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LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 6

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 6

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 6.

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.

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

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DREAMING OF FIRE

By J.J. Cassidy

Photo Description

A lean male holds a drape of red cloth around his hips with one gauntleted fist, while the other hand rests on his head, the position displaying his muscular arms and torso to perfection. His long, dark-blond hair blows around him, blending with swirling mist. A ghostly full moon glows over his shoulder, and obscured weapons form a horizon below a dark sky. Around his neck is a gold chain with a round ruby pendant.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Naxom was orphaned at five and taken in by a monk of the secretive Order of Cett. He and his wife raised Naxom as their son. Outside the Order, Cett is often derided as the god of nothing because he never claimed dominion over anything. But to those special few who have been called, Cett is the god of all—warrior, scholar, woodsmen, mage, sailor, smith—whatever he desires. Like their god, those of his order must be everything, yet nothing.

Naxom's father has sent him on his first mission—it is as simple as it is hard—find his other. You can tell the story from the POV of Naxom or the “other,” but not both. (You may change Naxom's name and/or Cett's if you wish) The “other” need not be human, but no vampires, werewolves and preferably, no shifters (though a magical creature who can take human form but is not part of a shifter pack or the like is fine). I do not necessarily see a HEA or HFN, as members of the Order lead dangerous lives, but HEA/HFN is a possible outcome for Naxom. This can be high fantasy, urban fantasy or sci-fi however you see it, but there should be magic and warrior skills of some kind as those are some of the skills Naxom will have mastered by the time he sets out to find his other.

Sincerely,

Andrew

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mage/sorcerer, religious orders, royalty, mythical creatures, magic users, soulmates/bonded, non-wolf shifters

Word Count: 25,447

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DREAMING OF FIRE

By J.J. Cassidy

Anger has no place in the heart of a Cettai.

Chapter One

The open road was a fine place to be on a bright day, with no clouds anywhere to be seen and the promise of good weather for the next hand of days. I shaded my eyes and judged the angle of the sun, thinking I might make it over the ridge up ahead before deciding where to camp. Or not. I had no one to please but myself, after all. I could walk all night if I wished.

Beyond that ridge—if I had read the map correctly—lay the plains, vast grasslands stretching west to the city of Abderan, at the edge of the Great Sea. My own magics ran to Earth and Air, a somewhat infelicitous combination, and while that meant I rarely got lost, the map was very old and, I suspected, not particularly accurate. Still, the land breeze playing with my hair was headed for the ocean, and so I followed along with it.

I had been traveling for three days, and other than a shepherd with a herd of paca, I had neither seen nor sensed anyone. The solitude was oddly pleasing after a lifetime with no space of my own. In the temple compound, I lived first with my adoptive father and his wife—not my parents by blood, but they had the raising of me—and then in the dormitory with the other novices. I would be there still, if not for the dreams.

Everyone dreams—the ordinary kind that takes scraps of this and that and weaves those scraps together with fear or longing or lust, clearing them from your head. Boys dreamed of lovers, and woke with sticky bellies, and perhaps girls dreamed that way as well—although I wouldn't know, not being one myself and not knowing any to speak with about such a thing.

I dreamed of fire. Not... ordinary fire. This flowed like water, surrounding me, carrying me—and I would wake to find myself on my feet, heading for the western gate of the monastery. The first few times, I returned to my pallet without anyone being the wiser. Then one of the other novices followed me, and the time after that my father, Noll, saw me and asked questions... and those questions led to my being here, climbing this road with the sun warm on my back.

It was the belief of my Order—I followed Cett, a god of many aspects—that everyone had an *Other*, someone or something that completed them. Most with the gift of magic could work all four elements—Earth, Air, Fire, and Water—to some degree, and their Other would balance their workings, and help them focus.

All my life I had heard stories of Cettai—members of my order—and their Others. My friend Sefin and I speculated endlessly on what our Others might be. He hoped for a woman from some exotic land, well-versed in the erotic arts, while I thought he deserved to be like one Cettai of legend who was joined with a tree. That suggestion resulted in both of us being punished for fighting.

My father came to the conclusion that the fire dreams were a call from my Other, and they would only grow stronger the longer I refused to follow them. He explained that if the dreaming were a true sending, perhaps my Other had an affinity for fire, and would balance my... In truth, calling it a *lack* of talent would not be correct. “Unpredictable talent” might be a better phrase. My teachers believed that practice or time would improve my skills—they had more faith in that respect than I ever did.

It took only a hand of days to prepare me to leave on my quest, half of those taken up by lectures from the senior members of my Order. Novices younger than me had already left on their own quests, or to train with masters in other provinces. Sefin had been sent south five, almost six moons ago to find his Other, and he was very near a year younger than me. My flawed abilities might be the excuse given out for why I lingered in the monastery, but I knew better.

Cettai are allowed little in the way of personal possessions, we are limited to things we have made or earned by our own hand. As a result of this, I had no sword—the forge and I were not in sympathy—although I did have a fine bow crafted during a long winter. I had bartered my lesser bow for a wickedly long knife, and my pile of pelts, gathered over a fall and winter of hunting, were traded for a good pair of boots. My gauntlets were my own work, and clothing was provided by the Order. According to custom, I took only what I could carry on my person or in a pack.

Lost in thought, I crested the ridge and blinked at the view—the plains spread out before me, mottled in gold and green all the way off to where the walls and spires of Abderan glowed in the sun. And beyond the city lay the western sea, a darker blue curve glittering below the paler blue of the sky.

Closer by far, and utterly ruining my enjoyment of the moment, a caravan made its ponderous way across the plain, leaving in its wake a roil of red-brown dust and the stink of the massive bufa yoked to the carts. As I watched, one of the carts, one with a shrouded box in its bed, rocked once, twice, thrice—and tipped on its side with a screech of abused wood, accompanied by the startled bellows of the pair of bufa in front of it. Men ran for the cart, their yells audible even from a distance, and the wreckage erupted with an enraged squeal of absolute rage.

A hot, bright hook lodged in my chest and *yanked*—I obeyed the pull of that invisible tether and ran toward the chaos below, the downhill path lending me speed. And robbing me of any chance of stopping to think.

Metal bars from the rolling cage—for that was what it had been—rattled and sang as the thing that had been imprisoned within it rose on its hind legs, long silvery chains whipping through the air. I kept running as the terrain leveled out, one hand on the strap of my pack to keep it still, the other on the hilt of my knife, and still not entirely sure what I ran *to*, exactly. Or why.

The escaped beast leapt over and through the scattered pieces of its prison, frightening the placid pair of bufa into an awkward run when it hissed at them. I had a blurred impression of a matted, tangled, smoky mane of hair, and a dusty dark coat. Not a tanga, this was bigger, and the feet were wrong. Another leap, undeniably graceful even among the chaos, and then the beast scrambled forward, straight at *me*, closing the distance with alarming speed. Driven by necessity, my mind added up disparate details, and I realized what was charging me—a dhourgan.

Gods above and below—I thought they were myths, a pretty illustration to fill up the pages of a fanciful bestiary, not a real creature at all. Dhourgan were all beasts and none, the saying went, which made them kin to the Cettai, in a strange way. The drawings did not do it justice in the least, I thought, nearly going to my knees in the attempt to stop my forward rush.

I managed a balanced crouch as the dhourgan lunged—and then the beast was brought up short by the two long chains attached to the collar on its sinuous neck, each of those chains now weighted by four men. With a horrible grinding snarl, it snapped to the left. Now I could see it was muzzled, its jaws caged in a lattice of metal fastened to its head with broad leather straps.

The long narrow head—almost the length of my torso—swung back in my direction, and the dhourgan regarded me with dark, dark eyes glowing with mad red fire. It hissed again, and lowered its head further, nostrils flaring behind the silver muzzle. The deep, plaintive noise it made raised the fine hairs on my neck, cramping my stomach with a sudden chill.

I sidled to the right, thinking to put some distance between us, and the beast moved as well, a two-toed forefoot sliding sideways. It made the same low sound, more frustrated than plaintive this time—perhaps it was disappointed not to make me its next meal. I wasn't entirely sure what dhourgan ate, but the curved teeth behind the muzzle hinted that it might not be herbivorous.

The other men from the caravan had gathered around by now, and one, in fine enough clothes to be their chief, came to greet me, leaving a goodly distance between himself and the dhourgan. "Is it not a wonder?" he said. "I should think that even one of Cett's own would not have seen its like out in the world."

I let the *Cett's own* lie there, ignored, and raised an eyebrow. "And how did you come to acquire such a thing?"

"Ah." The man grinned and spread his hands. "That's a tale best told before the fire. Camp with us, and I shall tell you." I inclined my head in silent agreement, and the man leaned closer. "It might be—"

The dhourgan surged forward, snarling, hind legs digging for purchase and dragging the eight men with it. The muzzled snout swung at the headman, sending him scrambling backward, before it reversed to face me.

I was a hunter and a tracker, and familiar with the nature of prey and predators—from timid, tiny lupa to nimble, wild paca, as well as the feral kunda, cousin to the tame ones used for herding and hunting. I knew domestic creatures, their care and feeding, and I could ride a tanga well enough, although I'd rather walk. None of that prepared me for the wicked intelligence gleaming at me from the dhourgan's dark eyes.

That same bright hook from before snagged my hand and drew it up and forward, until my palm rested on the broad, bony forehead of a creature out of legend. The dhourgan sighed—there was no other word for it—and I could hear the men around me murmuring invocations to various gods. Answering an urge that was not my own, my fingers dug in and rubbed at a faint ridge under the sleek, short, dark hair. Then up further, to scratch the base of the mobile pointed ears, and further still, to the leather strap of the muzzle behind those ears, sliding my fingers around it, under it—

I snatched my hand back, and the dhourgan sighed again, not so much in pleasure this time as resignation.

"Perhaps," the chief drover said, slowly and thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are traveling on to Abderan, as we are?"

Chapter Two

I almost laughed at the look of calculation on his face, but settled for inclining my head in what could be taken for agreement. It was enough, for the man hurried off, giving orders to make camp. If he believed I could keep the dhourgan quiet and cooperative, well, then, that was all to the good. I wanted time to examine the beast, and I did, in fact, intend to visit Abderan.

In two hands of days the moon would be at the full, and every man, woman, and child would celebrate Cydnos, the sun festival that signaled the start of the growing season. Abderan would overflow with people from every province, and I believed it was where I should find my Other—for Cydnos was a festival of both sun and of rain, the things needed for a successful harvest. Fire and water, the missing half of my talent.

Admittedly, Abderan was probably the worst place I could go, and I had shaded the truth about my route to my father and the elder monks as much as I dared. To my mind, it had been more than twenty years, and other than a few nobles at the emperor's court—and the emperor himself—it was doubtful anyone seeing me would instantly recognize the child in the man. In any case, I had no plans for visiting the palace, and no one else was likely to recognize me and carry rumors.

Once they had secured the dhourgan's chains behind nearby rocks, the men left us alone. The dhourgan crouched, belly on the ground, and stared at me. I stared back—when would I have such an opportunity again? If I had the talent to do more than sketch rough maps, I should have liked to draw it, capture the lines of muscle and sinew and bone. It—no, *he*, for I had seen the proof of that when the men led the dhourgan away—was covered in dust, the short coat thick with it, the mane matted and snarled. He had a tail like a kunda's, long and thick, and the bottom half matched the mane, with the same soft hair.

There was no menace in the way it watched me. Curiosity, yes. Still, the dhourgan was not any sort of tame creature, was it? "How did they capture you?" I murmured, walking in an arc around where he lay. "And what do they intend to do with you?"

The dhourgan grunted softly, and with a grumbling sigh, rested his head on his folded forelegs and closed his eyes.

"I suppose I shall have to ask the head drover, then, if you won't tell me." I laughed, a single quiet huff, and shook my head. Beasts were incapable of

understanding speech, or so I had been taught, although they were quick to catch nuances of tone or pitch. Foolish for me to read more into the creature's response than could actually be there.

I was escorted to the head drover's fire when dinner was ready. To my surprise, they had set up a table and benches, with an actual chair for him and another for me. The food was simple—roasted cubes of meat and vegetables, fresh flatbreads, greens, and some cheese curds. There was wine, too, and I saluted the head drover once my cup was filled.

“Water and salt,” I said, the traditional blessing from a guest. There were two hands of men at the table, and they all relaxed when I spoke. Did they think I would curse them? Cettai were feared, to a certain extent, but I had not expected this sort of wariness. I took a guest's portion of everything—not too little, not too much, thereby allowing the host to offer more.

When we had all eaten our fill, and another jug of wine was on the table, the head drover sat back in his chair with the air of a man about to tell a tale. His name, I now knew, was Lefi ap Horas, marking him as an Easterner. Most of the caravan was his blood kin to one degree or another—they were, to a man, shorter than me, wiry and dark. Dark hair, dark eyes, dusky skin made darker by the sun.

I stood out among them like the moon in the middle of the night sky with my pale skin, amber hair, and gray eyes, everything about me marking me as a man from the provinces north of the capital. In point of fact, I was born in Iuvanum, a northern province that no longer existed, a true-blooded son of House Valerii—which also no longer existed, save for me.

My given name—Naxomion—would have told them I was northern-born as well, but out here in the world I had no name. I was simply Cettai, a monk of the Order of Cett. A houseless and clanless wanderer, and under the law I might be summoned to act as both judge and executioner. It had been so for countless generations of Cettai, and to ask for a Cettai was to ask for both the man and the judgment—one word for both, and our word was final, our authority absolute, with no recourse. It made people less likely to trouble us over simple things, for our investigations might turn over stones or open chests that might have been better left untouched.

“Tell me of the dhourgan, then,” I said, the traditional asking for a tale, and I mimed Lefi ap Horas' easy sprawl.

“I am no bard,” he began, and that, too, was tradition. “But I shall tell the tale as best I may. It happened that we had some paca go missing, as the creatures will, and I and my brother went to track them. And among the rocks we saw prints that no beast nor man we knew could have made. We determined to drive it from our grazing land, and barring that, capture it.” He paused to take a sip of wine. “We took nets, and more men, and we scoured our valley and the hills beyond, searching. Three of our missing paca did we find, but no more strange tracks.”

He went on in that vein—treacherous weather, men lost and found, strange sounds—for long enough that I finished my cup and reached for the jug, pouring myself another measure. He took that as a sign of impatience, and thankfully came to the crux of the tale.

“Then fortune favored us, and we came upon a freshly killed paca. We laid a clever trap, a spring-net, and waited to see what would come sniffing. A day and a night we waited, in tree and thicket, and to our great wonder, a dhourgan crept back to the kill, and we all believed it an illusion. Yet our net tangled it as surely as any real beast, and with much—”

My glance at him just then was pointed, and he decided against whatever flowery recounting of injury and mayhem he had intended.

“—cost to ourselves, we were able to subdue it. We used shackles from the bufa, and logging chains—nothing else would hold it. We are not a wealthy house, and after a great deal of deliberation, we began this journey. We travel to Abderan, there to make the dhourgan a gift to the emperor.”

“Indeed. Such a gift guarantees your house will be spoken of for generations.” My voice was all smooth admiration for his cleverness and his tale-telling, and I refilled his cup. “The muzzle, though, that was not made for any bufa.”

The pause before he answered lasted less than a heartbeat, but his eyes flicked to his left and he hunched one shoulder. I took a sip of wine and waited to hear the lie... or at the very least not the whole truth. “It was not. The maker crafted it of steel and silver, for all men know the dhourgan is no mortal creature.”

Ah, I had wondered when he'd bring magic into it. I knew those stories as well as he did, perhaps better. The dhourgan were said to come from some other realm, slipping through holes in the weave of the world for reasons best known only to the dhourgan, that is, if they were capable of reason. The dark

intelligence of the dhourgan's gaze came to mind, and the skin on my arms rippled with a chill. There was a kind of magic here for certain—the compulsion that dragged me down the hill, and the impulse to slip the strap of the muzzle.

“I commend that maker's cleverness as well as your own. And the telling of such a tale. But now?” I drained my cup and stood, inclining my head to show I meant no disrespect to my host. “My thanks, but the nights are short, and I wish to seek my pallet.”

I walked back to where the dhourgan was tethered, taking time to allow my fire-dazzled eyes to adjust to the dark. The dhourgan did not stir as I readied myself for sleep. With a brief prayer of thanks to Cett for the day past, I spread out my blanket, laid myself down on the mattress that had been left for me and descended easily into sleep, one hand on the hilt of my knife.

Chapter Three

I might have been asleep for half the night, or slipped directly into the dream—I had no way of knowing. This was and somehow was not the now-familiar dream of liquid fire. I went from nothingness to every part of me saturated with heat, moving with no effort through stuff too thick to be air, but not water, either. I had no sense of up or down, and the only warning I had was a subtle thickening of the substance surrounding me, a brief resistance, before I slid past some barrier and found myself on my feet.

I knew this place, from my own memory. There was a spring an arm's length away, and it rose out of the earth and spread into a pool, the steam rising from the surface and smelling of iron and copper. My bare feet rested on warm sand, and instead of my leathers, I wore only my red kilt, the official garment of my order, knotted around my hips rather than secured with a belt the way it should be.

I turned, intending to orient myself by the stars or perhaps the moon, and there, on the rocks, crouched a man. In my waking life I would have been wary, prepared for an attack, but in the way of dreams, it struck me as right that he was here. The instant my eyes found him he rose, uncoiling to his full height with a predator's liquid grace. He was bare-chested over hunting leathers, with dark hair not quite as long as mine, and muscled like a swordsman. He was, in a word, desirable—I could not imagine a man or a woman looking at him and not thinking lustful thoughts.

He smiled at me, the smile of one old acquaintance to another, and leapt easily from the rock, landing with only the faintest thud of his bare feet in the sand. "Cettai," he said, studying my face with flattering intentness. I was not vain—one's physical form is a shell, and outward beauty, or its lack, was beyond our control—but I knew both women and men found me attractive. It was a weapon, same as any other. He tilted his head. "What is your name?"

I raised my eyebrows at his presumption, and shrugged one shoulder, ignoring the twist of apprehension at the question. "I am Cettai—"

"—Houseless, friendless, nameless." He waved a lean hand in dismissal. "I know all *that*. I need to know your *name*." He took a step closer, less than an arm's length away, close enough so I could see his eyes, strangely colorless in the dark. "I need to know who you are." Another step, and then one more, and I could not look away.

This close, the warmth of his body was temptation to my fingers, which were lonely for the feel of skin that was not my own. A fleeting sense of familiarity, of *knowing* him, rasped over me and made my skin prickle with uneasy craving. I wanted to—

“Touch me,” he breathed, and I saw him swallow.

I raised one hand, not to do the obvious—cup the bulge in his leathers—but to lay it flat on the smooth skin of his abdomen. No—not smooth. My other hand joined the first, both palms resting lightly while my fingers traced the subtle contours I could feel but not see. His skin glided under my fingertips so easily it might have been oiled, and under the skin was hard muscle. But between the two—I frowned and listened carefully to what my fingers told me. It was not bone, or even cartilage—the skin itself was somehow thickened. Armored. I traced the boundaries of it, out to the arch of his ribs and then up, where the strange armor tapered slightly before widening to cover his pectorals.

My thumbs inadvertently brushed his nipples and he shivered under my hands, the first response I’d gotten. His hands settled on my hipbones, callused thumbs slipping under the edge of my kilt to brush my lower belly, and he ran his nose along my jaw, inhaling against my skin. And even that touch struck me as familiar, something he had done before or perhaps would do one day—it made no difference at the moment.

This close, he smelled of smoke and brine and male arousal—musk with a sharp edge of sweat. He tasted my skin, using lips and tongue, and now it was my turn to shiver. He hummed, and his mouth moved higher on my neck. “Mountains,” he said quietly, lips moving on my ear. “You taste like the air in the mountains, and you smell—” One of his hands found my lower back and pressed until our rigid shafts were separated only by leather and silk. “You smell of earth.” His wicked growl urged me to lean into him, one of my bare thighs slipping between his leather-clad ones. “I want that all over me.”

Gods—the image in my head at that moment was enough to bring me over. I rutted lightly against his hip instead of shoving him onto his knees—or trying to, for we were evenly matched in height, if not in breadth—reaching around his waist to get more leverage.

“Your *name*,” he groaned. “Tell me your name and I will be yours.”

I shoved him away over my body’s instant protest. “I have no name,” I spat. I could feel the tug of magic—he had asked three times, and it took real effort to not let those two forbidden words tumble from my lips. “I am Cettai.”

“You are mine,” he said, low and insistent. “And a fool.”

Everything disappeared between two heartbeats—the sand under my feet, the steamy air, the warm male body in front of me—and my next indrawn breath was abruptly cold inside in my lungs. Now I was curled on my side, wrapped in my blanket... and inexplicably, deliciously, warm. There was a quote from some Cettai master about there being no shame in taking ease where one found it, but I was too disoriented to think of how it went.

Hot breath ruffled my hair, and I rolled onto my feet with a speed that would have made my arms master proud, crouched with my knife in one hand and blanket in the other. The dhourgan opened one eye and grunted at me, apparently unimpressed.

The mattress was where it had been when I fell asleep, but at some time during the night I had moved until I lay against the dhourgan, my back fitted against the swell of its ribs and belly. I stared at the wickedly long claw visible on the back of one foreleg, a hand's breadth from where my face had been resting. Then, behind me, in the camp, I heard a commotion—voices raised in alarm. I dropped the blanket and trotted off to see what had happened, and if that left me with a sense of deliberately avoiding things, so be it.

I followed the disruption all the way to where the herd of bufa had been left for the night, next to a trickle of water too pitiful to be called a stream. One of them had been killed, dragged away from the others some little distance. The throat had been torn out, and the belly ripped open, but beyond that the carcass appeared untouched.

The dirt all around was a confusion of tracks, both human and animal. Circling around, I ignored the angry and alarmed drovers, looking for something that was not human or bufa. *There*. I knelt, and used one finger to trace the impression in the dirt. Not a bufa, not with four oval toes in front of a sizable pad. No claws. I would guess kunda, save for the size of the paw print—it was close to the width and length of my hand. Still, it was the only beast that matched, and I knew the wild ones hunted in packs. When I broadened my search, I counted four sets of tracks heading away from the camp, off onto the plains.

Looking at the map before I began this journey, I'd supposed the plains to be flat, like a tabletop. Looking out across them now, they were more like rumpled bedclothes, hillocks rising over hidden creases and valleys. Easy for

things to hide out of view and yet be close by—and even my tracking skills would be stretched in such a place.

“What have you found?”

I turned to see Lefi ap Horas, barefoot and wearing nothing but breeches. I waved at the tracks. “Kunda, mayhap. Four of them.” He flinched, the reaction quickly hidden, and I stored that information away for later. “I should think they would hesitate to come so near a camp.”

“We have had so little rain, the game has all fled north,” Lefi said, staring at the tracks. “They are hungry, and hunger will make even a lupa bold.” He sighed. “We shall wait until the men have finished butchering the carcass—the meat is too fresh to waste, leaving it here for scavengers. If you wish to break your fast, there is food ready. We will all have time to eat it this morning.”

I chose not to watch—having done my share of dressing a kill—and wandered first to the kitchen wagon for hot bread and sausages, taking time to observe the camp, and then back to the dhourgan. His ears flattened when I got near, and I could hear him snuffling. I licked the grease from the sausage off my fingers, and he growled—no, groaned. I paused, wondering when anyone had thought to offer him food or water. No one had come last night, not that I was aware of. I went back to the kitchen wagon for a bucket and water, promising to return it, and carried it back without spilling it all. I set it down in front of the dhourgan, who plunged his face into it immediately.

It did occur to me then that eating would be difficult, if not impossible, with the muzzle on, and I wondered if they intended to starve the dhourgan into docility. The destruction of the cage made that theory unlikely, but then again, how would they get the muzzle back in place once they removed it? For that matter, how had they gotten it on him in the first place?

I also wondered how they intended to move the dhourgan without that cage. I got my answer some time later, when four men pulled a flat cart over to us, followed by six more men. After removing the bars securing the chains to the rocks, they led the dhourgan onto the cart, four of them on each chain. The remaining two men controlled the front of the cart as it tipped forward under the dhourgan's weight, propping up the shaft in the front with an ingenious folding leg. After shackling the dhourgan to the cart using the chains, a pair of bufa were led over and yoked to the shaft.

Other carts were already on the move, and the men led the bufa to join the rest of the caravan. I shouldered my pack and followed, walking beside the cart

carrying the dhourgan. Even with the spare bufa trailing behind us all, the dust was intolerable. I pulled my cowl from my pack and draped it around my face and neck, covering my nose, which made breathing somewhat easier.

All through the day, the caravan never stopped moving. If a team of bufa needed to be switched, that cart fell back in the line, changed the spent bufa for fresh ones, and caught up again. The kitchen wagon served the midday meal on the move—men walked up to receive a wrapped bundle, and fell back into position to eat as they walked. It made sense, for once prodded into motion, bufa will walk steadily all the day long, but are difficult to start again after they have stopped. They will also not move in the dark, so the caravan needed every bit of daylight.

By the time the caravan master called a halt and we all made camp, I was surprisingly weary. I ate at Lefi's table again rather than crouch by the kitchen wagon with the rest of the drovers, but excused myself as soon as I finished.

I remembered to fetch a bucket and fill it with water on my way, for I doubted anyone else would remember. The dhourgan lifted his head when I approached, and I delayed collapsing face down on my blanket to set the bucket near him, and waited while he drank. Afterwards, he demanded attention, hooking me with his jaw and pinning me in place against his chest until I scratched his neck and fondled his ears. With a final stroke, I stumbled over to my bed, under the cart the dhourgan had ridden in all day, and lay down with a groan of relief.

Chapter Four

No sooner did I slip into sleep than I was back in the same place as the night before—standing in the sand near the rocks next to the hot spring, wearing my kilt, with the same man sitting on the ground at the base of the rocks.

He didn't stand, just regarded me with a faint scowl on his handsome face. "I should not have called you a fool," he said tiredly. "That was ill-done of me."

"Who are you?" I studied him, wondering at the nagging sense of familiarity.

He opened his mouth, made a frustrated sound, and shook his head, his long hair sliding around his bare shoulders. I wondered what it would be like against my skin, and my shaft hardened. Not fully, just... thickening with curious anticipation, rolling against my thigh.

He inhaled, and grunted in the back of his throat. "Ask me something else."

I considered that, staring at the lines of his chest and abdomen, remembering the way his skin had glided under my palms. "Are you bespelled? Or under some compulsion?"

"I should think a Cettai would be better at riddles," he growled.

His obvious frustration made me laugh, and I settled cross-legged in the sand. "Is that what this is? I thought you were simply being rude."

He huffed, and moved until his seated position mimicked mine. His head bowed, his dark hair hiding his face for a moment, and he swayed from side to side the least bit. Finally he raised his head, frowning at me again. "Do not go to Abderan. And do not trust Lefi ap Horas."

"Why?" I stared at his bare arms, the muscles tensing as he gripped his knees.

His heavy sigh reminded me of the dhourgan. "Do not make me call you a fool again. Ask me something else."

I leaned forward, resting one elbow on a half-raised knee so I could cradle my chin in that hand. It was hard to miss the way he shifted slightly, trying to see under my kilt, and my lips twitched. "You want me."

"Only a fool would ask that question." His eyes narrowed, and I wondered what color they actually were. "Ask. Me. Something. *Else*."

I was a fool, just as he'd said. "What is your name?"

He uncoiled onto his feet with a fluid economy of motion, and his smile bared rather white teeth that, again, somehow made me think of the dhourgan. "Zerimedes Scipionus," he said. "You may call me Zeri," he added, and disappeared.

I woke up in exactly the same position as the morning before—my back tucked against the dhourgan's belly, his fore and hind legs forming a cage around me. This time, I stayed where I was rather than leaping away.

Do not trust Left ap Horas. That is what Zerimedes—Zeri—had said. True, it was in some dream-realm, but whether the warning was from another being or something brewed from my own mind made no difference. A warning was a warning. I would watch, and judge for myself now. I shrugged out of my blanket and sat up, blinking and breathing through a wave of sick dizziness. If I had anything in my stomach, I would have cast it out. *Gods*—I managed to gain my feet, swallowing the urge to vomit, and locked my knees.

Everything behind my eyes was one dull throb—even my jaw ached—and my tongue may as well have been dipped in sand. I made it two steps, and the dhourgan moaned softly, the distress in that single note cramping my chest. Water—we both needed water.

I braced my entire body and forced it into motion, careful not to betray any weakness. The further from the dhourgan I walked, the better I felt, and by the time I reached the kitchen wagon my headache was gone. I ordered a man to fetch more water for the dhourgan, and I drank from a jug while he fetched some full skins. The pain in my head swelled behind my eyes as I carried them back, three on each shoulder, hurrying when I saw the dhourgan lying flat on his side, his sides barely moving. Rather curiously, from where I was, his belly appeared to be hairless, and the skin was segmented, like armor. The dhourgan rolled onto his chest at my approach, and moaned a little when he scented the water. I emptied four of the skins two at a time into the bucket, trying to get a look at his belly while I did. Up close, the hair there was simply lighter in color, and the impression of armor must have been a trick of light and shadow.

The dhourgan plunged his muzzle into the water and drank, eyes half closed. I patted his neck, and as I went to touch his ears, I realized that the strap of the muzzle had rubbed him raw along the back of his head. Without any hesitation, my fingers slid along the leather until they found the buckle. I undid

the strap as gently as I could, not wanting to cause more hurt, and eased the muzzle off when the dhourgan raised his dripping snout.

I tossed the muzzle away as his huge head turned into my chest, the bony forehead pressing against me. I tangled my fingers in the knotted mane and simply stood there, the pain in my head faded to a mild annoyance rather than consuming all my attention. Idly, I pinched a fold of the skin on his long neck between my fingers and let it go, watching the sluggish way it flattened. The dhourgan needed more water—and food. I sighed, smoothing my hand along his neck, and dull anger rose at the rough feel of his hair.

“I shall return with food,” I murmured, stepping away. “Drink.”

I found Lefi ap Horas by following the low buzz of agitation in the camp, past the wagons and over to the herd of bufa. By the look of things, another one had been slaughtered in the night. One of the men muttered about *molossa*, and I raked my memory for the word, sifting through layers of accumulated knowledge—I had heard that name before. Another illustrated bestiary? The faint ache in my head made it hard to think.

“A word with you,” I said to ap Horas, and waited while he closed the distance. “The dhourgan needs water. And food.”

He stared at me, unblinking, and I did not miss the way his jaw clenched or the tightening of the skin around his eyes. “Water, yes. Food, no.”

“The dhourgan will not be very much of a gift to the emperor if it is dead.” I crossed my arms over my chest, reminding myself that anger would not serve. “When was the last time it was fed?”

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “It will be fine. Besides, there was no way to offer food without removing the muzzle.”

“I removed it. The skin was rubbed raw.”

This time, his anger was more visible, and I waited, perfectly still, aware of the way his fists clenched and the twitch of a hand toward a dagger. “Feed it, then,” he said at last. He jerked his head at the dead bufa, already being carved up by two men, and walked away.

It would be the work of a moment to kill him—snap his neck or cut some essential vein with my dagger—and I breathed through the wave of violent longing. Cettai did not kill in the heat of anger or for revenge. Death, if it was to be dealt by my hand, would be a considered act, born of logic, not passion. That did not mean the urge was not in me, for blood will tell, and it made me

wonder if my father had done right setting me out into the wider world beyond the monastery walls.

Still riding that red wave, I gathered a hunk of bufa flesh, still on the bone, and headed back for the dhourgan. The entire way, the morning sun beat down on my head, making my eyes water, and it took all my will to keep my steps even. I dropped the piece of meat in front of the dhourgan, and my empty stomach threatened to revolt at the way he tore into it. I backed up, one step, and then two, before sinking to my knees and fumbling for one of the remaining full water skins.

The water cleared my head, lessening the pounding behind my eyes, and my stomach gradually settled. I knelt in the dirt next to the bucket, watching the dhourgan strip the bone clean.

What possible reason could ap Horas have for starving the dhourgan? Or withholding water? If the creature was intended as a gift, it should be in the best condition possible. I could understand wanting to keep it docile, but surely keeping it fed would be the better way to accomplish that—feral kunda could be tamed in that manner, at least enough to be handled with some measure of safety. I was more inclined to credit him with ignorance than malice, but it did not sit well with me in either case.

The dhourgan finished stripping the last scraps of meat off the bone and took another drink, swishing its snout in the remaining water to wash off the blood. In the camp, a whip cracked, and I could hear the complaints of bufa being yoked as the caravan prepared to move for the day. I rose to my feet, brushing the dirt from my palms, and the dhourgan gently butted my midsection. I took a moment to fondle his ears, staring off at nothing. There was something in this I did not—or could not—see. I knew ap Horas lied, but there was more than that. And if I could not puzzle this simple thing out, what chance did I have of fulfilling my purpose as a Cettai?

Chapter Five

I broke my fast while walking alongside the wagon carrying the dhourgan, and once the sun climbed to its zenith, I vaulted onto the wagon bed. I shed my pack, and then used the dhourgan to cushion my back, stretching my legs and giving my feet a rest. It didn't take long for the double warmth to weight my eyelids, and I let my head fall against the dhourgan's muscled shoulder.

One moment I was on the wagon, leaning against the dhourgan's warm side, and the next I was at the hot spring. This time, however, it was daylight, and now I knew for certain this was a place from my five years of life before the monastery, in Iuvanum.

A touch on my hair made me whirl, one arm sweeping out and the other reaching for my dagger. The handle leapt to my palm, and only the sight of Zerimedes' grin stayed my hand. That, and seeing his eyes clearly for the first time. They were a vivid blue around the outer edge of the iris, melting into a dark gold around the pupils, reminding me of the sky around the setting sun. And in the light of day, his hair shone true black, highlighting his slightly dusky skin. He was darker than me, which was not difficult given my paleness, a rich sand color everywhere I could see.

Zerimedes reached for my hair again, and I allowed the touch this time. He gathered the end of my braid and rubbed it between his fingers before using it to tug me closer. His other hand slid around behind my waist, and I understood his intent immediately.

I tilted my head to complement the angle of his and our mouths met, our parted lips sealing together as our tongues came out to explore. I gripped his lean hips, giving over to sensation, and let his scent fill my head as his taste filled my mouth.

Power ran up from the earth, through the bare soles of my feet, and was drawn out of the air and into my lungs with every breath I took. Parts of me I had no names for rolled into perfect alignment, and the gates to my magic settled and unlocked inside me. I groaned at the perfection of it, the wholeness, and Zerimedes echoed the sound into my mouth.

He was my Other. I had no doubt of that, not with all four elements singing in my blood and bones the way they were. Remembering his demand from our first meeting, I drew back, panting, prepared to tell him at least my given name.

Zerimedes gripped my face with both hands, his thumbs under my jaw, and the near-panic in his eyes stopped my tongue.

“Go to the river,” he gasped. “Go *into* the river. Gods—I cannot hold you here.”

He let go of me, pushed me away from him so hard my arms flew out for balance. Unlike the other times, this was no gentle transition—here one moment, back in the waking world the next. No, this time I flew back into my sleeping self like an arrow loosed from a bow, as though Zerimedes had been an archer, pulling me out of the waking world, yet this time the draw of the bow proved too much for him, and he had no choice but to let me go.

I jerked back into my body and into wakefulness at the same moment the wagon hit a rut, and my body told me I was falling. I rolled to my knees even as understanding dawned—I was not falling, it was only that the wagon had turned down a slope. And before us, in a curving liquid silver line across the land, was the river.

It took almost the rest of the day for the caravan to ease its way down to the riverbank. The Botha, it was called, an inauspicious name, since in the old language it meant *drown*. Part of me worried over what Zerimedes had told me to do—go into the river—while the rest of me worried over the dhourgan.

The food and water from the morning might both have been for naught, because he lay on the boards of the wagon, his huge body rolling limply with every pitch and jerk. If not for the chains from his collar, I believed he would have slid off to the ground. His dark coat shone with sweat, almost too hot to touch, and he breathed in shallow pants, his flared nostrils showing red inside. He needed shade, and water, and even that might not be enough to save him now.

The entire caravan headed for a flat spot—a ford, given the worn trail on the opposite side. As the wagons drew closer, the bufa scented water and strained against their yokes. The herd of spare bufa that usually brought up the rear swung past the rest of the caravan at a near jog, raising dust and bellowing, adding to the overall air of urgency.

If I could get the dhourgan in the river, the water might cool him enough to keep him alive. The problem would be getting him off the wagon, because I feared he would not be able to get up, much less walk. Then again, the wagon's

two wheels allowed the bed to tip—if the wagon were rolled into the shallows, we could slide the dhourgan off right into the water.

I vaulted off the bed, and almost ran into Lefi ap Horas. “The dhourgan is dying,” I told him, ready and willing to stretch the truth, and he recoiled at the lash in my voice. “The sun has nearly roasted him. He needs to cool off, or you will have nothing to show for this journey except a rotting carcass.”

He hesitated, for two heartbeats, his eyes shifting toward the sun and then the city on the horizon, and I locked my jaw against a curse. *Fool*. The dhourgan was not meant for a *gift*, not in the sense I had understood the word. It was to be a *sacrifice*.

At sunrise on the morning of the sun festival, at the exact moment the sun’s light struck the dome of the great temple in Abderan, the emperor would make an offering. First a beast from the land, perfect and unblemished, and then one from the water. Sun and earth and water, all to ensure a plentiful harvest at the end of the growing season. In its own way, the dhourgan was the perfect choice, for according to legend, it was born of fire and water.

“You will have nothing,” I repeated. “Get him in the river, and you may save him.”

He stared at me, and then turned and yelled for the bufa to be driven into the water, taking the wagon with them. I climbed back onto the wagon, next to the dhourgan, and undid the heavy shackles, first at the end of one chain and then the other. The drovers undid the yoke, releasing the shaft, and I tugged at the collar on the dhourgan’s neck.

He moaned, breathy and low, and I hissed at him, still tugging. “Up,” I snarled. The wagon tilted, tipped, and the dhourgan’s head rose, his eyes wide and startled. I ran down the bed as he slid into the water, wishing I had thought to take off my boots. The water came past my waist, and it took some effort to wade against the sluggish current to reach the dhourgan, who wasn’t moving.

I heard thunder, and turned in time to see the entire herd of spare bufa run through the caravan. Some of the yoked bufa tried to follow them, and men screamed as they were knocked down or trampled. The dhourgan threw itself into motion, surging into deeper water, and one of the chains from its collar dragged me off my feet, under the water. Rather than try to stand, I swam until I could grab the dhourgan’s mane, and used that to haul myself to the surface.

My fingers wrapped around the collar for support, and the dhourgan dove, dragging me down with him. The collar glowed a sullen red, visible even

through the roil of sediment, but it was not hot to the touch. Bubbles rushed from the dhourgan's jaws, a bellow I could hear under the water. With no warning, my blood turned to fire, bubbling with acid, with poison, my bones swelling inside my skin, and I clamped my teeth around a scream. I was sinking, too heavy to stand, my lungs empty and aching. I could not let go of the collar, so I tried to pull it with me, my arms straining uselessly against the dhourgan's mass.

I tried once more, closing my eyes when something tore in my elbow, and the collar gave way. My head broke the surface and I sucked in scalding lungfuls of air—still holding the empty collar, the chains waving in the current.

The dhourgan was gone.

I waded out of the river carrying the collar—unopened, the lock in place—and trailing the lengths of chain, filled with a sense of loss entirely out of proportion to what had happened. The dhourgan was a beast—a fantastic, legendary one to be sure, but nevertheless a beast. I had no reason to mourn, not after barely three days. I needed to shake off that empty feeling and focus on finding a way to Zerimedes—discover his location in the waking world and make my way to him as soon as I could manage it.

Lefi ap Horas came at me, running, his face suffused with rage. He had a knife, and I batted it away with the collar. I broke his wrist, judging by his scream, and wrapped my free hand around his throat. Rather than drop the collar, I let it hang on my forearm, and it was the work of a breath to find my knife and press it to the edge of his ribs.

His face was wet with tears of pain and frustrated rage, and he sobbed curses at me. “You will see us all dead, Cettai. The beast was bought and paid for, and what are we to do now?”

He stumbled back when I shoved him, and sat down hard, cradling his wrist. I crouched in front of him. “That was no part of the story I was told.” Switching the knife to my other hand, I examined the collar. Made of iron, the metal sang to me under its coating of silver, and it was cast with incised runes—a simple binding—not a spell that would hold anything of real power. “Who forged this?”

“Peredur. Grygor Peredur.” Lefi spat, as though the name fouled his tongue. And it very well might have.

“The mage?” That explained a great deal. By all accounts, Peredur’s position in the emperor’s court was past its zenith, and if he was not careful he would lose it entirely. Producing a creature out of legend would go far to ensuring his continued security. “Was the dhourgan to be the Cydnos sacrifice?”

He blinked at me, startled enough that I believed his next words. “No. A gift. As I said.”

I would not put it past Peredur to lie, or at least not tell the entire truth. He had once, a great many years before, been a novice at the very monastery that had sheltered and raised me. But he left of his own accord after barely a year, saying he did not have a true vocation to Cett. Instead, he apprenticed to a lesser mage in the Eastern provinces... and then left there to find another master, and another after that. The Cettai supposed he sought some ultimate knowledge, and kept apprised of his doings. Eventually, Peredur found a place at court, and faded safely into obscurity.

“Please.” Lefi raised his head. “You could track the dhourgan. Find it.”

“You have trackers, surely.”

“Yes, but...” He closed his eyes, perhaps from the pain of his wrist. Perhaps not. “I ask you as a Cettai.”

Ah. I smoothed all expression from my face. If his kinsmen tracked and found the dhourgan—although I doubted they could—they would be bound by their agreement to deliver the beast to Peredur. If I did it—as a Cettai—I would have the final say on its fate, and my word would be law. Whatever I decided, Lefi ap Horas would be free of blame or prosecution. Also by law. I nodded in acknowledgement of his cleverness. “So be it.”

I took food—dried meat and fruit—and water, found my pack rather miraculously still snagged on the wagon, safely out of the river, and set off. Two of Lefi’s kin came with me, a pair of cousins, Anis and Efrau. I had no doubt they were meant as spies, and perhaps I should have been angry—was the word of a Cettai worth so little these days?—but all of my concentration was on the faintest of tugs below my breastbone.

Chapter Six

The three of us crossed the river upstream a ways from where the dhourgan slipped free. There were rocks scattered from bank to bank, and the worn track there made it clear it was the favored foot crossing. Once on the other side, I moved into a slow jog, obeying the pull of that invisible tether. I didn't know what it meant, but I would use it nonetheless. That made me think of Zerimedes again, for I imagined there should be that same kind of connection between us. No one ever explained how it would feel to find my Other, for it was understood that every Cettai's experience was unique. Still, that rush of power—what else could it have been? It could be that one might lead me to the other, and with that thought to comfort me, I scanned the bank for tracks, for water, for any sign something as large as the dhourgan had come ashore.

When I did find tracks, I knelt to examine them and suppressed a shiver. The damp earth showed me clear impressions of the dhourgan's two-toed feet, heading roughly north. But following them, nearly obliterating them, were other tracks. Four toes and a pad, the same footprints I'd seen by the slain bufa. Five sets of tracks all told, all heading the same direction.

After not too long, I left Anis and Efrau behind, trusting they would catch up by nightfall. Or not—I had not asked for their company, and had no need of them. For the remainder of the day I followed the dhourgan's trail, never once catching sight of him although he could not have been that far ahead of us. The other, four-toed tracks wove back and forth, until they split off and disappeared onto a rocky hillside. I kept on until the shadows made it impossible to track him at more than a crawl, and found a likely place to camp.

I gathered an armload of small branches for a fire, plus a few larger pieces that would burn longer. I wanted fire between me and whatever made those other tracks. Once I had the wood arranged, I reached in my pack for flint and steel... and paused. Could I...?

Even the most inept novice Cettai was able to light a fire with nothing more than magic—it was the very first thing they learned. I could not. Although, perhaps it would be better to say that I *could*, but *should not*. I looked around. It might be safe. There had been that moment when the gates of my magic aligned inside me, and my surroundings were not particularly flammable.

Crouching down, I reached for the pile of tinder, the dried grass and twigs, the invisible fingers of my will testing for dryness, for the willingness to burn.

They were things of earth, and I ignored the ties that bound them to the soil, the entire history of their growth laid out for me to read. I *pushed*, drawing air away from the tinder and into it at the same time, and... *nothing*. I sighed through my teeth. Better nothing than an inferno, or so my teacher had said after my last unfortunate experience.

Zerimedes, I thought. *Why won't this work?* I pictured his face, the spill of dark hair, the span of his shoulders—and I could feel him, in my head but somehow not. I closed my eyes and extended my will again, testing the boundary of whatever kept us separated. When I leaned on that boundary, it gave way but did not tear—like a net with no holes. The harder I pressed, the more it stretched, and he was on the other side, startled. *Zerimedes*.

He turned to face me. Watching. Waiting.

Now I understood what he had meant. It required real effort to keep myself close to him, for the barrier resisted me, wanting to push me back into myself. How did he pull me through, then? I struggled forward, not ready to give in just yet, and the barrier thinned as I pressed harder, until it was sheer enough to see through.

“*Zerimedes*.” I put out a hand, the barrier clinging to my skin like oil. “Can you pull me through?”

He shook his head, his eyes pleading with me for something—What? What did he—?

“*Naxomion*,” I said firmly, and his head jerked up. I leaned my shoulder into the barrier and added, “*Naxom*.”

His grin was wide and white, startling. “Wait,” he said, and I snapped back into my physical self so hard I almost tipped over.

“Damn you,” I snarled, at the same time as the pile of tinder flared aggressively to life.

Wait for what?

Anis and Efrau arrived long after the last glimmer of light had faded, and the three of us said nothing—the ap Horas cousins laid down near the fire and went immediately to sleep. I was up at first light and nudged them awake with the toe of my boot, impatient to be off. Trusting they could at least follow my trail, I set off, breaking my fast with the remainder of the dried fruit and some water.

Long before midmorning, I found where the dhourgan had spent the night. The molossa tracks converged nearby, and followed the dhourgan's when the trail started out again, still heading north. When a foolish lupa showed itself near the mouth of its burrow, I brought it down with my bow, and managed a second one not too long after. I gutted them both, tying them to my belt to leave my hands free, and kept walking, following the dhourgan's rather obvious trail. According to the tracks, every so often one or two of the molossa would split off and circle back before rejoining the others, or so it appeared.

The sun climbed overhead, and then began its downward slide toward evening. It was not so much that I recognized where I was, but a sense of familiarity stole over me the further north I traveled. The color of the rocks was different here, and the dirt had changed from the red-brown I'd grown up seeing, turning a darker, richer brown, almost black. In the distance, green mountains rolled away in waves to the horizon, and some inner part of my heart unfurled a little at the sight, like a plant sensing the warmth of the sun after a long cold season.

I knew my own history—this green and fertile valley was not more than two days ride from the place I had been born and spent my first five years. Not so long ago, this had all been the province of Iuvanum, and some maps still called it thus. Now it was two provinces—Clusium in the southern part, where I walked now, and Valatria in the northern half. While it was true I had done nothing worse than be born, it would not be altogether wise for me to show myself in either of the larger towns further north. The northern clans were slow to forget, and my family resemblance was too great for me to think I would not, eventually, be recognized.

When the sky darkened to purple, I found a likely place to camp in the lee of a rocky mound, and started a fire the mundane way. An elusive sense of being watched raised the hair on my neck, but that could mean some creature had made its nest among the tumbled rocks. Aside from feral kunda, there were few predators here. Efrau and Anis wandered in after the sun had slid out of sight, and one of my lupa was already skinned and over the fire.

"We're being followed," Efrau told me, keeping his voice low. "Ever since the other tracks separated the last time."

That wasn't news to me, but the firelight would give us an advantage if they were planning an ambush. Anis muttered something under his breath, one word followed by a long curse.

“What about the molossa?” I asked him. “What do they have to do with anything?”

Anis snorted, and I understood that to mean I was being stupid. “If there is a dhourgan, there are molossa,” he explained. “They have been following the caravan the whole way.”

“And killing bufa? Why do you not hunt them?” The prickling unease from earlier increased, and I stilled, wishing I could hear over the crackle of the fire.

“Do you not think we’ve tried?” Efrau squatted, stretching his palms toward the flames. “We’ve wasted arrows the entire trip, shooting at shadows. Add to that the dead bufa, and this was hardly—” He broke off at a quelling look from his cousin, and shrugged. “Lefi thought you might grant us some measure of protection,” he admitted.

A husky, barking cough brought me to my feet, one hand going for my bow. “Onto the rocks,” I told the cousins. “Quickly.” I grabbed the raw lupa and flung it out into the darkness. I heard a scuffle, and hoped whatever was out there was investigating the carcass. The only things I remembered about molossa was that they were big, near the weight of a man, and smooth-coated except for a ridge of shaggy hair down their spine. They could pass for a very large feral kunda, provided you didn’t look all that closely.

If we were facing bowmen, the rocks were a poor choice—we would be outlined against the sky, even in the growing dark—but the height would give us an advantage with a beast. Or beasts. I scooped up my pack and my weapons, gaining the first of the rocks with a one-handed vault. I scrambled to the top and strung my bow, waiting.

I fired at the suggestion of movement, another arrow in my hand almost the instant the first one flew. I heard nothing, even so, I loosed a second arrow at a moving shadow. Not a beast—firelight sparked dully off a leather doublet and a short sword. My magic kept the arrow on course, adding enough force to pierce the unprotected shoulder—and *it missed*. My hand stilled in the act of nocking a third arrow. Inconceivable. I had not missed a target since I first learned to hold a bow.

Three more figures materialized in the scant firelight—compact, wiry men in serviceable, old-style stiffened leather doublets sewn all over with metal rings. Bareheaded. Dark-haired. Leathers and boots, also dark. I slung my bow over my shoulder and around my neck, out of the way, and took out my knife. Not as effective as a sword, and I had a moment to regret not trading for one.

Next to me, Anis and Efrau both had their swords out—awkwardly, worse than any novice. Cett help me—if these bandits had any skill, those two were paca for the slaughter.

Chapter Seven

The four strangers ran for the rocks, leaping up with no effort and a fair amount of grace. One engaged Efrau, one swung at Anis, and a third came at me. The fourth one skipped around to my other side, and I spared a breath from parrying a swing at my head to shove at him using only air. My gifts might not lend themselves to starting a fire, but they had their uses. The fourth one stumbled back, and I grinned in feral pleasure. That was all I had time for, though—aside from wishing again that I'd traded for a sword instead of the knife.

If they were bandits, they were not the usual kind—we had nothing of value for them to steal. And they weren't bent on killing us, for the cousins were so inept as fighters they should have been dead already. The two strangers facing me did not try to advance the fight, but simply kept me at bay, preventing me from helping Anis or Efrau.

I took a blow on one gauntlet that numbed my arm, and lashed out with one foot, catching my opponent squarely on the side of his knee. He yelped, and fell back to let number four have a go at me. A sword clattered on stone at the same time someone cried out—and I snatched the discarded sword up in my left hand as it slid past. My opponent's eyes widened when I swung at him, the whites visible in the dark, and he hesitated for a breath and a heartbeat.

I snarled at him and used my knife to swipe at his free arm, wondering what their game was. Beyond my two opponents, one of the ap Horas cousins lost their footing and slid off the rocks. Instead of following him and finishing him, that fighter joined the two facing me.

Steel rang on steel as I took the offensive, my teeth set in a fierce grin. All they did was defend themselves, meeting each blow of mine with equal or lesser force—it was maddening, and my arms and shoulders ached. I growled in exasperation and prayed for Cett to grant me patience, for mine was nearly gone—and all the lectures I'd ever gotten on caging my temper meant nothing at the moment.

One of my opponents whistled, high and sharp, and beyond the rocks some dark shape hurtled into view. The phantom hook in my chest jerked, almost a physical pain, and without questioning the how or the why, I abandoned the futile fight and slid off the side of the rock, feet first, shoving my knife home in its sheath to leave me a free hand. The dhourgan sat down on his haunches,

sliding to a stop, and I grabbed the cloud of mane right above his shoulders. His front half spun away while his haunches swung toward me, and I let the motion aid my leap onto his broad back. I landed off-center, and he twitched one hip in a buck that bounced me into place.

And *ran*.

Part of my training included leaning to ride a tanga—a short, placid beast content to trot around a meadow while I attempted to coordinate staying centered in a padded saddle at the same time I learned the commands for *right* and *left*, *stop* and *go*. Eventually, I was able to shoot my bow while the tanga ran past a target, but it wasn't something I excelled at. Or particularly enjoyed.

And it bore no relation whatsoever to flying through the night with the dhourgan's mane stinging my face, heat and sweat bleeding through my leathers from the dhourgan's muscular back and sides. Somehow, I managed to reverse my grip on the sword so it lay flat along my thigh instead of threatening to cut my own throat with every dip and rise in the terrain.

I was riding a dhourgan. The idea of it was enough to put me off-balance, and the reality cramped my guts. As we hurtled down a short slope into a gully, a blur of motion off to my left made me turn to look—and wish I hadn't. A glance to my right confirmed that, yes, there were four beasts running with us, two on a side.

If there is a dhourgan, there are molossa—Anis had spoken the truth. The molossa—what else would they be?—were easily the size of a man, with sleek dark coats, and bristling coarse manes adding bulk to already powerful necks and shoulders. Parted jaws displayed a lolling tongue and sharp white teeth, and I caught the gleam of an eye when one looked at me. All they did was run alongside, and if they were somehow connected to the dhourgan, perhaps they would not attack me when I dismounted.

A stray thought bounced loose in my head—something about riding a dhourgan. So long as the rider held fast to the mane—and for as long as the dhourgan permitted—that rider would not come off. That made me sit up a little straighter, allowing me to see over the dhourgan's head, between the flattened ears.

We charged up a slope, then, out of the gully onto flatter, more open terrain. The dhourgan slowed his pace down to a rocking lope, and I drew an easier breath—only to inhale sharply the next instant. The dhourgan—no, the entire

world—twisted, my head insisting I was upside down and sideways. The moonlit valley winked out, replaced by absolute darkness—the liquid fire from my dreams. I clenched my jaw and tried not to breathe, one heartbeat after another until my pulse pounded in my ears and the need for air clogged my throat. White sparks lit my vision, the only light, and finally there came another dizzying twist, turning the fabric of reality inside out as though it were a tunic.

Another moonlit scene, not the same as before, with an aching familiar line of hills against the night sky. That was all I had time to see before I tumbled off the dhourgan, the sword flying from my hand. I tucked my arms and rolled, my bow stabbing my lower back, horribly aware of the dhourgan tumbling with me, of the curved talon on each foot.

I came to a stop with dirt in my mouth and a hard male body under my own, both of us breathing hard—and whoever it was grabbed my face in two hands and kissed me. I knew that taste, that scent, and scrambled back, onto my feet.

“Zerimedes,” I growled. The dhourgan was nowhere in sight, neither were the molossa. We were near the same hot spring as my visions, though—I knew exactly where we were. Before I said anything else, I checked to make sure I still wore my leathers and slightly damp boots, not my red kilt. Not a vision, then, and this was—it was—

Iuvanum. An easy walk would take me lower into the valley, to a small town clustered at the perimeter of a walled estate. To a pair of massive gates that had never in their long history been breached. Save the once—and in the end, once had proved more than enough. My throat closed—a ridiculous reaction considering how long it had been. An entire lifetime.

This was impossible. The dhourgan could run fast, I’d grant, but this cursed place was two days ride from where we’d been at the start of the night.

Zerimedes stayed on the ground, propped up on his elbows and grinning wickedly. His bare chest gleamed with sweat, the strange armoring under the skin creating edges that caught the light. “Naxom,” he said. “Or do you prefer Naxomion?”

“I would prefer an explanation,” I ground out. “And no more riddles.”

“I never told you any riddles.” He cocked his head. “Not even the one—”

“Zerimedes.” I pointedly did not sigh when he narrowed his eyes. “Zeri,” I amended. Somewhere, my teachers were gloating—they always said my besetting fault was impatience, and now I had an Other who would try the patience of Cett. No—a stone.

Zeri hummed and sat up, raising his eyebrows. "I do like the way my name sounds when you say it."

I was distracted by the way the muscles in his abdomen tightened, throwing the lines and cuts into sharp relief, and sighed through my teeth, annoyed with myself for looking. "How did the dhourgan carry me here—" I paused to glare at him when he opened his mouth. "And do not tell me 'on his back' or so help me, I will strike you. I know where we are, and it's a good two days ride from where I was before."

He hummed again, wrapping one arm around a knee and gesturing with the other. "There is—*space* between this realm and others. And it is possible to travel through that space—provided you have a clear destination, someplace you are familiar with." He seemed to be waiting for me to ask another question. I debated which one of a dozen I wanted the answer to first, while at the same time trying to fit the idea of these... *spaces* into what I knew of the world and magic.

When I didn't speak, Zeri sighed and pushed onto his feet, dusting off his leathers and then his hands. "Watch," he said. He didn't move—and yet he did, his physical form twisting like a dust devil and disappearing as though he stepped around—behind—something I could not see. The moment he flicked out of sight, the dhourgan appeared in exactly the same manner.

I stepped forward, smoothing the sweat-roughened hair on his neck with one hand, and running the other down his bony forehead. The dhourgan nudged me, gently, and performed that sideways-twisting illusion in less than an eye blink—and there I stood, one hand on Zeri's shoulder and one patting his hair.

I swore and took a step back, half in surprise and half because, behind him, the four molossa had appeared out of the darkness. I reached for my knife, and Zeri's hand gripped my wrist. "Hold," he said. "They are not a threat to you." He turned his head, the moonlight casting his face with sinister angles, and nodded.

All four molossa winked out of existence, replaced by the four men who had attacked me and the ap Horas cousins. I was not sure which was the worse threat. Zeri tightened his fingers on my wrist when I tried to pull away, my gauntlet digging into the skin under his grip. "They are mine to command. And yours." He tipped his head to the side and let go of my wrist to slide his hand up my bare arm. "As am I," he murmured, one corner of his mouth curving up. "Within reason." I could feel the heat of his chest even through my own vest, and his breath warmed my cheek, my jaw.

I inhaled his scent, shivering as my skin prickled with awareness and no little want. If it were not for the four men watching, I would have gone further—let him go further. As it was, I shrugged free and put some air and earth between us. “I still require an explanation.”

Zeri narrowed his eyes. “Why is it that I feel the gods are laughing at me? You know the saying—logic makes for a cold bed?—I never thought that was meant to be literal.”

I snorted, fighting a smile. “And my teachers would tell you that cool consideration is not one of my strengths. I—” How to say this? “I am not immune to your... *charms*. I just—want to understand what you are.”

Zeri growled and threw his hands up, taking two steps away from me before whirling back. “I am Dhourgan, of the Scipionii. That is both *what* and *who*—you understand? We can choose our form to suit our purpose. Or our whim.” He pointed at the four molossa. “*They* are Molossa, of clan Aufidii, bound in service to my house. Calix, Therin, Bened, and Eliud.” Each of the four inclined their head as he named them. “They are mine to care for, just as I am theirs.”

“So why not appear to me this way?” I waved my hand at him. “Why appear as a beast out of legend?”

“That,” he bit out, “was not my choice.” He met my eyes, red sparks glowing in his widened pupils. “I would blame myself, but Grygor Peredur is more to blame than my pride.”

“He forged the collar,” I said. “Ap Horas confessed as much. Beyond that—how much of what I was told was truth?”

“At last. A proper question.”

Chapter Eight

Zeri and I compared stories, and it seemed that only the smallest part of what ap Horas related to me was truth. Peredur had been the one to approach the ap Horas clan, asking them to capture any dhourgan they could find in return for a staggering amount of coin—and providing them with the muzzle and the collar. While he and I spoke, magic ran across my skin like sparks—from the Aufidii, who made bedding and a meal appear, presumably out of thin air.

We all sat around a merry little fire, light and warmth against the cool night. Zeri sat next to me, almost close enough to touch, while the four Molossa were across the fire from us. I was starving, and barely tasted the hot meat and flatbreads except to note they were delicious. Zeri watched me lick grease off my fingers with a great deal of interest, so I made a show of sucking them clean and laughed when he shuddered.

“I can think of better ways to fill your mouth,” he promised darkly, and his accent—broader than mine, with odd rolling Rs—was rather noticeable.

My smile was sly. “I can still laugh with a full mouth.”

“Not if you’re choking.”

“Better men than you have tried.” I tucked another piece of meat in my mouth, grinning as I chewed—and ignoring my thickening cock’s interest in that image.

He widened his eyes and smiled, raising his eyebrows to complete the illusion of innocence. “We will see about the better, but I’ll wager they were not bigger.”

I huffed, and shrugged one shoulder, refusing to adjust myself to a more comfortable angle. “Every man brags. It means nothing.”

Zeri rolled smoothly onto his knees, but whatever he planned to say or do was interrupted by one of the Molossa—the first time any of them had spoken.

“My lord?”

“Calix?” Zeri stayed where he was, his eyes on my mouth. “Whatever it is, go and do it.”

“Yes, my lord.” Calix bowed his head, almost hiding a smile, and all four of them rose to their feet. “Rest well, my lords.” I lost sight of them as they walked past the rocks, out of the firelight. Zeri still hadn’t moved.

“Naxom,” he said, drawing my attention again. He sat back on his heels, palms flat on his thighs. “As *dosmallos*—*Others*, in your tongue—we are bound. Me to you and you to me. But as much as I wish it, that does not mean there needs to be more between us.” His gaze slid away from me to the blankets the Aufidii had laid out for us—one pallet, not two—and he sighed. “Nor does it mean anything must happen tonight, despite their assumptions.”

“Or yours?” I moved until I mimicked his position, our knees almost touching.

“I would—”

I didn’t wait for more. I straightened and put both hands on his shoulders, using my weight to topple him onto his back. He went with no resistance, his knees parting so I landed between his thighs, and his hips rocked up to meet mine. I hissed in frustration—my cock was trapped against my leg—and lifted up enough to slide a hand down inside my leathers. Zeri grabbed my hair and kissed me, pushing his tongue into my mouth, his moan encouraging me to do the same. I did, and he switched tactics and sucked it deeper—*gods*. I yanked my hand away from my cock before I spent then and there.

One-handed, I undid the laces at my waist so I could shove my leathers down to my thighs. I wanted his hands on my bare skin, not just a furtive tug with my cock poking through the placket. Zeri released my tongue and did the same, wriggling beneath me and panting.

Both of his hands, as callused as my own, grabbed my buttocks at the same time he arched up. “Move,” he growled, and I plunged my tongue into his mouth, tasting his gasp. I thrust my hips down to collide with his, spreading my knees and forcing his thighs wider and higher. His belly was slick and I rubbed along it shamelessly, rutting into his smooth armored skin and hard muscles. Our mouths parted ways as we found a rhythm of sorts, and kissing was replaced by sucking bites to throats and shoulders—I breathed in his scent and tasted the salt of his sweat, whining in frustration at not being closer, at still being two bodies separated by skin.

Zeri bit me, right at the juncture of neck and shoulder, and my cock jerked between us, weeping but not quite there, trapped on the cusp of release. He licked my jaw, and I shuddered at the hungry way he mouthed his way to my

ear. "Come for me," he breathed, "cover me. I want my skin to taste of you, I want to lick—"

The rest was lost when my entire body convulsed, toes curling in my boots, thighs shaking, and my vision gone to sparks and fog. I might have cried out, and I know Zeri did, hoarse and breathless while his fingers dug into my muscles and held me down, as close as our bodies allowed. Our hips slowed, our softening shafts gliding lazily on skin slippery with spend and sweat, riding the last tremors of pleasure for as long as we could stand it.

My head dropped to Zeri's shoulder, inexplicable laughter rising in my chest. Under me, Zeri snorted, and turned so his temple pressed mine. The more I imagined the way we must appear—leathers around our thighs, sweat-soaked hair—and how we had gone at one another with all the finesse of lupa in the spring, the worse the urge to laugh became. I pushed back to sit on my heels, grimacing at the mess we'd made of my shirt. My leathers had escaped unscathed, and I hitched them back around my hips, still swallowing my laughter.

Zeri propped himself up on his elbows, watching me. "You can do as you like," he said, waving a hand at his belly. "I'm not sleeping like this." He scrambled to his feet, making a face as he grabbed his own drooping leathers with one hand and brushed off his buttocks with the other. "I have sand in unseemly places." Then he shucked the leathers, shaking them out and tossing them in the direction of our makeshift bed, leaving him wonderfully naked.

My cock bobbed against my thigh, interested all over again, and I swear to all the gods that Zeri *purred*, the sound tightening my sack and sending a thrill coiling up my spine to lodge in my gut. He turned and walked to the hot spring, wading into the shallow end, and giving me another view to savor.

I got my boots off without falling over, and left the rest of my clothes where they fell. Zeri had left room for me on the rock ledge, and I sank into the steaming water with a groan of pure bliss. I rinsed my hair as best I could, and when I sat up, Zeri pulled the whole dripping tangle over my shoulder. His fingers started at the bottom, finding the snarls and easing them free. It was oddly intimate, and reminded me of the dhourgan's—Zeri's—matted mane.

"How did Peredur know to find you?" I asked, fighting to stay awake, and Zeri's fingers stilled for a moment.

"I don't think it was me he was looking for, and so far as I know, he's already captured one of us."

“Has he?”

Zeri hummed, and I could feel him nod. “He has been searching for one of my kind for a very long time—or so I have heard. I was sent to find my missing cousin.” He sighed. “We never considered that word would go out when a ship from Tharros landed here.”

I blinked. “Is that where you’re from? The stories never say.”

“*Stories.*” His tone left little doubt of his opinion, and he gave my hair a tug. “Tharros is the closest port. Our lands are farther north. Have you ever been on the sea?”

“I’ve never even seen it. The farthest west I’ve ever been was—” I shook my head. “Luculla, perhaps. And the closest to the eastern sea I’ve been was with the caravan.”

“I wonder...” Zeri paused, and his fingers slowed their movements. “I will admit to being curious. I wonder what will happen when ap Horas does not deliver me as promised?”

“I suppose he will use me as an excuse—he asked me as a Cettai.” I turned enough to see him over my shoulder. “Do you think they will continue to Abderan? To explain? When he asked me to find you, ap Horas said you were bought and paid for. Would Peredur have paid them in advance?”

Zeri brushed a kiss to my bare shoulder, humming thoughtfully. “If he did, he was a fool.” He kissed my shoulder again, more insistent this time, and then again. I turned all the way around, and he straddled my thighs, tucking my hardened shaft beneath him. His own bumped my belly, and his lazy smile tightened something in my chest. “Peredur can wait until the morning.”

He leaned down to capture my mouth, and under the water his hips began to rock, inviting me to do the same. Nothing mattered at that moment except learning his taste, and then giving him my fingers to suckle while I teased his nipples to stiffness with lips and tongue and teeth. It was my turn to grip his buttocks, spreading his cheeks so I could rub my cock along his taint and beyond. Zeri moaned around his mouthful of my fingers, his tongue making promises I hoped he would keep. He rose, letting my fingers slip free, and pushed back until my shaft bobbed up next to his.

He wrapped his fingers around us both as best he could. “Stay still.”

I shuddered as he stroked his length against mine in the tunnel of his fist, but did as he’d asked and did not move. The friction was torture, driving me

wild at the same time it was not enough to drive me over the edge. I bit at his nipples, taking them in my teeth and tugging until he hissed and groaned at the same time, pressing his chest forward and silently begging for more.

His hips moved faster, and he used his thumb against my slit—all I could think of was a stopper in the neck of a bottle, and my need to come cramped my thighs and clenched my buttocks under the water. Not caring if he objected, I worked one finger down his crack and speared him. He spasmed around my finger, and his free hand yanked my head back by the hair. Our mouths collided, and I plunged my tongue inside at the same time I added a second finger. He bucked, losing coordination, and I joined my fist to his on our shafts and brought us both over, swallowing his moans and imagining it was my cock his body gripped so tightly.

“Gods,” he breathed when we finally slowed, resting his forehead against mine. I nodded, too drained to form words. *Gods*, indeed.

Chapter Nine

I blinked up at the sun, squinting and trying to piece together where I was, rolling over to stare at the rocks. We were still in Iuvanum, then. It wasn't a dream.

"If you're going to squirm like that, you might move closer so I can enjoy it." Zeri raised his head to scowl at me, and everything fell into place.

"It wasn't a dream." I flopped onto my back and stretched, my muscles complaining.

Zeri turned onto his side, propping his head on one hand. The other slid along my belly, disappearing under the blanket. "Is that good or bad?" He looked thoughtful. "Do you? Have true dreams?"

"No, not like that. They were all... I dreamed of you. Or, of finding you. Of—" I sucked in a surprised breath when he cupped my balls, lifting them, his thumb stroking. "*Zeri*."

"I'm listening. You dreamed of what?" He sounded as though he were smiling. "You dreamed of fire, yes?" He let go of my balls to run the backs of his fingers along my thigh, and I spread my legs, wondering if he—

Zeri lowered himself between my knees, dragging the blanket down to my feet as he did. Before I could say anything, he licked right up my shaft, and when he reached the head, he swallowed me down whole. Breathing was impossible, and I grabbed handfuls of bedding, gasping. He let me go, and I swore at him as soon as I had enough breath.

He wrapped one hand around me, low and tight. His lips moved against my shaft. "You were saying?"

I reached down and grabbed his hair. "Don't stop," I told him, and he didn't, not until we were both dazed and sated.

Beyond the rocks, I could hear the Molossa stirring and smell a fire and cooking. My stomach gurgled, and I staggered up from the chaos we'd made of the bedding to go and piss. When I came back, Zeri was nowhere to be seen, but I heard his voice from the direction of the fire. My boots sat next to a stack of folded clean clothing, and I took that to mean I should dress.

The shirt was a fine, soft linen, far better made than my own, and the leathers were also marvelously soft, and dyed a rich earth color. They were reinforced for riding, and the fronts and sides of the thighs were doubled thickness, with thin bone plates sewn in between. The matching sleeveless doublet was made the same way, and would afford me some protection—not as good as the Molossa's, but adequate. Even the stockings were a wonder, knitted of undyed paca fleece, and welcome under my boots. Belt, knife—my hair was a lost cause, a hopeless tangle, and I let it be—now that I was dressed, I headed for the fire and Zeri.

In the light of morning, it was clear this camp was no makeshift thing. Wood for the fire was piled neatly, there was meat drying and smoking, and beyond the screen of scrubby trees were eight tanga, standing hipshot in the sun on a picket line. Only two of the Molossa were present, Calix and one other—Therin, I thought—plus Zeri.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Five hands of days, my lord,” Calix replied. He stood up and gave me a slight bow. “Will you come and break your fast, my lord?”

“Yes, thank you.” I hesitated. As a Cettai, I was not anyone's lord. “Calix, I am not—”

“Do not even try,” Zeri said dryly. “It will be a waste of breath on your part, and they will do it anyway.” He patted the empty space next to him on the folded blanket, and I lowered myself to sit with him. He smiled at me when we were eye level, and leaned in to brush his nose along my jaw. “Eat, and then we'll make plans.”

Hungry enough not to argue, I took the food Calix offered—hard-cooked eggs mixed with a salty dried meat and wrapped in the same flatbread as last night. It was like nothing I'd had before, and I said as much when I thanked Calix.

“Therin is the one to thank, my lord. Without him, we should all starve, even in the middle of a marketplace.” His glance at Therin was warm with affection, and the other Molossa ducked his head and mumbled his thanks. The other two Molossa returned then, coming over to the fire and crouching across from Zeri and me.

“No sign of any trackers, my lord,” one of the pair said in a hoarse voice, and I tried not to stare at the scars visible around his throat. “Those two from

last night returned to the caravan.” He tipped his head at his companion. “Eliud followed their trail, all the ways back down to the river, but it seems the entire caravan has had something of a change of heart—and direction.”

“I can’t say as I’m surprised,” Zeri said. “Lefi ap Horas is probably thinking it’ll be easier to explain things if he’s holed up in his mountains.” He raised one knee and propped an arm on it, turning to look at me. “I think we need to go to Abderan.”

“You said I should not go there,” I pointed out.

“That was... before.” Zeri shrugged. “The Wheel turns as it will, and now our path has changed. I had no way to be sure I would be able to slip the collar once we reached the river—or if you would remove that muzzle. Both needed to be off if I was to escape.” His mouth quirked up on one side. “You were remarkably resistant to compulsion—and for that I suppose I must blame your training.”

I grinned in acknowledgment, remembering the end of our conversation of the night before. “You want to find Peredur. And your cousin.”

“Yes. We were already on our way to the coast when we got word that my cousin had disappeared. He had two Molossa with him, and they came home without him. They said he went into the palace to meet with your emperor and disappeared.” Zeri shook his head, his eyes flat and their color strangely muted.

“They should never have returned without him,” Calix growled, and the other three nodded. The hoarse-voiced one—I guessed him to be Bened—leaned forward and spoke directly to me.

“Seeing as how only his death would release them from their vows—one of them should have stayed behind if he was still alive, and the other played messenger.”

“So... you were already on your way here?” I asked Zeri.

Zeri paused before he answered. “Yes. We were—” He looked away from me, and then back. “When you met with the caravan—when I called you—you were traveling to Abderan. Yes?” I nodded, and he shrugged one shoulder. His next words were slow, almost reluctant. “Before, for months I dreamed of a city, and fire. And you, although your face was never clear. Only the red kilt, and the tunic. And this.” He touched a finger to my amulet, a red stone suspended on a gold chain. “The city was no place I had ever been, and we have no followers of Cett in my homeland. In Tharros, I described the city, and

one of the sailors said it was Abderan. So, when... someone was needed to come here, I agreed." He frowned. "Why were you headed there?"

"Cydnos—the festival. It seemed as good a place as any to begin."

Zeri stared at me for a long moment. "Calix—"

All four Molossa got to their feet, and Calix bowed his head. "We'll just go and pack up camp then, my lord."

"Does he always read your mind like that?" I asked, and only heard the edge in my voice after the words were out.

"He and I have been together for more than half my life, and no—" He paused until I turned to look at him. "We were never lovers. He and Therin were always a pair, for as long as I can remember." Zeri held up a comb. "May I? It will only get worse if you leave it, and I would not see you cut it."

I tried to take the comb from him. "I can—"

He lunged at me, shoving me sideways, and still managed to find my mouth—kissing me with a rough urgency that made me lose track of all my objections. And not incidentally leaving me dazed enough to let him have his way.

Chapter Ten

The Aufidii were efficient, I'd give them that, for they had the two extra tanga loaded and ready before the sun was even a quarter way to midday. Up close, these tanga were clearly nothing like the stocky mountain type I'd learned to ride on. These were longer-legged, with shining coats in varying shades of earth-brown, and elegant curved necks. Eliud explained that they had brought these with them from their homeland—these tanga were well used to both them and Zeri in both their forms and were smoother of gait, and therefore more comfortable over a distance.

He spoke the truth, for once we mounted up and began our journey, I rode for a goodly while before I could find words to describe the experience. *Floating*, perhaps came the closest—instead of bouncing in the saddle, I merely rocked from side to side, a strange sensation. The sun rose to its zenith, our shadows clinging underneath us, before we stopped to water the tanga and ourselves. Therin gave out food, and we all crouched next to our mounts on the bank of the stream to eat.

I had not thought about what would happen once I found my Other—foolish to plan for something that might take years, and who knew where I would be? Zeri and I could travel wherever we wished, even to his homeland—that would be an adventure worth having.

“After Abderan,” I said, and saw Zeri clench his jaw. “Where should we go?”

He scooped up a handful of water and rinsed his face. “Wherever you'd like,” he said after an overlong pause. He stood, not looking in my direction. “We should get moving.”

Abderan glowed in the afternoon sunlight, her walls rising to an imposing height as we neared the northern gate. This was our third day of traveling, and the fabulous smoothness of the tanga's paces had palled late on the first overlong day of riding. My lower back ached, my thighs ached, and the grit in my clothes and my hair had me half-wild with the need for a proper bath, in a bathhouse. Even in the monastery we had a bathing room, and we were expected to keep ourselves clean. It did not mean we bathed every day, but near enough to keep our bodies and hair free of pests.

We joined the throng of pilgrims streaming in toward the gates, for all were welcome in Abderan for the sun festival. There were still guards, though, and six armed men together would be marked and remarked upon, so our party split into three—Calix rode with me and Zeri, Therin trailed a few lengths behind us, and Eliud and Bened followed another group of riders.

The din inside the walls was near overwhelming after the relative quiet of our journey, and the smell of cooking warred with dung and overripe vegetables, all of it overlaid with smoke. Calix led the way onto a curving side street, the houses and shops overhanging the cobbles and blocking the light. The six of us rode on without speaking, and Calix turned into a gate that let into the walled yard of an inn. We all dismounted, and I tried not to groan at the relief of being on my feet. Therin and Calix went inside, and after a longish while they came back with a man I took for the innkeeper.

“My lord,” he said, bowing, his hands twisting together. “I can only spare two rooms of any size—and that is possible only if I move one of my guests to a lesser room—and he—”

Zeri held out his hand, and the innkeeper reached for the coins, still protesting. “Baths,” Zeri said, cutting him off. “For all of us. And a meal—I trust you have a private dining room.” It was not a question, and the innkeeper nodded in complete agreement, silenced by the coins in his fist and Zeri’s imperious drawl. “Stalls for our tanga, as well, food and water. We will carry our own packs. The rooms?”

More babbling from the innkeeper, the result of which was Calix and Therin taking our saddlebags and packs upstairs to oversee the preparation of our rooms, while Zeri and I followed a boy around the side of the inn to the bathhouse, trailed by Bened. Eliud went with another boy to see the tanga settled in their stalls.

Inside the bathhouse, Zeri and I stripped and left our things in a niche before entering the steam room with only a linen towel around our hips, with Bened standing guard outside. The boy ladled water over the rocks and left, leaving us to breathe in the heated, herb-scented air... and the tang of sweat, as the dirt and salt of our travels rose off our skin. And more.

The past nights, Zeri had been relentless in exploring my body and encouraging me to do the same to him. Sitting in the moist heat, I could smell him on me, a dark, nearly rank reminder of how many times he had come to completion against my belly or in my hand. I leaned back on the smooth

wooden bench and let my knees fall apart as my sack tightened and my shaft thickened, swinging around to bump my damp thigh under the linen drape.

Zeri was leaning back, eyes closed, so I swung my legs up, turning so I could use his thigh as a cushion. He tipped his head down to look at me. “Comfortable?”

I hummed my answer, arching a bit and resting my outside foot on the floor. The linen slid off my lap, exposing me to his interested gaze. Under my head, something nudged my ear. I grinned up at him. “And you?” Zeri’s fingertips trailed down my chest, and I closed my eyes.

His palm flattened over my abdomen, heading south. “Not yet. Wait a bit, then ask me again.”

We were boneless from the steam and hot water, among other things, by the time the six of us gathered in the private dining room of the inn and sat down to eat. The meal was a silent one, beyond some desultory small talk—the tanga were settled, our rooms were ready, was there more bread?—we were all exhausted, and for myself, clean hair and a fresh linen shirt only went so far in reviving me.

Our room was still glowing with twilight when Zeri and I fell into bed, and I remembered nothing until the morning sun woke me. Zeri was curled against my back, his breath tickling my neck. “I have a plan,” he whispered, and I rolled onto my back so I could see him. He stared back at me, unsmiling, and I closed my eyes.

“Why do I suspect I’m not going to like this very much?”

I was right about not liking what he had thought up—and he ignored every objection I produced. Calix brought him parchment and ink, and Zeri penned a note to Grygor Peredur, asking for an audience. He paid one of the innkeeper’s kitchen boys to deliver it while I fumed.

“Are you out of your head?” I demanded after the boy had left. “You’re going to go, alone?”

“Yes.” I knew him well enough by now to know he was hiding something, but considering my own secrets, I was hardly in a position to throw stones. “I don’t want you anywhere near the palace—all I am is a diversion. Calix and

Therin will search for my cousin—they are far better at that sort of glamour than I. Once they have him, I'll escape." His too-steady eye contact told me he was lying, but about what?

The last thing I wanted was to go anywhere near the palace—which gave all my protests an air of falseness. Coming to Abderan was one thing, for the crowds in the streets or the local guardsmen would hardly know what the vanished heir to the Valerii looked like. Plenty of northerners had my coloring, and my cowl would disguise that well enough. And if I dressed as a Cettai, I would be invisible, although that ruse would not work inside the palace. If anything, I would be found out sooner.

"Take the others with you then," I said. "Bened, at least. I don't need the two of them here with me while I wait."

"No." His jaw clenched so hard his teeth should have creaked, and I wanted to shake him until those teeth rattled.

Stalking over to the window and leaning my hands on the sill, I glared down at the inn yard below. Zeri came and draped over my back, running one hand down my arm and reaching for my chin with the other. He turned my head and stretched his neck, trying for a kiss, and I thought of every other time he had reached for me like this, using his hands and mouth and body to distract me.

I jerked my face away, jabbing an elbow back hard enough to make him grunt. Shouldering him out of my way, I put an arm's length between us. "Don't," I warned him.

The hurt that flashed across his features, there and then gone, surprised me. His lips parted, but all that came out was a soft sound before he shook his head, swallowing down whatever he had meant to say. Something dark moved behind his eyes, something awful, and he shuddered the least bit. "Please," he said, and that one quiet syllable sent a chill skittering down my spine on a thousand legs even as heat bloomed low inside me.

Zeri let me strip off his clothes, offering no resistance when I pushed him down on the bed, and he lay there with tiny shivers racing over his skin while I undressed myself. When I finally kissed him, he responded with a hungry enthusiasm that, for no reason I could name, left me uneasy even as I lost myself in his taste and the sounds he made.

He sucked my tongue, he bit my jaw, his fingers pinching and tugging at my nipples until I squirmed with the sweet pain of it, both of us grinding our hips

into whatever part of the other was closest. We rolled together, putting me on my back, and all I did was close my eyes when his mouth slid, hot and open and wet, along my belly until he reached my shaft. He licked everywhere, tip to sack, never taking me fully into his mouth, using one hand to tug my foreskin up over the weeping head until I was slick and desperate for release.

When he straddled me and lunged for my mouth, all I wanted was to come. I growled at him, and grabbed his buttocks, and he wrestled my hands off him. I moved my hips, looking for relief, for pressure, and he finally let me have something—one quick move from him and I slid up between his cheeks. Good as that was, I was greedy now, and too far gone to care what he wanted. Bucking, I wrapped a hand around his shaft and urged him up so that I could get my hand around both of us.

He did raise up, but only to tip his hips and sink back down—and I froze, holding my breath when I partially breached his body. I had never—for all the times Sefin and I pleased one another, we'd never gone this far, and there hadn't been anyone else. Zeri's body was hot and tight, and all I managed was a curse before he forced me the rest of the way in. It hurt—the twist of his mouth and the way his eyes were squeezed shut told me as much—but oh gods, the rough grip of his body was unexpectedly perfect.

Zeri moved, an ungraceful twitch of his hips, and we both hissed. Again, and when he shuddered I felt it all the way down my shaft and into my balls. I reached up, flattening my palms to slide over his taut muscles, tracing the armored skin. His hips rose partway, and fell, and he shoved one of my hands down and curled my fingers around his half-hard cock. It thickened when I pumped, and Zeri threw his head back and thrust into my fingers, panting through clenched teeth. I dug my heels into the mattress and matched him, sliding easier when his body relaxed and accepted me, and when Zeri said *please* again, grinding down while he swelled in my fist, I drove myself as deep as I could reach. His hand took over when I lost coordination, and the strong pulse of his pleasure dragged out my own until it bordered on pain.

Once I slipped free, Zeri collapsed on top of me, his face buried between my head and the pillow. He was shivering, and I dragged a sheet over him as best I could. He muttered something, the words blurry against my skin. It took a long moment for them to sink in and make sense. *I don't want to leave you.*

I slid a hand into his hair, draping my other arm around his waist. "I'll be here. Waiting," I told him.

He took a deep breath before he replied. "I know."

Chapter Eleven

Far more than half the day was gone, and I paced the width of our room, too restless to sit. The tray from the midday meal sat nearly untouched, and I told my complaining stomach I would eat when Zeri returned.

The boy he had sent to the palace had returned with an escort, and Zeri had gone to meet Peredur, along with Calix and Therin. To distract myself, I tried thinking of what we had done together, but instead of the incredible pleasure of being joined that way, my mind persisted in showing me every time Zeri had deflected a question about the future.

I went round and round, picking at the memories until I suspected every move and every conversation. There was no obvious lie, no inconsistency to anything he'd told me. When I reached for my talent, the surety that he was, truly, my Other glowed like a coal, warming me and mocking my doubts. And then I would hear him say, "I know", and the... the strange *finality* in his tone would start the cycle all over again.

The shadows in the room lengthened and filled the corners, and still no word. I stared out the window at the darkening sky, and as the first star winked into being, I knew what I needed to do to keep from going mad.

I folded my clothes neatly on the bed as I stripped them off. From my pack, I drew out my red kilt, the wide belt, and the matching short tunic and cowl. First I put on a fresh loincloth, and then fastened the belt high on my waist. Next came the kilt, tucking each fold and pleat under the belt, all the way around, before settling the belt lower and snugging it tighter. Then the tunic, still smelling faintly of the sweet and fragrant herbs of the storage chest, and the cowl around my neck. My knife secure at my hip, I slipped the gold chain that held my amulet over my head, under the cowl, so the red stone rested against my breastbone, cool and heavy. Lastly, I slid two small knives into the sheaths inside my gauntlets, flexing my hands to check the fit. In the monastery, or if sitting in judgment, it was tradition to be barefoot, but I needed to walk the streets of Abderan this evening, so my boots would be needed. After a brief hesitation, I hefted the sword Zeri had left behind and fastened the scabbard to my belt. I did not intend to need it tonight, but far better to have it and not need it than the reverse.

I knocked once on the connecting door, and waited until Bened opened it. "I am going to the temple. To meditate. You can find me there if you receive any

word.” He clearly wanted to object, but a lifetime of service kept him silent—exactly as I had hoped. For what I intended to do, I wanted no escort waiting on me. And if word did come, or if Zeri returned, they would know where to find me.

The streets were less crowded around the late twilight—shops were closing, and the swarms of people going about their daytime errands had yet to be replaced by the nighttime packs of pleasure-seekers and thieves. Even so, the hush inside the temple forecourt surprised me.

As befitted Cett, the temple was constructed of plain grayish-brown local stone, the pale shade soothing to the eyes. There was no paint or gilding here, no elaborate murals or mosaics. The forecourt was all about symmetry and mathematics, its columns and arches precise and orderly, inspiring peace in the viewer. At the far end of the forecourt, an open doorway led to the domed sanctuary, although a trick of the construction made it appear that there was no doorway at all. To reach the sanctuary, you walked into what seemed a solid wall, only to find a passage stretching to either side. Left or right made no difference, both doubled back around the wall to another open doorway letting out into the sanctuary itself. Even our monastery temple used this arrangement, both for appearance and defense.

The sanctuary was empty, as I had hoped, and I walked to the center of the open space and knelt, the stone cool under my knees through the kilt. Like the forecourt, the sanctuary was plain to the point of austerity. Outsiders never looked beyond that, and considered us a poor Order—where was our gold, our gems? What famous artisans had we employed for the glory of our god? Where were our rich vestments and the costly incense?

We had no need of any of those—the goal of our Order was understanding the truth of the world. It was possible to learn everything and yet know nothing—so we were taught. Our lives were dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge arcane and mundane, and it was often said that we were novices at all trades and masters of none. Like Cett, who was the god of everything and nothing.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the musty scent of stone, letting the silence of the space seep through me and unknot my shoulders and neck. I knelt, and breathed, until the world fell away and there was only the now. The ragged spaces inside me lost their edges, and my heartbeat matched that of the earth, slow and even. The anxiety of waiting faded to nothing, and I opened myself to all of existence, the gates of my magic level and plumb and *there*.

No sound prompted me to open my eyes, but my knife was in my hand and I was balanced to lunge. The Cettai facing me was old, hair gone to white and his face crinkled from a lifetime of sun and wind. His sword did not waver, though, as we faced one another in the cool dimness.

“Brother.” He sheathed his sword and nodded, his stance relaxed, and I put away my knife as I straightened up.

“I have found my Other,” I said, and the echo of my voice murmured along the walls. “He is Dhourgan.”

The older Cettai’s chest expanded at his sudden inhale. “That has never been, though some have hoped.” His light brown eyes seemed almost gold as he watched me. “Such an Other is both a very great gift and a curse—their magic is not like ours.” His bow was of one Cettai to another, for now I was no longer a novice, and could take up the full responsibilities of our Order. “May Cett guide your arm and your feet, and may he open the way to wisdom for you.” As he spoke, his eyes searched my face, my body, and I saw the moment recognition dawned—and the dismay nipping at its heels.

I returned his bow. “Let me not keep you from your meditations, brother. I have been long on the road, and the peaceful—”

The pain in my chest was as abrupt as it was shocking, and I actually looked down to be sure blood didn’t stain my tunic. I did not cry out—I had no breath. The same bright hook as before tore at my heart and twisted in my guts, a summons impossible to ignore. I whirled, orienting, and only then heard the sounds of booted feet marching in rhythm outside the forecourt. The city guardsmen, on patrol. There was no reason for them to pay any attention to me—but a man running, at night?

The Cettai pointed at the far wall, and I sprinted for the disguised doorway there, around the dividing wall and out into another courtyard. Two Cettai looked up, startled, and I wasted no time on greetings or bows. A running step gained me the lip of a stone trough, and my fingers grabbed for the raised lip of the low roof. I leapt and swung, planting both hands on the roof the moment my feet found the edge, praying the sword would not trip me up. I vaulted over the ridge, and skipped down the slope, launching myself off the roof to the ground.

The street beyond was empty—and dark—and no one noted my passing. I ran, the hook in my chest burning my lungs, taking turn after turn as I followed that invisible tether onward. The wall of the castle foiled my mad dash, and just as I stopped, the hook evaporated, leaving behind a gaping tear.

I wasted an eternity doubling back to find an entrance, not knowing what the loss of the hook meant and hoping Zeri was merely unconscious or distracted and not dead. *That* I would have felt, I was sure of it, and that surety lent some calm reason to my search. The postern gate sat in a deep arch of stone, hidden from the street—and it was locked. I put both hands flat on the scarred wood and closed my eyes, trailing one hand down to look for a keyhole. Nothing. I extended my senses, sinking into the wood and touching the iron hinges. It would take more strength than I had to pull the long nails holding them in place, and I growled in frustration.

Behind me, I heard the scuff of paws on stone, and Bened and Eliud pressed against my thighs, both of them panting. As much as I wanted to take them to task for disobeying me, I gave that up when warmth flooded me from the contact, a prickle suffusing my every vein, and my palms flexed against the door as my magic swelled and looked deeper. A stout wooden bar held the door shut from the inside, and I felt along the iron brackets there for any weakness. Earth magic came easiest to me, so I tested the stone of the wall around the fastenings of those brackets.

The stone wanted to be whole, and the spike was an unwanted intrusion. The mortar holding the spike in place was old, and crumbled easily when I encouraged the stone to expel the iron. I urged the first spike out, slow and steady, and started on the second after I heard a faint *plink* from the other side. Sweat formed under my arms and in the small of my back from the effort. The second spike fell, and the bar slipped down on that side as the bracket came loose. I shoved, and Bened and Eliud stood on their hind legs and leaned their weight on the door as well. The door opened a finger's width and stopped—the bar had fallen, only it still held fast in the other bracket.

Mindful of how much time had passed, I clenched my will around the wood of the bar and wrenched it sideways. The door opened with a muted squeal of rusted hinges, and the three of us froze, listening. No alarm sounded, no footsteps came to investigate. "Stay here," I told the Molossa, not sure if I was making a mistake. "I cannot risk you—and if all else fails, you may be able to get Zeri out." I stepped around the door and pushed it closed, jamming the bar back in place before they could follow me. Bened growled, but did not push against the door. Now I could only hope I did not need their help.

The postern let into a disused narrow courtyard, with only one possible exit. As quickly as I dared, I crossed the length of the courtyard, and found myself in another narrow walled area the same as before. Not knowing the layout of the

castle, I guessed this was for defense—anyone coming through the postern gate would be trapped here, channeled from one area to the next through openings barely wide enough for one man at a time. I jogged through two more similar spaces, watching the walls above for patrolling guards.

I found an unlocked door, and as I slipped around it into some kind of practice ground—archery butts and a quintain—the absolute certainty that I was going the wrong way filled me to the brim. I needed to turn around, go back, find another—

The moment I acted on that feeling and headed back the way I had come, it drained away. I hesitated after only a few steps. Turning in place, I took one experimental step toward the practice ground, and then another. Doubt rose up and choked me—*not that way, I would be lost, go back, go back, go back...*

“Zeri.” I breathed his name, staring up at the dark bulk of the castle against the night sky. “You forget I know your tricks.”

Chapter Twelve

And in that fashion, in fits and starts and wrong turnings, I wended my way deeper into the castle complex. The stronger the idea of going back became, the more certain I could be of choosing the correct passage. More than once I slipped into the shadows to avoid being seen, casting only the most basic glammers of avoidance—for all I knew, some of the guards could be sensitive to the presence of magic. At long last I entered the base of a square tower, where one staircase rose to the upper stories, and another led down into the cellars. For a moment, my dislike of closed dark spaces warred with Zeri's sending, but my own dread was no match for the terror choking me as soon as I ascended one step.

Up, then, wishing Bened and Eliud were crowding my heels and guarding my back. With every rising step, my heart hammered like dueling blacksmiths, my pulse rang in my ears, and I clenched my teeth against the urge to retch—and all the while, the compulsion to run down the stairs to freedom throbbed in my head. I stepped into a workroom of sorts—a stool next to a broad stone-topped table holding bowls and stoppered jars, another one of tools, and a tangle of pipes for distilling.

I crossed the room to reach the next set of stairs, and the pressure in my chest disappeared like a soap bubble, leaving me light-headed. The sword was in my hand without any thought, and I ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

As I cleared the landing, I blocked a wooden staff aimed at my head—grabbed it and jerked it away, letting it clatter down the stairs. In that first instant, all I saw was Zeri, chained to the wall and looking at me in horror. Considering he was the one bruised and streaked with blood, that did seem a bit strange, but all I knew or cared at the moment was that he lived.

A knife flew in my direction, poorly aimed. I batted it away on my gauntlet, advancing on the only other person in the chamber. He was in all ways unremarkable—not tall, not short, neither handsome nor ugly, the kind of man who could slip through a crowd unseen—the perfect Cettai, had he applied himself. All he did was walk backwards, hands raised in surrender... grinning.

“Valerius,” he said. “At last.”

My heart skipped a beat at the satisfaction oozing through those three words. No one outside of my Order, not even Zeri, knew my family name, or

that I existed. I lunged, intending to silence him, and he jerked sideways and skipped out of reach.

“Peredur,” I growled, to confirm what I had already guessed, and if anything, his grin widened.

“Even if you kill me,” he said, gliding sideways, “the guards will have you before you can escape.”

I snorted. “I managed to get this far without being seen, I daresay I can do the same in reverse. Who else knows?”

“Aneirin.”

Oh gods—the emperor? “Why?”

He shrugged, no longer grinning. “Clusium grows too powerful. You would be a handy bargaining chip.” Grygor Peredur cocked his head at me, and his sly smile chilled me to the core. In the distance, many booted feet thudded on stone, and I swallowed. I lowered the sword slightly, and Peredur smirked, his unremarkable eyes glowing with satisfaction. I cut off his head.

Peredur’s body fell in a spray of blood, and I ignored that to turn on Zeri. “Not a word out of you, unless you know where the keys are.”

“No keys,” he said hoarsely, eyes narrowed. “Pins.” So they were, and I made short work of his fetters, catching him when he staggered. “Look around,” he gasped, holding his ribs, and I did, noticing what I should have seen the moment I entered the chamber.

Shelves lined one wall, and they held books. *Books*. More than I had ever seen in one place. The lettering on one spine caught my eye, and I hissed, too dumbstruck for words. I snatched that one off the shelf and opened it at random, a moan bubbling in the back of my throat. In a careful hand were laid out the inner workings of my Order, something that should never have been committed to parchment. There was a very sound reason our teachings were oral, each and every novice only proceeding when his teacher judged him ready. With such a book as this, anyone with a sliver of talent could learn spells or incantations without the discipline to control the outcome. I ran shaking fingers over other volumes, realizing by the titles that these were all the same thing, more or less—the accumulated knowledge of different schools of magic all collected in one place.

Voices sounded at the base of the tower, someone giving orders, followed by the sound of steel sliding from scabbards. Going down the stairs was not an option anymore, and the only other way was up—useless unless one had wings.

“You should not have come after me,” Zeri said, and in my despair I shoved him, anger trampling any good sense. It was the curse of my house, and always had been.

“I would rather us die together than live knowing I had left you behind.” I shoved him again, and he stumbled back, his shoulders hitting the wall. Next to him, an open window showed a narrow slice of night sky, and beyond it, I heard more voices yelling the alarm.

“I saw you die,” he snarled at me. “Over and over. In my dreams. In a tower like this, filled with fire. I thought if he had me, he would let you live.”

I laughed, and even to my own ears, I sounded mad. “He would never have stopped looking for me, not once he knew who I was.”

“I did not tell him your name.”

“It doesn’t matter how he knew, now that the emperor knows I exist.” Footsteps on the stairs below now, and I stared at the books rather than face Zeri’s puzzlement. All those gods-cursed books. All that... parchment.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Zeri, and opened the gates of my magic just as the first guard reached our level. The books burst into flames, tumbling from the shelves as they ignited. The wooden shelves flared up a heartbeat later, and the soldier yelled in surprise as a burning book struck him. The linen of his shirt cuff went up, and so did the wall hanging above the stairwell. Then the ceiling above us caught fire, and still I could not stop—anger had a firm grip on me and I wanted everything to burn. Everything.

A bloody arm caught me around the chest, and Zeri laughed in my ear as he spun me around. “Hold on to me.” He spun us further, and my concentration wobbled. The room was an inferno now, my skin tightening even as sweat ran down and instantly disappeared. Cool air from the window rushed past us, and Zeri tumbled us both over the low sill into nothing.

Chapter Thirteen

The tower was gone, the fire was gone, the soldiers were gone. All that existed was Zeri, wrapped close to my side, as we twisted and spun through nothing and nowhere. My lungs screamed for air that did not exist, and the urge to breathe consumed me. White sparks danced across my vision as I fought not to inhale. My ears popped, and we slapped onto something hard, startling me into a gasp.

I inhaled water, and thrashed, choking, until my head broke the surface. Rocks scraped my knees as I crawled for the shore, and then I vomited up water and bile until my ribs ached. Zeri crawled up next to me, and if I could have, I would have hit him. "You could have warned me," I finally managed.

"I didn't know if it would work."

I raised my dripping face to stare at him. "You threw us both out a window without knowing what would happen?"

He moved farther from the water and flipped around to sit on the dry sand. He bared his teeth at me. "You think I should have let us burn?"

"I think you could have spared a moment to say more than 'hold on to me'." I sat back on my heels, flattening my hands on my thighs and then bunching my sodden kilt in both fists.

"This from someone who considers 'I'm sorry' a sufficient warning before they incinerate a room?" His teeth were clenched before he was finished.

"I have problems with fire," I admitted.

"Problems," he repeated, and I ducked my head so I wouldn't laugh at the look on his face just then. "Gods below." He scrubbed his face with both hands, grimacing at the sand, and I saw his hand shake—what had it cost him to move us this far? "I never thought—the dream was always the same, no matter what I did."

"You could have explained."

"Oh, for certain—and how would that have helped? We'd both be in chains now."

"Considering your brilliant plan consisted of leaving me behind—what if he killed you?"

"I didn't *plan* on dying," Zeri snarled, and I laughed at him.

"Yes, and I'm certain every dead man would say the same if asked."

"Gods." Zeri lay back down, covering his eyes. "It was the only thing I could think of."

"In the future, perhaps I should do the planning."

He laughed, with a curse in the middle of it, and sat back up. I looked around, only now recognizing the small lake we had landed in—the flat rocks and the way the land dipped beyond it were still familiar after all these years. I frowned at the lake. "How did you know to bring us here?"

"The hot spring is too shallow, and this was the only other place with water I knew well enough." He shrugged. "We camped here for a night or two, on our way south. We agreed to use this as a meeting place if we had to separate. This way, Calix and the others will know where to find us. Eventually," he added, mouth twisting. He leaned forward, looping his arms over his bent knees. "So who are you, really?"

"I could ask you the same." I moved onto drier ground, and into a more comfortable position, trying to ignore the cold water dripping from my hair down under my wet tunic. A fire would be—Perhaps not.

Zeri made motion with his hand that I interpreted as a bow. "My father is a duke, our Lord of War. Minor royalty—enough to cause an incident if I were to be killed, but not someone whose existence would threaten a kingdom." He narrowed his eyes at me, and I sighed.

"I am the eldest son of Melanion Valerius, who was the eldest son of Laxomion Valerius, clan chief of all the Valerii." Zeri made a rude gesture when I paused, so I continued—the first time I had ever said any of this aloud to anyone. "The Valerii ruled Iuvanum"—I waved a hand at the land around us, and Zeri nodded—"for more generations than I have fingers. They were... ambitious, and quick to anger, and it mattered very little to them who got in the way of those ambitions. The Maecia held Clusium, the province to the north, and no matter what the Valerii offered, the Maecia refused to give up so much as a twig or a stone."

Zeri grunted, and swung his hair over his bare shoulder so he could wring it out. "Let me guess. Blood-feud or outright slaughter?"

"Both. In a way. First the blood-feud, until every northern province had taken sides and the entire north was on the brink of war. One house was as bad

as the other—the Valerii would raze a village, and Maecia would offer the refugees succor. At a steep price. The emperor—this one, Aneiron the Fourth—sent a Cettai into the north to find a solution.”

“Ah.” Zeri raised his eyebrows. “If this was a story, there would be a daring escape by ship, and mistaken identities.” I rolled my eyes at him, and he gave me a tired smile. “So, the Cettai ventures into the nest of serpa—” He waved a hand, and I went on, slower now so as not to lose the threads of the story.

“Just so. In the end, the Cettai proposed sanctions against both houses, and a formal treaty, complete with hostages for their good behavior—one son from each house, of equal standing. The Cettai then made it so, and perhaps it might have settled things, save that word came to Maecia that the Valerii had killed their hostage, the nephew of the Maecia clan chief.” I had to stop and clear my throat, and only Zeri’s steady gaze allowed me to go on. “The emperor, when he heard, sent mercenaries to slaughter every single Valerii male, and every female of their house carrying a child.” Even now, a dull ache grew under my breastbone to say the words out loud.

Zeri stared at me for a long time. “You were the other hostage.”

I nodded. “Fortunately, the Cettai was still with the Maecia—with me. When he heard that the Valerii were dead, he took me away. I was, so far as we knew, now an orphan—my mother was with child when I left. I was... five.” Picking up a handful of sand, I let it trickle through my fingers. “Much later, it was said that the other hostage was killed not by the Valerii, but by an assassin in the pay of the emperor. That may or may not be the truth, but it came to light much later that the Maecia had granted the emperor a half share in all their trading ventures for twenty years, and a Maecia daughter for a concubine to sweeten the bargain.”

“And now the crown worries that Clusium is grown too powerful. I was right. Gods—what is the saying? Lay down with serpa, and never wake up?” Zeri stood, and offered me a hand, pulling me upright. We were both wet, and smelled like smoke, and this close, I could see the exhaustion etched in every line of his face and body.

I slid one arm around his waist, dropping my forehead to his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around me, leaning us together. My other hand found the damp ends of his hair and wrapped them around my fist. “I will not apologize. Not for any of it.” I raised my head, frowning. “Where are Calix and Therin?”

“When I presented myself to Peredur, they slipped off to find the other dhourgan. They are far better at that sort of glamour than I. The plan was that while Peredur was occupied with me, they would free my cousin.”

The image of him in chains rose in my mind, and I stepped back, shaking off his hold and giving his hair a sharp jerk. “Would you care to explain how you in chains was part of that plan?”

“I do not think he intended to kill me.” He grabbed my hand, untangling it from his hair, and licked my palm. He flashed his teeth at me when I scowled. “I’ll admit, there was a moment—when he gave me the drugged wine—” I spluttered, and he shrugged before continuing. “The beating was more to draw you in. He understood enough about my kind to know you would sense that, and come after me. Naxom—”

I looked up and met his eyes, and he chewed his lip. “If I had known the danger to you, I would have come up with a better plan. What will happen, now that the emperor knows you are alive?”

“We only have Peredur’s word on that, but if it is true...” I shivered, and not entirely because of my wet clothes. “My Order needs to be told, and after that...” Another shiver racked me, and Zeri hissed between his teeth.

“We need a fire,” he said. “Although perhaps it would be better if I started it this time. And then we can plan.” He stopped, raising his eyebrows when I coughed. “Hmm. Perhaps you can do the planning.”

Chapter Fourteen

Our planning could easily have been mistaken for arguing, if anyone had been around to hear us. This time of year, the locals would be occupied plowing or seeding their fields, or managing the young bufa and paca born earlier in the season. Once high summer arrived, and the smaller streams dried up, the lake would be used to water the herds. For the moment, though, we had the area to ourselves. With nothing decided, we eventually succumbed to sleep in the gray time before dawn.

The following morning, Zeri changed form and hunted on four legs, bringing back a year-old male bufa. If they were not intended as draft animals, or needed for slaughter, extra males were let loose to fend for themselves. They made for good hunting, and indicated that the local herds were doing well enough for there to be excess.

He was dead on his feet after that, still drained from moving the two of us from Abderan to here, and I let him sleep while I butchered the animal. Our discussion turned more rational once we had food in our bellies, and a bit more sleep, but we were still nowhere near set on a course of action when the Molossa showed up, late the next day.

Eliud and Bened were riding two of the tanga, with Bened trailing a string of three, and Eliud the two laden with packs. Calix and Therin wore their four-legged shapes, and ran beside the group. The last tanga bore a stranger, and Zeri grinned when he saw them.

When they reached our shabby excuse for a camp, Calix and Therin sprawled on their sides, panting, and all eight tanga staggered to a stop almost at once, nostrils wide and red, sweat dripping down their flanks to mix with the dust.

The stranger dismounted, and Zeri hugged him, nearly lifting him off his feet. They were of a height, and the stranger's hair was as black as Zeri's. The stranger stepped back, and they both turned to me, one of Zeri's hands squeezing the stranger's shoulder.

"Agamedes, this is my *desmallos*, Naxom." Zeri waved a hand at me, and gave a small bow. "And this is my cousin, Agamedes. The one I was sent to find."

Zeri's cousin had green and gold eyes, and between his pallor and the way his bones were a shade too prominent, I guessed he had not spent his stay in Abderan in one of the palace guest suites. Zeri had said *desmallos* meant *Other*, but given the way Agamedes looked me over—as though I were a bufa he wanted to buy—I had my doubts.

“You have the gods’ own luck,” he told Zeri. “Felicitations.” He bowed to me, and before I could decide if I was being mocked, Zeri cuffed him in the ear—and then Agamedes caught him around the head and jabbed him in the ribs. Zeri retaliated, laughing, the two of them grappling like a pair of young kunda.

The relief on Zeri's face was almost painful to see, so I left them to their rough play, and helped Eliud and Bened unsaddle the tanga, who looked ready to drop where they stood.

“No one followed us, my lord,” Bened told me. His mouth quirked up in what might have been a smile. “They were far too occupied organizing a fire brigade, weren't they? The other two”—he inclined his head at Calix and Therin, still panting on the ground—“had already found our lord's cousin, and we all met up in the confusion.” His dark eyes met mine, glinting with amusement, and his smile was sly. “There was talk of how the mage summoned a fire-drake, and lost control of it—for didn't half the castle see the creature fly out the window of that tower and disappear?”

“Gods,” I muttered. “Better that than the truth, I suppose.” Set free, all the tanga shambled to the lakeshore and waded in, plunging their muzzles deep into the water. “Come,” I told him. “We have food.”

The Aufidii had rescued all of our belongings from the inn, and Zeri and I were grateful for fresh clothing—not to mention the cheese Therin produced from his packs, along with salt and spices. Our meal was much improved when he took over the preparation, and I told him as much, earning a shy smile.

The seven of us sat around the fire in the late afternoon light, licking grease from our fingers and trading stories. At Zeri's silent urging, I gave the others an edited tale of my origins. The telling seemed easier this time, with Zeri's hand on my knee and his shoulder warm against mine.

“I had more than enough time to think, locked in that cell,” Agamedes said when I was finished. “All Peredur wanted from me was some blood—for scrying. He kept me nearby while he used the mirror. When it didn't show him what he wanted, that's when he had me locked away. I think he knew a

dhourgan was somehow connected to you, and I was the first one that came to hand.”

Calix leaned forward, shaking his head. “What I want to know is who told him my lord Naxom was alive. Scrying don’t work that way, does it? You need to know what you want to ask beforehand, like. Somebody told—and why now, after all this time?”

“They’ll be watching for you,” Zeri said thoughtfully, rocking in place. “So perhaps it’s best if we let the trail go cold.”

I raised my eyebrows at him, waiting for him to elaborate, and he leaned over and kissed me until I almost forgot what I wanted to know. Then he drew back, grinning wickedly.

“How do you feel about sea travel?”

The End...

For Now

Author Bio

J.J. Cassidy has had more jobs over the past thirty-something years than she likes to think about—everything from bartender, to spreadsheet guru/corporate drone, to barn help—and figures all that experience has to be worth something when it comes to inventing imaginary people and places. It also helps that her head is crammed full of useless trivia, which actually turns out to be not so useless after all. Thanks to her amazing husband, she is looking forward to her upcoming retirement, and being able to write more or less full-time. You can find her work on Amazon, through Dreamspinner Press, and at All Romance Ebooks or through her website. She is always happy to hear from readers.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#)

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THE DREAMS YOU MADE IN THE DIRT

By Lisa Henry

Photo Description

Two men embrace against a dark background. They stand, heavily shadowed, one in front of the other, chest to back, with arms entwined. They are tender, but at the same time appear desperate and vulnerable.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

MC1 (maybe eighteen to twenty years?) grew up hard in a dysfunctional family in a small remote community. His mother is gone and no one will say what happened to her. His father has always been abusive physically and emotionally. No one has ever stood up for him. He is smaller than average, making him a target for torment, but has had to learn how to fight for himself. He has the soul of a healer—naturally gentle and empathetic—but has learned not to trust as any time he has given himself emotionally he has been smacked down. Despite the way he is treated, he has never been allowed to leave and has nowhere to go as he has no education, money or friends/family to fall back on. When his father finds out MC1 is gay (not that he has had a chance to act on it), MC1 is bashed and left for dead miles from home.

MC2 (maybe twenty-eight to thirty-two years?) is a loner who has his own demons in his past (maybe ex-military/ex-con?). He is a natural alpha—protective and dominant. He finds MC1 and cares for him as he heals. Contrary to his promise to himself to stay detached, he feels a pull to MC1 and hates the sadness and despair in the eyes of his charge. He fights himself and MC1 as he finds he badly wants to earn MC1's trust. Who knows what can happen after that?

They are both capable of so much if they can find the right balance. I see the opportunity to have some emotional, hot scenes as they each give in to their natural instincts.

I'd love a HEA for these two battered souls.

Sincerely,

Mel

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: first time, hurt/comfort, military men, abuse, homophobia, age gap

Content Warnings: violence

Word Count: 23,786

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Dedication

To Mel, for the awesome prompt. And to my beta readers,
Aniko, Tracy, and J.A.

And to Elizabetta, my wonderful editor!

THE DREAMS YOU MADE IN THE DIRT

By Lisa Henry

Chapter One

In that split second as he watched the glass in the windscreen fracture like a spider's web, Cole knew one thing for certain: he was going to die. He'd survived a tour in a country where people tried to kill him on a daily basis, and now he was going to die in a car accident. How prosaic. How fucking absurd.

Then, just when he was sure the car was going to flip, it stopped, wedged sideways in the ditch. Cole, suddenly nursing a lapful of skittish dog, took a moment to make sure he was still in one piece.

"Well, fuck," he said to Tessa, and she whined.

He climbed out the passenger's side door, helped Tessa do the same, and then pulled his phone out of his pocket to find it was warning him he had a low battery.

Shit.

He quickly searched the web for a local tow company, hoping the phone wouldn't die before he could place his call. Holding his breath and massaging his sore hip—must've knocked it somehow—he waited for someone to pick up.

The wait seemed interminable.

"Lawson's Towing."

"Hi," Cole said. "I'm out on... shit. I'm outside Dingo Creek, on the road to the old McCann place, do you know it?"

"Yeah. That's Henley Road," the guy said. He sounded young.

"I need a tow," Cole said. "I'm in a ditch."

"You need an ambulance?"

"No, just the tow."

"Okay. What's your name?"

"John Cole," Cole said.

"Colt?"

"Cole." He spelled it out.

The guy repeated it slowly.

"Listen, my phone's about to die," Cole said, and then realized with dismay that it already had. He shoved it back into his pocket then leaned down and scratched Tessa's ears. "Could've been worse. It could've died ten minutes ago."

It took half an hour for the tow truck to arrive.

Half an hour of getting bitten by mosquitoes and sandflies as the sun settled lower on the horizon and the shadows of the gum trees stretched out across the road.

John couldn't have been more glad to see the tow truck if it'd come with a dining car attached.

"Hey," he said when a skinny guy, no more than a kid, jumped down from the passenger's door.

"Hey." The kid wore a trucker cap pulled down low, and hunched his shoulders over as he walked. "You John Cole?"

"You see anyone else crashed along here?" Cole asked.

The kid looked up, and Cole caught a glimpse of blue eyes in a pale face. "No." Then he ducked his head again and fiddled with his clipboard.

The driver's door to the tow truck swung open, and a man climbed out. He was big. Muscular once, maybe, but that muscle was turning to fat now. He was wearing the same cap as the kid: LAWSON TOWING. The man's boots crunched on the dirt as he strode over toward Cole's car.

"Don't mind the kid," the man said. "Dumb as fucking dog shit."

Cole glanced at the kid, but the kid didn't react to the insult.

"Paul Lawson." The big man stuck out his hand.

Cole shook it. "John Cole."

"What's the trouble?" Lawson asked, nodding at the car.

Cole smelled the beer on his breath.

"Swerved to miss a roo," Cole said. "Overcorrected and ended up in the ditch."

"Shit," Lawson said amicably.

The kid set the clipboard down on the edge of the road, then jumped down the muddy verge. He crouched down in front of Cole's car and peered underneath it.

"Lucky you didn't roll it," Lawson said.

"Yeah," Cole agreed, although he didn't feel exactly lucky at the moment.

"Your dog okay?" Lawson asked.

Cole leaned down to scratch Tessa's ears. "Yeah, fine."

Down in the ditch, the kid straightened up. "Axle's busted."

"I figured," Cole said.

"I can fix that for you," Lawson said. "You got insurance?"

"Yeah." Cole watched as the kid clambered out of the ditch, wiping his hands on the back of his thin jeans.

Lawson threw the keys of the truck at him, and the kid caught them.

Cole moved Tessa out of the way as the kid got the truck into position. Then the kid slid down into the ditch again and hooked the winch up. Cole watched as his car was pulled slowly out of the ditch and onto the tilt tray of the tow truck. The kid clambered up with it when the winch stopped, securing it.

