

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 7

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Volume 7

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 1.

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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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

[Sunset in Prague](#), [Purple mountain sunset](#)

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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FOREVER UNDER A RAINBOW

By Posy Roberts

Photo Description

Two men walk hand in hand along a trail. It's obvious one man knows the way through the field of native grasses, and the man who is a half step behind trusts his partner but might be apprehensive about the situation or where he's being led. They appear to be talking in intimate tones. They touch from fingers to forearms as they head toward the horizon.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I just came out to my best friend and she encouraged me to open myself up for love. Not knowing where to begin looking for another guy to meet (I'm not the club-going type) I went online and registered a free online dating profile. A lot of people there only wanted sex, but I was still a virgin and didn't want my first time to be with any random guy. I am a hopeless romantic and was looking for love. I was honest about what I was looking for and had some nice chats, but whenever HE went online, I ignored all other messages. We talked the nights away, getting to know each other and not trying to get in each other's pants. We built a meaningful connection and it wasn't long until we spoke on the phone and decided to meet. Dinner, a walk in the park, stolen glances and accidentally bumping into each other. A perfect date we didn't want to end. When I was home the first thing I did was checking the site and he was waiting for me. I called him, we talked for hours and I knew it was a terrible idea, but I confessed that I might be falling for him. Couldn't stop myself. He said he felt the same way. The happiest moment in my life. We had many great dates, talked about all the important things - the possibility of kids, marriage, being out. Everything seemed perfect and possible. Then we planned our first time, both nervous and exciting and realized we were both exclusive bottoms. I might be a virgin, but I could never see myself being the top. I craved something different, the same thing he wanted and needed. Please give us a HEA, because our love should conquer every obstacle and even though we will never allow a third into our relationship, I love him and need us to find a way to be enough for each other.

Sincerely,

Marc F

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: medical personnel, businessmen/lawyers, friends to lovers, self-acceptance, online dating, sex roles, compromise, coming out, almost perfect for each other

Word Count: 22,536

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FOREVER UNDER A RAINBOW

By Posy Roberts

1. Violet

Internet Dating

“Tell me everything! What was it like? Did it hurt much? Did it feel amazing? Was he as hot as his photo?”

I didn't answer right away, and I could see my best friend was about ready to blast off into the stratosphere the longer we walked in silence. I'd met up with a guy I'd been chatting with for the past few weeks and had planned on having sex with the handsome not-quite stranger.

Gina had met up with a guy of her own. She was the queen of online dating and had been trying to pass on her know-how to me. She'd had both great and horrible experiences. This was *all* new to me, and it wasn't going well.

Acquaintances didn't call us Barbie and Ken simply because we were best friends. We were both pegged as superficial lackwits because of our blonde hair and blue eyes. Few took the time to bother getting to know us. It was easier to stick us in boxes and pretend we were shallow and unworthy of intelligent thought or interesting conversation. We were grateful to have each other to understand how it felt to be dismissed out of hand because of a first impression based on an ignorant stereotype.

Now Gina and I were on our way back to our apartment building after our mutually failed meet-ups, and she wanted every detail of my experience because she'd just told me what had happened to her.

“Bridger! You're killing me. Tell me! Was it as good as you expected? Was he a good kisser? What was it like?”

“It was like nothing,” I mumbled. I had a hard time making direct eye contact with her, so I looked at the leaf-covered toes of my boots instead. I focused on the crunching sound our steps made until I knew I had to give her a better answer. “It didn't happen. I couldn't do it.”

“What do you mean? You chickened out *again*?”

Yes, again.

I tried to shove her probing questions away with defensive body posturing, pulling the corduroy collar of my jacket tighter around my neck, but she wouldn't let up. It was tough to admit that I struggled with getting physically

intimate without knowing a person. Men were supposed to be okay with no strings attached sex, but I wasn't. And the guy I'd met that night ended up being a condescending asshole who was probably most at home in front of a mirror kissing his own biceps rather than interacting with human beings.

"Did you even kiss him? Jerk each other off?"

"You see, that's the problem, Gina," I shot back, looking at her. "I don't want to get jerked off like that and come right home. I have a perfectly functioning hand that's served me well for years. I want something more."

"Did you kiss him?"

"He didn't want to. He just went for my belt, and when I tried to lean in for a kiss, he said, 'Not on the mouth.' When I kissed his neck, he made it very obvious there was only one thing he wanted me to kiss."

"Asshole."

"That's *not* where he was directing my head." She slapped me on the arm and snorted. "But yeah." I didn't tell her this was typical so far on my adventures in dating gay men.

I came out only a few months ago, and Gina was the first person I told, naturally. The day after my reveal, she had me on various gay websites—news, chat, forums, blogs—and of course, she suggested a free dating site.

Gina's intervention was her way of getting me out there and acquainted with a whole new culture, and it was like stepping into a radically novel world. The interaction I'd had with the guy tonight was an up-close-and-personal reality check for me. This was nothing like my experience dating women.

I'd always thought I was simply a late bloomer and that eventually cleavage and cloying lash-batting would appeal to me. They never did.

I started dating Anna when we were both seventeen. We'd met at her church-sponsored youth group get-together, the kind used by church leadership to convert insecure teens into a way of life sanctified by God. I was smitten by Anna because we had so many common interests, and eventually, I was blindly swallowed up by her evangelical faith. The things we do for love... and all that jazz.

We had an innocent affair, for the most part, because of her beliefs. She insisted on waiting until she was married to have sex, and I was cool with that. I was in no rush. We got to know each other really well instead, because we

weren't obsessed with losing our virginity. That didn't mean we didn't experiment.

Anna and I eventually drifted apart. She became a missionary after her first year in college, and I easily let go of my newer faith and became an agnostic again. I discovered I hadn't truly believed in Anna's God, but I had believed in Anna.

When other women didn't appeal to me after that, I was confused. I'd dated, but nothing ever felt right. I never connected. Some of the time it was because the women I went out with were more concerned with looking pretty than being interesting or showing their intelligence through good conversation, as if being smart would be an affront to me. Other times it was because they moved way too fast. I was used to a relaxed, slow pace and deep emotional connections.

I confessed all of my confusion about women to Gina after struggling for far too long. I told her I didn't find most women attractive. That apparently got the gears going in her head. One night she jokingly said, "Well, maybe you're bisexual or gay and you never knew it." I didn't respond.

She ended up speaking the truth.

Within a month, I had come out to her. I didn't say "I'm gay" or "I'm bisexual" because I didn't know which I was. I came out by saying, "I'm not straight."

Gina was ready for me to start waving a rainbow flag to tell the world. She was certainly ready to start waving one in support of me. I needed to find out who I was first because I wasn't entirely sure. There would be no rainbow anything for me. Ever. I didn't need to advertise that information, especially when all I really knew was that I wasn't straight. Facing the truth initially terrified me because I didn't really know what being *not straight* meant, in practice.

One night after draining two bottles of wine, I opened a new Word document on my computer and used Gina's dating site knowledge to help sign me up on Grindr and create a profile. She figured getting out and amongst my people would help me feel more comfortable in my skin.

"They're not *my people*."

"What?"

"They're strangers. Friends and family are *my people*. It would be great to find someone who could be though. I'm game."

“All right. Let’s get this profile finished up then.”

I hated the photo she insisted on me using, but she said it would be great because it was an attention grabber. I looked more like a Ken doll than a human being, but add Photoshop elements in there, and it was downright scary. My skin looked like plastic, but she said it looked flawless, which was exactly my point. I was full of flaws, and she was putting an image out there that made it seem like I was perfect, when I was so very far from that. Apparently, the photo appealed because by the next day, I had several hits on my profile.

Learning about online dating had been an adventure all its own, but after spending the summer *dating* gay men, I knew not to expect love. It was all based on the superficial, but Gina had encouraged me to stick with it to see how *not straight* I was and to figure out what I liked in a man.

Hooking up was all it could be called. Most of these guys wanted nothing to do with me. All they wanted was my dick or my ass or photos of them beforehand, which I never provided. If they liked the Ken doll photo, they got the Ken doll anatomy too, until they proved they wanted something more than the Photoshopped façade.

I knew I wasn’t setting myself up for success with that sort of attitude, but I was afraid. I was scared of putting myself out there.

Gina had the sense not to push me any further about my successes, or lack thereof, that autumn night as she unlocked the door to our building. We headed up the stairs in silence, and when we got to our floor, she went to her door, and I went to mine. She fumbled and dropped her keys and then stooped to pick them up.

“Do you want to come over to my place to talk?” I asked.

“Gawd, yes!” She followed me into my apartment and made herself at home, pouring us each a glass of wine.

I brought my iPad over to the couch and sat next to her, logging in to Grindr so she could see the site more easily than on my phone. I found the guy’s profile, the muscle kisser. He was hot—dark hair and sexy, sleepy eyes—and he’d been nice while chatting, not the callous prick he’d ended up being in person.

“I couldn’t go through with it because he didn’t want to know my name. He just wanted me to suck him right there or else go back to his place to fuck.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” she asked with a smirk.

I gave her a look. I didn't understand her nonchalance. Ever since I realized I liked guys, it was as if she expected me to turn into some sort of sex maniac. Maybe she thought I'd been so repressed because of my mistaken heterosexuality that I now needed to break free. I'd never felt repressed at all. If I felt anything different since coming out, it was more nervous because of situations like I'd experienced that night. I didn't know the rules of the game yet.

"What do you think?" I asked her. "How would you feel if some guy didn't give a shit what your name was but wanted to get in your pants?"

"When you put it like that... Yeah, I hate that, but I'm a woman. That's different."

"No, it's not," I said, frustrated that my best friend didn't understand me. "In the three years we've known each other, have you ever heard me mention wanting meaningless sex?"

"You haven't wanted sex at all because you were looking at the wrong gender." She snickered.

I shook my head. "I wasn't looking at the wrong gender. It's not that simple."

"So you figured out you're bisexual?" Finally she was serious, which I needed right then. I was glad she read me correctly.

