn flicked it like a switch knife, and the folded blade extended to its full length. He kissed the shiny blade. "I missed you, baby."

"Get a room!" Russo laughed. "You're not using that hilt for other things, are you?"

"All right! They sent us a new device for individual transportation back to our time." Ramsey pulled a little black box the size of two fingers. "There's one for each. At the end of the mission we come back here, take our clothes off and use it."

"Never heard of this before," Jagger commented, inspecting the one Ramsey had just put on his hand.

"It's been tested and approved. That's all we need to know." Ramsey pitched four boxes.

It was really light; it seemed a toy more than a time-traveling device. It was almost a joke. Seven digits were etched on one side and a barely visible button on what Quinn assumed was the top. "What are these numbers for?"

"Those are identification numbers. They were specifically assigned to each of us."

"I didn't see you look at any list." Russo frowned.

Ramsey tapped his temple with his index finger. "Do you really think I need to look at a list to remember six combinations of numbers linked to our names?"

Russo just put his hands up with a semi-shrug and a grimace.

"Now, the instructions are simple. Keep the device with you at all times, so if you need to escape back to our time you can do it quickly."

"You mean if somebody is chasing me I have to start stripping to jump in time?" Quinn asked, chuckling.

"Exactly."

Well, that didn't make any sense. Why now, without even informing them beforehand about this device? There was something dodgy about this assignment from the get-go, but they were already here, no turning back now.

Quinn looked at Veer and noted the same uncomfortable apprehension; the same expression was on Hollander's face. Russo's features were inscrutable, and Jagger was looking at anything but them. Knowing what he knew, Quinn wanted to punch himself for not paying more attention to what was happening around him since they arrived at the Big Apple.

Loud claps broke the awkward silence. "Let's get dressed, Team Aegis." Ramsey put his little black box in his pocket and walked toward the bedroom he shared with Jagger and Russo. Hollander led the way to the other room, the one he shared with Veer and Quinn. Veer opened his mouth to say something, but Quinn shook his head. This wasn't the moment to air their doubts.

*Four hours later...*

"You, the one with the turban!" the bouncer yelled over the crowd assembled in front of Studio 54's entrance.

"Told you," Veer said under his breath as he pointed to himself as if surprised.

"Yes, you, and bring the blond with you."

The blond was Quinn, and he laughed as Veer towed him, pushing the writhing mass clamoring for a chance to enter the infamous nightclub. They were dressed similarly. Veer wore a royal blue turban that matched perfectly his Nehru-style, sleeveless jacket with silver appliqués on the neck and along the front line. Quinn wore the same style of jacket, but his was hunter green with golden details. He'd have looked ridiculous in a turban, so his hair was in a sleek ponytail. Of all the outlandish outfits they brought, Veer had been sure these would do the deed to get them in.

Quinn had seen an old movie about the club, documentaries, and Clepsydra Project's own research about the place, but none of it prepared him for the circus that was Studio 54. Every crazy thing one could imagine was happening at once, and bizarre costumes and hairdos abounded; people with gold, silver

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and glittery body paint, psychedelic masks, or wearing nothing but G-strings. It was awesome. The smoke and the wavy lights gave the scene a surreal feeling. But the best thing of all was Veer holding his hand as he broke through the masses of dancing bodies like an icebreaker in the middle of Antarctica.

The music faded, and a hyperactive MC jumped to the main stage. “You know his brothers, and you know him. Please put your hands together for Mister Randy Glibb and his smashing number one hit ‘Dancing Shadows’!”

*Gosh.*

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## 14. THE OPPOSITE OF MENDACITY

Quinn and Veer were pushed by the people drawn to the stage. Three huge screens descended behind the handsome, lanky blond man all dressed in white in the center. A contagious melody started, and spotlights brought to life the silhouettes of dancers kept out of sight by the screens.

*You have me starin' in  
those windows to paradise  
your direction is what I chase  
no lies I'd ever tell  
all I can do is lovin' you  
If you say yes, baby, I'd lose my mind*

The voice was somewhat whiny and close to high-pitched, but there was something about it that was catchy and provocative. The energy of the people around them had Veer moving his hips in tandem with the enticing music. He sensed Quinn's solid body materialize behind him and wrap itself around Veer like desperate vines.

"Mmm, you're so right in my arms," Quinn whispered in Veer's ear, nibbling his earlobe.

Yes, this felt absolutely right and was ominously wrong, but Veer was not going to think about his beliefs now. They would figure out what to do with this growing happiness later, when they were back in their own time. He put his hands on top of Quinn's, where they rested over his stomach, and they both swung their hips, following the song's upbeat rhythm.

*Dancing shadows we are  
all through the night  
come on, baby, move me right*

Veer turned his neck a little to look at Quinn and nodded with a wink. He had so many things he wanted to say but neither the position nor the noise around them would let them come out the way they should.

Quinn grabbed him by the hips and made him do a complete one-eighty without releasing him. He kissed Veer softly on the lips and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "I love you."



Stunned, Veer swallowed hard, but the answer bubbled out before he could squash or overthink it. "I love you too." He took Quinn's face in his hands and kissed him for all he was worth.

"It's really nice to see that you two are having so much fun." Ramsey was looking at them with an arched eyebrow, his mouth twisted, and his arms crossed over his chest. He was in frustrated parent mode.

Quinn and Veer separated as if they had been zapped by a zillion volts. Not an easy feat when you had a crowd closing in and thus giving you minimal space to maneuver.

Ramsey sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He shook his head and rummaged for something in one of his pockets. "You forgot this. Keep it with you." He thrust the new transporting device into Veer's hand.

Veer didn't know whether to be embarrassed or annoyed. "Ramsey..."

Quinn tried to say something too, but Ramsey put his hand up, silencing both. "I don't wanna know. I didn't see anything."

The song ended and the crowd exploded in applause and cheers.

Beyond Ramsey's left shoulder, Veer saw their target. "Marmion!"

"Where?" Quinn and Ramsey followed his gaze.

"Okay, do your thing. I'll be outside." Ramsey zigzagged through the crowd and disappeared.

Marmion was gesticulating furiously at Townsend. Wilson tried to put himself between them, but they both pushed him aside and went for each other's throats.

"C'mon, they're gonna be thrown out any second!" Quinn grabbed Veer's hand and started to push people out of their way. They were too far away and by the time they reached their destination, the three men were nowhere to be seen. "Shit, let's go." Quinn kept towing Veer. They saw an exit door close and two security-looking guys dusting their hands off. "This way!"

They pushed the doors open and found Marmion and Townsend already rolling on the floor; Marmion with a gun and Townsend with a knife. Wilson had a gun trained on them, yelling at Townsend to leave their boss alone. Veer yanked his hand from Quinn's grasp. He needed to find a way to involve

Wilson in the fracas to kill him; the man was too far from the others to make it look like an accident. The ideal resolution would be to use either Townsend's knife or Marmion's weapon to finish Wilson, thus avoiding loose ends.

"Where are the others?" Quinn hissed, irritated.

The five of them were alone in that back alley. Wilson circled around the other two; both punched and snarled and kicked. Wilson's circling put him right in front of Veer, and he had an idea. It was risky, but it could do the deed. He drew his semiautomatic and launched himself at Wilson, the momentum making them both land on Marmion and Townsend.

"VEER, NO," Quinn cried, and amid the curses around him, Veer heard the unmistakable ring of metal sliding on metal as Quinn's sword unfolded.

An elbow hit Veer, and he grabbed someone's head. It was Townsend's, and he smashed it against Wilson's face. Veer only had seconds before Quinn entered the row and separated them. He pushed Townsend's hand, stabbing Marmion in the heart, and then with a better grip aimed it at Wilson's throat. He would have to kill Townsend too, there was no other option.

Before the blade could claim its prize, Veer was yanked, flying backward away from the group. The impact knocked the air out of him. He heard two shots fired, and by the time he was able to breathe again and open his eyes, Quinn loomed over him, the tip of his sword piercing Veer's chest.

Instinct and training surged blindly. The arm attached to the hand glued to the semiautomatic sprang to life in exact opposition to the long sword over him, and he felt wetness growing around the burning sensation on his chest. Veer almost squeezed the trigger, but the anger mixed with confusion on Quinn's face stopped him. Shit, he almost shot the man he loved.

"What the fuck, Veer?"

"I have orders," Veer growled, hoping those three words explained everything. He added three more. "Wilson must die." Veer didn't lower his hand.

"If you kill him, you kill me."

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## 15. SELF-PRESERVATION TRUMPS LOVE

“What?”

“Are you gonna lower that gun?”

“Are you going to take the tip of your sword off my chest? I’m bleeding.”

*Fuck. This is a fucking mess.*

Quinn wasn’t happy knowing that one of his teammates had been ordered to kill Wilson, but he never expected it to be Veer. Quinn sighed and moved his sword away, its tip red. He arched an eyebrow, and Veer lowered the gun.

“Would you care to explain yourself? What is Wilson to you?” Veer lay flat on the pavement and asked the question with his eyes closed. The memory of them in bed, in almost the same position, was painful to Quinn.

“Wilson is the father of my grandfather’s mother.”

Saint’s words came out of Veer’s lips in a groan, but it felt like a slap on the face. “You don’t go and kill Hitler or the Christ, you kill their grandparents...” Veer put his semiautomatic on the ground and proffered his hand with the most haunted face Quinn had ever seen.

The sword clattered, and Quinn pulled Veer up. They embraced, two children awaking from a horrible nightmare, looking for comfort in each other’s arms. But the real nightmare had just begun.

“Why would Clepsydra want to kill you, Quinn?”

“Not me, baby. Iven is the one to be erased. He was an assassin on the French Government’s payroll, and apparently he still does side jobs.” Quinn had just learned this truth the previous week. Growing up, he always thought his grandfather was just a busy traveling businessman obsessed with Japanese culture.

“A white ninja...”

“Never say that in his presence. My sword is like a butter knife beside his,” Quinn said, chuckling.

“What are we going to do?”

“Let’s hope none of the others was part of the plot and wasn’t ordered to finish the job if you didn’t. I don’t know where they are. I’m not even sure if their absence is a lucky break or another piece of the puzzle.”

“Who shot?”

“I did it, to get Marmion and Townsend out of the way. Both dead.” Quinn looked sideways. “I smacked Wilson with the hilt of the sword, so he’s still unconscious. We need to get the fuck out of here before the police arrive. We can’t be pinned as witnesses.”

They were in the middle of the alley. They picked up their weapons and ran to their left, away from Studio 54’s main entrance. As they reached the street, Russo and Hollander came running toward them, panting and with their clothes in disarray.

“What happened?” Veer asked, his hands on his knees, heaving.

“We were mugged. Can you believe it? Ramsey came to tell us you have seen Marmion and when we were about to split a fucking gang descended on us. Like fifteen against four!” Hollander was more pissed off than rattled.

“They hurt Ramsey real bad. Jagger went nuts. I think we killed like five people on this mission.” Russo shook his head; what was done was done. “What happened with you two, is Marmion dead?”

“Yeah,” Veer said. “He and Townsend killed each other.”

“Wait a minute, where are Ramsey and Jagger?” Quinn looked around for the other two.

“He needed medical attention, so Jagger helped him to get back to our time and left behind him.”

Good, Quinn didn’t have to worry about them then. Only Russo and Hollander to figure out. Sirens were wailing, getting closer to them. “We need to go.” He pushed the other three men away from the vicinity of the alley.

“And the other bodyguard?” Hollander asked.

*Shit, not Hollander.*

“He’s unconscious back in the alley. We knocked him out,” Veer replied.

“Good,” Hollander said.

“Yeah. We had more dead people than we needed already to add another one.” Russo almost cheered.

*Phew.*

It would have been really hard to have to kill one of these two. Hard, not impossible.

“Do we even need to go back to the apartment?” Veer asked as they crossed the street to hail a cab. None of them wanted to walk the two miles to 69th street.

“What do you suggest?” Russo looked at Veer expectantly.

“We just find a secluded place, shed the clothes and go back to our time like Ramsey and Jagger did. The cleaning crew can pick up what we’ve left in the apartment.”

“Excellent, I saw a restaurant a bit farther down the street. Let’s go there. Hollander and Russo, you two jump first.” With the happy pair back in 2089, Quinn would have time to plan something with Veer before they returned to the Clepsydra Project Complex.

Hollander grabbed Russo by the scruff of his neck. “C’mon, Booboo. Let’s jump the fuck out of 1978.”

They found the restaurant easily, and Hollander and Russo disappeared into the restroom. Five minutes later, Veer went to check, came out with their teammates’ clothes, walked straight to the entrance of the restaurant and gave them to a homeless guy.

“You lost your turban,” Quinn commented casually as Veer sat, facing him.

“That’s the least of our concerns right now.” Veer had a really sad face. “We are over, aren’t we?”

Quinn nodded. “I’m sorry, baby. If I can walk out of Building C tonight or whatever the time is in our time, I’ll go into hiding. Iven is determined to destroy Clepsydra Project now that he knows they are after him. It’s not an option. If I survive it will just be a bonus for him.” He patted Veer’s hand. “You should probably do the same.”

“Separated, we have a better chance to survive. Run today, fight tomorrow.” Veer drew out of his pocket the little black box. “I’ll go first. That way if they try to do something I can back you up.” He didn’t look at Quinn but stared at his box, his brow knitted. “These are not my numbers.”

“What?”

“Ramsey gave me his.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, the sequence is all wrong. He must’ve had both in the same pocket and gave me his by mistake.”

“Do you think it matters?”

“Only one way to find out. Let’s go to the restroom together. I want at least a good-bye kiss.”

“Maybe we can steal a quickie.”

“Even better.”

And they would have it because Quinn knew he was forever broken and incapable of reaction to any other man ever again.

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## 16. ENDINGS, BURIALS, AND WHAT THE FUCKS

They survived.

Ramsey didn't. He never came back from 1978.

Quinn went AWOL the afternoon they returned from their New York mission.

They didn't make plans to meet again. It was over.

Veer resigned two weeks later, after President Alicja personally assured him that everything was all right, that there was nothing to worry about. He had the nagging suspicion that if Ramsey hadn't confused the devices, he'd be the one lost forever.

Nevertheless, Veer was indeed lost. Nothing was right without Quinn beside him. He had fought his feelings for so long, only to lose the love of his life in an epic rush. He had even been preparing himself to face his family and his community, holding to the technicality that yes, he was supposed to get married and have descendants, but he could do all that with a man. Their beliefs were based on tolerance of all humans regardless of race, religion or sexuality. There was nothing specifically written against a same-sex match as long as he fulfilled his duty to have a family and not live like a hermit. But now that promise of a tomorrow with Quinn had vanished like morning mist.

Going back to Punjab would be a futile exercise. The sight of the *Harmandir Sahib* in his home city would make him crumble. Every Butter Chicken would drive him sad with longing. The smell of garam masala would be like a sword in his heart. He should find a place where the Hindu presence wasn't that big.

He chose a place where there weren't that many people anyway. Antarctica.

On December 1st, 2089, Veer finished his volunteer time with Better Earth in Climate Control Station Theta and started the long journey back to Aurora because he couldn't think of any other place to go.

Five days later, Veer rented a hotel room under an alias in a busy area of Nippon East. Wearing the bushy beard he had grown while he was surrounded by snow, a gray knitted hat, loose clothes, fingerless gloves, and insect-like sunglasses, he walked the several blocks to Circular Park Three every day and stared at the Pegasus Fountain, facing Tarot Towers, for hours.

Two weeks into this routine, a boy of ten or twelve sat beside him on his usual bench. He had a sunny complexion, a thousand freckles, and wore a terribly annoying yellow beret, tilted toward his left eye. "Are you a bum, sir?"

Veer chuckled. "I'm not."

"I needed to ask." The boy took out a folded piece of paper from one of the many pockets of his pants. "Are you Veer then?"

Taking off the sunglasses, Veer asked disgruntledly, "Who told you my name?"

"I guess you *are* Veer. This is for you." He gave Veer the folded paper.

"What's your name, kid?"

"JayeThreeFive." The little imp had a spark of defiance to his demeanor that Veer found mildly interesting.

"Why not thirty-five?"

"'Cause I'm not like everybody else," he jumped off the bench and waved. "See ya!"

"Of course you are not." And that reminded Veer of things he shouldn't be remembering.

For a long time, Veer stared at the paper with the same intensity he usually reserved for staring at the singing fountain, his mind back to absolute blank. He finally opened it. In blocky handwriting were the following words: *My Veeru, stop being ridiculous and get on with your life.*

He laughed like a mad man, like he hadn't laughed in months. He rose to his feet and walked back to his hotel. For a moment, naked in front of the mirror, he stared at the asterisk-like scar over his heart, reminder of his last night around Quinn. He shaved his beard after taking a shower and went out again to buy new clothes.

The next morning, Veer walked to a flower shop, bought a wreath of white flowers and took a cab to West Cemetery. It was on a hill, and the Pacific Ocean was visible from there in all its glorious majesty. Not ancient (because nothing was truly old in Aurora), the cemetery still possessed that desolation associated with the forgotten departed. Perhaps this eerie sensation had created the myth of the Elephants' graveyards around the world. Places where things instinctively went to lie silently, disremembered.



The spot he was searching for was located in the highest part of the hill; from there one could see the expanse of the city, alive and moving rapidly on the left, and the glittery waving of the sea on the right. Veer stood in front of The Travelers Obelisk (a monument erected in honor of those who died during time-traveling) for a moment and deposited the wreath on its base, close to a plaque with the coat of arms of the city: a rising sun over dark land with the words POST TENEBRAS LUX written in a semicircle on the dark area.

*Light after darkness...*

A sound Veer thought he would never hear again, grew closer. Slowly, he turned around, and Quinn, riding *Morena*, stopped beside him.

Quinn took his helmet off. His hair was fashionably short, and he wore a Vandyke beard. He didn't look exactly older, he looked... wiser.

"And you told *me* to shave my beard."

"I don't recall writing the word beard anywhere on that note."

"I know the *ridiculous* was for the beard."

"Not just the beard, baby. The whole concept of hobo-chic is a delusion. Didn't work before and never will."

Ah, that voice. It stirred so many things in Veer. Things that could never be. "How is the destruction of Clepsydra Project coming along?"

"It's coming. I'm pretty sure it will happen before the end of this century. A lot sooner than that." Quinn winked without humor.

"There's no hope for us as long as it exists, no matter what we feel."

Quinn cracked his neck and shook his head. "We have a better option of survival away from each other."

Surviving wasn't living, but Veer was not going to beg. He would find a way to go on. Wasn't the saying *better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all*?

What a sorry excuse to keep threading through life.

Veer drowned in those gypsy eyes, drank that form that he would never hold again. He was ready to say good-bye when Quinn groaned, breaking eye contact.

"This is what we need to do," Quinn said quietly, his hand open toward the marble obelisk.

“Bury them?” Veer sighed.

“Yes. These feelings will lie in our hearts to never awake. And we leave the memories here, in this fucking cenotaph.”

**The End**

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## Glossary

*Ambarsar* – It's the colloquial name of the Indian city of Amritsar. It is home to the *Harmandir Sahib* (referred to as the “Golden Temple” in the western media), the spiritual and cultural center for the Sikh religion.

*Kenjutsu* – Is the umbrella term for all (koryū) schools of Japanese swordsmanship, in particular those that predate the Meiji Restoration. The modern styles of kendo and iaido that were established in the twentieth century included modern form of kenjutsu in their curriculum too. Kenjutsu, which originated with the samurai class of feudal Japan, means “the method, or technique, of the sword.” This is opposed to kendo, which means “the way of the sword”.

*Kinagashi* – It is type of Kimono clothing that can be used in everyday life, to relax or go out. Informal.

*Mizmar* – Arabic flute.

*Tabla* – Arabic drums similar to bongos.

*Riqq* – Arabic tambourine.

*Zut Alors* – The French equivalent of Damn!, Dang! or Darn!

*POST TENEBRAS LUX* – The motto of Aurora. Latin for Light After Darkness.

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## Author Bio

*Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.*

*Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.*

*Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.*

*His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) will come to your e-reading devices in Summer 2014 and The Pompeiian Horse in Autumn 2014.*

## Contact & Media Info

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# A CHANCE TO FIGHT

By Lila Leigh Hunter

## Photo Description

A naked man sitting on the concrete base of a fenced area with another naked man standing between his legs. Several boulders are on the background marking the river's edge with a bridge alongside. They both could be considered bears and have several tattoos. They are embracing each other just before a kiss.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*He means the world to me, always has and always will. Leaving him was the biggest mistake I ever made but I got so caught up in my own dreams of glory, desperate to make it as a pro boxer [can swap for another sport if you'd prefer]. I knew that staying in such a small town would put an end to my dreams. I never asked him to come with me; I knew he'd say no. Not because he didn't love me but because his parents were struggling and they needed him to stay close. I couldn't ask him to abandon his family for me. So I broke his heart—and my own—by leaving town and walking away from the only man I've ever loved.*

*It's been five years since I left and I've finally returned. It's the eve of his twenty-seventh birthday and my heart is pounding in my chest as I knock on his front door. He still lives in our home town but he's got his own place now. An old friend told me that he's living on his own and that he keeps himself to himself. I feel sick with nerves but I had to come back. I know I'm something of a celebrity now, but my dreams of success have long since lost their shine. Please say he'll give me another chance and that he'll forgive me for walking away. I need him to know how much I still love him and that I never stopped loving him. I don't want to spend another day without him in my life, in my arms, in my bed...*

*I'm looking for a contemporary romance with emphasis on the romance part! There's absolutely nothing I want more than a happy ending :) Please don't make the guy he left behind have another boyfriend when he returns. Other than that, I don't mind seeing some drama/action/angst. I'd like to see lots of emotion, maybe some hurt/comfort, and a wonderful "I love you"*

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*moment. I live for the “I love you” moments! If you could help fuel my tattoo fetish by incorporating the MC’s tattoos into the story and maybe adding some more tats, I’d adore you forever! I love it when tattoos have a story behind them :)*

*There isn’t much I’d strongly object to, but please—absolutely no cheating or ménage, and preferably no GFY theme or BDSM.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lauren*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** bears, boxer, alpha males, hurt/comfort, reunited, tattoos, first love

**Content Warnings:** suicide attempt, homophobia

**Word Count:** 23,924

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### Acknowledgements

Thanks to my hubby for his help at the beginning of this project. I know you drew a line after the armpit love.

To my Betas, Thing 1 and Thing 2, thanks for the support words and for always going along with whatever crazy idea I came up with since school.

And especially, thanks to my editor, A.M. Martinez. Hope this is the first of many conspiracies.

Lastly, I dedicate this short story to my mom, for always following me around the world to make my life easier, even though living with me is an adventure. You closed the factory with your best kid: me.

# **A CHANCE TO FIGHT**

**By Lila Leigh Hunter**



## Prologue

*May 2005*

Austin really needed darker blinds in his room. Gavin reluctantly opened his eyes and tried to dodge the little sun rays shining in his face. He flipped over for a cuddle, and found nothing but cold sheets. Gavin checked the time and made a quick calculation; they still had three hours before he had to drop Austin at the boxing gym. The bedroom door wasn't completely shut, and he heard the water running. He stretched and hugged Austin's pillow, before getting out to look for his boxers. He followed the sound of water down the hallway, to the small bathroom in the house Austin shared with his dad. Luckily, Mr. Black left the day before to arrive early in Grand Rapids so he could set up everything for Austin's last week of training before his next tournament.

Gavin walked into the bathroom and peeked behind the shower curtain. "Hey, why didn't you wake me up? You know I love to shave you," Gavin said as a morning greeting.

"Since you looked so comfortable in *my* bed, I didn't want to disturb your beauty sleep. I guess I'm old enough to do it myself," Austin snapped back.

His words shocked Gavin with the strength of a slap in the face. Every time he had a chance, he helped Austin shave before his boxing matches. It was almost a job for two, he always teased, since a light fur covered Austin's entire body. It was a feature that Gavin loved, but wasn't able to enjoy too often, due to Austin's constant training.

"I'm sorry," Gavin said, turning to leave the bathroom.

"Sky, stop! I'm just in a bad mood today," Austin said, opening the shower curtain further. "You can shave my chest if you like."

"Only if you want me to," Gavin responded, without turning to face Austin.

A wet hand gripped Gavin's biceps and then strong arms wrapped around his chest, pulling him backwards. Austin kissed Gavin's neck and murmured, "I'm sorry," in his ear. A shiver went through Gavin's body as he relaxed into Austin's embrace.

"I'm freezing my ass off. We need to go back in the shower."

"I can warm up your ass pretty quickly if you want," Gavin offered, turning to Austin, grabbing his ass with one hand and with the other pulling him by the neck to kiss him deeply. They were both hard and panting by the time they separated to breathe.

"Fuck, Sky! You make me so hard," Austin said, placing his forehead against Gavin's shoulder.

"OK, darling, to the shower you go. I want whatever I can get out of you," Gavin said, turning Austin around, but not without first patting him on the ass.

"Hey, watch it. If you keep it going, I may like it." Austin wiggled his eyebrows and turned the shower back on.

Gavin's heart stopped for a second and his blood boiled. He had seen Austin under the water multiple times, and every single one took his breath away. He was in perfect shape for his upcoming match. Keeping his weight down to one hundred and fifty-two pounds wasn't difficult for him, in comparison with Gavin's almost one hundred and seventy-five pounds and counting. The tattoo sleeves Austin sported shimmered under the drops. Water slid down his chest, making the soft patches of hair on their path curl. He wanted to follow them and trace them with his tongue, down to Austin's groin and that beautiful uncut erection waiting for him.

"A penny for your thoughts," Austin said, bringing Gavin back from his lustful thoughts.

"I'm sorry, darling. I was just thinking about following those water drops from your chest to your cock with my tongue," Gavin replied seductively.

"Fuck, you're getting me hard again and you know I can't even jerk off. Come here and shave me, slave. I know that's what you want." Austin stared directly at Gavin's tenting shorts.

He didn't lose another moment. Gavin removed his boxers and joined Austin in the shower. He got everything he needed and started working on Austin's armpits, trimming them first. He applied the shaving cream and used short, secured razor strokes to remove the shorter hairs. He removed the excess cream with a warm cloth, and then licked the pit from the bottom up. Austin quivered, and Gavin kissed him on the chest. "If you want, sit on the tub edge while I do the other one," he said, directing him to follow his instructions.

"Just finish up," Austin said abruptly.

“Hey, why so serious all of a sudden?” Gavin asked, kissing Austin’s temple.

“I’m fine, just thinking about the match and my boxing future.”

“Oh!” Gavin let go of Austin and looked down, dejected. Austin’s career was taking off sooner than they expected, and their time apart had been increasing. He couldn’t accompany Austin on this trip, and it wasn’t the first time. Gavin still had one more year of classes at the community college, as well as his part-time job at Willie’s gym. They were only twenty-two, but had planned their future together since they kissed for the first time, and now distance was taking its toll.

“We have to hurry up. We need to be at the gym pretty soon,” Austin said, sitting on the tub edge. Gavin took a deep breath and continued shaving Austin. When he was done, they showered in silence.

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The weather was finally good enough to open the truck’s windows. Austin placed his hand on top of Gavin’s, but continued to look out. Since he sold his car to get money for gear, they drove to the gym together most of the time. When Gavin was in class, Austin would borrow the truck, or run the sixteen miles to town.

Thirty minutes later, they parked in front of Willie’s gym. Austin and his manager, Josh Carver, were driving to Michigan for the National Golden Glove Tournament. Hopefully, these would be Austin’s last matches as an amateur boxer. He was ready to fulfill his dreams as a professional boxer—something his father never achieved after Austin’s mother died and he had to shelve his career to take care of Austin on his own.

Gavin parked in front of the gym and saw Josh walking towards them. “See you in a couple of days, champ,” Gavin said, squeezing Austin’s hand one more time. They couldn’t risk a kiss where someone could see them, but they said their goodbyes at the house. They stepped out of the truck and retrieved Austin’s gear. Gavin removed the rosary his grandmother gave him before she died and placed it on Austin’s palm. “I know you can’t wear it when you’re in the ring, but please keep it. I want it to keep you safe, since I’m not going with you.”

“I can’t take it. I know how important it is for you.”

“It’s not more important than you. Please take it.”

“No, I—” Austin was not able to continue arguing about it because of Josh’s interruption.

“Ready to go, Gunner?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” he responded, placing the rosary in his jacket pocket and grabbing the rest of his stuff. He followed Josh, but turned, creating a space between them. He took an envelope out of the front pocket of his bag and gave it to Gavin. “Can you please promise me you won’t open this envelope until the tournament is over?” he asked seriously.

“Yes,” Gavin said, staring at it.

“Sky? Look at me.” Austin waited for Gavin to comply. “Never lose that spark in your eyes. They shine like the sky on a sunny day. Always remember you’re mine.” Austin paused a moment longer, gazing deeply into Gavin’s eyes, before moving away to join his manager, without looking back.

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## Chapter 1

*October 2010*

The arena was loud and involved in the fight. The commentator's voice made the crowd roar: *Pastrana sneaks a right into Gunner's side; then another one. Wow, Pastrana connected a good body shot. His solid right hand connects with the defending champ. Another stiff jab, and another one from Pastrana. Several left hooks and a right hand again. Gunner continues to flick out the jabs. Pastrana gets him to the ropes and briefly works the body, but Gunner continues to hold strong. Pastrana just lands a jab with ten seconds to go in this round. It looks like he is trying to steal this match at the last minute.*

Sitting in his corner, defending Middleweight champion, Austin "Gunner" Black thought this fight would end in the single digit rounds. He thought wrong. Young Jim Pastrana was taking the best out of him. Gunner was in his best shape ever, at one hundred and sixty-eight pounds, but mentally he was several states over. He heard everything his trainer Theo said, but he really didn't care. It was up to him, not Theo, to defend his belt.

The last round started and the commentator fired up again. As the last few minutes counted down, he announced: *They just tied up, as Pastrana tries to back Gunner into the ropes. Gunner jabs his way into the clinch, but Pastrana thumps the body point-blank. Uppercut from Pastrana met by a perfect left hook from Gunner. Pastrana connects with a lead right hand, jabs the champ's body. Clinch. Gunner just hooked Pastrana, sending him to the canvas. This fight is over.*

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Entering the gym at five a.m. was part of Austin's daily life, rain, shine or snow, and every time he checked out his problems at the door. Unfortunately, for the last couple of months, his miserable love life had followed him everywhere, including into his gym's sacred space. Finding himself on the canvas after his warm-up, having sparred with an up-and-coming boxer the day before, wasn't the way to start his week. Now, he was at the principal's office, waiting to be punished for his transgressions.

"OK, Gunner, we need to start getting serious about the next step in your career. You're one step from getting a chance at the Light Heavyweight belt. We start full training in two weeks," said Theo, Austin's trainer.

“You need to get your head back in the game. You almost lost your last match and that doesn’t give me much to work with, to get you into the bill,” added Dan, his manager.

Austin didn’t even look at them. He knew he was losing his focus and he wasn’t even sure that he wanted to go for the belt. Lately, he spent most of his time feeling miserable. The last match had taken its toll on him. Jim Pastrana was younger, faster, and if it wasn’t for his seventy-three inch reach, Austin would have lost the match and the chance to retain his champion belt.

“I need some time off. I’m not sure I want to relinquish my belt to go for the Light Heavyweight title. I don’t think I can hit one hundred and seventy-five pounds comfortably. I think I may need a cool-down period before I can wrap my head around all of this.”

“It has to be now,” Dan said, punching his desk. “You’re a hot commodity and everyone wants to bring you down. You don’t have the luxury of giving up when you are so close to achieving everything we’ve worked so hard to get! What the hell’s wrong with you? Too many punches to that useless head of yours?”

And therein lay the problem. He was nothing else to Theo and Dan than a way of making more money. Since he started with them, after the Michigan tournament, he’d had a lot of success, but at what price? He was just a dummy to them—the one taking the punches so they could enjoy the money and popularity that he’d rightfully earned. Even his dad wanted to go with whatever stupid idea those two came up with. As an amateur boxer himself, Damian Black was living vicariously through his son. With every beating, he reminded Austin that it was because of him that Damian couldn’t pursue his professional career, and was stuck in a shitty hole with a baby and no future. It was Austin’s time to repay his debt and everything Damian had sacrificed to raise him, after his wife Stella died during labor, forcing him to take a job at a water plant so he could take care of their son.

“I don’t care what you want, boy,” Theo said. “You are going to train and win that belt. You owe us that much.”

“I don’t owe you anything. For the last five years, I’ve been dealing with you two, manipulating every single thing I do with my life. I’m tired of being told what to do and when to do it. I need time to think about all of this. I’m not fighting this winter. You can get that in your stupid heads now.”

“Fuck yes, you are. What the hell crawled up your ass now?” Dan snarled. “Or maybe that’s the problem. Go to a bar and get fucked. Then you can come back and fight like a man and not the cock-sucking sissy you’re turning into.”

“I’m not listening to this. I’m taking off for a couple of weeks, or maybe months. Then we can talk again. Don’t even try to contract the fight, because I won’t show up.” Austin got up, ready to leave.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Dan ordered. “Sit your ass down, or I will call your dad to beat you straight.”

Theo snickered. “I don’t think that’s going to work. Gunner likes a cock up his ass way too much to turn straight.”

“Fuck you,” Austin growled, shoving Theo out of the way and storming from the office. He raced down the stairs and jumped in his car before any of them were able to catch him. He pulled out of the parking lot and hit the highway.

Austin was home within twenty minutes, and stormed straight to his room, where he took his duffel bag out of the closet and started packing up everything he could. He didn’t have much time before his trainer and manager contacted his dad to guilt him into taking the match, and he was tired of fighting just for the money. He lost his love for the sport a little more every day and was now seriously considering leaving everything behind. He was done fighting for nothing. He wanted a life, a partner to come home and talk to about his day, someone to take care of his injuries after a fight, to cuddle with at night. He needed someone to love. He wanted the love of his life with him once more, and he was going to win him back. He was a fighter and was used to winning when he wanted it. He just needed a chance.

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Gavin parked his truck, grabbed his bag, and headed inside as fast as he could. He wanted to be in his brother’s room before he returned from his morning therapy. He could only stay for thirty minutes or so before the nurses’ shift ended. “Morning, beautiful,” he said to Leah Jacobs when he reached the nurses’ station. She was the floor manager at the assisted care facility his brother Brian lived in.

“Morning, sunshine. Where’s my breakfast?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, but I was running late today. Here—take my card and buy something for you and Chase on your way home.”

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"Can I add a side of shoes to my order?"

"Good try."

"Pretty please?"

"Fine. Go ahead. Go crazy shopping for shoes. Just remember you need to sneak me in here one night, so I can stay over with Brian."

"Deal, but you know I'd do that without the bribe?"

"I know, and I love you because of it."

"Sorry to interrupt the love-fest, but I think he's here to see me," Brian said from behind Gavin.

Gavin turned and smiled at his brother. Almost four years ago, Brian had lost control of his motorcycle while trying to follow Gavin, after a fight with their parents. They found out Gavin was having a sexual relationship with Austin Black, his supposed-to-be best friend, when Austin's dad accused Gavin of corrupting his son. Gavin's parents had walked in the house at that precise moment.

"Yes, I'm here to see you. You're looking good today," Gavin replied.

"Someone has to keep the hopes up for the parental unit about having grandkids," Brian teased.

"I can have kids too," Gavin said, pushing Brian's wheelchair into the room.

"Do you want kids?" Brian asked seriously.

"No. I have enough with Emma. Plus, I don't think I can find someone else to love me."

"Yeah, right! Emma may love you, but she's a dog. You're a good guy; you have your own house, a nice hobby, a blah job and a handsome brother. What else does a dude need to get interested in you?"

"I ask myself the same question every day. But enough talking about me. We don't have much time before I have to leave. Tell me, how's therapy going? Are you considering moving in with me?" Gavin inquired, with hope in his voice.

"I'm not sure, man. I don't want to be a charity case for you. Plus, you don't need to rearrange everything to accommodate me."



Brian wheeled himself to the bathroom and Gavin followed. "You know, Brian, I'm not asking you to move in with me to be my charity case. I'm your brother and I love you. I can move shit around the house and install anything you need. You can have my room and I'll move to the dark room. I pass most of my time there anyway."

"OK, and how am I supposed to tell Mom about it? I'm here so she doesn't have to take care of Dad and me. Every time I try to talk to her about you, she changes the subject. She's convinced that someday you're going to show up at the house with a wife and ask for their forgiveness. I know you've done nothing wrong. Loving Austin was stupid on your part, but we all have our bad moments."

"Please don't give me a speech again. I know I was stupid enough, thinking Austin loved me, but I'm not planning on going home to apologize for who I am, especially not with a wife as moral support. I'm fine alone, unless you want to move into my house. Other than that, my love life, or lack of, isn't up for discussion." Gavin said his piece and sat on the bathroom floor to wait for Brian to take a shower. After the accident, Brian spent more than a year at the hospital, recovering from a concussion. He lost sight in one eye due to it. Plus, he lost both legs mid-thigh. After that first year, he moved to a rehab facility to continue healing; now, he was at an assisted-living facility, able to take care of himself most of the time. He just needed to have someone to keep an eye on a drain placed to help the blood flow around his brain without creating clots.

"Brian? May I come in?" asked Brian and Gavin's mom.

"Shit," Gavin murmured to Brian.

"No, Mom. I'll be out in a couple of minutes," Brian said, trying to finish up his shower.

"You don't have anything I haven't seen before, my dear. Remember, I cleaned your behind until you learned how to do it yourself, and helped you after all your surgeries."

"Thanks for the reminder, Mom, please give me a minute."

"I just want to be sure the drain in your head is working, baby. I have to go soon, because I have to drive your dad to the doctor for his checkup. Make yourself decent, I'm coming in."

"No, Mom!"

It was too late. Gavin held his breath and tried to make himself invisible, but his mother's face said everything before the words passed her lips. She was shocked and angry to find the brothers together. Brian grabbed a towel and asked his mother to wait outside, but she refused to listen. Gavin knew what was going to happen. Just like every time their paths crossed, she was going to tell him how worthless he was. According to her, he was going to burn in hell and drag anyone around with him.

"Good morning, Mother," Gavin said, without looking her in the eyes.

"What is he doing here? Brian, how can you let this sinner be here with you? I'm sure he's lusting after you."

"Mother, please. Gavin is your son too. Don't be so cruel. He's visiting me, like he does every week, and I look forward to it. He's here with me because it's the only time you're not hovering around."

"Brian Michael Parker, you better watch your tone. You may be almost thirty years old, but I'm still your mother. You know, he is not allowed here. He's a bad influence on you, and he stopped being my son when he decided to sin with that boy."

"That's enough!" Brian snapped. "Get out of here before I call security to take you out. You may be my mother, but he is my brother and I love him unconditionally—as you should." Brian got back in his wheelchair and moved close to Gavin, who was still sitting on the floor with his legs tight to his chest.

"You don't understand! Everything that happened to you was because of him. You've been suffering for more than four years. Your dad had a stroke and I lost my family, because of him. He prefers to live in sin instead of loving his family. I would prefer for him to be dead than fornicate with men."

"Out of here, now!" Brian ordered. "If you want him dead, then consider me dead as well! I don't want to see you here again. As soon as I can, I'm moving in with Gavin, whether you like it or not." Brian reached for Gavin's hand.

"Brian, you don't know what you're saying. You're better than him. He's the one that needs to leave. I'm the one calling security."

"No need. I'm leaving," Gavin said, standing up and trying to walk out of the bathroom, but his mom blocked the door.

"Don't even think about coming back here. You know you're not welcome in this family."

“Gavin, please don’t go,” Brian said. He tried to go after his brother, but his towel tangled in the chair’s wheels and Brian tumbled forward, onto the hard, tiled floor.

“Oh, God! My baby. See what you did? You hurt your brother again. Are you happy now?”

Gavin ran out and got help. Several nurses entered the room to take care of Brian. He was unconscious on the floor, and their mother was crying uncontrollably.

“We need you both to wait outside while we take care of him,” one of the nurses informed them.

“I’m not going anywhere until I know my baby is fine.”

“Ma’am you need to leave now,” the nurse ordered.

“Please, Mom. Let them help Brian. Come outside with me,” Gavin said, trying to help his mother move away from Brian.

“Don’t touch me. You disgust me. You stopped being my son when you took everything away from me. You did this to your brother. Go. Don’t come back to us again.”

“Mrs. Parker. You have to calm down and accompany me outside,” Leah said, coming into the scene looking at Gavin apologetically.

“This man is no longer allowed to see my son. Call security to take him out now!”

“No problem, Mom. Your wish is my command. I’ll leave and you won’t see me again.” Gavin stormed out of the room.

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## Chapter 2

Driving through the harvested cornfields on a clear night, did nothing to calm Austin's nerves. It had been five years since he left everything behind—including the only man he had ever loved—to follow his dreams of glory. Austin was desperate to make it as a pro boxer; now he was something of a celebrity, with an impressive winning streak. Sadly, his dreams of success had long lost their shine.

Austin's heart felt like it was trying to escape his chest, as he parked beside a familiar truck at the end of the gravel road. He'd driven for hours to make it on time for Gavin's twenty-seventh birthday, arriving the night before. The whole trip, Austin was trying to think how he could convince Gavin to give him a second chance. He knew he was a selfish bastard—he proved it when he ended the relationship with Gavin, with nothing more than a simple note.

He took his time exiting the car. Hopefully, his knees would carry him to the entrance and he wouldn't pass out due to lack of oxygen. Austin wasn't even sure Gavin was home, but if he wasn't, he'd wait until he arrived. A lost cause? Maybe, but he wanted another chance. He needed Gavin to know how much he still loved him and that he would do anything to be part of his life again.

"Can you stop staring at the door? It's been open for the last five minutes."

"What?" Austin replied, lost in thought. He didn't even realize the door in front of him had opened. The man before him looked so familiar, yet foreign at the same time. Not even in his dreams, could Austin have guessed how much Gavin had changed in the last five years. His hair was shorter, and his beard was fuller and unkempt. The hair on Gavin's chest looked thicker than before. He wanted to run his hand through it. He used to love rubbing his face against it, probably since personally he had to shave so much. Well, not much recently, but still.

"Did you finish ogling me?" Gavin remarked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not really."

"Then keep going. I have nothing better to do than to stand here with the door open when it's less than forty degrees outside, waiting for the Ghost of Christmas Past to speak," Gavin said in an annoyed tone.

Austin kept staring. It was almost impossible to stop, due to the low-hanging pajama bottoms Gavin was wearing. He had to smile. As always, Gavin didn't have a shirt on, but he was wearing a pair of fuzzy, bright socks. According to him, the carpet tickled his feet if he didn't wear them. Austin wanted to go down on his knees and beg for forgiveness, but knew he would probably end up kissing Gavin's crotch instead.

Austin noticed as Gavin crossed his arms, the two interlocking Mars symbols tattooed on his forearm. When he realized what was happening, Gavin turned to close the door, but Austin stopped him. "Sky, please, give me a moment to talk and then I promise to leave. I know I have no right to ask, but I would do anything to make you happy, even if that means leaving again." He grabbed Gavin's arm.

"That'd be great. You know your way out of town." Gavin rubbed his beard as he spoke, drawing Austin's attention to his lips. Gavin shook his arm to release Austin's grip, but Austin moved closer, grabbing Gavin's other arm. Gavin tensed and Austin almost gave up.

"I beg you. Please give me a chance. I know I was important to you once upon a time. Please, just give me ten minutes." Austin felt the indecision running through Gavin's body, and also knew the moment he gave up.

Gavin pushed him back. "You have five," he said, without looking Austin in the eyes; their touch lingered. Austin was glad Gavin hadn't noticed how hard he was. He adjusted himself and took a minute to calm down, watching Gavin walk back toward the house. Gavin turned around and their eyes locked. There was the promise of a fuck in his lips. It made Austin smile; just like him, Gavin knew what they felt for each other could not be hidden.

Finally, Austin gathered his courage and walked into the house. It was all Gavin. The colors were dark and inviting, and he could smell him everywhere. The space was small enough to take it all in at once. From the comfortable-looking couch by the fireplace, to the tall, square dining room table close to the kitchen. Everything looked perfectly in place. Even the dog's bed on the other side of the couch matched the rest of the décor. Austin could imagine Gavin and the dog, lying down after Gavin returned from work, telling him everything about his day, like they used to do every time they had the chance. Since they'd both lived with their parents, there weren't that many chances to get together, but they always found a way to share their beds.

“Emma?” Austin asked softly. The golden retriever jumped at him, almost making him lose his balance. “You kept her?” he asked, trying to contain his tears. Gavin and he had rescued the dog six years ago and taken turns taking her home. The dog followed them everywhere and loved to sleep between them. At night, they’d go to the river with her and chase dragonflies. Now Austin realized they were a small happy family, and he destroyed their future together.

“I wasn’t going to be a coward like you,” Gavin said, “just because you ran away. It was difficult, but I stayed behind in this hellhole, and eventually got the life I deserved—without you.”

“Ouch! That’s not nice.”

“I’ve never been nice. You know that better than anyone. Still, here you are, five years later, like nothing happened. Just like if we’d spoken and made plans to meet. At least it’s good to see you made it without me bailing you out of every single stupid thing that brain of yours puts you up to.”

“I know you have the right to think the worst of me.”

“The hell I do, so start talking. You only have three minutes left.” Gavin replaced his empty beer bottle and handed one to Austin. He sat by the fireplace and Emma jumped into his lap, but she was definitely too big to be a lap dog. Austin noticed other empty bottles around, but didn’t say anything.

“Two minutes and counting.”

“OK. Can I please sit down?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where my manners are. Please feel free to sit anywhere you want. My house is your house,” Gavin said sarcastically.

“Always so thoughtful.”

“One minute.”

“Before I start apologizing, I want you to know that I’m here to stay. It took me all this time to realize I should have never left. Here I had everything I needed, with you and Emma. I should have waited for you to finish your degree, so we could open the gym we always wanted. We were happy, and I destroyed everything we had, and could’ve had, leaving without telling you my plans. I just didn’t want to pressure you to leave, when your parents needed you so much.”

“Stop! Don’t even think about using my parents, or Brian, to justify your stupidity.” Gavin hit his bottle against the end of the table. He tried to stand, but

slipped. He caught himself before falling, making Emma bounce away. "Fuck." Gavin kicked the coffee table and stumbled back to the kitchen to grab another beer. He downed it without closing the fridge. Austin didn't know what to do. He was frozen in place. Gavin had never been a volatile person. The last time he saw him as lost as this was at the hospital, after his father had his first stroke.

"Will you please calm down and listen to me? I'm not here to give you any excuses. I'm here to ask you to give me a second chance. I want us to take the time to know each other again. To learn what we want and need. I want to be here for you, to love you, to be the partner you always wanted to grow old with." Austin moved off as he talked, following Gavin into the kitchen. Gavin's hands were holding the fridge door, contracting his back muscles into a perfect canvas. This was the first time Austin had seen Gavin's back piece tattoo finished. When he left, only the outline was completed. Now it was an intricate combination of colors and forms, blended together to showcase a magnificent combination of roses, thorns and tribal lines.

Austin moved closer, until he could feel Gavin's bare back against his chest. His heart was racing, and he held his breath, waiting for Gavin's reaction. Nothing happened. Austin moved even closer, placing his forehead against the back of Gavin's head, since they were both the same height. He could tell how tense Gavin was, but he'd waited so long to be this close again to the one person who meant everything to him, he'd do anything to gain Gavin's forgiveness, and he wouldn't let their individual fears interfere.

Gavin relaxed and Austin released his breath. He placed his arms underneath Gavin's and wrapped his hands over Gavin's shoulders pulling him even closer. Gavin shivered as Austin's erection made contact with his ass, and a hiss escaped his lips. Austin knew Gavin was surrendering to him, to their love. It felt like a dream to him. He never expected Gavin to be drinking as much on a week night, but particularly he was surprised that Gavin allowed him to talk. He was already prepared to beg and show up on Gavin's steps every night, until he opened the door for him.

"You know..." Gavin started, without moving away from the fridge. "I would've given anything for you to tell me all this before, but today it's too late. I already made the decision to forget you, and everything else that's hurting me. I'm tired of trying to do what everyone wants. This time, I'm doing what I want and I'm not going to apologize for it. After you left, everything fell apart. I blamed myself for not being enough for you, for not putting your career before our relationship. I tried to contact you, but you simply vanished. Nobody

knew where you were training, or when you were coming back. It took almost a year before your dad showed up. By then, I had nothing. I quit at Willie's. I couldn't even get into the parking lot without seeing your shadow everywhere. People kept asking me where you were, and I couldn't tell them why I didn't know, since we were such good friends. Yeah. Friends. Maybe you didn't love me anymore, but at least you could've had the decency to tell me you were leaving—" Gavin stopped talking, and his knees buckled. Austin held him tighter, and he balanced himself against the fridge.

"Come on, you're drunk. Let's go back to the couch."

Gavin didn't reply or release the fridge door. Austin grabbed his hand and opened Gavin's fist. He almost fell again, but Austin steadied him. He turned Gavin around and looked into his eyes. Gavin had been crying and his pupils were dilated. Austin moved closer and started kissing the tears away.

"Oh God, darling. I love you so much," Gavin said, holding onto Austin. His body started shaking without warning.

"Are you getting sick? Let me get you to the bathroom," Austin offered, trying to help Gavin.

"No. Beer," Gavin slurred.

"No. You've had enough to drink. You need to be in one piece to celebrate your birthday tomorrow."

"Not happening," Gavin mumbled before sliding to the floor. Austin cradled him.

"Give me a minute to get some water and a piece of bread. You need to eat something."

"Tell me you love me?" Gavin asked, closing his eyes and placing his head against Austin's chest.

"I can't imagine another day without you in my life, my arms, my bed," Austin declared, kissing Gavin's head. "You smell so good, Sky. I missed you so much. Nothing in this life is worth not being here with you. Please, Sky, look at me," he pleaded without a response. "Sky, please!"