"You got luggage or stuff you need?" he called down to Cole.

"Got a few bags in the boot."

"We'll get it when we get into town," Lawson said. He held out his hand, and the kid threw the keys back down. "Only got the one hotel. Don't know if they'll take the dog."

"I don't need a hotel," Cole said. "I'm heading to the McCann place."

"Harry McCann's place? That's been empty for a while." Lawson rubbed his blunt fingers through his stubble. "You something to do with the old quarry opening up again? Don't tell me someone actually bought the place."

"Harry was my uncle," Cole said. "And I'm actually here to try and sell the place."

"Huh," said Lawson. "Well, good luck."

Cole could tell he didn't like his chances.

Neither did Cole.

In the truck, Cole sat with Tessa on his lap.

The kid was sandwiched between him and Lawson. He gripped his clipboard tightly, his knuckles white.

The truck roared into life.

Cole's thigh rubbed against the kid's as they drove toward Harry's house. Denim against denim.

Cole stared out the window.

Tessa wriggled in his lap, trying to climb all over the kid.

The kid squirmed when she shoved her muzzle in his face and rasped her tongue up his cheek. Cole turned his head just in time to catch another glimpse of blue eyes, and a mouth open in a joyful smile.

That smile vanished as soon as the kid saw him looking

"So," Cole said, to make conversation, "the quarry's opening again?"

Lawson's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Sent a surveyor out last month. Waste of fucking time and money if you ask me."

He sounded pissed off enough that Cole might have thought it was his time and money being wasted.

"It would bring jobs to the town again, wouldn't it?"

Lawson snorted, as though Cole had said something stupid. Cole turned his head and stared out the window again, wishing the ride was over.

After they dropped John Cole off at the old McCann place, Aiden and his dad headed for home. It was close. They were neighbours, almost, except John Cole probably didn't know that. Aiden was still thinking about him when they got back to the towing yard.

And his dog. That was a friendly dog.

Aiden dragged the gates shut after the truck, then looped the chain through and locked it. Most times he didn't bother to lock the yard—they were far enough from Dingo Creek that they didn't get much trouble—but he didn't want to risk anything happening to John Cole's car. Last time a car had got damaged on site, the insurance company had refused to pay because they said the yard hadn't been secure.

Aiden's dad still got angry about that.

Aiden watched the truck rumble through the yard, gears grinding. It turned toward the garage.

Aiden cut through the yard, through the maze of rusted-out car bodies. He met his dad at the garage, and scrambled up into the truck to collect the clipboard and paperwork.

His dad banged on the side of the truck. "Hurry up!"

Aiden climbed down again. "Do you want to get the car unloaded tonight?"

"Football's starting."

Aiden nodded, and fell into step behind his dad as he headed for the house. "Maybe I can help work on it tomorrow?"

His dad shot him a narrow look. "Maybe you can shut the fuck up."

Aiden clasped the clipboard to his chest and followed his dad up the stairs into the weatherboard house.

His dad headed straight for the small lounge room. The television blared into life. The light from the screen illuminated the lounge room and the end of the hallway. Aiden headed down the hallway to the kitchen, the roar of the stadium crowd following him.

The house was dark.

Aiden wondered where Mike and Stu, his older brothers, were. Mike had said something about going into town to visit his girlfriend, so maybe Stu had tagged along. Aiden flicked the kitchen light on, but there was no note on the table, so he didn't know if he was supposed to make dinner for them or not. It was almost seven o'clock though. If they weren't back yet, maybe they were staying overnight in town.

Mike was twelve years older than Aiden. Stu was eleven years older. They both took after their dad. Aiden had seen pictures of their mother—she'd divorced their dad and taken half his money and fucked off—and she'd been a thin, pinched, red-headed woman. Neither Mike nor Stu had red hair, and they were both as broad across the shoulders as football players. They looked like their father.

Aiden didn't take after their father. He took after his mother, his dad's second wife. He was smaller than his brothers. He had his mother's dark hair

and blue eyes. He'd been waiting on his growth spurt since he was fourteen, and he was pretty sure by now that it was never coming.

Aiden washed his hands at the kitchen sink, scrubbing them to get the grease off. Then he filled a pot and put it on the stovetop for the vegetables. He took the sausages out of the fridge and put three in the pan. Two for his dad, and one for him. Mike and Stu could cook their own whenever they turned up.

Aiden smiled at the ridiculousness of his own rebellious thought. As if Mike and Stu would do that!

He hummed to himself as he worked. Some song he'd heard on the radio. He didn't know what it was called. Mike had that app on his phone that would tell you, but he hadn't been around yet when Aiden had heard the song playing.

Aiden was saving up for a phone.

The lid of the pot rattled. Aiden removed it, then tipped the frozen vegetables in.

From the living room, the football commentator got louder and louder as someone almost scored a try. Ended with a howl when the player was forced back. Whistles blew and the crowd roared, and the couch squeaked as Aiden's dad shifted.

An ad break.

Aiden got a beer from the fridge and took it down to his dad.

"Took you fucking long enough." His dad took the beer without looking at him, and used the corner of his shirt to twist the cap off the bottle. He flicked the cap onto the floor.

"I'm making dinner."

"Hurry up. I'm starving."

Aiden escaped back to the kitchen. His stomach growled as he turned the sausages in the frypan. His dad wasn't the only one starving.

He looked at the clipboard on the table, and at his painstaking handwriting. John ~~Cole~~ Cole. Underneath where Aiden had written the name, the man had signed. He had a nice signature. All the letters flowed together and Aiden couldn't distinguish them. Also, a running writing J didn't look like a normal J. But then Aiden had always sucked at reading and writing.

He turned the clipboard over, embarrassed, and tried not to think of the way the man's leg had rubbed against his in the truck.

The water in the pot was boiling again. Aiden drained the vegetables then scooped them out onto a plate. Put two sausages beside them, and grabbed a knife and fork. Took the plate, and another beer, down to his dad.

His dad grunted at him.

Aiden returned to the kitchen and ate his own dinner: a sausage in bread, smothered in tomato sauce. Just how he liked it.

When the whistle sounded for halftime and the ads blared, Aiden went and collected his dad's empty plate. His dad got up and went for a piss, then stopped in at the kitchen on the way back for a third beer.

Aiden did the dishes.

When the football started up again Aiden headed for his bedroom, his stomach twisting a little in anticipation. Forty minutes until the end of the game. Forty minutes until his dad moved from the couch again.

Aiden only needed five.

"What is this? What the fuck is this?"

No no no no no.

His dad wasn't supposed to be in here. Wasn't supposed to see.

Wasn't supposed to wrap his blunt fingers around Aiden's throat and slam him into the wall so hard that his spine lit up with pain and he howled like a dog.

"What the fuck is this?" His dad shoved the magazine in Aiden's face. "What the fuck is *wrong* with you?"

Even if he'd been able to speak through the pain, through the tears, and through the fear that threatened to choke him, Aiden wouldn't have been able to find the words.

Cole was woken by the sounds of a revving engine. Adrenaline coursed through him. He was halfway out of bed before he realised what he was doing. It took him a moment to shake sleep off and make sense of his surroundings.

In the distance, the sound of the engine was already fading.

Cole sat on the edge of his bed, the covers flung back, resting his elbows on his knees. He stared at his hands in the gloom, and waited for his heartbeat to rediscover its regular rhythm.

Just a truck.

Tessa whined.

Cole stretched. "You need to go outside, girl?"

She whined again.

Cole stood and padded out to the back door. He opened it, and Tessa darted outside. She stood there in the moonlight, her hackles rising.

"Go on." Cole yawned. "Hurry up. I'm not gonna stand here all night because you suddenly heard a possum."

She loped away.

Cole let the screen door swing back. He flipped the kitchen light switch, but nothing happened. That was no surprise. The electricity company had told him they'd have the power on today. Lying bastards.

He stretched, and his stomach growled. He'd had a can of cold spaghetti for dinner, shared with Tessa, because he'd brought a bag of non-perishable groceries from home. Mostly because it seemed like a waste to leave them there, when he'd just end up buying the same things for twice the price when he got to Dingo Creek. His sister Deb had reminded him he was going to Dingo Creek, not a third world country, but fucked if Cole could see the difference so far.

He'd called the electricity company last week, and they'd promised the power would be reconnected by the time he arrived. All they had to do was flick a switch somewhere, but apparently that had been too difficult for them. So fuck them, and fuck his cold spaghetti dinner eaten in the dark. And fuck Cole too, for moaning about it when he was too lazy to bother go and check if the old generator in the shed was still there.

He'd eaten his cold spaghetti, thrown musty smelling sheets over dusty ones in the bedroom, and gone to bed.

Until the revving engine had woken him, anyway.

Cole leaned in the doorway and peered outside. Where the hell was the dog? How far was she going for a piss? Once the electricity was on, he'd get his power saw going and put a damned dog door in.

Shit. He hoped she didn't run too far. Maybe he should have put her on a leash and walked her outside.

He grabbed the torch off the kitchen counter and headed outside.

The ground was cold under his bare feet.

"Tessa?" He whistled. "Tessa?"

Great. His first night in his new place and he'd already written his car off and lost his dog. Lucky he wasn't superstitious, or he'd fuck off back to Brisbane in a heartbeat. Well, if he still had a car.

"Tessa!" He shone the beam of the torch around wildly. "Come on, girl!"

Rustling.

Cole turned the beam onto the thicket at the end of the overgrown garden. Tessa scrambled through, something dark held in her teeth.

"What've you got?" Cole held out a hand, hoping to hell it wasn't a possum or a rat. Because he hadn't unpacked the soap yet. "Drop it. Drop it."

Tessa dropped it.

It was sticky and wet, but it wasn't an animal. It was... fabric? Cole turned it over. It was a cap. LAWSON TOWING. And it was covered in blood.

Tessa beamed up him.

"Where'd you find it?" Cole asked. "Show me. Fetch?"

Tessa bounded off through the bushes again, with Cole hurrying after her.

As long as Aiden lay still, it didn't hurt. He was cold, more than anything.

Then a warm nose was nuzzling around his face again, and a dog's tongue was lapping at him. The beam of a torch dazzled him.

"Holy shit!"

Aiden's body screamed when the man lifted him, but he wasn't sure any sound came out but a strangled whimper.

“Don’t die, kid.”

He was trying.

He tried to tell the man he was trying as well, but he couldn’t remember how to make words. It was so much easier to close his eyes and drift away. It didn’t hurt so much when he drifted away.

“Okay,” the man said later. Much later, maybe, because Aiden couldn’t see the stars anymore. He could see flickering candlelight instead, illuminating faded wallpaper with tiny little yellow flowers on it. “I don’t have a phone, and I don’t have a car. So please don’t fucking die on me.”

Aiden tried to follow the path of the little yellow flowers all the way to the ceiling.

“What I have, kid,” said the shadow looming over him, “is a cheap-shit first aid kit. So that’s gonna have to do for the moment, okay?”

Aiden couldn’t keep his eyes open.

“Shit,” the man said. “Shit.”

Cole flipped the switch on the generator, holding his breath.

Come on. Please, please, please let this work. Please let Harry’s dodgy DIY interlock kit still work. Please let it not blow up in his face, literally.

The generator spluttered into life.

Then, the torch jammed under his arm, Cole left the shed and fought his way through the crepe myrtle toward the fuse box. Who the fuck planted a tree so close to the fuse box? Probably someone who didn’t think anyone would be fucking around in the fuse box at 2 a.m.

He flipped the breaker switch, then forced his way free of the crepe myrtle. He hurried up the back steps into the kitchen, and flicked on the light switch.

The bulb buzzed as it came to life.

“Fuck, yes!”

Something was going right at least.

Cole filled the kettle from the tap in the sink, and plugged it in.

The fridge smelled bad, but Cole threw the ice packs from his first aid kit into the freezer.

Then he headed for the bathroom, to see if there was anything useful there. He found bandages and Betadine, neither of which would be much use if the kid was bleeding internally.

Cole checked his watch. 2:17.

Dingo Creek was probably a forty minute walk. Could he afford to leave the kid for that long? Shit. Could he afford not to? The kid needed a hospital.

He put his phone on charge. Maybe he'd get some reception once he got it charged. Then he could call for an ambulance instead of having to walk for one.

He took a knife from the kitchen and returned to the bedroom.

The kid was still bleeding all over his sheets.

"Hey, kid," he said, leaning over the bed. He lifted the hem of the kid's T-shirt and cut it with the knife. Then ripped the fabric all the way up to the neckband. He sawed through that, holding the blade away from the kid's throat. "My name's Cole. Remember me?"

The kid's chest was still moving up and down. Cole felt his stomach carefully, not entirely sure what he was feeling for, but hoping he'd pick up on it if there was something out of place. The kid moaned and flinched, his eyes flickering.

"Can you tell me if it hurts there?"

"Hurts," the kid whispered.

"How bad?"

He didn't answer.

"Okay," Cole said. He felt the kid's ribs. Something shifted, and this time the kid cried out and tried to roll away. Cole held him still. "Sorry. I'm sorry."

Tears ran down the kid's face.

"Okay," Cole said. "What I'm gonna do is get you cleaned up, and then I'm gonna call the ambulance."

The kid made a high-pitched noise.

"You need the hospital," Cole told him.

The kid shook his head. "N-no!"

"Not gonna argue with you," Cole said. "You need a doctor, and I'll bet your dad's worried about you."

“No,” the kid murmured. He lifted a hand, and closed his fingers around Cole’s wrist. “Don’t tell him.”

“He’ll be worried about you,” Cole said, dread settling around him. “He’ll want to know what happened.”

“He knows,” the kid whispered, one eye wide in his bloody face, the other swelling shut. “He did it.”

Chapter Two

The kid fell into an uneasy sleep around about three. Cole sat on the floor, leaning up against the wall, and watched him. He stretched his legs out across the doorway, shifting them every now and then to keep Tessa out. Didn't want her jumping on the kid.

When the darkness eventually began to soften into grey pre-dawn light, Cole climbed to his feet. He flicked the bedroom light on, and checked the kid's injuries again. He seemed to be breathing better now.

"It's okay," Cole said, not sure if the kid even heard him or not. "I'm looking after you."

When he was done, he turned the light off, pulled the door shut, and ushered Tessa down the hall into the kitchen.

He rearranged the few groceries he'd brought from home, then unzipped his first aid kit on the kitchen table and spread it out. He found a blister pack of codeine pills that hadn't expired yet hidden in amongst a nest of crepe bandages. Rubbed the scar on his thigh absently as he turned the pack over in his hand.

He wondered if the kid had been telling the truth last night. If his father had flogged the shit out of him. Cole wasn't sure he could trust anything the kid had said—pain fucked people up—but he couldn't think of a reason he would lie about it.

Cole made a coffee. As he tipped the water into the mug, he heard the sound of an engine.

The same one as last night.

He sat on the back step with the mug in his hand, and watched as the tow truck roared down the narrow road behind his property. In the daylight he had a better sense of the lay of the land. His property was set on a slight incline; from the back steps, the yard sloped away to the tangled row of bushes and the collapsed fence that marked his boundary line. Behind that was a paddock that was probably owned by the government. Certainly it had no other marks of ownership on it. It was unfenced, untended, and bristled with clumps of tall grass. The road ran through on the other side of that, disappearing over the

slight hill. If Cole remembered his map right, it was the road that led from Lawson's Towing down to the disused quarry.

Cole watched three men stalking around in the paddock, stopping every now and then as though to get their bearings.

Must've been drunk last night. Maybe they'd come out to see if the kid was still lying there. Maybe they'd woken up full of regret and wanted to check he was okay. Or maybe they just wanted to make sure they'd covered their tracks.

He twisted his head to look up at the kitchen bench. His mobile phone was plugged in and charging, but he didn't know what sort of signal he'd get out here yet.

Cole sipped his coffee and watched as the three men eventually gave up the hunt. They climbed back into the truck and roared off back toward the tow yard.

Cole scratched Tessa's head, set his cup down on the top step, and sighed. Time to check on his guest again.

Aiden didn't want to open his eyes.

To open his eyes was to acknowledge he was awake. To acknowledge he was awake was to acknowledge that it was real. He hadn't dreamed it. His dad had hurt him.

Really hurt him.

Aiden shifted slightly, and pain flared. He held his breath until it passed, and then realised he was blinking at the ceiling through the one eye that actually opened.

He let his breath go slowly, easing the pressure on his chest.

He felt curiously empty, as though the physical pain was taking up all of the space inside him usually reserved for emotion.

He wasn't scared like he'd been the night before. Like he'd been his whole life.

He wasn't even surprised.

Just empty.

He listened to measured footsteps creak down the hall, followed by the *click-click-click* of a dog's claws. He heard rattling next, the clatter of cutlery and crockery. A few minutes later, the whistle of a kettle.

Aiden watched the little yellow flowers on the wallpaper climb up toward the ceiling. He blinked when they shimmered, then kept his eyes closed for a little while. Maybe a long while.

Then the footsteps returned and the door opened.

Aiden kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to talk. Didn't want to explain.

He moaned at the sudden sharp sensation of cold against his side. His eyes flashed open. At least, his good eye did.

"Just changing your ice pack," John Cole said.

Tears filled Aiden's eyes. He raised a hand to brush them away, and was distracted by the tape on his fingers.

"Broken," John Cole said. "You remember what I told you last night? You need a hospital, kid."

"Aiden," Aiden whispered.

"Aiden. My name's Cole."

"No hospital." Aiden tried to make a fist, but his fingers wouldn't bend.

"Give me one good reason," Cole said.

"The hospital will call the police," Aiden said. "If the police come around, he'll kill me."

Cole clamped his mouth shut on whatever reply he'd been going to make. Then he shook his head slightly.

"Please," Aiden whispered. He saw the indecision written all over the man's face. "Please."

Cole only shook his head again, and left the room.

Aiden lifted his hand again and traced his broken fingers lightly across the yellow flowers on the wallpaper. Behind the flowers, twists of greenery rose toward the ceiling. Like a beanstalk Aiden wished he could climb.

Tears spilled down his cheeks, hot paths of pain and shame.

He wished he had the courage to run away, like his mum had.

But she'd been so clever.

So clever and so pretty and so unlike anything else in his life.

When he was a kid, Aiden used to pretend his mother was something from a fairytale. Maybe because she told him those stories, or maybe because he wanted to think she'd been compelled to escape, and that even Aiden's love couldn't hold her to this grey, bleak world. She was like the princess who discovered Rumpelstiltskin's true name, or the selkie who had found her skin again. One day, when his father didn't have the power to hold her against her will anymore, she was gone.

That was what he imagined, anyhow.

Aiden's childhood had been made from fantasies.

He was the youngest prince. The smallest, the weakest, but secretly, the smartest.

He had wicked stepbrothers.

Well, half-brothers.

And not wicked, exactly. Just older than him. Sometimes mean, but mostly Mike and Stu didn't pay him any attention at all. So long as he shut up and kept out of their way.

It was better to pretend that he was some poor Cinderella, slaving away in rags, but knowing that something good would happen just because he deserved that in his life. Better than acknowledging the truth: sometimes life was just bad. It was easier to pretend than to face the reality that nothing would ever change.

But the worst of all his fantasies, the most dangerous, was the one that Aiden could never share with anyone: that a handsome prince would rescue him.

God.

His dad had been so mad. Spittle flying out of his mouth, spraying Aiden's face. Shouting and screaming, and hurting him. His dad had dragged him out of the house, to the truck. He didn't remember much else. The thrum of the engine reverberating through him as he lay with his face on the cracked vinyl seat of the truck. His dad still yelling, still swearing. The way the truck lurched from side to side, because his dad was too drunk to be driving it. The sudden

realisation that they were heading for the quarry, even though the quarry was off limits. His dad's bellow of rage when he saw the gates were padlocked shut.

After that he remembered the stars, and the dog.

And he remembered Cole telling him not to die.

By morning, the fuel in the generator had run out and Cole switched the breaker back to the mains supply. Which, incredibly, was actually connected now. Only a day late, which had to be some sort of oversight on the part of the electricity company. Cole was sure it was official policy to fuck people around for longer than that.

Then Cole checked his phone to find he had some sort of signal at least.

Power and mobile phone coverage. Things were looking up, if you didn't count the injured kid lying in the bedroom.

He dialled his sister.

"Hey, John. Are you at Uncle Harry's? I can't really talk long. I'm at work."

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling you."

"Are you okay?" Deb's voice sharpened.

"Yeah. It's not me. Look, this guy, he got bashed and he doesn't want to go to hospital, and—"

"John, take him to the hospital."

"I don't have a car."

"What do you mean you don't have a car?"

"That's a whole other thing." Cole rubbed his hand over his face. "Listen, Deb, can I send you some pictures or something? And you can tell me what to do?"

"I'm telling you what to do. Call an ambulance."

"Deb, c'mon. Can you just take a look at him?"

"Can I just take a look at him via fucking telephone?"

"Yes."

“Oh, Jesus Christ, John. Let me at least get into the on-call room first.”

“Aiden?”

Aiden blinked his eyes open.

“I’m going to take some photographs,” Cole said, holding up his phone. “My sister’s a doctor. She’s going to take a look at them.”

Aiden nodded, and let John draw back the sheets.

Aiden closed his eyes as John photographed him, embarrassed to be lying there in nothing but his underwear, covered in ugly bruises. He kept his eyes closed as Cole held a conversation with his sister.

“About six hours,” Cole said. Silence. Then: “Okay, I’ll check.”

Aiden tried not to flinch as he felt Cole’s hand on his abdomen, prodding gently.

“That okay?” Cole asked.

Aiden murmured his assent.

“No,” Cole said into the phone. “I think it’s just the ribs, and the fingers, the black eye, and a fuckload of bruises.” He snorted at something she said. “Yeah, I have seen worse.”

Aiden opened his eyes.

“I’ve got codeine,” Cole said. He tugged the sheet back up. “Yeah, I know.” A sigh. “I know!”

He lowered his voice. “I will. If anything changes, I’ll call the ambulance. Okay. Okay. Thanks. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.” He ended the call and put his phone in his pocket.

“You’ve seen worse?” Aiden asked him in the sudden silence.

“Yes.”

Aiden didn’t know how to respond to that. He wished he hadn’t asked. Cole was his rescuer. A part of Aiden wanted him to be pure somehow, untouched by violence. Even the witnessing of it. Dumb. He was just being dumb. Because Cole was a big guy, a tough guy, and those were the guys who knew. They were the ones who were unafraid of violence because they were never on the receiving end. Big guys, like his dad. Like his brothers.

He could imagine Cole drinking beer with them.

Imagine him laughing when his dad said he was dumb as dog shit, and flicked cigarette ends at his face to make him jump out of the way.

"I was in the army," Cole said. "Cavalry."

"Like with horses?"

Cole snorted. "More like tanks."

"Sorry."

Cole laid a palm on his forehead. "Anyway, I got out. Spent a while pissing my savings up against the wall, and here I am."

"Why'd you come here?"

"This was my uncle's place. Turns out he left it to me. I was gonna spend a few months here, do the place up for sale or something."

Aiden nodded slightly, but it was difficult to listen. He was drifting further away every time he blinked. Cole's palm was cool against his forehead. It was nice to be touched. It hurt a little, but that wasn't Cole's fault. Cole was big, but maybe Aiden didn't have to be scared of that.

"Anyway." Cole sighed. "Stuck here until the car gets fixed now."

"Mmmm." Aiden closed his eyes. "The man who used to live here. Harry. He was your uncle?"

"Kind of. He was married to my aunt. They divorced when I was a kid, but he still remembered birthdays and Christmas. He left this place to my sister and me. He didn't have any family of his own."

"He was nice," Aiden whispered. He opened his eyes again. "He said hello if he saw me going up to the quarry." He swallowed. "Even though I wasn't supposed to go up there."

"What's at the quarry worth seeing?"

Aiden shrugged. "I liked it there. I used to play there. I pretended it was Tatooine. You know, Luke's planet in *Star Wars*."

"You like *Star Wars*?"

"Yeah."

"Me too," Cole said.

Aiden felt a smile spreading over his face. It ached.

"Before you crash out again, do you need to piss?"

That killed his smile. Made him conscious of the pressure in his bladder too.
"Yeah, I think so."

"I'll get a bucket or something."

"No, I can..." Aiden pushed the blanket back, but the second he tried to lift his head off the pillow he was overcome with dizziness. "Oh."

"Stay there." Cole put a hand on his shoulder. "I'll get a bucket."

When Cole got back with the bucket, Aiden was bright red underneath all the bruises that were starting to flower on his face.

"Can you sit up? Or roll over a little?" Cole winced in sympathy as Aiden shifted onto his side. His expression tightened, and he moaned. Cole got a hand behind his shoulder to help him. "Take it slow. You're okay."

Aiden squeezed his eyes shut.

"Okay. I'm just gonna... I'll hold the sheet out of the way, and the container in place, if you want to, um... aim."

"I'm sorry," Aiden whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Aiden," Cole said firmly, regretting his own awkwardness. The kid had probably taken his cue from that. "Open your eyes. Okay. Can you get your underwear down or do you need help?"

Aiden screwed up his face as he shoved his underwear down.

"I was in the army, remember?" Cole said. "You've got nothing I've never seen before."

Seeing, though, was a hell of a lot different from getting a container under the kid's dick and making sure it stayed there while he pissed.

"Plus your sister's a doctor," Aiden muttered. His eyes were closed again, but his mouth was pulled into a grim smile.

"Right." Cole laughed, surprised at his unexpected display of humour. "So that makes it all totally legit."

"Right," Aiden whispered, eyes resolutely shut.

The sound of his urine trickling into the plastic container was probably the loudest sound in the world. Cole tried very hard to keep his gaze on the stream, and not Aiden's dick. The stream was clear; no blood. That was good.

Aiden shifted back, shoving himself back in his underwear and flinching as he did so. His eyes flashed open.

"Okay?"

"Got kicked, I think. In my balls." He scrabbled for the sheet with his taped fingers.

"Icepack," Cole said. "And you'll tell me if it gets worse, right?"

Aiden nodded.

Cole rose, holding the bucket at arm's length. "I'll get you some codeine too."

It had been a long time since Cole had looked after anyone.

Aiden slept, mostly. He woke up in the afternoon long enough to piss in the bucket—a process that still seemed as mortifying to him as it had the first time—then ate a few spoonfuls of canned spaghetti. Heated up, which was at least something. Then he slept again.

Cole started to get the house in order.

He'd been in Iraq when Uncle Harry had passed away. His mum and Deb had come out for the funeral, and packed the house up. They'd taken the photo albums and Harry's scant few valuables. Everything else had been boxed up and left, because they'd intended to come back again. That had been right before Cole's mum had been diagnosed with breast cancer.

These things happen in threes, she'd said. She'd been counting Harry's death, her own diagnosis, and her next-door neighbour's grandson, who was battling leukaemia. The kid had survived. Cole's mother hadn't. Cole had made it home in time to see her, which she'd thought was a blessing. He hadn't. She'd been so destroyed by the cancer, carved out from the inside, that months later, Cole was still afraid he'd never be able to forget that thin, haggard creature who wore his mother's face in all his memories now. Superimposed on every one.

He'd tried to tell Deb, tried to explain it in a way that didn't sound so fucking selfish, but maybe there was no way to explain it. Maybe it was just selfish.

"Oh, fuck you!" Deb had shouted at him. *"This isn't about you and your PTSD and wanting to neck yourself or whatever the fuck it is you dream about! This is about our mother!"*

They'd both been pretty fucked up after the funeral.

Coming out to Dingo Creek was supposed to be a fresh start. A place to get his head together while he got used to being out of the army. While he got used to his mother's death. A project to keep him busy, to keep him from brooding, and maybe walk away with a bit of cash if he fixed the house up and sold it. Not like he'd get rich flipping a house in Dingo Creek, but if the quarry was really reopening, there might be people looking for places.

It was a good little house. Post-war. Solid. The original wooden stumps had been replaced with steel posts. The only termite damage was at least thirty years old, and superficial. Cole was mainly concerned about the roof. He hadn't had a chance to check it out yet, but he hoped it was in good condition.

It was still full of Uncle Harry's gear. Most of it boxed up for charity, with the boxes labelled in his mother's neat writing: *Clothes. Books. Pots + pans. Records.* Cole was tempted to dig through the records, except what were the chances he'd find anything other than Slim Dusty and Charley Pride? And what would he play them on, even if he did?

He found an old radio that worked, and listened to music and occasional bursts of static while he cleaned and Tessa got tangled up in his legs. He didn't want Aiden to recover from his injuries only to succumb to some exotic disease found in the scum in the bathroom tiles.

Aiden was problematic.

He was none of Cole's business, and the last thing Cole wanted was to get stuck in Dingo Creek sorting out someone else's problems, but, fuck him, he wouldn't let Cole hand him over to anyone whose job it was to help. No hospital, and no police. Which meant he was Cole's problem, whether Cole liked it or not.

Shit.

Cole looked at his phone on the kitchen table.

He should just call the police and be done with it.

Except, hadn't he promised?

Actually, he was pretty sure he hadn't.

But hadn't the kid's trust been betrayed enough?

Sure.

But again, not Cole's problem.

He sighed and tapped his fingers on the scratched surface of the kitchen table.

"What?" he asked Tessa. "What the hell do I do with him?"

Tessa looked at him with her head at an angle, and her ears cocked.

"Your fault," Cole muttered, and reached down to scratch her head. "You found him."

Her tail thumped against the wall like a heartbeat.

Chapter Three

At first, Aiden had been scared that Cole would call the ambulance or the police, or his family. He tried to stay awake to listen for vehicles approaching the little house, but couldn't. He slept a lot. He had scary dreams. Sometimes the only thing that saved him was Cole's hand on his shoulder, gentling him awake to take his temperature and give him more codeine.

Aiden lost time. He wasn't sure if it was hours or even days. Mostly, he was too tired to hold onto his fear for long.

In the night, Aiden dreamed of the quarry and woke up panting, twisted in the sheets. It was still dark, although the night was beginning to soften into greyness. His skin prickled. His heart pounded.

When the door squeaked on its hinges, Aiden was afraid it might be Cole. He would be embarrassed if Cole heard him, but also secretly glad to have his company.

Instead, Tessa sidled into the room. She stuck her nose in Aiden's face.

Aiden closed his eyes and ran his fingers through the coarse hair around her neck.

"Had a nightmare," he whispered to her.

It had been years since he'd dreamed of the quarry.

The quarry had been Aiden's favourite place once. It was where his imagination flew free and all the stories he knew—from his mum, from the television—came to life. The quarry was a desert island full of pirates and Aiden was their leader. It was an African savannah where lions stalked their prey and Aiden stalked them. It was the harsh surface of Tatooine where Aiden fought Sand People and Sith Lords.

Then, after his mum left, his dad had gotten a lot worse. Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe his mum just hadn't been there to deflect his dad's temper anymore. Whatever it was, suddenly Aiden had to bear the brunt. Once, when his dad had caught him at the quarry, he'd dragged him home and taken a belt to him. It had been vicious. Aiden had never seen his dad so out of control. He had been so wrapped in rage that Aiden's screams had only driven him to greater violence. Aiden didn't remember now how it had ended—whether he'd

passed out or his dad had gotten tired, or if Mike or Stu had stopped it. He could only remember his dad yelling—the spit flying from his contorted mouth—that Aiden had been told to keep away from the quarry. He'd been fucking *told*. Every shouted word accompanied by another vicious blow of the belt. The pain had been so intense that Aiden, screaming and begging, had seen white.

His bum and the back of his legs had been so badly bruised that he'd missed two weeks of school.

He'd never forgotten that terror, that pain.

He'd never gone back to the quarry.

He'd never defied his dad again. At least, he'd never meant to. But when it was something inside of him, something that he couldn't separate from himself any more than he could untwist the strands of his DNA and start again, Aiden didn't know how to make it right. How to make himself right.

He'd never wanted to be that terrified kid again.

Except he'd never stopped being that kid.

He was that kid right now, tears running down his face while Tessa tried to lick him clean.

"Gross," Aiden whispered, but didn't push her away.

It felt too nice to know there was another living creature that cared.

Aiden had nightmares.

Cole, trying to sleep on the lumpy couch in the front room, heard them. For a moment those sounds—low noises of helpless panic, rising like a whine—took him straight back to his own nightmares, straight back to Iraq. Then he heard Tessa's claws clicking as she went to check on Aiden.

"I've got a friend who trains service animals," Deb had said. *"I can get you a dropout."*

"The last thing I need is an animal."

"If you can't get out of bed to feed yourself, maybe you'll get out of bed to feed a fucking dog."

Which, stupid as Cole had thought it sounded, had actually worked.

There was no way in hell Deb would have trusted him to head to Dingo Creek on his own without Tessa. She was still convinced, Cole knew, that one day he'd just open a vein or sling a rope over a beam or something. Just because he'd dreamed about it. Dreamed about it so often that it became this insidious idea that crept into the back of his mind even when he was awake.

Just a dream, he'd thought a hundred times, unable to tell if he was relieved or not.

But you could make it real, a voice had started to whisper back.

His head had been fucked back then.

Still was, probably.

Cole climbed to his feet. He scrubbed his knuckles over his scalp. He crossed to the bedroom door and listened for a while. He heard Aiden murmur something, and then the answering thump of Tessa's tail.

Cole rapped on the door and pushed it open further. "Aiden, you okay?"

"Yeah."

Cole flicked the light on.

Aiden raised a hand to his eyes, flinching.

"Sorry. Do you need the bucket?"

Aiden grimaced. "What time is it?"

Cole squinted at the clock on the bedside table. "Almost five."

"What day is it?"

That took Cole a moment. "Tuesday."

"Oh." Aiden dropped his hand and blinked at Cole. "I think I want to try walking to the toilet."

"Okay. But you'll lean on me and we'll take it slow."

Slow wasn't the word.

Their progress was interminable.

Cole couldn't imagine it had even taken Harry as long to make the short walk, his lungs ruined by emphysema in his final months. Aiden was in obvious pain, and kept one hand on the wall to steady himself, but he smiled proudly at Cole when he made it to the small bathroom.

"Don't get cocky, kid," Cole said, wondering if Aiden would pick the *Star Wars* quote. He released his elbow at last.

Aiden's smile grew.

"I'll be right outside." Cole dragged Tessa out by the collar.

A few minutes later the toilet flushed, and Aiden shuffled into the doorway.

"Coffee?" Cole asked.

Aiden followed him into the kitchen.

"I used to get up early all the time," Cole said, flicking on the kitchen light.

"In the army?"

"Mmmm." Cole checked the kettle and filled it. He stifled a yawn, then opened the back door for Tessa. "Got out of the habit though. Feels good though, to be up at this hour. Waiting for the dawn."

"I get up early," Aiden said. "I make breakfast for my dad and Mike and Stu. They're my brothers."

Cole rattled around for a couple of clean mugs. "Is it just you and them?"

"Yeah." Hardly more than a whisper.

Cole picked up a teaspoon and wiped it on his sweatpants. "You want to tell me why your dad bashed you?"

Aiden paled underneath his bruises. His gaze flicked to the open back door.

"No," Cole said firmly.

"Wh-what?"

"No, you're not going to run out of here. I don't think you could, even if you tried, but you're not going to try, okay?" Cole prised the lid off the tin of instant coffee he'd brought from home. "Just tell me why you won't go to the police."

"He'd..." Aiden swallowed. "He'd *kill* me."

God, but Cole wished that were an exaggeration. It was hard to imagine anything that could make a man angry enough to hurt his own child so badly, but something had. Cole couldn't imagine living with fear like that, but it was so real, so palpable in that moment, that Cole couldn't even try to tell Aiden that he was wrong, and that he needed to go to the police.

Because your dad needs to be in jail.

Because if you let him get away with it, nothing will stop him from doing it again.

To you, or to someone else.

Because you won't be safe as long as he's free.

"Okay," he said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. "If that's your decision."

Aiden nodded, not meeting Cole's eyes.

Cole spooned coffee into the mugs.

It was Aiden's decision, and he'd abide by it. Until he could talk him around, at least.

Somehow, over the next few days they fell into a routine. It felt dangerous to Cole, how easy it was.

Cole would wake up each morning to the sound of the radio in the kitchen, and to the clatter and clink of Aiden making breakfast. Cole would wander out to the kitchen and lean in the kitchen doorway, and wait for Aiden to see him and flash him his shy smile.

After breakfast, Cole would get down to work, knocking out the tiles in the bathroom or stripping wallpaper in the back room, or whatever job he felt like tackling that day. Aiden would offer to help, and Cole would refuse. Instead he'd go and work alone, while Aiden kept Tessa out from underfoot, and brought him coffee.

Cole liked Aiden's company.

There wasn't a single moment when it changed, when Cole looked at Aiden and he'd been suddenly transformed into something new. Aiden was still bruised, still hurting. He was a *victim*. Which is why Cole felt like a total prick for staring as Aiden crossed the living room floor on Thursday afternoon wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants.

"You want a coffee?"

Cole, taking a break from the renovations, tried not to focus on anything except his face. "Are you having one?"

“No. But I can make you one.” Aiden’s smile was shy and proud at the same time.

God. Cole had no doubt that Aiden would do it; he seemed like the sort of person who would always put others first. But how much of that was his generous nature and how much had been flogged into him from an early age, Cole had no idea.

“Maybe later.” Cole shifted up to make room on the couch. “Sit down.”

Aiden sat, and immediately had a lapful of dog. “Hey, Tessa.”

“Traitor,” Cole told the dog. He reached down beside the couch to retrieve the book he’d started earlier. It was one of Harry’s books; the cheap cowboy pulp novels that Cole remembered had once been sold on racks in supermarkets and service stations everywhere. He showed Aiden the cover. “There’s a whole box full of them in the back room if you want to read one.”

“I don’t read much,” Aiden said.

Something about the sudden defensiveness of his posture made Cole realise that Aiden’s “*I don’t read much*” was really an *I can’t read much*. He remembered what Paul Lawson had said: “*Dumb as fucking dog shit.*”

Aiden stood up again. “I think I’ll, um, I think I’ll go and have a rest.”

“Aiden?”

Aiden turned, looking wary and hopeful at the same time.

“If I say shit that makes you uncomfortable, that’s only because I don’t know you, okay? I’m not doing it on purpose.” Cole spread his hands. “You can talk to me, you know.”

Aiden nodded. “I know.” Colour rose in his face. “Um, thanks.”

He left the room.

Aiden stared into the small spotted bathroom mirror and relearned the planes of his face. The swollen cheek. The puffy ridge of his jaw. The black eye that was open properly for the first time in days. He wondered if he’d ever look the same as he had, or if the beating had altered him forever. If, even when the swelling and the bruising faded, it would still be somehow written across his face.

"You okay in there?" The door squeaked open.

"Yes." Aiden moved back from the mirror. From a few steps away his reflection, spotted and discoloured, looked like an old sepia photograph of some boy who'd lived and died a century ago.

"Hot water should be working again now," Cole said. He turned on the tap in the sink. The knuckles of his right hand were grazed and oozing blood. The water turned pink.

"What happened?" Aiden asked, his heart pounding a little faster. Suddenly imagining Cole's fist impacting against his skull, bone on bone, the skin splitting.

"The valve wouldn't turn at first. Took me by surprise when it did." Cole turned off the tap and wiped his hand on his shirt. "Worth it for a hot shower."

"You should put something on it," Aiden said.

"Hey, I'm in charge of the first aid around here, okay?" Cole's smile belied his serious tone.

"Okay." Aiden grinned and flushed. Couldn't understand how Cole made him feel so embarrassed, just by smiling at him. "*You can talk to me, you know,*" Cole had said. Aiden wondered if it was true. He wanted it to be, except he wasn't good with talking, and he didn't have anything anyone wanted to hear anyway. But he trusted Cole enough to try. "Once, one of Dad's pig dogs got torn up and Dad wouldn't take him to the vet. I looked after him."

Cole frowned slightly.

Aiden's face burned. "Um, I said it because we were talking about first aid..."

"Oh, right!" Cole's mouth quirked in a smile. He sat down on the edge of the bath and held his hand out. "Have at it then."

Aiden's courage grew. He took the antiseptic from the counter beside the sink and unscrewed the lid. He dabbed some on a cotton ball and took Cole's hand in his own. It was warm. Large. Blunt fingers curled around Aiden's hand, the contact making him suddenly breathless. He studied Cole's knuckles. They were cross-hatched with old scars. Tried to think of what it meant those hands had done, not just about how good it felt to have Cole's palm pressing against his own.

Aiden shifted closer, conscious that another step would bring him into the triangle between Cole's knees.

His throat was dry.

"When, um, when my mum was hurt, I looked after her too." Aiden didn't know why he'd said that.

"Where's your mum now?" Cole asked, screwing up his face as Aiden swiped the antiseptic across his knuckles.

"She left." Sometimes Aiden dreamed of the places she might be. He'd always thought she was beautiful enough and clever enough to move to a city and just shine, but part of him was afraid it wasn't true. Maybe she wouldn't shine at all in a city. Maybe, in all that light, hers wouldn't seem so bright.

"Where'd she go?"

"I don't know." Aiden dropped Cole's hand and moved back. He felt cold suddenly. Dizzy. A wave of nausea hit him, and he fought not to throw up. "She packed her bag and she left."

"Did your mum get hurt a lot?"

Aiden swallowed. "Um, sometimes. When he was drinking. When she made him angry."

Cole flexed his hand. He frowned up at Aiden. "And you made him angry too, right?"

Aiden took another step back. "Yeah," he whispered.

Cole exhaled heavily. "What'd you do, Aiden?"

"There was..." The words died in his throat.

"There was what?" Cole's gaze caught him and held him, and refused to let him hide.

"There was..." Aiden drew a deep breath and tried again, even though he was scared. So fucking scared. "There was a magazine."

Aiden had found the magazine at the side of the road. Like it had been thrown out of a passing car or dropped from heaven or something. It had rained since the magazine had been dumped there. A lot of the pages had swollen and not dried right again. When Aiden had found the magazine it hadn't rained in

days though. It had been hot and dry, and the sun had bleached the pages that were exposed.

It wasn't like Aiden was in the habit of picking up rubbish from the side of the road. It was just that he'd kicked the magazine when he'd passed it, and exposed a page that hadn't been erased by the weather, and all of a sudden he'd seen.

There was a picture of a man giving another man a blowjob. A close-up of his face, his mouth stretched wide and tears running down his face as though it was something terrible.

It was.

Aiden knew it was.

He hadn't wanted to touch the magazine, but he'd been compelled. First though, he'd looked up and down the road to make sure there was nobody else around who might have seen him. Then he'd picked the magazine up and shoved it down the front of his jeans. It wasn't until it was resting against his skin that Aiden had suddenly realized it might be filthy in more ways than one—that it was probably the sort of magazine that a man had jerked off over—but by then it had been too late to worry about it.

Aiden had taken the magazine home and hid it under his bed.

He'd been so careful, never to let anyone see it.

For *months*.

Until five nights ago when his dad had barged into his room and caught him.

Once he'd started, Aiden told Cole everything.

He only stopped talking when, in the rush to get the words out, he forgot to breathe. He was overcome with dizziness, and with regret. Not just for what he was, but for being too weak to keep his secret and for forcing Cole to look at him differently. He turned away and staggered slightly. Pressed his hands against the wall to stop himself from falling.

“Hey.” Cole’s breath was warm against the back of his neck. He put his hand on Aiden’s shoulder, his touch gentle but firm. “Don’t panic.”

Aiden shuddered. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead to the wall.

“Breathe,” Cole said. “Just breathe.”

Aiden nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Cole squeezed his shoulder, warmth radiating from his touch. “I would never hurt you, Aiden. Not because you’re gay. Not for anything. You’re safe here.”

You’re safe.

You’re safe.

You’re safe.

Aiden would have given anything for it to be true.

Chapter Four

On Friday morning, Cole closed Aiden's bedroom door and called Lawson Towing. Got someone called Mike. Aiden's brother, he remembered.

"Oh yeah," Mike said when Cole gave his name. "You're staying out at the old McCann place, right?"

"That's right."

"You finding it okay?"

Cole thought of how he'd watched Paul Lawson and his sons checking through the scrubby grass in the paddock at the back of the house, and wondered if Mike was really asking if he'd found Aiden first.

"I like it," Cole said. "It's quiet."

Mike was silent for a while, his breath sighing down the line. "You ringing about your car?"

"Yeah. Any idea how long it'll take to get fixed? I'm running out of groceries."

"Shit," Mike said. "Gonna be another week, at least. Still waiting on the parts. But I'm heading into town later for a few hours if you want a lift."

Cole might have even warmed to such neighbourly generosity if he hadn't seen Aiden's injuries and knew what sort of man his brother was. What sort of life Aiden had lived so far.

"That'd be good." The moral high ground was for people with food in their kitchens.

"I'll pick you up in about twenty minutes," Mike said.

"Thanks." Cole ended the call.

"Aiden?"

Aiden struggled free of sleep, coming up for breath through the layers of his dreams that lay on him as soft as muslin. He blinked at the ceiling, his fingers finding those faded yellow flowers on the wallpaper without conscious effort. He turned his head toward the door. "Mmm?"

Cole sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm going into town to get some groceries and stuff."

"Okay." Aiden drifted for a moment, then frowned as awareness caught him. "How?"

"Mike's giving me a lift."

Aiden felt himself crumple, like a dry leaf too close to a flame. Fear twisted inside him, building quickly. He struggled to sit, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"Hey," Cole said. He shifted, and bedsprings squeaked. He reached out and put his hand on Aiden's shoulder. "He doesn't know you're here, and I won't tell him, okay?"

"Promise?" Aiden asked, the weight of the word on his chest making it difficult to breathe. He was unworthy. He had no right to make that demand of Cole, when Cole had already done so much. "Because if he finds out," he said, his throat aching, "he'll tell Dad, and Dad'll come and get me, and—"

"And nothing," Cole said firmly. "He's not going to find out. I promise, Aiden."

I promise, Aiden.

Aiden couldn't remember the last time someone had promised him something, and it hadn't been a threat. *You do that again, and I promise you'll regret it.* He tugged the sheet up over his lap. "I'm sorry."

Cole squeezed his shoulder. "What are you sorry for?"

"Everything." The heat from Cole's touch seemed to grow, spreading from Aiden's shoulder into his bloodstream. Travelling to every corner of his body. "For putting you in this position. For freaking out all the time."

"You don't need to apologise for anything."

Aiden searched his gaze. That rush of heat translated suddenly to a rush of hope. He leaned toward Cole before his fear could catch him.

"Can I just..." The whisper died as his lips brushed against Cole's.

It was a fraction of a second. It was a lifetime. Aiden forgot to breathe.

Cole pulled away, bringing his hand up.

Aiden flinched back.

“No.” Cole’s eyes were wide. He reached out and touched Aiden’s jaw. “Don’t be scared.”

Aiden was terrified. He was suddenly less afraid of Cole beating him down for daring to kiss him than he was of the alternative: that Cole *wanted* him. The expectations of that were dizzying. Aiden had never... he hadn’t done *anything*.

“Don’t ever be scared of this,” Cole said. He tilted Aiden’s head gently. This time it was Cole who leaned in.

Aiden closed his eyes.

A thousand different sensations. Heat. Electricity. Pressure. The pads of Cole’s fingers brushing his jaw while Cole’s lips touched his own gently. Then, something new. Aiden’s breath huffed out of him as Cole’s tongue brushed against the seam of his mouth. He made a strangled noise.

“It’s okay.”

Aiden felt Cole’s mouth make the shape of the words. He opened his mouth a little, and jolted with surprise as Cole’s tongue touched his.

The kiss was over before Aiden even had a chance to catalogue each competing sensation. He kept his eyes closed as Cole pulled away, grateful when Cole ran a hand through his hair and encouraged him into an embrace. Aiden rested his forehead on Cole’s shoulder, his face turned toward his throat. He hid his embarrassment in their closeness.

Cole rubbed circles on his back. “You okay?”

“Mmmm.” As long as he didn’t need to make eye contact.

“Good.” Cole exhaled heavily. “Okay, Mike’s going to be here soon. I won’t let him in the house. Do you want anything when I’m in town?”

Aiden shook his head. He straightened up again, unable to meet Cole’s gaze. Plucked at the sheet lying across his lap instead.

“Okay.” Cole rubbed his knuckles gently across the top of Aiden’s hand. “You’re safe here, remember?”

Aiden kept his gaze down. He nodded. “I remember.”

Safe, but still scared.

Mike Lawson looked like his father. He was a big guy. Built like a front rower. Sandy hair, freckles, eyes squinting against the sunlight, and a prominent chin with a dimple in it. If Cole hadn't known he was Aiden's brother, he wouldn't have believed it.

They shook hands. Mike had a good grip.

His gaze slid off Cole's face and over his shoulder.

Right into the living room and to the closed bedroom door.

Tessa barked from behind the door.

"Dog's not real friendly," Cole lied.

Mike rubbed the back of his hand, as though remembering an old scar. His face split with a grin. "Used to have one like that."

"I'd offer you a drink, but I've only got tap water."

Mike grinned. "Guess we'd better hit the road then."

"That'd be good." Cole followed him outside.

He pulled the door shut and locked it, then followed Mike to his car. It was a Holden ute, an older model but still in good condition. It was covered in dust. The seat covers were ripped.

The trip to town took about twenty minutes.

Mike talked about his girlfriend, his place on the local football team, and the best waterholes nearby for fishing.

"You staying around for long?"

About as long as it took to get his car fixed.

"I dunno. I want to sell the house if I can. It's in a good position if they're reopening the quarry."

"I guess." Mike fiddled with the radio for a moment. "You reckon anyone would move all the way out here though? Even if there were jobs?"

Cole stared out the window. "Probably not."

"Nobody comes here," Mike said. "You're born here, and if you don't get out after school, you die here too."

Cole thought of Aiden, bleeding in the paddock behind the house. His stomach clenched as he realised how close Aiden had come to dying, without

ever having left Dingo Creek. Without ever having lived. He thought of Aiden's kiss: so shy, so tentative, and at the same time the bravest fucking thing in the world. Cole had seen breathtaking daring like that before, in Iraq. It manifested in a different way, but it was born in exactly the same place. It was the reckless courage of a man who thought he had nothing left to lose.

It was brilliant. It was dazzling. It was also heartbreaking.

"Get out or die here," he said. "Are those the only options?"

"I reckon they are," Mike laughed.

In that case, Cole thought, Aiden needed to get out.

"You had any trouble since you moved in?" Mike asked, squinting into the glare as he drove.

Cole's gut tightened. "What sort of trouble?"

"I dunno." Mike shrugged his big shoulders. "Anyone hanging around or something."

"Haven't seen another soul," Cole lied, and frowned at the view as they arrived in town.

Dingo Creek was a main street; hot, faded bitumen overlaid with a thin shroud of red dust. Three large hotels occupied three different corners where the main street met the highway, their wide wooden verandas and decorative fretwork recalling a more prosperous era. Two of the three hotels had boarded up windows. On the fourth corner was a bank. Three empty shopfronts marked the place between the bank and the supermarket.

"Meet you back here at noon?" Mike asked.

"Sure. Thanks."

Cole wondered what the hell he could do for two hours. The slowest grocery shopping in the world maybe.

Cole remembered visiting Uncle Harry a few times. He must have been eight or nine the last time. They'd visited a park by the river, and went riding quad bikes at one of Harry's mate's properties. They'd come into town every day to get chocolate milkshakes. He didn't remember Dingo Creek being so run down back then. He thought the hotels had all been open.

Cole went to the bank first. Drew some money from the ATM, and looked at his balance. The numbers on it still meant nothing to him. His half of the

inheritance. His mother's money, sitting in his bank account on top of the money he'd got for his tour of Iraq, where he'd seen people die. Where he'd killed people. And now, he was living in his dead uncle's house. Cole was a fucking parasite these days. A leech, or a tick, or some corpse-fed worm, growing fat on the death of others.

Kissing a boy who was black and blue with bruises, whose ribs creaked when he moved. Kissing a boy who'd stared death in the face as well.

It surrounded him.

For a moment, standing in the shade of the ATM vestibule, Cole was paralysed by the thought.

Shit shit shit.

He shook it off.

No. He wasn't doing that anymore. Wasn't falling into the traps that his thought patterns set for him. He'd talked about it with his psychologist, with Deb, and mostly with Tessa. Stupidly, it was Tessa who listened best. She might not have had the temperament to become a certified service animal—she was too bloody bouncy for that—but she had the right stuff where it counted. She'd got him through some bad nights, and she could do the same for Aiden.

Cole stuffed his money and receipt into his wallet, and headed for the supermarket.

He suddenly wanted to buy his girl the biggest steak he could find.

Aiden sat on Cole's back steps and looked out beyond the overgrown yard to the paddock behind it. The paddock where his father had left him to bleed to death.

Aiden didn't know if the ache in his chest was from his ribs, or if it was something that went deeper.

Tessa, her head resting on his knee, gazed up at him.

"We don't go to the quarry," Aiden whispered to her, turning his gaze that way. "That's not allowed."

He let his mind drift as he stroked her head.

He closed his eyes.

He'd been happy, once, playing in the dirt. Following the roads carved out by the excavators. Throwing rocks into the pits. Splashing through the mud.

Just a dirty, filthy quarry, but it had been the blank slate of his imagination. It had been his world, before his father had forbidden it. His fear of the quarry ran bone deep now, but it hadn't, not always. It had been his sanctuary once. Ruined because of his father's temper, the whipping with the belt. Ruined because of the black water.

Aiden's heart raced, and he jolted awake.

He blinked down at Tessa.

Black water.

Where the hell had that come from?

"It was raining," he whispered.

Tessa whined.

"Raining," Aiden said. He frowned, but the thought had already gone and Aiden had no idea what, if anything, it had even signified.

Tessa stood up and stretched, digging her claws into the kitchen linoleum. Then she tensed, her ears pricking, and Aiden heard the sound of an engine.

Mike's ute. He'd know it anywhere.

Aiden climbed to his feet, wincing in pain and slapping a hand over his ribs. He closed the back door and moved as quickly as he could into the bedroom. Tessa followed at his heels. Aiden closed the bedroom door and leaned against the wall. He breathed shallowly as he heard boots stomping up the front steps.

Cole, he thought, smiling despite his fear. Making as much noise as he could to warn him they were back.

"*Quiet as a mouse*," his mum had whispered to him a hundred times when he was little. When his dad was drunk and angry. When Aiden's mum had given him a pillow and his teddy bear and put him in his bedroom cupboard. Sometimes he'd even fall asleep there, and the next morning he'd wake up in his bed again, not knowing how he'd gotten there. His mum was magical like that.

If he closed his eyes he could see her. Wearing her favourite blue sundress. The one that flared out when she spun around. Dark hair, like his. Pale skin, too, but the resemblance stopped at the physical. He wasn't smart like her.

Wasn't brave. Would never—*never*—stand up to his father like she had. Would never have the courage to run.

He just wished she'd taken him too.

Aiden bowed his head as tears stung.

Quiet as a mouse.

He listened as Cole and Mike spoke. He couldn't make out the words, but their tone was friendly enough. Aiden traced the flowers on the wallpaper, and waited.

Quiet as a mouse.

Listening.

He heard the creak of the front stairs.

The squeal of the front door.

Mike's laugh.

"See ya."

"Thanks, mate." Cole's answer. "See ya."

The roar of the ute's engine.

The crunch of tyres on dirt.

The *thump thump thump* of his heartbeat.

He kept his eyes closed even as Cole opened the bedroom door.

"Aiden? You okay?" Cole's voice was low, his breath warm against Aiden's cheek.

Aiden opened his eyes.

"Aiden?" Cole leaned one hand against the wall. Lifted the other one as though he was going to touch, and then thought better of it. He put his other hand against the wall.

He was so big, so strong, but Aiden wasn't afraid of him. It felt good to stand here, Cole's hands on the wall on either side of his face. Could have felt threatening, but it didn't.

"I'm okay," Aiden said, his breath quickening. He tilted his jaw upward, pushed himself up onto his toes, and brushed his lips against Cole's.

“Aiden.” Cole pulled back. “That’s not why you’re here.”

“I know.” Aiden swallowed.

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“I kind of do.” Aiden squirmed against the wall, resisting the urge to push himself against Cole’s body. Rub against that unyielding wall of muscle. Shit. His dick was hard. Cole only had to glance down to see. Did it matter if he saw? Maybe it was okay to be turned on by him. But another part of Aiden thought an erection was something he had to hide. Something that only ever happened at the worst possible time, and would give away his shameful secret. “That’s not why I kissed you though.”

Cole raised his eyebrows. “Why’d you kiss me then?”

“I wanted to.”

Cole stared down at him.

“Did you want me to?” Aiden asked.

Cole’s mouth twitched. “Pretty sure I could have stopped you if I’d needed to.”

“Yeah,” Aiden breathed. “Pretty sure you could.”

He kissed him again. This time Cole’s hands came off the wall and gripped Aiden’s hips. Gently at first, and then his fingers dug in. He held Aiden against the wall, and took control of the kiss. He pushed his tongue into Aiden’s mouth, and Aiden closed his eyes again. He shivered. It was... weird, feeling someone else’s tongue inside his mouth. Not just a brief touch, like their first kiss, but something deeper, something exploratory. And then, just when Aiden was afraid it was *too* weird, Cole pushed his knee between Aiden’s legs and brought it up firmly. The sudden pressure against his dick and balls was electric. It lit him up from the inside. Aiden gasped and—shit—*whimpered*. He lifted his hands to Cole’s shoulders and gripped him tightly. Didn’t care about Cole’s tongue inside his mouth anymore. Just opened his mouth wider to him, let him go where he wanted. Even pushed back with his own tongue.

Aiden probably... probably wasn’t a good kisser.

“Shit.” Cole pulled back suddenly. “How old are you?”

For a moment Aiden couldn’t remember. “Um, eighteen.”

“Birthday?”

“February the second.”

“Year?”

“Nineteen ninety-six.”

Cole laughed suddenly.

“What?” Aiden stared up at him, wide-eyed. His dick was throbbing in his borrowed sweatpants.

“Ninety-six,” Cole said. “Shit, please tell me I wasn’t in high school then. No. Still primary school. Just.”

Aiden tightened his grip on Cole’s shoulders. “Can we... um, can we...?”

“You want to come?”

Aiden’s face burned.

“Told you, Aiden, you don’t need to be scared of this, not ever.” Cole ground his thigh against Aiden’s balls. “You want to come, then you just tell me.”

Aiden’s heart was about to burst through his chest. “Can I?”

“Fuck, yes.” Cole ran a hand down Aiden’s abdomen, pressing his palm against his aching dick. “Let me just...”

Aiden watched in astonishment as Cole dropped down onto his knees.

Oh Jesus.

No way.

No fucking way.

Cole peeled Aiden’s sweatpants down, and wet his lips with his tongue.

“Cole, I—” Then, shuddering, hips jerking, Aiden came before Cole even touched his cock.

Right in his face.

An hour later, Cole was still grinning about it.

“I actually take it as a huge compliment,” he said, turning the steaks in the pan.

Aiden, sitting at the kitchen table, was a particularly stunning shade of red.

“I mean it,” Cole told him. “It was hot.” He stepped over to Aiden’s chair and put a hand on his shoulder. Rubbed the back of his neck with his thumb, and warmed at the way Aiden leaned into his touch. “We’re good, Aiden. We’re still good.”

He hoped it was true.

Chapter Five

“Aiden? Aiden?”

He was awake, but he wasn't. Not if he could hear his mum.

Aiden shivered in the darkness.

It was raining.

Not now.

Then.

It was raining then.

“Aiden?”

“Mum?”

Beside him, Tessa whined.

That strange world between asleep and awake slipped away like water, and Aiden couldn't hold it. It ran between his trembling fingers and dripped away into nothing.

His mum had never been here. The echo of her voice was nothing but his imagination. He was in Cole's house, with Tessa beside him. Cole would be asleep on the couch in the front room. In the morning, Aiden would hear the old house creaking as Cole started moving around and know it was time to get up.

His mum had never been here.

She'd gone.

She'd left without him, and Aiden had run to the one place where he'd ever been truly happy: the quarry.

It had been raining.

He'd had a stick in his hand. He'd leaned out over the pit, over the black water. Almost hooked it. Almost.

He had it.

Then his dad had caught him there.

Dragged him home. Screamed at him. Beat him. Flogged him with his belt.

He wasn't allowed to go to the quarry.

He'd been fucking *told*.

What to do with Aiden?

That was the million-dollar question.

And it probably would have been a hell of a lot easier to answer before Cole had complicated things by trying to suck his dick.

"Jesus *fuck*! Are you fucking kidding me?" Deb didn't beat around the bush when Cole phoned her on Saturday morning. "You are in no fucking condition to be getting into a relationship with anyone, and—"

"It's not a relationship." Cole listened to make sure Aiden was still in the shower.

"Oh, bullshit! You saved his life, John. You white-knighted your way into his life, of course he's fallen for you because of that, and now you're taking advantage." She drew a sharp breath. "And, to make things even worse, when it inevitably ends badly, you'll both be more fucked up than you were before. You might not think it's a relationship, but what about him?"

"I wasn't going to get involved..."

But he'd been involved from the moment he'd stumbled across Aiden in the paddock, hadn't he? Already emotionally involved, because it hadn't just been Aiden lying there. It had been Smithy and Newbie too. Smithy, who got sent home to get fitted for a prosthetic foot, and Newbie, who got sent home in a coffin. Newbie hadn't been new, of course. He'd been in longer than Cole. Just what else did you do with the surname Nguyen? Fuck. Cole missed him. Missed that quick smile and evil sense of humour. Even missed waking up with that dickhead blaring *Thunderstruck* right in his ear. Didn't seem right that he could just be gone, just like that. It didn't make sense. Not then, and not now.

Deb sighed. "But you *are* involved, John."

"Yeah."

"Look." She sighed again. "I don't know what to tell you. He must have *someone*, right?"

"I don't know." Cole rubbed his forehead. "I don't think so."

The pipes squealed as Aiden turned off the water.

"I gotta go," Cole told Deb.

"Okay." A pause. "Look after yourself, John. Please."

"I will. You too." Cole ended the call and shoved his phone back into his pocket. Then got back to stripping the wallpaper in the back room. It was mouldy in places, and stained with decades of cigarette smoke in others. Cole took his time with it, shifting the boxes of books and other crap while he worked. Not the most efficient way to work, but what did it matter? He was stuck here as long as it took to get his car fixed.

As long as it took to figure out what to do with Aiden.

Aiden found him working about twenty minutes later.

"I brought you a coffee."

Cole sat down on a box of books. "Thanks."

"And biscuits." Aiden set the packet down, and sat on the floor and drew his knees up. "I like these."

Cole hadn't had an Iced VoVo in years. He'd bought them, he supposed, because they reminded him of school holidays spent here at Uncle Harry's place. Iced VoVos and lemonade. Maybe buying the biscuits had been an attempt to reconcile the past and the present; to remember that once this house had been filled with life and laughter, and he'd loved it here, when he was too young to know that it was a tiny house outside a depressing dead-end town with nothing going for it.

Or maybe he'd bought them just to watch Aiden lick coconut off his lips.

"Is there a charity shop in town?" he asked, to distract himself from Aiden's mouth. "Maybe I should phone someone to come and pick up all this stuff."

"I don't really go into town."

"You don't?"

Aiden shook his head slowly. "I used to, for school. But I dropped out when I was fifteen. Sometimes I go in with Dad if he needs help to carry stuff, but mostly I stay at home."

"Shit." Aiden's world was impossibly small-drawn. Cole ached for him. Wondered what it was like to have nobody on your side. "No other family? No friends?"

Aiden couldn't meet his gaze. "No."

"What about your mum?"

"I don't..." Aiden frowned. "I don't know where she went."

"So what happens when I leave?" Cole asked in a low voice.

Aiden shrugged. "I don't know. I guess... I guess I'll go home."

"Home?" Cole couldn't believe his fucking ears. "Are you shitting me?"

Aiden flinched away.

Cole was stabbed with guilt. "Hey." He lowered his voice again, trying not to panic him. "Hey, I'm sorry. You took me by surprise. Why would you go home, Aiden?"

Aiden didn't answer.

"Because let me tell you, anywhere is better than going home."

"He didn't mean it," Aiden said. "He was drunk, that's all."

"He didn't mean to beat you half to death?"

"No," Aiden whispered. "He just went too far. That's all. Just too far."

"Aiden..." Cole shook his head. "Jesus, how far is too far?"

"I can take a beating."

"You shouldn't *have* to."

Aiden stood up suddenly. His blue eyes blazed. "But I do! I do have to!"

Then, before Cole could even think how to respond to that, he ran.

Aiden didn't get far. Only down the back steps into the overgrown garden. To the back fence. Leaned on it, even though he wasn't sure it would take his weight, because his ribs were killing him now. He stared down into the paddock, then at the road that led up to the quarry. As he watched, a white Land Cruiser headed down the road, churning up dust. There was some logo on the side of the door that Aiden couldn't make out.

Maybe the quarry would re-open after all.

Maybe Cole would sell Harry's house for a nice profit.

And maybe Aiden would never see him again.

He hunched over, his stomach hurting.

He knew what Cole was trying to tell him. That he should just leave home. People did that all the time. His mum had. But Aiden didn't have any money, and he wasn't smart enough to get a job. Even labouring jobs, the sort of jobs Aiden could do, they wanted more than a Year Ten education. A failed Year Ten education. He'd told Cole he didn't read much, which was a less embarrassing way of admitting he couldn't read much. He'd been diagnosed as dyslexic when he was nine, and struggled through six more years of school before he could finally quit. Failed every class along the way as well, except manual arts. Anything where he got to use his hands instead of books was just fine. He even took art one year, and impressed his teacher with the sculptures he made from the bits and pieces he found around the wrecks in the yard, but he'd still failed the written exam and the essays. Mostly because by that time he didn't bother handing anything in.

"Dumb as dog shit," his dad always said.

Dumber, probably.

"Hey."

Aiden closed his eyes as Cole found him. He straightened up as Cole put his arms around him from behind. Felt so fucking good to be held like this. Sunlight bathing them, because they were standing right out in the open. It felt reckless. It felt almost fearless.

"Remember I said I'd say the wrong stuff?" Cole put his chin on Aiden's shoulder. His stubble scratched his ear. "I'm sorry if I upset you, okay?"

"I'm not upset at you."

"I meant what I said." Cole tightened his grip. "If anyone deserves a beating in your family, it's your fucking father, not you."

"I know that." Aiden opened his eyes and looked up toward the quarry. "But where else could I go?"

"Anywhere."

Aiden didn't think that was true. He didn't even know how to start doing that.

Pack a suitcase like his mum had, and...

Pack a suitcase.

Rain and black water.

Aiden shivered.

Could he really run? Further than he'd run before? It would have to be. Further than the quarry, where he'd played out all his dreams. Slid down the hills of gravel in clouds of dust, "*Look at you!*" ripping holes in his shorts. Fought pirates and dragons and Sand People. Shouted and bellowed and sang where nobody would hear him. Made all his dreams there, just like his mum always said he could. Hadn't they both escaped into their stories? Into their imaginations?

He remembered her hosing off his filthy legs before letting him back into the house.

"Are you mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"I'm covered in mud."

"Are you sure that's mud? I thought you were covered in the dreams you made in the dirt."

After that, sometimes Aiden would look at the black lines of dirt under his nails and smile. Back then, he hadn't been afraid of going to the quarry. Back when it was his special place. Back before everything changed.

The thought of men working at the quarry again made him sick, somehow. Unsettled. Afraid.

"Cole." He turned in Cole's embrace and looked up at him. His eyes were dark and serious. "I want to do everything."

"What do you mean?"

Aiden's face blazed, but he pushed the words out. "I want you to, to, um, to fuck me."

Cole lifted a hand and stroked his cheek. "Why do you want that?"

"For when you're gone. To, um, to remember what it's like."

Cole's eyes widened. "Aiden, I'm not leaving you here."

Aiden drew back. "You're not?"

“Oh, Jesus, no!” Cole’s voice cracked. “I’m taking you home with me. And not, not *for* anything... I mean, I’ll take you because you’re a good guy, and you need to be somewhere safe. You can get a job, make some friends. You can stay with me as long as you need.”

“Do you mean that?” Aiden asked, unsure how he found the breath to make the words.

“I mean it.”

This, *this* was another dirt-made dream.

The one where he went to the city.

The one where he had a job, and friends, and someone like Cole.

Aiden hadn’t dreamed anything like it when he was a kid. It was such a small dream, a *modest* dream. At the same time it was more wildly fantastic than any dream Aiden had ever had about space battles and lightsabers and Sith Lords.

It seemed like the sort of dream it would be incredibly dangerous to put his hope in.

“Will you come with me?” Cole asked.

“Yes,” Aiden said.

He wanted it to be true, even though he thought it would never really happen.

So Aiden wanted to do everything.

It had been a long time since anyone had offered himself up like that to Cole. Not as trustingly as Aiden had. Because it was all about trust. Aiden was painfully fucking innocent, and the fact that he’d offered himself up to Cole, to do *everything*, was intoxicating and terrifying at the same time.

Cole wondered what Deb would advise, then realised he knew. He didn’t call her to confirm, because, fuck it, he wanted Aiden as well. It had been months since he’d gotten laid, and a hell of a lot longer since he’d been with anyone whose name he cared to remember. He didn’t think he’d ever been anyone’s first.

That night, he sat with Aiden on the living room floor, and they worked on the jigsaw puzzle they'd found in one of the boxes in the back room. Windmills and tulips.

Aiden was gathering the edge pieces together, into a pile beside Tessa. Tessa snuffled at them, going cross-eyed when she lifted her snout again and one was stuck to her nose. Aiden rescued it, then stretched out on the floor on his stomach and began to work on a patch of tulips.

"Earlier," Cole said, "you said you wanted to do everything."

Aiden froze.

Cole rested his hand on the small of his back, rubbing gently. "I don't want to embarrass you, but I need to know what you know."

Aiden turned his head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean there are plenty of ways to have sex without penetration," Cole said.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Like, um, like what you were going to do earlier? The blowjob?"

Cole grinned. "That's a good one, yeah."

His smile seemed to bolster Aiden's confidence. "I want to do that again, too. But I did mean penetration as well. If, um, if you want to."

"I do want to," Cole said. "But we're not in a race here. We'll get there when we get there."

"You don't want to do it tonight?"

"No." Fuck. Cole was pretty sure he was going to hell for that lie. He ran his hand up Aiden's spine, under his loose T-shirt. He liked the way that Aiden's muscles shifted under his touch as he shivered. "Not a race, remember? Anyway, we're going to need some supplies from town."

"What supplies?"

Not just innocent. Ignorant. Dangerously ignorant.

"Condoms," he said. "And lube. Gonna need both of those. With lube you can improvise a bit, but you never do it without a condom, understand?"

“I’ve never been with anyone.”

“And I’m clean,” Cole said. “But you don’t take my word for that. Don’t ever take anyone’s word for it.”

Aiden flushed. “Okay,” he mumbled, and looked away.

“Hey.” Cole rubbed his back a little harder. “What’s going on in your head?”

Aiden sat up, wincing a little. “Do you think I’m dumb? I don’t mind if you think I am.”

“I don’t think you’re dumb, Aiden,” Cole said. “I think... I think you’ve been isolated. I think you’re a guy who really needs to get the fuck out of this place.”

Aiden’s face was solemn. He chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, drawing Cole’s gaze. “Why do you call yourself Cole and not John?”

The question was so unexpected that Cole was taken aback for a moment. Then he grinned. “Habit. That’s what I was called in the army. Well, my mates called me Kingy.”

“Kingy?”

“Old King Cole,” Cole said, and rolled his eyes.

Aiden smiled.

“Which worked fine,” Cole said, “until a guy called King actually joined our unit, and then it got confusing. First he was Prince, because we already had a king, and eventually he became Symbol, and then the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. *Way* too long for a nickname, and way too complicated. Eventually we just called him Elvis and were done with it.”

Aiden turned a puzzle piece over in his palm. “Last night, when you were sleeping, you had a bad dream.”

“I get them sometimes.”

“Me too.” Aiden flushed. “Not like... not like yours, I guess.”

“You don’t have to go as far as Iraq to get bad dreams.”

Aiden closed his fingers around the puzzle piece. “I know.”

On Monday morning, Aiden helped Cole shift the boxes out of the back room and stack them in the hall. Then they prepped the walls for painting. Cole did most of the work because he didn't want Aiden to strain anything. Aiden taped the skirting boards, then used a screwdriver to lever open the first tin of paint. He jostled the tin and ended up with a pool of white paint in his lap.

"Shit," he said.

Cole threw an old towel at him. "Try not to get it on the floor."

Not a rebuke, Aiden realised, but a request. "I'm gonna need new pants."

"Hurry up then. Who else is going to talk to me while I paint?"

"While *we* paint."

Cole snorted as Aiden left the room. "And put those pants in the laundry tub to soak. We're running out of clothes!"

Aiden wished he had the guts to yell back and ask how that was a bad thing, but he didn't. Holding the towel over his sweatpants to keep the paint from dripping, he made his way gingerly to the bedroom and stripped off. He balled the sweatpants up, then pulled open the dresser drawers.

Cole had claimed the top two drawers for his stuff. It wasn't organised, exactly, just everything all shoved in. Shirts and pants and socks and underwear all mixed in together. The other dresser drawers, Aiden knew, were empty. Harry's stuff was boxed up. Aiden had thought that maybe he should liberate some of it so he didn't need to borrow Cole's clothes, but most of the boxes smelled of mothballs, and the thought of wearing a dead man's stinky mothball clothes was gross. And Aiden liked the idea of wearing Cole's clothes. Of smelling like Cole.

He reached into the drawer and found a pair of sweatpants. He lived in those because Cole's jeans just slid right off his arse. He tugged them free, dislodging a rolled up plastic bag that had been jammed in the back of the drawer. Aiden opened it.

A box of condoms, and something that was in a tube like toothpaste, but Aiden figured was lube. It took him a while to confirm it by reading the label. Too many long fucking words. Aiden unscrewed the lid and squeezed a dab out onto his finger. Felt cold. Not as slimy as he'd thought, but smooth. It smelled okay, and didn't taste of anything much at all.

Aiden put it back where he'd found it, then pulled on the sweatpants. He checked his shirt was okay, then went out the back and put the paint-stained pants and towel in the laundry tub like Cole had asked.

When he returned to the back room, Cole had started painting.

Aiden joined him.

"Careful you don't stretch too far," Cole said.

"Okay." Aiden tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but kept thinking back to the stuff in the drawer. "Cole?"

"Yeah?"

"How come you said you needed to go into town to get condoms when you've already got them?"

Cole froze for a moment, his arm extended. Paint dripped from the roller down the side of his hand. He stepped back at last, setting the roller down in the tray. "Because I don't want to *push*, okay? I don't want to take advantage of you."

Aiden's breath caught. "You haven't."

Cole studied his face for a long moment. "And I don't want to let you down."

"You wouldn't," Aiden whispered.

Cole smiled slightly and shook his head. "Those are some heavy expectations right there, kid. Not sure I'm ready for them."

He bent down to pick up the roller again, but before he turned away Aiden saw his smile vanish. He had the feeling that Cole wasn't talking about sex anymore, that he was talking about something much bigger, but he didn't know how to ask.

They painted for a long time in silence.

Chapter Six

When he got back from hanging out the washing on the sagging line at the side of the house, Cole found Aiden making dinner in the kitchen.

“Smells good,” he said.

“It’s just an omelette,” Aiden said. “And it’s just cheese and chives.”

“I bought chives?” Cole raised his eyebrows. That seemed pretty bloody unlikely.

“There’s a bunch growing under the water tank stand.” Aiden flashed him a shy smile.

“Huh.”

Cole headed to the toilet.

When he got back to the kitchen, he leaned in the doorway for a while. Aiden had the radio turned up to some song Cole didn’t know, and was moving to the beat as he stood over the frying pan. He had his back to Cole.

He looked good relaxed like this, with his guard down. He moved well, his muscles loose. Not tense. Not hunched over like he was always expecting the next blow.

And maybe Cole had been underestimating him this entire time. Maybe, instead of encouraging him to remain cautious and small-drawn, Cole should have been helping him stand taller.

Cole closed the distance between them, startling Aiden when he slid his arms around him. “Smells good.”

“You already said that.”

Cole nipped at his earlobe. “This time I was talking about you.”

Aiden’s broad smile almost eclipsed his blush.

The omelette did smell good though. Cole’s stomach rumbled.

Aiden tapped the spatula against the side of the pan. “Cole, did you always know?”

“Know what?”

“That you weren’t right?”

Cole tightened his grip. “What do you mean, I’m not right? There’s nothing wrong with being gay, Aiden. Anyone who tells you different is just an asshole.”

Aiden leaned back against him. “Oh.”

“But, yeah, I guess I always knew. Not like one of those kids who tells his parents when he’s five that he’s going to marry a boy when he grows up, or anything. I wasn’t that self-aware. But it was no big shock when I figured out I liked boys. I was about thirteen, I think.”

“Did you tell your parents?”

“Not for a while.” Cole almost smiled at the memory. “And not because I thought they’d take it badly. I just didn’t want to talk about sex with my parents. *Ugh.*”

“They weren’t angry?”

“No, mate, they weren’t angry.” Cole pressed a kiss to the side of Aiden’s neck. “They were good people.”

Aiden turned in his embrace, his eyes wide. “Are they...”

“My dad died in a car accident when I was fifteen. My mum passed away a few months ago. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry.” Aiden laid a hand against his cheek.

“Don’t be sorry. I was lucky. I know I was.” He’d never known it more acutely than with Aiden, who still wore the fading bruises his father had given him.

God, he couldn’t even reconcile this Aiden with the kid he’d seen that first night. That furtive, awkward kid with his hat pulled down and his clipboard clutched to his chest. Cole had hardly noticed him that night. Maybe because Aiden hadn’t wanted to be noticed. But maybe also because Cole had taken his cues from Paul Lawson. Thought the kid was stupid, forgettable. He hadn’t bothered to look any further.

But Aiden was so much more than that.

So much better than anyone knew.

Cole really didn’t fucking deserve him.

Lucky for him that he was a selfish enough prick to take him anyway.

Aiden felt Cole's dick digging into his hip. So big and hard that he didn't know whether to cheer, or to panic and run. He decided to lose himself in their kiss instead. Kissing was good. Kissing was better than good. It wasn't even a little bit weird now. Strange, the difference a few days could make.

But then, wasn't that always the way? If he could push through his fear today, it was probably his dad he had to thank for it. It wasn't that long ago that Aiden had thought he was dying, that his dad was killing him. So he wasn't going to be scared of this. And maybe that was a strange place to find his courage—in that pit of black fear still boiling away at the core of him—but Aiden didn't care.

He reached back and shoved the frying pan off the front burner of the stove.

"Our omelette's not done yet," Cole teased, his words and his breath hot against Aiden's mouth.

"Fuck the omelette," Aiden said. He pulled Cole's head down, forcing their lips together again. "I'm not hungry."

Cole's laugh shook both their bodies.

"Please," Aiden said, holding Cole's face between his hands. "Can we?"

"I don't want to pressure you into this. You don't *owe* me."

Aiden owed him everything, but that's not what this was about. "But I want to. Please. I want to."

Cole kissed him. "Okay." He moaned. "Fuck, okay."

Aiden grabbed him by the hand and pulled him through the house and into the bedroom before he could change his mind. He was overcome by his own recklessness, by his burning need to do this now, and to know what it was like at last. He wanted to have it in the past already so he didn't need to squint at a magazine again and try and puzzle out the mechanics of the act. Aiden was tired of fear and speculation. He wanted *knowledge*. He wanted to do everything.

Turning around when they entered the bedroom, Aiden was worried Cole would refuse him again.

"I'm not scared," he whispered, trying not to choke on the lie. Then: "Is it going to hurt?"

Cole stepped toward him.

"We're just going to touch for a bit," Cole said. "Nothing will hurt."

Aiden was afraid, but not afraid enough to run. He wanted this. He'd wanted it for years, and now he wanted it with Cole. Cole was bigger than he was, muscular, but Aiden wasn't afraid. Cole had saved him. Cole wouldn't hurt him.

Alright, *this* might hurt, but it could be good, too, couldn't it? The men in the magazine had sure seemed to like it. And who would do it, really, if it weren't any good?

He sat down on the bed, his gaze flicking from Cole to the drawer where the condoms and lube were stashed.

"Can you breathe okay on your back?" Cole asked in a low voice.

Aiden nodded, and shifted up on the bed. He lay on his back. His chest was still tight, and pain stabbed through him every time he breathed too deeply, but it would be easier than on his hands and knees, he guessed.

"If anything hurts, or if you just need to move, just tell me."

Aiden nodded again, and swallowed. It didn't seem to help his dry throat.

Cole put a knee on the bed and leaned forward. He slid his hands up underneath Aiden's T-shirt and across his abdomen. It was ticklish, and Aiden didn't know whether to laugh or to moan as Cole turned one of his hands and dipped his fingers under the elastic waistband of Aiden's sweatpants. Aiden's breath caught and his face burned. Stupid to be embarrassed. His dick had been hard since Cole had touched him in the kitchen. Since forever, actually. They both knew it. Still, he couldn't help squirming.

"Take it easy," Cole murmured. He moved his hands up Aiden's sides, pushing his shirt up. Aiden lifted his arms to allow Cole to drag the shirt over his head. Then Cole shifted back, taking his weight off the mattress so that he could stand up and take his own shirt off.

He had a tattoo on his chest, over his heart. Some sort of crest or shield that made Aiden think of the knights and the princes from the fairytale stories his mum had told him, but was probably something to do with the cavalry. Knights and horses, Aiden thought, or kings and tanks.

Cole, his eyes dark, unbuttoned the fly of his jeans. He hooked his fingers over the waistband and shoved his jeans and underwear down. His dick was bigger than Aiden's. Not longer by much, but thicker. It was hard not to be intimidated by it, and not immediately panic about how much it would hurt when Cole actually fucked him.

Cole leaned over the bed again, and tugged Aiden's sweatpants down. Then he crossed to the drawer to retrieve the plastic bag. "You want to stop at any time, you'll tell me, right?"

Aiden managed to nod. Cole climbed onto the bed beside him, and Aiden reached up and traced the tattoo with his index finger. Then he flattened his hand against it and felt Cole's heartbeat reverberating against his palm. "Please, Cole."

"I've got you," Cole said. He pressed his own hand over Aiden's. "Just relax."

Cole could not afford to fuck this up. If this was a disaster, where would that leave Aiden? Totally fucking friendless and alone. Aiden had enough in his past to be terrified of. Cole didn't want him to be afraid of his future as well.

He liked Aiden.

No. That was the wrong word.

He *loved* Aiden.

Cole laid a trail of kisses down Aiden's chest and tried not to remember how much he hated that word. *Love*.

"*How do you know you love someone?*" he'd asked his dad when he was kid.

"*Huh. That's a tricky one. I suppose you know you love someone when you want to make them happy.*"

It was as good an answer as any, Cole thought. The word didn't have to come laden with expectations. It didn't have to be difficult. It didn't mean forever, or a commitment. Love could be as ephemeral as a single breath. That didn't make it a lie.

But it could also be something enduring.

Cole held Aiden's gaze as he reached for the lube. He lay beside Aiden, propped up on his left elbow. He moved his right hand down to Aiden's arse, fingers exploring him, and making sure that every clinical instruction—*Legs apart. Relax. Bear down*—was softened by a gentle touch, a murmured assurance, a distracting kiss.

Aiden grew more and more restless under Cole's ministrations, his dick hardening and his hips jerking. A flush spread across his chest, and down to his abdomen. The muscles in his thighs bunched and released as he shifted his legs and scrunched his toes.

"Not a race," Cole reminded him when he whimpered.

Aiden's forehead creased as Cole scissored his fingers. He twisted his fingers in the sheets. "Cole!" His voice rose and trembled, uncertain.

Cole stilled his fingers. "Tell me."

"I'm okay." The pulse fluttered in Aiden's throat. He swallowed. "You've done this?"

"Yeah. But we can stop."

Aiden bit his lip. "Don't want to stop."

"Okay." Cole kissed him gently. "Just breathe for me."

Aiden nodded and swallowed again. He closed his eyes as Cole began to press his fingers deep inside him again, doing his best to relax right up until Cole pegged his prostate. He gasped, shocked, his eyes flashing open and his body trying to jerk off the mattress.

"You like that?" Cole asked him.

Aiden was wide-eyed and shocked. He probably had no idea what that even was.

Cole pegged him again, and this time Aiden gasped and shivered with pleasure. His dick twitched. "Oh. Oh, *wow*."

Cole almost laughed at the expression on his face. The penny had dropped: Aiden had suddenly figured out how it might feel good to have something up his arse. Smiling, he removed his fingers and climbed between Aiden's legs. He ran his hands up them, careful of the faint, mottled bruises. His touch made the fine hairs on Aiden's thighs stand up.

Cole shuffled forward on his knees, his aching cock bumping against Aiden's arse.

"You don't have to be scared of this," Cole said.

Aiden nodded, and tilted his hips up.

Cole hooked his arms under Aiden's legs and shifted him into position. Then he reached for the condoms. Tore one open and rolled it over his cock. Tried not to come just from that. He spread lube over the condom, then leaned forward, rubbing the blunt head of his cock in the cleft of Aiden's arse until it notched into place against his entrance.

"If you need to change position, or you need to stop, you tell me," he said, holding Aiden's gaze.

"Yes," Aiden murmured, fear and lust battling for dominance in his eyes. "Promise."

Cole pushed forward.

Aiden groaned, every muscle tightening.

"Breathe," Cole gasped. "Breathe, Aiden."

Aiden whimpered, squeezing his eyes shut.

He was so tight and hot. Cole pushed forward slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, waiting until Aiden's muscles fluttered and eased every painstaking step of the way. He could hardly bring himself to look at Aiden, whose face was screwed up in a grimace.

"Aiden?" Cole gasped for breath. "Talk to me."

Aiden opened his eyes. "Don't stop." His mouth twisted.

Shit.

Cole bottomed out inside Aiden. He held himself there, Aiden clenched too tightly around him. He nudged Aiden's chin with his own, and Aiden turned his face toward him. They exchanged an open-mouthed kiss, while Aiden made small unhappy noises.

"Breathe," Cole reminded him.

Aiden shifted restlessly. He lifted his legs and hooked them around the back of Cole's, opening himself more to the penetration. Cole felt the moment that

he relaxed. If the pain hadn't vanished entirely, it had at least become manageable.

Cole pulled back a little, then pushed back in. Aiden jolted as Cole's cock hit his prostate.

"That's it," Cole said. He worked a hand between them, wrapping it around Aiden's dick. Shit. He knew how quickly this kid could shoot. It wouldn't take long at all to get him hard again, and to get him off.

"Cole," Aiden gasped. "Cole!"

Cole pulled back, then pushed in again. He tried to jerk Aiden's dick at the same time, but fuck that. He needed to find his own rhythm.

"Fuck, yes," he said, as he felt Aiden's hand pushing between them to take over. "That's it."

Cole braced his hands on the mattress, and began to thrust slowly. He rolled his hips a little on each thrust, loving the way Aiden jerked whenever he hit his prostate. They kissed again, Cole swallowing Aiden's surprised little gasps.

In the hot, sweaty place between their bodies, Aiden worked his hand furiously.

Cole began to thrust more quickly, Aiden's heels digging into his thighs. Pulling him closer, deeper, each time. Aiden's pale skin was flushed with exertion. Blotches of red stained his cheeks.

"C-Cole!" he cried out, tensing suddenly, and then coming. He shuddered, and then sagged back into the mattress. Aftershocks made him twitch.

Cole thrust twice more, a part of him surprised he lasted that long after watching Aiden come apart, and then he came as well. Face buried against Aiden's neck, he came.

In the silence, he listened to Aiden's rasping, shallow breath.

Then he remembered his ribs, and rolled off him. He wiped Aiden's hair back from his sweaty forehead. "Shit. You okay?"

Aiden surprised him with a smile. "I think I'm gonna be sore in the morning." Then he laughed at the look on Cole's face. "I meant my ribs, but, um, *yeah*."

"Cheeky," Cole said, relieved. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He peeled the condom off. "Okay, I'm going to get rid of this, and then maybe have a shower. You want to join me?"

Aiden nodded, his smile suddenly shy. "Yes, please."

Yeah, Cole thought, as he padded toward the bathroom. He wanted to make Aiden happy.

As happy as Aiden was making him.

That night they shared the bed.

Aiden stole glances at Cole.

Then, when Cole's even breathing told him he was asleep, Aiden shifted carefully onto his side and stared.

Cole rolled onto his side as well.

They were magnets, pulling toward one another.

Aiden ached to reach out and touch his face, like a blind man trying to recognise a friend, but he didn't want to wake him. Didn't want it to be weird or awkward. He wanted this moment to last a lifetime.

In this moment, between asleep and awake, everything was perfect.

"Look at you!" his mum said.

"Are you mad?" Aiden whispered, half afraid of her answer.

"Why would I be mad?"

Aiden's chest ached. He couldn't help himself anymore. He reached out and touched Cole's face in the darkness.

Chapter Seven

Aiden liked waking up with Cole in the bed.

Wednesday morning was the second morning in a row it happened.

It was the warmth that Aiden liked the most. Cole's arms around him, his big hands splayed over Aiden's skin. Aiden's head tucked against Cole's chest. Cole's legs twined in his own. And, most often, Tessa jammed up against the back of Aiden's thighs, radiating heat like a furnace. Sheets that smelled of sweat and comfort, and dog.

Cole shifted, drawing one hand back from Aiden's flank. Sliding down the hollow of his hip instead, under Aiden's sweatpants. His blunt fingers drawing goosebumps along Aiden's abdomen. Tracing lower then, through the coarse hair. Then he curled his hand around Aiden's dick.

Aiden moaned, and pushed his hips forward.

Waking up like this was perfect.

Tessa snorted and shifted, then jumped off the bed.

Aiden lifted his head and blinked at Cole.

Cole smiled at him, eyes still bleary with sleep. "Good morning." He squeezed Aiden's hardening dick.

"Good morning." Aiden rolled his hips, then pulled away. He put his hands against Cole's shoulders and pushed him onto his back. Then he climbed on top of him, his breath shuddering out of him as Cole's cock dragged against the inside of his thigh.

Aiden shoved his sweatpants down, then did the same with Cole's. He licked his hand, and closed it around Cole's dick.

Rubbing off against each other like this was good. Better than good. It was fucking awesome. It was hot and close and slippery, and Aiden loved it.

He lined their dicks up and pushed forward. He moaned, and Cole moaned too. Aiden kept one hand on their dicks, keeping them in place. He leaned his weight on his other hand, over Cole's shoulder. Brought his mouth close to Cole's so they could kiss.

"Your ribs okay?" Cole asked between teasing nips.

“Mmmm.” Aiden’s breath hitched as he shuddered.

Cole moved his hands to Aiden’s arse, digging his fingers into his muscles, pushing him forward harder. Aiden moaned as he picked up the pace, then froze as pain stabbed through him. He slapped a hand to his ribs, his breath wheezing out of him.

“Aiden? Shit.”

“I’m okay.” As long as he didn’t move he was okay. Or breathe.

Cole shifted, rolling so that Aiden lay on his side on the mattress, and holding him close so that nothing jarred. “Your ribs?”

“Yeah.” That sharp, stabbing pain had short-circuited all his pleasure. His dick wasn’t hard anymore.

“We should bandage them up,” Cole said. “I’ll get you some more codeine.”

“No, don’t go yet.” Aiden didn’t want to be left alone in the bed. “Sorry.”

Cole reached out and brushed Aiden’s hair back from his forehead. “What are you sorry for?”

“Killing the mood?”

“The mood’s only fun if we’re both in it.” Cole rubbed his thumb along Aiden’s jaw. “So, what do you want for breakfast? Bacon and eggs? You’ve probably figured out by now that all I can cook is bacon and eggs.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Cole’s entire face lit up when he laughed. His body shook with it.

Aiden’s joy was quieter, slower. It warmed him from the inside that he’d made Cole happy, even if it was only for now, for this most brief moment in time. It seemed like the sort of moment he would want to remember for the rest of his life.

They were low on groceries again. Cole phoned Mike. He felt dirty doing it, with Aiden watching quietly from the kitchen table. His false cheeriness left a sour taste in the back of his throat.

“Yeah, that’d be great,” he told Mike. “I’ll see you then.”

He ended the call.

"I'll work on the bathroom while you're gone," Aiden offered. "Finish knocking the tiles out."

"Don't." Cole crossed over to him, and leaned down and kissed the top of his head. His scruffy hair tickled his lips. "Fuck the tiles. They can stay, in all their orange glory. If anyone actually buys the place, they can fix it themselves."

He wanted to go home. He wanted to take Aiden home.

"Okay," Aiden said. "What do you want me to do? I could do some more painting."

"No. I don't want you painting. Not with your ribs." Cole rubbed the back of Aiden's neck. "You can work on the jigsaw puzzle."

Aiden snorted, but he didn't argue. He finished his breakfast, washed the dishes, and retreated to the bedroom the moment he heard the roar of Mike's ute coming down the road.

"You getting much work done?" Mike asked, peering around Cole into the house.

"A bit, yeah." Cole pulled the door closed.

They walked toward the ute.

"What about the yard?" Mike asked. "I've seen them home improvement shows. You gotta make the yard look nice too. Bathrooms and kitchens and yards. Those are the big things."

They were also the things that would suck your profits dry before you'd even sold the place.

"Yeah, but I still don't know if this place'll even sell so I don't want to throw too much money at it. Maybe I'll clean the yard out a bit, but I won't be putting in a fucking gazebo or reflecting pool or any shit like that."

Mike laughed. "What the fuck is a reflecting pool?"

"Mate, I don't even know."

Mike laughed again.

Cole climbed into the ute.

He hated the idea that if he hadn't known about Aiden, he might have liked Mike. Might have considered him an okay bloke. Maybe even a mate.

“Dad’s got an excavator back at the yard,” Mike said as they headed toward Dingo Creek. “I can bring it over on the weekend if you want. Dig that spinifex out.”

Cole smiled to cover his unease. The last thing he wanted was Mike spending time at the house. “Let me finish up on the inside first.”

Mike glanced at him. “You want a hand with that?”

Shit.

He knew.

He fucking knew.

“Nah.” Cole scratched his cheek. “I kind of like working alone, you know?”

And he figured Mike could make of that whatever the hell he wanted.

“Less distractions,” Mike suggested.

“Yeah.”

Maybe he didn’t know.

Cole tried to hold onto that thought, because he didn’t really want to think about the fucking alternative.

Aiden was making a cup of tea when he heard the car. His gaze went automatically to the back window. There had been a few cars and trucks heading up to the quarry today. Not exactly a steady stream, but more traffic than that old road had seen since before Aiden could remember. Then he realised, with a jolt, that the car he heard wasn’t on the quarry road at all. It was coming from the front of Cole’s place, not the back. And it wasn’t Mike’s ute.

Aiden hurried into the living room and peered through the window.

It was Stu’s car. The one he’d been working on for months now. The ’86 Ford Falcon. Last time Aiden had seen it, the car had been on blocks still. Now it had shiny new mags.

Aiden stood trembling by the window as the car pulled up out the front of Cole’s house. Stu climbed out of the driver’s side, and their dad hauled himself out of the passenger seat. Aiden’s blood ran cold.

They must have known that Cole was in town with Mike.

Which meant they were here for him.

He moved as quickly as he could, making sure the front door was locked—hoping the back door was, because he wouldn't have time to get to it to check—and hurrying into the bedroom. Tessa followed him, ears pointed and alert. Aiden closed the bedroom door, and stood there, wishing it had a lock. Why didn't it have a lock?

Stupid.

His dad and Stu wouldn't break in. They wouldn't.

He heard their voices as they approached the house.

Heard the creak of the front steps and the rattle of the front door.

"I'll check round back." Stu's voice.

Oh god. Please. Please let it be locked.

Aiden squeezed his eyes shut and leaned his forehead against the bedroom door.

Quiet as a mouse.

"Locked!" he heard Stu yell out. The words floated through the kitchen shutters, through the thin walls of the old house, and Stu might have been standing right beside him.

Aiden swallowed. Tried not to whimper.

A sudden crash of shattering glass, and Aiden's heart froze.

"Jesus, Dad!" Stu's voice was half aghast, half amused.

"I know he's in there! Aiden!"

The front door rattled.

Oh shit. He'd broken the window beside the front door. He'd be able to reach in and unlock the door.

A part of Aiden wanted to break down and scream for forgiveness now, before it got worse. The rest of him knew it couldn't get worse than it already was. What would his dad do? Kill him twice as hard? He shoved a hand over his mouth to stop himself from making a sound. Tears slid down his face.

"Aiden!" The front door crashed open.

"Dad!" Stu called. "Fuck. Dad!"

“Aiden! You get your fucking arse out here now, boy!”

Aiden pushed away from the bedroom door. He stumbled over to Harry's cupboard—some of Cole's clothes hung in there now—and wrenched the door open. Wouldn't do any good, probably, but he needed to hide. He huddled on the floor of the cupboard.

Tessa tried to climb in with him.

“No,” he whispered. He couldn't trust she'd stay quiet. “No, sorry, girl, no.”

He tugged the door shut, wishing there was some way to hold it closed. Then drew his legs up, and buried his face in his hands. Waited for his dad to find him.

To kill him.

“Dad! Come on, Dad! He's not here. He must've run off.”

“He couldn't have fucking run off!”

“How bad was he?”

“Bad, alright? Fucking bad.”

“You sure? You were pretty drunk when we got home.”

“Aiden!” his dad yelled. Boots clomped down the short hallway. “Aiden!”

Aiden covered his head with his arms and squeezed his eyes shut. Tried not to rock back and forth.

Tessa growled lowly.

The bedroom door was pushed open.

“What the fuck—”

Tessa growled again, the noise reverberating like thunder. Snapped and snarled, and then yelped suddenly.

“Fucking dog!”

Her yelps became whimpers.

Aiden wanted to cover his ears.

“Mike said he locked the dog in because it was aggro. He's not here, alright, Dad? He's not here.”

Aiden dug his fingers into his scalp and tried not to scream.

“What the *hell*?”

The front door was open. A window was smashed.

Cole, loaded with grocery bags, spun around to look at Mike, but he was already driving away.

Fucker.

Cole dumped the grocery bags in the dust and leapt up the shallow front steps. “Aiden!”

Shit. The bedroom door was open too.

“Aiden!” His voice cracked.

Tessa hobbled toward him, whimpering. Then she stopped and cowered, her ears back, her body lowered.

“Tessa.” Cole dropped to his knees. “You okay, girl?” He ran his hands down the foreleg she was favouring. She yelped, then licked his face apologetically. Cole petted her head. “Where’s Aiden? Where is he?”

Tessa limped toward the cupboard.

Cole stood up and followed her, his heart in his throat. He wrenched the doors open, sagging in relief when he saw Aiden peering up at him. “Aiden!”

Aiden dropped his head again.

“Are you hurt?”

Aiden shook his head.

“Come on, come on out.”

Aiden hunched over further, and suddenly Cole realised why. The acrid smell of urine rose in the air. Aiden had pissed himself.

Cole squatted down and held his arms out. “Come on. Put your arms around my neck.”

Aiden shook his head again. Muttered something into his arms.

“Come on,” Cole said firmly. “You need a shower, then I need to check Tessa’s leg properly.”

“Is she okay?” Aiden’s voice wavered, and then he started to cry. “Couldn’t. Couldn’t get out and help her. Even when they left, I couldn’t!”

"It's okay. Arms around my neck, come on." It was difficult to keep his voice even when Cole wanted nothing more than to punch a fucking wall. Or any fucking Lawson that wasn't Aiden. He had to keep calm for Aiden. Because someone had to be in control.

He gave Aiden an encouraging smile as he leaned toward him. Aiden's arms slipped around his neck. Cole hooked an arm under Aiden's knees and lifted him. Murmured an apology when Aiden knocked his head against the closet door. Carried him to the bathroom.

"I'm sorry," Aiden whispered when Cole lowered him to his feet.

"Not your fault." Maybe if he kept saying it, one day Aiden would believe it. Cole leaned into the shower and turned the water on. "Get under here, okay? You gotta clean up."

Aiden stripped his shirt off and shoved his pants down. The bright red blush extended down his face and spread through his chest.

Cole curled his fingers around the back of Aiden's neck and drew him close. Pressed their foreheads together. "Tell me they didn't hurt you."

"Tessa scared them off."

"Good." Cole squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then released him. "Okay, you get in the shower, I'll go check on her."

Aiden stepped under the water, tugging the old shower curtain closed.

Cole stepped outside the bathroom. He leaned on the wall and drew a deep breath.

Fuck.

They'd been in his fucking house.

It took him a moment to swallow down his rage. He rubbed his forehead. "Tessa? You okay, girl?"

She wasn't in the bedroom where he'd left her. She wasn't in the living room or the spare room either. Cole was just starting to worry when he crossed in front of the open front door and saw her rooting around in the grocery bags.

"Tessa!"

She latched her jaws around the plastic-wrapped sausages and scarpered away. Hardly limping at all, with the right incentive.

“At least let me take the plastic off!” Cole called after her, but she was already skittering around into the back yard. “Fine, but don’t fucking eat it!”

He gathered up the rest of the groceries and took them inside to the kitchen.

He shoved the perishables in the fridge, and left everything else on the table. Then pulled out his phone and called his sister. It went to her message bank.

“Deb, it’s John. Listen, I don’t think I can wait for my car to get fixed. Things have kind of escalated with Aiden’s family. Any chance you can come and get us, please? I’m about to call the police, and I think once that happens the shit is really going to hit the fan.”

Aiden sat underneath the shower, his head bowed, the spray hitting the back of his neck.

Like it was raining.

With Aiden’s left heel blocking the plughole, the shower slowly filled with water. Aiden rested the palms of his hands on the top of the shallow pool and wriggled his fingers to make the water dance.

He was clean now, but still ashamed that he’d wet himself in the cupboard. Jesus, he’d never even done that when he was a kid. But he’d never been alone then. His mum had been there, getting between Aiden and his dad. Protecting him. Today, there hadn’t been anyone.

Except Tessa. And she was hurt as well.

Aiden hated that he’d never stood up for himself.

Never stood up for his mum.

Maybe when they got to the city, Aiden could find her.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply until the sudden dizziness that hit him had passed.

Then, with the shower running cold, he climbed to his feet and let the water drain away. He turned the taps off and reached for a towel. He dried himself off, grimacing as he noticed Cole had taken his dirty clothes. It felt good that Cole looked after him, but at the same time he was embarrassed that he needed looking after.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and padded out to the kitchen.

Cole was making coffee.

“Is Tessa okay?”

“Gorging herself on sausages,” Cole said, indicating the open back door.

Tessa sat in the dirt, her tail swishing back and forth as she licked out the bottom of a Styrofoam tray.

“She won’t eat that, will she?”

“Nah. She’s not as stupid as she looks. Or acts.” Cole’s smile faded. “Listen, you should get dressed. The police are coming.”

“The police?” The blood drained from Aiden’s face.

“Aiden, he needs to be stopped, you understand?”

“Um...” Aiden cleared his throat. “Well, the police won’t be here for hours, will they?”

The nearest police station was two hours away in Kallangurra.

“That’s the lucky thing,” Cole said. “They’re already here.”

“Here?” Aiden felt like he was suddenly standing on a precipice.

“At the quarry,” Cole said. He shrugged. “I don’t know why.”

And that’s when Aiden remembered. He took a breath, dizzy. Stumbled, and put his hand against the wall to catch himself. Opened his mouth and let the words fall out before his screaming mind could stop them:

“Because that’s where he dumps all the bodies.”

It was raining.

Then, and now.

The clouds had rolled in from nowhere while Aiden had sat on the couch and shivered, and Cole had talked to the police on the phone. A few hours later, when dusk was falling, the detectives turned up on the doorstep. Their faces were grave. Their shoes were caked in mud from the quarry.

“I got home from school,” Aiden told them over the hiss of static in his skull, “and he said Mum had run off to the city. Just like his first wife did. And I went into their room, and her things were gone.”

He could still remember that feeling: like a punch to the stomach.

Gone.

Gone without him.

“I was crying, and he got angry when I cried, so I went to the quarry.”

Cole held his hand, and didn't seem to mind when the detectives saw.

Aiden frowned and stared at a threadbare patch on the carpet. “I was playing. It was raining. There's a big hole there. There's always water in it, even in the dry. That afternoon it was full of black water. I was throwing rocks in, and stirring up the mud at the edge. That's when I saw the suitcase.”

It had appeared through the black water like some sort of misshapen sea creature trying to breach the surface. Aiden had been scared, before he realised it was just a suitcase. He'd taken his stick and hooked it. Aiden had reeled it in, his heart pounding at the thought of the treasure he was going to uncover.

He'd dragged it out, muddy water streaming from it.

He'd imagined it full of gold bars that would gleam when he flung it open.

Except nothing had shone. The suitcase had been full of clothes. Muddy clothes. Pants and shirts and women's underwear. A sundress that had once been blue.

Aiden, eleven years old, had stood there for a long time not understanding.

Stubbornly not understanding.

Clutching his mum's sundress, he'd stared into the black water. A part of him refusing to understand, and a part of him just waiting for the water to reveal her to him as well.

And then his dad had been there.

Furious.

Murderous.

And somehow everything that had happened at the quarry had been buried underneath the pain of the vicious beating he gave Aiden that night.

“I forgot,” he said now in the silence that followed his revelation, his voice wooden. “How could I *forget*?”

Dumb as dog shit.

The detective with the moustache cleared his throat at last. "The ah, the remains found on site do appear to belong to a woman."

Aiden clicked his fingers, and Tessa came and sat by him. Put her head on his knee and thumped her tail on the floor.

"Mr. Cole said your father assaulted you as well," the detective said.

Aiden lifted his head and met the man's gaze.

"Aiden," Cole murmured.

"I can do it," Aiden said. He didn't know where this strength came from. From Cole, maybe, and from Tessa. But also from inside him. From that kid who had never been able to stand up to his dad before, but now finally got his feet under him. The kid who was his mother's son. "He found me with a gay magazine. He kept hitting me. Even when I was on the ground, he didn't stop."

The detective's jaw tightened and he nodded.

"He was drunk," Aiden said. "I think maybe he forgot the quarry gate was locked since the surveyors had been back. I think he was probably taking me there too."

How the fuck was he holding himself together right now? Cole's hand in his, and Tessa's head on his knee. Those were the only things anchoring him, Aiden was sure. Them, and the memory of his mum.

Hadn't he fought monsters a thousand times before, with the dirt of his dreams trapped under his nails?

"Cole?"

"What?"

"Cole, when can we leave? I don't want to stay here anymore."

"Whenever you want," Cole said, and squeezed his hand again.

In the end, the police drove them back to Kallangurra, and Cole booked a hotel room there. He had worried there would be a problem with Tessa, but the lady who owned the hotel agreed to turn a blind eye. It helped that she was married to one of the detectives.

Cole phoned Deb from the hotel.

“Well, this is a fine fucking mess,” she told him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Is Aiden okay?”

“The police arrested his dad.”

“I asked if he was okay, not if he was safe.”

“I don’t know. He’s...” Tougher than Cole would have been.

“More fragile than you?”

“I am not fragile.”

“It’s an observation of your mental well-being, John, not a threat to your masculinity. Calm the fuck down.”

“You calm the fuck down.”

She ignored that. “So I’ve taken some personal days. I’ll be in Kallangurra by tomorrow evening.”

“Shit.” She’d have to drive through the night to manage that. “Drive safe, please. We’re okay here for now.”

“I’m sharing the driving with Matt.” And sighed when his silence spoke for itself. “Matt, who I’ve told you about heaps of times. Matt, who you’ve met. Matt, who I’m living with.”

Cole rubbed his tired eyes. “I’ve been a shit brother, haven’t I?”

“For the most part,” Deb agreed softly. “Welcome home.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, his throat aching, and ended the call.

That night in the hotel room, Aiden had a nightmare.

His mother crawled out of the black water, a pale, dead thing with dark shadows where her eyes should be, and grasping, claw-like hands, and Aiden had run.

Afterward, when he woke up, it was to find Cole’s arms around him.

She’d been so pretty, a fairytale princess, that it seemed like the worst betrayal in the world to make her into some grotesque dead thing.

“In my nightmares, I’m in a truck,” Cole said with a sigh. “Just a truck. And the worst part is, I know exactly what’s coming. Except I can’t open my mouth. All I need to do is tell them to stop the truck, but I can’t. I just sit there, listening to Newbie and Elvis argue about some shit music Newbie’s blasting on his iPod, and I know we’re going to hit it any second now, but I can’t open my fucking mouth.”

“Is it every night?” Aiden asked him.

Cole was quiet for a while. Then he said, “No, not every night. Not anymore.”

“Will it get better?”

This time Cole didn’t hesitate to answer. “Yes. I promise.” He put a finger under Aiden’s chin and tilted it upward. Kissed him so gently that Aiden hardly felt it, although he was filled with warmth. “I promise, Aiden.”

And Aiden was strong enough to believe him.

The End

Author Bio

Lisa likes to tell stories, mostly with hot guys and happily ever afters.

Lisa lives in tropical North Queensland, Australia. She doesn't know why, because she hates the heat, but she suspects she's too lazy to move. She spends half her time slaving away as a government minion, and the other half plotting her escape.

She attended university at sixteen, not because she was a child prodigy or anything, but because of a mix-up between international school systems early in life. She studied History and English, neither of them very thoroughly.

She shares her house with too many cats, a dog, a green tree frog that swims in the toilet, and as many possums as can break in every night. This is not how she imagined life as a grown-up.

Contact & Media Info

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

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ELEVATION

By Jenna Jones

Photo Description

A series of animated .gifs where a handsome, bearded man strips off his clothes in an elevator. At the end of the series, he laughs.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name is XX. I live in XXX, or rather in one of the crappy suburbs of XXX. I am and have always been the poor kid, everywhere I go. It's not my fault I have a few siblings and my parents divorced when I was little. We kids stayed with (either mom or dad) and (the other parent) never paid any support. So it's been tight. Enough for me to skip my college dream for now in favor of making sure my (younger sibling) has the means and the money to go.

When I needed a better job to make ends meet when my (parent) fell ill, my uncle stepped in. He's one of the maintenance men in this massive building downtown. It has offices in the first ten floors and apartments above. They needed someone to fill in for the maternity leave of one of the "night portiers" as they call the position and I got the job, for now. It's actually a glorified way of saying "you get to stare at screens all night and sit in the middle of a lobby that's bigger than your house."

That's okay, it's easy money. Or was, until this one guy showed up. He's one of the people who get to use the special elevator in the back corner. That leads to the top two floors only. Where the city's richest people live.

I've no clue where he was, maybe abroad or in rehab or whatever, but since he came back, he's been hitting on me nonstop. It's been going on for months, now. Every night I'm on shift. He's getting frustrated, sure, but I didn't expect THIS! What the hell is he doing? Doesn't he know WHO ELSE needs to use the elevator and might walk into the building at any moment while he surfs up and down, doing this... THING! (I refuse to call that striptease, the elevator doesn't even have music...)

He's hot, but we're from two very different worlds, and a guy like that is no good for a guy like me.

Sincerely,

Tia

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, security/guard, twink, grief, first kiss, reunited, rich playboy, draftsman, roller coasters

Content Warnings: past child abandonment, mental illness/depression of secondary character

Word Count: 22,135

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ELEVATION

By Jenna Jones

The Wolcott Building stands on the corner of Main and First. While it might be overshadowed by newer and showier skyscrapers, it's still one of my favorites in the city. It was built in the 1920s, with Art Deco-style arches and silver-gray brick with blue brick accents around the doorways and tall windows. Inside, it's pale marble and rich wood and golden light.

Over the front doors, there's a sculpture that my drafting teacher in high school said represents Sophia, the goddess of wisdom: it's a voluptuous woman, who holds scrolls in one hand and an astrolabe in the other. Sophia was also the name of the wife of Joshua Wolcott, who built the Wolcott Building and was the father of Stephen Wolcott, the late head of the Wolcott family.

I let myself into the building through the revolving doors and enter the vast, two-story lobby. To my right is the coffee shop, Brewsters; to my left are a few upscale boutiques. I can smell the leather goods shop even through the scent of coffee. At this time of night the lobby is quiet, with all the office workers upstairs gone for the day and the residents already home.

Tyson is on duty tonight, with the new guy by his side. They both say, "Cruz!" at the sight of me, and I go around the bank of security monitors to give them both hugs, though it takes me a minute to remember the new guy's name.

"Tyson, Davy, hi."

"You're all dressed up," Tyson observes. "Lookin' sharp."

"Thanks. I've just come from work," I tell him, though that's not why I'm in my best suit. I ask Davy, "How do you like graveyard?"

"It's an adjustment," Davy says. "But I've always been a night owl anyway."

"That helps," I agree. I ask Tyson, "Hey, is my uncle Ricky around?"

"He said he'll be waiting for you in the maintenance office."

I tell them good night and go through an *Employees Only* door to take the stairs up to the third floor. The Wolcott Building is forty stories: the first two

are the lobby, then thirty are offices and businesses, and the top nine are apartments. About twenty years ago, the owner had the top story revamped to be a swimming pool and rooftop garden. That's my ultimate destination tonight.

But first I check in with Ricky—my uncle, big and broad like the rest of my dad's family, his hair more black than silver and another attempt at a mustache over his lip. He gives me a hug and slaps my back, even though we just saw each other last Sunday.

I nudge his chin. "How long until Tía Cristina makes you shave that off this time?"

"Until she gets tired of bristly kisses. Is today the day?"

"Today's the day." I try not to fidget as he gets a skeleton key card out of a locked drawer at a glacial crawl. "Have you seen him?"

"You asked me not to tell you." He gives me the key and I tuck it into my breast pocket.

"And I don't want you to tell me," I say with a nod, because surprise, good or bad, is the point of this entire night. "See you later, Tío Ricky."

"Or not," he says, mischievous, and I wonder if that's a hint.

Back in the lobby, I pass Tyson and Davy again, as well as the main bank of elevators, and go to the private elevators in the northeast corner. You can go to any of the business floors from the main elevators, but to reach the residential floors and the roof, you have to take either the freight elevator or the private elevator, and to get into the private elevator you have to have a key. I let myself in with the skeleton key and push the old brass grate closed. You don't have to use it—the elevators have carved mahogany doors that form an elaborate, decorative circle when they're closed—but I like the brass grate. It lends a satisfying sense of history.

I press the button for the fortieth floor, and glance up at the security camera. It wouldn't surprise me if Davy and Tyson are watching, so I smile at them—probably nervously—and fold my hands together in front of me.

I dressed up for the occasion: my best suit, pale gray with a darker gray tie and a white shirt. I pulled back my hair into a ponytail which I've tucked under my collar, my usual trick for formal occasions. It doesn't really work—there is always a stray lock or two that escape the elastic band and frame my face. I don't fuss with them, though, except to tuck them behind my ears.

He likes them. He likes to curl them around his fingers.

I resist the urge to press the button for the roof again. It doesn't make the elevator go faster—if it did, I'd be pounding it with my fist. As it is, I wait patiently as the elevator glides up forty stories to the rooftop level, thinking about the path that brought me to this time and place and who I hope is waiting for me on the roof.

It's about a year and a half ago that I hear my father talking to someone as I'm getting ready for work, and I go to the kitchen to see what's going on. He's on the phone, and after a moment I realize he's talking to his boss—he's been cooking at a burger place called Sammy's for the last year, and they really like him, and the customers like him, and I was hoping this one might stick for a while—and I cross my arms over my chest while I wait for him to finish. It's the fourth day of him calling in sick, and it's not hard to tell what his boss is telling him: if you don't come in today, don't bother coming back. It's the same old song and dance that happens every time he gets a job—once spring rolls around, he stops getting out of bed.