"Maybe. Probably not. Does it matter?"

"It might matter."

"But more than needing to know that, I want a relationship with someone. I don't want to give it away to any guy or girl who will have me. I'm not going to bend over for just anyone. And I'm certainly not going to bend over for a guy who doesn't even give a shit about my name."

"I know. I mean... I know this about you, but I thought if you got out there and experienced a little hands-on time, you'd be less uptight. You're twenty-three, and you've been with all of three women, if you can even use the word 'with' when all you did was make out with them."

"I've done more than that."

"Barely. So, the guy you met up with tonight..." she said as she pulled the iPad closer. I watched her scan his profile. She clicked around to a few other guys I'd either talked to or met up with.

"I'm seeing a pattern," she said after spending some time reading. "You're talking with some pretty... extreme guys."

"Extreme?"

"Well, look at this guy," she said as she pulled up a profile. It was a guy who had crept me out, so I'd quit responding to him. "Who says crap like this? 'Looking to creampie your hole,'" she read. "Eww."

"I didn't read that. Maybe he just added it, but I stopped talking to him anyway."

"What does your profile say again? You might be getting these guys because of some innocuous little thing that needs to be deleted."

I clicked through to mine. I hadn't edited it since I'd signed up. I wondered how many guys had contacted me after looking only at my Ken doll photo, never once bothering to read on to find out more about me.

Bottom seeks a lickin'.

"What the hell?" I said, pulling the iPad back to my lap. "I thought I deleted that."

Gina gave me a wide-eyed look.

"Did you...?" I asked.

"No, no! No, I didn't. I remember you wrote that as a joke, but I swear you deleted it before putting it on the site."

I groaned and clicked Edit Profile, waiting as patiently as I could for the page to load.

"No wonder you were getting guys looking for a quick fuck," she said after reading it.

Gina and I spent the next thirty minutes rewriting my profile, sober this time. We both read it carefully several times before hitting Save.

"That explains all the spanking fetish comments I've been getting. And more."

Gina blushed and started giggling. "Seriously? Let me see."

I gave her a reproachful look and shook my head. "I blocked those guys so their past messages disappeared."

"I'm sorry, Bridger. I'm really, really sorry."

“It’s not your fault, but I’m never writing a dating profile while drunk again. Let me tell you...”

Gina laughed and pulled me into a hug. “You’re gonna find somebody. And when they take the time to see inside your heart, they’re going to fall head over heels in love.”

“That’s all I want is to have someone look inside, to the real me, instead of only at the outside.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Gina yawned and stretched. “Sorry. I’m tired.”

“You should go to bed. We’ll go for coffee in the morning.”

“Okay. Night.”

“Night, sweetie.”

I stood at my door while Gina let herself into her apartment, and I waited until her deadbolt slid into place with a *thunk*. After locking my own door, I went back to my iPad and pulled up my renewed profile. I read it and smiled, feeling it captured my personality and desires a whole lot better than the previous version had.

When I looked at my photo, I knew I had to change it. I found the photo I’d used over on a gay forum I’d been visiting regularly and uploaded it instead. I sat on a park bench in the photo and looked nothing like a Ken doll. Gina had taken this one too, but it was after a day of hiking. My hair was a sweaty mess, I was sunburned across my cheeks and the bridge of my nose, and I looked all sorts of exhausted. What the photo really portrayed to me was that I was relaxed and comfortable in my own skin even when I was grungy from a day of exercise in the woods. I wanted to feel that same level of comfort with a man.

Before going to bed, I headed over to the forum GaySpeak for a quick perusal to see if anything interesting had happened in the last few days. The site covered the entire spectrum of gay life. I’d spent time there over the last months because it was a fairly anonymous way to get answers to many of the questions I was too afraid to ask. I found out I wasn’t the only one who had so many queries, and I also found out I wasn’t the only person to realize he was not straight in his twenties.

I decided to pose a question. *How can I use a dating site to find love instead of just sex?* I gave a small summary of my dating experience so far, and before I’d had a chance to log off, a couple of people had responded. They all said the

same thing: delete my account on Grindr and sign up at a dating site where guys were looking for more than just busting their nut. They gave several suggestions, so I went and explored them all.

Thirty minutes later, I was registered on OkCupid with the new photo and revised bio Gina had helped with. Maybe I'd have better luck now. I deleted Grindr, too.

2. Indigo

Screen Names

I went about my daily life as normally as I could, considering I had attractive men messaging me on a regular basis and wanting to get to know me. There were still a few of the assholes on the new site who only wanted cock shots or more. But now, there were men to have insightful conversations with as well.

After spending my workday listening to patients' complaints about their pain and seeing their pleading looks that begged for me to please take it away rather than asking them to comply with their physical therapy plan, it was nice to go home and relax by chatting online with interesting men. That was how I came across a guy who called himself Rock-Mohs10. I rolled my eyes at his name, thinking of that wrestler-turned-actor "The Rock". Rock-Mohs10 was talking to another guy on GaySpeak about the pain he had in his right heel.

I lurked through his past posts before introducing myself. I said I was a physical therapy assistant and asked Rock-Mohs10 a few questions about his pain. I wasn't a doctor, but it sounded like the start of plantar fasciitis from his description. I told him about a few stretches he could do, suggested he use a tennis ball to massage the bottom of his foot, and then recommended better arch support in his shoes before I recognized I was stepping into a very weird place. This was a gay forum, not a physical therapy forum. I decided to send him a private message.

Bridger: *I'm sorry. Didn't mean to butt into your conversation.*

Rock-Mohs10: *No. Thank you! I'd rather try this stuff out first before I go to a doctor.*

Bridger: *It's not a quick fix. You're forewarned.*

A few days later, Rock-Mohs10 private messaged me and told me his foot was already feeling better because of the tennis ball massage and new shoes. I suggested a few more tricks of the trade before we started talking about ourselves. I noticed he was single and lived in Minneapolis too, so I sent him a link to my profile on OkCupid. I put myself out there, and it paid off. In less than fifteen minutes, we had connected on the dating site. I was disappointed when he went by Rock-Mohs10 there too. I wondered what his real name was.

Rock-Mohs10 was twenty-six, gay, and had been in a long-term relationship, but since the breakup two years ago, he'd been *laying low*. As I continued to read, I saw he was looking for new friends only. No dating options were selected, which was disappointing because he'd been nice from what I'd seen so far. I figured we'd chat, and I'd follow his lead. I looked at his photo, but it was hard to see what he really looked like. He was tall and lean, and it looked like he had brown hair, but his profile said it was red. If it was, it was auburn. The profile also said he had green eyes. I clicked through to another photo. It was a close-up. I saw his beautiful eyes. They were green with some tawny flecks that made them look otherworldly. Freckles dotted his nose and cheeks, and I wondered how much his face would freckle in the sun.

I decided to keep Gina in the dark about him because I didn't want to jinx things before they'd had a chance to begin. He seemed great, but I'd hardly talked to him yet, and Gina had a lot going on in her own life that was taking up most of our conversation time anyway. She had started dating a guy, Tyler, whom I felt was too good to be true. It was as if he'd found her must-have list and made himself into the perfect man for her. He bought her flowers *all* the time. He was trying too hard. However, she didn't see anything suspicious about the way he acted. Every time I was around him, I felt like I was on Red Alert.

She thought I was overreacting, so eventually, I kept my suspicions to myself to keep the peace. With all the extra time she was spending with Tyler, I had more time to kill than ever. I ended up going on OkCupid to check out the new guys who had messaged me and those I'd been matched with. Eventually, I caved and downloaded the app right to my phone.

That's how I ended up being that pathetic guy who stood in line at the grocery store chatting with some stranger I may or may not ever meet. I wanted to make a soul connection, but many of the guys I was coming across still wanted to make only a physical one. Some hid it behind the convincing desire to find a boyfriend. A few seemed genuine, so I decided to meet them once they asked. *I* was too chicken to ask. Rather than meeting at a bar or going out to dinner, I tried to keep it casual by suggesting an alternative. Coffee or lunch during the week made it obvious I wasn't looking for sex à la carte.

On one of those dates, I met a guy I was considering being bold enough to ask out on a second date before we said goodbye. After he finished his last sip of coffee, his mood changed dramatically.

He leaned in and whispered, "I'll have you begging in a matter of minutes. You'll be thrusting that ass to get me as deep as I can go. Come up to my office right now."

"No thanks," I managed to say. I walked out the door and wondered how we went from talking about our favorite vacations to him envisioning bending me over his desk so quickly.

I blocked him on the app.

I ended up blocking a lot of guys and soon wondered why the hell I was doing this at all. I considered a few other dating sites after talking to one of the gay men at my clinic, and he commiserated with me about how frustrating they could be.

It was a tool to get laid. That's all it was.

Of course, you heard of people connecting on these sites, meeting in real life, and falling in love, but that happened next to never.

I decided I'd delete my OkCupid profile at the end of December. It was December fifth when I made that decision, and there was no logic as to why I decided to wait until the end of the month. Hope, I suppose, was the only reason. Hope and Rock-Mohs10.

What a stupid name. But was I one to talk?

Every few days I'd look to see if there was anyone of interest on OkCupid. Most of the time the answer was a resounding no, and I'd end up talking to Rock-Mohs10 some more. I would've liked to get to know him better, but he very much stayed in the friend zone. His foot was healing up nicely, and we started talking about other things in our lives.

He worked in a field that kept him at his computer a lot, but that's all I was able to grasp from what he'd shared about his job. He helped businesses with their business platforms, whatever those were, and it was a high-stress job. He'd originally injured his foot after taking up running to help him combat stress. He'd been training for a marathon, a personal goal he'd set for himself after losing some weight. He sent me a photo of him at his heaviest, and I couldn't help but think he was just as handsome with meat on his bones as he was without it. I told him as much.

Rock-Mohs10: *Stop it, or I'll fall in love with you.*

Bridger: *All it takes is an honest compliment? Are you truly that easy?*

He was silent for a few minutes, and I started to worry I'd crossed a line. I was trying to flirt, not insult him. But our conversations had never gone in this direction before. Strangely, after he showed me some of his vulnerability with that photo, I felt more attracted to him.