It took Gavin a moment, but he heaved open his eyelids, looking straight into Austin's dark eyes. The same eyes he loved waking up to.

"Bye, darling. Too late. Pills. Love. Happy. Kiss—"



“Fuck, Sky! What did you do? Wake up, Sky. Look at me. Please don’t leave me now that I’m back.” Austin held Gavin tighter for a second, before placing him softly on the floor. He searched frantically for his cell phone and kneeled back beside Gavin.

“9-1-1. What’s your emergency?”

“I need an ambulance. I don’t think he’s breathing right and he isn’t answering when I call his name. He said something about pills.”

“Sir, please calm down. Can you tell me what happened exactly?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know? I came to see Sky and we were just talking. He was rambling and then he began to shake. He had trouble keeping his eyes open.”

“How old is he? Did he have something to drink or eat?”

“He will be twenty-seven tomorrow. We had several beers and I don’t know if he ate or not. Can you please stop asking me stupid questions and send an ambulance?”

“Can you please give me your address?”

“Three-four-nine-two Empire Road, Eldon.”

“OK, that’s three-four-nine-two Empire Road, Eldon. Correct?”

“Are you deaf? That’s what I said!”

“Calm down, sir. The ambulance is on its way. Can you please verify his pulse, as well as his temperature?”

“He’s really cold and his heartbeat is low.” Austin kissed Gavin’s forehead. “Sky, wake up, stay with me.”

“Sir, please look around and let me know if you see anything out of place, any food or drinks that you may have not recognized, any medication bottles.”

“I don’t know. I just arrived less than twenty minutes ago. He had a beer in his hand when he opened the door and two more after. I can’t move now. He’s on the floor and I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“Sir, how’s his breathing?”

“I can see his chest rising slowly. Why is it taking so long? I’m going to take him in myself.”

"No sir, please. The ambulance will be there very soon. They will be able to give him the help he needs. I need you to try to calm down, so you can assist them."

"I'm leaving now."

"Take a minute and think about it, sir. I know you're worried about him, but he'll have a better chance if you don't move him, until we know exactly what's happening. If he stops breathing on his way to the hospital, you won't be able to administer CPR. The ambulance is his best chance right now."

"I need them to be here now. He can't leave me." Austin's voice shook in desperation.

"I'm sure we will give him the help he needs. Please keep monitoring his breathing and pulse."

"Emergency assistance. Please open the door," the EMT called, followed by a knock on the door.

"It's about time." Austin quickly stood up, pocketed his phone and opened the door.

"Gunner?"

"Yes?"

"It's me, Steve Mallory. Man, it's good to see you," the EMT said, as he and his partner followed Austin into the house. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I'm not sure. We were talking and he started acting up, talking shit and rolling his eyes."

"I see. Let's do some check-ups and take him in." Steven lifted Gavin's hand, holding it palm up. "Gunner, do you know when this happened? They look old."

"He didn't have the tattoo five years ago, but I'm not sure when he got it. Why the hell do you need to know?"

"Calm down, Gunner. I'm talking about the cutting marks under the tattoo. Look, here—he has them on both wrists."

Austin moved forward to get a better look. One wrist read *Love* and the other *Brian*. "Oh God! That's his brother's name."

“The cripple?”

“What the hell, Steve?”

The other EMT interrupted, “Mallory, we don’t have time to be chatting now. We need to take him in. We’re losing him.”

Austin followed them to the ambulance.

“Gunner, you can’t ride with us.”

“The hell I am. Move out of my fucking way, before I kick your ass.”

“You aren’t a family member. You’ll have to follow us.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” Austin said, pushing the EMT aside and boarding the ambulance.

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## Chapter 3

Gavin never felt more miserable. Another frustrated attempt. He was such a loser that he couldn't even kill himself. He thought maybe he needed to hang himself, which would've been faster and dumb-proof, as once again, he was looking at the white, sterile walls of the psych ward at the county hospital. He was seated in the room's corner trying to make himself invisible—kind of difficult, due to his size and build, but he wanted it with all his heart. Gavin just wanted to make all the pain disappear. Soft steps drew his attention.

"Please don't say it," was all Gavin said when he saw Leah. He knew she was disappointed that he'd tried to do it again, but he couldn't take it anymore. She was his best friend for a reason. She knew him better than anyone; well, almost anyone.

She sat down next to him and placed her head on his shoulder. "You know me better. I'm not here to judge you. I'm here because I love you." Leah was the only person to reach out and help him after his world collapsed. For the last five years, she had been his rock and she helped him accomplish everything he did in his adult life. "Baby, do you remember when we first met?"

"Yes, Leah. I'll never forget how you just happened to bump into me, spilling your latte all over my shirt."

"You know, I tried for weeks to get your attention, but you never looked at me. You were so handsome and always so happy, that I wanted to be part of that happiness. And then, you started missing classes. I was heartbroken."

"Your point?" Gavin asked, cutting Leah's rant.

"I'm getting there. I promise I have a point."

"OK."

"When you came back, you were so sad. I wanted to make you happy again. Seeing you without your shirt was just an added bonus," she said with a smirk. Gavin leaned his head against Leah's and hugged himself tighter. "I knew you wanted to be alone, but you needed all the help you could get. I'm here for you again. No matter how many times you fall, I'm always going to be here, because I want to be part of your happiness." They cried softly together.

"I love you," Gavin said, moving to lie down on Leah's lap. "You know, sometimes I wish I could just vanish. Everything would be better for my parents, for Brian, and I wouldn't hurt anymore."

"Please, don't say that. You're an amazing person, Gavin. You've been there for everyone whenever they needed you, without asking questions. You just need to realize that in order to give so much to others, you have to take care of yourself first," Leah reaffirmed as she played with Gavin's hair.

"The other night," he said, "I had a weird dream. I guess I was pretty buzzed."

"I guess."

"I thought Austin came to visit me. He asked me to give him a second chance. He held me and I felt complete for the first time in years. I don't know why I keep waiting for him to return. It's been five years in hell since he left, and I don't know how to escape."

"If you let me, I'm here to hold your hand and bring you back to life," Austin said from the door.

Gavin turned into Leah's lap, trying to hide. He brought his legs to his chest and covered his face with his hands.

"May I come in?" Austin asked, without moving.

"And you are?" Leah demanded.

"I'm Austin Black and I—"

"Stop! You're upsetting him. Please leave."

"Sky, please listen to me."

"Don't call me that!" Gavin shouted, sitting back in the corner and wrapping his arms around his body.

Leah brushed his cheek. "Gavin, I'm going to go out for a minute. Will you go back to the bed and wait for me?"

Gavin nodded. Leah stood up and met Austin by the door. "I'm Leah, Gavin's best friend. Follow me."

Austin and Leah walked in silence, until they reached an alcove down the hallway. Leah sat down and invited Austin to do the same.

"Can you please tell me what's happening with Sky?" Austin asked as soon as he sat.

"Many things, but it's not my place to inform you," Leah said sharply.

"I'm not sure if you know who I am, but I'm here for Sky. No matter what he needs I can get it for him. I don't care the price or location."

"Don't underestimate me. I know everything there is to know about you. Especially, how you abandoned Gavin when he needed you the most. You knew his family was struggling after Mr. Parker's first stroke and how difficult it was for Gavin to lie to his family about who he truly was. But you felt compelled to pack up and leave without having the decency to let him know in advance."

"You don't know anything."

"I know how you destroyed Gavin's hopes for a future with you. How you chose your career over him. All he did, he did it for you, and when you left, he lost everything. His degree, his job, his family—everything he held dear to his heart was gone with the strike of a pen."

Austin stared at Leah, puzzled by her words. He had no idea about Gavin losing anything. Since his father left town to live with him in Michigan, Austin had no way to know what was happening in Eldon. Six months after he left, he fired his trainer and manager and signed with Golden Boy productions. They took him in and five years later he was the current WBC Middleweight champion.

"I don't think I follow you. I know Gavin's family was having issues taking care of Mr. Parker, but he was doing better, even with his condition. His parents loved him and his brother deeply. Plus, he only needed one more year to complete his degree. I've no idea what you're complaining about, or why you have so much interest in Gavin. You know he's gay, right?"

"Mary mother of God! You are such a douche!" Leah shouted. "Please leave and don't come back again. You aren't worth my time or Gavin's love." She stood up, but Austin caught her arm, halting her departure.

"Let my damn arm go, or I'm going to scream for help."

"You don't have to do that. I just wanted to have a civilized conversation, to see how I could help Sky and you're responding like a psychopath."

"Psychopath?!" Leah seemed to struggle with the term as she panted heavily, trying to get herself under control. "I'm sorry," she gasped. She sat back down, putting her elbows on her knees, and burying her face in her hands. She kept quiet for a couple of minutes, making Austin think he'd stepped too far, and she wasn't going to reply.

"You see, I met Gavin in class several months before you left. I fell for him the first time he walked into the classroom. He looked like a GQ cover model, but his brain and heart were my undoing. I started wanting him, but at the end, I needed him. Then you broke his heart and I was left to put the pieces together. Unfortunately, you took several of those with you, and he was never the same."

"Fuck."

"Calm down, Romeo. This is my story."

"Go ahead, but know that I'm listening because I want to help Sky, not because I want to be your BFF."

"Please! Like I need your friendship or your permission. I tried for weeks to call his attention. He arrived to class early and left last, always with a smile on his face. Sometimes he looked tired, and I wanted him to hug me with his big arms, take a nap in my bed; but nothing I did worked. One afternoon, I was walking down the street and saw him coming my way. He was distracted, talking on his cell phone, and didn't notice me. I knew that was my opportunity and I went for it."

"Do I really want to know this?" Austin asked, annoyed.

"Why? Are you jealous?" she replied.

"None of your business. Continue."

"I walked directly into him, and spilled my coffee on his shirt. He automatically took it off and I went to heaven."

"Definitely, I don't want to hear this."

"Do you ever shut up?"

"Only when I have a hard cock in my mouth."

"That wasn't necessary. I'm done dealing with you. Please leave and don't try to look for Gavin again. He is better off without you." Leah stood up and started walking back to Gavin's room. Austin caught up with her at the door.

"Fine, I'll shut up, but I don't care about your attraction to Sky."

"Can you stop calling him Sky? His name is Gavin."

"He will always be my Sky."

"*Your* Sky? Do you have any idea how hard it will be for Gavin to start over again? This is the second time he's tried to commit suicide, and it was a lot

closer than the last. He's asking for help, but no one can help him if he doesn't play his part. And you—" Leah stopped to clear her throat. She wiped hard at the tears stinging her face and took a deep breath before she continued, "Gavin and I went to class together, did homework together, and then you left, and he was waiting for you to come back. His world was already shattered, and then Brian had his accident, and their dad had another stroke."

Leah saw the shock register on Austin's face. He hadn't known about Mr. Parker's second stroke, or about Brian.

"So you see," she said, "he feels guilty, but it's up to him to tell you exactly why. He's my friend, and I love him, and I'm asking you to give him time to process everything that's happened. Because if he gets too attached to you and you decide to leave again, it would be over for him."

"I have no intention of leaving him again. I'm here to stay, to be everything he needs. If you excuse me, I think he needs to hear this, not you." Austin stepped past her and entered Gavin's room. Leah went after him and pulled his arm, trying not to disturb Gavin, who was now fast asleep in bed.

"Get out of here." Leah hissed.

"No."

"I'm going to call security to take you out," she said, her voice loud enough to have awoken Gavin.

"Leah, please stop," he pleaded. "Let me talk to him."

She moved forward and gently sat on the bed. She moved the hair from his forehead, gave him a kiss and pressed her forehead against his. "I'm going to get everything ready to take you out of here. You're staying with me and Chase for a while. I've already contacted the plant and told them you're sick and that you'll be out for at least a week." She got up and started to move away.

"I love you," Gavin said.

Leah smiled back at him and stepped into Austin's personal space. She took a minute to look him over. "You better be good to him. If not, I'm going to turn into your worst nightmare." She poked Austin hard in the chest with every word.

"Understood."

"Good. Now, I'm going, before I change my mind." She left the room.



"A feisty one you have there," Austin remarked. He sat on the chair across from the bed, sliding forward enough to place his hands close to Gavin's. "How are you feeling?" he asked softly.

"Better."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"No."

"OK. Since I'm not sure you remember, can I tell you what we talked about the other night?"

"No. I remember everything. I thought it was a beautiful dream. What I really wanted, given to me as my dying wish." Gavin closed his eyes and tried to bury his face on the pillow.

"Sky, please look at me. What we had five years ago was beautiful, but what we can have now would be endless. I know you have a lot to think about, but I want you to know that I still love you. Everything I said was real and I won't change anything about it. I'm here to stay, if you give me a chance to fight for your love." Austin reached for Gavin's hand. "Leah said you struggled over the years, with the consequences of my decision to leave, but I want to heal all the pain I've caused. Please, Sky, give me a chance."

Gavin sat up and stretched out his arms, palms up, for Austin to see. "I don't know why you want to be with me. You don't know me anymore. I'm not the same happy dreamer you used to love. I'm nothing else than a lonely drifter whose only friend is a married woman. I think she tolerates me just so she doesn't have to watch soap operas."

"Sky, stop! First, I love you more than before I left. Secondly, I know you better than you think. You're loving, caring, and you're an amazing friend and lover. And I might be a bad friend, but I was always your friend too. I'm sure Leah knows how much you love her and from what I've seen she is on your side."

"Really? Did you ask around? Do you know what everyone thinks about the town's fag, who caused his father a stroke with his filthy lifestyle? No. You don't know me. The only reason I haven't left town is because Brian needs me. But my dear mom banned me from visiting him. See? I have nothing else here. I wish you'd never showed up the other night. All this pain would have been gone by now."

Austin stood up and grabbed Gavin's wrist. "You see this here? *Love*. I'm here because I love you and I know my love is strong enough to heal your heart. I wish I'd been here when your parents found out, but I was caught up in my own stupidity. Now I realize that no matter how many matches and championships I win, you will always be more important. You mean the world to me, always have and always will. Leaving you was the biggest mistake of my life." Austin pulled Gavin close to his chest and kissed his cheek softly. He continued kissing his jaw, his ear, his neck and rubbing his back. "Sky, please give me another chance," he said, placing his face against Gavin's.

"I need time, darling."

"Anything you need from me you can have."

Gavin moved away and took his previous position on the bed. So many times he'd thought about what he was going to do when this happened, and here he was, face-to-face with the man who stole his heart many years ago, and he was at his lowest point. Austin looked like a mirage; older than he ever pictured him, but still ruggedly handsome. His signature mustache was well trimmed and his cheeks had that five o'clock shadow Gavin loved so much. He never imagined his body would betray him, but the sight of Austin was bringing all the longing back to the surface. Gavin still remembered the last time he kissed those lips and got lost in those black eyes. To protect himself, he wrapped his arms around his own chest and looked to the floor.

"I think we have a lot to talk about and to learn from each other before you leave," he said.

Austin moved forward and lifted Gavin's chin, forcing him to look into his eyes. "As I've said multiple times already, I'm here to stay as long as you'll have me."

Now that Austin was standing so close, Gavin could see that the years had been good to him. He still had those wide shoulders and small waist he had loved to hold so much. In comparison, Gavin was wide as a linebacker and as tall as Austin. The dark jeans encased his legs beautifully, and the button-up shirt, opened low, allowed Gavin to see a collection of tattoos, covered by a light coat of fur. In happier times, he had loved to rub his face against that chest every time Austin returned from a long day of training. As Gavin reminisced, something shiny caught his eye. He reached forward and lifted the rosary he had given to Austin, when he left for the tournament. Since he had watched several of Austin's matches as some sort of punishment, he knew the same

rosary was one of the tattoos on Austin's chest. Before he was able to let it go, Austin grabbed his wrist and pressed Gavin's hand against his chest.

"Why are you here? Why now?" Gavin asked, trying to move his hand away.

"I have so many things to explain, but first I have to apologize for being an asshole—"

"Yes you were an asshole, but you don't have to apologize. It took me a long time and many bottles to understand that you had to leave. I know now that I wouldn't have gone with you if you had asked and that you did what you thought was right. I'm OK with that, and if you need to hear it, I forgive you for it. More importantly, I know that you didn't love me enough to trust me, or tell me what you thought you needed to do, and to let me find a way to be here for my parents and at the same time be there for you—"

"That's not true. I—"

"Don't interrupt me. I had five years to reach this conclusion and I'm not changing my opinion. Thanks for what we had, but now I have to move forward. Now that you have seen me at my worst, there's nothing left you may need from me."

"You're everything I need and want. I never felt like me since I left, but you're wrong. I loved you enough to let you go, without making you choose between your family and me. We were young and stupid, but I want back all those dreams we used to have. I want to travel with you, and see the world through your eyes. Without you, my life is dull and lonely. I need the happiness that comes from knowing I can make you smile, just by being by your side."

Gavin moved his hand away and cleared the tears from Austin's eyes. They were interrupted by a nurse, and Austin was asked to leave the room. When he returned, Gavin was tucked back in bed, facing the door and tracking Austin's movements. He was happy when Austin moved quietly and sat next to him again.

"I think we need to continue this conversation later," Gavin said. "I'm not sure I can deal with your return right now. I need some time to rearrange my feelings. As you can see, I've got to take better care of myself before I can tell you if I can give us another chance."

"That's OK with me. We can talk again when you are home."

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“Home?”

“Yes. I’m planning on taking residency on your couch, so you don’t have to stay with Leah. We need time together in order to know if this will work. I’m not going to push you; I just want you to know that I’m here for you. I don’t want a perfect boyfriend, I want you as you are, because I know that I am more with you than I am without you.” Austin leaned forward and kissed Gavin softly on the lips.

“You can stay in my house, if you’d like, but I’m going to stay with Leah for a couple of days. You can come visit me and I can meet you at the house too, but I need some time away from everything. Someday I’ll be strong enough to take care of you, but now I just need you to come here and hold me until I feel whole again.”

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## Chapter 4

Gavin took a minute to enjoy the warm arms wrapped around his waist. Since the morning Austin left, Gavin had not felt so safe. He knew their relationship couldn't be the same, but he hoped to have some part of it back. The hospital bed was small enough for their bodies to be in complete contact. It felt right to have Austin comforting him when he was at his lowest. Even if it was only for a couple of hours, he wanted to believe everything in his life was back to normal. At least Brian was OK, and as soon as he could, he would visit him.

"Gavin Elijah Parker, what do you think you're doing?" Leah questioned, waking up Austin.

"Taking a nap. And you?" was his reply. Austin tried to move away, but Gavin kept hold of him. "Stay."

"Damn, you're slow," Leah pouted. "I was expecting to interrupt some hot making out, at least. You two are so boring."

"If that's what you want," Austin said, grabbing Gavin's face and kissing him deeply. It took a minute for Gavin to catch up. A moan escaped his lips, and Austin used the opportunity to deepen the kiss. Gavin grabbed Austin's shirt, pulling him forward.

"More," Austin said, surrendering control of the kiss.

"Don't worry, she's gone," Gavin murmured in Austin's ear, but still continued to kiss his jaw and then his neck, tracing with his tongue down over the part of the rosary tattoo showing over Austin's clavicle. "Is this one for me?" he asked.

"Yes."

Gavin moved back to Austin's mouth, exploring every inch, biting his lower lip softly. "I want to see it and kiss you for every single prayer in it."

"Anything you want."

"Umm," came out of Gavin lips. He'd just started pulling Austin's shirt up, when a knock on the door brought them to a stop.

"May I come in?"

“Yes,” Austin responded.

“I had to step out,” Leah said. “That kiss was so hot my pupils were burning. I hate to interrupt, but I have your release papers, Gavin, and Chase is waiting to take you home.”

“Who’s Chase?” Austin asked abruptly.

“Never imagined you could go from nice to jackass in fifteen seconds flat,” Leah remarked. “Chase is my lovely husband and when I say home I mean my house. This one here has been alone since the day you dumped him.”

“Good.”

“Excuse me?” Gavin said, moving out of the bed.

“I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant. I’m just glad there’s nobody in your life now.”

“You think I would have let you kiss me if I had a boyfriend? I guess you don’t know me that well.” Gavin looked around the room for the clothes Leah had brought him for his three-day stay at the ward.

Austin followed him, and hugged him from behind, kissing his neck. “I just don’t want to lose you now that I have you back.”

“You don’t have me. I just got carried away. I told you I need some time alone. I need to find myself before I make the decision to be with someone else.” Gavin moved out of Austin’s arms. “The offer still stands. You can stay at my house until I return.”

“If you aren’t going to be there, I’ll stay at my dad’s place,” Austin said. Leah took some keys from her purse and held them out to him.

“If your dad’s house is the one I think, you can’t stay there. Here are the keys to Gavin’s house. Emma is already at my house, so you don’t have to worry about her.”

Austin took the keys and turned back to Gavin. “Sky, I’d love to see Emma and you at some point this week.”

“I’m not sure. Do you have a cell phone with you?”

“Yes.”

“Give it to me.”

Austin handed his phone over. Gavin entered his number and called his own, which sounded from Leah's purse.

"When I'm ready, I'll call you and we can sit and talk. We're leaving soon, so you can go ahead and leave now."

Austin took his phone back from Gavin and kissed him on the cheek. He took a small box out of his pocket and gave it to Gavin. "Happy belated birthday, Sky," he said and walked out of the room.

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The only good part about staying at Leah's house was the daily updates about Brian. Finally, for the first time since the argument with their mother, Gavin was going to be able to sneak in and see him. Gavin had spent the last week resting most of the time and ignoring Austin's calls, texts and voicemails. He wasn't sure how to deal with Austin; maybe if he ignored him, he would get tired and leave.

Gavin hoped Austin would be asleep, since it was only five in the morning. He had enough time to stop home and get his work gear, before going to see Brian. He used his spare key to enter the quiet house, removed his shoes at the door and stopped by the kitchen to set up the coffee pot. He saw nothing but fruits and vegetables on top of the counter. He opened the fridge and was surprised with how full it was. Austin had bought enough food to feed a small army for a month. A really boring army, since there was no ice cream that Gavin could see.

He took a deep breath and walked down the hall to his room. For a minute, he thought the TV was on, but he quickly realized Austin was moaning. Gavin's heart sped up and his skin started heating at the noise. Through the slightly open bedroom door, Gavin caught Austin's reflection in the bureau mirror. He was partially covered by one of Gavin's white sheets. Austin was rubbing his chest slowly, pinching his nipples and following the trail down to his groin. Gavin couldn't see Austin's other hand, but he was sure he was tracing his hole. Gavin was overwhelmed by the view. He wanted so much to tie Austin's hands and take over for him.

He'd eat him first, and then he would tease him with his tongue until he accepted it, adding one thumb first and then the other to stretch him good.

"Enjoying the view?" Austin asked breathlessly, startling Gavin.

“Fuck.” There was no way Gavin could hide how turned on he was, but he wasn’t going to give Austin the satisfaction of knowing how much he still affected him. He bolted, but Austin caught him in the living room and pinned him against the front door.

“Why didn’t you answer my calls? You’re making me crazy. Please, Sky, come back with me to the room. Let me feel you again,” Austin begged. He moved closer to Gavin, pushing his naked body against him. “Sky, please? Fuck me until I can’t remember my name. Show me you still love me.”

“No,” Gavin said. He wrapped his arms around Austin, moving them slowly and grabbing Austin’s ass. He used the momentum to swap places and pulled him up. Austin clamped one leg around Gavin’s waist.

“Please?” he begged.

“I said no,” Gavin replied, kissing him. They were rubbing on each other, panting and moaning. Gavin didn’t want to think. He needed this. He wanted to find out if he was ready to be the man Austin needed. “Come for me, darling,” he commanded, biting Austin’s ear.

“Oh God, Sky.”

Gavin felt Austin shatter and pushed a finger inside him, riding out Austin’s orgasm, and then lowering him back to the floor. He removed his shirt and bent to clean him up. After an awkward moment, Gavin moved quietly to the kitchen. Austin hurried to the back of the house and started the shower. Gavin wasn’t sure if he should wait for Austin or leave. He looked at the time and realized he was too late to visit Brian. *I may as well stay and take care of the elephant in the room*, he thought. He got his coffee ready, and went into the bedroom to look for a clean shirt and his work gear.

By the time Austin came out dressed, Gavin had scrambled eggs and bacon ready for the two of them, together with coffee, juice and some fruit. They started eating without paying too much attention to each other.

“Thanks for breakfast. Do you have any plans for today?” Austin asked.

“Yes. I was on my way to see Brian, but got a little sidetracked,” Gavin responded with a wink, making Austin smile. “I only have a little time to finish eating before I have to leave for the plant.”

“You’re working at the water plant? Why?” Austin sounded surprised.



"Where else in this town am I supposed to work, with a high school diploma and an unfinished degree?" Gavin replied defensively.

"Why you didn't finish?"

"None of your business," Gavin said, standing up and placing his dishes in the sink. "I have to go. Can you take care of the kitchen?"

"Yes. Can we meet tonight? I really want to spend some time with you," Austin said, setting his own dishes in the sink.

"I don't know. I can't get to Leah's too late, and I'm pretty beaten up by the time I'm done. Plus today is my first day back after a week. Maybe another day."

"I can have dinner ready, and give you a massage when you're back," Austin offered suggestively.

Gavin moved closer and placed his hands around the back of Austin's neck, using his thumbs to rub circles on his face. Austin tilted his head to the touch and closed his eyes. "You're definitely a man after my heart," Gavin said.

Austin opened his eyes and looked directly into Gavin's emerald ones. "Yes, I am. I held your heart in my hands once and hurt it, but now I'm ready to treasure it."

Gavin kissed Austin's lips softly. "Dinner better be ready by eight o'clock, and thanks for the birthday present."

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Gavin was ready to leave work from the moment he walked in. Between all the paperwork he missed the week before, and the emergency job on one of the pumps, his day was turning out to be one for the books. Everyone wanted to know what had happened to him, and why he'd been in the hospital. He didn't think people would care, so he wasn't ready for all the questions his nosy coworkers could imagine to ask. He simply blamed it on appendicitis.

He tried to forget about Austin waiting for him at the house, and what had happened that morning. They didn't talk about it, but it felt almost natural, as if they were apart for only a couple of days instead of five years. Everything felt so right and he wanted more. This morning was everything he always wanted: someone to love and spend his time with. In reality, that someone had always been Austin, and Gavin thought that was probably why his life was so miserable.

When his shift ended, he was ready to bolt and hide in Leah's house, but he couldn't be that cruel. He told Austin he was going to be there, and he needed to do it for both of them. If they could start over, and forget their past, they might have a chance. It might be difficult, because their past was great—up to the moment Austin left—or, at least, that's what Gavin remembered. Maybe Austin gave some clues about his career being his first priority and Gavin never acknowledged them. They were young, and their relationship started out as a lifelong friendship, until they began experimenting. Then it became a connection that they didn't even have with their families. They were it for each other, and Gavin simply broke apart when Austin left.

Now, when he was in so much pain, Austin was back, and hopefully, he would be the bigger man. He still loved Austin and they deserved a second chance. He would talk with him to learn what had changed between them. Maybe that's why he hadn't been able to kill himself the past two times. Life had a plan for him. Gavin never expected to see Austin again, or imagined Brian would still move into his house after everything that happened. Gavin had the chance to start a new life with the two people that meant the world to him. He only needed his parents to have a change of heart—*maybe when hell froze over*, he thought.

Gavin debated stopping at Leah's house to shower and get ready to see Austin, but it felt stupid when he was going to his own house. *Oh well*, Gavin thought when he arrived. He had nothing to lose, but his own heart; which Austin already had. He took a breath and stepped inside his house.

"Are you making me chili, darling? Let me take a shower and I'll help you set the table," Gavin said, taking his coat off. He heard a crashing noise and moved to the kitchen. Austin had dropped a bowl full of chili, which was now covering most of the floor as well as Austin. Gavin couldn't resist laughing at the situation, even though he could tell Austin wasn't amused.

"I'm sorry I startled you," Gavin said, still laughing. "I was just excited about the chili. Go ahead and take a shower. I'll clean all of this."

"I'm the one who's sorry. I lost track of time, and didn't hear the door open. I'll take care of the mess myself."

"Take your ass into the bathroom. I said I'd do it."

"I like it when you get all bossy on me," Austin said with a wink.

Gavin just growled and left to get the cleaning supplies.

An hour later, they were sitting on the couch, finishing their chili and watching *SportsCenter*. Gavin caught Austin smiling at him several times. Everything felt right. They commented about stats and the different news in the program. Austin got interested in an MMA interview and Gavin took the time to study his profile. Austin wore sweats and a muscle shirt that looked as if someone had painted it on him. He had his legs on the couch and his elbow resting on the armrest. He looked so at home that Gavin realized how much he wanted this to happen every day.

“Do I have chili on my face?” Austin asked.

“No. I’m just glad you’re here with me. I really missed you all these years. I may be stupid enough to forget how much it hurt me when you left, but I couldn’t stop wishing for us to have a second chance.” For a moment Gavin looked down. He wasn’t sure why he’d told Austin that. He wanted another chance, but it felt a little too fast to let his heart free. Maybe they needed to start developing their friendship again, before jumping in the deep end.

“Gavin?”

“Yes.”

“Are you OK?” Before Gavin was able to react, Austin put his bowl down and tackled him. He just hugged him for a long time. Words weren’t needed. They knew exactly what the other was feeling, how long they had been apart, and how hard it would be to be together again. Gavin had so many questions for Austin, but he didn’t want to ruin the moment. They would have the chance to deal with everything over time. Now they just needed to sort out the path they wanted to follow.

They were interrupted by Gavin’s phone. When they moved apart both had a smile on their faces, and their eyes were shining with tears.

“Hello, love, I haven’t tried to kill myself today. I’m just at the house having dinner with Austin,” was the greeting Gavin gave Leah.

“Please don’t joke like that. You know I only worry about you because I love you.”

“I know, and that’s why I can. I now understand that if I want, I can have a chance at happiness again. I have people that love me, but more importantly I have people that need me to be strong and take care of them,” he said this to Leah, without taking his eyes off Austin. Gavin moved on the couch and made

a space for Austin to lie down between his legs. When Austin's back touched his chest, Gavin wrapped his free hand around him and continued talking to Leah. He kissed Austin softly in his hair, and on his jaw and neck.

"I'm going to see Brian tomorrow morning before work, do you want to go with me?" he asked Austin.

"If he wants to come here, I can make breakfast. You can spend the night here so you can be with him longer," Austin said hopefully.

"He can't come. He had a motorcycle accident four years ago and now lives in an assisted living facility. He's planning on moving in with me, but we had several delays since I had to fix the house to accommodate him."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. Yes, I will go with you."

"Leah, are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Austin and I will be there early. I'm staying here tonight, so we can save some time."

"I imagine. You may even save water too, if you shower together."

"Leah!"

"Relax, Gavin. I could tell the moment I met him he was all you needed to be happy again, but please slow down and do things right this time. It may take a while for you two to learn how to put your love for each other before everything else."

"Since when did you become so thoughtful?" Gavin asked.

"Since always. I love you and I'll talk to you later."

Gavin put his phone aside and wrapped his other arm around Austin, moving his hand up and down his chest. "We have a lot to talk about," he said.

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## Chapter 5

Austin felt completely at peace in Gavin's arms. Finally he had what he wanted, now he needed to figure out what to do to keep it.

"I know we have a lot to talk about and that's exactly why I'm here. I know I have a lot of groveling to do and I'm up for it. It's not going to be easy and I'm sure I'll say a lot of stupid things that may not make sense to you. I just want us to try, to have a chance at happiness forever." Austin got comfortable against Gavin's chest and closed his eyes.

"Thanks for not running out of town. If anyone has been stupid, it's me. I'm no longer that happy guy you once loved. I'm trying to survive with everything happening around me. I'm trying to be strong, but sometimes I just want to fall and have someone there to catch me," Gavin said.

"I'm here for you," Austin promised. "I'll never run away again. I loved when you were there for me and I was a coward leaving you without a word. If I only knew everything that would happen to you because of me, I wouldn't have ever left."

Austin was holding Gavin's wrist and rubbing circles softly over his tattoos. Gavin tried to pull his arms away, but Austin kept hold of him. He kissed the one showing Brian's name and placed it against his face, kissing it softly. "I know how much you wanted to be like your brother, and I'm here if you need to talk about what happened, when you're ready. I'll also be here for you when you are ready to talk about the marks his name is covering." He placed Gavin's arm over his chest and grabbed the other. "Is this one for me?"

"Kinda. You were my first love, but I got this one to remind me that I need to love myself first. It's been hard, as you know. I'm not quite there yet, but I started therapy again and I'm not planning to stop again."

Austin kissed the word *love* and traced it with his tongue. "I love how your back piece looks. It's much more elaborate than the outline you had before I left."

"I know. The pain from the needle feels good, so I kept adding lines and roses. After you left, I added the thorns."

"I'm sorry I caused you so much pain, but this time apart made me a better person. I'm sure if I didn't leave, we would have ended, grown apart. I was too

immature to figure out how important your love was—well, is—for me. I learned that boxing is just something I like, but I love you more.”

“I’m not sure. I would have done anything for you to stay with me. I have always known how important your career is, and I would never have asked you to put me first. I just wanted to know what you were planning, rather than finding out so cruelly.”

Austin turned to face Gavin. The only light came from the TV, creating shadows between them. Austin kissed him, letting him know how much his words had meant to him. He bit Gavin’s lip and kissed his jaw. He moved closer and murmured in Gavin’s ear, “Please let me show you that I will be there for you for the rest of our lives.”

“OK,” crossed Gavin’s lips.

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Austin took a minute to pinch himself, just to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. He was with Gavin, on his way to visit Brian. The last time he rode in Gavin’s old Chevy was the day he left. Today they woke up cuddling. Nothing happened during the night, but Austin was OK about it. Just having Gavin holding him during the night was all he needed to feel his life finally getting back to normal. He didn’t miss his daily training, or the fame that came with his championship belts. All Austin needed was his big man beside him.

Austin was fit and had stayed at the same weight for several years. At six-one, he was considered tall. He stopped any manscaping when he left Nevada and had no plans to do it any time soon, unless Gavin wanted to do it for him. Thinking about Gavin shaving him made him squirm in his seat, and Gavin gave him a questioning look. Austin just smiled and watched out the window to cover the blush taking over his face. If he had to guess, Gavin was probably over two hundred and twenty pounds now, making Austin look smaller, and he was amazed how easily he could manhandle him around. His beard was unkempt, and Austin could imagine how much he would enjoy it all over his body.

He definitely needed to corral his thoughts; visiting Brian while lusting after Gavin might not be a good idea. They spoke the night before about Brian’s accident and how guilty Gavin felt for not stopping his car when Brian asked. The wreck wasn’t Gavin’s fault; it was simply a tragic accident. Yes, Gavin left the house and ignored Brian’s attempts to stop him, but the east turn in that

highway had cost several people their lives. Brian was lucky to have survived, even with his limitations. He was mostly independent now and Austin would help the brothers with anything they needed.

“Are you ready?” Gavin asked, when they arrived at the assisted living complex where Brian lived.

Austin nodded and followed Gavin inside. They arrived at the nurses’ counter, where Leah was waiting.

“Your mom left about thirty minutes ago and she isn’t coming back until dinner time. You’re safe to stay as long as you need,” she told Gavin. “Austin, if you like, you can wait in my office.”

“He’s coming in with me, I’m sure Brian will be OK with him visiting, after the initial shock,” Gavin replied, taking Austin’s hand. Leah laughed.

“I guess he knows how to defend himself. Just be careful about flying debris. His arms are pretty strong,” she warned Austin.

They continued to Brian’s room, holding hands, making several people look twice. Eldon’s main claim to fame was its American Gothic House. The facility was in a larger city that was not as progressive as other towns in Iowa. Austin didn’t care what others thought about them. He loved Gavin and was getting another chance to fight for his love; nothing to be ashamed of.

When they entered the room, Brian had his prosthetics on, and was standing by the door. He was wearing shorts, which allowed Austin to see them. Gavin had told him not to stare, but Austin was failing miserably. When the door closed behind them, Brian turned and realized Austin was in the room. Just like Gavin, Brian didn’t know how to hide his emotions and his face showed the surprise at seeing Austin change into anger.

“We’re going to talk about him in a minute,” Brian said to Gavin. “First, I want you to come here and tell me how you’re doing.”

Austin released Gavin’s hand so he could move closer to Brian. Brian hugged him for a long time and talked into Gavin’s ear, but Austin was too far away to hear. Were it not for how much the brothers looked alike, Austin wouldn’t have recognized Brian. He looked older, too mature for his age. Austin could tell his upper body was strong, probably from all the work done during his rehabilitation. He could see how Gavin changed when he embraced him, like a scared little boy getting comforted by his older brother.

"I know you did something after you left here. Tell me now, and don't try to sugarcoat it," Brian ordered Gavin after they separated. "It has to be a really stupid reason for this one to be here with you."

"He has a name and you know it. I didn't do anything out of the ordinary, just worked and played in my dark room. I had to wait for Leah to give me the OK to come visit after what happened with Mom."

"You know that's bullshit and I'm only giving you one more chance to talk. If not, I will ask you to leave. I was waiting for at least a call, to have a chance to wish you a happy birthday, and I got nothing. It took you almost two weeks to come see me. So talk now, or you and this one can walk away." Brian moved to the bed and sat on the edge.

Gavin looked uncomfortable, like he was being reprimanded for stealing cookies out of the jar. Austin moved forward and stood beside Gavin, placing his hand on Gavin's lower back. Gavin relaxed and walked to join Brian on the bed. He sat beside him and held his hand. Brian had a matching tattoo on his wrist, of Gavin's name, but no cut marks underneath. Gavin held Brian's hand and closed his eyes.

"After I left the other day, I didn't know what to do. I just drove around a little while and ended up at Randy's. I stayed there drinking for several hours and then drove home." Gavin opened his eyes and looked at Brian. Austin could see the desperation in Gavin's eyes reflected in Brian's. He was sure he knew exactly what Gavin was going to say. Gavin continued, "When I got home, I started thinking about everything that happened before, and with Mom that morning."

"Please tell me you didn't. You promised me you would talk to me before you tried something that stupid again."

"I'm sorry," Gavin said looking down into his lap. Austin wasn't sure what to do. The moment was private. It was a conversation he didn't need to be part of, but he was happy that someone had worried about Gavin all these years. Brian hugged Gavin, and when Austin tried to leave, Brian asked him to stay. Austin walked to the bed and hugged Gavin's back. After a moment, Austin moved away and stood by the window, allowing Gavin and Brian to have a moment together.

"Gavin, can you please let me talk to Austin alone?" Brian requested.

"No. I want to hear anything you have to tell him. I'm not the stupid twenty-two year old you have to babysit anymore."



“Believe it or not, little brother, for me, you’re always going to be that annoying baby Mom and Dad brought home to dethrone me. So live with it. I just want to know why Austin is back after all the havoc he caused to our family.”

“He didn’t cause anything. It was my—”

“Sky,” Austin interrupted, moving closer so that he was standing behind him. “I understand Brian’s concerns and I’m fine answering any questions he may have. If you want to stay that’s OK. I have nothing to hide, and any apologies I need to offer, are just to you.” Austin kissed Gavin and wrapped his arms around his neck. He wanted to protect him, to keep him close all the time. He knew better than anyone how painful it was to have your family hurt you.

“Austin, Brian needs to know that the only reason I’m here today is because you showed up at my door.”

“It’s about time he did something worthy of you,” Brian said sarcastically. “He was your all, and left without looking back. Now I’m sure he just wants to pick up where he left. Like if what happened to all of us never existed. Gavin, you can have the life you deserve, if you finally let him go.”

Austin accepted what Brian was saying, but he wasn’t going to let Gavin go. He held Gavin tighter and was rewarded when Gavin leaned back against him. He knew then that Gavin was choosing him and he was ready for the challenge. The recovery route was going to be long, but Austin would be there for him. He would accompany him to therapy if need be—whatever it took to get his happy Sky back.

Gavin looked his brother in the eye. “We’re giving each other the opportunity to see if we can have at least a friendship again. If it ends in more it’d be great, if it doesn’t, we’ll know it’s finally over.”

“Fine,” Brian said. “Do as you please. I’m here for you either way. Plus, I’m going to cock-block you, since I’m ready to move in with you when you can have me.”

Gavin scooped Brian up into his arms. Austin was surprised with the reaction. The brothers looked so happy that Austin had to smile. He didn’t know how they’d manage it all together, but he was sure he could charm Brian.

They only had a couple of minutes before Gavin had to leave for work. Austin was going to drop him off and then get some things done at the house.

He was getting really used to living at Gavin's and was ready for him to move back in. He was ready to retire and stay with Gavin.

"I'll wait for you in the truck so you two can have some time alone."

"Thank you, darling," Gavin responded.

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## Chapter 6

For the next two weeks, Gavin continued to show up at his house after work. On his days off, he and Austin spent time together buying groceries, running in the afternoons and lazing on the couch in the evening, watching movies. Every night Gavin would return to Leah's house and in the morning he'd go back to have breakfast with Austin; some days they stopped and visited Brian.

In two days, they would be moving Brian into the house and Gavin would finally stay, but Austin would be moving to his dad's house. Gavin wanted him to stay with them, but Austin wanted the brothers to have the space they needed. Plus, they needed to take it slow. So far, everything had worked great between them. At times the tension was high, but other than making out and some fondling, they had played it very safe.

*Maybe they needed something more*, Gavin thought, because since Austin's return and his therapy sessions, he had been feeling better. He was seeing life with a different perspective and was taking it a day at a time. He finally understood the importance of putting himself first, but he was ready to move forward with Austin. If not, he would never know if they belonged together, or if time was now standing between them. Gavin was ready to take the first step on the path to happiness. He might not have his parents' blessing, but having Brian move in with him gave Gavin the comfort of knowing that he hadn't lost all his family. He knew he needed to try to talk again to his parents, but he needed to be stronger for that.

Gavin finally understood why suicide wasn't his way out of all the pain surrounding him. He was finally going to own his happiness. The days he spent alone in the hospital showed him that he was letting others control his life. He was ready to break through and find the peace he needed in his life. Killing himself would only hurt those he loved, creating new victims out of his problems. Gavin knew it would take time, but he was ready to move forward, not for anyone else this time, but for himself.

Emma jumped on Gavin's lap, surprising him. He hadn't noticed the dog return with Austin from his afternoon run. Gavin had left work early to stop at Leah's house and get ready for a night with Austin. It was Black Friday and he wanted to do something special, to thank Austin for being there for him for the

last month or so. He knew that no matter what Austin said, he would need to return to Nevada at some point, to train and defend his championship belt. Gavin wouldn't let him give up on his dreams when he was so close, just to play house with him. Austin grabbed Emma and sat on Gavin's lap with her. He kissed him softly on the lips and the dog joined in.

"No threesome, Emma. You know I'm a faithful one," Gavin said smiling.

"So pick one," Austin joked. "Her or me."

"Emma is always going to be my baby, but you're my darling," Gavin replied, kissing Austin's neck and marking him. "Do you have any plans for tonight?"

"I think she is free tonight, but I can check her agenda," Austin grinned.

"Oh, you're a comedian now?"

"Since I'm going to retire, I need a new career. Class clown was always my best quality."

"I know. I was there."

"Yes, you were. Always trying to keep me out of trouble and always ending up with me at the principal's office."

"Please don't remind me. I made the stupidest decisions when you were involved. I think I still do."

"You did and I love you more for it. And no, I have no plans but to be with you tonight."

"Good. Go get ready. We're going out tonight! Dress warm—the weather forecast is calling for below freezing temperatures tonight."

"Are you asking me on a date, Mr. Parker?"

"Indeed I am, Mr. Black. Now, move your ass. I have to finish getting everything ready."

"Do you want to help me get ready?"

"No, my boy. If I do, we won't leave the house tonight."

"That's good with me," Austin said, putting Emma down on the floor and getting comfortable on Gavin's lap.

Gavin growled and moved Austin to straddle him. He removed Austin's gym shirt and attacked his nipples. He loved the taste of Austin's sweat. He

alternated between twisting and nibbling each nipple, blowing on them and watching them perk up. He continued to kiss Austin's chest and every little defined muscle in it. He then realized the rosary was inscribed with the word *Sky*. Gavin looked at Austin and he smiled back at him.

"You're always with me, Sky, close to my heart. I love you," Austin confessed.

"I know it may be too early, but I love you too, darling. I just want to make everything right this time. Please get ready so I can take you out on a proper date for the first time."

"OK. I want to have many more firsts with you." Austin kissed Gavin and stood up. He didn't try to cover the bulge in his running shorts. He just moved down the hallway, leaving Gavin with only a wink.

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Gavin held Austin's hand as they entered Randy's, a small dive bar that was the center of Eldon's nighttime entertainment. They used to meet there over the weekends, to have dinner and a couple of beers once upon a time. Most nights they hustled people at the pool tables, before the band started playing covers, ranging from Toby Keith to Nirvana. The place hadn't changed much since they were younger; Friday night was still steak night.

"Wow, Abby hasn't changed a single thing in this place," Austin commented.

"Nope, and the steak is still great."

"Nice. Now I'm officially a cheap date," Austin added.

They moved to an empty corner table away from the band area. Gavin wanted to have a chance to talk without having to shout. Since they only had one item available for dinner, there was no need for a menu. To Gavin, it felt like a dream to be back at the dive with Austin. After Austin left, Gavin never stopped by, because everything reminded him of Austin. About two years ago, Leah made him stop for lunch and it wasn't too bad. Since then, he stopped a couple of times, but always on his own.

"Hey, Gavin, who's the catch?" a waitress asked.

"Georgia, this is Austin. Austin, this is Georgia," Gavin introduced them.

"He's really handsome. You finally found a good one. He does look kind of familiar though."

"I get that a lot," Austin replied.

"Can we have two steaks, medium rare, fully loaded potatoes, and two cold ones, please?"

"Yes, Gavin, especially since you asked so nicely," Georgia responded.

After the waitress left, Gavin took a moment to study Austin. He looked so different from the dreamer he used to be. In the time they were apart, both of them had changed considerably. Gavin felt they were shielding their hearts and he was afraid that he was too damaged to love Austin the way he deserved. They had talked a lot during the last couple of weeks and had arrived at a simple compromise. Gavin knew Austin wanted more from him, but he wasn't sure if he could trust Austin again. He needed to find a way to assure Austin they could have a relationship, without the need for him to retire from boxing. Just like before, Gavin couldn't leave Eldon to follow him. Before, he needed to help after his dad's stroke, and now he had Brian to take care of. Hopefully someday, Brian would be able to live on his own, but until then, Gavin was stuck.

Gavin wanted to wake up every day with Austin and have a chance for a normal life. He wanted to be there when he trained, to take care of him. He wanted to start dreaming again, to plan the next ten years of his life, without the fear of being left behind. Maybe he needed to be selfish and think about himself first, but he always wore his heart on his sleeve and couldn't say no to someone who needed him. Austin noticed him staring and smiled. As always, that simple gesture warmed Gavin's heart. Maybe it was finally time to let go and live the life he imagined.

Austin grabbed Gavin's hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss.

"Am I dreaming or has the prodigal son returned to this humble establishment?" Abby, the bar owner, interrupted their moment.

"I'm here in flesh and blood, dear Mistress, for you to do with as you please," Austin replied. He stood up and hugged Abby. The older woman wasn't more than five feet tall and looked like a dwarf compared to Austin. Gavin smiled, seeing Austin had not changed his flirtatious antics.

"I was so worried when the sport channels began speculating on your retirement," Abby said. "For the last couple of weeks, the reporters have had a ball, counting the days before the announcement. I'm glad to see you're in great shape and worthy of your current championship."

"They may not be too far from reality. It's not official yet, but I'm considering retirement. Well, that is if this gorgeous guy finally takes me back," Austin replied, making Gavin blush.

"Oh. I thought you guys were just friends."

"We are. I just want to be more than that to him."

"Gavin, that sounds like a proposal to me. You know it's legal for you guys to marry here in Iowa, right?"

Gavin's face got several shades redder.

"That sounds great to me, too," Austin agreed. "What do you think, Sky?"

"I think the two of you are delusional," was Gavin's response. "Austin, you're too young to retire, and Abby, I'm not a damsel in distress, waiting for my Prince Charming."

"OK, Cinderella. I didn't mean to insult you. Gunner, you better go sweet-talk his ear. He doesn't sound like a man in love. It was great seeing you. Please don't forget about your dear Mistress again." Abby kissed Austin and left them alone.

"I think she's right," Austin said thoughtfully, taking a sip from his beer. "I don't think you love me enough to marry me."

Before Gavin was able to answer, Georgia arrived with their food. It took several minutes for her to leave the table, because Abby told her who Austin was, and she proceeded to tell them about how sorry she was for not recognizing Gunner Black. According to Georgia, she always watched his matches and had made several hundred betting on his wins.

They were finally alone again, the silence that followed was awkward, changing the feeling of their night together. It was Austin who broke the silence.

"I can't do this anymore. If you don't want me, I'm willing to leave. I love you too much to let you destroy your life. If you need me to be away in order to be happy, I will, because I love you."

Gavin dropped his fork in shock. He thought carefully before he responded.

"For a while, I thought that was what I needed. Then I realized how stupid I was. I didn't want to think about the pain I caused. I have everything I've always wanted with you. I trust you, and know you will never do anything to

hurt me. I want you to know that I will be strong for you, but especially, I will be strong for me. I want to be the one holding you up. I want you to know you can count on me and that I'm not going to break every time you turn your back. If you want, you can have me and your career. You don't have to choose one or the other."

Austin shook his head. "I want to choose, and I choose you. Five years ago, I placed my career first and my heart second, and all it gave me was a cold bed and a gold belt. What I've always wanted was your heart and your company. Please, let this be the time we take a leap of faith and love each other unconditionally."