He sees me when he hangs up, and starts, "Cruz, *mijo*—"

I hold up my hands. "I'm supposed to start a new semester at the community college in a few weeks, or did you forget?"

"I remembered." He rubs his forehead. "But I can't—I can't—"

"You never can," I say, and it's bitter and unfair and I know it, because I know what this is and why, but that doesn't stop me from hating it. "Fine. No classes this year. At least I haven't paid tuition yet."

"Cruz," he says quietly, but I just take the lunch I made last night from the fridge and toss it into my backpack.

"Luna's tuition is due in July," I say and leave it there for him to do the math. Rent is due, bills are due, we have to eat, and Luna goes to a private performing arts high school. She wants to be a dancer. When the choice comes down to me or Luna, I'll choose Luna, every time.

When I leave the house, I let the door slam behind me. At least my job at the plant nursery is pretty good. I get to be outdoors most of the time, it smells like fresh soil and growing things, and most of the people I deal with are excited and happy because they're making their homes into something

beautiful. Still, I only make minimum wage and I've been working part-time for the last few months while I take some classes at the community college. Even if I change to full time, that's not enough to cover everything, and we really need Dad's wages. The family is willing to help sometimes—Ricky makes a decent wage working maintenance at the Wolcott Building—but I hate asking for handouts.

I should have known this was coming, though. As I wait at the bus stop I count the months, and yep, it's about time for the anniversary of Mom leaving. After seven years, I should see the pattern. Spring rolls around and he loses himself in asking why he wasn't good enough, why his wife didn't love him enough to stay, and why she left him with two children who look so much like her it hurts to look at us.

He thinks I don't see that, how sometimes he'll avoid looking at me unless he absolutely has to.

She was a renowned beauty, my mother, and my sister is becoming beautiful too. Me, my resemblance to my mother makes me look delicate, and this got me a lot of punches to the face when I was a boy. I still get called a pretty young thing when I go out, and though I've been twenty-one for months, I still get carded at bars.

The bus comes and I climb on, and wrap an arm around one of the poles to keep my balance while I text Luna:

Dad's bad again today. Can you make dinner?

She texts me back:

Sure. When are you home from work?

Late, I tell her, and then my stop comes and I get off. As soon as I clock in I find my boss, Emily, to explain the situation and ask for more hours. She taps a ballpoint pen against the new catalog for a moment or two before she answers.

"I've got everybody scheduled as much as I can right now, but if you're willing to be on-call, I'll call you first when I need a sub."

"Thank you," I say fervently, and go out to the yard to start my day.

Next comes four hours of carrying bags of mulch and potting soil, restocking flats of flowers, and maneuvering concrete statues carefully on hand trucks. At twelve-thirty, I clock out and take my lunch bag and a sketchbook to the employee break room. A couple of guys are playing Foosball and ask me if

I'd like to join in, but I tell them I've got a project to work on, and sketch while I eat. Finals are next week and I still have to figure out exactly what my final project is going to be for my urban design class. The brief is to create a civic building within specific budget guidelines and using specific materials. Most of the people in my class are designing grand city halls or court buildings, but I'm leaning toward a library—and if it's got a few elements of my favorite building in Aldhurst, so be it. I sketch in tall, arched windows—you need plenty of light to read—and draw in some stained-glass designs of climbing vines. Stained glass is probably out of the budget, unless I can move some numbers around...

Then it's one o'clock and I'm back to work until five. The nursery isn't busy on weekdays—weekends are another story—but I still help four or five customers before it's time to clock out. Three of them thank me by name. One of them, a handsome, graying man with a fading tan line on his ring finger, even gives me a look like he wants to ask for my number, but I keep my smile polite and call him "sir" when I ring up his purchases of weed killer and marigolds. I don't date customers. I don't date coworkers or classmates, either. I don't date much at all.

After I clock out, I wash up as best I can in the employee bathroom, throw on a clean shirt, and catch the bus to the community college. Class is three hours, twice a week, and while I feel like I'm learning a lot, it's still a frustratingly slow process, and there's only so far that a community college course can take me. After graduation, the next step is an internship with a design firm if I really want to learn anything, and even if you can find a paying one, it won't pay much more than I make at the nursery. And graduation will be put off for another year. Again.

After class, a group of us get together in the student lounge for study group. I have an ancient laptop that I bought used, and it's hard not to growl in frustration every time the CAD program freezes up. One of my classmates looks over at my computer when I shove my hands through my hair in frustration again. "You need more RAM, Cruz," he tells me. "That will help until you can get a new machine."

"I can't afford any upgrades right now."

"It's cheap," he says with a shrug, "and I'll install it for you."

"I can't pay you for your time, either."

"We could get a cup of coffee and not talk about school for an hour."

I look up from my laptop. His name is Paxton and he cuts his golden-red whiskers into a goatee. I like him enough, I suppose, but it only now occurs to me that he makes a point to talk to me every class and it was his suggestion that got me into the study group in the first place. I was struggling a little on my own.

Still, I'm not here to enhance my social life, and I smile and say, "Thanks, but I'll just have to manage with what I've got for a while longer."

Paxton smiles and shrugs again, and we get back to work.

Study group ends at nine, and the bus gets me home by ten. The house smells like waffles and bacon, and there's a stack of waffles on the kitchen counter for me, kept warm under a clean dish towel. I pour on syrup and get a glass of milk, and take them to Luna's room to talk to her while I eat. But her light is off and the door is closed. Asleep already, even though it's a Friday night. Probably smart—she probably has a rehearsal of some kind tomorrow morning. I should get to bed early too.

But I don't work tomorrow until two, and despite my long day, I don't want to go to bed just yet. I wash my dishes and put the rest of the leftovers away in the fridge—my dinner tomorrow will probably be peanut butter sandwiches made with cold waffles—and spend a moment or two lingering at the kitchen sink, looking out the window at the neighbor's house across the yard. Their kitchen light goes off as I watch.

Something about that makes my decision for me, and I grab my billfold and a light jacket and head out again, letting the door close behind me much more quietly this time, so I don't wake anybody up. The buses run all night, so it's a short wait for one that will take me downtown.

Aldhurst isn't one of those cities that rolls up the sidewalks at ten o'clock, thank God, so there's plenty to choose from. I can hear bands playing as I walk past bars, or there's a pool hall that's open until two, and as I pass the art movie house some friends call my name as they wait in line for *Rocky Horror Night*. I smile and wave back, but I don't join them.

If I were in a different mood, any of these would do, but tonight I'm looking for something else. Preferably with no exchange of names.

There are two gay-friendly dance clubs in Aldhurst: the Zephyr, which has been around since the 1910s and still has the tunnel bootleggers used to bring in

illegal beer during Prohibition, and Glass Onion, the newer and more popular one. On a Friday night, its three dance floors will be crowded with beautiful, shirtless men looking for love, or looking for what will pass for love for the night.

For the mood I'm in, the Zephyr is the wiser choice. Its clientele tend to be older than me, rough and bearded men, looking for something they can forget about in the morning. The music that greets me is more bluesy than electronic, and after I hand over my jacket to the coat-check boy and climb the stairs, I see the dance floor is sparsely populated and the pickings are slim.

A few heads perk up as I circle the dance floor, but only one of them actually gets up from his stool to approach me. He reminds me of the man who wanted to pick me up at the nursery today, the same graying temples, the same visible lack of wedding ring. "Dance with me," he says simply, and I take his hand and lead him onto the dance floor.

It's not the easiest music to dance to, but we manage, bumping together slowly, his hands on my waist. "You're the hottest guy in here," he tells me, and I smile and murmur, "Thank you," thinking that it's not much of a compliment, all things considered.

Still, he seems like a good candidate for what I want tonight, and when he kisses me I don't stop him. I push my fingers into his short hair and he mutters, "Let's go out to the alley."

Technically, we're not supposed to have sex in the club. Back in the day, in addition to being a speakeasy, the building was a whorehouse, but the most recent owner removed all the doors from the little rooms for liability reasons, and they're not used for much aside from historical color.

Then there's the alley. You'll find people doing everything from having sex to selling drugs in there, and it's where you go if you don't mind risking the other guy messing you up. That happens sometimes too. I've had friends go out there and come back with bloody noses or black eyes, or I wouldn't see them at all for days and hear later that they were jumped by a group of straight guys who beat them to a pulp. There are actually signs in the alley that it's under surveillance, so those incidents have dropped somewhat, but still, even I am not that stupid tonight.

"Nah, that's okay," I say, and I'm turning away when the guy grabs my elbow.

"I insist." I try to tug my arm away, but his fingers dig in deep. He pushes his face closer to mine and growls, "Don't play with me, amigo."

"*Amigo?*" I say, when an arm goes around my neck and another man says, "There you are, honey," in a tone that makes the creep release my arm. I would object to this newcomer manhandling me too, but there's something about his easy smile and the tropical scent of his cologne that makes me relax against him like I've known him for years.

"Hi, *mi cielo*," I answer as I put both arms around his waist. "I've been looking for you."

"Who's your friend?" He gives the creep a smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

The creep takes a step away from us. "You should have said your boyfriend's here."

"My boyfriend's here," I say with my sweetest smile. The creep gives us both a dirty look and goes back to the bar.

"Are you okay?" the newcomer asks me, his arm still around my shoulders. "He looked like he was up to no good."

"Yeah. Thanks." We stand there for a moment, looking at each other. There's something about him that's so familiar I rack my brain for where we might have met. He's mid-twenties or so, so we probably didn't go to school together, and I would know if I'd seen someone this handsome on campus at the community college. There's always church—unlikely—so it's probably that we've just seen each other in the other gay-friendly spots in town.

And yet, I feel like there's something more to it than that.

He smiles at me. It's a wonderful smile, showing even, white teeth against full pink lips. His whole face is pretty good, high cheekbones and square jaw and lines beside his eyes that grow deeper when he laughs, which he does as I stare at him. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm just trying to remember the last time I met a knight in shining armor," I say with an uncertain smile back. "Can I buy you a drink? To thank you?"

He laughs. It's a hearty sound, and I like it. "I'm no knight. I'm Mal."

"Cruz," I say, "nice to meet you." So much for not exchanging names tonight, but I'm all right with that. Some people you fuck for the sake of fucking, and some people you fuck for the sake of fucking *them*. This guy definitely falls into the second category.

He tilts his head, an odd look on his face, like he expected a different answer. "Nice to meet you too," he says. "I'd love for you to buy me a drink."

Holding hands, we go to the bar. The bored bartender ambles over and I hand over my ID without waiting for him to ask, and say to Mal, "Whatever you like. Within reason."

"Whatever's on tap," says Mal, and I order the same. As we wait, Mal says, "So do you come here looking for trouble, or does it just find you?"

"It found me. What about you?"

The bartender brings our drinks. Mal has a sip and wipes foam from his upper lip. "Definitely not looking for trouble. Kind of the opposite, actually."

"And yet you still came to my rescue," I marvel. "Thank you."

He shrugs a shoulder and gives me a sidelong glance. "I have a soft spot for boys like you."

"Boys like me?" I say, bristling.

"Whoa, don't get offended. You remind me of someone." He strokes my cheek, and I glance down at his fingers, unsettled by how gentle he is. "I've always had a soft spot for wounded creatures, I guess."

"What makes you think I'm wounded?"

"You hiss when you're backed into a corner." He gives me an off-kilter smile and has a pull on his beer. I drink too, frowning, and look at him again when he says, "My grandfather's dying and I wanted to get my mind off it. He's one of my favorite people in the world and I am going to miss him like hell."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks." He gives me another sideways look. "How's your family?"

"We're fine," I say, wondering why a complete stranger would ask. "We get by."

"Good." He drains his mug and stands. "Thanks for the drink. It was nice to—to meet you."

Before he can go far, I turn and say, "Hey," and he pauses and looks back at me. There's something in his face I can't read, regretful or sad or something even more complicated. The last thing I thought I wanted was complicated.

Still, I say, "If you're looking for peace of mind," I swallow, "maybe you could give me a try."

Mal looks at me a moment, then steps close, crowding me against the bar. "Maybe I should," he murmurs and takes hold of my face. His eyes search mine, and then he kisses me.

Sometimes you kiss a new person and it takes a few minutes to get used to the shape of their mouth, the taste of their breath, even the click of teeth. Sometimes it takes a try or two to figure out how deep to go, how to make our faces fit together, where to put our hands.

Kissing Mal is not like that.

It's more like we've kissed a hundred times before and will kiss a hundred times again. His tongue sweeps into my mouth naturally, and his face fits perfectly between my hands. We breathe together, into each other, and my legs wind around his hips as he presses closer, fitting us together like puzzle pieces.

He looks stunned when we finally part. I know I am. I gasp, "I feel like I've kissed you before. When have I kissed you before?" as I stroke his cheeks with my palms.

Mal shakes his head. "I—" and then he scowls as his phone starts vibrating loudly in his jeans pocket. He takes it out with a curt, "Yeah?" and then just listens for a while, holding my hand. "Okay. I'll be there as soon as I can." As he pockets his phone again, there's a look of devastation in his eyes, and I hold his hand tighter as he says simply, "My grandfather died."

"I'm sorry."

"I have to do—whatever it is you do. I don't know what you're supposed to do."

"Funeral stuff," I say, because while there have been deaths in the family I haven't done any of the preparations and planning. I suppose that day will come eventually. "Would you like me to drive you wherever it is you need to be?"

"I actually have a driver. He's waiting for me." He holds his temple a moment as if he can't get his thoughts in order. "I can take you home, if you want."

"It's okay. I took the bus. Go do the things that need doing."

"Right," he says and lets go of my hand. "Okay. See you."

“See you,” I reply, and it’s not until he’s disappeared down the stairs to the street that I realize I didn’t ask for his number and don’t know his last name.

There’s a family dinner on Sunday at my grandparents’ house; my father’s parents. Dad doesn’t come, of course, too busy lying in a dark room, and when I make excuses for him my abuela exchanges glances with Tía Cristina as if this is exactly what they expected.

We’re catching each other up on what’s going on in our lives, when Tío Ricky says, “I have very sad news. Mr. Stephen Wolcott died Friday night. He’s been a very good boss and I’m going to miss him very much.”

“He wasn’t exactly your boss,” says Tía Cristina.

“He signed our paychecks,” replies Tío Ricky. “That’s enough for me.”

“Who’s Mr. Stephen Wolcott?” Luna whispers to me.

“He owned the building Daddy works in,” says my cousin Marisol, who’s sitting on her other side. “The Wolcotts own half the city.”

“I wouldn’t say half,” says Tío Ricky. “They own a lot of it. The city really ought to be named Wolcott, since they basically built it when there was nothing here but scrub brush and desert.”

As he extols the virtues of Mr. Stephen Wolcott, his generosity, his friendliness, how he treated everyone from the building supervisor to the girl who watered the flowers in the lobby as if they were equally important, I think of my briefly-met friend and his grandfather, of the devastation on his face after he had that call. I wonder if people miss Mr. Stephen Wolcott in the same way that Mal missed his grandfather.

“The funeral is private, just the family,” Tío Ricky says. “But there will be a memorial service in a few months for everyone else. With all he’s done for Aldhurst, I’m glad they’re doing it this way. I plan to go.”

“That poor family,” says Tía Cristina, and I for one am glad when the conversation moves on to what my cousins Mateo and Aron plan to do over the summer.

We’re cleaning up after supper—the women cook, the men clean up, and we both think we have the better side of the bargain—when Ricky quietly says to me, “How long has Arturo been in his funk this time?”

"All week," I reply. I'm scrubbing goblets in the sink, my sleeves rolled up and my tie thrown over my shoulder. "They haven't fired him from Sammy's yet, but they will if he doesn't go to work Monday."

Ricky frowns. "Your grandfather used to get like this sometimes. I remember when I was a boy, there were just some days when we had to let Daddy sleep, even if it was the middle of the afternoon."

"I didn't know that."

"It used to be the kind of thing you never talked about. People are much more open now." He takes a soapy goblet to rinse and dry. "Are you still working at the nursery?"

"Yes," I say with a sigh. "Emily is going to call me first when they need a sub. I think I need to look for another job."

"Maybe not," Ricky says. "How do you feel about working graveyard? Ten at night to six in the morning?"

"It would be hard to work another job with that shift."

"You wouldn't have to. How much are you making at the nursery? Eight dollars an hour?"

"Yes," I mutter.

"One of the people on the security team is going on maternity leave soon, and they need a replacement for at least four months. It pays fifteen an hour."

Fifteen. It sounds like riches.

"There are other benefits, too," Ricky says, watching my face. "You know I love working there. They're good people, the Wolcotts. They take care of their employees."

"It would help a lot," I say quietly, as I give him another soapy goblet.

He gives me a pointed look. "Should I get you an interview?"

I inhale, knowing that I should say I'll get him a resume and then see if they want to interview me—but I say, "Yes, please. Thank you, Tío Ricky."

"Anytime, Cruzito." He puts another goblet in the dish rack. "Just remember to wear a tie. And I'll see if I can talk my idiot brother into acting like the head of the family soon, too."

I smile a little at that, but we both know it's no use. My dad will come back to himself in his own time. I just hope it's soon.

A few days later, I get the interview at the Wolcott Building. Like Ricky said, I wear a tie. They offer me the job on the spot, which makes me think maybe Ricky had a hand in it, but they seem genuinely happy to have me and it's a better-paying job than the nursery.

The security team—the porters, they tell me they're called—are Douglas, the head of security; Evan and Tyson, the daytime guys; and Mina, the pregnant woman I'll be replacing for the next five months or so. "I wouldn't worry about looking for a new job when I come back," she tells me. "If we like you, we'll find a place for you."

We arrange for me to start as soon as finals are over, and I give notice at the nursery. Emily says as we plan my schedule, "I'm sorry to lose you. I never had to worry about you," and I take the compliment for what it is.

Meantime, the portrait of Stephen Wolcott is framed with black fabric in the lobby, and Ricky and other employees wear a black armband.

It feels like a long wait during those two weeks. Since we're living on my part-time salary, Ricky loans us enough to manage until I get my first paycheck from Wolcott, and I work on a budget with Luna to make sure it will last. She's not happy with my new schedule—"When will I ever see you if you're working nights, Cruzito?" and I hug her shoulders and assure her she can talk to me whenever she wants. She's also job-hunting for the summer, though she's hoping for a position with one of the dance companies in Aldhurst or even a show at Lakeview Park, the amusement park in Payton Wells, twenty miles to the north on the lake shore. I tell her even if she just takes admission tickets, it's enough to help.

For my final project, I decide to do the library after all, and when I hand it in my professor says, "I didn't see your name on the class roll for next year, Mr. Morales."

"I have to postpone my degree for a while," I reply, and he gets the same troubled expression people tend to get when I explain my situation. "Family things."

"Then I'll look for you the year after," he says, and I smile and say I hope so.

My first night at the Wolcott, there's a uniform waiting for me, as well as a badge that says "Cruz Morales" in raised gold letters. The uniform is beige and brown polyester, with brass buttons on the shirt and a nightstick hanging from the belt. I get a locker of my own to leave my street clothes in, and the building's laundry service will have a clean uniform waiting for me every shift.

The first night, I spend with Mina and Douglas to learn the monitors, and walk around with her to check the doors and do spot-checks on the business floors. The apartment floors require some finesse, she tells me. We respond when a resident calls, but unless there's an immediate threat, we're not supposed to engage with criminals. We're to call the police instead. "We don't get break-ins or robberies often," Mina says. "The biggest problems tend to be drunk and disorderly when residents have parties. Then I feel more like a bouncer than a security guard."

We take the private elevator to the residential floors and Mina tells me a little about each person or family that lives there, like the Carsons, who have three little girls who like to play tea party in the lobby on rainy days; or Mr. Lloyd, newly divorced and enjoying it enormously with a new woman every night; or the newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Fuller, who kiss during the entire elevator ride to their floor every night.

The biggest apartment on the thirty-ninth floor belongs to Mrs. Margaret Wolcott, widow of Mr. Stephen Wolcott. "Did you ever meet him?" Mina asks me as we go past their door.

"Never, but Ricky used to tell us about him."

"He was lovely," says Mina with a sigh. "He made a point of learning all our names, and he was always so kind. Last Christmas he gave every building employee a five-hundred dollar bonus. It's like he knew he was going soon and wanted us to remember him fondly."

"Nice," I say. "What'd you do with yours?"

"College fund." She pats her baby bump.

"What about Mrs. Wolcott?" I ask as we go down the carpeted hall. "Is she going to stay here?"

"I assume so. She hasn't told us otherwise. We're keeping a closer eye on her now, too. She has a personal assistant that you'll get to know, and her grandson who stays with her sometimes. Douglas says they've always been close."

By six a.m. it's a struggle to keep my eyes open, but I manage to stay awake during the entire shift and figure it's just a matter of getting used to the hours. I sleep a little when I get home, and Luna makes me empanadas for my lunch, wrapped in paper towels to keep them warm. At the Wolcott, Mina brings me a large cup of coffee from Brewsters, the coffee shop in the lobby, kisses my cheek and tells me good luck and to call Douglas if I have questions, and leaves me to it.

So I drink the coffee, watch the monitors, and spot-check the floors.

And that's the job.

It's easier than washing cars, or carrying seedlings, or frying burgers, or anything else I've done. I can read or study while I'm at the monitor bank. They ask me not to listen to music through headphones, but I can tune the lobby music to any satellite channel I want, as long as it's not too loud. Every ninety minutes I get up and walk around, so I even get a little exercise. The main elevators get little use after eight p.m., the freight elevators are used only when people move in or out, which means hardly ever; the private elevators are quiet after two.

The first week, it's a struggle to stay awake. I drink too much coffee and by morning I'm wired and buzzing. Dad and Luna tiptoe around the house when I get home, until finally I tell them I can't sleep unless they act like normal people again. I buy wax earplugs and stop drinking coffee after two a.m., switching to ice water instead. Sleep is glorious.

The second week, I make friends with the women who own Brewsters, and they start preparing a large cup for me to pick up just before they close at ten every night. I bring my textbooks and my laptop, and try to keep up with my studies, even though it'll be months before I'm in a classroom again. I recreate exercises from the books and set challenges for myself to design projects mentioned in the local news, and hope that I'm not too far behind my classmates by the time I can get back to school.

I'm starting to get to know the residents, too, and their various drivers and bodyguards and personal assistants. I even meet Clarissa, the assistant to Mrs. Wolcott—a severe woman in her mid-fifties who talks in the pseudo-British accent of a classic movie star and wears her blonde hair swept back from her face with two tortoiseshell combs no matter what the occasion. She gives me a long list of medications Mrs. Wolcott takes, and a longer list of what to do and who to call, should Mrs. Wolcott need help or collapse when Clarissa isn't

around. "She's taken the death of her husband very hard," Clarissa tells me, "so we're keeping a close watch on her." She sniffs. "That grandson of hers is no help, even if he says he's here for her sake. Malcolm never lets us know when he's coming, so she sits and waits for him all day. So thoughtless."

My curiosity about the mysterious Wolcott grandson only grows. I can't tell what manner of man he might be—he cares for his grandmother, it would seem, but his care is an absent sort. Even Douglas tells me I probably won't meet Malcolm King, since he's bound to go back to his travels before much longer.

"What does Malcolm King do?" I ask, and Douglas answers with a sigh.

"Race yachts, climb mountains, explore jungles—anything foolhardy and dangerous, he does it."

He seems like the type to appreciate my dream job, and I sketch a roller coaster that might make someone who likes taking risks happy, with lots of banked curves and an inverted corkscrew.

Third week.

When I arrive at the Wolcott, Tyson says, "Mrs. Wolcott's grandson moved into 39 F today. He wanted to be closer to her, I'm told. So that's one less empty apartment we'll need to inspect."

"I heard he was leaving town," I say, as I glance over the list of empty or currently-on-vacation residences. Sure enough, 39 F is no longer on it.

Tyson shrugs. "If he is, he's not going any time soon." He picks up his things and tells me good night, and I'm on my own again.

Three a.m. and everyone who is coming home tonight is already there. It's just me and the lobby, the satellite radio quietly playing Enrique Iglesias, and my book on roller coaster design open in my lap. I'm not reading it, though, and instead am daydreaming of designing the next classic ride and the thousands—no, millions—of roller coaster enthusiasts who will stand in line for hours to ride it and will speak my name with reverence...

The revolving door turns, which gets my attention at once, and as I watch, in come two dark-haired men, so absorbed in kissing each other that they almost take the door in its complete circuit. They stop and get out, laughing, their arms around each other, and cross the lobby to the residential elevators. They gaze into each other eyes the entire way.

I sigh, trying not to feel envious. While I enjoy sex as much as the next twenty-one-year-old man, I often feel like I'm waiting for something to come into my life and make it—not whole, not exactly. Fuller. And I certainly wouldn't mind someone to gaze at me like these two men are gazing at each other, like it's only a matter of seconds before they're all over each other.

One of the men happens to glance at me with an absent, "Hi, Mina," and then he does a double-take. "*Cruz?*"

"Hi," I say in an exhale, unable to get out anything more because he's Mal, my rescuer from the Zephyr. The pieces click into place—Mal is Malcolm King, and his grandfather who died the night we met is Stephen Wolcott. I feel a spark of jealousy, wondering if he met his current companion at the Zephyr and if he would have brought me home with him if we'd met there again. Then I put on my most professional smile and say, "Mr. King. Welcome home."

"Yeah," he says, still studying me. "How long have you worked here, Mr. Morales?"

"Three weeks, graveyard shift. I'm sure you've been here too early in the day to have seen me before."

"Right," he says slowly. His companion looks from me to him and back expectantly, and Malcolm says, with a shake of his head, like he can't quite believe he has to do this, "this is Cruz Morales, the, um, night watchman. This is—" He gestures to his friend.

"Paul," his friend supplies.

"Paul. Does he have to sign in?"

"No, Mr. King, not if you're going to the residential floor."

"Right," he says and gives me one more perplexed look, and then leads Paul to the private elevators.

I close my book and shove my hands through my hair, trying to keep myself calm. My fingers catch in the hair band that holds my ponytail and I curse as I untangle them, and have to pull out the band and smooth back my hair all over again.

Malcolm King. I've kissed Malcolm King. Worse than that, he's kissed me, and probably won't appreciate the reminder of his slumming—because, of course, that's what it was, why else would he be at the Zephyr when men of his kind go to Glass Onion—sitting at the security desk five nights a week. He'll

probably complain to Douglas in the morning and I'll be out of a job, because no matter how nice Douglas is to me, and no matter how long he's worked with Ricky, his loyalty is to the Wolcotts, not to the Morales family.

As I'm pulling back my hair and tucking the little ponytail into my shirt collar, I happen to glance at the monitor for the private elevators. One is empty, of course. The other holds Malcolm King and Paul. They're making out with an intensity that makes me envious, Paul holding Malcolm against the wall, Malcolm's hands pinned over his head.

As if he knows I'm watching, Malcolm opens his eyes and stares at the security camera. He smiles a little as Paul starts kissing his neck and his hips start moving against Paul's in a sensual, unmistakable rhythm.

My face grows hot. He knows, he *knows*, doesn't he, that I would risk this job and my family and my dreams, besides, for the chance to be going up in that elevator with him? Was it written that obviously on my face? Could he hear it in our brief exchange of words? Was I that obvious a month ago when we met at the Zephyr, that if he'd asked me to come home with him, I would have gone?

It's not until he blows a subtle kiss at the camera that I look away. I don't look back until I see from the corner of my eye that the elevator is empty.

And then, slowly and deliberately, I leave the security desk and go to the posh men's restroom across from the main bank of elevators. I go into one of the stalls and jerk myself off as quickly as I can, remembering the feel of Malcolm King's lips and his body between my legs, and trying not to imagine the cool wood of the elevator behind my back as he kisses me into oblivion.

The next month is a test of my patience if ever I've had one. While Luna is doing all right—she found a position with a dance company for the summer, possibly for credits when the school year starts again—my dad still spends most of the day in bed or watching *telenovas* on the couch, and only eats or takes a shower when one of us prods him to it. Ricky and Cristina help when they can, but they have their own family to worry about. Mateo will be going to college soon and is taking all of the entrance and advanced placement exams he can, and that costs money and time.

The worries about Dad would be enough, without the mounting situation with Malcolm King on top of it.

I didn't hear a word from Douglas about Malcolm King complaining about me, so that's one concern I can put aside; but that doesn't mean Malcolm King leaves me alone. Oh, no. He comes home every night with a different guy and greets me cordially at the security desk, asks after my family and if there are any messages for him, while his companion for the night kisses or paws him blatantly, as if he dared them to be as obvious as possible.

That, I can handle. I've dealt with the public. I can be icily polite in the face of extreme rudeness with the best of them. What happens after that is making me crazy, because after the chitchat in the lobby, Malcolm takes his man for the night to the private elevator and makes out with them all the way up to his floor. What's worse, he watches the security camera as much as he can, as if he wants to be sure that I see every moment and he wants to know what I think of his performance.

What's worse than *that* is that it's working.

Despite my efforts to take care of it myself, he's got me so frenzied that it's a wonder I don't haul him over the security monitors and have him right there on the gray marble floor. The more calmly I try to behave in his presence, the more passionate he gets with his dates and the more amused he looks when he glances at the security camera. I'd pity the men he brings home every night if I didn't envy them so much. They're playthings in the hands of a sexy, confident man, and I often ask myself if they do it because sex with Malcolm King is worth the indignity of being tossed aside in the morning.

Or maybe they all think they'll be the one he asks to stay.

In a folder titled "Thermodynamics research," I write notes to myself. I title them all *Don't Sleep With Malcolm King* and number each one. The notes themselves say things like, *You don't want him to break your heart* and *He'll only hump and dump you*. I write myself a new one every time he brings home another man and the way they carry on sends me to the men's restroom again. By the end of June, there are twenty-three notes in that folder.

Twice during this time, on Saturday night I go out to Glass Onion and pick up a man with the closest resemblance to Malcolm that I can find. It's a poor substitute, but at least it gets me through the next few weeks without giving in.

A rainy Sunday afternoon, and I'm prowling around the house, trying not to yell at Dad to get out of bed already, when Luna shoves a cup of spicy hot chocolate in my hands and says, "Porch. Now."

We huddle in the mismatched wicker chairs on the screened-in back porch, mugs of hot chocolate in our hands, and she gets the whole story out of me with little prompting. There are a few things I leave out—my sister does not need to know how often I've been glad the security camera in the lobby restroom is not pointed at the stalls—but I tell her about the creep in the club, Malcolm's many men, and how much I want to be the one on the elevator with him.

And then I sit, my arms crossed over my knees, my cup loose in my fingers so I can drink from it with minimal effort, and watch the rain.

Luna sips, a frown between her brows, and says, "What's wrong with wanting to have sex? I know you do, Cruzito."

"In itself, nothing," I say. "But I don't want to be a notch in his bedpost, or an ethnicity crossed off his list. You'd be surprised how many guys hit on me just because they haven't slept with a Latino yet."

"And it has nothing to do with how pretty you are," she says, and I glare at her, before letting my hair fall over my face and hide me from her view.

"And if I do and he decides he doesn't want me around anymore, he could get me fired," I say, pulling my hair out of the way again.

The teasing look leaves her face. "Do you think he'd do that?"

"I don't know. I don't really know what kind of man he is, except Douglas says he likes to take risks and he moved into the Wolcott to be closer to his grandmother. But I can't risk that kind of thing happening. This job's too good and we need the money too much."

Luna sips her hot chocolate and watches the rain. Despite the fact that it's July, it's chilly on the porch, and she's wearing layers of T-shirts and thick woolen socks on her feet, peeping from beneath her jeans. We haven't had much chance to talk lately, between her rehearsals and classes, and my shift at the Wolcott, and I've missed her. She'll be sixteen in a few weeks, and she's become a true beauty. I saw how many boys were smitten with her at her *quinceañera*—she's only grown lovelier in the last year.

"You're beautiful, Lunita," I say quietly, and she looks at me with a pleased smile.

"Thank you." She shifts closer to me, her head resting against the back of the winged chair. "Tell me something."

"Sure." I settle back in the chair too, and put my empty mug on an upturned crate we use as an outdoor end table.

"Is your problem with him that you think you don't deserve him, or you think he doesn't deserve you?"

I open my mouth, then close it. I honestly don't know.

"I think if you want him, you should do it anyway. He saved you from that awful man—he can't be a bad man himself. I think you're so ready for people to hurt you that you don't give them a chance to show you they won't."

I have nothing to say to that. I wish I had more chocolate so I can drink instead of answering.

"I suppose it's not romantic," she muses. "But I suppose romance is something that comes on a different path than desire."

"Not always," I say, though I know much more about desire than romance, and I trust romance even less than I trust Malcolm King.

I have the Fourth of July off, so Luna, my cousins, and I go to Lakeview Park. We ride the coasters all day—especially the Grizzly, the enormous woody, until I can't drag anyone to ride it with me anymore. At nightfall we go to the picnic area, where we grill burgers and eat potato chips and watermelon, and watch the fireworks show.

As I lie on the grass, Mateo and his girlfriend talking quietly to one side, and Aron and Luna talking on the other, I wonder if Malcolm is in the park to see the fireworks too, or if he watches them from across the lake. Does he like roller coasters, like me, or are they too tame after his life full of adventure?

No matter, I tell myself, and try to focus on the lights flowering in the sky.

The next night I'm back to work and the thunderstorms return. The thunder is loud enough that I can hear it from the other side of the lobby, and I've turned down the music system so I can hear the storm as I watch the rain coursing down the windows.

It's almost midnight when the revolving door turns to admit Malcolm. This is no longer unusual. He's alone, and that's unusual enough for me to sit up straight and watch him cross the lobby to stand in front of the bank of monitors. He's wearing a sweatshirt under a denim jacket, and his shoulders and the top

of his hood are dark and damp, like he's been walking in the rain. He puts his hands on his hips and we gaze at each other before he says, "Did you have a good Fourth?" and I say, "Still raining, I see," at the same time.

He smiles a little. "Still raining."

"I had a good Fourth, Mr. King. Did you?"

"Would have been better with better company."

I don't know what to say to that, so I just clear my throat and shuffle my notes and book together, looking at the monitors again to keep myself from imagining climbing him like a tree and inhaling the scent of rain from his skin.

"Well," he says, "good night, Mr. Morales," and I nod, not trusting my voice.

He goes to the private elevator, and I breathe easy again once the doors slide shut. Not going to make a fool of myself tonight. I know I should feel triumphant, like an addict earning his thirty-day chip, but all I feel is empty.

That's when I glance at the monitor for the private elevator. My mouth drops open.

Malcolm King is dancing. Slowly. Rolling his hips, swaying his shoulders, shrugging off his lambswool-lined jacket.

It's a sensuous sight, one that would stop anybody in their tracks to watch, and I am transfixed. That he's comfortable in his body is obvious from the way he moves. If we were at a club, if he were moving like this on a dance floor, I'd be proud to be his partner. I'd move with him, match him step for step.

But we're not partners on a dance floor. He's a Wolcott. He's never worked a day in his life, and I'm a kid from the sketchy side of town who thinks fifteen dollars an hour is a good wage.

I'm scowling at the monitor when I realize Malcolm's dance is changing. Even more sensual, even more sexy, his hands running over his chest and thighs, through his dark hair.

And then he looks straight at the security camera and pulls off his hoodie, then his white T-shirt, revealing a body that is strong and slender, a deep chest, a flat stomach and bracketing hips.

He puts his hands on the fly of his jeans, gives the camera another glance, and then they, too, come off.

The doors slide open to the thirty-ninth floor. He gives the camera a wink and a smile, and, clad only in his blue briefs, steps out.

I don't know how long I sit there, my mouth still hanging open. It's not even the audacity of this move that does it, or the beauty of his body. It's the little pattern of freckles on his smooth abdomen, like the Big Dipper flipped upside down.

I've seen that pattern before.

The summer my mom left, my dad didn't get out of bed for three weeks. I was fourteen and Luna was eight, and Tío Ricky said we all needed to get some exercise, so he took us to the Wolcott Building to use the pool and the rooftop garden. Technically, the pool was being cleaned and no one was supposed to be swimming in it, but Uncle Ricky said his boss would look the other way.

My cousins are nearer to Luna's age than mine, so they played and splashed around and amused each other, but I got bored after a few laps around the pool. Tío Ricky had said we could use the garden, too, so I took my towel and left the pool area, hoping to find a grassy, open space where I could lie in the sun. There was plenty, along with multi-colored flowers and rows of trees. There was even a community garden, where people were growing things like carrots and raspberries.

I spread out my towel on a grassy patch under some trees and lay down. The leaves danced overhead in the faint breeze, and the sky was bright blue, peaceful and pretty. I tried to relax, to close my eyes and sleep a little—between school and my part-time job (which would become a full-time job in a few weeks, when summer officially began) and looking after my father and Luna, I hardly had time to sleep—but it was so hard to unclench everything enough to even close my eyes.

I was concentrating so hard on enjoying myself that when an amused voice said, "Working hard, I see," I sat up like someone had blared a vuvuzela in my ear, and saw a boy standing at my feet with his hands on his hips and a smile on his face that I would have thought of as teasing if I knew him better. He was maybe four or five years older than me, also in swim trunks, a towel slung over his shoulder and sunglasses perched on his nose.

I said, gasping a little from surprise, "I'm Ricky Morales's nephew. He said it was okay."

“Well,” the boy said as he spread out his towel beside me, “if Ricky said it’s okay, then it’s okay.”

He sat on the towel and spent a few minutes smoothing coconut-scented sunblock onto his skin. He offered the tube to me. I took it, and spread some on my shoulders, chest and face. He watched me do it, too, until he noticed me noticing and then looked away.

“How come Ricky hasn’t brought you over before?”

I shrugged. “He thought we needed it today. There aren’t any good places to swim in our neighborhood.”

“You’re not swimming,” he pointed out.

“I swam a little.” I ran both hands over my wet hair.

“Hm.” We both lay down and sunbathed in silence for a while. He lay with hands behind his head, still wearing his sunglasses.

I don’t know why I blurted out, “My mom left.”

He turned his head toward me. I couldn’t tell if his eyes were opened or closed, but it seemed like he was listening, so I said, “She fell in love with another man. My dad thinks I don’t know—my sister doesn’t know—and he’s telling everybody she went on vacation. But she’s gone. She took her suitcase and all our money.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“I hate her,” I said vehemently, and he sat up.

“Don’t say that,” he said. “You don’t hate her. You’re angry, and that’s understandable, but that will fade. And who knows? Maybe she’ll come back.”

“I hope she doesn’t. I hope she never comes back. I hope she stays away forever.”

He looked away from me. The other buildings on the block were older and smaller than the Wolcott, some of them Art Deco structures, with delicate arches over the windows and doorways; most of brown brick and narrow windows, leftovers from a more industrial age. It was a beautiful view—one of the reasons why I chose this particular patch of grass—and I got the feeling that it was the boy’s favorite thing about the garden, too.

He said, “You don’t want that. You want to see your parents. You want them to see you. I hope she does come back and I hope when she does, you forgive her.”

“You don’t understand,” I muttered.

“Probably not.” He wrapped his arms loosely around his knees. His toes wiggled in the grass. “My parents are around and are still together, but you’d never know if you spent a night in our house.” He smiled at me, careless and crooked. “Not that I want to play ‘my problems are bigger than yours.’”

“Good.” I imitated his pose, my arms around my knees, my feet together. We were close to each other on the grass, and he smelled good, like coconut and sunshine and wind.

I’d only recently realized that I liked boys more than girls, that I didn’t want to kiss girls the same way I wanted to kiss boys, and as we sat together in the faint breeze and dappled shade, I realized that this boy was exactly the kind of boy I wanted to kiss, with his soft mouth and tanned skin, slender body and long legs. His dark hair was slicked back from his face, and he wore a braided leather bracelet on one wrist. There were light freckles dusted all over his skin, and the most distinctive pattern was on his flat stomach, bisected by the trail of hair that led below his waistband—four points of a square, with three more trailing from the lowest corner, like the Big Dipper flipped upside-down. I imagined myself fitting my mouth over that square and licking every corner, before nosing my way along that trail and following where it led.

I looked away. A boy like him wouldn’t want to kiss a boy like me. Some boys in my year looked like how this boy looked, but most of them looked like me: still unfinished.

I wanted to touch him. I wanted to touch him so much that I clenched my hands to keep from doing it.

While I ogled him, the boy was saying, “Someday you’ll go to college and leave it all behind.”

“I could never leave my family behind.”

“You don’t leave your family behind. You leave the situation behind. Your family—that will stay, whether you want them to or not.”

“I don’t see how,” I said. I was a freshman in high school. College seemed a thousand years away.

“You will. I did. Like I said, it’s not easy at home, but I come here and it’s like the city takes all my troubles away.” He looked at me. “Close your eyes.” I

closed them obediently. "Take a deep breath," he said, and so I inhaled slowly. "Imagine everything that hurts is a little gray cloud over your head."

I opened one eye to peer at him. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, dude, seriously. It's a meditation thing. My therapist told me about it."

"Okay," I said doubtfully, but closed my eyes again and pictured the little gray cloud.

"Now imagine the breeze carrying it away, out over the lake."

I tried, frowning in concentration, but instead the cloud stayed stubbornly over my head, turning darker like a summer thunderstorm.

Finally I exhaled in exasperation. "It's not working."

"Well," he said, "I guess it takes practice to let your worries go. I wasn't good at it at first, either." He lay on his side, his body supple and lean, and I had to look away again to resist the temptation to reach out and see if his skin felt as smooth and warm as it looked. He said softly, "I don't live here, but I visit the Wolcott a lot. Sometime if you want to come in and visit me too, you could have your uncle bring you back. I could show you around. This building is pretty cool. Lots of weird passages and odd little rooms."

I whispered, "Why would you want to do that?"

He shrugged. "You seem cool," he said and smiled at me, his head turned toward me, his eyes hidden behind the brown glass of his sunglasses, and without even thinking about it I leaned forward and kissed his friendly, open mouth.

I was clumsy at it, of course, I had never kissed anyone like this before, and went into it without much thought and with too much teeth—but his hand still slid into my hair and I held his face, and for a few minutes there was no sound on the rooftop but the wet noises of a kiss and the gentle breeze through the leaves.

And then I came to my senses.

"Oh," he said softly when I pulled away. I was blushing so hard I could feel the heat in my face. I grabbed my towel and ran to the passage to the pool area so fast that I tripped when the towel tangled with my feet, and I barked my chin

on the pebbled pathway hard enough that I felt it in my teeth and my head swam.

“Are you okay?” the boy called after me, and I said, “Yes, yes, thanks, goodbye, sorry,” as I scrambled to my feet. I ran into the passage and leaned against the wall in front of the door. I slid down the wall to the floor and wrapped my arms around my knees until the shaking stopped.

When my heart had stopped racing I went back to the pool. I was about to jump in again when Luna cried, “Cruz, you’re bleeding!”

I ran my hand over my face to find that the stinging on my chin was a deep and bloody scrape. Blood ran down my neck.

“Come with me,” Tío Ricky said and led me to one of the little supply rooms on the floor, where there was a cabinet full of first aid supplies. He cleaned the wound and put a big Band-Aid on my chin, his dark eyes concerned. “What happened while you were on the roof, Cruzito?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I tripped and fell.” I thought I should ask him about the boy on the rooftop—if the boy knew him, then he must know the boy—but I decided I wanted to keep him to myself.

When he had finished cleaning me up, we went back to the pool and I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with Luna and my cousins. When we got home, Dad didn’t even notice the bandage on my chin.

I never told anyone about the boy, and what I told people was my first kiss was another kiss entirely. But I thought about him, all the time at first—wishing I’d been brave enough to stay and kiss him more, kiss that constellation on his stomach like I daydreamed—then fondly over the years, nostalgically, the way you remember your childhood crush.

I was just always sorry I never got his name.

Now with this revelation, that Malcolm King is the first boy I ever kissed, I am even more bewildered. Does he remember me? Is that why he helped me get away from the creep at the Zephyr, and is that why he was trying to make me jealous with his other conquests, or is it all just coincidence, or does he remember me fondly too and wants to see what kind of man I’ve become?

My textbook and laptop stay in my backpack the next night, as I doodle a handsome, square-jawed face in my notebook amid drawings of a new coaster

for Lakeview Park. It's soon joined by a Big Dipper on its end, the handle pointing toward a taut navel, and I add a few dark, crisp hairs leading down to a tight waistband...

The doors to the private elevators slide open and Malcolm steps out. I put down my pencil and shut my notebook as he strides across the lobby, a look of determination on his face.

"Mr. King," I say calmly—calm only because my hands are gripping the desk of the security station so tight I might crack it in half. "What can I do for you tonight?"

"What is it going to take for you to come up to my place?" he says in a tone completely unlike what he usually uses with me—no politeness, no teasing.

The answer is so simple it comes out without me thinking. "You ask me."

He stares at me, his head tilted and his brows furrowed, like something that basic never occurred to him. "Ask you," he says flatly.

"Yes. That's usually how it's done. Not—" I gesture to the monitors. "—whatever game you've been playing here." *As much as I've enjoyed it*, I think, because in all honesty, I have. Who wouldn't, in my position, enjoy a handsome man trying to get his attention?

"I wanted to be memorable."

"Oh," I say quietly, "you are. Trust me on that." I pause, and he continues frowning at me. "Do you still do the cloud trick to make your worries go away?"

The frown disappears, a genuine smile taking its place. "You do remember me."

"Now I do. I recognized your freckles." I point to his stomach, and he laughs.

"So you remember that kiss, too," he says with a tender look, and I wish I could believe it.

"I remember," I say. "I remember you were kind to a sad, scared boy when you didn't have to be, and I thank you for that."

He folds his arms on top of the monitors and rests his chin on his hands. "I've thought about you a lot over the years. I've always wondered what happened to you. I guess I shouldn't be surprised you ended up here, since our families know each other already."

"I don't think my uncle working for your father for two decades really counts as 'knowing each other.'" I take a deep breath. "Look, Malcolm—Mal—"

"There's a spark between us," he says. "You felt it too. I know you did."

"I did, but here's the thing you don't understand. *I can't act on it.*" I slap the desk with each word for emphasis, and he frowns at me again.

"Why not? You're legal and single. There isn't anything else that could stand in our way."

"For you, maybe."

"But not for you? Am I reading you entirely wrong—are you not gay after all?"

"No, you're right about that. But I also work for you—for your family, which is just as much of a problem. And you're—" I wave both my hands at him, trying to say without saying all the objections I have—his wealth, his status, his reputation. "While I'm nobody."

He blinks at me, then straightens up. "Is that your—oh, Cruz. You're wrong. You're so wrong." He turns and goes back to the private elevators.

For a moment I just sit there, his words echoing in my ears.

And then I get up from the chair and run across the lobby, grab Malcolm by his T-shirt and kiss him with everything I've got.

I don't know if it's what he expected or even wanted, but in a moment he practically melts into me, his hands on my neck and his fingertips in my hair. He tastes delicious, like whiskey and chocolate, dark and sharp.

When I finally pull away, I search his eyes as he smiles at me. They're mischievous—no surprise there—but there's also something tender in them that makes me shiver.

Nonetheless, I whisper, "Stop it." The argument probably lacks some punch, since I just had my tongue in his mouth.

"You kissed me first."

"I mean stripping in elevators and trying to make me jealous. Stop it."

"Why? It got your attention, didn't it?" He leans in for another kiss but I stop him, my hands on his chest.

"I'm more worried about who else's attention you'll get."

"Trust me, Mr. Morales," says Malcolm, leaning in again, "there is no one in this building who cares." I can smell his cologne, cool and clean like fresh water, and I have to stop myself from leaning in and taking a good long inhale.

"I care," I tell him quietly and remove my hands from his shoulders. "I'm not going to take off my clothes for you," I say and swallow hard.

Malcolm tilts his head, confusion in his eyes. "Young Mr. Morales has some teeth."

"Don't call me that. I know you're just making fun of me."

He wraps his hand over the elevator door to keep it from sliding closed. "I'm not."

"You're just a good-time boy," I say, and God, his lips are amazing this close up.

"I do like having a good time, but who doesn't? What time do you get off work?"

"Six a.m. And then I go home. Straight home."

"Come up to my place instead."

"No."

"Please."

I close my eyes and lean my head on his chest. My hands are shaking. My entire body is shaking. I say, "I have to get back to work," and let him go as slowly as I can.

"Hey," he says and catches me with a hand curled around the back of my head. "Cruz. At least tell me something. That night in the club, what did you call me? My seelo?"

"*Mi cielo*," I say. "It means 'my sky.'"

"That's nice," Malcolm says. "That's really nice." He lets me go. "See you, *mi cielo*."

Don't, I want to tell him, *don't pretend I'm your everything when I'm just a boy you want to fuck*, but I just smile and go back to the monitors.

I wake up the next morning to a text from Douglas:

Meet me at my office at six p.m.

Since he texts me sometimes to let me know about changes or emergencies, I think there's nothing unusual about this one.

The lobby is far more bustling than I'm used to when I arrive, the last of the office workers trickling out of the elevators, and few of them give me more than a glance as I move through them to the Employees Only section of the building. Tucked behind the alcove that proclaims this building the Wolcott and bears portraits of Joshua, Sophia, Margaret, and Stephen are the offices—the building manager's, Tío Ricky's as the head of maintenance, and Douglas's. I knock on his door and he barks, "Come in."

I find myself hesitating before I push open the door. "You asked me to come by?"

"Sit." He points to the chair in front of his desk, and when I sit he swings around the large, flat monitor on his computer. "We did a spot-check of the security footage this morning. Want to explain this?"

He presses play. The footage is of Malcolm and me, kissing in front of the elevator. Both of us look like we're in heaven, and his fingers tenderly stroke my face in a way that I had missed during the magic of the kiss.

"Are you and Mr. King dating?" Douglas asks me when I don't say anything.

"No," I say. "He's been flirting with me a lot, and we've kissed before." I look at Douglas, though I could watch the looped footage of the kiss forever. "Does he want me fired?"

"No," Douglas says, his eyebrows furrowed like the idea never occurred to him. "He hasn't said a word to me. I intend to have a few words with him, though. Look, Cruz," he says, "I appreciate that you haven't taken advantage of the leeway we give you, but this kind of thing?" He points to the monitor. "It's unprofessional. I don't care if you dance the naked Watusi on his dining room table. Just keep it off the clock."

"Yes, sir," I murmur, embarrassed. "Am I fired?"

"No," Douglas says, softening. "You'd have to actually do the naked Watusi in the lobby for that. Have you been fired before?"

“No,” I said. “Never.”

“Then stop worrying about it. You’re a pleasure to have on our team. Just don’t kiss Mr. King when you should be working.” He turns off the footage. “Go on, Cruz. Do whatever you need to do before your shift.”

“Good night, Douglas,” I answer and leave his office. My legs are shaking so badly that I have to sit down in the lobby for a few minutes. On the way over I’d planned to go to my favorite diner near the Wolcott to pass the time before ten, but now I just want to go home again and crawl into bed until the earth swallows me.

Despite Douglas’s assurances, I feel like I’m teetering on the edge of joblessness; and even though I know the nursery or anywhere else I’ve worked would have me back, I want *this* job, I *like* this job, I feel at home in this job, and I know my family will be fed and housed because of this job. And I could lose it all because of Malcolm.

Tyson is behind the security bank, and in a moment I make up my mind. I go to him and say, “Tyson, I need to ask a huge, huge favor.”

He rises from behind the monitors and walks to the private elevators, and uses the skeleton key to open it. I stare at him, stunned, and he shrugs. “I saw the security footage too.”

“Oh, my God,” I say and get into the elevator, and pull my hoodie over my face to hide my embarrassment all the way up.

As the elevator takes me up, embarrassment becomes something else—something hot and angry, like my blood is boiling through my veins. I know I shouldn’t blame Malcolm, but I do. It’s his fault for being such a flirt, his fault for being so sweetly sexy, his fault for being irresistible. His fault for taking his clothes off in this very elevator, where he knew only I (and a few other members of the security team) would see.

There’s only one thing to do about it.

I rap my fist on his door, and don’t have to wait long until Malcolm opens it. He’s wearing an unzipped sweatshirt, his chest bare beneath, and tight sweatpants. He looks like he’s just about to start working out.

“Cruz?” he says with equal parts confusion and gladness, and I grab his face and kiss him.

He melts into me at once, arms going around me, and he pulls me into the apartment and slams the door shut behind me.

“Cruz,” he whispers as we kiss, “Cruz, Cruz,” and I answer him with kisses and by tugging off his sweatshirt so I can kiss his chest. He tastes as clean as if he had just showered, and I hold him by his waist and scrape my teeth over his chest until he cries out, throwing back his head.

He grabs me by the back of my head and forces me to look into his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Fuck me,” I answer.

“What happened to ‘I’m never taking off my clothes for you’?”

“Fuck me,” I say again, and jump into his arms so that he has no choice but to catch me. He does so easily, and carries me to the nearest wall so he can press me against it. He kisses my neck and my face as his hands slide up under my hoodie and T-shirt to pull them off.

He licks my ear and mutters, “Are you sure this is what you want?” and then pulls the hoodie and shirt over my head. I raise my arms to make it easy to take them off, and then wrap my arms around his neck and my legs tighter around his waist. I toe off my sneakers and they fall to the wood floor with soft thumps.

“Fuck me,” I say as he kisses my neck and shoulders, “fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,” as he drags my jeans to my thighs and pushes his sweats down to bare his cock, curving upward eagerly and already growing wet. He spits on his fingers and pushes them into me, and I ride his fingers, moaning as he opens me.

Neither of us pause, not for a moment, as he lifts my hips and guides his cock into me.

It’s rough and raw, I can barely move, and I know I’m going to feel this for days. But it also feels glorious, Malcolm’s head against my neck and his cock thrusting into me, and I chant his name as my fingers scrape his shoulders and my lips slide over his skin.

His strokes, already shallow and fast, grow erratic, and he bites hard on his lower lip as if it’ll help him last a little bit longer. I dig my fingertips into the back of his neck and ghost my lips over his, and that’s all it takes for him to shudder deeply down his spine and groan against my mouth.

He pants for a moment, collecting himself with his face pressed against mine, and then mutters, "Shit," and pulls out.

He sets my feet on the floor and I lean against the wall, gasping for breath, and run my hand over my face. My cock is aching and hard, and Malcolm wraps his hand around me and slides to his knees. I twist my hand into his hair and watch his mouth slide down my cock until the sight makes my legs tremble, and then I tilt back my head and close my eyes. Despite the soothing strokes of his thumbs over my hipbones, I don't look at him as I come.

I'm still coming down and trying to catch my breath as Malcolm hitches up my jeans and his own sweatpants, and carefully tucks my cock away and does up the zipper. I hold his shoulders for balance, and manage a tiny smile when he whispers, "There. You're perfect."

Then with a simple, "C'mon," Malcolm guides me through the apartment and to his bedroom. Now that I'm not in a daze of anger and lust, I notice the light and colors of the place. Most of the apartments in the Wolcott are precisely as the decorator left them, even the ones with kids. Malcolm's is not. The furniture isn't pristine and most of the art on the walls look like souvenirs of his travels rather than something plucked from a boutique. There are books in the built-ins, several in languages I don't speak, and despite Malcolm having moved in two months ago, there are still unpacked boxes tucked into a few corners.

Somehow, that makes me feel even more at home than the deep leather furniture and the framed movie posters on the walls in French and Japanese and other languages I can't name. It occurs to me that, really, I know so *little* about Malcolm and most of it is what other people have told me. His home tells me volumes that I never would have guessed.

His bedroom is like the rest of the place, a little worn about the edges and not entirely finished, and the duvet is so thick it puffs up around us when we lie on it. Malcolm pulls over a pillow for us to share, and gazes at me until I have to look away.

He puts his hand on my hip. "I don't do that often," he says quietly. "Go bareback, I mean. And I get tested a couple times a year. There shouldn't be anything for you to worry about."

"Thanks," I say quietly. "Me, too. I'm usually a lot more careful."

“Tell me you’re coming next time and I’ll have a condom in my pocket.”

“There won’t be a next time,” I say and slowly sit up. The soreness is setting in, but I refuse to feel regret. This was necessary for my own sanity.

I can almost hear Malcolm frown, and he strokes my back. “Why not? Next time we’ll just be better prepared and—”

“Douglas looked at the security footage from last night,” I say without turning around. “He saw me kissing you by the elevator. I’m not in trouble, I don’t think, but he kept saying how unprofessional it was.” I finally look at Malcolm over my shoulder. “This is me getting you out of my system, so I can keep my mind on my studies and my job.”

“You won’t get in trouble for kissing me in public,” Malcolm says, still stroking my back.

“Not the point,” I reply and get carefully off the bed, hissing a little as the movement only increases the ache.

“Then what is the point?” Malcolm says as he props himself on his elbow. The playful, hopeful look on his face is fading. “Cruz—” His cell phone, sitting on the dresser, starts buzzing, and he mutters, “God damn it,” as he gets up to answer it. I leave him to his call and go out to the living room to find my clothes.

My shirt and hoodie folded over my arm, I go back to Malcolm’s bedroom to ask if it’s okay if I wash up a little, and he waves at me to sit on the bed again. “Uh-huh,” he says to the caller, “I understand that, but—Douglas—”

Shit. I sit on the bed before my knees have a chance to give out. If Douglas knows I’m here—would Tyson rat on me like that? I don’t want to think so—

“Listen, Douglas,” Malcolm says. “Just listen a moment. Nothing’s going on between us that you need to worry about. I promise I won’t—Douglas—” He stops talking with a heavy sigh, and sits on the bed beside me and takes my hand as he listens. I can hear Douglas yelling through the phone.

Finally Malcolm says, “I won’t. I won’t. You don’t have to worry about anything with me, Douglas. I don’t want that either. Okay. Bye.” He hangs up and looks at me with a rueful smile. “Well, I just got my ear chewed off.”

“He’ll fire me if he knows I’m here.”

“No, he won’t. Douglas thinks I’ve been harassing you into quitting.” He frowns. “Have I been harassing you? I didn’t think of it that way.”

"It's a fine line between harassment and aggressive flirting," I say, taking my hand away, and I pull my T-shirt over my head. "I think you've skirted it a few times."

"Well," says Malcolm, nonplussed, and then adds, "Don't go."

"I need to eat some dinner before my shift."

"You can eat here. I'll cook. I'm actually a pretty good cook—I did a semester at the Cordon Bleu."

"I don't know what that is," I say with a sigh, though I can guess from the context. "Malcolm, you're not listening to me."

"I am," he insists. "I'm listening. You don't want to kiss me while you're working. That's fine. That's probably smart. And you don't want me to flirt with you while you're working, too—and neither does Douglas—so I won't. I'll keep it to your off-hours."

"I don't want you to even think about me," I say and get off the bed. "I told you, this is just to get you out of my system. You can go back to having sex with whoever you want, and we can be Mr. Morales and Mr. King until you move out or I get another job. It's better that way."

Malcolm is quiet as I pull on my hoodie, and then says, "But the only one I want is you."

"Too bad," I answer, and hate myself for the hurt look on his face. "You don't understand the position I'm in. I cannot jeopardize this job. I'm the sole breadwinner for my family right now, and if I get fired—"

"God, Cruz, you're not going to get fired!"

"How do you know?" I snap. "Douglas works for your family, not mine. If you wanted me out, I'd be out. If Douglas is given a valid reason to fire me, he will, no matter how much he might like me. So I'm not going to give him a reason, and if you care about me at all you won't, either."

"Of course I won't," Malcolm says. "I'm not that big of a dick." He reaches out to catch my hand. "Tell me what's going on with you."

I look at him a moment, that handsome, square-jawed face like a superhero in a comic book, and blurt out, "My dad has depression."

"Oh," Malcolm says softly and holds my hand tighter.

"I think he's had it all his life, but it's been really bad since my mom left. Every couple years he just shuts down for a couple months, and right now is one of those times. I know he should be seeing a therapist and taking pills for it, but he won't go. All he does is sleep."

Malcolm nods. I keep talking, the full weight of everything on my shoulders pouring out, and I can't stop it.

"And my sister goes to a private performing arts high school, so there's always tuition to worry about. We could manage it when both Dad and I were working, but now that it's just me—well, I have to make what I'm making here to keep her in school and a roof over our heads. She's working this summer, she's in a dance company and they pay her a little, but it's still only enough to help with a couple of the bills."

Malcolm nods again, still holding my hand.

"I've been trying to finish a bachelor's degree for four years and I'm still behind. I can only take a few classes a semester and I keep needing to take semesters off to work full-time. My degree requires a lot of lab hours and I can't even afford a computer that runs the CAD programs I need, and I have to take next semester off *again* so I can work here, and—and—" My eyes are wet and my throat feels tight. I croak out, "I'm so tired, Malcolm."

I don't know how to read the look on his face as he pulls me to him, and he whispers, "Come here, Cruz, lovely Cruz, come here," as he pulls me onto his knee and holds me tight until my trembling stops.

"You would get along with my abuela," I tell Malcolm as he sets me to chopping tomatoes in the kitchen. "She thinks food is the solution for everything, too."

"I don't think food is a solution to anything aside from hunger," Malcolm answers. He's whisking some eggs and milk together to make frittatas, and I'm actually interested in seeing how his fancy cooking school taught him to make something so basic. "You think better when your stomach's full."

"There's nothing to think about." I bend my head enough to curtain my face with my hair. "Please respect my decisions, Malcolm."

"If they were smart decisions, I would."

I have no answer to that. I finish the tomatoes and sweep the chopped bits into a bowl, and get started on the green pepper. Malcolm pours eggs into a frying pan. He turned on his stereo at some point, just a little set of speakers hooked up to his iPod, and the music is soft and soulful.

I feel quietly despairing. I like his apartment, I like his music, and if his food tastes as good as it smells I'm going to like his cooking, too. It's like the universe took everything I want in a man and put it into one unattainable package.

Well, not unattainable, I muse as I chop the mushrooms. I've had him, after all. I just won't be able to keep him.

We sit at his kitchen table with hot frittatas and glasses of white-grape-and-peach juice—he offered to open a bottle of wine, but it makes me sleepy—and quietly eat. There's something comforting about the dish, and I wonder if Malcolm knows and made these for that exact purpose.

Malcolm says, when his plate is half empty, "Douglas called to make sure I don't make you quit. I hope you understand that."

I look up. "Oh."

"Yeah." He drinks his juice, looking at me. "You've got to stop worrying about being fired. It's not going to happen."

I shake my head. "You don't know what it's like, living paycheck to paycheck."

"You're right, I don't," Malcolm says mildly. "But I do know Douglas likes you and wants to keep you employed here, and that goes a long way. You've got to stop worrying."

"Easier said than done," I mutter. I cross my knife and fork on the plate. "Thank you for dinner."

"You're welcome. If you want to come back when your shift is over I'll make you breakfast, too." I start to remind him that we're not having sex again, and he holds up his hands. "I'm just offering breakfast."

"Maybe, in that case," I say.

He catches my hand and kisses the back. "Though if you wanted more—"

"Good night, Malcolm," I say, pulling my hand away, and I hear him sigh as I leave.

There's a shower in the employee locker room, and I use it with some regret. I'd rather keep the scent of Malcolm on me a little longer, but it's better this way.

I stashed my backpack in my locker before I saw Douglas, and I take it out to the monitor bank to meet up with Tyson for the shift change. "How did it go?" he asks me, and I cover my face with my hands a moment.

"I did what I needed to do," I reply simply when I take my hands away.

"I hope it was fun, because, *damn*, Mr. King's hot."

I smile at him. "I thought you had a girlfriend."

"I do," Tyson says blithely. "I'm in a relationship, I'm not blind." He gathers his things—he's also in school, studying pre-law—and says goodnight, and I'm on my own again.

I leave my laptop and textbooks in the backpack most of the night, doodling in my notepad instead. I try to recreate Malcolm's square jaw and warm eyes, but I've never been good at portraiture—one of the reasons why I chose drafting instead of art—and finally turn the page to design a house for him instead, someplace with lots of curves instead of corners, and little nooks for reading or daydreaming out the window.

It's my dream house, I realize, as I darken a line. This is where I would live if money were no object and I found the perfect cradle of rolling hills. A little round house with round windows, part of it underground to keep cool in the summer, a place for flowers to grow on the roof, and a garden in the front for practical things, like carrots and fruit trees.

And then, because it's my dream house, I add a little Shoot-the-Chute type roller coaster like they had back in the 1920s, with a pulley system to haul the car back to the top of the hill, and trees that hang over the track to hide the route just enough to make it interesting.

By the time I've finished drawing, I'm not sure if it's my dream for Malcolm or for me, but it hardly matters. I'm overcome with melancholy when I look at it. I'll never live in a house like this. People like me don't get dream houses. We don't get dream jobs. And I won't get my dream lover, no matter how loudly my body is crying out for him.

YOU ARE NOT SLEEPING WITH MALCOLM KING AGAIN, I write in big block letters over the drawing, and then shut the notepad and put it away as

Evan, yawning, ambles across the lobby to change shifts. "Good morning," he says, "anything happen last night?"

I'm about to snap that what happened between Malcolm and me is our business when I realize he means with the building, and just say, "Quiet, as usual," as I zip my backpack.

"Mmkay. Good night, Cruz."

"Good morning, Evan," I reply and go to the locker room.

I should go home.

I'm going to go home.

I'm not going to go to Malcolm's apartment again and tear his clothes off. Not this time. He is out of my system.

Out. Of. My. System.

Except that as soon as I slam the locker shut I get into the freight elevator, the only elevator that goes to all forty floors, and ride it to the thirty-ninth. The entire time I'm walking down the hallway to Malcolm's apartment, I tell myself I'm only going to finish our conversation and maybe thank him for being so forthright about Douglas.

Nothing more.

He beams with happiness when he opens the door to my knock. "I thought you said it was never going to happen again."

"Shut up," I answer as I put my arms around his neck, and I take his mouth in a deep, long kiss.

We don't make it to the bed this time, either.

Not until later, anyway, and I watch him through half-closed eyes as he ambles, naked, around his bedroom and juggles two oranges and a pear from the fruit basket in his kitchen. "I learned to juggle in Malaysia," he tells me. "There was this street performer who wasn't doing so well that day, so I tried to give him twenty dollars, but he wouldn't take it until I said it was in exchange for juggling lessons."

I rub my eyes with the heel of my hand. My eyes are scratchy with weariness but I don't want to sleep. Not when there's Malcolm to watch and

listen to. "I don't think the question is, so much, where you learned to juggle, but why. It's not like you're going to be busking on the streets any time soon."

Malcolm tosses the pear to me. "I don't have a whole lot of useful life skills, but maybe someday I could be a court jester."

"Barter, is that it?" I bite into the pear as he bounces onto the bed, and he starts rolling one of the oranges between his hands to loosen the skin. "*Will juggle for food?*"

"That's what I'm thinking." He peels the orange with his fingernails and the room fills with the sweet scent of citrus. "I can cook. That's about it." He parts the orange into segments and offers me half. I take them slowly—I've got the rest of my pear—and eat a few bites. The fruit is just as tangy and sweet to the taste as it is to the scent, and I'm unexpectedly ravenous—I devour the orange and pear, slurping with pleasure at the juices and the textures.

Malcolm watches me eat, his half of the orange cradled in his palm. Softly, "I'm still not entirely sure why you're here. I'm *glad* you're here. But you were so... *certain* last night."

I lick the last droplets from my fingers, and tell him, "I'm not certain of anything anymore."

He takes the core of the pear from me and drops it, along with the orange peel, into a wastepaper basket. He gets back into bed with me and pulls the sheets over us, and we curl together. I run my fingers over his stomach, and watch the way my fingers catch in the hair below his navel, rather than look into his eyes. Malcolm's breath deepens as I touch him.

Still, he doesn't speak, and so I tell him, "Luna—my sister—she says I expect people to hurt me, and so never give them the chance to prove they won't."

Softly, "And you want to change that?"

My voice is just as soft. "I don't know."

I look into his eyes at last. They are warm and dark, and the look in them is so tender that I feel I could wrap myself in that look and keep warm through the winter.

"Well," he says simply, "all right," and gathers me to him. I tuck my head against his neck and he strokes my hair, loose from my workaday ponytail, and lifts it from my neck like he means to cool me down.

It does cool me down. I breathe easily against his skin and he whispers, “Stay here, Cruzie. Sleep. It’s been a long night for you. If I’m not here when you wake up, help yourself to anything you like.”

“I don’t need anything from you,” I mutter, already struggling to keep my eyes open in this safe little cocoon.

Malcolm chuckles. “From the moment we laid eyes on each other, we knew we’d get here. We knew we’d shake us both from head to foot.”

I nod against his neck.

“This is more than just sex,” Malcolm murmurs. “Sometimes you meet someone and you know not only are you going to fuck them, but you’re going to fall asleep next to them and wake up beside them, and you’re going to be there for everything in between.”

My eyes open in surprise, and then I close them again and snuggle closer. “Some people call that falling in love.”

“Do they?” Malcolm says, all innocence, as he strokes my hair. “That’s interesting. Go to sleep, Cruzie. Go to sleep.”

“Cruzito,” I murmur. “You can call me Cruzito.”

“Cruzito,” he answers, and then I’m gone.

I don’t go home for three days.

I go straight from Malcolm’s apartment to my shift, and straight from my shift to Malcolm’s apartment. We have sex, he lets me sleep, he makes me food, we talk a little and kiss a lot, we watch movies or listen to music, and I feel contented down to my bones. Luna texts me after two days:

Are you still alive? Are you Malcolm’s sex slave?

And I answer:

Yes and yes.

She responds with a laughing emoji and a few lines of hearts, and I just shake my head and toss my phone away so I can snuggle with Malcolm instead.

I’ve never done anything like this. At most I’ve slept over a night, but I’ve never just let everything else in my life drop away. For three days, I don’t worry about anything—not Dad, not school, not even Luna.

(Well, I worry about her a little, and text her to check in. Her reply is:

Everything's fine, enjoy yourself

And so I put my worries away for a little while longer.)

Malcolm seems happy, too. He's shirtless most of the time, which I like very much; and when I offer to cook he says, "I've got it, you just relax." He tells me stories about his travels: he's climbed the pyramids in Guatemala and explored the ruins in Angkor Wat, raced yachts in the Mediterranean and Grand Prix in Monaco; he's eaten squid and shark and roasted grasshoppers; he's met Tibetan monks, poets and painters, minor royalty.

And the sex is... the sex is amazing. He doesn't fuck me again until I'm not sore anymore from the first time, and then he's gentle, lubing me up and entering me slowly, and very protected. Meanwhile there are hands and tongues and thighs, and we fall asleep sticky and sweaty more often than we don't.

When I finish my Friday-night-to-Saturday-morning shift, he asks me, "What do you want to do today?"

"Breakfast, sleep... the usual. I should probably get some fresh clothes from home."

"But what about tonight, after you've slept?"

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Do you have something particular in mind?"

"We should go out," he says. "See a movie, go out to eat?"

"Like, a date?" I say slowly, and he grins.

"Like a date."

"Are we a dating sort of couple?"

"We are if we actually go on dates."

I try not to smile, and fail. "What about Lakeview Park? I like the Grizzly at night."

"Then let's go to Lakeview Park," he says, beaming, and I laugh and kiss him.

I've been so happy that I forgot it was payday on Friday, so on our way to the park I stop at my bank for a little cash and to check my balance. There's a

lot more than I expect in my account, even for a new payday, and I take out my card and put it in again to check it one more time. I'm frowning when I go back to the car, the receipt in my hand, and Malcolm says, "Bad news?"

"Clerical error," I say and show him the receipt. "There are about five hundred more dollars in there than there should be."

"Oh," says Malcolm and swings into traffic. "That's interesting."

I study his profile as he drives. "Did you have something to do with this?"

"Maybe."

"Malcolm," I say sternly.

"Look, you have a lot to worry about, so I had a word with the payroll clerk and they gave you a bonus. That's all."

"Malcolm!" I say, exasperated. "You can't do that!"

"What? I wanted to give you something and I figured this was the best way to get you to accept it."

"So basically, you've paid me five hundred dollars to have sex with you for the last three days. Thanks. That's just perfect." I crumple the receipt in my hand and stuff it into my pocket.

"No," he protests. "I want to help you."

"You can't—" I exhale. "Remember the juggler in Malaysia, who wouldn't take your money for nothing?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, same thing. I don't want you for your money."

He's quiet for a while, until we're on the freeway over to Peyton Wells and the noise and traffic of the city on a Saturday night is behind us. Then he says, "I didn't think of it that way. I'm sorry."

I nod, looking out the window. "I'm not angry. Just don't make me feel like a hooker, please."

"Okay," he says, and I take his hand.

Our first date is pretty good, despite this. We go on all the rides we can and eat greasy amusement park food, and he rides the Grizzly with me as many times as we can before the park closes.

Sunday I do go home, just for a few hours, to get clean clothes and check on Luna and Dad. Malcolm comes with me, and I try not to see the house through his eyes—the cracked walls, the faded curtains, the cobwebs in the corners of various ceilings.

Luna hugs me tight and then looks at Malcolm expectantly. “This is Malcolm King,” I say, as proud of how handsome Malcolm is as I am embarrassed of how obviously we've been fucking each other stupid, “and this is my sister, Luna.”

“Hi,” Luna says. “I started to think at one point that you’d kidnapped my brother, but considering I’ve never seen him so happy, I think you ought to hold him captive more often.”

“For as long as he’ll let me,” Malcolm answers, and they grin at each other and I relax.

I check on Dad, too—cracking open the bedroom door and peering into the dark room. “Dad? You awake?”

“Mm.”

“Have you had a shower lately?”

“Mm.”

I stand there for a moment, then say, “Well, I’ve been staying with a friend for a while, and probably will be staying a while more. Call Ricky if you need me for anything,” and close the door. I ask Luna, “How is he doing?” and she sighs.

“He’s caught up on all his stories,” she says, and Malcolm’s eyebrows furrow. “I think he’s mostly eating frozen waffles and peanut butter. I leave notes for him on the fridge, but I don’t know if he’s reading them. Who knows, Cruzito? We just have to wait this out.”

“I know,” I say, and then run my hand over Malcolm’s head to make myself feel better. I give Luna some money for groceries and collect the bills that are waiting for me to pay, pack a few days’ worth of clothes and get back into Malcolm’s car so we can return to the Wolcott.

He says as we drive, “Want to make another stop?”

“Sure,” I say and put my hand over my eyes, trying to switch my mindset from worried to happy again.

I take my hand away when he pulls into our destination. It's a car dealership, mostly Volkswagens and BMWs, and I raise an eyebrow at Malcolm. "Trading up?"

"What color do you like?" he answers.

"You're not buying me a car."

"You need a car."

"I don't need a car."

"Your sister needs a car."

"Luna is fifteen and doesn't drive. Neither does my dad. We can't afford car insurance on any of these, anyway."

He sighs. "If you have a car of your own, you won't have to wait around for buses and you'll have more time for whatever you need to do. Or Luna could get around more easily—she'll be sixteen soon, right?"

"Yeah, next month."

"Well, then, I'll take care of the insurance and the payments and you'll have a better way of getting around, you and Luna both. I'll even teach her to drive, if you don't want to."

"In exchange for what?"

"In exchange for nothing!" Malcolm says, throwing up his hands in exasperation. Over his shoulder, I can see a salesperson approaching us, but she hesitates at the obviously heated conversation we're having. "In exchange for me not worrying about you and your sister!"

"It's not your job to worry about us!"

"I'm not saying it's my job—it's my—" He stops a moment, then says earnestly, "It's my *privilege* to worry about you."

I look away, not even sure why I'm angry. I like presents as much as anyone, but this is just as bad as money I didn't earn in my bank account. Or money I earned on my back, and the mere thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

"Please don't buy us a car," I say quietly.

Malcolm sighs, waves off the sales person, and starts up the car. We go back to his place, but when we kiss it feels mechanical and I say, "Maybe I should spend the night at home after all," and he rubs his eyes and sighs.

"I'm trying to understand you, Cruz. I really am."

I stroke his hair. It's soft, no styling product in it today, and feels delicious between my fingers. "You can't solve all my problems with a quick fix, no matter how much you want to. You can't throw money at a problem and make it go away."

He takes my hand and kisses my palm. "I really like you, you know."

"I know. I really like you, too."

"I want to make things better for you."

"You do," I say quietly. "You fall asleep next to me and you wake up beside me, and you're there for everything in-between. That's more than I've had before, and I love it." I hug his neck and he closes his eyes.

"I don't feel like I really do that much for you, in-between."

"Between orgasms and how you feed me, I feel like a house cat—fat and sassy."

Malcolm chuckles and pokes my stomach, and I giggle, flinching away. "Gonna need a whole new wardrobe soon," he says with a speculative look in his eye, and I tilt my head, studying him.

"Don't get any ideas."

"No, sir. No ideas. What do you want to do with the rest of today?"

I know what will distract him from whatever plan he's forming, and it sounds like a great thing to me, so: "Go back to bed for decadent, middle-of-the-day sex."

Malcolm nods wisely. "I concur." And then he scoops me up and carries me, fireman-style, to his bedroom, while I laugh and wiggle the entire way.

A few more days pass, maybe not quite as blissful as before, but I still fall asleep beside Malcolm and wake up in his bed more often than I don't. Then it's Saturday afternoon again and Malcolm says to me, "Hey, have you ever met my grandma?"

"Never," I say. "Just her assistant."

"Well, you've got to meet Grandma," he says, so after I've had a shower we leave the apartment and go down a few doors to 39 A.

I know from the building's blueprints that it's the biggest apartment in the building, with a private garden and three balconies. Malcolm knocks on the door but doesn't wait for anyone to answer, and just opens the door and calls, "Gran? It's me," before leading me through the rooms. It's a crowded apartment, too, and much like Malcolm's, it holds many souvenirs from other countries, snow globes and books in foreign languages and framed photographs.

Clarissa bustles in from the garden. "Mr. King, Mr. Morales. How lovely to see you today."

"Hi, Clare," Malcolm says and Clarissa rolls her eyes. "How's she doing today?"

"It's a good day," says Clarissa. "But do try not to wear her out."

"Yes'm," says Malcolm and gives me a grin, and we go outside.

You can see the entire city from the garden, as well as the lake and even the faint outline of the roller coasters at the park, and I pause for a moment to drink it in. Then Malcolm says, "Cruz, this is Maggie Wolcott," and I focus on her.

"Hello, ma'am."

"So you're the young man keeping my grandson in Aldhurst," says Margaret Wolcott, offering me her hand, and I take it for a moment, not sure what exactly I should do. She's one of those elderly white ladies that smells like baby powder and looks like she's made of whipped cream and lace. Her hand is soft in mine, and her snow-white hair is braided over the crown of her head.

"Um," I say with a glance at Malcolm. "I suppose I am?"

"I'm here to be with you, Gran," says Malcolm, and she laughs abruptly.

"Nonsense, child. I'd see you more often if you were."

"I've been a little preoccupied lately," he says with a wink to me, and I blush. "I could start visiting four times a day, if you want."

"You come when your young man is sleeping, I know," she says. She pats the arm of the empty wrought iron chair beside her. "Sit here and tell me about yourself."

I sit obediently, my hands folded together, and Malcolm sits on the grass at our feet. "I don't know what to tell you. There's not much to me."

"Incorrect," says Mrs. Wolcott. "Everyone has something about them. It only depends on what they wish to share. So, what do you wish to share?" She folds her hands on the head of her cane and peers at me. Her eyes are dark brown like Malcolm's, sharpness in their warmth.

"I'm a security guard in the building," I say with a glance at Malcolm.

"Malcolm said you're in school."

"Sort of. I'm studying drafting. I want to design roller coasters."

"Oh," she says, sitting back with a smile. "Malcolm neglected to mention this."

"That's because Cruz neglected to mention it to me," says Malcolm.

"I don't tell many people. It's a bit of a daydream. I haven't been able to go to school two semesters in a row because of money issues."

"Yes," says Mrs. Wolcott. "Malcolm mentioned that, too. And you have a sister who is studying dance."

"Yes, that's right. She's dancing with the Claude Kyle Dance Company for the summer."

"I know of them," she says, nodding. "The Wolcott Foundation sponsors them. They'll be dancing in my late husband's memorial service."

"I didn't know that."

"We're still arranging the performances," says Malcolm. "That's why nothing has been announced yet. We ought to do that soon, Gran."

"Once everything is arranged, we will." She looks back at me. "What about the rest of your family, Cruz? I know your uncle Ricky, and I believe I've met your aunt Cristina."

"There's just my dad," I say. "My cousins and my grandmother, too, but for immediate family it's just my dad. My mom is... out of the picture."

"What does your father do?"

I think, *Not much*, but say, "He's a short-order cook. It's not glamorous."

"Stephen and I used to love diners," says Mrs. Wolcott. "When we were courting we'd end the night with pie and coffee at a diner, most of the time."

"Listening to jazz," says Malcolm, smiling.

"Doo-wop, dear. It was doo-wop. Don't make me older than I am."

Malcolm laughs. "Yes, ma'am. Gran, I have a scheme and I need your help."

She turns that piercing look at him. "Oh? I do like schemes."

"I want Cruz to come to the memorial service."

"So do I."

"You don't need to scheme to get me to do that," I say, alarmed at what they might be plotting. "You just need to ask me."

"But Cruz doesn't own a summer suit," says Malcolm. "I've seen his closet."

"I have a suit," I say, though I haven't worn it since high school and I'm not sure it even fits me anymore.

"I'm thinking a pale, silvery-gray," says Malcolm, and Mrs. Wolcott hums in agreement.

"That will look lovely with his olive complexion."

"But he doesn't like it when I want to buy him things."

"Oh, dear," says Mrs. Wolcott.

"I'm right here," I remind them. "I can hear you."

"So, my scheme is, how do we invite him to the memorial service with the caveat that I'd like to buy him a suit?"

At this point, I just cover my face with my hands and curtain it with my hair as much as I can.

"I ask him!" says Mrs. Wolcott in delight, and thumps the ground with her cane. "Mr. Morales, come to the memorial service as my guest, and we will help you acquire something appropriate to wear."

"Mrs. Wolcott," I say with a sigh, and try to communicate silently to Malcolm that I don't like being ambushed like this. He just beams in reply. I sigh—faced with both of them, I can hardly refuse. I tell Mrs. Wolcott, "I would love to be your guest." I add, still looking at Malcolm, "And I look great in gray."

“Oh, I *like* you,” Mrs. Wolcott says, and I blush and hide behind my hair again.

Shopping for the suit is not as bad as I fear. We take a Saturday afternoon and go to Malcolm's tailor—his father's and grandfather's and great-grandfather's, too, the entire Wolcott family has had their clothes made here since their cattle baron days—who takes my measurements and we discuss fabrics and colors. I get to give more input than I expected, though I find myself deferring to Malcolm because he knows how these things work.

A week later there's a beautiful suit ready for me, that fits perfectly—falls perfectly to my wrists and the tops of my feet, not too loose and not too tight around my neck and across my chest—in a color that makes my skin glow and my eyes look deep and rich. Malcolm stands behind me as I inspect myself in the three-sided mirror, and puts his hand on my shoulder.

“You're beautiful, Cruzito,” he says quietly, and I lean back against him.

“Sometimes, I think you're right.”

The memorial service is the last Saturday in July, at the Wolcott Theater on the university campus. Tickets are free but limited, and were snatched up quickly by family and Wolcott employees. I would have wanted to go just to see Luna dance—being beside Malcolm, helping him through the grieving process, makes it even more meaningful. For everyone who wanted to attend but didn't get tickets, the service will be simulcast on YouTube.

Before the service begins, I finally meet Malcolm's parents, Daisy and James. Malcolm has Daisy's eyes, and I can see how Malcolm got his height and broadness from James and his square jaw and thick hair from Daisy's side of the family. “We've heard a lot about you,” Daisy says to me, and I blush a little because the only thing I can really imagine Malcolm saying is how good we are in bed.

The service is sweeter than I expected. Family members tell stories between performances by groups sponsored by the Wolcott Foundation, including Luna's dance company and a gay men's choir. I hold Malcolm's hand and look at him sometimes, and when he catches me looking, he smiles and squeezes my hand.

And I feel... good. I'm glad I'm here for all the in-between parts.

After the service there's a reception at the Wolcott Building in the rooftop garden, for the family and all Wolcott employees, the building and the construction company and whatever else that I know nothing about. I leave Malcolm talking to some of his cousins and amble around the garden until I spy Mrs. Wolcott, and join the people who come to offer their condolences.

"Hug me, dear," she says and so I bend and do so, gently. "Sit with me for a bit?"

"Of course," I say and sit in the chair beside her. A few more people come to speak to her, and then when we're alone she turns to me.

"Thank you for being there for Malcolm. I do worry about him. He's sweet, but he's unfocused."

"I know," I say with a nod. "He means well."

"He does. He just needs a way to put that meaning into action." She gives me a keen look. "I have a scheme."

"I think you often do."

She smiles, delighted. "Oh, you understand me, Cruz."

"I'm trying to, Mrs. Wolcott."

"Call me Maggie. We can be informal here. Can I enlist your help in trying to give Malcolm a little focus?"

"It depends on what you want him to do."

"The Wolcott Foundation," she says. "We want to expand to a few more countries, ones that Malcolm is familiar with. It would mean sending him away for a while," she adds. I bite my lip and spot Malcolm in the crowd—my tall and handsome man in his summer suit, my playful and odd sweetheart, *mi cielo*, my world. "Do you think you can bear that?"

"I don't know," I whisper, and my gaze meets Malcolm's. He smiles and crosses the garden to join me.

"What has Gran gotten you into now?" he says and bends to give me a kiss.

"She wants to give you focus," I tell him, and move over in the chair so we can squeeze in together.

"Oh?" he says to Maggie, and she smiles.

"I think, and I suspect Cruz may agree with me, that you ought to be the head of the Asian arm of the Wolcott Foundation."

"I do like Asia," he says, giving another look to me.

"And you want to help people," I say. "There must be some worthy causes over there."

"I know there are." He taps his fingers on my knee. "Could Cruz come with me?"

"Cruz needs to get back into school," Maggie says, "and put his sister through school, which is even more complicated."

"That's true," Malcolm muses. He looks at me a moment, then says to Maggie, "I will go to work for the Foundation if you can figure out a way to help the Morales kids to go to college. Cruz, Luna, and Ricky's kids, too."

"Hm," says Maggie.

"Malcolm," I say. "We don't need—I don't want—"

"For me," says Maggie. "Oh, let me play fairy godmother, Cruz. I would very much like to see a roller coaster that you design, even if I can't ride them anymore."

Maggie is a lot harder to turn down than Malcolm. Still, I just look at Malcolm, utterly perplexed about what to say.

"It would mean me leaving for a while," Malcolm says. "I'd have to actually go to the countries and find the organizations that we can sponsor."

"Love is patient," says Maggie.

I take Malcolm's hand. "Come with me," I say, and say to Maggie, "Excuse us," and pull Malcolm to another part of the roof—into the fruit tree orchard, so we can have a little privacy.

"I didn't know she was going to offer this," Malcolm says. "I never know what she's planning. Seventy-eight years old and she's still full of surprises."

"I adore her," I tell him, "and I'm crazy about you, and I want you to go to Asia and I want you to stay here with me, and I don't know what to do."

"Grandpa would say when you don't know what to do, always do the right thing."

"And when you don't know what the right thing is?"

"It's usually not the easy thing." He takes my hand. "I want you to earn your degree and get your dream job."

I say quietly, "And I want you to go to Asia and find some worthy causes for a while."

Malcolm nods, his expression solemn, and his eyes are suddenly wet and bright.

"Give me a year," I say. "A year for us to figure out if this is real. Meet me here in a year and we'll... we'll figure it out from there."

"And if it's not?" he says with a tight smile. "What if I can't—I mean, I've never really—God, I'll miss you, Cruzito."

"Then come back to me," I say, and he exhales, closing his eyes.

He puts his arm around my neck and pulls me close, kisses me and whispers, "I think I love you, and if it takes a year apart to prove that, then okay. Okay."

"Okay," I answer, my arms tight around him.

And that is what brings me here, to the old Wolcott building on a breezy summer night. The moon is full and low over the lake and the air on the streets is hot, but I know on the roof it will be cool and calming. It always is.

Mrs. Wolcott passed away not long after her husband. No one was surprised, though the grief everyone felt was very real and still is. I still feel a pang every time I walk past her portrait in the Wolcott lobby.

Uncle Ricky still works at the Wolcott, keeping the HVAC running. Mateo got into his first choice of college, and Aron is even talking about what school he wants to attend and buckling down on his schooling to make sure he gets in.

Dad is... Dad. He still misses my mom beyond reason, only now once a week he goes to a therapist and talks about it. Last month, he even went on a date. He was home before ten, but the fact that he put on a tie and left the house is a big deal.

Luna is still dancing with the Claude Kyle Dance Company during the summer and attending the performing arts school during the winter. She intends to apply to a performing arts academy after she graduates. I have every faith that she will.

And Malcolm, my sweet Malcolm, my dear Malcolm... I assume his emails are highly censored, as they focus primarily on the villages and their needs for

hospitals and libraries and schools. There must be handsome men that catch his eye, but if so, he never tells me.

That is the only reason my step hesitates as I leave the elevator. If he has done things that make him ashamed, he won't be there. I can only assume he has done what he always has done before, played around, broken hearts, danced away before anyone could catch him. If he has, I don't blame him. He's a beautiful man in a world that values pretty things.

But if he is not on the rooftop, oh, how I will miss *mi cielo*.

I pass through the pool area. An older couple are swimming sedately, their strokes evenly matched. In the deep end, a young man practices dives while his coach looks on. Small children splash in the shallow end, and the walls echo with their noise.

Myself, I've done little aside from study and work. Good words were put out for me and I found an internship with a design firm for the summer. I've learned a lot already, and they've been kind enough to grant me a few days off to enjoy my lover when he returns.

I stop and take a deep breath when I hesitate at the door between the swimming pool and the garden. I know the garden will smell of flowers and soil. I know it will be quiet, high above the noise of the city.

I do not know what else I will find. I do not know what else I will see.

I open the door anyway.

There's the scrape of a chair on the pebbled pavement, and a tall figure stands, silhouetted against the night sky.

"There you are," he says.

The End

Author Bio

Jenna Jones is the author of m/m romance such as The Auld Lang Syne of Barnaby Sloan, Shaken and Cartography for Beginners. She lives in a small town in the Wasatch Mountains, where she reads, writes and watches a lot of movies. She enjoys her imaginary worlds.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Website](#)

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EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

By Lou Sylvre

Photo Description

Picture shows a blond man, naked, midair in a jump into a pool, and another man across the pool taking a picture of him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm gay and thank God my best friends are okay with it. This was supposed to be a weekend with the boys, and we had my uncle's freaking awesome house just to ourselves. Pool, lots of alcohol and my four best friends, it was going to be the perfect weekend for sure! But the thing is, three of those best friends ended up in bed with the flu since they were stupid enough to go skinny dipping in the fucking rain two days ago, and now it's just me and Josh (can change the name if you want) alone for two days in this house. Well, you can think it would still be great, as isn't he my best friend too? Yes, he's the one I'm most close to and that's the problem. I really want to be way more close to him, if you know what I mean, and I don't know how I will manage to hold myself back this time. Sometimes I think Josh gives me signs that he wants something more too, but how can I be sure? He's the silliest guy I ever knew, and everything is a joke to him, so how can I know he's serious? Should I try to take my chances and find out?

I'm a sucker for happy endings and sweet, silly moments, and yummy hot sex is always welcome. Feel free to do anything you want, I just want a sweet love story with two silly friends having fun like the pic shows.

Sincerely,

Gabi

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, first time, masturbation, public activity, coming out, gay for you, voyeurism

Word Count: 10,266

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EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

By Lou Sylvre

“What?” Sam Gallagher all but snarled the word, none too pleased about being roused from sleep. Although, if he had to wake up, Josh was certainly the person he would choose to do the waking. He got a whiff of Josh right away, and nonchalantly curled up on his side in an effort to bring his nose a little closer, to breathe in a little more of the man he most wanted in the whole world.

The man who would never want him back.

Sam thought, *It's not supposed to be like this! I'm not supposed to be in love with a heterosexual. What the fuck is wrong with me?*

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Sam?”

“What?”

Josh forced his breath out on a hiss, which Sam knew meant Josh had become exasperated with him. He knew that because he and Josh had been friends since second grade. And because he always watched Josh like he was the only person in any room. Sam even knew Josh had rolled his eyes, despite being unable to see his face, since Sam's eyes were level with Josh's thighs. Suntanned, strong, hottie thighs. Sam rolled a bit forward to hide his erection, while from far above, Josh said, “Blake, Terry, and Ramon all caught full-blown colds last night.”

“Who would have imagined,” Sam said, having found his tongue and his typical morning attitude, “that you could get sick skinny-dipping in the Pacific in an October storm at night... while drunk?”

Josh laughed, which Sam really liked, because Josh had this deep, sexy chuckle that always sounded like it was making love to Sam's ears. “Probably crazy people,” Josh said. “Maybe people as crazy as the person who could get drunk on lavender vodka and lemonade, sleep through the excitement, and feel all hungover and pitiful the next day, right?”

“I didn't mean to.”

Josh patted Sam's shoulder, and if Sam thought his hand lingered there for a little while longer than it should have, he'd imagined it. He knew that.

"I know, Sammy," Josh said, and it sounded so much like care. Different from best friend care.

"I'm surprised you remember that, though—the skinny-dipping I mean."

"Barely. Last thing I really remember is you, bare-assed, jumping off that rock ledge into the pool. That, and being thankful I didn't have to rescue you afterward."

"Always the lifeguard," Josh said, and then added, "Anyway, I'm going to drive them home, so they can snuffle and cough in their own beds."

In a perfect traffic world, the drive from Sam's uncle's house in Newport Beach, where the five of them had gathered for their annual, four-day house-sitting party, to Pasadena, the city where they all lived, would take about an hour. But it always took longer, and Sam knew Josh wouldn't want to drive three hours or more just to spend the remainder of the weekend with him. Josh loved to party, do crazy things, go off on adventures. A wild man. And Sam? He worked helping to plan exhibits in a museum, played serious music on the piano, took an occasional swim—in a pool, thank you very much—and loved to read. Not up to Josh's speed at all. Subdued and tentative, Sam said, "So I'll see you..."

While Sam tried to think of how to end that sentence, Josh spoke up. "In maybe three hours." After a pause, he added, "It'll be just you and me, Sammy. Okay?"

"You're coming back?"

"Of course! I wouldn't miss the one weekend per year I still get to spend with my best friend." He laughed again.

Oh, dick of mine, lay down and shut up! Sam shook his head, wondering how a little chuckle could be that exciting. But he knew it wasn't that. It was the whole Joshua Heathcliff Brennan package—the white-blond hair, the red-hot body, round butt, quick wit, even that ridiculous middle name.

"You're shaking your head," Josh said, and plopped the aforementioned butt down on the bed, which placed his heterosexual crotch right in Sam's line of vision. "Don't you want to spend the weekend with me?"

If you only knew, Sam thought. Out loud he said, "No! I mean yes, yes I do!"

“Okay, then! I figure it’ll be kind of like when we were kids and had that tree house out back of your house.”

Sam smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “We’ll have fun.” Josh had sounded almost as excited as that long-ago boy in the tree house, and Sam couldn’t help but say that, even though he knew that for him it would more likely be torture.

By the time Sam rolled out of bed, the sun shone hot and golden through the west-facing window, having slipped down about halfway between noon and sunset. His first thoughts centered on Josh—who, Sam was sure, hadn’t returned after all. He’d expected as much—Josh had no doubt found something to do that would be more entertaining than spending the day with Sam. He’d allowed himself hope, anyway, but now he couldn’t tell whether he felt sad about his dashed hopes or relieved that he’d escaped a full day of having Josh all to himself, yet so *very* untouchable.

Sam deliberately turned his thoughts away from all things Josh, and noted a bright spot: his hangover had almost dissipated, all gone but for a bit of headache and mental fog. He threw his jeans on—commando, which amounted to a pretty daring act for Sam—and did some reconnaissance, combing the huge house to make sure nobody was there. All clear.

After he fed his Uncle Ricky’s two long-coat Akitas, Cub and Leo, he raked their fur real good and started coffee dripping. While it brewed, he picked up some of the detritus from the previous night in the den—horrified at the smell of leftover vodka—and made himself eggs and toast for breakfast. Or lunch. Late lunch, really.

The meal done, he took his coffee out by the pool, plunked his cup down on a glass table, and draped his long, slender body on a lounger, while the dogs settled in the deep shade of the cabana. Rick’s pool exceeded all expectations, built right into the cliff, with steps to climb up to a high rock ledge so you could jump off. Sam could have done without the fake boulders placed around the pool, but the palms, hibiscus, and bamboo created an outdoorsy feel without blocking the sun. Southern California in early autumn could be a risky business—cold and stormy one day, sunny and hot the next. This day exemplified the hot version, and Sam was fine with that. He lay back and let the sun slant over his skin, warming him like a lover.

A light breeze rattled the palm leaves, and when it ruffled the few hairs on Sam’s chest, teasing his nipples, he moaned. He imagined hands, not wind,

caressing him. Generic hands at first, but then specifically Josh's long, strong fingers. Thinking of things long and strong turned his mind to Josh's penis, which he'd never seen erect but imagined it *could* be, most likely *would* be, long and strong. And perhaps thick. Or curved.

Sam's own cock got hard thinking about it, of course. And commando in jeans with a hard-on, Sam learned, is not comfortable. He had two choices: he could go inside and get properly dressed, or he could set his cock free and let it dance in the open air to its heart's content. Hell, he might even give it a hand.

Why not? I'm alone.

Not at all a daredevil, Sam had never jerked himself off any place less private than his bedroom, and as he slid his jeans down and watched his cock leap to attention, he felt somehow illicit. And it *fucking* turned him on.

Truthfully, Sam had always loved his cock—the way it looked, that is. Oddly narrower at the tip and very thick at the base, not overly long but rather prettily curved. He pinched his nipples as a warm-up, then tongued his fingers, spread the moisture over the hard nubs, and let the breeze lick them dry. Still watching his cock, he reached around it with both hands to enjoy the silky feel of the skin over his balls. When a bead of crystal moisture appeared at the tip of his cock, he finally touched it, smoothing the slick precum over the head, teasing at the slit.

“Oh,” he said, “fuck yeah.” He started to stroke up and down the back of the shaft with his other hand, fast at first. But then he thought, *Sammy, if you're going to jerk off in the open air, why not make it last, really enjoy it? Who knows if you'll ever have the courage to do it again?*

Sam's penis argued against delay. Sam had studied long and hard since puberty, and when it came to pleasing his cock, practice had made perfect. Still, Sam reined in his dick's excitement, slowing down the strokes, moving both hands back to his balls, then one hand to a nipple. He sort of felt like closing his eyes, but he just wanted to go on looking at his hard-on, making his dick happy to be teased, knowing there would be an amazing orgasm as reward for patience.

He raised up his slender legs so he could reach his ass, ran a wet finger down from his balls and past his hole, making it pucker, begging for more. Sam didn't want to leave out any source of potential joy, so he slicked some more precum off the crown of his cock—resulting in an enormous wave of

pleasure—and applied his middle finger to his ass. He circled his finger around the opening, then ran it up and down the cleft a few more times, letting the heel of his hand rest on his balls, massaging them with every movement. His other hand alternated between nipples, pinching them hard for an exquisite pain that electrified his cock.

He moaned, “Oh, god, fuck, oh,” and dipped into the hole, loving the tightness of his puckered opening on his finger, loving the burn of his barely wet finger breaching his ass. At the same time, he moved his other hand down to his cock, circled the hardened tip in his curled palm, and then began to stroke.

That’s when he became aware that the whole time, he’d been picturing Josh standing at the end of the lounge, naked and engorged and watching him. He practically growled in the intensity of his desire, “Oh, Josh, Joshua, please!”

He knew there would be no more holding off, so he stroked his cock fast and hard, gave it a few twists, plunged as deep as he could into his ass teasing his slick prostate for a pleasure so intense he thought it could never be better—unless the real Joshua did the touching. Or perhaps sucking. Fucking...

He fairly shouted as he came, “Yes! Fuck me Josh! Fuck me!”

Sam came down slowly, enjoying the still-pulsing squeeze of his ass, gently pulling at his cock, avoiding the too-sensitized tip. When he’d milked that orgasm for all it was worth, he extricated his finger, wiped his dick, hands, and chest with his jeans—they were dirty anyway—and sighed. “God, Josh. That was good.”

Then, he heard someone breathing. And he noticed a shadow falling over his left shoulder. He turned his head, and there he was. Joshua Heathcliff Brennan.

Josh’s throat felt as dry as old paper, making him realize he’d been breathing open-mouthed, all but panting. His gaze stayed glued to Sam’s cock and his busy hands. And then Sam came—*oh, fuck!*

Josh had seen Sam jerk off before, more than once, though Sam didn’t know, and he’d felt like a peeping perv. But he couldn’t help it! He’d lusted after Sam since the first time he’d woke up across from him and seen his morning wood tenting the sheet, his chest bare and sculpted. At fifteen, Sam already had a swimmer’s body, perfect.

Josh's eyes had opened to something brand new in that moment. Not only had he been surprised at how hard he'd been just watching as Sam, still asleep, moved his hand to touch his cock under the covers, but he'd realized he *loved* Sam. Not romantically, maybe, but Sam had been with him through all the thick and thin moments of the previous eight years. Sam defined the word *friend* in Josh's mind, and nobody—save perhaps his mother, totally different—occupied such a huge space in his life. He'd wished then that he could climb under the covers and touch Sam, just to make him feel good, just to watch delight bloom on his face.

Still, though he'd do almost anything for a wild time, he hadn't dared to join Sam. He couldn't, because he *knew* Sam would never want him to. Yeah, Sam liked boys—that had become evident early on. But not Josh. Never Josh.

Six years had passed since that moment, and Josh had managed to see Sam masturbate in the shower twice. Then once, late at night when he'd intended to climb in through Sam's bedroom window, he'd seen Sam loving his cock and stayed outside balanced in the branches of their favorite tree, unable to look away. Truly, he hadn't felt too much like a perv because he'd had no desire to watch anyone else that way, and he'd only watched Sam because... he couldn't seem to help himself, back then. He *had* managed to tell himself "no" by the time they were out of high school, and he'd stuck to that, because by then he *had* fallen in love—real love—with Sam. Somehow that meant he couldn't disrespect him by sneaking around and ogling him.

But, now... oh, lord! Josh didn't know what to think. Sam had been so beautiful, pleasuring his sweet cock, and...

When Josh heard Sam gasp in apparent alarm, he swept his gaze up Sam's body to his face, where he saw an expression way beyond surprise. He knew how easily embarrassed Sam was, and shy, so he wanted to stop that look from turning into one of horror. Josh tried to speak; he ached to articulate all the feelings he'd bottled up for six years. *Now is the moment*, he thought. But, always more a jock than an intellectual, he instead blurted out, "You said my name!"

Sam's face turned the reddest red and, *damn*, tears formed in the corners of his eyes. He licked his lips, and Josh thought he would speak, but he didn't, just looked absolutely mortified and shook his head, then shot up off the lounge. Josh reached out to stop him. He *knew* that if they could get to a calm moment, he'd be able to tell Sam the whole truth about how he felt. But Sam moved so fast, Josh didn't even manage to touch his arm before he was gone.

An instant later, Josh took off after him, desperate to explain, and hoping against odds that what he'd heard Sam say meant he returned Josh's feelings. The lounge chair somehow got tangled in his feet as he tried to clear it, and that slowed him down, though thank heaven he didn't face plant. He collected himself and started to run again, but Leo and Cub apparently thought he was going to attack Sam, whom they'd known since puppyhood and would, of course, protect. Josh stopped and stood like a statue on the patio, with the dogs between him and the glass door, and Sam on the other side of it. Sam must have regained some of his faculties after the shock, because he didn't let the dogs eat Josh—he opened the slider and whistled for their attention, but as soon as their tails cleared the threshold, he slammed the door shut and, as Josh soon found out, locked it.

Josh stood outside hollering, "Sam, please let me in!" He begged, pleaded, even tried scolding. After carrying on for a good ten minutes, he stopped, but only because his throat was getting sore. Sam had long since disappeared deeper into the house, and finally Josh stepped away to stare into the blue waters of Rick's singular pool, totally defeated and looking for ideas. After he quieted, his brain resumed functioning, and he remembered that the patio slider wasn't the only way into the house. He slapped his forehead and ran around to the side door.

Locked.

Josh ran back the other way, fumbled the gate latch open, and ran along the side of the house toward the front. He pounded on the door, expecting it to be locked, too—and almost fell over when it swung open. When he recovered his balance, he looked up expecting to see Sam, but the space in the doorway stood empty. He realized the door had been hastily closed and not latched, and he worried about the implications. Still hoping, he stepped in, and then wandered through the house calling out for Sam.

But the house was empty, completely. Sam must have taken the dogs. And left in a hurry, judging from the clothes scattered in the bedroom and the watch and cell phone occupying the nightstand. Josh pictured Sam running out the door with his shirt half-buttoned, and he almost laughed. But, if Sam had run...

He was running away from me, Josh thought, and felt his heart break a little.

Josh wandered back to the front door, stared out at the yard desperately seeking a clue to where Sam went. He felt absolutely certain he'd blown a golden chance, possibly his *only* chance, to get through to Sam, to let him know

the feelings he'd harbored in his heart for years. Despite defeat, he hoped he could resurrect the opportunity if only he could talk to Sam right away, while it was all still fresh.

As he stared outside, he tried to clear his head, feeling like he had missed something obvious and important. Then, all at once, the whole situation seemed like too much. And futile—he had never been able to figure out why Sammy didn't want to get close to him. Maybe Josh didn't seem like he had the potential to be gay enough, and that might bear some truth. He wasn't sure if he'd be gay for anyone besides Sam. It had never seemed to matter and still didn't, because even though Sammy had said his name while having an apparently huge orgasm, he probably hated Josh now—and who wouldn't? Josh had been standing there all perv-like watching him jerk off. Sam's rejection of him had been plain in his expression before he ran, and the fact that he'd run away had made it even plainer. He no doubt hoped Josh would just leave.

Josh entertained the idea of doing exactly that, thought it might be best if he got out of Sam's sight altogether. He went to the kitchen, grabbed his keys and jacket from where he'd left them on the table, and headed out to his car. But he couldn't make himself go.

In the end he turned back around and went upstairs to the bedroom where Sam had slept. Where Josh had sat down so close to Sam he could feel his heat, and promised to spend the day with him. Where Josh had let his hand fall to Sam's shoulder, daring to touch him for a beat longer than seemed right for friends, even best friends. He recalled the way his own voice had gone tender: *'It'll be just you and me, Sammy,'* he'd said.

As Sam trotted down the stairs to the beach, all he could think amounted to variations of *oh god oh god oh god oh god*. When he got to the cove, he slipped his flip flops off and rolled up his pant legs, and then walked on until he got a little past the water's edge, so that the waves washed over his feet on the way in and pulled the sand from under them on the way out. He felt like that, too, like the shock of seeing Josh standing there watching him tend to his cock had washed over him in a terrible wave, and as it receded, everything that had to do with Josh and him was pulled away with it. Including his pointless pining over Josh, his secret lusting after him, and most importantly the friendship they had shared for so many years.

Gone... Ruined... All because for once in my life I did something a tiny bit daring, didn't think it through and weigh all the possible outcomes before acting. I just pulled my dick out and started stroking!

He wouldn't in a million years have chanced his solo session by the pool if for one minute he'd believed Josh would show up and catch him. Since it did happen, though, and he couldn't take it back, a small voice urged him to go right back, catch Josh before he left, and lay it all out, bare his heart, maybe even say, *Josh, I love you*. But the more realistic voice, the practical, cautious one he always listened to, scoffed at the idea. No, it would be best if he just gave Josh a chance to gather up his stuff and clear out. Maybe they could talk about it someday, even laugh, but Sam sincerely doubted that would happen. Ever.

Sam breathed deep, and walked through the water, meeting the waves where they were nearly spent, just deep enough at the end of their reach to roll over the tops of his feet. Clouds had formed overhead, dark and heavy, so much so that the wind that caught at Sam's hair and billowed his loose shirt hardly moved them. They seemed to be getting lower, as if they wanted to overtake the sun before it plunged into the sea, and Sam figured they were in for more rain after nightfall. Still, the vivid colors, cast by the sun against the clouds and the rippling water, couldn't be ignored. And gulls called, heading inland, and the seashore calmed Sam, as he'd known it would.

Soon, the clamoring and scolding and debating in his head quieted and once that happened, he heard another voice that sounded suspiciously wise.

Admit it, Sammy. You're not sorry, are you?

He did admit it. The thing that happened with Josh showing up was ridiculously unfortunate, but before that it had been good. Partly because... well, jerking off isn't unpleasant, but also because it had felt good to let loose, to do something a little bit wild.

And you want to do it again, don't you?

What? Masturbate? No!

But there's something else you want to do, isn't there? You want to throw caution to the wind and...

Yes. True. He wanted to strip off his clothes and go swimming in the Pacific.

So he did.

Well, not *all* of his clothes—he left his skivvies on. And he did look around first to make sure no one else was nearby. And he did walk back up to the dry sand and fold his clothes and stack them.

He happened to be wearing a pair of orchid pink satin briefs—because they matched his T-shirt—and he smiled when he remembered them. *So much the better*, he decided. Then, instead of proceeding slowly into the water, sliding his feet on the bottom in case mantas lurked unseen, checking the waves for jellyfish and floating sticks as he usually would, he ran out into the surf, full bore, even let out a whoop. The cold water didn't change his mind, didn't even slow him down. He made his way out to where the waves were deep enough to dive under, then let one tumble him back toward shore. Out again, and back, repeat. And the whole time the smile didn't leave his face.

Instead of moping about Joshua on dry land, he played, and he gave it everything he had. When finally he felt pleasingly played out, he left the water where the subtle current had taken him, near the headland that divided Little Corona cove from the big, popular beach at Corona Del Mar. He decided to let the wind dry him off before collecting his clothes. Besides, he wanted to be sure to leave Josh plenty of time to make his getaway. He climbed up to a perch on the steep rocky slope facing the ocean and carefully sat down, getting as comfortable as bare skin on rocks would allow.

The sheltered niche still radiated the warmth it had collected during the day, and it felt good to rest there. Sam let his mind go still, for once, and simply watched the last of the sunset.

He must have fallen asleep! The last he remembered, the sun had not quite disappeared, and when he awoke the night was full dark and the round moon was high. It took him a minute to realize what had pulled him back from slumber. Someone kept calling his name. He stood to look back along the beach, and easily identified the tall, athletic body, the long stride, and the blond head reflecting silver from the moonlight.

“Oh my god,” Sam whispered. “Joshua Heathcliff Brennan! He’s still here.”

Sleeping in the bed where Sam's scent still lingered, Josh dreamt of Sam and the tree house they'd had as boys. In the dream they were both grown men, and the tree house was much larger and furnished with loungers like the ones

by Rick's pool. The entire dream involved Josh trying again and again to kiss Sam, but every time he did, Sam got that horrified look on his face and melted—literally—once onto the pine floorboards, once into one of the loungers, once all over Josh's... boxers? Yes, boxers. In the end, when Josh tried to plant a kiss as Sam was exiting via the ladder, Sam melted right out of the tree house and was absorbed into the new-mown grass below. Josh screamed and woke up.

Sam had left his phone on the nightstand, and it was whistling—a tune, not like a teakettle—which Josh recognized as the signal for an incoming call. He yelled, “Sam!” and wrestled himself free of the twisted sheets to reach for the device. As soon as he'd swiped the green icon, he repeated into the phone, “Sam!”

It came as quite a shock when Rick's distinctive, deep baritone voice came through. “Who's this? Josh, is that you?”

Realization dawned: it would be unlikely for Sam to call him when his cell phone sat on the bedside table. Feeling stupid and enduring another wave of worry for Sam and grief for their broken friendship, Josh took a minute to form his answer.

“Hello,” Rick said, making it sound like a demand.

“Yeah, Rick. Sorry. It's me, Josh.”

“Sam's not around?”

“No.”

“Where is he?”

“I don't know.”

Rick breathed out a deep audible sigh, and said, “Listen, Joshua. You sound upset, and you're making me worry. What's going on with my nephew?”

Josh scratched at his scalp, wishing he could take the whole damn day back and do it again. Into the phone, he said, “Well, we had a... confrontation, I guess.”

“You guess? You mean you had an argument? A fight? You and Sam?”

Rick sounded incredulous, and Josh understood. The entire history he and Sam shared included less than a handful of disagreements. Clearly Rick wanted more information, but Josh didn't plan on describing the incident at the pool.

So he skipped to the aftermath. "He left, ran out of the house." Glancing out the window, Josh saw that night had fallen, so he checked the clock before adding, "Maybe three hours ago."

"And he didn't say where he was going?"

Why bother to explain they weren't speaking at the time? "No," Josh answered, and left it at that.

"But he left his cell phone," Rick observed. "Is he driving?"

"No, he left on foot."

"Well, did you *look* for him?"

"Of course... well, not much because I couldn't figure out where he could have gone."

"Joshua, you've always been fairly bright. I'm going to assume you've been lacking sleep or something. Go down to the beach below the house. He's always spent a lot of time there, and there aren't too many other places nearby he could have gone on foot."

"Oh, yeah. The beach!"

"I'm hanging up now. Let me know if... *when* you find him."

Josh didn't wait to see if Rick had more to say; he had his pants on by the time the light went out on the phone. He pulled his shoes on without donning socks and without untying the laces, then headed out the front door, across the drive, and onto the path hidden behind the hibiscus hedge. Despite the dark, he risked leaping the stairs three at a time, not even slowing down after a near miss.

He should have felt relieved at having a logical place to search, but instead he felt foolish. Rick was right—Little Corona was the only place Sam could have and would have gone, and that was the obvious something Josh had been unable to put his mental finger on that afternoon. So convinced was he of this clear fact, that when he got to the beach he expected to see Sam as soon as his eyes adjusted to the moonlight. But when he scanned the beach he found it empty.

Josh fought off an initial wave of panic, and moved along the bottom of the steep slope, thinking Sam must be in the shadow of the cliffs. He made it to the end of the headland on the south end of the beach—no Sam. Again fighting to

avoid jumping to conclusions, he walked straight across the beach toward the other headland. The tide was high and only a narrow strip of dry sand remained between the water's edge and the slope at the back of the beach—he could see most of the cove from the edge of the surf.

When he had gone a few strides, he noticed something odd in the combers rolling in—something perhaps floating on the surface, but dragging as if caught on a rock, or a shell—something in the sand. Josh's cargo shorts worked out well, because he had to wade several yards out into deeper water where the waves splashed up to his knees. As he drew near, he thought he knew what it might be, and a chill that had nothing to do with water or wind snaked up his spine. But the moonlight had stolen all the color from the drowned thing, so he couldn't be sure—not until he was right up to it and fished it out of the water.

A T-shirt, and it belonged to Sam, no question. Who else would wear a purplish-pink T-shirt with “one does want a hint of color” printed in tiny letters above the pocket? Josh found himself chuckling absently when he recognized the shirt, remembering how Sam had chided him for not knowing the color's proper name. He pictured Sam wearing it, that color—whatever it was—so perfect with his dark hair and nearly black eyes.

Then, without warning, his wandering mind shot back to the present and presented him with a horrible possibility.