I started to type that I was sorry when a new message came through.

Rock-Mohs10: *Easy? Not really. Willing? Maybe.*

Bridger: *Maybe? What does that hinge on?*

Rock-Mohs10: *Knowing your real name might be a good place to start.*

I laughed at the computer screen.

Bridger: *Believe it or not, my real name is Bridger.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Come on. I'm not falling for that.*

Bridger: *It's true. My mom and dad were hippies.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Hippies?*

Bridger: *Yep. The real life thing, from the 70s even.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Sounds like you have older parents. I'm the youngest kid in my family so mine were older than average.*

Bridger: *Me too.*

Rock-Mohs10: *So, back to Bridger?*

Bridger: *Tell me your name first and then I'll tell you the whole story behind my name.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Stone.*

Bridger: *LOL. And you go by Rock-Mohs10? Here I worried that you wanted to be like "The Rock", that Dwayne Johnson guy.*

I hoped I hadn't offended him, but from what I already knew about him, I suspected he'd laugh it off.

Rock-Mohs10: *That's it. I'm changing my screen name!*

Bridger: *Haha. Not so fast. It fits you, Stone. ;-)*

Rock-Mohs10: *Did you miss the Mohs10 part? I'm really Rock-Hard.*

Bridger: *Wow. Your humility is staggering.*

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. It was great we could tease each other. When I saw my reflection in the screen, I realized I was sitting in my apartment alone, grinning like a fool.

Rock-Mohs10: *Back to the story of your name.*

Bridger: *How about I tell you in person? I'll tell you the whole story rather than the watered down, abbreviated version.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Okay. Out of curiosity's sake, what's the watered down version?*

Bridger: *My parents were hippies who liked bridges.*

Rock-Mohs10: *I can't wait to hear the whole story.*

I couldn't wait to tell him. I couldn't wait to meet him either.

We planned to see each other the following weekend. I'd suggested lunch, but because of his marathon training schedule, he needed to meet later. We decided on dinner. I wasn't expecting to ever go to dinner as a first date with a man I met online, yet this was what worked out.

3. Blue

The Date

My palms were sweaty, and I wiped them on my jeans, feeling even more self-conscious because of the denim. The restaurant Stone had suggested was much fancier than I had expected. I felt like I should've been wearing trousers and a tie, if not a suit. He'd sent me a text message saying he was running late because of an accident on the I-35 bridge, so the host had seated me with the promise he'd direct Stone to the table when he arrived.

I ended up ordering a bottle of wine and tentatively sipped at my glass while I waited. I sent a text to Gina—a freak-out text, as we jokingly referred to the texts we sent each other in moments like this.

I'm not sure about this date. What if it goes horribly wrong?

She immediately sent a message back. *You're gonna be fine. You're just there to get to know each other better.*

She was right. There was no reason to be this nervous, even if she didn't know how invested I was in this guy.

But what if he ends up like all the others? I'm not sure what I'll do because I think I like this one.

Drama King much? It's dinner not a marriage proposal.

A man cleared his throat, and I looked up. He had dark-red wavy hair pushed back off his forehead. He was dressed much like I was, relieving all my dress code worries. He had on dark jeans, a casual button-down shirt, and trendy leather shoes that looked comfortable, not stuffy or formal.

"Bridger Jenkins?"

I stood and held out my hand. "Stone Moore?" He nodded. I smiled as he gave my hand a firm shake that lasted a little longer than normal, and then it softened. His fingers glided over my palm in a way that could only be considered flirtatious. "I'm glad you made it. Was the accident bad?"

He shook his head, and his face turned grim. "It wasn't good. Damn ice. It's slick out there."

I gestured to the chair next to me rather than the one across the table. "Please, sit. I ordered a bottle of Pinot Noir. Have a glass and relax. I figured a

light- to medium-bodied wine would be good. You said you like reds on your profile.”

My mouth was sprinting because of nerves, yet Stone looked completely at ease. He unfolded his cloth napkin and laid it in his lap as our waitress greeted him and expertly poured him a glass of wine. She topped my glass off as well before she ran through the specials for the night, and then she left us alone.

Stone took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair as if he were either stretching his back or trying to crack it. I gave him a closed-mouth smile and kept any work thoughts out of my head. He was training for a marathon, so he was bound to be sore somewhere, and sitting in a car in standstill traffic certainly wasn't easy on the back. He didn't need me scrutinizing his aching muscles.

“I'm nervous” slipped out of my mouth.

“Me too,” he said. “I don't usually date. Plus, we've gotten along so well online.”

“That's probably why. Online is different than real life,” I said as I reached for my glass. I took a healthy sip before setting it down and finally making more direct eye contact.

His eyes were more gorgeous in person, and they mesmerized me. I scooted my chair in closer to the table, closer to him, and I leaned in.

“How's the training going?” I asked.

“Really good. My friend has been running marathons for years, and I'm following his beginner's training schedule. I think I'll be ready when the day comes. And then I'll probably sleep for a week afterward. I need to do this to prove to myself that I can.”

“Better you than me,” I said with a low laugh. “Running on the elliptical is about as far as I'll go. I'd rather hike on the ground than run on it. Too many joint injuries.”

“I don't love it,” Stone said, and then he gave me a quick flash of his smile. His lips were pale pink next to his fair skin. I allowed my gaze to drift across the freckles on his cheeks and nose. He had a few more than had been captured on the photo he'd posted online. I liked them. They made his enchanting eyes less powerful. They made him seem more down to earth and less... something.

Our waitress returned. My stomach was a little queasy, but I knew most of that was nerves. I'd been ravenous just an hour ago. He ordered shrimp and

pasta, and I decided on the steak. I was glad when the waitress left us again so we could continue talking.

“Now, I need the long, convoluted story about your name,” he said. “You promised.”

“Long and convoluted? I don’t know if I said it would be that.” I feigning affront, which only caused him to laugh.

It was a great laugh, loud and carefree. And deep. His voice rumbled in his chest, and when he spoke again to encourage me to tell the story, I swore I could feel it in my chest too. Who knew that I had a thing for men with deep voices? But I guess I did.

“Well, my parents used to be hippies, but then again, do you ever truly unhippify?” It was a rhetorical question, and his only answer was a smile, so I continued. “I suppose a lot of people went from hippie to yuppie in the eighties, but not my parents.” I coughed. “So, maybe this *is* the long, convoluted version.” My nerves were turning me into a motor mouth. “Well, one summer Mom and Dad decided they wanted to travel across the country in their old VW van. Dad spent weeks fixing the engine with my older siblings. The youngest, Lotus, was eleven at the time, so even she helped. Or so the story goes.”

“Are you close to your family?”

I nodded, mentally noting to get back to talking about them later and to ask about his family as well. “So the van was drivable, but it wasn’t looking the best on the outside because of hail damage, and this was supposed to be my parents’ last hurrah or maybe a goodbye to their wild youth.”

Stone watched me with great intensity as if he were hanging on to every word I was saying.

“They were in their forties, so my oldest brother jokes that this was their mid-life crisis trip. I think he’s still bitter that he had to spend the summer driving all my other siblings around to baseball practice and swimming lessons, but that’s a whole ‘nother story.” I took a sip of wine trying to remember where I got off track. No wonder I never told the extended version of the story. It took forever.

“Hail damage,” Stone said.

“Right. Thanks. Mom and all my siblings ended up painting the van in a rainbow of daisies to cover the hail dents. It was hippie heaven, especially after dad threw a mattress in the back. They were going to drive cross-country, sleep

in the thing, and cook on a camping stove they took along. The only other money they were going to shell out was to stay over in state parks, and of course to buy maps along the way. Their true goal was to drive over as many bridges as possible as they crossed America.”

“Ah!” Stone lit up as he nodded.

“Don’t get ahead of me,” I said as I reached for his hand and patted it. He slipped his fingers between mine and didn’t let go. It felt so natural. I momentarily lost my train of thought as I looked at our joined fingers. I noticed my nervousness had disappeared. I liked how he made me feel as if I’d known him forever. Looking back up, I continued, much more relaxed in my manner of speaking. “They broke down in the middle of the night on a bridge in the middle of nowhere. It spanned a huge gorge, and as you guessed, that’s where I was conceived, they think. Or hope. They almost named me Gorge. I’m glad they didn’t go that direction.”

“Conceived in a VW van that was painted with a rainbow of flowers.” Stone smirked. “No wonder you ended up gay as a daisy.”

I hesitated, not sure how he’d react if I told him I wasn’t entirely comfortable with the designation *gay*. Then I pushed on with my tale. “But that’s just part of it. I was so much younger than my other siblings that I was going to be closer in age to my nieces and nephews than I would be to my youngest sister. Mom and Dad hoped I’d be a bridge between the generations.”

Stone let out a sappy, “Awww,” and I got embarrassed. “Bridging the generation gap.”

“It’s such a pathetically dorky story, and I can’t believe I just went into all of that on our first date.” I covered my face.

“Don’t do that.” He squeezed my fingers, so I looked at him. “I want to see what you look like when you’re feeling shy.”

“How come?”

“You’re beautiful when you get flushed.”

I tried to ignore the overt flirting by redirecting the conversation away from me. “Tell me about your name. Where did Stone come from?”

“I don’t have the interesting backstory you do. My parents wanted a tough name for a boy so I wouldn’t get bullied like my brother Felix did. People made fun of him *because* of his name—Felix the Cat and other asinine things—so

Mom and Dad weren't going to make the same mistake twice. Stone seemed impenetrable to them, which is a joke. 'Dumb as a rock' for starters. When my classmates caught on to the fact that I was gay, I got flack about who I was rather than just my name. At least until my older brothers threatened anyone who bothered me. It was good to have protective siblings."

I nodded in agreement and was about to ask more about his family when the waitress delivered our food. It was with reluctance that I let go of his hand so we could eat.