"I will," Gavin answered. Austin moved forward and kissed his lips softly. They both continued eating and smiling at each other. Gavin faced the bar and saw Abby's knowing gaze on them. Georgia magically disappeared, leaving them alone. They talked about people they used to know, and Austin told Gavin about his matches. Gavin told Austin about the year he had left to finish his college degree, and they made plans to help each other fulfill their dreams.

"Do you want to dance with me?" Gavin asked, when the band started playing George Strait's "Cross my Heart". Austin stood up and followed Gavin. Several couples were already on the dance floor, and only a couple of people looked at them, frowning. Gavin didn't care. When Austin left, rumors started, and by now the whole town knew he was gay, thanks to his lovely mother and her public prayer requests to save his soul. He was relieved Austin accepted the dance with him. This was the first time they displayed any type of affection in public. Most people in the bar knew them, and he was sure it would have some repercussions down the road, but he wasn't going to lose the opportunity to have a normal relationship.

They held each other and lost themselves in the lyrics. Gavin placed one hand on Austin's back and with the other he held his neck. Austin had one arm around Gavin's waist, and the other between them, resting on Gavin's chest. He nuzzled Gavin's neck and rested his head on his shoulder. They swayed to the music, like they were the only two souls left in the bar. Their bodies fit against each other perfectly and Gavin felt his life taking shape once again. They were stealing small touches here and there; they kissed several times and swayed against each other. Gavin could feel his body responding to Austin's closeness, and he knew Austin could feel it too. When the song was over, Gavin grabbed Austin's hand and led him outside. It took them no time to be on the road, but Gavin turned away from the house.



“Where are we going?” Austin asked.

“It’s a surprise, but I’m sure you’ll want to kiss me when we get there,” Gavin said and blew a kiss to Austin.

Gavin couldn’t do anything else, but smile. His life had turned full circle. With a lot of help from his therapist, Brian, Leah, and Austin, he was able to find himself. He understood that the pain he was feeling wasn’t because of all the troubles he thought he’d caused, but because he allowed his fear of being alone to take over his life. He always lived to please others and thought he had no value when Austin left, when his parents pushed him away, but, more than anything, when he thought he was responsible for Brian’s accident. Now he was on the right track, and had the love of those who wanted him to do better and keep moving forward. This time, he was going to live his own life day-by-day, trying to be happy.

They left the truck and walked close to the fence that divided the river bank from the water plant. It was a remote area they used to visit together when they were younger—the place where they kissed for the first time, on a warm summer afternoon. Austin had challenged Gavin to skinny dip in the river and he didn’t think twice about it. The fence was covered, so people couldn’t see the equipment storage behind it, and the pier on the other side was condemned, after some parts of it were damaged by flooding several years before.

When they came out of the river, Gavin had reclined against the fence and pulled Austin to him. Their skin was bare and cool from the water. Austin placed his hands on the fence and Gavin held him by his biceps. They hesitated and held their foreheads together. Their lips were close and their breath was caught. If someone had taken a picture, their love would have shone through.

This time, before they made it all the way to the fence, Austin tackled Gavin to the cold ground, but he didn’t feel anything other than a great expectation. The warmth from Austin’s body was enough to make him forget about the hard, frosty earth. They held each other close, kissing and trying to touch each other—difficult, since they were wearing several layers and winter coats, but they tried anyway.

“Darling, please let me love you,” Gavin said and kissed Austin deeply.

“Are you sure you are ready?” Austin asked, when they separated to breathe.

“Yes.” Gavin kissed him again. His hands moved around Austin’s back, until he found skin underneath his shirt. He traced circles over and over and

pressed him closer. A *hmmm* escaped from Austin's lips when their hard-ons rubbed together. Gavin felt Austin smile against his lips. He knew the effect he had on Austin. He was capable of making him forget everything that was happening around them. Gavin could only feel the pressure of his chest above him and he wanted more skin-to-skin. He needed Austin more now than their very first time, when they both came as soon as Gavin breached Austin.

"Please fuck me," Austin pleaded, sitting up on Gavin's groin and grinding against his cock. "I want you to fill me, and make me forget everything."

"No."

"What?"

"After all these years I want to make love to you in my bed, our bed, where you've always belonged. Plus, I don't want you to freeze that pretty ass of yours." He rubbed Austin's thighs, until he reached what he wanted. "Now, move forward and sit on my face. We can't leave before I taste you. I'm sure you're dripping for me already." Gavin grabbed Austin's dick through his jeans and helped him forward.

"Fuck, you are going to make me come with your words and your hands."

Austin didn't lose time. He aligned himself and opened his jeans. Gavin helped him free his dripping cock and kissed its head reverently, causing Austin to shudder. He licked the underside, to the tip, and lapped around the slit, using one hand to pump Austin and trying to grab his ass with the other.

"Your jeans are in the way. I want to touch you and feel your hole quiver."

"Oh God."

"I know. Later I'm going to eat you properly and get you ready for me. Move your hand back and touch me. Yes, like that." Gavin swallowed Austin's dick all the way down his throat. Austin took a minute to adjust, and started moving slowly. He found a rhythm, alternating speed and depth. Gavin still needed more. He put his hand inside Austin's coat, pinching one nipple and then the other. Austin withdrew quickly. Gavin tried to pull him in again.

"Fuck my face, darling. Show me how much you missed me and how much you like me sucking on you."

"Oh fuck, Sky. I'm going to come. Oh shit." He moved frantically in and out of Gavin's mouth.

The first spurts started and Gavin swallowed Austin's load until he was fully expended. He released him with a pop and Austin moved down Gavin's body for a kiss.

"I could come again, just from tasting myself in your mouth. I missed you so much, Sky. I can't believe I was stupid enough to leave you."

Gavin offered two fingers to Austin and he opened his mouth hungrily, lapping around them and making them wet.

"Don't worry, darling. You have all night to show me how much," he said. "Now we have to go, before I put you on your knees and fuck you raw."

"I'm ready. Go ahead."

"As tempting as that offer is, I want to take my time exploring your body again. I want to mark you as mine, so you will never leave me again. And if you're really good, I may let you fuck me."

"OK. Time to go," Austin said, tucking himself back in. He got to his feet, pulling Gavin with him. Gavin smirked at his antics.

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Getting into the house was interesting. Gavin couldn't stop touching and kissing Austin long enough to open the door. He was surprised they actually had stopped at the river bank. Gavin was ready and wanted nothing else but to show Austin how much he'd missed him. He'd dreamed of having one more chance to even so much as talk to Austin, and now he had the chance to claim him, to make Austin his once again. He couldn't believe he almost lost everything, and it was Austin who gave him a new opportunity at life, by saving him with his arrival.

"Fuck," Austin shouted after stubbing his big toe, as he fought his shoes off. "Could you remind me again why I need to take my shoes off at the door?"

"To keep the mud off the carpet. Not all of us have a maid to take care of the house, unless you're offering to stay and do it for me. You can wear nothing, but a cute apron, so I can have quick access to all your bits to give you your payment." Gavin wiggled his eyebrows salaciously.

"Anything you want," Austin agreed. "Now, can you please stop talking and use that tongue for something more creative?"

"Oh, yes I can," Gavin said, going down on his knees. He removed Austin's other shoe and opened his pants. Pulling them down over his thighs, he ordered

Austin to turn around and brace himself against the wall. He spread Austin's cheeks and started licking him, from his balls to the top of his ass, circling his hole with his tongue, while holding his ass cheeks forcefully. "Grab your dick and stretch it down so I can have it too."

Austin followed the command and Gavin didn't lose the pace, giving equal attention to every single inch of Austin's lower region.

"Fuck, Sky, you already made me come once tonight. Slow down. I want to come with you balls-deep inside me."

"You're so sexy, darling, when you talk to me like that. I'm just getting you ready for me. I need to take my time with you."

Gavin continued his assault, sucking on one of Austin's balls, and then the other. Gavin was glad Austin didn't shave them. He loved the rough texture in his mouth. He licked from Austin's perineum to his hole and back again, his hand on Austin's lower back, pushing him down and bringing his ass closer to his face. He teased Austin's opening several times and then sucked hard on it.

Austin's legs wobbled, but Gavin held him close to his body. "OK. We need to take this to the bedroom. Too many clothes and I need you now." Gavin helped Austin out of his pants and kissed him one more time before taking his hands to guide him down the hallway. He closed the door so Emma couldn't follow them. She didn't need to see her daddies fucking. Gavin surprised himself with that thought, but he liked the sound of it.

Gavin removed Austin's shirt and threw it to the floor. He took a minute to look at Austin's body. There was something so erotic about having him in front of him, completely undressed, while he himself was still fully clothed. He moved his fingers slowly over Austin's jaw, neck, down his pecs, tracing the rosary on his chest. Austin's cock was pointing straight up, hard and dripping pre-come. He grabbed it and gave it a couple of tugs. Austin shivered and moved to the rhythm Gavin imposed.

When Gavin stopped, Austin went down to his knees and rubbed his face against Gavin's jeans-clad bulge. Austin moved back and opened Gavin's pants, bringing them down to his ankles, together with the black briefs he was wearing. Gavin's cock bounced free and Austin gasped. Gavin looked down and saw the surprise on Austin's face. After Austin left for the tournament five years ago, Gavin had Austin's name tattooed below his navel. He knew Austin was going to win the tournament and he wanted to do something special.

Unfortunately, he did it, only to find days later that Austin wouldn't be coming back.

"Sky," Austin murmured, taking hold of Gavin's hips. He took his time, tracing his name, first with his fingers and then with his tongue. "When did you get it?" he asked.

"Couple of days after you left. It was your gift for winning the tournament. I did it even before the tournament started. I knew with all my heart you would win."

"I'm not going to live long enough to apologize for what I did, but I promise you from now on there isn't going to be a single day in which I won't show you how much your love means to me." Austin tenderly kissed the tattoo.

Gavin didn't say anything, clearing tears from his face before Austin noticed. He placed his hands in Austin's hair, which was longer than when they were younger. He didn't pull or guide him; he just enjoyed running his hands through it. Austin palmed Gavin's dick and nibbled the underside, giving special attention to Gavin's sack.

"Stop, darling. I need you now." Gavin helped Austin up and they moved to the bed. Gavin opened the night stand and took the lube and some condoms.

"Feeling lucky?" Austin asked sarcastically.

"Nope. I know I am. Climb up the bed on your back," Gavin commanded, with a swat on Austin's bare ass. Austin responded by wiggling it for more. Gavin spanked him again and pushed him, making him bounce on the bed. Austin laughed and moved to the center of the mattress.

Gavin took his pants all the way off and removed his shirt. He felt Austin's eyes on him. He didn't have a perfect body, like Austin. They were both the same height, but Gavin was never a gym rat. He preferred physical jobs and junk food. He wasn't fat—more like a big bear. At the sigh, Austin started jerking off, calling Gavin's attention. He crawled into the bed, spreading Austin's legs, his hands traveling from Austin's ankles, all the way to his chest. Gavin stopped Austin's hand and kissed him deeply.

They both grunted as their bodies finally lined up skin to skin. Gavin reached for the lube to get Austin ready, bending Austin's left leg at the knee and kissing him again. He slowly entered him with his index finger, then used another to make Austin comfortable. He dragged his lips down over Austin's

chest, taking his time to explore each nipple and trace around his tattoos. Gavin sat on his haunches and used his other hand to jerk Austin's cock, increasing the speed of his fingers in Austin's ass to match.

Austin was panting and Gavin loved all the noises coming from him. He lined up with Austin, moving his hand to grab both of their dicks at the same time and rubbing them together. He removed his fingers from Austin's ass to get the condom. Austin grabbed his legs, pulling them close to his chest and exposing his hole to Gavin in readiness.

"I love you so much, darling. I missed you," Gavin said, as he entered Austin. He didn't stop until he was all the way in.

"Fuck, Sky, that's so good. Please make me yours, Sky."

"You're mine, darling. You're not leaving me again." Gavin remained completely still. "Say it. Tell me you're not leaving me again."

"I promise, Sky. I'll never leave you again."

Gavin started moving, slowly at first, enjoying all the cursing coming from Austin's lips, as he tried to make him move faster. He wanted it to last, since the last time they were together felt like a lifetime ago. Austin placed his feet flat on the bed and pushed against Gavin, trying to take over.

Gavin moved forward and whispered, "I love you," in Austin's ear. He pulled out. "Get on your knees, face-down on the bed," he ordered. Austin complied. "So beautiful," Gavin said and grabbed Austin's hips so hard he was sure he would have bruises in the morning. Gavin moved one of his hands around and got hold of Austin's dick, jerking him off.

"Oh fuck, Sky, I'm almost there. Fuck me harder, I'm coming. Oh God, Sky—"

Gavin felt Austin's ass grab his cock and he increased his pace. He kissed Austin's back as he exploded. One or two more thrusts and Gavin followed him.

Gavin pressed his weight against Austin and stayed there, until their breathing calmed. He pulled out carefully and went to the bathroom to take care of the condom and clean up. He returned with a warm rag and took care of Austin, dropped it on the floor and climbed back into bed. They cuddled together, but Gavin stayed awake, waiting for his love to fall asleep. He kissed

him one more time and slowly drifted off to sleep with his head on Austin's chest.

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## Chapter 7

"Where the hell is my son?" Damian Black screamed as soon as the door opened. He didn't wait for an answer. He simply stormed inside the house, pushing Gavin aside. Gavin turned and grabbed the back of Mr. Black's shirt, stalling his pace.

"Let my fucking shirt go!"

"You better leave now. This is my house and I didn't invite you in," Gavin said, pulling Damian harder. Austin walked out of the bedroom.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I knew you were going to be here, fucking this loser," Mr. Black snarled at his son. "Get your stuff together. I've given you enough time to fool around. Now it's time to start training for your next fight."

Austin stayed right where he was. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I'm not a kid looking for your acceptance anymore. I told Dan and Theo that I'm not going to fight for the Light Heavyweight belt and I'm not defending my title next spring. So get the fuck out of here."

Damian escaped Gavin's hold and went for his son. He tried to connect several punches with Austin's midsection, but Austin was much faster than his father. He'd learned to protect himself against his father long ago and he was tired of being treated like a piece of property.

Gavin moved forward, ready to step in and protect his lover, but Austin signaled to him not to intervene. He knocked his father to the ground, face-down, and pinned his arms back, placing a knee in his back. Damian continued to struggle and shout in a fit of rage.

"Calm the fuck down," Austin told his father, at the same time tightening his grip.

"Let me go now and fight like a man! I'm going to beat your sorry ass and then you're coming back to Nevada with me!"

"I'm not letting you go until you calm down. Then you're going to walk out of here and never come back. When I'm ready, I'll contact Dan and start the process to relinquish my belt. I'm going to retire."

"In your dreams. You will retire when I say so."



Austin forced his father to his knees and stood up without losing his hold. Again, Gavin tried to help and Damian launched at him, but Austin grabbed him before he escaped and shoved him out the open door. He fell down the porch steps and quickly struggled to his feet, all set to go for Austin again, but Gavin stepped between them. Austin put a protective arm around Gavin's waist and steered him away, turning his back on his father. The force of Damian's charge threw both of them to the floor. This time Austin didn't think twice, attacking his father to defend Gavin. By the time Gavin was able to stop him, Damian was barely moving.

"Please, darling, stop. We need to get him to the hospital. Go get dressed and I will take care of him."

"No. Let him die like the dog he is."

Gavin held Austin close and said, "Like it or not, he's your father, and he needs our help. Let me be here for you. I love you."

Austin collapsed against Gavin and started sobbing quietly. "He never loved me. All he wanted was for me to achieve what he couldn't. Why help him? He never helped me. No one was there to help me, when he beat me up, night in and night out, to 'make me a man.' I can't take it anymore."

Gavin shushed him gently. "You don't have to. We'll take care of him now, and then we can start a new life together."

Austin stepped back from Gavin and looked at him, and in that moment his future flashed in front of him. He understood the value of the love they used to have, and the miracle of how much more it had become. The years apart only provided them with the opportunity to grow and be the men each other deserved to love, and be loved by. He would do everything in his power to love Gavin with all his heart, but most importantly he would allow Gavin to take care of him. That was the gift he didn't recognize before—the ability to love unconditionally—that Gavin possessed. From this moment on, he would live for the chance to be Gavin's world.

Damian slowly pulled himself into a sitting position, holding his ribs and leaning back against the railings. One of his eyes was closed and he was bleeding from his nose and mouth. Austin tried to move closer, but his father pushed him away. After a few minutes and several tries, Damian staggered to his feet and turned to leave.

"Dad, let me take you to the hospital."

"I'm no longer your dad. I'll take care of myself, as always. I spent my whole life looking after you and this is how you repay me. You're leaving behind everything I taught you, for this asshole. You can have anyone you want and continue your career, but you have to come back to this miserable town, just for this fucking faggot."

Austin didn't know how to respond. He'd always looked up to his father, even when Damian returned drunk from the bar and released his rage on his son, leaving him crying in a corner. He'd always tried to be the son his father wanted and lived his life to achieve his father's dreams. Austin loved boxing, but his father was obsessed with it. If his father had asked him to return when he was driving to see Gavin before his birthday, he would have done so, but now it was too late. He was finally in the place he belonged: with the man who owned his heart.

"I never cared you fucked guys, but I can't forgive you for letting me down. I made you what you are. You owe me your life and your career. Without me, you're nobody. Don't even think about calling me again. You're dead to me."

"Dad, please."

Damian ignored him and moved slowly to his car. When he was gone, Austin fell to his knees on the driveway. Gavin carried him inside the house, where he helped him shower and put him to bed. As he started to doze, Austin knew everything would get better with Gavin on his side. It might take time, but he was ready to let go of his father's hold and become a man in his own right.

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Austin opened his eyes to find a pair of emerald ones looking directly into his. Gavin was guarding his sleep. Austin was glad about it. They canceled all their plans and stayed home. It took a moment for it to become clear, but in the last couple of weeks, Gavin's house had become Austin's home too. Gavin and Emma were always his family, and finally everything was falling into place.

Now that the end of the year was approaching, Austin was glad to have a chance at a new life. For the first time in five years he felt at peace. He didn't need to look for nameless strangers to spend his nights with, and didn't have to train for a career that he'd stopped caring about the moment he stepped out of Eldon. He loved boxing, but not the bureaucracy and scams around the championship matches.

"I see a part of you is glad to see me, darling," Gavin said with a smile.

"More than you can imagine. Every time I see you, my heart melts."

"Awwww. He really, really loves me," Gavin responded jokingly, but Austin held him tight and started kissing him, trying to convey how much he truly loved him. He felt so lucky Gavin had forgiven him without too much of a fight. They were both in a low moment in their lives, but each other's love was stronger than any wrong-doing they'd suffered because of each other's decisions.

"Darling?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for giving me another chance to live. You gave me my life back and pieced me together." Gavin cuddled closer to Austin.

"Sky?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for giving me another chance to fight for your love."

"Always."

Austin sat up and reached for his phone. He was ready to start his new life and only one thing kept him from moving forward. He tried to call his father, but the call went directly to voicemail, three times. He felt like throwing his phone against the wall. Gavin rested his head on Austin's legs, distracting him from his rage. He played with Gavin's hair until his anger subsided, smoothing his hand over Gavin's cheek and beard, his index finger tracing his lips. They parted for him and Gavin lapped at his finger seductively. Austin felt his body heating up and his cock hardening under Gavin, causing him to smirk.

Austin withdrew for a moment to call his manager. Gavin started kissing his cock through the blanket, causing Austin's breathing to become rapid and shallow. By the time Dan answered the phone, Austin was rock hard.

"Fuck," he murmured, making Gavin laugh and Dan ask what was happening. Austin told him he was retiring, and it took a minute for Dan to stop shouting, but Austin's offer to compensate him until the end of his contract, and possible investments, calmed him enough to finish the conversation. Austin agreed to talk with Dan and Theo in person as soon as possible and ended the call.

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“Are you sure this is what you want?” Gavin asked from his place in Austin’s lap.

“Yes. All I need to be happy is you—well, and maybe Emma.” Austin lifted Gavin’s face to his and sealed their future with a kiss.

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## Epilogue

*March 2013*

Gavin lit the fireplace and rearranged several candles around the room. He had ten more minutes to place Emma in the bedroom and catch his breath before Austin's arrival. Gavin had waited for Austin to leave in the morning so that he could get everything ready to celebrate Austin's thirtieth birthday. Now he was starting to worry about whether he would like what he had done to their home. Since Austin returned, almost three years ago, they had been living together. They had been there for each other, and their love had grown more than they had expected.

They still had some family issues, but Gavin's parents were getting used to seeing them together in town without making a scene. Brian moved to an apartment of his own, since he started dating a lovely girl he met in a support group and at least once a month they double-dated. Austin's father was a different story. After that day, three years ago, Damian disappeared, together with half of the contents of Austin's house. They really didn't care about the stuff he took, but the little they knew about him was through Dan and Theo. Neither of them were especially happy about Austin's retirement, but they were more than pleased with getting a percentage of Austin's investment in Willie's gym.

Now they both worked at the renovated gym. Willie sold it to them after he learned of Austin's return and retirement. Gavin finished his business degree and was the gym's manager. His photography had also taken off, transforming his hobby into a second full-time job, allowing them to travel the world. Austin was in charge of the training and development of new boxers. As businessmen, they were at an exciting stage of their careers. As a couple, they were ready to take the next big step. Maybe if Gavin could stop sweating, he would be presentable enough to make that happen.

When the door opened, Gavin stayed quietly by the fireplace. All the house lights were off and candles were on every surface. The fireplace was set and a blanket with assorted fruits and cheeses was awaiting them. Two glasses of champagne were set on the cloth and in the center was the small box Austin had given Gavin after his twenty-seventh birthday.

Austin came into the room and saw Gavin standing next to the fireplace and holding a cake. He was wearing a black suit, with a black V-neck sweater, together with a pair of boots. Austin smiled in amusement.

"I didn't get the memo about the dress code," he said, dropping his gear on the floor.

"I'll let it slide just once, but please try to do better next time."

"Hey, if you're going to be looking that hot every time I get home, I'm willing to follow any of your rules."

"Any?"

"Yes, any." Austin moved closer to Gavin. Since he was returning from the gym, he was wearing only his training shorts and a polo shirt with the gym's logo. His feet were also bare, as he'd left his shoes by the door. Once again, Gavin was amazed by how lucky he was to have Austin by his side. After all this time, his body still responded immediately to Austin's closeness. Austin took the cake from Gavin and placed it with the rest of the food.

"Are you my early birthday present? Can I unwrap you?" Austin asked, sliding his hands under Gavin's jacket and around his waist. Gavin looked into Austin's eyes and saw how much he was loved. He led Austin over to the blanket and waited for him to sit before kneeling in front of him. He saw the moment at which Austin realized what he was doing, and smiled.

"Since the moment we met, we were best friends. We were inseparable and shared many firsts together."

Austin's smirk interrupted him.

"Out of the gutter please," Gavin said. He waited a moment before he continued, "When I figured out what love was, I knew I wanted to share it with you for the rest of my life. I was so happy that you felt the same way. It's always felt natural to be together and move forward with our dreams. As a couple, we were great when in private, but never figured out how to share our love with others. Unfortunately, we were apart for some years."

Austin looked down, but Gavin lifted his face and made him look into his eyes. He leaned forward and kissed him softly. "We needed that time apart to be where we are today. You saved my life and I will never forget that. I'm here because your love made me stronger, and gave me a second chance at happiness."

Gavin stood up and grabbed the small box from the mantel. Austin's smile was bright, and Gavin couldn't do anything but smile back to the love of his life. He returned to the blanket and sat against the couch, facing the fireplace. Austin moved between Gavin's legs and they stayed quiet for a while, getting comfort from each other. Gavin wrapped his arms around Austin and opened the box. Inside, two platinum wedding bands sparkled at them.

"When you gave me this box I thought it was a sick joke. I was deep in a black hole without a way out, but you never pushed me, or asked for more than I was able to give. You were patient, but most importantly, you were there to guide my every step. Now I know you understood from the beginning how big our love was. I want you to give me the opportunity to love you for the rest of your life, to be your husband and dedicate my life to showing you how much I love you. Austin Jefferson Black, would you make me the happiest man alive? Would you marry me?"

Austin turned and straddled Gavin. They kissed deeply, stopping only for Gavin to take Austin's shirt off. Gavin bent his legs, allowing Austin closer, and continued kissing him.

"Can I think of this as a yes?" Gavin asked.

"Yes, Gavin Elijah Parker, I will marry you. Since the moment we met you were everything to me—my friend, my lover, but most importantly you were my Sky. You allowed me to fly high and gave me all I needed to soar."

No more words were spoken.

**The End**

*Afterward*

No person or situation is worth your life. If you feel there is no other option available for you than suicide, please ask for help. You are an amazing human being with a bright future ahead of you.

Just reach out.

Loves,

Lila Leigh



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### Looking for help?

#### *The Trevor Project*

The Trevor Project is an American nonprofit organization founded in 1998 and the leading national organization focused on suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth.

Toll free 1-866-488-7386

<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

#### *Suicide.org*

Suicide.org is 501c3 nonprofit organization which was conceived and founded by Kevin Caruso in 2004. We currently assist more than 3,000,000 people throughout the world each year. Our mission is to prevent suicides, support suicide survivors, and educate the public about suicide.

International Hotlines

[Suicide.org](http://Suicide.org)

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## Author Bio

*Lila Leigh Hunter lives in sunny California, but expends her days indoors following gay porn stars on Twitter for inspiration. When outside of her cave, she likes to observe men and try to guess their stories. Sometimes she wishes the voices in her head were real; going out with the boys in her books sounds like a plan made in heaven. Her love for writing is only surpassed by her devotion to reading. Lila considers herself lucky for the love and support of her husband and four kids. Even when they think she doesn't do anything around the house. Someday her books will pay enough to change their opinion.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Tumblr](#)

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# CHAPMISTRES VIEW – ADAM AND BEN

By Carol Pedroso

## Photo Description

This is a color photo of a muscular man with tattoos down his left arm. He is doing push-ups facing forwards to the camera, and he has a baby lying on his back. The baby is looking at the camera and looks happy to be where it is.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*This scene has been going through my head for a few months now; if it calls to your muse use it 'cause I seem unable to put my stories on paper and would rather someone with talent give it a try. ;D. Please no BDSM; light bondage and sensation play is fine. I really love witty dialogue and spunky characters. Paranormal of any kind is fine, I said vampire but anything will do; the mpreg would be nice if you can work with it. I want children, and that's it—I won't bother you anymore! :D.*

The sound of the door banging open had every male in the room at the ready in case of attack until they saw my pregnant mate standing there looking like an avenging angel, all beautiful and disheveled, with his thick dark hair escaping the complicated braid he always weaved it into, his usually deep chocolate eyes had a coppery shine to them and the flames in there could burn entire cities, he looked so beautiful it was almost painful, but he also looked quite pissed, which is why I assume my men were pressing against the walls trying to disappear into the woodwork.

“There you are, you bastard! You’re never around when I need you, always doing business!” he snapped angrily while he strode into my office.

“What’s wrong my love?” I asked worried.

“What’s wrong? This is what’s wrong!” he ranted, pointing at his belly where our children were growing inside him. “You did this to me! My back aches, my feet are swollen, I look like a cow, I need to pee every twenty minutes.” He sucked in another breath and continued to vent, even if a little softer. “I have food

cravings I can't fulfill because of your stupid vampy DNA, and I'm horny and I can't sleep if you're not there!" He finished on a sob, the wind having gone out of his sails.

Thankfully he let me gather him in my arms and carry him to our room to a few chuckles from my men.

"I heard that! Don't laugh at my mate, 'cause he's getting laid and you're not!" He yelled over my shoulder, which made me laugh as silence spread over the room, Yep! He was pretty scary when he wanted.

*I'm sorry, mate, I embarrassed you* he said through our bond as he snuggled further into my shoulder.

*Don't worry, love, it's okay* I smiled into his sweet-smelling hair and as I looked down on his face I noticed the dark circles under his eyes.

My poor mate looked at the end of his rope, dark circles stood out against his pale skin and I could feel his exhaustion through our bond, which made me feel like a piece of shit for not noticing he needed me sooner.

*I apologize, my love for not paying enough attention* I said, choosing to keep up the most intimate form of communication and cuddling him closer to me.

Finally, I got to our room, the bed was a tangled mess, the comforter lying on the floor as if he had kicked it off of him in his sleep, which made me feel worse because he could have slept better if I had been here. *I'm taking the whole month off, damn it! No one needs me as much as him.*

*Sincerely,*

*Alecto*

## **Story Info**

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** m-preg, vampires, witches, abuse, bonded, weddings

**Content Warnings:** some violence and reference to past abuse

**Word Count:** 18,903

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## CHAPMISTRES VIEW – ADAM AND BEN

By Carol Pedroso

Adam rushed down the street frantically flipping through the folder in his hands. He had already sacked his personal assistant for forgetting such an important elder's council meeting. If his second, Tim, had not rung him at his home office to ask when he was arriving, he would not have known the meeting had been called at all. He continued to rant to himself as he turned the last corner by the council building, and he ran straight into a figure coming the other way. The figure went flying through the air, landing on its back then rolling onto its front, before coming to a stop.

Adam went running over and saw a young man painfully trying to get up off the ground. He reached down and gently but firmly helped the man up and set him on his feet. As their hands met, Adam felt a shock go through him, and a voice in his mind said *mine, my mate*. The man was definitely not a vampire, so that made him one of the witch half of Chapmistres View community. The man was about a foot shorter than Adam's six feet ten inches and had long blond hair tied back in a tight braid. He had a slim build and was currently trying to wipe rather ineffectually at a large coffee stain that covered the front of the tired, ratty coat he wore.

"Please accept my sincere apologies," Adam stated, smiling in what he hoped was a friendly way. All he wanted to do was take the man in his arms and make sure he was safe and protected. However, they were strangers to one another, and although vampires recognized their mates instantly, a non-vampire may take exception to having a complete stranger trying to seduce him in the street. He just needed to get the man's name and maybe get him to agree to another meeting. Meeting! He had nearly forgotten the meeting! Damn, he needed to get going, but he was not willing to rush off without having some way to see the man again.

While he had been having his internal conversation, the man had undone his coat to try and assess any damage to his shirt. Adam recognized the uniform as that of the healing clinic. He smiled; well, he knew where to find the man now and knew he would use that knowledge as soon as he could. "Sorry again, my

name is Adam. Whom do I have the pleasure of knocking over today?" He hoped the joke might break the ice.

The man looked at him warily but finally answered, "My name is Ben, and apology accepted. If you'll excuse me, I need to get to work." He made to turn away, but Adam stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. Ben instantly moved away from the hand, as though it had burned him.

Adam held his hands out in front of him in a non-threatening manner. "I mean you no harm. I just wanted to make sure you're okay and to give you my card so you can send the cleaning bill for your clothes to my office." He held out a business card, but Ben refused to take it.

"That's fine; I'll throw this lot in the washing machine at work. I really must go." He turned and walked away as quickly as he could.

Adam stood for a moment watching him walk away. He could catch him if he wanted to, as vampires were fast when they wanted to be, but he had the sense that would only make the situation worse. He continued on his way into the council building deep in thought.

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Adam hurried into the meeting, over half an hour late, and took his seat beside Tim.

"Nice of you to take the time to join us," Jackson, the senior elder, called from the head of the conference table.

Adam made a polite apology, and the meeting resumed. Tim quietly filled him in on what he had missed, and they both joined in the rest of the meeting without incident.

Back in his council office later, Adam had his secretary take the evening off so he could work in peace. First he went online to order some flowers as an apology to Ben. He had them sent to the clinic with a dinner invitation and all his contact info.

He then finished all his backlogged paperwork and headed for home humming a tune.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next night Ben arrived at the clinic to see all his colleagues crowded around one of the staffroom tables. As he entered the room everyone went quiet, and he had to fight the urge to turn around and run.

Jamie came over and slung an arm around his shoulder. He had to hide the wince of pain as Jamie's arm hit a bruise from his fall the night before. He had a lot of practice hiding pain, and last night no one had noticed he was in any pain. He had gotten to work, slung his dirty clothes in one of the staff washing machines and used a spare uniform for his shift.

"What have you been hiding from us?" Jamie asked with a grin.

"What do you mean?" Ben asked warily, as he was led nearer to the table. As they approached, people made way for them, and he saw a large bouquet of flowers on the table. There were all different colors and so many different types that Ben couldn't name them all. Ben was staring at the flowers, when Jamie handed him a sealed card with his name on it. With shaking hands, he opened the card and read the message inside:

*To Ben*

*Please accept these flowers as another apology, and I hope you are okay. I am hoping you will allow me to escort you to dinner at your convenience so I can apologize again in person. My contact information is included.*

*From Adam Rickman*

A business card was tucked into the card with an office number, a home number, and a mobile number on it, as well as a home address for "Elder Adam Rickman". *Elder?* Ben stared at the card not knowing what to do with it.

"Wow," Jamie said from behind him, where he had been reading shamelessly over Ben's shoulder. "What did Rickman do to have to apologize like this?"

Ben stared at the card a moment longer before replying. "He ran into me last night, literally, on my way to work. Knocked me flying through the air and spilled my coffee all over my coat and uniform."

"Why am I only hearing about this now?" Jamie demanded, frowning. "I looked over all the records from last night, this morning when I had finished at the guards' clinic. There was no examination report for you there. I would remember."

Ben blushed and started to stammer that he was okay, but Jamie was already dragging him by his collar into an examination room.

As the blood-bonded mate of a vampire, Jamie was stronger than a normal witch in the community, so Ben did not even try to get free. He knew it would be useless. In addition, Ben did not try too hard as Jamie was also pregnant, and Ben would never want to risk hurting the baby.

Jamie let go of him and fixed him in place with a glare. "Strip," he demanded. "You can keep the underwear, but all the rest comes off."

When Ben just stared, Jamie growled at him. "Either you strip, or I will strip you. Just ask Andrew if you don't believe me!" Ben smiled at that comment; Andrew was Jamie's vampire mate. He was shy, sweet, and loved by everyone at the clinic.

Ben sighed and started to undress. He heard Jamie catch his breath as he uncovered the bruises on his chest. He put the shirt on a chair and removed his pants. As he stood, he heard Jamie muttering spells under his breath. He felt the pain from the bruises fading, and he knew the bruises would soon disappear. "Turn," Jamie demanded between spells. Ben turned without thinking but went still when he heard Jamie's indrawn breath.

"What the hell happened to your back?" Jamie asked in a shocked voice. Ben knew what Jamie was seeing. He had used two mirrors to see his back a few months ago and had seen the damage. There were old burn scars on his sides and down the middle of his back. There were also long thin white scars crisscrossing each other over his back from his neck down to his ass.

Ben took a deep breath and hung his head before starting his story for Jamie. "I met Ian four years ago when I turned twenty-one. We attended the same healing conference. We found we lived in neighboring clans, and we really hit it off.

"He was a vampire—tall, strong, and dashing. He treated me like a prince, taking me out to dinner and buying me gifts. I moved in with him after only six months and things started to change. He was very possessive and controlling. He chased off all my friends, and I don't have any family left, as my parents died after I moved. Ian didn't allow me to attend their funerals.

"All the compliments stopped, and nothing I did was right. I was not allowed out during the day, and to ensure I stayed put, he locked me in the bedroom with him while he slept. I had to give up healing and stay at home, sticking to a schedule of chores that he would lay out for me. If the chores were not done to his satisfaction, which they usually weren't, I would get punished.



He would sometimes do this himself, usually with a whip. Sometimes he would give me to one of his guards who could use anything including fire to punish me. The only rule was that they could only scar my back as he wanted to be able to see and touch my smooth skin when he tied me to the bed to fuck me.

“I lived with him three years before I managed to squirrel enough money away to escape. The local shop owner, where I went for groceries, usually escorted by a guard who waited outside, figured out what was happening. Each week he would add a few fictitious items to my shopping receipt that I gave Ian, and then he would keep the money safe for me.

“Finally I had five hundred dollars, and one day, after Ian had decided I was too weak to try and escape any more so he took the guard off me, I made my move. The shop owner gave me a backpack with supplies, and I just left and started walking. It took two months of running to arrive here. I shortened my name, which is Bennett, to Ben and used a simple spell to make my hair grow and change color. I used a spell to fix my eyes and got rid of the horrible glasses that Ian made me wear. I think my appearance is different enough that he wouldn't recognize me if he saw me now.”

By the end of his tale, Ben had silent tears running down his face, and Jamie had gathered him close to allow him to cry.

When he finally cried himself dry, he felt like a small weight had been lifted. Sharing his story with Jamie seemed to have helped, and it felt good not to be bearing it alone anymore.

Jamie held Ben at arm's length and looked into his eyes. “I am only going to say two things, then I won't mention this again unless you do. One, if you ever want to talk, I'm here, night or day. Two, if you want those scars removed, Casey and I will do it for you. We've done that sort of magic before and can leave you with a nice smooth back again.”

Ben looked at him and swallowed several times before answering, “Thank you for both offers. I may want the scars removed some day, but at the moment they are my reminder to be careful who I trust, especially if it is a vampire. I know in my head that not all vampires are like Ian, but my heart may take longer to catch up. Till then I'll keep the scars. As for talking, I am very grateful to have a friend again, and maybe one day I will take you up on both the offers.”

Jamie gave him a hug then left him to dress.

The rest of the shift passed quickly with only a few comments about the flowers. Ben assumed that Jamie had warned people to lay off him, and he found he did not mind that thought at all.

At the end of the shift Ben had thought long and hard about Adam's offer of dinner, but decided he wasn't ready for socializing again. He gave the flowers to a female colleague and dropped the card in the trash before leaving for the day. He couldn't explain the slight feeling of loss when he walked away, but he kept walking till he arrived home.

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Adam was sitting in yet another 'important' council meeting trying to pay attention. Tim had noticed how distracted he was, and he had been taking more notes than usual so he could try to keep Adam up to date on what was going on.

A week had passed since he had 'bumped' into Ben, and Adam had not heard from him at all. When he had called the clinic to see if the flowers had been delivered, he had been told by a female nurse that, yes, the flowers had been delivered, but that Ben was not available to talk. He had gotten the same response every time he had called, and he got no answer when he left messages or sent more gifts.

He was starting to get desperate. At almost two thousand years old, he thought he would never meet his mate, and now he didn't know what to do.

At the head of the table, Jackson's second, Andrew, winced and put a hand to his head. He then rolled his eyes and scribbled a quick note to Jackson. Jackson looked at the note and raised an eyebrow at Andrew, before looking directly at Adam.

"Adam, there seems to be some guests outside who wish to speak to you and Andrew. Please, can you make this as fast as possible and make sure Tim has any instructions before you go."

Adam frowned, as he had a whispered conversation with Tim before meeting Andrew at the door.

Outside, he found Jamie and Casey waiting for him, both wearing identical annoyed expressions. Andrew went straight to Jamie and greeted his mate with a long kiss that wiped the annoyed expression off his face. Casey rolled his eyes as Andrew stood behind Jamie with his hands on his mate's pregnant belly. Adam found himself feeling jealous of Andrew and quickly looked away.

Jamie looked over his shoulder, and after a moment, Andrew nodded and turned to Adam. "This conversation would be better in private so why don't we head to your office, Sir?" he asked respectfully.

Adam shrugged. He could guess what this might be about and Andrew was right—it would be better in private. He led the way down the hall to his council office and sent his secretary home for the night. Once everyone was seated in the office he turned to Jamie, who seemed to be leading the group. "What can I do for you?" he asked, in what he hoped was a polite tone of voice.

Jamie looked at Casey who nodded, and Jamie turned back to Adam. "We want to know why you're harassing one of our nurses. You have been calling the clinic and sending him gifts for days now. He's been getting more and more agitated and scared. We're worried he's going to move away if this continues, and good witch nurses are hard to come by."

Adam stared at Jamie in shock. "But why would gifts and a few dinner invitations scare him?"

Jamie looked at him as though he was an idiot. "You're a stranger to him, and you're basically stalking him. He is only twenty-five years old, and if I remember correctly, you're nearly two thousand years old. What do you expect? Why won't you take no for an answer?"

"I just want to get to know him, but he never answers any of my messages."

"But why?" Jamie persisted, fearing he knew the answer. "You have lots of men to choose from, why pursue him, when he has made it clear with his behavior that he is not interested?"

"He's my mate!" Adam muttered, almost too low for the others to hear.

Jamie stared at the powerful vampire before him, who now looked so lost and upset.

*Shit! What do we do now?* Jamie asked Andrew and Casey through their mind link.

After a hurried silent conversation, Jamie turned his attention back to Adam. "Okay, here's what we'll do. I will talk to Ben and try to convince him to meet you. But you must stop calling and sending things until you hear from me again."

Adam looked at him with hope in his eyes. "I can do that if it will help," he said almost eagerly, then he stopped and added, "But I want to hear from you within forty-eight hours, or I will call you!"

Jamie nodded, and after looking at his companions, they exited the office.

Adam sat thinking about Andrew and his mate. As an elder, he had been filled in on the peculiarities of his joining with Jamie. Jamie had turned out to be the first non-vampire mate in a long time to be able to get pregnant; actually it hadn't happened in five hundred years. Also, because Jamie and Casey were twins and had shared a mind link since birth, that same mind link was now shared with Andrew. So Andrew and Jamie had a private mind link and a shared mind link with Casey. He shook his head; he did not think he could share his mate like that, even with a sibling.

He decided to stay in his office instead of rejoining the meeting, as he knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate. Tim came looking for him about two hours later to catch him up on what he had missed and try to get him to tell him what was going on. He got rid of Tim, only to receive an urgent summons from Jackson. So he locked up his office and headed out.

In Jackson's office, he found himself on the receiving end of a lecture about his responsibilities and how he should take care of them.

After over fifteen minutes of lecturing, Adam finally snapped, "Look, I've found my mate, and I'm trying to get to know him. But I've just been told by his friends that all I'm doing is scaring him so much he is starting to think about moving. So I'm sorry if council business takes second place at the moment."

"You've found your mate?" Jackson asked, after a few moments of stunned silence.

"Yes, but he's afraid of me," Adam said bitterly, putting his head in his hands.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "I know a little about how you feel. I still haven't had the courage to approach my mate even though I know who he is."

Adam looked up into Jackson's face and saw the torment in his friend's eyes.

"Why haven't you approached him?"

Jackson stared off into space. "I've known my mate since he was a baby, and I was waiting for him to become a man first, before dropping the bombshell. But as he matured I found myself very protective of him, and he saw this as being bossy, and now we can rarely be in the same room with each other without arguing or me saying the wrong thing."

Seeming to shake off his mood, Jackson focused back on Adam. "Give Tim all he needs, then take the week off. Talk to your mate's friends, who I assume include Jamie and Casey, or Andrew wouldn't have been on the receiving end of a summons earlier. Trust them, and they will help you."

Adam nodded as he rose. "I will speak to Tim tomorrow, and thank you, my friend."

As he walked home, he thought back over all that had happened that night. He supposed he could see what Ben's friends meant, that in his enthusiasm he may have come on a bit strong.

He got to his home just in time for the security to engage and seal the house up for the day.

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Jamie cornered Ben the next night and took him to the office he shared with Casey.

"Look, we need to talk," he said, as he guided Ben to some comfy couches in the corner of the room.

"Casey and I spoke to Rickman last night, as we noticed how his attention was affecting you and your work. There's no need to be scared," he added quickly, as he saw Ben go pale. "But I need to tell you what he said. First though, I would like to know what you have been taught about vampire mates."

Ben frowned at what he thought to be a random question that had nothing to do with what they were discussing.

"Well, I know a vampire recognizes his mate instantly. I also know it is unheard of for a vampire to harm their mate as they have a strong protective instinct. They are also very single-minded once they recognize their mates. They want to claim them and be with them all the time, at least until they are blood-bonded. They will keep after them until..." His voice trailed off, and Jaimie saw a slow realization dawning behind Ben's eyes.

Ben started shaking his head. "I can't be, can I? He must be mistaken." His eyes were fixed on Jamie's, pleading for answers.

Jamie placed a comforting arm around his shoulders and pulled him into a hug.

"As hard as it is to believe, Rickman believes you're his mate. He is almost two thousand years old, and if you had seen him last night, you would have

seen a very lonely, desperate vampire. He couldn't understand how his behavior could be mistaken for anything other than genuine interest. When I agreed to speak to you he looked so hopeful, and even agreed to lay off the calls and gifts for forty-eight hours."

Ben sat in thought for a few minutes when suddenly he felt movement against his side. He looked up, but Jamie seemed to have dozed off with his head tilted back against the wall. He felt the movement again and realized it was the baby inside Jamie, moving and kicking. Without thinking about it, he put his hand on Jamie's swollen abdomen and grinned when the baby pushed against his hand. He jumped when Jamie spoke. "He keeps me up half the day when I'm supposed to be sleeping, and then when I try to catch a nap during a shift, either we have an emergency, or he starts up again."

"He? Have you found out the gender then?"

"No, I just like winding Andrew up, because he thinks it's a girl. We haven't even had a scan yet, as the ultrasound machine is broken, and we've had to order a replacement, which is being sent, but will not be here for a few more days. Meanwhile, I keep getting bigger and having weird cravings. At the moment it's chocolate, but since I've been pregnant if I eat my favorite chocolate, which is milk chocolate, I am sick. I have to have dark chocolate, but it's just not the same." He sighed and got up to stretch his back. "Think about what I've said, and let me know what you decide, so I can call Rickman."

"I'll meet him," Ben blurted out quickly before he could change his mind. "But only if you and Andrew are there too."

Jamie thought about it. "What about going out for a drink or a meal, and Andrew and I will sit at a table close by. That way you can meet Rickman, but you'll know you're not alone with him."

Ben thought for a moment, and then nodded.

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Adam was sitting in his home office trying to catch up on paperwork but couldn't concentrate. He jumped when his phone started to ring, and he didn't recognize the number. "Rickman," he said, as he put the phone to his ear.

"Hi, it's Jamie," the voice on the other end said. "He's agreed to meet you with a few conditions. You free tonight?"

It took a minute for Adam to process what Jamie had said. *He wants to meet me? Conditions? Tonight???* All these thoughts ran through his mind before he heard Jamie calling his name, and asking if he was still there.

"I'm here. When, where, and what are the conditions?" he answered Jamie all in one breath.

"When is as soon as possible, as he's nervous and doesn't want to wait. Where is up to you, but trust me and please do not pick anywhere expensive, and don't try to show off your money, which I know at your age you probably have plenty of. And as for the conditions, he has asked that Andrew and I accompany you and sit at another table so he knows that friends are nearby."

Adam thought about it for a moment. At his age, he remembered the times when women went everywhere with a chaperone, and therefore he didn't have a problem with that, at least if it meant Ben would meet him. As for the inexpensive place, what was that all about? He shrugged to himself, remembering what Jackson said about trusting Ben's friends. "I have no problem with you and Andrew playing chaperone. I can meet you all in one hour at Molly's Diner in the night district."

The night district was the part of town that was open all night for the vampires and the night-workers in the community, while another section of town was open during the day for the day-working witches. Molly's Diner was a small place that sold simple homemade meals at a reasonable rate. It was very popular with the midnight lunch crowd.

He was pulled from his thoughts again by Jamie saying they would be there and hanging up. He stood staring at his phone for a while before he snapped into action. Looking down at the comfortable sweatpants and ratty T-shirt he was wearing, he started heading for the bathroom as he shed the old clothes. After a quick shower, he donned some tan slacks and a button-down shirt in dark brown. He shoved his feet into some dress shoes and made for the door, barely remembering to grab his keys on his way out the door. He lived a fair distance from Molly's, but with his vampire speed he arrived there with fifteen minutes to spare. He saw he was first to arrive so he settled at a corner table where he could see the door and ordered himself a coffee.

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Jamie turned the speakerphone off and looked at Ben. "Right, now let's get you dressed in something other than your work uniform and get over to Molly's."

He looked at Ben critically then muttered a complicated spell under his breath so fast Ben couldn't have followed it even if he could have heard it. Suddenly his uniform of a blue T-shirt with the clinic logo on it and his navy pants were replaced with an emerald green button-down shirt and black slacks. He raised an eyebrow at Jamie. "Green? Really?"

Jamie shrugged. "It sets off your dark eyes."

Ben rolled his eyes and was smiling as Andrew walked into the room. "Hey guys," he said, as he wrapped an arm around his mate and greeted him with a long kiss. Ben was just about to clear his throat when they broke apart. Andrew looked at Ben's red face and laughed. "You know you remind me of myself before I met Jamie. I was so shy I would blush at everything." Ben fought the urge to point out that, even when he was not with Jamie, Andrew still could be made to blush at the drop of a hat.

Andrew looked at what Ben was wearing and nodded. "I see you're ready, so let's go. We don't want to be late, now do we?"

With that, he led Jamie out the door with Ben trailing at the rear.

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They arrived at Molly's just as Adam was being served his coffee. When he saw Ben, he shot to his feet, nearly knocking over the waitress who was serving him and trying to give him a look down her top at the same time. When she saw what had his attention, she rolled her eyes and pasted on a smile before heading back to the counter.

"Hi," Ben offered shyly, standing looking at his feet.

"Hi," Adam returned, smiling, and then he gestured to the seat opposite him. "Please sit. What do you want to drink? Are you hungry?" His speech got faster as he spoke, until he was babbling, and Ben was staring at him. He stopped suddenly and took a breath before letting out a low laugh. "Sorry, I'm so happy you agreed to meet me that I don't know what to say or do."

Ben smiled at him. "That's okay. I'm nervous too. I'd love a coffee and seeing as you can't eat, I'll give food a miss. Besides," he continued quickly before Adam could insist he eat something, "I had something to eat not long ago and won't be hungry for a while yet."

Adam nodded and signaled for more coffee to the waitress who was hovering at the counter.