Spotting something else some distance up the beach, he trotted toward it and soon recognized Sam's stonewashed, butt-shaping jeans, soggy in the foam but apparently too heavy for the surf to drag out. Then, a bit farther on, he found one flip-flop tangled in a mound of seaweed along with the fine gold chain Sam *always* wore. Josh's heart threatened to beat its way out of his chest. He fought to control the flight his mind had taken.

It isn't that. Sammy would never...

Not on purpose, no, but... accidents happen.

No! He's a good swimmer.

In a pool.

Fuck you! Josh halted the internal conversation, not caring that he was swearing at himself. He knew the thing he contemplated but refused to even name couldn't be true; it just couldn't! Sam had to be here, somewhere on the beach, and Josh would find him alive and well.

Also, Josh belatedly thought to wonder, where are the dogs?

He continued his walk toward the jutting headland that marked the cove's northern boundary, scanning in all directions with every step. When clouds obscured the brilliant moon, Josh could no longer distinguish shapes. Then, he started seeing multiple Sams. He saw them everywhere—standing, lying, sitting, walking. And dogs; he saw them too. Even as he felt panic rise up again, he berated himself. He was adventurous, a gambler, an adrenaline junky. He wasn't supposed to panic and quiver like a fly on a web.

No, he would stay in control as always, he *insisted*. Not being able to see well, he began to walk up and down and across the beach, yelling Sam's name at the top of his lungs. And he kept doing it, repeating even though it felt like the wind kicked up right then for the sole purpose of scattering his voice in fragments.

At last he reached the spot where the foot of the headland was submerged by high tide, and stopped. Unable to go farther in that direction and sure that he'd covered the entire cove, Josh looked inland along the rocky outcrop. A gleam caught his eye, up where the sand was still dry, like a spark—or a pair of them—coming from the shadows under an overhanging ledge. Clutching Sam's wet shirt—*orchid, that's the color*—clutching it hard against his chest, he strode forward.

Leo and Cub grinned at him from the shadows, whining a little, but not moving from their shelter. The gleam Josh had seen came from their eyes. Sam, however, was nowhere to be found. Josh continued to stumble around, tripping on rocks, the shirt dripping down his arms and soaking his clothes, calling for Sam.

Finally, he allowed himself to ask the dreaded question: *Could Sam have drowned?*

He still didn't want to believe it possible, but... the scattered, soaked clothes in the surf, the dogs huddled and whining in the hollow under the cliff, and no Sam despite the fact that Josh had shouted for him until his throat felt as gritty as the sand under his feet. He shook his head in denial, but a moment came when he faced the possibility—probability—that Sam, whether by accident or intention, had gone under in the waves. Josh pivoted, faced the sea, walked once more out into the surf, the waves retreating now that the tide had turned. He looked out on the water, searching for a bobbing shape that he prayed he wouldn't see.

The Pacific seemed as dark as the clouded sky, and he could make out nothing at all beyond the breakers, not even ripples. Josh was about to give up, but when the moon broke through and cast silver light on the water, he renewed his scrutiny.

He still found no sign. Defeated and utterly exhausted, he felt tears burn his eyes. He shouted out Sam's name twice more putting all his energy behind it, and then fell to his knees. He let the water drench him, and he let a few tears run, but still he didn't believe, not all the way.

He had to hope!

He stood and walked back to the beach, heading for the trail back to Rick's house, thinking Sam had probably snuck back in for fresh clothes—or something. As he splashed through the shallows, he heard faint sounds following him and thought the dogs had given up their vigil too.

“Josh!”

The dogs wouldn't be calling his name.

“Josh!” Closer the second time.

Am I imagining? He was half-afraid to turn around, but he slowed his pace.

A hand landed on his shoulder. “Joshua!” Sam's voice, clearly Sam's voice.

Josh spun around, and there was Samuel Lee Gallagher in the flesh, looking troubled but absolutely alive. For the second time that day, Josh found himself unable to speak intelligent words.

Sam's words filled the vacuum. “Josh,” he said. “I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done what I did this morning. I figure I've ruined our friendship—”

What is he babbling about?

“But I should have known you'd worry about me anyway, so I'm sor—”

Sam never finished whatever nonsense he was trying to spout, because Josh shut him up with a kiss, pressed his lips against Sam's, licked and pushed with his tongue until Sam let him in. Kissed him hard and then kissed him some more, trying to deliver by mouth-to-mouth the love he'd been saving just for Sam for an eternity. He caught his breath in fear when Sam pushed away. Josh forced his reluctant tongue to form words. “I've wanted to do that for so long!” But something in Sam's eyes scared him, made him doubt the possibility of a happy ending. Barely able to breathe, he whispered, “Don't you want me, Sam?”

Sam continued to stand silent before him, mouth open, wide-eyed, looking cornered and wild.

Josh asked again, louder this time, rough, "You don't want me? Sam? I thought..."

At last, Sam shook his head and spoke. "No! That's... I mean yes! I do... I just didn't expect you... to do that, kiss me like that."

Sam's expression transformed, became so thoroughly 'Sam', cautious and amazed and sassy all at once, Josh couldn't help but chuckle. He put his arms around Sam, around the man he'd wanted to hold and never thought he would, and leaned down so their foreheads touched. "Sammy," he said. "Surely you know me well enough by now to expect the unexpected."

Sam felt Josh's arms wrap around him—welcome warmth and strength accompanied by the scent of the man he loved. Yet, everything seemed so unlikely that he didn't respond at all; he stood there with his shoulders and spine feeling stiff as a board. He thought maybe he hadn't actually woken up, maybe that kiss, those words from Josh had only happened in a dream.

If so, he thought, the dream-Josh kisses like a pro!

He chuckled at the thought, and Josh pulled back to look him in the face. "You're laughing, Sam."

Sam shook his head and tried to snuggle his face into Josh's neck, beginning to realize how very perfect he felt, with Josh's arms around him and his hard athlete's body protecting him from the night chill... *because I'm almost stark-ass naked! I wonder where my clothes are? And Cubby and Leo...*

He looked over his shoulder and saw the dogs waiting, watching him—probably hungry. But he couldn't locate his neatly folded stack of clothes.

Then he saw the soaking wet orchid-colored fabric Josh had dropped, lying at their feet. "My shirt!"

"Sam," Josh said, and then louder, giving him a little shake because Sam didn't respond—he was still searching the sand for the rest of his things—"Sam!"

"What?" He snarled the word more or less exactly as he had that morning—in the moment that had begun this unbelievable day. But when he looked into Josh's eyes, he saw hurt. "Oh," he said. "Josh..."

Josh's voice shook a little when he spoke again, sounding as though he chose each word carefully. "Sam, you're my friend. I know we're just friends. I've wanted you... *loved* you, for so long, but I knew... But then, this morning... Oh, god, Sammy, you were so beautiful I..."

"Josh," Sam said, smiling, feeling his heart melt away. "You need to work on finishing your sentences."

Josh looked surprised, but then he laughed, reached out to Sam, and pulled him tight to his body once more. Squeezing him almost hard enough to hurt, he pled, "Sammy, say it. Say you want me, please."

Reality struck Sam hard. *This is it!* He was living the moment he'd dreamed of so many times, and he'd hardly been paying attention. Josh's arms were holding him, their bodies pressed together, and Josh wanted him! His cock reacted, erect almost instantly. He pulled back, looked up into Josh's vivid blue eyes, and said, "Yes. *Fuck* yes! I want you! I've always wanted you! Since tree house days!"

They both laughed, but Josh cut it short, covering Sam's lips with his own, as if he thought he could smother the scorching fire he'd lit in Sam's body.

"Oh," Josh said, barely breaking contact. "Now, Sammy!"

"Now?" Sam answered, even in that moment heeding the voice of caution in his head. "Here?"

Josh seemed almost angry. "Yes, here, now! I've been waiting years for this. Don't make me wait any longer." He seemed to flounder for a minute, but then firmed ahead, more articulate than Sam had ever heard him sound. "Shit, Sam! You jerked off by the pool today, and I gather you went skivvy-dipping—you got brave and took chances and *I know* you loved it! Do this, Sammy. Take this chance with me!"

Sam wouldn't have been able to say no even if he'd wanted to; his dick was about ready to launch itself at Josh, with or without him. He fell against Josh, ran his hands under his shirt, snapped Josh's pants open and felt Josh's cock hard and hot and already slick.

"Oh," he panted, feeling a wave of pain and pleasure as Josh pinched one nipple, scraped canines over the tender flesh of his neck, and pushed Sam's briefs down, freeing his cock.

"Orchid," Josh said, and when Sam realized what he meant he giggled. Josh stopped the giggle with some hard, attention-getting strokes.

Sam felt much more serious then, and he breathed into Josh's ear, "I want to taste you. I want to suck you."

For a minute Sam worried that either Josh's knees would buckle or he'd burst into orgasm right then and there, but neither happened. Josh kissed Sam so hard, Sam thought their lips might stay like that forever. That flaming kiss claimed most of Sam's attention, but he was vaguely aware of Josh pushing and pulling, maneuvering him away from his fallen orchid briefs and toward the shadows under the cliff.

Josh leaned his ass on a rounded outcrop of rock, and said, "Here." His lips brushed Sam's chest. "Dark. You won't have to worry about people seeing. Better? Okay?"

"Thank you," Sam whispered, and then kissed Josh, sucking in his bottom lip and scraping his teeth over the tender flesh inside, hoping that would be enough to show how very "okay" it was.

Josh pulled his long, strong erection out of his pants and pushed them down to his ankles. He spread his knees wide for Sam, and Sam didn't waste another second.

Kneeling before him, he placed his own throbbing cock against Josh's leg so he could move against him while he sucked his new lover—his forever lover, he hoped. Josh certainly had a cock Sam could love to the end of his days, beautiful in the moonlight, with the wet crown glistening like polished marble. He leaned forward, dragged his tongue over the taut head. *Oh, fuck.* Josh tasted even better than he'd imagined—better by far than any other cock he'd tasted, and he loved to suck dick, so he had a few to compare.

Josh groaned, then curled his fingers through Sam's hair, deliciously scraping nails over his scalp. Sam responded by diving deep down on the shaft, opening his throat and then letting the muscles at the back squeeze against the crown.

"Fuck," Josh said, and started to pump in and out of Sam's mouth. Sam pulled Josh's hairy, muscled shin against his cock and moved, begging for friction, and with his other hand took hold of Josh's balls. They felt perfect, too! Everything about Josh seemed perfect, better than he could have imagined.

Josh's movements became more urgent, but erratic, as he began to lose control. Sam stopped everything else, looking up into Josh's eyes and giving all

his attention to what he was doing with his lips and tongue, making it as good as he knew how for the most perfect man in the world.

Josh's gaze didn't leave Sam's as his climax neared, and his eyes closed only the barest instant before he shot sweet, tangy, salty seed into Sam's hungry mouth.

As Josh came back from that orgasm, Sam began to feel desperate for his own release, and with his face buried in the thatch around Sam's softening cock, he began to move against Josh's leg hard and fast.

Josh stopped him, pulled him into his lap, putting Sam's back against his chest. He pinched nipples, flicked his fingernail across them, bit and sucked hard at the top of Sam's shoulder. He put one hand to excellent use on Sam's primed cock, stroking it as if he knew exactly how Sam liked it.

"Good," Sam breathed.

Josh responded, "Yes, Sammy. Yes," and then licked at Sam's ear, blew his breath across it, bit the lobe. "Come for me. Now. I've been waiting such a long time."

Sam did come—how could he not? His cock jerked hard, over and over, and jizz shot straight up, falling back to splash on his thigh and Josh's hand.

Nothing Sam had ever experienced had come remotely close to that orgasm, and when it subsided, he couldn't even speak. Josh turned him in his lap and held him, silent also, and they sat there together for a long time.

Rain began to fall, and they collected Sam's scattered things, called the dogs, and walked hand in hand across the cove and up the stairs to Rick's house.

Sam looked at Josh just as they stepped inside. "Best weekend ever," he said, smiling.

Once they were inside, with the front door closed, the lights on, and the dogs already noisily munching kibble, Josh supposed he'd have to let go of Sam's hand. He didn't want to. He felt like they'd entered a foreign country—or perhaps a different planet—where the customs were strange and doing the wrong thing could result in corporal punishment. As long as he held tight to Sam, as long as they negotiated this strange terrain together, they'd manage, and Josh would stay safe.

He knew he couldn't keep Sam's hand in his forever, but he wasn't sure he remembered how to let go. *All in all*, he thought, *an unaccustomed head space for a risk-taking jock like me*.

For once, Sam seemed to be unafraid in new territory. He leaned forward to catch Josh's eye, and when he had Josh's attention, he smiled softly, gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, and let go. He turned up the heat on the wall thermostat, and then asked, "Could you eat something?"

To his surprise, Josh recognized hunger gnawing at the underside of his ribs—he hadn't eaten anything since morning, and he'd used up a lot of fuel on the day's ups and downs. Especially the ups. He nodded enthusiastically, and just in case that wasn't clear, said, "Yeah!"

Sam's smile grew, and he raised his eyebrows—a familiar expression, and Josh knew it meant Sam was mocking him. He didn't mind, because he knew it also meant Sam knew him well and liked what he knew.

"I'll tell you what," Sam said. "As soon as I put on some clothes, I'll make us some sandwiches, and you can make us a fire. Okay?"

At last! Something to do with his hands. And his brain.

Rick's fireplace nested in a hearth of polished, rounded stones, designed for beauty more than warmth. But Josh's lively blaze and the turkey sandwiches, red grapes, and tart white wine Sam put together thawed Josh's nerves—and his tongue. He reached across the tray they shared and popped a fat grape past Sam's lips, then asked his most pressing question. "So, what is this, Sam? What we're doing... what we are now?"

Sam looked a little saddened, but he met Josh's eyes and answered clearly and without hesitation. "It's whatever you want it to be, Joshua."

Josh didn't quite know what to make of that. Maybe Sam didn't want him the same way he wanted Sam. Maybe for Sam it had just been a sex thing. He waited for words to come, but serious conversation had never been his strong point, and the silence stretched on.

Sam, in his mercy, must have decided Josh needed more information. He drew in a deep breath and let it out on a sigh. "Josh, you're my friend. My oldest and best. If it's what you want, we can go on as before. I think I've revealed my secrets today—you must have figured out that I've wanted you... I'll even say *loved* you, for so long I can't even remember when it started. So, I'm yours if you want me. If not, I hope you'll still be my friend." Sam stopped,

then let a mischievous grin take over his face. He giggled, "Or, I suppose we could be fuck buddies! That was pretty awesome sex, down there on the beach, right?"

Josh, still confused, or rather confused again, mumbled, "Uh... right."

"But," Sam went on, "I won't lie. My first choice would be for us to be *together*. Partners, friends, and lovers—the best kind of couple, I think."

That came through Josh's mental fog clear as a bell, and he smiled in relief. He couldn't make his reply eloquent like Sam's words, but when he could at last speak his heart, the words that rushed out seemed at least good enough.

"*That*, Sam. Us together. That's what I want, too. And—I said it before on the beach, but maybe you didn't know that I meant it—I love you, too."

"Love me that way?"

"That way. For so long. *So much*."

He stood and, smiling slyly at Sam, pulled the love seat over to situate it immediately in front of the fire. He held out his hand and Sam came to him and took it, and they sat together, sinking into the plush cushions. He and Sam turned to each other as if on cue, and Josh wrapped Sam in his arms—no urgency now, and he thought it might qualify as the best moment of his life... *Well, second best*, he mentally noted, *the beach—that has to be first*.

"You're grinning," Sam observed.

Josh, chuckled, but didn't try to explain. "I love you," he repeated.

Sam laughed and hugged him, then laid his head on Josh's shoulder. They watched the fire for a time, then Sam got up and poured them more wine. When he sat back down, he asked, "Will you tell me what 'for so long' means?"

That started a long conversation in which Josh confessed his voyeuristic Sam-lust sessions, and the gradual growth from amazement and possibly obsession to a need to be close, and finally to the knowledge that nobody else could ever fill the chamber in Josh's soul that had been built around Sam.

"You *watched* me!" Sam turned the brightest shade of red Josh had ever seen him turn, and repeated it as a question. "You *watched* me?"

Josh felt his heart thud to the pit of his stomach, thinking he'd fucked his good thing up. He said, "Yes," and was about to add an abject apology, but Sam jumped to his feet, suddenly antsy.

Dancing around as if he couldn't sit still, he said, "That is *so fucking hot!*" His erection bloomed so quickly it visibly popped against the button fly of the washed out jeans he'd slipped on when they got to the house. Sam laid a hand over it and put the other hand over his mouth, making a picture both extremely hot and a bit comical.

Josh laughed—couldn't help it. It turned out okay, though, because Sam laughed too. Then Josh stood up and pulled Sam into his arms, and they swayed together as if slow dancing, heated but not overwhelmed. Josh kissed Sam, then turned Sam's question around. "What about you, Sammy? You said you've wanted me..."

"Oh," Sam said, and gently broke Josh's embrace. As he often did in emotional moments, Sam went to the piano—a baby grand that Rick had put in the house especially for his nephew. He began to play, and Josh leaned on his elbow on the closed lid, chin in hand, so he could watch Sam's expressive face.

Whatever Josh knew about classical music, he'd learned from Sam—from things he'd said, from listening, from watching him play. Now, he could appreciate the music Sam made, but he fixed his attention only on his friend. As Sam touched the keys in slow, quiet, inevitable sounding chords, his face looked utterly peaceful, and sincere.

While he played, he spoke. "Beethoven," he explained. "'Appassionata', second movement." Josh quickly became entranced by Sam and his music, and it surprised him when, a few measures later, Sam spoke again. "You see, Joshua. You were my first crush, way back when. If I thought a person could make someone else gay, I'd say it was you that did it to me. And it's been you ever since."

Not a trace of smart-mouthed Sam, or cautious Sam, or insecure Sam—the Sam who let those words fall among the notes as if they were part of the music seemed supremely sure, serious, both joyful and sad.

"You," Sam continued, "are the one I've always dreamed of. And ever since I was old enough to recognize love when I felt it, you've been the one I loved."

Sam's eyes were dry, his words calm, and his fingers played over the keys as if self-directed, now picking up into light, quick notes that even Josh could recognize as playful. Sam smiled then, and looked at him with his brows raised. "It's as simple as that!"

When he got to the end of the passage, Sam abruptly stopped playing. Looking serious, perhaps a little scared now, he said, "But maybe it's not simple at all, Josh."

Before Josh could answer Sam started to play again—something totally different. A pop song, Josh thought.

"Colbie Caillat," Sam said, a name Josh didn't recognize, and a song title he didn't remember ever hearing, "'Realize'."

But then Sam started to sing the lyrics. His voice couldn't be described as exceptional, but it had a pleasant, sweet quality, and of course he carried the tune quite well. When Josh heard the words he understood why Sam had chosen that song—they were all about friends becoming lovers, not having to spend the rest of their lives wondering if they'd missed out on something wonderful.

If Josh hadn't been so hypnotized by Sam's quiet performance, he might have cried, so much relief and contentment and hope flooded his heart. As it was, though, he waited in silence, scarcely breathing, until Sam stopped playing, stood up, and took his arm, pulling him toward the stairs.

"I think it's time for bed, Joshua. Don't you?"

He did indeed! He followed along and when they reached Sam's bed, they fell into it together and stretched out side by side, the full length of Sam's body snug against his own like the proverbial silver lining on a cloud.

This time, they made love, and it startled Josh to realize he'd never made love before in his life. He wanted to savor it, but mostly he wanted to *do* it, to direct his attentions to his fabulous lover until Sam tasted nirvana. He rolled so that Sam lay partially beneath him, snuggling his own cock against Sam's hip, and looked into Sam's dark eyes, delighted to find that Sam *waited* for him, open and ready for whatever Josh would do.

It stole his breath, but he recovered quickly, and bent to kiss Sam's compliant lips. He ran his hand down Sam's body, skimming over sensitive nipples, a ticklish spot near his groin, over the wet crown of his cock, and on down his thigh. On the return trip, he caressed the soft flesh high on the inside of Sam's thigh, and Sam opened his legs in response. When Josh rolled Sam's balls inside their loose covering of tender skin, Sam made a sound, broke his lips away from Josh's and bit down—not too gently—on the tender spot where Josh's neck and shoulder met.

Josh panted in response and licked at Sam's ear, moved his hand up to the hard shaft of Sam's erection, and began to stroke. Suddenly, he realized he had a deep, undeniable need to do something he'd never done before—taste a man's cock... Sam's cock. True to his adventurous soul, he immediately slid down to give it a try.

And loved it. Kept at it. Couldn't stop. Especially not when Sam made such delicious sounds, moaning, saying Josh's name, finally begging.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, Josh, please!" Sam started to buck his hips, but not so violently that Josh couldn't stay with him. And when Sam grabbed Josh's hair, pulled his head down, and screamed, coming hard and filling Josh's amazed mouth with a most wonderful salty tang, Josh moaned too, and sucked, and swallowed every drop.

Sam called his name after he'd quieted, and pulled at his shoulders, so Josh slid up to plant a kiss on the mouth of the friend he loved so helplessly.

He moved so that his whole body lay over Sam, taking some of the weight on his elbows and knees, which he'd spread to straddle Sam's hips, allowing him to move the way he wanted. He rocked his hips so that his cock had full contact with Sam's, discovering Sam already hardening again. *God!* Sam's body set Josh on fire, and he came like fireworks blooming one after the other on the Fourth of July.

He collapsed, rolled off Sam, said, "Fuck."

Sam giggled. "Next time."

Feeling shy again, but oh so right, Josh laughed too, and soon neither one seemed able to stop.

Until a shadow blocked the light from the doorway.

There stood Rick, clearly surprised, and Josh instinctively held Sam a little tighter, wanting to protect him from... whatever.

Rick soon recovered his composure though. He said, "I see you're home safe, Sammy. Glad of that." He turned to walk away—pulling the door closed behind him—and Josh distinctly heard him say, "I wondered when those two would figure it out."

The End

Author Bio

Lou Sylvre hails from southern California but now lives and writes on the rainy side of Washington State. When she's not writing, she's reading fiction from nearly every genre, romance in all its tints and shades, and the occasional book about history, physics, or police procedure. Not zombies, though. Her personal assistant is Boudreau, a large cat who never outgrew his kitten meow. Lou plays guitar (mostly where people can't hear her) and she loves to sing. She's usually smiling and laughs too much, some say. She also loves her family, her friends, the aforementioned Boudreau, a Chihuahua named Joe, and (in random order) coffee, chocolate, sunshine, and wild roses.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Facebook Author Page](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Wordpress Blog](#)

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EXPOSED

By Bette Browne

Photo Description

A half-dressed man stands in front of an ornate mirror. The room is luxurious, as are the red, lacy panties and fishnet stockings he wears. Long black patent-leather boots reach mid-thigh. He is muscular and very handsome.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Fuck! I got all dressed up for an evening alone and forgot that tonight was my night to host "pizza and basketball night" with the guys. My detective partner arrived at my house first and came looking for me upstairs and found me like THIS!!! How am I going to explain this to him?! He doesn't even know I'm GAY! Much less that I have a lingerie and heel fetish!

Author, the kinkier the better (no ménage or cheating). I want there to be tons of tension during the basketball game and please do not have it resolved immediately. I give you the freedom to choose from which POV you want to tell their story.

Sincerely,

Gyn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: fetish, gay for you, alpha males, cross-dressing, friends to lovers, cops, NYPD

Word Count: 21,671

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Acknowledgements & Thanks

For S. Bigger thanks than I can say.

Thanks to the DRitC team. You all rock for doing such an amazing job of putting this all together for the benefit of everyone. Bravo!

Thanks to Gyn for an absolutely amazing prompt. I would never ever have gone anywhere near this topic without it, and considering my future plans on where I plan to take these two guys, that would have been a real shame. I hope I've done it justice for you, and that there is just enough kink (for now) to whet your appetite.

And finally, thank you to the wonderful people at XDRESS who granted me the rights to use their image for my cover—I am eternally grateful. Not only for the sexy guy in red wearing product number 290, but also for their supportive words in our email correspondence. Please go to their website—xdress.com—for many great products, including loads of great photos of gorgeous men in lingerie, but also for an amazing blog that is insightful, inspirational, and incredibly well presented. It helped me on this journey a great deal.

EXPOSED

By Bette Browne

Chapter One

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* flowed through the sound system, filling his brownstone with its soothing, rich tones and surrounding Mason Reid with a total separation to the world outside his four walls. He couldn't hear the traffic, and he couldn't hear the neighbors next door. And god, he needed it. He lifted a glass of his favorite California Cabernet Sauvignon to his lips, breathing in the heavy notes of black currant and dark cherry, then took a mouthful, swirling it over his tongue and enjoying its flavor. *So good*, he thought, swallowing, the liquid sliding easily down his throat.

He looked at the open bottle on the counter, deciding to leave it uncorked to breathe, and left the kitchen, walking through the dining room and then the living room. His footfalls accompanied the music as he moved across the hardwood floors, *clack, clack, clack*, only muffling when he crossed a rug. He stepped into the entry, pausing for a moment to take another sip of his wine before he began to walk again. The marble underfoot made a new, brighter sound. He liked it. His hips swayed to the music with every accentuated step he took, and he lost himself to the moment.

Mason ascended the staircase. Despite wearing the three-inch heels, he didn't reach for the banister. He climbed steadily, the action as natural as if he'd been in bare feet. The stair runner removed the music from his steps, but he'd get that again as soon as he reached his bedroom. The parquet oak floors there wouldn't let him down.

His business shirt ruffled with his movements, swishing about in the breeze he created as he walked. He'd removed his tie and undone his buttons but, as yet, hadn't removed that one item of clothing, even if he had already changed from his restricting everyday suit pants and boxer briefs and, of course, his shoes and socks. Going downstairs still wearing his shirt had been an unconscious decision. He was in his own house, but down there, downstairs, everything seemed so much more public and open—so very different to the intimacy he felt when he was upstairs.

Moving into his bedroom, Mason took off the shirt and threw it on his bed. Then found the sound system's remote control and turned the music up louder. He had speakers in his bedroom, but they weren't as loud as in the rest of the house. The music seemed to reverberate through the walls now, and he loved it.

He took another mouthful of his wine and walked toward the antique French armoire that had been his mother's pride and joy.

Chapter Two

What the hell is that noise?

Thomas Perkins stared at the door in front of him, straining his ears to try and make out whatever that god-awful noise was coming from inside. It was familiar, in that he'd heard it somewhere before—*maybe?*—but he couldn't place it. *And why the hell is it coming from inside Mase's place?* He considered that, his eyes flicking from side to side as he stood on the stoop, six-pack of beer in hand, as if the answers would just appear. He knocked again then put his ear to the door. Through the inch-thick timber the sound was clear—it sounded like damned opera. He stepped back and eyed the large brass number on the middle of the black-painted door, checking that he was at the right house. He'd knocked on this door too many times to count, so he knew he was, even if it didn't feel right today. He wondered if one of the other guys had already arrived. If so, maybe they were joking around in there. Mase had an amazing sound system more than capable of delivering the music; it was just the type of music the stereo was currently delivering that had him perplexed. He was more used to his partner wanting to listen to Seattle grunge and arguing with him about it—his own preference of “anything but” often a contentious issue between them. As he knocked once more, it occurred to Tom that he was early. Only half an hour, but the other guys were usually late, if anything. It might be one of them subjecting Mase to that orchestral din, but that was unlikely. So what was going on?

Tom reached into the pocket of his jean jacket and pulled out his overloaded key ring. He shuffled awkwardly through the keys one-handed, the six-pack of beer still held in the other, until he found what he was looking for. Mase had given him a key to his place not long after they'd become partners. He'd wondered why at the time, and asked the question. Mase had looked at him, a “why the hell wouldn't I?” expression written all over his face, and told him that, of course, his partner should have a key to his house. What if some drug-crazed loony tracked him home and put a bullet in his gut? He had no one else to come find him, so the job fell to Tom. Tom chuckled, even as he pushed the key into the lock. Guys that said shit like that *did not* listen to opera. And since no one was opening the door, and he was clearly expected—it was game night after all—then he was letting himself in. He'd never forgive himself if that “loony” was the one playing the music in an effort to drown out the sound of Mase's screams.

He pushed open the door and hesitantly stepped into the large marble-tiled foyer of the brownstone. This place blew him away. Most of the time it was hard to remember that Mase came from this kind of lifestyle, from so much wealth. On any given day, he was just one of the guys: loudmouthed, crude, hardworking, dedicated... and most of all, loyal to the core. There were no airs and graces about Mase. He worked hard, he got dirty if he had to, and he was always there for everyone—especially for Tom. He trusted the guy with his life. That had nothing to do with the money in his bank account and everything to do with Mase and the kind of guy he was. He was just good people.

The music was even louder in here. Tom shook his head as if that would ease the pain in his ears and didn't bother to call out for Mase. No one would hear him over the volume of that music anyway. He made his way to the kitchen, and the refrigerator, to get the beer chilling again. Like the foyer, the kitchen amazed him. Tom loved to cook, and he loved this room. Mase had even given him full access to it a few times. Of course, Mase had benefited from that, as had a few of their friends. Tom knew the room had been redone not long before they became partners. It was one of the few things Mase had changed about the house after his parents died. And for a guy who had no idea about those sorts of things—Mase's words, not his—he'd done a damned good job of the renovation. Dark timber and marble and stainless steel. It was beautiful. There was a story behind the renovation, one Mase had "almost" told him on a couple of occasions. But he still didn't know, although he suspected it had something to do with Mase's mother. Hopefully, Mase would feel comfortable enough to confide in him one day.

Tom opened the large French-door refrigerator and placed the beer on a shelf. As he turned back around, he noticed an open bottle of wine. Odd. Mase drank beer, occasionally bourbon, but usually beer. He tried to remember if he'd ever seen Mase with a glass of wine. Possibly, but it was certainly the exception, not the norm. The only reason he didn't question again that he must be in the wrong house was that he knew this kitchen so well.

"Mase!" His voice blended with the music, falling flat even to his own ears. "Fucking hell," he mumbled to no one as he walked from the kitchen toward the media room. Had Mase forgotten tonight was even happening? The low coffee table, usually set up with chips and dips, was empty, and the pre-game telecast was noticeably absent from a very dark flat screen on the wall. Tom glanced back toward the kitchen. Even though he couldn't see through the walls, he thought of that bottle of wine. Could Mase have someone here with him?

He'd be pissed if Mase had forgotten them for a woman; this was game night—you didn't *forget* game night!—and you didn't forget your friends. But for all his posturing, he'd understand it if Mase had. Not much in the world could make you forget yourself like a beautiful woman. He was almost envious. It was too long since he'd had the pleasure of a night with the fairer sex himself. He looked toward the ceiling and listened, trying to hear anything above the volume of the music and got nothing, but that was hardly surprising. God, it was loud. And so *unlike* Mase. His thoughts drifted back to today at work. Mase had been distracted come to think of it. Nothing obvious, but he knew his partner. Sly dog. He'd had something else on his mind. *You go, Mase.* But then he remembered why he was standing in Mase's media room—it was game night. He tried to remember if something had been said. Had Mase canceled things? No. He'd even overheard Griff say that he'd see him tonight when they were leaving for the day, and Mase had agreed. Or had he? Maybe he just nodded. But nodding was agreeing. There'd been no other talk of it between any of them, but that wasn't unusual. They all met every two weeks, as they had done for so long that it was now a habit. They didn't need to reconfirm their plans, and if someone had to cancel, for whatever reason, they made it known to everyone else, usually organizing a trade. One of them would then have everyone to their place instead. Mase had definitely not organized a trade.

The thing was, Tom wanted to know what was going on. It was the detective in him—he was a curious SOB. His gut told him that maybe he should just leave, but his curiosity was winning over. “Mase!” he yelled again. Still nothing. The other guys would be turning up soon. If Mase had a woman here, and that was a big if, even if it was Tom's guess right now, then he'd be able to shut off the other guys at the pass. He was fine to have them over to his place if he had to, but he'd need to move fast. He really didn't want to miss the game, even if he was eager to learn what Mase was up to.

A break in the music between songs—they were called that with this type of music, weren't they?—was a welcome relief to his ears. He could actually hear himself think. He was about to call out again in an attempt to get Mase's attention when the distinct sound of stiletto heels moving across a wooden floor came from overhead. Tom smiled wide. *He does have a woman up there! You go, Ma*—The thought was abruptly interrupted by the start of another piece of music. “Jesus Christ,” Tom muttered. “Looks like it's on at my place now.” He turned for the kitchen and his beer, pulling out his cell to call Griff and let him know the change in plans. He hadn't even leveled the phone to waist height

when another musical interlude brought the sound of more footsteps. Tom imagined what she might look like: all long legs in those sexy sounding heels. He was happy for his friend, even as a pang of envy shot through him. Not that he'd ever begrudge Mase his happiness; he just wouldn't mind a bit for himself.

He looked at the screen of his phone, finding Griff's number and pressing on it. The call connected and as quickly went through to Griff's message service. "Shit." The guy could be anywhere. In fact, he could be walking up Mase's street right this minute. He'd better let Mase know he might still get some unwanted visitors. He dialed Mase's number instead. A phone began to sound behind him, and he turned. Mase's phone was on the counter right there. So much for leaving a message! Oh well, it wasn't really his problem. He took another step toward the refrigerator then stopped. But if it was him in the same situation, he'd want to know. Wouldn't he? Yeah, he would, he decided. It was what friends did for each other—they kept each other in the loop.

Tom was still justifying that to himself as he climbed halfway up the staircase. He paused. "Mase." Still nothing. He took a few more steps, listening carefully for any sign that might make him turn around and get out of there. "Mase," he said again at the top of the stairs. The sound of the music was his only reply. He looked down the hallway. It was rather dark with not even a lamp turned on. There was a soft glow coming from the end of the hall—Mase's bedroom, if he recalled correctly. He would go most of the way and call out again. He sure didn't want to see anything he shouldn't; although a glimpse of whoever was in there with Mase was rather appealing. At least if he got to see her he'd have ammunition for weeks, if not months, to play at Mase with.

With every step he took, Tom knew he should turn around and go back downstairs. He wouldn't be welcome here, but screw that, Mase had ditched them for whomever it was he had in that room. The least Tom could do was remind Mase who he was forgetting. To see Mase's face would be the best thing ever. He just hoped he didn't embarrass the poor woman. If they were in any compromising positions, he'd hightail it out of there quick smart... and deal with Mase tomorrow.

"Mase," he said once more as he got closer to the door, far too softly; there was no way that would be heard over the music. The first thing he saw was the bed, and Mase's clothes discarded on it—he recognized the shirt Mase had worn to work during the day—his shoes and socks haphazardly thrown on the floor. He'd obviously been in a hurry; the disarray very unlike Mase. Tom's

eyes darted around the part of the bedroom that he could see. Tom didn't make a habit of taking in the details of Mase's bedroom, but to him it looked like it always did, nothing out of place. There were no signs to indicate a woman was anywhere in the room. She might still be dressed, though, a glass of wine in hand, pushed up against the wall. A shiver walked its way over Tom's shoulders. *Just a peek*, he convinced himself as he took another step.

The first thing he noticed was a leg. A leg so long it seemed to go on forever. Or maybe that was the shoe, no, the boot. Black with spiked heels and shiny leather that went all the way up to a thigh... a thigh that was so toned and firm. Tom had to force himself to breathe. His eyes were locked on that thigh—red fishnet stockings clinging to it, like a gift ready to be unwrapped. His eyes moved up. Had he ever seen a more perfect ass? He'd sure never seen one that looked like that. The red lace panties hugging it tight just begged to be pulled down slowly to reveal more of that lower back. Jesus Christ! Dimples. Dimples and narrow hips, and honey-colored skin so soft looking... Tom took it all in, not realizing until his gaze moved up toward the woman's shoulders that something was wrong. She was too toned, too tall, too—too fucking muscular and strong. As he swallowed, Tom felt the lump lodge in his throat. He slumped sideways, using the doorframe for support, just as there was another break in the music. The sound must have alerted the room's occupant to the fact he was there, because they turned.

Tom's eyes fell immediately to the front of those red lace panties. Holy shit! Definitely not what he'd been hoping for. He looked up. A deep-brown gaze met his. As those eyes he knew so well registered what was happening, they widened.

"Tom?"

Tom only saw Mase say the word, as if he'd said it so softly he'd only mouthed it, voiceless.

"What the hell is going on?"

Tom watched Mase as emotions passed clearly across his face: shock turned to mortification—Tom could definitely get on board with that—and then anger. "The fuck are you doing in my bedroom, Tom?"

"I—I—Fuck, Mase. It's game night. I—I'm supposed to be here." They were both talking loud enough to be heard above the music.

Mase closed his eyes at the reminder and let out a sigh, but then he seemed to steady himself. He looked back at Tom, lifted one eyebrow, and asked, "In my bedroom?"

"Well, no, of course not, but—"

"But?"

Who gives a shit if I'm in your bedroom? Tom thought. *That's kind of insignificant right about now!* There was something much more important to deal with. "Jesus, Mase. I thought you were a woman." Tom couldn't think. This was incredible. "A-a woman..." he stuttered, repeating himself. Not that he had to. Mase had heard him. The look in his dark eyes assured Tom of that.

"Obviously I'm not." As did the tone of his voice.

"You do this a lot? Dress up? Do you get off on—"

Mase didn't reply. The continued rise of his brow, as if it was lifting right up into his hairline, and the jut of his jaw meant he didn't have to. He was getting pissed off. And Tom felt bad for it. But he didn't understand—and he *needed* to understand.

"I heard the heels on the floor and thought you were up here with a woman, Mase."

Mase laughed, the sound not even close to jovial. "And you thought that gave you the right to come up here and... what, check on me?" Mase's eyes were glacial as they stared at him.

"No, I—" What could he say to defend himself? He'd known it was wrong to come up here, known that he was overstepping boundaries with every step he'd taken.

"Fucking unbelievable."

"I'm sorry, man."

Mase expelled a breath-like snort as he threw a hand in the air, and then, as if resigned, shook his head, his lips drawn into a thin line. He finally looked back up to meet Tom's eyes, pausing for just a moment, and then said, "Besides, when have you ever seen me with a woman?"

Tom let the words sink in, his mind scanning quickly back over the last two years, unable to pinpoint a time when he was sure Mase had been with or left anywhere with a female. There'd been plenty of women; they all loved Mase

with his exotic dark looks and easygoing nature, always flocking around him and flirting with him... He looked back at Mase. *Fuck!* His gut clenched, the wind knocked right out of him. "You not only wear this shit"—his hand gestured wildly up and down Mase's body—"but you're gay as well."

"A-plus, asshole." Mase turned and walked over to the window. Tom could see the tension in his friend's back and the set of his shoulders.

"Jesus Christ, Mase. Why the fuck didn't you ever tell me? Like I could give a shit who you want to fuck." Tom watched Mase's head move slowly in a negative shake. "I really wouldn't—I don't—I really don't care."

Mase held up the wine glass in his hand in an almost salute. Wine? The music? Did he actually know this man at all?

Tom couldn't think. He brought his hands to his head, clenching the hair just above his ears in frustration. "Would you turn that fucking noise off?"

Mase spun on his heel—very expertly, Tom noticed—and looked at him, his face a study in contempt. Tom wondered what he was about to say, maybe only "Go to hell" if he was lucky, but then Mase walked toward the chest of drawers next to the window—his hips swayed as his heels clacked across the hardwood floor with each step—and picked up what Tom guessed to be a remote. He turned back to Tom, looked directly at him, then lifted his hand and pressed a button. The music instantly died.

Mase stood motionless for what seemed like an hour, but would have only been seconds, and stared at Tom. When he finally broke the silence, he said, "I think you should leave, *partner*, before one of us says something else we might regret." Mase turned back to the window and stood there looking out. His back, shoulders, and his incredibly long legs, almost defiant in their stance, and very masculine.

"Mase I—"

"Is anyone home?" a loud voice bellowed from the ground floor. "Where the hell is everyone? The game'll be on soon."

Mase's shoulders slumped. "Fucking great," he muttered softly, but loud enough for Tom to hear it.

Just what they *didn't* need! This was a disaster waiting to happen—as if it could get any worse—and he needed to divert it. He stuck his head out the door and called out loudly enough for Paul Staten to hear clearly. "Be down in a

minute, Pauly.” He then turned back to Mase, who was still facing the window, saying the only thing he felt could possibly make any of this okay, “Get out of those clothes and be downstairs in five minutes. I’ll get everything, and the guys, organized.”

He didn’t wait for a response.

Chapter Three

Mason felt ill. It took everything in him to not throw up. His guts churned, and his head throbbed. What the fuck had just happened? How the hell had he forgotten that tonight was game night? And what the hell had he been thinking to put himself in a situation for Tom to find him like this? He braced himself on the windowsill, staring aimlessly out onto the quiet street he had called home for most of his life. Nothing about the calm streetscape soothed him.

He felt like pitching his glass against the wall, but what would that solve? Nothing. With his luck, Pauly would be up those stairs in a heartbeat to find out what had happened. Like he needed that. Instead, he downed the remaining mouthful of wine and placed the empty glass on the side table. He leaned down and yanked at the zipper of one of his thigh-high boots. It stuck, but with another tug, it finally gave. He couldn't get the offending items off fast enough; it was as if they were burning him. He knew he was being irrational, but he didn't care. If one time in his life allowed irrationality, it was now. The boots removed, discarded carelessly by throwing them across the room, he started on his stockings. He grabbed at the netted fabric, pulling and ripping at it. When it didn't give like he expected, he stopped. Of course it wouldn't, it was attached to his underwear. He undid the suspender belt, releasing its clips and flicked it away too, then gripped the top of the panties, the silky fabric that generally felt so good in his fingers disgusting him right now. He pulled them down and kicked them off, and then, gathering the netted stockings in his fingers, he bared each inch of skin quickly, freeing his legs from the hideous things. With the last pull over his left foot, he did with them what he'd wanted to do with his glass—threw them against the wall. It was rather anticlimactic. Nylon and lace didn't fly very well. Instead of hitting the wall, they dropped silently to the floor.

“Fuck.”

Mason sat down on the edge of his bed. His naked ass sank into the soft down comforter. Ordinarily he'd like the feeling. Today he didn't even give it a thought. He was a man defeated: forearms on his knees, shoulders slumped, head down, eyes closed. He inhaled deep breaths to try and calm his rapid pulse. The ramifications of what had just happened began to take root. He was screwed. How the fuck could he go down there like nothing had happened. How could he face Tom now that his partner, his *friend*, knew the truth. Tom

was a good guy, so Mason doubted he'd out him right here in his house, but that didn't mean he'd ever be able to look at him the same again. He'd said it didn't matter, and maybe that was the truth, maybe Tom really didn't care, but Mason couldn't rely on that. Not in words said in the moment. When he'd had time to think about it, would Tom still want to rely on him as a partner? Mason didn't want to make assumptions, but he couldn't help it. His whole life had been about keeping things from people so that they wouldn't make assumptions, and now he was doing the same thing. He might be wrong; he hoped he was wrong. What he did know was that everything was about to change—how could it not.

“Get down here, Mase. Game’s about to start.”

He recognized Griff's voice. He hadn't heard Griff arrive, but that didn't surprise him. Now that he was paying attention, he could hear more voices. Bobby and Randy, by the sound of it. He had no idea how long he'd even been sitting up here, lost in his head, in his thoughts. He reached for his discarded briefs, hating himself for the feeling of “normal” that swept over him as they slid over his ass. It wasn't that long ago that he'd felt good about himself in what he *had been* wearing. His eyes fell on the red pile on the floor in sadness. He pushed up off the bed and stepped over to it, reaching down and picking it up, then threw it, with much more accuracy, straight into the trashcan beside his bed.

Mason pulled his bedroom door closed behind him. He'd cleared his room of any “evidence,” but closing the door to what that room represented at the moment worked best for him. Dressed now in old jeans and a sweatshirt, his feet covered in socks, he padded along his hallway and then down the stairs. The noise of his friends got louder as he got closer to where they were. He could picture them sitting around, pizza boxes spread out and opened, bottles of beer either clutched in tight fists or resting on the coffee table.

“*Mase?*” Randy this time, loudly, and then, “Where are you, man?”

“Yeah, yeah. I'm right here,” he called as he walked into the kitchen.

“Well hurry up. Pizza's gettin' cold.” Like he cared.

He filled a glass with water and pulled three Tylenol from a pack, downing them quickly. That would hopefully stop the headache that was forming behind his temples from taking hold. As he turned, he noticed that the bottle of wine he'd opened earlier—the one he'd been so thoroughly enjoying—had been moved. Now it rested beside the coffee machine, out of the way, its cork

pushed firmly back into the neck, the label facing the wall. Tom. He looked at the doorway, listened to the noise of the guys as they ate and watched the beginning of the game. All of them full of commentary and opinion. All of them, except Tom, whose voice was noticeably absent. He leaned back against the counter as he finished the water, almost expecting Tom to appear and ask him what the hell was going on. He didn't.

Mason opened the dishwasher and placed his used glass inside. He then opened the refrigerator door, eyeing the selection of beers inside. For only a split second he contemplated reaching in and grabbing one, but he didn't want beer. He wanted the wine he could still taste in his mouth, that lingering fruity acidity that he loved. He liked beer too, and normally it wouldn't even be a question, but right now... right now he wanted that wine. He wanted to be defiant. He wanted to pour another glass of wine and drink that with his pizza. Griff and Pauly, Bobby and Randy... would they even notice? Or care? And Tom? Well fuck Tom. Wasn't like his "preferences" were a secret anymore, anyway.

Mason closed the refrigerator door and pulled out a wineglass from the cupboard beside it. He took the three steps from the refrigerator to the counter where the bottle was sitting with gusto, pulled out the cork—loving that quiet pop—and poured a generous glassful. Before he'd even placed the bottle back on the counter, he'd tipped half of the glass of wine into his mouth, barely even registering the taste as he swallowed the far-too-much mouthful down, and then he belched. "Don't be an idiot, Mason," he chastised softly. Getting stupidly drunk was definitely not what he needed. What he needed was his wits about him. For that reason he replaced the cork and left the bottle be, not daring to top up his glass further. But he was taking his glass of wine in with him. He'd deal with any comments about it if they came.

Mason stood at the door to his media room and watched his friends. With their backs to him, they were oblivious that he'd finally arrived. They were doing just as he'd imagined: eating pizza and drinking beer, with a good dose of chastisement at the large flat-screen TV thrown in for good measure. All of them, except Tom. His partner was sitting with his back to Mason, only a small part of his profile visible from where Mason was standing. He sat quietly, solemnly. No pizza in his hand, only a beer, which he kept lifting to his lips and taking long mouthfuls of. Mason wondered what he was thinking, and it was obvious he was thinking, and not about the game. Pauly clapped him on the shoulder, his accompanying exclamation of, "They can't do that!" barely even

gaining a reaction from Tom. None of the others noticed this, too caught up in the food, the beer, and the game.

Knowing he couldn't stand in the doorway all night, Mason steeled himself and stepped into the room. He'd expected Griff or Randy to spot him first. They were the ones on the sofas at the side, but no. As if expecting him, it was Tom who turned his head and met his eyes... and as quickly turned away again. Mason's heart fell. *Oh shit!* He kept walking. He couldn't exactly turn around and leave.

"Here he is!" Randy finally noticed him. "What the hell you been up to?" He ignored the question, and Randy didn't seem to mind, his attention quickly taken again by a three-pointer scored by the opposition. "No!" Randy cried, his complaint echoed by Pauly and Griff. A quick discussion immediately ensued about the poor quality of the referee.

Mason could feel Tom's eyes on him, knew they were following him as he passed in front of the TV to take the seat next to Bobby. Bobby smiled at him and nudged him playfully in the side, and then he went back to what he'd been focused on. Mason reached for a slice of the pepperoni with anchovies—only he and Tom ate the salty combination—but sat back without taking a slice. The thought of the food made his stomach churn again. Instead, he sat back in the seat, crossed his ankle over his knee and lifted his glass to his lips. Then he looked pointedly at Tom.

Tom returned his stare but didn't say a word. Mason couldn't get a read on him at all, couldn't tell whether he was angry or disappointed, or just plain indifferent. No, he wasn't that. His face was blank, but his eyes weren't. They studied him intently. What was he looking for? An answer? If so, Mason didn't think he could provide one, even if asked.

"Great game, Mase," Griff said, pulling his attention away from his partner, and Mason looked at his oldest friend. "Even if the Knicks ain't playing."

"Yep. Who you cheering for?"

"Don't really care. All I know is it will be the—" He stopped as another three-pointer was scored. The stadium crowd went wild, and Mason couldn't help but pay a bit more attention to the TV. "Jeezus," Griff drawled, slightly in awe. "If they keep that up, they'll be the ones in the final come June."

The consensus on that seemed to be agreement as Bobby, Randy, and Pauly all muttered and grumbled. None of them were happy. The Knicks were out,

and Boston too—Randy's team—neither having made it to the playoffs this year. Mason listened to his friends as they debated the merits of the player who'd scored and whether the referee's decision of allowing the points was fair. Mason tuned out to them.

Tom was noticeably quiet. Well, at least, to Mason he was. He could feel Tom watching him. He wished the guys weren't here; he'd confront Tom if he could... maybe. He wanted to think he would, now that his heart had stopped pounding, and he was thinking more clearly. He'd come to an uncomfortable acceptance. Tom knew he was gay. He also knew he liked pretty, lacy underwear. What he had to work out was how the hell he was going to deal with it. That's if he had anything to deal with come tomorrow morning.

Pauly asked a question. Mason wasn't sure who to, so he turned to look at him. It hadn't been to him. Pauly was facing Tom, a look on his face indicating he was confused. "What do you mean you don't care?"

Tom answered, "Just what I said, Pauly. I don't care." His tone was flat, as was the expression on his face—at least in Mason's opinion. Mason felt all eyes turn in Tom's direction.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man? Ever since you came downstairs, you've been in a prick of a mood." Pauly glanced at Mason, his eyes narrowing, then back at Tom. "Did you two ladies like have a domestic or something?" He laughed loudly as if his question was the funniest thing in the world.

Tom lifted his beer and took another long pull. The moment dragged out, even the TV stayed silent. "Screw you, Pauly."

"Settle down," Pauly defended, holding up a hand. "You know I was only jokin'."

"You're both acting weird. He's right," Randy added. "Get the fuck over it, whatever it is, and enjoy the game."

Mason looked at Griff, who didn't add an opinion along with the others, but narrowed his eyes at Mason. The slight tilt of his head asking silently if everything was okay. Mason let him know he was fine, as much as he could without words, and Griff let it go. He just hoped Pauly and Randy would as well.

"When the hell did you start drinking wine?"

That question was for him, and Mason turned his attention to Bobby. On any other night, if things were fine, he doubted anyone would have noticed, but with all attention on him and Tom, it was bound to happen. He was just about to respond when Griff beat him to it.

“Mase drinks wine all the time,” Griff said, phrasing it like Bobby was an idiot for only noticing tonight. “Look around you, man”—Griff gestured around the room—“look at this place. Of course he drinks wine.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You want one, Bobby? It’s a really nice vintage,” Mason added, trying to make a joke out of his words and defuse the tense situation.

“Hell no. I’ll stick with the good stuff, thank you very much.” He held up his beer for effect. Pauly and Randy chuckled, but the looks on their faces were as surprised as Bobby’s. None of them had ever seen him drink wine.

Griff laughed. Mason knew there was little humor behind it—his friend was diverting attention and helping him out. “Bobby wouldn’t know a ‘nice vintage’ if it smacked him in the ass.” The others laughed too. “And neither would you two fools.”

Pauly looked offended. “I drink wine at Momma’s Sunday lunch every week. Have since I was thirteen years old.”

“Sure you do. Does it come out of a box?” Griff asked on a laugh.

“Fuck you, asshole.”

Griff continued to chuckle; his easygoing manner defusing the quickly escalating tension. And after a moment, Pauly joined in.

A loud cheer from the speakers had all the men looking to the screen. Another point. And a much needed distraction. *Thank god.*

Mason watched the game, forcing himself to look only at the TV and definitely not at Tom, although he did chance a couple of glances, neither time meeting Tom’s eyes. The game was white noise, though. If any of the guys asked him a question, he doubted he’d be able to answer. He was lost in his own thoughts, and his wine—his long-empty glass hanging loosely in his fingers. He could feel the effects of the alcohol moving through his body and mind, warming him, but also clouding his judgment, and that could be dangerous. The two glasses he’d drunk wouldn’t ordinarily affect him so, but with no food in his stomach it wasn’t surprising that it was. He didn’t feel like

eating but forced himself to chew and swallow a slice of pizza, and then another. Wishing he hadn't had the second when his stomach started to protest.

Pushing from his chair, Mason made his way to the kitchen. No one questioned what he was doing—he doubted they cared—but he did glance at Tom. Tom's blue eyes met his, studied him, asked a hundred silent questions, and then looked away. Mason kept walking. In the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of carbonated water. Hopefully, a large glass would settle his stomach. He finished drinking it down, the accompanying belch that he'd hoped for was loud and felt good. He remained facing the rear wall of the kitchen, his hands holding on to the edge of the counter, taking his weight.

"That's more the Mason Reid I've come to expect."

He didn't turn straight away. Instead he closed his eyes and waited, unsure of what to expect and not wanting a confrontation. When he did turn, Tom was standing on the other side of the island, his arms crossed on his chest like a barrier.

"I'm the same guy I was at work today."

"I'm not sure about that."

Mason huffed. "If you'd minded your own damned business, you'd be none the wiser. We'd say hi at work tomorrow morning, like any other day, and nothing would be different. Would I be the same person then?"

"If you hadn't been so—" Tom looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "—fucking eager to get into your *play clothes* and forget about your friends, then I wouldn't have had to come looking for you."

"Go to hell," he shot back, defiant. "What I do in my own house is none of your fucking business."

Tom unfolded his arms and leaned forward, gripping the far side of the island counter, his knuckles whitening. "No. It's none of my business; you're absolutely correct." His voice was still low and Mason appreciated that—they didn't need to attract an audience. "And I don't give a shit what you do... or *who* you are. What I told you upstairs is the truth. You should know that about me." He stopped, watching Mason for a long moment, as if contemplating his next words. "What I can't come to terms with is that you didn't trust me, your partner, your friend... the guy you gave a key to your house to—the reason I was inside by the way—with something so important."

Tom actually looked hurt, and that surprised Mason. Hiding that part of himself was intensely personal. If someone else suffered because of that omission and got their feelings trodden on, then he was sorry; it had never been his intention, but Tom's feelings had never been on his radar.

What could he say? Everything Tom had said was the truth. Deep down he knew Tom didn't care if he was gay. He probably didn't care too much about the lingerie either. Mason knew it wouldn't have affected anything between them, so why hadn't he ever told him the truth? He leaned back against the counter behind him, his ass taking his weight, and scrubbed a hand over his face and up into his hair. He didn't want to have this conversation now; especially not with Bobby and Randy, let alone Pauly, two rooms away. "I don't—" His head fell, the black-and-white checked floor tiles suddenly very interesting. He stared at them for what seemed an eternity, studying the gray grout filling the joins... filling time. But that didn't make Tom go away, and when he couldn't ignore him any longer, he looked up. Tom still stood there, hands on the counter, his face etched with concern, and his eyes—those gorgeous blue eyes—asking so many unspoken questions.

Those gorgeous blue eyes.

Oh god. Yes, he'd thought it, and it wasn't the first time. But he couldn't think it again, or allow himself to think about how that stray lock of dark hair always fell over Tom's right eye, or about the dimples that just peeked through when he smiled like he meant it or really laughed. Mason had fought against thinking it for two years. Knocked anything like it out of his brain at the first sign of a nigger of thought. Because you didn't think about friends that way, not when you wanted them to stay friends, and especially not when they were straight.

So what could he say?

"I'm sorry."

And weren't those the two most pathetic words in the world.

Chapter Four

I'm sorry. Tom repeated the words that Mase had spoken in his head. "You're sorry? You're sorry! That's bullshit, Mase."

Mase shrugged his shoulders. "What more do you want me to say? I kept a part of me private. I didn't tell you. I'm sorry."

That didn't cut it for Tom, and in his opinion, Mase was full of shit. He was trying to brush it off, act like what had happened was insignificant, but his voice, and his eyes, betrayed him. Especially when they looked over his shoulder at whoever'd just walked through the door.

"Everything okay in here?"

Griff. Of course it was.

"Everything's fine," Tom answered without looking around.

"Mase?"

Mase's face warmed for his friend; he even managed a small smile. "Yeah. We're cool."

Tom wasn't sure they were.

And apparently, Griff wasn't going to accept Mase's declaration so easily either. Mase continued to look at Griff, strange headshakes and narrowing of the eyes passing right across Tom's shoulder. He didn't have to turn to know the same was happening behind him. Obviously Griff knew about Mase. He wasn't surprised, and certainly not disappointed in the fact that Mase's oldest friend knew something so important. He was actually glad that Mase had a confidant, he should, but it did sting... a little.

He faced Griff. "Look, I know, okay. And it seems you do too." Griff's eyes narrowed, and he threw a quick glance at Mase before looking back at Tom. "I shouldn't have gone upstairs. It was wrong of—"

"Yep. Seems I'm coming out of that closet all over again," Mase interrupted, his voice still low. Griff's eyes shot back at Mase. "It's fine. We're fine, man. Just go back in with the guys and give us a moment." Griff didn't move. His head tipped—he seemed to be assuring himself it was safe to leave the room—as his eyes darted back and forth between them. "Just go. Please."

Griff opened his mouth, seemed to reconsider what he'd been about to say, and closed it again. He watched Tom, his eyes burrowing into him like lasers, then flicked back to Mase. "I'll go. But I'm only through there." He gestured back over his shoulder.

"Jesus, Griff. What do you think I'm gonna do? Like I could care less if he likes to dre—"

Mase's words shot from his mouth. "He's fine with it, man. Let us deal with it, okay? ...Alone."

Griff shrugged, his eyes continuing to dart between him and Mase, but didn't make an argument, and with one last look at his friend, he turned and left. As he watched Griff walk away, Tom was hit with the realization that Griff didn't know *everything*. He knew Mase was gay, was obviously supportive of the fact, but he didn't know about those red panties and thigh-high boots—he didn't know about what Mase liked to do when he was alone. What surprised him even more was that he knew, and Griff didn't... Interesting. He also kind of liked it that way. Until he remembered any knowledge he now had was through default.

Mase's steely gaze met his. Clearly, Mase now understood that Tom had worked it out, and his elation blossomed, but that enjoyment of the fact was short-lived. Who cared? It was all irrelevant. It didn't change the fact that he worked with someone who didn't trust him, at the very least with the truth about his sexuality. Tom wasn't comforted by the fact that Mase didn't know everything about him either, but he sure knew the important stuff. The stuff that mattered. And that's what he had issue with. How could you really trust someone who didn't trust you?

He had to get out of here.

"Look, I can't deal with this tonight. I'm going home." He waited for a response from Mase, and when he didn't get one, took a step closer, prompting... something. He stood there, his eyes locked on the man standing across from him, waiting. When nothing came, he raised his eyes to the ceiling. When he looked back at Mase, he said, "I'll see you tomorrow. Say bye to the guys for me."

He was almost at the door when Mase spoke. "Please don't tell them—or anyone."

This angered Tom. He whirled around. "Really? You really think I would do that?" When Mase lifted his shoulders as if he wasn't sure, Tom exploded again. "Fuck you! Go to hell." He didn't care if the guys heard that last bit.

Tom was halfway down the street before he realized he'd even made it out the front door. He was furious. Fuck being hurt, anger trumped that pathetic emotion. How could Mase even think he needed to say that to him? He would never betray that kind of confidence, and the fact that Mase felt he had to remind him—Well, screw him. "Fuck you, Mason Reid," he spat out through clenched teeth.

He'd seen Mase's face when Pauly had called out announcing his arrival; he'd seen the absolute mortification. And he got it. Pauly, Bobby, Randy, they weren't like Griff. They were good guys, but they were guys: hard-hitting, fast-talking NYPD detectives. A bit rough around the edges and not always one hundred percent tolerant. They were men who liked women and were vocal about it. They viewed masculinity that way. He couldn't imagine them ostracizing Mase if they knew he was gay, but it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. Especially from Pauly, who was the most religious and set in his ways of all of them. And that wasn't even counting what Tom had walked in on. The fetish, he couldn't see that going down too well with any of them, Griff included. Maybe that was why Mase had never told his friend. But then, he hadn't told Tom either. It was clear where he stood—he was just one of the guys. He'd have to deal with that.

A yellow cab was coming his way, and he stuck out his arm to hail it. The driver was thankfully not a talker, and the streets of Manhattan were quiet, so he was home and closing the door of his small fifth-floor walk-up in no time.

As he moved around his home, his anger began to abate. What happened between him and Mase was going to happen regardless of how long he stewed over it. They'd either get through this or they wouldn't, and either way that saddened him because Tom knew they were never going to be the same again. A part of their relationship had changed, and there was no going back from it. That pissed him off. He didn't want it to change. He liked Mase, had from the very first time they were introduced. Their friendship—he scoffed; so much for that—had always been easy. Well, at least it had been for him.

He flicked on the TV. No point in missing the end of the game, not that he really cared, but the TV provided some white noise. He took off his jacket and threw it over the back of the sofa. Doing so made him think of Mase and how

he never did that at his place. The hall closet was there for a reason in his big ol' Brownstone, and Tom had gotten into the habit of using it. Tonight he'd been thankful he did; it had meant he didn't have to go into the media room to get anything when he stormed out of Mase's house. No confrontations. He almost felt guilty knowing Mase was back there dealing with it all alone. Almost...

Beer in hand and shoes discarded somewhere close to his bedroom, Tom sat in front of the TV. The score was as they'd predicted, although much closer, and it looked like Miami was moving on to the next round of the playoffs. He could care less.

At some point, he must have zoned out. He had no idea what piece-of-crap show was on TV and no idea of what the time was, but the beer in his hand was empty, and he placed the can on the coffee table in front of him. He picked up the remote and clicked off the TV then pushed up off the sofa. Bed sounded like a good idea. Hopefully, everything would seem better in the morning.

His soft queen-sized bed, normally one of his favorite places in the world, was not a good place to be tonight. Every time he closed his eyes, images of Mase in red stockings... lacy panties... and those boots came to mind, and try as he might, he couldn't keep them away. He also couldn't forget how he'd felt when he'd first seen him. Sure, he'd thought Mase was a woman, and as a straight guy, it was okay to find women attractive, but Mase wasn't a woman. Definitely not. Those legs were not a woman's legs, and that ass, oh Jesus, that ass. He'd wanted to touch that ass, had felt a need to do so, but that was before. He also remembered those shoulders, and whom they belonged to, whom it *all* belonged to, and that realization was enough for his willful erection to wither and die, leaving him lying there more confused than he had ever been.

He was so screwed.

Tom didn't know what time he'd fallen asleep, only that he'd spent far too much of the night tossing and turning in his bed. And he was paying the price. Even with a half-drunk grande triple-shot latte in his hand, he was still fighting tiredness. A couple of hours of sleep—and restless, thinking-about-your-gay-partner sleep at that—had a tendency to do that to you.

“You flew out of Mase's place fast last night.”

Bobby.

Tom found himself face-to-face with his friend. "Oh, you know how it is," he tried to make light, "things to do, people to see, and all that."

"Not really," Bobby replied. *Fucker!* The man was far too shrewd. "You're full of shit, Perkins. You and Mase had a big ol' showdown last night; mind you, he was pretty vague about it too when he came back in for the end of the game."

Not that he'd imagined Mase would bare his soul to the guys, he was happy he hadn't. "It's got nothing to do with you, Bobby. If Mase didn't want to fill you in, then I'm sure not going to."

"You girls havin' a lover's spat?"

Tom felt his empty fist clench at his side. "You're a jackass." He turned away from Bobby and walked toward his desk.

A loud burst of laughter sounded behind him. He'd thought it once, and he'd think it again: *Fucker!*

He really wasn't surprised. They'd made a lot of noise last night—figuratively as opposed to literally, except for that last outburst of his—so it was only natural the people they'd done it in front of would be curious. He would be. That didn't mean he was going to allow any of them to be assholes about it.

Tom sat at his desk, conscious of the fact that Mase hadn't arrived at his. He looked around at the desks surrounding him, noting that Griff wasn't in yet either. Randy and Pauly were out too, but he remembered the case they were on had some leads they'd talked about following up this morning. He could see Bobby in with the boss through the glass windows of his office. He wondered what they were discussing and whether it had anything to do with Griff. Bobby and Griff were a good team, strong. They got on well and did most things together, not everything because they pooled their resources, but it was strange to see Bobby without him. It wasn't something he'd generally give a second thought to, but with Mase missing in action too, and what had gone on last night, he couldn't help his train of thought. Brushing it aside, he started on the pile of paperwork on his desk; he must have been at it five minutes when he heard his name.

"Perkins, get in here." Bobby poked his head out the doorway of the boss's office to call him over.

This was gonna be interesting. Tom made his way quickly. Captain Liam O'Farrell wasn't always the most patient of men. He was a fair and honest man, but keep him waiting and his very loud Irish-New York brogue would leave your balls shriveling back into your body in fear.

The day progressed slowly. He'd been given a small assignment with Bobby for the day, and it had gone well, even if things between them had been a little strained. It was when Tom was finally tidying his desk for the day, ready to file some paperwork on his way out, that Mase and Griff returned to the precinct. Bobby was still there too, and Griff clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. "Miss me, partner?"

"Not damn likely," Bobby said loudly, his Brooklyn accent pronounced, the words clear even from halfway across the room. He was a happy guy, and it was good to see him joking around with Griff. "You better be back in the car with me tomorrow. Don't think I can stand another day with that surly bastard." Bobby tipped his head Tom's way.

Tom flipped him the bird.

Griff studied Tom as he packed up his own things for the day, making him slightly uncomfortable, and he again wondered what might have been said involving him. And when Griff walked over to Mase's desk and pressed his hand to Mase's shoulder, quietly saying "Work it out," he guessed he'd been right on the money.

Tom could have walked out right then and gone home, but he'd had a lot of time to think in the twenty-or-so hours since he'd left Mase's house the night before. He looked around the room. Now that Griff and Bobby were gone, they were the only two left. And Mase had yet to meet his eyes.

"What did you tell Griff?" he asked, his tone as even as he could make it, hoping to break the ice.

Mase continued to turn the stapled pages of the report in his hand. Without looking up, he said, "Nothing for you to worry about."

He heard the rebuff, but it wasn't the words Mase said but the way he said it that Tom took notice of. Mase was a "Noo Yawker" born and raised, but his private-school education and Wall Street-banker father meant that his accent wasn't strong, not like Bobby or Pauly. Something about his voice resonated in

a way it never had before. Tom sighed. He'd never cared about the sound of Mase's voice. It was just another thing that Tom found himself looking deeper into about Mase now that he realized he didn't know him as well as he'd thought he did.

He tried again.

"Jesus, Mase, don't be like that. I said a lot of shit last night I wish I hadn't said." His thoughts over that "lot of time" had provided few answers, but this was something he was sure of. "I overreacted. I'm sorry." Mase stopped shuffling, and stared distractedly at the papers in his hand. Tom quickly glanced around them again, making sure they were alone. "I had no right to react like I did, not about what you did or didn't tell me. What you tell anyone is your business, and I respect that. I do." Mase placed the papers carefully on the desk and turned his head. His eyes were narrowed but focused. "I'm not gonna lie, man, you shocked the hell outta me, and you in those—" Mase held a hand up halting his words, but he still didn't say a word. "Put it this way, I ain't gonna forget you in your bedroom in a hurry." Mase could take that however he liked—Tom was still undecided.

"Do I need to ask the boss to reassign me?"

No?! Tom should have responded faster, he knew that, and the resignation that crossed Mase's face at his silence was like a kick in the guts, but he was torn. Not because he gave a rat's ass about what he had learned, he really could care less, but his reaction when he got home the night before, and the subsequent thoughts that had invaded his mind all day, had spooked him.

Mase pushed out his chair, the sound loud and echoing in the empty room, and stood up. "I'll come in early tomorrow and make sure he finds me someone else quic—"

"No!" Tom might have been struggling with his own demons, but Mase getting a new partner was not what he wanted. "I don't want that, man. It might be weird between us for a few days, and that has nothing to do with what I now know"—he tried to make that sound like an assurance—"but we'll be fine." They had to be. And he was going to try his hardest to make sure they were.

Mase scoffed. "What do you mean it has nothing to do with 'what you now know'? Of course it does. If you were so *okay* with it all, we wouldn't be having this discussion."

"I am okay with it."

“You’re really not.”

Tom looked down at the ground. How the fuck did he explain himself? “Christ, Mase, I not only found out you’re gay”—he whispered the word and lowered his tone as well—“but that you like... certain things. To be honest, I didn’t need to know that, just like you don’t need to know whether I like to fuck missionary or doggy.” Mase’s brows skyrocketed toward his hairline. “But I do know, and try as I might, I can’t erase those images from my brain. I can’t kid myself you were practicing for Halloween, and you need to accept that, and give me time to pretend it never happened.”

“It did happen, Tom. It’s who I am.”

“Yeah, man, I get that.” Damn, did he get that. He took a step and stopped. He didn’t think getting too close to Mase’s personal space was a good idea. “Look, I’m hitting the road. Don’t go speak to the Captain in the morning, please. Let’s try and get through this.” He waited for an answer, and when nothing came, resigned, he began to walk for the door.

“Tom.” Mase’s voiced halted him. “I’m the same guy I was yesterday. If you can’t get back to that place then we can’t be partners. I can’t put myself through that.”

“I know.”

And with that he walked from the room.

As expected, things were strained between him and Mase, but Tom tried his hardest to keep acting like normal. Days passed, but he wasn’t able to forget what had happened. If anything, his thoughts and memories became more and more of a burden, his mind constantly replaying every move Mase had made in his bedroom that night, even at times expanding those memories into new images and, what he didn’t like to refer to them as, fantasies. It was making him crazy. Not once in his thirty-two years had he ever even considered a man sexually, not once, but now... god, now, that’s all he did. Try as he might to send his thoughts and burgeoning desires in any other direction. He’d even gone to a bar in the hopes of finding some beautiful woman, thinking a gorgeous woman would make him remember what it was he really desired. And there had been more than one candidate, but he’d found himself comparing them to him—well, Mase’s alter ego at least. And when a gorgeous blonde with big tits and a sexy round ass had gotten in real close and slid her hand up his

thigh, her hot breath close to his neck and ear, he'd not even felt a twinge of desire for her, his dick remaining neatly flaccid in his jocks.

"What the hell is going on with you?" Griff asked one day, two weeks later. They were alone in the lunchroom, and Tom was thankful of that, even though he knew, considering Griff and Mase's friendship, that Griff would never do this if anyone else was around—even Mase it seemed. "Do you want him?"

Tom felt cold all over. "Do I—What—Do I—*Who*?" He knew exactly "who" Griff meant.

Griff put a hand on his shoulder. "This is between you and me, man, and you know I can keep secrets." That wasn't comforting. "I've seen you looking at him."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The words raced out much too fast. "You're wrong, mistaken."

"What am I mistaken about, Tom?" Griff, the master interrogator—fuck! He was king of wearing someone down and getting them to admit to... everything. "Mase is a good-looking guy. Some might even say he's really hot—if you're into that sort of thing. Are you into that sort of thing now, Tom?"

Tom glared at Griff, then flicked his eyes to the door, petrified that someone might walk in. "You *know* I like women," he insisted vehemently.

"Yeah, you do, or you did. But I think something else has sparked your interest. And I know I'm an observant bastard, but others around this place are too. If you don't tone it down, it won't be only me noticing."

Tom didn't say anything to confirm Griff's words, but he didn't deny them either—with Griff and this situation, it would be futile. God, had he really been that obvious? If Griff had worked out that something had changed in him, what about Mase?

He wasn't sure how long he'd been lost in his thoughts when Griff spoke again. "You don't have to say anything to me, but you might have to think about what you're gonna say to Mase, and soon. I won't say anything to him, so don't worry 'bout that. Whatever it is between the two of you is between the two of you, and it's none of my business." At some point, Griff's hand had fallen away, and he replaced it on Tom's shoulder again, giving a supportive squeeze. "I'm only saying something now because you need to be careful—you don't want to be confronted with a conversation like this from Pauly or Bobby."

Tom agreed with a small movement of his head. Griff deserved that much. “But you need to be sure of where you’re going with this, Tom. Mase doesn’t deserve to be an experiment.”

Tom would never do that. “I’d never—!”

“Not intentionally, no. I don’t believe you would. But people get hurt, man, for many reasons. Don’t let the two of you become a statistic.”

Griff walked away, leaving Tom dumbfounded.

By the time he arrived home that night, he was more confused than ever. Mase had been friendly enough, and there had been no issues, but he’d also been oddly removed, his verbal replies succinct but far “too” to the point, not reminiscent of their friendly banter of weeks earlier. And Mase had caught his eye more than once; each time the stare had held longer than felt comfortable for him. He wasn’t sure what it meant. It had never felt like a come-on, but it hadn’t felt normal either.

With a beer in hand, he sat on the sofa and turned on the TV. It was a cop show, the episode set in some seedy joint filled with hookers. A woman walked onto a stage, her long brunette hair only kept his attention for as long as it took for his brain to compute what she was wearing. Not much, but what there was comprised lacy lingerie and fishnet stockings. He slumped back in the seat. Her sparse outfit wasn’t the same as what had haunted his dreams night after night, but it was close enough. His eyes closed, and a picture-perfect image of Mase in similar attire was all he could see. Tom looked back at the TV but couldn’t even focus on it. He didn’t care. He picked up the remote and flicked the machine off.

Tom squeezed the beer in his hand tightly. Cool condensation from the bottle ran over his hand. He lifted it to his mouth and finished off what was left of the beer, wiped any drips off his mouth with the back of his hand, and stood up. He walked to the desk at the far side of the room and picked up his MacBook, returning to the sofa and sitting down again. It only took a moment for the computer to boot up, and when he opened Safari, the large Google search bar of his home screen flashed its taunting cursor at him. “Fucker,” he mumbled. The distraction was not enough to empty his mind of the image in his memory, or of the fact his cock was rock hard in his jeans.

Taking in a deep breath, Tom began to type: G-A-Y-space-P-O-R-N. And with each keystroke he wondered if he was gonna like what he found. Was it

Mase driving him to do this, or was it thoughts of having gay sex, or even just the lingerie and what that represented? Maybe it was a combination of all of them. There was only one way to find out. He pressed Enter.

Chapter Five

Wednesday

Mason walked into the precinct begrudgingly. Prior to two weeks ago—before game night—he couldn't remember a time when he'd felt that way. Before then, everything about his job had driven him to get up in the morning and drag his ass in: rain, hail, or shine. He loved his job, loved how it pushed him to put in the best effort he could every day; he even loved the guys he worked with—most of the time. But since that night, and building up steadily each day, it had felt like a gathering storm cloud was shadowing his every step, bringing him down, and he refused to go on that way—something needed to be done about it.

He'd tried, he really had. He'd hoped things would get better, easier, back to how they'd been between him and Tom before that night, but they hadn't. Tom tried his best to act like everything was normal, and Mason was thankful for that, but it was obvious to him, and to some others around them, that nothing about their relationship was normal any more. That sounded so damned dramatic, but it was how it was. In essence: totally fucked up.

More than once, Griff had pulled him aside to offer his support and assistance, and Mason was thankful he had at least one person truly on his side, someone who actually knew him—most of him, at least. Griff wasn't aware of what he was protesting for—which was the irony—but he had been vehement. At first, Griff was angry with Tom, sure that the tension between them stemmed from prejudice and determined to involve himself on Mason's behalf. Mason had talked him down, assured him that wasn't the case; Tom was just coming to terms with the guy he worked so closely with not being the guy he'd thought he was. Griff thought that was bullshit, but he'd let it go. At some point, Griff's support had changed, though. He looked at Mason as if he was sorry for him now, and Mason hated that. He refused to be pitied by anyone. He didn't pity himself or the fucked up situation they were in; it just made him angry, and a little sad. But sad wasn't pity, not in his book. Mason didn't need a white knight; he was too proud and self-resilient for that. Although he had to admit, it was nice to have a friend who actually gave a shit.

What it wasn't nice to have was friends beginning to make deductions he wasn't comfortable with. When Randy had stopped him near the Xerox

machine Tuesday to ask, “What the hell’s goin’ on with you and Tom?” he hadn’t reacted well. He didn’t yell or scream, and even if he was tempted to, he didn’t tell Randy to mind his own fucking business, but he did get pissed. “There’s nothing wrong with me or Tom or anyone else.”

Randy ignored his words, adding a sympathetic shake of his head. “Something’s going on with you two, man. I don’t know what the hell went down, but you’ve gotta fix it. You’ve gotta make it right.”

What the hell do you think we’ve been doing? he thought to himself.

But then Randy delivered the clincher. “People are starting to say stupid things, man, and you don’t need that sort of crap goin’ down.”

“I could care less what people say about me; you should know that.”

“Well, maybe you should... care.” For the first time Mason could recall, Randy had looked uncomfortable. Not much phased the Bostonian, and his reaction concerned Mason, even though he played it down.

“Really? About bullshit rumors?”

“It’s what they’re—Christ, man, it’s just that: bullshit.”

Mason could only guess what would make Randy uncomfortable like that, so he hadn’t bothered to ask what “stupid things” Randy was referring to. Randy was a good guy, even a pretty accepting guy—most of the time—but there was a reason only Griff knew about his sexuality. The idiots around this place had vivid and incredibly juvenile imaginations at times. They’d carry on thinking their bullshit was a joke, until something was said, and some bright spark would make some astounding realization that would really fuck everything up.

“Yep, bullshit, so don’t worry about it. I sure don’t. And don’t worry about me and Tom. Shit happens, man. We’ll get past it,” Mason had pacified, trying to convince himself of the fact as well—as the cloud loomed closer.

Right now, he and Tom were in their black police-issued G-ride, traveling back to the precinct from a block of apartments in Brooklyn where they’d questioned a suspect involved in one of their cases. Things were uncomfortably silent, the crackling, disembodied voice of the NYPD radio dispatcher and the sounds of the engine the only things breaking it. It was the end of a very long and very trying day. The rush-hour traffic made the journey slower than usual,

and all Mason wanted was for it—the day—to be over. But it wasn't over yet. He had a few things to address before he could claim that victory.

He wasn't sure what to say, but he knew it had to be something, especially after what Randy had told him yesterday, and the night of reflection he'd bathed in the evening before.

"Randy cornered me yesterday." He waited for Tom to respond, making allowances for the busy intersection they were turning at.

"Oh yeah?"

Mason continued to look out the front window and watch the heavy crosstown traffic, choosing his moment to continue.

"Yeah." He looked sideways at his partner. "Seems we're attracting some attention."

Tom's eyes closed for a split-second, before quickly resuming their concentration on the street ahead. "Is that right?"

"That's right. He didn't go into details, and he was damned uncomfortable, but seems we're generating some talk and some *unusual* conclusions are coming out of it."

Tom scoffed. "Something more interesting will happen tomorrow, and they'll forget all about us. Besides, there's nothing for them to make 'unusual' conclusions about."

"You're not that naive, Tom." Mason waited again for a reaction. When none came, and Tom's stoic stare continued to watch only the street ahead, he added, "I can assure you everyone would have no problem deducing that things are not right between us."

"Not right? What's not right?" Mason could almost feel the clench of Tom's teeth as he lied through them.

"Jesus Christ, Perkins." Mason felt his ire spike. "You can barely look me in the eye, you hardly say two words in a row at any time, and you think that everything is fine. You are so full of shit!"

Tom didn't reply, but Mason watched as his hands gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles whitening with the force. He waited for Tom to say something in return, but when it didn't come, he scoffed.

"I can't do this anymore! I know you've tried. I really believe you have. But you can't get past what you know about me now, and I can't keep coming into

work every day knowing I'll have to face this tension. I hate it. I'm going home at night feeling drained, yet I've only been at my desk or questioning some worthless kid, and I shouldn't feel like that. Work's not tiring me, you are. I can't stand it anymore. It's not worth it."

"No." Mason hardly heard the word; it was said so softly. Tom was still clenching his jaw and looking straight ahead. It was as if he hadn't spoken at all.

"Yes." Mason leaned forward a bit as he spoke. "The boss should still be there by the time we get back. I'm going in to see O'Farrell, and I'm going to ask to be reassigned. I'll ask for a transfer—"

The car swerved, Tom pulling it toward the curb in a move that was frankly impressive. He threw it into park, yanked the handbrake, and turned the car off, then looked at Mason. "No!"

"You don't get to make that decision." Mason sucked in a deep breath, his chest expanding forward, and his own jaw clenched. "You said you were okay with everything, and you're not, so—"

Tom's body moved forward too. "You can't change partners. I don't want you to—"

"I don't want to do that either." Their faces were about six inches apart in the small space of the car's interior. "Jesus, Tom. If I walk in there and ask O'Farrell to transfer me, I don't only lose my partner, I lose my friend. Do you think that's an easy decision for me?"

"Easy?" Tom spat. "You think anything about this is fucking easy?" Mason felt puffs of warm, sweet-smelling breath touch his face with each of Tom's words. "Nothing is easy. Nothing!" Tom was almost panting now, his frustration tangible. "I can't forget what I saw. Do you get that? I can't fucking forget."

"I'm sorry you saw me like that, but I can't—"

"You don't get it." Tom's eyes closed again, and his body shrank back against his seat. "You don't get it," he repeated but much softer. Then his eyes popped open, his gaze boring into Mason's, and he sat back up straight, grinding out, "I. Can't. Forget." Each word was punctuated with a stop. "It's always there. Every time I close my eyes. Every time I *don't* fucking close my eyes. I can't stop seeing you like that."

“I’ve said I’m fucking sorry!” Mason yelled at him. “I can’t change what happened. If I could, I wou—”

“I wouldn’t want you to change *anything*,” Tom interrupted, his voice coming during a break in the dispatch, and far too loud in the small cabin.

What? Mason puzzled, repeating what Tom had said in his head, his eyes moving to look at the dashboard so as to get some separation.

When Mason looked back after a long moment, he asked, “How can you say that? After how hard it’s been these past weeks between us.” He shook his head in bewilderment. “You said you can’t forget, that it’s always there. You can picture me, Tom. Jesus Christ, I can’t be happy to put you through that. It would be easier if you hadn’t—”

Tom had moved closer again during Mason’s rant. Now only inches separated them. “I said I can’t forget.” Tom’s voice was much lower, not that it needed to be loud seeing as how close they were. “I didn’t say I didn’t like what I was remembering.”

Mason’s heart stopped in his chest. His eyes bugged out, and his mouth dropped open. He felt like a fish as his mouth opened and closed with no words exiting.

Tom continued. “I liked it. I *like* it.” Tom lifted his hand toward Mason’s chest, not touching, just hovering there. Mason could almost feel it—wanted it to be real. “I liked you in those clothes, Mase... looking like that.” Tom finally allowed his hand to settle, the firm pressure on Mason’s pectoral electrifying. Then Tom swept his hand up and along the underside of Mason’s throat, ending with his hand under his jaw. He touched Mason softly, turning his head so that their eyes met. “I’ve never seen anything so sexy in my life.”

“Holy shit,” Mason muttered. “What are you—?”

Tom didn’t allow him to finish his question. Tom’s hand held tight, tilting Mason’s head, and then Tom’s lips were on Mason’s. Tom Perkins was kissing him, Mason Reid, and Mason couldn’t do anything but melt into it. A kiss like that, in circumstances like these, should have been awkward, but it wasn’t. Tom kissed him like he’d done it a hundred times, his lips smooth and soft, his afternoon stubble just scraping the soft skin under Mason’s bottom lip. Mason didn’t breathe; he couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t want that kiss to stop. Finally, Tom pulled back.

They stared at each other for long moments as their breathing calmed. When it seemed like Tom's had, he sat back in the driver's seat and started the car up again. Clicking on the turn signal, he looked over his shoulder into the traffic. The car began to move, but then it stopped, and Tom turned back to Mason.

"Don't go see O'Farrell. Not today, Mase. Please."

As if not expecting an answer now, Tom pulled out onto the busy street, rejoining the flow of cars. Mason, too stunned to say a word, let him concentrate on his driving.

Thursday

He'd walked into the precinct begrudgingly the day before... and today, well today, Mason couldn't explain how he was feeling. He was dog-tired—having no sleep in a twenty-four hour period would do that to a person—and he was confused.

Fourteen hours before, Thomas Randall Perkins, his NYPD partner and friend, had confessed to liking seeing him dressed in red lacy lingerie and thigh-high boots and had kissed him. Mason still couldn't get a handle on how he felt about that. He'd liked the kiss, god had he liked the kiss. Anyone who didn't like a kiss like that was a fool, an unfeeling, probably dead, fool. But the kiss had come from Tom—straight, never shown an interest in anything other than buxom, leggy women, Tom—and Mason wasn't handling it very well.

He'd picked up the phone numerous times to call Tom over the course of the night but had been unable to follow through to hit the send button every time. And while there'd been a part of him silently hoping, the phone had never rung for him either. Not that he'd expected it to. At one point, his fantasies of Tom arriving and pounding on the door at midnight had almost overwhelmed him, but he'd known that's what they were, just fantasies.

It was just past seven thirty a.m., and Mason let the bustle of the already busy police station settle his nerves. This was what he was used to. This was what he loved.

"Hi, Mase," Carol, the desk sergeant, called out to him, adding a big smile to go with her greeting. "How are you on this fine Thursday?"

"Great," he lied but returned the smile as convincingly as he could.

He was stopped to chat and joke numerous times before he could reach his desk. The normality of it settled him further—until he rounded the hallway close to his office, his heartbeat racing steadily faster and faster as he closed the gap on the room. But when he walked through the doorway, Tom was nowhere to be seen. Griff was, though.

“What’s got you spooked?” Griff asked.

Mason narrowed his eyes at his friend as he pulled out his desk chair.

“I saw the look on your face when you walked through that doorway. Things haven’t improved?”

“Umm... Ahh...” he faltered.

“You need to do something about it, man. You can’t go on this way.”

“Yeah. We’re working on it,” he said noncommittally. Griff raised a very unconvinced brow.

Randy and Bobby entering the room saved Mason from the conversation. Randy seemed to assess him, but he didn’t say anything related to their discussion the day before, of which Mason was very glad. The four of them joked around, then Pauly arrived, and finally Tom, just after eight. He was polite to everyone, including Mason, and joined in with the fun until Captain O’Farrell called them into a meeting. To the unobservant it might seem like a normal day, and a return to everything being normal again, but Mason didn’t miss the slightly longer than usual glances from Tom, most of them locked on his mouth, or the one to his groin.

The day progressed oddly, considering he was sent out with Pauly for the first part of it. They did what they’d been assigned to do without any drama, and Pauly didn’t once even mention him and Tom, or any “rumors,” so maybe it was really Randy who had the issue. When they returned to the precinct, Mason finalized the accompanying paperwork then went to the lunchroom to eat. Being with Pauly had worked wonders for him; Pauly spoke so much, and so fast, that he really had not one minute of spare head time to even think about Tom. And he’d appreciated the time off from his thoughts.

But the time off had ended.

Mason first realized someone had entered the storage closet behind him when the door closed, the lock clicking into place. He knew who it was. There was no undeniable scent or electric impulse, but he knew it was Tom. And

knowing who was in the small room with him, knowing the man might be stepping up closer behind him, did things to Mason's body he wasn't sure he was happy with. He felt out of control, and at work, that wasn't acceptable, but he liked it—wanted it.

He finished collecting the black and red ballpoint pens he'd been in there for, letting the tension build, even somehow enjoying it. He wondered which of them was happier by letting Tom wait, Tom or himself.

"Tom," he finally said.

There was a brief delay, and then Tom replied, "You were so sure it was me?"

"Yeah." And that was the absolute truth. Who else would come in and lock the door on him?

Mason took half a dozen slow, deep breaths before Tom spoke again. "Have you had a good morning?"

"Have you?" he said with a little more bite than intended.

"Ouch." Tom took a few steps forward, the sound of them an echo in the room. "To be honest, I wasn't sure I would, but I did. I was pretty fucking nervous coming in here this morning."

Those words slid over him, making Mason less on edge with the realization Tom had struggled with what had happened as well. "It wasn't an easy night for either of us then?"

"No." Footfalls closed the gap between them. "And now?"

"Pauly kept me entertained this morning. Kept the demons away."

Tom chuckled. "I'm sure he did. The guy can't shut up." Two last steps, and Mason could feel Tom's heat behind him. "And those demons? Are they gone yet?"

Mason needed to look at Tom's face. Maybe then he'd know for sure that the tone of Tom's voice matched his words. He turned around. Tom was right there, right in his space. Those blue eyes he'd thought of, dreamed of, so many times recently were right there too. Bright and clear and locked on his. Time stilled. And he stopped thinking of anything other than the man in front of him.

Like he'd done yesterday, Tom reached up a hand and gripped Mason by the jaw. His thumb grazed the skin there, then his bottom lip. "So fucking

handsome.” Not beautiful or even gorgeous, but handsome. Was that a straight man’s way of thinking of other men? He liked it. Liked the masculinity. Mason was interrupted from his thoughts when Tom’s tongue swiped his own lip. Mason focused on the slight shine it left there, felt his body move forward, offering himself, and then, all of a sudden, Tom was kissing him again.

Tom’s kiss made him weak at the knees, and he had to grab onto the shoulders in front of him and hang on or he might fall down. Tom was still gripping his jaw, holding him and directing him the way *he* wanted. Mason really liked that assertiveness. Tom’s other hand found its way to his waist, slipping slowly around until it was spread, fingers wide, on his lower back—and he could feel and make out every digit through his business shirt. Tom pulled him closer, and their bodies met from waist to thigh, not a doubt in his mind what Tom thought about the encounter after he felt Tom’s erection hard and straining against his own. Mason might have whimpered.

Tom pulled back and looked into his eyes, “We can’t do this here,” then he kissed Mason again, his lips aggressive and determined, until he broke away, his next words like breaths against Mason’s cheek. “But god, I want to.”

Mason pulled away this time; he couldn’t sense conflict within Tom, and all he could see was acceptance in his expressive blue eyes. Could it be that easy? “It feels like you want to, but... shit, Tom, do you really? Are you sure? This is huge.”

Tom pushed his hand higher on Mason’s face, sliding a thumb across the cheekbone he’d just whispered against. His eyes softened as they looked at him with an almost adoration. Mason shivered. “I can’t stop thinking about you. And after yesterday, and now today—I don’t want to.”

Mason knew what he meant, but he teased him anyway, as was his way, trying to lighten the moment. “You don’t want to kiss me?”

Tom laughed, the sound breaking the serious tension between them. “Come ’ere.” And he kissed him again, sliding his tongue deep into Mason’s mouth. When they broke away one final time, Tom added, his tone serious, “I want to see you tonight.”

Mason didn’t feel like playing games anymore either. “Okay.”

Tom seemed to appreciate that. “Can I come to your house?”

“Yes.” Wanting more of that assertiveness, he asked, “Any special instructions?” He was happy for Tom to lead—it seemed the safer thing anyway.

Tom dragged the hand still resting on Mason's hip higher, dipping his fingers under the waistband of his dress pants. When his fingers met the fabric of Mason's underwear, his breath hitched. "Holy fucking shit!" he exclaimed, and jerked back to study Mason's face. He swallowed hard, his eyes wide in surprise. "You wear them... here?"

Mason lifted his lips in a smile. "I wear them whenever I feel like it."

"Is it the same ones?"

"The red ones?" Tom nodded frantically. "No."

Tom swallowed again and seemed to struggle to make words. "You have more than one?"

Mason's grin teased. "I have many pairs. In all sorts of colors."

"*Holy shit!*" The emphasis was there even if the words were said so low Mason hardly heard them. "Wear them tonight." It was a command, albeit a quiet one.

Mason screwed his face up a bit. "I've had them on all day."

"Not these. The red ones. The ones you wore that night... and the boots."

"That's a rather special outfit."

Again, Tom's fingers brushed against the lace below his dress pants. "It sure is. Will you wear them for me?"

Mason knew he had to check... to make sure. "Tom. This is serious, if we do this, there's no going back." Tom's eyes didn't waver from his. "Is this really what you want?"

He replied with one word. "Yes."

Mason kissed Tom this time. They needed to be quick, but honestly, if someone tried to get in at this very moment, caring about it was the last thing on his mind.

When the kiss ended, Tom withdrew his hand and took two steps back. The loss of Tom's hands touching him pained Mason, but the time for jokes was over. This had to be all on Tom.

"I'll be at your place at eight sharp. I'll let myself in—just like I did that night—I'll come up to your bedroom, and when I see you in those red panties,

when I think about how long your legs are and how tight your ass is, I won't stop doing exactly what I wanted to do that first time."

And with that he turned on his heel, unlocked the door, and left the room, leaving a very horny and very amazed Mason Reid behind to watch him leave. Mason hoped that was the first and last time Tom would ever walk away from him when he was so aroused.

Chapter Six

Mase stood in front of an armoire in his bedroom. Tom didn't even recall the antique piece of furniture from last time, but it was in the same place Mase had stood that night. He was looking into a mirror, the same mirror he'd probably stood in front of and looked in a million times—one day he'd ask him about that—the same mirror he must have been preening into the night Tom discovered his secrets. This time Tom didn't stop his admiration at Mase's legs or his ass or even his shoulders. He allowed himself to appreciate everything. The view from the front was just as good as, if not better than, the one from behind. Even though Mase had his back to him, the mirror did the job of voyeur, making the experience even better, because he got to see both sides at once.

"Jesus Christ, you look good."

Mase knew he was there. That was obvious from his lack of reaction. The music was playing again tonight, classical too, but not loud enough to burst his eardrums. Mase smiled but didn't turn around.

"You came."

Hell would have frozen over before anything could stop him. Mase likely didn't need to know that right now. "Yes."

"I'm glad."

"Yeah, me too." Mase began to turn around. "Stop," Tom insisted, halting Mase in his spot. "Stay like that. Please."

Mase didn't reply, an inch of a smile seen through the mirror assured Tom that his request was okay.

Tom didn't want to waste time. His lust was pulling him like a magnet toward Mase, but he resisted. The thing was, he didn't know how long he could do it, resist. Or whether he wanted to. "Can I come in?" He was still standing against the doorframe.

"Yes." The tone was subordinate, and god, that turned Tom on.

He stepped cautiously toward the mirror, watching Mase's face for any sign that his consent had changed. He received none. Mase watched him intently through the mirror, even via that detached medium, evidence of Mase's lust

was obvious, assuring him, prompting Tom to keep walking. It felt like a hundred steps, when in reality it was no more than ten, but Tom took each as if he was turning the page of an amazing book, savoring each new scene that would finally lead him to the excitement. At last, he took his final step.

Up close, the man in front of him was magnificent: long, lean, perfectly sculptured. They were very close to the same height when in normal—Tom had to stop himself from thinking that—in “day” shoes, Tom was half an inch or so taller. With Mase in the heels, he seemed to tower above him; even if Tom knew that wasn’t the case. Not that it mattered, it didn’t lessen the feeling of subtle control he felt right now.

Tom stood behind Mase, watching him in the mirror over his shoulder. He might be wearing lingerie, but he didn’t seem feminine to Tom. He didn’t smell it either. Tom could still make out the faint hint of Mase’s expensive cologne, and the unique scent of Mase. He let his eyes move up and down Mase’s body. He was so toned. How many times had they hit the gym together? Tom had never even looked twice, let alone suspected this other side of Mase. His chest was contoured without being overly muscled, a nice lineation of his pecs showing the effort Mase put in, without being overdone. He slid his arm around Mase’s waist, that first contact causing a quick breath to leave Mase’s lips. Tom placed his hand over Mase’s chest, felt it move with each breath, was fascinated, but he’d finished with that part of Mase’s body, was eager to move on. His hand slipped lower, and he reveled in the flat, hard abdomen beneath his hand. Mase’s abs contracted as he moved over them, another hitch of breath the one reason he looked back up to meet Mase’s eyes. They were heavy and lust-filled.

He resisted looking back in the mirror, wasn’t ready to look lower. Not because the thought of what was inside Mase’s underwear was confronting, but because Mase was a prize, and that part of him wasn’t his yet.

Tom moved in close to Mase’s back, his hand still resting on Mase’s stomach. He let the fingers of his other hand trace up the side of Mase’s thigh. He moved them slowly, lingering on the skin between each break in the fabric of the stockings that peeked above the boots, sometimes rubbing the fine netting through his fingertips as he passed. His fingers still moving, he leaned in and kissed the taut muscle of the shoulder closest to his mouth, pulling back the slightest fraction and then running his tongue across it. Mase’s entire body quivered, and then he moaned... the sound low, aroused. When his hand

reached the satiny edge of the panties, Tom couldn't help but ghost his hand over the red silk. It was so soft, utterly sexy, and even knowing the panties were red lacy lingerie, and that Mase was wearing them, nothing about Mase was at all feminine. What he really noted was how hard Mase's buttock was underneath. He'd never felt anything like it; it was an absolute juxtaposition. When his fingers reached the edge again, he lifted it. It pulled away easily, allowing him the freedom to slide his fingers up under the fabric onto the soft, warm flesh of Mase's ass. He leaned his forehead against the shoulder he'd just kissed as he played with the skin under his hand, his entire palm and fingers now spread wide. A fine dusting of hair covered the skin of Mase's ass cheek. The sparse hairs tickled his palm, fascinating him—so much like his own, but different. Women didn't have hair like that—well, none he'd ever been with. He could still feel that silky fabric, now brushing the top of his hand, and it too fascinated him, reminded him how Mase looked right now dressed in this lingerie. He continued to explore, and his thumb grazed the ridge of the cleft separating Mase's ass cheeks, but he didn't delve any further, cautious, waiting.

"I might be wearing these clothes," Mase said, his voice tight, "but I'm *not* a woman," as if reading Tom's mind. He pushed his hips back, his ass pressing against Tom's hand. "Don't treat me like one. You don't need to be gentle with me."

Had he been? He didn't think so. He just wanted to savor every moment. Tom met his eyes in the mirror again. "I'm sorry, I..."

"Tom. I'm serious," Mase insisted. "Touch me like you mean it, for fuck's sake. Please." His courtesy more a command than a request, Mase punctuated the word with another push of his ass.

Tom reacted to Mase's words. "Jesus Christ." He squeezed the flesh under his hand hard, the touch of his thumb, which had been so delicate before, moved to insistent, running along the warmer valley of flesh. Rather than turn him off, the heated hollow turned him on. He liked anal sex, always had. Mostly, it was more a fascination, because for many women, it was a no-go zone—at least it had been for the casual encounters his experience comprised. Of his two serious girlfriends, only one had enjoyed it, and that had been only sometimes, and only after he'd "softened" her up with a nice dinner and good wine, and even then he'd had to work hard to get it. But Mase, he seemed so eager—it didn't seem like working hard for anything would be the case tonight.

"You really like the thought of me touching you here?" He edged his thumb a bit lower. Mase sucked in a breath.

“Like?” Mase scoffed. “I fucking love it!” Mase’s hand reached up behind him and pushed his fingers into Tom’s hair, gripping it tight, and pulling his lips back down onto Mase’s shoulder. There was nothing gentle about it either; the grip hurt, reminding him of the power of those hands. “Want it.”

He did. That was glaringly obvious. And Tom wanted it too. Damn, he wanted it.

Tom moved his whole hand farther down, torturously slowly, and even while he let his lips move over the smooth skin of Mase’s shoulder, he watched Mase’s face for a reaction. Mase’s eyes closed, and he sucked in a breath, holding it, leaving his lips parted on the exhale. *Damned hot!* Tom squeezed again, his thumb moving just a bit lower. With each fraction of an inch he descended, Mase seemed to become more impatient. “You *really* want this.”

Mase sighed. “So much.” He took another staggered breath, his fingers gripping tighter in Tom’s hair at that moment. “And for so long.”

Tom didn’t need any more encouragement. He dragged his thumb with purpose, the pad quickly coming upon the puckered skin of Mase’s opening. He hovered there, applying pressure, rotating in tiny circles. With no lubricant, he dare not try to push in, but he could tease, and he did, his own cock hard as a rock over the reactions of the man in front of him.

Mase was wanton, his body betraying every aroused breath. Tom couldn’t remember ever having such a responsive lover, and this was only the beginning. What would Mase be like when he really touched him? As he continued to apply pressure on Mase’s most intimate of places, he looked at Mase’s front reflected in the mirror: his chest, nipples, stomach, cock... Oh god, his cock. Tom finally locked eyes on the very obvious erection inside those panties, leaving nothing to the imagination. He wanted to touch it, maybe even—That thought stopped him. He loved touching his own cock, so he was fine to go down that road, and he loved oral sex—giving and receiving—it didn’t seem so different to consider sucking a guy as opposed to going down on a woman. Would it be so different? Bother him? No, he didn’t think so; his concern more about worrying whether he’d be any good. He’d put plenty of thought into this over the last couple of weeks, and he was ready... eager. He wanted it.

“Tom, oh god, so good.” Mase’s voice surprised him from his thoughts. “More. Need—I need more.”

More? Tom stilled his hand but didn’t remove it. He moved back a bit, and Mase began to turn his body. “What do you want?” he asked, their eyes

meeting face on. In that moment, he would give Mase almost anything. Mase's dark eyes were heavy, the pupils dilated, his stare filled with lust.

"I—I—" He seemed unsure of what to say. "God, anything. Everything."

Mase watched him, waited for Tom to respond. When he didn't, Mase's eyes closed, his expression unsure. Tom wasn't having that. He removed his hand from Mase's ass, only allowing a minimal slump of Mase's shoulders before he grabbed them and pulled Mase around to face him. Mase's eyes opened, and Tom gave him only a split-second to realize what was happening before he kissed him.

Kissing Mase's lips lit a fire under him. He recalled the kiss in the storeroom earlier today, and how afterwards, he couldn't recall ever having had another like it. And this was better—a hundred times better. He burned for the man in front of him, felt consumed by him. Tom held on tight, his hands gripping Mase's shoulders. They fell back against the armoire, and Mase shuddered. Tom imagined that it was because of the mirror's cold glass on Mase's bare skin. But Mase didn't slow in his attack on Tom's lips, so Tom wasn't going to, either. When the need to breathe finally made him break away, he needed to look at Mase. He stepped back and observed.

Mase was panting for breath, his cock still steel-hard and pushing at the top of the panties in an effort to escape. His hips swayed ever so slightly, and Tom wondered whether it was the music or if it was him Mase was moving for.

"You are *so* sexy." Even though he directed the words toward Mase, it was himself he was reminding. But did he need that reminder? Hell no. He was right here, in every way. "So damned sexy."

The words seemed to buoy Mase, and he stepped away from the armoire and came toward Tom. He could handle those heels—expertly—and Tom took steps backwards to keep Mase walking. *Clack, clack, clack*. The sound resonated in his head as the steps he'd heard from downstairs two and a half weeks ago. Definitely not a woman. He was surprised when his legs hit the bed, because he hadn't been expecting it, but he held his ground and kept standing upright.

"*You're so sexy*," Mase parroted. "I'm wondering what you're gonna do with me. Or what I'm gonna do with you." Mase took the final step and pushed Tom back. With the strength in Mase's arms in that push, there was nothing he could do but fall on the bed. He shuffled back, and Mase crawled over the top

of him. "What do you want me to do... Tom?" The words came out like a breathy sigh—it was the first time Mase had seemed somewhat feminine; no, not feminine, it was a slightly submissive edge to his voice, and hell if he didn't like it.

"You want me to tell you what to do?"

There was no delay. "Yes."

Yes. Interesting. But fucking intimidating.

"But I'm new to this, Mase. You have experience."

Mase chortled. "You're not a child, Tom, and you're far from inexperienced. You know what to do and what you want." He kneeled up on his shins and moved his hands to the buttons of Tom's oxford. "And I think you've been studying." He said no more while he undid all of the buttons, pushing the sides away to reveal Tom's chest. He then placed both hands flat over it, adding pressure with his palms over Tom's nipples as he leaned forward. "Did you like watching boys together?" No one would ever accuse Mason Reid of being stupid.

"What boys?"

"The ones on your computer screen with the big cocks who've been tutoring you in the joys of sex between men." His tongue met Tom's sternum. "You must have liked it—you're here right now."

"You mean porn."

"Of course."

"Yeah, I've been watching some porn." He had, quite a bit of it, and he'd learned a lot for sure, but none of the guys on his computer screen were Mase. And none of them had affected him like Mase did. "Those guys really get into it, don't they?" Mase paused, and Tom noticed the smile in Mase's eyes when he looked up to meet his, before Mase continued to run his tongue over Tom's over-sensitive skin again. "But I couldn't find any with this..." Tom reached out to run a finger along the waistline of the panties.

"You don't need it. I'm right here." Mase's tongue continued across to Tom's nipple once he'd moved his hand.

And that led to one of his main questions. He'd been the one to insist Mase wear this tonight. "Do you always wear—" He pinched at the silk. "—this when you're with someone?"

Mase's immediate shake of his head came before his words. "No. I don't." Tom wasn't sure if that surprised him or not.

"But you're happy to wear it for me?"

Mase sat up a bit straighter, his eyes now a bit more intense. "I wear it because I want to wear it. You asked me to, and I'm happy to please you. I even *want* to please you, but in the end, I only do it to please myself."

He thought about that for a moment.

"I'm sorry if that offends you," Mase added.

"No. No, not at all." And it didn't. What it did do was bring home exactly who was kneeling above him. That surety of attitude—that was the Mase he knew. This—he quickly scanned every visible inch of the man—was like an added bonus; at least, that was how he thought now. How he'd been thinking for two weeks, if he was honest. "That's one thing you have never done—offend me."

"I don't know that I believe that. You seemed rather offended last time."

"Not over you." And he knew without a doubt that was the truth.

Mase's smile was wide and lit up his face, but it only lasted a heartbeat before happiness blended with lust, and Mase's eyes narrowed. Tom felt like prey, about to be consumed, and he reveled in it as Mase nipped and sucked at the bare skin of his chest and stomach. Those lips felt amazing, and he was happy to let Mase continue to move lower, but he remembered that Mase wanted him in control.

"Mason. Undo my jeans, and touch me."

Mase didn't look up at him, a hardly recognizable pause of his lips on Tom's skin the only sign he'd heard. Nor did he assent. His lips resumed their exploration of his flesh. Mase dipped his tongue into Tom's navel. A shiver erupted over his skin, and he moaned low. Mase nipped at the sensitive nerve-laden edge of it, almost like a distraction, continuing to do so. Tom had never realized the pleasure that could be received by such a small, innocuous part of the human body, and he pushed his hips up, seeking more attention from Mase's mouth. It was when Mase began to unbutton the fly of his jeans, he realized it had been a distraction—intentional or not—it had made him forget what he instructed. This was going to be a very long night.

Mason's fingers worked the fly of Tom's jeans quickly. He was all for teasing Tom and showing him how good sex could be between them, but he wanted more as well. He was straining, almost ready to bust out from his panties, and needed more contact between them.

When Tom told him to undo his jeans and touch him, Mason had fallen into the command. He craved it, needed the structure. He led everything else in his life, had for so long, and this was the one time he allowed himself to bend to someone else's will. He didn't get off on humiliation, or pain for that matter, but commands and having someone lead him on the journey of intimacy was amazing—especially when he was dressed like this.

The buttons now undone, Mason sat back on his haunches to see what he'd revealed. He'd felt Tom's erection under clothing already, but was unprepared for how perfect it looked: long, thick, uncut. He sucked in a breath.

"Like what you see?"

He'd been told to touch Tom, so Mason moved his hand and closed his fingers around the long velvety length. "I do." He slid his palm lower, his thumb dragging over the frenulum, and Tom hissed. "Perfect." He continued to masturbate Tom, alternating his eyes between watching what he was doing and looking at Tom's face. Tom watched him with rapt attention, his breathing continuing to accelerate as he became more aroused. Pearly pre-cum formed a long thread to Tom's stomach, and Mason collected it on a fingertip before leaning forward, not letting go of Tom's cock as he directed the fingertip toward his mouth. He stuck out his tongue and licked the pre-cum from his finger, then eyes locked with Tom's, pulled Tom's cock more vertical and sucked the tip into his mouth.

"Holy Jesus!" Tom gasped.

Mason smiled around him and sank his mouth lower.

"Fuck, fuck," Tom chanted. "Oh god, yeah. That's it. More."

Mason gave him more, a practiced blend of everything he knew felt good. And continued to give him more until Tom was begging him to stop, then demanding that he move away and stand in the middle of the room.

On unsteady feet, he did as he was told, but he couldn't resist palming his own leaking dick through his panties, the fabric wet under his hand.

"Fuck," he heard again.

Tom was still on the bed, slow to move, but doing so. When he finally sat up and pulled off his shirt, it was Mase's turn to gasp. Tom's body was broader and more defined than his own, his skin pale ivory. In that seated position, his abs were tight, holding him upright, each ridge visible, and Mase wanted to attack them again, but he held fast. Tom pushed off the bed, quickly discarding his jeans and socks as he took the few steps between them.

Mason leaned down and reached for his boots, ready to remove them too.

"No."

He remained bent over but looked toward the voice.

"Leave them. Please."

Mason straightened again, relaxing his posture. "Okay."

"I—" Tom trailed his fingers across Mason's chest, leading them up along his throat, then dragging one along Mason's very dry bottom lip, the skin catching and pulling with the movement, causing his tongue to swipe out and wet both lip and fingertip. Tom pushed it inside his mouth. "Let me," he said as Mason sucked in his finger.

That worked for Mason. And he nodded his head once, slowly.

Tom leaned over and lifted Mason's leg at the calf. Mason placed a hand on his shoulder for support. He drew down the zipper on the inside leg, allowing the soft faux leather to fall away and expose the stocking underneath. The long boot came off easily, much to Mason's relief. Tom repeated the process on the other leg, but when the shoe was off, he didn't let go of the leg, instead, he ran a hand over Mason's calf and foot before he placed it reverently back on solid ground.

Tom straightened back up, then leaned in and kissed him, slower this time, with more purpose, his hands looping behind his back and touching him all over. Tom finally broke the kiss, moving his lips to mirror his hands, both making Mase feel as if they were touching every part of his body at once. Tom kissed a nipple and pinched its mate, then a hand was in Mase's hair, then running down his side. Tom dedicated long minutes to his torso and face, hand only moving as far down as his panty line. Finally he paused, his mouth moving millimeters away from the skin of his clavicle, Tom's hot breath the only thing touching him, and Tom was gripping the silk fabric of Mase's underwear in tight fists. "Have the overwhelming urge to rip these off you."

“Do it.” He understood that kind of desire, was happy it was there for him, and he honestly didn’t care about the panties. “I want you to.”

“No.” Tom shook his head. “I don’t want them destroyed.” Tom laid a chaste kiss on Mason’s chest then looked into his eyes. “But I do want to take them off, now. I want to see all of you.”

“Please.”

Tom began to lower the panties, first over the swell of Mason’s ass, and then carefully at the front, pulling them out and down. He didn’t look at what he was doing, kept their eyes locked. The silk moved easily down his legs, but then it caught on the edge of the stockings. This caused Tom to look down. His breath hitched at what he saw, and Mason doubted the panties, or the stockings were the cause.

“Fucking incredible.”

“Like what you see?” he repeated Tom’s exact phrase.

“You have no idea.”

“Don’t know about that.”

“No, really. You didn’t see what I’m seeing when you first saw me. Your cock—*fuck*—and the red of the panties, the stockings. Jesus Christ, Mase.”

“You can rip them off.”

Tom’s whole body vibrated with the shake of his head. “No. But I’m leaving the stockings.” He pulled the panties down lower. “Is that okay?”

“You’re running the show.”

Tom scoffed out a sound halfway between a laugh and a huff. “That’s right. I am.” Then he dropped to his knees.

Tom didn’t take Mason in his mouth, and to be honest, Mason would have been surprised if he had. But he pushed his nose into the join of his leg and hip and breathed deep. The panties long gone, Tom’s hands slid up his legs along the stockings, rubbing up and down, almost creating heat. He sat back and studied Mason’s erection right in front of his face, “I’m not sure why, but I didn’t think you’d be cut,” tentatively reaching up a hand to touch him. Mason sucked in an involuntary breath at the contact. “Not that I’d thought about your cock at all before.”

“I hope you still like it.”

“Like it?” Tom applied more pressure with his thumb. “It’s perfect.” He wrapped his hand more firmly and stroked long and slow, over and over, alternately watching what his hand was doing and looking up to meet Mason’s eyes. At one point, when their gaze held for longer than it had before, desire bright and obvious in Tom’s eyes, his hand stuttered to a stop. He stood up, not letting go of Mason’s cock, and kissed Mason again, the kiss increasing in passion until Tom dropped his hand and pulled Mason in tight to his body, grinding their groins together. For a long time.

Mason was inordinately aroused, almost ready to take command of the situation. He loved these kisses, but was Tom stalling? Tom answered that unasked question when he spun them around and backed Mason toward the bed.

“I need you. Can’t wait... don’t want to wait any longer.” Maybe he’d needed those extra moments to convince himself and be sure, but the heated look in Tom’s eyes caused Mason to grin. Happy they were finally moving forward again, Mason shuffled onto the middle of the mattress. Tom’s eyes darted to the side table, and guessing where his thoughts had gone, Mason lifted the pillow behind him.

“Something I prepared a little earlier.”

Tom grinned and crawled over him. “You’re a good boy.”

“I am.” Mason ran a single finger teasingly between Tom’s pecs. “Now I want you to hurry up and use them.”

And so it began in earnest.

“Turn over. Get on your hands and knees.”

Mason did as he was told, posturing his ass into Tom’s face. He reached out and grabbed the lube, passing it back to Tom, then placed a condom closer to them on the sheet.

Tom’s hands were on his buttocks, kneading them firmly and pulling them apart. Tom’s thumb dragged down the crease between them, stopping at his entrance with more insistence than before, and applying delicious pressure. He groaned deep and low at the intrusion, begging for more with a push of his body. Mason felt the other hand move away then heard the snick of the tube of lubricant. Heard the airy squelch as the gel was squeezed out. Felt it drip onto his skin above Tom’s thumb, the sensation of it even more arousing. Tom

began to spread the gel over his opening, working it in slowly but surely. They hadn't discussed it, but Mason thought Tom might have done this before. He wasn't going to think any more about it now, but Tom's confidence was comforting. Mason loved how Tom worked the muscle, using his thumb with pressure to move around the edge, pushing in a little deeper as it loosened. His other hand now rubbed Mason's back, from his ass all the way up, and into, his hair.

"So hot... God, Mase, I want you."

Mason couldn't reply. It felt too good. Tom's finger was now in deep, fucking him with much more purpose. He slowed, withdrew, and then pushed in another. Mason loving the burn that was a mix of pleasure and pain.

"More," he managed. "Faster."

Tom ramped up the speed to mirror what he'd been doing with one finger. With two he could go deeper, and the graze of Tom's fingers over Mason's prostate had Mason canting his hips to chase every bit of sensation. It was too good, and if Tom didn't get inside him soon, it would all be over. Mason pulled forward, and Tom's fingers left his body. He looked over his shoulder, directing his eyes on Tom. "Now."

Tom understood and scrambled for the condom, ripping it open. Sheathed, he got in close behind Mason. "I don't want to hurt you. I'll go slow."

"You won't. Just take it easy, not slow. You'll know."

Mason felt Tom press against him, but then he moved back. "Not like this. I want to see you."