He fed me a shrimp right from his fingers, and when he mouthed a bite of steak from my fork, my jaw dropped open as I stared at his lips. When I regained enough presence of mind to look in his eyes again, I saw how delighted he was that he had that effect on me. I'd never been more attracted to anyone in my life, let alone that turned on. It was as if some switch had been suddenly flipped inside of me.

"Tell me about your last boyfriend" was his segue from our mutual eye fucking. That doused the flames almost immediately.

I sipped my wine and glanced around the restaurant for several seconds before I was able to look at him again. He looked happy... hopeful.

"I've never had one," I said, and I saw his face fall. It drooped as if I'd delivered a blow to his heart.

"What do you mean?" he asked with such sincerity etched in his brow that I somehow didn't react in a defensive manner at all.

"Uh... my last boyfriend... was... a... girl..."

He looked at me confused. "You mean... are you straight? Curious?"

I immediately shook my head, perhaps a little too vehemently. Then I stupidly added, "No!"

Stone slowly leaned forward and grabbed my hand again. I nearly pulled away because it felt too intimate, but the second I felt the heat from his skin, the last thing I wanted was to let go of him. "Tell me about her?"

"There's not a lot to tell," I heard myself say, and then I shared more than I'd anticipated confessing that night. "She was never *the one*, so I'm a twenty-three-year-old virgin that just realized he was gay or bi or somewhere in the realm of not straight. That's all I really know. I'm not straight, but I've never found the right guy to even... I don't know what I mean except that I've never

met anyone I've wanted to be *with*. I've never met anyone like you." I allowed my forehead to hit the white tablecloth in mortification.

Somehow Stone managed to get the conversation back on track, or at least on a much more comfortable track for the rest of our date. He laughed at all my jokes, even the lame ones, but he made sure to let me know the joke had bombed even if he was able to see something endearing in me when I tried for a punchline I couldn't actually reach.

At the end of the night, we decided to take a quick stroll in the park across from the restaurant, as if both of us were reluctant to say goodbye. We bumped into each other on more than one occasion, and by the tenth or eleventh time, I had a sneaking suspicion this was intentional. At least on my part, it had been. I barely hid my excitement as we walked under a streetlight on our way out of the park and headed toward my car.

He leaned me up against the car's ice-cold surface. He looked at me with those intensely beautiful eyes, and it was almost as if he were sending me secret messages I wasn't sure how to interpret yet. Then he kissed me. When I should've gone right, I went left, and our noses ended up getting all smooshed together for a few seconds before I got my act together.

His lips were soft and smooth, warm even in the chilled winter air. He gave me a slow, damp peck, and I was positive that was all I was going to get. I would've been satisfied because it had been a great kiss despite the non-verbal miscommunication at the start. But then he came back in with a firmer kiss. I felt the scratch of his beard that had grown back since his most recent shave, and the sensation of stubble on my lips lit something up inside of me. I took more control of the kiss and allowed my tongue to drift into his mouth.

Stone moaned, which made me smirk. Then he took a deep breath, wrapped me in his arms, squeezed me tight, and kissed me so intensely I had to fight for my breath. It was his fingers drifting into my hair that brought me out of my oxygen-deprived haze.

Then softer kisses.

The brush of his nose on the tip of mine.

Stone rested his forehead against my own while he caught his breath.

I loved the feel of his breaths washing across my kiss-damp lips and the lemon flavor of his dessert that now lingered on my tongue.

"Good night, Bridge. Drive safely."

“Night,” I managed to say as well as giving him a pathetic wave while he walked away.

It didn't even bug me that he'd shortened my name.

4. Green

Know Thyself

I didn't hear from Stone for a week. Then he traveled over the Christmas holiday to visit his family at a ski resort. He spent most of his time on the slopes and complained to me via text about his awful sunburn. I begged for photos, wondering what his pale skin would look like with some sun, but he refused.

With all the peeling, I look like I have leprosy right now.

Come on. It can't be that bad.

I waited in vain.

When he got back home, he started acting strange.

We'd had a great time at dinner, but he didn't initiate a second date, and any time I suggested something, he already had plans. Or so he said. At first I was confused, but then as I replayed our dinner conversation over and over in my head, I suspected he was leery of my inability to more clearly pin down my recent sexual realizations. I couldn't blame him. It's not as if I presented myself in a great way that night with how I tried to explain my sexuality. I'd been wishy-washy, at best. I seemed ashamed of who I was, at worst. I would've been subtler if I'd arrived for our date with *NEWBIE* printed on my forehead.

But the way he was putting up his virtual hand to keep me at a distance hurt. I was frustrated he so easily found an excuse each time I asked him to do something because I wanted to spend more time with him. We'd had a magical time together—or so I'd thought—and had talked about so many things, including our childhoods, and I'd felt as if we'd made a genuine connection. Then nothing.

I grumbled to Gina about my worries and hurts. She brought movies over one night to distract me, but we didn't watch them despite them flashing right in front of us on my huge television. Instead, I shared with her how I thought I came off during the date: bi-curious, naïve, and insecure.

Before giving up entirely, I texted him. *Breakfast on a Wednesday morning?*

I can't right now, Bridger. This is really bad timing for me.

Okay. I'll stop asking then.

My heart broke a little when he responded with *Thank you*.

I needed to reimagine that evening with him as nothing more than a great date, but it wasn't the only great date I'd ever have. Stone had made it obvious he didn't want more with me than what we were experiencing online, and I didn't want to humiliate myself by pursuing him.

One conclusion that came from my evening with Gina was that I didn't have to stay a newbie. I could still get out there and get to know myself better and try to find a way to be more comfortable in my own skin. From what Stone had shared, he'd been out since high school or possibly even earlier, so his self-knowledge was deeply rooted. He knew what he wanted in a man, and apparently an inexperienced *not straight* guy who didn't fully understand his own sexuality wasn't it, despite how great our evening together had been.

During the coldest part of winter, I started meeting other men I'd been matched with on OkCupid. I tried to analyze how I felt, what I liked, what I hated, and what I hoped would happen again. I wanted to know who I was. On each date, I found out a little more.

Most of the time the dates were filled with innocent flirting that ended up in either a sweet or not-so-sweet kiss at the end of the night. On a couple of the hotter second or third dates with men that seemed like they had true boyfriend potential, I took a risk and went back to their place. We hastily removed our clothes and either jerked or sucked each other. Both men didn't contact me after that, and I did my best not to feel too dejected. I knew that was part of the game before starting to play again. I shouldn't have been surprised.

With each experience my *not straight* status was clarified. Of course, I hadn't been with a woman since this whole sexual awakening, and I felt I had to know.

All it took was one date with an intelligent and beautiful woman whom I had a great time with, but as soon as we kissed, I felt like I was kissing a pet rock. It was probably less exciting than kissing a rock, in fact.

Which simply made me think of Stone. That's who I wanted to be spending time with and dating.

We still chatted whenever we were on OkCupid at the same time, and we'd occasionally text, but neither of us talked about getting together anymore. It was confusing at first, but I did my best to enjoy our conversations. After the

initial uncomfortable awkwardness had worn off, it was easy to see he was a great guy who was now a great friend. On more than one occasion, I let a potential date slip away because Stone and I were lost chatting with each other. I didn't mind.

The conversations we had were varied and interesting, and I felt as if I had so much more in common with him than any of the guys I'd been seeing. It seemed—or felt—as if he were thinking the same thing. But feelings were what got me into this predicament in the first place. That kiss had been perfect, and all the right signals had been sent on our date, but I had to let that go or at least bury the memory so it wouldn't interfere with our friendship.

So we shared news and more information about our lives as well as everyday happenings and funny stories. Then he started talking more about local plays and art shows he'd been to, making recommendations then following up if I'd gone to the event.

I started to suspect he was dating someone because of all of his outings.

Why not me? I wanted to shout.

If we couldn't date, at least we could be friends. I tried to content myself with that. Yet, I wished we could be friends who met in person rather than only online or via text message.

I was pretty sure who I was now, even if I wasn't entirely comfortable in my new skin. Coming out to my parents seemed like something I needed to do, for myself and for them. I wanted them to know about the changes and discoveries I'd recently made. Fresh starts were good, especially in early spring.

Mom and Dad looked nervous as I sat on their couch facing them. Dad fiddled with a worry stone, and I could tell Mom was itching to grab the knitting that sat in a basket beside her chair. She tugged on her long, blonde-grey braid instead.

"I wanted to talk to you about something new in my life. You know how I've never really dated much?"

"Yes," Mom said. Dad scrutinized me and pushed his thick fingers into his grey hair to give himself a quick scratch. I had to get this out there so they didn't have heart attacks from unwarranted stress caused by the anxiety I was creating.

“Well, I figured out I’m not straight.”

“Oh, you’re gay. That’s it?” Mom’s aging face lit up with relief, and she slapped her knees in what looked like delight.

“Not straight,” I corrected in a low voice.

“You scared the bejeezus out of us,” she said over me. “We thought you had cancer or you were going to join the military or something like that. We had no idea it was good news.”

“It’s good news?”

“Compared to what your mother’s mind has conjured up since you called this morning and said you needed to talk to us, this is wonderful news,” Dad said. “So, are you dating someone?”

“I’ve been seeing a few guys recently, but there’s one that I’d like to see more of. He says the timing isn’t right, but we chat all the time. His name is Stone.”

“Tell us all about him,” Mom said as she redirected us into the kitchen. She immediately started pulling food from the fridge, dishing it up on a plate, and microwaving it.

I wasn’t entirely sure why I’d brought up Stone, but my parents knew how my brain worked. I wasn’t the persistent type that went after what he wanted unless it was very important, and years prior, they’d perfected ways to motivate me.

“I like him a lot. We had an amazing date but only one in December. He got weird right afterward. He’s not much of a dater, but we chat about nearly everything under the sun. I’ve gotten mixed messages, and I’m sure I’m sending out some of my own. I’m doing my best to feel satisfied with our friendship.”

“If you like him, you need to go after him,” Dad said. “You need to be more direct and come right on out and ask him. Don’t beat around the bush.”