“Thank you for agreeing to Jamie and Andrew being here,” Ben said quietly after the waitress had delivered his coffee. He looked across the room where Jamie and Andrew were apparently engrossed in one another, but Ben could feel a spell around him and guessed that Jamie wanted to be able to ensure he knew where Ben was all the time.

“I still remember a time when women required a chaperone just to speak to a man, so trust me, I have no problems with them being here. As long as they’re not eavesdropping!”

He held out his hand and offered it to Ben. “As I neglected to introduce myself properly when I knocked you off your feet, I’m Adam Rickman. I’m an elder on the Vampire Council, and I would like to get to know you better.”

Ben looked at Adam’s hand for a few moments before cautiously taking it. He smiled at the warm feeling that spread from the small connection. “I’m Bennett Glenderson, but I go by Ben Smith at the moment, and I’m a nurse at the healing clinic.”

“Why the name change if I may ask?” Adam smiled at their joined hands, but then he felt the instant tension his question caused, and he cursed himself for not thinking before he spoke. “You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to. It was a very personal question.”

“No, I think you should know because it will explain a lot about how I am. The short version is my ex-boyfriend was a vampire who thought I should be chained to his bed, and I do mean that literally, and that I should only do what he said when he said it. If I broke the rules then I was punished. His favorite was a whip, or if he was busy, he would give me to one of his chosen guards to punish.” Ben jumped when he felt Adam’s fingers wiping the tears that he had not felt running down his face. When he looked at Adam’s face, he saw the suppressed rage there and went to pull away, but Adam carefully tightened his grip on Ben’s hands so he couldn’t move.

“Don’t be scared. I’m not angry with you, but if I ever catch up with your ex, he will wish he was never born.”

Ben saw the sincerity on Adam’s face, and he smiled when he realized that his past wasn’t going to chase away this person. He frowned again, and then took a deep breath.

“You do realize that if you want to get to know me you are going to have to deal with a lot of baggage in relation to this? I panic at silly things sometimes,

but to me they're real, and the panic attack they cause is real too. If I have an attack, there is a possibility of me passing out if I can't calm down. Are you ready to deal with that?"

Adam smiled reassuringly. "Ben, you're my mate. I will look after you whatever happens. I will be there whenever you need me, and if it's during the day I will ensure there is someone you can call that you trust to be with you if you need them." He moved over to Ben's side of the booth and pulled lightly on one of Ben's hands.

"Come here and get used to me. Your friends are still just over there so you know you're safe." He kept his voice soft and low and was pleased when Ben slid nearer to his side.

Very slowly, Adam put his arm around the smaller man and gave him a soft hug. Ben melted into Adam's big frame. He could feel muscles rippling as Adam breathed and a sense of peace seemed to flow from Adam and straight into Ben. He snuggled closer to the warmth Adam's body offered.

Ben hadn't realized how much he missed being touched. No one but Ian or one of his guards had touched him in over three years, and those hadn't been loving or caring touches. Other than Jamie, of course, but he didn't count that, as this felt so much better.

Adam smiled down at the top of Ben's head. He hadn't expected Ben to actually move when he asked, but he had thought he had nothing to lose, and it appeared he had everything to gain. As he felt Ben cuddle closer, he ran his hand slowly up and down Ben's arm, soothing away the nerves he could still feel coming from his mate.

Thinking on what Ben had told him about his ex made Adam mad, but also explained a lot about Ben's behavior so far. He was going to have his work cut out for him, winning this little witch's trust, but it was a challenge he was looking forward to winning.

Ben felt so good cuddled up next to him, and it took a moment to realize that Ben's breathing had evened out, and he had dozed into a light sleep.

He saw Jamie's approach from the corner of his eye, and he smiled at him.

"Wow, you really won his trust quicker than I thought, but then the mating call is hard to resist even for us non-vampires. We just hear it in a different way." When he saw Adam look at him with questioning eyes he continued.

“We feel it more as an attraction to start off with, and when we are around the vampire in question, we feel drawn to them but don’t know why. We also feel safe with the vampire even if we don’t know them well. I think you’ll find that now he’s met you properly and has touched you willingly, he will trust you instinctively. Seeing as he knows more about vampire mates, because of being a healer, than other non-vampires usually do, he will come round more quickly now. But that doesn’t mean you can rush him.” They both looked down as Ben stirred and looked up at them both, blinking before blushing.

“I can’t believe I fell asleep. I’m so sorry. What must you think of me? I have not had much sleep the past few days.” He tried to move away from Adam in embarrassment, but Adam kept him close and resumed rubbing his arm in comfort, and he found himself relaxing again. He didn’t notice Jamie smiling approvingly at Adam.

Adam winced at Ben’s words about sleep. “Well, since I’m guessing I may have had something to do with your lack of sleep, I can honestly say you can sleep with me any time.” He grinned with his last statement.

Jamie rolled his eyes as Ben blushed again at the double meaning.

Jamie coughed. “Well as much as I hate to cut this short, we have to get back to the clinic, as we only got cover for just over an hour, and we still have to get back there.”

Ben reached out impulsively and pulled Adam down so he could give him a small peck on the cheek. While Adam was still staring at him in shock, he slipped out of the booth and followed Jamie out the door with Andrew bringing up the rear.

Adam sat there for a few more minutes before paying the bill for the coffees and heading home.

When he arrived, he found he couldn’t concentrate on his work anymore, so on an impulse, he rang the clinic. He spoke to Jamie and, after a few minutes, he had a plan in place. He finally managed to get a few hours’ work done before going out again and heading for the clinic. He stopped on the way and picked up what he and Jamie had spoken about and then waited by the staff entrance for Ben to emerge.

Ben smiled when he saw Adam, and his smile widened when he saw the single red rose Adam held out to him. “Thank you. It’s beautiful,” he said,

taking the rose and bringing it to his nose to smell. "To what do I owe the honor of a second visit tonight?"

"I thought you may like company on your walk home," Adam replied, holding out his arm like an old-fashioned gentleman, with what he hoped was a winning smile. "I can even protect you from any vampires that aren't looking where they're going."

Ben smiled at the gesture and words. He took Adam's arm, feeling the same warmth and sense of safety as when they had touched earlier.

They walked along the dimly lit streets chatting about where they grew up, and Adam kept Ben entertained with stories from throughout history. In his lifetime he had seen so much, Ben wondered how Adam dealt with it all. Nearly two thousand years of memories that included love, hate, greed, and loss. When they arrived at Ben's door, Adam turned to look at him. "May I kiss you?" he asked, with the need evident in his eyes, but in no way trying to force Ben into anything he wasn't ready for.

Ben nodded and reached to put his arms around Adam's neck as the bigger man leaned down to him. Their lips met, and they both let out a moan of pleasure. The fire of arousal started at their joined lips and spread throughout both their bodies.

Ben tried to pull Adam closer, and Adam backed him into the wall by his front door and deepened the kiss. Ben felt Adam's tongue demanding entrance and opened his mouth to allow him to explore. Adam's hands fell to Ben's waist and he pushed up tight against Ben, feeling Ben's hardness poking against his thigh as his own pressed into the smaller man's stomach.

Ben ran his hands over every bit of Adam that he could reach. Adam was big and muscular. His shoulders were wide, and as he bent to kiss Ben, he completely covered the smaller man. Ben felt safe and protected all at once. He was also very turned on and was harder than he could ever remember being before.

With what little control he still had, Adam slowly pulled back from the kiss but kept Ben pressed into the wall. When he was sure Ben was stable on his feet, he stepped back, and noticing the rose on the ground, he picked it up and returned it to its owner.

"I'm sorry, that was a bit more than I bargained for. I didn't know your touch would do that to me. You'd better get inside and, looking at the sky, I'd better go, as it's getting near sunrise. Can I walk you to work tomorrow?"

Ben smiled. "I'd love that. I leave around seven p.m."

"I'll be here," Adam said, stealing another quick kiss that left Ben panting again, before disappearing in a whirl of vampire speed.

Ben went inside and got ready for bed. He then fell into a deep sleep that was filled with dreams of a big vampire who was intent on making sure he never ran out of flowers and kissed like a god.

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Adam arrived fifteen minutes early the next night, thanking god for early sunsets in the winter. He then really thanked whoever was listening when Ben answered the door in only a bathrobe. His hair was damp, and he had obviously only just gotten out of the shower.

Ben's eyes widened when he saw the heat in Adam's eyes as they raked down his body. Adam seemed to shake himself, and then he grinned. "So, is this the new uniform for nurses at the clinic?"

Ben blushed at Adam's comment, and then shook his head ruefully. "I can see I'm going to spend a lot of my time with you blushing."

"Oh, but you blush so prettily," Adam grinned.

Ben laughed and waved for Adam to follow him inside, but then stopped when Adam didn't follow.

"You have to verbally invite me in, or I can't enter," Adam reminded him.

"Sorry. Please consider yourself welcome inside my home at any time," Ben quickly said formally, wording it in such a way that he wouldn't have to repeat it every time Adam came around.

Adam happily followed Ben into the small house and Ben directed him to a compact living room. "The kitchen is just over to your left there. If you want some coffee, just help yourself." Ben pointed to a doorway in the corner of the room. With that, he hurried from the room to dress for work.

Adam looked around the room but saw it was very bare and had no personal touches at all. He made a note to himself to rectify that situation as soon as he could.

Ben came back in the room, fully clothed and ready to leave, but before he could pick up his keys, Adam stopped him with a hug and then a deep kiss. "Good evening," he said with a grin, when he broke the kiss.

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Ben grinned back at him. "Good evening to you too."

They left the house and walked toward the clinic. "May I ask you a sensitive question?" Adam asked cautiously, not wanting to offend Ben now that he had him talking to him.

"Of course, you can ask me anything. I will always answer."

"Well, it's just that whenever Jamie speaks to me, he makes a big deal about how expensive something is. First he insisted I choose an inexpensive café—By the way, Molly's happens to also be my favorite diner anyway—and when I asked what your favorite flowers were, he told me to make sure whatever I got was not too expensive. So what gives?"

Ben frowned for a moment, then he realized what Jamie had been doing. "I think Jamie was trying to help you because my ex seduced me by buying me expensive presents and taking me out to fancy restaurants. He probably thought if you tried that, I'd freak out."

"Ah, I see. Well, I'll try to keep that in mind, but I make no promises. I've waited for you for nearly two thousand years. I want to spoil you."

They arrived at the clinic and parted ways with a kiss and a promise to meet later for lunch.

Ben headed in for his shift with a smile on his face and feeling happier than he ever remembered feeling.

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The next week saw Adam walking Ben to and from the clinic every day. He found out when Ben's day off was, and asked if Ben would spend the day with him. When Ben agreed, Adam said Ben could choose the activity, if he got to choose the restaurant they went to afterward.

He was surprised when Ben chose bowling as their first date but kept his promise and rang the lanes to make a reservation for the evening. He then called a small restaurant that wasn't expensive, but wasn't cheap either, and made dining reservations as well.

At the last minute, Adam called Jamie and asked if he wanted to make up a team, so Ben would feel better than if they were alone. Jamie agreed and said he would bring Casey too.

Adam was surprised, therefore, when he and Ben arrived at the bowling lane, to see Jackson standing with the group.

“What are you doing here, my friend?” he asked Jackson, who looked supremely uncomfortable.

Jackson glared at Jamie before answering. “Apparently vampire elders don’t have enough fun.”

Jamie was laughing, and Adam guessed he was the reason that Jackson was there. But as he turned back to Ben he caught a look in his friend’s eyes and continued turning to see what he was looking at. The only person he saw was Casey, who was bending to hear something a small child was saying. He turned back to his friend and saw him watching Casey with a wistful expression on his face. Adam raised an eyebrow in question, and when Jackson looked up he nodded almost imperceptibly. Adam realized that Casey was the mate Jackson had been speaking of in his office.

He remembered Jamie and Casey’s mother had died when they were eighteen, and they had taken over from her, running the clinic as joint healers. Jackson had taken them under his wing and had been their go-between for the council. He had done everything he could to protect them, especially last winter when a nearby clan elder named Samuel had tried to kidnap Jamie and Andrew to force Casey to follow. Adam remembered how frantic Jackson had been when Casey had used magic to take himself to Jamie. He thought it had been paternal worry, but now he saw it for what it was—a vampire trying to protect his unclaimed mate. He also remembered how Casey had laid into Jackson on more than one occasion, not realizing that Jackson was trying to protect him. He thought Jackson was trying to replace their mother and control him and his brother.

Adam shook his head at the situation and offered Jackson a small smile before turning back to Ben who had started to look at him with curiosity.

“What’s up, Adam?” Ben asked, seeing the sadness on the older vampire’s face and hoping he was not upset about going bowling.

Adam seemed to shake himself and smiled down at Ben as he drew him into his arms. “Nothing little one, just realized something and was trying to see if I can help at all. But I can’t, so...” He reached down and kissed his mate softly and moved back before he could be tempted to keep going and embarrass them in public. Ben blinked and looked up at him with such an open expression of desire that Adam almost reconsidered the dinner reservations in favor of just taking Ben home.

“You guys ready?” Jamie’s amused voice came from behind them.

“We’re coming,” Adam replied automatically, not realizing what he’d said till Jamie started laughing, and he saw the grin on Ben’s red face. He groaned and buried his face in Ben’s neck till the laughing stopped.

The games went well, with the vampires competing against the witches. Jamie got pounced on at one point when his ball went zigzagging unnaturally down the alley.

He had used a spell to ensure he would get a strike, and the vampires claimed that was an unfair advantage. Casey agreed and got his brother to agree to behave.

Ben had a wonderful time and even got a strike on his last throw of the game. As he turned with a yell, Adam grabbed him and swung him around in a circle. When Adam set him down, he also gave him a kiss that made him wish they were alone. Adam was always so careful about how far he pushed, but Ben was ready for more. He was not ready to go all the way yet, but he wanted more time alone with Adam, and he definitely wanted more of Adam’s kisses and touches.

The game ended, and the witches came out on top by a small margin. Jamie declared that since the vampires had lost, dinner was on them, and when Adam mentioned he had reservations, he offered to expand them to include everyone.

The restaurant was not busy so they were able to get a bigger table with no problem, and the witches ordered a dinner each while the vampires settled for a glass of blood each and some wine.

Conversation flowed nicely and so did the wine, except for Jamie, as he couldn’t drink because of his pregnancy, a fact he moaned about off and on all evening. By the time everyone was ready to leave, Andrew and Jamie were propping up a tipsy Casey who was telling everyone how everything was *just lovely* and how everyone was his *bestest friends in the whole world*.

“Here hold him a sec,” Jamie said to Jackson as he passed Casey over to Jackson. Jackson froze as he found himself with an armful of drunken witch. Casey turned to snuggle into Jackson’s embrace, and as he inhaled, he seemed to slowly go limp. Jackson swung him fully into his arms and held him cradled against his chest. Casey was completely asleep, and Jackson couldn’t help but smile.



"I'll get him home," Jackson told Jamie. "You can't carry him in your condition, and I have a car that he can sleep in on the back seat. I'll meet you back at your house." With that, he strode off towards the parked cars.

Adam shook his head and turned towards Ben to find him smiling in a way that sent his libido skyrocketing, and he fought it back with a silent groan. On their walks to and from the clinic, Ben had opened up to Adam with all the details of his relationship with Ian, and he was wary of trying to push too hard, too fast.

Ben had other ideas. The wine had helped him to relax, but he knew he was still thinking and making his own decisions.

On the drive home, he snuggled next to Adam and ran a hand up and down his leg. He could feel Adam shaking from trying to control his reaction, and wondered how long it would take to get him to lose that control.

"Ben, you need to stop." Adam's voice sounded strangled, and Ben couldn't help but grin at the effect he was having on this big bad vampire.

"Why? I'm enjoying touching you. Or is that not what mates are supposed to do?" he asked, trying to look innocent. The breeze from the open window had dispelled most of the effects of the alcohol but had left him feeling relaxed. He cuddled up to Adam, and before Adam could answer any of the questions he had asked, he had fallen asleep.

When Adam looked down, he couldn't help chuckling; and shaking his head, he continued the drive to Ben's house.

Moving carefully, he picked Ben up, cradling him gently in his arms and made his way up to the house. He managed to open the door with Ben's keys and headed up the stairs to the bedroom. He had only seen the room once, when Ben gave him a swift tour of the house a while back, but he remembered the way and rapidly had Ben naked and tucked up in bed. He glanced at the time and realized he needed to move fast if he was going to get home before sunrise. He found a pen and paper on the bedside cabinet and scribbled a hasty note before giving Ben a swift kiss on the forehead and heading home at top vampire speed to beat the daylight.

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Ben woke in the morning and was surprised to find he was naked in bed. As the events of the previous night started to return to him, he saw the note on the bedside cabinet.

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*Hope you know how cute you look fast asleep. Had to rush to get home before sunrise but will pick you up usual time for work this evening.*

*Love, your mate.*

Ben blushed when he finished reading, and glancing at the clock, dragged himself out of bed and into the shower. As he washed, he recalled his plans and how he had fallen asleep before he could implement any of them. Thinking about his plans for Adam had the effect of making him painfully hard, but he found the idea of jacking off in the shower didn't appeal. However, it did give him some ideas about what did appeal, and as he was rinsing himself off, he formulated a plan for when Adam arrived.

As usual, Adam arrived early, no doubt hoping to find Ben only half dressed, just out of the shower. This time when Ben heard the doorbell, he opened and looked out the bedroom window to ensure it was Adam and not a neighbor, before calling down, "The door's unlocked, Love." The endearment slipped out before he could think better of it.

When he heard the front door open and shut, he then called out, "I'm upstairs. Can you give me a hand with something?" He hoped his voice was steady because his heart was beating double-time. This was the first time he had tried something like this.

Adam opened the bedroom door and stopped in shock on the threshold. Ben was lying on the bed with not a stitch of clothing on. His hard cock was pointing straight up at the ceiling, and he was watching Adam's reaction with a very vulnerable look in his eyes. Adam started to grin, and with startling speed he pounced on Ben for a hot and steamy kiss.

When they came up for air, he asked with a smile, "Now what can I help you with?"

Ben grinned with him while running his hands over every bit of Adam's hard body that he could reach. "Well you see, I have this hard problem I thought you could help me solve before work, but first you have too many clothes on," he replied, trying without much success to keep a straight face. His giggling turned to gasping as he saw Adam shedding his clothes, and he got his first proper look at Adam's body.

Adam was big *all* over, his whole body was rippling with muscles, and there wasn't a spare inch of fat on him anywhere. He also had tribal tattoos all over his left shoulder, and there was a sun tattooed on his right shoulder.

Ben moaned at the sight, and he felt himself getting harder than he could ever remember being.

He moaned again as he felt Adam's hands find his hard cock and start to stroke it with strong, slow strokes. His head fell back, and his body arched into Adam's expert touch, while he felt kisses being feathered across his face and down his neck. He felt Adam's fangs lightly scrape his neck, and he cried out at the sensation that shivered down his spine at the contact.

"Yes, please bite me," he pleaded, as he writhed beneath Adam's caresses. He felt Adam pause. "Please remember I work for Jamie. He had told me all about the effects of being with a vampire," he added, and before he took another breath he felt a sharp pain in his neck. Then he experienced an orgasm so huge his vision went black for a few moments, before all the colors came rushing back. He screamed his pleasure at the top of his lungs as he felt Adam sucking gently on his neck, drawing Ben's blood into himself.

As soon as Ben stopped shuddering, Adam withdrew his fangs and licked over the spots to ensure they healed. Adam panted to catch his breath. Just tasting his mate's blood, and hearing him cry out in completion, had been enough to make him come just as hard as Ben had. He searched Ben's face worriedly, until he saw Ben's sated smile and the look of pleasure in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked, just to be sure. "I didn't want to take too much and leave you too weak to work tonight, but your blood tastes like a fine wine that I can't get enough of."

Ben caressed the side of his face reassuringly. "I'm fine. I don't feel weak from blood loss, but that orgasm should have come with a health warning. Being told the effects of a vampire bite and experiencing it for myself are two different things. I never dreamed I would react so quickly or strongly." He dropped his head back to the bed with a contented sigh.

Adam went to the bathroom to fetch a wash cloth, and as he cleaned Ben off, he explained.

"You reacted so strongly because we are mates. If we had not been mates, the effect would have been less, and your reaction wouldn't have happened so fast. Have you never been bitten before?" Adam held his breath, waiting for an answer.

"No" Ben answered, "It was the only thing I retained control over with Ian. He knew if he tried to force a bonding, or even a bite on me, that it would

eventually strip me of all my personality, and as much as he wanted me to obey him, he also wanted me to resist. As a healer, I know that the bite of a vampire will begin a short bonding process, and if repeated enough on an unwilling participant, will give the vampire control over that person. I also know that a bite between mates just reinforces the bond that is already there. So I am safe with you.” By the end, he was smiling at Adam.

“I am glad that I am the first and will be last to taste your sweet blood. I am also grateful to call you my mate. You’re beautiful, smart, and so giving. When we fully bond, I would love it if you would consent to take my last name. That way everyone will know we belong to each other.” Adam leaned down to kiss his mate’s tempting lips.

Ben had closed his eyes for the kiss, but opened them to answer. “Of course, I will take your name. It will be an honor. Is that your way of proposing?”

Adam stared at him, then scrambled off the bed and fell to his knees. “Would you do me the greatest honor of becoming my blood-bonded mate as soon as possible? I can promise to honor you, be faithful to you, and do everything in my power to keep you safe and happy for the rest of our lives.” By the time he had finished, Ben had tears running down his cheeks.

“Yes, yes, yes, and a thousand more times, yes,” Ben cried, leaning towards Adam at the edge of the bed.

Adam swooped in for a long kiss, but Ben had seen the time, and after a few moments he turned his head away to tell Adam they had to go.

Adam, however, had an idea. While Ben was dressing upstairs, he quickly called Jamie and told him Ben needed to be a little late and asked if he could cover as a favor to them. Jamie teased him about *why* they were running late, but agreed as long as it did not become a habit.

When Ben came down dressed and ready, Adam pulled him out the door and turned in the direction of the night district. Ben tried to slow Adam down, but the bigger man kept walking steadily. “Where are you going? I need to get to work,” he called, as he tried to pull his hand free.

Adam pulled him up next to him. “Don’t worry. You won’t be too late, and I already called Jamie. I cannot let you go to work without giving you something to show that you just agreed to be my blood-bonded mate, now can I?”

Ben hadn't thought about having a symbol of their pending joining; he knew women usually got an engagement ring, but what would a man get?

"Remember, as a healer I can't wear rings with stones in them, just in case you were thinking down the engagement ring route."

Adam tilted his head as he continued to walk fast enough that Ben had to trot to keep up.

"I had a neck chain in mind that would be long enough to be tucked into your clothes for patient safety. What do you think?"

Ben thought a moment. "That could work," he agreed.

They entered the night district and Adam headed straight for a specific jewelers shop he knew. It was run by a fairly old witch couple who were known for their exquisite work.

As they entered the small shop, a smiling man came bustling out of the backroom.

"Elder Rickman, I didn't expect to see you again so soon." He turned to look at Ben. "And you must be Ben. Adam told my wife and me about you, and how you were his mate. I must say I wasn't expecting you both to come together. I assumed this present would be given to you privately." At his last comment, he looked pointedly at Adam, who managed to look sheepishly at the floor.

"The question came up unexpectedly, and I didn't want to wait."

Ben laughed at the expression on Adam's face. He could see that Adam was a bit annoyed with himself, and he guessed that Adam had probably had a romantic setting in mind for his proposal. However, Ben thought it could not have been more perfect. He squeezed Adam's hand, and when their eyes met, he smiled reassuringly.

The man had disappeared into the backroom again, and he returned with a medium-sized velvet jewelry box which he handed to Adam. When Adam opened it, he found the gold circular pendant with a crest on the front, that he had ordered. As Ben watched, Adam lifted the pendant, revealing a long gold chain. He pressed his fingers to the edge of the pendant, and it opened. Ben realized it was also a locket; inside there were two engraved pictures. On one side was an engraving of Adam, and on the other was an engraving of Ben.

“My idea was that this would keep me close to your heart at all times and remind you of me while we are apart. The crest on the front is my family crest, and it would honor me if you would wear this as my promise to you.”

“Put it on for me?” Ben requested, looking into Adam’s eyes as he lifted his hair out of the way.

As the clasp closed, Ben felt a warm tingle go through him. He knew this would be the start of the rest of his life.

Both men thanked the jeweler and set off at a brisk pace towards the clinic. Ben kept one hand in Adam’s and one hand over his heart where the pendant rested under his clothes.

Arriving at the clinic, Adam insisted on escorting him inside to ensure Jamie didn’t try to lecture him. As Adam predicted, Jamie was waiting for them, and Adam held up his hands to stop the lecture before Jamie could even draw a breath.

“Before you start, we are not late for the reason you think.” He gestured to Ben, and Ben drew out the pendant.

Jamie looked at it, and then looked at Ben, a silent question in his eyes. Ben smiled and said, “Adam gave this to me after I agreed to become his blood-bonded mate.”

Jamie’s eyes widened, then he cheered loudly, drawing lots of attention. Jamie looked around at all the people, before shouting out, “Listen up everyone; pass the word. We have a newly engaged couple here.” The crowd cheered, and the people nearest to them clapped Ben and Adam on the back.

After a while, Jamie broke up the crowd and sent Adam off with instructions to be back to pick up his *fiancé* after his shift. Adam took the teasing with good grace and went off to his council office, no doubt intending to spread the word from there.

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The arrangements took two weeks, and by the end of that time both Ben and Adam were going mad. All they wanted was to be bonded and to start living the rest of their lives together, but the community had decided that an elder getting bonded was a big deal, and that they had to have a big celebration.

Adam had explained to Ben that the actual blood-bonding was very simple; each of them had to drink some of the other’s blood while making love to seal

the bond. There was nothing else to it. The community, however, wanted a whole ceremony with vows and an exchange of rings, which made it more like a wedding service. The actual blood-bond would be forged afterwards on their “Elder Adam Rickman”.

Jamie teased both men unmercifully by commenting frequently on how he was glad that he and Andrew had not had to have all the fuss, as Andrew was only an administrative assistant at the time of their bonding.

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The night of the ceremony started clear; the moon was full, the stars were bright, and the air was crisp. Ben, however, didn't notice any of this because he was too nervous. He and Adam had discussed the ceremony, and they had decided that Ben should use his full proper name. Ben had suggested it because, as he told Adam, he didn't want their new lives to start out with any lies.

He was also not in his home tonight, as he had given up his home in preparation of moving in with Adam. Instead, he was staying with Casey and Jamie at their house that adjoined the clinic. The last few days had been busy with work, preparations, and writing his vows. The ceremony was taking place at midnight, as that meant they would start a new day as bonded mates. He couldn't wait. He had so much energy he knew he wasn't going to get any more sleep.

He was just thinking about getting out of bed when there was a knock on the door.

He pulled the blankets around his body before calling out for the person to enter, guessing it would only be Casey or Jamie this early in the morning. Proving him right, Jamie poked his head around the door before stepping inside.

“Hey, you're awake.” Jamie grinned. “Ready to tie the knot?”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Hello to you too, and yes, I am ready to be *bonded* tonight.”

“Good.” Jamie paused before continuing more seriously, “Look, Casey and I discussed what to give you and Rickman as a bonding gift, and I remembered our first conversation together after your run-in with Rickman.”

Ben frowned, trying to think back, and then he remembered the conversation he had had with Jamie about Ian and the scars on his back. “You're offering to get rid of my scars for me?”

Jamie nodded. "That, and Casey thought you may like to have your hair color done too, so you look like yourself for your joining."

Ben smiled his agreement. "Sounds great, but I would like to keep my hair long. I've gotten used to it now."

"Well, why don't you grab a shower while I get Casey? Only put a robe on after you're clean, as we will have to be able to see all the scars to remove them all."

Jamie left, and Ben headed for the bathroom down the hall.

After his shower, he returned to his room as requested, only wearing a robe. Jamie and Casey were waiting for him there, and as he had done last time, Jamie grinned at him before ordering him to strip.

Ben rolled his eyes as he removed the robe and dropped it to the floor; Jamie then guided him to lie on his front on the bed.

He heard an indrawn breath from Casey when he saw the scars, but before he could comment, the brothers had started to chant in unison. He felt his back getting warm, and a feeling of relaxation spread through him, leaving him in a magic-induced haze. He came out of the haze to find himself still lying on his bed with Jamie and Casey sitting on either side of him.

Jamie smiled, and offered him a hand to get up, while Casey repositioned two mirrors so Ben could see his back. The first thing Ben saw when he looked in the mirror was his hair; it had been blond for so long, he had forgotten how different he looked when it was jet black. His eyes then moved to see the reflection of his back in the other mirror. He gasped as silent tears ran down his cheeks. His back was smooth again; there were no marks to mar his skin at all.

"Thank you both," he said, when the tears finally slowed. Jamie handed him some clothes, and once he was dressed, he joined the brothers downstairs for some food.

He spent the late afternoon going over his vows and getting ready. He decided to leave his hair out of its usual braid, because he knew Adam preferred his hair loose, and he hoped his mate would like the new color. He put on a new suit that he had bought specially for the occasion with his meagre savings; it consisted of light-grey pants and jacket, with a white button-down shirt and a silver tie.

Andrew had found him the day before and handed him a gift box which contained a pair of gold cufflinks with the initials B and R on them. Ben still



smiled when he looked at them; he liked the thought that his name would soon be Bennett Rickman.

When he was dressed and ready, he made his way downstairs to find the brothers and Andrew waiting for him. As a group, they left the house and headed for the town square. As they got nearer to the square, people seemed to multiply. It seemed the whole community had turned out to see the ceremony. The crowd made way for the small group as they moved towards their designated spot near the council building. Starting at the council building, there was a trail of red rose petals leading him to the center of the town square.

Andrew had left them a while back to join the other vampires. Jamie and Casey took up positions on either side of Ben as music started to sound out into the night. Staying in that formation, they followed the rose petal trail, walking in time to the music.

As they got nearer, they saw Adam being escorted in the same way by Andrew and Tim, coming from the opposite direction. They all met in the center of the square, and the ceremony began.

Jackson presided over the ceremony as the Senior Elder. He started by telling everyone how rare mates for vampires were becoming, and how proud he was that now two vampires from this community had found theirs. He went into detail about what a mate meant for a vampire, how the bond was for life, and how the mates would always put each other before anyone or anything else.

Next came the vows Adam and Ben had written; Adam went first.

“Bennett Glenderson, I had all but given up hope of ever finding my mate. After nearly two thousand years, it seemed to be almost an impossibility. Running into you was the best thing that could have happened to me. I cannot change your past, but I can promise to do everything in my power to give you a long and happy future.”

By the end of his vow there was not a dry eye in the audience. Ben had to take a few deep breaths to calm himself down before beginning his.

“Adam Rickman, you have accepted me and my past without question or reservation. I cannot promise that we will never fight or hurt each other. But I can promise to love you for the rest of our lives. Today I give up my past; Bennett Glenderson no longer exists. I am now, and will always be, Bennett Rickman.”

When Ben had finished, everyone in the square was openly weeping for the couple.

Jackson said a few more words before proclaiming that it was midnight, and this was a time of celebration. Their four escorts took Adam and Ben to the edge of the square; they were then escorted into the council building that had been lavishly decorated for the occasion. There were flowers and candles at regular intervals around the room, and some big doors had been opened to allow the party to be taken outside. There was food for the witches and a bar serving drinks and blood.

When Adam and Ben finally got away from the party, they made their way quickly to Adam's house, now their house. Ben gasped when he saw the bedroom. The sheets on the bed were red silk, and there were lights strung all around the room giving the effect of candles.

Outside the door of the house, they had found a parcel left for them; and Ben now opened it and started to laugh. In the parcel was a bottle of expensive lube, a bottle of champagne, and two glasses, carefully wrapped in tissue paper.

Adam looked in the parcel and grinned. "I should have known Jamie would do something like this."

Adam pulled Ben into his arms, and he came willingly. Their lips met, and the passion exploded. Both men knew this first time was going to be fast, the buildup—that had started when they met—had almost reached breaking point. As they came up for air, Adam whispered in his ear.

"I love you more than anything, and I need you now." Ben moaned at the words and melted into Adam's body. "Can you use that spell you told me about that Jamie taught you?" Adam asked in a seductive tone, while running his hands over Ben's cloth-covered erection.

Ben pushed into Adam's hand and started to mutter rapidly under his breath. Their clothes disappeared, reappearing neatly folded on a nearby dresser.

Adam took swift advantage and swept Ben up into his arms. He strode over to the bed and laid his mate in the middle, on his back.

Ben looked up at Adam and saw the hunger he felt, mirrored in his mate's eyes. He held his arms open, and Adam prowled up from the bottom of the bed until he was leaning over Ben, propped on his hands with his body wedged firmly between his mate's legs. They both moaned as their hard lengths rubbed together and sent shocks through both of them.

Adam reached for the lube he had snagged from the parcel, and after slicking up his fingers, he leaned forward to kiss Ben, while his hands fondled his mate's balls and inched lower till they found their target.

Adam leaned back to assess his mate, before running a slick finger over the hidden entrance. He felt the ring of muscles give slightly under his touch and slowly started to push one finger into the hot heat of his mate's body.

Ben arched into the sensation of being penetrated after so long, relishing the slight burn and the feeling of Adam being inside him.

"More. More, please," he begged, but Adam refused to be rushed and took his time adding more lube and increasing to two, then three fingers.

"Please, Adam, I'm going to come if you keep doing that, and I want to come with you inside me. Please hurry!"

Adam took pity on his mate and reached again for the lube. After slicking up his rock-hard shaft, he positioned himself at Ben's entrance. He looked into Ben's dazed eyes, and as he pushed forward he said, "I claim you now as my mate; I will always protect you and will make it my life's work to ensure you are safe and happy from this moment on."

He started off slowly, but quickly gained speed and strength. Soon he was pounding into Ben, and Ben was meeting him thrust for thrust.

When he felt his climax approaching, he sank his fangs into his own wrist and pulled them out so that it was bleeding. He then sank his fangs into Ben's neck while bringing his bleeding wrist up to Ben's mouth.

As they both took the other's blood, he sensed the bond snap into place and Ben's emotions enter his mind in waves. He read Ben's pleasure, and as they both climaxed together, the effect on both himself and Ben at the same time was transmitted through the new bond. The connection prolonged their orgasms till they both collapsed, Adam on top of Ben.

When Adam finally seemed to come back to reality, he quickly rolled off Ben, afraid he was crushing him, but when he looked down at his mate all he saw was love shining back at him.

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The next month passed slowly, and Ben felt like he was in heaven as he lived with his perfect mate and worked at the clinic. Jamie had a baby girl.

They named her Elizabeth, or Beth for short, and the whole community celebrated with another midnight party to welcome the new addition.

Ben talked to Jamie, and Jamie explained that Beth would have traits from both her parents. She would be able to bear the sunlight till she hit puberty, but then would have the same restrictions as any vampire and only be able to go out in the dark. She would be tested as she grew, to see what magic she had inherited from Jamie, and she would then be trained in that magic by either Jamie or Casey, so she could decide what she wanted to do.

Ben and Adam had settled into a routine, and they were happier than either of them could have imagined. The only cloud in Ben's silver lining was the fact that two weeks after their bonding he had started to get dizzy spells. He assumed it was due to his system getting used to the new changes in his body from the bonding. He already knew he was stronger and could try and give Adam a run for his money when they got into a wrestling match now.

He had also seen an improvement in his sight and hearing. That was taking some getting used to, as he often ended up listening to things that he wasn't supposed to by overhearing his colleague's conversations.

The best improvement had to be the increase in his libido. It meant that whenever Adam wanted to seduce him he was more than willing, and sometimes he even tried his hand at seducing Adam.

Ben was doing inventory, and he blushed as he remembered how his mate had woken him up that morning. He had woken from an erotic dream of Adam sucking him, to find it wasn't a dream. Adam had sucked him till he had come twice and then made love to him till they both came.

He had lain on the bed trying to catch his breath, and Adam had collapsed next to him. After kissing and touching for another few minutes, they felt able to get up.

Adam had then pounced on him in the shower, but Ben had managed to keep him to just horsing around, as he thought if he had come again he wouldn't have been of any use to anyone at work that night. He had promised to make it up to Adam when they got home from work.

Ben shook his head to shake off the memory and returned to his chore of inventorying the supplies in the medicine cabinet so that Jamie could order anything they needed. As he climbed the short stepladder to see the top shelf, he felt a wave of dizziness and had to cling onto the shelf to avoid falling. He

managed to get back on the ground and headed out the door to get a glass of water from the staff room, but as he walked along the corridor another wave of dizziness hit him too quickly for him to grab anything, and he fainted on the floor.

Luckily for Ben he was outside the office, and Jamie heard him hitting the floor. Jamie came running out of the office to see what the crash had been, and when he saw Ben, he rushed to his side. Ben was just starting to come to as Jamie reached him and was looking around, trying to work out how he had gotten on the floor.

“What happened?” Jamie demanded, as he helped Ben to prop himself up against the wall.

“I had another dizzy spell; they’ve been driving me mad since two weeks after the bonding. When will I settle into this feeling of Adam always being a part of me? I can feel him in the back of my head, not what he’s thinking or doing, but I can feel his emotions all the time, and it’s disorienting.”

Jamie frowned at him, when he heard this wasn’t the first time. “Feeling your mate’s emotions will stay with you always; that’s the mind link. But you shouldn’t be having any dizzy spells. Have you told Adam?”

Ben shook his head. “He has been busy with catching up on the work he postponed when we took that week-long honeymoon at home. He saw me having one spell during that week, but we both put it down to my body settling down after the bonding ceremony.”

Jamie rolled his eyes. “You need to communicate with him. He’s probably been able to feel you’re hiding something, you know? And he has probably been wondering what it is.”

Ben stared at him. He hadn’t thought about the link and how Adam would have known he was worried about something. Adam would never press Ben to tell him anything he didn’t want to, but he had been asking how Ben was feeling, more often than he usually did.

Jamie helped Ben get up, and before Ben could argue, he was being guided to an examination room and being helped up onto a bed. Lying back stopped the room from spinning so Ben was grateful to be horizontal for a while. He heard Jamie muttering spells that would show him if anything was wrong with Ben, and then he heard Jamie give an indrawn breath.

Ben opened his eyes to see a surprised look on Jamie's face, and he started to worry. "What's wrong with me? Is it bad?"

He was starting to panic as Jamie didn't answer straight away, but Jamie seemed to shake himself and smiled before straightening out his expression and looking down at Ben.

"Well there's good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

Ben swallowed, not sure what to expect. Jamie looked so serious, but there was something in his eyes. "The bad news first," he replied, a slight quaver in his voice.

"Well the bad news is you're probably going to be dizzy and maybe even sick for at least another eight and a half months or more."

Ben frowned as something in the back of his mind tried to scream at him, but he couldn't quite think what he was missing. "And the good news?" he asked.

Jamie beamed at him. "You're pregnant!"

Ben's mouth fell open. If he had been standing, he would have collapsed again there and then. After a few moments his face split into a smile, and his hand fell to his stomach. Suddenly, he felt Adam's voice in his mind. *What's going on, Love? I felt your mind go blank for a few moments, and then you felt shocked, and now you're projecting so many different emotions I can't separate them.* He sounded confused and very concerned.

Ben considered waiting till they got home, but he knew Adam would be worrying for the rest of the night if he did that, so he took a deep mental breath. *I have a bit of news for you. Firstly my mind went blank because I fainted. Before Adam could respond to that, he quickly added, Don't worry, I'm fine, but be warned it may happen a few more times in the next eight months, and I may be a bit sick too.*

Adam was quicker on the uptake than Ben, and as soon as Ben had said about being ill for only eight months, he asked tentatively, *Eight months? Does that mean what I think it does?*

Ben smiled and answered, *We're going to be fathers, Love.*

He could feel Adam's happiness through their link, and he made sure Adam could feel his.

He looked up as Jamie handed him a note. On it, he said he guessed Ben was talking to Adam, so he was going to leave, but he said Ben was to have something to eat and drink and then go straight home to rest. Ben nodded, and relayed the information to Adam, who said he would meet him at home as soon as his current meeting finished, which should be within the next hour if he had anything to do with it (and he would).

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Jamie checked Ben again before he headed home and pronounced him fit to go unescorted. Ben was very grateful for that, as he wanted time alone to process what was happening before talking to Adam. He couldn't believe he was pregnant. Of course, he had known it would be a possibility because of Jamie's pregnancy, but he had not thought that it would happen so soon.

He was nearly home and starting to speed up in anticipation of seeing Adam. He wanted to get started on some dinner before his mate got home. As he passed a side road, he didn't see the other person coming out until it was too late. He felt an arm around his neck and then the prick of a needle, before the world went black.

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Adam was just finishing up his meeting when he felt Ben's mind blank out again. A check of the time told Adam that Ben should be home and would be alone.

Panicking, he rushed out of the building and used his vampire speed to get home in record time. Arriving home, he found the alarm system still set and no one in the house. He immediately called the clinic only to be told by Jamie that Ben had been fine, and he had sent him home in good time to meet him there.

By this time Ben's mind had been blank for over forty-five minutes, and Adam was starting to really get worried, when suddenly he felt a sharp pain going through his head, and then Ben's voice came through clearly.

*ADAM, HELP ME. IAN HAS ME IN THE WOODS. COME QUICKLY. I NEED YOU!*

The shouted words roared through his head and brought him to his knees. He immediately got up and started talking to Ben.

*Ben, calm down, and tell me where you are. You need to help me find you so I can get to you quickly.*

Ben's mind quieted, and he replied, *I'm in the woods south of the community border. I'm near that clearing we found when we went for a picnic last week.* Adam could feel Ben starting to panic again. *NO. Please I can't take this again. What about the baby?*

Adam was already grabbing his phone and talking to Jackson, while trying to send calming thoughts to Ben and trying to stay calm himself at the same time. He drew on his training as a soldier to block off his emotions. He knew he needed to think clearly and act quickly, but not without thought first. Acting without thinking things through could get Ben and their child killed.

Adam raced back to the council building and met with Jackson and the other vampires that had been contacted. Others were still arriving at top speed, and he was surprised to see Casey and Jamie appear out of thin air near Andrew.

Jamie came straight up to Adam, but Adam cut off his apology before he had really started.

"This is not anyone's fault but that bastard Ian's, and trust me when I say he will not live to see the sunrise." Then he added as an afterthought, "Or maybe he will see the sunrise, tied to a tree." With that comment, he turned and made his way to Jackson.

As Adam joined the group, he saw that Jackson had a map of the community grounds and was giving out orders.

Jackson looked up at him. "Can you show us the location Ben told you?" he asked holding out the map.

Adam skimmed over the map till he saw the area he and Ben had picnicked in. He fished a pen from his pocket and marked the area. As he handed it back to Jackson, he asked what the plans were.

"The fastest vampires are heading out now. Come on. We're going too."

Jackson took off at top speed, and Adam followed. Being two of the oldest living vampires, they were also the fastest, strongest, and most people agreed, the meanest when crossed.

They arrived at the edge of the woods; and with the other vampires, they fanned out to cover as much ground as possible and hunt out any lookouts or planned ambushes.

Andrew arrived, and immediately Jamie and Casey appeared at his side. Jackson cursed and turned on Casey.



“You and Jamie are to stay here and not move.” He then turned on Andrew. “Why did you let them follow you here? This is not the place for non-vampires.” Andrew started to hang his head, but Casey stepped between them and faced Jackson.

“We are here because you will need us when you get Ben back. Unless you have medical knowledge of pregnant blood-bonded mates that are non-vampires?”

Jackson was going to interrupt but stopped as soon as Casey mentioned pregnant mates.

“Ben’s pregnant?” He turned to Adam and saw the torment on his friend’s face.

“Yes,” Adam said. “We only found out an hour ago. I was heading home to see him when he contacted me to say he had been taken.”

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Ben had awoken to find himself tied by his hands to a tree in a sitting position; his feet had been tied together, as well, to prevent escape.

He looked around groggily and started to panic when he saw Ian talking to a group of men not far away. He reached out for Adam and managed to tell him who had him and where, before he started to panic in earnest. Adam tried to calm him, and he could feel his mate was trying to coordinate with other people while still talking to him. He took a deep shuddering breath and focused on staying calm so his mate could focus on finding him, instead of dividing his attention.

Ben tried to stay composed when he saw Ian walking towards him with his guards in tow. Ian looked like a predator stalking its prey. Unfortunately, Ben knew he was the prey, and he was already caught. He knew he had to stall for time until Adam could get to him, so he steeled himself and put on what he hoped was a blank expression.

“Well pet, you have led me on a merry dance haven’t you?” Ian sneered, as he approached.

“Don’t know what you mean,” Ben answered with as much of a shrug as his tied hands would allow. “I led you nowhere. I left you. I never asked or wanted you to follow me, and I never wanted to see you ever again. Actually, that’s not true. I would have liked to see you, dead with a stake through your heart. Oh, sorry, you would have to have a heart first wouldn’t you?”

Ian's face would have been funny in any other circumstance. It went red then seemed to swell with his anger. Then his eyes caught on a glint of gold showing at the ripped edge of Ben's shirt. His hand whipped out, but when he touched the pendant, he howled in pain and snatched back his hand which was rapidly blistering.

"What is that?" he demanded of Ben, even as his hand stopped blistering and began to heal.

Ben thought about lying, but then he thought that the threat of his mate might just give Ian pause and at least would keep him talking. "*That* is a bonding gift from my mate. His name is Adam Rickman. Maybe you've heard of him?" As he said Adam's name, he had the pleasure of seeing Ian and most of his guards flinch. Seemed Adam was well known!

"Why would a powerful vampire like Rickman want to take a scrawny wimp like you for a mate?"

"Being a vampire, you should know that you don't get to choose your mate. The bond is there before the blood-bonding. The blood-bonding just strengthens it," Ben replied scornfully. "Then again, it never was your brains that attracted me. I realized quite quickly you didn't have any."

He knew he had said too much in his anger over Ian's comment about Adam and himself when Ian barked a few words at a nearby guard and a blindfold was secured over his eyes.

Ben fought down his panic and forced his voice to sound even more scornful. "Well, I see some things never change. You never could handle me. You always had to tie me up to beat me, and you never could look me in the eye when you did it. I always knew you were a coward and now your guards are going to know the same."

When he would have continued speaking, he felt a fist slam into his mouth. Knocking his head against the tree, he tasted blood, and he would swear he saw stars. Before he could shake the feeling from his head, he felt a foot connecting with his side. After that, he lost count of the punishing kicks and punches he endured. All he remembered was the sound of his mate's voice telling him he was near, and that he was coming. He just hoped Adam would get there in time. His last thought before he lost consciousness was *please help me protect my baby*.

Adam and Jackson arrived at the clearing first, with their men spread out to either side. With their vampire hearing, they could hear what was being said, and Adam tried to tell his mate to not provoke Ian too much, but his mate's fear had turned into anger, and he let his anger speak for him.

As soon as Adam felt the blows starting to fall on his mate, he signaled Jackson that they needed to move quickly. Both vampires used hand signals to pass instructions to their men, and as a unit, they all burst into the clearing. Adam and Jackson immediately pulled Ian off Ben while their men took on the guards. Ian tried to fight, but the elder vampires quickly subdued him, and while Jackson held him, Adam ran for his mate.

When he saw Ben was unconscious, he roared his anger and turned back to Ian. Jackson saw the killing anger in his eyes and quickly released Ian and moved away.

Adam lunged and grabbed the weaker vampire by his neck. "You touched my mate and for that you will die. Just be grateful that you have not managed to harm the baby, or I would make you suffer a lifetime of agony that would have you begging for death."

At the mention of a baby, Ian's eyes had widened in fear. He knew that to touch another vampire's mate in violence was forbidden, but to harm a pregnant mate? That was a much worse crime. He gasped for breath as Adam's hold on his throat tightened. He didn't feel the silver knife Adam had used to penetrate the flesh of his stomach, but he definitely felt it when Adam released his throat and yanked the knife upwards, splitting him open from stomach to throat. Blood poured out with no way for his vampire body to heal before he bled to death in seconds.

Adam threw the knife on top of the body and turned back to Ben to see that Jackson had untied him from the tree, and had him laid out on the ground.

Jackson looked at Adam. "I'll get Casey and Jamie," he said, before whirling off at high speed.

He cradled his mate in his arms. "Please Love, wake up and look at me. I can feel the baby's okay, but I need to see your eyes and know you're okay too," he begged, as he rocked back and forth.

Jackson returned with the brothers and made him release his hold so the healers could do their work.

"I can feel the life within him, so the baby is okay. Because the baby is part of both of us, I am bonded to it. I can't feel emotions yet, but I can feel its presence," Adam said to the healers, as Jackson made him stand back.

Jamie and Casey muttered spells between them and Ben started to groan. Adam quickly turned his attention back to his mate. He scooped up Ben in his arms and sent him reassuring thoughts, as Casey directed him to take Ben to the clinic.

Their men had either killed or subdued all of Ian's guards and were heading back to the community by a different route with their prisoners. Their prisoners would be turned over to the high council for trial and punishment.

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It turned out Ben had escaped serious harm and had only suffered bruising with no cracked or broken bones. Adam was relieved, but he was also starting to get angry at Ben for provoking Ian, when he had been so near.

The two mates accepted the healer's offer of a room for the day and were led to a guest room at the back of the house.

After the brothers had left them, Adam turned to his mate who was laid out on the bed to help ease his still stiff muscles and joints.

"What were you thinking by antagonizing him like that? Calling him a coward? What did you hope to accomplish?" Adam was talking fast and getting progressively louder as he continued his rant.

Ben just lay there with his eyes shut. *I was trying to stall him long enough for you to get to me. I got angry when he called me a wimp. He had called me that many times before, and I had never answered back. This time I just saw red.* He used their mind link to speak as his jaw was still aching from the first punch he had received.