Tom didn't even have to ask the question. Mason turned over onto his back and spread his legs, lifting one to place on Tom's shoulder when he moved in between them. Tom slid a hand up the leg from thigh to calf, closing his eyes and leaning his cheek against the stocking-covered skin, then he kissed it. *Wow*. But Tom gave Mason no further time to become sentimental; he quickly took himself in hand and lined up, then eyes locked with Mason's, he pushed in steadily, all the way.

Mason felt it down to his toes. Tom pulled out and pushed in slowly again, then did it again. Mason's body quickly adjusted for him, and then he began returning the thrusts from the bottom, moving his hips to meet each one. Perfect pressure rubbed over his gland, rocketing him toward what he could only imagine was going to be an amazing orgasm.

“Fuck,” Tom said, his eyes closing momentarily then popping open again. “Fuck.”

Mason understood Tom’s incoherence. He wasn’t sure he could produce more than that either; the sighs and moans that were escaping his mouth would have to suffice.

Tom paused and lowered Mason’s leg gently, then readjusted his position, thrusting a few more times before he took Mason’s cock in his hand. Mason wasn’t sure he wanted that. There were too many sensations, and he was too close to coming, but it felt fucking amazing.

Still, Tom flicked his attention between Mason’s face and the cock in his hand. He looked awed.

“Kiss me,” Mason said, Tom’s eyes settling on his. “Please kiss me.”

Tom let go and leaned forward, and Mason wrapped his legs around Tom’s waist as their lips met. The kiss stumbled; it was a mix of tongues and lips and teeth all working against the other, but utterly perfect. At one point, Tom bit lightly on his chin, and held there, as he continued to thrust deep. With no hand on his dick, Mason had fallen away from the edge, and that suited him fine—he wanted this to last and last. But he could tell Tom was close; his thrusts and movements were getting erratic.

“Gonna come,” Tom said against his mouth. “Too good.”

“Come. Let me feel you.” He wanted to feel Tom break apart in his arms, to totally lose himself, and then he’d worry about his own orgasm.

Tom pushed his face into the hollow of Mason’s throat and came. His whole body quaked, and Mason could feel every inch of it shuddering against him, inside him. The eroticism of Tom’s orgasm pushed Mason closer, but it wasn’t enough to take him along on the ride. Instead, he gripped Tom’s hair as he rode through his high. Tom collapsed on top of him, panting, and then he looked into Mason’s eyes, understanding immediately sparking. He reached down to hold the condom as he withdrew from Mason’s body, quickly pulling it off his dick, tying it, and throwing it on the floor. “Your turn.”

Tom spat saliva into his hand and gripped Mason’s cock tight, quickly beginning to jack him. He also bent his head toward the closest nipple and laved it with his tongue. Mason threaded his hand into the curls at Tom’s nape. He was tempted to pull Tom’s head to his mouth, but he didn’t. Tom needed to see him come.

“Harder,” Mason requested, and Tom tightened his grip. “Faster... so close.” Tom ramped up the speed as well, his eyes locked on what he was doing the whole time now. Mason felt his orgasm start low and build like a wildfire in his body. There was no stopping it. “Coming... Oh god, coming.”

“Yes. Come for me, Mase.” Mason began to shoot. Long thick bursts that showered his stomach in blobs. “Hell yeah!” Tom exclaimed sounding awed. And so he should be. Mason couldn’t recall when he last came that hard, if ever.

Mason slumped back against the mattress. He was shattered, totally boneless. Tom had let go of his cock and was now running his finger through the warm evidence of his release, trailing it in long sticky lines all over his skin.

When he could make a sound, he chuckled. “Are you done making a mess yet?”

Tom huffed. “You made the mess. I’m just cleaning it up.”

That caused a lump to form in Mason’s throat as he considered another way Tom could do that, but that was a game for another day, maybe one he’d have to play first. That’s if the chance ever presented itself again. “Look at me.”

Tom’s finger stopped moving, and he realigned his body to look up at Mason’s face.

“That was amazing.” He brushed his hand across Tom’s cheek. “Really amazing.”

Tom smiled, and it seemed genuine, without any hint of a scared rabbit making an appearance. “It was. *You’re* amazing, Mase.”

Well, damn, he thought. As long as it wasn’t only the post-sex glow talking.

“Well, we have that in common.” Tom’s skin pinked. “But seriously, are you okay?”

Tom moved up and kissed Mason chastely on the mouth. “I’m really okay. In fact, I’m fucking *great*.” And he kissed him again, and this time there was nothing chaste about it.

The End

Author Bio

Bette Browne is wife to an extremely understanding husband and mother to two very tolerant children. In her mind they are the most accepting family in the world, allowing her the freedom to indulge her passion for fiction, whether it is reading or writing it.

She enjoys traditional male/female romances, but male/male is her passion. In her mind nothing is more erotic than two (or more) beautiful men finding love together.

For Bette, the fight for tolerance in all its guises is an important one, and hopefully her contribution, even if it is only in the form of the occasional love story, is one she will continue to happily find the time for.

Bette's story, Dirty Martini, is published by Bottom Drawer Publications, and her contribution, The Jacobite, in the Not Quite Shakespeare Anthology is published by Dreamspinner Press.

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EXTREME HOMECOMING

By Jennah Scott

Photo Description

The prompt picture for eXtreme Homecoming is a single person, black and white photo. The man—who turns out to be Hunter—is sitting down, looking at the camera like he's deep in thought. He's holding his bike helmet to the top of his head and wearing his riding glove. Tattoos cover three-quarters of the one arm showing and his elbow is propped on his knee. To me this picture was one of contemplation.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I don't talk about my past. Ever. My tattoos are all the reminder I'll ever need. "Don't look back. Don't back down." That motto's gotten me to where I am today. I dragged myself out of the gutter and hell itself to be able to live the dream life as one of the top Xtreme Sports athletes in the world. So what if I'm a bit of an adrenalin junkie. I've got girls screaming my name and throwing themselves at me every chance they get. Too bad that'll never be what turns my crank. Any dream I could have had, of a happy future with that one person who might just be the other half of your soul, was destroyed long ago. Well fuck it all anyway! Whoever said you could have your cake and eat it too was a goddamned liar. Lord knows you can't be gay in this world, not at this level. Besides without him it's not like there's any point.

****I love reformed bad boys, more than a little snark, and a HEA is a must. While I love the paranormal world as well, this guy just called to me, granted if someone wants to take a swing at throwing that in there with the kitchen sink I'm not going to complain. ;)*

Sincerely,

Shelby

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: new adult, military men, motocross, oral sex, established couple, homecoming, sports, reunited, tattoos

Word Count: 7,881

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Author's Note

This is my first Don't Read in the Closet event, and I'd like to take a quick second to thank a few people. First, to the volunteers of the Love's Landscape event, thank you for your time and dedication. You've made it easy as an author to participate and enjoy the event. Shelby: thank you for the great picture and prompt. I've wanted to write a sports-themed story and your picture and prompt gave me the chance. I couldn't have finished this story without my betas: Amy, Lori, and Valerie. Lastly, thank you Andrea and Pamela for helping name Hunter and Bastian! I hope you all enjoy Hunter and Bastian's story; it was a lot of fun to write.

EXTREME HOMECOMING

By Jennah Scott

Chapter One

In less than one minute, I will mark another item off my bucket list.

“Thirty seconds. You ready?” My skydiving instructor checks my harness one last time. His fingers run across my waist, and my muscles tense. It’s been too damn long since another man has touched me—intimately.

Women. All. The. Damn. Time. Unfortunately for me, it’s not their touch I want.

“Ten.” The countdown starts. “Nine.”

“Don’t look back. Don’t look down,” I whisper the mantra written on my forearm.

“Five. Four.”

I place my hand over my heart. It’s the only spot I haven’t inked. Well, one of the few. But this blank canvas is blank for a reason. It’s a reminder. Of him. Of love lost.

As my instructor gets to one, I shake my head. This is not about *him*. This is me. I smile. My heart pounds.

“Go. Go. Go,” Todd shouts.

I dive. Gravity takes over.

“Fuck yeah!” I shout into the open air.

This is the most freeing, exhilarating experience. Like landing a double backflip for the first time. I fist-punch the sky. I can’t help it.

My chute deploys and pulls me up. *Unfuckingbelievable!* I did it.

Too soon my feet hit solid ground. The parachute follows behind, and my friends rush toward me. Fists are pumping. A couple of them yell questions at me. I’m floating. The adrenalin high is insane. I want to go back up—higher this time—and do it all over again.

But I can’t. Because tomorrow I have to be at the Staple Center for first-round practice. The joys of riding motocross professionally, I suppose. I love my job, but every once in a while I enjoy getting away from reality for a short time.

“Damn, man. How do you feel after that?” Brian asks me.

“Better than pullin’ a No-Handed Superman. I can promise you that. You’ll have to come with me next time.”

“Hell yeah. Would have been there this time, if the doc hadn’t sidelined me after the last crash.” Brian laughs, punches me in the shoulder, and heads back to the runway where I’m sure his fiancée is waiting for him.

Lucky bastard. He and Shanna have been together for a few years. None of us can figure out why they haven’t tied the knot already.

I want what Brian has. Can’t have it though. Even if being gay was fine in this industry, the man I love—loved—left.

As I start gathering my gear, my thoughts wander back to that night. The night before everything went to hell. The night before he...

No. I won’t think about *him*. It hasn’t done me any good the last few years. No reason to think anything will change now.

“Hunter.” Clint, another member of Metal Riot, stands in front of me. He’s wearing a smirk, and I know he’s caught me zoning out.

“What do you want?” I ask.

He comes to my side and helps me get everything. My instructor is making his way over as well.

Clint is the only one who knows my preferences. Mostly because he prefers men too. Although, most of the time, I’m pretty sure he’ll fuck anyone who’s interested. Despite his incessant need to get laid, the asshole is a maniac on the back of a bike, so we keep him around.

“The crew elected me to drive our sorry butts around tonight. Figured I’d come try and talk you into partying with us. I don’t want to be the only sober lameass.”

“Great jump, Hunter.” Todd shakes my hand. “You get a few more solid jumps in like that, and I’ll take ya higher.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll call and schedule some time.”

Todd takes my gear and leaves me with Clint. I stare at my instructor’s tight rear end and shiver at the memory of his fingers brushing over my waist. Fuck. I need to get laid... quick. Between the memories and my constant state of

horniness, I'll be sure to screw up this weekend if I don't relieve some pressure. That's not a risk I can afford. Not when I'm so close to the top. This stop is our last one before the X Games. I will win Freestyle Moto. I have to. The gold is mine.

Don't look back. Don't back down. It's the key to my success.

"So you in or am I alone?"

I forget about Clint being there until he speaks again. I turn to face him. "Alone, my ass. The whole crew is going. Impossible to be alone, man."

"And I'm staying sober. Alone. These pussies," Clint waves to the parking lot, "are going to make complete fools of themselves. By the end of the night, it'll be a miracle if none of them land some time in the tank."

I laugh. He's right. If I were a good friend... nah, Clint wouldn't return the favor, even if I do help him out tonight.

"What's in it for me?"

We walk toward the main building. I need to shower and change if I'm going out tonight, which I will. But I've got to make him sweat for a while.

"Always about you," he mumbles. "Fine. You come along and keep me company and dinner's on me."

"Hmm. Babysitting you and them. Worth more than one dinner. Better make it a week."

"You eat like a damn elephant." Clint is such a whiny bastard.

"And I know you've got more money than you know what to do with, trust fund baby." When I elbow him in the ribs, he grunts and flinches. *Shit*. I must have hit him where he fell on top of his bike a week before. I start to apologize, but he shakes his head.

"I'm good. Spot's a little tender still, but it's healing."

"Tell me Doc cleared you to run this weekend."

"Fuck off, Hunt. You're not my mother," Clint growls.

"Retract the fucking claws, brother. As your friend, it's my duty to bust your balls. You going to buy my dinner this week, or am I hanging at home tonight enjoying some peace and quiet?"

"Fine. Dinner. One week. You join the fun tonight."

We shake on it and part ways. He'll text me later and let me know when I need to be ready.

Three hours later, I'm climbing into the front seat of Brian's Escalade. Brian's driving for now. Clint and Luke are in the second row while Gun, Ty, and Matt have squeezed into the last row.

"Hunter," Gun calls out, "heard I missed a helluva show this afternoon."

I smile. "Sure did. Hear you have the delusional belief you think you can actually land a seven-twenty this weekend."

It's been a while since I've seen Gun—otherwise known as Gunner. He's been off training in hopes of knocking me out of the top spot. We've traded back and forth throughout the season, but I'm determined. Only way he has a chance is to actually hit the seven-twenty, which he won't. No one has. Not even the greats.

"Oh I'm going to. You're going to need a box of tissues on Sunday."

"Why's that?" I shoot back.

"All the tears you'll shed when I kick your ass."

"I'm not worried. Even if I was, this is best trick. The race that really matters is still a month away. You, pretty boy, should be worried."

The truck explodes with noise. Half the guys slamming me, the other half Gun.

"What's the game plan tonight, boys?" Luke interrupts the boisterous ribbing.

"Food, drinks, and kicking your asses tomorrow," Ty answers.

"Don't care. Ready for a release." I grin at Brian. He loves his fiancée, but we all know how much he's dialed down his partying for her.

"Release. Right. You'll go home and snuggle up with Shanna tonight. We all know that. She's got you wrapped around her little finger."

"Shut it, Hunt. Okay. I'm picking dinner. The rest of you jerkoffs can argue about the bar."

I lay my head against the headrest and close my eyes. Lately, I haven't been hanging out with these idiots, and I miss them. There are times though. when

everything gets to be too much. I miss *him*, and it's easier to hide the hurt when I'm by myself.

"Hunter, man, that jump was insane. Didn't realize you weren't going tandem today."

I smirk, not surprised Ty's the one who spoke up first. He's the most observant of all of us. Todd wanted one more tandem, but I needed the rush of going by myself. Since I met the requirements after my last jump, he didn't have much room to argue.

"Yeah, that's what you told me yesterday," Clint adds.

"Changed my mind. Talked to Todd this morning. We switched things around. Worth it, too. Tandem and diving alone are nothing alike."

Brian pulls into a parking spot at some diner I've never heard of, and we all climb out of the car. Clint grabs me and keeps me back while everyone else goes inside. Brian looks at the two of us and lowers his chin slightly. Apparently he and Clint planned this ambush. Go figure.

"You okay, Hunt?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I'm your best friend. I know all your secrets. Something's off and I'm not letting you go inside until you tell me what it is."

Do I tell him about the letter I got in the mail today? Clint knows about *him*. Knows how much damage was done. He's the only one. I'm not sure I'm ready for any of this. Tomorrow. The next day. Now. If I talk about it then it's real. Right now... it's nothing more than a letter. Paper and ink.

"Bastian's home." Then again, maybe I need to get this off my chest.

"What the fuck?"

My thoughts exactly. As soon as I saw the handwriting, I knew who it was from. Three years and the guy's chicken scratch is still the same.

I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and slowly let it out. "Got a letter from him yesterday."

"Letter. Like via mail?"

"Yep. Guess he sent it on his way out of the sandbox."

"Boy always was good at theatrics. Gotta give him that. So he's home. What else did he have to say?"

I shake my head. Now is definitely not the time to tell Clint that my ex, who wants to talk, will be at the Center tomorrow. Even more, I can't tell him that Bastian will be there as part of the medical personnel. From what I can tell, he's putting his medical training into practice as soon as possible.

"Later. Don't want to ruin tonight. I just want to put this behind me and let go."

"Right." Clint pats me on the back, and we head inside to join everyone else. "You think we can get them drunk and hungover enough they screw up this weekend?"

I chuckle. "Probably not. Don't need to, though. I intend to beat all of you without breaking a sweat. Tomorrow's just practice anyway. We'd have to do this again, which I won't do. I love ya like a brother, but after a few passes I'm going to head out and get some rest."

And worry about Bastian. 'Cause no doubt he'll try to corner me. I hope I can convince him to wait until after the final run.

"Damn." Clint gives a dramatic sigh. As if I'm that much of a sucker.

I make it through the night without more inquisitions from Clint. Barely. Midway through the bar hop he tries to get me to talk, but I put him off again. Only Ty and Gun need help getting out to the SUV at the end of the night, so I'm grateful for that.

As I lay in bed much later, I wonder if I shouldn't have had a beer or ten. I quit drinking four years ago, after being arrested for drunk and disorderly and my sponsors threatened to pull my ride. That'll straighten a rider out real damn quick. The tossing and turning is making me reconsider sobriety.

Damn Bastian for coming back. Damn him for leaving. Just... damn.

Chapter Two

I ride to the top of the ramp and visualize my first jump. A Rock Solid Backflip. My heart races as I imagine throwing the bike into a backflip, letting go and stretching my body all the way out before the bike rotates around, and I land.

There are so many things that could mess up here, but I don't think about all that. The only thing I focus on is completing the trick.

They tell me I'm up. I adjust my helmet. Tap my foot against the footpeg. The bike sounds good. No misses in the engine. Everything's set. I'm ready to go.

On the way down the ramp the bike builds speed. I hit the apex, throw my weight into the trick, and let gravity take over. As I settle back onto the seat, I let out a breath. Fuck yeah! I'm going to nail this. It's all mine. The front wheel hits the dirt, and I look up.

He's right there. Straight ahead. Shit. I jerk the handlebars to the left, and the bike veers in the same direction. So fucking close to a perfect ride, and I lose it. Because of Bastian. I have never paid attention to the crowd until my run was over—until today.

It's his fault my bike rolls to the side with me still on it. I'm going down, and there's not a damn thing I can do to stop it. Seeing Bastian in all his muscled glory has frozen me in place—the absolute worst possible place.

“Motherfucker.” My ankle is throbbing. I don't think it's broken. Just bruised—I hope. Hell, my whole left side hurts.

Then someone's hands are on me. Their touch is hesitant, and I know they are checking for injuries. I hear the medic crew talking, asking me questions, but I can't focus on anything other than the stabs of pain rocketing through my body.

“Ugh.” I try to sit up and feel an arm drape across my shoulders. Whoever is behind me gives me a nudge. One step at a time, I get off the dirt. Thankfully this is just practice, so I don't have to smile and wave. No need to put on a happy face.

“Hunter. What the hell, man?” Clint's at my side now.

“Umm.” I look around for the offender. I know he’s near. Bastian and I are connected in a way I’ve never experienced with anyone else. We sense each other when we’re in the same area. I don’t need to see or hear him to know he’s there.

I find him lifting my bike off the dirt. A small part of me is thankful it’s Bastian. At least I trust him. Not that I don’t trust the others, but I don’t know them. Like it or not, I know my old lover. Better than I know myself—at least that’s the way it had been before. Now, I’m not so sure.

Clint must see him at the same time I do, because he stiffens and hisses in my ear. “That son of a bitch is the reason you wrecked, isn’t he.”

I’m in too much pain to hide and argue, so I just nod.

“You knew he’d be here. Wait. Is he...? No way. Bastian’s a medic?”

“Yeah.” I grab my ribs and take a breath. “Guess they were shorthanded or something. Don’t know exactly. Just know he’s working the event.”

We walk back to First Aid in silence. What’s there to say? I don’t owe Clint an explanation, despite what I’m certain he thinks. He’s as much my brother as anyone—most of the time. We have our own past, which he thinks entitles him to know everything. I have a tendency to disagree.

“Your bike looks okay.” The deep timbre of his voice makes my sore body numb, erasing the injuries for a few seconds. And I’m more than grateful. Until I look at him and everything between us rushes back into focus.

Alcohol.

Fight.

No more contact.

Three years.

Love.

My heart beats so hard I fear it’ll burst out of my chest. Why is he here? Why didn’t he stay away?

Unfortunately, the burning in my eyes isn’t caused by the failed jump. The reason is standing in front of me. Over six feet of muscle. Short, military-cut blond hair. Brown eyes with gold flecks throughout. He was built before he left. Now, I’m speechless. Even in the plain black T-shirt, I can see the definition of his chest.

I want to yell at him. I want to pound my fist into his sexy-as-hell face. Make him hurt the way he made me hurt. Every. Damn. Day.

I want to hug him. Press my lips against his. Taste him. Get on my knees and swallow his thick cock.

I want all of it. Good and bad. But I can't have any of it, because there are too many people standing around us. Don't ask me who they are. I don't know. The only person I see is Bastian. In this moment, he is everything.

"Hunter." Clint pulls me out of my haze. "Come on. Let's get you back to your room. Doc says you need to rest tonight, and you can ride tomorrow."

Don't look back. Don't back down.

I rub the blank spot on my chest. Bastian reaches for my arm, the one where my motto is written. We make eye contact again, and I look at the words beneath his hand and nod.

"Hunter, you have to..."

"Not now, Bastian. Not here."

Clint grips Bastian's shoulder and pulls him away from me. Bastian's eyes plead with me. He wants to talk. I know that. And I want to know why he didn't tell me they were shipping him to Afghanistan. Why he didn't keep in touch after leaving in the middle of the night. I got to see him for a short time after boot camp. Then he was gone.

Except, that's the past, and I don't talk about the past. I try not to think about it—most days I'm successful. Today's different, because my past, and everything I love and hate about it, is staring at me, pleading with his eyes.

"I need to get out of here." My words are directed at Clint while my gaze is locked on Bastian. Leaving is a good idea. What I really want is to get on my bike and ride until I can't ride any more.

"You're not going out there," Clint scolds me at the same time he helps me off the bed I've been resting on.

His warning doesn't come as a surprise. All of us have a place to go when we need to relieve stress. Brian goes to his fiancée. Clint goes for a ball-busting run. I find a dirt track. Not a freestyle track, but an outdoor motocross track, where I can run at top speed.

Speed. Adrenaline. Those are the things I need right now. Definitely not rest.

“Don’t worry. I’m fine.”

I don’t look over my shoulder when we leave. If I did, I’d go to Bastian. If he wants to talk, he’ll have to come find me.

I’m an asshole for testing him. I know this. Doesn’t stop me, though.

“Doc told you to take it easy. Killing yourself on the track is the opposite of his instructions.”

“Right. When have you known me to listen to what people tell me to do?”

“Never,” Clint mumbles. “You have to ride tomorrow, Hunt.”

“Yep. I will. No more tricks. I promise. But I’m not going to sit around the rest of the day.” I stop and turn to face my friend. “I’m going alone. Don’t follow. Don’t show up unexpectedly in a couple of hours to check on me. I don’t want to see anyone until tomorrow morning.”

“Hunter. Don’t. You’re letting him...”

“This isn’t about him. This is about me. What I need. Be the friend you say you are, and leave me alone.”

I don’t give Clint time to answer. Mistakenly, I look over his shoulder. Bastian is within hearing range. He knows what I’ve just asked. He nods. Yeah. He’ll find me.

Damn if I can stop the grin that slips out.

Chapter Three

Five laps in, Bastian shows up. *Didn't take him long to find me.* I wonder if Clint told him where to look. Then I remember the way our eyes met right before I left practice, and I know he got here on his own.

I hear him rev the engine of another bike. A smile forms on my lips. Good. We're going to beat each other on the track before we get to the verbal sparring.

Maybe things haven't changed too much after all.

For the next couple of hours, we race each other. Sometimes I win. Others Bastian takes the hypothetical checkered flag. Since it's only the two of us out here, we make our own rules. We don't have to stop and talk. Instinctually, each of us knows when one race ends and the next one begins. It's always been like that. I don't realize until I'm mid-turn on our last lap how much I've missed the ease Bastian and I have with each other. I've missed him, but I've forgotten about all the little things.

I realize how much I needed this time. Not the speed. Or the adrenaline rush. I needed him. Bastian.

We stop side-by-side. I straddle my bike and slide off my helmet. He hasn't cut his engine, but I know he's watching me. Waiting. Giving me first go.

"Might as well get this over with," I say as I start to walk my bike to the trailer.

A deep chuckle sounds behind me, and my body tingles all over.

Bastian is parked next to me. We can easily set up a couple of chairs between the trailers and talk, uninterrupted, for however long we want. While he secures his bike, I pull out a folding chair and have a seat. I've already got a bottle of water and bag of chips in hand when Bastian joins me.

"Still filling yourself full of shit food I see." He reaches across the space and snags my bag of chips then tosses an apple in my lap.

"Still a food Nazi, I see."

"Seems like someone needs to take care of you. How you managed to survive the last three years without me, I don't know."

His words are meant to be a joke, not intended to cut me. His joke backfires. It took me a year to get on track after Bastian left. He has no idea what I dealt

with. For now I choose not to tell him all the dirty details. The trouble I caused. I may not have been drinking, but trust me when I say I got into some serious trouble without alcohol to use as an excuse.

“Yeah. You wouldn’t know. Then again, an email, text, or even a letter wouldn’t have killed you.”

Bastian tilts his head to the sky and releases a long, slow breath. I bite into the apple. My heart tells me to say something. Apologize for my snippy comment. Too bad for emotions, ’cause my head has a whole different plan. I want—need—answers.

“Okay. Ask me. Whatever you want to know, I’ll tell ya. For the next hour, I’m an open book. After that, I want to put all of this behind us and move forward. I love you, Hunter. I have for years. As much as I hate the distance between us, I get it. So let’s do this.”

He loves me. Those three words almost make me rethink everything I want to say. I love him too, but I owe myself answers. I’m afraid if I don’t understand why, I’ll always worry it’ll happen again. Next time, he may not come back.

I sit up straight in my chair. One hour. Then we are done with the past. I can work with that.

“You left me in the middle of the night. You shipped off to the hellhole of Afghanistan and left me wondering, until yesterday, whether or not I’d ever see you again.”

“I’ve accepted my fuck up. That’s why I’m not arguing or trying to avoid your questions. We need to move beyond. I saw what you’ve got on your arm. Don’t look back. Don’t back down. That’s what I’m saying. It’s why I want to resolve this now.”

He makes sense. I understand what he’s saying, but this only brings up more questions. Like what his plans are now that he’s home. Does he plan on doing another tour? How did he keep all of this a secret?

“You. Left. Me. We’d seen each other for a few weeks at most. I know you enlisted for school and for your dad. Hell, I took you to camp and left you there. One of the hardest things I had to do, because I knew what it meant. But then you came home. I thought we were good. That we’d make our relationship—if we had one—work throughout your enlistment. Then you left.

Fucking left in the middle of the night. Why?" My voice rises with each word and cracks on the last one. I'm seconds away from giving up on this talking bullshit.

"Not without a word, Hunter. The note was the best I could give you." Bastian isn't looking at me. Which is fine, because in no way do I want him to see the tears in my eyes.

"Yeah. You were such a mother-fucking pussy you couldn't at least wake me up and tell me you loved me or that you would talk to me later. A Dear John letter is all I got."

Bastian shakes his head. "Not a Dear John letter. Never that. I've always planned to come back to you."

"Then why?" My voice cracks and Bastian looks at me.

"I fucking loved you. Too much." Bastian stands up and runs his fingers through his hair. He starts out yelling. Unlike me, each word softens, becomes pain-filled. "I had to do it that way for me."

Rage replaces heartache. I stand in front of my best friend and stare him down. He left me, and all he has to say is that he loved me too much to wake me that night. "I spent a year in hell. Every time I turned on the news, I had to pray I wouldn't see your name flash as a soldier killed or missing in action. Do you know what that did to me?"

He shakes his head. My hands fist at my side. "I'm sorry." Bastian's apology is so quiet I almost miss it.

Without thinking, I pull my arm back and let the right hook go. Bastian's head pops back and he yells, but doesn't fight me. The seconds of relief are good, but not enough. I somehow find my way back to my chair.

Bastian falls back into his seat then leans forward and presses his head into his hands. He's still the Bastian I love. Sensitive. Caring. Loyal. So damn hot. On its own accord, my hand moves to caress his close-shaved hair.

"I love you so much, Bastian. Admitting just how much freaks me the hell out."

I continue to stroke his head, down his neck, his shoulders. Back up. Then down. We both sit in silence. The warm air starts to cool, and the skies begin to turn from blue to reddish orange. I've lost track of how long we've sat out here. At some point Bastian sits up; I don't stop touching him. He scoots closer to me

and rests his hand on my knee. Before I say anything, I whisper a prayer that he'll answer. Because if he doesn't, I'm not sure where we go from here.

Don't look back. Don't back down.

"Bastian." I wait for him to look at me. "Three years. I heard nothing from you. Why?"

The silence that follows is all consuming. I'm worried he won't tell me. Or worse, whatever he has to say won't ease my fear. The last thing I want him to say is he found someone else while deployed. I know the idea is ludicrous. Even without "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" it's not like men can readily come out. But that's not to say he didn't find a partner that would keep their relationship quiet.

"For eighteen months I was in the sandbox. Surrounded by heat, sand, and hours of nothing to do. We had to be on guard no matter what. Alert. Ready to kill at a moment's notice. As a medic, things weren't the same for me. Didn't change the atmosphere as a whole. Being over there is the greatest mindfuck you'll ever experience."

Bastian presses his lips against mine. I want to pull away, but my heart overrules my head this time. He needs this. It's comfort. Safety. Not sexual.

"Bas..."

"Wait. Let me finish."

I nod. Bastian reaches behind him and pulls out his wallet. Inside he has a picture of us. We are standing at the top of a ramp. I'm straddling my bike; my helmet is tucked under my arm. Bastian is on my left, his arm draped across my shoulders, and Clint is on my right. He's giving the camera a thumbs-up. I remember the picture. Luke is behind the lens. It's the last competition Bastian was at. A week later he left.

"Every morning, I looked at this. It was hidden in the bottom of my locker. Before lights out I saw it again. On the days I didn't get to see you, I struggled staying in my head. For eighteen months I told myself stories about what you were doing. Where you traveled. Before they shipped me out there, I kept up with racing news."

So he thought about me. Kept tabs on me. Yet, he still hasn't answered my question.

Bastian's not done. "If I'd reached out to you—even once—I would have needed to hear your voice, talk to you every day. That wasn't possible. So I chose to cut ties completely."

"And me? You didn't think about what it would do to me?"

"I couldn't, Hunter. Trust me. I know how bad that sounds. It would have made everything so much worse if I thought about how badly I'd hurt you. The only thing for me to do was hope that you'd take me back. I'll do whatever it takes." He brushes his thumb down my cheek then grips my chin and lifts my head so we are eye to eye. "There was no one else. I know you're afraid I'm going to tell you there was—or is. I won't. Because there isn't. You are the only one I've ever wanted. Will ever want. I. Love. You."

"Sappy bastard." I smile. The truth is there in his eyes. Every part of me believes him. My heart and head are no longer battling each other. The reasons don't ease the heartache. Understanding the why is two-thirds of the battle for me.

"I love you too. I missed you so damn much, Bastian. I'm still mad. We aren't through with this. Won't be for a long time." I lick my lips. "I want you, Babe. Now."

He smiles and kisses me again. His calloused fingers slip under my T-shirt.

"Need you too, Babe." Bastian tries to pull my shirt over my head, but I stop him.

"Not here. Too much of a risk. Can't be caught."

"Fine. We're going to talk about that too. I won't keep you a secret. When I want to kiss you, I'm going to. To hell with anyone who has a problem with it."

I start to move, but before I turn away, I run my hand down his chest to the bulge in his pants. I grip his cock and jack my hand up and down.

"You're the one who wants to wait, Hunt. That's not helping."

"I know. Don't want you to lose momentum on the way back. Want to be sure you're ready the minute we get behind closed doors."

"Definitely not a problem."

I chuckle and smack his ass. "Good. Let's go."

Bastian follows me to my hotel. I'm not far from home, but it's still a drive, and I'd rather not have to drive more than necessary. On the way over, I'm both

glad we are in separate trucks and disappointed. Now that he's back, I don't want to let Bastian out of my sight. The alone time gives me a chance to process.

I keep replaying his explanations. Halfway to the hotel it hits me. Never will there be a time I can truly know how Bastian felt. If we want what we had—and more—then the only choice for me is to take him at his word. To trust that what he did, by cutting me off, was the right thing for him.

He's already told me he's not happy with the decision he made. He didn't dodge my questions. Bastian isn't trying to hide from me.

And that kiss. My semi hardens in an instant. *Looks like I'll be as ready to go as I wanted him.* Good. A few good kisses were not enough. I rub my crotch. Naked images of Bastian flash through my mind making it difficult to pay attention to the road. I have to calm down.

To keep from wrecking, I go back to my dilemma. To pursue more or not. For each excuse why we shouldn't, I come up with a reason we should.

Don't look back. Don't back down. As Bastian said, it applies to us.

I pull into an empty spot at the back of the hotel lot, and Bastian parks next to me. It takes me a minute or two and a few deep breaths to calm my nerves enough to get out of the truck. My hands are sweating. My heart is racing. I'm about to go into my room for a reunion with the man who left me three years ago. The love of my life. As pathetic as some may say I sound, Bastian's ruined me for anyone else.

Women have tried. Track bunnies. Friends tried to set me up. Clint and I gave it a shot—albeit a very short one. But none of them were Bastian. None of them turned me inside out and upside down the way he does.

He doesn't pressure me to get out, which calms the turmoil in my head. This is the right thing to do. It has to be, since I'm pretty sure I won't be able to handle the consequences if it's not.

The door creaks as I open it, and Bastian looks over his shoulder at me. He's perched on the hood of his truck. "You good, Babe?" he asks without turning around completely.

"Yeah. I am."

I meet him at the front of our trucks, and he jumps to the ground. I grab his hand and intertwine our fingers. When I glance at him, he's grinning, and I return his smile.

“Want you so bad.” He shifts behind me, and we make the quick walk inside, my back pressed against his front. Awkward. But I don’t care.

We come to the door, and I hesitate with the key card poised in front of the lock. Bastian slides his hand to the buttons of my pants and pops the first one free. Then the second. Warm breath flows across my neck, and my cock twitches.

“Bastian.” I draw out his name.

“Open the door, Hunter. You did this to me.” He rocks his hips, and the thick length of his cock presses into my ass.

“Someone will see us,” I whisper.

“Then I suggest you move a little faster, Babe. Unless you don’t want this. If that’s the case, then speak up now, because once I have you in that room, there is absolutely no fucking way I’m leaving or letting you leave.” Bastian takes my earlobe between his teeth. The bite of pain has me rocking back into him. Any lingering doubts disappear. I want him. I want him now.

The door opens, and the only reason I don’t fall to the floor is Bastian’s grip around my waist. I don’t know where the room key lands, since I’m too busy yanking my shirt over my head.

Unbelievably, by the time I’ve got my pants to my knees, Bastian is standing before me naked. His erect shaft, long and thick, bounces against his belly. My mouth waters, and I lick my lips. Inside my chest, my heart pounds so fast I’m afraid I’m going to have to sit down. Rather than finishing the chore of undressing, I fall to my knees in front of him.

“You don’t—”

He doesn’t finish, because I’ve already taken him in my mouth.

Holy fuck, does he taste good. Salty. Musky. Pure male. Mine. All mine.

When I moan around his length, I feel him pulse against my tongue.

“Slow down, Babe. I want to last. Don’t want this to end.” Bastian grabs handfuls of my hair and tugs me off his dick.

“We’ve got all night, Bastian. Unless you don’t plan on staying.” I lean forward; the pain from him pulling my hair makes me wince and edge back.

“I’m not going anywhere. Stop that train of thought right now. If you think I’m the only one who’s going to blow like a virgin, you’re wrong.”

Confused and frustrated, I rest on my heels and look up at Bastian.

“Get rid of your jeans and get on the bed.”

While I do as he instructed, he goes to the bathroom. What feels like an eternity, but more than likely is no more than a minute or two, my lover comes to the side of the bed and lays a towel between us. Bastian crawls onto the bed with his head at my feet.

“Yes,” I groan.

Bastian shackles my ankles with his hands and yanks me down so I’m flat on my back. He straddles my chest so his balls dangle in my face.

“Same time, Hunter. We come together. Got it?”

The command in his words sends shivers through me. Without warning, Bastian engulfs my prick in his hot mouth. My hips buck off the bed, and the smack he plants on my ass is sure to leave a mark.

Together. We’re supposed to come together. From past memories, I know he’ll torment me if I don’t get to work. Before taking him down my throat again I lick his ass, getting him nice and wet so he can take my finger. Bastian pushes against me when I nudge his hole.

I lick his shaft, suck his balls, and then return to his ass. With each pass I can tell he’s getting closer. He takes me deep and sucks hard as he pulls off, forcing my body to react. I can’t resist any more and let go. His balls tighten, and seconds later his seed is shooting down my throat.

We stay silent as we clean each other up. Bastian gets rid of the towel, and I pull back the comforter to climb into bed. I’m not done for the night, but after that orgasm I’m in definite need of recovery time. Bastian joins me and enfolds me in his arms. As my eyes drift closed, he presses his lips to my forehead.

“Love you so much, Babe.” His whispered words are the last thing I hear before drifting off. “I’m back, and I don’t plan on leaving. One tour. That’s all I’m doing. Now that I’m home, I plan to go to school and make up with you. Please don’t give up on me.”

I can’t respond to Bastian’s plea, and he doesn’t push. I hear the honesty in his words. I want to believe him. My heart is already his, always was. In time, my mind will catch up. For now, we’ll have to take it slowly.

“Holy shit. The ghost of years past is back.” I smile when Brian jogs over to us and gives Bastian a quick hug. “Good to see you, bro. Military didn’t fuck with you too much did they?”

Bastian’s low chuckle vibrates through me. After waking up to his punishing kisses and his hand wrapped around my cock, I didn’t think I’d have any problems today. Should have known better.

“Good to see you, Brian. Pretty sure I fucked them more.”

“Lookie there. The inconsiderate prick returns.” Clint joins our group with his hands on his hips, glaring at Bastian.

“Stop it, Clint. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” I glance from Clint to Brian and then Bastian. This is not the place or time.

“Right. Later then.” Clint huffs and walks away.

“Bastard needs to get laid,” Brian quips. He squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t worry, brother. I know about you and Bastian. Glad to see he’s home in one piece and you finally get who you want.” With a wink and a smirk, Brian leaves Bastian and I alone.

“Well, that was interesting,” Bastian says.

“Umm. Yeah. I had no idea.”

“Guess it’s one less thing we have to worry about. Clint on the other hand...” Bastian looks off in the direction my friend headed toward.

I sigh. “Clint was there when you left. He...” The sharp intake of breath and glare from Bastian catches me off guard. I hold my hands up in surrender. “Slow down, Bastian. We kissed, once. Both of us were drunk. Afterward, we talked and agreed it wouldn’t work. I won’t lie and tell you I was a saint. You left with no word. I may not have been celibate, but none of them meant anything.” I step closer to him and rest my hand on his waist. We could so easily get caught, but right now I don’t care. This needs to be said. “I love you, Bastian. Nothing, no one, no matter how long we were apart, will change that.”

Bastian studies me before wrapping his hand around my neck and jerking me forward until our lips collide.

The years of pain and heartache were worth a lifetime spent with the man in front of me. I have no doubt we’ll find a way to make things right between us. Our relationship will never be what it was before. We’ve both grown up to be

different people. But this is one homecoming I will never forget, and hope to never repeat.

Epilogue

I look at my arm. *Don't look back. Don't back down.*

I place my hand over my chest. The empty space no longer bare. After I won the Best Trick competition, I went with Bastian and had the space filled. An American flag with dog tags draped over it now covers the skin.

This is my final run. With Bastian home, I've decided to retire. It was an easy decision to make.

My heart pounds.

The engine revs when I turn the throttle. X Games gold is mine.

I run the course, and Bastian meets me at the end. He's mine as much as I am his. I have everything I'll ever need in him.

The End

Author Bio

Born and raised in Texas, Jennah is a transplant to Missouri long enough ago she should probably consider that her hometown. But she will forever be a Texan. She loves to write any story that will make a reader smile, laugh, and maybe even cry (although you won't ever hear her admit that she cries). Whether the next story she writes is contemporary, urban fantasy, LGBT, or whatever other crazy idea she comes up with, there will always be love and romance in the midst of trials and turmoil.

When she's not writing, you can find her on Twitter, with her family, or buried in a book trying to escape reality for just a minute.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook Author page](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Pinterest](#)

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FAIRE PLAY

By Chris Cox

Photo Description

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

Story Letter

Dear Author,

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

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

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

Sincerely,

Aislinn

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

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

Content Warnings: dubious consent

Word Count: 18,182

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FAIRE PLAY

By Chris Cox

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

Today, apparently, Brendan Teague was his tool.

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

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

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

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

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

“Why me?”

“Because you’re his type.”

“Shit.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hidden him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He breathed in, letting his immediate surroundings take over.

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

One of those bodies was his.

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

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

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

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

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

Annoying. Crashing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The guy was still staring.

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

Another misstep. Another jerk on the leash.

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

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

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

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

Did kilt guy have big hands?

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

The guy was gone, too.

Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

“You might try courting him.”

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

“I said. Try. Courting. Him.”

That’s what Brendan thought Stinson had said.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

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

“You still there, Teague?”

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

He was doing a lot of firsts.

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

And apparently, fucking pimping himself out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Damn! No wonder he could never move ahead in his love life. He had never wanted to use the approved come-on lines his brothers or sister used to encourage an appropriate member of the opposite sex. Because he was gay, damn it. Gay and okay with it.

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

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

And his neck itched.

Yeah, the guy was staring again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck. This was as awkward as high school.

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

Fuck.

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

"I'm Brendan."

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

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

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

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

Fuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Want. Not need. He jerked his hand away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck. Another misstep.

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

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

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

Man. Not kid. Man.

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

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

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

"Damn it." He slipped the T-shirt over his head. Where it had fit tight on Brendan, showing off his pecs, it hung loose on Kevin. The residual heat from

Brendan's body sank into Kevin deeper than skin level. The scent from Brendan's cologne had Kevin drawing in deep breathes and holding them as long as he could before letting go.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, you. Hold up." Max.

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

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

Deliberately, he picked up his pace.

"Hey. I told you to hold up."

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

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

Where was that damned sandal?

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

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

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

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

“What did that new guy want?”

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

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

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

“Answer me.”

“I guess.”

“He’s queer?”

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

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

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

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

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

“To bed.”

“By yourself?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Calling home was too hard to think about right now.

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

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

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

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

Today was going to be a good day.

Chapter Three

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

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

This place gave him the creeps.

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

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

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

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

And that was another of his dilemmas. Ethics.

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

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

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

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

On impulse, he backtracked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What's wrong with my accent?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But what if he stops taking care of you?”

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

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

They hadn’t even come to look for him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was it better to not know?

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

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

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

"I appreciate—"

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

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

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

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

But he didn't have to do that here.

Tension left his shoulders, although that tingling only intensified.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brendan held out the flowers. "These are for you."

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

"I thought we might get something to eat?"

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

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

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

"A good-looking man like you?"

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

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

"Then I'm glad to be your first."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It must have been enough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not a baby. A full grown man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And courting him. It was his duty.

"That's it? Stew is all you want?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing wrong with being a virgin. I wasn't much younger myself." That was the solid truth.

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

Damn. He shifted on the hard wood chair.

"How old were you?" Kevin pulled back. "If you don't mind my asking."

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

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

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

"What branch?"

"Special Forces."

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

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

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

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

"So how did it happen?"

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

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

"Your family doesn't know?"

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

"And you?"

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

“Why?”

“Because—” Kevin’s mouth tightened. “Because I must have subconsciously known that no one would be pleased.”

“That’s not right.”

“That’s just how my family is.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kevin sat back so hard, his chair rocked.

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

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

With a curtsy, she was gone.

And so was the moment.

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

A comfortable that made remembering his mission all but impossible.

Chapter Four

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He'd almost been late for his performance.

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

Think of something else. Think of anything else.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Like him.

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

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

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

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

"Nothing," he said again.

Max held out his hand and Kevin flinched away.

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

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

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

"Kevin?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two men to share his day with in one afternoon.

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

How long would it hurt like this?

Brendan was *not* in the mood for this.

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

"Volunteers?" he ground out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But she was his best prospect.

She gave him a look, warning him off.

The flash of flame-colored harem pants caught his attention. Off to the side, halfway behind a cart selling astrology sign posters, Kevin peeped through the

cart's supports while his friend Sammy stood free and clear of any obstacles and stared at Brendan as if willing him to stare back.

It worked. Brendan stared.

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

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

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

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

And that blooming began to wither.

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

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

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

"Easy," Brendan murmured as he pulsed his grip on Kevin's arm.

Kevin took a breath, obviously trying to follow instructions.

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

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

"Why?" Kevin asked, his focus on Brendan's throat. "Why did you leave me?"

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

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

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

"You're cold?"

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

Brendan needed his trust.

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

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

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

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

A reflection of Brendan's own emotional transformation.

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

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

He fucked.

He reminded his cock that Kevin was a virgin.

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

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

A mission it would take a fantasy to accomplish.

Court him. He had permission from the boss himself.

Kevin shifted toward him.

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

"Okay," Kevin said again.

"Okay." Brendan looked up at the crowd that had more than tripled, the crowd he'd forgotten about. Dangerous.

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

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

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

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

Instead of feeling restrictive, the ropes felt—

Safe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not protected, but hidden.

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

And high.

No drugs involved. Not a drop of alcohol.

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

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

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

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

Beautiful. Perfect. Safe.

Perfectly safe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He owed her a huge apology.

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

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

If only it was real.

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

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

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

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

And it felt damned good.

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

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

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

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

"I've got you." His lips brushed Kevin's ear.

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

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

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

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

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

The knife sliced sharp. Clean. Cold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Forever.

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

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

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

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

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

Just like he wouldn't allow Max to—

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

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

His parents would—

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

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

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

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

While Max stood by, arms crossed, foot tapping.

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

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

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

"Come on, boy."

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

Max made him feel immature. Stupid.

Brendan made him feel—loved.

Deluded.

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

In any amount of time.

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

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

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

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

He looked away from Kevin and remoteness hardened his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kevin took it before Brendan dropped it in the mud.

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

"You earned it."

Then Max, showing off, held out his hand.

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

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

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

Safe.

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

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

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

"I do. I owe him."

"How much?"

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

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

"Tell me tonight."

"Not your business."

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

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

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

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

Chapter Five

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

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

His soul.

Had he left it safe with Brendan?

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

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

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

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

Who was he kidding?

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

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

Truth played hell with fantasy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rest of his meager wardrobe had been soaked through.

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

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

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

Brendan would protect him without any pretense.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brendan had made some calls. Some maddening calls.

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

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

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

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

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

What was he doing with Kevin? Indenturing him. Slowly, ever so slowly, adding him to the ring. Oxycontin was how Max kept the drummer and one of

the dancers close. The flutist had been with him since the kid was about thirteen and knew no other life than this one. Brendan didn't know the story behind the other dancer, but he'd bet it wasn't pretty.

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck. Kevin was still a virgin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

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

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

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

Maybe it was.

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

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

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

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

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

Brendan's turn.

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

"Yeah?"

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

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

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

Then where would the boy be?

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

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

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

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

"The side bet?" he prompted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fuck. Now or never.

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

Some things were worth incarceration.

Instantaneously, he had a plan on how to take out Max in under three seconds. The woman might make hostage status if she cooperated and the others stayed put while he ordered Kevin to his truck and they made their getaway.

Not an elegant plan, but an effective one.

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

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

Fucked. Up. Mission.

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

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

"Call," the dealer said.

Brendan flipped over his cards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Anyone want to top that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Outcome? Prison.

And he'd never see Kevin again.

Why was that the deciding factor?

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

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

He had to keep Kevin as safe as he could.

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

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

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

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

Abruptly, Kevin turned to Brendan, his forehead creasing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And now he knew.

Yes. He had.

Double fuck.

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

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

Yeah, he could do that.

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

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

Brendan had inspected the pill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look at me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kevin nodded again, this time focusing only on Brendan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kevin moaned, low and needy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another deep breath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Another one."

Kevin held him tight while he added another finger.

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

“Ahhhhh.”

“Okay?”

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

Too lightly, Kevin’s hand pushed up the kilt and rested on Brendan’s ass.

Brendan twisted around to make his point clear.

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

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

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

Brendan pushed back, as Kevin pushed in.

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

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

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

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

“Yes. Fuck, yes.”

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

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

“Kevin, come now!” he ordered.

Then he went over the edge himself. Coming, coming where nothing mattered but the throbbing in his asshole, the pulsing of his cock, the moans of

his love as Kevin splayed himself onto Brendan's back, holding on. Holding on.

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

Just on the outskirts of his reality, stood a noisy, laughing, cheering mob.

Against his back, Kevin's breathing slowed, then hiccuped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Take him home. Fuck.

Brendan opened up his embrace and let Kevin go.

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

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

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

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

"That's it?"

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

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

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

Fuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What choice did he have?

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I want to never, ever, go back to what I was, who I was. Who I wasn't. I want to be exactly who I am, everywhere I am. No more pretending. To anyone, including myself. I want to stay with you. I want to love you, nothing held back. I want you to love me back the same way."

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

"Okay."

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

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

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

A muscle in Brendan's jaw jumped.

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

"Okay."

"What?"

"Okay. We can try it."

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

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

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

“Breathe, boy.”

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

“I've got you. You're okay.”

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

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

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

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

Epilogue

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

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

“As in—”

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

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

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

He *was* the king of Kevin’s world.

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

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

“We’re on our way to do that now.”

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

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Brendan?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m happy for you.”

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

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

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

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

“That sounds perfect, baby. Just perfect.”

The End

Author Bio

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

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

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Facebook Author Page](#)

[Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Pinterest](#) | [Google+](#)

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FALLING FOR YOU

By Matthias Williamson

Photo Description

One man is leaning over a balcony, having his knuckles of his hand kissed by another man who is rising up to meet the challenge.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Due to a very embarrassing accident I am stuck at home. Broken leg. My profession requires a lot of exercise, so not being able to move around freely drives me crazy. One morning while sipping my coffee and browsing the internet on my tablet, I spotted the most gorgeous guy just outside my balcony. He was so engrossed in talking to the dog he'd been walking that day, that he hadn't noticed me watching. In hope of seeing him again and maybe for a chance to get to talking I had every breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack and dinner on my balcony. Every day. I knew it was crazy but I just had to see him again. I did. For days I had been watching him and his dog play at the park across the street. One day, when he actually noticed me, it was everything I could have hoped for and more.

The only problem: his dog is his entire world. Unfortunately I've been suffering from Cynophobia (terrible dog phobia) ever since I can remember. How can we find our HEA? He would never choose me over his dog...

Sincerely,

Riina

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sports, veterinarian, sweet/no sex, men with pets, humorous

Word Count: 11,017

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FALLING FOR YOU

By Matthias Williamson

Chapter One

Marcello

I woke before my alarm even sounded, feeling content. That was probably because of the warm, heavy arm flung over my chest and the smell of musk from my boyfriend. I gently slipped out from under the weight of his thick muscles, tiptoed around the room, and quickly folded Speletsky's clothes before placing them on the blue wooden chair by the window.

A glance at the watch that never left my wrist proved I had plenty of time before he'd wake up. He wouldn't miss his sweatshirt, it would be an extra layer of warmth, and I'd be able to smell him as I ran through the city. Today was different in that it was a game day, so the run would be a little shorter. When I got outside, the chill morning wind slapped my face, and I started my light run across the street to the gated park. I didn't bother to bring the key to the gate on runs like this, so I skirted the edge, turned left to run the four blocks to First, and took a left to get to the route I used for shorter runs. The route was familiar, and I was able to let my mind go blank. I ran until I felt the burn, and then headed back towards the townhouse. I'd already made the decision to skip the gym and opt for a shower and steam back home. As I neared Gramercy Park West from East Twenty-First Street, I slowed to take in the view of the park before I reached the stairs down to my front door. The little run only took about fifteen minutes, so when I looked in on Speletsky I wasn't surprised to find him still asleep.

I stepped into the shower, adjusted the water temperature and began talking to myself, as usual. Whereas most people would be singing, on game days I use the time to practice what I want to say for the day. I even have my trusty little waterproofed recorder taped to the tile.

As I finished my last lines I switched the water to steam and sat on a stool in the corner of the shower, watching as the white subway tile around the sink seemed to disappear behind the fogged-over glass. I closed my eyes and tried to prepare myself for the big speech, the one that went with the talk I'd wanted to have with John for months, ever since two major sports figures, Jason Collins and Michael Sam, had come out of the closet. Slowly, I whispered my words for the recorder, just for that last minute confidence.

“You know, John, if an NFL and NBA player can do it, why can’t someone who’s playing for the NHL? And you’re already on a professional team, which is something Michael Sam didn’t have.”

That was how simple the conversation should be. I was convinced if Speletsky only took the jump, we could go out on the town. I knew in my heart that he would be so much happier to not have to hide. As a man in the sports world, I knew how hard it was to play from the closet. My bosses knew when they hired me, but told me to keep it on the down low. In fact, they made it a condition in my contract, but I got bolder as I got a larger fan base. Just last week I’d come out to my camera man, who’d asked about a rumor he’d heard in the control room. And my assistants had known for a while, since we’d bumped into each other at a few clubs around town.

All I wanted was for John to be able to knock on my front door, or meet me at Gramercy Tavern at a table at the window. That was all I hoped for as I entered the bedroom and saw his body sprawled across the width of my bed. The body that I cradled when he was black and blue from fist fights over a small little piece of rubber. I let the white towel drop from my waist and walked nude across the room, keeping an eye on the gentle bear in my bed. I pulled on my typical sports day uniform: black jeans, a white Oxford shirt, and a simple red tie. Just the right look for a gay man running the sidelines at a Giants football game.

I shook my head and laughed lightly as I tied my Cole Haan sneakers, grabbed the newsboy cap off the hook, and walked to the bed. Leaning down, I kissed the back of Speletsky’s neck to wake him. In one quick move, the hockey player rolled over and pulled me on top of him. We looked into each other’s eyes and kissed slowly. Before long I protested and fought to get out of my man’s grasp. It was a funny little battle.

“Did you hear? Michael Sam is set to get signed onto a team.”

The once-tight grip fell dead away and Speletsky closed his eyes. “I’m not coming out.”

I backed up and looked down at him. “Why? Gay marriage is winning in states across the country, Sam and Collins and countless other...”

My words were cut off by a pillow thrown at my head. By the time I pulled the pillow off, John was already out of the bed, searching for his clothes, and making an exasperated sound when he noticed them folded neatly on the chair. He kicked the chair out of the way and grabbed at his clothes.

“This discussion is over. It ain’t happening.” When he got mad, Speletsky fell into his white-trash tongue. “I’m not gonna be the laughing stock of the NHL. You think I got bruises from fights ’cuz of the puck slamming someone in the crotch? Next they’ll be bruises because someone thought I was looking at their cock in the shower. It’s over...”

I stood against the wall; a quiet fear tightened my stomach into a knot.

“This is over... it’s over, I can’t deal with this shit. March, you’re a... great... I love what you do, but this can’t work if you need me to be a purty boy on your arm. I’m out.” He turned away from me to check his reflection in the mirror behind the bed. To me, he looked stunned at the words that came out his mouth. “I’m out of here.”

The door slammed—the back door, of course, the one connected to the alley behind the other buildings so that he could escape without being seen. Not that photographers were that welcome around Gramercy Park, or that anyone would know that John had been here.

I stood there, shocked. I lost him. *My love life, my fuck buddy. I lost it all because I wanted him to be out to the world.* I looked in the mirror, took a deep breath, wiped my eyes, and left for work.

If that had been the end of it, it would have been fine. But, Speletsky just couldn’t shut up. During the course of the game, he texted three times, and each time I replied with a simple ‘no’.

JS: *Can I come over tonight?*

MM: *no*

JS: *Can’t you forget what I said?*

MM: *no*

JS: *We can meet at a hotel*

MM: *no*

He wanted another chance, but didn’t want commitment. He didn’t get it at all. You don’t break up and then just come back. I didn’t want to be a hate fuck. Or a convenient bed to hop into.

The players were running down the field, I felt the phone vibrate in my hand, and I had just enough time to glimpse down and read the long message from Speletsky. Then I was running, talking, and trying to type.

JS: March, look it's really tough for me to do what you want me to do, but I need you. Can't we just forget about this and make up tonight?

MM: No, you don't do this, ever again.

JS: Why is it such a big deal what we do in the bedroom?

MM: I'm tired of hiding. I want a real relationship. I used to be proud to know I was getting fucked by you.

JS: Used to? What? I'm not good enough for a little FAGGOT like you?

Then the shit hit the fan, and it all happened so damn fast. Anything else but that word. Like how some women cringe when “cunt” is slapped across their face, “faggot” had the same effect on me. And John knew it. I got lost in the blur of texting as I moved quickly to the end zone, not paying attention to anything else.

The cameraman, Hank, who had been working with me since I'd gotten the sidelines contract, was following closely behind me, but also focusing on the game. He lifted the camera at probably the best and worst time. I was too busy cussing in Italian to notice the two huge players who were barreling towards me. In the blink of an eye, it was over. Giants #39 had just tackled #18 from the Vikings, and then they both tackled me.

There was silence in the stadium as they pulled the two large men off of me, and in that instant, it was like being in a cocoon; the warmth and heavy breathing surrounding me. I almost didn't want anything to stop the intensity of it all. Hell, it was just like bear night at the Hole. There was spit or sweat all over my face, I wasn't sure which. I lay on the ground, practically laughing, except I couldn't breathe. The Viking player on top of me was babbling and apologizing and trying not to spit anymore onto my face. It was sorta cute and I could just kiss him when it was all over. Once the players were off of me, I gasped for a breath and looked to my left at the phone vibrating on the ground. Remembering my fury with John, I jumped up and attempted to hurdle the bench, but my toe caught the edge. I heard the snap as I fell near my phone. This time when I tried to stand, my left foot swayed under me, a pain shot up my leg, and I collapsed into a heap, passed out.

I opened my eyes to see that I was surrounded by medics. The smell of wet grass, chalk and antiseptic filled my nostrils as I clutched my phone to my

chest. If the phone and those texts ever fell into the wrong hands, it could be disastrous. Once they had me on a stretcher, the medics told me to relax, lifted and carried me off the field. I heard the cheer from the crowd as I waved my hand that I was all right.

I wasn't all right, because I saw that they'd called in Suzi Sarno to replace me. She was great, not that I had big shoes to fill. But I hated missing a game. I kept repeating in my head, *It's not the end of the world.*

But for the next couple days, it sure as hell felt like it was. Hank told the bosses that he'd seen me texting and yelling loudly, and, unfortunately, it was all seen in the replay. Hank was the best cameraman I'd ever known, and he filmed what was the most important shot at the time. Me. And it turned out the initial crash hadn't even been what broke my ankle. It was the bench I'd tripped over trying to retrieve my phone, like an idiot, when it went flying. All of it, every embarrassing second, had been caught on film and sent live to the world watching the game.

Then I saw the nightly news—I heard the entire scene played out with bleeps to cover my cussing, and the newscasters stating that they had a translator working on the Italian.

I turned off the television.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Swans - Unkle Bob

9:45 pm

Dear Sis, I wanted to tell you that everything's gotten better with me since I moved to New York. It's so much different than Saginaw. After I graduated, I took an internship with a major vet here in upstate New York, but that fell through because the doctor wanted more than just my skills—he expected me to do so much more. I guess I was moving to New York with stars in my eyes. I was always so trusting... how can I say this? I may have graduated with honors, but all I've wanted to do was raise Seeing Eye dogs. For you. That's why I took on training Finn. But, a person needs something to fall back on and Dr. Bedford was so much more than that. I had saved a lot of money from

that first two years with him, and then I was offered a column to write in one of the small dog magazines, so when Dr. Bedford showed his true colors at a vet convention and had gotten a little too hands on for me, I up and left.

Mom sent me the letter that said Pop had died, and I managed to live the rest of the time on my inheritance. It's a shitty thing to admit, but moving to the city was probably the best thing I could have done. Especially for me. I've had a few relationships, but nothing fit. I've been getting sick of my most recent boyfriend. He's a little too young for me, a wannabe artist, who can only create stupid T-shirts. His name is Finn Huck, really stupid; I've told him maybe he should change it.

The idiot shrugs his shoulders and kisses me on the shoulder to calm me down. I just sigh and rub Finn-the-dog's ears. This was the biggest mistake, getting together with this guy. But, he sometimes makes me happy. Oh, he just got home.

Shamanic Journey - Anugama

11:30 pm

Sis, I'm so pissed off, I had to put on some relaxing music just so I wouldn't yell and kick things. He's told me he's met someone else and he wants to break up. That I'm not doing it for him, that I'm not supporting him in the lifestyle he's accustomed to. Whatever. I have to admit, I was always a little embarrassed to introduce him to friends. We were never a good fit. I've got four deadlines on articles that need to be finished, and I'm sitting here listening to shaman music so I can calm down and not break shit.

Chapter Two

Marcello

Annie was the first person I called when I broke my ankle. I didn't bother calling my parents; they were in Rome, and it was just a broken ankle. The entire world saw the fall that did it, so it wouldn't be a secret. Even people that didn't watch sports saw it, thanks to the nightly news. I'd become the laughing stock of the world. I knew people were sending their translations of my Italian tirade to the network. Thankfully, most of it was drowned out by the crowd cheering the tackle and then the inward pull of breath as the crowd felt the impact of the three of us falling to the ground.

Annie had been my best friend since college, when in study group, she sat between Ryan, my longest lover, and me. It was a good thing for all of us, since for the entire last semester, anytime Ryan and I got together we'd spend more time fucking than studying. It was a wonder we ever passed our classes that year. The three of us became best friends, doing everything together. Well, not everything, obviously. Annie took control of the study schedules and always sat between us, especially after that first time, where my hand roamed a little too low and Ryan started kissing my ear. We knocked our chairs over, made it to Ryan's bed and started going at it with her still in the room.

"Guys, I'm still here. It's quite the show, I feel like maybe I should leave you a twenty on my way out the door. But, that's where you are wrong, because I have a scholarship I'm tending and we need to figure out the quadratic equation of a line. A line?"

She sounded so stressed out, but I was lost in the lines of Ryan's body; the way Ryan's skin felt under my hands as they slid down to his waist, the way his body ground into mine, our lips meeting perfectly, our tongues circling each other. It stopped being exciting the moment I felt her hand grip my ear.

"I'm telling you to stop, please. I'm begging. Put your hormones in check and study this fucking line with me for two hours, then you can fuck like bunnies and I'll go to my legal studies group." She was yanking hard, and I stood up, buttoning my shirt and returning to the chair on her left. Ryan buckled his belt and took the chair to her right. That was the way study group lasted the rest of the year. And amazingly we all got A's. So the next semester, we made sure we took more classes together.

It was great for everyone, but especially for Annie, as she managed to graduate *summa cum laude* with further studies available should she need them. However, she already had three companies who wanted her for internships, and choosing was the hardest part.

I had gotten to school on several LGBTQ scholarships, though they weren't needed. My parents had the money to pay for me, but I told them I needed to prove to myself I could do it. If I failed, it would be my fault, and I wouldn't have wasted their money. I excelled at water polo in high school, and that's what got me on the team at Harvard. I didn't see a future in water polo, other than trying for the Olympic team, but after that? So, I took journalism and communications classes, with the hope of becoming a reporter on ESPN. And I wanted to be out doing it.

Ryan, on the other hand, wasn't very excited about the prospects of spending the rest of his life as the partner of a successful sports reporter and wealthy bachelor of Gramercy Park. When he came home with me for the holidays, he saw the money, saw the luxury, and freaked. And strange as it sounds, being in the home of a family that accepted their son and his lover, with parents that had no problem with the two of us sleeping in the same bed, freaked him out even more. I thought Ryan would have been happy, or at least relieved, but this wasn't the life he was accustomed to. With Ryan's dad working sixty hours a week and his mom working two jobs just to pay for his education, he'd been too afraid to come out to them. Ryan couldn't do that to his parents. They almost lost everything they owned, and he felt he owed it to them to graduate and be successful. After holiday break, Ryan moved to a different seat and focused on his classes, and we never saw him at study group again.

Annie and I lost touch with Ryan, but remained study buddies and became best friends. And even now, she rents the basement apartment in my house. Annie told me once over drinks on New Year's Eve that she had a huge crush on both of us back then. She laughed and admitted to writing fan fiction about the three of us together. We both laughed long about that and she said, "A girl can dream."

Through the years, both of us had an array of partners. Most of mine were secret, backroom dealings. Annie had moments where she fell hard, head-over-heels in love, with a string of men who were useless buffoons. None of them were worthy of her attentions. Sometimes I think she likes them big and stupid.

That same New Year's Eve that Annie admitted to her crush, we kissed at midnight, a chaste, sweet kiss, and placed the paper we'd both signed in my secret hiding place on the roof. It was a promise that if neither of us were in a committed relationship by thirty, that we'd be together. Each year, in private, we'd toast the stone and each other. And each year, she'd place a gentle kiss on my cheek and whisper thank you. I kept up hope that I'd find someone or she would, because I knew deep in my heart that I'd follow through with the note, even if we both knew it'd never work.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Wonder-Dummied - Brooke Waggoner

10:00 am

Dear Sis, today I was arguing with Finn-the-artist, again, because I didn't have the heart to kick him out last week and I saw Finn-the-dog sitting in the corner, whimpering. I have to stop this shit. Finn-the-dog is so much more important to me than that fake Fuck. I can't do it on my own anymore. But, Finn-the-artist is the wrong one to help me. Damn it, I've done everything I wanted to do. Why can't I figure out what the fuck to do with my love life? I sit here laughing and crying because Brooke has it right, I'm wonder-dummied. I'm stuck in this time and place and know that at thirty-three, I deserve more than a T-shirt designer wannabe artist. He can't even bring in a decent wage. Let him go off and live with the banker he met at that bar. I've got the real Finn here.

2:00 pm

Hey Sis, So, he's packed a bag and taken it to see his sugar daddy in the Village. I've just thrown anything he left down the garbage chute, and I've arranged for a locksmith to come over tomorrow, since the fucker took the keys with him.

I've taken some paint he left and put a large two-month calendar on the wall so I can keep track of when I need to take Finn-the-dog back to the Center. I regret letting this fucked-up relationship get in the way of training Finn. I'll write more

*tomorrow. I need to go for a run with Finn-the-dog.
Relationships suck, Sis. I'm so glad you found Peter.*

Chapter Three

Marcello

A couple days after my fall, Annie showed up with three newspapers and her Kindle that she'd been playing the repeat of my embarrassment on. I really didn't need to see any of them. The only thing I wanted to do was to shut the world out. I lay in the bed, my leg raised on three pillows, my head raised on six, and the remote in my hand. I looked a mess, wearing the same T-shirt I'd worn when she left me last.

"Alright, March. You are done being miserable. I've taken a little vacay from work. I've got plans." She pulled out her iPhone and spoke, "Siri... please bring up my Marcello schedule."

"You have a schedule for me?"

"Yes. You are to spend as much time sitting with the leg elevated as possible. Remember what the hot doctor said before we left? But you do need to walk for some exercise. So, I figure we can visit the lovely park down there once a day, lunch or dinner time." She continued through her agenda of places and times to do things. "Dr. Harlan suggests getting a bag to place over your leg so you can shower." She looked me over. "Don't you take care of yourself anymore?"

I laughed and let her take care of everything. I knew deep in my heart that if we did end up getting married, I'd be so pussy-whipped. Annie was gorgeous, but having sex with her? Just, no. In an hour, I was showered, groomed and dressed. It was the first week, I was given a plan to follow, and I was grateful for my little Asian organizer who'd brought me back to life.

"What was so important on that phone that caused you to think you were a rabbit?" Annie busied herself with making the bed and moving the furniture for easy access from my bed to the bathroom.

"Hmm... let's see. A hate-filled text from JS."

"I didn't think you were serious about him."

"It wasn't love, but I thought it had potential. And now it'll never be anything." I bent to tie my right shoe. "JS is a major-closeted athlete, so, if my phone had gotten into the wrong hands, it would've been bad for both of us. Mostly him."

"I was a little shocked when you told me you were seeing someone in the closet. You've always said you'd never do that." She took my hand and led me to the stairs. "Do you need help?"

I shook my head, resisting for a moment, but then sighed in submission. "Yeah, I do." She wrapped an arm around my waist, and I leaned into her while we managed the stairs. "Closets are a pain, but, I kept hoping he'd come around. Though, 'Fuck you faggot,' makes me think not anytime soon."

The journey down the flight of stairs to the living room was uneventful and slow. When we got there, the small French doors out to the balcony were already wide open.

"I'm going to go out for a few things," Annie said. "Go check out the little set up I arranged for you." She nodded towards the balcony. "I'll be back soon." With that, she handed me my crutches and left me alone in the living room.

I hobbled to the balcony to see what she meant. Annie had placed a table and chair halfway on the small balcony so part of it was in the doorway. I looked at the arrangement and saw a tablet on the table beside the breakfast tray that had a now-cold cup of coffee, two carafes, an empty bowl and a box of Froot Loops. There was a note taped to the tablet.

March, you can have one bowl of cereal. The blue carafe has milk, the black has coffee. Rest! Dr. Harlan told you rest and keeping your leg elevated will do the job. Just look out on the city, maybe write. You used to love to write. In fact, write me a story about the people out your window.

—Annie

I laughed and filled the bowl with cereal, poured the milk and ate as I took notes on what was happening in front of me. In this small part of town, no one ever talks to anyone else unless they're visiting. It's comical, or maybe sad. I don't even know any of my neighbors. Perhaps living in Gramercy Park afforded me the pleasure of not having to meet anyone I didn't want to meet. My parents bought this house when I turned twelve and Athena, my sister, sixteen. We grew up in the beauty of the neighborhood. I remember days spent in the park, playing with my best friends, Sam, Billy and Sara. I laughed as I thought of the day we all picked flowers and sold them. It was on that one Saturday in the fall when the gates were swung open and the great unwashed

were allowed entry into the park. I never knew what it meant back then, but us kids would sit and decorate our little booths where we sold our flowers. My parents gave the building to me when they moved to Italy and my sister Athena got married. It basically made me the most eligible bachelor in town, if I cared about such things.

Chapter Four

Marcello

From where I sat, I didn't have a direct view of the park, and what I saw past the gates was mostly covered up by foliage. So, I watched what went on around the what-seemed-like-a-prison in front of me.

I saw six people walking their beasts, which Annie referred to as dogs. Only one of the dog walkers caught my attention. He was wearing really loose grey shorts and a grey and green T-shirt with a Spartan on the chest. The man would greet every dog walker he came upon, almost as though it were a ritual of his while walking at this time every day. I also saw men and women in sweats running around the park, and three runners who I noted were running very slowly—they'll never get fit from those slow times. There were also two male and three female couples holding hands, four women pushing strollers, and an old lady walking around with a clipboard. It had been an exciting four hours.

Around lunchtime, a nice policewoman ticketed three cars in front of our building. I turned my head away when she gazed oddly upon my sitting and sipping coffee. I don't know why I cared what she'd think of me. *It's my balcony, my broken ankle.* Maybe she was trying to figure out why I looked so familiar.

When I got up to go to the bathroom, I noticed a man in an orange backpack sitting on a parked car. When I'd returned, he'd set up a canvas and was painting the park from the spot on the car. I didn't know if it was his car, but did it really matter? He wasn't very far from me and from what I could see, the painting wasn't that good—the proportions were all off. The colors lacked a certain city quality, and his trees looked as though they were bleeding, whereas the picture I painted in my head was of life living on the other side of the leaves.

That is what I saw. It was very structured and not artsy at all, save for that moment with the tug of war I had in my mind with the painter. As night came on, the artist packed up.

I called down to him, "Excuse me?"

He looked up and turned. "Hmmm?"

"Are you showing anywhere?"

He looked at his zipper, then back to me, shrugging.

“What’s your name? If I want to look up your work?”

“Finn Huck.” He turned and walked down the street.

“What kind of name is Finn Huck? It’s just Huckleberry Finn flipped around.” I turned back to the tablet and wrote, ‘Don’t look for the artist Finn Huck. He’s shit.’

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: True Colors – Jules Larson

2:30 pm

Sis, I'm sorry for what happened to you. I'm sorry that you had to go through all that pain. I can only hope that... I am just sorry. I was stupid showing off, and I learned my lesson, I'm so sorry. I don't even drive much anymore. I moved to New York so I wouldn't have to get behind the wheel. I feel it's my duty to train the dogs; it's... what I was called to do. I still remember that day when you got Buster, and you were so happy. The way he came when you called him and he licked your fingers. It was like you were seeing all over again. Norah, I wish it had happened to me; I wish I were in your place. And because I'm not, I will do everything in my power to bring that same love to the world.

Chapter Five

Marcello

I'd been told by Dr. Harlan that the ankle would probably be healed in six weeks, but could take as long as twelve. I knew I didn't have twelve weeks of sitting on a balcony in me. I was used to movement; sitting in the same spot, barely able to walk around, was driving me crazy. Hell, I was bored the second day, and by the third I was calling the park regulars by code names. But what else did I have to do?

There was this old woman who was The Prison Guard. She'd walked around the park, tapping her key on the gate as she'd walk. She had a clipboard in her hand and would stop patrons to verify they had a key, even though she saw them every day. And every day the people she asked would have a silly look on their face—she'd just asked them the day before, but they would humor her just the same. There was the lesbian couple, who I was pretty certain didn't live together. They always entered the park from opposite ends, but would laugh when they reached the gate at the same time and reach for the knob at the same time. The blonde one always giggled first. It was a ritual, I imagined. There was Patches, the cat that always managed to get into the park no matter how many times The Gardener threw him out. And there was Orange Backpack, and Beady, and Big Sweater, and Stains. But my favorite, of course, was The Spartan, the guy with the dog.

The Prison Guard actually walked across the street today, and was knocking on doors. When she got to the gate at the top of the stairs down to my door, I started to get up, but then noticed The Spartan had arrived.

It was too nice of a view to leave. The Spartan bent down to pet his dog—the most well-behaved dog I'd ever seen, but then... It was a dog. Dogs... No matter how I tried, the bad memories wouldn't go away. All it took was seeing one and I remembered the time—remembered how I used to love playing with Toby, but how my fears far outweighed my sadness for Uncle Mike, who lost his companion.

I wiped at the tears that had sprung up and saw the old woman walking determinedly down the stairs towards my door. I called out to her before she could get further and knock on the door. Apparently, she was taken aback by the fact that someone would actually be sitting outside enjoying the air.

“How may I help you?” I leaned over the balcony and shouted to her.

The Prison Guard appeared under the balcony and scowled at me, looked at her clipboard and then back up at me. “I’m just verifying that you are Marcello Morosini and that you have one key only.”

“Yes, ma’am. One key only.”

She checked off a box, and turned away from me, I raised up onto my crutches for her, but she stalked off to the building with the elaborate ironwork next door. There was no answer, and as she left, I made notes about The Prison Guard’s strange visit in my notepad. She’d had pearls around her neck—thick fake white pearls. I was pretty certain I could see the plastic tabs on them.

I shook my head and went back to watching the park. I could have sworn The Spartan was looking my way, but probably not. The man knelt before the dog, rubbing its face. They looked so cute together, but still I couldn’t get over the possibilities of what that dog could do to my face. It looked like at any moment he could bite those hands. Most dogs that were walked in the neighborhood were little yappy things, that if they weren’t on a leash would get run over by the first cab that barreled down the street.

Beardy came around the corner, his loud radio swinging at his hip. It was the first time that he would be passing the dog/man duo. I was afraid for The Spartan, and hoped the sudden loud music wouldn’t cause the dog to bite his master. But nothing happened. They passed, and everyone ignored each other like proper New Yorkers.

Later that afternoon, thinking of The Spartan, I began looking into cynophobia, the fear of dogs, to see if I could do anything, or learn anything about how to get over it. I found a video, The Dog Whisperer, about dog trainer, Cesar Millan, and I printed out articles on everything from getting a puppy, to watching dogs play, to doing what I’d been doing—just watching.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Foolish Love – Jules Larson

7:15 pm

Sis, I saw him looking at me again, the guy on the balcony by the park. This is so dumb; I’m trying to figure out why he looks so familiar. Finn called the other night, left a message that

consisted of, "I wish I hadn't been so..." and then he hung up. Truth be told, Norah, it was the best thing to have ever happened. I mean, what the hell was I thinking? An artist? And he was just a cute guy who nine times out of ten couldn't even do what he set out to do. Couldn't sell his art, which, by the way, was the worst shit I ever saw. I mean, why do we do stupid things?

Today I took Finn-the-dog with me to the gated park. We ran around it and I got to thinking, he's a Seeing Eye dog, he needs to deal with all sorts of shit that's thrown at him.

But, he shouldn't have had to deal with what I put him through. I think part of the reason I even started seeing the artist was because I thought it was cute that his name was Finn. Dumb, huh? I should have known that he was bad news when Finn-the-dog backed away from him. I think the foolish-love side of me was so excited by the fact that I found the one man in NYC named after my dog. I need to use my head the next time I find a possible partner. One who loves dogs as much as I do, one who wants to be happy. Hell, maybe even get married.

Chapter Six

Marcello

On a warm, sunny day about two weeks after my accident, Annie brought out plates full of sushi, and sat with me on the balcony. “You have been missing this, my friend, I know.” She looked across the table at the printouts while I was watching the tail end of the video by Cesar Millan. “What’s all this?”

I looked up from the video and sighed. “I saw a guy in the park, around the park. He’s here every morning when I set up, at lunchtime when I bring out my sandwich, and usually at night when I’m getting ready to pack it all up. And, well, he’s fucking hot.”

“How come I’m only just learning about this now?” Annie shoved a ginger-covered unagi into her mouth.

“Because it wasn’t worth mentioning. I’d approach him, but he’s got this big dog and uhm...” I took a bite of unagi and slowly chewed. “When I was about nine, I’d been playing with my Uncle Mike and his dog Toby in his backyard. Well, Mike threw the ball and we raced to the wall to retrieve it. Toby got there first and I grabbed the ball out of his mouth. I remember laughing and rolling around on the ground. This big blue-black Great Dane slobbered all over me, nudged me with his head, tried to take the ball away from me, and I laughed and laughed, and then I hear the scream. It’s my mother. She screamed bloody murder and Toby bit down, but not on the ball, on my head. I was crying so hard, mostly because I was in shock, and I saw my Uncle Mike kicking Toby. It was scary. My mother was screaming so loud, screaming that there was too much blood, and that I was probably already dead. But, I wasn’t. I was saying *Mom... Mom... Moth... Mother*, but she couldn’t hear me over her own screams.”

We both sat in silence for a couple seconds, Annie with this horribly sad look, as she studied my face.

I pointed to above my eyelid and behind my left ear. “These are the scars. I had twenty-one stitches in my head. He’d clamped down pretty hard, but I was fine. No permanent damage, nothing. It would never have happened if Mother hadn’t screamed and caused a scene. Uncle Mike took Toby in to be put down.

It was sad for everyone, even me, because I really loved Toby. But, ever since then I get so scared whenever I see a dog. I have dreams of being chased down the streets of New York with dogs yapping at my heels. Just waiting for the next bite from the next dog and knowing it'll take me down."

Annie had finished her plate. She pulled out one of the takeout menus and began folding it. "I never told you I do origami to calm down, did I?" She slowly went through the motions, making the folds that would turn the black and white paper into the cutest little wiener dog origami. "I give you your first pet. It won't bite, I promise, though it might sting if you get a paper cut. It wants to love you." She smiled and picked up her plate and offered to take mine. As she walked into the kitchen, I saw The Spartan walk down the street to the gate of the park.

I half-whispered, half-yelled, "Oh my god! Annie, he's here. Just walked into the park."

She ran out to the balcony as fast as she could and glimpsed the man in shorts closing the gate behind him. "Do you want me to be your Grace Kelly and go investigate?"

I looked at her. "What?"

"It's just that this feels so much like *Rear Window*, except you're in the front window and you're spying on your garden instead of your back neighbors." She laughed, "Anyway... I'll be right back."

She ran back through the living room, down the stairs and was out the front door before I could stop her. I watched as she skipped across the street in next to no time. She got to the gate and turned around to look at me, holding out her hands to show that she'd forgotten the key to the gate. Annie shrugged and pulled out her phone. I didn't know what she was doing until I saw her take a picture of the sign on the gate, and then a selfie of herself with The Spartan over her shoulder. She was a shrewd woman, taking clandestine photos of the dog owner. He was getting closer, but then at the last second The Prison Guard walked up beside Annie, nudged her out of the way, and demanded The Spartan remove himself from the park. Annie stepped back and began filming with her phone.

"Sir, who let you in the park?"

"I did." He knelt beside his dog.

The woman glanced around him—looking for what, I couldn't tell—but she was so obviously angry. "I demand that you leave. If you got yourself in, you can get yourself out, correct?"

The Spartan rose, in his uniform of baggy shorts and college T-shirt, producing a key. He unlocked the gate.

Annie jogged back and into the building. I couldn't pull myself from the scene. I watched The Prison Guard hand him a paper. I didn't like the worried look on her face as Annie plopped down in the seat across from me. She played the video for me on her iPhone, and even on its little speaker I could tell The Spartan had a very sexy voice. Then she enlarged the photo, pointing to the yellow harness on the dog. "Guide Dogs of America... He's blind."

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Can I Cross Your Mind - Trent Dabbs

5:45 pm

Dear Italian man on the balcony, I saw you again today—three times, in fact. I think you only spied me once, but strange things happen. Finn was walking slowly beside me when your friend took the pictures and filmed the fiasco with that old bitch. She ticketed me for taking my dog into the park. I've got a case, and so I won't have to pay.

I also saw your picture on the news. I watched and re-watched everything that happened. I also talked to my old buddy back east about what the translation was. People said you were shouting something about your amigo, but I hope it was your boyfriend you were arguing with. I know that's cruel, but you are so beautiful I find myself not going anywhere near the park and just standing at the edge, teaching Finn small prompts so I can look up at you. I want you to see me just so that I can cross your mind.

It's really stupid writing in my journal about hoping I would cross your mind. I did discover that your name is March Morosini. I'm in love... with your name, with your face, with your sad broken ankle story. I wonder if I can get the courage

to approach you. At least you're successful, unlike some of the losers I've had. Though, with a broken ankle you're probably not going to be reporting anything for a while. Oh well, more time to spend with me until you are finally able to walk. I know, I know... like we'll ever meet. You've probably got bigger thoughts on your mind than the dog trainer who passes by your balcony every day, sometimes three times a day.

Chapter Seven

Marcello

Rituals were what I'd picked up on while peeping on my neighbors. I began to daydream about the people I saw and had elaborate fantasies about them. I even dreamed up wild stories about The Prison Guard and The Gardener, of the trio that had the picnic lunch, of the lesbian couple who met and hid in the shrubs to kiss.

Oh, and then there was The Spartan, with his muscled arms and thick chest, and legs I imagined wrapped around my waist.

I kept notes for Annie on the people I saw.

The Prison Guard – Sharp, fake-pearled lady, old and rigid, holds a clipboard and stops all frivolity from occurring around the park or inside.

The Gardener – Older man, with panama hats and an apron full of gardening tools.

Pinkie – Cute little old lady in a pink cashmere sweater.

Bruises – Runner with lash marks on back.

Runners – four of them, two men and two women who run/walk at various start times. They seem to run around the park only, as I've timed them and they either run a fast run, which I doubt, or the security of a park, even one they can't run in, makes them more comfortable.

Leather – Every night for two hours leans against the fence outside my building, in full leather regalia, with chains that make a tinkling sound when he walks.

Sweatshirt – She comes from somewhere near my building, not in it, as I'm the only one here save you. She kneels at Leather's feet and places her head on the toe of his boot. I've assumed she's got her tongue there.

Beardy – He masturbates in the morning in front of my building. I've never seen any police come and stop him, so it's

a ritual everyone on this side of the block who wakes up at four a.m. experiences.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Relax (New York Mix) - Frankie Goes to Hollywood

12:30 am

Sis, this Italian, he's dreamy. Did I just use the word dreamy? I think I'm losing my mind. When I heard Finn on the voicemail, I took Finn-the-dog on another run down to the park. It was late, nearing midnight. It was foolish, I know, thinking about it now. I stopped right in front of his building and he wasn't on the balcony. What was I thinking? That he'd be there for me every minute of every day? I hung my head and sat against the gate, waiting to see if he'd appear. There was a light in the basement apartment, then another light on the third floor, and I glimpsed him hobbling to what I can assume is the bathroom. I haven't gone over the edge yet, Norah. No floor plans to help me track him. Hmm. No, not there yet. But, I perked up and so did Finn. He lifted his head from my lap and we watched the Italian move unsteadily through the room. He'd obviously gone this route several times, as it appeared like he had tables and chairs moved to just the right place for his hands.

From where I sat, I could just make out his beautiful body. He had on pajama bottoms and nothing else, just moving from the bed to the opposite room. I couldn't help myself but sit and watch, and about ten minutes later he slowly walked to the bedside and then an undignified plop onto the bed. I laughed a little—what can I say, it was cute. I sat for another minute before I stood up and walked back to the apartment, knowing my Italian was safe in bed.

Chapter Eight

Marcello

There are several ways I like to get woken up. One used to be the feel of Speletsky's hard body pressed against my own. Another was the tingly feeling of a tongue following the line of my body. But, the way I was woken up every day this week, the piercing shriek of my house phone, was not one of them. I remembered making the ring tone high and sharp because I used to work on various floors throughout the house, and wanted to hear the phone wherever I stood. Now I hated it; in fact this morning was the last straw. I unplugged the phone from the wall, took a deep breath and felt calm for about ten minutes. Then my cell phone started twittering and beeping, and my email pinged on the computer.

It had been five weeks since the break, and there was an article in the tabloid naming names and outing me—or trying to. The emails were from concerned friends, coworkers and reporters trying to get the inside scoop. Even Annie commented when she came in with a tray of food and about ten newspapers.

"Well, you got a royal fuck up going on here." She handed me the coffee from her favorite shop.

"Oh? I thought things were going splendid. A broken ankle, almost six weeks holed up in my house, in love with a man who doesn't know I exist, trying to get over my fear of his vicious beast. What more could go wrong?"

Annie stood and stared at me like I was an idiot, then pointed to the newspapers. "You've been outed."

"Annie, they can't out the willing. Besides, my bosses knew I was gay when they hired me. I've been out since I got caught sucking off the water polo captain, Malcolm, in high school," I said, laughing.

"Yes, well that may be all good with you, but they're speculating that you were cussing about your..." she made little quote motions with her fingers, "'friend', if you know what I mean."

"I was cussing about Speletsky. He texted that I was a fucking faggot. I told you that."

“Well, Hank caught you on film, remember? Nice Italian, even with the New York accent. Your father would be proud. Your mother would not.” She laughed and opened the *Village Voice*.

Noah

DogLoverNoah.wordpress.com

Song of the day: Wicked Game – Phillip Phillips

4:30 pm

Dear Sis, I've fallen in love with that Italian who sits on a balcony in Gramercy Park. I see him every day. Soon he might notice me, since Finn and I have been almost stalking him. I know that sounds crazy. According to what the tabloids are saying now, he got in some sort of text fight or something with his boyfriend, and started cussing in Italian right before he was caught in a tackle. So, at least I'm 98% certain he's gay. I've decided I'm going to introduce myself. In a few days I'm taking Finn to the Center. I'll take the time to do it later that day. I'll never know if I don't do it. He's just so perfect. I'm talking nonsense, I know. I love you, Norah. Someday I'll have the courage to say this to your face.

Chapter Nine

Marcello

Annie, you wanted me to document the city before me. I have been sitting on this balcony at all hours of the day. Thank you for my constant pet companions, by the way. The stuffed Great Dane you brought the other day was just named Toby. And I've watched the video with Cesar Millan every night before bed, and listened to tapes on how to get over my fear. Now that the cast is off, if The Spartan is still around, I will walk out, look into the eyes of the vicious beast, the dog, and introduce myself. I know it's what I need.

So, I started this daily ritual where I hobble slowly to the balcony, pour a cup of coffee and spend the day notating the people I see. And thank you for encouraging me to write again. It's been interesting. The people in New York, though not like any other place in the world, are so very similar. We all have these rituals we do. The same runners I mentioned that first day, are still out running at five, and a couple of them at six, every morning. They are all still running slowly, but one of the four has actually lost weight and she runs with a new spring in her step.

The Prison Guard starts her rounds at seven forty-five and meets with The Gardener. They walk together around the inside of the park. She picks up trash and places it in a doggy poop bag, while she orders the man about and tells him how to do his job—at least that's what I'm assuming she's talking about as she points to shrubs and flowers, and the tree in front of my balcony. I've thought of getting binoculars so I could trace her whereabouts, but that makes me feel a little stalkerish. Do you think that if I were a photographer, I could use the Jimmy Stewart telephoto lens trick he utilized in *Rear Window*?

Hey, I could watch The Spartan that way too. Speaking of, he just showed in the park. You'd think I could come up with a better name for the man I've fallen in love with from afar, the

man I'm willing to do everything in my power to change the way I feel about dogs for. I think I'm going to start calling him The Lover, since I'm in love.

I stopped writing to watch him walk across the park. Our eyes met and I couldn't break away. I had butterflies in my stomach and it took everything in my power not to cry that he noticed me. Or, at least, I'm almost positive he did. Which would mean he's not blind. I finally looked back down and picked up my tablet. If he could see me, I didn't want to be caught staring.

Annie, if I didn't know he was blind, I would swear our eyes met just now.

I looked back up, but he was gone. I sighed, disappointed, and got back to writing to Annie.

He didn't have the dog with him, so maybe... wait...

There was a noise coming from right under me. "Annie? Are you moving things down there?" I leaned over the balcony, and there he was, arranging trashcans so that he could... Oh, holy shit, he was climbing up on top of them. He *did* see me. Oh god... I'm scared. No, I'm not. Oh, please.

He shakily raised his hand to me, so I leaned over and grasped it, confused about what was happening, nervous and excited all at the same time. And then... *and then*, he lifted his lips to my hand and kissed my knuckles.

"I'm Noah Wright, and I think I'm falling for you."

And the words that came out of my mouth? "I thought you were blind." He laughed and started wobbling on top of the trashcan. "Get off of those. I'll come down to you." I walked as fast as I could; thank god I'd gotten the walking cast put on the other day. It was much easier to get downstairs. Faster than the fastest runner I'd seen, I opened the door to his beautiful, smiling face and gorgeous green eyes, sparkling under a tousled shock of black hair.

"I'm Marcello Morosini. My friend's call me March." In a crazy, impulsive move, I raised my hand to his face, slid my fingers behind his neck and pulled him to me. I could smell him, something spicy, as I lingered in his arms and slowly, gently, our lips made contact. It was soft and then it wasn't. It wasn't anything I'd have ever thought. It was so much better.

I looked around, behind him, at his feet, and up the stairs towards the street. "Where's your dog?"

“Oh, I turned Finn in to the Center. I was training him, and his training was over.”

“You aren’t blind, you’re a trainer...” And then I forgot about the dog as our bodies entwined once more. We stood there for what felt like hours, kissing, hugging, till I finally remembered I lived there.

Chapter Ten

To say it was a whirlwind romance would be completely true. I mean, it took us six weeks to finally lock eyes at the same time. It took stumbling through miscommunication from Annie with the Seeing Eye dog/blindness thing. Noah's a veterinarian, but currently writing freelance stories about training Seeing Eye dogs. He told me about his failed relationship with a stupid artist who nearly ruined all the training he'd done with Finn. I laughed when I heard the name of the dog and relayed the horrible artist that had painted the bleeding-leaves painting in front of my balcony. And we both said "Finn Huck!" at the same time. It was little moments like that that made me realize this might actually work.

Annie had to mysteriously go out of town the night after we met, and I asked him if he'd go with me to get the walking cast taken off and have a final check in. He helped me as best he could, and it was sweet. After the appointment, we went to lunch at Gramercy Tavern and sat at a table by the window to celebrate.

"Are you sure? It can be pricey and very visible."

Noah laughed and said, "I've got money and I want people to see you with me."

"You know, people might assume you are the guy from the initial break." I laughed nervously.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure they won't even think that. And even if they do, who cares? I'll be too busy staring into your beautiful eyes to notice them."

The lunch was amazing. There were photographers who captured the two of us, leaning in and leaving a kiss. It was weird to think I'd become someone noteworthy enough to take a picture of, all because of a stupid fall. And the fact that Noah really didn't seem to care? I walked away from that date on cloud nine. I think he knew what that kiss meant to me, what it would do to me, and when we got back to the townhouse, I was surprised we still had any clothes on when we reached the bedroom.

"Well, Dr. Harlan said I need to exercise." I laughed as we fell to the floor. Within seconds, there were hands and toes and fingers exploring, and kisses everywhere. The tip of my tongue slid circles around his navel and up to his

nipple; his hands slid down my back and over my ass. We were in unison, as though it was this practiced dance we'd done for years.

After, I led him to the bathroom where we stood in the shower, bathing each other, and the kisses... Oh, the kisses lasted forever. The embracing, the teasing and tickling, the loving.

The next morning, Noah brought me breakfast in bed and presented me with the *New York Post* open to page six, with a picture of the two of us, leaning in to kiss.

**Another Break for Morosini? Inquiring Minds Want to
Know Who the Mystery Man Is.**

"Do you think I should call them?" Noah climbed into bed beside me.

"Well, I hope your family is aware of your life." I laughed, then looked at him more seriously, "They are, aren't they? Oh god, did I royally fuck up..."

He stopped me from saying anything else with a hand over my mouth. "It's all right. My family knows. Though, I can't wait to see who calls."

Chapter Eleven

One morning at breakfast, Noah brought out some brochures on the Center along with coffee.

He knelt beside me and took my hand, kissing it just like that first time. “March, I know you’re frightened of dogs. The best way I’ve been told to get over the fear is to get a puppy of your own, to raise one. I’m willing to go slow with you and the puppy. We’ll go at your pace, let you pick out the one you want, the one you feel comfortable with.”

I sighed, kissed his hand and smiled. “All right, I’m ready for this. I know the dogs make you happy.”

“It’s not that they make me happy. I mean, they do, but it’s also because I feel responsible for what happened to my younger sister, Norah.” He sat in the chair beside me. “I was sixteen and a half, and had just gotten my license and a rusted red Volkswagen bug. It was a sixty-nine,” he chuckled. “I loved that number, even then. Anyway, there had been a blizzard that came through town, but I volunteered to take my sister to school. She was only twelve. Things went well at the beginning, because they’d salted the roads that morning, but I got brazen and started showing off for Norah. I took my hands off the wheel and was steering with my knees when we hit some black ice. I lost control of the car and we flipped like four times, our seat belts barely holding us in place. When we stopped, we were upside down and Norah was screaming. At least we were alive.”

It was my turn to kneel beside him. I placed my head on his hand and kissed his knuckles.

“We later learned that Norah had broken bones in her face, a traumatic brain injury, and damage to her pituitary gland and optical nerves. She lost her sight because of it. It was so unfair, because I just had a broken leg and hand—nothing wrong with my brain, nothing wrong with my eyesight. I feel it’s my duty to give to the world what I took from Norah. I’ll never be able to make it up to her for what happened. When I saw how happy Buster, her Seeing Eye dog, made her, I vowed to do the same thing for as many other blind people as I can. It’s silly, I know. I can’t save them, and I can’t save Norah. I just need to do this.”

I stood, pulled him into my arms and kissed him madly. “I can’t wait to meet Norah and our new puppy.”

The End

Author Bio

I've grown as a writer since Resistance, my submission for last year's anthology. I see many more stories in my future, and thanks to my two beta readers, I've gotten the confidence to write again.

Contact & Media Info

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FIGHTING DIRTY

By Olley White

Photo Description

The photo is of a man in his early twenties. Naked from the waist up, his dark hair is damp and tangled and his olive skin mud-splattered. With dark, dark eyes, perfect full lips and a defined, smooth chest, he is truly beautiful—but there is something haunting about him. His brooding gaze, trained on something just behind the photographer, shows determination... and maybe just a little bit of sorrow.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I won the tournament, he came in second...

I didn't even compete to win, but once he was my final opponent, I had to give all I have in me, to prove to him I'm worthy.

I always admired him from afar, but dreamed about him up close and this tournament was my chance to get near him. All I ever wanted was for him to get to know me and maybe, just maybe, something could grow? But I guess I blew it already, given the dirty looks he sends me...

Please give my guys a HEA... otherwise, feel free to make their story as hot and dirty as you want :)

Sincerely,

Tina

Story Info

Genre: historical, other world

Tags: slow burn/UST, fighting, class differences, first time, enemies to lovers

Word Count: 7,991

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Acknowledgements

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A big thanks to Natasha Snow for my beautiful cover—I love it hard.

Of course I can't thank my husband and children enough; they have to put up with me when I'm not fully present in this land. Many a tea's been burnt because I've "just had to get this idea down". Thanks guys, I love you so, so much.

FIGHTING DIRTY

By Olley White

Ethan

Ethan Reed slammed his opponent down and the crowd cheered, he'd been caught out before though, so he didn't let his gaze falter. Sure enough, as the chanting started, a mud-covered hand shot out, reaching for Ethan's ankle. Moving just fast enough, he avoided being pulled to the ground beside his winded challenger and waited for the horn to sound, indicating the end of this round. After endless moments, the shrill resonance of victory filled the air in a loud, continuous blast. More roars erupted from the mass of people watching and waves of relief washed over Ethan. His arm was yanked into the air by the tourney judge, no care taken to ease the aches and injuries he'd accrued. Banners of all colours waved in the burning sun, blues and golds from supporters of the King and every colour imaginable representing the ruling houses of each province.

Ethan forced a smile to his face and waited. As soon as his arm was released he went to the victors' tent and gulped at a pitcher of water. His body was battered and bruised, his side ached and his arm felt as if it was on fire—ale was what he really craved, but he knew he couldn't afford to have his wits dulled. He was in the final battle, he'd made it this far, but judgment, not luck, had been his guide. While others had relied on strength or reputation alone, he'd studied his opponents, worked out their strengths and weaknesses, their foibles and blind-spots. Everyone had them; even the strongest of adversaries had flaws. So, as soon as he knew his way out of this goddess-awful life was to win the tournament, he'd set about doing just that. The prize? A place in the King's army—places usually reserved only for the rich, for the sons and daughters of the noble and wealthy. Peasants were expected to farm, to labour, to bow down to those of higher class. They lived in one-room mud huts that offered no privacy, and they were to do whatever the noble classes wished. They had barely any more rights than animals, and the luck of each settlement depended on the man or woman in charge.

Some were more fortunate, they were ignored by and large, left to carry on with the daily grind of their lives, producing food and heat bricks and other

necessities that were demanded of them. For some though, luck was a word that may as well have not been invented. They were owned by their nobles, every last hair on their heads belonged to them and no violation was too great. Some worked them beyond exhaustion, beyond endurance, beyond life, discarding dead bodies with no more care than the livestock they slaughtered for food. Yet this still was not the worst type of aristocracy. The worst, the very worst, enjoyed humiliating and using their peasants for their own pleasure and enjoyment. No act was too bawdy or too risky or too degrading and games of humiliation went on in never-ending cycles, with rivalry between the ruling classes to see who could do the worst. Yet, as long as they weren't revolting and stayed loyal to him, the King did nothing. This tourney was Ethan's chance to get out—and more than that, to maybe make a change.

Forcing himself to stop drinking, Ethan slowly checked over his injuries. His legs were fine, but once he'd scraped some of the mud away from his torso, he could see a darkening of the skin across his side. He applied pressure with his hands, testing the extent of the damage, and while it was painful, he was pretty sure he'd not cracked any ribs. His left arm was a different matter. The dull ache turned into fiery tendrils of pain that spiked down his arm whenever he tried to move it. He'd felt like this before, not six moons gone, when he'd tried to catch a neighbour's bull about to slip out of its pasture. The pain had been much the same and the healer had said his shoulder had become misaligned and shown him how to hit it against a wall to get it back in position. He gritted his teeth and went to the broad oak pole in the centre of the tent. Before he could think what he was doing he slammed into the post, a hiss of pain escaping as he did. Agony speared through his shoulder and then it was gone, replaced by a throbbing ache. *That* he could live with; he knew once he got back in the circle, and was pumped and focused on the fight, even that pain would fade. And truly, what was a bit of pain compared to a lifetime away from Lord Granston—the most vindictive, cruel nobleman of them all?

Reassured that he'd sustained no injuries that would prevent him from winning, Ethan started to slowly loosen his limbs and relax his mind. He sifted through the other possible candidates for the final; he was pretty sure it would be Wily he was fighting. Wily was, just as his name suggested, cunning. Like Ethan, he watched and used the knowledge he gained to his advantage. He was also not above sly manoeuvres, those not outlawed as such but considered dirty and shameful by the masses, particularly the nobility. Wily frankly didn't care and, by that standard alone, Ethan had figured him to be his final opponent.

Music drifted in from outside the tent, pipes and bells accompanied by the bawdy laughter and drunken singing of peasants allowed a day out of their usual drudgery. One day every five years was all they got. In his fifteenth earth year, when last the tourney had taken place, Ethan had sworn he would be its next winner. He would be the next one to escape this life. And so it was—one more fight between him and his freedom, or the closest thing to freedom he would ever get. Then, above the noise of the masses, the horn sounded again. A long deep note followed by two short trills. Time for the final round. An armoured man pulled back the flaps of the tent, his muscled stomach encased in the iron of the King's men, tanned flesh showing at the sides, thick thighs and long legs not hidden at all. It was a feast for the eyes. Ethan couldn't wait until he wore this uniform and spent every day with men in the same attire. The final low blow of the horn sounded and Ethan silently followed the guard out. The crowd erupted in cheers as he made his way to the circle.

The sun was high in the sky, a burning, blistering mass of heat, but the ground underfoot bore witness to the rain that had fallen in the preceding weeks. Ethan didn't mind, the mud that splattered his body saved his skin from the burning sun and was a good aid to felling opponents, especially those who relied on strength. The boggy ground had been more friend than foe these past two days. He stood in the circle, eyeing the ground for the muddiest parts while he waited for his opponent. Another fanfare and cheer from the crowd and Ethan watched for the dark curls and slender build of Wily to appear from behind the guards of the other victor's tent. Instead, the tall frame and cropped blond hair of a far too familiar figure entered the ring and Ethan felt his heart sink. Bile welled in his stomach, swallowing deeply he forced it down and made rapid calculations in his head.

Charlie Fitzwilliam, Fitz to all and sundry, nephew of Lord Granston but his uncle's polar opposite in every single way. While Granston was mean and conniving and one of the most sadistic men to ever walk the goddess' earth, Fitz was kind and caring and spoke to the bottom classes as if they were human beings. He asked the farmers their opinions about the crops and livestock. He thanked the heat labourers as they dug the black heat bricks from the ground, which were used by the nobles to stave off the frigid winter. He didn't seem to see the differences between the bottom classes, the merchant classes and the nobility—or if he did, he chose to ignore them as much as possible. He was the most valiant man Ethan had ever known and he was the one who had caused endless sodden patches in Ethan's straw mattress each night.

“Ready,” bellowed the tourney judge. Fitz nodded, a look of sheer determination on his face that Ethan had never seen before. His green eyes glinted in the sun, his mouth set in a firm line across his face. Even without his easygoing charm, he was easily the most beautiful man Ethan had ever seen.

“Ready,” roared the judge again and Ethan shook himself realising they were waiting for his consensual nod. Dazed, he nodded, yet all the while his head was screaming, *No, no I'm not ready for this fight!* A bell rang loud and clear and Fitz slowly edged towards him. Ethan stepped sideways, keeping the other man in his sight but not willing to make the first move, as his brain scrabbled to work out what the fuck was going on. Fitz didn't need to fight, he was one of the noble classes, he could join the King's army any time he wanted. Hell, Granston's family was so highly placed in the nobility, he could probably join the King's personal guardians if that was his desire.

The two men continued to circle each other, each waiting for their opponent to make the first move. Resolve was written across Fitz's face and the crowd began to hiss at the slow action. Catcalls and chants were uttered.

“This is a tourney not a fucking mating ritual,” jeered one man, raising his tankard in the air as others around him hooted in agreement. “If we wanted to see the love dance we'd just stand outside Mistress Viola's on a Friday night.” Laughter tumbled from the crowd and several of Mistress Viola's best prostitutes whooped along with them. Keeping his eyes on Fitz, Ethan tried not to be distracted, that would be his downfall, he knew. Luckily though, he had blocked out the crowd enough that, even if his favourite of Mistress Viola's men were standing there, he would not have noticed.

Patience is your friend, he told himself, refusing to be drawn in to make the first move. Those who made the first move were far less likely to win, in his studied opinion.

“C'mon Fitz,” the high squeaky voice of the goat herder's lady called, and the sentiment was echoed by the deep-throated call of her son, Brendan. Why were people from *his* hamlet in the crowd, cheering on a noble? Then it hit Ethan why Fitz was fighting. Everyone eligible to fight could, and, once they'd registered to do so, if any ill befell them before the tourney, they were allowed to ask for a replacement. The sticking point was that the replacement had to be the same age—and generally everyone of eligible age was fighting already. A one-in-a-million chance to better yourself, the only chance you'd get, was not to be sneezed at, so finding anyone who would be willing to take your place

was virtually impossible. All your peers would be fighting and nobody above the bottom class would be interested. Except, apparently, the generous-to-a-fault Fitz. Brendan, the goat herder, had been suffering from the sweating sickness, Ethan recalled, as he moved his feet slowly through the boggy ground. Although he'd recovered, Brendan's strength was diminished—Fitz wouldn't have liked to see this injustice happen. Ethan knew enough of him to understand that.

It seemed luck favoured Ethan today, for Brendan's calls distracted Fitz enough that he let himself be swayed by his thankless task and made a move. He stepped towards Ethan and grabbed his upper arms, squeezing tightly and pulling him down. Using his status to intimidate must have been all that got Fitz this far because Ethan effortlessly kicked the other man's legs from under him and knocked him to the ground. He followed him down, knees straddling Fitz and pinning his arms above his head.

Oh fucking goddess, Ethan thought, for, even as soft mud squelched beneath his legs and Fitz bucked against him trying to throw him off, all the blood in his body started to drain south. He leaned his weight forward, aware of nothing but the bulge grazing his groin and the hard muscles of the other man's stomach. Vaguely, somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear the crowd counting down with the judge. Ethan needed to keep Fitz pinned for a twenty count in order to win the first set, but all he could think of was the hot body beneath him and the grass-green eyes glaring up at him. He tried to take a deep breath to clear his mind but Fitz wriggled again, using his strength to try and throw Ethan off. Fitz pushed at the arms that had his own pinned down and this was Ethan's saving grace. At the force, the dull ache in his shoulder turned into a blaze of pain that drew his thoughts away from the hot, solid body beneath him and back to the task at hand. Forcing through the pain, Ethan returned the pressure, and, as the crowd counted five, four, three, two, one, he focused purely on winning this round. Now was not the time for lust, now was his only ever chance at this. Now he had to remain centred.

The horn blew to signal the end of the round and Ethan finally allowed himself to move off of Fitz. As soon as the muscled body slipped from under him, he felt bereft. Rolling his shoulder to loosen the joint, he grimaced through the throbbing and stood back at the opposite side of the circle from Fitz. People from his hamlet were repeating his name, he might be the only one to actually leave the hell they called home, but it would feel like a victory to them all. One of *them* had gotten out. One of *them* was bettering himself. Some of the goat

herder's family were calling Fitz's name, but mostly jeers were thrown in his direction—niceness didn't count when you were preventing one of theirs from winning.

The bell rang again and Ethan moved swiftly to the centre. This was the time to make the first move, Fitz would be dazed and reassessing after his loss in the first round; he'd be expecting the cautious start from before. Heading straight for Fitz, Ethan swung his leg out, hoping to sweep his opponent's feet away as before. But Fitz was quicker than Ethan had anticipated and moved sharply right, avoiding Ethan's kick and grabbing hold of him, pulling him into his chest, using his extra height and strength to his advantage. Even as Ethan was cursing his own slowness and twisting in order to break Fitz's grip on him, his heart started thumping harder at the closeness of the other man. Fitz wrestled him closer still and grabbed him in a bear hug. Ethan's heart banged in his chest as he struggled to get free. A twist, a bend of the knee, then soft mud squidged under Ethan's back.

Before Fitz could pin him fully, Ethan bucked and flipped, trying to hold Fitz as he had done in the last set. But slimy mud oozed under his hands and he couldn't grip properly. In a determined move, Fitz flipped him again, holding him flat beneath the full length of his body. Strong forearms restrained him as hands gripped his wrists. Fitz was a big man, burly and with enough bulk to make Ethan's efforts pointless. After just seconds, he stopped struggling, conserved his energy for the next round, and tried to ignore the honey-mead-sweetened puffs of breath that wisped across his face and the mud-streaked nipples that brushed against his. He tried not to see his own desire reflected in Fitz's eyes as their bodies lay heavily together. It was probably just his imagination, a trick of the light, a futile glimmer of hope that was all of his own making.

His heart thumped in time with the crowd counting down and Fitz moved his head slightly so he was staring straight into Ethan's eyes. For a moment, time stopped. For a moment, *everything* became those bright emerald eyes that were laced with an unmistakable look of lust. For a moment, the crowd disappeared and there was only him and Fitz and want. Then the horn blew and while Ethan had virtually forgotten the who and why of everything, apparently Fitz hadn't. He rolled off Ethan and raised his arms to the cheering crowd, victor of this round.

The aroma of beer and cheap, smoked meat wafted across the circle, and the crowd hummed a steady background noise in Ethan's head. One all; the score

echoed through his brain, repeating and repeating as he tried to prepare himself for the final round. It was the first time he had lost in the whole competition. He'd not had to complete a third round yet. It was because he'd been unprepared for Fitz, he told himself as he circled the edge of the ring warily. It was because he hadn't studied him, didn't know his strengths and weaknesses, his techniques. He acknowledged the lies almost as soon as he'd thought them—none of that was throwing him off this fight. Lust was to blame, pure and simple.

Lust was all, was everything: the feeling of that solid muscled body on top of his, the cropped golden hair, and the piercing green eyes. The perfect lips and hot breath that made him yearn to be kissed. The broad, smooth chest and the trail of hair that led beneath his leather half trousers. It was lust that wracked his body and he could not—*would not*—lose this tourney because of wanton desire. With all the mental strength he possessed, he pushed away all of those thoughts and concentrated purely on Fitz being his opponent.

As soon as the bell rang, Ethan moved. Quick and slick and down low he bumped Fitz, pushing to where he knew the ground would be in his favour. Feeling the roughness of turf under the soles of his feet, he knew he was backing Fitz into the mud. Fitz tried to push back, to fight against Ethan, but the oozing mud underfoot allowed him no purchase at all. Using his lesser strength and nature's own gift as an aid, Ethan did not let up. Planting his feet as firmly in the grass as he could, he kept the pressure up, feeling Fitz flailing to get a grip, to find somewhere he could get enough leverage to push back. Nothing was there though. Ethan had angled him to the perfect spot and, as Fitz's feet sank slowly into the mud he was unable to keep his grip firm. His opponent's pushing changed to clinging as the ground slid underneath him and he fell with a splash into the mud pit. Ethan felt the wind knock out of Fitz as he landed on top of him, and while the other man struggled to gain his breath, Ethan had no problem keeping him pinned to the ground.

The twenty count was screamed loudly by the crowd, cheering and jeering and overwhelming support for Ethan drowned out the official's bellowing voice. *Nine*. The crowd yelled as alertness reasserted itself in Fitz's eyes. *Eight*. And Fitz looked at Ethan, his face an unreadable mass of emotion. *Seven*. Resignation reigned—Ethan needed this more than him, it was as readable in his expression as if it were scribed in clay. Ethan had done it, he was going to win, he was moving out of this hellish life forever. He loosened his grip, not a

lot just a little. Eyes filled with both passion and compassion stared into his. A wordless conversation took place and the crowd disappeared. Then...

...Six... "C'mon Fitz." One lone voice called his name. The shrill, wearied tones of Brendan's mother—even Ethan could hear the hope that was draining from her voice as she called, the wish of her son leaving the only life she could afford him—echoed plaintively across the circle. Shutting his eyes to Ethan's gaze, Fitz started to fight again. *Five*. His arms moved and his body bucked, but Ethan was quick enough. Fitz may have the strength advantage, but for even the strongest of men it was nigh on impossible to move from the position Ethan had pinned him in. Especially with mud sucking him down.

Four. And determination writ itself across Fitz's face. *Three*. More calls from the goat herders, and pain fought determination to shape Fitz's features. Not physical pain, but the pain of an honourable man letting down those less fortunate than him. For less than a beat, Ethan faltered, hating the look on Fitz's face; then... *Two*. His name was chanted loudly. *One*. His move out of here was guaranteed.

The crowd roared, his name was called and sung and yelled from all corners of the crowd. The victory he had longed for, yearned for, pined for, these past five years, was his—but it was a victory more hollow than even his darkest thoughts would have allowed. Disappointment and disgust was all Ethan could see as Fitz opened his eyes and stared at him, and that tore his soul in two. Would it be worth leaving this life if that haunting disappointment and hatred was going to follow him—wouldn't that be a torture as bad as the drudgery to which he was accustomed?

The tourney judge was calling his name, the name of the victor, of the army's new man, but still they lay together entangled in the mud, Ethan willing the look of revulsion to be gone from Fitz. Instead, Fitz sighed and, shaking his head, pushed Ethan away. Limp, he let himself tumble to the ground until he was seized by two of Mistress Viola's favourite workers. He let them lead him to the judge, let the celebrations take place around him. He accepted the wine and gifts of food, accepted with the charm that showed him to be a soldier of the King's army. The King would not lower himself enough to come to a tourney, but some of the minor members of the royal house were in the regal tent and Ethan let himself be introduced to them. He knew he responded, he knew he did what was expected of him, but all he could think about was the disgust that had passed over Fitz's face.

Fitz

As Ethan was led away by Lady Viola's tempters, Fitz moved silently to the edge of the crowd, over towards Brendan's family. The gathering, emboldened by the ale, jeered at him, but he straightened his back and held his head high. He'd done his best, he'd fought his hardest. A tiny bit of him acknowledged that he'd nearly given in to the other man. As he'd lain trapped beneath the lithe body and stared at the smooth, dirt-splattered chest, then met the darkest, most beautiful eyes he'd ever encountered, he'd longed to run his hands through Ethan's tangled, mud-encrusted hair, desired nothing more than to pull him forward and taste him. To be able to press his lips against that luscious, full mouth and ravage it. For that small moment in time, he *hadn't* given his best; for that moment in time, he had been willing to give it all up for just a taste of the man on top of him.

Then, the voice of Brendan's mother had risen above the crowd, and his honour had marched firmly back into place. He had promised his best and he never went back on a promise. Closing his eyes against the beauty of the other man, he'd struggled against the heavy grip, wriggled to try and free himself, to try and get Brendan the place in the army he so yearned for. But time was against him and as the masses had counted down he'd known the fight was lost. The victor was named—Ethan; the name of the man who was stirring a longing in Fitz like no other had. Ethan, the man who had stolen victory from him.

He'd lain there, Ethan's heavy weight resting atop him, and he was aware of every piece of skin that touched, every muscle in both his body *and* Ethan's. Brendan's ma called out again, a hate-filled cry laced with the distraught hysteria only a parent could know. It cut him in two—he had let them down, he'd hesitated however briefly and lost the tourney, lost Brendan his chance at bettering himself. Disgust welled up inside, hatred at his lack of mental strength. He had become all he detested, a man who'd let lust rule over honour, a man who had abandoned his promise because of the stirring in his groin.