“That’s right, honey,” Mom said with an overexaggerated nod. “Some men don’t have a clue about picking up on subtlety. You need to tell him how you feel about him and don’t be shy about it.”

While I ate, I answered all their questions, and they asked a lot. Some were harder to answer than others, especially admitting how Stone and I had met. They weren’t shocked, and they certainly weren’t judgmental. They also made me pay attention to how much I liked this guy.

As we talked, they both kept using the word *gay*. I didn't. In fact, I avoided using any label if I could. I didn't understand why I was still so reluctant to take that on, especially after my recent disastrous kiss with a woman. I'd convinced myself the kiss had been bad because we hadn't had sexual chemistry.

Mom left the room to "find something" for me, and Dad took that as his cue to talk to me about the ins and outs of safe anal sex, as if I were a teenager. He made me promise to buy condoms and lube on the way home from their house that day. It was ridiculous, but I figured once a person became a parent they never let that job title go. I didn't mind humoring him as I ate the last few bites of pie Mom had forced on me and sipped at my coffee.

Mom returned with a bag filled with things she insisted I take with me. The blue bag had the yellow equality symbol in the center of it. She told me to wait to look inside until I got home. I hugged and kissed them both, thanking them for the food and the support. I headed to my car.

"We love you just the way you are, gay as can be," Mom said from the front step as she waved. Dad put his arm around her and kissed her cheek.

I loved them just the way they were, too, even if I had no intention of ever using that equality bag in public. When I got home and unpacked it, I saw my mom had probably given me every rainbow item she had in the house. There was a flag, a scarf, some pins, a canvas bag, and a few T-shirts. I shook my head. She was trying to show her support, but I wasn't a walking billboard, and I never would be.

5. Yellow

The Courtship

It had been a hellishly cold winter, unlike anything seen in ages. It seemed as if the entire earth had frozen over, and everyone in Minneapolis wondered if they'd ever see grass growing again. Even a yard full of weeds would've been welcomed.

When I finally saw the robins return in April, I was more than ready for warmer weather. After months of little enjoyable downtime, I needed it. When Gina dumped Tyler, I had to fight to hide my happiness that the guy was gone and my friend was back. We visited all our old haunts and did all our usual things that didn't include dating: grilling together, getting fro-yo for dessert, going to Twins home games, and hiking on local trails.

I'd even stopped going to OkCupid and now only checked the site if I was alerted to a message. I had no energy for dates, at least not the type I'd had in recent months. I was up to dating Stone though, especially after the encouragement I got from my parents. Their advice resonated. If I wanted to go out with him, I had to ask more directly.

But did I still want to? That was the question, wasn't it?

I thought back to how I'd felt in January after being brushed off. It hadn't felt good, but good had come of it. I'd gone out there and found out more about who I was, which I'd needed to do. I felt a hell of a lot more comfortable in my skin than I had in the fall, and all my conversations with Stone were part of that.

Stone and I still talked, but through texts now. That meant our conversations had become somewhat more clipped, and we didn't cover the depth of topics we used to, but instead, we were in contact most days of the week. He found a way to make me feel as if I were part of his daily routine.

What if all his talk of various plays and art shows had been a way to engage me in conversation? I might've been jumping to conclusions, but it could have been an excuse to have something more to talk about or to share an experience. Maybe that would be a good place to start.

I looked online to see if there were any interesting upcoming events, and I saw two comedians I liked who were coming to town. I decided to bite the

bullet and ask Stone if he'd enjoy going with me to either Jim Gaffigan or Lewis Black. I figured it was an easy date to say yes to since there was less expectation of conversation and most certainly no expectation of sex. From what I had gathered about him over the last months, he enjoyed comedy. I didn't know which guy made him laugh more, so I was glad I could give him options.

How about The Magic Flute?

I looked at his text and was surprised. I never would've pegged him as a fan of opera. It was a good surprise.

How about opera and a comedian? If I could go out with him more than once, I was more than up for it.

I'd love to.

After attempting to hash out the details via text, he called me.

"This will be easier by phone."

"You're right," I acquiesced. "We haven't talked since our date, so I didn't want to make *first contact*."

"I'm not the big bad wolf, ya know," he said through a chuckle that sounded forced to my ears.

"I know you're not." I couldn't help but smile. "We haven't had a lot of contact lately, and I didn't want to overstep any boundaries."

"Ah. Is that a considerate way of saying I've been an aloof asshole?"

"Not at all." *Yes*, but I didn't want to say that, at least not right to his face.

"Work has been crazy. My social life has been on fire." He paused, and I hoped he would explain his odd behavior. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Bridger. I kept turning you down because I started seeing someone. You and I had only gone out on one date... It was shitty timing." He cleared his throat.

My gut churned with jealousy, and I could feel my cheeks heating. I took a breath to say something but then stopped. I tried to shake away my anger and dejection and remember the great friendship we'd forged in recent months.

He spoke when I couldn't. "When I went skiing with my family for Christmas, I ran into my ex. We got to talking and... I thought I still loved him despite our past. I'm pretty sure when he saw my new and improved body he thought everything would be perfect now. He promised things would be

different, and I stupidly believed him. I never should've." He sighed, and it sounded self-deprecating. "Anyway, it's been over for a few months, and I needed time to shake it off. I'm sorry for not being one hundred percent honest with you."

There were a thousand words left unspoken.

I'd kept talking to him because he was interesting and funny, not because I was pining after him. Well, mostly. I wasn't going to let my hurt feelings get in the way of us being more than online friends because he wanted to give an ex-boyfriend a second chance. They had history; we only had hopeful potential.

"Thanks for being honest with me. I started to wonder if I'd read more into our evening together than was ever there because of how weird things got."

"Sorry about that. And no, I think we both felt something that night."

"I'm glad that's the case. So... if you're free and open to getting together, if the timing is right now, I'd love to see you again. I've made some... I did some dating of my own, and not one of those guys compared to you. Not even in the same realm."

Why'd I tell him that?

I dropped my head into my palm, and considering the laughter coming through my phone, I had a strong suspicion he'd heard the slapping sound of flesh meeting flesh and knew exactly how embarrassed I was by my admission. Then he got quiet very quickly.

He said in a low voice, "I couldn't get you out of my head either."

"Really?" I sounded as dumbfounded as I felt.

"Yeah, really. I'm glad you asked me to go out with you and never gave up on me, even if I wasn't completely honest until now. I'd love to see you again."

"I think we could be great together."

It seemed I couldn't stop myself from giving my soul away to this guy whether he wanted it or not.

First, we saw Jim Gaffigan, and the next night we attended the opening of *The Magic Flute* at the Minnesota Opera. After both events, we headed to a restaurant and talked until the after-bar crowd filled the place and it got so noisy we could no longer hear each other. When we got home both evenings,

neither of us had had enough. We ended up talking on the phone into the wee hours of the night. I admitted more than I should have, telling him how I'd never felt more at ease with a man before. I thanked him for the amazing dates before letting him go. I'm sure I slept with a smile on my face both nights.

We met for coffee and went out to dinner every few days for nearly the entire month of April, and in May, we went to see Lewis Black together, too. With each date, I found myself falling harder for him. He was as handsome as ever, and I couldn't believe how we never ran out of topics to talk about. It all felt so natural. He'd smile at me in a way that made me feel energized and desired. When we walked around the Chain of Lakes on breezy afternoons and he held my hand, I felt warmth rather than the panic I'd expected from any sort of public display of affection.

"Please, come back to my apartment?" I asked after spending a late-May morning together at The Farmers Market. "I'll whip us up a little lunch."

"All right. I won't say no to food."

We stopped off at the grocery store to pick up a few more ingredients, and before I knew it, we were walking up the stairs to my apartment. He'd never been there before. We were talking passionately about the great cheese we found, which must've alerted Gina to our presence, because she opened her door and greeted us in the hallway.

"Need any help, boys?" she asked in a sassy way.

"Sure." I handed her the bag in my right hand so I could more easily fetch my keys.

"I'm Gina, and you must be Stone."

Stone smiled at her and attempted to shake her hand but was only able to manage a finger shake because of the bags in his hands. "I am. It's good to meet you, Gina. Bridge has told me a lot about you."

"All good, I hope."

"I heard nothing bad."

"Same here."

I stepped into my apartment and took a quick look around to make sure I didn't have dirty laundry thrown over the back of the couch or on the floor. It was clear. Gina led Stone into the kitchen, and they started unpacking the groceries efficiently while they made small talk. I allowed myself to sit back

and watch them. They seemed to like each other, and when Gina excused herself and headed toward the door, she gave me a look showing her approval. One of her eyebrows lifted in a flirty way as she smirked.

“Be safe, boys, and enjoy!” The door clicked shut behind her, and I was somewhat embarrassed to look at Stone again.

“Should I start dicing the onion?” he asked, and I was more than glad to leave Gina’s comments in the dust.

“Sure. I’ll wash the rest of the veggies.”

As we worked together in my kitchen, Stone fed me small pieces of strawberry and cheese. “Stop. I can’t keep eating. You’re filling me up.”

I blushed when my words registered because I *wanted* Stone to fill me in a different way. Then I laughed at the ridiculousness of my thoughts.

“What’s so funny?” Stone asked.

“Nothing. Just... My brain is going places it shouldn’t be going when we’re cooking. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for your thoughts.”

“Dirty thoughts.”

“Ah!” he said as he popped a small piece of cheese into his mouth. He gave me a cheeky, knowing smile as he chewed. “Gina’s words stuck with you too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Speaking of safe, I was just tested, and everything was negative. When was your last test?”

I couldn’t believe how bold he was about this topic. Online, I was used to being this frank, but not face-to-face.

“I was tested last month, right after we started dating, and I haven’t been with anyone else. We’re dating, right?”

He gave me his big smile and stepped closer, taking over my personal space in such a delightful way. I wrapped my arms around his waist and tugged him in closer. He looked into my eyes and then rubbed the tip of his nose against mine.