Adam turned to him; he could sense the ache of his mate's body and felt slightly guilty for laying into him while he was hurt and had only just been rescued. He strode to the bed, and after stripping to his underwear and helping Ben do the same, he eased them both under the blankets. *Sorry, my love, I wasn't thinking. I was just scared that I would lose you,* he said through their link, and he pulled Ben gently till his head rested on his chest. *Just sleep, and we will talk when we wake.*

Needing no more urging, Ben snuggled into the warmth of his bigger mate's body and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

\*\*\*\*

They returned home and life settled into a routine again. Ian's guards were charged with aiding a criminal but were given only a short sentence when it came out that Ian had been threatening their families to ensure their cooperation.

Ben had to give up work as he got nearer to his term, because the dizzy spells kept hitting without warning.

Because Adam still had council work to do, he moved to his home office so he could get his work done and still be near if Ben needed him.

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The sound of the door banging open had every male in the room at the ready in case of attack until they saw Adam's pregnant mate standing there looking like an avenging angel. He was all beautiful and disheveled, with his thick dark hair escaping the complicated braid he always weaved it into. His usually deep chocolate eyes had a coppery shine to them, and the flames in there could burn entire cities. He looked so beautiful it was almost painful.

He also looked quite pissed, which is why Adam assumed his men were pressing against the walls, trying to disappear into the woodwork.

He assumed they were remembering the last time one of them had gotten on Ben's bad side. Ben had used a spell he now was very good at, to strip the offending vampire in front of his friends and then ordered him to serve drinks to everyone in the room, including going to the kitchen to retrieve the drinks with nothing on. All of Adam's men had walked on eggshells since then, and they all tried to avoid Ben as much as possible.

"There you are, you bastard! You're never around when I need you you're always doing council business!" he snapped angrily while he strode into Adam's home office.

"What's wrong, my mate?" Adam asked, worried.

"What's wrong? This is what's wrong," Ben ranted, pointing at his belly where their child was growing inside him. He was now seven months gone and getting rather large for his small frame. "You did this to me! My back aches. My feet are swollen. I look like a cow. I need to pee every twenty minutes." He

sucked in another breath and continued to vent, even if a little softer. “I have food cravings I can’t fulfill because of your stupid vampire DNA. I’m horny, and I can’t sleep if you’re not there!” He finished on a sob, the wind having gone out of his sails.

Adam was thankful when Ben let him gather him in his arms and carry him out of the room to a few chuckles from Adam’s men.

“I heard that! Don’t laugh at my mate, ’cause he’s getting laid and you’re not!” Ben yelled over Adam’s shoulder, which made Adam laugh as silence spread over the room. Yep! Ben was pretty scary when he wanted to be.

*I’m sorry, Love. I embarrassed you,* Ben said through their mind link, as he snuggled further into Adam’s shoulder.

*Don’t worry, my mate. It’s okay.* Adam smiled into Ben’s sweet-smelling hair, and as he looked down at Ben’s face, he noticed the dark circles under Ben’s eyes.

*My poor mate,* Adam thought. Ben looked like he was at the end of his rope. The dark circles stood out against his pale skin, and Adam could feel his exhaustion through their bond, which made him feel guilty for not noticing it sooner.

*I apologize, my dearest love, for not paying enough attention,* Adam said, choosing to keep up the most intimate form of communication and cuddling him closer.

Finally, they got to their room—the bed was a tangled mess, the comforter lying on the floor as if Ben had kicked it off of him in his sleep, which made Adam feel worse because Ben would have slept better if they had been together.

*I’m taking time off, damn it! No one needs me as much as my mate does,* was Adam’s last thought as he lay his mate down on the bed and caressed him till they both fell into a deep sleep.

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*Four months later*

Ben woke late in the night. He had not slept much since the birth of their son, Thomas, two months ago. Thomas, or more commonly called Tom, was a demanding child, and since Adam needed to sleep during the day to get enough sleep for work at night, it fell to Ben to get up and down all day.

Ben had taken paternity leave from the clinic so he could stay at home with Tom. After that, they had arranged that Tom would go to work with Ben during the night, and Tom could play with Jamie and Andrew's little one.

The two couples would split the cost of a nanny to watch the children, but Ben and Jamie would always be nearby if they were needed.

As Ben stretched in the bed, he noticed the bedroom was too quiet. Since bonding with Adam had enhanced his senses, he usually could hear Tom breathing in his sleep. Slightly panicked, he jumped out of bed and headed for the cot in the corner of the room. When he found it empty, he reached out for Adam.

*Sorry to worry you, Love; we are in the training room. I have a later start tonight, and so I didn't want to wake you,* came Adam's reply through their link.

Ben smiled at his mate's thoughtfulness and headed for the training room downstairs. The sight that met him had him stifling a laugh. Adam was doing some push-ups on a gym mat in the center of the floor. He had placed Tom on his back and was exercising while Tom looked around in interest at everything in the room.

Tom caught sight of Ben and started making lots of noise, causing Adam to look up, and when he saw his mate, he grinned.

"This is my version of babysitting," he said, as he continued his workout.

Ben shook his head and bent to pick Tom up off Adam's back. Adam sprung up and swept them both up in his arms. He peppered kisses over both their faces till both of them were giggling.

Ben set Tom on the floor, and he immediately started trying to eat his toes. Meanwhile, Ben wrapped his arms around Adam and drew him in for a long kiss.

"Feeding time," Ben said, as Tom had stopped playing and had started to whimper.

Ben bent and picked up the baby while Adam grabbed a towel and wiped off the worst of the sweat from his face and torso.

Together they headed for the kitchen, and Adam made up some vampire formula for Tom while Ben made himself a snack.

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When Ben turned around holding his plate, he stopped at the scene before him.

Adam was sitting at the table with Tom in his arms. He was watching the baby as he suckled on the bottle he held with a tender loving expression. All Ben could think was: *This is my family now, the most important people in my life. Nothing and no one will ever come between us, and if they try, I will make sure they regret it. If Adam leaves them alive that is!*

He joined his family at the table, and Adam leaned over to kiss him swiftly on the lips before returning his attention to Tom.

*Yes, this was the life they had both been waiting for, and now it was here to stay...*

**The End**



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## Author Bio

*Carol has not been writing long but has wanted to try her hand at it for a while. She has an ongoing story that is posted to Gay Authors and is hoping to submit a story for publishing in the near future.*

*She lives in the UK with her husband and nine year old daughter, who support her writing in any way they can.*

*She always loves to hear comments and suggestions from readers.*

## Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Gay Authors](#) | [Twitter](#)

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# CHARON'S DILEMMA

By Eloreen Moon

## Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: A tall man with short, dark brown, Roman-cut hair, piercing eyes of indeterminate color, and high cheekbones in an oval, masculine face with pouty lips is walking towards the viewer. He wears a tilted gold crown with two red stones visible on front. He has a brown, thigh-length fur coat with a black fur collar, a dark brown scarf, and leopard-patterned gloves. His long black pants partially cover the top of his silver-studded black boots.

Photo 2: A golden-tanned man with black pants hanging hip level and a muscular, shirtless back is facing away from the viewer with a black background. He has short, straight, ginger hair with brown and gold highlights. His left hand grasps a long silver sword at the hilt near the left side of his head, across his broad shoulders, and cut off from the picture to his right with his right arm hanging down.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*As Crown Prince to the human nation, I could have anyone I choose but to end the war between the humans and the griffons, I must marry the youngest son of the Griffon King. The night before I'm to be married, I meet a man who captures my attention at first glance but before I can talk to him, he disappears. How am I supposed to marry someone I've never met when I've finally found someone who's captured my interest? But I suppose it's for the best because no matter what, I'm determined to end this war... I just hope my betrothed is someone I can grow fond of...*

Sincerely,

Nikyta

*P.S. I want this to be similar to a classic fairy tale (without the evil woman trope) in a historical fantasy setting with shapeshifters that turn into griffons and where arranged marriage of same-sex couples is the norm. Sweet but no sex, although sexual tension is allowed. That means kisses are okay but no frottage, BJs, hand-jobs, etc. No cheating, sharing, ménage or open relationships and please don't make the Crown Prince a slut! I would like him*

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*to be standoffish and uninterested in every man but his love interest. HEA is a must. Thank you for putting up with my demands!! ^\_^*

### **Story Info**

**Genre:** fantasy, paranormal, science fiction

**Tags:** royalty, sweet/no sex, shifters non-wolf/cat, interspecies, magic, arranged marriage, mates/bonded

**Word Count:** 16,284

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### Dedication

I would like to dedicate this story as a thank you to everyone who works tirelessly on these annual events: The M/M Romance group mods, editors, and proofreaders. Without them, my story wouldn't exist. A special Dedication goes to Kathleen Hayes, my M/M Romance editor for this story. Thank you for putting up with me... and my Word issues. ☺

*Acknowledgement*

A big thank you to Nikyta for the wonderful prompt. Finally to my beta readers: thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping me along this journey. You know who you are. 😊

# CHARON'S DILEMMA

By Eloreen Moon

*King Varick's Personal Study*

*Hoomun Nation Castle*

*Planet Prenides*

*366 Sun Cycles after founding (702 Earth Standard Years)*

"I'm sorry, son. I would have put this off as long as I could but the laws are clear. You have to marry by your twenty-fifth sun cycle day, or the Senate will choose another Crown Prince. Think of this as an... opportunity to—" King Varick of the Hoomun nation started telling his son, Crown Prince Charon, when said son interrupted him.

"No, Father. I can't have this. The day of my birth is only a moon cycle away. How am I supposed to choose someone in such a short amount of time? I thought the Senate was postponing this farce of a marriage because of Mother's death?"

King Varick thought Charon would snap something in his spine when his son sat up in his favorite chair. He looked taller than his previous bearing of straight as a rod when this conversation had started. Not that it was perceptible to most people since Charon usually looked like he had a stick up his ass. Sometimes Varick wished he had been alive when his ancestors had crash-landed on Prenides. He could have stopped some of these ridiculous laws the starting Senate had created in the face of failing technology and what they perceived as a top-heavy power distribution. Then maybe the Hoomun society would not be as straitlaced as it was today.

Charon is a haughty, asinine relic of a long-gone society that was light-years from this planet in a galaxy forgotten over time. One shouldn't think like that of their only son. Never mind that the Hoomun nation was a direct descendant of that ancient "Human" race and their petty differences.

Varick wanted to think that their current society was better than it had been in those long ago times. Charon did have a point though.

“They were going to when the recent cease-fire with the Gryphuns was suddenly... no longer, after your sister threw her rather pointed shoe at the Gryphon Crown Prince Seneca’s head. After a long minute of shock on both sides, he took offense and angrily stomped off shouting to be ready at dawn.”

“I bet that stuck in his craw.” Charon smirked with a suspicious twinkle in his eyes.

“Did you have something to do with it?” Varick asked mildly, quirking his eyebrows upwards, resigned to knowing the answer.

“Who? Me?” Charon said with feigned innocence in his seat.

Well, mostly feigned. Charon did still have an innocent air about him despite his twenty-four sun cycles—something that Varick thought he might contemplate later. He closed his eyes, a pained expression on his handsome face as he ran his rough hand over his bald head, grimaced, and wished he still had hair to pull out. His son would be the death of him.

“You do realize, son of my loins, that if this war is not stopped, our nation will be wiped out within a generation?”

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Shocked to speechlessness, Charon stood at his father’s direct statement and looked at his father’s countenance. Really looked at the man, not the embodiment of Duty he had come to know and take on like a mantle to shield him from the rest of the planet. The man—not the King—who had helped him throughout the sun cycles and felt regret for the first time at his involvement in the squabble between Bethany, the younger sister in question, and Seneca. It was his suggestion that she should do something to make Seneca see her—since she liked him. He hadn’t realized what she would do to get his attention and that it would restart the war with the Gryphuns.

“I... I... I’m sorry. Bethany likes Seneca. She wanted him to notice her. I didn’t realize... I never intended for that to happen.” Charon abruptly sat down into his father’s velvet chair, allowing his earlier stiff demeanor to melt away since they were in Varick’s private chambers and not in the throne room. As he felt the soft “velvet” covering the chair he sat in—velvet they no longer had the ability to create—Charon distantly wished old Earth technology could function on Prenides. It would have made acclimating to their home a bit easier. While those with magic abilities could reproduce, or substitute, most things lost to them from the breakdown of technology, it wasn’t the same.

"I know, son." Varick took another deep breath and let go of his anger, sighing. "I know. This is why we need to get your marriage arranged so your sister can just go up to him and ask. You know the laws prevent her from marrying until you are married." Charon growled. "Yes, yes. I know. They are antiquated laws and I'm working on changing them but they were all we had when we settled on Prenides. You can only go so fast with the Senate. They are like their Roman counterparts in ancient Rome on old Earth in the Milky Way Galaxy before space travel..."

"Stop right there, Father. I know the little bit of history we have left, too. I KNOW—" Charon stopped before his temper got the best of him and took a couple deep breaths himself. "I understand that they are slow but—" He sighed, pained. "I wanted to find someone that I actually care for and not have an arranged marriage," he said more softly, almost pleadingly.

Charon watched Varick's face soften. Varick walked over to the wing-backed chair Charon favored and knelt in front of him. Charon watched as his father reached and touched his Earth Roman styled hair reverently with a slightly pained expression on his face. Then he lightly grazed over his high cheekbones, sadness and loss in Varick's eyes.

"I know, Father," Charon whispered, knowing his own pain reflected on his face. They hadn't been physically affectionate since Mother's death, even in private. "I miss her too." He took a deep breath, clasping his father's hand and continued his plea. "Despite the fact that you only knew her for a few moon cycles before you married her, I know you cared for her. I saw that she did too. Even after the few moon cycles since her death, I see you sometimes stare off looking at nothing and know that you are thinking of her. Even though your marriage was arranged, you had time to get to know and care for her. And that, more than anything, is what I want. "

"I understand, son." Varick closed his eyes briefly, took a couple of calming breaths, then opened them looking more settled than usual. "Do you have anyone in mind?"

"No one has caught my eye. I haven't been interested in anyone. The only preference I have is that the person must be male," Charon replied quietly, his own pain from the loss of his mother morphing to the simmering temper that seemed to sizzle under his skin most of the time recently. Temper in check for the moment, Charon wondered about this need that never seemed to go away. *It is getting worse. I need to work on that more.*



Charon looked up to see Varick with a contemplative expression on his face before Varick removed his hand from Charon's face. Charon let go and blew out the breath he hadn't known he had been holding, waiting for his father to speak.

"It will be done. I know the timing of this is not ideal, but we need to make the most of it."

"That is why I wanted to find someone on my own. Someone to—dare I say it—love like you and Mother did," Charon said with a mixture of hope on his despondent face, not realizing how vulnerable his eyes looked.

Charon's gaze followed Varick as he sat back in his chair, a gleam of knowledge in his eyes that Charon hadn't seen before. Charon knew that look. A mixture of innocence and amusement that he just knew meant he wasn't going to like it. *Like father, like son.* Charon sighed. *I did learn from the best.*

"You are up to something, aren't you?" Charon accused his father, resignedly.

Varick smirked as he hinted. "Let's just say that I have plans in motion that should benefit all of us."

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*The following quarter moon cycle—Eight day cycles later. Also called a quarm.*

"You summoned me, sire?" Charon announced himself as he walked into the throne room, noticing the formal attire of the two men within. He continued through the big wooden doors in the stone walls, toward his father and a man he had only met a couple of times at parlays, and usually across a cease-fire. He slapped his riding gloves on his thighs as he walked in—the only sign of his impatience. The man in question was tall—a trait he had noticed many of the Gryphun royals shared while watching the negotiations at the various intervals since his involvement in this long war. He had dark copper hair that almost glowed as natural light from some of the windows made in the stone walls reflected off the man's head. It was cut short like most royalty had, Charon included, but he sported sideburns to his chin and no mustache. He had a small circlet with a variety of multi-colored stones Charon knew could be found in the local countryside. He was wearing the red-gold robes of the Gryphun royal house with hints of chain mail under the robes. He looked familiar, but Charon couldn't place him.

Charon watched as his father, also in full regalia robes including his own crown, turned from the conversation with the man and looked at Charon thoughtfully. Charon felt a little small since he was somewhat underdressed in his usual attire of black pants, black shirt suitable for the fighting training grounds, and a small purple cape with his initials embroidered on it. Considering he had not been told this would be a formal meeting, he continued towards them head held high despite his lack of meeting attire.

“Yes, Prince Charon. I would like you to meet the His Royal Majesty, King Alder of the Gryphun Nation.”

Charon only stumbled slightly at the name of Varick's guest. It was slight enough that only Varick would have noticed it. He smoothly walked up to the pair from the door and gave the warrior greeting to the Kings—a slight bow as he held his fist over his heart with his elbow pointing to his hip. The filtered light through stained glass windows bathed Charon with colored, dancing lights.

“Welcome to the Hoomun nation, King Alder,” Charon said steadily. “Was not your father the Gryphun King when we last met, several sun cycles ago?”

“I'm glad to be here. You may call me Alder,” King Alder returned the greeting with a Gryphun warrior greeting of both crossed arms over the heart. “Yes, young Charon, my father, the prior Gryphun King Nebual, went to the Gryphun sky lands and left the leadership to me about three moon cycles ago. Your mother had just passed when I was crowned a moon cycle later, so your father and I decided not to tell you until your mourning period was over.”

“Ah.” Understanding sympathy passed over Charon's face as the mourning period in question was not yet complete. *This is why I didn't know.* “I am sorry for your loss. I would have given my respects if I had known. You were always fair at the parlays.” Charon grimaced. “Your father, on the other hand, was not.”

“Yes, I understand. My Seneca is much like his grandfather.” Alder smirked. “I heard Seneca shouting when he returned from... meeting your sister.”

Charon looked pained and was about to apologize when Alder continued.

“It's fine. I stopped him from breaking the cease-fire on such a little thing as a shoe to his face.” Alder grinned fully, showing his white teeth and a glimmer of amusement in his gold eyes. “It was interesting when I enlightened him as to

*why* he got the shoe thrown at him. He was better once that was explained. Stubborn goat. I was mildly amused when he related the tale, but he was not. Not surprising since he doesn't have a humorous bone in his body. He plans on apologizing to her about getting mad so easily. But, I digress."

"Yes." Varick rolled his eyes towards the heavens, glad that war had not broken out from such a petty thing. Hopefully, the current cease-fire would be of a more permanent thing shortly. "Let's go to my chambers. This is best discussed outside of the presence of listening ears," Varick ushered them to his chambers in the back of the throne room.

"Indeed." Alder raised an eyebrow, looked at Charon as they moved to the door of the chambers and noticed Charon looking back with an I-have-no-idea look. "He doesn't know?" he asked looking back at Varick.

"No."

"I see," Alder responded, and the other eyebrow joined the first. "It has been a quarm," Alder said mildly with a hint of humor and a little bit of a question.

"I'm aware," Varick said tightly, looking like had bitten something sour.

Charon looked between the two Kings, shook his head, and opened the door to his father's chambers holding it for them to walk through.

"He will tell me when he is ready," Charon answered calmly to the unspoken question the Gryphun King had implied.

"Which will be now," Varick stated flatly as he turned to Charon. "Please close the doors. Alder, would you do me the honor of protecting this chamber with a silence spell?"

"Certainly, Varick," Alder said with a smile as he closed his eyes, clapped his hands together, and a palpable presence was felt around the small room.

Varick mused on the nature of the magic on Prenides when the Human technology they had brought slowly failed while watching Alder create the shield to prevent what was said from being heard by listening ears. The experiments of his ancestors on Alder's ancestors—which were logged by the former captains—the surviving logs of which he had in his possession these many centuries later detailed how his ancestors who hadn't understood anything different from themselves had become complete bastards. *I wonder if that is why Humans and the shifters that became the Gryphuns were at war? It*

*would certainly make sense that Humans would fear new things and as the generations passed, Hoomuns forgot the real reason and just perpetuated the same war.*

“Is that necessary, Father?” Charon asked, concerned.

Varick came out of his thoughts and started his answer, “Yes—”

The Gryphun King interrupted Varick. “We are doing this because there are factions within my court that would kill me and my family if the information he is about to tell you gets out too soon.”

“What is going on?” Charon demanded.

Varick sighed, heavily and long.

“Do you remember your request to me last quarm?” Varick asked, looking older than his sixty sun cycles.

“Yes...” Charon drew the word out with confusion, thinking about that day cycle when he had broken down in front of his father. Despite the emotional upheaval, it had gotten his heart’s desire out—to be with a man, finally. Not at all happy with arranged marriages in general, he understood the nature of them well. Ancient Humans were willy-nilly about their partners. While love existed here on Prenides, it was not the norm. Love from an arranged marriage was almost unheard of—but not impossible. This was why he wanted to have what his parents had and to buck the norm by choosing his own partner before the contracts were signed. He would have had a better chance of finding someone to love. Thank the gods the sex of the partner didn’t matter, unlike those ancient Humans. Children could be had in any number of ways, so it didn’t matter what sex your partner was—or who your parent, or guardian, arranged for you. At least Father was working on that with the Senate. Having a choice would be nice.

“Well, I knew exactly who to request for you and, luckily, King Alder agreed,” Varick continued.

“Why would he have to agree?” Charon was more confused than before.

Alder answered with a smile, “Because, you will be marrying my youngest son, Reddington... in two day cycles.”

Charon stilled with an expression of pain on his face, instantly realizing that this is what his father knew when he left that fateful day.

“WHAT!! Father, how *could* you? I understand making arrangements but to have it in such a short time—” Charon continued to rant and curse the gods for several minutes, starting out under his breath, but then his barely controlled temper exploded in a rather vocal way.

Varick saw Alder looking at him, shocked silent at the outburst from the young man—something he knew Alder had never seen any of the royal Hoomuns do.

“And that is why I hadn’t told him yet,” Varick said, resigned, while listening to his son blow off steam as he paced around the room several paces away. He smirked at Alder and then sighed, continuing his explanation while Charon ranted in the background.

“What most people don’t know—hell and damnation, the entire planet doesn’t know—is that we Hoomun royals have a terribly short fuse. It’s nothing to worry about, just means we are passionate people, but the simmering tension must be siphoned or it boils over. Because of life here we had to hide it, especially from the Gryphuns, so as not to give you any more ammunition in this war. Part of the reason I had you here was so that you would understand and keep our secret.”

Varick winced at a particularly creative string of expletives that came out of Charon’s mouth while he explained their secret to Alder. He hadn’t known his son knew that many curse words.

“What we are about to do with this marriage arrangement is basically unheard of. No one in the Hoomun generations prior to me ever thought to make a marriage contract to stop the war. My guess is that, for reasons I will never know or fully understand, they wanted to keep the war going. Perhaps out of fear of your abilities such as the magic we discovered after our technology failed. Whatever the reason—that decision has almost led to genocide of our race.”

“Genocide!” The Gryphun King sputtered, shocked again at the statement being said so matter-of-factly. He was having a hard time reconciling the King in front of him now and the King he had known about for the last ten sun cycles. He sat down on the nearest chair. “Your people have lost so much?”

Varick sat down heavily with a tired air behind the large wooden desk that was a relic from their ancestors’ furniture-making skills and trees planted when they had arrived. Most of the technology and some of the skills and plants were

lost over the 366 sun cycles since the founding of the Hoomun nation, but there were some who could still make decent furniture with the native hardwoods that was very pretty. He just preferred the style and wood from the Humans. Luckily, it had lasted a long time in this environment. *Sometimes, I wondered about that.* Mentally pulling himself back to the conversation at hand, he continued.

“Yes, we have, unfortunately. The death rate has risen enough in the last few sun cycles that it is out-pacing our birth rate. With some of the population not marrying other species; hell, not even outside our own nation let alone our own race, we have become inbred mostly due to the lack of new population. The royal family more so since our ruling body, the Senate, has required the royal Hoomuns to marry other Hoomuns. I got that overturned last sun cycle, shortly before his mother took sick.”

Varick grinned at that last statement. Not hearing as much cursing, he looked over at Charon and noticed that he was winding down from his rage. He must have built it up quite a bit since the last time he had vented in the previous quarm. A good partnership could help with the ever-present tension that seemed to always be there. Hopefully, this marriage he had contracted would rectify that soon, and stop the war, too. The need to release the ever-present tension in Hoomun royals did not necessarily express in anger but could manifest in sudden melancholy, as Charon had expressed somewhat just a quarm before. Positive outlets were better, and sex was the one outlet that helped the most. He had a strong suspicion on that concerning his only son. Varick was just now realizing Charon had not taken his advice when he came of age to learn the ropes, so to speak. His son could be called a throwback. Shaking his head at his thoughts, he called over to his son.

“Son, you need to take a meditative breath and come over to discuss matters at hand. Why have you not released your tension before now?” Varick used his deep voice as he called out to Charon to gently prod his offspring out of the temper he was in as he had done periodically in Charon’s life.

Charon awakened from his rage at his father’s calm voice and looked up from his hands, realizing he was kneeling on the floor and had no idea how he got there. He stood up, took a few meditative breaths as suggested, and took a seat next to Alder and across from his father.

“I was on my way to the training grounds when I got your message.” Charon was much better as he sat there just breathing.

“Did you not do that two day cycles ago? And every day cycle for the prior six day cycles before that?”

“Yes.” Charon took a last calming breath. “It has not helped. I have been restless since that talk last quarm. Training takes the edge off but—”

“Why haven’t you had sex yet, Charon?” Varick asked with a piercing gaze at his son.

Charon blushed furiously. And that, by itself, answered Varick’s question.

Both Charon and Varick were focused on each other so much so that they were effectively ignoring the rather large man sitting there with them. King Alder was tall, even sitting, and a good head taller than Varick or Charon. The slight sound of chainmail catching reminded Alder of the protection he wore as he shifted slightly, watching the by-play of father and son. Of course, he could change into his Gryphon form to protect himself, but why subject his Gryphon to tight quarters if a little planning while walking as a man would be just as effective. He continued to watch, mouth hanging open slightly in his surprise because they were so... direct. Gryphuns, especially the royal house, did not talk about sex, or the lack of it, like it was a common place occurrence. And here he thought the Crown Prince and his father were prudish. Charon’s voice pulled him out of his musings.

“Because there has not been anyone I’ve been interested in doing *that* with. So, I train, I fight, and I do other things...” Charon said flushing even more and squirming slightly.

“You know sex will help more than training... and the other things,” Varick said uncomfortably.

*Well, maybe they are a bit straitlaced, Alder mused at the conversation. Good. I didn’t want all of my illusions shattered. Hmm, I think I might not tell Reddington about this. I think he needs to find out about his intended for himself.*

Alder cleared his throat.

Varick and Charon startled. Together, they turned to look at him, realization dawning on their faces that they had ignored him for the last quarter hour.

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” Charon started his apology before his father, bowing slightly in his chair.

Varick continued, "I am sorry about that, Alder. When we are out of range of prying eyes and listening ears, we tend to let loose," he said wryly, grinning slightly with a twinkle in his eyes.

Alder nodded in comprehension once. "I believe I understand. We, too, have our own secrets that we have to keep for peace among ourselves. I've been sitting here fascinated. This is a new side to both of you that I had not seen—or heard—before."

"There is a reason that Father calls me an asinine prick on occasion," Charon told the Gryphun King quietly.

Alder quirked one eyebrow at Charon's bold statement in inquiry.

"You heard that at the last formal ball, didn't you?" Varick asked sardonically. "Damnation, I was hoping you hadn't."

"The fact that you two speak your mind about these things and understand each other so well... well, it's mind boggling." Alder continued to look a little dazed, "I mean... Charon, you always seem so... haughty and above everyone. I guess with this revelation, the reservations I had when Varick proposed this arrangement to me are gone. I had definite concerns when he suggested the timing, but seeing you like this gives me hope that you are more approachable than I had known. Gryphuns are fervent people. We have to be because our animal counterparts are fairly avid and enthusiastic, and must be free to shift on a regular basis, especially when we are hatchlings. Therefore, our partners need to be able to not only stand up to us but allow physical contact as well. I am pleased." Alder concluded his speech with a little awe and reassurance in his voice.

"We had to have proper demeanor or we would have been lynched in the beginning. While the Humans who were shipped to this sector to settle somewhere that would host them had more liberal leanings than their Earthbound counterparts, they were still all about not showing emotions and having as much control as possible, potentially because of their own circumstances. If the ship leaders, called 'Captains', hadn't, the people on board would have panicked when the ship carrying them developed a mechanical malfunction and crash landed here. The members of the royal house of Hoomuns are direct descendants of those ship leaders. That crash landing directly affected everyone nearby." Varick looked directly at Alder, "The largest transformation was the beginning of the Gryphuns."



Alder and Charon's jaws dropped completely and they gasped simultaneously in surprise. They looked at each other, realized neither knew, and looked back to Varick.

"Explain," Alder demanded. "We know nothing of our Gryphun origins. Only that there was a Change and it was forevermore called that. No details were given, not even to the royal family."

Varick took a deep breath and continued the story.

"An accident caused the containers for the genetic material for the eagle and the lion, the two animals your Gryphuns are made from, and the environment's magic to mix and cause the sentient full shapeshifters indigenous to this planet to change and become Griffin shifters. Griffin was the name of an eagle-lion hybrid and was a being of myth on ancient Earth. Over the years the name morphed and became Gryphun while Hoomuns evolved from Humans, the race name of the people on the ship that caused your Change. There are notes and logs as both races evolved from that fateful day."

Alder was flabbergasted after Varick finished.

"You mean our ancestors could shift to anything? That would make my Gryphun a different entity and explains why I can feel him inside me. We share the body regardless of the Gryphun form or the man form. I never knew... That explains much. In some ways, I'm glad we only have the two forms to change between. I'm not sure what I would do with myself if I could change into any form. May I have a copy of any notes and logs to take back to my scribes so we may understand our history?"

"Of course. Our scribes are making copies of the relevant materials and they should be ready any time after the marriage," Varick answered with a smile.

Charon cleared his throat.

Varick and Alder turned towards him.

"I have a question," Charon said as he leaned back in the chair, head tilted back, hoping to glean enough strength to continue. "Why two day cycles, Father? I understand about Alder's side having issues, but why did you agree to it so soon? Usually, these things take moon cycles and the gods forbid if the Royal Chatelaine is given anything to plan for the palace without a quarm warning."

"I have a confession, son," Varick said with a look of apology. "I have been talking to Alder for a few moon cycles and so informed Chester last quarm.

Yes, the time was pushed up because of Alder's people, but it was done mostly because of you."

"I knew you had something... wait... me!?" Charon exclaimed as he sat up in the chair ramrod straight with his usual stick up his ass. Haughty Charon had returned.

*I know that he doesn't like the spotlight but I had hoped that Charon would be more... flexible.*

Varick continued, "Because I knew that you needed someone sooner rather than later and I gleaned, correctly I might add, that you would prefer male to female when you came of age. Although, the fact that you didn't take my advice—"

"Stop, Father. Don't say another word. As I said, I wasn't interested in anyone, which is why I hadn't done anything about it."

Charon flowed to his feet, stiffening to formal protocol and gave the warrior's greeting in reverse.

"By your leave?"

"Do you wish to see the contract?" Varick asked concerned at Charon's stiff demeanor.

"No, sir. I trust you."

Charon looked his father with haunted and pain-filled eyes, but his demeanor and voice were steady as a rock.

"I will go to the training grounds and... practice tonight and tomorrow morning. Please let me know of any pertinent information that I will need before the marriage in two day cycles at the appointed hour.

Charon executed a perfect bow to both kings, spun around fluidly with his cape falling exactly so, and left the chambers, closing the door quietly behind him.

Varick leaned back in his chair, noticing before closing his eyes that Alder had watched the entire exchange with a slightly shocked expression, again.

"What just happened, Varick?"

Varick kept his eyes closed, exhaustion showing on his rugged face.

"What you missed was the look he gave me before he left. What you don't know was that he was looking forward to choosing his own partner, but the

Senate nixed that after the Seneca and Bethany incident. They were willing to postpone the twenty-five sun cycle requirement for marriage for another six moon cycles because of his mother's death so close to his birth sun cycle day. He was going to use the extra time to quietly find someone, present said person to me, and then I would draw up the marriage like it was arranged so none would be the wiser. However, his off-handed comment and Bethany's own spirit created the incident with Seneca and the cease-fire. Although nothing really happened, the Senate insisted that Charon marry by his birth sun cycle day or they would find another Crown Prince. I presented it to him last quarm. Since you and I had the contract in place and were already working on the marriage preparation, it seemed like a simple thing to change things when I saw him at the brink of falling apart at that meeting. Your political unrest was just the thing to step up the timing and here we are, two days from a marriage that would be beneficial to everyone and my son will be locked into something he absolutely loathes."

Varick opened his eyes and watched Alder open his mouth looking stunned and having a million questions running through his eyes. Alder realized he couldn't get anything out; he closed it, thought for a minute and then tried again. "Loathes?" At the slightly higher pitch, Alder cleared his throat briefly and continued in his normal voice, "How can he loathe someone he's never met?"

Varick continued with slight smirk on his face.

"Of course he doesn't loathe the person. You are correct, he has never met Reddington, but he does loathe that he doesn't get to choose the person. It is against his nature that he does not have a choice, which is why I'm slowly changing the laws with the Senate so that it matters not who, what, where, or when you marry. Or even, if you marry at all. Not even if you have tri-marriage or a quad-marriage—"

"You have those?" Alder interrupted, inquiringly. "We sometimes mate with more than one person, but it is rare."

"Yes, we do have multiple-partner marriages." Varick sat up, amused at the turn in the conversation. "According to the records from the ship I mentioned earlier, Humans persecuted their own kind for having those kinds of relationships, even as they started to allow same-sex marriages. They even persecuted those Humans that wanted both sexes. We have all of these types now and there are some that go for a multiple partnership because they find two

people they want to be with at the same time. While rare, it's more common than having more than two of the same sex. If you like, I'll add those notes in with your history I'm having compiled. Not as much information, but might be useful. Most of the information I have back then was from personal logs and diaries of the ship leaders so I don't know the accuracy. But it does make interesting reading." Then Varick thought about his son and lost the smile.

"As for Charon, he'll come around but it will be hard for him. I'm not sure how much you'll want to tell Reddington but you probably need to prepare him somehow." Varick looked over at Alder with a hopeful expression. "Unfortunately, Charon knows the contract is signed since he did not want to see it but maybe we should arrange a meeting between them?"

Alder sat forward himself and then decided to stand. Varick stood with him. Alder clasped Varick's left elbow with his right hand and Varick did the same, a question in his eyes with the sudden farewell greeting between equals.

"That will not be possible as no one knows he is near and I would like to keep it that way." Alder thought for a moment. "He could come to the training grounds in his Gryphon form. Charon did say he would be there tomorrow morning. It is large enough to accommodate his large shifted size. Your people will not recognize him and your people have interacted with some of my Gryphon soldiers before. While he has distinctive red-gold plumage, he can meet Charon and no one will be the wiser. Either he or I might be able to conceal the meeting somewhat with magic. I would not tell Charon what will happen in case it does not go as planned, but it will give them the opportunity to meet before the wedding and no one will be the wiser."

Varick's face fell at Alder's initial denial of a meeting, but then grew in hope as Alder continued his idea.

"I like that idea." Varick shook Alder's arm as per protocol, and they separated, smiles on their faces at the plan they had just come up with to help their children along in this trying time.

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Charon slid down the door, eyes closed, after he had closed his father's chamber doors, pain and want bubbling while he did something not in the mien of a royal. No control. Luckily the guards were not there but at the throne room entrance. There were no other entrances to the chambers except for the secret passage that only the royal family knew about in case they needed to escape the palace. So, no one was around to see him break down.

*Reddington. That is a fine, strong name. Gods, I wanted to pick my own partner, a husband, a mate. I like the sound of mate. I wonder what Gryphuns have? I'll have to ask my future husband or Alder. If the political unrest is as Alder says, I probably won't meet him until we are at the altar.*

Charon sighed at the last thought and opened his green-brown eyes, a little calmer, but still bursting with the unfairness of it all. His tension was getting harder to handle.

*Maybe I should have done something about sex before now. Oh well. I will not do that to my husband-to-be at this late date. I will just have to train harder. The other thing will have to wait too. It's not as satisfying and I don't really want to take the time. Maybe I'll sleep this time.*

With that in mind, he stood up, brushed his immaculate clothing and continued towards the throne room door and the training grounds.

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The next morning—one day cycle before the wedding—Charon could see the preparations as palace staff were running around him while he was walking out of his sleeping chambers toward the side doors. Unfortunately, no one but himself, his father, the Chatelaine of the palace, and his groom-to-be's immediate family knew what was going to happen. Everyone else—staff, guards, and villagers—were told that we were hosting the royal Gryphuns as dignitaries and it was to be a political party for a potential treaty. Well, there would be a treaty, just not as most treaties come—complete with exchanging of vows and a hand fasting.

He was dressed for his morning training session in his typical black ensemble but without his cape. He felt last night's endeavor—enough that he hoped he would be able to do this practice without falling on his face. He didn't get to be one of the fastest swordsmen in the history of the Hoomun nation by not keeping up. He continued to walk out the side doors of the palace and turned towards the stables and the training ground. As he passed the food and herb gardens that led to the grounds in the back, he saw a glimpse of the big tent that was going up there.

*That will be a lovely setting.*

He imagined the grounds decked out with the decorations for the wedding, chairs arranged in a circle around the main altar so that all could see. The altar circle for ceremonies would be enclosed by a wood and canvas tent. He did like

flowers. He might stop by after training to see everything and confirm it would be like he imagined.

He continued past the herb and vegetable gardens and the formal flower garden to the left and towards the front of the palace. A circular packed road in front of the palace doors led off down to the main road. The palace doors opened to the entrance way of the palace and the formal spaces open to the public. The throne room and chambers were situated on the left of the entrance and the formal dining room for receptions on the right. A carriage house was on the right side of the palace for the guests' transportation and their horseflesh.

After passing the formal gardens, the training grounds were at the end of the walkway with the stables attached. Since mounted training was a necessity, the stables for the guards and royal family were kept in the same area. There were other areas for the mages' training and even a wide area ready for the Gryphuns if they choose to set up training there. Considering his father's plans to become allies with the Gryphuns, it was not surprising that he had cleared a space for them to build upon later.

Charon decided to go to the stables and train with his mount, Horse, instead of returning to hand-to-hand combat he had done yesterday. He liked the name, even though it was Human English. He knew it was a name to label a common type of animal but it seemed to fit his charger. The horses on Prenides stayed pretty true to form despite the magic of the land changing most of the inhabitants and any technology.

*It was interesting history, about the Gryphuns,* Charon continued to muse, while walking.

When he had found out that Humans were the source of the Gryphuns' Change, he had researched what he could in the royal library—housed near the royal family's quarters and where his family kept all of the papers, journals, and books that were salvaged from the original landing. The other library in the palace kept the common scrolls and books that had been made here on Prenides. His father had kept the personal journals of the ship's "captain" in his bed chambers and had given them to him when he had returned from training the previous night.

*I'm glad he understood me so well that he gave me the information without prompting, or a word of what had happened prior to me leaving Father's throne room chambers. I'm so very thankful not to dwell on the subject with him.*

He arrived at Horse's stall and started the preparation of saddling Horse for his next bout of training.

"Doing well, Horse?"

Horse tossed his head and snorted like he was answering "yes" to Charon's question.

Charon continued the ritual as if he was having a conversation with Horse directly.

"Good, good. Well, we are about to do some work today," Charon said as he finished and started to mount. He was interrupted when a stable boy rushed in, babbling almost incoherently.

Charon turned around and looked at the boy, Ned, who served him and his house, but Ned was also special.

"What is it Ned? You need to slow down if you want me to understand."

"Y-y-your, Maj-j-esty!" Ned stuttered looking panicked. "T-there's a-a-b-b-big—"

"Spit it out, son. I know you have trouble talking when you are upset but you need to take a deep breath and say it firmly like we talked about." Charon looked at Ned concerned—he hadn't stuttered in moon cycles. It must have been something fairly scary for him to revert to how he had spoken before they had started the sessions to correct his stutter.

Ned took several deep breaths like Charon had taught him over the moon cycles they had worked together so far and calmed down enough to get out what had happened. Charon was starting to hear a commotion outside so he knew time was of the essence.

"I'm sorry, Y-your Highness," Ned spoke more normally. "There is a rather large red-gold Gryphun on the training fields, sir. He... just appeared. No warning." Ned took another deep breath, calming further and on the exhale said, "The quartermaster sent me to get you. He got the Marshall of the Guard there with the guards but the Gryphun is just sitting there. He hasn't done anything yet."

"I'm glad the guards didn't attack first and ask questions later. That would have been grounds to end the cease-fire we have." Charon handed the reins of Horse to Ned.

“Go ahead and finish checking Horse here and I will go see what is going on. You can calm down and come out when you are ready. You haven’t seen a Gryphon before, have you?” Charon was glad that the wedding had not been announced yet. The stable boys probably would have had stars in their eyes if they realized that this was one of the royal Gryphons. The only royals he had seen in their Gryphon form were Alder and Seneca—and while they had a little red in their feathers and fur, he believed they were mostly gold and white. He had never seen a red-gold one before. All royal Gryphons had gold in their Gryphon form. The other color depended mostly on something that he was not privy too—yet another thing to find out once everything settled out with the marriage.

“No, sire.” Ned interrupted his reflections as he reached the stable door.

“This is a royal Gryphon, son. There is nothing to worry about. I’ll go find out what is going on and then I will be back to train with Horse.”

“Yessir.” Ned bowed, appearing relieved he didn’t have to go back out. “That was the biggest thing I’ve ever seen, sire.” He grinned cheekily now that he was done with his fright.

Charon gave Ned one of his rare smiles.

“I would guess I would panic if a Gryphon arrived suddenly too.”

With that, Charon turned around and walked out of the stables to find chaos.

And what chaos he found. The Marshall and his guards were about to attack, the stable lads were cowering near the entrance of the stables, and the other fighters were already suited in their armor and ready with swords to attack one Gryphon that, as Ned had said, just sat there on his lion hind legs.

He took a moment and looked at the majestic creature as he sat in the training fields like he owned it. The Gryphon was easily nine feet tall, sitting. He didn’t want to contemplate how tall he would stand if he stood on his hind legs. Charon could certainly understand Ned’s fear of the large being taking up a good quarter of the field for mounted training. *Beautiful creature.* The head was a red-gold eagle head that looked piercingly at the men around him. His feathers were glistening in the morning day cycle sunlight and continued to his eagle front legs which he seemed to be kneading in the ground like the baker would with his bread dough. *I wonder if he is as nervous as the men?*

Charon continued to peruse the magnificent specimen of Gryphon in front of him as he cautiously walked forward towards the tableau before him. The



eagle wings on the Gryphun's back blended perfectly with the lion portion he was sitting upon and was also shining red-gold in the sunlight. He could see the muscular definition in the wings, chest, and back as the Gryphun moved his wings a bit. Before he knew it, the Gryphun was on his paws and claws with his wings fully extended to what looked like a fifteen- or sixteen-foot wingspan.

*Wow. He's mucking huge! Oh boy, I better get in there before he takes out a man... or two.*

Charon stuck his pinky fingers into his mouth and whistled the royal stop trill. The people stopped instantly, with the exception of the Gryphun who reared up, and started his own Gryphun noises of alarm.

"Whoa, WHOA!" Charon yelled towards the Gryphun as he ran up in front of him to stop the panic he could see in the gold eyes. "You are fine. I just whistled for them to stop what they were doing so they didn't do something stupid and attack you." Charon continued to explain and say soothing nonsense words towards this beautiful creature, hoping his horse-calming techniques worked. Slowly, the Gryphun settled down and returned to his original sitting position, towering over Charon, beak open and gulping air. He blinked and then did something Charon was not expecting.

"I apologize, Royal Hoomun Prince Charon," the Gryphun said in a deep, throaty, and melodic voice with long vowels that nearly sizzled Charon's nerve endings, causing him to purr himself.

*Wow. Didn't know they could speak.*

The few times he had seen other Gryphuns in their Gryphun form, they hadn't spoken. The royals always talked to Father in bipedal form. He mentally shook his head as the Gryphun bowed slightly to him.

Charon answered the bow with one of his own.

"I did not realize you could speak in this form. I apologize if I am a little stunned at this knowledge. To whom do I speak?"

"It is best that I not answer that question. Let me just say that I'm one of the royal Gryphuns here on an ambassadorship between our peoples in the hopes that the cease-fire will be made permanent."

*Father must have told the royal Gryphuns what to say if we met in public. He's probably one of the brothers of my intended.*

"Welcome to the palace. Would you like to change to meet with King Varick?"

“That will be unnecessary, Prince Charon. I will leave here shortly. I misjudged my arrival and interrupted your training schedule. I shall leave and return to meet the royal family as a man on the morrow’s day cycle. It is easier to travel in Gryphun form when no bags are needed.”

*So, he is not staying after the wedding.*

Charon was a little disappointed. He dismissed his slight sadness at that thought and continued to make nice.

“Then I will see you on the morrow.” Charon bowed again, and the unnamed Gryphun took flight with his powerful red-gold wings beating higher into the air. Charon watched in wonderment and hoped that the man the creature would become would be at the wedding at the next day cycle. After the Gryphun climbed high enough not to see details, Charon raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he watched him fly away.

“All is well. Get back to what you were doing.” Charon yelled for Arken, the Marshall of the guards. “Marshall!”

“Yes, sire.” Marshall Arken stood at attention in front of Charon.

“Please do not attack any Gryphuns that come on to the grounds. A permanent cease-fire is in the works and all will be announced on the morrow. Please see that everyone understands to welcome them to the palace.”

“Will do, sire.” The Marshall bowed and walked off shouting orders.

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*Later that day-cycle.*

Charon walked into the sitting room attached to his bedroom area and past the guards that stood outside it. Night was upon the lands, and there were shadows everywhere. He had a couple of candles and a few blue magic orbs the mages had anchored in his room.

He felt something—a connection, a knowledge that was instantaneous—he couldn’t name the feeling or the surety. He looked into the far corner of his room and knew there was someone there.

“Who goes there?” Charon spoke cautiously—intently staring at what he thought was a man.

The most beautiful man Charon had ever seen quietly walked out of the shadows. He was tall—taller than his own six feet. He stared at the golden skin

with muscles moving gracefully underneath it. The man wore black pants and black boots, with straight, short hair that glowed a slightly reddish gold tint in the low light. His hair looked like it could flame at any moment.

*I wonder if it is soft.*

Charon was so intent on drinking the man in that his brain never engaged to wonder how the man could be in his outer chamber, undetected. He was a stunning man, and yet he felt safe. He knew this man would not harm him. He didn't understand how he knew, but he never even considered raising the alarm.

The gorgeous stranger stepped forward, and Charon was helpless in his own body. The man quietly touched his hand to Charon's cheek and closed the space between them until there was barely room for a breath of air. Charon felt the man press his lips against his, and sensations exploded in him as he touched the softest flesh he had ever encountered.

They both moaned. Charon muttered something even he did not really understand, let alone think about, and the man pulled him closer.

Following the man's lead, Charon began to nibble on the exquisite lips that tasted like honey and berries. Charon melted into this wonderful man getting lost in the fiery kiss, and he knew that his dream had come true. He had found the man he could connect to and possibly could love.

So lost into the sensations he experienced, Charon never heard the interruption that signaled the end of his first kiss.

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Reddington, or Red, as he preferred to be called looked out from the darkened corner of the sitting room at his intended. Thank the gods of foolish Gryphuns that he had this ability to teleport and cloak at will. It was nice to see Charon up close before the marriage tomorrow. At 106 sun cycles, this long war had been his life since he was a very small hatchling. *It is a good thing, this arranged marriage. This war has gone on too long.* He continued to muse as he remembered the meeting with Charon earlier in the day, not paying attention to his stealth.

Red flew in his Gryphun form towards the Hoomun's royal palace from his home at the edge of the forest near his own royal seat many leagues away. He closed his eyes slightly, his face feeling the wind and the sun, hopeful that this first meeting with his intended would go well. He was a little annoyed with his

father gleefully telling him nothing about Prince Charon when he returned from meeting the Hoomun royals, other than his belief that it was a perfect match and instructions on where his intended would be this morn. He shook his red-golden eagle head at that thought, snorted, opened his eyes, and looked for a place to land.

*Ah, the training fields. Not too many people and I know Charon will be there.*

He banked and headed towards the training fields, cloaking as he went so as not to startle people by flying overhead.

Courtesy of his father's caution, he would meet his intended in Gryphun form so as to be prepared if something tried to attack him. And he would have the added bonus of meeting his soon-to-be husband without anyone knowing. Not many had seen him in his Gryphun form outside of the Gryphun nation. That would change once this marriage was completed.

Red noticed as he was flying low towards the main complex that there were several men training in one area, some mounted men training well away from the foot soldiers in another area, and yet another area with a mage tower that must be where the mages trained. *Well, look at this? An empty area sitting fallow separate but connected to the compound? How interesting... It looks to be large enough to setup a Gryphun training facility. Hmm. I wonder how long my Father and the King of the Hoomuns have been planning this marriage. I think Father has been holding back.*

He mentally grinned and continued towards the mounted training grounds, as that was where Charon would likely be this morn—according his source. He settled in an open area away from the training men so as not to startle them, dropping his magical cloak as soon as he landed.

*Ah, damnation.*

Too late, Red realized that he should not have been cloaked once he was over the palace lands. As soon as he landed and the men noticed him suddenly appear out of nowhere, all hell broke loose and chaos reigned. Men drew swords all around him with what looked like a captain in his distinctive attire shouting orders. A burly man near the armory motioned to a lad in a royal squire's attire spoke briefly to him. It was too loud to hear, but he thought the lad was being sent to get someone. Since he was in royal livery, he assumed someone from the royal house. Hopefully, his intended. The lad, looking a little

pale and scared, broke away from the burly man as soon as he was done talking and took off to a separate horse stable like he was on fire. There were some mounted soldiers in armor coming up from the far side too.