So Fitz continued towards the goat herder's family, telling himself those few seconds didn't count, that he'd lost fairly by then anyway—and he knew he would try and justify himself to them, because if they accepted his reasoning then maybe *he* could accept it too.

"Ya lost. To a reed collector. He's half frogman, al'ays in the water, and you lost to him." Spittle flew at him from between the rotten teeth of Brendan's ma.

"I did my best, Ma'am," Fitz said, bowing his head slightly, knowing her words came from grief.

"Ya lost," she said again, spitting in the muddy ground beside them.

"Leave it, Ma," Brendan said, tugging at his mother's arm. "Nothing changes for me. It ain't like I don't know this life."

"I told your da', I did, I told him this was a half-cocked idea. You mayn't be big Bren, but you're strong. You can wrestle the goats well 'nuff. You'd've squashed frog-boy and won, but your da' thought getting a noble to fight would be best. 'Ev'ryone'd be too scared to win 'gainst him,' he said. Ev'ryone 'cept a frog, mayhaps."

Fitz listened to the craggy-faced woman and her son, trying desperately to unravel what she was saying. If he'd got it right, Brendan didn't really need someone to fight for him, it had all been a falsehood. Cold rage wormed through him, any feeling of dishonour or shame he'd had dissipated. Without another word he turned away to find Ethan, the man who'd won and who deserved the victory.

He found him in the bathing tent. Mistress Viola's best were still beside him. The woman and man were both as naked as the day they were born and both had the most beautiful bodies imaginable. Only the best, the most desirable, were entitled to work for Mistress Viola. Ethan lounged in a chair, a tankard of ale in his hand, ignoring the ministrations of the two.

The woman stroked down his mud-caked chest and whispered in his ear. Ethan shook his head and muttered something. Though Fitz couldn't hear what, he guessed from the woman's pout and the way she moved away from the winner, that he wasn't interested. The male let a sly smile creep across his face—his interest in Ethan was plain for anyone to see. A cock any man would be proud of bobbed fully erect, inches away from Ethan's face. It was plain Ethan was more interested in this one of Mistress Viola's best, but still he pushed the man away. Ignoring the gesture, the man pawed at him, straddling his lap and wrapping his hands 'round the back of Ethan's neck, pulling him forward for a kiss.

A cold, jealous rage coursed through Fitz—a feeling unlike anything he'd ever felt before. He heard himself call out, heard the authority of the nobleman he was, and found himself striding through the tent towards the trio before he'd even stopped to think.

"You can leave now." He dismissed Mistress Viola's two, who, despite their pouts, knew their place in the class system.

"What if I don't want them to leave?" asked Ethan, sitting up straight in his chair, his fatigued eyes suddenly alive and glinting.

"Oh, I think you do." There was a dangerous edge to Fitz's voice that he didn't even recognise himself. Fitz, laughingly called 'Fitz-the-nice' by most of his uncle's court, didn't feel the slightest bit nice any more. He felt horny and possessive and he wanted Ethan all to himself.

"I said leave," he warned, and the two lurking in the open flap of the tent did. A guard poked his head in, but before he could ask the tourney winner if he was okay, Fitz spoke again. "You are to shut the flap and not let anyone in unless I specifically ask you to." The guard bowed his assent and let the canvas flaps of the tent fall closed, and then it was just Fitz and Ethan in the flickering candlelight of the bath tent.

Ethan

Heart pounding and limbs aching, Ethan watched as Fitz asserted his authority. They were of the same class now, or close enough to make no difference, but Ethan keenly felt the other man's influence in a way he'd not before. 'Fitz-the-nice' had an edge to his voice that Ethan liked—a lot. He felt his cock stir and was thankful he was still in his leather half trousers; he couldn't hide the tenting, but in the flickering candlelight it might not be too obvious.

He stared at Fitz, searching for the signs of disgust that had been etched on his face not a half turn of the clock earlier. Nothing was there to see but the kindness he usually wore... except... Ethan frowned, something *was* different. Brazenly, he continued to stare—he was this man's equal now, after all. With interest, he noted the wide pupils and slightly-parted lips. This was kindness laced with a little lust. Blood surged in his groin, throbbing and hardening him. Those eyes, fuck, those eyes...

"I am glad you were victor in the tournament," said Fitz, kneeling beside Ethan's chair. "You deserved to win, you fought well. The King's army will be a better place with a man like you in it." He placed his hand on Ethan's knee, slowly, as if he were afraid he would be rejected. Ethan shifted slightly, trying to loosen his trousers so he'd feel less confined. Hurt surged through his shoulder as he moved, and he let out a pain-filled groan.

“You’re hurt?” Fitz ignored Ethan’s shaking head and ran his hands lightly over the other man’s body as if trying to determine where the injury was. He only succeeded in making Ethan even more uncomfortable. “Tell me where?” Fitz asked. “Do you need a healer?”

“No, I’ll be fine. It’s just a few aches and pains.” Ethan’s breath hitched as he spoke, Fitz was so damn near. He remembered the first time he’d seen Fitz as a boy. He’d been following his uncle’s entourage through the market square when a boy of perhaps seven or maybe eight had been barrelled out of the way by the guards. The basket of fruit the boy had been carrying spilt and apples rolled everywhere. Once all the nobles had passed, Fitz stopped and came back to help Ethan and the boy pick up the fruit. There’d been many small encounters like this over the years, and Ethan remembered each one—he was under no illusion, though, that Fitz would know who he was.

“The hot water will be good for your aches. I can help you bathe.” Fitz’s voice faltered as he said the words. Reaching out, he caressed Ethan’s face as steam rose in spirals from the ornate porcelain bath behind him. This may be a camp, and only temporary, but the King’s representatives travelled with only the most desired of accessories. Fitz stood and popped the seal on a bottle of oil. He tipped it into the water and instantly the tent was filled with a sweet, vanilla essence. “Come Ethan, let me clean you.”

Entranced by the husky voice, Ethan stood and fumbled with the lacing of his half trousers. “Here.” Fitz moved his hands out of the way and pulled the laces for him. He loosened the top of the leather garment and placed his thumbs in, ready to ease them off. The two were standing so close. Ethan could see that the green of Fitz’s eyes wasn’t as clear as he’d thought, it was broken by tiny amber flecks, like glints of sun. Pale stubble, the same gold as his hair, graced his chin. Lips so perfectly shaped, plump and inviting, parted slightly and made Fitz look more wanton than anyone Mistress Viola had to offer. Ethan closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing. In, out. It was simple really, but with Fitz so close it seemed almost impossible.

Strong fingers pushed into the waist of the trousers and slid them off. Gripping the other man’s shoulders for balance, Ethan stepped out of them, unashamed of his hardened cock. Straightening, Fitz stood so close, so near, that his breath whispered across Ethan’s face; a promise so sweet, breathing itself became difficult. He leaned forward and Fitz wrapped his arms around him to pull him even closer.

“Aaah!” Ethan couldn’t stop the exclamation of pain.

“I’ve hurt you?” Concern laced Fitz’s eyes.

“It’s nothing, just a bruise. It will be fine when I’m in the water.” Ethan pulled away, embarrassed at giving into the pain. The water, when he got in, was like nothing he had experienced before. The bottom classes bathed in the river in the summer and just didn’t bathe in the winter. This, this was divine. Warmth wrapped around him, swirling over his limbs and up his torso. Fitz climbed in and knelt behind him, his rigid cock pressing into Ethan’s back, and unused to the forwardness of the upper classes, Ethan froze for a moment. But heat and desire invaded his sanity, stole his fear and helped him relax.

Tipping a little cleaning lather into his hands, Fitz ran them over Ethan’s body and Ethan sighed, sinking into his touch. Strong strokes swept up his back over his shoulders and down his front. A soft moan escaped from Ethan’s lips, his senses were overloaded as they had never been before. Vanilla and sweet, soft and smooth, hard and gentle. Candles flickered and shapes danced around the tent. Fitz’s strong hands rubbed Ethan’s shoulders and Ethan couldn’t help but groan at the nagging ache there.

“Here?” Fitz asked, rubbing in firm motions across the painful area. Long strokes up his neck, then down his arm, talented fingers gently plied the aching joint, soothing away the pain.

“Goddess, that feels good.”

“Oh, I can make you feel a whole lot better than this,” said Fitz softly into his ear, as he moved his hands back down and over Ethan’s stomach. Ethan groaned again—this time with desire. Love and lust were widely celebrated in all forms in both the noble and merchant classes, but those in the bottom class were too overworked and too exhausted to have more than the odd, occasional fumble to release any pent up feelings of lust. Unions in the bottom class were made solely to carry on bloodlines, not to satisfy sexual needs. Young couples who joined together with the intention of bringing children into the world were given easier duties by the higher classes—a way of enticing them into populating the bottom class. After all, the rich and entitled would always need people to toil for them. So, Ethan had never actually felt the loving touch of another man. Night visions causing a need for fresh sleeping straw and occasional quick fumbles were all he had experienced.

Now Fitz's strong hands were running over his thighs and across his stomach, fingers brushing his balls and shaft, feather-light strokes that left him aching. He pushed back against Fitz, longing for more.

"Have you done this before?" Fitz asked, nipping lightly at Ethan's neck.

Ethan shook his head. "Not like this," he said, refusing to let shame slip into his voice. He may have been born in the bottom class, but he had already started his journey up in the world. "Not like this," he repeated, "just hands, rubbing for relief."

"My sleeping tent would be better," said Fitz, after a moment's silence. "Let's get this mud from you now." Ethan accepted a handful of cleansing lather and soaped his body and hair, jolting at the cooling water Fitz used to rinse the suds from him. He climbed from the bath and wrapped himself in a soft length of linen, savouring the gentleness against his skin. Fitz cleaned his own body and wrapped himself up before grabbing Ethan's hand and leading him through the camp to his sleeping tent.

He repeated his instructions to not be disturbed to the guards outside, and dismissed the servants waiting there for him as soon as they'd lit the candles. Once the tent flap was tied up behind them, Ethan was pulled roughly towards Fitz. Hands clasped his cheeks and their faces were just a whisper apart. "Is this what you want?" Fitz asked.

Swallowing hard, Ethan stared into searching green eyes and nodded before closing the gap between them. Rough lips moved against his mouth with need and want. A faint taste of honey-mead and the sweet scent of vanilla. Hard, then gentle, then seeking more. Hands loosened his linen wrap, it fell to the ground and their bodies pressed together. Ethan's chest, smooth, and Fitz's, covered lightly in hair. Ethan trailed his hand up, longing to feel all of Fitz, needing him so much and in so many ways. He ran his fingers in the short hairs at the back of Fitz's neck and pulled him in tighter, kissing harder, nipping lightly at his perfect mouth.

Fitz moaned and his cock twitched against Ethan's stomach. Strong hands clasped Ethan and he found himself being forced to move backwards, until his knees hit something soft and he collapsed back. "My bed," muttered Fitz, pulling away slightly as Ethan gazed up at the silky canopy above him. Swathes of material in deep red and silver were artfully draped above him and the same silky material covered the mattress beneath them. Ethan had no notion what the

mattress was made of, but he knew it wasn't straw as his was. *Or, had been*, he reminded himself. Now he didn't need to have a scratchy straw bed ever again.

Fitz rolled further onto the bed so they were facing each other. "Is this what you want?" he repeated, running his palm flatly over Ethan's chest. Nearly losing the ability to think, Ethan just nodded and submitted to his touch, his back arching as Fitz sucked on his nipples. Pleasure, wanton and lustful, a yearning to touch and to be touched. Hands caressing, lips seeking and searching new places, new treasures. Time became irrelevant; Ethan knew not if one turn of the clock had passed or several. Fitz touched him in places he'd never thought of being touched and he mirrored the actions. A hot mouth encasing his cock caused stars to dance in his head.

This love fun was unlike any he had ever known. Before, it was hands on cocks, rubbing until a need had been satisfied—it had been fast and weary and of limited pleasure. Not that Ethan had realised this until Fitz had started his exploration. He hadn't known the bliss of having his cock sucked, or the musky, unique taste of another man. He hadn't known that gentle bites and a probing tongue could elicit feelings of pure joy. Fitz stopped and reached over Ethan. Grabbing a small vial, he tipped floral-scented oil onto his hands, hands that he stroked over Ethan's thighs and pushed up over his arse. Need rose in Ethan as Fitz caressed the muscled cheeks and fingers dipped towards his most private part. He groaned, called out incoherently as the fingers brushed and probed, teasing and never going as far as Ethan wanted them to.

"Soon," Fitz promised, as he withdrew his touch, leaving Ethan bereft. "Tonight this will be better for you. I need you too much to be gentle and your first time *should* be gentle." Not knowing of what he was talking, Ethan ached with need, a longing that only grew as Fitz rubbed his oil-slick hands over his own backside. Fitz leaned forward and kissed him, then lifted himself above Ethan. Oily fingers wrapped around his cock and rubbed once, twice, and then Fitz was pushing Ethan inside him.

Tight and warm and "Oh goddess!" Ethan cried out, as Fitz slowly moved. Everything was the man moving up and down on him, hard muscled thighs and the tightest, most beautiful arse. Finding Fitz's rhythm, Ethan matched it, aware only of the intensity building inside him. His hands clutched the silk beneath him and he called out, low guttural noises that meant both nothing and everything. Pressure grew, immense and perfect and born of pure need and deep longing. It built and built and grew and grew until there was only the

power pooling in his cock, and then he could hold it no more. An explosion, and every nerve in his body danced and sang.

Slowly, slowly, time returned to normal. He felt Fitz move off of him, then the gentle wiping over his stomach. The cool water brought him back, back to the tent and the red and silver canopy. Back to Fitz. He realised the other man had spilt his seed on his stomach and this was what he was washing gently away. Their eyes met and a slow smile crept across the other man's face. "Is it always like that?" Ethan whispered, afraid of breaking the spell they'd woven.

Fitz shook his head, "It's never been like that." He threw the damp linen onto the ground and climbed beside Ethan, pulling the silky sheet from under them and letting it cover their naked bodies.

"What now?" Ethan asked, staring into Fitz's eyes.

"Now we sleep, Ethan, here together, and tomorrow I see about joining the King's army. But tomorrow is a whole night away, so let's not worry about it yet." Ethan didn't want to sleep, but slumber stole in anyway. The softness of the mattress and the warmth of Fitz enclosed him, and contentment covered him like a blanket. Today, his life was starting again, and what better birth could he have hoped for than this?

Epilogue

Sunday was rest day, an idea Ethan still found hard to comprehend a year after leaving his hamlet. Fitz did his best to make him rest and play, but so many years of conditioning were hard to break. Strolling through the stables, Ethan stopped at the stall of his beloved mare. Crooning softly to her, he offered up some carrot, entered the stall and started to brush her. All the time he talked softly under his breath, and, though he could have told tales of the changes he was making, the influence he had on no one less than the King himself, he instead told his mare his favourite story of all, the one of the night of the tourney, the one where his life changed forever. He spoke briefly of the fighting but mostly of the loving. His mare had heard this story many, many times but Ethan never tired of telling it. Never wearied of speaking about the first time he'd felt Fitz's hands, tasted his lips, learnt what a joy it was to love a man. That night was branded in his brain forever.

"Hush now," his lover's teasing voice interrupted his story. "Poor Bess has heard this account too many times."

“There is never too many times for me to tell this tale,” Ethan responded, admiring Fitz, in his casual Sunday linen, anew.

“Well, I can think of better things for that mouth to be doing other than flapping at a horse’s ear.” Fitz slipped into the stall and closed the gap between them.

“Oh you can, can you? And pray tell me and the goddess what they are.”

“Well, I thought perhaps this for a start,” said Fitz, smiling softly before brushing his lips briefly over Ethan’s.

Ethan returned the smile. “This time, hmm, yes, this time you might be right,” he conceded, touching his own kiss to his lover’s mouth. *Maybe Sundays didn’t need to be all about work*, he thought, before thinking was no longer an option.

The End

Author Bio

Books with romance, books with sex,
Voodoo books and books with hex,
Fantasy, mystery, humour and crime,
Young adult, adult adult and kids from time to time,
In all their shapes and all their sizes,
I love books in all their guises.

Olley White is the pseudonym of Lori Powell, an English gal who likes reading too much, housework too little and her family the perfect amount. As she writes YA books under her actual name and doesn't want a youngster stumbling across the ~~smut~~ more adult books she writes, she thought an AKA was the way to go.

Contact & Media Info

Free samples of her writing are available on both of her blogs.

[Google Email](#) | [Waitrose Email](#) | [Olley White Blog](#) | [Lori Powell Blog](#)

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FIVE DATES

By Amy Jo Cousins

Photo Description

A good-looking, young blond man leans back against exposed pipework. He is shirtless and his jeans look a little old-fashioned with their light wash. His arms are huge and he sports a six-pack, although he's already looking the tiniest bit soft around the waistline. As if that six-pack might not quite be there in ten years...

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I lost a bet with my sister. I was so sure the Broncos would win. Now it is time for me to pay up. She has decided I need a man in my life. She submitted a profile for me at Guys4Guys.com and set up five dates. I haven't been on five dates in the past five years. And if the thought of five first dates isn't scary enough, check out the photo she put in my profile.

Yes, that hot, young, guy really is me... thirteen years ago! To be twenty-two again. I miss my thirty-two-inch waist and six-pack.

** No BDSM please. * Humor a plus. * HEA a must.*

Sincerely,

Susan A

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: age gap, blind dates, humorous, slow burn/UST

Word Count: 24,868

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Dedication

To all of the amazing M/M romance authors who have inspired my love for this genre, and to Kaje Harper, whose *Into Deep Waters* moved me and led me to the Goodreads M/M Romance group's Don't Read in the Closet events.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Susan A, for writing a terrific story prompt that sparked all kinds of ideas in my brain! I'm so grateful your idea gave me the chance to get to know these guys. And this story would be a mess, a lumbering hodgepodge of too many f-bombs and not enough biting, without the best bunch of betas and CPs an author could have. Thank you Piper, Liz, Tamsen, Annabeth, and Susan! You made it better.

FIVE DATES

By Amy Jo Cousins

Chapter One

The minute the punt returner crossed the thick white line into the end zone after a ninety-seven-yard run, Devin's phone lit up. The twisty strains of *Evil Woman* blared in the suddenly silent room as he thumbed the off button on the remote control.

Damn it.

He flopped back on the couch and draped an arm over his face, as if he could block out Lucy by limiting his sight. Bringing the phone to his ear, he started groaning even before he accepted her call. "I miss John Elway."

"Dude, you're crazy. Peyton is the bomb." His sister never wasted an ounce of sympathy on him when he lost a bet with her.

"Peyton Manning sucks."

"Hey, the Broncos won. You're the dummy who gave me points on the line."

"That's why I miss Elway. He would've gotten me the extra TD I needed to win even with points."

"Suck it up, loser."

"*You* suck." A thump rattled his floorboards. "Stop it."

The floorboards shook again as something slammed into them.

"Stop what?"

"Stop throwing your football at the ceiling. I hate you." Most of the time he loved living above his sister in the two-flat they shared. It made helping out with his nephew a breeze and when he wanted some privacy, or just to watch the Sunday football games in his underwear, he had plenty of space to himself.

Thump.

Sometimes, though, he wanted to move to the other side of town. To the suburbs. Back home to Colorado even, if it would get him away from her when she was preparing to rub his nose in a loss.

"You don't even know what I'm gonna make you do."

"I know it's gonna suck. Or be embarrassing. Or it's gonna suck *and* be embarrassing." Sometimes Devin wondered what those first three years of his

life must have been like. He didn't remember anything from that far back, but he imagined the time before his baby sister was born as taking place in a rosy glow of peacefulness and calm.

The pre-Lucy years must have been *fantastic*.

"That's not nice. Would I do that to my big brother?"

Aw, shit. He could hear it in her syrupy sweet voice, the giggles barely kept on lockdown.

This was going to be bad.

Epically bad.

"You were adopted." He held the phone further away from his head as her cackling laugh exploded in his ear. "We tried to sell you to some other family but no one wanted you. Also, why do I keep making bets with you? I never win."

"Beats me, dork. I wouldn't."

He didn't have anyone to blame but himself. He knew better. Their bets, whether they were on football or the next election or on what year the local supermarket chain was established, inevitably ended up with him as the loser. But he couldn't stop himself. His faith in the ultimate fairness of the universe meant he was convinced every time that it was finally his turn to win.

Not yet it wasn't.

Damn it, Peyton Manning. You couldn't score one more fucking touchdown? Even a field goal or a safety would've done it, for crying out loud.

Devin heaved a sigh and prepared to suck it up. "So, what's my forfeit, brat?"

"I need a little prep time. Are you coming down for dinner later?"

"Nah. I gotta go out."

"Hot date?"

As if. Between work and babysitting and trying to hit the gym, he hadn't had a decent date in... god, he didn't want to count how many years. Nearly anonymous hookups for sex? No problem. An actual *date*, with conversation and wondering about whether or not you were going to see that person again? Ha. No. "Slept in. I'll hit the gym, be home late."

“Tomorrow then. We’ll do pizza. And I’ll tell you all about it.”

He groaned loudly enough to drown out Lucy’s laugh as he ended the call. When the thunk of the football hit his floor again, he swung his legs off the long leather couch and drummed his heels on the floor. He imagined his sister’s laughter rising through the heating grate and following him out of the living room as he got up to get dressed.

Four miles on the treadmill and an hour with free weights left his endorphins high and his biceps, triceps, and delts pleasantly loose. The soreness would come tomorrow, just in time to make him even more uncomfortable while Lucy detailed the lurid ways in which she planned to make him pay for his losing bet. Her last best idea had been for him to anchor the school play as the save-the-day superhero.

Three nights onstage in nothing but a spandex jumpsuit and a modified Lucha Libre wrestling mask, surrounded by nine year olds singing off key Christmas carols—scratch that, holiday songs—should have cured him of any lingering fondness for making bets with Lucy. He’d held out for a good six weeks since the last one.

If only he’d kept up that streak of wise decision making.

In the locker room, he stripped out of his sweaty workout clothes and pulled on a clean pair of sweats and a hoodie, feeling the eyes of another Sunday night regular roaming his naked ass. He considered it, the song and dance of glances, some casual conversation, the take-it-or-leave-it offer of a hookup, but he couldn’t work up any enthusiasm for the idea. Slinging his gym bag over his shoulder, he nodded at the ripped lifter as he left and grinned at the shrug and wink he got in return.

Next time, maybe.

If he was still showing his face in public after whatever Luce had planned for him, that is.

“Jesus. Holy—”

“Yeah.” Lucy’s sigh was a symphony.

Devin tore his eyes away from the photo. He’d already negotiated Lucy down from ten dates with guys she pulled off the Internet—from dating websites and not from Grindr, thank god, which, please Jesus, she would never

learn about—to five torture sessions. He meant dates. Sure he did. But he still had a funky feeling about the whole thing.

Something was off.

“*This guy* wants to go out with me?” Hey, he didn’t lack confidence, yeah? He might not have the no-body-fat six-pack of his youth, but he was big, nicely muscled from the lifting, and good-looking enough to pull at the nightclubs when he wanted to get laid.

But this kid.

Holy shit.

Maybe, *maybe*, he was twenty-five. Face like a fucking angel, midnight hair falling in his eyes, which were huge and dark and just a little bit wounded. Or wicked. Or both. Devin didn’t normally go for the über-twinks. Delicate and small weren’t his thing. He appreciated a man who could push back, give it as good as he got, not someone he had to worry about breaking in half.

But something about this guy lit him up like a sparkler, crackling and suddenly bright. The photo was lit like an art shot and Devin was jealous of the photographer for getting to stare at this guy live and in person.

“He’ll meet you at seven o’clock on Thursday at Iberico.” That was a bribe. Lucy knew he loved the tapas bar on LaSalle and she was clearly easing him into this insanity by offering up *jamón ibérico*, *queso manchego*, and the best damn olives this side of the Atlantic.

“Wait. Seriously. Is this guy, like, a hooker or something?”

“What the hell?”

“I’m just saying, guys like *that* don’t go out with guys like me. Unless he thinks I’m loaded or something.”

Lucy’s eyes flickered away from his face. “No! I wouldn’t lie about that.”

He caught the treasonous little word.

“That. You wouldn’t lie about *that*.” A strawberry-red flush crept over her cheeks. They were damned by their fair complexions, the both of them, to impossible-to-hide blushes. “So what *did* you lie about?”

“I, um, may have used an older picture of you when I set up your profile.”

He closed his eyes and counted to ten.

"How old, Luce?"

"Don't be mad."

Oh. Shit.

"How. Old."

He pressed his lips together and waited. Lucy glared at him, mutinous, but if there was one thing he knew about his sister it was that she couldn't stand a conversational lull. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and she wouldn't be able to resist—

"All right! I used that picture of you I took at the lake."

He shook his head. What picture?

Lucy lifted her brows and stared at him as if he were an idiot.

Picture she'd taken at the lake? They'd spent a lot of time with Rowan on the Lake Michigan beaches over the last few years, but he couldn't remember any picture of himself alone that his sister could be referencing.

"Not this lake. The other one." His sister grimaced and he could see the beginnings of regret in her pained smile.

Fuck. No.

They didn't talk about that lake any more. The summers spent at the cabin on the lake high in the mountains all throughout their childhood. Running wild in the woods, catching fish off the dock, the whirl of the Milky Way overhead after dark so bright it felt as if the sun never went down.

They'd lost all that when they left home, she and he. Well, maybe she could have gone back, even after the scandal of winding up pregnant at eighteen. But after what he'd done, he never could.

The easiest choice he'd ever made, deciding to turn his parents' anger away from his baby sister. She'd been so silent and cowed, sitting there on the couch, staring down at her lap, hands in a knot, hair curtaining her face. He could see the wetness on her fists and knew she was crying silently as their parents stood over her and raged about sin and sluts and the end of her college plans. He'd known she hadn't expected him to be able to do anything to save her, had only asked him to come with her to tell their parents because she hoped he'd pick up her shattered pieces when they were done and try to put her back together again.

But he couldn't stand it, watching them berate his bright, shiny sister and she was small and shuddering and nearly broken.

"I'm gay."

In retrospect, the fact that he'd had to repeat himself six or seven times before his mom and dad stopped shouting long enough to hear him was mildly entertaining.

At the time, it had felt more like standing in the top of a tall, tall tree and chopping away at the trunk beneath him until he started to fall.

Lucy's out of wedlock pregnancy by a man whose name she refused to give was small potatoes compared to their son coming out as gay.

Devin realized he was holding his breath and let it out with a *whoosh*, shaking his head and rolling his shoulders to release the instant tension that hit him whenever he thought of their parents. Anger had mellowed into a general apathy and coldness after ten years, but little things could still bring him back in an instant to that afternoon of anger and fear and an overwhelming protectiveness. All of which had been followed swiftly by panic and nausea when he realized that he was totally responsible for the eighteen-year-old pregnant girl who helped him pack up his car with their combined belongings.

He might not have been as intimidating then as he could pull off now, but he'd been plenty big enough to stand guard at the door of his sister's room while she'd packed up her clothes.

That was the last summer they'd spent time at the mountain lake. He'd been halfway through his master's program for architecture and he knew Lucy still felt guilt about the fact that he'd had to quit before finishing to get a job as a draftsman, supporting the two of them during her rocky pregnancy.

He'd never regretted it for a minute.

That last summer though... that had been magical. He'd brought his boyfriend at the time to stay, although they'd kept everything on the down low, and only Lucy had been aware enough to see through their façade. Hours each day spent stripping down in high mountain meadows after sweaty hikes or on the dock before refreshing jumps in the lake, and no one had noticed how frequently his and Tommy's eyes fell on each other's naked skin. No one except Lucy.

She'd been obsessed with her camera that summer, taking hundreds of pictures a day and sorting through them all night long, discarding anything less

than perfect. The one she'd caught of him, wearing only his jeans, leaning back on his elbows, the six-pack he'd been so proud of on display, with glowing gold skin and hair long enough to fall onto his forehead in lazy curls.

He'd been smiling up at Tommy, thinking about the hours they'd managed alone the day before on a drive into town for groceries, and Lucy had caught the hint of heat in his eyes.

The perfect summer photo. The perfect summer boy.

Thirteen years ago.

"You put that on..."

"Guys4Guys.com."

He curled forward until his forehead hit the kitchen table.

"I can't go."

"Of course you can."

"No. I can't. Do you have any idea how humiliating this is going to be?"

"What? You're still a fox. He's gonna love you. Besides, this is just your warm-up date."

"What?"

"Well, duh. This kid's a baby. Plus, a guy that good-looking and single has got to have something wrong with him, yeah? Probably an airhead or a stalker. But you need the practice and maybe you'll get some action out of it."

"Luce. He's not gonna... kiss me." He swallowed the word he'd almost said and shot a glance at Rowan, who'd slid in earbuds and pulled out his homework as soon as the pizza was boxed up and shoved in the fridge. "He's not going to stay long enough to eat dinner. That guy'll be out the door in ten seconds flat once he sees me."

"Oh, shut up. He will not. He seems really nice in his emails."

"You've been emailing him? About what?"

"Relax. I just set up the date after he liked your photo."

Devin groaned and banged his head on the table. "I'm not going."

"You're going to stand him up? Leave poor Jay sitting alone at the bar, by himself, for hours, feeling all rejected and shitty because his date didn't show?"

Now the rock star angel had a name.

Jay.

He tilted his head to skewer his sister with a glare as she reached over to clear his plate. "A guy like that won't be alone for long."

"You keep saying that. A guy like what?"

The word felt awkward in his mouth. "Beautiful."

Lucy's eyes softened. She stepped close and laid her small hand on the back of his neck and squeezed. "Go. Tell him your crazy sister set you up. Maybe it'll be fun."

"It's not going to be fun. It's going to be the worst date in the history of bad dates."

His baby sister ruffled his hair on her way out the door, leaving him at the kitchen table with her son, the tinny strains of some hip-hop song squeaking out of the boy's earbuds as he scribbled in a spiral notebook.

As always, Lucy waited until she was at a safe remove before delivering the killer blow.

"By the way, it doesn't count as a date for the bet unless you get a goodnight kiss."

There was always a catch.

Chapter Two

The tapas restaurant was slammed. Devin half-stood half-sat, the edge of the hardwood barstool barely under his ass, and protected the free seat next to him with his puffy, down coat and dirty looks at anyone who tried to claim it. Waves of sound rolled over him, conversations competing with the crash of dirty plates into bus tubs and the shouts of servers weaving their way through the crowd, trays held high, *Heads up! Coming through!*

He wrapped his hand around the beer he'd ordered, too uncomfortable to hold seats at the bar without buying something, and made himself stop rubbing obsessively at the corner of the label where it peeled up. His stomach flipped every time the glass door at the front of the room swung open.

Arriving twenty minutes early, to make sure that he got there before Jay had sounded like a great strategy when he was standing in front of his closet, trying to figure out what the hell to wear on a first date. Nothing sounded worse than walking in the door to a restaurant and scanning the room, trying to pick out a face he'd only seen in one photo.

Now the waiting was fucking killing him.

He probably ought to turn his head, let Jay find *him* when he arrived. But he was depressingly afraid that that would never happen. That Jay would look around, never connect him with the date he hoped to meet, and simply leave.

Odds were good the guy would leave as soon as Devin introduced himself anyway, but at least he'd get a minute or two to see if someone could really be that magnetic in person. Maybe it was just a *really* good camera lens...

The glass door swung open, Devin's head swiveled like it was tied by a damn string to the doorknob, and, swear to god, there was a fucking lull in the wall of sound as Jay walked in.

Taller than he'd looked in the photo. Not too far under Devin's own five foot eleven. But just as slim and even more beautiful. His black hair swooped up in what was damn near a pompadour and that, combined with maybe a tiny hint of guyliner, made him look like a rock star. Skinny dark jeans and a white V-neck T-shirt under a leather jacket. Motorcycle boots halfway up his calves. His skin was darker than most Chicagoans at the beginning of summer, rich and smooth, as if he was Latino maybe, or Middle Eastern. High cheekbones and a

full mouth. A woman near the door, shrugging into her coat, almost elbowed Devin's date and the young guy's grin, as he blocked her arm with an open palm and accepted her apologetic turn, was devastating even halfway across the room.

What would it feel like to have that smile turned on him up close?

Devin shivered and his cock woke up in his jeans.

The younger man pushed back his hair, sparkling a little with melting snowflakes, and scanned the room.

Devin held his breath.

Wonder if he'll recognize me?

The blow to the ego when his date's eyes skipped right past him without hesitating was enough to bring heat to his face, but when the kid's gaze traveled back across him, Devin managed to catch his eye.

He pointed at the open chair and half-pulled his coat off its back, raising his eyebrows. *Want it?*

The smile he got was brilliant.

Yup. That smile was a deadly. Devin's cheeks grew hot.

Jay made his way to the bar, sliding the barest inch of his ass onto the edge of the seat and sharing that killer smile with Devin, another casual blow to the heart when he saw it wasn't any different than the smile Jay had given the girl who'd elbowed him at the entrance.

"Thanks. I'm meeting a date, but I definitely need a drink first."

"No problem." Devin leaned over the counter until he caught the bartender's eye and lifted his chin. The woman nodded at him and held up a finger. His stomach fluttered as he eased back into his seat and angled himself toward the man at his side. Jay was unwrapping a skinny scarf that was looped around his neck and the swish of fabric through the air carried his scent to Devin, new leather and vanilla. Devin wanted to bury his nose against the delicate skin under his ear and breathe deep. He cleared his throat. "Bartender'll be here in a moment."

Another grin. "Thanks. Again. Dutch courage and all that."

He couldn't help torturing himself by asking. "Hot date?"

“God, I hope so. You never know with the online stuff, right? Red sangria, please.” He smiled at the bartender. God, Jay smiled at everyone and it was like white lightning up Devin’s spine every time. “Thanks, hon.” He turned toward Devin, looking past his shoulder at the front entrance, eyes bright and eager. “It’s stupid to be this excited, I know. But my last boyfriend... well—” The light dimmed in those eyes for a moment. “—he made me feel pretty shitty. No more daddy-types for me, thank you. But a fun guy, my age, who makes me feel good? Sign. Me. Up.”

God, he was sweet too. *Luce, I’m gonna kill you for making me wreck this kid’s fantasy.* The happy chatter hadn’t stopped.

“Sorry, that’s really TMI, huh? You’re probably all, *will Junior here ever stop talking about his date?* Shutting up now. I’m gonna watch the door. God, I hope this guy looks like his picture.”

Junior. That made him Senior, he guessed. Ouch.

Devin lifted his beer bottle to his lips and took a swig. That was a conversational opening if he ever heard one—*Let me tell you about this crazy thing my sister did, ha ha*—but he didn’t want to take it. He wasn’t going to out and out lie, but he wished he could pretend for a few minutes more that when he told this guy who he was, this would be anything except a disaster.

“I hope I don’t get stood up. That would suck.”

“No way. Someone would have to be pretty dumb to stand you up,” he said roughly and looked down at his hands when Jay’s dark eyes met his. Their wrists rested close together on the bar rail, his skin pre-summer pasty next to the richer brown of Jay’s hand.

When he risked a glance out of the corner of his eye, the sight of a blush staining Jay’s cheeks made Devin bite his lip. He inhaled and tried to keep it from becoming a gasp. Was that because of his comment?

The surge of heat pushing from his balls, trying to reach out through the front of his jeans to rub his dick against this beautiful boy next to him, was born in the tiny grain of hope that sparked in his belly at the sight of that blush.

“So, you waiting for someone too?”

Fire extinguished.

Well, there you go. Moment of truth. The sixty seconds of fantasizing were all he was going to get. Devin settled further back in his seat. Might as well get

comfortable. Odds on he'd be sitting at the bar by himself to finish off his beer and head home. "Yeah. You, actually."

Jay gifted him with another smile, probably the last one, and rolled his eyes at what he no doubt took as a cheesy compliment. "That's sweet."

"Yeah, no. You're Jay. I'm Devin Hollister." Embarrassment flared higher in his cheeks, his skin so hot it probably looked like his face was on fire. Jay was staring at him blankly. "Your date?"

Narrowed eyes locked on Devin's, pinning him in place like a bug to a mat, Jay dug in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The sweetness drained out of him like water swirling down a toilet bowl. Five seconds of finger tapping and the clearly less-than-pleased walking wet dream thrust his phone screen-first at Devin.

He'd pulled up the picture Lucy had posted and looked as if he wanted to beat Devin over the head with it until he was bleeding out his ears.

"Seriously, dude?" The kid's scorn dripped off his words like acid, as if Devin had flipped a switch with his confession. He didn't look surprised though. Just angry and resigned. As if his date's turning out to be a liar was merely confirmation for this kid that life was built to kick him in the teeth.

Devin stared at his own photo and winced. Fuck. Twenty-two-year-old him glowed with the youth and sparkle of a guy who hadn't yet been tarnished by anything more serious than never placing higher than second in his cross country races. There wasn't an ounce of body fat on his golden torso and his stomach fucking *rippled*.

Had he really had an eight-pack? Devin rubbed his stomach where a queasy ache had set in and consoled himself with the fact that his belly was still pretty much flat. But he'd never be ripped like that again. Grown-ups with jobs and kid sisters and nephews to support didn't have time to maintain that kind of thing.

"I'm *really* sorry. I can't apologize enough for this. Seriously." He shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. "It's a funny story actually. I lost a bet to my sister and she's the one..." Yeah, sex god man didn't look as if he gave a goddamn about Devin's sister.

Glass could have shattered from the cold in Jay's voice. Devin elbowed his beer further away, although he desperately wanted to chug his drink. "Listen, daddy, you do *not* want to tell me that not only did you troll me with a photo

from, what, fifteen years ago, but that this whole mess of bullshit is because you lost a *bet*.”

He didn't know if being called “daddy” was supposed to be an insult or a sort of compliment at this point. Mostly he screwed other guys from the gym. Or *at* the gym. He had no idea. “Please, let me buy you dinner at least.”

Jay's scoff was so loud heads turned. “No way.”

You used to be fucking charming, asshole. Try harder. Devin dug deep for his sense of the ridiculous and hit the jackpot when he was able to laugh at himself and mean it, his smile making his cheeks ache. “C'mon. You'll have one hell of a story at least, right?”

“I said *no*. What part of no do you not understand?” Color flew high in Jay's cheeks and the tips of his fingers where he was gripping the edge of the bar were white.

Devin flinched and backed up a step, hands spread at his shoulders. “You're absolutely right. It was just an offer, to make up for screwing with you. Totally your call.”

The younger man closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled slowly. Exhaled. When he looked at Devin again, he'd found a way to paint cheerful on his face again, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

“I'm going to order all of the really expensive shit, you know.” Jay sounded like he was reaching for self-assurance and Devin didn't believe him for a minute. “And a *lot* of drinks.”

“It's on me. Anything you want.” Damn. He and Luce had stepped so far wrong with this one he wanted to crawl on his hands and knees out the door, just to make sure everyone in the room knew what a shit he was. He owed this kid more than a meal and some drinks to make up for whatever bad feelings they'd triggered here.

“Okay. But this isn't a damn date.” Jay blinked hard, eyes bright. “Jesus. This is humiliating.”

“Because you're out with me?” Ouch. That stung.

Jay waited a moment and then sighed heavily, like he was thinking about letting that stand. Then he sighed. “No. Because I went on and on to you about how excited I was. Shit. And because I got conned. By a *girl*.”

Devin took that opportunity to step away and tell the host stand that his guest had arrived. They were eating early enough to avoid the inevitable wait for a table that would kick in by eight p.m., and a hostess walked them to a table in the big room with cases of Spanish painted dishware lining the wall across from another long bar. Long rows of tables, easily pushed together or separated to seat groups of any size, crossed the room in parallel stripes. White light flashed in Devin's face as he sat down. He looked up to see Jay lowering his phone, already swiping away on it. The younger man looked up and scowled at him. Jay seemed to have settled on crankiness as his comfort zone, which was totally okay with Devin, who figured he'd have been more than just cranky in Jay's place. "I wouldn't normally take out my cell phone on a date, you know. But I want Toby to have your picture, in case you're a serial killer and drug my food. Plus, this isn't—"

"Got it." His own phone had buzzed in his pocket on the walk to the table. Devin figured the same leeway applied to him and pulled out his own phone for a quick glance. Rowan's nightly homework emergency. Fourth grade math was kicking all three of their asses, which was pissing Devin off because he used math for a living as a draftsman. But the way they taught it to the kids today, he couldn't make head or tails of his nephew's homework some nights.

He sent a best guess suggestion and apologized as he put his phone away.

"Homework emergency. Sorry."

Jay's head reared back so far it looked like it hurt. "You're an *actual* daddy? Aw, hell no. I don't do that."

"No!" For a moment, he thought Jay might actually get up and leave, his hands braced on the arms of his chair. Devin scrambled to explain. "I mean, I help my sister with her kid, a lot. But at the end of the day, I go home alone. By myself. To my own place." No matter how he said it, he sounded pathetic.

"God, okay. Okay."

"Not your thing, huh?" Devin said, foolishly wistful, because he already knew that he wasn't anything this kid wanted.

For the first time since he'd met Jay, the younger man's cheeks pinked up and he looked away, pretending to eyeball the dishes being delivered to the table next to them. "Something like that. What do you think those little meatball things are?"

Interesting.

“Albondigas.” At Jay’s blank look, Devin explained with a smile, “Little meatball things. Have you had tapas before?”

Jay shook his head and Devin’s grin grew. “You’re gonna love it. It’s great. Everything’s tiny plates, so we get to order a ton of stuff.” He leaned forward and tilted his menu so they could both see it, pointing to the different sections. “There’s cold and hot tapas and then other stuff, like paella, but I usually skip that because if you share a bunch of tapas, it’s more fun. And they have specials, like *conejo*—that’s rabbit—and *pincho de gambas*—a shrimp skewer. Those are usually really good, too. But we definitely have to get *queso manchego*, *jamón ibérico*, *aceitunas*, and *tortilla*.”

Devin trailed to a stop as he realized that he’d just spewed a shitload of geeked out Spanish food lingo on someone who probably didn’t give a shit.

But Jay was smiling at him, a small smile, but he might as well have stood on Devin’s chest for all he could catch his breath at the sight.

“It’s kinda cute how excited you get about this food. Makes me feel better about before.”

“Cute?”

“Don’t get any ideas. This is so not a date right now. But you can tell me more about whatever the hell it was that you said we should order.”

Devin grabbed the edge of the table. Hard. *Not a date right now*. If that meant he had any chance at all with Jay... He tried to slow his mouth down and talk about his favorite tapas, the sharp creamy cheese, the cured ham sliced so thin it folded on itself like ribbon, the garlicky olives and the cold egg and potato pie of *tortilla*, but the server showed up halfway through his recitation.

When he nodded at Jay to order first, his not-a-date shook his head and waved at him. “Go wild, Tapas Man. This is clearly your thing.”

Then he shrugged out of his leather jacket, threading his scarf into one sleeve before hanging it over the back of his chair with care.

“Tight.”

After a moment, Devin blinked. Both Jay and the server were looking at him curiously as he pulled his brain back from the total wreck it had slammed into at the sight of Jay’s tight, white T-shirt. The shirt was a plain V-neck, but he’d somehow gotten tangled up in the way it glowed against Jay’s brown skin. In the etched silver bead on a rawhide cord that sat cupped in the hollow at the

base of his throat. In trying to decide if he could actually see Jay's nipples through the fabric or if that was wishful thinking.

Shit. He'd said that out loud.

"Tight... um, call. Tough call. Hard to decide." *Please shut up, you idiot.*
"Right. Ordering now."

The look Jay leveled at him, leaning back in his seat, one arm hooked over the chair back, wasn't exactly a smirk... but it was close. And if he didn't know spreading his legs until his booted foot nudged against Devin's below the table was a helluva turn-on, Devin would suck his own dick. Not that he could. But Jay obviously wasn't above making him want to try.

Jay waited until the server left and then lifted his chin at Devin. "So, tell me about this sister of yours."

"She's awesome. Except when she is evil." Siblings. Can't live with 'em, can't boil them and eat them when they're born. "We tend to bet on things. Don't look at me like that." Devin blew air out through pursed lips. "As if it would take a fucking bet for me to want to go out with a guy like you. Which we've already determined isn't on the menu. I should be so lucky." The compliment seemed to soothe Jay, whose brows had tugged together at the mention of that bet. "So we had a bet on the Broncos game."

"And you lost."

"I always lose."

"Always?"

Yeah, this part didn't make him look too bright. "It isn't possible that she can win every time. It isn't," he insisted.

"And yet here you are." Jay played with the bead on his necklace with one hand. Devin dragged his gaze back up to Jay's face when he kept talking. "I'm still waiting to hear how going out with me is what you have to do because you *lost*. I'm not usually a consolation prize. Feel free to make this flattering."

Devin got a brief reprieve when the server, a distractingly attractive Spanish guy who he and Jay both checked out before catching each other's eye and grinning, delivered the first of their cold tapas. He took a moment to point out that the white ovoids in the dish of olives were actually brined garlic cloves—*not that it matters, might as well chow down like you're heading into battle with Dracula*—before deciding he had nothing to lose with the full-on, strip

himself bare and let the embarrassment rain on down, detailed list of forfeits paid to Lucy's devilish sense of humor.

"Should I start with the first time she made me streak the church picnic back home in Colorado? Or my most recent triumphant run as a lycra-clad superhero anchoring the elementary school holiday play?" He decided every time Jay laughed out loud counted as a win and set himself the goal of running up his point total until the whole night was a lock. Jay was gonna go home and tell his friends about the most charming fucking not-a-date he'd ever been on.

It turned out that Jay was a terrific listener, reacting dramatically to every story. His shell of crankiness cracked and finally fell away completely as he listened, clapping his hand over his mouth with big eyes at the really humiliating moments and giving good "Awww!" at the sweet ones.

Devin was halfway to being in love by the time the flan was served.

Jay didn't really care for any of the three flan flavors, but he liked breaking the crunchy caramelized sugar with his spoon. He poked at each ramekin in turn while Devin ate the custard he exposed. "Okay, okay. You win. I'm not mad at you," he said, brushing his fingertips across the back of Devin's hand in passing. He might as well have unzipped Devin's pants and squeezed his dick, as every muscle in Devin's back froze while Jay kept chattering on as if fireworks weren't shooting off across the table from him. "I'm curious though. Lucy called this your warm-up date. Why's that?"

"I think she thought this would be a no-pressure date." Jay tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "Because you're... you. And I'm me. She thought if she set me up first with someone who was clearly not gonna happen, maybe I'd relax about it."

"Well, that's kind of... thoughtless."

"Nah, she didn't mean it like that. She just wants me to have a life that doesn't revolve around her and Rowan."

"Cool name for a kid." Jay opened his mouth for a moment, then shook his head and closed it. Devin watched, waiting to see if his date would change his mind and say whatever it was that he'd cut himself off from. But it looked like he was out of luck, because after another minute, Jay simply said, "Well, at least you've got one date crossed off the list, right?"

"Yeah, um, no. This still sucks because it's not gonna count. As a date."

"What do you mean?"

“The deal is, I have to go on five dates. But they don’t count as dates unless I, um,”—shit, this was awkward—“get a kiss.”

Silence.

Jay’s eyebrow migrated north and got lost somewhere behind his hairline. “Oh, hell no.” He sputtered for a second, which was funny, because Devin had expected more of a cool laugh and a *sucks to be you, dude*. “You... you... ate all that garlic!”

You ate all that garlic was not no fucking way.

He wasn’t under any illusions here. He had exactly zero chance with this guy for anything real. But maybe... just maybe... a kiss wasn’t totally out of the question. He’d caught the glances Jay snuck at him, at his arms and his chest, thick and broad, when he thought Devin wasn’t looking. However irritated Jay might be to have been tricked into this date by an old photo, he wasn’t totally turned off by thirty-five-year-old Devin.

And Devin would work it like a rent boy to get one kiss from Jay. He didn’t even give a shit anymore about the bet with Lucy. But he was pretty sure he’d never meet anyone as magical as Jay again and he’d take what he could get.

I’ll remember this kiss for the rest of my damn life.

“Do you have a sister, Jay?”

“Three.”

Devin flinched. “Holy shit.”

Jay gave him a look as if to say, *Right?*, and waved at their server for the check.

Time to move fast. “You love ’em, right?” Jay nodded, warily. “And if one of them asked you to do something...?”

“I’d tell her to mind her own sex life, heifer,” Jay snapped, pulling his scarf out of his coat sleeve and looping it around his neck twice.

“But if it was important to her. If she was asking for your own good and you didn’t want to let her down.”

“I’d short-sheet her bed and put all her panties in the freezer.”

Devin cracked a laugh and Jay started to smile. “Dude, she’s merciless. I’m in for a world of a hurt if I go home without a kiss. Plus, I ordered those scallops for you.”

"You picked those out!" Jay couldn't sputter his outrage fast enough.

Grinning, Devin leaned forward. "I picked them out for you. Because I could tell you wanted them but you're not really the kind of guy who orders all the expensive stuff, are you? So I did."

Jay flushed and turned his face away. Devin waited. Finally, the younger man threw his hands in the air. "Fine. Fine! You can kiss me. Jesus. Drama queen."

"That's daddy drama queen to you," Devin teased, and chalked up another point on the board when Jay crossed his arms and tried to pretend that wasn't a laugh twisting his lips into a smile. He settled back in his seat, content for the moment to wait for the server to return with the check. A low-grade hum of arousal vibrated under his skin. Jay wanted to kiss him. Protest all he wanted, his eyes were drawn to Devin—and not always to his face—and his cheeks were pink. His lips too, as he bit at them nervously.

"Man, this is so weird." Jay was sliding his jacket on as he muttered, as if he needed to arm himself even though they were still waiting for the check.

"What?"

"I don't normally *negotiate* a kiss before it happens."

"How do you normally do it?" Like he couldn't guess, but anything that kept the conversation on kissing was a win as far as Devin was concerned.

"It just—" a vague wave of a hand "—happens."

"That's not really helping me out here, Jay. I don't want to screw up my one chance to kiss you goodnight."

"Oh, shut up. How do *you* kiss on dates?"

Yeah, not going there. Devin's hookups didn't count as dates. Not even close. "Oh, no. You're not making this about me. I already talked about myself for two hours. You know a ton about me and I don't know squat about you."

"You think that's an accident?"

"Ouch."

Snarky comments aside, though, Jay was a nice guy. A genuine, deep-down nice guy who had listened to Devin's stories with his cheek on his fist and a smile on his mouth. And he couldn't let his own smartass remark stand for

long. Heaving a sigh and crossing his arms again, he sat back in his chair. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"Aside from what kind of kiss you like at the end of your dates?"

Jay confirmed Devin's suspicions that nervousness made him mouthy when he snapped out his answer. "The kind that's on my dick."

Oh, hell yes. Devin could play. He leaned forward again and kept his voice low. "There's a bathroom downstairs that hardly anyone uses. I'll get on my knees and kiss you goodnight so hard you'll have to shove your fist in your mouth to keep from crying out, if that's what you want. Just say the word."

Jay didn't say a word, only turned even more pink and stared at Devin's mouth. His pulse beat visibly in his throat and his lips were shiny when he licked them.

Eventually, Devin took pity on him. He didn't want to cross too many lines here. "Or you could tell me something about yourself. Where you work or what you do for fun. Not in a 'tell me the address so I can stalk you way.' Just, generally." He sat up straight again and watched the color in Jay's cheeks ease.

"There's nothing much to tell. I have a big family in Pilsen." The largely Hispanic neighborhood on the near south side, which might or might not be tied to the brown skin set off so perfectly by that white shirt. "I work in retail. A menswear boutique." Jay paused and glanced at him—they were back to wary now—as if expecting some kind of comment.

"Do you like it?" Devin had worked at a Best Buy in high school. Knew how shitty and demanding customers could be. He'd done plenty of bitching.

That wasn't Jay's style.

"I do. I'm good at it." Another one of those pauses, waiting. Maybe someone had done a number on him in the past about his job. Jay seemed ready to block verbal blows Devin had no intention of delivering. "I'm an assistant manager now, but our GM is angling for a district manager position, although she's so preggo they probably won't move her 'til after she pops. I figure I've got a decent chance at getting her job when she's promoted."

"It's a tough job."

A shrug and another stare over Devin's shoulder at nothing. "It's not rocket science. Pretty much anyone can do it."

Devin shook his head and moved deliberately into Jay's line of sight. "I know for a fact that's not true."

The server chose that moment to deliver the check and Devin couldn't decide if that was good or bad. Jay was clearly uncomfortable talking about himself, but Devin was realizing exactly how little he'd learned about the other man during their meal. There wasn't much he could do about that though. If Jay didn't want to get to know him beyond funny stories about Lucy and ways in which Devin had been publicly embarrassed, that was his call.

Devin had known going into this not-a-date that the pleasure of Jay's company for a couple of hours was his best-case scenario.

He had nothing at all to complain about.

After adding twenty percent and signing the check, he left the fake leather folder on the edge of the table and stood up, shrugging into his puffy, down coat. Jay pursed his lips and shook his head a little and Devin assumed it was because his coat was vastly less cool than the leather jacket Jay sported. He smiled.

No one was ever going to pick him for his fashion sense, which could most charitably be called *basic*.

They made their way through the restaurant, dodging busboys and servers with trays carried high over their heads. The crowd in the bar had tripled and Devin eased more than one tipsy diner out of their path before they stumbled into Jay or himself. He knew from experience that a two-hour wait in the bar for a table was made more palatable by the generous application of sangria pitchers.

He pushed through the double glass doors to the street and held one open for Jay.

"Right. So."

"God, you gotta be freezing in that jacket," he said without thinking, shivering in his own down jacket.

The snark was back. Jay must be nervous. "I don't wear it because it's warm, Devin."

The shiver that ran over his skin when Jay said his name for the first time froze him in place. Traffic streamed by on LaSalle Boulevard when the light

changed, surging wetly through the slush. Jay shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Devin stepped closer to him.

Although he'd thought of Jay as smaller all night, he really wasn't. Jay was almost the same height as him, just more slender, and the proof was that his face was right there in front of Devin's mouth. After every sexual innuendo at dinner—not that there had been a ton of them—after the nudges from Jay's boots and the kissing conversation, he wanted to push Jay up against the wall of the florist shop next door and suck on his mouth until their lips were bruised and his dick was sore in his pants from too much friction.

He ran his hands from Jay's elbows to his shoulders and tugged him closer. Jay's eyes locked on his own. Big, dark eyes, blinking as Jay's narrow shoulders tensed under Devin's hands and Jay's breathing sped up until white puffs of air drifted like smoke signals down the sidewalk.

Devin leaned in and brushed his lips against Jay's, the barest butterfly kiss of a good-bye. When he pulled back, Jay's eyes were huge, one hand sliding up to press against his lips, as if he wanted to mimic Devin's kiss.

"This has been the best not-a-date of my life. If you ever want to not-date again, you should definitely call me." He squeezed Jay's shoulders gently and let his hands fall away.

"I don't have your number." The words tumbled out like puzzle pieces dumped out of a newly opened box, possibility and confusion both.

Devin bit the inside of his cheek so hard it bled. "You've got my sister's email. Just ask her."

Backing away, Jay shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. The wind ruffled his hair and he shivered in his thin coat. The most beautiful man Devin had ever seen, taken to dinner, and barely kissed, took another backwards step and shook his head.

"No way."

"She's gonna send me on the next date before too long, you know. You could help me out. Help me find something to wear that'll mean I get lucky."

"Don't hold your breath." But Jay was smiling as he walked backwards toward the corner. He waved good-bye as Devin watched, then turned to cross the intersection, probably heading toward the El station a block away. At the

last second, as he passed out of sight, he looked back at Devin one last time. Then he kept walking and was gone.

Fuuuuuck.

Devin was completely and utterly wrecked. Screw Lucy's five dates.

He'd be lucky if he got over this one, ever.

Chapter Three

By Sunday afternoon, Jay's head was sore from all the metaphorically smacking of it he'd done and he forced himself to lock up his phone in his manager's desk. Which was risky, because Tracy wasn't above reading his incoming texts and emails if she thought it would give her dirt she could use to tease him during the slow hours, but he had to do something to keep his hands off the screen.

Desperate times...

His phone pulled at him like a magnet to true north, a tiny corner of his brain whispering to him as he received new inventory and updated the latest batch of markdowns.

You could text him to say hi.

Three days of that whisper and he was ready to throw himself in the compactor when it was his turn to roll a dolly of broken-down boxes and other trash down to the loading dock.

"No, I couldn't!" His shout echoed in the empty dock. Yelling at himself was so much more soothing when there wasn't anyone around to side-eye him for the cray-cray. He inserted his key and turned the activation switch to *On* before pressing the *Start* button. Then waited through the loud grinding as the machine mashed everything flat and he could remove his key again. The dock always reeked of rotting compost, courtesy of the restaurant trash that stank it up for the rest of the mall shops. The textured sheet metal platform vibrated under the soles of his boots and he set his teeth against the noise.

He felt as growly as the damn compactor.

Damn Devin Hollister for being everything he *used* to want in a man. Although it would probably be fairer to damn Carl, the man he'd thought was his forever guy. The man Jay had found last year when he realized the glitter was fading around the edges of the club scene. Guys his own age didn't seem to see that, so Jay had gone looking for someone outside his usual twenty-something crowd. And discovered, to his surprise, that older men really turned his fucking crank.

He'd thought he found what he was looking for in Carl. A man who wasn't in the club scene, a lawyer, hot as hell and with that commanding presence of

someone who didn't hesitate to define himself as an expert in his "professional community."

Jay rolled his eyes at his own naïveté. Bad call all around. It hadn't helped that every time he'd told Carl they were through, he'd ended up giving in to Carl's twist-your-brain-in-knots persuasive arguments and getting back together with him. Over and over again, like some damn dog that always found its way home to get kicked again, instead of staying out in the wilderness where it could get cocktails and hand jobs in club bathrooms.

Okay, you've taken that metaphor down the wrong path. Ew.

He shook off the self-recrimination. And the dog-sex imagery. Dragging the dolly back up to the back entrance of the shop, he keyed in with his card and parked the dolly in its place by the door.

The stockroom was empty, so he caved and unlocked the desk, planning a quick check of his text messages. He'd been dumb enough to email Devin's sister, Lucy, busting her for the photo scam and casually getting Devin's phone number from her, as if he barely cared whether or not she passed it on. He'd made her promise not to tell Devin that he'd asked for it though, saying she owed him for playing him. But he assumed her promise was bull and half-expected to see a text pop up any time now from Devin.

So far, he was about as popular with older, sort-of-architects as he was with his ex's legal eagle crowd. That is to say, not at all.

Which is perfectly fine, because you're not changing your mind this time. So just stop it.

He thumbed the security code into his phone and pulled up the dating site app. Devin's—Lucy's, he now knew—most recent message was at the top of the list, her brother's deceptive photo filling his screen when he touched it.

"Ooh, who's that? He's cute." Shit. Tracy might be approaching walrus-like proportions—which he would *never* say out loud because he wanted to keep his balls intact—but she could still be stealthy when she wanted. And after three years of working together, including half a dozen of overnight inventory sessions where they both got slaphappy with sleep deprivation and the gossip flew fast and furious, she didn't hesitate to grill him. "Where did you bang him?"

Jay flushed. Fair enough. Before last year, he hadn't exactly been... selective. But the club scene had gotten old. He'd started wishing he could walk

in a bar and not spot ten guys he'd already fucked. All the knowing looks and raised eyebrows as everyone watched each other negotiate their next hook ups were an insider's conversation he'd wished he weren't a part of anymore. "I didn't. We just went to dinner."

"Fancy." Right. With his track record, getting dinner first had felt halfway to a marriage proposal the first time he'd done it. "What's he do?"

"He's a draftsman." He wasn't exactly sure how that was different from being an architect, but he'd gotten the feeling Devin had taken a step down from whatever his original life dreams had been. It was clear though that he didn't regret a thing and would do whatever he could for his baby sister and nephew.

One of the things that made him so irresistible, damn it.

He tried to deflect Tracy's interest. "He doesn't even look like that actually. He's way older."

"Oh, no. Not another daddy." Tracy used his slang as if she'd been born going to Roscoe's and Sidetracks up on Halsted in Boystown. "Haven't you been burned enough already?"

"I know," he wailed, fingers clenching on his traitorous phone. Why didn't he have the screen set to black out faster? Devin's picture glowed at him, not going anywhere. "I'm not going out with him again." He'd already promised himself, even though he was pretty sure if Devin stood still long enough, Jay would end up humping him like his mama's Yorkie assaulted the couch corner.

"Yeah, right. That's what you said the last time." Tracy could lift an eyebrow like a weight lifter bench-pressing cotton candy. Effortlessly.

"I mean it this time. I'm *not* changing my mind."

"Then stop staring at his photo like you want to lick your phone."

"I can't help it."

"And that's not even a recent picture?"

He explained about Devin's sister, who Jay sort of admired for her manipulative scheming, even if she'd put him in the middle of this shit. "He's maybe ten or fifteen years older than that now." And damn if he didn't just push all of Jay's buttons.

"Still looks good though, huh?"

“Hell, yes.” He pulled his phone away from her grabby hands. “Like, he doesn’t have that six-pack anymore, I bet. He’s a little softer. But bigger. More... manly.” Such a stupid, silly word for something that made his stomach roll as if he’d crested a hill in a fast car. He searched for better words. “He doesn’t look like a boy anymore.”

He couldn’t stop thinking about Devin’s next date. No way would that man have been up for another outing over the weekend. Mondays sucked everyone’s balls, so that was safe too. But by Tuesday, certainly no later than Thursday, Devin would be meeting his next guy in a bar or restaurant somewhere. In his suburban soccer dad clothes. Not terribly out of fashion, really, but khakis and a denim shirt were no man’s ticket to ride, Jay believed firmly.

“Don’t do it.” Tracy was shaking her head, the corner of her mouth pulled back.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bitch, please.” The pang in his chest stopped his breath. For a moment, he had his girl back. It had been weeks since she’d been able to focus on a conversation that didn’t revolve around the hassle of finding gender-neutral baby clothes and which baby bottle nipples were best at minimizing gas. Too gross for words. Tracy smiled at him and pointed to his phone. “You just looked at your phone for the seven hundredth time this hour. Don’t do it.”

He couldn’t decide if she meant it or if she knew that the fastest way to get him to do something was to tell him not to. Either way, his thumbs were moving over the screen before he had a chance to second-guess himself.

Did you go out on your next date yet?

A minute later, his text notification chimed. Tracy rolled her eyes and headed out to the counter.

Jay? Hi! Not yet. Tuesday. :)

Damn, he was good. Devin’s next date was in forty-eight hours.

What are you gonna wear?

Jay typed the message before he could convince himself not to and put the phone down on the desk. Lecturing himself on showing restraint, he resumed tagging the wooden-wicked candles that had arrived the day before. He wouldn’t text back for at least fifteen minutes, no matter how quickly—

His phone chimed.

Nope. Jay pulled the trigger on the pricing gun, the loud, chunking plastic mechanics of it not nearly enough to drown out the sound of his phone chiming a second time. Or to distract him from the little blue light blinking on it.

He lasted a minute and a half.

Meeting him for a drink after work. Khakis and a button down?

A second text bubble below.

Do you think I need help?

Jay clapped a hand over his eyes. He could picture it. There'd be a brown leather belt and some comfortable loafers. Thank god he could text one handed and blindfolded.

You may be beyond my help. Beyond anyone's.

He didn't even pretend to put the phone down.

Nah. You could save me from sartorial embarrassment.

Shit. He barely knew what that meant. Jay held the phone out at arm's length and squinted so he could pretend not to see what he was typing. Giving a drowning man a helping hand via some pants that would show off his ass was not the same as changing his mind about not dating him. It wasn't.

Busy now? Come by the shop.

Holy crap. He was the dumbest asshole in the greater Chicagoland metropolitan area. Hell, he could probably take in downstate Illinois too and still top the list.

On my way to the gym. 1.5 hrs ok?

Hurry. We need all the time we can get.

For an hour and a half, Jay showed about as much focus as Tracy, who at least had the excuse of needing to pee every fifteen minutes. He wandered the store, trying to keep an eye on the open entryway, vaguely moving stock from one display to another.

When Devin strolled in exactly one and a half hours later, Jay waved Tracy off with a free hand and a *don't make me stab you* glare, before dragging Devin off to a changing room and ordering him to strip. They were pushing up on closing time, so he'd already pulled a dozen items he wanted to see modeled on

that bulky, muscled body. Devin's sizes were wildly out of balance, his shirts needing enough room for a thickly muscled chest and arms that... well, *bulged* was really the only word for them. His hips and waist were narrow though, and those thighs were going to prove a challenge with those sculpted quads.

And that ass...

Devin lifted an eyebrow and gave a one-word explanation when he caught Jay staring at him after he put on Jay's favorite pair of tailored, gray trousers.

"Squats."

It almost made Jay want to go to the gym.

Turning in front of the three-way mirror and looking at his own backside, Devin smoothed a hand over his flat stomach in the fitted black T-shirt Jay had pulled for him. "Jesus. You can practically tell I'm circumcised in these."

Jay closed his eyes. Damn the man. "Stop talking about your dick. The goal is to dress so you don't have to *talk* about it in order to draw attention to it, *me entiendes?*"

"I hear you." Jay jerked his head around, staring at Devin and wondering if he'd answered that way by accident. Devin's smile said no. "What? I forgot most of it, but I took Spanish for eight years in high school and college." Devin threaded the dark gray leather through the belt loops of his skinny gray trousers.

Jay was about to say something cranky in Spanish that felt half like flirting when Tracy strode into the changing room hallway where they were loitering while Devin finished buckling up.

It took Jay two seconds to see she was out of gas. She braced herself with a hand against the straining bulge of her belly that made her look on the verge of tipping over. Exhaustion carved lines in her cheeks. Her voice rang hollowly.

"Almost closing time, kiddo, so we better get a move on. Got your boy here settled up? We can close out the registers."

Un-preggo, she would never have hustled a customer out the door. She screwed the heel of her free hand against her temple.

"Why don't I close up tonight? There's nothing going on here. You can head out early," he said, keeping his voice gentle.

Tracy blinked and he pretended not to notice that she was on the verge of crying. "Sure. If it's no trouble." Her words came out even softer now.

"No worries at all, *mami*." She snorted and rolled her eyes at the hot momma nickname. *As if*, she mimed. "G'wan with your bad self. Get out of here."

She sniffled again. "Thanks, Jay. You opening tomorrow?"

"You know it." He made the schedule and he didn't put Tracy on opening shifts any more. She ended up working late too often, so he made sure to schedule her for the noon to close.

"I'll lock up. You can let him out when you're done." Tracy nodded at the both of them and left the hallway. A minute later the CDs they kept on endless repeat in the background switched off and the store fell into silence.

Broken soon enough by Devin, who had moved closer, still needing to tuck in the T-shirt and buckle his belt.

"Why are you relieved?" He raised his eyebrows when Jay glared at him. "What? I can see it on your face."

Jay pressed his lips together. He didn't talk about this with anyone.

Except he already had, hadn't he? That first date. Or not-a-date. When Devin had looked up after making Jay laugh for two hours straight and told him it was Jay's turn to talk about himself. And somehow, Jay had. He'd kept most of the words bottled up. The list of scathing remarks and subtle putdowns he'd tolerated with his ex. The quick subject changes when they were with company and someone asked Jay what he did for a living. But Devin had understood even without those words. Understood what Jay meant, even when he hadn't known how to say it out loud.

So tempting to see if that understanding extended this far.

"She's had a really rough pregnancy. She's trying for this promotion and her douchebag boyfriend took off to parts unknown." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Devin.

Eyes narrowed, shirt hanging out of his pants, belt hanging limp from one hand, Devin studied him.

It didn't take him more than a minute. "Pushing too hard?"

Jay exhaled. Devin got it. Yes. His boss and good friend was that close to putting herself in the hospital in her desperation to provide for herself and her soon-to-arrive baby. And the only thing Jay could do about it was... "I think she knows I'm trying to protect her. She never argues when I send her home."

Devin lifted a hand as if he were going to grab Jay's arm, but let it fall at the last moment. Jay told himself he wasn't disappointed.

"You're a good guy, Jay... Hey, what *is* your last name anyway?"

God, he couldn't believe his ex had made him wary to say something as don't-mess-with-me as his name. "Gomez."

"Jay Gomez." He could hear Devin feeling the words in his mouth, rolling them around on his tongue, and braced himself for... something. The wince. The hesitation. It wouldn't be the first time a white guy's interest waned at the reality of his last name. He didn't know what it was, but something about Gomez seemed to bring out icky jokes.

All he got was a smile.

That made it easy enough to follow up with, "It's Julio actually, but no one calls me that. I've been Jay since middle school."

"Whatever works for you." Devin smiled and Jay could tell he felt as if he'd gotten some kind of inside info. Stupid man. He ignored the flush of pleasure that warmed his skin and made his voice brisk instead. "Get out of those clothes so I can ring them up for your hot date. I hope your sister did a better job picking this one out."

"Doubt it. I'd rather go out with you."

"I'm flattered." That was snarky as hell and Jay blushed as Devin shot him a disappointed look. "No, I really am."

"But?" The older man paused with his hands on his belt and Jay was tempted to see what would happen if he didn't wave Devin off to a changing room.

Tempted. Not terminally stupid.

We've been over this already, remember? Dogs. Wilderness. Hand jobs. God, I've got to get some new metaphors.

"But no way. You're too old for me. And in five minutes? When you realize having a cute boyfriend doesn't make up for the embarrassment you feel when he tells your friends he works *retail*?" He tried not to let it get to him, but even talking about it sent waves of shame through him. Though he didn't know which was worse, what Carl's friends had said about him, that his ex-boyfriend hadn't defended him from their crap, or the fact that it still bothered him so

much. "I don't need another daddy who makes me feel like shit. I've made up my mind. No thanks."

Harsh, and way out of line for how Devin had treated him so far, but too bad. Sometimes when crap landed, innocent bystanders got splattered. He braced himself for the inevitable argument.

It didn't come. Just a smile and an easy headshake. "Damn. And here I'd hoped your texting me was flirtatious."

"Stop trying to be charming and strip, pencil man." Which was a job joke, not a body joke, since Devin could snap Jay in half with casts on both his arms. "If you remember to put these on, I guarantee your next date will be fabulous."

Playing white knight for Devin's wardrobe was *not* the same thing as changing his mind about dating him.

It *wasn't*.

Chapter Four

Devin had been hiding in the bathroom for ten minutes.

The first time he'd attempted to stick his head out the door, his date had spotted him and waved while Devin pantomimed forgetting something in the quiet room behind him. Back in the bathroom, he leaned against the exposed brick wall and thunked his head back, letting the rough edges scrape his scalp.

Fuck. No escape.

Trapped in the bathroom, trying to work up the energy to go out there and blow off his musclebound 'roid jockey of a date. One drink was enough to make it clear that Devin would gnaw his own arm off before he'd let that guy grab his hand and drag it over to his crotch again.

Lucy had made a valiant effort, hooking him up with a guy who definitely spent time at the gym, which was the only place she knew Devin went except downstairs to her apartment. But he could have told her as soon as he saw Tad—terrible name... sounded like something you scraped off your shoe after it accidentally stuck there—that this date was going to be a spectacular washout.

Spectacular in that it had the potential to turn into a bar brawl if Devin didn't watch it.

Jay's outfit of choice had sure as shit done its job though. The predatory look in Tad's eyes at the sight of him might have been a turn-on if the guy were less of a douchebag. Devin had threatened Lucy with bodily harm if she didn't update the profile she'd created with a more current photo, so this date hadn't included any embarrassing explanations. Just some low-grade sexual harassment. Thrilling.

Jay. God, the thought of him tightened Devin's stomach with a flutter of nerves and made it clear what a flop date two was. The meathead back in the bar didn't tighten anything but a feeling of revulsion. Devin's not-a-date with Jay had been ten times hotter than this meet-and-greet in the hip River North bar.

Devin cursed himself for an idiot as he pulled his phone from his pocket and hit the text icon. He hadn't heard a word from Jay since Sunday night and had promised himself he'd wait to see if Jay contacted him again.

Yeah, that promise was bullshit when he made it.

Help! Worst. Date. Ever.

His phone lit up a moment later.

Did you wear the pants?

Devin grinned. Jay had been convinced he'd chicken out and wear one of his ordinary pairs of jeans.

The pants are working. Too well.

No such thing.

This guy's a loser. You should come rescue me.

What are you, chicken? Tell him to piss off.

Devin had been teasing, typing nonsense because it was more fun than going back out into the posh bar and telling that asshole that he was heading out, no kiss necessary for this one, thank you. But at Jay's dismissive words, he paused. It might be a bit devious, but anything that gave him a chance to hang out with Jay was worth it...

Can't.

What excuse could he give?

He works for a client. Have to be nice.

Fake an emergency at home. Rugrat vomit always works.

Told him my sister was home w/nephew. No excuse there.

His phone didn't blink for a hundred and thirty-seven thousand years.

The text message light started blinking a split second before his phone buzzed and Devin couldn't keep the grin off his face.

Pain. In. My. Ass. You're totally buying me drinks. Text address.

He'd never punched in numbers and letters so fast in his life. Devin killed another five minutes in the bathroom before it occurred to him that his date might come looking for him, thinking his lingering in here was some kind of invitation.

Ugh. Gross.

Back at their semiprivate seating area, he grabbed a seat on the couch kitty-corner to the one where his date sat. Tad's eyes narrowed at Devin's choice of a more distant seat and stayed that way through twenty minutes of stilted conversation about workout regimens and protein shakes.

Jesus. Devin liked to blow off steam at the gym, but he couldn't imagine anything more boring than sitting around and talking about it on a date.

Tad's startled look was the only warning Devin got before a heavy weight pushed against his shoulders and a hand snuck into the open front of his shirt. Devin closed his eyes and smelled the vanilla and leather scent of Jay's cologne.

"Who the hell are you?" Tad was pissed at the interruption.

"His boyfriend." Jay looked over Devin's shoulder at Tad and the words vibrated against Devin's ear. Which was apparently connected to his cock. Either that or Jay's voice resonated on some kind of weird sex frequency that made him hard whenever he heard it.

"What the fuck?" The wrinkled up nose and exposed front teeth didn't improve Tad's looks.

"He gets these ideas, don't you, Devin?" Jay's hand was massaging his chest and Devin was pretty sure if he held his breath any longer he'd pass out. "You can't go looking every time I throw a hissy fit, baby."

Keep touching me like that and I'll stop looking for good.

"Yeah, right." Tad scowled at them. The douche-canoe was still arguing. "No way *he* gets himself a hot twink boyfriend like you."

Jay's fingers in his shirt curved until his nails dug into Devin's chest, a sharp sting that drove Devin's hips deeper into the couch as he tried to hold still. The need to get up and plow his fist into this asshole's face surged strong, but he was pretty sure Jay wouldn't thank him for stepping in.

"I'm no twink, you micro-dicked Neanderthal." His sweet boy was gone. The bitch, who'd put his boot so far up your ass you'd be tying his shoelaces with your tongue, was back.

Devin understood it this time. Easier to figure things out when that white-hot anger wasn't directed his way. Somewhere back down the line, Jay had decided that offense was better than defense. Probably when the ex Jay had dropped hints about had been part of his life.

“Please. You’re gagging for it from a real man.” The Neanderthal in question jerked his chin at Devin. “He couldn’t fuck a girl without flinching.”

Jesus. Devin didn’t even know if he was supposed to be insulted by that last crack or not.

In a heartbeat, Jay *slithered* over the arm of the couch, landing in Devin’s lap, facing him, his knees pushed deep into the cushions on either side of Devin’s hips. He ground their crotches together, hard. Devin caught himself before he thrust up and whipped his head right and left, eyes darting everywhere. Were people staring? Grid wasn’t a gay bar, although the downtown scene was hip enough, and their corner recessed enough, to keep any fuss to a minimum. He couldn’t see the asshole anymore because Jay’s chest was in the way, his thighs holding Devin down when his instinct was to stand up.

Jay grabbed his chin, forcing Devin to focus on his face. “Eyes on me, sailor.”

Jesus, it was hard enough keeping his eyes off Jay at the best of times. Impossible to resist him now. Dark eyes locked on his, the hint of a curve at the corner of Jay’s full lips. He leaned forward, lips brushing along Devin’s cheek on a straight line to his ear.

Jay’s whisper took Devin’s attention off the low-key Tuesday night crowd, because he was suddenly so hard he worried more about coming in his fucking pants while Jay writhed melodramatically his lap.

“Put your hands on my ass, dummy.”

He’d have gone to his knees in the middle of the bar. Putting his hands on Jay was the opposite of a hardship. Devin slid his hands up hard, narrow thighs and around the slim curves of Jay’s hips until his hands spanned an ass that made him lightheaded. No doubt the jerkoff across the way was getting an eyeful. Devin dug his fingertips in and the audible hitch in Jay’s breath made Devin’s cock twitch.

“So—” Devin struggled to clear his throat. “Is *this* a date?”

“This is us showing that asshole what he’s missing.” Jay dragged his mouth down Devin’s neck, encouraging him to tilt his head for better access.

The rough scrape of a tongue on his neck set Devin’s skin on fire. He tried to sound grateful. *For the white knight syndrome that keeps Jay riding to the rescue, Lord, we thank you.* “Right. Kind of you.”

"Don't get any ideas." Jay bit his earlobe. Devin shuddered.

"You're kidding, right?" His eyes threatened to roll back in their sockets. "These pants were tight *before* you climbed in my lap."

Jay shook with silent laughter and Devin thought he might come off the couch with the vibration. "Your sister set you up with *that* guy? You're gonna have to give me her number. Girl needs help."

"Her number? Sure. Anything you want." *Seriously. Anything.*

"Stop dating assholes."

"Got it. Whatever you say."

His brains were scrambled and his mouth opened, trying to help him suck in more oxygen. Whatever would clear the sex fog from his brain. But full-on stupid seemed like the best he could manage as Jay humped him while Tad grumbled and Devin set his teeth against the bony wedge of Jay's shoulder and bit down hard enough to get some attention.

Jay froze. His hands, which had been loosely laced behind Devin's neck, clutched at the short hairs at Devin's nape.

Both of them held still for long enough to make things awkward. But after a minute, the boy in his lap broke the spell.

"So. I think we're done here, yes? Yes." Jay rose to his knees, which pressed his groin against Devin's chest, who groaned as he felt Jay's hard dick pressing into his sternum. When he looked up, Jay's cheeks were pink and he wouldn't meet Devin's eyes. He swung one leg elegantly off Devin's lap and braced himself with a hand on the couch's arm as he stood up.

"You better be buying my drinks, asshole." Devin's date wasn't pleased.

Jay's mouth opened to argue. Grabbing him by the hand, Devin pulled him away from the seating area.

"*That* guy's a client?" Jay hissed in his ear, trailing behind as Devin threaded through the sparse crowd to the edge of the bar where the wait station was. He lifted two fingers and got the bartender's attention, pulling out his wallet and finding his credit card.

"Hmm. What?"

"Are you seriously going to have to suck up to that guy at the office?"

Shit. Jay's little lap dance had driven every thought of Devin's lie right out of his head. "Um, no. I don't think we're going to end up under contract to them." He tried to shove the hand with crossed fingers—like a kid for Christ's sake—in his too tight pants pocket and failed.

"Good. God, that guy couldn't fuck a pre-lubed asshole." Jay narrowed his eyes and glared over his shoulder at the seating arrangement they'd left, where Tad had spread his arms and legs wide on the couch like a pasha waiting for tribute.

Devin was surprised Jay had gotten so worked up on his behalf actually, but it was sweet to be defended. More than sweet. It was hot as hell. He leaned up against the bar and scrubbed his hand through his hair, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and wondering if anyone in the bar noticed his dick was an iron bar in his pants.

A heavy warm weight draped itself against his back. Devin's spine jerked straight. "What—" he managed to squeeze out as Jay's arm snaked around his waist, his hand landing square on Devin's dick, out of sight beneath the edge of the bar.

"Shut up. That jackass can still see us and I want him to know exactly what he's missing out on." Jay pressed his face against Devin's back, his mouth landing smack between Devin's shoulder blades. Mouthing up Devin's spine, his lips dragging against the starched cotton of the button down, Jay reached his neck. Devin dropped his head with an all-over shiver and slid his credit card to the edge of the rail in front of him, hoping the bartender could take it from there.

He knew this was only a game to Jay, something he was doing to piss Devin's date off. For whatever reason, Jay had decided to make himself Devin's champion tonight. But that was a hard dick pressing against his ass and Devin's body didn't give a shit that this was all for show. Sweat misted on his skin and he rolled his hips in an effort to push his ass harder against the slim young man plastered to his back.

"Fuck." Devin honestly wasn't sure who said it. Jay's hand on his dick held him tight, not moving, but with a grip that ratcheted up the pressure in his balls until his heart was pounding in his ears and he leaned over the bar on his elbows, panting and staring at the counter.

Forget this being a game. If he didn't get out of there, he was going to come in his pants for real.

A credit card slip materialized at his hand and he scrawled an absurdly generous tip and then a signature across the bottom. Then he shook himself loose from Jay's clasp and spun around to stare the younger man down.

They stood nearly eye to eye. Jay's chest rose and fell as rapidly as his own. Devin shifted forward an inch, pushing against Jay's chest, the toes of his boots kicking against Jay's shoes. He fisted his hands at his sides to keep his fingers from wrapping themselves around Jay's arms, his hips, his fucking neck for turning Devin on so fast and so hard he could hardly think straight. The bar's music kicked up two notches in volume until the bass beat drowned out the thump of Devin's pulse, a throb he could feel in his dick. Jay's breath moved on his skin like water.

"Devin." The word was barely audible above the music.

He pushed past Jay, feeling the younger man at his heels all the way to the short flight of stairs that led up to the street entrance. It felt like running away, but he needed some breathing room and the bar seemed to have run out of oxygen. He jogged up them, feet pushing off every other riser as he headed for the exit, for the bracing cold of the January night air, and the clarity it might blow through his overheated brain.

"Devin." Again, just the one word, this time quieter as Devin turned the corner of the building onto Wells Street. Jay's footsteps followed him, too close.

"Back off. Back off right now, Jay, unless you want—" Devin broke off midsentence. He took a step back. He had no business pushing this, no matter what kind of show Jay had put on inside the bar. "Fuck. I need some fucking breathing room." For once, the wind off the lake had died and his harsh breaths hung in clouds in front of his face, slowly fading.

Jay looked him in the eye.

And stepped forward.

Devin's hands fisted around Jay's upper arms, pulling him close as he backed Jay up until his shoulders slammed into the brick wall, Jay's hands on Devin's hips, tugging him closer. Devin dove at Jay's mouth, his lips forcing Jay's wide open until they were panting into each other's mouth more than they were wrestling about who had more uptight, unresolved energy to spend. He ground his cock against Jay's hip, barely able to feel anything other than his own spiking pleasure through the thick layer of his coat. He pulled back from

the kiss in seconds, knowing he was screwing this up, but Jay chased his mouth for a moment, before falling away.

Devin dropped his head on Jay's shoulder, panting into Jay's thin leather jacket. The butterfly brush of a hand at the nape of his neck pulled him upright. Jay's hands were both at his waist, shoved deep in his jacket pockets.

Stepping away, Devin sucked cold air into his lungs and stared, wide-eyed, at his not-a-date. He opened his mouth, ready to apologize, even if he wasn't quite sure for what.

Jay cut him off before he could get a word out. "Not your fault. I'm giving off some hellu mixed signals. Sorry." Jay dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. His lips were red, as if he'd painted them.

"Fuuuuuck!" Devin stomped down the sidewalk, feeling like an angry toddler with a randy teenager's hard-on in his pants, and shouted his frustration at the always-illuminated sky over the city. He'd never wanted to go out on these damn dates to begin with. Now he was all twisted up over this guy who seemed half into him, half about to nine-one-one him, and whose touch lit Devin up like a sodium flare. He pressed his face into his hands. Jesus, he needed to calm down. It wasn't this kid's fault that Devin had apparently been bullshitting himself this entire time, telling himself he didn't care about finding someone. After twenty feet, he stopped and turned around.

Jay stood motionless under the streetlight, fingers pressed to his mouth, eyes wide. His ridiculous jacket gaped open over his chest, completely inadequate for a Chicago winter but sure enough making him look like a damn runway model.

Devin pressed the heels of his hands to his eye sockets and groaned. His fingers ached with the cold. He gave up and pulled his gloves out of his coat pocket, jerking his head to beckon. "Come on."

Jay cocked his head to the side but didn't say anything.

"I'll give you a ride."

"Where?"

"Wherever."

Jay bit his lip, hesitating.

Devin sucked in cold air through his nose, freezing the hairs inside until he exhaled. He knew he radiated sexual tension right now. Getting in a car with

him was probably not the most comfortable idea. "I'll give you money for a cab."

Jay reared his head back. "No way," he snapped. "I can pay for my own cab."

"But you won't." Devin didn't know *how* he knew this, but he was sure he was right. "You'll walk to the Brown Line and take the El home and it's fucking freezing out, Jay. So just let me give you a ride or pay for a taxi, okay?"

Silence hung in the air between them, its edges softened by the *shhh* of passing cars on Wells. Jay looked down the street, up at the streetlight, anywhere that wasn't Devin.

Devin waited.

"Fine."

Devin kept his mouth shut as he walked to his car, Jay following behind him. There wasn't a single thing he could say right now that wouldn't come off like manipulation. Or begging. In the middle of the block, he cut between two parallel-parked cars and crossed the street to where he'd left the Camry. He pressed the unlock button on the key fob and the low beep showed Jay the car. The streetlight overhead was burned out—city crews were slow to change lightbulbs in the dead of winter—and he kept his head up.

If somebody tried to mug him, he'd take their head off, just to release a little sexual tension.

He got in the car and slammed his door shut, buckling his seat belt before starting the engine. Jay slid into the seat next to him, shutting his door quietly. Waiting for the click of the seatbelt buckle, Devin focused on his hands where they gripped the steering wheel at ten and two.

"Buckle up." His voice was harsh in the silence of the car, the street noises shut out in this dark, quiet space.

Silence.

Devin could've sworn he could hear his neck creak as he turned his head slowly to the right.

Jay's head was tipped back against the headrest and he rolled it to the left so he stared in Devin's direction. He shifted in his seat, reaching down to tug at the crotch of his pants.

Sucking in a raw breath, he smelled Jay, the heat of his body rising in the frigid car and carrying his scent to Devin, woody and sharp. A rising tide pushed him toward Jay and told him to reach out and lay his hands on what he wanted, but he locked it down. He closed his eyes, squaring two over and over again in his mind to distract himself. He made it to four thousand ninety-six.

A light hand landed on his wrist.

He opened his eyes wide enough to see the long, pale fingers stroking the back of his gloved hand. The rest of Jay was still, like the lake, frozen in the cold.

A single fingertip traced up the back of Devin's hand until it hit the bare skin of his wrist.

The scritch of a nail against his wrist shot electricity up his arm until it bounced around his insides, making every inch of him twitch and then freeze when Jay's fingertip slid under the hemmed edge of Devin's glove.

Jay stilled too, that one trespassing finger pushed deep under the supple leather.

Impossible to think of anything else, of passing pedestrians or neighborhood patrolmen in cruisers easing down the streets, when Jay's hand was barely touching him.

He stopped thinking entirely. "Open your jacket."

"What?"

"Open your jacket. Pull up your shirt. And unzip your pants." Devin heard the growl in his own voice. Hands on the steering wheel, eyes on Jay, he didn't move. Not one. Fucking. Inch.

"Fuck. This doesn't change anything." But Jay was pulling the lapels of his jacket apart and yanking his shirt up. Devin fell out of his self-imposed stasis and thumbed at the button of his seatbelt until he bruised his finger trying to open the buckle. It clicked and he shoved the strap off his shoulder, twisting in his seat, too impatient to remember how to get enough room to do this.

Jay was fumbling with the button fly on his jeans. Devin pushed his hands out of the way. Ripped the buttons through their holes with a sharp yank and reached in with one rough hand to pull out Jay's cock, ignoring Jay's hands shoving the jeans down his hips.

He swiped his thumb across the head of Jay's dick, pulling a thready cry into the quiet, until Jay fisted one hand and pressed it against his teeth.

I told you. The need to lay claim with his words was fierce, but he locked them in the back of his throat and twisted his hand on the soft skin of Jay's dick instead. He meant to be gentle but couldn't quite manage it, breath harsh in his lungs. There wasn't enough air. He was lightheaded with want and need.

Jay's hips bucked into the air. Leaning a heavy arm across Jay's thighs, Devin held him still as he grabbed Jay's cock more firmly in his right hand, pointing it toward his mouth.

He wanted to take his time. To lick and suck and play with his mouth over the veins and ridges of Jay's dick until he'd memorized it with his tongue, but there was no fucking way.

If Jay was anywhere near as turned on as he was, this wasn't going to take long enough. He slid down deep over Jay's dick, the upward punch of Jay's hips frozen in place by Devin's weight.

Even a fist in the mouth couldn't keep his boy quiet.

Jay's cry ripped through the car, bouncing off the ceiling and slamming into Devin until his hands shook on Jay's thigh, on the base of his cock. He pressed his face down far enough to choke himself, swallowing fast as Jay spilled in his mouth.

Silence descended like fog over the front seat.

Pushing himself off Jay's body, Devin already knew what he'd see when he looked at Jay. And what came next after that too.

Jay's eyes were wide, fearful. And Devin felt like shit for putting that look into them, even though he knew they were both equally responsible for this stupidity. Another couple moments of embarrassment kept them still, until Jay scrubbed a hand over his face.

"I can't believe I did this again. Shit." Jay dragged his clothes roughly together and yanked on the door handle, spilling himself out of the car in his haste. Devin didn't know exactly what it was that made this such a terrible idea, when he and Jay were so obviously drawn to each other, but understanding was less important than fixing this.

"I'm sorry." He was already calling after a ghost. "Jay."

He could only see Jay's back as Jay pulled his jacket closed and walked away in one goddamn hurry. Before Jay had reached the corner, Devin was texting him, hoping this child of the digital revolution would be unable to ignore a text message staring at him from his cell phone.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that.

Jay pulled his phone from his pocket before he turned the corner, the one working streetlight flaring off the white plastic cover as he moved through the warm yellow light. Devin knew he saw the text message, but his own phone sat silent in his lap. After another minute, he texted again.

*I was out of line. We can just be friends, ok? Your call entirely.
I apologize.*

The car sank deeper into coldness as Devin sat with his phone on his knee, waiting for a buzz or a blinking light that never came.

Jay? Please. I'm sorry.

Species went extinct and new ones evolved from protozoa while he sat in his car in the dark and waited to see how badly he'd fucked this up. Finally, his phone vibrated.

I screwed up. Don't call me right now. Talk to you later.

Not until the air whistled hollowly into his lungs did he realize how unsure he'd been that Jay would answer. He leaned his forehead against the steering wheel until the icy plastic curve gave him a headache. Sitting up straight, Devin twisted the key in the ignition and headed home, fully prepared to lie to his sister about the nature of the kiss that had ended this date.

It was none of her business—no one's business at all, actually—whose hands had been on him. Or on whom his hands had been.

At home, Devin stripped out of his clothes as he walked through his apartment, leaving a trail from the front door to his bed where he fell onto the sheets, hand already hard on his dick. He jerked himself dry and told himself it deserved to hurt as he remembered Jay's cry, the sharp sound vibrating in his chest until Devin spilled on his stomach in a sharp spasm whose ache lingered until he drifted off, wondering if he would ever hear from Jay again.

Chapter Five

"Jay picked out this guy?" Devin heard his own voice hit a pitch more commonly found in teenage girls. A man shouldn't have to hear news that caught him off guard while standing around in his drawers.

It didn't help that he hadn't heard from Jay since the guy had bolted from his car on Tuesday night. Now, as he got dressed for date number three, his sister hovered awkwardly in the doorway while he debated about wearing again the simple but stylish outfit Jay had picked out for him. But even pulling those hangers out of his closet made his stomach clench. With nerves or arousal, he wasn't sure. He shoved the clothes deep in the back of his closet and moved to his dresser instead. Black turtleneck and a pair of dark jeans would have to do. Close enough.

"Well, he helped."

"What do you mean, *he helped*?"

Lucy blushed and crossed her arms over her chest. Her gaze flicked away from Devin before returning to look him in the eye. Stepping into his bathroom to change, he left the door open so he could hear her explanation. "He told me to stop thinking with my dick unless all I wanted was for you to get laid."

Huh. Pretty good advice.

He tugged on his jeans and changed shirts.

"So, you what? Ran my date by him?"

"No." He stuck his head out the door at Lucy's long pause. She blushed. He rolled his eyes and waved a hand in a *C'mon* circle. *Yes, yes. We know you've overstepped your bounds again. Get on with it.* "I wanted to find out what was going on with him, since you were being such a closemouthed bastard about it all."

He smashed toothpaste on his toothbrush and brought tube and brush out into his bedroom with him. Lucy didn't look away as he pinned her with a look. Telling her about shopping at Jay's store had obviously only encouraged her. Then again, he hadn't told her anything about Tuesday night's disastrous finale. "You didn't think that maybe it wasn't any of your business?"

"That's what he said," she admitted. "But he was *into* you, Dev. If he thought he was hiding that in his emails, he sucks at covert activity. And I know you're into him."

"Listen, Luce. I know you mean well, but don't push, okay?" He stuck his toothbrush in his mouth and squeezed his last warning around the edges. "I mean it."

"Fine." The set of Lucy's mouth was mutinous. "But I still think he's into you. I feel bad. I think I screwed this up."

He headed for the front hall coat rack, stopping to kiss his sister on the head. "It's not your fault. But you could always let me off the hook for the rest of the dates."

"No way, dude. Maybe he'll ask me how they're going and get jealous."

"Maybe."

He doubted it. Devin knew he was going to do that stupid wishing on eyelashes or pennies in fountains shit, because he was an optimistic and superstitious dumbass, but he figured his best-case scenario was the chance to shop now and then for pants that made his ass look good from a guy who made his heart stutter.

It wasn't much, but it would have to be enough.

An hour into his date with Matt, the restaurant manager, Devin had to admit Lucy had done a much better job of it this time around. Matt was smart, funny, good-looking, and had no qualms about kicking Devin's ass in eight-ball at the pool hall on the edge of Boystown where they'd opted to meet. The place was more dive than gay bar, but the lack of crowds meant they could keep the table for as long as they wanted.

Matt's repertoire of entertaining stories from his restaurant meant Devin had laughed more in the first ten minutes of this date than he had in the entire disastrous evening he'd spent with Tad, before Jay rescued him.

Jay.

The root of his entire problem right now. Every thought led back to Jay somehow, even if the twisty turns of his brain to get there were labyrinthine. Going out on a date, introducing himself to someone new... Hell, even going to

the bathroom to take a leak made him think of texting Jay from the john at Grid.

Matt was patient with Devin's occasional moments of distraction, but it was clear he sensed their lack of connection. The restaurant manager was younger than Devin was, although not Jay-young, tall and wiry with dark hair clipped short and cheekbones you could cut yourself on. If Devin had spotted him in a club two weeks ago, he'd have had that shit on lockdown before his second beer was finished.

Things were different now.

Devin shook his head and leaned over the pool table. He could feel Matt's eyes on him and knew that in a different scenario—on a date with someone else... with Jay—he would be playing it up, sticking his ass out as he bent over the table until he provoked a remark or, better yet, a grab. But he just wasn't feeling it and this perfectly nice guy deserved better.

He'd somehow managed to stay in this game until the very end and lined up his shot, an easy cut into the corner pocket that only required him to avoid scratching by letting the cue ball ricochet off into the adjacent corner. To his surprise, he sank the shot perfectly, eight ball dropping cleanly into the pocket while the cue ball bounced harmlessly around the table. Matt's smile for him at his first win was genuine and when they shook hands, Devin was aware that their clasp lasted longer than a strictly polite handshake would.

He waited to feel something. That slow burn of waking desire. The quick mental speculation about what it would be like to get naked with a guy

Nothing.

He let go of the other man's hand.

"Listen, Matt." No matter how nice you wanted to be, this was always the sucky part. His stomach roiled a little. Was he being an idiot here? Probably. "You're a great guy." God, worst lead-in ever.

Matt's smile was generous. "But you're not feeling it."

"God, I'm sorry. But no."

"That's okay. There's no knowing who'll click. That's why we go out on dates, right?" His date shrugged and tipped his head toward the pool table. "I'm having fun anyway. Another game?"

“Sure.” He pulled the solid and striped balls from pockets and rolled them down to the opposite end of the table where Matt racked them. Devin racked his brain for any spark of interest. What was wrong with him that this guy didn’t do it for him? *He’s a smart, fun guy who’s not so young that he’s out of your league, like Jay was...*

God, when would every thought his fucked-up brain crapped out not wind its way to Jay? *Who would be all over this guy probably. Matt’s exactly what he said he wanted.*

Devin froze.

Matt was exactly what Jay had said he wanted.

Ah, hell.

He yelled at himself—on the inside, no need to alert bystanders to the level of crazy being achieved at this point—for being an overachieving idiot. Nobody was this noble. On the other hand, if he wanted to show Jay he really meant it, that they could be friends, what better way?

Hell in a motherfucking handbasket.

Devin’s sigh was loud enough to catch Matt’s attention. “So, I have this friend.”

“Oh god, you’re not going to set me up with someone.”

“No. Well, maybe.” *Because I have lost my ever-lovin’ mind.* “He’s a terrific guy. Smart, funny, hot as hell. He’s in retail management, so I’m sure he can go toe-to-toe with your horror stories.”

“And you’re not dating him why?”

Devin blushed. “He’s made it clear he isn’t interested.”

Matt raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow. “Or else you would...”

“Tie him to my bed and not let him up for a week?” He shrugged, feeling kind of stupid. “Hell, yeah.”

“So, what? You want to give me his number?” Matt racked the triangle of balls, giving it a sharp shake to keep them tightly packed as he lined up the top of the rack with the circle spot. Then he lifted the plastic rack carefully and slung it back into the slot in the end of the table.

The whole operation was so sexily competent that Devin tried to talk himself out of this stupid plan. But he held his breath for a moment, waiting,

and it still didn't work between the two of them. Before the sighing reached teenage girl with a stupid crush proportions, he cut to the chase. "I was thinking I'd give him a call right now. I could introduce you two and head out."

Matt twisted his cue tip into one of the tiny cubes of blue chalk, his grin like lightning on a hot night. "Why not? Call him up."

Devin pulled out his phone and hit *Contacts*. At the last second, he touched the text message icon instead of *Call*. The odds of Jay picking up a phone call from him were not great, but he'd bet cash money Jay couldn't resist looking at a text message.

Yeah, and look at how well your bets have served you so far.

Enough with the bickering. Jesus. The voices in his head were getting out of control. He swiped the message before he could second-guess himself any further.

Hi. Date three: great guy, no spark. Just realized you'd probably like him. Told him about you & he's interested. We'll be at Halsted Billiards for another hour if you want to meet him. I'll head out when/if you get here.

He pressed *Send* and tried to not flinch.

Jay pulled on the bar door's icy metal handle and wondered if he could clock himself with it, leaving his unconscious body to be stepped over by Devin and Date Three on their eventual way home to the night of raging porn sex they were obviously going to have after punking the stupid guy who showed up *again* after a shout out from the man he'd promised himself he wouldn't pursue.

But I'm not pursuing him. I'm after his date this time.

He stepped into the dive bar and let his eyes adjust, bracing himself for crowd of vaguely bathed hipsters. Or a motorcycle gang.

Listen to yourself. Clearly all decision-making responsibilities should be removed from your job description, you moron.

The place was half-full of small groups, mixed gender, and seemed relatively clean. The bartender had her white blonde hair in pinup girl rolls and had a full sleeve of tattoos on both arms. She was also older than Jay's mother

and scrutinized his ID long enough to make him question if he somehow wasn't old enough to be in a bar after all. Maybe this was Bizarro World.

Maybe that would explain your inability, again, to make a decision and stick to it.

He ordered a cheap bottled beer so he wouldn't mourn it if the situation turned squicky and he had to jet in a hurry. He pushed a five across the bar and waved off the change, grabbing his beer by the neck and bracing himself to look for Devin and his, Jay's, date.

For days now, each time his phone's blue alert light started blinking, indicating he had a text or an email, every muscle in Jay's body would tense, an all-over spasm that hit him like a jolt of electricity. Every time. He tried to hold off, to look at messages and emails only from time to time instead of as soon as they came in, but that blinking light was like a finger smooched on a doorbell, a buzzing in his head that wouldn't go away until he answered. Or at least looked.

When he saw Devin's name pop up on his screen, his pulse had fluttered and he'd had to wrench a deep breath into his chest to get enough oxygen out of the suddenly thin air. Simply seeing Devin's name flooded him with memories, as if he'd been body-slammed back to last Tuesday in an instant. The dark quiet car. The harsh pull of their breaths. The wet heat of Devin's mouth on him as his hips flew off the seat. The inevitable humiliation when he realized that he'd done it again. Fallen for another older man with more status than him—and you could say that shit didn't matter all you wanted, but Jay knew from experience that the real professional men, the lawyers and doctors and Indian chiefs, didn't hesitate to slap you down to your face when your job was pushing sixty-dollar button-downs. He'd sworn he wouldn't do this to himself again. Wouldn't put himself in a position where he was ashamed of what he did for a living and made to feel worthless by the man he dated. He didn't even really care if Devin meant to do it, because it would happen. There was just no way to balance out that kind of inequality.

And yet here he was again. Acting like the man's beck-and-call girl.

The bartender indicated a dark hall at the end of the bar when Jay asked about pool tables. The hall itself was short and he paused at the entrance to the back room to get the lay of the land.

“Jay!”

Just his luck. Devin and Date Three were at the table nearest the door. He plastered a smile on his face. His cheeks felt like ice cracking under a heavy weight. Handshakes and awkward introductions all around were next, Devin's date the only one who seemed at ease.

"Well, guess I'm outta here." Devin shrugged into his parka and took a step toward the hall before pausing. "Um, have fun. I guess."

He turned to leave and the words ripped out of Jay before he could stop them. "So, this isn't gonna count?"

Devin spun on his heel in an instant and came back. "What?"

"Unless you've already, you know." Jay made a kiss face and appropriate noises, thereby relegating himself to the third grade.

Devin turned pink and sputtered. "No. I hadn't mentioned..."

Oh, Jay would get more than his fair share of pleasure out of putting Devin on the spot this time. Echoes of their first date—*not a date!*—rang in him like a bell. "If he doesn't kiss you, then this date doesn't count toward the bet, right?"

"The bet?" The hot, dark-haired guy clearly wasn't clued in to the grand plan.

Devin's pink bordered on purple as Jay spilled the details of the wager in all their embarrassing glory.

But when Matt laughed and said, "You guys are crazy. Sure, I'm good for it." Jay didn't feel as if he'd won this round at all.

Or if he had, it was because everyone else was playing some other game. Watching Devin kiss this guy—walking around the corner of the pool table first and why couldn't they have leaned over it, because a brush of their lips would do, wouldn't it?—scritch'd at Jay's equilibrium until he accidentally slammed his beer bottle down on the rail. The cheap lager foamed up and out of the longneck and his curses broke up the kissing couple who theoretically didn't have any connection, so what the fuck was that about anyway? Then he spotted Matt's finger hooked through one of Devin's belt loops as the older man turned to Jay and figured that for all he'd made a good impression on Devin, the restaurant manager was clearly a player.

Devin was the one who retrieved a bar rag from the front room and mopped up the mess, lingering over the wipe down long enough to get funny looks from Matt. Finally, he balled up the dirty towel and nodded at them.

"Right. See you." Devin wiped a palm on his pants and shook hands with Matt before turning to Jay.

To Jay's surprise, after a brief hesitation, he was folded in a quick hug. Devin's bulky coat billowed under his cheek and he caught himself squeezing back with his arms around the older man's waist. They separated quickly.

"Be good." The corner of Devin's mouth pulled back in half a smile.

"I always am, baby." He mustered up a wink.

"I know."

The quiet that lingered after Devin's exit crumbled under the sudden clatter of another table's winner scattering the initial rack with a fierce break.

"Game?" Matt asked.

"Sure." *Shake it off, Jay. Why else did you come out tonight if not to hang out with this guy that Devin thinks you'll like?* "Fair warning though. I suck."

Matt pressed his lips together for a moment before laughing. "I'm gonna let that one just sail by."

An epidemic of blushing was breaking out on the north side that night apparently. Jay's cheeks felt as if they were on fire. Where he'd normally flirt back, his regular banter suddenly felt awkward and inappropriate. "Thanks. Why don't I rack and you can break?"

An hour later, it was clear that while Matt was charismatic enough to charm the pants off a virgin prom queen, which was damn near what Jay had been in his senior year, the odd start to their evening made any kind of real flirtation too funky to pursue. After his second loss, Jay congratulated Matt and slid his cue into the wall-mounted rack.

"Are we done?"

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. My head's not in the game."

"No worries. We can head out if you want." At Jay's lifted eyebrow, Matt laughed. "No subtext intended. That thing between you and Devin still feels a little sticky to me. I'd like to go out with you again though, on a night that doesn't start with me seeing someone else." By the end of his speech, Matt had eased himself close enough that Jay had to tip his head back to look Matt in the eyes. The little zing that came from knowing he held a hot guy's attention skittered along Jay's spine, but he let it fizzle out unacknowledged.

“We could maybe do that.”

That maybe hadn't slipped by Matt, who looked willing to hang tough. “Do you live in the neighborhood? I'm headed to the El.”

“So you're not going to try to pay for my cab ride home?” He bit his tongue. That question sounded hella obnoxious out of context.

“I'm a restaurant manager, Jay. Every server on my staff makes more money than I do. I'll guard your ass on the El though.”

Jay grinned. It was still kind of weird that Devin had set him up with his own date, but Matt was certainly the kind of guy he'd been looking for. If he didn't quite feel it, he was being an idiot. *Suck it up. This is your guy.* “Deal.”

On their way out the door though, he thought he saw a familiar figure, head down, puffy coat still on, at the end of the bar closest to the door. As if Devin had almost made it out to the street before changing his mind. When Devin spotted him and then ducked his head, Jay jogged away from Matt with a quick “Wait up!” and slid into the gap next to Devin at the bar.

“Jay.” Devin's eyes were at half-mast and he swayed toward Jay before carefully righting himself. Even his careful articulation of the name couldn't hide the fact that he was completely and utterly hammered.

“Hey, Devin.” Jay braced a hand on the other man's shoulder, in case Devin was as liquefied as he looked. “What are you still doing here?”

Slow blink. “You're leaving. With Matt.” Devin stared over Jay's shoulder to where the restaurant manager was waiting at the double doors to the outside.

“I'm leaving at the same *time* as Matt. Not *with* him.” He didn't know why he felt the need to explain himself. And based on the blank, blurred look on Devin's face, subtle vocabulary choices were a bit too much of a challenge for him right now. “How are *you* getting home? You didn't drive, did you?”

Devin tried to make a scoffing raspberry noise and mostly succeeded in spitting on Jay. Nice. Good to know the guy he hadn't been able to stop thinking about for days couldn't hold his liquor worth a damn. “Think I'm gonna need a walk.”

Jay rolled his eyes. *That* was so not happening. “Yeah, right.” He looked over his shoulder to find that Matt had come up behind him. He waved a hand at Devin, encompassing the situation. “Look, I can't leave him here. You go. I'm gonna get him home.”

“Need any help?”

“Nah. I got it.”

Matt gave him a nod and a two-finger salute before heading out the door. Jay turned to Devin in time to catch him draining the last of his pint and waving the bartender over.

“Oh, no way, *papi*.” The nickname slipped out and he grunted. *Whoops. Not your daddy.* He wedged a shoulder in Devin’s armpit to keep him upright and signaled the bartender to total up the check. When he saw the credit card receipt, he squeaked. “Forty dollars? How many beers have you had?” Devin started pinching his fingers to his thumb. Index. Middle. Ring. Lost count and started over. “Okay, we obviously don’t have time for that question. Sign the slip, drunken one.”

The cab ride was manageable, after he finally wrestled Devin’s wallet from him and got his address from his license.

Shoving Devin up the stairs to the unit on the second floor of the two-flat was an exercise in not paying attention to the perfectly muscled ass under his hands.

Jay gave Devin three tries at inserting the key into the deadbolt lock before he took them away. Five minutes later, he figured out that Devin hadn’t been using the right key. Once inside, he fumbled for a light switch and then made a beeline for the first large piece of furniture he saw, an oversized couch up against the wall opposite the front door. He rolled Devin off his shoulder and onto the cushions, then made him sit up so Jay could pull off his jacket. While he was pulling Devin’s mucky boots off, the man himself pried a bleary eye open and stared at him.

“Jay.”

“That’s me, buddy. How you feeling?”

“Maybe I’m gonna puke.”

“Excellent. Wait here.” He left Devin sprawled on the chocolate brown leather couch and went in search of a bathroom. The entire apartment was unlit but airy, white walls and hardwood floors, giant unframed canvases on the walls that looked like painted black and white photographs of rainy city streets. The first door to the right on the hallway leading back from the living room was a bathroom—a powder room, he supposed, just a toilet and a sink—which

meant that he didn't have an excuse to snoop further, damn it. Jay snagged the tiny wastebasket from the cabinet under the white bowl of a sink and brought it back to the front room.

"Here. Puke in this." He dropped the bucket next to the couch. Hands on his hips, he eyed Devin, who'd managed to pull himself into a sitting position. "We good here?"

"You're leaving?" Devin flung himself onto his back, betrayal writ large on his face.

"You think I'm gonna stay here with you all night?"

Even Devin's shrug lurched. "I drank all the beers." He rolled back onto his side and lifted his head, thwacking his palm against the seat cushion until Jay sat down and let Devin drop his drunk-ass head in his lap.

"That you did, my friend." He flexed his thigh involuntarily and Devin's head rocked.

"Am I?"

"Are you what?"

"Your friend."

Jay sighed. Shit. "Yes. Yes, you are." He ran his fingers through Devin's short blond hair as the heat of Devin's cheek soaked into his leg. Devin rocked his head, rubbing his face against the denim.

"That's good. 'Fraid you'd say no way. So I drank—"

"All the beers, yes." He kept threading his fingers through soft hair and pretended it was for Devin's sake. "And you want to be my friend."

"Yeah. You're smart and funny and really nice even when you're cranky." Devin half-droned his litany of charms and the words tugged at Jay, even if he didn't expect Devin to remember a damn word of this conversation in the morning. It was kind of sweet. It was the way he'd always wanted someone to see him. Jay's stomach flipped. *It was the way he wanted someone to see him.* Devin was still talking. "Want to. Even if you won't let me suck you again."

Jay's dick jumped. Having Devin's face two inches from his crotch suddenly seemed like the world's worst idea. His balls pulled up and the vibrations from Devin's mumbling traveled across his skin like circles on a

pond after you threw a pebble in. Except each word Devin muttered was another pebble and Jay was so full of ripples his skin hummed.

“What the hell am I going to do with you now?”

He guessed the snoring was a decent reply.

By the time Jay slipped out the door at two a.m., leaving a sleeping Devin under a blanket on the couch, he still had no clue what the answer to that question was.

Just a small, quiet voice in the corner of his mind, whispering to him.

This *is your guy*.

Chapter Six

Jay was a mess.

On the other hand, every button-down, T-shirt, pair of jeans, sweater, or scarf on the boutique floor was in perfect order. Hell, he'd even reorganized their display of tastefully colorful socks.

Control on the outside. Chaos on the inside.

Tracy was about ready to push him over the safety rail of the atrium balcony outside the boutique's entrance.

"For Christ's sake, what is your problem?" His boss had done a complete one-eighty on the topic after a week of listening to Jay say absolutely nothing about Devin Hollister.

After five years together on the mall floor, Tracy didn't need words to know exactly what was going on in Jay's tortured brain. "Just call him! Email. Text. Whatthefuckever. You're obviously halfway in love with this guy or you'd be bitching to me about him nonstop."

This was true.

But god, he couldn't. He'd promised himself that he'd never be that kid again, the one who fell for a slick line and couldn't hold firm to a single decision he made for himself if a hot, older man who wanted to show him off was on the horizon.

Problem was, a niggling little voice in his brain kept pointing out that Devin was the opposite of slick. That he almost never pushed, and when he did, was willing to back off immediately at Jay's command.

No. It didn't matter. Jay couldn't afford to second-guess himself.

He couldn't handle that back and forth again. Not and find himself whole afterward.

"I made up my mind, Tracy. I made it up the first night." He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, making sure to leave it as carefully tousled as before. "And I've been screwing it up ever since. It's Carl, version two point oh."

His boss opened her mouth. Shut it. Bit her lip. Jay crossed his arms high on his chest and forced a loud exhale. Waited patiently.

Okay, waited.

“Did you ever think maybe you got it wrong?”

Overnight inventory counts left behind a bond you didn't bullshit. “Every day.”

Tracy wrapped him in a firm hug because she was halfway to being the world's greatest mom before the kid even arrived. “Standing firm is great, kiddo, but so is admitting you made a mistake and fixing it.”

“How am I supposed to know the difference?” His voice was muffled in her hair until the baby kicked him and he jumped back. He was convinced that kid didn't like him already.

“You just have to feel it. Listen to your heart.” He scowled at her. “Yes, you could choke on the cheese but there's a reason people say it. Listen to your goddamn heart, Jay.” She crossed her arms and rested them on her bulging stomach.

“You know, you can't talk with that kind of potty mouth once the sprout shoots out your vajayjay.”

“Gross.” Even the mother-to-be flinched at that image. It was possible he'd taken things too far. Tracy narrowed her eyes at him again. “Your heart, dipshit.”

Jay bit his lip, right on the sore spot where he'd been gnawing ever since getting an email from Lucy. “I know where his next date is.”

Tracy's dramatic gasp would've made him laugh if this weren't so frigging important. She pressed her fingertips to the corners of her mouth. “Holy shit. You can go there and declare your love and win him forever.”

Jay groaned out loud. “Oh my god, that's exactly what I was thinking, which means it's a terrible idea.”

“What?”

“Your last romantic decision knocked you up and skipped town.” Tracy glared at him. *Danger, Will Robinson*. But it was true and he knew their friendship could take the truth. “And mine made me embarrassed to admit that I work here, at this job that I love, with the best boss in the universe.”

“You have to do it, Jay. You've gotta know.”

He was pretty sure that made up for the knocked up thing. There were stampeding buffalo in his belly. "What if it's the worst idea ever?"

"It won't be. Because you know it's right."

For once, Lucy had set up Devin on a date in a gay bar. Jay didn't know if she was finally getting the hang of things or if Devin had pointed out that maybe the first time two gay men got together it might be more comfortable to do so in a setting where, if someone was staring at them, it was with admiration, and not a prelude to a gay-bashing.

In any case, Boystown was jumping for a Wednesday night and Jay had to thread his way through drifting bunches of men on Halsted Street, dodging the occasional smack to his ass from men he would maybe recognize if he could be bothered to look at anything other than the battered hammered aluminum sign spelling out the name of the bar at the end of the block.

For the first time ever, Jay shivered in his leather jacket and wished he had one of those fugly down parkas. He wished he was bundled up in something warm and unshakably cozy. The sidewalks were crazy icy, even though all the bars salted them heavily, hoping to avoid cracking their drunk patrons' skulls. He shoved his hands under his armpits and nodded to the regular bouncer.

Inside the bar, he ignored the nods and waves of half a dozen guys he knew. Well, knew biblically, even if he wasn't entirely sure of all their names.