“We’re most certainly dating.” His palms rested on my biceps, and I closed my eyes to the warmth of them. He pressed a token kiss to my lips. “Now, tell me about your test results.”

“Everything’s good.” I looked at him as I gave him the news.

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

Stone leaned in and gave me a much better kiss then, opening his mouth to me and threading his fingers through my hair. The taste of strawberries, cheese, and Stone was an amazing combination, so I deepened the kiss.

He laughed and slapped me on the ass before pulling away. “We need to finish up, or we’ll waste away.”

“Right. One meal missed and *poof!* We disappear,” I said with some snark.

“You know what I mean. Let’s eat.”

After eating and cleaning up the kitchen, I tugged on Stone’s hand and started leading him... to the bedroom? To the living room? I didn’t know which way to go. I wanted to go to the bedroom.

Stone’s ringing phone stopped me from having to make a decision. He answered as I sat on the couch so he could have a small amount of privacy. He didn’t need me staring at him while he talked. I paged through a magazine and then tossed it aside when I didn’t find anything interesting in it.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he sat beside me after he was done. “Putting out fires at work even when I’m not there.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Not really, but the owner of the company is out of the country. All the bigger problems come to me when she’s away.”

“Sounds stressful.”

“It can be, but I enjoy it.” He reached for my hand. “Now, before that call, I think we were headed in a totally different direction than talking about my work. Am I right?”

He didn’t give me a chance to answer, kissing me instead. This wasn’t like one of our usual kisses that I could tell was going to end after a short time. This was more intense. His breathing sped up and so did mine. When he pushed against my shoulder, silently telling me to lie down, I willingly went without a doubt or a moment of hesitation.

This was so much better than anything I’d experienced with anyone else, and I tried to communicate that with my touch. I tentatively explored the

muscles on his back. Then I got braver, squeezing his ass and loving the way he arched into my palms and moaned. He felt wonderful in my arms even if I was nervous. I didn't want to screw this up.

Stone started kissing my neck as he touched my chest through my T-shirt. I wanted more contact, so I reached for my neckline and pulled the shirt over my head. He sat back to give me room, and I suspected to give my chest a slow perusal, considering the way he reached out and touched me.

"You're gorgeous," he said, running his thumbs over my nipples, causing them to respond. My eyes drifted shut as he touched me, but I forced them back open.

"Take your shirt off, too," I whispered. I wanted to see more of his pale skin and to see how much of him was painted with freckles. He complied, and I was thrilled to see he had a patch of red hair in the center of his chest; it was lighter than the hair on his head. I had to touch him, mirroring what he had just done to me, but then I allowed my fingers to drift over the freckles on his shoulders. He must've gotten some sun, but only there. The rest of him was like a carving, pale and smooth.

I pulled him back down to me and kissed him again, taking more of a lead this time. I didn't know where I found the boldness, but I didn't question it. The feel of our naked chests touching was a decadent sensation that had me wanting our pants off, too. I wanted to rut against him, so I unbuckled his belt. Knowing exactly what I desired, he stood, opening his fly and dropping his pants around his ankles.

As he stepped out of them, I asked, "Do you want to go to my bedroom?"

"Yeah."

I nodded, my excitement and nervousness showing through. I refocused by looking down and working on my own pants as I led the way.

I took my underwear off too, even if Stone had chosen to leave his on. I wanted this. I *really* wanted this.

I sat on the edge of my bed and leaned back when Stone came in for another kiss. I was glad he took the initiative. He moved down to suck at my neck and then my nipples. He kissed my stomach, and just when my muscles tensed from his ticklish touch, he sunk to his knees and kissed my thighs.

This was actually happening, but it seemed unreal. I drew myself up to my elbows to watch. He looked at me with those green and tawny eyes and smiled as he kissed up my leg, moving closer to my inner thigh with each kiss.

I was hard as a rock, and pre-cum started to slide down my shaft. Stone reached for me and used my natural lube to jerk me off. My head dropped back, and I couldn't contain my gasp of excitement. Then the warm, wet feel of his mouth surrounded me. I let myself get lost in the feel of him.

"Ahhhhh. That feels great."

He moaned, sending scintillating vibrations to all the right spots. I thrust, needing to feel more of his throat around me. He understood my desire and swallowed. That felt unlike anything I had ever experienced.

"So amazing, Stone."

"Scoot up on the bed," he said as he patted my ass. "My knees are killing me." A rag rug over hardwood floors would be painful, so I moved to the middle of the mattress.

Settling between my legs, he lowered his mouth to my cock again. I watched him now, loving the way his lips stretched to accommodate me. He looked and sounded like he was enjoying himself, too, and the way he ran his hands over my torso, groin, legs, and balls made me aware of how lacking all my other sexual experiences had been. This was much more sensual. All encompassing. It wasn't a quick "Get me off!" thing. It felt like *more*.

"I'm close," I warned so he could pull off and jerk me to completion. He didn't. Instead, he looked up at me and kept eye contact while doing amazing new things with his tongue. Then he deep throat me while I came, dragged over the edge of pleasure by the flexing of his muscles.

I panted and felt exhausted despite him doing all the work. He wormed his way up my body with a pleased look on his face and settled his chin on my chest.

"Good?" he asked.

"Far better than good. I feel like you took me to the moon and back."

He laughed. "Did you just make a Savage Garden reference?"

"No. I was actually going for *Guess How Much I Love You*, which suddenly feels like a horrific reference. I doubt any children's author wants to have their book talked about in relation to a blow job."

"I promise I won't tell anyone," he said in a sexier-than-hell whisper as he came in for a kiss that I gladly opened for. I was in a blissful state of exhausted euphoria, but his tongue energized me the more we kissed.

Slowly, I caught my breath, and once I did, I rolled him to his back and kissed down his body, spending a few moments kissing his freckles and sucking at his pale pink nipples. I licked there some more, loving the feel of the hard nipple against my tongue compared to the supple skin around it. His stomach was toned and tight—all that running had paid off. I found myself exploring subtle ridges and valleys I'd never had the opportunity to feel before. Having sex at home with a man, with Stone, was so much better than the quickie sucks and frots I'd experienced with other men. I liked being able to take my time and enjoy his body.

When I got to his groin, I didn't move his dark-blue briefs aside right away. I nosed his cock and balls through the fabric instead and drew in a deep breath, smelling his scent. His pheromones zinged inside me, forcing saliva to pool in my mouth. I had to swallow it away. I'd never reacted to another man's smell this strongly before.

I looked up at Stone and then sat back. "Wow," came out of my mouth, and I didn't want to elaborate when I saw his look of curiosity, so I released his hard cock from the confines of his underwear. It bobbed there for a few beats while I pulled the briefs off completely, and then his hardness hovered above his belly. So hard. Mohs10, indeed. I could see it move with his pulse. The veins were thick, and I traced them with my tongue.

"Don't tease."

I wasn't, but I wanted to explore all of him. Just to prove him wrong, I took him in as deeply as I could. I was still working on this, so I made up for my lack of technique by using my hand. By the fourth penetration, I felt his pubes tickling my nose. I wanted to get as close as I could. I tried to get deeper yet and ended up gagging myself.

"Slow down, Bridge. No need to overachieve. It feels great already."

I studied his face after that, watching how he responded. When I wanted more of his scent and buried my face in his balls, he laughed at me but then gasped as I licked and sucked at them. He held my hair in his hands, and I followed his lead when he urged me back up to his cock.

He thrust into my mouth then, and I did my best to open up my throat to take him in. Somehow it was easier, and I wondered if that was because he was taking charge. In my previous failed experiments in dating, I'd learned that I liked being bossed around a bit. Having him use my mouth and throat however he wanted made me let go of all of that apprehension about sex I'd carried

around for years. It was as if I was given permission to give in and enjoy it for the first time rather than to try to hold back and stay in control.

I could tell he was close by the way he was breathing and the way his face scrunched up. He was getting more forceful with his hands, too, pulling my hair in an exquisite way.

Stone curled his back and came in my mouth. I swallowed and gently squeezed his cock, making sure I got every drop. I loved this part. I licked him clean and then moved up the bed so I could rest beside him. He kissed my forehead, my nose, and then my lips. Each kiss felt like a thank you, and I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

We readjusted and napped on top of my comforter with his arms around me, covered by a throw blanket. It felt natural to be held by him, and I loved that I was the little spoon.

I was awakened by damp kisses being pressed into the back of my neck, and I thought, *What a spectacular way to wake up. I could get used to this, especially with him.*

I turned to face Stone, and he gave me a sleepy smile and a kiss on the mouth. "I should go. I've taken up your entire day."

"I'm not complaining. Would you like to eat dinner here? We could watch a movie."

He pushed hair back that had fallen across my forehead. "Are you sure? I wouldn't be smothering you, would I?"

I quirked a brow at him. "Where'd that comment come from?"

He shook his head and looked embarrassed. "The past."

"The last word I'd use to describe you is smothering. If I could have you around more often, I would. In fact, can we just skip working and spend all our time together instead?"

He pulled me into a hug and kissed my shoulder. "I don't think that would end well because we both get a lot of satisfaction from our jobs, and we need to be able to buy food. But if you want to spend more time together, I'm game."

I held him close to me until my stomach growled, and then we spent the rest of the day together.

And the night.

We were together a lot after that night, most often at my apartment. He ended up inviting me over to his house one night, and I saw in stark contrast how different our lives were. His place was spacious, immaculate, and it was a *home*, not an apartment. When I slid into his bed, the sheets felt softer than any bedding I'd ever slept on before. The thread count had to be astronomical. I never wanted to leave, though the sheets weren't the reason.

That night Stone climbed on top of me and thrust to his heart's content against my body. While he held our cocks together so we both got maximum pleasure, I let go more. I loved that he took charge, and I showed him my appreciation by making a lot of noise.

After that, we never went further: only frottage, blow jobs, or hand jobs. I wanted him to fuck me, but I wasn't comfortable asking for that. I wanted him to be the one to initiate it even if I was starting to get desperate with the waiting and wanting. Actually, I wanted him to just take me, throw my legs in the air, and have his way with me. I wanted to feel him thrusting inside of me.