*Great! I am such an idiot sometimes. I forgot that some Hoomun people haven't seen a Gryphun before.*

If he'd had hands, he would have knocked some sense into himself. Instead, he kneaded the ground in front him in a display of nerves his Gryphun used. He sat there holding himself as still as he could, looking around at the people, hoping someone would stop the royal guards.

His roaming gaze alighted upon a man coming out of the stables the lad had run into moments before, and he stopped looking further. He was dressed in all black with armor and looked like he was about to start training himself. Red judged that he was shorter than he, but not by much, with dark brown hair, sharp cheekbones, and an oval face. The man's gaze was arresting with brilliant green-brown eyes staring at him in wonder. He was very thankful that Gryphuns had very sharp eyesight in this form as it helped him see minute details even while in the air and flying high over the land. He drank in his intended's visage and was so excited to be meeting him that he stood upon claws and paws and he extended his wings to their full sixteen-foot wing span, causing all the men around him to go into attack preparation mode.

*PHREEETTT!*

The piercing trill of a loud whistle startled Red so badly that he barely had time to see everyone stop instantly before his Gryphun reared in panic and he had to force his attention inward to try to calm himself.

Red vaguely heard a strong, commanding but gentle, voice say "Whoa, WHOA!" Words blended together as his Gryphun calmed faster than expected and he heard the voice apologize for startling him and explained what was going on. Gradually, his Gryphun settled, panting slightly, and he sat back down on his red-gold hind legs looking at what must be the Crown Prince of Hoomun, his future husband.

"I apologize, Royal Hoomun Prince Charon," Red said in his Gryphun voice, which was full of many notes and vowels that most Humans would not hear, and bowed his head in a gesture of respect between royals.

Charon looked a little shocked at his speech but answered with his own royal bow calmly.

"I did not realize you could speak in this form. I apologize if I'm a little stunned at this knowledge. To whom do I speak?"

"It is best that I not answer that question. Let me just say that I'm one of the royal Gryphuns here on an ambassadorship between our peoples in the hopes that the cease-fire will be made permanent." *Father did say that I would be an ambassador to the Hoomuns after the marriage, so not entirely a lie, but also not the whole truth.*

"Welcome to the palace. Would you like to change to meet with King Varick?"

"That will be unnecessary, Prince Charon. I will leave here shortly. I misjudged my arrival and interrupted your training schedule. I shall leave and return to meet the royal family as a man on the morrow's day cycle. It is easier to travel in Gryphun form when no bags are needed."

*Meeting the King would have been good, but I don't want to chance it.*

Red's bags should be here later today so he wouldn't have to figure out how to carry them while flying. Thank the gods his majordomo took care of that detail or he would have had nothing once he and Charon traveled on their honeymoon.

"Then I will see you on the morrow," Charon said as he bowed again.

Red turned and spread his wings, the red-gold of his coat glistening in the morning sun. With a jump he was back in the air, careful to leave his cloaking off so as not to suddenly disappear and really upset people. He felt eyes on him long into the air, and so he traveled until he was sure he was out of sight and then teleported directly into bipedal form at the side of the palace out of sight of everyone this time. As long as he could see where he was going, he could teleport to it. He was the only one with this ability, and he hoped to keep that knowledge from those that would seek to harm him as long as possible.

The Hoomun King and Charon would be the first to know after the wedding since their lives would depend upon that knowledge.

"Who goes there?"

Charon's voice startled Red out of his thoughts, returning him to the present to see Charon looking straight at him despite his being hidden in the shadows of the room.

*How did he know I was here?*

Red walked up to Charon, seeing the haughty but cautiously curious expression on his masculine face, and stood in front of the proud man. He was right that his intended was shorter, but he was actually shorter than expected when he only came up to Red's nose. At six foot five, there were not many who were taller, except a couple of his brothers. Charon was smaller, but hints of muscle beneath his attire gave Red some ideas for later.

Throwing caution into the wind, Red stepped closer until Charon and Red were barely touching, with only the clothes between them. He reached out to Charon's face and cradled it in his battle-scarred hands. Rubbing thumbs lightly over Charon's high cheekbones, Red saw the slightly glazed look in his Crown Prince's eyes as he lowered his lips to the pouty red ones that had been calling to him ever since seeing him while in Gryphon form.

They both moaned into the kiss when their lips touched. Heat rolled between and burned them both as Red intensified the kiss, pulling on Charon's lips with his teeth, never taking it further than closed mouths.

But the sparks! Charon murmured something unintelligible, and Red lost himself as he wrapped himself around this fascinating man. Red grabbed the back of Charon's head with one hand and placed his other arm around Charon's back at the waist, pressing them together.

The kiss grew to scorching as it deepened, and they both nibbled and tasted each other's mouths. Charon's stiff continence slowly melted, and Red vaguely noticed that they fit perfectly together.

Both were so lost in the kiss they probably would have missed a fireball whizzing past. Nevertheless, reality managed to intrude into Red's consciousness when an unidentified sound reached his ears. Red took a step apart from Charon and gazed into his face with wonder in his heart. He noticed Charon's eyes were still closed, still lost in the kiss with a look of wonderment of his own. Taking advantage, Red caressed Charon's face briefly before using his ability to teleport before someone caught him where he was not supposed to be.

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Charon slowly awakened as he felt a slight caress on his face. Then there was nothing. He blinked his eyes rapidly to find that the man who was everything he'd dreamed about was gone.

*Whaat?! He's gone!*

Looking around frantically, he realized he was alone—more alone and despondent than he realized before the marriage was contracted.

*I found him. I found the man that captures all the qualities I want. He's bolder than I, he's handsome, and he has muscles. Don't forget the muscles... Ah crap. I sound like a girl swooning at her suitor. Except that I'm not a girl. And this mystery man is not my suitor. Where did he disappear to? How did he do that?*

Charon gave himself a mental shake to stop dawdling and get back to the real world. While he wanted to be with this mystery man, he must do his duty and marry the Gryphon Prince tomorrow. Without duty, he would be nothing and the King would be disappointed. This war must be stopped once and for all.

Saddened, Charon gathered together his things before going to the baths at the other side of his wing.

It was too bad that technology didn't work on this world. Reading about the long-ago Human settlers of Earth where they had "bathrooms" within what had been called a "bedroom suite" would be nice. Since the magic of the planet kept the baths warm sun cycle-round, renewing the spells in one area was easier for the mages than individual bathing rooms within each set of sleeping chambers.

*Pity though. I guess it's a good thing that I don't have a modest bone in my body. Then again,* Charon smirked to himself, *rank has its privileges.*

Charon walked up to the bathing area doorway. Two soldiers on either side stood at attention and gave the warrior greeting.

"Soldiers, please ensure that the bathing room is cleared so that I may bathe in peace... alone."

"Yes, sire," they answered at once in unison.

Charon quirked his eyebrows at the synchrony, amused. The soldier to the right, Quess—Charon believed his name to be—nodded once and went inside to carry out his orders. A little steam escaped the curtained doorway as it fluttered closed. Within minutes, a couple of gentleman of the court with a lady between them exited the bathing room, bowing to him as his rank demanded—the men protectively hovering around the lady as they left. Charon gave a distracted nod of acknowledgement, vaguely amused at some of the inhabitants but thinking of the kiss more as he waited for them to pass. Quess returned to his post a few moments later.



"It is all clear, milord."

"Thank you, Quess. Please see that I am not disturbed."

"Yes, sire," Both soldiers answered in concert.

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### *The morning of the wedding*

Charon awoke to the light filtering through the curtains on the windows in his chambers. He blinked the grit from his eyes, feeling a little fuzzy from the night of sleep. *Sleep? Wait... I slept? All night?*

He scrambled out of the bed alarmed and looked around with new eyes. His sleeping area looked fine. More than fine. He didn't think he spent all that much time in here because it haunted him when he couldn't sleep.

*How did I sleep? I haven't slept but for a few hours each night for quarms, maybe even a couple moon cycles. I know the temper and tension problems were a part of it, but I thought it wouldn't get better until I could release the tension with sex.*

Charon shook his head, still a little bleary and unfocused, standing in a fight-ready position he automatically assumed when he leaped out of the bed. He slowly started to notice things. He saw that the bed coverings were slightly damp. Then he realized that he felt something, something sticky on his chest and abdomen. He looked down and saw dried trails of white trailing to his...

Understanding dawned and Charon blushed... hard. So embarrassed, he felt on fire despite being alone. He thought that his whole body was the color of those deep red beets he had read about in one of the agricultural journals that had survived. He realized that he was next to his full-length mirror, looked askance at it briefly, and then snapped straight ahead seeing the flush over his entire body.

*Yes, yes, I am.* He sighed and shook his head a little to lift the last of the grogginess. *I guess I need to bathe... again. I wonder what I dreamed about... oh yeah, that gorgeous guy who kissed me last night. Well, I guess I know what happened when I slept.*

Charon's thoughts continued to race while he grabbed his things for bathing, including what he needed for the wedding in a few hours and walked towards the door to head to the bathing room. He walked out of his chambers, looking around quickly and noticed that no one was around at this early hour.

He quickly walked to the bathing rooms he had been to last night. At least, he was pretty sure he had gone to them last night. He must have gone to his chambers at some point since he did not remember past the walking in after the trio had left.

He put on his blank face and walked up to the guards. To their credit, they didn't blink at his lack of attire or the mess on him. They were very well trained indeed. They were a different pair than last night, and he didn't know their names.

"Please see that the chambers are clear. I have preparations to make."

The guard on the left nodded in acknowledgment and walked into the room. A few minutes later, he exited the chambers.

"It is all clear, Your Highness." The guard went back to his position.

"Please see that I am not disturbed. I will be done within the hour." They both bowed in understanding.

Charon walked through the archway and let the curtain settle behind him.

He exhaled, slowly, relaxing some as he felt the steam from the baths seep into his pores. It was a fairly large room with several smaller, partially enclosed areas for semi-privacy and one that was completely enclosed for the modest among his people. There were not many—only a few here and there, but the ruling body tried to accommodate them. He walked straight to the large main bath in front and set his things aside on the bench closest. The benches surrounded the circular baths with small walkways in between for people to enter and exit the steps that led into the baths. They were fed by springs under the palace and the heat was maintained by mage spells.

Charon quickly walked into the nearest entrance and efficiently cleaned off the residue he had found upon waking. He went through and cleaned every crevice since he did not know what would happen later tonight. It will be his first night as a married man.

*What a scary thought. I will be married in a few hours to someone I will meet at the altar. I wish this could have been avoided, but the Senate had spoken and Father had found someone who would take me. I don't feel like a prime catch in the marriage market. If nothing else, I will not have to worry about it anymore. It's out of my hands now.*

He sighed continued his cleaning preparations. After he finished, he went to his things and gathered the anointing oils all of the royals used for their pre-

wedding rituals. They smelled heavenly, and he quickly applied them to his skin, beginning his meditation on what was to come.

He breathed in and out the traditional five times, each breath slowly sinking him into a calm state. He let the peace fill his mind and he noticed little nuances. He could hear the humming of small insects outside. The water flowed over his skin as it mingled with the oils, settling his inner thoughts further. He could feel the slight breeze through the windows lightly caressing his skin. He felt refreshed and ready to accept this marriage, and joy began to fill him once he had let go of the tension he had accumulated about the marriage. He felt like a large weight had been lifted and he was at peace with the direction his life was going towards.

*No wonder these rituals were created. I feel better.*

After he completed his pre-wedding meditation, Charon exited the bath and retrieved the clothing his father had specially made for this occasion. They were dark purple robes, so dark, they were almost black. Trimmed in grey fur, the robes shimmered in the sun coming in from the windows. He dried himself off and put on the robes. There were some Human fabrics called silk preserved by some early magic in a chamber made for those artifacts. His robes felt just like those fabrics. He placed the hood over his head after quickly combing his fingers through his hair.

*Luckily, I kept my hair short.*

After making sure he was presentable, Charon gathered his bathing things and walked out of the chambers. As the curtain closed and he was preparing to leave, one of the guards gasped in surprise.

“Sire?”

Charon turned around, eyes hard and completely green, and found both guards staring at him in shock. Since the robes he wore were only worn when a royal was getting married, the guards knew—at a glance—what was about to happen. What Charon didn't know was that his eyes were glowing slightly, too.

“Yes,” he answered their unspoken question. “And you are not to say anything until it is done. No one is supposed to know what will be happening under the large canvas tent in the rear of the palace until they get there. Do not disclose it.”

Charon looked hard at both of them and then looked individually in each guard's eyes. They both swallowed loudly, and looked away from Charon's

piercing gaze. Responding quickly, they said “Yes, sire” as they returned to their posts and stood at stark attention. Charon turned again and walked towards his chambers, thankful that his side of the palace was still clear.

*While I understand the need for secrecy, surely the staff and guards should know. I wonder why they acted like they were afraid of me. I wasn't that hard on them, was I?*

He shrugged away the thought, not worrying about it as he had other things to do. He walked into his chambers and put away his bathing things. After he was done, he walked into a side chamber and out the hidden door towards the back of the chambers. It led to a tunnel to his father's chambers where he was to meet him prior to officially arriving at the altar in the less than two hours under said tent.

*I better hop to it then.*

Quickly finding the end of the secret passage, he knocked on his father's door and it opened. Varick himself opened the door. Charon mused that would make sense since the staff did not know what form the political treaty was taking.

“Greetings and salutations, Father.”

“Greetings to you as well, my son. Did you sleep well last night? You seem... rested,” Varick said, smiling knowingly.

Charon stilled, closed his eyes and clench his fingers into fists, and then his blush from earlier came back in full force.

“Father, do you know something about last night? I confess that I do not remember it past walking into the bathing chambers for my nightly soak. I woke up this morning... *covered*.” He whispered the last word, knowing Varick would understand. While not modest about his body, as earlier proved, he was very straitlaced when it came to the act of sex itself. It did not matter that he was alone. Self-sex was still sex in his eyes even when his body was acting upon it without his knowledge.

Both of Varick's eyebrows shot up at his son's blush and the implications.

“You had a wet dream? And what do you mean by knowing something about last night?”

Charon blushed harder on his moderately light skin. He noticed that his father took notice of his rosy complexion.

“Yes... it appears that I did.” Charon continued to clench his fist but opened his eyes and tried to look anywhere but his father. “In fact, I deduced that I had the—*wet dream*,” he whispered hoarsely. He took a moment to clear his throat and continued in a more normal voice, “Because there was ejaculate on the front of my body.” *There, I said it. Almost twenty-five sun cycles old and I still have trouble talking to my father about anything dealing with sex.* He took a deep breath and faced his father. “I do not recall anything from the time I had entered the bathing rooms until I awoke early this morning. I felt like I had slept, and that was strange by itself. I haven’t slept more than two, or maybe four hours at most, for most of the last moon cycle.”

Varick stared into his eyes stunned, not saying anything as he stared into his son’s eyes.

Charon noticed his father’s expression was eerily similar to the one the guards had given him earlier that morning. “What?!”

“Son, I don’t know how to say this but... your eyes... they are this brilliant deep green, and they are glowing slightly.”

“Green? But I have green and brown eyes... glowing... they’re really glowing?” Charon said faintly. *What in all of the gods’ hells is going on! It had to have happened last night during that blank space of time.* He couldn’t remember anything. He never forgot how he went to bed before. Even when drinking ale, heavily.

“I don’t know, son. I’ll have someone research in the archives and revisit this after you return from your honeymoon. Shall we go?” Varick shook himself out of his shock. “We have only a few moments before it’s time.”

Charon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Strangely enough, he didn’t feel the tension he had been battling for the last moon cycle. It was surprisingly absent. For some reason, he was concerned with its absence. That surprised him somewhat. He shrugged and felt that his shoulders seemed to be fairly loose as well. He chalked it up to the strangeness that had been his morning, and looked at his father.

“I’m ready.”

Charon met his father’s eyes for a long moment. In a little more than an hour, their relationship would never be the same. Charon knew he would be embarking on a new life as a married man and his father would have to learn to let someone else take care of him. It was a heavy thought, but he knew that he

would still have his father when he needed him. *This is it.* Despite duty, despite that it was not his choice, Charon had a small flame of hope in his breast. He knew not how, or from where, but the light of a brand new day cycle had dawned and with it, maybe his wishes could come true.

Almost as one, they both turned and walked towards the passage that Charon had just walked out of and continued the journey to the back of the palace via hidden passages so Charon would not be seen before it was time.

Charon's only regret as he followed his father to his awaiting husband-to-be was that the lovely man who had kissed him would not be the one he would face in less than an hour at the marriage altar.

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They arrived at the small enclosure attached to the big canvas tent constructed for this event without anyone seeing them. There was an identical enclosure on the opposite side of the rather large circular tent, built for Reddington. The location was important because it was part of the ritual Charon and Reddington were about to embark upon. Charon only hoped someone had coached his intended well. The gods were not forgiving of any deviation from the ritual.

Varick walked to the center of the staging tent that was empty with the exception of a mat on the floor—at which, they stopped. Charon placed himself in full meditation position on the mat, kneeling and completely naked under his dark robes, as tradition dictated. He performed his full prayer and meditation to the gods as he respected their presence and wished them to aid him in this new endeavor.

After what seemed like hours but was likely only several moments, the gong signaled the beginning of the ritual. Charon gathered himself, got up in one fluid motion, and walked sedately in time, almost trancelike, to the low music that had started immediately after the gong had sounded. He left the smaller tent and walked down the aisle towards the central circular altar. As he passed the rows of seats aligned to the aisles and with the main altar like the spokes on a wheel, he heard his side of the tent sound an almost unanimous gasp as the Hoomuns saw what he was wearing, most understanding what the robes meant. They quickly quieted, and the music flowed from the players almost like the gods themselves saw fit to bless this union directly.

Charon saw a tall figure across from him matching his pace as they almost danced towards the central altar. As he drew closer, he noticed that the man

staring back at him, and the hope bloomed full force in his chest as he saw the familiar form of the man he had kissed the night before.

*My mystery man is Reddington! Oh happy days! My desire has been granted!*

None of these thoughts ever showed on Charon's stony face. But his now green eyes brightened further, starting a steady change from bright green to green-amber as he continued the ritual walk towards Reddington.

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Red noticed the change in color of Charon's eyes, his Gryphun stilling inside him suddenly. He felt a communication from him that nearly stopped his own steady walk towards the altar that he had been coached to perform.

::Be prepared. Another will be made::

Red heard mentally this cryptic remark from his Gryphun and tried to get more information out of him while he finished walking to the altar. Communication with your Gryphun didn't happen often, or as clearly as this one was, but a Gryphun speaking to their cohabitant in thought and pictures was not unheard of. His Gryphun apparently knew something was going to happen, and Red knew to listen. With this in mind, Red braced himself for anything and continued the slow circle opposite Charon and around the main altar in between them, going slightly faster now, as he had been instructed, so they would meet at north side of the altar at the right time.

They both finished their circuits and arrived at the north steps that led to the platform where their respective fathers awaited. Beside King Alder was his lovely mother standing at the south end facing them.

They joined hands, and both of them felt a slight jolt when their hands clasped together. They looked into each other's eyes with acknowledgement of the connection, and turned back towards the steps. Hand in hand, they continued the same sedate pace they had previously displayed, only stopping once they were at the small table in the very center of the platform.

King Varick stepped towards them, placing the small table between himself and Charon, while King Alder, with his wife, stood in front of Reddington. Varick picked a purple cord and Alder picked up a gold one. In unison, they turned with the cords, bowed to each other, and returned to their respective sons.

“Do you, Crown Prince Charon of the Hoomun Nation take Prince Reddington of the Gryphun nation, as your bonded husband?” Varick asked Charon.

“I do.” *The word change from lawful to bonded must be a Gryphun request*, Charon thought as he answered.

Alder continued the challenge.

“Do you, Prince Reddington of the Gryphun nation take Crown Prince Charon of the Hoomun nation as your bonded husband?” Alder asked Red.

“I do.”

“Challenge has been asked and accepted. As officiant of this wedding ritual, I bind these two in everlasting matrimony and bless this union. May the gods bring you joy and love.” Varick finished his speech while taking Charon and Reddington’s clasped hands into his and wrapped the purple cord around their wrists.

Alder continued the ritual, “As the leader of the Gryphun nation, I bind these two in everlasting matrimony and bless this union. May your bond grow wondrous and solid so you always know your mate’s devotion and well-being.” Alder finished his blessing as he tied the gold cord in his hands around their wrists next to, and over, the purple cord.

*Mates. Well, that answered one of my questions.* Charon thought when he heard his new father-in-law’s blessing.

Alder finished the ritual.

“By the powers bestowed upon me and the blessing of the gods, I pronounce you bonded and married. You may kiss to complete your bond.”

Charon noticed the addition to the finale of the binding words as he turned toward his husband. He leaned in towards him moving their bound hands aside while their free hands grasped each other’s heads for their first kiss as a married couple. A second jolt of energy traveled their arms as they connected hand to head.

Charon looked up into Reddington’s golden eyes as he prepared to kiss him.

::Red. I prefer Red.::

Charon stilled, a little surprised but willing to go with this new development. Cautiously, he answered in the same way.



::Did you just ask me to call you Red? Without speaking?::

::Yes::

::The bond is literal:: Charon stated faintly.

::Yes, my mate. Gryphuns form telepathic bonds with their mates. When we kissed last night, it started the process. Although, I didn't realize it had started or I would have warned you. I also didn't realize that the bonding ritual would allow us to mind to mind speak instantaneously::

::It usually doesn't happen this fast?::

::No. It usually starts upon the first kiss as a married couple, but since we briefly kissed last night, I would assume it started then::

::What's going to happen when we kiss now?::

::I have no idea. Shall we find out?:: Red twitched the corner of his mouth at the last thought, eyes dancing and inviting.

Charon smirked a little as well. ::Let's do it::

::Good mate. I think I could love you dearly:: Red closed his eyes and bent down, ready to take those soft lips he remembered from last night.

Charon's eyes glowed more as they slowly bled from green to full amber. He closed them, anticipation rising within.

Their lips met and white hot fire exploded between them. Red vaguely heard from his Gryphun.

::He comes, hold him::

Except he didn't just feel desire as he thought he would. Red opened his eyes slightly and noticed immediately a partially transparent white fire tinged with green and gold bursting from Charon. Red saw it rise and reacted instantly locking his free hand and arm around one side of Charon's body. He continued his hold by resting their bonded arms at Charon's lower back. Red tightened his grip on Charon now firmly holding his bonded as his Gryphun had instructed.

Red reached to his parents with his mind, since he was lip-locked with Charon.

::Get everyone away from here!::

At the silent command of their son, Alder and Celine moved quickly to get the stock-still Varick to move away from the altar. Varick was still as he

watched the white-gold-green flames surrounding Reddington and Charon, and then he finally heard the commotion around him and the Gryphon royal's urgent calls. He shook off his daze and started to help get the people closest to the altar away from whatever was about to happen. He glanced up, checking on the couple a few more times as he ushered people out hoping he would not lose one son on the brink of gaining another.

Red continued to hold a flaming Charon, vaguely curious as to why he didn't feel more heat than he was feeling.

::I have you, mate. Charon, I have you. I am going to stop kissing you now but I will continue to hold you.::

::I feel so hot. What is happening to me, Red?::

::I believe you are about to change, my bonded. My Gryphon warned me that something new would be made when we saw your eyes glowing green-amber when we walked in.::

::Made?: Charon alternated shivering and sweating in Red's arms.

::Yes. I believe you are about to shift into an animal form. I don't know what your form will be as Gryphons usually have a gold shimmer when we first change as hatchlings. Over the years, it becomes almost a blur. I've never seen white with green-amber in a change aura before.::

::I fear it.::

::Do not fear for I am with you, now and always.::

::I feel you.::

::Then relax and let it happen.:: Red slowly ended the kiss and pulled away. He opened his eyes further to see what would happen next.

Charon slowly opened his eyes when the kiss broke, and Red saw that they were full amber now looking through the translucent white flames. That was a sure sign of a change being eminent. Gryphons' eyes glowed gold. Red wondered what glowing green then amber meant. He guessed he would find out soon enough. *Let's get through this one first.*

::I feel something changing, Red!::

::Don't panic, Charon. I still have you. Let it change.::

::But... the bonding cords....::

::I will take care of them. Relax and let it happen.::

::Alright... my mate.:: Red's heart warmed at those words from Charon, seeing him visibly relax. Charon's man form began to disappear as the flames bled to a solid white. He quickly took the cords away from their hands with only a thought, pulling them off just before the white fire went solid and surround them both. *The fire should hide that little trick.*

While Red still felt a solid mass, he was unable to see past the white fire wall that had engulfed them. It flamed higher, and he felt a difference in its presence and Red latched onto it with both hands and arms now that they were free. He closed his eyes as the brightness of the fire hurt them. He held on tight as the change took hold of what he thought was his Hoomun-only mate. His kind had experienced this in the last three hundred years, give or take a few decades. It should be interesting to see what Charon would become.

Then Charon yelled, loud and long. In the midst of the yell, it changed to a loud bird cry mixed with what sounded like a Gryphun hatchling cry. The previously solid white fire slowly went transparent, and then faded to nothing leaving a fairly large bird-like form in Red's arms. He opened his eyes and looked into the amber-green eyes of his mate.

"You are beautiful, my mate," Red said, awe-struck at the amber and green plumage of a bird creature he had never seen before. He was larger than most birds on the planet except Gryphuns, and they were not birds in the strictest sense. His feathers had a green-amber sheen to them and shimmered like flame. "I do not know your type, but you look wonderful."

"I know what he has changed into." King Varick stepped towards them once the wall of white was gone. "Liked the Gryphuns before, and with their Change, it appears that Charon has become a shifter with animal characteristics. There were hints that our ancestors were affected by the Change that affected Gryphuns but not how it was to express. I believe this is potentially a manifestation of some of the by-products of the evolution of magic triggered by our old technology."

Both Red and the Charon-bird turned towards the Hoomun King.

CAW! CA-CAW! CAW?

"Shush, my mate. All is well. Don't try to speak. Speaking develops later," Red answered Charon's bird talk. "Just think your questions to me and I will translate."

“You have bonded that much?” Red’s father approached with his mother.

“Yes. It appears the bond started when I kissed him last night.”

King Alder quirked his eyebrows at him. “Really?”

“Yes, Father. Wait... Charon is trying to tell me something.” Red looked towards Charon’s bird form and concentrated on hearing his bonded.

::Ask my father what he knows. This is a bit strange. I think I know as well but I want him to confirm.::

Red turned to Varick and repeated the questions.

“He is a Phoenix. Like the Griffins of ancient Earth, they too, were a myth. It appears that the magic of the planet has evolved us as it did the Gryphuns, albeit at a slower pace, and now here is another shifter,” Varick answered. “Although, they are usually depicted as having red flames from the feathers, having healing properties in their tears, and they could be reborn.” He frowned at the last statement. “I’m not sure if I believe the stories but it appears the flaming is right, just different colors. As for the rest, time will tell. I will have to see if there is anything more in the archive.”

::I had read about them. That is what I thought.:: Charon’s brilliant green and amber eyes turned towards Red, and he knew to repeat Charon’s comment. Red continued staring into his bonded’s eyes and knew he could come to love this man. *He is amazing. He’s handling this so well.*

“I want to kiss you again.” Red’s eyes started to glow a warm gold.

::Are you sure? Look what happened the last time...:: Charon thought to him mentally chuckling. He contemplated about it a little more and continued. ::I would rather be a man again.::

“Then return. Just think about being a man, kissing me, and you should change back.”

Green eyes twinkled and Charon returned to his man form, robe still on as if nothing had happened. When the change was complete, Red bent down and took that kiss he had promised. This time, Charon was not consumed in the process.

**The End... or is it?**

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## Author Bio

*Eloreen Moon is a pen name for a writer, reviewer, beta reader/editor, and reader of all things romance, including alternative lifestyle (LGBT) stories and novels. Inspiration is all around and life will not limit her to one particular topic. She likes to read and write a blend of science fiction, fantasy, historical, and paranormal—sometimes more than one together, especially if romance is involved. However, cowboys, lawmen, and contemporary times are fun, too.*

*In Real Life, she works full-time, has a blended family with children, and enjoys gardening, computer games, and nature.*

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**Love is Love: Romance with a Twist**

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# CLICKING

By Alex Gale

## Photo Description

A heavily-tattooed man, wearing aviators and a white cotton V-neck T-shirt, is carrying a beautiful, blonde baby girl. She's about a year old and wearing a little pink dress. The man is holding her tightly and kissing her sweetly on the cheek as she smiles.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I've started to fall in love slowly with this man in the picture. I am a freelance photographer and got invited to take pictures of a band while they are on tour. This doesn't only include pictures of them performing, but also of them backstage and sometimes even on their days off. This man is one of the band members and through all the pictures I've taken of him I feel so close to him, but we haven't even had a real conversation. A couple days ago I took this picture when his daughter visited (I didn't even know he had a daughter, though now it makes sense he kept mentioning a girl to the other band members). Seeing him with her I knew there was no back for me: I'm completely in love with this man. I just hope I have the guts to approach him (like I have a chance with a man like that... I don't even know if he's gay. He has a daughter, for Christ's sake!), because the tour is almost over and the possibility of us meeting again is very slim.*

*Sincerely,*

*Rochella*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** musicians/rock stars, photographer, men with children, kidnapping, homophobia, sweet-but-dirty

**Word Count:** 15,402

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Finally, thank you to all my loved ones for encouraging and believing in me. I hope to do you proud!

# **CLICKING**

**By Alex Gale**



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## Chapter 1

The moment Matt Courtland saw Mitch Miles carrying a baby, he knew he was done. The little star-struck crush that had been percolating in the outer boroughs of his psyche was now a major, full-on, grade-A love affair. Only in his mind, of course. There had been no indication in the last few months Matt had spent touring as Vain Affliction's official photographer that Mitch had noticed him as anything other than one more guy hanging in the background and lugging heavy equipment about. Hell, there had been no indication Mitch was even gay.

Seeing him with the beautiful baby girl, who was obviously well taken care of and well loved, impressed Matt for two reasons. One, he was a complete kid person. Kids were his kryptonite. He melted in their presence and, in turn, they migrated to him, realizing that he spoke their language. Ever since he was a little boy he had loved taking care of his younger cousins. Seeing a man who liked children was very attractive to him.

The second reason was that it humanized Mitch Miles. It took him from being a rock god/musical genius, who had earned every accolade known to man and could have any person down on his knees in a second, and turned him into a human being who was currently wiping snot from a tiny nose with the back of his fingers without losing the smile on his face for even a second. Matt couldn't build a fantasy life together with the first guy; even his prolific imagination had limits. But the second guy? Matt was currently picturing the morning routine they would enjoy every weekend, with Mitch manning the coffee preparation, while he flipped Mickey Mouse shaped pancakes for their kids. Yes, kids. Plural. It was his dream and he was making the most of it.

While his brain never stopped churning impossible scenarios, his finger was equally tireless with the clicking. He took frame after frame of Mitch and the little girl. He was entranced and he was sure there were some beautiful shots that Mitch might enjoy having for himself, even if they were never published.

Matt had been hired to document the tour for a coffee-table book that would be published in celebration of the tenth anniversary of Vain Affliction's first multi-platinum album. He had been glad to get the gig since he was rapidly losing interest in the society-wedding niche. While it had brought him success, as well as the attention of Vain Affliction's manager, a former client who had

been so happy with his work for her wedding that she had recommended him for this job, the fact of the matter was that if he had to deal with another powder-puff nightmare masquerading as a bride, he just might give it all up and escape to Walden Pond. No joke.

His job had been fairly easy and he was sorry the tour was wrapping up. Oddly enough, he had encountered less prima donna behavior from the world-famous rock stars than he had from the spoiled brides he had formerly shot. Never literally, of course. Not that he wouldn't have liked to a couple of times.

He was good at his job. A photographer should be unobtrusive, lulling the subject into acting as if they were not under a microscope. While he could do portraits with the best of them, it was his work documenting the little moments of a wedding—the groom's face when he first sees the bride coming down the aisle, the look of love after saying "I do," the flower girl dancing on her daddy's shoes—that made him so good at his job. It had also served him well on the road. He blended so well into the background that the band tended to forget he was there. He felt he had gotten many wonderful photographs depicting who these men really were behind the scenes: their focus on the music, their generally positive attitudes, and the way they always tried to make time for their fans, barring security issues and the appearance of impending epileptic attacks on the part of said fans.

It was insane the way people reacted to them, especially to Mitch. Matt probably wasn't one to talk, given his monster crush, but at least he had managed to refrain from bursting into tears and yelling through gasps, "I love you, Mitch!!! Marry me!!! Please!!!!" Not by much, but still, the restraint was there.

Matt had been so busy, mindlessly following Mitch and the baby with his camera and clicking, that he did not notice they had made their way towards him, until he found himself in the uncomfortable situation of having been caught fixating on his crush. While it was his job to focus on Mitch Miles, there was no denying that there was more than professional Dedication involved in the way he lost himself photographing the man.

"Hey," Mitch said to him with a knowing smile on his face.

"Oh, hey. Hi. Hey..." Matt willed himself to stop stammering.

"How are those coming along?" Mitch asked, gesturing towards the camera.

“Great, They’re great. I have a lot of great stuff. You guys are great subjects. The photos are just... great...” Wonderful, he was no longer stammering. Now he was babbling.

“Dude, relax, I promise I won’t bite. At least not while I’m holding Lexi.” Mitch smiled again, and Matt nearly fainted.

Was Mitch Miles flirting? With him?

“Uh, okay.” Brilliant. Now he was struck dumb. Literally. His breakfast fantasy was cementing its status as a complete impossibility at a staggering rate.

Mitch laughed, his eyes shining brightly. “You’re pretty cute, all confused and whatnot.”

Matt scrunched his eyes and looked around, understanding, as he hadn’t earlier, that there was obviously someone behind him. Or next to him. There was obviously someone very nearby, because there was simply no way this man had just called him cute. He was of average height and build, with dirty-blond hair and brown eyes. He knew he was not a bad looking guy, but this was Mitch Miles, *People* magazine’s sexiest man alive a couple of years back. He was a whole other level of good-looking. There was no way he thought Matt was cute. None.

“Ok, let’s start over, shall we?” Mitch asked, switching the baby to his other arm and extending his right hand. “Hi Matt, how are you doing today?”

“I’m well. Thanks,” Matt said, tentatively shaking his hand, trying his very best to appear as normal as possible. He was confident he was failing admirably.

“This is Lexi, she’s my daughter. She’s having her first birthday this weekend, and I wanted to do a photo shoot of her. It wouldn’t be for publishing anywhere, just for the family. I’d also want some family pictures taken with my mom. I remember from your portfolio that you have some great photos of kids, so I was wondering if you could help me out. I’d pay you, of course. It’s separate from the tour thing.”

Photography was a subject that Matt felt very confident about, and hearing Mitch was just interested in hiring him to take some pictures made far more sense than any flirting that might appear to be happening. His heart steadied, and his body stopped vibrating, allowing Matt to feel downright self-possessed when he answered. “Of course, it would be my pleasure.”

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“Good! I look forward to seeing you on Saturday. Take care, Matty.” Mitch winked—winked!—and walked away, having a baby talk conversation with Lexi that had the little girl giggling hysterically.

Matt brought up his camera just in time to catch the two exchanging a look of complete adoration. Oh God, he was definitely in trouble.

Wait... Matty?

\*\*\*\*\*

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## Chapter 2

On Saturday, Matt drove up to the gated entrance of Mitch's Spanish-style home in the Hollywood Hills. He had visited before to photograph rehearsals at the recording studio Mitch had built in his former pool house. At the time he had focused on the band as a whole, and while he was never unaware of Mitch, he was somewhat nervous at the prospect of spending time alone with the man and his family.

After parking in front of the garage, Matt started to gather his equipment when Mitch emerged from the front door—looking like the rock god he was—barefoot, in ripped jeans and a tight, white V-neck that showed the tattoo sleeves decorating his muscular arms. His hair was going in every direction and his smiling face was delectably scruffy. Matt had to concentrate to make sure he wasn't staring, slack-jawed. That would not do.

"Hey, man, how are you? What can I help you with?" Mitch walked over to the car and looked at the equipment Matt had brought.

"Hi." Matt smiled shyly. "No help needed. I'm actually going to try to do most of the shots with natural light, so I just need my camera. I brought all this stuff just in case, but there's no need to carry it in yet."

"Always be prepared, right?" How on earth were this man's eyes twinkling?

"Right."

Matt grabbed his camera bag and started walking with Mitch towards the house.

"So Lexi is napping, we had a very busy morning. She just started walking, and won't stay still for a second. I think she completed a 5K today..."

Matt laughed. "This is a great age. Everything is new to them, and now they can get to it. Lucky girl."

They walked into the huge kitchen connected to a family room that appeared to have been hit by a pink and primary-colored tornado.

"Oh, I'm the lucky one. I'm glad I got back in time to spend this time with her. I hate that I didn't get to see her first steps, but at least I can be with her for other firsts. Like this morning, she discovered gardening. My little girl is a champion dirt digger, and I couldn't be prouder." Mitch laughed.

“That’s amazing. I didn’t even know you had a kid.”

Mitch’s eyes dimmed, “Yeah, I’ve tried to keep it a secret. I would prefer no one knows how she came about. It’s not a particularly heartwarming story, even if the result is having her in my life. She’s not really mine. I’m her guardian and in the process of adopting her. Her dad died and, without my knowledge, he had appointed me guardian of his unborn kids years ago as a joke. He never expected to have any, so he thought it was funny when the lawyer suggested it... But he signed it, and he died, and now I have Lexi.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, I wasn’t prying... It’s none of my business.” Matt wanted to crawl under a rock.

Mitch put his hand on Matt’s shoulder, “I don’t mind telling you. I just don’t want it to get out to the press. Not because of me, but because of Lexi. She’ll know the truth when she’s old enough to understand it. But people can be very cruel, and I don’t want that for her...”

“You can trust me, I won’t tell anyone.”

Mitch’s hand was still on Matt, and he was looking into his eyes, with a slight smile. “I know I can. I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t feel I could.”

“Uhm... okay... I mean good... yeah...” Matt was very flustered being in such close contact with his dream guy.

“Do I make you nervous, Matty?” Mitch asked, his eyes mischievous.

“Uhm, no? I mean, of course not... Why would you? That’s crazy.” Matt was out of breath.

Mitch got even closer, placing his hands on Matt’s chest. “See, I think you kinda like me.”

“You’re Mitch Miles, everyone likes you...” Matt was staring at Mitch’s hands, which were softly caressing his chest.

“I guess. That might be true. But I don’t like everyone back...”

Matt’s eyes popped wide open. “Huh, what?”

Mitch spoke slowly. “I.” He pointed at himself. “Like. You.” He pointed at Matt, poking him in the chest.

“What do you mean, you like me?” Matt must have slipped into the Twilight Zone. There was no other logical explanation.

"I mean, I think you're very attractive, and I'd like to get to know you better."

"Better?" Matt was squeaking by this point from the lack of oxygen being taken in by his body, which was too busy trying to adjust to what was obviously a parallel universe.

"A whole lot better."

"But you're not gay!"

"I'm not? That's shocking news to me, Matty. All these years, so confused..." Mitch teased.

"But no one's ever said that. You date models and actresses. You were engaged!"

"Was I? All that was manufactured for publicity, Matt." Mitch stepped back, sounding bitter. "I was in a relationship with a man for ten years. The record company didn't want it getting out, so they made me do all that shit... I already put a stop to it, 'cause it ended up fucking my life up. Now I don't say anything, but I won't keep pretending to be something I'm not."

"Ten years?"

"Yeah. Of uninterrupted happiness," Mitch said sarcastically.

"Oh, okay..."

"Sorry, don't mean to lay all this crap on you. I had a very bad situation, and I'll tell you all about it someday. It has to do with Lexi too. But it's a bit much for a first conversation, and not appealing in any way, I'm sure."

"No need to be sorry." Matt had no idea what was going on, or why this man was talking about telling him anything in the future.

Mitch smiled uncertainly, "Anyways, what I was trying to get to before was that if you'd like to hang out or go out or something, someday, that'd be cool."

"Me?" Matt looked around the room, sure this had to be a huge joke everyone was playing on him.

"Yeah. Why not?"

"'Cause you're you... And I'm... me..."

"I'm kind of aware of that. Still doesn't answer my question. Why not?"

“First, I’d need to know why...”

“Fishing for compliments, Matty?” Those twinkling eyes may well be the death of Matt.

“No. Genuinely confused.”

Mitch got close to Matt, once again caressing him, this time his arms. “Matt, you’ve been traveling with the band for three months now. I’ve seen you watching me, but I’m guessing you haven’t seen me watching you.”

“No...”

“Well, I’ve been watching you for a while now.” Mitch ran his hand through Matt’s hair, brushing back the floppy side-swept bangs that perpetually refused to stay out of his eyes. “You’re very beautiful, and I guess that’s the first thing I noticed. But then I also noticed how dedicated you are to your job and how much you like what you do, and that’s very attractive to me.”

“Okay.” Matt leaned into Mitch’s hands, seconds from purring.

Mitch stepped closer until their faces were inches away. He murmured, his voice gravelly, “Also, you’re sweet. You’re nice to everybody and don’t get pissed off for no reason. You seem easy-going. And you’re quite hot... I said that already, didn’t I?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Well it’s definitely something that bears repeating. I know the idea of getting involved with someone like me can seem overwhelming, but I’m quite normal, despite all the circus crap going on around me. You’ve probably noticed that, haven’t you?” Mitch looked at him hopefully.

He had. Mitch, and all the men from Vain Affliction really, were not prima donnas. They didn’t do the stereotypical rock-band things, like snort cocaine from a hooker’s belly button or throw televisions out of hotel rooms. They didn’t yell at people to get them a fifth of whiskey and a bag full of red Skittles. They showed up. They worked hard. They were nice to the roadies and fans. They were perfectly normal. If one could ignore the extraordinary good looks, out of this world talent, and millions of dollars and awards netted. It wasn’t until observing Mitch with Lexi that Matt was able to conceive of a world where Mitch Miles was something other than the rock god of his dreams.

“I guess...”



“So what do you say, Matty? You wanna date me?” Mitch asked teasingly. He seemed nervously excited, but he was still working his twinkly smirk thing. It was the combination of the two that did Matt in. Witnessing Mitch looking like an over-excited puppy at the prospect of dating him was a dream come true, and Matt wasn't going to keep on questioning it.

“Sure.”

“Awesome!” Mitch leaned in and planted a quick kiss on his lips. It took all Matt had to not start jumping around like some giddy tween.

“Awesome.” Matt smiled shyly. He hoped to be able to keep an air of normalcy. It wasn't every day one was asked out by a celebrity, but Matt had seen enough on the road to know hyperventilation was never sexy.

“Hey, I'm sorry you have to wait around for Lexi to wake up. I should have planned today better, I guess.”

“It's not a problem, I left the whole day open for this.”

“You want to go in the pool or something while we wait? She's a bit of a diva about her beauty sleep. It might be awhile before she's up.”

“Yeah, sure. But I don't have a—”

“I've got a suit you can borrow. You never know when an impromptu pool party's going to break out, so I have a stash of them in the guest room. I'm not a fan of strangers free-balling in my pool!” Mitch said, gesturing for Matt to follow him as he walked towards a wide hallway Matt assumed led to the bedrooms.

Matt laughed. “And you call yourself a rock star!”

“I know, right! Shameful!”

Matt followed Mitch through the house surprised, as he had been before, at how homey it was. There were no black walls and paintings of devil worshipping rituals. It was light and airy, decorated in warm tones, which were highlighted by colorful pieces of modern art, many by artists whose work he loved and had seen before. In museums. It was difficult for Matt, who lived very comfortably yet modestly, to understand the wealth necessary to live like this. But he couldn't say Mitch acted differently because of it. There was certainly a confidence about him, a positive demeanor typically apparent in those who have known great success and are certain things will generally work out in their favor. Yet it wasn't laced with arrogance or snobbery. To someone

like Matt, who was usually uncomfortable around everyone except good friends, Mitch's attitude was very attractive.

After changing into a pair of bright blue board shorts, Matt walked to the pool where he found Mitch had already jumped in.

"You can grab a beer and there are also some sandwiches, if you want," Mitch yelled from the pool, where he was reclining against the border, bottle in hand.

Matt headed to the fully stocked bar beneath the gazebo, where he grabbed a beer and a sandwich. Having been too nervous to eat before coming over, his rumbling stomach was excited just from the smell of grilled chicken and sun-dried tomatoes.

The pool had an edgeless border that gave it a beach-like appearance, so Matt simply walked in, wading towards the deep end, holding his drink and food above the water level. Mitch, who was sitting on a bench that lined the end of the pool, was smirking, probably at the awkwardness of his movements as he attempted to keep his sandwich dry. Between the dripping hair, wet skin and the unobstructed view of Mitch's colorful tattoos, Matt could see that this experience would be quite a test for his impulse control. This was further complicated by Mitch's eyes, which were very much focused on Matt. He really hoped he wasn't blushing. Splochy necks were never attractive.

"So, Matty," Mitch said, after Matt had settled in and was almost done eating, "talk to me. I don't know much about you, and let me tell you I've been trying to find out! You have this mysterious vibe around you. I've been asking around, trying to find out if you even liked guys and no one had a clue."

"You did? Why didn't you just ask me? I keep mostly to myself. I'm kind of... shy. Introverted or something. I'm sure you've noticed..."

"I have. Somehow it makes you more attractive." Matt imagined he'd never get used to hearing Mitch talk like that about him, but his whole demeanor was very earnest. "You have all these amazing qualities, but you're not a show-off. You don't need to be the center of attention, making a show wherever you go. You just do your thing."

Matt laughed. "I was thinking the same thing about you earlier."

"See... we're meant to be, Matty." Mitch's slow smile, combined with the looks he kept giving him, made Matt grateful the rippling water was camouflaging his lower body's reaction.

After staring at each other for what may have been several hours for all Matt knew, Mitch's gaze turned predatory and, putting his bottle down, he moved towards Matt, maneuvering him until his back was against the wall. Mitch then straddled him, placing his hands on Matt's shoulders and drawing close until they were face to face. "Can I kiss you, Matty?"

Matt couldn't do much but nod, as Mitch got closer and pressed against him, placing soft kisses on his lips. When Matt opened his mouth to let out a low moan, Mitch took the opportunity to gently dart his tongue inside. Feeling Mitch's erection against his, realizing how excited this simple kiss was making him, shook Matt from his stupor, and the intensity quickly escalated. He wrapped his arms around Mitch, bringing them as close as possible to one another. Mitch's hips had started rocking against Matt's. Tucking his feet under him onto the bench, Matt lowered his hands down Mitch's back to his unbelievably firm ass, slipping them inside the loose-fitting bathing suit. With the traction gained by his new position, Matt pumped his hips against Mitch's. Part of Matt just wanted to remove their bathing suits and slip his dick inside Mitch. Thankfully, the part of his brain that was aware it was the middle of the day, and Lexi and her nanny were in the house won out, and so they continued kissing and rubbing against one another, until Mitch came.

"Oh shit! I came in my pants," Mitch panted, incredulous. "What the hell'd you do to me, Matty?"

"I'm more concerned about me right now, Mitchy," Matt groaned, rocking his hips to make Mitch aware of his still-erect cock.

Mitch sat down on the bench, floating Matt over to sit on his lap with his back against Mitch's chest. He snapped the buttons on Matt's bathing suit, slipped his hand inside, and wrapped his hand around Matt's cock, lowering the shorts just enough with his other hand. He feathered the slit with his thumb, stroking him with long, slow pulls, which gradually became more vigorous. It wasn't long before Matt was thrusting into Mitch's hand as he came, trying, though probably not succeeding, to be as quiet as possible.

As they caught their breath, Mitch continued kissing Matt's back and running his hands through his hair. It felt loving, which was confusing the hell out of Matt. That didn't mean he wasn't going to indulge for as long as he could.

"Fuck, that was amazing. Completely high school, but amazing," Mitch murmured against Matt's ear. "Would have liked more, but I didn't think it was the place for it."

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“Same here. Didn’t want the nanny catching us.”

“Me neither. Especially since the nanny’s my mother... I might be almost thirty, but that doesn’t mean I’d want her to see that,” Mitch laughed.

Matt’s eyes went wide, and he was extra glad his brain had prevailed over his dick.

“Don’t worry, she’s been warned to stay away until Lexi wakes up. She knows I’m trying to win you over.”

“You’ve been talking? About me? Why would you? I’m no one...”

Mitch’s face lost all trace of amusement. “Matt, are you saying there’s something wrong with me for being attracted to you?”

“No. Doesn’t mean I understand it... You could have anyone...”

“Yes, but there’s something about you.” Mitch raised Matt’s bathing suit and moved to reach for his beer. Matt felt very sorry for having ruined things. “I’m kind of a relationship guy. I can do a one-night stand like the best of them, but I prefer to be with a good, steady person. I had that for the first six years of my last relationship. I miss it...”

“What happened?”

“Jamie, that’s my ex, and I grew up together. We were inseparable. Last year of high school we became more than friends, and when I started the band he came along as our manager. When we hit it big, the record label told us we should get a professional who could manage all the details that went into running the band. They didn’t think Jamie could do it. Who knows? Maybe he would’ve been able to. He got very upset. He stayed along helping Jess when she took over managing us, but he resented it, and since he wasn’t so busy he had more time to do all the crap that’s available so easily backstage... Fuck!” Mitch angrily pushed the water away, sending a big splash across the pool.

Matt was so sorry he had let his negativity ruin the moment they had shared. “I’m sorry, please forget what I said. You don’t have to tell me this.”

Mitch moved back towards him and held Matt’s head gently between his hands, so he couldn’t look away. “I want to tell you. I need you to understand why I like you, and why all those people you say I could have don’t mean all that much to me.”