That's why you're here. Because that shit is fucking old and I'm still a babe in the woods. Imagine what it's like to be an old dude, walking in here at fifty, knowing there isn't anyone left for you to bang who doesn't already know that you fart in your sleep.

And maybe his eyes had frigging radar now for Devin, because it didn't take Jay more than two minutes to spot him across the room on a stool at the back bar next to what was undoubtedly Date Four. The idea of having to tap Devin on the shoulder kind of made Jay want to pass out, so he approached from an angle that allowed Devin to spot him walking up.

"Jay?" Devin half rose off his barstool.

"Hey." Jay nodded at the man next to Devin who was twisting around on his own stool to see who was interrupting them. "Sorry to interrupt. You got a sec?"

Devin sat up straighter and squinted at him, tilting his head. "I'm—"

"I know," Jay interrupted, feeling his nerve drain away like water, leaving him a hollow, shivering shell. This was a terrible idea. "Just one minute."

He stepped away, far enough not to be able to hear what Devin said when he leaned closer to his date, a ripped black dude with a shaved head and a goatee.

"Hey. What's up? Are you okay?"

Of *course* he would ask that. Because Devin was a good guy and if Jay weren't so fucked in the head he would have figured that out from the beginning and wouldn't be standing here, about ten seconds from puking on his own shoes with nerves.

"Here's the thing." He couldn't do it. Couldn't look Devin in the eye. So he stared at the floor and blurted it out. "I think I made a mistake."

"A mistake?"

Imagine Dragons faded out and Jay caught himself in time to avoid shouting his reply into the quiet between songs. As quiet as a bar half full of gay men got at least.

"When I said we shouldn't, um, date."

"Really."

"Pretty sure."

"Okay, well, that's, uh, good to know. But I have..." Devin looked back over his shoulder to where his date sat.

Jay's eyes stung. His chest was tight. Right. He'd known the potential for humiliation was huge, but he'd really thought...

What? Did you think he was going to dump his date when you laid yourself out like some kind of shitty brunch dessert at Old Country Buffet? Even if he wanted to take pity on you, he's not the kind of guy to ditch someone.

He never ditched you once. But he sure has moved on.

"I gotta go." His voice rasped in his throat. Devin opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but Jay couldn't bear to hear it. He spun around and booked it for the exit.

Worst. Idea. Ever.

“You’re gonna go get him, right?” his date asked when Devin took halting steps back to his barstool, trying to process the whirlwind that had just picked him up, tossed his pockets for loose change, and slammed him to the ground again.

Get him. Him.

Jay.

He blinked at his date, a handsome man who was smiling like he’d seen stranger things a hundred times before.

Yes, go get him, you asshole.

Devin was already grabbing his coat. “Hell, yes. Sorry.” His date’s name had flown right out of his brain. He dug through his pockets for his wallet.

His lovely, wonderful, too late to the dance, fourth date waved him off. “I got it. Go get your man.”

He punched his fists into sleeves that tangled with bar patrons’ elbows as he pushed his way to the door. Every twink and his bear blocked his path to the exit, until Devin wanted to roar with frustration. He burst out the doors and nearly landed on his ass as the ice slid his booted feet out from under him. He kept himself upright with a hand on the bouncer, who didn’t look as if he appreciated it.

“Sorry. Have you seen—” A group of giggling suburbanite-looking kids pushed past him and the bouncer eased him out of the way, demanding ID or a perfect ass to get in the door.

Where the fuck was he?

Devin would track Jay down sooner or later, he knew it. Even if he had to do something as fundamentally crass as show up at his place of employment wearing a trench coat and holding a boom box over his head, a reference that would undoubtedly get Devin a blank look. But this was Jay, who had issues Devin had only fumbled around the edges of and he didn’t know how far off the rails Jay could drive himself in twenty-four hours. Or longer, if he didn’t work tomorrow and didn’t answer his phone.

He took a guess and headed north, because it was that way to the El. He pushed it with a slow jog, hands spread wide at his sides like a tightrope walker, sliding across the sidewalk square and looking like an idiot because he didn’t give a shit if only he could find Jay.

At the nearest street corner he skidded to a halt, sliding on the ice until his toes hit the curb and a cab rounding the corner honked at him to back off as it sped by.

Where is he? Shit. Where is he?

He scanned both sides of the street leading to the El station.

C'mon. C'mon. He has to be here. He has to.

His pulse was pounding in his ears, his hands shaking, and he didn't know why it felt like he might die if he couldn't find Jay right the fuck now, but it did. Who knew what kind of screwed up thoughts were running through Jay's head, all because Devin was too damn stupid, too slow to figure out what to do when the man he wanted more than anyone he'd ever known showed up in the middle of another stupid blind date. He'd seen the look on Jay's face, that crushing mix of humiliation and resignation, as if he knew exactly what it felt like already to come in second. As if he half expected it and yet was still smashed into pieces by the rejection.

Jesus. Would it have killed you to tell him yes? Yes, I want you. Yes, I pick you. Above this guy. Above everyone.

Where is he?

Then.

Barely fifty feet in front of him.

Skinny shoulders. Hunched in and barely covered in the world's stupidest leather jacket.

Relief made him dizzy. Made his knees wobble under him.

"Jay!" Heads turned, every pedestrian on the block.

Including the only one he wanted.

Jay froze, eyes wide and watching him as Devin jogged and slid and kept himself from falling through sheer determination to catch up. When he got close enough to talk without shouting, Jay shivered like a rabbit and bolted, calling over his shoulder, "Sorry. God, sorry."

"Wait. Jay." He grabbed Jay by the sleeve, but the other man spun away from him, walking backwards for a moment, words pouring out of him until he backed into a light pole.

“I’m sorry. I know that was out of line, busting in on your date like some kind of stalker. *Ouch.*” The pole halted him in his tracks but Jay’s mouth kept running. “Jesus, I don’t know what I was—”

Devin stopped Jay’s babbling with his mouth. He smiled into the kiss and braced his hands on the light pole above Jay’s head, licking his way into that suddenly silent mouth, until Jay opened underneath him and it was good. So good he mashed himself shoulder to ankle against Jay and tucked his face against the stupidly bare skin of Jay’s neck. He was buying Jay a fucking proper winter coat for Christmas next year. Imagining Jay’s reaction if he said that out loud, he smiled into the coat’s collar. “I’m so glad you did. I pick *you*. Please, please, *please* tell me you’re coming home with me.”

“Oh, god yes.”

Get up. You cannot fuck him on the stairs.

But stopping was impossible when Jay’s leg was wrapped around Devin’s hip, groin rolling against his, one hand scrabbling to open Devin’s coat, the other gripping his ass, as they sprawled where they’d stumbled on the staircase to the second floor. And Devin knew his sister wasn’t deaf and wouldn’t hesitate to come into the hall and bust them, but Jay was *humping his leg* and Devin was trying to avoid coming in his pants from the little moans that spilled out of Jay’s mouth with every thrust.

“Have to.” He fisted his hand in Jay’s hair. Pulled the man’s head back and sucked on his throat until Jay groaned again. Devin lifted his mouth, panting. “Get up.”

“Can’t. Unh.” Jay opened Devin’s coat and worked a hand up under his shirt. His fingers burned on Devin’s back, fingernails scratching across his spine.

Devin arched his back, electricity shooting to his toes. Then he hunched over, dug his arms under Jay’s, and hauled him to his feet. “Up. Now.” He would physically manhandle this guy up the fucking steps if he had to.

Jay scrambled to get his feet beneath him and they made it to the top in half a breath. Getting his key in the lock was a challenge, with Jay pressed up behind him, hands up his shirt and digging past his waistband. The snick of the lock made him lightheaded with relief. He pulled away from Jay, grabbed him

by the hand, and yanked him through the door, slamming it shut behind them and heading straight for his bedroom.

They toed their boots off and threw their coats on the armchair in the corner of the room that functioned as a clothes rack, grinning at each other and breathing hard. Devin was halfway through wrestling his shirt over his head when Jay tackled him to the unmade bed. He pulled his arms and his head free and tossed his shirt to the floor, slinging a leg over Jay's hip and pulling him close, kissing him hard until they were gasping, hot and wet, against each other's mouths.

Jay's voice hummed and tickled against his lips. "How do you want me?"

The words *ass up and spread 'em* were at his teeth, when Devin paused. His chest rose and fell like bellows, the taste of Jay's skin on his tongue. Somewhere down the road he'd get the full story about Jay's ex, but he was pretty goddamn sure that what Jay wanted had come in pretty far down the list with that guy.

He sucked on Jay's bottom lip, testing his teeth gently against its fullness before pulling his face away. "This is your show, baby. You call the shots."

"Really?" Jay's voice couldn't have held more skepticism with a bucket. He slid his hands into the rear pockets of Devin's jeans and pushed their groins together. Rocking his hips against Jay's hard length, Devin closed his eyes for a second as pleasure tumbled him like a wave. "So if I say I want to fuck you..."

"Condoms and lube in the drawer." Devin lifted his chin at the nightstand behind Jay and smiled a little on the inside, because he knew he'd made the right call. "Just tell me if you want me to roll over or not."

Testing maybe, Jay tugged on Devin's hip, his eyes flaring as Devin tipped onto his stomach. The pillow was soft against his face as he raised his hips to let Jay work his jeans down his legs. He'd want to push that pillow down in a minute but right now he needed to bite it to keep the moans inside as Jay ran his hands back up Devin's legs, nudging them apart as he rose. Jay's thumbs dipped in between Devin's thighs, the backs brushing against his balls, before they pushed up and in and spread his cheeks apart. Cool air hit his ass and he clenched his hole.

"Shit," Jay muttered above him. "You know this is not gonna be my finest hour, right?"

“Oh, it’s gonna be fucking fine.”

“I’m just saying.” Jay huffed a breath on Devin’s lower back, making him shiver. The mattress rocked underneath him as Jay got off the bed and grabbed what he needed from the drawer, stripping his clothes off with porn star speed. Devin didn’t move, eating up Jay—*naked Jay*—with his eyes. Especially Jay’s uncircumcised, brown dick, which he stroked twice, hard, staring back at Devin, before climbing back on the bed and kneeing Devin’s legs further apart. The slick noise of a condom being rolled on hit his brain like pure adrenaline. He hunched his hips and shoved the pillow down under his belly. “Get ready.” Jay laughed shortly. “Figure I’m gonna last about five minutes. Maybe.”

Cool fingers slick against him, circling and brushing, until his quads started to shake and one slim finger slid deep on his shaky inhale. Pressing his mouth to the bare sheet, Devin tried to muffle his groan. A sharp slap landed on his ass, Jay’s hand soothing the sting a moment later.

“Don’t. I wanna hear. Please.”

There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t give this man. He turned his face to the side and rested his cheek on the mattress, letting the sounds pour from his mouth as Jay moved inside of him. When he looked up, Jay was leaning over him, eyes fierce, dipping his head to bite at Devin’s shoulder until the almost-pain arched his back. Devin’s brain started to splinter, tracking the slow slide of fingers in his ass and the burn of a bruise being pulled to his skin.

“Jerk yourself. Now.” The words slipped out on a moan as Jay’s cock slipped in. Devin turned his face to the mattress after all and braced his forehead so he could push back against the burn, because it had actually been quite some time since he’d last done this, a fact he didn’t really acknowledge until Jay’s dick was lodged halfway up his ass.

But then his dick was hot and hard in his hands. The ache in his balls pushed him further back, and the pain didn’t matter because it melted into a rush of fire in his blood that spilled out over his hand as he came, his ass clamping down on Jay’s cock. Jay’s shout tore through the night as his hips stuttered, held. The heavy weight of him collapsed against Devin’s back.

Their breathing settled, sucking gasps gentling as the sweat cooled on his skin. Jay fumbled for the condom and eased off Devin, who rolled to his side and kind of regretted that pillow as Jay limped to the bathroom and switched on the too-bright light. Water ran and then the light shut off. Grabbing the only

other pillow on the bed, Devin pushed it over for Jay, curling his own arm under his head. Close enough.

“Holy shit. I think I broke something.” Jay clambered back onto the bed and pulled the covers over them both.

“My ass,” Devin said, a little shaky with adrenaline.

“Really? Are you okay?” Jay sat up like a Jack-in-the-box. He reached out in the dark and patted down Devin’s torso.

Checking for a busted ass, Devin guessed and grinned. “You didn’t break it, goofball. That was awesome.”

“It was totally awesome.” Jay’s smile shone in his voice like diamonds.

“Totally.”

Jay snuggled up against Devin’s crotch and pulled one of Devin’s arms around him. The edge of the pillow nudging Devin’s face caught his attention as Jay pushed it back far enough to share.

“Here. Get yourself half of this, *papi*.”

“*Papi*? Thought you didn’t want one of those.”

“Yeah, well, it looks like I got one, right? Don’t want you getting a crick in your neck, old man.”

He smiled into the back of Jay’s neck. Stuck out his tongue and licked a stripe up the bumps of his vertebrae until Jay shivered in his arms. “Right.”

“None of that now.” But the younger man’s voice was gruff, rumbling in his belly. “You need your sleep.”

“Yeah?”

“Want you rested so you can fuck me in the shower tomorrow morning.”

Devin shut up and went to sleep.

The alarm went off early enough that Devin tried to pull his spare pillow over his head to block out the slowly escalating beeps. But there was no second pillow. Moving the one under his cheek got him an extremely cute growl from the warm body in front of him.

Jay.

Recognition made him smile. Then he remembered words whispered in the dark and his smile split his face wide open in a huge grin. "Rise and shine, boy! Welcome to a brand new evolution." He yanked the covers off the bed as he climbed over the curving body of his lover.

"Nooooo." The thin wail came from under the pillow now as Jay ostriched himself.

"Yes! And I was promised sex, so get your butt out of bed."

The pillow nailed Devin in the ass as he stepped into the bathroom. Taking a piss and brushing his teeth with someone else in the bathroom with him was weird. Something he'd never done before. He could get used to the company though if it came with orgasms like the one that had nearly broken him last night.

Jay smacked his butt as Devin leaned over the sink and spit. "Hurry up, old man, or you're gonna miss getting blown in the shower."

"Listen, about this 'old man' thing."

"Blown. In the shower." Jay's voice floated over the shower curtain.

Devin threw his toothbrush in the general vicinity of the cupholder and hit speed dial on his phone.

"It's hella early, Dev." Lucy's voice was sleep-raspy.

"Hey, Luce, listen, I need you to cancel date five." Keep it simple. Keep it brief.

As if his sister did brief. "What? Hell, no. You're not welshing now, boyo. What's going on?"

"The thing is..." He tried to figure out how to put it without announcing that he needed to get his well-fucked ass into the shower with his new boyfriend.

A shout rose over the spatter of water hitting porcelain. "Tell her she got it right the first time."

"Is that—" The gasp in his ear was the last thing Devin heard as he hung up on his sister.

He slid his phone on the counter next to the sink and pulled back the navy cloth shower curtain.

Winking with more sauce than a chocolate sundae, Jay glanced back over his shoulder and wiggled.

“Yeah she did,” Devin said, and got in.

The End

Author Bio

Amy Jo Cousins writes contemporary romance and erotica, both straight and LGBTQ, about smart people finding their own best kind of smexy. She lives in Chicago with her son, where she tweets too much, sometimes runs really far, and waits for the Cubs to win the World Series. Off Campus, an M/M contemporary romance, is the first book in her Bend or Break LGBTQ series from Samhain, launching December 30th, 2014.

Contact & Media Info

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FLEECE, FLEAS, AND FLIRTATION

By Ava Penn

Photo Description

A dark-blond, nude man, visible only from his belly-button upward, lays on a sheet-draped couch with his right arm bent to rest his hand on the arm of the couch. His green eyes catch some of the light streaming in through the window behind him, and his plump lips are parted slightly. He has a close-trimmed beard and lightly haired chest and abdomen. He isn't extremely muscular, but his arms and core muscles are well-toned.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Did you know that satyrs and other ancient creatures exist? I didn't know, of course I didn't know because they're disguised as humans. Now I do and I don't know if that's a good thing. So I saved that satyr from suicide, so he's kinda cute, so what! Didn't know it at that time with a lot of his body already under water but now I know—like I know now that my boss at the garage is a minotaur and he better know nothing about my connection to the satyr. Got the impression that this brute is the reason for the suicide attempt. Satyr's afraid of him.

What do I do now and how come that I find this goat guy cute and even more sexy than his female roommate?

Of course a HEA would be fine anything else is up to you.

Sincerely,

Achim

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, Greek mythology

Tags: blue collar/mechanic, masturbation, switch/versatile, mythical creatures, humorous, contracts/debts (strict, binding), gay for you, tail fetish

Content Warnings: sexual interactions between a Satyr and a human

Word Count: 19,936

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Last, but certainly not least, thank you to Alishea, my event editor, for being so wonderful at what you do!

FLEECE, FLEAS, AND FLIRTATION

By Ava Penn

I didn't think about it at all as I dove into the chilly water. I just knew that I saw cinnamon-colored hair disappearing under the calm surface of the lake; and the next instant I was running over to the shore, barely taking enough time to yank my shoes off and toss my cell phone next to them. I thanked whoever was listening that I hadn't slacked off over the winter, and my muscles were in decent enough shape to make cutting through the water easy.

I saw the shape of a person ahead of me, and I strained to swim faster. I was almost there when something cut me off. It was green and scaly but looked almost like a monkey, if you could ignore the smile full of sharp predatory teeth. The resistance of the water weakened my momentum, but I kicked at it anyway. As it floated away, I closed the gap between myself and the drowning person.

I was surprised to feel a glancing kick against my shin when I began working my way toward the surface. The person in my arms began thrashing, making it difficult to hold on while swimming. When the movement stopped, my heart accelerated in panic.

I surfaced seconds later. The adrenaline coursing through my veins made it easy to move quickly. Once on shore I began the basic emergency care I remembered from lifeguard training so long ago. Tilt the head back, clear the airway, and check for a pulse. The pulse fluttered so weakly beneath my fingers that I almost didn't feel it. I tried to remain calm as I alternated between forcing breaths into the open mouth that was so cold against my lips and making hard compressions to the chest. It was just as I was beginning the third round that it happened.

There was a forceful impact to my abdomen, and I went flying through the air. I landed several feet away, dazed from the incident. Relief flooded me when I heard coughing and sputtering. *I did it. I saved someone.* My body ached as I sat up, trying to focus my vision on whoever I had just rescued.

It was a man. He was short but well-muscled. And his chest was covered with curly hair. I continued my visual assessment, wanting to make sure he was uninjured, and didn't really believe what my eyes were seeing.

Starting at the top of his hips and covering his legs all the way down to the cloven hooves where I expected to see feet, there was fur. I could feel my left eye twitching as I directed my gaze to his groin. The fur was still present but noticeably thinner at the apex of his thighs. That, at least, looked very human.

Funny, but that was the last conscious thought I had before my vision went black. When I came to, it was with a startled jerk that resulted in the sound of something breaking against what sounded like a tile floor. I could hear muted conversation approaching, and I tried desperately to open my eyes.

“So you brought him *here*?” The voice was clearly female and definitely sounded upset.

“Where else could I take him? It’s not like I could walk into the hospital like this right now!” a male replied snippily.

“I suppose it didn’t occur to you to just leave him there,” she snapped back.

“You know I can’t. I owe him now, whether I want to or not.”

I groaned, and the conversation abruptly stopped. I was finally able to bring a hand up to rub at my eyes. When I opened them, it was to see the man I had rescued staring at me from the vicinity of my feet, which were hanging over the edge of a couch. He extended his hand toward me; and I panicked, falling to the floor since my legs weren’t responding to my brain yet.

“I won’t hurt you. I can’t.” He tried to soothe me with his words.

“Like fucking hell,” I groaned, wrapping my arms around my stomach where it ached sharply. It must be bruised very badly to hurt like this. “You kicked me!”

“That was a reflex. Look, let me help you.” He pleaded with me, and I could hear the tap of his hooves on the tile as he approached.

I scrambled backward until I was pressed against a wall. He let out an annoyed huff, stomping one hoof down angrily. We stared at each other for a moment, until he finally spoke again.

“At least let me see how bad it is. Just pull your shirt up.”

I slowly pulled the hem of my shirt up with trepidation. I sucked in a sharp breath as the skin of my stomach was revealed to display the red, swollen impressions of hooves surrounded by mottled purplish bruises that radiated outward for about three inches in each direction. My head snapped up when he let out a distressed bleat and trotted over to me.

“Shit. Karen, I need a favor from you.” He looked over his shoulder to speak to the woman I had heard him talking to earlier.

“What do I get out of it?” she asked while inspecting her nails as though she were bored.

“I’ll give you my silver chalice.”

“Done. What do you need me to do?”

“Take him to the hospital. He might be bleeding internally. When they ask about the injury, tell them he works for you at a goat ranch or something.” As he spoke, his fingers were gently exploring the wounded site.

“Um, he’s kind of awake. What if he tries to tell them the truth?”

“I’ll take care of that.” He looked up at me. “Sorry about this.”

“About wha—” I started to ask. His forehead connected with mine, and I slipped into unconsciousness once more.

I blinked my eyes open to the stark, sterile whiteness of a hospital room. I hissed harshly at the sensation of an IV in my arm. I could feel the low burn, as whatever it contained was being pumped into my bloodstream.

“You’re awake. Good, that means we can leave soon.” The woman from before spoke, coming into view on my right side.

“Who the hell are you?” I’m sure I sounded a little rude, asking this so suddenly of the person who had been kind enough to get me proper medical treatment.

“Karen. I live with the dumbass you saved. Just answer their questions with whatever will make them let you go when they come in.” As she said all this, she pressed the call button on the side of my hospital bed.

“That thing in the water...” I wasn’t sure what I was trying to ask exactly, but Karen must have had an idea because her reply wasn’t instantaneous.

“Probably a kappa. Now shut the hell up and wait for the nurse,” she snapped, glaring at me in warning.

It didn’t take long before a perky, young nurse rushed into my room. She cooed delightedly upon realizing that I was conscious. Looking back, I suppose I could have tried to tell the truth; but that would have been a one-way ticket to

a mental hospital. Instead, I just did as the lady had asked and answered all the questions with the answers that would get me discharged from the hospital as fast as possible.

Everything after that kinda happened too fast for me to protest; and before I knew it, the car was parked by a waterfall that spilled into a wide, shallow river. I just sat in the passenger seat, blinking stupidly at my surroundings. Then it occurred to me that I had no clue what was going on.

“Where are we?” I questioned the woman who had yet to open her door.

“My house. Get out of the car. I have to go to work,” she practically barked at me.

I was too confused to argue, so I got out and watched as she drove away. I was startled by a low bleat that drifted out from behind the waterfall. My curiosity piqued, I wandered over to the rock cliff the water fell from. I could see a ledge wide enough for me to walk on leading behind the curtain of water.

I stepped through an opening in the rock wall and heard a crunch. My heart started pounding in my chest, and I cursed myself for being afraid. There was another bleat followed by another crunch. I crept forward, willing my feet to tread lightly and remain silent.

I breathed a sigh of relief to see the guy I had saved earlier sitting on the couch. He had his hooves resting on a coffee table and was holding a bowl on his lap. I watched as he picked a celery stick out of the bowl. Crunch, bleat. Well, that explained that.

I cleared my throat and stepped forward. He gave a startled bleat; and the bowl went flying in the air to crash against the rock floor, shattering. I winced at the sound because it reminded me of earlier.

“Hades! That’s two bowls in one day,” he griped as he stood up from the couch.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, unsure what else to say.

“Yeah, well, you should be. First, you ruined my suicide. Then, you broke my bowl. Now, you made *me* break my other bowl. Who do you think you are?” His pale green eyes sparkled with fury as he berated me.

“I’m Jace. Jace Kosta,” I replied awkwardly, even though I knew his question had been rhetorical.

He paled instantly. I wondered why, but was saved from asking when he spoke up. "Jace isn't short for Jason, is it?"

"No. My name is just Jace. J-A-C-E." I spelled it for him out of habit.

"Thank Zeus." His relief was apparent.

"Ah, could I ask what your name is?"

He leveled a fierce scowl at me before answering. "Aegidios."

"What-ios?"

"Aegidios."

"I'll never get that right. Can I just call you Dios?"

"Sure. Whatever. It's not like I can tell you no." He snorted and stamped a hoof on the floor.

I had the impression he was annoyed by something, and I couldn't just ignore it. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter, you ask? You saved me. That is what's the matter. Now, I'm indebted to you. Until I can repay you in kind, I am obliged to acquiesce to anything you ask of me." His frown was sour, and I wanted to replace it with a different expression.

"Okay. Well, then I want you to forget about it."

His eyes widened in shock, and his mouth fell open. It was a little comical actually. To me, that solved the problem. If he had to do what I said, and I told him to forget about the "debt", then everything was fine. Right?

"Are you stupid? That's not how it works! Athena must have missed you when she was delivering common sense." His words were like acid, hurtful and lingering.

My mouth opened and closed several times, doing a good imitation of a goldfish. Before I could begin to argue, he trotted over to where I stood. I caught a glimpse of horns peeking through the cinnamon curls of his hair, then he tilted his face up to look me in the eye.

"I apologize. That was uncalled for," he sighed, and continued speaking. "You should stay here for a few days or at least for tonight."

"I have work tomorrow. I can't stay here." I still didn't know where *here* was.

“Where do you work?”

“Taron’s Auto Maintenance and Repair.” At my reply, Dios paled again. I could see the fear in his eyes from this close; and, for some reason yet unknown to me, I wanted to protect him from whatever made him so afraid.

“You... Did he send you for me?” Dios took a step back from me.

“Huh? No. I didn’t even know you knew him until now.”

“Don’t tell him. Please, don’t tell him about me. He can’t know that you saved me. That would be bad.” Dios was staring at me, like he was waiting for me to attack him or something.

I shrugged. “Fine by me. Um... This is probably a stupid question to be asking now, but what exactly are you?”

I was revisited by the look of disbelief and shock from just moments ago before Dios replied, “You never heard of satyrs?”

“Fraid not.” I shrugged again.

“That’s what I am. Part man and part, well, goat.”

“Oh.” That explained the hooves and fur I supposed.

“Anyway, you need to call in to work for a few days. Tell Taron you got a bad case of food poisoning.” I could only nod my agreement and watch as Dios abruptly turned his back to me, walking toward the only other door in the room. “Follow me. I’ll make dinner for us, then I’ll show you to your room.”

I did as he ordered, ending up in a kitchen and dining area. I felt more than a little foolish while I sat at the table, waiting for Dios to finish preparing dinner. After maybe half an hour of letting my eyes wander around the dwelling, I noticed something that I had previously missed about Dios’ body. He had a tail. It was short and fluffy, just like a goat’s tail would be. It twitched occasionally, making me chuckle.

I hadn’t realized I was staring until Dios turned around with a large bowl in his hands. The bowl actually went unnoticed for a few seconds, as my eyes were focused in just the right place to be graced with an unhindered visual of his flaccid cock. I recalled having seen it after he kicked me at the lake, and it still struck me just how human it appeared compared to the rest of his body from the waist down.

“Salad okay with you? I’m not a big fan of meat,” Dios checked, setting the bowl in the middle of the table and walking back over to the counter.

“Yeah. Salad is fine.”

He returned with two small bowls, setting one in front of me and holding on to the other. Dios served himself from the large bowl with his hands and began picking up small bunches of the salad with his fingers. I guess he wasn't a fan of silverware either. Too shy to ask for a fork, I followed his lead.

When he was done eating, he carried the large bowl over to a refrigerator; and I wondered how exactly he had electricity in a cave behind a waterfall. Childhood habit kicked in, and I picked up both of our bowls to take to the sink. Another mystery, running water and sewage systems? I automatically reached for the dish soap and rag to clean the bowls; but I was stopped by a small, thick hand shackling my wrist.

“I'll clean those later. You really should rest. It'll help you heal faster,” Dios explained to me.

“I can do it. It's not difficult,” I argued.

“You need to rest.”

“Dios, let me clean the bowls.” I tilted my head to the side and raised my eyebrows pleadingly.

He huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Since you put it that way, I can't exactly refuse. Clean the damn things then.”

“You mean because of what you told me earlier?” I had no idea such a simple statement could count as *asking something of him*.

“Yes. If you ask, desire, or demand it then I have to do it.”

“So if I told you to jump off a bridge...” I voiced the thought carefully, not wanting it to come out the wrong way.

“I would have to do it. Please, if you want me to die just stick with drowning me.” Dios grimaced bitterly as he said this.

“I don't want you to die. Wait just a moment while I wash these, okay?”

“I have to, one way or another,” he replied snarkily.

I winced upon realizing it had come out as a request. I really didn't want it to be this way. I'd have to be really careful about what I said from now on. With a grimace of my own, I started washing the bowls.

I lay on the bed in what I supposed was Dios' room. There was a cabinet full of wine glasses, goblets, and such against one wall. Next to it was a wine rack filled with wines of all colors from all around the world. Without anything to distract me, I fell asleep in very little time.

I woke much later to an ear-splitting screech coming from somewhere else in the house... uh, cave. It took me a bit to get out of the bed, and I stumbled along the hall trying to find the source of the noise. The screeching abruptly cut off.

"He works for Taron, and you just invited him to stay here for however long he wants!" The furious voice belonged to the woman from earlier. What was her name? Kate? No, Karen.

"It's not *however long he wants*. It's just until he recovers. Besides, I owe him. Once he leaves, I'll have to go with him. Who will protect your treasure hoard while you work when I go?" Dios came to my defense, but the rest of his words left me curious.

I stepped into the living room where I saw a bird-like creature perched on the back of a chair by the entrance. I figured it must be Karen, but she looked so... different. Menacing. Her body resembled a large bird of prey, like a vulture, while her chest and faced remained human-like. Just how many half-human creatures are there around here?

"Um, look, I don't know what the big deal is about my boss; but I promise that I won't cause any trouble for either of you." I finally spoke up.

Karen focused on me immediately and launched from the chair, bringing her taloned feet forward as if to attack me. I flinched and closed my eyes in anticipation of the pain, but it never came. I heard the muted thud of flesh meeting flesh and then another thud as a body hit the floor. I opened one eye, wary of what I might see.

The sight was so unbelievable that I began to laugh uncontrollably. Dios was sprawled on top of Karen in a graceless heap. They struggled for several minutes to disentangle from each other. I had managed to rein in my laughter by the time they succeeded. I watched in amazement as Karen shifted back into her fully human appearance, her lack of clothes kept my attention for a mere split second.

"Whoa! Dios, can you do that too?" He had to be able to. There was no way he could walk around looking like he did right now.

“Not anymore. Yesterday my seal was taken from me. There’s no way I’ll get it back, so I have to ask Hephaestus to craft a new one for me.” He sounded irritated, but I detected an undercurrent of fear. I wondered if it was because of whoever took his seal thing or if it was because of this Hephaestus person.

“What does it look like?” I held no illusions that I’d be able to find it, but I figured it was polite to ask.

“It’s a necklace with a silver charm in the shape of reed pipes,” he sighed and shook his head.

“I’ll keep an eye out for it,” I replied and then turned to Karen. My next question mimicked the one I had asked at the hospital. “What the hell are you?”

“My, aren’t you the rude one? ‘Who the hell are you?’ ‘What the hell are you?’ A lady could be offended.” She studied her nails as she spoke. “I’m a harpy, you idiot.”

“Oh.” It was a lame reply, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“You’re going back to bed. You still need rest. Goodnight, Karen.” Dios grabbed my arm as he passed by, dragging me behind him like a lost kid.

I obediently went and lay down on the bed, scooting over to the side against the cave wall. It was cool against my back, and I found it soothing. I grew anxious though when I didn’t feel the bed dip with the extra weight of Dios. I propped myself up on my elbow only to see that he was curled up on a blanket on the floor.

“That can’t be comfortable. Why aren’t you sleeping on the bed?” I had a guess, but it was better to outright ask.

“That would be because you’re in it,” he grumbled in answer.

“This bed is huge. What is it, a queen? That’s more than enough room for both of us. I may be on the tall side, but you’re not exactly a behemoth.”

“How observant of you.” Dios snorted and rolled over so that his back was to me. I guess he considered this the end of the conversation.

I bit my lip, debating whether to give voice to the idea banging around inside my head like a marching drum. It could worsen his opinion of me, but I really didn’t want him to wake up with a cramp or a cold. “Dios, get on the bed with me.”

I ducked the pillow he threw at me but smiled warmly when he clambered onto the other side of the bed. He glared at me as he reached over to yank the

pillow away from where it landed across my hip. He flopped down with a frustrated bleat, and I hoped he would forgive me in the morning.

“Goodnight, Dios. Sleep well.” I curled my right arm up under my pillow and drifted back to sweet sleep.

When I woke up, I couldn't quite tell what was going on; but I do know that I liked it. Something was teasing my semi-hard shaft through the silky material of the basketball-style shorts I was wearing. The soft, arrhythmic twitching had me fully erect just seconds after the last wisps of sleep disappeared. Then I made the mistake of opening my eyes.

Dios was laying less than a foot away from me. Dios, who was a satyr. Dios, who was a goat from the waist down. Dios, who—I recalled—had a tail... that twitches. I groaned, covering my face with my left hand. The satyr in front of me yawned and stretched, his tail twitching faster.

“Fuck!” It was either curse or moan in ecstasy, and there was no way I wanted to moan because a goat's tail was about to get me off.

“Aaaaha!” Dios yelped and promptly scrambled away from me, falling off of the bed. “Damn, are you capable of not causing things to hit the floor?”

“Sorry,” I apologized. I hoped he would mistake my blush for embarrassment caused by his comment and not by my current predicament.

Dios waved off my apology as he pushed himself up from the floor. I'm sure it must be hard to wear clothes when one's lower half was that of a hooved animal; but when Dios finally stood, I really wished he had been wearing something, anything, to hide the thick, hard cock jutting up towards his navel. I swallowed nervously.

“Are you okay? You're really... red.” Dios leaned in to study me with concern.

“Fine. Fine. Just, uh, still a little sore is all.” It wasn't entirely a lie. My abs were throbbing with dull pain where he had kicked me yesterday.

“Hmmm. Alright.” He looked as if he didn't believe me, but shrugged and walked out of the room.

I reached into the pocket of my shorts in search of my cell phone, panicking when I didn't find it. Then I remembered that I had thrown it in my shoe

yesterday and not seen it since. I recalled having worn them yesterday on the way back from the hospital. Just as my feet touched the cold, stone floor, I heard the opening notes of my ringtone very faintly from somewhere down the hall.

“My phone!” I lurched forward, falling to my knees when my abdominal muscles screamed in protest of the sudden movement.

“Jace, are you alright?” Dios rushed through the door to stand at my side.

“Yeah. I moved too fast. I heard my phone go off. I need to call my boss.”

“Your... phone. Is that what was in your shoe at the lake? Shiny, silvery case around it?” Dios asked timidly, giving me the idea that I might not like what he was going to tell me next.

“That’s the one.”

“About that...” He scuffed one hoof on the floor. Holding out a hand to help me up, he continued in a soft voice. “Uh, Karen has it.”

“Why would harpy-lady have my phone?” I frowned. She wasn’t exactly a bitch, but she wasn’t Sister Theresa either.

“Because she’s a harpy.” Again with that look of shock and disbelief. Dios was starting to give me a complex.

“Okay...”

“Harpies like shiny things. Gold, silver, diamonds. Hell, it can be a piece of tinsel; and Karen will add it to her treasure hoard.” Dios snorted; and even though he was facing me, I just knew that his tail twitched when he did.

“So how do I get it back?”

“You have to see if she’ll trade it.”

“I don’t have anything to trade with!” My voice was creeping up in volume in direct relation to my frustration, which was not helped by the fact that I still had morning wood.

“Well...” Dios’ eyes momentarily flicked to the side.

I looked over at his cabinet. One particular item caught my eye immediately. It was a crystal-studded figurine of a unicorn.

“Dios...”

“Just say it already,” he sighed, expecting the inevitable.

"No." I smiled when he looked up at me. His plump lips parted in surprise.

"Why?"

"I won't do that to you if I can help it."

"So ordering me to get on the bed last night was an accident?" He arched one finely sculpted brow.

"No, that was intentional. I wanted you to be comfortable."

Dios made a sound halfway between a bleat and a laugh, eliciting a chuckle from me. "You're a strange human."

I was about to argue that I wasn't strange *because* I was human, when a screech filled the cave. It only took seconds for a very angry Karen to appear in the bedroom doorway. I swore tiny feathers were starting to peek out from her skin.

"Make it stop!" she screeched, holding up my phone. "It keeps making noise. Noise! I'm trying to get my beauty sleep!"

"You have to give it to me if you want me to make it be quiet." I held out my hand, trying not to let it shake.

"Just take the stupid thing back!" She threw my phone at me and stormed off.

I barely caught it, just in time to press my finger to the "answer" icon blinking in green on the touchscreen.

"Kosta, why is it already nine in the morning; and you aren't here yet?" Taron's deep bass rumbled, carrying every single bit of menace which his very tall, very muscular frame was capable of in person.

"I'm sorry, Taron. I went out to eat last night and ended up with food poisoning." It sounded so hollow, but maybe that's because I knew it was a lie. "I've spent the last twelve hours in my bathroom. There wouldn't be a point in me coming today. You'd just end up paying me to sit by the bathroom door."

"Fucking useless. If you're not here tomorrow, you're fired." My phone beeped, signaling that the call was disconnected.

I gave a short laugh. "So much for calling in for a couple days. I'm fired if I'm not back tomorrow."

“That’s okay. Just don’t do anything today. Rest.” Dios’ face was drawn and pale again. The worry and fear in his eyes upset me.

“I can do that.” An awkward silence hovered between us until Dios motioned to the doorway.

“I’ll show you where the bathroom is.” He walked off, not waiting for me to reply.

I slowly shuffled to the bathroom, both to avoid pain and to prevent my cock from bouncing against my abdomen. Ah, the downsides to freeballing. It felt like it took forever for me to reach the bathroom, but I decided it was definitely worth the trouble.

It had to be the biggest room in the cave. The floor sloped gently downward toward the far end, creating a serene pool that was being filled with water spouting from a crack in the wall. To top all of that off, vibrant foliage provided decoration and color. Vines hung from the ceiling, creating a curtain around the pool that was tied off to the side with another vine. Flowers poked merrily up from cracks in the floor.

“Wow...” That was the only response I could muster at first. “This is amazing, but don’t you dislike water? You can’t swim right? I mean, that’s why...”

“I don’t have anything against water; but no, I can’t swim. Goats can, even if they don’t like to. Humans can. I can’t. Something about the mix of the two makes it almost impossible.” Dios sounded like he was focused on something other than answering me.

I gave him a sideways glance, only to see that he was looking at me; or, more specifically, he was looking at the erection still tenting the front of my shorts. His attention was completely riveted on my cock. I shuffled my feet nervously, and he finally looked up at my face.

“Dios, could you, uh, could you go... somewhere?” I knew I was blushing, and for some reason his stare and my embarrassment made my cock harden to the point of pain.

“Sure. Just call me if you need anything.” Dios licked his lips, and my cock twitched at the sight.

I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I only nodded in reply. He finally turned and walked away, leaving me by myself in the cavernous bathroom. I sighed in relief and started to undress.

I spotted a toilet tucked in a corner along the same wall as the door. After emptying my bladder, I set my clothes on a moss-covered log off to the side. When I was ready to wade into the crystalline water, I steeled my nerves for the cold. My member had already begun to soften at the mere thought.

Imagine my surprise to feel warm water lapping at my toes. A blissful smile spread across my face the further I got. I slowly worked my way over to the waterfall, noticing the water was still fairly shallow.

The wonders of this little hideaway still didn't cease to amaze me. There was a set of stone shelves carved right in to the rock wall which held shampoo, conditioner, body wash, and shaving razors. I took a mental note to ask Dios how all the modern conveniences of comfort existed in this place as I worked some shampoo into my short, black curls.

The water spilling from the wall was even warmer than the water in the pool. It felt so good battering the tense muscles of my back and shoulders. Sadly, the more relaxed my muscles became, the more demanding my dick became for the attention it had thus far been denied this morning.

I curled my fingers around myself, stifling a moan. Images played through my mind like a slideshow. My ex-girlfriend, the really hot barista at the coffee shop, Karen—as a human, of course. Then everything came to a shuddering halt when Dios took center stage, the way he had looked after falling out of bed. Eyes still a little clouded with sleep, lips soft and pink, and his hard member practically begging to be teased.

I could feel the orgasm building, and I was powerless to stop it. Guiltily, I tried imagining what Dios would look like in a completely human form. He would have a pert, grope-able ass and toned legs with just a little more hair than would be normal. I couldn't hold the vision, and it was again replaced by Dios as he was.

I imagined him lying on his side in that huge bed with me standing at the end, watching as he stroked himself in time with me. His tail twitched as he came. That did it, sent me right over the edge; and I heard the soft plunk of my jizz landing in the water.

I rinsed off and made my way to the edge of the pool. Towels were hanging from a large root that emerged from the wall and burrowed its way back in several feet away. I grabbed one to dry myself with, then realized that I had no clean clothes. I wrapped the towel around my waist as tightly as possible,

tucking a corner into the top to secure it, and left the bathroom in search of Dios to ask if he happened to have a washer and dryer.

“Washer, yes. Dryer, no,” Dios informed me.

“Okay. That’ll work. Thanks.” I smiled, knowing the dimple in my right cheek would show.

Dios blinked at me with wide eyes before getting up from the couch. He shook his head as he walked toward me. I turned on my heel to follow him when he passed by and was led all the way to the end of the hall. Directly in front of us was a heavy wooden door like you would see in an old castle, and to our left was an arched doorway and staircase carved into the stone.

He started going up the stairs without saying a word. They spiraled on and on. By the time we reached the top where I could see daylight again, I was a little dizzy. We emerged into a field surrounded by forest. The presence of a clothesline in the middle was so incongruous with the unspoiled nature around me that I began laughing.

A cave with electricity and plumbing, a heated spring for a bath and shower, and now this. Dios would be answering a lot of questions today. I hoped he wouldn’t mind.

“Jace...”

“No, it’s just... This has got to be a dream. Or maybe I’m the one that drowned. Satyrs, harpies, caves with electricity and plumbing... Ha, wow.” That was it. That explained everything. I was dreaming, or I was dead. “Ugh!”

A kick from Dios disproved both ideas. To the best of my knowledge, you can feel pleasure in dreams but not pain; and if you’re dead you can’t feel anything. Was it my imagination, or did Dios look... hurt?

“Once your clothes are washed, we can hang them up here. Come on, we better put them in before Karen wakes up.” He turned to go back down the stairs, and I couldn’t help but notice that his tail was completely still.

I wondered about that as I followed him back down the stairs. Why did it twitch sometimes but not others? That was a question I was definitely NOT going to be asking with all the others.

I grabbed my clothes from the bathroom on the way by, and Dios led me to the laundry room which was through the kitchen. I turned around to go back to

the living room and almost knocked him over. I hadn't realized he was standing right behind me.

"I'm sorry! Are you okay?" I blurted, reaching out to steady him.

"Yeah. Come on, we can watch TV or something while we wait for your clothes to wash." Dios wouldn't meet my eyes, and his tail still lacked the twitch to which I had become so accustomed.

We had been sitting on the couch for about half an hour, watching some crime show about two women in the Boston Police Department, when Karen came sashaying in. She wiggled into the space between me and Dios, ending up with her leg pressing against mine. I leaned back and shot Dios a questioning look. He replied with a shrug.

"Jace, was it?" Karen batted her eyelashes at me.

"Yeah."

"Since I gave you my little trinket earlier—" she began.

"You mean MY phone?"

"—I'm going to need payment, handsome." Her hand settled on top of my thigh.

"I'll buy you some tinsel for Christmas."

Karen cocked her head to the side, confused. "I don't know why you would do that, but no. Your payment is going to be moving in."

"To where?"

"Here, silly."

I just stared at her, unsure if she was serious.

"It won't be so bad you know. You don't have to sleep in the satyr's room," she purred close to my ear as her hand crept up my thigh.

"Thanks, but I'm not into bird-women." I gingerly picked her hand up from my leg and settled it in her own lap.

Her seductive smile changed instantly to a frown, and little feathers poked out from the skin at the outer corners of her eyes. "Look, if you leave, Dios leaves too. I can't let that happen. Your payment for me giving up my trinket is for you to live here. If you don't, I will make your life VERY unpleasant."

I looked over to Dios, who just offered another noncommittal shrug. "I'll think about it."

Karen huffed and got up from the couch, leaving me alone with Dios once more. Talk about strange. Now I could honestly say that I had a harpy hit on me, at least I think that's what she was doing.

"You really should stay here," Dios piped up.

"Why?"

"It will be easier for both of us. Your neighbors might have issues with a satyr living with you, for one thing."

"So I'll just stay here until you can get a new seal thingy."

Dios snorted. "Harpies are not creatures you want to cross. She can curse you with bad luck if you piss her off badly enough."

"What woman can't?" My turn to snort. Three ex-girlfriends had given me sufficient experience for that comment. "I'm just curious, what does Karen do anyway that she gets home at four in the morning and sleeps all day?"

Dios smirked. "She's a stripper."

My jaw dropped. Harpy-lady, a stripper? I shuddered at the mental image. As a human she was actually kinda hot, but knowing what she looked like when she didn't look human just killed it.

"Ugh, wrong question to start with."

"Start?" Dios raised his eyebrows at me in question.

"Yeah. I've been wondering about a lot of stuff."

Dios sighed, "I wondered how long it would take. Surprised you waited so long, actually." He waved one hand in the air, giving me the go ahead, I suppose.

"How is it that you have electricity and stuff here? How is the water in the bathroom so warm?"

"Well, it's thanks mostly to Zeus, Poseidon, and Hephaestus. Oh, Athena and Apollo too. Zeus provides electricity on a closed grid with a few of his lightning bolts. Poseidon handles the plumbing, including the waste water and filtration. Hephaestus is responsible for heating the water and keeping

dwelling warm in the winter. Athena drew up all the plans for the dwellings, and Apollo provides artificial sunlight in ones like this.” Dios gestured to the ceiling of the cave where there was what I had thought was a light bulb.

“Dwellings?”

“For the others like me and Karen.”

“Others?”

“Nymphs, centaurs, and whatnot. The half-humans and humanoid nature spirits.”

“Right.” My brain really wasn’t able to comprehend what he said, so I focused on something else. “You keep mentioning Zeus and Hephaestus. Who are they?”

“You’re joking... right?” Dios asked dryly.

I shook my head.

Another sigh from Dios. “Did you not study Greek mythology in school?”

I shook my head again.

“Great. Just great. I got saved by the one person on the face of the earth that doesn’t know a damned thing about my culture!” Dios bolted up from the couch and marched off. When he returned, he was holding a thick leather-bound book. He held it out to me and plopped back down in his seat.

“What is this for?”

“That will explain most of what you need or want to know. It will also occupy you for the rest of the day.”

Just as I opened the front cover, the washer beeped, signaling that it was finished washing my clothes. Dios hopped back up and disappeared through the door to the kitchen before I could even get up. I wanted to hang my clothes myself, but at that moment I couldn’t think of a way to say so without it coming out in a way that would take away Dios’ choice.

I swung my legs up onto the couch and started reading the first story in the book. It was about how Zeus saved his siblings and killed their father. I learned that Dios had been referring to Greek gods this whole time, and I felt more than a little foolish for not realizing it until now.

I was halfway through the second story, something about Zeus trying to choose a wife and marrying his sister in the end, when Dios returned. He eyed

my feet warily, like they were poisonous snakes that would strike out if he sat down. He turned around and went back into the kitchen, coming back just seconds later with a bowl full of celery.

Dios sat down as far away as he possibly could from my feet, which wasn't all that far, and put his hooves up on the coffee table. He picked up the remote and flipped the channel to the Food Network. I continued reading, and I figure I must have read about five or six stories before I passed out.

I had some of the strangest dreams I've ever had in my life. One included Dios and Karen competing for tips at a strip club. Another featured Dios giving me a lap dance in a VIP room, but with human legs and feet although his tail was still present.

I drifted toward consciousness, wriggling my toes. Bringing one hand up to rub at my eyes, I realized someone had covered me with a blanket; but a blanket was not what I could feel at the soles of my feet. Whatever it was, it felt coarse, but still somehow soft, and warm. I carefully lifted my eyelids, trying to be discreet.

Dios was still on the other side of the couch, but he was leaned over the arm and using his arms as a pillow. It dawned on me that my feet were pressed against Dios. I couldn't tell if it was his hip or his thigh, but my toes were comfortably burrowed in the thick fur. Guiltily, I kneaded them against his warmth.

Dios let out a sleepy bleat, startling me; and I yanked my feet away. He stirred, shifting around until he was laying on his stomach. I knew I should have kept my hands to myself; but my curiosity overrode my common sense, and I reached out to touch the tail that had captured and held my attention from the moment I saw it.

The fur was softer than I expected it to be. Dios snorted and twitched his tail. I flinched back, expecting him to wake up and tell me off. When he didn't I reached out again, this time to touch his hooves. The tactile proof was cementing what I had already been told by Dios.

Fascinated, I ran my hands up the length of his legs. The muscles were well-defined and thick. No wonder his kick to my stomach still hurt so much. I noticed my hands getting shaky as they approached his hips. My tongue darted out to lick my lips as I reached out to stroke the tuft of his tail again.

Dios groaned and shifted his hips. At first I thought he was trying to move his tail out of my reach, but something about the movement was familiar. I brushed his tail again, causing another roll of his hips.

The light bulb finally clicked on in my brain. Dios wasn't trying to get away from me. He was trying to get friction.

I bit my lip so hard that I thought I would taste blood any second. It was mesmerizing, in a weird sort of way; and I wanted to continue petting him just to see what would happen. It was right about then that my common sense made a comeback.

Instead of acting on my impulses, I pushed myself up from the couch and flipped the blanket over Dios. The book he had given me fell to the floor with a muffled flop, and I half-expected him to wake up. I sighed in relief when he remained asleep and left to check on my clothes.

About halfway up the stairs, the towel I had wrapped around my waist after my shower came undone, nearly causing me to bite it. I grumbled as I readjusted it and continued up the spiraling staircase. I reached the top and took a moment to just soak up the warm sunlight filtering through the trees.

The sun was riding low on the western horizon. I figured there might be three hours, tops, until sunset. It surprised me to know I had slept most of the day away.

I walked over to the clothesline and unpinned my basketball shorts. They were warm from the sun and smelled like fresh, mountain air. I hurried to put them on, almost falling in the process. It felt great to have clothes on again. A seriously evil corner of my mind whispered that it didn't feel as great as Dios' fur, but I ignored it.

I pulled my shirt from the line and tossed it over my shoulder. Holding the towel in my hand, I descended the stairs. I walked into the bathroom to hang it up on the tree root, only to see Karen bathing under the waterfall.

"Change your mind, handsome?" She leered at me, giving me the chills.

"No," I replied bluntly. "I just wanted to hang up my towel."

She pouted. "Too bad. I've never invited a human to my bed before. You'd be the first."

"I've never slept with a half-human, mythical creature either. If I ever do, it won't happen with you. Sorry."

I realized I might have said too much when her eyes narrowed menacingly. "You're good-looking but not THAT good-looking. If you plan on holding out for a nymph or demi-goddess, then you'll be waiting a long time."

"Nope. Dios is really interesting though." My bad habit of speaking before I think made an appearance again.

Karen's eyes widened in surprise. She stared at me speechlessly while I stood there awkwardly, not sure if I should try to cover up my statement or just act like I HADN'T said something totally weird.

"Well, if you're not interested in women then at least I can honestly say you have good taste in men," Karen finally quipped back.

I just turned on my heel and left. My stupidity knew no bounds, apparently. I groaned inwardly, hoping that Karen wouldn't repeat what I said to Dios.

When I entered the living room, aforementioned satyr was sitting up with the blanket draped across his lap. It was doing a horrible job of hiding his erection. I could have sworn that it was even larger than the one he had this morning.

"You're awake," he stated.

"Yep."

"Good. We're going to go with Karen when she leaves for work. She's going to drop us off at your house," he informed me.

I nodded in agreement while wondering how Dios planned to walk around without being seen. Absently, I wandered back into the kitchen. My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten anything since sharing the salad with Dios the night before.

Unfortunately, Karen came in right then. "Let's go. I don't have all day. I have to be at the club in an hour."

I stuck my tongue out at her retreating figure. Childish, I know, but I just couldn't help it for some reason. Dios had gotten up from the couch and wrapped the blanket around his lower half like a sarong. He followed Karen out of the cave, and I trailed behind him like an obedient pet. I walked around to the driver's side and slid into the backseat, figuring Dios would sit up front with Karen.

No. Dios joined me in the backseat. It almost felt like we were in a taxi cab as I directed Karen to my house after she pulled out onto a highway that I recognized. Or at least it would have if most cab drivers were bitchy, sarcastic harpy-women.

Karen tapped her fingertips impatiently on the steering wheel while Dios and I got out of her car. "You could have told me it would only take fifteen minutes to get here. Now I have over half an hour to kill."

"I didn't even know..." I let my words trail off, since the car tore away from the curb the second Dios shut his door.

I stood in the street, clueless as to what to do next, for a moment. Dios cleared his throat, and I launched into motion. I grabbed his arm, dragging him along with me to the front door. I shoved my hand roughly into the pocket of my shorts for my house keys; but they weren't there, which I already knew in the back of my mind.

"My keys..."

Dios gave me a pained look. "Karen..."

"Right, harpy. Shiny keys. Gotcha." I sighed in frustration, raking my fingers through my hair. I crouched down and picked up the flowerpot with fake orchids, revealing the spare key on the saucer underneath it.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open, gesturing to Dios to precede me into my home. He stepped forward warily and promptly tripped over the threshold. I reacted instinctively, reaching out to wrap my arms around him and keep him from falling on his face.

Dios cleared his throat after several seconds passed with me just holding onto him. I noticed that while one arm had wrapped around his chest, the other was situated lower. Like around his hips, lower. My hand was splayed across his abdomen, pressing his very hard dick against his stomach.

Scenes flashed through my mind. Dios dry-humping the couch as I fondled his tail. Dios sitting on the couch with the blanket tented over his erection. Dios dropping the blanket from his waist and grasping his cock in one of his thick hands.

The last one wasn't a memory, but a daydream; and it served to snap me out of my stupor. "Sorry, I didn't want you to fall."

"It's okay." I couldn't see his face, but Dios sounded like he was embarrassed.

"You can sit on the couch while I pack, if you want to." I made sure that my suggestion hadn't come out as a binding decree.

Dios nodded and hobbled over to the couch. It occurred to me that he might be having trouble walking on the plush carpet. I furrowed my brow, thinking about the possibility, while I made my way to my bedroom.

It took me quite a few minutes to find my duffel, but I already knew which clothes I needed to pack. I was ready to go, but I was still thinking over the dilemma of Dios and my carpet. My stomach rumbled loudly, reminding me that I still had yet to eat.

I walked back to the front room and dropped my duffel on the floor by the couch. "Dios, are you hungry?"

"Yeah. If we go back—"

"I'll fix something before we go. I'm sure I've got something you'll eat." I smiled, coaxing my dimple to appear again.

"Oh. Okay." Dios blinked at me from where he sat on the couch.

I entered my kitchen and made a beeline for the refrigerator, where I knew I had a sirloin tip steak waiting for me. I needed protein. I began the process of cooking my steak while wondering if I could persuade Dios to keep some meat in the refrigerator back at his cave.

I turned the heat off and placed a lid over the skillet after searing both sides of my steak. Opening the refrigerator again, I peered into the crisper drawers. There was half a head of lettuce, some carrots, and a cucumber. I grimaced. It was better than nothing, but I had wanted to give Dios a really good meal.

It didn't take long for me to chop the lettuce, grate the carrots, and slice the cucumber. I tossed it all together and pulled a plate and cutlery out of the drainboard for my steak. Bowl in one hand and plate in the other, I returned to the living room. I handed Dios the salad and sat down next to him on the couch.

It was a stretch, really, to call it a couch. It was more like a loveseat; but that never registered until that moment, because that was the first time I had someone else sitting on it with me. I was so close to Dios that I could feel the shift of his muscles through the cushion every time he reached for a handful of salad.

I had just taken the first bite of my steak when Dios reached over and deposited some of his salad on my plate. I looked at him, but didn't bother to rush chewing my steak. I took my time, savoring the flavor and the texture of the meat in my mouth. Dios wasn't paying me any attention. It seemed he had only thought of me enough to want me to share his salad, because he was now engrossed in what was playing on the TV.

"What else do you like to eat, besides salad?" I asked, pleased when he finally turned to look at me.

"Fruit, nuts, and salted fish." Dios paused, then waved a hand at the TV. "Is this really how people think satyrs look?"

I glanced at the screen. The animated Disney version of Hercules was playing. My lips quirked in an amused smile when Philoctetes started grazing the field, followed by a herd of goats. "Well, considering that most people don't know satyrs actually exist, can you blame them?"

Dios didn't reply except to harrumph when Phil went flying through the air, getting his horns stuck in an archery target, thanks to his demigod protégé. I mentally made comparisons between Dios and Phil while I continued eating my dinner. Where Phil was extremely short and a little on the pudgy side, Dios was roughly the same height as an average human male and had more muscle than fat. Where Phil had very exaggerated goat features, Dios' horns were unobtrusively short and hidden by his hair. Of course there was no hiding the legs, tail, or hooves; but they seemed to fit with him so perfectly that it didn't even seem strange to me any longer.

We watched the movie without saying anything else as we both ate. I took just enough time to wash our dishes before hauling my duffel out to my hunter green Chevy S-10. When I came back in, Dios was repeatedly struggling to lift his right leg from where he stood in front of the couch. I instantly recognized the action from having grown up with several Jack Russell terriers as a child. A part of his hoof must have gotten caught in the fiber of the carpet.

"Here, let me help you." I crossed the room in just a few long strides and knelt at his feet, er... hooves.

I instinctively steadied him, placing my left hand against his lower back, as I ran the fingertips of my right hand along the edges of his hoof. I found the rough split that had snagged a loop of the thick carpet and deftly freed it. I looked up at Dios and was surprised to see him gaping at me, a bright pink flush gracing his high cheekbones.

“Sit back down for a moment. I’ll get a file and smooth that hoof out some, okay?”

Dios snapped his mouth shut and flopped back onto the couch. It was then that I noticed his erection either hadn’t gone away before or had just now returned. Though he was still wearing the blanket as a skirt, I could clearly see in my mind’s eye what it must look like right now. Feeling my own dick start to grow hard, I promptly got up and left to find a file.

I knew exactly where my file was since I had just had to use it last week. Being a mechanic was rough on fingernails; and I had learned in trade school that unless you wanted to lose one to any of the many moving parts of a vehicle, then you had better keep your nails trimmed and smooth. I grabbed it off my bathroom sink and hurried back to Dios.

He was sitting on the couch with his hands tucked firmly under his thighs. I didn’t waste any time walking over to him. I sat with my feet flat on the floor and my legs bent so my knees were tucked close to my chest. Gripping his ankle, I pulled Dios’ hoof forward until it rested atop my knees.

“Jace, you don’t—”

“Shhh. Just let me take care of this, and then we’ll go home.” I quickly set to work smoothing away the rough spots on his hoof. After finishing his right hoof, I gently guided it off my knee and back to the floor before replacing it with the left hoof. It wasn’t as bad as the other had been, but it still needed some work. I helped Dios get his hoof safely off my knee and then shifted so I was kneeling between his knees.

“Will you stop that!” Dios griped at me.

“Stop what?” I had no idea what I had done wrong.

“You insist on getting just a little too close to something you don’t need to.”

I frowned in confusion, placing my hands on his knees. It was when the muscles under my palms jumped and tensed that I finally understood what his problem was. The tell-tale shift of the blanket caused by his cock twitching was the last clue I needed to piece the puzzle together.

Since we had arrived at my house, there had already been three instances where I had been in a rather intimate situation with him. First I had palmed his

hard-on. Then I had knelt right in front of him and practically groped his ass. Finally, here I was, kneeling again, between his legs.

“Dios...” I wasn’t sure what it was that I wanted to say. *It’s okay. I don’t like dudes, but that’s not a problem since you’re a satyr. Or maybe, I think I should tell you that I’m developing a kinky fascination with your tail. Of course there was always the old college standby, I’m curious. Will you let me fool around with you so I can figure out if I can get off with another dick instead of a pussy?*

“Jace, please don’t.” While his cock was begging for my attention, Dios’ face had a different story to tell. His brows were drawn together as though he were in pain, and I could see the glimmer of tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

“Hey. Hey, what’s wrong? Tell me, Dios.” I scrambled to my feet and sat next to him, slinging an arm around his shoulders and pulling him up against me to try to comfort him.

“I... I wish I didn’t have to tell you.” He frowned sadly. “I can’t let myself hope for anything more from you than what I already have.”

“What do you think you have?”

“A savior. A master.”

“That’s all?”

“How can there be more?”

“We can try for friends, at least. Can’t we?”

Dios pursed his lips, choosing not to reply.

“Dios, don’t make me force you to explain.” My words were a threat, but my voice lacked the proper firmness to make them sound dangerous.

He shifted on the couch, freeing his hands from where he had purposely trapped them. “If we become friends, I might think that more would be possible.”

“Would that be so bad?”

I had to bite my tongue to stop a laugh from escaping at the way Dios snapped his eyes up to meet mine, filled with disbelief. “Are you...?”

“I hadn’t thought so, but lately I’ve been rethinking what I thought I knew about myself,” I answered his unfinished question. When Dios simply stared at

me, I continued speaking. "I rescued a satyr, was driven to the hospital by a harpy, and will soon be living in a cave-house that was created and is provided for by Greek deities. I broke up with my last girlfriend over a year ago and haven't dated since."

"That doesn't have anything to do with this."

"I disagree. See, even if you and Karen were both completely human, I'd still rather sleep in your room."

Dios eyed me like I was some rabid, wild animal about to pounce on him. "With the way things are, it's not like I have a choice. What are you waiting for? Get on with your little experiment already."

I shook my head as I stood up. "I won't do that. I told you this morning that I won't. And it's not an experiment, not like that. It's this thing called pursuing an attraction."

"So you won't...? If I don't want to...?" Dios ventured. I shook my head again. He was silent, staring down at his lap. Dios didn't look up when he spoke again, and his voice was so quiet I had to strain my ears to hear him. "What if I do?"

"Then you should stand up." I replied and waited to see what he would do.

Dios reached up to scratch behind his ear, then he slowly pushed himself up from the couch. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him, pressing our bodies close. I let loose a low chuckle at his sharp intake of breath when I rolled my hips forward, grinding my desire against his abdomen. His hips jerked against me in return, rubbing his stiff cock against my thigh.

"Jace..." My name spilled from his lips as a heated plea.

"Hold on," I warned before hooking one arm under his shoulders and bending down to hook the other under his knees. Again, I was thankful that I was more or less in shape. Dios was heavier than he looked, the weight of his compact muscles belied by his frame. It proved a little difficult to keep his legs securely draped over my arm with the anatomical differences, but fortunately my bedroom wasn't far.

It only took a few seconds for me to stride down the hall and deposit Dios on my bed. My hands trembled as I reached for the knot at his right hip that was securing the blanket in place. He surprised me by covering it with his hand.

“Are you sure?” A glimmer of fear flickered in the depths of his green eyes.

I nodded slowly, and Dios easily undid the knot with a quick tug from his fingers. I slipped my left hand under the edge of the blanket, caressing the firm flesh of his thigh. His cock twitched, causing the blanket to shift and slip. I grabbed a handful of it and flung it aside, wanting to see him laid bare to my gaze.

Memories from college danced at the edges of my mind. Parties with too few women and too much booze, where members of the gay frat on campus would show up at the end of the night and “take care” of the guys that hadn’t snagged a chick. I hadn’t ever consented to an offer, mostly because I never was quite sure who was actually taking advantage of whom.

My blood was rushing in my ears, drowning out all other sound as it sped through my veins to feed my own growing erection. I bit my lip and slid my hands up to Dios’ hips. Yanking him forward, I dropped to my knees so that his throbbing dick was mere inches from my face. Tentatively, I traced the veins and ridges of his member with the tips of my fingers.

“Please!” Dios begged me, flexing his hips into my touch.

I gripped him, excited by the feel of his cock in my hand. It was so different from touching myself. He was shorter than me, but thicker. He was uncut, and watching the hood of his foreskin slide back and forth over his head fascinated me.

A drop of precum oozed from the tip. My mouth watered with curiosity. I leaned forward and let my tongue dart out to swipe the bead of liquid from the slit. Dios shivered and gave a choked moan.

Guided by instinct and aided by memories from college, I enveloped the smooth head of his penis with my lips. I pressed my tongue flat against his shaft and slid down until I made myself gag. Dios shivered when I bobbed back up his length, and my teeth scraped slightly where the tip flared.

“Jace, maybe we should try something more simple,” Dios suggested, preventing me from swallowing him again by fisting his hand in my black curls.

“Like what?”

“We could just jack each other off, or rub against each other maybe...” he ventured.

“No.”

“But you don’t—”

“I want you, Dios. I want this with you.”

“Uh, maybe we should—that is, er—so I don’t kick you...”

I understood what he was trying to get at, but that wasn’t really what I had in mind. No matter how fixated I was on his tail, I knew there was no way I could top him without feeling like I was committing an act of bestiality. Which is why I said, “Don’t worry about it. You can’t kick me if you’re behind me.”

Dios stared at me in confusion as I licked from the base of his cock up to the tip, smiling like the Cheshire cat. I continued sucking and licking, waiting to see if he would figure out what I meant. I pulled away when his muscles started to tense.

Dios grunted and tried to guide me back to his stiff, swollen dick. I shook my head. “You can’t come unless it’s inside me.”

I almost laughed; I couldn’t help it. I think Dios’ eyes might have fallen out if it were possible. Seconds later his jaw dropped, but he still hadn’t said a word. I stood then and leaned forward, pressing my palms into the mattress on either side of him, caging him.

He looked into my eyes, and I could see desire swirled with confusion and something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I dipped my head, melding our lips together. I realized this was our first kiss, and my heart swelled in my chest. It was tender and sweet and all of the things I never felt until this single moment in time.

Then I slipped my tongue easily between Dios’ lips to glide against his; and it changed, becoming intense and all-consuming and burning me up from the inside out with the need for release.

I broke away, gasping for air. I looked at Dios, his lips erotically bruised from our kiss. “Fuck me.”

“I thought—”

“I can’t. Not yet. So I want you to fuck me.”

Dios actually growled as he surged to his feet, gripping my waist and twirling around so that we exchanged positions. He didn’t stop there but spun me about so I was facing the bed and pushed me forward. I fell to my hands and

knees on the mattress, then his fingers hooked into the waistband of my shorts and yanked them over my hips and down my thighs.

I held my breath, waiting for Dios to actually touch me. When his thick hand wrapped around my aching cock, I thought I was going to explode. That was nothing compared to the first touch of his tongue to my ass. He swirled a lazy pattern over first my right and then my left cheek before licking along the trail from the seam of my balls up to my hole.

“What—” I started to ask.

“We don’t have lube, and I don’t want this to hurt. Just relax,” Dios assured me.

He licked and laved until I became accustomed to the sensation, and then I felt the tip of his tongue stiffen and push inside me. My muscles clenched on reflex, and I focused on keeping my breathing even and trying to relax. In and out his tongue speared me again and again. I think I might have actually whimpered when he finally stopped.

I should have known what was coming next, but I wasn’t expecting it. He pressed one thick finger deep into my passage. The ring of muscle around his finger clamped tight, and then he rubbed my prostate. I had learned about it in human biology classes, heard about it from a couple different sources, and even thought once or twice about what it might feel like to play with it a little. Now I knew.

It was like a jolt of lightning arcing to my balls and racing up my spine. Dios rubbed it until I started rocking my hips back against his hand. He slid a second finger in next to the first, stretching me, and gently started pumping.

I could feel an orgasm building slowly, but I wasn’t ready yet. I wanted to know what Dios would feel like inside me first. “Dios, fuck me now!” I demanded in my lust-blind haze, knowing he would have no choice but to comply.

“*Ilíthios*,” Dios hissed in my ear as he lined the head of his cock up with my entrance. He pushed in all at once until his hips were pressed firmly against my ass.

I felt a tear slip from the corner of my eye and roll down my cheek. I knew it would hurt, but I didn’t know it would hurt this badly. Before I had a chance to adjust to the pain and the feeling of Dios filling me so completely, he started thrusting. I sobbed out a harsh cry.

My erection faded in the onslaught of the agony, and still Dios went on. I knew it was my own fault. I should have waited for Dios to finish what he had been doing, but I was impatient. Not even the sporadic caress of his shaft against my prostate could revive my arousal.

What felt like an eternity later, but I'm sure was only several minutes, Dios came inside me. I could feel myself being pumped full of his seed, and it was a very strange sensation. I was frozen in place until Dios collapsed to the side of me and pulled me down with him, still connected at our hips.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in my ear.

I don't recall drifting off to sleep, yet that is exactly what must have happened. When I next opened my eyes it was to a night-darkened room. I shifted, reaching for the lamp just a few feet away on my nightstand; and that was when I realized Dios was still buried inside me. A sharp ache stabbed through my abdomen; and I held back a groan, not wanting to wake Dios.

Right, almost forgot about the dreadful experience of being skewered from behind. I found it hard to believe that gay men actually find that enjoyable. I braced myself for the promise of fresh pain and shifted completely away from Dios. I felt empty suddenly, and the remnants of his release trickled down the inside of my thigh.

I eased from the bed and gingerly stood. I flicked the lamp on, my gaze immediately focusing on Dios. His lips were set in a frown, and his eyebrows were drawn close together.

I leaned down and brushed a kiss across his forehead. His face softened into the relaxed way a sleeping person should look. I shuffled slowly out of my bedroom and across the narrow hall to the bathroom. After half an hour of soaking in water hot enough to leave my skin bright red, I didn't ache as much.

I took my time toweling off while I mulled over what exactly I felt for Dios. He was sweet, funny, caring; and I realized that I liked him. Not like I like a buddy or a family member, but more like how I would like a girlfriend.

I could see myself taking him out to dinner or to see a movie, see us going on road trips and spending holidays together, and the most proving thing of all was that I could see us living together. Not just for the period of this short-term arrangement due to circumstances, but for the rest of our lives. I knew these were crazy kinds of thoughts to be having about someone I'd only known for a

few days; but for all I knew, Aphrodite had decided to entertain herself by screwing with this mere mortal's love life.

I must have been attracted to Dios from the start, from the very moment I saw him sinking to the bed of the lake in the sun-dappled water. That was the only way to explain why I hadn't *completely* freaked out when I woke up on his couch after he knocked the air out of me with his hooves, why I hadn't tried to tell the truth at the hospital, and why I had insisted on staying in his room despite the offer to share with a harpy who was actually very beautiful in her full-human form. It definitely explained why, after enduring the torturous experience from a few hours ago, all I wanted was to go back to where Dios lay on my bed, wake him up, and try the whole thing all over again—without rushing him this time—that way I could have one more intimate moment with him to myself before we went back to the cave.

I didn't bother getting dressed. When I got back to my room, I draped my damp towel over the rail at the foot of the bed and easily settled back down next to Dios, pulling a blanket over us. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Dios' voice rumbled sleepily near my ear.

"Why did you want me to do that?"

"I, uh, I was kind of uncomfortable with the whole tail and fur thing."

"*Ilíthios*." I wasn't sure if it was an insult or endearment, but Dios smiled when he said it this time.

"What does that mean?"

"Greek for 'idiot.'"

"Oh."

"We should go back. Karen will be furious if she gets home, and we're not there."

"Can we just... just for little longer. I want... I don't want to stop yet."

"Just a few minutes, then," Dios consented, snaking his arms around my waist and pulling me up against him.

He was hard again, and my semi-hard length brushed against his as we both thrust against each other. We kissed, slow and sweet. No teeth, no tongue, just breathless parted lips and the need for more than just a physical connection.

As my orgasm built, I craved some amount of dominance, of control; and I rolled so that Dios was beneath me. I rutted against him, bringing us both closer

and closer to what we were after; but it wasn't quite enough for me. With a frustrated growl, I hefted his legs up around my waist, spreading him open so I could move against him harder. One hand shackled both of his wrists, pressing them into the pillow above his head, while the other tenderly cupped his bearded cheek.

Our kiss never broke, and I was starting to get dizzy from lack of air. I came hard; so hard that my vision went black, and my balls felt empty afterward. Dios was panting under me. I waited for my vision to clear and was rewarded with the sight of his face flushed and pupils blown wide with satisfaction. We shared one more kiss before Dios pushed me to the side.

"Jace, we really need to go. Karen—"

"Yeah, I know. Harpy-lady will throw a bitch fit. Come on. Let's get cleaned up, get dressed, and go."

It took me quite a few trips back and forth from the bedroom to the bathroom with a washcloth before we were both clean. It was more difficult than I anticipated to clean the result of our second round from Dios' torso. The coarse body hair impeded my and the rag's ability to wipe him clean in one go.

When I had finished cleaning us both, Dios asked for the restroom. I showed him to the door, then went to put my duffle bag in my truck. I returned to find Dios struggling to walk down the thickly carpeted hall. I walked over, picked him up, and carried him out to the truck. He sputtered angrily in my ear the whole way, but all I could do was smile.

We ended up getting back to the cave around three in the morning. No sooner were we done unpacking my duffle into a set of drawers that Dios had cleared out for me than Karen showed up. She dragged a trunk in behind her, leaving us wondering just what she was up to.

Dios and I were curled up together on the couch—he was watching the show about the Boston PD again and I was reading up on my Greek mythology—when she came back in from her room and tried to drop between us to sit. I put my arm around Dios' shoulders and pulled him close while pointedly looking at the empty seat on the other side of him. She finally flopped down with a huff.

"Well aren't you two cozy," she observed.

“Yep, we are. Cozy, comfy, and rather satisfied this way,” I goaded her, though I don’t know why. Was I rubbing in the fact that I was more attracted to Dios than to her, or was I just getting revenge for her making off with all my shiny personal possessions?

“I hope you brought enough stuff with you for your stay. Dios won’t ever be able to repay you for saving his life you know. You’re stuck here,” she prodded back at me.

“Nope, actually I couldn’t get into my house. No keys.” I gave a half-shrug.

“Why you—”

“Karen, what were you doing with that trunk?” Dios asked. I was amazed as I witnessed Karen go from vicious harpy-lady to gushing diva in five seconds flat.

“Leda quit!” She grinned widely, eyes gleaming; and it was similar to how a scavenger might look upon discovering a fresh carcass that was all theirs for the claiming. “Missy has seniority, but Dave said she’s too old to become the next lead dancer. She’ll be retiring in just a few years, and he offered me lead! ME! I have to go through the trunk, see what fits, what doesn’t, and then tell him what I want to throw away or have modified when I go to work tomorrow night.”

“Congratulations,” Dios offered with a smile but no real excitement.

“Cool. Does that mean you’ll spend less time here?” That was my own contribution to the subject at hand.

Karen narrowed her eyes at me. I could almost see smoke emitting from her ears as the gears of her brain turned, trying to figure out why I was asking. “Yes, I will; which means that Dios will have to spend more time here, guarding my treasure.”

“Cool, ladyhawk. Don’t you have sparkly outfits to try on?” I don’t know why I just couldn’t resist taunting her.

Karen screeched at me, then got up and stomped out of the front room and down the hall to her vault. Dios and I sat in silence for a few minutes. It wasn’t an awkward silence like you might think after what happened at my house. Still, I had to clear the air a little.

“Dios, I’m sorry. For earlier. I shouldn’t have—”

“Jace,” Dios touched my cheek and turned my face to his, “don’t worry about it. I know you wouldn’t have ordered me if you were thinking right. I’m sorry I hurt you. Will you be okay at work tomorrow?”

“I’ll be fine, but really I—”

“Hush.” Dios leaned in and breathed the word against my lips, effectively silencing the rest of my speech.

I pulled back and stood up, tugging him up with me and heading for his room. I clambered onto the bed, eager to hold him against me again. Dios wasted no time in joining me.

I would love to say that we spent long hours until the sun crested the horizon caressing, cuddling, exploring and affirming our mutual love for each other; but that didn’t happen. Neither of us said a word as we kissed sweetly, almost chastely. It was a little like we were both afraid. I, of forcing him by command to do something he didn’t want to; and he, of hurting me again. We fell asleep intertwined so closely that there wasn’t a centimeter of space between us.

I emerged from my sleep slowly. Just before I opened my eyes, it dawned on me that my palms were pressed against something furry. I jolted to complete awareness.

I was cupping Dios’ ass in my hands, pressing him against me while I moved against him. Dios whimpered and, before I could register what was happening, wrapped his hand around both our shafts. The increased friction felt glorious; his dick against mine, my dick in his hand, his hand on his dick, and our hips rolling together. It didn’t take too long for me to topple over the edge.

“Good morning,” I murmured and kissed Dios on the cheek, enjoying the feel of his scruff against my lips.

“Jace?” I was a little thrown by the questioning tone of his voice.

“Yeah?”

“Please promise you won’t tell Taron about me.”

“I won’t say a word.” I made the promise and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

I made a beeline for the bathroom—showered in record time—and was ready to leave before Dios even got out of bed. Today was going to be a long day. My stomach was still tender and being a mechanic was no cushy desk job.

"Jace, my office. Now," Taron growled as soon as I closed the door on my truck.

I sighed and shuffled along behind the giant of a man that owned and operated this car repair garage. My coworker, Mary—yes, a woman—raised her eyebrows in silent warning as I walked past. Great, that probably meant Taron was really steamed about something that was—if not my fault—going to be blamed on me.

"Siddown." He motioned to the lone chair in front of his mahogany desk.

I complied, waiting for the inevitable ass-chewing. Taron eased into his leather rolling chair and threaded his fingers together, resting his elbows on the desk. He pinned me with a hard stare.

"How are you feeling, Kosta?"

"Better. My stomach is still a little—"

"If you hurl on the concrete today, you're cleaning it up and then going home."

"Yessir."

"Get the hell out there and work on something. I don't pay you to sit in my office."

"Yessir." I stood hurriedly and turned to leave.

That was when I saw it. A necklace was hanging on the board where we kept the keys for the vehicles we were working on. The necklace had a silver charm on it; a silver charm in the shape of a set of reed pipes.

I recognized it instantly as the one Dios must have lost. I had flipped through the mythology book when we got back to the cave the night before until I found a picture of a satyr playing reed pipes. I wanted to know what they looked like, just in case. Damn my luck that it was my boss that had the charm, though.

I spent the whole time thinking about how I might get Dios' charm back, but I did my work—replacing the fuel pump on Mrs. Torkelson's Pontiac Grand Prix, changing the oil on a Chevy Malibu I'd never seen before. I was working on replacing some belts for Mr. Hendels' Buick Le Sabre when Taron emerged from his office a little after three.

"I'm headed to the bank with today's deposit. You two watch the shop."

Mary and I nodded. This was my chance! I could sneak into the office and get the charm now.

“Mary, I’m going to hang up Mr. Hendels’ keys and call to let him know the Le Sabre is ready to be picked up.”

“Alright, Jace. Will you call Caroline too? I just finished rotating her tires.”

“No problem.”

I made an effort to not act suspiciously. I walked at a normal pace, left the office door open, and went straight to the key board to hang the keys in my hand on the “done” side of the board. I took the opportunity to snatch Dios’ necklace and another set of keys that were for a car needing a monthly check-up. My next stop was the telephone on the wall.

I walked back out to the garage, whistling a country song. Mary had moved on to a car that needed a spare replaced. About half an hour later Taron returned.

I tried to not hold my breath, waiting for the bellow that would announce his discovery of the necklace missing from the key board. It never came. Closing time arrived, and I drove off in my truck to return to the cave.

My body was jittery with anticipation. I would finally get to see what Dios looked like as a human. Would he be the way I imagined, or would he look different? There were spots in my vision as I parked my truck, and I realized my breathing had become very shallow and fast.

My hands were shaking so bad that I shoved them in my pockets in an effort to mask the nervous sign. I didn’t understand why I was so worked up about this, but I wanted to look calm and collected when I surprised Dios with the good news.

The cave was eerily quiet when I entered from behind the waterfall. I wandered through, not finding Dios in any of the rooms. My last resort was to climb the spiral staircase. I finally found him hanging a fresh basket of laundry to dry, including my dirty clothes from yesterday.

“Hey.” I didn’t even try to hide my grin as I closed the small distance between us and wrapped my arms around him from behind.

“How was work?” Dios’ question was so mundane, it filled my heart with a sense of contentment—like we were a couple that had been together long enough to develop a routine. However, I knew what he was really asking.

“Work was fantastic. Taron did threaten to send me home if I threw up today, but that’s all. He didn’t ask about my weekend or where I had been or anything.”

“Thank the gods.” Dios’ relief was evident in the sudden relaxation of his whole body against mine.

“I have better news.” I nuzzled my face against his hair.

“Tell me,” Dios replied, though he hadn’t paused in hanging the wash despite my obstruction of his movement.

“I found your charm.”

“Y-you what?” Dios finally stopped what he was doing and turned to face me. “You’re not joking with me, are you? Please don’t joke with me about this, Jace.”

In response, I pulled the necklace from my pocket. I held it up in front of Dios, inviting him to take it. Yet, as he reached for it, I spoke. “Before you put this on...”

Dios cocked his head to the side, awaiting my next words.

“Your tail. I-If I could... That is, I want to... Fuck! I can’t figure out how to ask without it being bound by the debt.” My shoulders slumped in defeat.

“If you’re asking what I think you’re asking, then yes. You can touch it if you’d like.” Dios was looking down at the toes of my shoes as he said it, but I used my free hand to tilt his face up to mine so I could kiss him.

Both of my hands instantly slid down the muscled plane of his back until my fingers were burrowed in the fur covering his buttocks. I stalled, groping his ass and kneading it in my hands. I wasn’t sure if I was more concerned with what his reaction would be or my own.

Finally, my right hand shifted towards the center of his back; and I brushed my fingertips along the short length of his tail. Dios jerked his hips forward against me, a low bleat escaping him. I sucked in a sharp breath and stroked his tail again. The fur here was infinitely softer than anywhere else on his body.

The more I petted him, the faster Dios was coming undone in my arms. I wanted more. I forced my hands to still and stepped back, looking Dios in the eyes.

“Do you want to try again? Different this time?”

“Try what?” Dios’ eyes were unfocused, and his face was pink with a blush.

“Sex.” It tumbled awkwardly from my mouth.

“The charm...?” he asked.

I lifted my hand only to find it missing. My whole body was engulfed in panic until I spotted light glinting off metal in the tall grass. I bent down to pick it up and promptly undid the clasp. Dios stepped forward until he was pressed against me, looking up at my face with unabashed desire. I fumbled with it for a split-second before I managed to latch the clasp. When it was done, I took a half step back.

Dios’ lower body began to glow. The fur began to shorten until it disappeared completely, save for what would pass as natural human body hair. I could only stare as his legs changed, stretching slightly and morphing into those of a human.

I had gotten several things almost spot-on in my various imaginings, but nothing I could dream up compared to the reality before me. The body hair was now sparse enough to afford glimpses of the milky skin beneath it, meaning there was still enough of it to justify using the term “lightly furred.” His thighs were thick and strong with toned muscle, and his calves were perfectly proportioned to his thighs.

What I hadn’t gotten right were his feet. In my mind, I had repeatedly pictured his feet to be on the small side. His feet were not small; they were wide and flat.

Dios blushed at my perusal, turning away from me. I drank my fill of the sight before me. The cheeks of his butt were rounded nicely but looked firm. I actually had a brief moment of dizziness as all the blood drained from my brain, destination my dick.

“Dios.”

“If you want the tail back, I can control what shifts to human.” He still hadn’t turned back around to face me, but I could hear the hesitancy in his voice.

I walked up to him and enveloped his smaller frame in my arms. Leaning down, I whispered in his ear. “I don’t really care that much what you look like. Horns and tail or body hair and flat feet, you’re still you. You’re still the

mysterious satyr that kicked me in the stomach when I saved his life and then insisted *I* be the one to go to the hospital. You're still the stubborn shit that refused to sleep in your own bed because I was sleeping in it. You are still the sarcastic, adorable, sexy, real mythological half-human that I want to seduce and keep by my side for as long as I possibly can."

"Jace." Dios took a shuddering breath as I began lightly tracing teasing circles around his navel with my fingers. "Why do you have to be so gods-be-damned sincere? I could hate you, if you were a liar."

I let my other hand slide down his side, ghosting across his hip and between his legs to cup his balls. The weight felt good in my hand, somehow. It was infinitely more arousing than the weight of a breast in my palm. A keening whine escaped Dios, and I relented in my purposeful avoidance of his erection to drop my hand from his navel down to wrap around the base of his rigid cock. I pumped up, once, twice; and he bucked in my arms.

Keeping my hands where they were wasn't too difficult as I dropped to my knees behind him. I ducked my head, tongue darting out to lick from the seam of his testicles up along the crack of his ass. I curled the tip of my tongue to press between the flesh, seeking the ring of muscle at his entrance. Dios moaned and reached back to part his cheeks, assisting my efforts.

I pushed in with my tongue, surprised at how easily he opened up to me. I found myself wondering if was from experience or simply physical differences. The little green-eyed monster within me roared that it had better just be physical differences.

I worked his hole with my tongue until he was helplessly riding my mouth. I pulled away and straightened up on my knees to rub my cheek against the side of his hip. Before Dios had a chance to react, I tilted my head sideways and sunk my teeth into the muscle there.

"J-Jace!" Dios gasped, and I smiled when precum dribbled down from the tip of his cock over my hand.

"Mine." I followed up with the same to his other hip, causing him to quiver in my grasp and his cock to jerk.

I surged to my feet, swinging Dios up into my arms to carry him over to where the shade of the trees around us fell across the clearing. I laid him down as gently as I could, sprawling beside him on the lush green. I ached to claim his lips, and Dios beat me to it—pressing a close-mouthed kiss on me.

I rolled onto my back taking Dios with me to straddle my abdomen. My tongue darted out to lick across his plump lower lip, deepening the kiss. He moaned into my mouth, sending a thrill of scorching heat to pool low in my belly. I let my hands grab hold of his ass, circling his opening with the tip of my middle finger.

I easily slid my finger inside him. The warmth and twitching muscle was like nothing I had felt before. My forefinger easily joined, and I began searching out his prostate. I wanted to see the look on his face, the ecstasy.

Dios panted into my mouth as he began to ride my fingers, grinding down and swiveling his hips for the extra sensation. He pulled back to sit up for a better angle, and the way his eyes were just slightly glazed over was making me even harder than I already was.

I almost lost it when he palmed his member, holding it against his stomach so it wouldn't bounce in the air. I watched his pink tongue swipe across his lips to leave them glistening, stared as he curled his fingers around himself and began gliding up and down his length, and went slack-jawed—just a little—when Dios slid a finger from his free hand in next to my own.

That only lasted for about half a minute before I just couldn't stand it anymore. I slipped my fingers out and fumbled with the zipper on my jeans. Dios bit his lip, rolling it between his teeth, and continued pleasuring himself while I desperately tried to free my painful erection. I couldn't help the slight growl that escaped upon my success.

I guided my sensitive head to his entrance, and Dios promptly bore down to take it inside him. My eyes rolled back in my head with rapture; and without thinking about it, I thrust upward hard enough to actually lift Dios' knees from where they rested on the ground on either side of me.

My hands clamped onto his hips while he continued stroking his dick in time to my thrusts. I was lost in the feel of him; the way his little pants, whimpers, and the occasional bleat fed some growing need in me to force more of them from him. We toppled right off the edge simultaneously. Both of us were shaking from the exertion and the residual frissons of our orgasm.

We simply lay in the clearing for quite a while in the aftermath of our lovemaking. I reveled in the way Dios fit against me so perfectly. He was just short enough that I could rest my chin on top of his head with him spooned against me.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" I belatedly asked him.

"No. I'm used to anal sex," he replied bluntly.

"Don't tell me. I'd rather not know." I had figured that might be the case, but it did nothing to deter jealousy from rearing its ugly head within me.

Dios only grunted in response. I was beginning to drift off in a half-sleep when he spoke again. "How did you find it?"

"Find what?"

"My charm."

"Oh. That. Well... It was in Taron's office, on the key board."

"He didn't see you take it?"

"No. I waited until he left to go to the bank."

"Do you think he'll find out?"

"He's not that smart," I snorted. Taron was smart enough to run his own garage, but that was about the extent of his mental capabilities.

"I hope you're right. Now let me up. I have to finish hanging the laundry." Dios wriggled away from me, and I felt his absence even though he was only about a foot away.

I remained stretched out on the grass, waiting for Dios to complete his task. I really enjoyed watching him in his new form. I had grown so accustomed to the movements of his goat-like lower half that this change was riveting. The muscles moved and shifted differently, the thinner hair lending itself to my study of his form.

"Dios?"

"Hmmm?" he called over his shoulder without turning to look at me.

"You said you can control your shifting, right?"

"Yes."

"Can you show your tail, please?" Okay, so maybe I liked his tail more than I should after all.

He didn't reply, but I watched the tail slowly emerge from just above the crevice of his ass. It twitched merrily from side to side, and a faintly hummed tune carried through the open air. When he had finished, I got up and walked down the stairs with him to the bathroom.

After cleaning ourselves, we fell into our usual routine. He watched his show, and I read Greek mythology. Dinner was a salad again—I really needed to remember to buy some steaks. We called it a night before Karen arrived home and fell asleep snuggled together despite the warm early summer temperature.

The remainder of the week passed in idyllic glory. I would go to work, keeping an eye out for any sign that Taron might suspect I had reclaimed Dios' charm. Dios would be waiting for me to get home, and we would touch and explore each other. I even asked him to do me again, though this time I let him take all the time he wanted.

It was peaceful, easy living—aside from the occasional temper tantrum from Karen. I figured there was no reason for Dios to stay cooped up in the cave though, now that he had his charm back. So come the weekend, I asked if he would like to go out to dinner. It took a lot of pleading and pouting, but he finally agreed.

Sunday night, we found ourselves dressing up—not too flashy or formal, just spiffy casual. I knew where I was taking Dios, but I hadn't told him. Mary had told me about this cute little place that just opened about a month ago. It was called Gyro Grill, and I figured it would be perfect since the menu was mostly authentic Greek cuisine.

A hostess showed us to a table and brought our drinks. Dios took a sip of his wine, and I took a long pull of my beer. A frown was playing at the corners of his mouth, but I wasn't expecting what came next.

"I was intended to be a sacrifice to Taron."

I choked on my beer, drawing attention from the other diners around us. When I could finally breathe again, I asked, "What the hell?"

"My name, Aegidios, means 'shield of goatskin.' My mother had made a deal with Taron that her last child would become his shield. Granted that was back during the time after Theseus slayed Taron's grandfather, but that doesn't matter. Her contract is just as binding as your saving my life is. I've been trying to find a way out of it."

"I see, I think. So what does this mean exactly? As far as you and I are concerned, that is."

"Well, if I've read the scroll right then I only have to act as his shield if he is in danger."

“Okay. What if we get him a better shield?” I voiced the question that, to me, was perfectly logical. It must not have occurred to Dios before, because his jaw practically hit the table as he stared at me incredulously.

“Can it really be that simple?”

“Worth a shot, right?”

Dios just nodded silently. Our food arrived, and we spent the rest of the evening eating while talking about the Greek myths. So far, my favorite was the one about Cupid and Psyche. Dios’ favorite was about how the god Pan came to play reed pipes.

That night, lying in bed, Dios sighed against my chest. I held him closer to me and asked what was wrong. He didn’t answer at first; but when I was just about to give up on ever getting an answer, he spoke up.

“Taron will catch on to us sooner or later. Especially if you help me look for a way out of my mother’s contract with him.”

“I don’t care. I’ll deal with him. How bad can it be?”

He shook his head and adjusted where it lay on my shoulder. He drifted off with no more said on the subject. I pressed a kiss to the top of his head and let myself fade into sleep.

When I got to work the next day, Mary informed me that Taron would be out all day. He had to drive to the next city over to pick up a part for the old Model T that someone brought in Saturday. I breathed a sigh of relief. No worrying today about him finding out I had given Dios back his charm.

Work was hectic, since it was a Monday. There were several customers insisting their vehicles be fixed immediately, because they had traveling to do this weekend. Then of course there was the routine of maintenance and repairs for our regulars. By the time the day was over, all I wanted was to curl up in bed with Dios and doze off.

I wearily clambered out of my truck and shuffled my way into the cave. Dios wasn’t in the front room or kitchen, so I continued on—up the stairs and into the clearing. Still no Dios. He wasn’t in the bathroom either. It was when I opened his bedroom door that I truly began to worry.

The room was a wreck. His wine rack and shelf had been tipped over, broken glass decorated the floor. The bed sheets were pulled off. Dresser

drawers and clothes were strewn about the room. I felt my knees give out, and my vision dimmed to blackness just before my face hit the floor.

I must have been out for a long time. I came to with Karen screeching at me from the doorway. At first I couldn't process what she was screaming at me, then I remembered why I ate dirt in the first place.

"Dios!" I scrambled frantically to my feet.

"Never mind him, where is my treasure?" Karen was livid, as evidenced by her transformation into her harpy form.

My fear for Dios overrode my habit of bickering with Karen, and I replied as calmly as I could. "Whoever took Dios probably has your treasure too. We find one, we find both. So are we going to get along for a bit and help each other, or is this going to be business as usual?"

Karen glowered at me while ruffling her feathers for an excruciatingly long moment. "Fine, human. I'll call Dave and have him bring his hunting hounds over here."

I expressed my concerns about bringing a human—aside from myself—into this. Karen assured me that her boss knew about her and Dios. From what I understood any creatures or demi-gods that were employed could only accept jobs from other creatures, demi-gods, or god-approved humans in the know.

It took a while for Dave to arrive, since he lived clear across the other side of town from where the cave was. He brought three hounds with him, and in only a few seconds they had caught the scent and were off in hot pursuit of their target. We followed them on foot, flashlights in hand.

The sun was cresting the horizon when they stopped at the mouth of a small cave set at the bottom of a sheer-rock cliff in a mountainside. No waterfall here. No sweetly whispering wildlife. No enchanting little clearing to hang laundry.

The surroundings were instead barren and desolate. What little vegetation there was looked parched and stunted. There were no small animals scurrying about, nor were there any visible insects—not even ants.

Karen let out a soft warble that echoed back to us from inside the cave. The hounds whimpered and hid behind Dave rather than following the trail into the dark space. I squared my shoulders and walked straight into the unknown danger awaiting me.

The cave turned out to be a tunnel, which felt like it went on for miles. I trailed my hand along the wall to my left and shuffled my feet along the floor

instead of taking steps; just precautions to keep myself from tumbling headlong into an unseen crevice. The flashlight wasn't much use in such complete and utter blackness.

The tunnel twisted and turned, sometimes seeming to double back on itself. Suddenly I heard a crash from somewhere ahead. It sent a chill down my spine, but I was too determined to find Dios to even think of turning back.

I rushed ahead, abandoning my safety precautions in favor of getting to the origin of the sound as fast as possible. I saw the edges of the soft light from around the corner and rounded it with a skidding slide. My gaze immediately focused on Dios laying bound and gagged in the middle of the floor.

Yanking my pocket knife out, I dropped to my knees and immediately began cutting at the ropes immobilizing him. The second I got his hands free, Dios reached up to untie the cloth that was obstructing his speech. I sliced away the rope at his feet and helped him up. Dios clung to me, shaking.

"Taron. He found me, Jace. He found me, and he's going to—"

Dios' words ended in choked silence at roughly the same time I went flying through the air. My right shoulder slammed hard into the wall of the cave, leaving my whole arm numb and useless. I had one guess what had happened, and when my eyes finally refocused I found myself to be right.

"I knew you'd come after him. You're pathetic, Kosta." Taron growled, literally. Ok, well, rumbled—since I don't think bulls are capable of growling. What an interesting way to discover my boss was a minotaur. It was strange to see the head of a bull atop his hulking, muscular body and yet not strange at all. It actually looked better on him than the human head I was used to seeing.

"Look who's talking. Took you long enough to figure it out. I thought bulls were hard-headed, but I didn't know they were dense too." There went my mouth again, just like when Karen's around.

"You..." Taron didn't bother finishing his sentence. He just lowered his head and pawed at the ground. I knew exactly what was coming and braced myself for the pain.

I waited for the impact, the slide of sharp horn into my flesh. When I dared to open my eyes, I was thrilled, shocked, amazed, and ultimately horrified by what I saw. Dios had my forgotten pocket knife in hand, and the blade was

embedded deep into Taron's gut. Not a big deal if it were an average everyday pocket knife, but it's a hunting pocket knife. Six inches, as opposed to the average two or three, of steel was sufficient to do enough damage to stop Taron in his tracks.

The cave suddenly filled with blindingly white light. The spots in my vision cleared to reveal a tall, elegant woman in a tunic and armor with an owl on her shoulder. Pieces of information tumbled together in my head, giving me an idea of who this was, but I couldn't understand why she was here. With a wave of her hand, my knife disappeared from Dios' grip and reappeared in her open palm.

"Stand before me, Aegidios of Athens. Stand before your patron goddess."

Dios wordlessly walked over to her and bowed his head. She reached out and placed her hand atop his cinnamon curls. Dios glowed and shifted back to his satyr form despite the fact that his charm was still around his neck.

"Your bravery is commendable. I have recently come into possession of something which I wish to give you as a token of my respect for a child of my city. Will you accept?"

Dios nodded carefully, eyes still downcast to the floor.

Without further ado, Athena withdrew a shining golden length of thick fabric from her tunic. She draped it across his shoulders and then lifted his face to look at her again with her fingertips beneath his chin. He blinked at her repeatedly then stammered out a quiet, "Thank you."

"Remember, Aegidios. I am the patron goddess of the courageous and the wise." Her words echoed around us as she faded from sight right before our eyes.

Dios pulled the item from his shoulders gently. His eyes widened almost comically as he looked at it and then at me and then back at it. He rushed over to me, hooves clicking loudly on the rock.

"Jace, do you have any idea what this is; what Athena just gave *to me*?"

I shook my head in reply, in too much pain to form words.

Dios spread the cloth across my injured shoulder and then spoke again. "This is the golden fleece! It can heal any wound and protect its bearer from any attack."

At first I could only nod in agreement with what he was saying, but then I felt it. A warmth was spreading out from where it touched my skin as my arm slowly regained feeling. I belatedly remembered my boss was likely bleeding out somewhere behind Dios, but he was way ahead of me on that score.

“Jace, I think I know what Athena wants me to do with this. I think... I think she wants me to offer it to Taron in place of myself, to fulfill the contract.” Dios looked into my eyes, as though he were asking for my consent.

I nodded again, eager to have Dios freed from his morbid fate. I watched as he walked over to where Taron seemed frozen in place and held the fleece to his gut wound. When Dios moved away, the wound was healed. Taron shook his head and flared his nostrils.

“Wait.” Dios’ voice was firm and confident, for the first time since I had met him. It sent a thrill down my spine. “Taron, will you accept this shield in place of myself?”

Taron studied the fleece for a split-second before holding his hand out toward Dios, who immediately handed it over. “Fucking satyr. Cowards, the lot of you. All you’re good at is drinking and fucking. Kosta, you’re fired. Go get your toolkit and clear out.” He walked farther into the cave, leaving us alone.

“Come here,” I told Dios without thinking.

He just stood rooted in place for the longest time, I began to think something was wrong with him. I scrambled to my feet so I could totter my way over to him. He smiled brightly at me and flung himself into my arms. After a bit, I felt him sobbing. I started rubbing his back gently before I dared to ask, “Are you okay?”

He pulled back, giving me a watery smile. “I didn’t have to go to you. Just now, when you told me ‘come here’, I wasn’t forced to obey.”

I grinned like a fool when the meaning finally sunk in. Wrapping my arms firmly around him, I spun Dios around and whooped with joy. The echo of my shout faded long before we managed to make our way back to open air.

Epilogue

It’s been a year since that fateful day when I rescued a drowning man—excuse me, satyr—from his attempted suicide. I can’t help but smile at the way everything has turned out since then. Dios moved into my house after Dave got settled in the cave with Karen. His hounds made perfect guard dogs for her treasure.

She was livid that we hadn't gotten it back, but Dios and I have been helping her gather a new hoard. Of course, my first contribution was silver tinsel. I don't know what was more hilarious, her overjoyed reaction or Dios' uncontrollable giggles as I presented her with the package.

I have been running a car care and repair business from the garage at my house. I can't handle anything too big, but I always send those ones to Mary. She and I caught up in line at the grocery store about a month after I was fired, and she told me that Taron had been gone for two weeks after the incident because he had somehow fallen prey to fleas. Of course, she didn't know about the incident itself.

Dios and I finally came to an agreement concerning meat in the refrigerator. As long as it was beef, chicken, or pork he didn't care if I had it and understood that he wasn't expected to eat it. I'm counting today as our anniversary, so I bought him a crystal goblet. We've been working on replacing his broken collection too.

He might just kick me again when he sees this one though. It's got a hand-painted scene of Philoctetes stuck in a target by his horns.

To Télös

Author Bio

Ava Penn is an incurable bibliophile with a passion for food, romance, and nature. This often shows in most of her writing. Other interests include anime/manga, video games, horses, and Amtgard. She loves to hear from readers, so feel free to get in touch.

Contact & Media Info

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FLY LIKE AN EAGLE

By Cherie Noel

Photo Description

Two muscular young men kiss. One leans against the front of a spotless silver cooking range, white v-neck tee shirt rucked up and exposing the lower half of his chest. A medium sized ring hangs from his right nipple. His hair is short and dark. Though his face is clean shaven there is still a faint stubble shadow just beneath the skin along his sharply angled jawline. Both hands rest behind him on the stove. In the tilt of his head, the sliver of pupil visible between his thick, dark lashes, and the extreme upright posture of his body there is a clear air of authority. The other man is leaning ever so slightly forward, body angled out so they only touch pec to pec. The man on the right is shirtless. He has a thick silver chain around his throat and has one hand lightly resting on the dip of the first man's waist. His other hand dangles at his left side. The muscles of that arm are taut and the cheek we can see is flushed. His face has a day or two of beard scruff, and yet he still appears the more vulnerable of the two. His hair is also dark and short on the sides and back. On the white wall behind him, above the brown tile backsplash, lies an intertwined shadow of their kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm the one with the white shirt. I was the younger brother, boy next door (yea, just strikes against me) I fell in love with him when I was 9. He was the only one for me. Unfortunately he didn't see me that way. So without telling him I left to go to college, never was able to get over him, in fact, I'm still a virgin, dammit! Every time I get close, I close my eyes and see him, in fact I hear him. How the fuck is that even possible? I am now graduated and ready to get on with my life. Mom has kept me up on his life, not that much going on, but I'm sure he keeps his lovers close to the chest.

Love tats and HEA, no non-con, no BDSM, love some hot m/m love, no more angst, because this poor boy has already lived through enough of that, soul mate a plus.

Sincerely,

Angelique

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, science fiction, alien-race shifters, first time, destined mates, coming of age

Word Count: 15,812

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FLY LIKE AN EAGLE

By Cherie Noel

Prologue

“Get in, Matty, the water’s nice today—don’t be a chicken!”

Matt narrowed his eyes at Marlon and Ryan’s baby brother. Huh. The kid was cute and all, but only Matt’s strict instructions to “blend” kept him from... he caught the thought back and warily eyed the big blue rectangle where Chase bobbed. Clicking his teeth together, Matt hummed at the back of his throat as he sought a particular English word. His... um... *Accipitridaehenis*. Dammit, he’d been here for ten Earth years and the English words, still so different from his native tongue, were hard to remember. His gut ached and his chest felt tight. Sometimes he shivered with the need to simply take wing, escape from the never-ending pressure. His *Accipitridaehenis* wanted him to appear human, though. They told him constantly, his father’s deep bass tones overlapping with his mother’s clear, lyrical soprano, and his cousin Adam’s wryly amused tenor. Even his dear Aunt Sophie always had something to add.

“Keep quiet, son, or sing as the lesser birds do, from the shadow of the hedge.”

“Blend in, my heart. Dim your plumes to join the flock.”

“Learn the language, cousin. You will never fit in unless you learn why the people you live among laugh, and what makes them trouble the sky with curses.”

“Make friends, but don’t get too close, nephew.”

Wait, he remembered... “Mother” and “Father” were the English language titles for those who cared for young hatchlings... They wanted so badly for him to fit in. Matt did not mind trying harder for them. Especially not after they gave up everything to offer him a better life here on Earth.

He sniffed. The harsh smell of the water Chase floated in burned Matt’s nose hairs. If Chase were not such an interesting human, well... Matt curled his lip before dipping his toe into the foul smelling water the younger boy floated in. He shivered as the cool sensation of water slipped over his skin. Why had the Simms put this overly deep bath in their yard? They did not have one last

year. What purpose could such a thing possibly serve, save to bring other predators, and necessitate strict patrolling of the resources in order to prevent a take-over? Matt shook his head. Foolishness. A glimmer off the water drew his eyes across the expanse of wet to where Chase bobbed, skin glistening above the water. Matt's breath caught in his chest. He had an audience. Chase waited, watching him, eyes bright, lips pulled back to show white teeth shining against his golden skin. Fine hairs at the base of his neck standing to attention, Matt forced his aversion to deep water aside.

"Um, sure."

Matt meant to sit down, ease himself over the scratchy concrete side of the pool and then hold on, with an appropriately white-knuckled grasp. Instead he stepped back abruptly. He'd have managed leaping forward, no time to second guess there, but jumping in from the side was ridiculously out of the question, since he didn't swim. Not a single stroke. This was another of those weird social things he still hadn't quite sussed out since they'd immigrated to Buffalo. He missed home violently some days, missed knowing what was acceptable in differing situations. It took years before he'd adapted enough to go to public school. His only friends back then had been Ryan and his little brother Chase. They had an older brother, Marlon, but as he'd left for college before Matt and Ryan even started high school, Matt had never been very close to him. Ryan's mother looked sad whenever she talked about him, and even happy-go-lucky Ryan refused to talk about why he never visited. The only thing Matt really remembered about Marlon from before he'd left was that the eldest Simms brother always stood with his back to a wall. Matt could completely relate. In large groups like the extended Simms clan, he felt uneasy as well. After ten years of living next to the Simms, countless backyard barbeques and holiday gatherings, Matt's stomach still burned with the constant unease of not quite fitting in around them. And he'd gotten something wrong again judging by the puzzled expression on Chase's face. Perhaps he'd lost too much time in thought. Chase's happy expression fell, eyes going serious and mouth drooping at the corners.

Damn. Matt liked Chase. The younger boy smelled right, when so much in this new place carried a vaguely wrong odor. Chase's lopsided smile warmed the edges of the part of Matthew that felt frozen still after the long, cold journey in cryo. Chase had been the first to approach Matthew, the first to extend warmth and welcome. From that first day eight years ago, when Chase raised his big green eyes worshipfully to Matthew's face, he'd hated to disappoint the younger boy in any way.

Swallowing down the acid taste of potential error, Matthew pushed himself forward to the water's edge. Perhaps if he'd been watching his feet, instead of the way light played in the glittering droplets of moisture on Chase's long black lashes, he wouldn't have slipped. There was no telling. One moment, his vision lasered in on the shimmer and gleam of Chase's hazel-green eyes, and the next, his mouth was full of chemical filled water, the back of his head exploding with a razor-edged wash of crimson pain, and his flailing hands found nothing but a cloud of rapidly descending blackness.

"Matt! Oh my god, Matt!"

Soft.

So soft.

Slick, warm flesh pressed to his lips. A burst of warm air filled his heavy lungs. Matt coughed. The back of his skull pulsed hotly, sending jagged shards of fire though every part of his being. Instinct rose in a twisted rush. Matthew struck out, arms winding rapidly around a slim body, mouth opening to mark what was his.

Mine. Protect. Bind, must bind. Mine.

Teeth closing over the flesh pressed to his mouth, Matt exerted enough pressure to part the skin, just enough to let through one vital drop of blood. Reaching a hand up, he swiped unsteady fingers against the throbbing epicenter of agony at the back of his head. A gasp sounded. Matt squinted up at the figure crouching over him. A flickering, silvery nimbus surrounded Chase's head, while Matt's temples throbbed in time with the pulsing sparkles. Letting go with one arm, he reached again to the locus of burning pain at the back of his head. Something hot and slick coated his fingers. A vicious pulse emanated from skimming his hand across the rapidly protruding lump at the back of his head. Chase made a low whimpering noise. Matt's heart beat pushed fire through his veins as Chase wrenched his mouth away. Drawing in a deep breath brought the scent of blood like the tumblers of a lock turning in his mind. He reached up, pushed his crimson-coated finger into the lush mouth opened above him in a perfect "O", and rubbed his essence across the receptors there. The pupils of Chase's brilliant amber flecked green eyes flared. He jerked his head back slightly. Swirls of black and silver whirled madly at the edges of Matt's vision.

Mate. Mine.

The eyes widened above the wrinkled up nose. Matt coughed, water spewing from his mouth.

Mine.

A flash of blackness. Matt was on his side, concrete scratching his side, patio table legs and the green edge of a lawn filling his vision. Feet slapped on the pavement, and then Chase's voice, panic spiking through until the edges cracked. Matt remembered Ryan teasing Chase even though at that point the teenaged Chase's voice hadn't broken a single time since he was fifteen. Matt certainly hadn't heard that uneven pitch for two solid years.

"I unlocked the front door... oh god, please hurry... I don't know... out back by the pool. His head. So much blood. Hurry. Just fucking hurry!"

Matt reached forward. The words in his head sounded so clear.

"No. Chase. M'okay. Don't—"

The outside echo, however, blurred and melted into an unrecognizable aural mush of yearning and sorrow. Chase should never worry. Chase. His. His. Another wracking cough shook his body. Matt spewed water as tremors raced through him, pain flared white-hot, and then darkness pulled him down into its soft embrace.

Four Years Later

Matt Altieren plucked at the frayed seam running down the inner thigh of his favorite jeans.

Leaning a thickly muscled shoulder against the weathered wood siding of his front porch, Matt swiveled his head to one side to focus on the battered silver van he'd caught a glimpse of in the periphery of his vision. The faded Cinderella carriage topping the radio antenna and the familiar, boxy, out-of-date silhouette of the vehicle declared Chase's presence louder than the echoing strains of The Steve Miller Band's classic song, "Take the Money and Run", which belted out of the van's wide open windows.

"You know you need to tell him."

The muscles in Matt's neck tensed. "Ryan, I... how do you tell someone something like this?"

Matt turned to gaze through the screen behind him at the man sitting in his living room with bare feet propped on the windowsill. His best friend and

business partner shrugged a shoulder even more heavily muscled than Matt's. "Hell, just tell him. You told me."

Matt made a high clicking sound at the back of his throat. Without moving his head, he turned his gaze to skewer his best friend. "You walked in on me in the middle of a shift, Ryan. Or should I say you kicked down a locked door and blundered into the room where I was trying to finish my lunch and shift back to human?"

Ryan's cheeks flooded with a rosy tinge. Wrinkling his forehead, he pointed the blunt tip of his index finger at Matt. His mouth opened, shut, and opened again. "Gah. Ass. Something screamed bloody fucking murder in that motherfucking unfinished room, and you hadn't been feeling well all day. The only reason you were even working that job was because that fuckstick Tony Silenzsky we hired called in sick at the last minute when we were already running behind schedule. And ewww. You were gobbling down a damn mouse."

Matt winced. "I was an eagle. Eagles are carnivores—"

Ryan cut him off, one hand waving imperiously. "Dude. That shit was nasty, and you finished gulping the critter down when you look just like you do now."

Matt bit his tongue, waiting for Ryan to finish his theatrical shuddering. The ass even gagged a couple of times for effect, but finally Ryan wiped a hand over his face, squinted and began to speak again. "I—my little brother has been into you since he was nine years old, man. If I can get past seeing you doing the weird feathery shit when I'm not even into you like that, you can bet your pointy beak Chase isn't gonna let a little thing like you getting all feathery slow him down."

Matt gaped at Ryan. Sometimes the guy was such a damn stereotype, it hurt to be in the same room with him. Opening his mouth to tell Ryan what an idiot he was proved to be a moot point when the squealing of Chase's driver's side door sounded less than twenty feet behind Matt. He bit the inside of his cheek.

"Get your ass out here, Ryan. He's going to run straight inside your parent's house and not come out until he's leaving for good again if you don't show your face."

Ryan flipped him off, dropped one foot to the floor and leaned forward, cupping his hand around his mouth like a makeshift megaphone. "Hey, Chase! Come over here. Matt and I were just having a beer. Why don't you join us?"

Matt froze, gut clenching and sweat beading at his hairline as his gaze locked on Ryan's smirking face. Ryan stood, finally ambling to the screen door and pushing it open. He sketched an indolent wave at his younger brother. "Come on, come on. Mom and Dad's 'date-nite' is tonight. You don't wanna get caught up in that terrifying shit. Seriously, man, you need to hang with us."

A pebble rattled against the sidewalk. Matt spun on his heel. Chase stood not five feet away, his mouth puckering as though tasting Chinese bitter melon for the first time. Shaking his head after shooting a narrow eyed glare at his parent's front door, Chase muttered just loud enough for Matt to hear. "Oh, hell no. Never, ever again."

He looked up, gaze sliding past Matt to rest on his brother. Matt's chest cramped. Chase was taller. Broader. Tanner. A silver hoop pierced his left eyebrow at exactly the same point where Matt's was pierced. The paper thin cotton of his tight white tee shirt showed a clear circular outline originating from the hard point of his right nipple. Matt's mouth dried up in a millisecond. His hand twitched, fingers spreading apart and then clenching into tight fists at the sides of his thighs. Chase kept his eyes fixed on Ryan even as he climbed Matt's stairs. Sliding a sideways glance at Matt, he dipped his chin slightly.

"—'lo."

Then he brushed past Matt, topping him by a good inch, and every hair on Matt's body stood on end. Chase strode into the house, hips rolling with the predatory gate of a big cat. Matt sucked in a sharp breath.

Holy Summer Triangle.

Matt's mate had turned from gawky, off-limits teen into... a walking, breathing invitation to hot, sweaty sex. Ryan pulled his brother into a rough hug, pounding a lightly clenched fist against his back in a classic straight-guy hug. Then he pushed him out to arm's length away, shook him lightly, and pulled him in for another quick squeeze. This time Ryan did some funky pseudo-wrestling move before he pushed Chase away a second time. His smirk firmly in place he held the door of Matt's house open a touch wider. His green eyes laughed at Matt. They were a shade duller than Chase's and Ryan was laughing softly as Matt stood immobile, gaze yearning after Chase's retreating form. Ryan reached out, grabbed Matt's forearm and hauled him into the house. When they were shoulder to shoulder, Ryan released him, leaning close to whisper.

“Tell him tonight. He’s got job offers lined up all over the world, man. If he takes off this time, you might not see him again.”

And then Ryan walked out the door, down the front stairs and across the lawn. Calmly producing Chase’s van keys from his pocket—he must have stolen them when he hugged his brother—he climbed into the silver monstrosity and drove off.

Chase heard the screen door slam in the background but the sight of his favorite beer, Sam Adams Winter Snap, caught his attention. “How the hell does he get this stuff out of season? I can never find Winter Snap in June.”

The sound of a throat clearing pulled Chase up short. With the skin on the back of his neck tingling, and his pulse beating low and steady in his groin, the throat clearer could only be Matt. “Where’d Ryan go?”