I'd experimented with toys at home alone for months, and I knew I was a total bottom. Yeah, I loved having my dick sucked and all that, but I wanted Stone to slide into me and make me submit. Perhaps that's what had always been lacking in my relationships with women; I was expected to take charge. I didn't want to. And I loved the feel of something in my ass. I could jerk myself off any time, but I couldn't satisfy the need to be filled as easily by myself. At least, I didn't want to. I wanted it to be a shared experience. I wanted to share it with Stone.

So I was frustrated we never went further.

Not frustrated enough to ask for it, though.

6. Orange

Missing Pieces

“We should live with each other.”

I couldn't broach the subject of anal sex with Stone, but my brain had no problem blurting out thoughts about us moving in together.

Stupid brain/mouth connection.

We'd been dating for nearly five months. I'd come out to all the important people, but I was still using the *not straight* label. More often, I talked about my boyfriend as a way to out myself. We'd met each other's friends, hobnobbed with everyone in our social circles, been to work parties, and even had a designated drawer for clothes in each other's dressers.

“I love yous” had been exchanged at three months. The future had been talked about at four months: we both wanted to get married *to someone*, and kids weren't out of the question. Our friends on both sides thought we were great together, filling in pieces to make one another better, or so several of them had said. Some were jealous of what we had. We had even started blending our social groups.

But five months? That was too soon, wasn't it?

Minus the few months we both dated other people, we had been getting to know each other for nine months. We'd never stopped talking.

“Are you serious?” Stone asked me. “About moving in together?”

I studied his face and saw that he didn't look horrified by the idea. A small smile slipped across his mouth, and his eyes sparkled.

“I didn't mean to blurt it out quite like that, but I've been thinking about it more and more in the last month. What about you?”

“It sounds like something I'd like to do. It would sure make life simpler. I wouldn't be searching for a shirt at my place that's hung up in your closet. I'd get to come home to you every night. I would be able to wake up to your gorgeous face every morning. I think that sounds perfect.”

He pulled me into an embrace I leaned in to. Perhaps my runaway mouth knew better than my brain.

“Maybe I should lose my virginity before we live together.”

He laughed at me. "Haven't you already? How many times have we made each other come?"

"You know what I mean," I said as I looked at him with my serious face. Then he nodded.

"Okay, but not tonight, because I'm exhausted and I have to be up early. Tomorrow night. Deal?"

"Deal."

Saturday night this would happen.

I was nervous all day long. Stone had been called in to the office earlier than expected. Even after all these months together and his patient and varied explanations, I still didn't understand what he did for his job aside from helping people with their business platforms, but it was much more complex than that.

My mind had been wandering like that for hours, focusing on mundane things and obsessing over them, but then I was ripped back into the reality that I was going to have full-on sex with Stone that night. I hoped I didn't suck, and even more so, I hoped it didn't hurt. His dick was bigger than any toy I'd used during masturbation.

I was so nervous I couldn't eat. I hopped in the shower instead and got ready for him. When he arrived at my place, he showered as well, and then he skipped dinner. He must've been nervous too, but I didn't know why. He'd been doing this man/man sex thing a lot longer than I had. At least he knew firsthand what to expect. And what to do.

Ignoring my damp hair, I lay down on my bed. I was already naked. Earlier, I'd tucked condoms—more than one, just in case—and lube under my pillow for easy access. Stone walked into the room without a stitch of clothing on, and despite my apprehension, my body responded to the sight of him.

He crawled over me as if he couldn't wait to kiss me. He had to have sensed my fear because he said, "Shhh, relax," before he kissed me. The kisses lasted a lot longer than usual, too. They were more... passionate, yet almost hesitant. His warm palms roamed over my chest and legs, but he ignored my cock. No pressure was how I took that.

I loved the way he was licking my skin. I relaxed and thrust against his body. Finally, I was going to be able to experience a closeness with Stone that was completely unique to me.

"I can't wait to have you inside me." I sounded desperate, but I *was* desperate for him.

"What?" he said as he reared back. His face was hard to read at first, but then he scrutinized me, his brows furrowing. "I don't top."

"What did you say?"

"I'm not a top. I don't top."

"At all?"

"No." His answer was so definitive. "Exclusive bottom here."

I sat up and hugged my knees. "Me too. I mean... I've been imagining us together for months, but only with me bottoming."

He scooted over and sat. He looked defeated. I felt that way too. Had we finally found something we couldn't work through? Was this the sticking point that would end our relationship?

"So what do we do?" I asked. My stomach clenched, and I was very grateful I hadn't eaten since lunch.

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't. I mean, this is why I ended up breaking up with Garth. He wanted me to top him after two and a half years of me bottoming, and he pushed hard. Too hard. And he wouldn't ever let it go. He said he'd changed when we got back together, but he hadn't. I... I don't know what to say."

I sat there naked on my bed feeling ashamed—rejected, in truth. He didn't want me, at least not like that. Sex was supposed to be a relationship-enhancing experience, but it seemed this was turning into a relationship *ending* one instead. Sex had never been our focus, but this was a shock.

"Considering how much we've shared with each other, how did we not figure this out until now?" I asked.

He grimaced. "I'm not sure except to say that most of our conversations weren't about sex, they went a hell of a lot deeper. Neither of us is exactly sex-obsessed. We talk about more important things. Sex is rarely the first thing on my mind." He shrugged and looked defeated. "And when we first started chatting on GaySpeak, it was about my foot, for God's sake. I used to boldly share that I was a bottom on dating sites, but it caused more trouble than it was worth. I was sick of talking with men who treated me like an expendable commodity to use then discard, so I removed that from my profile."

“And I wrote versatile on my profile because I didn’t know yet. Now I do. I love it when you pin me down and I can submit to you. I don’t want to top. The thought of it scares the living crap out of me,” I admitted.

“Why does it scare you so much?” he asked as he scooted closer and pushed the hair out of my eyes. He looked at me with such tenderness that it made my heart hurt. I didn’t want something like this to come between us, but I didn’t know how to work around it either.

“I don’t want to hurt you. And I’m not sure I want that sort of responsibility either, to make sure all your needs are met. What if I can’t satisfy them? I don’t know what to do. I’ve never had anal sex before or even sex with a woman, so you know I’m going to blow like a teenager if I do manage to get inside you without causing you pain.”

Stone looked starry-eyed.

“What’s that face about?”

“You *inside* me.”

“God. What are we gonna do?”

“Fingers. Toys. Tongues,” he suggested with a hopeful half smile.

“Or I could try.” I looked down at my limp dick and gave it a few tugs.

“I don’t want you to feel pressured to do something you don’t want to.”

I saw his sincerity. He’d been pressured by his ex, after all.

“I’m scared, but if I never try, how will I know, right? Did you ever try?”

He nodded. “With the first few boyfriends I had. I didn’t see what the big deal was about sex until I bottomed. Then I understood better.”

He leaned forward and kissed me, and my body started responding again. I could try, even if this wasn’t at all how I thought the night would go. Stone didn’t have to work too long before I was hard again, so I reached for my supplies and made a move to open the condom wrapper.

He pulled the package from my fingers and set it aside. I took his cue and realized I still had to get him ready. I was a true novice.

I can do this, I mentally encouraged myself. I’d dreamed of these things being done to me enough times, so it wouldn’t be too much of a leap to do them to him. Kissing down his chest, I closed my eyes, searching for that kernel of my toppy self that had to be hidden inside somewhere.

I sucked him and mouthed his balls. I smelled him, and as usual, his scent awakened something primal. Like I'd always hoped he'd do to me, I pushed on the backs of his thighs, and he easily curled his spine, exposing his ass. I opened my eyes and looked. If he was going to so freely offer his body, I had to be brave enough to look.

His hole was light pink, just a shade darker than his nipples, and he was totally hairless. I wondered if he'd done that for me or if this was natural. He wasn't a hirsute man. It was possible. I'd never touched or looked at his asshole before.

"Hey," Stone said in a low voice. "Look at me."

I did, and he gave me that beautiful smile. Somehow, I relaxed. I didn't break eye contact as I leaned down and licked him. I hadn't known what to expect at all when it came to rimming, but it wasn't that. He was almost sweet tasting, and the feel of his pucker under my tongue felt familiar, like a kiss. I pulled back, worried I wasn't doing anything right.

"It feels good," he said.

Undaunted, I tried again, this time running my tongue over him in different ways to see what technique he liked best—if you could call my naïve attempts at pleasuring him a technique. I kissed his ass cheeks and his pucker, and then I licked some more, feeling him open up to me. Pressing the tip of my tongue inside him, I wished I was the one getting this treatment, but that didn't stop me from putting all my effort into my attempts to please him and to bring my camouflaged top out of hiding.

The sounds he was making, moans and heavy breaths, made me feel accomplished and happy despite my inexperience. He enjoyed what I was doing, which made me try harder. I was anxious, so I put extra attention into sensations.

I tongue fucked him, sliding in and out and enjoying the silky skin. I focused on his taste and scent. I used my hands to get closer to him, to feel his warm skin, to make him feel loved. Before I was fully cognizant of it, I was trying to get in as far as I could, and I nearly sprained my tongue. I suspected eating would be painful tomorrow.

Stone tapped my arm with the bottle of lube, so I sat up, took it from him, and drizzled a little on my fingers. I'd fingered myself a lot and had been fingered a time or two, but I'd never done this to another man. I took care to

watch his face to see if I was messing up, but he seemed to enjoy it as I pumped in and out of him, adding a third finger when I guessed he was ready. I didn't really know if he was, but he didn't object to the extra intrusion. After all, I had to get my cock in his ass, and that was larger than my three fingers combined.

I pulled out and hesitated. He must've read my mind.

"You really don't have to."

"I want to try."

"Okay."