Matt kissed him lightly on the lips and grabbed his hands, “Okay.”

They sat back, shoulder to shoulder. Mitch kept playing with their joined hands, lightly splashing water. "Jamie had never been the cleanest guy, but it was under control. All of a sudden he's on coke all the time, and he's becoming a bit of a pain in the ass. I put him in rehab a few times, but he always relapsed." Mitch turned his head to look at Matt. "No one ever understands why I stayed with him. But he was my best friend. I loved him. I had wanted to be with him forever. I felt it was my fault he was screwed up. Our band had always been fairly clean. We like alcohol and partying, but we always understood that getting involved with anything heavier would just get in the way of doing what we had to do to get where we wanted to go. Still, we play festivals, and we have opening acts, and so there was always a lot of shit available and I felt responsible."

Matt started to object, but Mitch interrupted him, as if he knew what he was going to say. "Yes, I know, I'm not responsible for anyone's actions. He did what he wanted to do. I can't save everyone. Blah, blah. I get it. Doesn't change things. By the end of things, he was sleeping with anyone who came his way. Then he told me he had gotten a girl pregnant. That was when I finally put an end to things. There was only so much I could take, no? I told him he had to leave, that I had no interest in spending the rest of my life trying to fix his."

"Lexi?"

"Yeah. The asshole then had the nerve to OD. Lexi's mom had left them, and Jamie could barely take care of her. I might have been mad at him, but I still cared and checked up on him once in a while. I showed up one day and found him. Lexi was alone in the house, in her crib, crying hysterically. I carried her and started rocking her until she calmed down and fell asleep in my arms. It was like she knew I could take care of her, and I pretty much fell completely in love." Mitch's face turned serene when he spoke of Lexi.

"Didn't he have family? How did they let you keep her?"

"He and I had signed papers with powers of attorney for one another, and we were the beneficiaries in each other's wills and all that. I had changed mine, but he hadn't. There were provisions for who we wanted to care for our kids, if we ever had them. I was appointed guardian for his kids, and thankfully no one has tried to battle it. The adoption is going to be finalized soon, and I'm terrified every day." Mitch sighed, reaching over for his warm beer and taking a sip that made him grimace. "His parents belong to some basement church that damns basically everyone to eternal hellfire, and they hate me. They blame me

for turning him gay. I wouldn't put it past them to cause trouble, though they haven't so far."

Even though Mitch was taller and broader than him, Matt wanted to protect him from all the shit he'd gone through. He might be rich, famous, and successful, but trying to fix an addict had broken far stronger men. The possibility that Lexi could be taken from Mitch scared Matt. He placed his arm around Mitch, who leaned back against his chest.

"Even if they did, the fact that you've been caring for her has to count for a lot. I'm sure between that and the will, you should be fine." Matt hoped his words were as true as they ought to be.

"Nothing's certain till it's certain. The roller coaster of expectation and disappointment I lived through with Jamie has taught me not to expect too much where he's concerned. Even now."

"I'm glad you feel you can trust me, telling me all of this. But I still don't understand why me..." Matt was sorry to bring it up again, but if they were to have any hope, he had to know.

"You can't imagine from what I just told you, why someone who is interested in me as a celebrity, the way most people I meet are, might not be too interesting to me? Why I might be more into someone like you?" Mitch got up from the bench, floating in front of Matt. "Judging from your reaction to my little revelation you are clearly into me, but you never tried to take advantage of your closeness. You just did your job. I admire that." Mitch paddled back towards Matt. "So to answer your question, first I thought you were hot." He held up one finger. "Then I realized you're incredibly talented." He raised another. "Then I saw that you're responsible and committed. And then I watched you for months and realized none of it was a show." Mitch kept on counting off the reasons. Finally he shrugged, "I don't know Matt. You're a good guy. I like good guys. It's pretty simple, I think."

Matt looked at Mitch, who had floated right up to him. He couldn't say he completely understood what was going on, but Mitch seemed sincere. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "Ok. I'll try to not question that." He leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Mitch rewarded him with a sweet smile, then kicked off backwards into the pool, splashing Matt. "Good!"

After an hour of splashing around, a bit more kissing and talking about everything and nothing, Mitch grabbed Matt another beer.

"I was premed the first two years of college," Mitch said, handing him the opened bottle.

Matt was surprised to learn Mitch's original major in college had been chemistry. He hadn't believed he had what it took to make it as a musician, so he wanted to do premed as a fallback. Who falls back on medicine? When Vain Affliction started gaining a greater following, he dropped out of college, but later got his bachelor's online. Although in live shows he mostly served as lead singer of the band, he could play every instrument, and every track they had ever recorded featured him playing at least one instrument.

Mitch was also incredibly devoted to Lexi. He felt that the road wasn't a good environment for her, but his mom connected them on Skype several times a day, and whenever there were two days between shows, he flew back to Los Angeles to see her. He was trying to figure out how to arrange things so that she could travel along on the next tour, without exposing her to the inherent dangers of life on the road.

Matt talked about his family and his wedding jobs. He spoke about the things he wanted to do to move away from event work, into more artistic photography, telling him his work for Vain Affliction had been the opportunity of a lifetime.

Just as Matt was becoming concerned about the possibility of permanently turning into a raisin, Mitch's mom, Diane, came out carrying Lexi, who had just woken up. The little girl was still groggy, but clearly excited to see her daddy.

While Mitch got ready, Matt started setting up for the first photos on the garden terrace in front of an amazing wall covered with azalea bushes. The white piqué dress with turquoise trim that Lexi was wearing would contrast beautifully with the hot pink background. When Mitch came back, he was wearing dark jeans and a white button-down shirt with the top buttons open and the sleeves rolled up. Once again he was barefoot.

"So where do you want us, Matt?" Mitch carried Lexi, who looked far happier now that she had been up for a while.

"Come over here and stand in front of this wall. Let's do a few with you standing, holding her, then we can do some sitting on the ground, and then a

few with her on the ground doing her own thing. We'll repeat the whole thing out in the yard. We should get plenty of good stuff from that. Generally, trying to get toddlers to pose by themselves is impossible, so we'll just let her loose and I'll take a million pictures. There should be plenty to choose from."

"Perfect. Lexi, say hi to Matty. He's going to take your picture. You like pictures right?"

Matt put down the camera and walked over to them. "Hi Lexi, how are you? You look so beautiful today, like a princess!"

Lexi gave Matt a smile that melted him completely. Her eyes disappeared, and she was showing all her baby teeth, framed by her red cheeks. By the time she stretched her arms out for Matt to carry her, he was in love. He grabbed her and her hands went directly for his glasses. "Oh, I see, it's not me you wanted to say hi to, it was my glasses. Well, I'll take it anyways!" Matt started blowing raspberries on her belly, and immediately the glasses were forgotten as she let out the sweetest giggles, which didn't stop until Matt finally handed her back to Mitch, who had been standing back, watching them with a smile on his face.

"You're amazing with her," Mitch said.

"Ah, kids like me. And I like them, so it works out."

Mitch's mom came back with Lexi's favorite doll. Diane was a youthful-looking woman in her early fifties. She was slim with short dark brown hair and she was wearing jeans and a white button-down like her son. She was loving and energetic, and Mitch was very lucky to have her. Matt's mom had died when he was in high school and there wasn't a day he didn't miss her.

"Okay, boys what are we doing?"

"Diane, I'm going to need you to stand next to me and be bright and shiny. Make Lexi smile and laugh and look in my general direction. Mitch, I want you to just be natural and look at Lexi or the camera or wherever you feel like, but don't worry about getting her to do anything. Just play and interact with her, and focus on having fun."

"You don't give so many instructions when you're shooting the band," Mitch laughed.

"Oddly enough, wrangling a one-year-old is way harder than dealing with rock stars. Don't tell anyone, though!"



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“You got it!” Mitch said, giving Matt one of those twinkly-eyed smiles that he just may have become addicted to in a matter of hours.

Matt looked down shyly, turning to look for his camera. No matter what he said, having the full force of Mitch’s attention turned on him was very overwhelming, and it would take some time for him to get used to it.

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## Chapter 3

Matt spent the next few hours photographing Mitch, Lexi and Diane, and enjoying every second of it. They were such a fun family and clearly very loving. Mitch and Diane hadn't stopped singing everything from the Beatles to Katy Perry, or telling jokes, except to kiss and cuddle Lexi. Even more than the idea of being with Mitch Miles, the rock star, Matt was hoping things would work out so he could spend more time with Mitch and his family.

Lexi had been a pro. Whereas most kids only lasted a few minutes before they got upset and started squirming and tearing off hair bows, she had happily played and smiled. Matt couldn't wait to see the results of the shoot.

As they were about to wrap up, Mitch called him over and placed Lexi in his arms. "So, if I trust you with my baby, do you think you can trust Diane with yours?"

"Huh?"

Mitch grabbed Matt's camera and handed it to Diane. "Take a picture with us Matty!"

Matt felt he should pretend he couldn't. That he should believe it was too early for him to be in a family picture. But he didn't even allow those thoughts to linger for long before he smiled shyly, and explained to Diane how to operate the camera. He wanted a photo with Mitch and Lexi. If nothing else, it would be proof that one of the best days of his life had actually happened.

Matt held Lexi, while Mitch stood beside them with his arms behind his back looking at the two of them. Lexi was playing with Matt's face, trying to stick her hand in his mouth, while Mitch laughed on. At one point he looked at Matt with such tenderness that Matt could barely meet his gaze.

After Matt had packed his equipment and was reluctantly getting ready to leave, Mitch asked him to stay for dinner. Diane was going out with friends and he had to stay home with Lexi, but he wanted to keep hanging out. Matt agreed readily, as he had no plans, and he couldn't think of anywhere he would rather be.

They spent some time with Lexi in her playroom, letting the little girl run back and forth, stumbling like a roly-poly, pint-sized drunk. She would spend a minute banging on her floor piano, quickly moving on to cuddling with a

stuffed dog that was larger than she was, and within seconds she was back, climbing up the wrong end of the plastic slide set up in a corner. After a while, Matt collapsed on the floor, and shortly after, Lexi came over, climbed up on his stomach and promptly fell asleep.

Matt looked over to see Mitch sitting on the floor, leaning against the sectional, contemplating them with a slight smile on his face. Matt gestured, silently asking if they should take her to bed. Mitch stood up and crouched down beside them, gently taking the little girl in his arms. Matt stayed on the padded baby-proof floor staring at the ceiling and thinking. It had been a long time since he'd had such a fun day. He was very shy and as a result had never made friends easily. His best friend was his sister. It was only when he knew a person well that he felt comfortable enough to relax and enjoy the experience. Generally with new people he felt so overwhelmed, wondering if he was saying something stupid or doing something wrong, that the stress and effort soured the experience.

He wasn't quite sure why he felt so relaxed around Mitch. The man was famous. Truly and completely famous. There were people in all seven continents singing his songs and making out with his shirtless posters. But spending the day with him and witnessing his love for Lexi and Diane, and their interactions, had made Matt momentarily forget that he was also that man. Looking at the last few months he had spent touring with the band, Matt realized that he had been so overwhelmed by Mitch's talent and looks that he had not realized what a great guy he actually was. This understanding, combined with a feeling that Mitch wasn't pulling his leg when he professed his attraction, excited Matt. He was looking forward to getting to know Mitch in a way he hadn't even considered with anyone else since his last relationship had ended, almost a year and a half earlier.

Mitch came back and flopped down on the couch. "She's asleep! Who would have thought such a little person could wipe out a grown man in his prime."

"She's amazing. Such a happy kid."

Mitch's face clouded, "Yeah, she is. I'm so glad I've been able to do that for her. I don't want to think about the day I got her and how she lived before then."

"She's very lucky to have you and your mom."

“Nah, we’re the lucky ones. Between the gay thing and my career, Mom had never figured on having grandkids, so having a little girl to take care of is the best thing that ever happened to her.”

Matt’s stomach took the opportunity to growl so loudly Mitch noticed. “Oh wow, you must be starving!”

Matt was quite embarrassed, but he decided to brazen it out. Today seemed like that kind of day. “I think you better feed me soon, or I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

“I’m so sorry. Shit. Well, we have a problem. I can’t actually cook anything... I was going to order something, but that might take a while. Can you wait a bit?”

“Mr. Famous Celebrity can’t cook... Such a surprise,” Matt teased. “Let’s go to the kitchen, I can throw something together if you want.”

“I’m the worst host ever. You’ll never want to do a photo shoot for me again. I make you cook and babysit...” Mitch tried to look chagrined, but his eyes were telling a different story.

Matt got up and leaned over Mitch. “This is one of my best shoots ever.” They stayed inches apart, just looking at each other. Matt then smiled, planted a quick kiss on Mitch’s lips, and headed back to the kitchen.

“You’re so easy,” Mitch said, following Matt.

“You have no idea.” Matt looked over his shoulder, giving Mitch a saucy grin.

Mitch stopped in his tracks, his jaw dropping. “What on earth has happened to you, Matty? Where’s my shy little squirrel?”

Matt gave him a mock glare. “Okay, Matty is kind of cute, I’ll give you that. But you cannot call me a squirrel!”

Mitch went over to Matt, putting his arms around his waist. “But you were my shy little squirrel, running away every time I tried to get close.”

Matt pushed against him, laughing. “I did no such thing!”

“You did. You think yesterday was the first time I tried to talk to you? Every time I asked you a question you would look down, blush, mumble something, and run away. You made me work very hard, Matty.” Mitch appeared very put out, milking the mock reproach for all it was worth.

Matt's attempts to playfully push Mitch away turned into soft caresses. "Well, duh, you're kind of a big deal, you know. You were lucky you had my kryptonite on you yesterday—Lexi, of course. Otherwise..." Matt made a face, laughing.

"I wish I'd known about that sooner." Mitch kissed Matt heatedly. When he finally broke away, his eyes were dark and intense. "Come on, cook something. Replenish your energy. Soothe the beast within and all that. I have plans for later."

Matt stared, his dick stirring. He grabbed an apple from the fruit basket on the counter and took a few bites, chewing and swallowing as quickly as possible.

"That'll do." He put the mangled remains of the apple on the counter and walked towards Mitch, pushing him against the refrigerator and kissing him like it was his job. He pressed tightly against him, his hands touching everywhere, from his hair to his face, down to his abs and ass, not resting for a second in any one spot.

"Come on. Let's go." Mitch grabbed Matt's hand and hurriedly led him across the house, down a long hallway and through a set of double doors. Without losing a second, he stripped his shirt and tore his jeans off. Despite his speed, Matt did not miss the fact that there was no other clothing beneath the jeans.

Mitch walked Matt backwards towards the bed, simultaneously kissing him and stripping off his shirt. When his legs hit the bed, Matt flopped back onto it. Mitch unbuttoned his pants, making quick work of removing them. He crawled up the bed towards Matt and kissed him, thoroughly taking possession of his mouth, before moving to lightly lick a path from his ear, down his neck. He continued downward, sucking and licking and biting and blowing on his nipples, until Matt realized the experience would be over far too quickly if Mitch continued at that rate. He sat up, flipped Mitch over and dragged him up the bed. He went down quickly, and before Mitch probably even had a clue about what was happening, his dick was down Matt's throat.

"Holy fuck!" Mitch's hips jerked up, which would have caused a serious problem had experience not taught Matt to expect the instinctive reaction. He moved back up, licking his way towards the head. He swirled his tongue around the slit, before taking him deep and swallowing around Mitch's cock.

“What the...? Anghhhhh,” Mitch moaned.

Matt continued, alternating between long licks and deep swallows. Pumping some of the lube he'd gotten from Mitch's nightstand, he started massaging Mitch's tight hole with his slick index finger.

Mitch had not stopped babbling incoherently, as Matt continued probing with his finger. When he had breached the tight ring, he crooked his finger, while taking Mitch's dick deep and swallowing. Mitch let out a yell as he came down Matt's throat.

Matt sat up as Mitch collapsed, panting, “Matty, what the hell?”

Matt looked at him innocently, “What?”

“That. What was that?” Mitch limpidly gestured towards his groin.

“Oh, that. Did you like it?”

Mitch stared at him in disbelief. “Yeah, Matty. I think I liked it. Give me a few minutes, and I'll show you how much.”

“That a fact?” Matt asked, turning to lie on his back next to Mitch.

“Yeah.” Mitch extended one hand to grab the bottle of lube and a condom from a drawer. Without moving the rest of his body, he opened the condom and rolled it down Matt's cock. Pumping some lube in his hand, he stroked Matt gently.

After a few minutes he sat up, straddling Matt. Pumping some more lube, he used his fingers to open himself up. The sight was so arousing, Matt thought once again, he might lose control on the spot.

Removing his fingers, Mitch grabbed Matt's cock and slowly lowered himself against it, past the tight ring all the way to the hilt. When he was completely filled, he leaned forward to kiss Matt slowly, making small writhing movements with his hips, which, combined with the tightness surrounding him, drove Matt crazy. He needed more, yet despite his best efforts, Mitch refused to move more urgently.

“Mitch, if you don't speed things up...” Matt threatened, though he imagined his moans and groans were not providing the necessary muscle to get Mitch to move.

“What are you going to do, Matty? What's going to happen if I don't speed up?” Mitch continued his languorous swivels.

“I’m going to stop letting you be in charge.”

“You are?”

Seeing the twinkle in Mitch’s eye, Matt grabbed him and flipped him over. He took Mitch’s legs and pressed them against his torso, leveraging against them to begin a punishing rhythm. Instantly, Mitch started moving to meet his thrusts. Both were grunting and moaning, completely in the moment and out of control.

Just when Matt thought he couldn’t handle any more, Mitch wrapped his legs around his hips pressing their stomachs together, stimulating Mitch’s trapped dick. Matt continued thrusting relentlessly, until he came so hard, he thought for a second he had gone blind. Seconds later, he felt Mitch coming between their bodies and collapsed breathless against him.

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A while later Matt woke up, tangled in sheets and Mitch. He extracted himself quietly to avoid waking Mitch, and headed to the bathroom. When he was finished cleaning up, he grabbed his pants and went to check on Lexi. He wasn’t used to having sex with an infant in the house, and he felt a need to make sure she was fine. He had seen the baby monitor in Mitch’s nightstand, but he was still worried they might have missed her crying.

Heading towards her room, he found her sleeping peacefully. He leaned over, watching her and finding peace within her even breaths. Matt was struggling to understand how Mitch and Lexi had become so important to him in just one day. He had no words to explain the way he felt. Somehow, being around them felt like home, and Matt was scared that he was falling too fast. Matt felt that Mitch was a good man, who was being honest with him. Yet he was still a musician. His job was to travel the world making people fall in love with him. Matt didn’t know what his place could be in such a life, and he feared his insecurities might betray him.

But he couldn’t ignore the fact that the time he had spent with Mitch and Lexi had been incredible and among the best experiences of his life. Although part of him was scared, he needed to ignore his fears for the first time in his life and focus on his faith. He didn’t have much in the way of facts to back his feelings up, but he had faith in Mitch. For once Matt was ready to jump in blind, sure within himself that he would not wind up splattered on the sidewalk.

Matt felt the door open and turned, meeting Mitch’s eyes, as he walked towards him, wrapping Matt in a gentle yet fervent hug.

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“I thought you had left...” Mitch whispered, stepping back.

“Why would you think that?”

“Don’t know. It happens.” Mitch shrugged, not meeting Matt’s eyes.

Matt planted a soft kiss on Mitch’s lips. “I needed to see her breathing.”

Mitch laughed quietly. “I do that almost every night.”

“She’s incredible. You’re so lucky to have her. She’s so lucky to have you.”

“How about you, Matty?” Mitch leaned against the crib, lightly caressing Lexi’s cheek. “Are you lucky?”

“I’d like to be.” Matt placed his hand on Mitch’s back, tracing small circles with his thumb. “Today it feels like I might be.”

Mitch turned, wrapping his arms around Matt, and kissing him possessively. When he came up for air, he whispered in Matt’s ear, “Good answer, Matty.”

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## Chapter 4

Over the next few weeks, Matt basically moved in to Mitch's house, spending all his time with Mitch, Lexi, and Diane. Nothing they did would make any top-100 list of things one would expect to do with a rock star. Mitch's tour was on hiatus and the band had taken the time to focus on writing music for their next record, which for Mitch meant a lot of time in his pool house studio. During the day, Matt would head to work at his photography studio, taking portraits of kids and families, but more importantly, putting together a proposal for a project that he hoped would enable him to spend the next few months with Mitch, as the band embarked on its world tour. He had not discussed his plans with Mitch, not wanting to seem like he was rushing things too much. While they had become extremely close far quicker than most people would have, he was still cautious.

Not that he was too worried, as Mitch was the one who constantly wanted Matt to be everywhere he was. The first few nights they had spent together Matt had planned to eventually head home, but invariably Mitch would ask him to stay. It was a heady feeling, being with someone who seemed so invested, especially when it was someone like Mitch.

The only dark spot in their lives was the upcoming court appearance to finalize Lexi's adoption. Mitch couldn't shake the feeling that Jamie's parents had something up their sleeve. Until the papers were signed, he wouldn't rest easy. The court date simultaneously excited him with its promise of closure, while at the same time terrifying him with thoughts of all that could go wrong.

Matt had learned more about Mitch's relationship with Jamie, and it angered him so much to know how much the man had hurt Mitch and Lexi. It appeared that despite her parents' best efforts, Lexi didn't have any developmental problems, although she was small for her age. Of course, it would be many years before they had a definite idea of what lasting damage their drug use may have caused the little girl. Lexi's mom had, for the most part, cleaned up during her pregnancy, relapsing quickly after giving birth, and abandoning her child shortly thereafter. Jamie had stayed, taking care of the girl, but he had not been the kind of person who could provide the level of attention a newborn required, especially given his infrequent sobriety.

Jamie's parents had been far from exemplary either, more concerned with their place within their religious community. They disowned their son when

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they discovered his relationship with Mitch, who knew that any effort they might make to get Lexi would be solely to spite him. They were convinced it was Mitch's fault that Jamie had turned out to be gay, and wound up doing drugs. They hadn't cared enough about their son to love him despite his perceived and real faults, nor to help him through his struggles, but they had cared enough about their hatred of Mitch to attempt to blackmail him a few years back. They'd asked for money in exchange for not divulging his homosexuality. Out of love for Jamie, Mitch had refrained from having them arrested, but had countered by assuring them, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would make sure they spent the next few decades in a federal prison if they ever approached him again.

The sheer insanity of their actions was proof of the degree of their hatred towards Mitch. He didn't know how far they might go, and signed court documents would give him far more peace of mind than the directives of a drug addict, who just so happened to be his former homosexual lover. Even in Los Angeles, drug-addicted homosexuals didn't engender much sympathy and support.

Matt was trying his best to be supportive, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't worried. Losing Lexi didn't bear consideration, for fear of complete dissolution of any and all of Mitch's mental faculties. There would be no turning back from such a loss, particularly to such cruel people. Mitch would fight for her to the ends of the earth, but sometimes right didn't vanquish evil, and the alternative was terrifying. Matt was trying to focus on the day-to-day. There was nothing for them to do but wait, so he tried to keep Mitch otherwise occupied to keep him from going crazy over the unknown.

They spent a lot of time with Lexi in her playroom, which was the best therapy Matt had ever had. Lexi giggled so infectiously that dark thoughts had no place in her presence. After a hard day at play, she loved to fall asleep lying on his chest. The meditation practice he had developed after breaking up with his first boyfriend had nothing on the Zen-like feeling those moments brought him. He lived for them.

They went shopping and took Lexi to the park so she could play in the sandbox with other kids her age, but their outings were infrequent due to the constant presence of the paparazzi. Mitch told Matt he was through putting on a front for the outside world, but that didn't mean he could come out. He said he didn't care, but his record label had expressly forbidden it, making any time spent in public difficult. In the privacy of Mitch's home, they had quickly

gotten used to constantly touching one another. Matt's hands were always running through Mitch's hair, and Mitch never missed an opportunity to put his arms around him. Spending time together and being unable to touch each other was a special kind of torture they tried to avoid. They hung out with the band and other friends and relatives, but any time they stepped out of the house, cameras were waiting to catch them slipping, draining any potential for fun.

Today, they were taking one of their rare outings to the park. Mitch wanted very badly for Lexi to have the most normal childhood possible within their circumstances, so he liked to take her to the park himself, instead of relying on his mother all the time. They packed all the assorted bits and bobs that were necessary when traveling with a baby, even to go down the street, and set off immediately, encountering a gaggle of paparazzi the moment they stepped out of the gate.

The photographers immediately rushed towards them, cameras clicking nonstop. "Mitch, who's your friend? Is he your manny?" One photographer rushed in, getting far too close to Lexi for Matt's comfort. "Did you fire your mom? Give us a smile, Mitch!"

Their comments and questions all melted into one blob of sound, until there was no way to tell who was yelling what. Mitch flashed a quick smile at them, introduced Matt as a friend, and wishing them a good afternoon, walked away, pushing Lexi's stroller.

"I have no idea how you get used to that," Matt said, once they had walked a bit. The photographers had gotten in their cars, and he was sure some would follow them down to the park.

"You don't. You just draw on all your Zen reserves and hope they don't take it so far you explode. As long as I stay boring, I win. I react to their crap, they win."

"Trips to the playground without any acknowledgment from your part probably aren't very useful to them, I guess."

"Oh, they'll get something. By loving my daughter and actually spending time with her, people get to see that, 'OMG, stars are totally just like me!', so there's a few thousand dollars heading these guys' way for a photograph of our very mundane Saturday afternoon."

Matt laughed. "I guess you gotta laugh."

“Only way to keep from crying.” Mitch adjusted the brim of his cap. “Don’t get me wrong. Being me is an awesome thing. I do what I love. I’m surrounded by incredible people. But there are downsides.” Mitch looked back down the street they were walking along. “I wouldn’t even mind having them around if it wasn’t for all the secrets I have to keep. If I were holding your hand right now, I’d just turn and smile and answer all their inane questions. But everything has to be such a game, and that wears on me, I guess.”

“What would happen if people found out you’re gay?”

“Honestly, at this point I don’t know. We have such a huge fan base. Everyone just worries that all the girls who think they stand a chance with me would stop buying our music once they realize there’s not a chance in hell I’ll be fathering their babies. Who knows? Some might. If it were just me, I’d risk it. I enjoy my success, but I’d sacrifice some of it to live a more honest life. But I’m in a band. I can’t play with their income.”

“I’m sure they’d support you no matter what.” Matt had spent a lot of time in the last few weeks hanging out with the other members of Vain Affliction, and he was positive that the love between them was real. They wouldn’t begrudge Mitch his happiness.

“They would, but that’s a lot of responsibility to bear. What if we lose our record deal? If they find us in breach of contract, they could sue us. The record company I care less about, but they have a lot invested in us...”

“Well, whatever. Today is about us and Lexi and the park, so let’s think happy thoughts! Ommmmmmmm.” Matt stopped walking, closing his eyes and putting his hands up in a meditation stance.

Mitch laughed, “God, I love you!”

Matt’s eyes popped wide open, and he stared at Mitch, whose expression had turned slightly uncertain. “I love you too.” They kept looking at each other intently. “I really wish you hadn’t done this now, ’cause I really want to kiss you right now. Like a lot... I still love you, though.”

Mitch laughed, and turned to start walking, bumping his shoulder to Matt’s. “I guess we’ll just have to make up for the lost opportunity when we get home.”

They arrived at the park and placed Lexi on the baby swing, gently swaying her back and forth, loving her delighted peals of laughter. Some of the other parents took photos of them with their phones, but in general everyone was pretty respectful. They did the rounds through the bouncing caterpillar and the

baby merry-go-round, then took Lexi over to the lawn for group playtime, where a teacher would lead the parents and their babies through musical games. Matt had been attending the classes with them for the last few weeks, and he had come to consider it a highlight of his week.

They staked out a spot beneath the shade, making small talk with some of the other parents as they laid down a blanket and prepared for the class. Ms. Alice called everyone to attention and the class began. Since the kids in Lexi's class were at that age where they were just starting to get mobile, the scene quickly became vaguely chaotic, with babies toddling to and fro, while the parents sang "The Wheels on the Bus."

Matt was chasing after Lexi while Mitch took a video with his phone, when he heard a commotion in the distance. He quickly realized that Mitch was no longer recording them and was, instead, in the middle of a fight surrounded by photographers. Matt asked Ms. Alice to look after Lexi and quickly ran over.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked as he grabbed Mitch, who was pummeling a short, fat, bald man on the ground.

"This asshole said something about Lexi. I won't have that, Matt. They can say whatever they want about me, but they better fucking well leave our kid alone." Mitch was seething and it was taking all of Matt's strength to hold him back.

"Mitch, you can't do this. Chill out. Remember what we were talking about earlier."

"He asked me how I felt about raising my fag friend's crack baby. She's not a crack baby, and nothing about her is any of his goddamn business."

Matt's blood ran cold. It had never occurred to him that people would say such things about an innocent baby. He understood Mitch's anger and desire to beat on the man. Nonetheless, he needed to put a stop to it. He grabbed Mitch's head and looked him straight in the eyes, whispering, "He's an asshole, I get that. But you're creating a show that is making all of them very happy. You need to stop it. Right now. It's not helping anything." He kept staring at him, until he saw that Mitch was breathing more normally.

Mitch gave his hand a squeeze and nodded. "Thanks."

The adrenaline that had flooded Matt's system was just starting to recede, when Ms. Alice came over shouting, "Mitch, Matt. Lexi's gone!"

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## Chapter 5

Two of the longest hours of Matt's life had passed when they finally got home. The police had come and interviewed everyone, but no one had seen anything. In the chaos caused by the fight, all the parents had grabbed their children and left. Ms. Alice had looked away for a second to pick up another kid who was crying. His mom had attended the class with a nanny, but with triplets to care for and the confusion, the other kid had been left alone. Ms. Alice was desolate. She had just turned to grab the boy, and when she turned back Lexi was gone.

Mitch had shut down, not saying a word except to answer the cops' questions. He had called the private security firm that handled the band, and they had sent someone over immediately. The police had confiscated the paparazzi's cameras, but given that they had been focused on the fight, there wasn't much hope that there would be any clues.

Matt longed to console Mitch, but the guilt he felt was overwhelming. He had left Lexi behind. At the time, it seemed like the right choice. He couldn't very well take a little girl into a fight. The fact, however, was that he should have thought of protecting her, and he didn't. Matt was positive he would never forgive himself for his stupidity. He was sure that Mitch was blaming him as well.

"We got something from the photographer you beat up." John Sanders, the investigator the security firm had sent over, was a tall man in his early forties, whose eyes appeared to miss nothing. His entire persona inspired a great deal of confidence, and Matt was sure that there wasn't anything John Sanders couldn't do if he just set his mind to it.

"The guy said he was approached last week by a man when he was waiting outside your house. He said the man asked a lot of questions about your routine, and when he heard that you went to the park every Saturday, he offered the photographer five thousand dollars to create a distraction today."

"And I fell for it," Mitch said in a monotone voice.

Sanders looked at him. "Well, it was intended to get to you. The photographer said the man told him what kind of things he should say to really upset you."

“How could they know any of that? Lexi’s family history is not common knowledge.”

“Mitch, do you have anyone who you think might wish you ill?” Sanders asked.

“I’m a public figure. I’m sure there are many people who hate me.” It was killing Matt to see Mitch so beaten.

“Yes, but kidnapping a child requires a different level of hatred. I’m not talking about people who don’t like your music. I mean someone who has a serious grudge against you.”

“I...” Mitch stopped as soon as the first word was out of his mouth. His face turned incredulous. “They wouldn’t. They couldn’t possibly...”

“Who, Mitch?” Sanders asked in a soothing tone.

“Lexi’s grandparents. Her birth father’s parents. They hate me. They tried to blackmail me once. But how could they do this to her? She must be so terrified. Why would they do this?” Mitch was becoming agitated.

“Can you give me their information? You can freak out later. Let’s fix this first, okay?” Sanders placed a notebook in front of Mitch, handing him a pen.

Mitch wrote their name and address, searching for the phone number in his phone. Sanders immediately ran out, promising he would call as soon as he had any information.

“Oh my God, Matt, do you think they have her?” Mitch was quickly sliding into desperation.

“I don’t know, babe. I hope they do, actually. I’m sure they wouldn’t hurt her.”

“What do you mean, you hope they do?” Mitch turned angrily towards him

“I just mean, it’s better if she’s with them. That’s a clue we can follow. If they have her we will find her.”

“What do you mean we, Matt? What do you care? You couldn’t even look after her for a few damn minutes.”

“I’m so sorry, Mitch.”

“What good is that? I still don’t have my kid. She comes first, Matt. She always comes first. You should have let me kill that guy. As long as you were with her, she would have been fine.”

“Mitch, this was a planned attack. They knew what they were doing. I was just acting on instinct. You were in trouble. How could I know she wouldn’t be fine with Ms. Alice? We’re not always on top of Lexi when we go to the park. I couldn’t have known.”

“You should have. She would be with me now if you had.” Mitch was yelling, unhinged.

“Mitch, I’m so sorry, you have to believe me. I would rather die than have something happen to her. You know that.” Matt was crying hysterically, his fear of losing Mitch crushing him.

“All I know is that I don’t have Lexi with me, and it’s your fault.” Mitch stormed to the front door and threw it open. “Get the fuck out of here! Right now. Get. The fuck. Out.”

“Mitch, please. Don’t.”

“Out. Now,” Mitch bellowed.

Matt grabbed his keys and walked out, feeling as if his entire world had crumbled.

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Matt got in his car and left the property, but he couldn’t head to his apartment. He had to know what happened. He needed to know that Lexi was all right. He parked outside the gate, far enough to avoid the paparazzi that had multiplied since the news of the kidnapping had been broadcast. He was sure that the other paparazzi at the park must have recorded Mitch talking about “our kid”, and he didn’t want anyone to notice him outside.

He sat in his car for a long time, thinking and waiting. He understood why Mitch had reacted as he had. Hell, he felt horrible about what he had done. But that was the problem with hindsight. His actions had seemed perfectly logical at the time. Who goes around imagining kidnappers? The more he thought about it, the more it made sense that Jamie’s parents had taken her. He knew if this were the case that Mitch would get her back. These were not hardened criminals who couldn’t be outsmarted. He had every confidence that John Sanders would get Lexi back very soon.

The moment he thought of the man, his car appeared, driving up to the gate. Matt followed him and got out, knocking on his window.

“Matt, why are you out here?” Sanders asked, surprised.



"He kicked me out. Says it's my fault. But I couldn't leave. I have to know she's okay. What do you know?"

"We found them. She's safe. My people contacted them pretending they needed help finding Lexi, and they admitted they had her. They don't appear to be the brightest people in the world. They seem to believe that knowing Mitch is gay will protect them. They asked for ten million dollars and if Mitch accuses them or refuses, they will not only keep her, but they'll out him publicly. It appears that while they might hate... uhm, let's phrase it nicer than they did... homosexuals—and they really do hate them—they have no problem with their money."

"What does he have to do?" Matt was so relieved to know she was safe, he felt as if he was finally breathing for the first time in hours.

"They want to meet at some motel in San Luis Obispo."

"I have to go with him. He can't do this alone."

"Matt, I really can't get in the middle of this, and if he kicked you out, it's pretty much my job to make sure you stay out."

"Please, Sanders. It was an honest mistake."

"I know that." Sanders sighed. "Look, I'll let him know you're out here, and try to get him to agree to let you come along. Mostly because I know you're right, and he shouldn't do this alone."

"Thanks so much, Sanders."

"I don't promise anything," Sanders said, as he rolled up his window and drove up to the house.

\*\*\*\*

Matt waited for what felt like hours—though the clock on the dashboard assured him it had only been ten minutes—growing more and more scared that Mitch would never agree to see him. He was about to storm the house when his phone rang, Mitch's name on the caller ID.

"Mitch, oh my God, what's going on? What are you going to do?"

"Come on in, Matty, and we'll tell you." Mitch sounded hoarse, but considering the circumstances, fairly calm.

Matt drove up to the house in a flash, moving so fast he felt as if he was simultaneously shifting to park, shutting off the engine, and jumping out of the car.

Mitch was standing in the front door, and he ran towards Matt throwing himself against his body in a ferocious hug. "I'm so sorry about what I said. You didn't deserve that. I'm just... I just..."

"Mitch, I understand. *I* blame myself for my stupidity. Just 'cause I couldn't have known better, doesn't mean I don't feel I should have. But that doesn't matter. Now, we just have to get our baby back. How're we doing that?"

"They want me to go there and transfer the money to some offshore account, then they'll give me Lexi. Sanders said that the firm has contacts at all banks for just this purpose, which is really fucked up, but they can cancel the transfer as soon as we're out of there with Lexi."

"What's to stop these people from coming back for her, when they realize they don't have the money?"

"I'll have a little camera on me which will record them, and as soon as we're gone, the police will come in and arrest them. With the video, they should stay locked up for a very long while. Plus, I can still press charges for the blackmail. So they'd have a lot to answer for."

"Okay, so when are we going?" Matt asked. When Mitch made a gesture that implied he thought Matt should stay, he didn't even allow him to say a word. "I'm going. Even if you hadn't called me in, I was going. I need to see her. Don't even bother keeping me from going."

"Matt, it might be dangerous."

"Mitch, you and Lexi will be there. I could care less about me."

Mitch hugged him with all his strength. "I love you so much. I'm so sorry about earlier."

"I love you too. Let's go get our baby, and then we can spend the rest of our lives making up for our fuck-ups."

"Okay, gentlemen, we're leaving. I take it you're joining us, Matt?" Sanders asked, walking up to them with two necklaces, each with a circular black pendant about the size of a nickel. When Matt nodded, he continued, "Great, so you both will be wearing a necklace. It contains a microscopic camera that will transmit what it records to our headquarters. Once you guys are out, the police will go in and seize them. The police already have plenty of reasons for the well-padded warrant out for their arrest, but the video will be a nice bit of ironclad evidence against them. Mitch, when they ask you to do the transfer,

just use your normal bank information. We have everything set up on our end to make sure you get the money back as soon as possible.”

“I just want Lexi back and them behind bars for a long time, nothing else is important,” Mitch said, squeezing Matt’s hand tightly.

“We’ll get her back. I promise,” Sanders said.

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Matt and Mitch drove up the highway, with Sanders in the backseat. When they neared their destination, Sanders would hide in the backseat and be their lookout, along with other backup units from the security company, which were already in place. No one expected anything dangerous to occur, but everyone felt better erring on the side of caution.

The drive was a quiet one, as they were all too keyed up for small talk. When they neared the motel, Sanders went over the plan and any unforeseen complications that may arise. Matt was certain that there were no possible scenarios left to contemplate. When they arrived at their destination, he felt he might explode from nervousness. It was six in the morning, and he had not slept or eaten for almost twenty-four hours. Once this was over with, the three of them were going to hunker down in their home, and if he had any say, no one would ever leave it again.

Matt and Mitch got out of the car and walked over to the room where they had been told to go. The motel looked rundown, the sickly-yellow paint peeling, and the grimy windows sending the message that cleanliness was not a priority in the establishment. Matt hated to think of Lexi trapped in that place with her godforsaken grandparents. Mitch raised his hand to knock on the door, but before he made contact, it opened, and a short, skinny woman in her sixties, wearing a frumpy dress and with her long, white hair tied back in a bun, peeked out.

“Who’s he?” she asked, gesturing towards Matt.

“He’s a friend. Lexi loves him very much and will be glad to see him,” Mitch answered curtly.

She snorted. “Friend, I’m sure. Come in,” she ordered them, the venom dripping from her words.

They walked into a small room decorated in dark oranges and browns, that did very little to disguise the grime impregnated on every surface. Matt nearly

ruined everything when he saw Lexi laying on a bed, her red face and moist cheeks a sign that she had been crying. Sanders had told them to be as economical as possible in their movements, and not to go to Lexi until her grandparents handed her over, in order to avoid any confrontations that might harm the child. That didn't stop Matt from wishing with every fiber of his being that he could just grab her already.

"She just fell asleep. You've turned my granddaughter into a devil-child, which isn't surprising, I guess. She's been crying like a banshee for hours."

"Well, being around strangers will do that to a child, Sheila," Mitch replied, his voice perfectly even, his anger evidenced only by the clench of his jaw.

She turned towards Mitch sharply, her eyes hard. "No, my Jamie was a perfect baby. He was the perfect son. Until he met you, and you ruined him."

"How did I ruin him, Sheila?"

"You turned him away from God. You made him an abomination," she said, shaking with barely suppressed rage.

Mitch sighed, realizing that continuing this conversation just risked their plan. "Sheila, I'm just here for Lexi. I have the money. I'd like to give it to you, take my child, and be on my way."

"I don't have anything to do with that. That's Bill's idea. I want to keep her, but Bill says she has the mark of the devil in her. He says there's nothing we can do for her, just like there was nothing we could do for Jamie. You have contaminated my whole family and stolen them from me. Why would you do that? What did I do to you?" The woman was now crying angrily. If their scheme hadn't been enough proof already, this would have been the point at which Matt realized she was actually insane.

"What's going on here?" A tall, portly man emerged from the bathroom, his cold eyes boring through them. "Why is my wife crying? What did you do?"

"He took everything from me, Bill," Sheila wailed hysterically. "He took my Jamie, and now he's taking what's left of him."

"Sheila, I know. That's why we're making him pay, no?" Bill placed his arm around his wife, though his eyes never looked at her.

"But why can't they pay, and we keep her? We can save her. Pastor James told me there are rituals we can perform to exorcise the devil from her." Sheila's blue eyes were shimmering with tears and hope.

“We talked about this. We can’t risk it. If it doesn’t work, she could contaminate us. We must walk the righteous path of the Lord until the day of reckoning, or there shall be no salvation. Her soul is already lost, poor child.” Though his words, and even his tone, appeared caring, his eyes only displayed calculation.

“Of course, you’re right, Bill. You’re always right.” Subdued, Sheila sat on the second bed in the room, staring longingly at Lexi, while at the same time keeping her distance.

“Thank you, dear.” Giving his wife a quick pat on the head, Bill turned to Matt and Mitch. “You have the money?”

“Yes, how do you want me to do the transfer?”

“Use this computer here,” Bill said, pointing to a black laptop on the coffee table. “It’s all ready. You just have to type in your information. I’ll warn you, don’t try anything funny. The man who set this up said it’s fail-safe. Don’t be underestimating me.”

“Of course not, Bill,” Mitch said in the same calm tone he had maintained since they had arrived. He sat down at the computer, pulling out the paper with his bank information from his shirt pocket.

“Why’d you have to bring your fag over? Can’t stay away from his ass long enough to rescue your daughter?” More than what was said about him, Matt was sickened by the disdainful tone Bill used when referring to Lexi.

“Bill!” Sheila appeared scandalized by his words, as she crossed herself.

“Sorry, dear. I apologize. You see, just a few minutes in their presence, and I’m uttering profanities. It’s the devil’s work.”

Matt met Mitch’s eyes, and although they were both doing their best to appear unmoved, Mitch’s gaze mirrored Matt’s feeling of incredulity at what they were hearing. They needed to get out of there very soon.

“It’s done. See? The money’s transferred. Can I have my daughter and leave already?” Mitch stood up.

“Not so quick. Let me make sure it’s gone through.” Bill walked over to the computer, and after a few minutes, stood up. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mitch,” he smirked.

“Right. So can I go?”

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“Of course. A deal’s a deal.”

Mitch ran over to Lexi and took her in his arms, holding on as if his life depended on it. As they ran out of the room and down the stairs, they heard Sheila wailing disconsolately. When they were halfway down the stairs, Lexi woke up, bursting into tears upon seeing Mitch, and clinging to him as tightly as he was to her, as she repeatedly shrieked at the top of her lungs, “Daaaaa!”

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## Chapter 6

As Matt had wanted, they spent the weeks following the kidnapping closed up in the house. Diane, who had been away in Las Vegas with friends when Lexi had been taken, went shopping for groceries and other necessities so Matt and Mitch were able to renounce the outside world and keep to themselves in their home. Matt had officially moved in, although he had not been able to bring his things over, as he had not wanted to leave Mitch and Lexi for even a second.

The kidnapping had been front-page news throughout the world. Bill and Sheila had been arrested, and identified as Lexi's biological grandparents, although no connection had been made linking Mitch and Jamie. No one had drawn any conclusions about Matt and Mitch either. Mitch had decided that when his next contract was negotiated, he would refuse to sign unless the controls over his personal life were eliminated. But for now he had decided he would live his life completely openly. While he would continue to refuse to comment on their relationship for the next few years, all of his actions would demonstrate who they were to one another. For Matt, just being with Mitch and Lexi was everything. The details weren't a concern in his eyes.

That night, after they had put Lexi down in her crib—which they had only moved back into her room a few days earlier—they went to bed, snuggling while they watched stupid sitcoms, and ate ice cream and cake. After they had turned the television off, Mitch turned to Matt, placing small kisses all over his face.

"I have some news for you," Mitch said between kisses.

"What? Are you trying to butter me up?" Matt murmured, enjoying the attention too much to mind.

"I have to head back on tour in a few weeks."

"I knew that. I know that eventually we have to leave the house again, as much as I might not want to..."

"Well, I asked the band and they want you to photograph the rest of the tour as well, so we can be together."

Matt sat up. "Mitch, that's great. But we can't both leave Lexi. I know she has Diane, but I feel we're creating something new, and I wouldn't want to leave her behind, especially after all that's happened."

Mitch reached up to kiss him. "I love you so much for loving her so much. You have no idea. Actually, I've decided to bring her and my mom as well."

"You did? Why? You've never wanted that." Mitch was genuinely surprised.

"Well, my priorities have changed. Being normal suddenly doesn't seem so important. Having her around and knowing she's okay, that's all that matters."

"What about security? We would always be worried about her in all those different places." If a simple trip to the park was beyond Matt's abilities these days, he couldn't imagine how overwhelmed he would feel touring the world.

"I talked to Sanders, and we would set up a security detail for her. Around the clock. I had already decided to do that anyways. We can just start it off on tour." Mitch pushed Matt back, straddling him. "I can't spend all that time away from you guys. You're everything. I wouldn't be able to function. I would be no good to anyone."

"Well, before this all happened, I had been trying to work out a plan to be able to travel with you... I've always wanted to travel the world, photographing people, telling their stories. I've sent out a few proposals for a book series, and there's been some interest. Put together with the chance to continue working with you guys, it's really an amazing opportunity for me."

"Good, it's settled!" Mitch bent down and kissed Matt with an enthusiasm that quickly turned far more intense and sensuous. Unlike their usual frenzied lovemaking, they seemed content to take their time; to celebrate what felt like a turning point in their relationship. While they had spoken of an indefinite future ahead of them, these were the first plans built around their desire to spend the rest of their lives together. It might be a few years before they could get married, but for now, knowing that no matter what, as long as they were together, they would always actually be together, was enough.

"I love you," Mitch said as he thrust languorously against Matt.

"I love you too. Thank you for not giving up on me."

"Matty, from the moment I met you, I knew we could be this great," Mitch whispered, in between kisses. "I'll never give up on you. I promise."

**The End**



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## Author Bio

*Alex has sensed the muses flittering and fluttering about for the better part of her life, but had never heeded their call. It wasn't until the wondrous day she discovered the delightful world of M/M romance that the errant thoughts that had previously loped about her brain in a renegade fashion agreed to come together in a mostly structured manner and reveal themselves to the world at large. The alpha males and sensitive lads who had taken her imagination on delicious flights of fancy no longer beckoned for the lovely ladies who, to be honest, bored her. They were more than happy to play amongst themselves, and she was more than happy to bring their stories to life.*

*An all-around artsy person, Alex has been everything from an opera singer to a photographer. It is one of her greatest goals in life to write a novel, and boy, does she have a good one up her sleeve. Watch this space!*

## Contact & Media Info

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# COMING OUT OF THE STORM

By Laura Mathews

## Photo Description

A double amputee lies on his back, one man supporting his head and shoulders as another stands between the vee of his thighs, fucking him. Beneath the veneer of sex, the scene feels contrived and the intimacy broken, chipped and cracked by a lack of a personal connection.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*The man on his back is my friend—no, my best friend, and I love him. He brought me here for moral support.*

*Seeing him with these men is hot as Hell, but it's also breaking my heart.*

*We were together when he lost his legs in a war that didn't belong to us. Since we returned, he always seems ashamed of any physical contact, and I have to hide the depths of my feelings for him. Now some kinky porn studio has offered him money for a couple of films, and he's going to use the proceeds to get the prosthesis he desperately wants, thinking that being able to walk again is his only path to happiness.*

*Help me make him accept and return my love. Help me show him that I'd always love him no matter what.*

### Comments:

*I didn't use names so the author could choose them. I want this to be a love story, but the raunchier the better, and I particularly want at least one sex scene within the context of one of the porn movies the cutie on his back has agreed to make. The POV of the friend in love is really important too; I don't mind if there are several POVs, but his is a must.*

*Sincerely,*

*Gabbo*

## Story Letter

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** interracial, military men, slow burn, fetish for hire, friends to lovers, disability, ménage scene, sex industry

**Word Count:** 10,798

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# **COMING OUT OF THE STORM**

**By Laura Mathews**

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## ONE

“What’re you doing here?”

“It’s Friday.” The porch light comes on, flooding the darkness with light. Andre blinks against the sudden brightness, eyes watering after fourteen hours on the road, the last two surrounded by the dark moonless night. Looking at his watch, he checks the time. Quarter to ten, not so late that Billy should’ve written him off as a no-show. “I told you I’d be here today.”

“Yeah, well, lots of people have said lots of things.” Billy cuts a fast glare towards his lap. “Found out most of ’em are lies.”