He didn’t need to turn to know his brother wasn’t there as well. Hell, he’d bet good money that Ryan wasn’t even in the house anymore, the rat. Silence pressed against the tender backs of his knees, into the hollows beneath his ears, and tugged at the fine hair at the base of his neck. Sighing, Chase stepped back, letting the curved handle of the refrigerator slip from his hand. Pivoting around on one heel, he braced one hand on the brown tile of the counter adjacent to the fridge, and the other on the edge of the gleaming stainless steel surface of the restaurant-grade stove.

Four years of frustration and humiliation burned low in his gut. The last time he’d seen Matt this close had been at the hospital after the accident in his parent’s pool.

God.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Letting his eyes droop slightly closed, Chase pushed his hips forward enough to put his half-hard cock on display. He ran his tongue over his lips and then bared his teeth in a thin, hungry sliver of white that barely passed as a smile. Matt gulped, nostrils flaring as he pointed toward the front of the house. Chase was tired of being hung up on this man, sick to death of hearing his rumbling bass voice pleading for Chase to wait—every damn time Chase got close to scoring some tail, every single time he’d hear this man’s deep voice pleading softly and he’d be unable to go through with it. No matter how hot the guy he’d picked out that night, they all left him cold once that voice started to murmur at the back of his brain. A snarl curled the edges of

his smile into something almost mean. A shudder shook Matt's thickly muscled frame. Pointing toward the front of the house again, he spoke.

"Ryan took your van."

Chase shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I'm fine here for now, aren't I?"

Matt nodded, stepping forward with shoulders back and spine arched as though Chase had hooked an invisible line right through his center. Chase's gut tightened at the sight of Matt's pupils blown wide, a flush crawling up his neck and his shaft hardening behind the fly of his worn jeans. The whole wanting, craving picture of gimme-gimme-gotta-have-it sent a thrill zinging through Chase's chest. Then Matt was close enough to touch, and Chase slipped a finger through a small hole low on the faded red tee Matt wore.

"Take this off."

Matt's lips parted, a whisper of air escaping with a rushing sound. The flush climbed past his throat to his cheeks. Chase let go, deliberately placing his hand back on the counter, letting his hips jut forward a hair more. Matt's grey gaze dipped, sweeping the front of Chase's tight jeans and rising again so full of heat his irises seemed to be made of molten silver.

"I have to tell you—"

Chase cut him off. "Take it off, big man. I'm not a kid anymore, Matt. I want to see your skin. Now."

His voice shook after the first sentence, and something broke in Chase, stripping away the frail remains of the last wall his pride had to hide behind. No one else made him shake like this. At school the whole campus called him the Ice Prince. They bragged about sleeping with him even though none of them ever had, and when he spent enough time to get them hot and bothered before fleeing, some even felt as though he'd paid them a compliment. Chase never denied the rumors of his prowess, nor the ones about the ridiculously high number of conquests he was reputed to have tossed out before their muscles could stop shaking from cataclysmic orgasms. He never told a single soul he could only get hard when he imagined touches from Matt.

Now, the man stood in front of him, the one who'd patted his hand and called him "a good kid" after Chase saved his life. The memory of Matt's condescending tone in the hospital was as bitter now as on the day it happened. Four years of anger coiled in his gut. Matt's lips parted, words trembling on the tip of his tongue. Chase's long-simmering rancor flared, lacing his voice with thin whip strands of cruelty.

“I’m a man now Matt. One that wants to get laid tonight. It can happen here or I can get a cab down to Marcella’s. I don’t actually give two shits where it happens. You want it to happen with you then take the fucking shirt off.”

If his voice still shook a little, the meanness inherent in those acrimonious words would balance out that weakness. Chase spread his legs, tipping his chin up as he did so, settling down to look Matt square in the eye. Matt’s chest rose with a quick breath.

“I-no. Here. Y-you can’t go. Stay. I’ll take the shirt off.”

Matt’s voice shook too, and his hand trembled as he reached down to pull the hem of his shirt up. In seconds, he had the material over his head and dropping to the floor. His already deep voice grew husky.

“You too.”

He drifted closer, one hand hovering at his side, the other reaching behind Chase to pull the back of his thin white tee up. Matt’s hand slid around to the front of Chase’s torso, lifting the shirt’s hem above Chase’s chest. A drawn-out, shuddering sigh escaped him.

“We need to talk—“

Chase put his hand over Matt’s mouth.

“No. I don’t want to hear any of that angsty, need-to-be-polite crap tonight. You can tell me how hot I make you. You can get poetic about my cock and ass and the curve of my lips. You can beg me to fuck you into tomorrow—oh, you thought I hadn’t figured out how much you’d rather catch from me? I told you I’m not a boy anymore. So. We can fuck. You open your mouth for anything else and I’m out of here, got it?”

Before Matt’s lashes dropped down over his eyes there was a flicker of something raw there, but he nodded, and really? That was all Chase cared about in this moment. He lowered his hand back to the counter, tilting his chin enough so Matt would have to go on tiptoe to kiss him. The way Matt couldn’t stop staring at his lips, there would be kissing soon. Chase wanted him to work for it.

Matt rose up, swaying on his toes, mouth sipping at Chase’s while his hot hands pushed and pulled at Chase’s shirt. Murmuring low in his throat, making nonsense sounds, his humming and growling interspersed with short, stinging bites and sucking kisses only increased Matt’s feverish motions. A sense of

power curled through Chase. Matt's questing fingers finally found Chase's nipple ring. He pulled back, a gasp echoing through the kitchen.

"I thought I saw a nipple ring. Oh. Holy gods above. When, uh, when did you get this?"

Matt slid a finger slowly, with what felt damn near like reverence, over Chase's nipple ring. Chase shivered, familiar tingles racing from his piercing to dance in his balls.

"Uh. Feels good. Last year. Ah. Yes. After I came home for Christmas. Needed something to clear my head after the way we—missed each other at every gathering."

The words hit Matt's chest like miniature explosions, each one digging a crater of remorse and regret into his lungs until there was no room left for air. Pushing forward, clawing his way past the pain, past the inescapable knowledge he'd handled everything wrong, he moved further into Chase's space. When he got close enough the skin of their chests rasped together with each deep breath, Matt surged up onto his toes, slid one arm behind Chase to catch the counter tile with his fingertips and cling for dear life. Chase slipped a finger under the thick silver necklace lying heavy against Matt's collarbones and tugged him forward. Matt's muscles went soft everywhere except at his groin.

"I—"

Whatever he'd been about to say broke apart into babble and delirium in his head as Chase crushed their lips together in a heated claiming. Matt slid his hand forward and flattened his palm against the countertop. Whatever foolish thoughts of dominating the younger man he'd clung to for the past four years leached away. Chase's tongue mapped the interior of Matt's mouth with fierce assurance. Heart pounding, knees shaking, Matt moaned and swayed forward, resting his full weight against Chase.

Catching his jaw with a firm hand, Chase tipped Matt's head to one side. The kiss slowed despite all Matt's whimpers and moans, easing to feather light brushes against his lips, cheeks and then his eyelids before stopping altogether. Matt blinked his eyes open. Chase grinned down at him, the razor sharp, bitter edge thankfully gone from his smile. Matt's breath stalled in his chest. Chase's eyes glimmered, amber flecks catching the light and somehow intensifying the

underlying green. He stroked a thumb along Matt's jaw, and when he spoke, his voice was rough and low.

"Come on, handsome. I bet you don't keep lube in the kitchen, and I for one want to get to the good stuff sooner rather than later."

A shudder worked its way up Matt's spine. He could no more deny Chase than cease breathing. The cedar scent Chase had taken to wearing his first year away at college filled Matt's nose. Matt's eagle stirred, wings beating with the force of a hurricane against the inside of his ribcage.

Mate.

Matt gasped for breath.

Mine.

Another full-body shudder wracked him. His knees went loose and floppy, his vision narrowed to Chase alone, and his heart thudded in great, galloping hammer strokes just left of center in his chest. He drew in a slow breath that shook no matter how he tried to steady himself.

"Yes. Come on. I'm in the master bedroom now. I—my folks moved to Florida."

Chase slipped his fingers out from underneath Matt's necklace. His gaze lingered, and his lips pressed into a thin line. One corner of his mouth turned up in a sharp curve.

"Nice bit of shiny there, Matt. Get it from your folks?"

The muscles at the hinge of his jaw tightened until it seemed he'd snap the joint there as he asked. Matt's stomach clenched. Pulling in a slow breath, he reminded himself that Chase could not know the depth of insult he offered. Muscles along the back of his neck pulled taut. In the space below his right eye, a small tic jumped in rhythm with his heart.

"No. My aunt sent it to me."

Chase's jaw unclenched and his lips curved up at the corners. The easing of stress showed in the easing at the corners of his eyes. That small sign that the answer meant so much to Chase eased some of the insult's sting for Matt. The gentle tone of Chase's next words helped even more.

"Ah. Never met her, did I?"

Matt's eyes locked with Chase's, and the heat he found there nearly scalded him from the inside out. "Ah." He coughed to clear his throat. "No. You never

did. Aunt Moira immigrated after you left for college. And I don't think you were ever both here at the same time."

Chase's regard intensified, hotly possessive. He stepped into Matt, bumping their hips together and pushing lightly against Matt's bare chest. "Come on. Let's go scandalize the neighbors."

The heat spread everywhere Chase's gaze touched Matt, wrapping him in a blanket of sultry warmth. Swallowing thickly, Matt raised an eyebrow at Chase. "Scandalize them how?"

Chase licked his lips. "Let's leave your windows open so they can hear you scream my name, shall we?"

English deserted Matt utterly. He could only make a clicking noise at the back of his throat as he waited for Chase's next move. He hoped Chase wouldn't catch the birdlike quality of Matt's response as Chase continued his deliciously aggressive behaviors. Longing rose in Matt's soul, hot and fast, for the nips and head strokes that would mark him with reddened patches of skin and Chase's scent. But did humans even do that? A memory of Ryan coming to work one day with bruises on his neck surfaced. He called them... hickeys. So, even if humans didn't do such things in the same way Matt's people did, perhaps Chase would feel drawn to mark Matt anyway.

"Matt? You still with me?"

It took a moment for Matt to clear his head of questions and wishes. Stupid bird. He needed to pay attention. Chase's voice had a lilt up at the end of his sentence, his brows were drawn together, and his eyes had gone from hot and heavy lidded to cool and narrowed. Not good. Matt hastily cleared his throat.

"I'm with you Chase. Neighbors. Scandal. Keep the windows open wide. Yes, yes, and oh hell yes."

Matt grabbed Chase's hand, strode past him and tugged lightly to move the younger man in the direction of the stairs. While everything didn't feel... perfectly in sync between them like he'd always thought it would when they finally got to the point of mating, no harm could come of their bonding further, could it?

Watching Matt's attention all turn inward, the nervous lip bite, and the faint shaking of the other man's hand in his sent tendrils of fire snaking through Chase's gut. He narrowed his eyes at Matt's back. Why the game? Why the big,

do-me-now eyes and the faux-innocent gasps while they were kissing? Matt didn't need to put on a show of caring what Chase thought or felt beyond the amount of time it took them both to get off. Chase knew full well the man practically tripping over his own feet to get to the bedroom didn't actually care a second past wham-bam-thank you, man.

Oh, crap. An image of Marlon, Ryan, and Matt all playing basketball together the last summer Marlon still lived at home flashed into Chase's memory. Hell. Okay, considering how Matt had always looked up to Marlon as well as his business partnership with Ryan, Chase got why Matt would try to dress up screwing him. Matt was also Ryan's best friend, and Ryan was Chase's big brother. Matt couldn't help but feel a need to inject some faux emotion into the situation. He had to cover his ass over breaking the unwritten guy code. Blithely trampling all over "thou shalt not schtup thy bestie's younger sib" required a fairly high level of finessing to keep everyone's rosy view of the world intact. Too bad for Matt that Chase had neither the time nor the inclination to let that shit fly. He tugged on Matt's hand as they reached the top of the landing.

"Matt. Stop. You can cut all the fake nervous shit. I heard you and your dad at the hospital after you hit your head in my folk's pool. I don't care." Stepping closer, he crowded Matt against the wall, ignoring the way each hard-edged word caused his heart to pound faster, the way his eyes stung, and worst of all, how his gut moved past burning to being shredded by invisible talons of want and need. Pushing his chest into Matt's, Chase reached around to palm the most biteable ass he'd ever seen.

"I want in here. You gonna let me in, Matty? No games, no bullshit, just us fucking until we're sweaty and sticky and spent?"

Matt froze. His whole body locked down tight, the muscles under Chase's hands morphing from warm, pliant bits of flesh to the hardness of rock in a second's time. The only movement Chase could detect in the other man was the erratic, darting motions his eyes made as he seemed to map out every segment of Chase's face. Matt ended with his gaze locked with Chase's. Something flickered in his grey eyes. Something he saw caused his breath to stutter. He stumbled back a step. His retreat left Chase chilled and furious.

Narrowing his eyes against what looked like pain in Matt's gaze, Chase growled. "Don't. You don't get to look at me like that."

Matt's face turned a whiter shade of pale, and then something shifted in his gaze. Pupils narrowing, the grey of his eyes shimmering a metallic silver, he

rolled up off the wall and stalked forward. His hands shot out and grasped Chase's wrists. Pushing them behind Chase's back, Matt transferred his grip on both of Chase's wrists, holding both in one of his large hands. Breathing in sharp bursts, Matt raised his chin to whisper directly into Chase's ear.

"Yes. I'm the only one who gets to look at you like that, or like this." Then he pulled back to give Chase a molten gaze of want and need.

The heat in Chase's stomach rose, wrapped around itself and lodged like a miniature sun in the very center of his chest, burning everything there to ash. Matt wanting him bad enough to handle him like this was sorta hot, but... His eyelids drifted shut for a split second. With the sight of Matt's chiseled features and the warmly welcoming hues of his home hidden, Chase focused on chasing down the feeling slipping just out of reach. An image of himself and Matt, positions reversed, flashed against the red and gold screen inside his eyelids. The second Chase saw himself holding Matt, owning every single inch of the other man, everything in him from heartbeat to hard-on settled, steadied, and drove down into the hard-baked soil of his soul like steel-tipped arrows into paper targets backed by bales of hay. The rasping clutch of Matt's big hand around his wrist instantly chaffed.

"Wh-what do you mean? You know what? Never mind. Never fucking mind. I wanted a fuck, not a damn nail-painting sleepover party. You can keep your preteen Patty feelings to yourself."

Matt cocked his head to one side, brows drawing together. Chase clamped his jaw shut. Fuck it. Sue him for having weird sayings. They made sense to him. Matt squinted at him, shook his head, and then his face got harder, more focused somehow. He swooped forward, plastering his mouth to Chase's while making a strange keening sound at the back of his throat. Something sharp scratched at Chase's wrists, but the sensation was lost in the sudden heat of Matt's mouth plundering his. It was different somehow once Matt made that hungry sound and clutched Chase's wrists. Something intangible shifted. Chase felt the way Matt used his grip on Chase to hold himself together. That made everything okay again, made it hotter than before, made it so damn hot it melted every thought in Chase's head for a few moments.

So it was no surprise that this time, it was Chase gasping, Chase's hands shaking as he wrenched them free to push Matt away but instead ended up wrapping them tight around Matt's thickly muscled neck. It was Chase's eyes going wide in wonder before sliding shut so he could concentrate on feeling everything. Matt made that odd keening, *click, click* sound again, and then one

big hand slid from the small of Chase's lower back to cup his ass, and the other slid up to press between his shoulder blades. To press Chase forward. That was—oh, that was right and wrong at the same time. Chase fisted his hand in Matt's hair, tilting the shorter man's head until the angle felt right again and pushed away from the wall. He pulled Matt up onto his toes, enough to pull his heels off the floor, just enough to take back control of everything, and then he tore his mouth free.

"Fine. Fine. No more words. Just—where the fuck is your bed, Matt? I've been waiting years for this."

Fuck. Shit. Double-damned pissing camels. Chase's ears burned. He ignored the sensation, eyes locked on Matt's, gaze unflinching as he pretended he didn't say that last bit out loud. Matt didn't say a word about Chase's needy-sounding slip of the tongue. Dipping his head almost shyly, he cast a look up through his lashes as his cheeks pinked up enough to finally bring some color back to his face. He slid his broad, callused hand into Chase's, turned and walked a few steps down the hall. Glancing over his shoulder, Matt reached forward blindly, hand landing unerringly on a sturdy door handle. A small part of Chase's brain noted the handle—like much of the hardware on cabinets and doors throughout the house—was new since he'd last been in the house. Not new-new, clearly antique or trying to seem antique with its slightly pitted brass surface. Chase noticed the changes peripherally. They added to the creeping sense of right and belonging seeping deeper into his gut with every passing second. Then Matt's tongue flicked over his plump bottom lip, and all Chase's thoughts except those of getting Matt naked and under him as quickly as possible disappeared. Chase pulled his hands free, placed one on Matt's lower back and steered him into the bedroom.

Matt's eagle beat at him. His mate was—what?—trying to leave? No, that wasn't quite right. His gaze flitted around the room he'd spent the past four years preparing for this day. A pang shot through his chest, ricocheting around until it lodged in his gut. The homely, pine-green comforter, the worn wooden towel rack standing next to the floor vent, and the bits of change strewn across the scratched top of his dresser were exactly as he'd meant them to be. They screamed simple, unpretentious comfort. They whispered of home. But Matt couldn't shake the feeling that Chase wanted to have quick sex and then leave. No, no, that couldn't be allowed. A shivering cry right at the edge of human hearing whispered from his throat. Matt needed his mate to be whole. It wasn't

the same as with the humans—they could love and lose and break their hearts a thousand times and live to tell the tale—but the Altarians, the people of the Summer Triangle, weren't like that. Being without Chase for the amount of time necessary for him to attend school had been bad enough. Matt sucked in a shallow breath. Only his parents' dedicated nursing in the early days and his own stubborn will had kept him mostly sane and physically whole during the hellish time apart. Once he and Chase cemented the next portion of their bond there could be no separation for Matt without losing his human half to the eagle completely.

Matt swallowed, trying to work up enough saliva to wet his dry lips. Waving a hand toward his favorite things in the room he started to blurt out something stupid about how he'd prepared their nest. Chase shot him a superheated glance from under lowered brows. The instant connection slammed into him. Remembering Chase's edict concerning unnecessary chatter, Matt shut his mouth on his stumbling description. His teeth clicked together audibly in the sun-dappled silence of the room.

"I-ah, this is... right. No words."

The normally soothing green, brown, and gold colors of his room failed to calm his racing pulse. Turning to face Chase, Matt reached shaking fingers down to the button of his jeans. His voice deepened, roughened as he spoke again. Chase noticed, pupils flaring in response.

"I-how do you want me? There's lube—"

Button undone on his jeans, fingers still fumbling with the tab of his zip, Matt bent over the bed to reach the nightstand on the far side. As he stretched across, snagging the edge of the worn brass handle with one hand, Chase's palm landed in the center of his back. The warm weight slid back and forth, fingertips digging into taut muscles on either side of Matt's spine. Chase pressed down until Matt lay prone on the soft cotton of the gold duvet cover. Matt lifted his hips to push his jeans down, pushing at them with one hand while the other reached to the bedside table. Chase's hot hands circled his ankles, squeezing for a moment before his jeans were tugged down and off, briefs tangled inside them. Matt grunted, dropping flat to the bed again and redoubling his effort to reach the bottle of lube at the bedside. Objective snagged with the tips of his fingers, even though it meant his arm stretching far enough to strain the joints at elbow and shoulder, Matt sank into the comforter. Lips pulling into a grin so wide it almost hurt, Matt let the pride roll through him. He was a good mate, providing what his other half wanted and needed.

His chest filled with bubbles of joy. Chase's warm weight pressed down on him. So right. Chase would see. There was no way to miss it.

Then there was a quick rub of striated fabric against Matt's legs, and then the rough-soft feel of lightly furred legs sliding along the outside. A hot puff of air blew moistly over Matt's ear, and then there was a slick, slithery sound followed by a muted thump. Something crinkled on the bed near Matt's hip. Cool and slippery yet dry, whatever it was slid half under Matt's leg. Chase's hand eased along Matt's side and then whatever it was got pulled away. Warm air caressed the side of Matt's face again as Chase's voice dropped another half-octave deeper than before to purr into Matt's ear.

"Lift your hips."

Shuddering, all Matt could think was oh. Oh. Sweet Summer Gods, yes. Something melted and then tightened deep in Matt's gut. Lungs squeezing together and heart pierced with inexplicable, razor-tipped shafts of sensation, Matt gasped. Chase didn't seem to hear the sound though, nor did he see the gnarly ropes of hacked-off, fraying tension Matt's muscles became. Instead, his hands gripped Matt at both hips. As Matt glanced over his shoulder, Chase's lips pressed together forcibly, and his whole face squinched into something that was probably the beginning of a little old man pucker. Or possibly the harbinger of a pleasure so sublime Chase couldn't process it yet.

Matt's whole being stilled, his eagle silent in his chest, body utterly motionless on the cool gold of his softest cotton sheets. One of Chase's hands stayed at his hip, tightening until the sensation teetered between hard, bright pleasure and a faint, clouded pain. Chase's other hand eased, rough and sweet, between Matt's ass cheeks to tap his fingers in an easily deciphered code against the tightly furled muscle there. Dot-dash, let me in, flick-tap. Matt moaned, helpless to stop the sound from welling out of his chest once his body interpreted the message. Chase leaned forward, voice so deep and gravelly Matt barely recognized it.

"Don't move. Gonna try something. Gotta taste—"

Chase's hands—and fuck, they were big four years ago when he'd still been a kid, but now they were hard, and capable, and—they pulled Matt's hips up from the bed. A pillow shoved between his groin and the bed while Chase growled against his thigh. A rush of hot, moist air rolled across the thin flesh where Matt's legs met up with his ass, and then those ridiculously competent hands were pulling his ass cheeks apart. Neurons scrambling on a slippery

slope of hommina-hommina-guh-yeah-there, Matt only managed a throaty whine when Chase's tongue slicked a strip of hot, wet perfection from his taint to the top of his ass crack. Chase didn't bother to speak, just gave a rumbling hum and settled in like he planned to make a seven-course meal out of Matt's ass.

Matt's neurons—poor, overwhelmed little fuckers—rolled over and showed their bellies at that point. Gibbering, humping the air, spooging right where they lay in quivering heaps, they did fuck-all toward cooperating with his attempts at higher thought and sang a hallelujah chorus toward the powerful and moist God of the Flexing Tongue. At this point, Matt made a few noises pretty much unknown to man, although standard enough for mating eagles. Chase, the evil bastard, hummed again. This time he licked a circle around Matt's asshole as he did it, and that was the final straw. Matt heard a wild scream echoing off the walls. His face went hot the second he realized the god-awful noise came from his own throat and not outside the house. Fingers twisting in the sheets, ass shoving back toward Chase's face, he gave up trying to be macho, gave everything over to his young human lover, screamed and whimpered and hoped like hell the noises he was making didn't include any words. He had absolutely no idea what might pop out of his mouth while Chase used his mouth and hands like hell-red branding tools glowing as they marked Matt's shifter soul.

Matt made another wild kingdom sound, and Chase couldn't stop a quick 'I am the man' hum from rumbling up out of his chest. All those failed attempts to hook up, all the hours watching "educational" porn and the one uber-humiliating Q & A session with his friend Martin... they were all worth it when he could pull raw animal sounds out of Matt. Blood thrumming in his veins, Chase snagged the lube from next to him, flipping open the top with a gratifying snick sound. He never would have guessed a little plastic bottle top popping open could make his dick jump and dance.

Another moan filled the air as Chase pulled back to drizzle lube down Matt's crease. The noise and accompanying shiver pulled Chase's gaze up the line of Matt's spine to his face. Mouth hanging open, eyes squeezed shut hard enough to leave the corners crinkled, and a hectic flush staining his high cheekbones, Matt had never looked so defenseless.

The soundtrack in Chase's head stopped playing the hot Euro Techno-pop club tune, "Du hast den schoensten Arsch der Welt", by Alex C featuring Y-

Ass and morphed seamlessly into the smoked out, sexy blues stylings of Chet Faker crooning “No Diggity” in what Chase always thought of as a drop-trou voice. The change in his mental playlist pulled Chase’s stomach into a tight ball of acid, angst, and released the brakes on things he’d thought were lock-boxed and tossed in the same brain landfill where the stats for his little league team’s second (shitty) year ended up. He meant to lean forward, bite Matt’s sweet-peach ass, and then sheathe his latex-covered cock in the ass he’d been wanting to fuck for the past four years. Instead his tongue flapped around in his mouth like a survivalist salmon at a grizzly convention while his traitorous hands caught Matt’s hips and twisted, pushed, and rolled the man over.

“I want to see you.”

Oh fuck, fuck, fuckkity fuck, he did not just say that out loud. Except Matt’s eyebrows crept up his forehead like sangria-dipped caterpillars, all eighty or so feet a touch unstable but still moving in the same direction—straight toward Matt’s hairline. Yeah, pretty clear indicator that he did indeed spill that angsty crap off his tongue. Clamping his lips tightly together, Chase settled one of Matt’s legs into the crook of his arm, canted his hips and positioned himself with his free hand. Cudgeling his brain managed to knock a few less “seventeen and hopelessly in lurve” words out of his mouth.

“Ready for the rodeo, cowboy?”

Okay, so that was lame too. Matt blinked and then burst into a split second of raucous laughter. Chase stopped that shit in its tracks with a thrust of his hips. Matty’s eyes glowed like a solar flare, but then Chase blinked, and Matt’s thick lashes were dusting his high cheekbones and he was biting that plump bottom lip. Chase growled, swooping forward to nip Matt’s chin. Matt gasped, releasing the punishing hold his teeth had on his lip. The noise covered Chase’s bitten back cry. He—dear lord, he didn’t know it would be so tight and hot. Matt’s face tightened, and the ring of muscle around Chase’s cockhead closed in a crushing grip for a moment. Chase froze.

“Matt. Matty. You okay?”

Matt’s eyes stayed closed, but his plump lips turned up at one corner. “Um. Maybe go easy? It’s actually my first time at the rodeo.”

The words hit Chase square in the chest. Air wooshed out of his lungs at hurricane force, and he tried to pull away but Matt’s legs were locked around him. “Fuck. That woulda been great info two minutes ago, Matt.”

Nodding, Matt opened his eyes. Sun-warmed pools of honey and fields of sunflowers had nothing on the sweet golden orbs, and Chase was all at once

gasping for air. Matt's legs tightened a bit more, pulling Chase forward a scant inch. They both moaned. Matt's cheeks were redder than Chase had ever seen them. A tremor started somewhere between Chase's belly button and his cock. "I—Matt, I gotta move. Please. I. Are you?"

But he didn't need to ask. The vise-grip on his cock eased to ripples that pulled him farther inside Matt's startling heat. Matt answered anyway. "Yeah. Go. Just... slow, okay?"

So Chase went slow, as gradual and measured as spring sunshine coaxing the first green shoots of the year to life from winter's blankets of cold and forgetfulness. He eased forward, eyes squeezed shut to block out the burning gold of Matt's eyes, block out the hard-edged echoes of words he'd heard four and a half years ago outside Matt's hospital room, block out the snarling, clawed thing that had lived in his gut since that day. Those jagged words—"He's not *Aquillian*, Matt. That's all there is to it."—snarled out in Mr. Altieren's gravel and smoke voice.

Then Mrs. Altieren's razor-tipped alto—"It wouldn't be proper, Matthew. Why are we having this discussion? You know what you have to do."

Chase released Matt's legs, slid his hands under Matt's shoulders and dug his fingertips in at the top. He squeezed his eyes tighter. His face stung, and his lungs were riddled with holes. The slick velvet vise of Matt's channel almost strangled the memory into nothingness, but then Matt made a tiny sound at the back of his throat, and Chase couldn't keep his eyes closed one second longer. He had to see Matt's expression.

His heart banged around in his chest as his gaze mapped every inch of Matt's face. An impossibly earnest expression in the clear grey eyes, the soft curve of a half-open mouth, and then the flutter of inky lashes against Matt's reddened cheek sent the weight of four fucking years of carrying that overheard conversation around in his chest crashing down on Chase. "Why, Matty? Why now?"

Matt squeezed his eyes shut. For a second Chase could breathe again. Then Matt turned his head away. "Later, Chase. Weren't you the one who didn't want any small talk?"

Chase looked for the spray of blood, sure Matt had pulled an acid-tipped straight-razor from somewhere and laid him open, but somehow the cuts seemed to be all on the inside. Matt's hands gripped Chase's hips, and he curled and surged and—holy fucking four-year dry spell—suddenly Chase was balls-

deep in the guy who'd starred in every single monkey-spanking and chicken-choking fantasy Chase ever had. Matt made that whine-scream-animal cry again, and this time the sound rolled through Chase's chest at the same time Matt's ass clamped down on Chase's cock. Yep, all she wrote.

It should have been mortifying, but right when Chase's head was exploding and his nuts were trying to propel themselves out the top of his dick, Matt made a new noise, raw, needy, and scraped from the floor of his soul maybe. His eyes rolled back in his head; his whole body tensed under Chase's. Earthquake of the flesh, Matt shuddering and coming wet, messy, musk and want and need distilled... and it was perfect for a handful of heartbeats.

Right about when Chase's brain stopped gibbering and making guh-guh-guh noises, Matt squirmed and then tensed in a very "get the fuck off me" kinda way. Chase recognized the move because it was the exact move he'd made about twenty-eight times over the past four years, usually right before his "it's not you, it's me" speech. Fuck that noise. He was gonna make like next year's Audi and move on down the road.

"Well. Guess you'll get the buckle since you stuck for the whole eight seconds, huh?"

He peeled himself off Matt and levitated off the bed. No, not really, but he gave it his best shot. Then he hotfooted it across the hall, scrubbed up without meeting his own eyes in the medicine cabinet mirror, and dug around in the cupboard next to the toilet for a washcloth. Matt still kept the linens right where his mom had, so in less than two minutes Chase was back in the bedroom. After giving Matt the warm cloth and a lopsided smile, he dove for his clothes, scrambling into them faster than he'd ever managed before in his life. Matt was giving him this weird, soft, wet-eyed look that Chase needed to get away from pronto. He turned up the wattage on his smile.

"O-kay. I—yeah, I'll see ya later, right? At Ryan's thing tonight?"

Matt might have responded, but Chase leapt straight from awkward shuffle to fleeing like the hounds of hell were on his heels, and he was out the bedroom door and leaping down the stairs three at a time before the man would have had time to do more than suck in a single shocked breath.

Their accidental bond grew; of course it grew over the years. From that first drop of blood Matt unthinkingly ingested, while Chase was busy saving Matt's life four and a half years ago to today, their bond had grown, tightened, and

strengthened. Every joint barbeque their parents threw, every holiday gift exchange, every pheromone-laden breath of summer air by the back fence or bleak mid-winter piney promise on December twenty-fifth, added weight and tension to the tenuous thread between them until it grew into a solid, shining web of interwoven life forces between the two of them. The final piece came with the scent of Chase's ejaculate. Matt's whole body caught fire, every nerve ending screaming out its own hallelujah chorus. Matt hung there: vaguely aware of communication sounds pouring from Chase's mouth. His eagle was screaming though, and the only thing that made sense was the touch of Chase's strong hands steadying and cleaning him. By the time the eagle was calm enough to make sense of man words and things again, the front door was rattling closed, and Matt was wondering what the hell had just happened.

Chase said he'd be at the party, Ryan's party that night. Matt remembered those words. Sucking in a lungful of strangely insufficient air, Matt clung to them, twining his mind with his eagle's and promising they could have their mate in a few hours. Neither of them bought that fairy tale any more than they'd bought the one the *Impriteans* sold at the beginning of the cleansing back on his home world. Some of the other eaglets in his training wing had believed everything the big reptiles told them, but Matt had listened to the mature eagles. Well, eavesdropped. None of them believed. To have that same hollow nothingness expand in his chest in response to words from the lips of his mate cut down through sinew and bone to nearly stop Matt's heart. His eagle screamed, and for a while, everything faded to white.

"Matt. Matt. Matty! Ewww. Are you going to eat that? Seriously? That is so gross. Jesus. Do you have to tear them apart like that every time?"

Matt came back to himself hunched on the rough attic floor, back pressed into a corner and hands wrapped around the shredded carcass of...

"Oh fuck. Did Chase?"

Ryan pressed his lips together until a white line ran around them, throat working for a moment. "No. Jesus. Just." He shuddered, eyes flitting to the bloodied flesh hanging in Matt's hands. Nostrils flaring, Ryan stepped forward, pulling the dead rodent from Matt's hands. "Dammit, Matt, get downstairs and take a fucking shower. For the record, that's seriously gross, but more importantly, what the hell made you eagle out?"

Matt shivered. His lungs stung. "I-I think Chase lied to me. I. He said he'd be at your party, but the door closed like good-bye."

Ryan gaped at him, hand tightening convulsively around the remains of Matt's rodent tartar. "Oh shit. You said he can't—what the fuck is the little princess thinking?"

Matt's shoulders crept toward his ears, and his teeth began to click against one another. Face pinched into a moue of disgust, Ryan flung the carcass to the floor and then pulled Matt to his feet. "Come on, buddy. You need to get warmed up, and I need to get down to the YMCA to round up your freaky darling. You know exactly where the weirdo is. Where does Chase go when life throws him a curve?"

Matt's heart stuttered, stopped, and then banged into a galloping rhythm. Ryan rolled his hand in a very maestro of the orchestra motion, and they locked gazes to speak in unison. "Zumba class."

Then Ryan's gaze flicked down to Matt's feet and back up once. His lips kicked up on one side, and a dimple flashed. "I really think you should save the nature boy attire for my baby bro though. I keep telling you that even your extreme hotliness won't tempt me to the dark side, man."

Matt growled, pushing past his friend's broad-shouldered smartassery to stomp down the stairs. A shower sounded damn good.

Later, sitting in his mother's car in front of the YMCA his parents still held a family membership at, Chase dialed his brother's phone and prayed for voicemail. By the time the fourth ring clicked over into the blessed distance of Ryan's tinny recorded voice, Chase was at the front desk and asking what time their next Zumba class happened. His luck turned, because the perky blond at the counter named a time that coincided perfectly with Ryan's party.

"Hey, bro... not gonna make the party tonight. Uh, got notice that I have an interview in Boston the day after tomorrow, so if you could stick the keys to the Mystery Machine under the driver's seat, I'll grab them tomorrow morning before I head out. I'll see you in about a week, ha, unless I get the job—"

Blond and bubble assed said something low and flirty—Chase honestly couldn't be arsed to figure out exactly what—and Chase held up a finger before pointing at the phone that was right there in plain sight against his ear. He turned away before he rolled his eyes. "—and then I guess you'll have to come visit me in my new digs. I'd say I owe you a beer or something, except you're not forgiven for throwing me under the bus this afternoon. Fuckwad."

Then Chase turned back to the guy at the desk. "Sorry, sweetness. I'm taken."

As he strode away to the locker room, battered gym bag in hand, Chase realized the weirdest part of the whole damned surreal day was that the words sounded so sincere he almost fooled himself. He shimmied his shoulders as though the uncomfortable thoughts would roll off onto the cheap but clean linoleum flooring of the locker room. "Right. Fuck my life. Like it could ever be that easy."

Muttering the words under his breath in case there were any kids lurking in the hallway leading to the studio where Zumba class was about to begin, Chase dragged a hand through his hair. Glancing through the window of the first door into the studio, Chase's whole world brightened. "Oooh, score. It's Chuck, which means step-Zumba. Hell to the yes."

Stride lengthening, Chase hustled into the dance studio and parked himself behind the first empty stepper he found. Chuck grinned at him, and Ann Marie, one of Chase's favorite Zumba aficionados, fell in at the stepper next to him. The heavy Cuban rhythms Chuck preferred began to pound through the room. Chase took his first full breath since he'd peeled himself off of Matt and followed Chuck's lead into the opening sequence of dance exercises.

An hour and twenty minutes later, the last of the hip-shaking rhythms faded away with the echoes of Chuck and Ann Marie's farewells. Chase settled onto the pale wood of the studio's floor to do one more set of quad and hamstring stretches. Lying on his back, one leg stretched toward the ceiling and the other bent and lying flush to the floor, Chase floated in his happy place. The *squeak, tap, squeak, tap* of a pair of athletic shoes barely registered.

"I never took you for a coward, bro."

Fuck. Ryan. Squinting against the glare of the overhead lights, Chase peered up at the shadowed face of his, sometimes, favorite brother. "Seriously? I'm in the Zumba room, man."

Ryan snorted, huffed out a breath and nudged Chase's side with his toe. "There's crap you don't know, princess... and anyway, what the hell have you had your royal knickers in a twist over for so long?"

Chase unkinked his legs and rolled to his feet. "Guess it's a good thing I was done here, isn't it?"

Ryan flinched, eyes darkening and face closing down to his construction-guy mask. Shit, Chase hadn't meant to lace his words with arsenic and old

knives. "Crap. Sorry. I'll—we can talk, but not here. You know this is my Zumba zone, Ry."

And he just couldn't get anything right today, could he? Evidently not, because there went the fucking whine he thought he'd eradicated from his repertoire over two years ago. Chase cleared his throat and dug his big-boy voice out of the depths of his psyche. "Meet me down in the locker room, okay? And I—"

Chase lay a hand on Ryan's shoulder, squeezing firm for the length of a heartbeat. Ry's eyes lightened a fraction. He grunted, chin still tilted at a pugnacious angle. "Whatev. Fucking weird ass Zumba-head. You got five to get your ass downstairs, princess. I am seriously pissed. That voice mail was total bullshit and we both know it."

He flung a callused hand up, pivoting to stalk across the floor. As Chase watched him fume out of the studio, a reluctant smile curved around the edges of his mouth. Pissed Ryan might be, but he still respected the Zumba zone. Chase called out after his brother. "Hold up, Douche. Ma would be so proud. You honored the no fly-DMZ-Zumba zone."

Ryan tossed a one-fingered salute over his shoulder. A guffaw shook its way free of Chase's throat as he snagged his water bottle and loped across the floor to catch the door before it closed behind his pain-in-the-ass brother. He caught Ryan two strides past the doorframe and slung an arm across his shoulders. Ryan reached up with the arm not trapped between them to flick Chase in the nose. "You're still a pain in the ass, Princess."

Chase choked on a laugh. "Yeah, I was just thinking the same about you, Douche."

Matt leaned against the wall, eyes trained on the archway leading to the front hall. Everyone kept calling the party Ryan's thing, which really made no sense unless you understood Chase. The Simms were celebrating Chase's graduation despite his longstanding antipathy toward graduation celebrations. Though, really, the dislike was for any celebration held in his honor, so they called it Ryan's party. Weird, but it worked for them. Matt turned his thoughts to the why behind Chase's dislike of celebrations, and winced. He harbored a suspicion as to the source of Chase's dislike. The Simms ebbed and flowed around him, reassuring chatter turning the party noise into something sounding like a flock of flamingos gathered in one of the marshes near his parents' new

abode in Florida. His eagle flexed one wing and then the other, the restive clench of flight muscles preventing him from settling comfortably into his human form on an internal level. He kept his eyes fixed on the door and sipped slowly from the bottle Mr. Simms pressed in his hand the moment Ryan dragged him through the front door this evening.

Matt picked at the familiar golden-yellow label of his favorite beer with one ragged nail. The cherry-red accent colors outlining the edges of the seasonal brew drew a click and a chirrup from his throat. Gah. His fingers tensed around the brown glass of the bottle as he fought down the burning urge to find out how many pieces the bottle would make if he flung it against the wall opposite him. This constant tap-dance around who knew what, and how much he could reveal, kept his stomach acids in a constant slow boil. How much before the possibility of a lifetime spent on the cold metal tables, of some nameless research facility, extended beyond his own beak and encompassed his entire immediate flock? Family. Whatever.

Matt shook his head, the single short, sharp movement doing nothing to dispel the rising tide of dissatisfaction. Then the front door opened, and finally, finally Matt could scent his mate. The huge honking knot residing dead center in his chest ever since Chase took off that afternoon loosened.

Taking his first full breath in hours, Matt let the air escape to form his favorite word in the world. "Chase."

Nothing else came out, but it didn't matter. His eyes filled with long clean lines of muscle, his lungs with the dark musk of recent physical exertion overlaid with brighter tones of cucumber and melons... a new shampoo. His feet pulled him away from the living room wall and into the entryway before his head registered the tight-lipped, carefully blank state of Chase's face. His hand, as foolishly optimistic as his overeager feet, traced a shaking arc up from his side toward the high curve of Chase's cheek. Ryan stepped forward, blocking Matt's move. Eyes wide, lips puckered in a ridiculous duck-face selfie pose, he settled into the inches between Matt and his mate with the stubborn implacability of a granite wall.

"What the actual fuck, Matty. Did you guys talk at all? I mean ever?"

Matt's hand accidentally brushed Ryan's thick pectoral muscles for a scant second, burning before he snatched it back. Crap. Mating response. Dammit. No touching other males even casually for a few months. Better get some thick gloves to wear all the time at work.

Rubbing his stinging palm against the side of his jean-clad thigh, Matt squinted at his friend. "I-yes? Or maybe. What do you mean? Chase, what's he talking about?"

The cool strains of Chet Faker's *Thinking in Textures* album faded into silence at the exact moment Matt's voice rose to an ungodly screech. Ryan flinched back, mouth turning down at the corners and dark gaze boring a white-hot hole through Matt. Flicking a split-second glance toward the sea of curious faces turned toward them, he waved an impatient hand at his mom. Matt glanced over as Mrs. Simms pushed buttons and cursed at the stereo system. The music cut back on, and Ryan leaned in close to Matt. "Yeaaaaaah. Ah, why don't the two of you take this out to the pool deck to work things out? And for fuck's sake, talk this time. With actual words and everything, m'kay? Full disclosure time, buddy."

Chase ground his back teeth together. His mom would definitely kill him if he punched the back of Ry's head hard enough to knock the fucker out. Well, maybe not. He was her baby. Flashing a look across the room, he caught sight of her shaking her head at him. It was not fair that she always knew when he was about to kick the shit out of some deserving douchey douche-fucking moron. Her lips quirked up on one side, but her gaze stayed steady even though he unleashed the full power of his baby-of-the-family puppy-dog eyes on her. Only the slight shake to her shoulders even indicated that she'd seen his plea for a blind eye this once. Fine. He stalked down the hall past the arched entrance into the living room. Matt's distinctive *tap-patter-thumpata-tap* eased along the hardwood behind him, so Chase didn't bother to look back. After that magma-infused eye-fuck Matt treated him to before the giant dillweed masquerading as his brother stepped between them, there could be no doubt Matt was following wherever he led. Chase pulled in a long, slow breath as he approached the sliders leading out onto the pool deck.

"After you."

Shit. His voice came rumbling out deep and raspy, a clear marker of desire. He drew in another heady lungful of air. Matt—dear god, he still smelled like sex, pine and sunshine. As he brushed past Chase into the dusky evening air, he made a wordless murmur. The sound sparked an instant flame in Chase's gut and had him clenching his jaw hard enough to make it ache. Damn, he wanted to sink his teeth into the man. Again. Chase breathed deeply, which made everything worse, lungs filling with more of the wild scent that was all Matt

and sex and home to Chase. He cleared his throat, shot a heavy glare down the hall toward his brother's smirking face, stepped forward far enough to pull the sliders closed, and strode out in to the dark.

Matt meandered around the deck, down the steps and then over to the exact spot where he'd fallen into the pool four years ago. Chase's gut tightened and his mouth went Death Valley dry.

"Christ. Don't stand there."

Matt shuffled back a step, then turned to fix his eyes on Chase. In the dark, their unusual amber-gold hue flashed out at Matt like gleaming high beams on a two-lane country road. "I-I promised Ryan I would tell you, but—"

The heat in Chase's stomach turned from lava-lava hot meets ocean floor to molten center of the sun incendiary. The ball of dread and leftover hurt he'd carried for four years expanded, pushing all air and words from his lungs before his brain had a chance to sort them out. "What the fuck does Ryan have to do with anything? I'm—"

Matt took another step toward Chase, but Chase slashed one hand through the empty air between them. "No. Wait. I just can't. I heard them, you know. I get it. You guys are some kind of royalty or something where you're from, and I'm nobody. Well guess what? I don't give a shit—right, that's a fucking lie. I do care. But I get it."

Even in the faint light filtering to where they stood, remnant of the golden beams spilling from every window of the house behind him, Chase could see the instant pallor of Matt's face. Matt stood there for a heartbeat of time, face stark white and mouth gaping open. Then a tide of red rushed up the older man's neck to crash against the high cliffs of his cheeks. Chase could practically feel the heat from where he stood.

Matt slammed his mouth shut, took two rapid steps forward and curled his fingers into the thin cotton of Chase's shirt. "I—wait—just wait. Listen. Let me say—just listen and let me say this. I can't stop or I might never get it said right. Okay? Okay. So there's something you don't know. I. My whole family. We—fuck, ask Ry later, okay? I'm not crazy—we're shifters. Eagles. Not royalty, though related distantly on my father's side."

He shook his head, pressed his lips together until they turned white, kept one fist wrapped in the front of Chase's shirt while the other opened into a hand that crept, hot and trembling, to press against the side of Chase's neck. "I—Chase, that day. Here. When I fell, and you saved me?"

He paused then, waiting. Chase forced words out of the thousand-miles-deep well of crazy he'd fallen down. "What about that day, Matty?"

Matt's eyes, close up, were wet and gold and fucking glowing like twin stars. He swallowed convulsively. "You started the bond, Chase. I knew—we all knew—you were my mate the first time we met your family. But it's forbidden—no, no, not because of why you think. You were too young. We have to wait. Our mates have to be adult before we can start the bond. It—what happened is forbidden."

Chase reeled, the vise grip of four years' worth of rejection and bitter self-recrimination sloughing away in the span of a single heartbeat. "Matty. Matt. Jesus, your eyes are glowing. It's—Christ, it's true, isn't it? You're like—what—a werewolf? *Underworld* and shit, but with wings?"

A harsh sound filled the air between their breaths, half-wild animal cry and half choking laughter. The noise slid into the aching spaces of Chase's soul, slipped down into the love-drought-riddled soil inside the empty acres years of self-doubt had created within Chase. He shook, absolutely certain now. "Christ. Truth. Every word. I—Matty, what does that—fuck, either I'm going to be taking some nifty new meds soon, or you're telling me the truth here. I..."

Chase blinked, eyes blind to everything but the glistening yellow fire of Matt's gaze. "Fuck it. I can do crazy. So you're a shifter. Ah, and I'm your—what, mate? Is that why I haven't been able to keep my dick stiff around anyone but you since I was seventeen and you bit the shit out of me?"

Matt nodded wordlessly, an expression of such wariness flinching along the surface of his face it hurt to breathe next to him. Chase coughed, choked, and lifted a shaking hand to wipe across his face. "Okay. You're a shifter."

Matt flinched again. Dammit, maybe he needed to try to make his voice a little softer around the edges, because damn if that last thing didn't come out all gonna-fuck-you-up badass. Chase huffed out half the air in his lungs. "You shifter, me mate, and what—oh shit. You were all kinds of screwed after the thing by the pool... that was what, instinct?"

This time there was less flinch and more rosy-cheeked, glowing-eyed goodness to the head nodding. A tiny spot of easy warmth began to push aside the lava-acid in Chase's stomach.

"Instinct." He nodded decisively, and then leapt nimbly to the next logic rock in the raging river of crazy. "Instinct, and then you got your ass reamed in

the not fun way by all those older and wiser bird-brains I overheard in your hospital room that day.”

“Yes.” Finally, a word to go with Matt’s cute bobble-head impersonation. Oh damn. He just called bobble-headedness cute. This did not look good. Next thing, he knew he would think it was adorable when Matt did something weird and birdy like eating a rat, maybe. A shudder wracked Chase’s body and he swallowed hard. Christ. His life was officially *X-Files* level strange now.

Matt watched Chase closely, waiting for the incredulous stare, the stammering excuses to leave, or the full on pale face-pulse drop-holy shit shock to set in and send Chase screaming into the house. The younger man surprised him with a level gaze, hands that shook only a little, and the faint scent of arousal. Either Chase was holding out on some prior knowledge of shifters being real, or the pull of the mate bond eased the way to belief. Matt would lay money on the last one. “Can we take this over to my place? I. Your call. I know your mom planned this whole thing—”

Chase snorted, eyes bright and teeth flashing white against the tan backdrop of his face. “Ha. Told them all I didn’t want a party. I hate these things.”

Matt shivered. “Because of me?”

Chase froze, eyes locked on Matt’s face, gaze sliding focus from the region of lips to chin to eyes and back again like a warm caress. “Huh. Yeah. Probably. Never really thought about it. Well, I was never crazy about all the people staring and shit. But yeah. It got worse for sure after that summer.”

The words hit like a hail of arrows. So much pain, and he’d caused most of it. Matt’s chest squeezed down tighter than an asthmatic’s breaths in the midst of a Florida Keys heatwave. “I’m sorry. I never meant for you—”

Chase took three short steps, chest bumping Matt’s and then pressing him back a pace. His large hand curled around the nape of Matt’s neck, strong, warm, and steady. “I think I’m starting to see that... but let’s talk about it where people aren’t trying to be clever and watch us through darkened windows.”

Matt laughed. Chase’s voice rose steadily through the whole last half of his statement, and at least two curtains twitched guiltily in upstairs windows. The acid-peel bitter feel of the last few minutes broke, leaving him with the sweet scent of summer, Chase, and chocolate. “Okay. You want to go through the house or out the side gate...”

But Chase wasn't listening, already turning toward the gate, that hot hand sliding down to the small of Matt's back. Protective and guiding rather than proprietary and demanding, the small gesture wrapped Matt in a blanket of care. When it slid away, even though he knew the gate was old and needed two hands to finagle open, he still mourned the contact. Worse yet, that sliver of time showed him exactly how bad having Chase deny him now would be. He bit his lip and lifted suddenly leaden feet to clump along the side of the Simms home and across the intervening lawn to his own front door. The pinprick of happy goo he'd felt when Chase took control of him, steering him out of the pool area and then out of the Simms's backyard grew and spread through his body faster than mice on ice disappeared at an Altieren family reunion. The kick in the teeth came with the way the happy goo morphed into a huge load of leaden happy-be-gone, what-ifs, and good-bye blues.

If Chase left, it wouldn't kill Matt, or make him wish he were dead. This wasn't some stupid romance novel full of easy clichés. No. Chase denying their bond would merely strip Matt of his will to retain his human half. No big deal. He'd always enjoyed the time spent in his bird form. Matt squared his shoulders, lifted his chin, and unlocked his front door. This was a win/win scenario for him, right? Either he got a gorgeous mate, or could start putting things in order to turn all his possessions over to either Ryan or the flock. Hey, maybe someone could set him loose on one of those big wildlife preserves to give him a good shot at staying out of any close encounters with the local taxidermist.

Matt's head filled with the buzz that came before the white noise pulled him under. Panic streaked though him on fiery wings. He flung a hand behind him grasping for some bit of Chase's naked skin. The heat of Chase's broad palm settled against the nape of his neck.

"S'okay, Matty. Just get the door open. I'm here. Listening. You got my attention, okay? I'll hear the whole thing through. Might need a little show and tell, 'cause this shit is definitely *X-Files* strange. Heh. You're cuter than Mulder though."

The razor-winged, gnat-sized eaglets flipping through advanced maneuvers in his stomach paused long enough to let him bark out a ragged laugh. "I—okay. Okay. Come inside."

Finally, the damn door was open. They stepped inside, and then Chase crowded him against the door, and oh, the chocolate he'd been smelling all

night was coming from Chase. He tasted of it, dark and faintly bitter and so damn good. A gasp painted the air between them, and Matt didn't know which of them it had come from. He took the chance to push a hand against Chase's chest, not that he could move him. Chase was crazy strong for a human. Probably from the protracted bonding process. Matt sucked in a lungful of Chase-scented air, moaned, and forced himself to speak intelligibly. "Wait. Talk. I—shit, step back. Can't think when you touch me."

Chase, the evil bastard laughed low and rough, pushing his hips forward for a teasing moment before canting them back and tipping his head down to rest their foreheads together. "Sorry. I'll behave. We—you wanted me then?"

His voice betrayed a barely there quiver, and his big hand, still resting on the back of Matt's neck, had gone cold. Matt lifted his own hand to cover Chase's. "Always, Chase. Every damn second, since I first laid eyes on you, as twisted as that sounds. You were so young when we first got here, and my parents insisted—I didn't want to fuck you then. You were just a kid, and I wanted to be your best friend—"

His mouth was running away with him. Thankfully, Chase jumped in with the perfect thing to stop him. "Once more into the breach, my friend, and fill it with your froggy dead!"

Matt blinked, not sure if he should be impressed that Chase was quoting Amy Lane, or appalled at such rampant misquoting of classical literature. That Matt needed to be appalled at the implication that he would prefer squishy amphibians over a juicy rodent went without saying. He shook his head to clear it. "Ah. So. I—do you want to see it?"

Chase snorted. "Matty, I've already seen your everything."

Matt thumped him on the chest. "My eagle, you jerk. Do you want to see my eagle?"

Face gone still, eyes hot and fathoms deep, Chase nodded. "Yeah. Think I'd better, hadn't I?"

Matt pushed against him again. "Well then, you'd better let me up off this door. Let's go upstairs. If I'm gonna get naked, it might as well be in my bedroom."

Following Matt's juicy bubble of an ass up a set of stairs could never be seen as anything but pure pleasure. Chase rolled with it, feasting his eyes and

putting serious thought into whether it might be acceptable to engage in a bit of groping before they go to the meds-or-madness part of the evening. He should probably take this all more seriously, but... he just couldn't. Nope. Chet Faker's "No Diggity" started looping in his head again, and he figured, fuck it. Reaching forward with both hands, he grabbed a double handful of delight. Matt squeaked in a very unmanly and screeching tone. "Wha—Chase. I—give me a second to—"

Chase kept one hand on Matt's bite-worthy posterior, and slid the other forward to cup his equally luscious package. "Christ, Matty, you're just fucking edible, you know that right?"

Matt skipped up a step. "Please, Chase. Let me show you first. I—you need to see it. Meet my eagle."

His eyes glowed again, and Chase swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat. "Okay, Matty. I—so you change into an eagle? No fooling?"

Matt smiled, but the edges of his grin were too tight and the expression didn't reach his eyes. "Yeah. No fooling. My eagle... he wants to meet you, Chase. He wants to see you, and have you see him."

No pressure there.

"Yeah. Okay, Matty. Bring it."

Matt didn't pause at the head of the stairs, stride long and even as he made his way into the master bedroom. The second he hit the door he started peeling out of his clothes. Chase watched the fluid movements with hot eyes and fingers pressed against his lips. His heart beat against the walls of his chest like it was trying to escape. Matt dropped his shirt to the floor at the foot of his bed, then unbuckled his belt before unsnapping and unzipping his jeans. Every article of clothing that came off seemed to center him more and fill Chase's body with pins and needles. Matt kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his pants.

Chase caught his breath as he took in the perfect symmetry of his lover's form. "God. Matt. I don't know if I'm ready."

Matt fixed him with a long glance. His pupils contracted, his head thrust forward, shoulders pushed back, and then there was a flash as white light poured out of every pore of Matt's body. Chase blinked, one arm flinging up to shield his eyes. Something rustled, flapped, and a heavy weight landed with sudden force on Chase's wrist and the lower portion of his forearm. Prying his

eyes open, he stared into the fierce silver of Matt's eyes resting in an eagle's face.

"Fuck. That is really weird, Matt. And damn if you don't make a sexy bird. Huh. Trust you to find a way to stay edible, even all feathered out. Um, thanks for not slicing my arm up with those huge fucking talons. Nice trick. Do you think you can bring the skin and man-shape back now?"

The light flared again, and then Matt stood in front of him, chin lifted and eyes staring at him without blinking. "So?"

Standing at the foot of his bed without a stitch of clothing to hide behind, arm outstretched and verbal challenge hanging in the air between them had the razor-winged mini-eaglets bashing at the walls of Matt's stomach again. He swallowed thickly, hand growing heavier with each second ticking by. Chase didn't seem to be breathing, and if he'd blinked once since Matt changed back to his human form, Matt had missed it entirely.

"Um, Chase? Dying here. Are you... what are you going to do?"

But Chase didn't say a word. Instead, he knocked Matt's hand to one side, surged forward, and wrapped both arms around Matt's torso. Lifting Matt with both arms, he nipped along Matt's collarbone. Fire raced through Matt's veins and a shuddering sound, half moan and half sigh, escaped him. "I—Chase what—"

Chase bit down on the side of Matt's throat. Incendiary. Matt gave up on words. Fuckers were over rated. Keening in tones more suited to his bird form would express what he was feeling with perfect adequacy. Chase nipped under his jaw, then pressed a chuckle to his lips. "Don't have to guess if you liked that."

And with a growling, grunting noise from Chase, Matt found himself suddenly airborne. He bounced down on the messy surface of his bed, the musk of their earlier lovemaking rising from the sheets. Matt shivered, cock racing past *ooh, interesting* to *oh-hell-yeah* in less time than it would take to speak the phrases aloud. Chase watched him with hooded eyes as he stripped off shirt, shoes, and everything in between in a handful of sharp, efficient moves. Breath going shallow and fast, Matt stroked his tongue along suddenly dry lips and lifted both arms up toward his mate. Another whining, keening sound slipped from his lips. Chase grinned, teeth sharp as a shark's appetite. Crawling up

from the foot of the bed, the younger man prowled up the length of Matt's body, heat and intent radiating from his golden skin like a promise.

"Shh." Chase dipped down, hot skin sliding along Matt's chest, thighs, belly and groin. Squeezing his eyelids shut, Matt lifted his head, arms slipping behind Chase's slim waist and pulling. His lips drawn like metal shavings to a strong magnet, Matt pressed a whole swarm of butterfly-light kisses along the length of Chase's throat. Hunger coiled, wild and toothy, in the cavern of Matt's mouth. He moaned and then sucked up a mark under Chase's jaw.

"Oooh. Yeah. Just like that."

Matt grunted, hips rolling up, every piece of him seeking friction. Chase obliged, sliding and twisting against him to the music of their moans. A snicking sound echoed through the air and then Chase was pushing two slick fingers into Matt's ass. The stretch burned enough to pull a hiss from Matt, and Chase paused for a split second. He lifted his head away, settling back on his knees and flicking Matt's hip. "Pay attention, Matty. I—you were my first. I'm thinking that's a mate thing? Hoping anyway, because if you're as new to this as I am, we can ditch the rubbers, yeah? At least—shit, it sounded exclusive. Did you mean exclusive?"

Matt's heart rate sped up and the corners of his mouth tilted up. Good to know he wasn't alone in babbling when he got nervous. "Yeah. Me, you—that's it. Ever."

Chase grinned and flicked the condom back toward the nightstand. Matt grinned back and crinkled his brow. "When the hell did you get that thing out?"

Laughter spilled out of Chase's open mouth and danced in his glittering eyes. "While you were shivering and whining under me."

Matt's face filled with heat. "Oh."

Leaning down, Chase nuzzled behind Matt's ear. "Don't sweat it, Tweety. I'm good with my hands, and been practicing on myself for years. Seriously man, years. If you don't lose your effing mind I'll have to turn in my man-card."

Matt bit his lip, a thousand questions crashing against the sealed gates of his pride. Chase held his gaze, one eyebrow climbing up to a crooked arc. "Dude. Shit. We're gonna try. Okay. Sweaty, nakkie time first, m'kay? Then if you still wanna get your tweenie-girl gabfest on, we can. Yeah, don't crinkle your eyebrows at me. I can see at least nine thousand questions trying to fight their way out of your pointed head."

Opening his mouth, a scoffing puff of air tripping off his tongue, Matt twisted his mouth into position to deliver a suitably sarcastic zinger. Chase beat him to the punch though, pressing a feather-light kiss to his lips and then pulling back just far enough to squint down at him. “Jesus. And they call me Princess. I can see who’s really going to be shopping for tiaras in this relationship.”

And then Matt didn’t have time for scoffing or zingy quips. He was too busy moaning and whining as Chase kissed him within an inch of his life. Later sounded like a perfectly acceptable time to talk. Way later. Like after Chase fucked him through the mattress a few more times. Yeah, as long as they tried, everything else was details.

The End

Author Bio

Butcher, baker, candlestick maker... Cherie does occasionally wield a meat-cleaver—it's best to stand back until she's finished that first cuppa joe. No, really. She bakes to relieve stress and increase the ratio of brownies to humans. Hey, someone has to. Cherie's really more of a candle burner than a candle maker, but let's not quibble.

Born in West Palm Beach, Florida and raised... er, is all over the damn place a sufficiently descriptive term? No? Okay then, moving right along... she's a tinker, tailor, and an Indian chief... Ooooh, Cherie especially likes to tinker when smexy men are involved (!), she only sews under duress, and did her cheek-bones give it away?

Cherie has lived in Washington D.C., Virginia, Upper Michigan, Texas, New York, California, and Alabama in the United States; Hessen in Germany, London in England, Masirah Island in Oman and... sometimes she lived in a house, sometimes in a tent, and sometimes wherever she could lay her head.

Cherie's been in love with words since before she drew breath, and doesn't see that ever changing. She writes stories. Sometimes there's music with them, sometimes they're poems, and lately, to her great delight, a plethora of M/M erotic romance. Yum. Smexy man to the second... or third power... now that's the kinda math Cherie can get behind!!

The hair curls or frizzes as it will, the eyes are green and tend to look in two different directions—no, really—and the rest is subject to change. You know the guy who didn't know if he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man or a man dreaming he was a butterfly? Yeah, that's Cherie, but substitute drag queen for butterfly and wacky, wild ex-Army chick for man.

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FOR WANT OF A NAIL

By MA Ford

Photo Description

Two men, naked, on a clear Perspex chair, chest to chest, forehead to forehead, looking intently into each other's eyes.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It seemed like a good way to make a few extra bucks. The new semester was starting and my scholarship didn't quite cover all my expenses. I'd never thought of myself as particularly photogenic, but when I saw the advertisement for male models hanging on the bulletin board in the Art building, AND saw how much they offered to pay, I was in.

My first shock was that I was expected to model nude for the cameras. I was nervous, but the professor assured me that everything important would be covered in a "truly artistic manner." Not what I expected, but I was sure I could handle it.

My second surprise was that I was not the only model. Not a big deal. I'm comfortable with my body and my masculinity. It was just a job—a rather well-paying job. Nothing personal. Nothing real. So when I opened my eyes and saw that look, why did my insides start to burn?

Sincerely,

Chris

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, British, family drama, non-explicit, coming out, sweet

Word Count: 12,179

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FOR WANT OF A NAIL

By MA Ford

You know that old saying? The one that starts off “for want of a nail...” and ends up with the kingdom being lost?

Well, in my case, it wasn't a nail. It was a button.

To be more precise, a shirt button, from my best white shirt, the one I was supposed to be wearing for the posh dinner to celebrate my parents' silver wedding anniversary.

My sister Liz had ironed it, but it was rather tight. Too tight. But with an effort, I breathed in, and grinned. Not bad, if I said so myself. And then I breathed out, and...*Ping*. The button flew across the room.

I knew I'd put on weight during my first year at Uni. Everyone does, don't they? But it wasn't until that button popped that I took a long, hard look at myself in the mirror.

I think my jaw dropped a mile. Who was that porky guy looking back at me from the wardrobe door? Not exactly ugly, but podgy, with no definition, no muscles. White, fat male.

At that moment Liz came bursting in to the room, in her usual way. No boundaries, my sis. She stared at me for a moment. “You look about six months gone,” she said in her frank way. “What have you been up to?”

I scratched my head, and thought back over the past year. Too much beer, too little exercise. My mate Toby had gone off to Manchester, and without his constant urging to run, cycle, and swim as he trained for yet another triathlon, I'd become lazy. I'd joined the rugby club, but hadn't even made the second team, so I'd given up on training, and instead I'd become part of their social club. Believe me, ten pints of beer is a different kind of exercise, and one I'd excelled in.

I breathed in and looked in the mirror, then turned to face my giggling sister. “Okay, needs some work,” I said. “What did you want, by the way?”

She held out a hand. "Your filthy lucre, brother dearest. Your share of the silver cufflinks for Dad and the silver vase for Mum. I did all the hard work, remember, but you owe me half of the cash."

Shit. My bank account was empty, and my credit card maxed out. I decided to try and bluff it out. "Hard work? I thought you loved that sort of browsing round antique fairs and junk shops?"

She glared at me, her best librarian-cum-school-mistress look. "You're broke, aren't you?"

I've never been able to hide anything from her. "Things are pretty tough at the moment," I said. "Can you sub me, just for a while, just till I get back on my feet?"

She stood there, curly hair pulled into a pretty up-do, weighing me up. "I don't get it, Chris. You've got that great scholarship, plus your student loan. You should be living the life of luxury. What happened?"

I shrugged, but her glare, a mix of threat and compassion that was specifically Liz, and one I'd known all my life, did its usual trick, and I spilled the beans. "I suppose it all went to my head, being away from home, away from Mum and Dad. It's the first time in my life I've had cash in my pocket. Liz, you must know what it's like. You've been through exactly the same."

She sat down on my bed, and shook her head sadly. "I know, Chris. I know the pressure of growing up in a vicarage, of never having enough money, of having a dad who'd give away the contents of house and home if someone only asked, a mum who is always busy with committees and the garden. And when I went away to university, I did go a bit crazy to start with. But I soon realized what a great opportunity I had to make something of myself, so I buckled down and started to work and to save." She bit her lower lip, a nervous gesture so familiar from our shared childhood, us two and our brother Rob. "I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty, Chris. But you know there's no money to spare, and you can't go getting into debt. It would kill Dad, and he's already worrying about everyone in the parish."

"I know, I know, sis. But what do I do? How do I get myself sorted out?"

She gave me another one of her looks. "Start exercising again? Get rid of that belly that makes you look as if you're about to go into labour. Study hard, eat properly, and find yourself a job. There'll be plenty of them on the notice boards at Uni if you look hard enough."

I groaned. “Liz, it’s hard enough trying to keep up with my studying without getting a job too. Aren’t there all sorts of rules about working as well?”

“Now you’re just making excuses. You know I did babysitting all the way through. Three years of spending most of my evenings in someone else’s living room, enjoying their heating, eating their food, watching their TV and getting paid for it. Sort yourself out, Chris. I know you can do it.”

She got up and gave me a quick hug. Not much of a demonstrative family, ours. Then she smiled. “Now find a shirt that fits, and come downstairs. Rob and his brood should be arriving soon, and the table’s booked for eight.”

We had a great evening, and I nearly forgot about my troubles, falling back into the old family dynamics, and treating our parents to a well-deserved celebration. But Liz’s words had gotten through to me, and the next morning, I ran my slight hangover away with a circuit around the village. By the time I caught the train back to the college, I was already looking seriously more toned, and I was determined not to let it drift again.

But then there was the work issue. Liz was right, I had to find some alternate income to avoid worrying my parents. The scholarship money that had been deposited in my account had paid back the overdraft, but I’d be really tight for the year ahead if I didn’t find something.

I didn’t really fancy the usual jobs, stacking shelves in Sainsbury’s, or working in the burger van parked outside the Student Union on party nights. I applied for the sort of babysitter/nanny positions that had worked so well for Liz, but I was made to feel rather uncomfortable for wanting to work with kids. There were some fruit picking positions available locally, but the hours didn’t really suit my lectures, and the pay was awful. So for the first few days back, I just spent as much time as possible in the library, avoiding the ten-pints-down-the-pub rugby crowd as much as I could.

It takes something like that to really make you take a long, hard look at your life. It soon became clear that, apart from the hard-drinking rugby crowd like Gazza and Trev, I hadn’t really made any friends since I’d left home.

I’m not really a party person. Or perhaps I could be, but I hadn’t found the right party yet. I hadn’t dated since leaving home, partly because I missed Toby. We’d been best friends since we were eleven and found ourselves sitting next to each other on our first day at senior school. We’d always hunted as a

pair, with Toby searching out girls, the prettiest one for him, and her friend for me. Not that it really bothered me—usually it worked out just fine. The last year at school we'd had a steady foursome, Toby, his girl Mattie, tall and gorgeous with sleek brown hair, normally to be found at the stables, Sue, and me. Sue was short and bubbly, energetic, and enthusiastic about everything. She got into Southampton, and she's studying marine biology. Making a splash, as we joked. But we decided to split up before leaving home. Long distance relationships and all that stuff... And I had to admit that although she was fun to be around, I wasn't heartbroken. Sue was great, but she didn't make my heart skip a beat. So far, no one had...

There were plenty of pretty girls around, but I hadn't really made any connections. So there I was, alone, broke, and studying like crazy.

After a long day studying, while queuing to check out one of the reserved texts I needed to read for History of Computing, I suddenly remembered there was another notice board in the library. So far I'd been concentrating on the Student Union one, the main focus for all that sort of thing. The library one was inter-college, and included all the rubbish like calls for auditions from the drama courses, and rehearsals for the orchestra. Not my sort of thing.

But there were a few job offers as well. A part-time lab assistant seemed rather down my path. I was sure it would mainly be washing up, and if there's one thing I'm well trained for, it's doing dishes. The psychiatric department was looking for volunteers for some sort of survey, for which they were offering a fiver for every one completed. Not to be sneezed at, but I knew it would involve long, cold evenings stopping students going about their business.

And then I saw it. "Male Models Wanted", with an hourly rate of pay that quite honestly made my eyes pop.

But modelling? I was no model. I was looking a lot better, it was true, but I was not what my sister and her friends had called "knicker man material", the sort of guy you'd see on the front of underwear packets.

I read the advert again. *Male models wanted. All shapes and sizes considered. Some nudity required.*

Well, I was a shape and size. As for nudity—well, it was just skin, wasn't it? We were all covered with it. Even a few hours' work with that sort of salary would make my bank balance look a lot happier. It would be easier and far drier than standing in the square with one of those ubiquitous blue clipboards the psych department always used.

I jotted down the internal phone number. Worth a try. Why not? What did I have to lose?

When I got back to the dorm, I found Trev in the kitchen, an impressive array of empty Corona bottles in front of him. "Hey, mate," he said, handing me a bottle. "Where've you been? No one's seen you around."

I shrugged, not really wanting to go into the reasons behind my sudden disappearance, but feeling some sort of explanation was due. "Time to buckle down a bit, if I want to get through," I said. "Parental lectures and so forth."

"Ah, mate, sympathy," Trev said. "I know what that's like. But don't drop totally out of circulation. Away match against Norwich this weekend, you can't miss that one."

I made some vague noises. Tempting, but I knew that as soon as I was back with the gang I'd be downing the pints, singing the raucous songs with the rest of the social crew and cheering on our mates on the pitch. Before I knew it, I'd be another hundred or so worse off. Better to stick to the library.

Unless that model thing really paid that sort of money. Four hours and I'd have plenty of funds for Norwich. It was so tempting. *Some nudity*. Nudity. I thought instantly of the rugby locker room, hairy sweaty men and blue jokes. Would anyone really want to draw that, and pay money for it? Hard to imagine.

I went to my room, and stripped down, looking at myself in the narrow strip of mirror on the door. Medium height, brown hair, pretty nondescript, I thought. The beer belly had totally disappeared, and the steady exercise had begun to define my muscles. Nothing to send people screaming. But model material? Was it even worth a try?

The next morning, a bank statement came in the post, and that made up my mind. I was nearly at the limits of my overdraft, my credit card was full, and if I didn't take care I'd be starving by the end of the week. I had to earn some money somehow, and fast. I went to the phone and dialled the internal number.

With an appointment to discuss the position the next afternoon, I headed off to lectures feeling slightly more optimistic. I was imagining the work: myself draped tastefully over a couch, filmy gauze over the more daring areas, while a class full of modest, serious young ladies surrounded me, carefully sketching

my hands or shoulders on their large easels. Don't know where the image came from. I seemed to be channelling the 1920s.

My illusions lasted all the way through to the interview. I'd been surprised to find it was in the History department, as I'd really expected the Arts, but it was still pretty much uncharted territory as far as this science undergrad was concerned. I was greeted by a large, bubbly female, nothing like the demure demoiselle of my imagination. "Hi Chris, I'm Tabs," she said with a smile. "Short for Tabitha. Thanks for answering the ad. I've been a bit short on replies. They seem to be a timid lot around here. So, what brought you along?"

Rather unsure of what to say, I shrugged and decided to be truthful. "The pay sounded good," I said after a moment's reflection. "I doubt if I'm what you need."

She looked me up and down, thoroughly, but impersonally, as if she was a tailor measuring me up for a suit of clothes. "You'll do," she said. And then suddenly grinned. "Let me tell you a bit more about it, and then I'll ask you to strip off for a couple of photos."

"Sounds good," I said, as my stomach rumbled. "How long until you take a decision? And how soon would it start?"

"Right, first things first. It's all part of my postgrad research, and I want to set up one session a week for the rest of the term. A minimum of four hours per session, possibly more. Mainly photography. And rather more nudity than the advert might have suggested. The results will appear in my dissertation, and possibly some articles in print with an academic press, but it is unlikely you will be recognizable. Still interested?"

I was calculating. Say five hours a week, until the end of term. I'd clear my overdraft, get a bit of space on the credit card and even be able to get home to see the parents for the next break. I grinned, and Tabs must have known she had me hooked. I'm an idiot like that: you can always see everything on my face. Otherwise perhaps I could have even strung her out for a better rate...

No, that was just stupidity talking. The rates offered were astronomical compared to anything else available on campus, and it wasn't as if I was a Diet Coke style model. Be nice, Chris, and accept gracefully. "Sounds great," I said. "Where do I sign up?"

"Not so fast," she said with a smile. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

I looked at her. "Here? Now?"

"If you can't do it now, will you be able to in front of the camera?"

Good point. But it still felt weird, as if there should be something against me just removing my clobber in this anonymous university office.

Then she gave another of her explosive laughs. "Come on, into the studio. I've got a camera set up there. I just need to take a few snaps. My assistant's there too, in case you think I'm going to ravish you."

I blushed crimson. It was as if she read my mind. I picked up my bag and followed Tabs as she led the way through a door at the back of her office, up a flight of stairs, over one of the strangely placed air bridges the university architecture specialized in, and into a large, airy room.

A young man with a goatee was fiddling with an expensive looking camera. "Another one, Tabs?" he asked. "Are you getting the whole male population in here?"

"Shut up, Frederick," she said. "I'll try out as many as I need to, until we find the right models. Concentrate on your photography."

The said Frederick looked at me dismissively. "I'm sure you could find better samples, anyway." He sniffed, and then sighed. "Go on, then. Down to your underwear, please, then stand on that spot."

There was a green cross on the ground. I slipped off my jeans and T-shirt, and then was suddenly hit by a new raft of worries. What if these pictures turned up in some uni rag, or in one of the red-tops? "Just a moment," I paused. "These photos... If you don't choose me, what will happen to them?"

"Don't worry, they won't go anywhere out of this studio," Tabs said, walking around Chris purposefully. "And nothing's going to end up somewhere you wouldn't want people seeing it," she said, once again somehow picking up on my thoughts in that almost eerie way.

Feeling rather stupid, I stood on the green cross, and waited patiently while Frederick did his job. Then he walked over to an open laptop.

"Not bad," he said to Tabitha, scrolling through his images. "Nice bone structure. Should be suitable, if you don't want to take more time looking."

Feeling rather like a horse that had been taken to market and found to be just about adequate, I picked up my jeans and got dressed. *Remember the money*, I said to myself. It had to be worth it. Better than starving. Much better than confessing to my dad what an idiot I'd been.

“Right, you’re on,” Tabitha said. “Are you available on Friday afternoon?”

First things first. “When will I get paid?”

“Four hours, four till eight, cash in a brown envelope when you finish the session.”

What more could I ask for? Cash on Friday, the rugby on Saturday... and out of debt by the end of the term. Life was picking up. What could possibly go wrong?

Back in the student accommodation, I bumped into Trev, unshaven, hair awry, tucking into beans on toast.

“Mate!” he said, through a mouthful of beans. “Coming down to the bar?”

I shook my head. “Can’t afford it. Anyway, I’ve got an essay.”

Trev looked up at me through his messy fringe. “What’s got into you, mate? You’re looking different. You’re not coming out with us, no one’s seen you in the bar for days. You are coming on Saturday, aren’t you?”

I shouldn’t. I should save my money. But I had to keep in with my mates as well. Didn’t I? “Course, mate. I’ll be okay by then.” I grinned, then left the room, leaving him to his baked beans.

Back in my room, I flung myself on the bed, and began to wonder what I’d done. I realized I didn’t have any information on the sort of photos or artwork, or what the dissertation was even about. What if something got out, if everyone saw me in the altogether? What if my father... That’s the problem of having a vicar for a dad. You spend all your time hoping that nothing gets reported back to him, especially if it’s something that would shock the parishioners. I went hot and cold at the thought of a photo of me, in the altogether, on display in the church vestibule...

As the days went by, my nerve began to falter.

I thought of ringing up, cancelling, saying I was ill, caught some horrible, disfiguring skin complaint or something. But a text message from Liz—*Found a job yet? Remember you still owe me*—and the prospect of nothing but beans on toast for the rest of the year girded my loins.

So there I was, Friday afternoon, in my cleanest underpants and clothes that wouldn’t leave marks on me—one of Tabs’ final instructions before I left the

interview. I'd skipped lunch, hoping my stomach would look flat, and even tried to address a few ragged hairs on my eyebrows. Taking a deep breath, I left my room and headed for the studio.

Tabs greeted me at the door. "Glad you made it," she said with a rather knowing look in her eyes. "I thought you might have bottled out."

I shrugged, but then turned it into a grin. This woman was far too knowing. "I did have a few second thoughts," I said. "I mean, I'm no Brad Pitt."

"Don't worry, we do wonders with soft focus," she said with a laugh. "No, I'm not really looking for Brad either. But I'll explain more afterwards. Clothes off, please, and you'll find a thong behind the screen."

It was tiny, skin-coloured, and all I was allowed to wear. I'd never felt so exposed in my life.

Tabs looked at me as I stood in the studio, critically, almost clinically. And then she nodded, and picked up a heavy-looking book from the bench, opening it at a tab and showing it to me.

To my surprise, it was a photo of some ancient Greek pottery. A naked man, holding something that looked rather like a discus.

"Right, that's going to be you," Tabs said. And she handed me a brightly coloured Frisbee.

I followed her instructions, and tried to keep the pose. Not easy, as I was up on one leg, off balance and uncomfortable. I was afraid I'd topple over exactly when the photographer told me to stand as still as possible.

You know, I'll never go on about top models and the ridiculous amounts they earn again. It was exhausting.

But eventually, Frederick seemed content. "That'll do nicely, thanks," he said. "Tabs, Lysander'll be here in a few minutes. How about the chair shot? We could try it again."

"Good idea," she said. "But first, perhaps I owe you a few explanations, Chris?"

I was rubbing my leg, which had begun to cramp up, but looked up and shrugged. "You're only paying me to model, you don't have to explain," I said.

"It might help. I'm trying to recreate the images from ancient Greek pottery and other such things in the style of modern erotic photography. It's all part of my thesis."

“Porn, you mean?” I asked, a shiver running down my back despite the robe Frederick had handed me.

“Not porn, definitely not. But possibly exploring the boundaries between eroticism and something more explicit. Don’t worry, as I said before, you won’t be recognizable, it’s going to be really artistic, and I promise this is not going to end up on the Internet. This is real historic research, I promise.” She looked at me, as if she was weighing me up. “There’s one reconstruction I want to do, and you’ve got the perfect physique for it.” She turned to the photographer. “You’re right, Fred, with Lysander this will be just great.”

At that moment, the door to the studio opened rather tentatively, and a slight, dark-haired guy with close-cropped hair peeked round. “Not interrupting, am I?” he asked.

“Lysander, great timing, come on in,” Tabs said. “Meet Chris. He’ll be partnering with you in some of these reconstructions.”

Lysander—what sort of name is that?—stuck out his hand, and seemed to rake me up and down with his dark eyes. I felt suddenly totally inadequate and extremely insecure. Some of this must have come over in my body language, because Tabs quickly sent the other man to get undressed, and called me over.

“Don’t worry about Lysander,” she said. “He’s my regular model, and is a bit miffed that I need more people for this project. You’ll look great together. But I’m afraid for this one I need to see your buttocks, so no thong. You’ll find a modesty pouch over there.”

I felt rather as if I’d fallen down the rabbit hole, as things were getting stranger and stranger. Part of me wanted to call out that I hadn’t signed up for all this, which was much more than “some nudity”. But my rational side was going “cha-ching” and counting out the money. Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound as they said, as I stuffed my junk into the pocket.

Frederick had placed this Perspex chair in the middle of his stage, and changed the backdrop for a light grey fadeout. Lysander was lounging elegantly on the chair, apparently unconcerned by being totally naked. His skin was lightly tanned, and he had impressive musculature. I was trying to remain nonchalant in this unfamiliar situation, but couldn’t help glancing over at Lysander, as if my eyes were magnetically drawn to him.

Tabs came back into the room and instantly took charge. “Right, Chris, Lysander, this one is going to need you two to get extremely close. Chris, you

sit on the chair, on the edge, leaning back. And Lysander, you get on top of him, chest-to-chest, forehead-to-forehead. The two of you need to be almost fused together.”

Lysander raised an eyebrow. “You sure about this, Tabs? We tried it before, remember. It was a disaster. The chair broke.”

She nodded. “I know. But this is a new chair. And I know exactly what I’m looking for. Fred will get the photos done quickly. I know it’s not going to be comfortable for either of you, but grin and bear it, please.”

After a rather nervous look around, I sat down on the transparent chair. It was cold and smooth, and I could feel my skin sticking. This was not going to be pleasant. “This okay, Tabs?” I asked.

“Not quite, Chris. You need to be nearly horizontal, just leaning on the very top of the back of the chair.”

I tried again, scooting forwards and trying to put my body as she described.

Tabs nodded. “That’s better! Now, Lysander, assume the position.”

He looked at her, clearly dubious. “Okay, but I’d just like to state my concerns in advance. If we end up in a heap on the floor, you’ve been warned.”

“Just try it again, Lysander,” she said.

“Okay. Chris, hold on, I’m coming!” Lysander said with a wink.

And then he was lying on top of me, moulding his body to mine. I gasped with the sudden weight, pushing me into the chair. He slipped his hands between my arms and those of the chair, holding on and taking some of the weight. “Better?” he asked.

I nodded. I couldn’t remember ever being quite so close to anyone, not even on the couple of times I’d been intimate with Sue. His smooth skin was touching mine from head to toe, the warm, almost spicy smell of him invading my nostrils. It was all too much, and I closed my eyes to escape from the overwhelming proximity.

“Okay, that’s a good start,” Tabs said. “Now, Lysander, push yourself up a bit. You need to open up a space between your chests, and rest your foreheads together. A bit more, Lysander. Chris, move your head a bit. Your neck needs to be straight. I’m looking for a heart-shaped gap between your bodies. Yes, much better. Chris! This will never work if you don’t open your eyes, lad!”

On command, I opened my eyes, and looked straight at Lysander. He was staring at me with the most intense look I have ever seen in my life. It seared into me like a knife, igniting something deep inside that I had never really felt before.

And suddenly, I was hard, more erect than I could ever remember being before, spilling out of the modesty pouch. If only the world could have ended at that very moment, I would have been eternally grateful.

Tabs' words washed over me, but I was beyond listening. It was all emotion, sensation, tactile sensations washing over me.

I had to stop this, quickly. I resorted to the tactics of my teenager years, the words of one of the Sunday Collects I'd had to memorise coming back to me. Picturing the old ladies of the parish quickly made things subside. But Lysander must have noticed...

Somewhere in the distance, I could hear Tabs shouting out instructions, Frederick ordering us to hold. But I was not there anymore. It was just Lysander and me and an ocean of new, strange emotions.

Lysander's voice suddenly got through to me. "Chris? You okay? We're done here. Hold on while I lift myself off."

A sudden boost of pressure, and then he was gone. For a moment, I felt bereft. And then my cheeks were burning as I realized I was still semi-erect. I couldn't meet anyone's eyes, but Lysander threw me the robe, which I gratefully slipped on.

Tabs was over with Frederick, leaning over his shoulder to look at the small screen on the back of the DLR. "It's looking really great, guys," she gushed. "Exactly what I was looking for. I think we're done for today. Your envelopes are on the desk—next week, same time, same place?"

"Great—thanks, Tabs," Lysander said, glancing over at me. "Come on, Chris. Let's get some clothes back on and get out of here."

I felt as if I was walking through concrete, confused, embarrassed, but at least it was over for the day, and I could escape. I grabbed my jeans and T-shirt, and got dressed quicker than I ever had in my life, dashing down the stairs while Lysander was still dressing behind the screen.

Outside, in the cool air, I opened the envelope with my name printed on it. It lived up to all promises. The £20 notes beckoned to me: beer, toast, cheddar,

cereals, even a pizza or two. And the overdraft, of course. A couple more sessions and I'd even be able to pay Liz back. If I could do it. If I could cope. If I could control my treacherous dick... Perhaps I should ask Tabs just to do the solo stuff—that I could cope with.

I was debating what to do—a coffee in the Union bar, or calling Trev to go for a beer—when Lysander suddenly appeared in front of me. And all over again, I felt embarrassed about what had happened.

“You got out of there quickly,” Lysander said, his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of the long Captain Jack Harkness style greatcoat.

I shrugged. “Needed some fresh air,” I said truthfully. And then I paused. I needed to mention it, to say something. “I just wanted to say—” I began.

At exactly the same moment, Lysander started to speak. “You know, you don't have to be embarrassed,” he said.

“I don't? I think I do, you know. Getting hard like that. What must you be thinking of me?”

He shrugged. “Flattering in a way,” he commented. “But I haven't seen you around, Chris. Are you a student?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, surprised at the question. “Engineering and Computing. Second year. You?”

“Drama and literature. Third year. So my question again—why haven't I seen you around? I can't remember seeing you at the Soc, or the Paradise, or even down the Willow Arms.”

I recognized the names from a list of pubs issued by the Rugby Club Society, of places to avoid on a pub-crawl. Some being gay bars, some being those frequented by squaddies. The ones Lysander had mentioned—well, let's say that they weren't too popular with the Army barracks. “Possibly because I'm not gay,” I commented with another shrug.

Lysander looked at me with a lazy smile. “You might want to revise that statement, Chris,” he said. “Considering the evidence, of course, you being a scientist.”

“Evidence?” I asked, although my mind was filling up with screaming voices and my body felt as if I was caught in the flight or fight mechanism. “What evidence?”

He put down his bag, and counted out on his fingers. "Well, we have that glorious erection you popped out as soon as I touched you as exhibit number one," he said.

"Just a reaction. A loose wire somewhere," I blustered.

"Two, just the fact that you signed up for that project," he said.

"Hey, I need the money!" I protested.

"Three, I pride myself on having the most finely tuned gaydar in the county, and you set it off into the red zone." He looked at me, that lazy smile and those incredible eyes boring into my soul. "Of course, I suppose you're now going to produce a devoted girlfriend or, even better, a fiancée to prove me wrong."

He had me there. I couldn't even name a less-than-devoted girlfriend. But still, he wasn't right. Was he? "I'm the son of a priest," I commented. "Perhaps you're confusing the natural reserve emanating from a vicarage childhood for repression of a different nature."

He gave a little laugh and shook his head. "Chris, I think you're so far into the wardrobe you're even beyond Narnia. But I'll leave you to enjoy your little delusions. It was fun working with you, and I'll enjoy seeing how you cope with the rest of the project. We're doing the Warren Cup images soon. Just imagine what fun that's going to be!"

The Warren Cup? It didn't mean anything to me at that point, so I just hunched my shoulders. "See you next week, then," I said.

To my surprise, he pulled me close and kissed me right on the lips, his tongue grazing my startled, partly open mouth. I caught my breath, and my treacherous dick decided to react again, leaping to attention in my luckily baggy trousers.

"See you, kid," Lysander said, his eyes shining, as he picked up his bag again and disappeared up the path towards the sports centre and the car park.

I remained standing, stunned, shaken, stirred. A martini, basically.

I gave a shudder, pushed the feelings out of my mind, and headed back to the student flat. At least I had a huge wodge of twenties in my pocket, enough to go to the away match tomorrow, and to splash out on a burger from the van parked outside the Student Union Bar. Gay? Me? I'd show him...

We went out that night, me and Trev and Gazza and the rest of the rugby social crowd, and I enjoyed my first pint for weeks. I was clearly out of practice, and the alcohol went slightly to my head. But instead of following the others off on a preparatory pub-crawl before the next day's match, I chickened out and went back to bed, pleading exhaustion. They teased me about being a wuss and a pansy, but I was shattered, and just wanted to sleep.

Of course, as always, the moment I lay down in my bed my mind cleared and I was wide awake, my mind buzzing with the day's events. No matter what I tried, one picture kept coming back to me, like a screensaver, or a pop-up that won't go away. Lysander's eyes, boring into my very soul. His lips, his smell. Clean, fresh, masculine. The touch of his skin against mine. I sighed, and allowed myself to run through the thoughts, without prejudice, without self-editing. And once again my body responded, tension deep inside, and an erection harder than I'd ever had in my life.

Almost without a conscious decision, I reached down under the bedclothes and took hold of myself, moving slowly, then faster; picturing Lysander in my mind, quicker than ever, I came.

Oh shit. He was right after all. What on earth was I going to do?

In the few lucid moments before sleep overcame me, it all seemed so clear, so perfect. Yes, I was gay, but it didn't change anything. It all made sense, somehow. My ambivalence when it came to girls, the faint distaste I'd felt on the couple of occasions Sue and I had made love. I'd thought it was all something people made too much about, all exaggeration and hype. I was a vicar's son, and that was why I was almost chaste, all that religion and stuff growing up. Made sense, didn't it?

I fell asleep feeling almost content with my new sense of self-discovery, but woke up the next morning with the beginning of a hangover and a feeling of doom and dread hanging over me. I couldn't be gay. What would my family say? What would Trev and the other guys in the rugby club say? I'd be drummed out...

It was all nonsense. Nothing had changed. It had just been a strange moment. Something in my brain. Perhaps all that dieting, exercising, studying, along with the lack of sex... I'd just lacked human contact, and had reacted to it. Nothing more serious than that.

I looked over at my desk, with the envelope full of twenties. Result! Worth every moment. I got up and had a quick shower, rushing to get ready for the coach for the away game. As I stood under the pounding water—pounding being a relative term, as the water pressure was never that great in the student accommodation—thoughts of the night before flooded back, and my cock woke up again, collaborating with my brain to demand more images, more action.

I quickly jerked off, trying to think of Sue, but my thoughts kept zapping back to Lysander until I gave up and gave in to it.

A day of rugby, coarse jokes and beer took my mind off things. It was good to be out with my mates again, after my monkish isolation since Liz had brought me back to earth with a bang. But even as I sang rude songs and downed pints, part of me kept thinking back to the day before, and Lysander.

I've always found it strange how you can meet someone new, and then somehow they are everywhere. It was like that with Lysander. I could have sworn I had never seen him before in my life, but suddenly I was catching sight of him all over the place. In the queue in the cafeteria, in the middle of a group of drama-type students in the coffee bar, waiting outside a lecture hall, striding down towards the sports hall...

On the Thursday, I went up to the sports hall to use one of the running machines. It was wet and windy out, a typical November evening, and I had no desire to do my usual circuit around the campus. I might be keen on keeping in shape, but running in the rain was not for me. The gym equipment was in a large room separated from one of the sports halls by a glass wall. I clipped myself onto the machine and set the programme, then settled down to a run accompanied by my iPod.

A fencing class was going on in the next room. They were just warming up when I started, lots of lunges and lengths of the room with strange steps. But as they paired off and began parrying with foils, one of the fencers caught my eye.

Slender and lithe, he seemed by far the most agile and skilful of the group, darting forward and back, his foil gleaming under the bright lights. I'd never really watched fencing before, but it was far more interesting than the podcasts on my iPod. He was elegant, beautiful to watch.

However, you could have easily knocked me off the running machine when the fencer removed his mask, to reveal the close-cropped hair and vivid gaze of Lysander.

My heart missed a beat as those eyes met mine through the pane of glass. Then he gave a cheeky smile and raised his eyebrows. I blushed beetroot red. What was happening to me? What was this guy doing to me?

He gestured to me through the window, which I interpreted as a request to see him outside. I shook my head, suddenly scared of what my treacherous body would do if I let it. I indicated my watch, hoping he'd understand that I needed to carry on running. He disappeared, so I guessed he'd gotten the message. I readjusted my iPod and increased the pace, trying to run away any stray feelings.

So why did I feel so bereft?

It must have been ten minutes later when I opened my eyes to see Lysander standing before me, looking up at me with a lazy smile. "Enjoyed the view?" he asked. "Much of a fencing fan?"

"I like a nice wrought-iron one myself," I managed to say, before grinning. "You're pretty good."

"Thank you," Lysander said with a bow. "Comes in useful for drama. And good exercise, better than that barbaric machine you're on. You should give it a try one day."

"Maybe I will," I said. "I don't seem to be getting very far with rugby..."

"Ah, all those thighs and the mud..." He fanned his face. "I thought you said you weren't gay."

"I'm not! You don't have to be gay to play rugby. We're not all Gareth Thomas!" But even as the words came out of my mouth I remembered the huge poster of him above my bed as a rugby-mad teenager, and blushed scarlet again. Flustered and losing my coordination, I went backwards and the stop cord came unhooked, stopping the machine.

"Ah, that's better," Lysander said. "Come on, get showered and meet me outside. I'm taking you for a drink."

"You are?"

"Call it research. We are on duty for Tabs again tomorrow, aren't we?"

He had an elderly two-seater Toyota MR2 car, and I had to bend practically to the ground to get into it. The seats were sporty and so low that I felt I was practically sitting on the tarmac. "Fantastic car," I said as we got underway.

“Glad you like it. She’s elderly, but I love her, and I dread the day I can’t get her repaired. So, how’s life in the closet?”

I gave him a soft punch on the shoulder. “Shut up. I’m fine. Enjoying life with more than a can of beans between me and the weekend.”

“Did you look up the Warren Cup for tomorrow?”

I shrugged. “Didn’t seem much point. I just thought I’d let Tabs tell me what to do like last time.”

Lysander raised his expressive eyebrows. “It might be better if you looked at this. I don’t want you to be fainting on me or anything like that. There’s a folder on the shelf behind you. Have a look.”

The folder contained photos and photocopies of a silver cup, with bas-relief images on it. I screwed up my eyes to see better and tried to work out the pictures. I’d never been good at this sort of thing—I’d been so bad at art history at school that the teacher had refused to let me sit the GSCE. Then it dawned. “They’re having sex?” I asked, aghast.

“Yep, that’s it,” Lysander said. “All very tasteful and classical, of course. But still shocking. On display at the British Museum now, but there were all sorts of complaints when it was first offered for display last century. I’m not sure what Tabs has planned. She won’t tell me, which is slightly worrying in itself. I just thought you should be aware.”

I turned the pictures over and over, looking at the two youths with long locks, their bodies entwined. It woke something deep in my loins, a longing.

Was Lysander right? Was I kidding myself that I’d always been straight, that this was just a one-off thing? My thoughts were broken off as he pulled into a parking space.

“Come on, I didn’t mean to scare you. Buy you a drink?”

The bar was narrow and crowded, with a noisy, cheerful group of people drinking elaborate, colourful cocktails. Not the sort of place to find Trev and the rest of the rugby crowd, I thought. Squeezing past the milling people, greeting everyone, Lysander led me through to the back, where, miraculously, a small sofa was unoccupied. He waved to the bartender—tall, blond, with eyeliner and earrings—and gestured some sort of order to him before sitting and pulling me down next to him.

Two frosted, frozen glasses arrived before I’d even caught my breath. Lysander raised his glass. “To new friends,” he said. “And Tabs’ project.”

I chinked glasses with him, and took a sip. It was icy cold and very refreshing, but I was sure the sugar hid copious quantities of alcohol. Give me a beer any day.

“So,” Lysander said, putting his glass down. “You say you’re not gay. So you have a girlfriend?”

“Not any more. Didn’t want a long-distance relationship. And you? You have a boyfriend?”

Lysander grinned. “I’m hopeful,” he said, raising his eyebrows with that trademark gesture of his, and winking at me.

“Idiot,” I said, gulping down another mouthful of the frozen beverage, hoping to hide the jump of interest in my loins and the strange, fluttering feeling in the pit of my stomach. “So how did you get involved in this project?”

“Tabs does some work in the drama department. And Frederick—well, he’s sort of an ex. I was one of the first people Tabs called on when she realized she needed models. I’d have done it for nothing, but the money comes in handy.”

I rubbed my eyes. “It was just the money for me. She pays way over any other campus jobs. You can’t imagine how broke I am. But I never thought... I suppose I pictured a tastefully draped male figure and a prim drawing class. I didn’t think it would be like this.” I realized I was babbling on, and that Lysander was watching me, a thoughtful, almost hungry look in his eyes.

“Shhh,” he said after a moment, and reached out with a finger to touch me under my chin. He lifted it up, then caressed the side of my face with his other hand. It was chilly from the drink, but the shivers down my spine had nothing to do with the cold. Then he leaned in and kissed me.

It was unexpected, unasked for, but strangely not unwelcome. He teased open my lips with his tongue, deepened the contact. I reached out, wrapping my arms round his chest, pulling him closer to me. I felt as if I needed to merge with him, to become one, to somehow quell the amazing feeling in my body.

After what seemed like an archaeological era, he pulled away, leaving a final soft kiss on my nose. I collapsed back on the sofa as he took a sip of his drink, then grinned.

“Still somewhere on the other side of Narnia?” he asked, that incredible intense look in his eyes again.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Making my way out very slowly,” I said. “Lysander, what are you doing to me?”

“It’s a talent I have,” he said smugly, then he shook his head, his face serious. “You have no idea how lovely you are, do you? The moment I saw you in that chair, I just thanked Tabs and my lucky stars.” He took another sip of the drink.

I could feel my face burning, my stomach churning, my legs weak and wobbly. “Lysander, this is all totally new to me. I don’t know how I’ll feel tomorrow. But tonight—tonight I’m going with this. Because... because I’ve never felt the way you make me feel. And just now, I don’t want to stop.”

Looking back, I don’t know how I had the nerve to say that, or how I managed to turn off nearly twenty years of habits and preconceived ideas to fall into Lysander’s arms. But he was there, enticing and inviting, with those amazing arms and incredible mouth, with that body and...

And he rushed me out of the bar back to his flat, a tiny loft in the town centre, all bare floorboards and flimsy curtains. He lay me down on the futon, and slowly removed my clothing, kissing me, caressing me, making me feel as if I had no bones in my body. His scent enveloped me, strong and masculine. And then he took me in his mouth, and everything seemed so right, so perfect, so wonderful.

Afterwards, there were tears in my eyes, and I could barely talk. He looked down at me, and lifted a finger to wipe a stray drop from my cheek.

“Why the tears?” he asked. “I thought you liked it.”

I bit my lip. “It was wonderful and you know it. I just can’t believe that I could have been so close to this for so long and pushed it away. I’d given up on sex, because I thought it was squishy and smelly and somehow unpleasant. But now I realize I was just in the wrong place. How could I have been so wrong about myself for so very long?”

“That wardrobe,” he said with a slight smile. “Glad to have pulled you out of it.”

I grinned, then took his arms and flipped him over on his back. “Again?”

And he was happy to comply.

By the next afternoon, we managed to drag ourselves out of bed to get to Tabs’ studio. She was nervously fussing around with drapery on a chaise longue, while Frederick adjusted lighting. A copy of the Warren Cup stood on

her workbench. She gave a final twitch to the fabric, then looked up at us, and gave a smirk. "So I guess I won't have too many problems persuading you to do these poses?" she asked.

I shrugged. "We've been practising," I said calmly.

Lysander laughed. "He's a quick learner," he replied.

Tab looked from one to the other, and shook her head. "Get undressed. And try to keep your hands off each other until I'm ready for you."

I have to say, that afternoon's work was amazingly tough, and if not for Lysander, I think I would have run screaming. But Tab was practically purring with pleasure at the photos, and even Frederick looked pleased.

I'd love to say that it was happily ever after for Lysander and me. But unfortunately life is not a fairy tale... or perhaps it is, because some of those tales ended pretty nastily. We spent a wonderful week together, hardly stirring from Lysander's heavenly flat. I missed classes—most unlike me—we ordered take-away, and hardly got out of bed. I began to relax, and the world took on different colours for me as Lysander brought out a new side of me, an aspect I'd never, ever expected.

But like all dreams, you have to wake up sometime.

Trev was waiting for me when I got back to my flat; his face was like thunder. "Where on earth have you been?" he demanded. "You didn't even come to the rugby meeting last night. I've sent you dozens of messages, and you didn't even reply."

"I ran out of credit on my phone weeks ago," I admitted sheepishly. "Sorry, Trev. But you know what it's like when you meet someone..."

"Mate! You've met someone? Result! Who is she?"

I grinned. "He's called Lysander. He's great—"

Trev's face dropped. "He? What do you mean, he?"

My face suddenly broke into a wide grin. "I met a bloke."

Trev sat down, looking vaguely shocked. "You mean you're gay? I didn't realise..." His voice trailed off.

His reaction took me by surprise. This was the twenty-first-Century, wasn't it? Was I going to get this from everyone? "Trev? You okay? This isn't going to be an issue between us, is it?"

Trev shrugged, but he looked slightly green, and wouldn't meet my eyes. "Not sure. I'm going to have to get used to it. It's a bit of a shock, Chris. I never even imagined... I mean, you're a rugby player! What are the rest of the guys going to say?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters. To me. And it'll matter to the guys." He shook his head. "You're going to have to give me some time to get used to this, Chris."

As he sat there in silence, I suddenly felt a rush of anger at his reaction. I headed for my room, shutting my door firmly and threw myself on the bed. My earlier sense of elation had evaporated. If Trev, who I'd thought to be an all-round good bloke, was giving me this silent treatment, what would other people be like? What about my family? How on earth would my father react?

I came down to earth with a bump. What was I doing here? Was this really what I wanted? Away from Lysander, all my worries and fears came flooding back.

I was supposed to meet Lysander for dinner, but I cancelled it. We met up the next afternoon at Tabs' studio, but we worked separately, and I kept aloof. I knew I was hurting Lysander; he kept on glancing at me, but I looked away.

On the way out of the studio, he grabbed my arm. "What's going on, Chris?"

I shrugged out of his hand, and shook my head at him. "Sorry, Lysander. I made a mistake. I can't go on with this." I lifted my head to look at him, and was dismayed to see the tears in his eyes.

I hated to be hurting him so badly. But how could I go on like this? It had just been a dream, nothing real. I turned and rushed down the stairs, ignoring Lysander, who was calling to me.

Back in the flat, Trev was pacing up and down in the communal living area. "You got over this gay phase yet?" he asked.

"Yep," I said baldly. "Coming out for a pint?"

He shook his head. "Don't think so, mate. Perhaps tomorrow." And he went away.

I sat down at the table, looking around the bleak room, imagining myself back in Lysander's elegant little loft. What on earth had I done?

For the next twenty-four hours, I basically hibernated. Cocooned in my bed, with only the kettle and a jar of instant for company, I studied and ignored the world. Who cared if I was straight or gay? When it came down to it, I was here to study, to get a degree. That was all it was about.

That Sunday, I'd promised to go home for the day, to attend church and have lunch with the family. I felt like death warmed up, and it was the last thing I wanted to do, but I'd promised. So I slipped out of the flat early, just pausing to pick up a pile of post from the communal table, and dashed to the railway station.

Of course, I was late, slipping into the church once they had already started singing the first hymn. Dad was up there, in the new vestments provided by the energetic fund-raising activities of the devoted ladies of the parish. I could see Mum and Liz on the front pew, with big brother Rob, his wife and kids. I skulked into the back row and picked up the shabby hymnal.

Gradually, the familiar words and rituals calmed me down and made everything seem as if my life was not coming to an end, as if there was still hope. And Dad's words during the sermon, all about the infinite ability to forgive, seemed somehow to make me feel that possibly, just possibly, I could get back with Lysander.

Back at the vicarage, while my mother put the finishing touches to the Sunday roast, I found myself reluctant to deal with the assorted nieces and nephews, and escaped to my old refuge, the shed at the bottom of the garden. It didn't take long for Liz to find me there.

She gave me a quick hug. "Good to see you," she said, looking at me with her usual intensity. "I have to say, there's a lot less of the Tom Kitten about you now!"

I grinned, pulling my now baggy white shirt away from my chest. "No risks from exploding buttons today," I confirmed. "And by the way—your money," I said, handing over a pile of twenties.

She took it with a wry grin, not bothering to check the amount. "Thank you. I take it this is honestly come by, and will not leave you starving for the rest of the term?"

I shook my head. "Honest hard labour," I said, before the words sank in and I felt myself blushing.

Her eyes narrowed. "There's something else about you," she said slowly. "Come on, baby brother. Spill the beans. What's been going on?"

I took a deep breath. I could never keep anything from my sister; she had this way about her that makes you bare your soul. She'll make a good priest. Although I know she's aiming for Bishop at the least. I won't be surprised if she ends up the first female Archbishop of Canterbury. And she'll be a damned good one. "I met someone," I confessed.

Her face broke into a wide grin. "And what's his name?" she asked.

Honestly, you could have knocked me over with a feather. "You knew?"

She wrapped her arms around me. "Of course I knew. I'm omniscient, haven't you realized that by now?" She kissed me soundly on the cheek. "Let's just say it was a good guess. I have been watching you for some time, you know."

I sank to the dirty floor, my legs unwilling to hold me. "Do you think other people know already?"

"You mean Mum and Dad? I doubt it. Although Mum may have her suspicions. And don't go thinking Dad is going to send you straight to hell for this. He's not like that. I've sat in on some of his counselling. He's not going to treat you differently because you're his son." She crouched down by me. "So come on, spill the beans. What's his name? How did you meet?"

So, sitting there in the chilly shed, I told her all an edited version of my meeting with Lysander. "But after Trev's reaction, I got cold feet. Freezing cold. So I broke it off. But now I'm wondering if I was an idiot."

"Wondering? Of course you were an idiot!" Liz exclaimed. "And you haven't been in touch with him since?"

"It was only Friday," I commented. "But I just don't know what to do."

"And this modelling stuff, you've really earned enough to put yourself back in the black?"

I pulled out the pile of post I'd grabbed before leaving from my pocket, and handed it to Liz. "There's a bank statement there. Check it with your own eyes."

"No, I believe you," she said, riffling through the letters idly. "Good on you, Chris." She turned another envelope over. "What's this one? Looks like it was delivered by hand."

The envelope was heavy, cream-coloured paper, the writing in brown ink, elaborate and stylish. It just said "Chris".

I knew it had to be from Lysander, and my stomach plummeted down through the foundations of the shed.

"It's from him?" Liz asked.

I nodded, turning it over and over in my hands.

She squeezed my shoulder, then got up. "I'll leave you to read it."

"Don't. Stay, Liz, please. I may need your shoulder to cry on." I opened the heavy envelope, and spread out a thick sheet of paper. So like him, a real quality item. It even had his name printed at the top: Lysander Chateris.

Chris,

I know I pushed you into this, dragged you out of the closet, and generally took away your option to choose. And it's my fault you're having second thoughts. But please believe me, I miss you so much. I really thought we had something special. Give me another chance? We can take it slower... And whatever happens, we can't let Tabs down. She was worried about us.

Ring me?

L.

I read it through again and again. Liz was looking at me, obviously dying to know what he said, but trying not to pry. "He wants me to ring him," I said.

"Then ring him!" she urged.

I shrugged. "No credit on my phone."

"I thought you were floating in cash now?" she asked.

Another shrug. "Perhaps I exaggerated. I'm in the black, and I'll have enough to be able to get through if I keep on with this job. But the phone's a luxury I can live without. Even in this day and age..."

"You know, there is such a thing as a landline. Go, ring him. I'll keep the hordes at bay."

I went into the study, where the vicarage's only phone was based. I know, terribly antiquated. It still seemed near sacrilege to use it, after being lectured so often about the expense, and all that. My hands were trembling as I tapped in the number—luckily, written on the bottom of Lysander's letter. My fingers ran over the heavy paper—amazing, really. Who wrote letters in this day and age,

let alone had engraved paper. It made me realise just how little I knew him. But I really wanted to get to know more.

The phone rang, then picked up. "Hello?"

For a brief moment, terrified, I thought of slamming the phone down. But I realised that I'd have to face Liz's wrath, which, so to speak, girded my loins.

"Lysander? I got your note."

"Chris! I didn't recognise the number. You're lucky I picked up." He paused for a moment. "You read it?"

"I did, and I have to admit it's not your fault. I panicked. You didn't make me do anything I didn't want, deep down. I was just so deeply in denial... I didn't realise myself. You woke me up, pulled me out."

"I know, other side of Narnia," he said with warmth in his voice. "So can we try again?"

"I'd—I'd like that, Lysander. I'm catching the 5:05 train back. See you this evening?"

Mum's roast was, as always, delicious, and it was good to catch up with the family, especially now I knew everything was going to be okay. But I couldn't wait to catch the train and head back to Lysander.

Liz offered to walk with me to the station, so we strolled down the lane past the church, round by the little school where we'd both started our lessons, and down the hill to the station. Then I spotted an unusual car in the station car park. Low, black, two-seater. Lysander. "Thanks for everything, sis," I said, giving her a quick hug. "I think he's come to pick me up. And I'm not quite ready for the meet the family thing yet."

"I'll let you off this time," she said, poking me in the ribs as she'd done when I'd been a pesky kid. "But you're not going to get away with it for long, you know. You've got to tell Mum and Dad someday soon."

"I promise. But now—go!"

She left, blowing me a kiss as she headed back up the hill.

Lysander had got out of the car and was lounging on the bonnet. He looked like something out of a gay fantasy, lithe and handsome, dressed to perfection. I looked down at my scruffy jeans and trainers, and inwardly shrugged. It wasn't

as if I could wave a wand and turn into something from an Attitude front cover between the steps and the car park.

He looked up at me rather shyly as I approached the car. "Thought I'd give you a lift," he said. "Then I got scared and nearly turned round again. But I saw you coming down the hill..."

I took him in my arms, and kissed him. Sometime later, I pulled away. "And now it's going to be all over the parish," I said. "The poor vicar, they'll say. What he has to go through with his children."

"You don't sound as if you mind too much," Lysander said, draping one arm around me.

"My sister told me some home truths. Made me see life was not as black and white as I'd thought it was. And—I missed you, Lysander. You didn't push me into anything. I'm grateful for everything. And I want to try again. If—if you'll have me, that is?"

"Idiot," he said, pulling me close to him. "Why do you think I drove up here? Come on, let's get back to Uni, see if we can make things work this time. Deal?"

"Deal."

So that's what we did. I'd love to say he swept me off my feet, put rose petals around the bed, touched my life with magic, but it wasn't like that. We just became part of each other's lives, almost seamlessly. And everything was better because he was there.

Trev and I sorted things out, gradually, although we never fell back into quite the same mates-down-the-pub rhythm as before. With my new, fitter physique, I left the social crew and started rugby training again. I might even make it onto the team next season. Lysander loves watching me, although he isn't so keen on the bumps and bruises.

We finished the work for Tabs, but now that my finances are in the black, I don't think I'm going to do any more modelling work. It was never really my sort of thing, although I have a new respect for the patience and skill of those who do it full time. Not for me.

However, there was one final consequence of all that stuff, which I really need to get down on paper. You see, after Lysander and I had been going out

for about four months, and we were seriously beginning to look at shared flats for the next year, when I'd be in my third year and he was planning to carry on post-grad, I had a call from my Dad on my finally reconnected phone. He was in the area for a regional meeting with the Bishop, and would like to meet up for lunch.

I had to admit I wondered what was going on, but I'm never going to be one to turn down a free meal, so I went to the old-fashioned restaurant in the town centre. To my surprise, before the soup arrived, he passed me a magazine, with a coloured tab marking a page.

"Like to explain this to me, Christopher?" he said, as I noted the title—'*New Studies in Classics*' and opened the page.

The article was titled "A New Look at the Warren Cup" and there, in all its academic glory, was a photo of me and Lysander.

Well, I didn't know where to look. In doubt, fall on family habits and blame your siblings. "I was overdrawn. Liz told me to sort myself out. So I did some modelling..." I began. Then I glanced up at my father, and was relieved to see that he was smiling. "You don't mind?"

"Well, I have to say it was a bit of a shock to see quite so much of my youngest son in a scholarly revue, but... no, I don't mind, Chris. I'm disappointed that you didn't think you could share your pecuniary problems with me, though."

I took a deep breath. "Then perhaps I should tell you now, Dad. The other boy in the photo, Lysander, he's my boyfriend."

The soup arrived at that moment, giving me a moment to persuade my heart to start beating again.

Dad looked at me, took a spoonful of soup, then put his spoon down. "And when do we get to meet him?"

Was that all? For a brief moment I almost felt cheated, as if the big coming-out speech and horrified reaction was something I'd been cherishing. But who was I kidding? As if my father, compassionate and loving, could ever really be like that. "You want to meet him?"

"Of course. Why not bring him home for Easter? You are helping out for the Good Friday service as usual, aren't you?"

I have to admit that I almost groaned, as the sheer bleakness of Good Friday and the interminable anthem St Ethelred's always sings is not exactly

something I look forward to, but I'd never tell Dad that. "Of course. I'd love to."

For a moment, Dad looked solemn. "Your mother warned me about this. She had this feeling about you. You know, I'd always dreamt of officiating at the ceremonies for my children. But Rob chose to get married by the army chaplain. Liz says she's not planning to marry. And now... there's actually an act of parliament to say you can't marry in church."

I reached out for Dad's hand. "Perhaps that'll change one day. Not that we're even close to think of getting married. But at the rate which things are changing..."

And Dad smiled. And I did too.

A couple of months after that, Lysander and I were in my room at home, getting ready for another family dinner. Bit of a squash, it was, but I was grateful that no one had tried to make us sleep in different rooms.

"Pass me my hair gel?" Lysander said, contorting in front of the mirror.

I reached over the bed, picked it up and then somehow slipped and ended on my knees by the bed, the gel rolling underneath.

"Clumsy," he said as I shimmied down, trying to fish it out. It was almost out of reach. I stretched as far as I could, but instead of the can, managed to grab something small and shiny.

I looked at the button in my fingers. "Wow," I said, turning it over. "You'll never believe it, but without this button, we'd never have met."

Lysander, trying to tame his hair without the missing gel, looked puzzled, so I explained, told him about the year before, the shirt, the debt, everything. He leant over and kissed me. "Glad you took your sister's advice," he said. "I really owe her my thanks."

We got ready, and went downstairs. As I closed the door behind me, I couldn't help thinking how lucky I was. For want of a button... I gained everything.

Better than a nail any day.

The End

Author Bio

After what feels like a lifetime working in motorsport—not F1, as she frequently has to explain—Melandra has finally achieved her dream of turning the real motorsport world into fiction. Her first romance, Track Limits, was published in December by Dreamspinner Press, followed by three short stories, also with a motorsport element. She is now working on books two and three with the heroes of her book, Mark and Jordan.

When not at work or at the track, Melandra reads as much as she can manage (or as much as she can afford) and is very grateful for the invention of e-books, without which her home would by now be struggling under archeological layers of paper. She lives in Europe but longs to move to the Shetland Islands one day.

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