It’s been a little over nine months since Andre’s seen Billy—nine months, one week, and three days, to be exact—and of all the reunion scenarios that he’s played out in his head, this ridiculous awkwardness was never on the list. Most of the fantasies ended with smiles and kisses and sex. After he told Billy he loved him, that this, *them*, was it for him... then there’d been sex. Copious amounts of sex. “Look, Billy, I—”

“Will.” Billy interrupts.

“Will? Will, what? Will I come in so the nosy old bat across the road doesn’t call the cops and report the scary black man for loitering?” Andre takes a step closer to the door. He figures there’s only one way to play this: ignore the unholy level of tension building between them and act like nothing has changed. And hold off on all game-changing declarations of feelings. Obviously, there will be no sex tonight. Dammit. “Sure, man, thanks for the invite.”

One corner of Billy’s mouth quirks. After the less than stellar welcome, Andre counts the small reaction as a win.

Billy slumps into his chair. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“Nope. Got a bag in the car. Your place or a hotel, doesn’t matter to me where I crash at night.” It’s a lie. His choice would be here, preferably in the same damned bed as Billy. “You ain’t shakin’ me loose.”

“Jesus, fuck.” Billy glances across the street and frowns. He maneuvers his chair back and opens the door wider. “Get in here. Mrs. Olsen really will call the cops on you.”

He slips by Billy before the man can rescind the offer and heads straight for the living room. Dropping down on the sofa, he says, "So, Will? What's that about?"

"That's my name, yeah?"

"It's always been your name. And in fifteen years, this is the first time I've heard *you* use it." He's heard Billy's mom and dad use it, their teachers and the Army recruiter who sweet-talked them into joining up. But never Billy himself. "Matter of fact, you used to ignore anyone who did use it."

"Everything's changed." The air surrounding Billy reeks of bitterness and betrayal. "I've changed, Dre. Way too much to be arrogant, cocksure Billy Westerson anymore. I left that man in the sandpit."

"Billy, no—" Andre starts, then stops abruptly. Billy might have a point. At least about having changed. The last time they'd been together, their world had literally exploded into a haze of smoke and sand. Andre had come out the other side covered in grime, skin torn by shrapnel and oozing blood.

Billy had lost his legs.

Both of them were luckier than Rodriguez, who'd died in a personal version of hell. The roar of the fire had done nothing to drown out his pleas for help.

Dragging a hand over his head, he asks, "Are any of us the same?"

Thumping a hand against his left thigh, Billy snaps, "I've got no legs. You've got something to trump that?"

Anger burns through Andre. It'd taken days to shake the scent of fire and smoke, of blood and charred flesh. He still wakes up some nights with the sound of screams ringing in his ears, the scent of blood and smoke so real he gags. Swallowing down his rage, he whispers, "I came through that day with you."

"Yeah, I remember." Billy stares pointedly at Andre's legs. "You *stood* right there and watched them evac me out."

Andre can't form a reply, at least not one that won't lead to an argument. Instead, he asks, "It's late and, I've been on the road all day. Can I stay here tonight or is it a Motel 6?"

"How long?" Billy asks.

"How long what?"

“Your leave, Dre. How long is your leave?”

“Not on leave.” Andre shakes his head. Without Billy there, he’s got no desire to stay in. “I didn’t re-up, I’m done.”

“What the hell were you thinking? You were halfway to a pension.”

“What was I thinking?” Andre forces himself to not look at Billy’s stumps. “I was thinking that I stood there and watched my best friend get evac’d out.”

Apparently the words leave Billy just as speechless as they left Andre. A full minute passes, sixty slow ticks of the second hand, then an alarm clock sounds from a room at the end of the hall. The buzzer keeps repeating in a steady, mocking beat, making the strained silence more oppressive.

“That’s for me, time to get to work.” Billy swings his chair around in a wide circle and starts rolling down the short hallway. “You can take the couch for tonight. Blankets and an extra pillow are in the bedroom closet, top shelf.” At the door closest to the living room, Billy looks over his shoulder and adds, “Tomorrow will be soon enough to figure out what to do with you in the long-term.”

After the door shuts behind Billy, Andre huffs out a frustrated breath. Nothing is the way it’s supposed to be. There was nothing to prepare him for the utter helplessness shining in Billy’s eyes. Not in the letters or the emails he received while he was still in the desert, nor in the frequent texts or the one phone call since he arrived stateside.

Instead of Florida, it feels like he’s landed in the Twilight Zone.

He’s always hated that fucking show.

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The sound of a moan pulls Andre out of sleep. At least, he thinks it was a moan. Yawning, he lies still and listens. If Billy’s hurting, he’s gonna say to hell with things like boundaries and personal space. When he starts thinking he imagined the noise, another rumble echoes off the tile floor.

Now that he’s awake, there’s no mistaking the moan for what it is. And it has absolutely nothing to do with pain.

“Uh, *fuck*, oh...” The babble breaks into another raspy whimper.

The murmurs tumbling down the hall are everything that Andre had hoped to hear tonight. Erotic and wanton.

Except he wanted to be the one to make Billy sound so damn needy. Wanted to have Billy beneath him, writhing on his fingers—and his tongue, and his dick—and begging for more, for *anything*.

Closing his eyes, it's easy to pretend that Billy is doing this for him, that he knows Andre is listening. That he *wants* Andre to hear him.

Andre slips a hand into his boxers and squeezes his dick, massaging himself to full hardness. His strokes are stuttered, hindered by the dryness of his hand. The friction is almost too much to be pleasant, but his breaths match the rhythm of Billy's words and grunts, and he loses himself in the fantasy.

He drags his thumb across his dick, spreading precome over his glans, then trips the edge of his nail over the slit. The muscles in his thighs tremble and, shoulders pushing down into the couch cushions, his back arches.

Words want to spill out, answers to all of the shit Billy's muttering. *Yes* and *please* and *fuck, Billy*. He bites down on his lip to hold them in, and the tang of copper explodes over his tongue.

It's not enough. Release is flittering out of reach. His dick is hard and balls are pulling up and... He wants—*needs*—so much more. He pushes his other hand beneath the sheet and cups his balls through the thin worn cotton of his underwear, his fingers dancing over his taint.

When he hears Billy say, "Come on, you know you want to," arousal spirals down Andre's spine, slamming into his balls. Pulling on his dick with tight strokes, he comes.

The lethargic high of release lasts only seconds. Only until he hears Billy whisper, "Yeah, just like that, Edward."

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Andre's on his third cup of coffee when the sun comes up, on his second pot when Billy wheels into the kitchen wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung cargos. It's the first real look Andre gets of Billy. The changes in his friend have him spluttering a mouthful of hot coffee through his nose.

The scars, the weight loss, the hard glint in Billy's eyes and stiff set of his shoulders. It's like looking at a stranger. He wonders if there's any of his fun-loving friend buried beneath the crusty shell of a man sitting in front of him.

Reaching for a coffee cup, Billy frowns. "You alright?"



“Yeah, just didn’t...” Andre stops and shakes his head. It’s not like he can actually tell Billy he didn’t imagine that Billy’d look like five miles of bad highway. He’s not that much of an asshole. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Liar.”

“Didn’t sleep well.” It’s not a lie, and as long as Billy doesn’t ask him *why* he didn’t sleep well, it never will be a lie.

Adding enough sugar to make Andre wince, Billy asks, “Couch that uncomfortable?”

“Nah.”

Billy looks at him and arches a brow. “Well?”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Andre says, “Some nights, sleep is elusive.”

“Uh huh.” The way Billy drawls the word out, Andre knows the conversation isn’t over. Billy drains his coffee and immediately refills his mug. “Start another pot and I’ll throw together some bacon and eggs, yeah?”

Finally, Andre thinks, something familiar. Billy’s caffeine addiction has been running strong since their junior year in high school. Having Advanced Chem first period had forced them both to actually be awake before the morning bell rang. “Roger that.”

He’s measuring scoops of coffee grounds when Billy says, “Didn’t think you’d be one to lie to me, Dre.”

“You thought it well enough to be surprised that I showed up when I told you I would.” And, okay, that came out a little more tart than he’d expected. Having Billy accuse him of lying fucking *hurt*, goddammit. Plus, when he’s honest about it, he is lying by omission. And that is embarrassing. “And I’m not lying to you. I spend more time awake at night than I do asleep.”

The kitchen fills with the scent of bacon and coffee. It’d be a perfect combination if Andre felt the least bit comfortable. As it is, his skin is crawling with the need to clear the air. Or escape. Escape is really sounding good.

“I was afraid,” Billy says, turning strips of crispy bacon out onto a paper-towel-lined plate. “I didn’t know what to expect from you, and I couldn’t have stood pity. I’d have wanted to slam the door in your face.”

“When have I ever pitied you?”

Billy flashes a grin and for a second, Andre sees the man he grew up with. “Prom, Amanda Eckerson and her campaign to make me straight.”

"Point," Andre replies, snorting a soft laugh. "Haven't thought about her in years."

"She works at the VA. Saw her every damn day 'til they cut me loose."

Andre releases another chuckle. "How'd that reunion go?"

"Oh, fuck off." Billy cracks a half dozen eggs into the skillet. "Seriously, why no sleep last night?"

The heat of embarrassment burns Andre's face. "I, uh, woke up and heard you with your man."

"My wha... *oh*." Billy looks away, focuses all of his attention on the electric skillet. It puts Andre on alert. No way scrambling eggs needs that kind of undivided attention. "Who?"

Wary of what's coming next—because, really, how does Billy not know who?—Andre says, "Edward?"

The tips of Billy's ears turn a deep red. "Edward isn't... I mean, yeah, I don't have a man. Who'd even want me now?"

Andre has the answer to that. He wants Billy. But deep in his gut he knows now isn't the time to throw that into the mix, not when Billy would see it as a sympathy fuck. Instead he asks, "Who the hell is Edward, then? 'Cause from where I was, it's more than a passing acquaintance."

"That's a long story." Scooping the eggs onto two plates, Billy waves a hand towards the fridge. "There's juice in there, if you want."

"Billy?"

"Will. No one calls me Billy anymore."

"Whatever." As far as Andre is concerned, *Billy* is who he's always been, *Billy* is who he'll stay. Digging the orange juice out of the refrigerator, he looks over his shoulder and asks, "Edward?"

"Dammit, man," Billy growls. "Can't you let it go at least until after breakfast?"

"No, not after I spent half the night thinking Edward was the reason you didn't want me here last night." He sets the juice down harder than necessary. "I actually thought about skipping out and finding a damn hotel at zero-five this morning."

“Yeah, and after I tell you who he really is, you’ll haul ass so fast, you won’t even slow down ’til the Georgia line.” Spittle flies from Billy’s mouth, and his face is a rictus of self-loathing. He pushes away from the table and starts heading towards the archway leading into the living room.

If Andre wasn’t so pissed, it’d break his heart. But he is pissed. Hellfire mad in a way he hasn’t been in months. “I ain’t never cut out on you, and fuck you for assuming I will now. Fuck you really hard.”

In a flat monotone, lacking all of the venom of moments before, Billy asks, “You want to know who Edward is?”

“Yeah,” Andre says, mulish and ignoring everything in him screaming to just let it go. “I wanna know.”

Without looking back, Billy says, “He’s a freak who likes getting off by watching me fuck myself with a dildo while I rub my stumps. It’s not very glamorous but it pays the fucking bills.”

And then he wheels away, leaving Andre slack-mouthed and scrambling to make sense of it all.

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“Well that went well,” Andre mutters when he hears the pipes creak and the shower start. “Fuck.”

Busy work. He needs something to keep him occupied until Billy ventures out again. Otherwise all he’s going to do is keep kicking himself in the ass for pushing it.

“Can’t ever leave shit alone, can you, you damned idiot.”

Clearing the table, he scrapes the ruined breakfast into the garbage can and stacks the plates in the sink. Kitchen set to rights, or as right as he can get it until Billy finishes up in the bathroom, Andre rummages through the cabinets. They still need to eat breakfast.

More than twenty minutes later, Andre has all of the fixings for stuffed French toast lined up on the counter. He’s just waiting on Billy to show his face. He doesn’t have to wait long.

Shower damp, Billy stops in the archway. “You’re still here.”

“Still haven’t had breakfast.”

Some of the wariness fades from Billy’s eyes. “So you’re gonna eat all my food then split?”

“Thought I’d make banana, peanut butter French toast, and then go grocery shopping.”

“Staying, then?”

Andre licks his lips, rolls his shoulders in an uneasy shrug. “Not running out, even if I did make an ass of myself.”

“That’s you, alright. Andre Jackson, master ass and best friend.” Billy spins his chair around, heading towards the hall.

“Where are you going? I’m not cooking all this just for me.”

“Need to move some shit around. It’s not proper for you to sleep on the couch when I’ve got a perfectly good second bedroom.”

Dipping the first sandwich into the egg batter, Andre grins. “Yell if you need help.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just don’t burn my house down trying to cook.”

Burn the house down, indeed. They both know it was Andre who taught Billy how to cook. “Whatever you say, *Billy*.”

“Just for that,” Billy’s voice bounces off the tiles, sounding strong and slightly amused, “you can make supper tonight too.”

Andre can’t stop the small grin from exploding into a full blown smile.

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## TWO

After two weeks, Billy starts believing that Andre is really going to stick around. He's done everything in his power to push Andre away, and the damn fool just keeps boomeranging right back to Billy's side. Billy'd be lying if he said it wasn't nice, almost comforting, to know that someone has his back again.

Looking across the living room, Billy comes close to frowning. Andre looks like he's about to squirm out of his skin. "Spit it out."

"What?"

"Whatever's got you dancing, Dre." He does frown now. Andre's never been one to hold back when there's something he wants to say. "You're making me nervous with all the bopping back and forth. And, in case you're wondering, you still don't have any rhythm."

"Got more than you've got, cowboy."

"Nice try at the redirect. But, yeah, still a fail."

Andre sighs and drags a hand over his head. "You get disability pay, right?"

"Yeah, twenty-two hundred a month." He has a feeling about where this is going. Andre hasn't mentioned Billy's evening activities since that first morning, but his face pinches every time Billy's reminder alarm goes off. "Why?"

"I'm here, taking up space and eating your food. I've got more than enough saved up to cover my share of shit until I find a job."

Billy arches a brow and waits.

"Between us we can cover all the bills and your meds and appointments, right?" Andre cuts a fast look down the hallway. "Quit. We'll make it work."

For everything that he's lost, for every dream that is now little more than dust in the cosmos, there are certain things he'll never be. A charity case is at the top of that list. "I'm not working to meet my bills, not like you're thinking. Yeah, you kicking in with groceries has been a help, left some extra for me to funnel into savings. But the twenty-two a month keeps the lights on."

"Then, why?"

“You see a prosthetic around here?” Billy waits until Andre shakes his head. “You won’t either. My benefits are a ninety/ten split. No prosthetics until I can pay my ten, and my ten? It’s a hell of a lot more than I’m gonna raise on twenty-two a month.”

Andre’s brow furls. Billy can practically see the man puzzling things out. “Why wasn’t everything covered? That’s a combat disability.”

“Yeah, um,” Billy stammers. “The VA has a backlog. Like, a forever huge backlog.”

Andre snorts and points a finger at Billy. “You skipped out before they actually released you.”

“I took the life management classes,” Billy says. It’s a weak argument, and he knows it. “But, yeah. Signed the medical separation, every waiver they put under my nose, and then realized...”

“That you fucked yourself over.” Andre slumps back, slouching down against the couch. “Jesus, Billy, really? You couldn’t ask some questions before flying off half-cocked?”

“Have I ever?” Billy waves his hand through the air. “It doesn’t matter now. I did it and it’s over.”

“How much?”

Billy doesn’t even pretend to misunderstand the question. “More than I’ve got and more than I’ll borrow.”

“Jackass, that doesn’t answer the question.” When Billy remains silent, Andre pushes to a stand. “Go put a fucking shirt on, I’ll be back in thirty.”

“What?”

“I need to get out of the house.”

Getting out sounds great, especially to somewhere besides the VA or the grocery store. Except the last time Billy went to the store, he’d ended up breathing into a paper bag, overwhelmed by the feelings of exposure and vulnerability. “Don’t see what that has to do with me.”

Andre starts working his feet into his shoes. “All I’ve got is my bike and you won’t let me help you into that jacked-up truck of yours. Gonna hit up the rental car place and then *we’re* taking a ride.”

“I’m not going.” No way. Not now, not when having a fucking breakdown means Andre will be there to see it all. “Don’t waste money on a rental.”

“Billy...”

“No.” Billy winces. That single word held a fuckton of fear. “You don’t know what it’s like. Being under a microscope, not knowing what the reactions are gonna be.”

“You trust me?”

“It’s not about if I trust you or not, Andre. It’s about everybody out there,” Billy waves his hand distractedly towards the windows, “and all of the people I don’t know.”

“I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

Billy snorts and shakes his head. “You’re gonna stand between me and the world?”

“If that’s what it takes. I’ll also stand between you and yourself. Lean on me. Trust me to be there. I won’t let you fall.” Hand on the doorknob, Andre gives Billy a pointed look. “So, thirty minutes and then I’m dragging your ass out no matter what. Be dressed or go ugly. I don’t even care.”

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“The mall?” Billy looks at the sea of cars and frowns. A fully-packed mall. No way does he want that amount of pity tossed at him ever, but especially not all at once. “Seriously? What about somewhere, I don’t know, less full?”

“I need clothes, man. And the Apple Store is in there. You know how much sand is in my iPod after twelve months in the desert? So, yeah, no, we’re not going somewhere *less full*.”

“Dre...” Anxiousness crashes through Billy. This, the mall, the visibility, is something he’s gone out of his way to avoid. Heart racing, he says, “Come on, let’s find somewhere else.”

“Nope.” Andre shakes his head, a rugged determination showing in his eyes. It’s the same look Billy saw more than once on missions. “You’re just gonna have to suck it up, buttercup. We’re shopping here, and we’re shopping now.”

Billy blinks, the apprehension replaced by confusion and then, after he replays Andre’s words, irritation. “Did you just call me buttercup?”

“Indeed.” Andre locks Billy’s wheelchair in place and does a deep, playful bow. “Your carriage awaits, my—”

“If you call me princess, I’m gonna punch you in the balls,” Billy interrupts. With practiced ease, he shifts from the car seat to his chair. “And, for the record, you’re a fucking asshole.”

“And you’re a goddamn drama queen.” Andre turns and starts walking away, calling out, “You better get that chair in gear before you get left behind.”

Billy spends the next two hours moving from shop to shop to shop, buying shirts and shorts and underwear. He even picks up socks before he remembers just how unnecessary they are. It’s not until they’re on their way out that he realizes that if anyone was staring at him, he didn’t notice it. He’d been too busy trading insults with Andre to worry about the strangers surrounding them. It was wonderful and fun and *wonderful* to be out and doing nothing. “Stupid grunt,” he mutters under his breath, glaring at Andre. “Stupid, perfect grunt.”

A smirk curls the edges of Andre’s lips. “What was that, *princess*?”

“Said I’m hungry,” Billy lies, fully aware that Andre knows he’s lying his ass off too. “You feeding me or not?”

“I don’t know. Shopping and now dinner, then you’re probably going to want to go to a movie and the next thing you know, this becomes a date.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Billy laughs and flips Andre the bird. “Burgers, Dre. Time for burgers.”

Checking the traffic, Andre changes lanes. “Five Guys it is then.”

Billy grins, the idea of asking to go see a chick flick fluttering around in the back of his mind. It’d be worth sitting through an hour and a half of hell just to watch Andre’s mouth fly open at the suggestion.

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### THREE

During the day, they've fallen into something close to normal. They bitch, they bicker, they laugh. The only thing missing from this domestic bliss is the intimacy. Every day, many times a day, Andre stops himself from stealing a kiss, or copping a feel. Whenever he gets too close, Billy flinches away and the next ten minutes are spent in an awkward silence that leads to stuttered babbling. The only person Andre's seen Billy let close with any amount of grace is old Mrs. Olsen who lives across the street.

Of course, she came bearing a plate of homemade cookies, a bowl of potato salad, and a platter of fried chicken. Andre would've let her hug him too.

While the days may be normal, the nights are anything but. They've exposed a side of Andre that he isn't sure he likes. Lying in a dark room every night and listening to his best friend talk one client or another into creaming has to be one of the most fucked up, creepastic things he's ever done. The fact that he's been stroking his dick to the cadence of Billy's words is something he's still ignoring. He's pretty sure he's going to end up in a special level of hell just based on the last three and a half weeks of his life, damn everything else he's ever done.

He vows every morning to not give into the temptation once the sun goes down. Then he'll hear Billy talking, catching a word here and a word there, and his dick perks up, filling and leaking and *aching*. After that, it's a freefall dive off a familiar cliff.

It's a cliff he's inching closer and closer to right now, with the low and breathy echo of Billy's whispers carrying gently into his room. It's not the usual murmurings, nowhere near Billy being seductive. But Andre's body has been trained, and between the darkening sky and the echo of Billy's hushed voice, it's game on.

Just as he's pushing his hand beneath the sheet, Billy's voice rises and, for the first time, Andre can hear him without straining. "I don't know about that. Webcams and shit is one thing. What you're talking about, that's long lasting. There's no controlling who sees it."

Andre realizes Billy's on the phone, apparently with his boss, and circling the living room, every pass bringing him close to the bedroom door. The bedroom door that Andre left open on purpose, so he could eavesdrop on Billy and pull one off before letting sleep drag him under.

“Fuck,” Andre mutters softly, curling his hand into a tight fist. “This shit is completely out of control.”

“Movies, Mark. You’re talking movies.” The tone in Billy’s voice makes Andre cringe. There was a time when that level of exasperation was a prelude to a ridiculous amount of cursing and, if you were close enough and kept pushing, a thrown punch or two. “What’s the payoff? If it’s high enough I might, *might*, consider it.”

Fucking money. More than once Andre’s been ready to scream the house down over Billy’s fricking pride and refusal to take the help being offered.

He hears Billy whistle and then say, “That much? Really?”

And in that moment, Andre knows that whatever this Mark person is asking, Billy’s going to agree. The idea of it chaps his ass more than he figures it has any right to.

He’s proven right when Billy’s next statement is, “I’ll see you tomorrow at zero-nine.”

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They’re sitting in the living room with a basketball game on the big screen, a quartet of empty beer bottles littering the coffee table, and two cold ones open and leaving water rings. The silence is oppressive, clinging to Andre’s skin like a tangible thing.

He has the urge to ask Billy where he’d disappeared to earlier, just wanting to see what level of honesty he’d get. Instead, he says, “Thought I’d do ribs on the grill tonight. Good for you?”

Billy grabs his beer and starts peeling the label. “Yeah, whatever you want is fine.”

“Uh huh.” Andre takes the beer out of Billy’s hand and sets it on the table. He waits until Billy looks away from the floor and looks head-on at Andre, and then asks, “What’s eating at you?”

“Did you mean it?” Worry and guilt, a hint of self-disgust, plus a tiny seed of hope. They’re all easy to see in Billy’s eyes, in the tight pull of muscles of his shoulders and the straight-line set of his mouth. “I might be in over my head on something and I need to know if, when you said you weren’t gonna cut and run, no matter what, you’ve got my six, I need to know if you meant it?”

He meant it. He just can't guarantee a favorable fallout once all is said and done. Not after spending a never-ending day alone with all of his thoughts occupied by what Billy *might* be doing. "I meant it."

"Okay, good." Billy scrubs his hands over his thighs, pulling his cargos high enough for Andre to see a tiny slip of skin. "I, uh, I expanded my contract at work today."

Here we go, Andre thinks. He takes a swallow of beer to hide his grimace. "And?"

"If I can pick up a couple more contracts like this one, it'll be enough to cover the deductibles on both prosthetics."

"Okay." Andre drains his beer, resists the impulse to grab Billy's and drain it too. "What's it gonna cost you?"

"Nothing I ain't given up before," Billy says. "I'll go grab my contract, you can read through it and see if you're still on board."

He's rolling away before Andre can say another word. Goddammit. This thing has Billy on edge, and that in turn is making Andre short-tempered and foul-mouthed.

Because, really, Billy won't let Andre touch him but Andre's pretty sure the contract will be all about Billy doing a fucking porn vid or five. All for the sake of a pair of legs.

It's not a fair trade. No matter how many angles Andre comes at it from—and with the hours he lost thinking about it today, he's pretty sure he's covered *all* of the angles—he'd rather Billy told this Mark asshole to fuck right off and just leave the legs at the VA.

Legs don't make the man. It's a statement he's made more than once since taking over Billy's guest bedroom. He doubts the damn fool will ever believe him.

Grunting, Andre pushes to a stand and goes to the kitchen. No matter what Billy has dragged them into, they still have to eat.

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Andre looks from the grill to Billy and, pointing the grilling fork at the papers clasped in Billy's hand, asks, "That it?"

"Yup," Billy says, rolling closer. "You putting sauce on those ribs?"

“When it’s time.” Andre stabs the slab of ribs and deftly flips it over. “You gonna tell me what that contract says before I read it?”

“Maybe we should wait ’til after dinner.”

“Maybe you tell me what the hell you got us into while my hands are otherwise occupied.” They’ve traded enough slaps and punches over the years for it to be a legitimate request. Andre closes the grill lid and turns. “Now, contract for what?”

A pink hue tints Billy’s cheeks. “The company I work for has another department, one that pays out higher for specific gigs.”

Andre arches a brow. Damned if he’s going to make this easy on Billy.

“I’ve got a bit of a following. I mean, I’m always booked. I could make more if I opened more slots up.”

The roundabout way Billy’s explaining things tells Andre just how uncomfortable the situation is making him. “That what the contract is for? More slots?”

“No.” Billy drags a hand over his face, then up and over his scalp. Andre follows the movements with his eyes. He misses Billy’s sandy brown hair and the way it’d curl over Billy’s forehead when he’d get sweaty. “It’s for a video.”

“A video?”

“A, um, couple of super-short skin flick kinda things.”

Andre reaches out and, before his fingertips reach Billy’s shoulder, Billy rolls his chair back. He huffs a short, sardonic laugh and says, “How in the hell are you gonna pull off a skin flick when you can’t bear being touched?”

“They’re strangers.”

Andre blinks once, then once again. He wonders if he needs more or less beer in his system for that to make any kind of sense. “Huh?”

“Strangers, Dre.” Billy moves in closer to Andre, determination written all over his face. Andre would be amused if the stakes weren’t so high. “They didn’t know me before. They won’t be looking for anything now.”

Opening the grill top, Andre starts slathering sauce on the ribs. He doesn’t have an immediate comeback because, goddammit, what Billy said makes sense. Same way as when he first owned up to wanting dick instead of pussy, Andre had looked for it outside his usual haunts. The problem is, having Billy

pushing him away hurts. And if he wants any hope for more in the future, that has to be dealt with now. "If I want something from you, I'll tell you."

"I know."

"We've lived in each other's back pocket since we were fourteen."

"I *know*."

Andre gives Billy a hard look. "Do you? 'Cause, seriously, I never realized how much I touched you until you started backing away from me."

"And I never forgot," Billy replies. "Your hand was on my shoulder when the bomb went off. It was the last thing I remember feeling."

Andre closes his eyes, thinking back to that day. Billy's right. They were both a few steps behind Rodriguez, and Andre had just pushed Billy in front of him, thinking they needed to pick up the pace. In hindsight, it could've looked like he was saving himself, using Billy as a shield. "If I'd've known, I'd have never..."

"I know. When I truly think about it, and especially now that you're here, I know you'd have never deliberately set me up for this."

He's not sure he wants the answer, but he has to ask the question. "And before I got here, when I was still in the sandpit?"

"There were days..." Billy stops and, his head tilted back, releases a broken sigh. "Sometimes I'd wish this on you and then immediately take it back, because I would *never* wish this on you. I wondered why it was me. Then I'd think about how close one of us came to being Rodriguez and losing my legs seemed like such a small thing.

"Then there were days when I hated you. Hated you like I've never hated before. Can you even understand that, Andre? Deep in my gut, like hell on fire, *hated* you. And now you're here and acting like everything is fine and, man, I look at you sometimes and I remember hating you for letting this happen to me." A single tear slides down Billy's cheek. "I don't know how to make that up, how to even begin to apologize to you for it."

Warily, Andre steps close to Billy and rests a hand on Billy's shoulder. As he feels the tension bleed out of Billy's frame, he curls his fingers in, squeezing gently. "Billy."

Billy snaps his head up and back, staring at Andre.

"I had days I hated, too." It's the first time Andre's given voice to the feelings that ate at him for months. "Hated not having you there, hated you for being a step in front of me. Hated myself for being thankful it wasn't me. The situation brought out the worst. Us being apart... that just made it easy for the bad shit to take hold. You hearing me?"

"Five-by-five, Dre. Five-by-five."

Andre squeezes Billy's shoulder one more time and then steps back to the grill.

"So, we're good?"

"We've never been anything but good." Andre opens the grill top and frowns. There's been too much bloodletting; he almost fucked up a perfectly good slab of ribs. "Now go get me a damn platter before these things burn."

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After dinner, when Andre's elbow-deep in soapy water, he looks at Billy and asks, "Did you already sign it?"

"Yeah. Three scenes, all for short video clips for the website." Billy dries a plate and stacks it on the counter. "Did one scene today, too. Wanted to make sure I could work with the guys."

Guys. More than one. A flare of jealousy lights in Andre's gut. "Oh. Okay, then."

He washes the rest of the dishes, and wipes down the counters in silence. It takes that long for him to rein in the desire to snap Billy's head off. The idiot. "If you've already made the move and tried it on, whataya need me for?"

"I need you there with me. Just, you know, for support." Billy shrugs his shoulders. "I don't know that I can do it again, but I definitely can't do it alone."

That's all the opening Andre needs to let his annoyance spill out. "Then *don't* go back. Jesus, God, Billy. I've told you we can do this. Some-fucking-how, we can pull it out. Call them right now, tell them all to kiss your lily white ass and move on."

"I can't do that." The words are whispered, but laced with the hardheaded resolve that's all Billy Westerson. "I gotta be there in the morning at zero-eight, need to leave an hour before that. Either you're at my side, or you're not."

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Like he'd be anywhere else. "Am I driving or is another car picking you up?"

"They'll send a car," Billy says. "It's in my contract."

Andre rolls his eyes. Fucking contract.

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## FOUR

Twenty minutes after arriving, Billy disappears behind a closed door for make-up and a list of other shit Andre didn't catch. It leaves Andre to find an out-of-the-way spot so he can be *supportive*.

A man approaches—shorter than Andre's six feet, pudgy but not fat... ordinary in a way that makes him completely unremarkable—and steps right into Andre's space. "You're Will's friend, right?"

There's no graceful way for Andre to blow him off. Shaking the offered hand, he says, "Andre Jackson."

"Mark Smith." Mark waves a hand towards the set Billy abandoned Andre in front of. "It'll be another hour or so before we're ready to shoot. You interested in a tour?"

Fuck no, Andre thinks. He'd prefer to give Mark the finger, and then steal Billy away. Instead, he pulls up the politeness his grandma drilled into him and forces a smile. "Thanks, but I'll just hang out here. It's close to the coffee pot."

"You sure? Not many people have the chance to see behind the scenes."

Andre takes a step back. Mark reminds him of the worst kind of used car salesman. Then again, it may be that he was predisposed to dislike the man from the first word. Either way, much longer in his company and Andre's going to be looking for the exit sooner rather than later. "I'm good."

"Did you meet Kurt and Steve?"

The two dudes Billy's doing the scene with, one of them just as bald as Billy—Kurt, if Andre picked the names up right—and the other working a high-and-tight that would pass Army standards. For the hot second he spent with them, they seemed like stand-up guys. "I did."

"Yes, well." Mark bounces on the balls of his feet. "If you're sure..."

"I'm sure." Andre smirks as Mark nods and takes a step back. A rattled Mark is actually kind of amusing. "I told Billy I'd be here, and here is where I'll stay."

Mark opens his mouth, but before he can say 'boo', someone calls him to the other side of the set. Andre's thinking about sending his unknown savior flowers as a thank you.



Looking around, he sees a metal folding chair leaning against the wall. He nods once. A cup of coffee and that chair, he'll be set for the rest of the morning. At least he will as long as he avoids looking at the goddamn sex sling hanging from the ceiling.

A sex sling. Jesus, fuck.

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They're not using the sex sling. Andre's caught between disappointment—because, seriously? *A sex sling*—and relief. That's an image of Billy he doesn't want doggin' his dreams.

Not that he wants the scene playing out in front of him invading shit he associates with Billy either. He doubts he'll ever be comfortable with having full Technicolor memories of Billy getting fucked by someone else.

It's not as intimate as he had expected. The cameraman circles the trio, leaning in and obviously focusing on Billy's cock and then shifting to film where Steve's cock is splitting Billy's ass or where Kurt, kneeling between Billy's stumps, is jacking his own dick. It takes the edge off of the scene, adds another level of separation between Andre and Billy and the fact that Billy's getting sexed up by a stranger, a passing acquaintance.

And for all the distance the cameraman creates, it does fuck all to keep Andre's body in check. His breathing speeds up, matching the heavy thud of his heart as it hammers against his ribs, and his cock slowly fills. Even with all of the distractions, seeing Billy needy and wanton is captivating.

Sweat dots Billy's oiled skin, trailing over his chest in tiny rivulets, and the precome pushing out of his slit glints in the bright overhead lights. Andre wants to step into the middle of the action and touch, learn the feel of Billy with his fingers and his lips. He wants to spread Billy's thighs wider and take Billy's cock into his mouth, sucking and slurping until he's overloaded with the taste and scent of Billy.

Then Billy cants his head, turns away from watching Kurt, and looks at Andre. It's like being caught in a web, locked in place by the weight of Billy's stare.

And all of the levels of separation vanish and Andre is *right there* with Billy.

Billy opens his mouth, his tongue darts out and swipes over his bottom lip, and, his fingers curling against the arm Steve has wrapped around his torso, he comes.

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Andre does the only thing he can. He flees.

Through the studio and the offices, until he's pushing the door open and stepping out into the heat of a Florida summer day.

He tips his head back, closing his eyes against the sun, and sucks in a deep breath of humid air. Slowly, the tension seeps out of his muscles. It's quickly replaced by a stomach-churning embarrassment. And a feeling of helplessness. Because he's sure he just managed to blow all of the trust he'd managed to rebuild with Billy.

What a goddamn clusterfuck.

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## FIVE

The car ride home is made in total silence. Billy doesn't expect Andre to say anything, not after the way he ran out of the building earlier. But, he's realizing, there's a mile of difference between expecting something and having the actuality of it shoved down your throat.

He's man enough to admit that he's skin hungry, in want of a touch that isn't fueled by medical necessity or overflowing with ideas of what he *used* to be. He almost lost himself in it during the first video shoot. Dre was his backup plan, his anchor.

And it damned near pulled him under. Looking away from Kurt, seeing beyond the stage set and meeting Andre's gaze. All it did was throw a huge spotlight on the fact that the wrong man was touching him. Not a lover, not even someone he could claim as a friend.

He'd been ready to call a halt to the whole fucking thing, to finally do what Andre'd been asking, begging him to do for weeks. Then Andre took off, moving like the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

Watching Andre run out on him hurt in a way that not even losing his legs had. And it proved that he was in this alone, that he had to do whatever was necessary to survive.

Billy doesn't know what he wants more: to hurl insults at Andre or to tell the driver to pull over and kick Andre's dumb ass to the curb. Both have their merit. He opts to keep his mouth shut, refusing to have this shouting match in front of a witness. It's a trial of his most basic instinct and by the time the driver is pulling the car into his driveway, words are begging to spill out.

He makes it. Barely. Just as the door snicks shut, he wheels around on Andre and demands, "What the fuck, man?"

Andre leans against the door and shrugs.

His continued silence just pisses Billy off even more. "Why'd you go?" he asks, downright demands. "If I disgust you so much that being in the *same building* as me made you run, why did you go? Better yet, why are you even here?"

Andre pushes off the wall and takes a step towards Billy. He still won't look Billy in the eye. The bastard. "You don't disgust me, Billy."

“That’s what your mouth says. Your actions, though, they’re screaming a whole different line.” Billy rolls his wheelchair wide around Andre, stopping in front of his bedroom door. “You tried your best to get me to *not* go, then bailed as soon as you thought I wouldn’t notice. So really, why don’t you do us both a favor, and get the fuck out while I’m in the shower.”

“Is that what you want?”

“It’s not about what I want, that much is obvious.” Billy drags a hand over his scalp. “I don’t want anything from you that you can’t give without reservation. And seeing as—”

“I can give you a fucking lot without reservation,” Andre snaps, cutting Billy off midsentence. “You’re the one with the rules and the walls and the goddamn guilt complex.”

“You left me,” Billy shouts. “I asked you to be there and you *left*.”

Andre raises his head slowly and finally, fucking *finally*, looks Billy in the eyes. The raw emotion, the anger and hurt swirling in the brown depths makes Billy suck in a fast breath. “You think I left because you disgusted me?”

“Why else would you cut and run?”

“That bastard was fucking you, Billy. His hands were all over you and, fuck me sideways, but you sure as hell weren’t looking like it was bothering you.” Andre curls his hands in tight fists, swipes his tongue over his bottom lip. “You wanna know why I split? Because I was, *I am*, jealous. You’re supposed to be mine, not someone else’s. Especially not when it’s some jackass you barely know doing you in front of a camera.” Andre releases a broken huff and then softly says, “I couldn’t watch someone else have what I want.”

Billy shakes his head. That’s the last thing he anticipated hearing, not now, not after knowing each other for so damn long. “I wanted you when we were fifteen, and you wanted to be friends.”

“Things change.”

“Things change, yeah, but how many people know someone for half their life and then all of a sudden decide it’s something special?”

“Things change,” Andre repeats, voice sharp as any KA-BAR Billy’s ever carried.

“Not that much, Dre.”

“Is it that much of a change? Good, bad, and ugly... it’s been the two of us.” Andre drops down to a crouch, reaches a hand towards Billy, not touching but close enough for Billy to feel the warmth hovering over his stump. “We’ve been *together* for years, in all the ways that count, and you damn well know it.”

Mind whirling, Billy takes a page out of Andre’s book. Without another word, he pushes into his bedroom and closes the door behind him.

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The shower is Billy’s second in less than an hour. The one at the studio was hot, almost to the point of scalding, in a bid to wash away more than the oil they’d slathered all over his chest. This one is just warm enough to create an oasis for him to get lost in, do nothing but sit and think.

Just like when they first met, Andre has managed to turn Billy’s world upside down with just a few words. Only this time it’s a lot more than the meanest-looking kid on the basketball court picking the new white boy for his team. It’d been a year later when their relationship found boundaries and definition. Billy’d finally worked up the nerve to make a move, and Andre had shot him down in flames. Gently, but still. Shot him down with a speech about friendship versus hook-up and how there was no way a hook-up would last, not like a friendship would.

Billy hadn’t been looking for a hook-up, but he settled for the friendship.

And now the jackass was offering everything that Billy wanted, all that Billy gave up thinking about years ago. Billy needs to know why. Why now, why not before, when he had more to offer in return.

Billy wonders if it’s that, the guilt of him losing his legs that brought all of this on. Turning off the water, he decides that’s the first thing he’s gonna ask Andre.

Minutes later he’s rolling down the hallway, shower damp and with his cargo shorts sticking in all the wrong places. He comes face-to-face with Andre, the jackass, ready to walk out the door, his damn duffel bag in hand. “So much for things changing, huh?”

Andre slowly turns around and leans against the door. He keeps a tight grip on the duffel bag. “What?”

Billy cants his head towards the duffel. “Looks to me like you’re skipping out.”

“Give me one damn reason why I shouldn’t go,” Andre snaps. “You’ve done nothing but push me away since I got here and if you think, even for one hot second, *if you think* I’m gonna stay just for you to pull away again? Fuck you. I lost you once. I’m not setting myself up for a second turn on that dance floor. Not when this time you’re fucking *choosing* to do it.”

Andre turns back to the door, wraps a hand around the knob. And suddenly, Billy knows exactly what *things* changed for Andre.

Because if watching Andre almost walk away is this much of a punch in the solar plexus for him, then standing by as Billy was chopped out, covered in blood and legless, must have been like a death blow to Andre.

“Stay,” Billy says softly. They’ve got some talking to do, probably more than a few shouting matches to have. None of which can happen if Andre walks out that door. Louder, Billy repeats, “Please. Stay.”

Time slows down and then finally, *finally*, Andre drops the duffel. “Don’t fuck with me, Billy.”

Hope, warm and tingly, explodes in Billy’s chest. Lips quirking into a grin, he says, “Never in a way you won’t appreciate.”

“Jackass.”

Tempering the ridiculous giddiness in his voice, Billy says, “Stay, Dre. Stay with *me*.”

Andre picks up his duffel and retraces his steps back towards the guestroom. He stops beside Billy and drops a hand to Billy’s shoulder, squeezing once. “Yeah, Billy. I will.”

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*Six months later...*

Kicking the door closed behind him, Andre rushes into the kitchen and starts unloading the grocery bags. By his figuring, he has twenty minutes at the most before Billy’s gonna be walking through the door, his discharge papers from therapy in his hand.

It’s something worth celebrating. And that’s just what Andre has planned. A light supper—cold shrimp salad and a crusty loaf of bread, dessert if they’ve the mind for it—and then, if everything falls into line, the one thing they’ve denied themselves.

By some unspoken agreement, sex was pushed out of the way until everything else was settled. At first because of Billy and his stubborn need to be a stand-up guy and fulfill the contract, and then just because. Because Billy was going to therapy day in and day out, and Andre was enrolled at UCF and had shit like lectures and papers and fucking calculus homework.

But mostly because they were both enjoying the build-up, the teasing and the playing and the loving that let them learn each other in these new roles. It's not as if Andre's still in the guest room. There'd been hand jobs and frottage, and one blow job so intense it'd left Billy babbling about changing his religion. And every intimacy, every night they spent talking and touching and feeling their way through this, every morning they made breakfast together, had coffee and watched the sunrise, Andre found pieces of the Billy he remembered, but mostly, he fell for the man Billy is now.

All of it's been right and perfect and helping add to the foundation that is, as far as Andre is concerned, what their forever will be built on.

He slides the salads into the fridge, the bread onto the table, and then heads towards the bedroom, sure he has enough time to jump through a cool shower and into something that doesn't reek of a day's worth of humping all over campus.

Except he doesn't have time. The rumble of Billy's truck hits him before he steps into the bedroom. He stops and, going for sexy, leans against the hallway wall.

The supper, the leaning, the planning. It's all a wasted effort.

Billy storms into the house, a sheaf of papers in his hand and a broad grin on his face, and, before Andre can mutter out *hello*, Billy drops his keys and the handful of papers and pushes into Andre's space, pinning Andre against the wall with his body.

He rucks up Andre's shirt with one hand, fingers tripping lightly over the sensitive skin of Andre's waist, as the other wraps tight around Andre's wrist. His lips trail over Andre's neck, and then Billy is ravaging Andre's mouth.

The kiss lasts *forever*, until Andre's lungs are burning and desire is spiraling down his spine and his dick is straining against the hard press of his zipper.

As soon as Billy pulls back, he sucks in a deep breath of air and then moans, low and raspy and fucking broken. "Billy."

Billy grins and, mouth dragging against Andre's neck, says, "Hope dinner can wait."

"Jesus, fuck. Even if it couldn't, it will now." Because, *goddamn*, the whole fucking kitchen could burn before he'd willingly let this end. "Bedroom."

"Too old to fuck me against the wall?"

Andre grunts, seriously contemplating trying it. But then shakes his head. Not today, not their first time. Not when he doesn't want to be rushed. Pushing off of the wall, he says, "Tomorrow, maybe. Bedroom tonight."

"Holding you to that, Dre," Billy says, tugging Andre down the hallway. "Up against the wall, on the chaise out back, the bed of my pick-up at the beach."

Andre bites back a groan, pretty sure he came a little from just the images of Billy spread out and begging on the chaise they've spent too many nights making out on. He's tempted to change directions, to take Billy outside and fuck him in the burning orange light of the setting sun, the possibility of someone watching be damned. Pushing against Billy's shoulder, he growls, "You're a menace."

"Bet you aren't saying that when you're riding my cock."

And, hello, *fuck*. Billy just cut to the one fantasy that Andre indulged in when he was surrounded by sand and at his lowest. There is absolutely *nothing* he can say to that except, "Yes."

Then they're standing by the bed and Andre strips Billy's shirt off, makes a move towards the snap of Billy's cargos, Billy's hands are right in there, returning the favor, tugging at Andre's shirt before running his hands over Andre's chest and leaning and mouthing kisses into Andre's skin.

Tilting his head back, giving Billy more room, Andre laughs softly. This heady combination of friend and lover has been taunting them since the very beginning, and he'd been too stupid to realize it for what it was.

He taps at Billy's prosthetics with his foot. "Off, and then on the bed." And when Billy just stops and looks at him, a dare to do more fluttering through his eyes, Andre lands a fast slap to Billy's ass and says, "Now."

"Demanding fucker."

"Comes with the rank," Andre retorts, happy enough to see that Billy is fucking listening and that, after working his prosthetics off, he shimmies out of his shorts too.



Billy reaches out, tugs Andre down beside him. He works the buckle of Andre's belt loose and then starts working down the zipper of Andre's denims.

They're laughing and teasing, it's all nothing but friendly fun, and then Billy's hand grazes the head of Andre's dick and the amusement bleeds into *yes, now, please*.

Not breaking the silence, Andre leans across Billy and grabs lube and a condom from the bedside drawer. He holds them up and arches a brow.

"You sure?"

"That I want to ride your cock? Oh, yeah."

Billy's eyes go dark, and Andre's pretty sure he's fixing to get fucked to within an inch of his life.

Anticipation raises goose bumps over Andre's arms. Finally, after all of the months of war and reconnecting, Billy's months of therapy and his first semester in college... *finally*.

Billy pulls himself up the bed, sits with his back against the headboard, and, watching Andre, he opens the lube and lets it coat his fingers in slick. "Come on, it's time to take a ride."

Andre straddles Billy's thighs, raises to his knees and cants his hips. The first cold touch of a lubed finger has him grabbing the headboard, his head dropping to Billy's shoulder as a moan bubbles out. "More."

"Easy. We're nowhere near done," Billy whispers, rubbing a hand over Andre's thigh. "I'll get us there."

He opens easy under Billy's touch, and when he's begging and pushing back on the thick bunch of three fingers, he looks down, watching as Billy uses his free hand to roll a condom over his dick.

Billy grips Andre's hip with one hand, steadying Andre as he slowly leans back, taking Billy's cock in.

Andre rides the stretch and burn, relishes in the feeling, cataloging the differences between reality and fantasy. When he's seated in Billy's lap, he murmurs, "Oh, *yes*."

"Now, Dre." It's all the warning Andre gets. Billy pulls Andre down hard, bringing their bodies clashing together, and all thoughts of slow and gentle, of romance and sentimentality fade away.

Like a fire reaching flashpoint, the need, the desire consumes them, leaving behind hot and rough and wanton. Two men moving on instinct after denying themselves for too long.

The room fills with the scent of sweat and sex, the sound of skin slapping against skin.

"Billy..." It's a plea or curse, a demand or a promise. Andre doesn't know which.

"Yeah," Billy says, huffing the word hot and wet over Andre's skin, sounding like he knows exactly what Andre meant. "Fuck, yeah."

Then Andre grinds down, and a hand wraps around his cock, and, "Jesus, fuck," he comes.

He clenches his muscles, rocking his hips in slow, tiny circles until Billy tightens his grip on Andre's hip and, with a soft grunt, finds his release.

Leaning forward, Andre presses his forehead against Billy's and grins. "So, huh."

"No shit."

"Should pro'lly get up and get us a washcloth." It sounds good, he just isn't sure his legs will actually support him yet.

"Bottom drawer." When Andre arches a brow, Billy shrugs. "Figured we'd get around to this eventually. Stocked the come rags in the bottom drawer."

Pushing to his knees, Andre waits until Billy reaches between them and grabs the base of the condom, then he pulls himself off of Billy's lap. "There's a joke in there about always being prepared, you know."

"Thought those jokes centered around lube and butt plugs."

Andre snorts and shakes his head. He's in love with an idiot. Grabbing a rag for himself, he tosses one to Billy.

"Think dinner is ruined?"

Andre glances at the time. Not so long as to be completely ruined but a fuck of a lot longer than he'd thought. "Salad might be soggy."

Billy wrinkles his nose. "PBJs?"

"Or pasta." Andre pulls on a pair of boxers, tosses the two washcloths into the laundry basket.

Before Andre can offer to hand Billy his prosthetics, Billy slides from the bed into his chair. He looks across the room and, wiggling an eyebrow, says, "Race ya."

Andre watches Billy roll out of the room. A ball of tension and worry that he's been holding on to since *that* day breaks loose. They're finally coming out of the shit storm they fell into in the desert and finding solid ground again.

And they're doing it together.

"You comin' or not?" Billy's voice pulls Andre out of his wanderings. "I'm hungry, and you put the peanut butter on the top damn shelf."

Grinning, Andre heads to the kitchen. "Quit your bitchin', princess. I'm on my way."

The salad might be lost, but the shrimp are easily rescued. He lets the sound of Billy's voice wash over him and starts putting together the stuff to make a quick shrimp pasta. It's worth the effort, if for no other reason than to avoid having peanut butter and jelly for supper.

Billy drags a hand over Andre's back. Andre leans in and brushes a kiss over Billy's lips, snatching the loaf of French bread off the table when he turns back to the stove.

When Billy moves in beside him, close enough that their bodies touch with every movement, Andre knows that everything really is gonna be just fine.

**The End**

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## Author Bio

*Born and bred on the Florida coast, Laura Mathews is a beach bum cleverly disguised as a mom, an educator, and a slave to her cat. She considers flip-flops to be appropriate for all occasions, arguing for sport as entertaining as college football, and nothing to be more perfect than the scent of fresh coffee on the morning ocean breeze... except, maybe, the icy tang of a margarita on a sweaty summer night.*

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