I watched as he put a drop or two of lube on the tip of my dick, and then he rolled a condom down me like it was second nature. He looked in my eyes as if I had made his day. I didn't want to disappoint him. I was nervous as hell, positive I was going to fail. I didn't want to lose this man I'd fallen for because of something as arbitrary as sex *roles*, especially when we had both managed to go this many months without having anal sex and both felt satisfied (for the most part) with everything else we'd done.

I squeezed lube on him and watched it slide down his crack, catching the lowest drop with my cock before sliding up. I played with my head at his entrance, allowing myself a few moments to get used to the sensation. I didn't want to blow in a matter of seconds.

Licking my lips, I gazed at him. I wanted this to happen in a conscious way, not with me feeling sex-drugged. He reached for my hand and threaded our fingers together. Suddenly, I felt more grounded.

I allowed just the head of my cock to slide into him and out again. When I did it a second time, I looked down and watched. I went deeper with each thrust, and Stone squeezed my fingers like his ass squeezed my cock. Retreating, I made sure I wasn't hurting him.

"No, just go a little slower. It's been awhile. Ease in a little at a time. Steady."

He talked to me in his deep voice as I tried to do what he'd asked. It helped. I focused on what he was saying, or at least his tone, and before I knew it, I was all the way inside him. Looking up, he nodded and smiled in a lazy, satisfied way.

I pulled back and gave an experimental thrust and another and another, each time lengthening my stroke. He was tight around me. I focused on moving my

hips in a nice rhythmic motion. Out of nowhere, I thought of the salsa dancing lessons Gina had talked me into. She let me quit after five sessions because my hips refused to move like that. I worried they were too stiff now, as well.

“A little harder?” Stone asked, and I tried to satisfy him. He seemed to be enjoying himself. He tugged on our joined fingers, inviting me to bend down. “Suck my nipples,” he begged.

I tried, but I had to stop my thrusting for several seconds until I found my rhythm again. He gripped the sheets at his side, and then he reached for me, kneading my ass with both hands and pulling me deeper. He was showing me what he wanted, and I kissed him with gratitude.

He grunted as I continued to thrust, harder than I ever would've dared do without his encouragement. I felt his feet and legs shifting as he bent his knees. That's when he really started making noise. It was beautiful and so was the way he arched his neck. His lips puffed out with each breath, making them even more kissable. He made a hungry noise.

I must've been stroking right over his prostate. I kissed him again, but he needed the personal space to breathe instead. His head thrashed from side to side as he squeezed my ass so hard I couldn't do anything except press the full length of my cock inside him. I considered how to jack him and keep up the intensity in my hips when his muscles contracted erratically around me while he came. As the spasms dampened and slowed, he reached for me and pulled me into a tender kiss. His entire body was loose now.

“That was perfect. Are you sure you've never done that before?”

“I'm positive.”

He shifted, and my cock slipped out of him. He hissed. I sat back and looked down at myself. So did he. I wasn't hard, and the condom tip hung there empty.

“Didn't you come?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“I thought you did.”

“Not even close.”

“And you were afraid of having a teenage moment?”

I laughed in a pathetic way.

“So, what do you want me to do to help?”

I tugged the condom off. Using a towel I'd set on the bed earlier, I wiped off the leftover lube. Stone reached over and stroked me, but that wasn't what I wanted at all.

Instead, I crawled toward my bedside table and found my favorite dildo, the one that hit me in just the right spot. When I handed it to Stone, he looked at it a few seconds and then bit the inside of his cheek. I didn't know what that meant.

“Lie down,” he said. He lubed a finger and started rubbing it on me, easing my body open so I could take the dildo. I tried not to be disappointed that he hadn't used his tongue first. When he hit my prostate, I forgot all about that and used him to find the pleasure I'd always had such a hard time finding on my own.

To have his touch, which was unpredictable compared to my own, was wonderful. He curled his fingers and used a cadence that left me wondering what was coming next. When he lubed up my dildo, I was more than ready.

“I'm gonna fuck you so good,” he said in a growl. I saw a side of Stone I hadn't seen before. Had he been holding back with me? Why? No matter what, I liked it, and so did my cock. I was hard again.

“Yes. Please,” I begged in desperation.

He put the tip in, twisting the dildo left and right. He was getting the lube spread around. Then he pressed the toy into me in a methodical way. He kissed my stomach, then my balls, even taking time to lick and suck them. Then he deep throat me.

But it was the fake cock in my ass that was really getting me off.

Stone sat up and grimaced. “Man, lube tastes horrid. We're buying flavored shit if this is how we're going to have sex from now on.”

I laughed and bent my knees so I could rest the soles of my feet on the bed. He hovered over me and talked in his low voice. Dirty words spilled out. My eyes drifted shut, and I chased the sensation, coming down on the fake cock over and over, pretending it was his. “Take what you want from me,” Stone said, and that's when the pleasure started curling deep inside me. A few more thrusts of the dildo was all it took before I was coming, every muscle in my body getting in on the action.

I didn't need to be sucked or jerked off as much as I needed something in my ass for an amazing orgasm like that. Nothing compared.

So where did that leave us? I couldn't even come when I topped.

This was our watershed moment.

7. Red

Seeking Answers

Stone spent the night with me after our Saturday night of experimental sex and went to put out more fires at work the next day. I got the typical text at eleven in the morning, asking me how my day off was. I responded like always.

But he didn't come over that evening and there wasn't an invitation to come over to his place, even though we usually ate dinner together on Sundays. I tried to reason the coincidence away.

He'd had a long week.

He'd had no real weekend.

He was probably tired.

Gina came over after she supposedly heard anguished music coming from my apartment. I suspected she'd been spying on me through her peephole though. I forgave her when she showed up with key lime pie.

"Text him, stupid," she said after digging out my worries. Apparently, my misery was written all over my face. I also knew to do what she said.

Are we all right after last night's sobering surprise?

I read my message one more time to see if I sounded as pathetic as I felt. Did I sound too needy?

"Send it," Gina said.

"Fine!" I pressed the screen on my phone and waited for that ubiquitous sound signifying an outgoing message. It was off.

"You guys are great together. You love each other. Anyone who's seen you together can see that."

I knew she was trying to make me feel better, but what she said was making it worse.

"Two bottoms in love. How will that work? Neither of us is ever going to get what we want from the other. Do we start inviting tops over to fuck us? Do I watch him get fucked by another man, knowing I can't get off that way and wishing I could so I'd be enough for him?"

She looked at me with sympathy, so I threw a pillow at her face.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Okay. No pity. Tough love then.” She cracked her knuckles and then shook out tension from her shoulders. “You could invite some topsey guy over who fucks you both, or you could try again. If it still doesn’t work after a few tries, you get creative with toys. There are a lot of gay men who don’t ever have anal sex, ya know.”

“But am I okay being one of those? I’m not entirely sure what I’m missing because I’ve never had it, but Stone knows. Isn’t that setting us up for failure?”

Gina squinted, looking like she was thinking hard. “I don’t know. But it’s just sex. You guys have never been desperate to jump each other’s bones. You’re not sex maniacs. You held off for ages.”

“I don’t want to hold back anymore. I love the way I feel when I submit to him.” I looked away because I didn’t want to see her reaction to my words.

“How have you submitted to him without him... fucking you?” Her voice was cautious.

“He kissed me first. The way he takes charge. He sometimes holds me in place while he blows me. And I like not knowing what’s coming next. Jerking off or playing with my dildo, I always know what I’m going to do. There are no surprises.”

“But you didn’t know what Stone was going to do, did you?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Sex is only a part of this relationship, and it’s never been your sole focus. You wanted to fall in love and make a connection with someone. You did that. You both did. Don’t let the sex, even if you guys never have any sort of penetrative sex again, get in the way of your love for each other. And yes, I know how much I sound like a romantic dork right now, so don’t even try to tease me.” She slapped my thigh playfully.

I allowed her words to roll around in my head, and then I recalled what Stone had said last night. He said something about how we would have sex “from now on.” That didn’t sound like the end, did it?

Not to me.

His text before bed didn’t sound that way either.

We're more than all right. I missed you today.

Yet I still remained on alert.

Stone was a harried mess because of the stress in his job the next week. I suspected his tension had less to do with work and had a hell of a lot to do with our new revelations. I'm sure his past relationship's end was zooming through his mind. How could it not be?

I didn't know how his relationship with his ex had worked, but avoidance seemed to be Stone's way of dealing with things today. It was mine, too. I hated conflict, outrageous emotions, and the thought that we might actually be at a crossroads, despite Gina's romantic notions of love.

Over the weekend, Stone had to travel for his job. It had been planned for weeks, so I knew he wasn't running away from me. Even so, as I dropped him off at the airport, I felt melancholy when he kissed me goodbye.

When we saw each other the next week, we finally had a serious talk.

"Moving in together might not be the best idea right now," Stone started.

May as well get right to the point, I thought as my chest ached.

"Who knows if we'll work things out in a way where we'll both be happy with the results. What if we don't? We could turn into roommates with a lot of bitter feelings in the way of making a satisfying life. Right?"

I had to agree. He was being logical and most likely speaking from experience, so I nodded.

"Is that all you're going to give me?" he asked. "No commentary? You give me commentary on everything we've ever talked about."

I took a deep breath and palmed the back of my neck, working out the tension in my muscles. I didn't know how to say this without sounding like I was whining. I carefully considered my words for a minute or two without any more pressure from him.

After taking a deep breath, I looked Stone in the eye and tried to put away the defensiveness that was brewing strong right beneath the surface.

"More than anything, I feel unwanted and rejected. Like I'm not worth going outside your comfort zone for."

His face pinched together in an unfamiliar way.

“If I’m going to be with you...” I pushed on. “Well, I was hoping it would be for a long time. But if we’re going to be together, I want to experience *everything* with you. The last thing I want is to crave this so much that I meet up with a stranger just so I can know what it’s like. I’m not asking... Okay, maybe I am asking you, but I’m not going to force you to do anything.” I dropped my head in my hand because this wasn’t coming out right at all. “I’m not sure what I’m trying to say.”

He squeezed my forearm and forced my hand away from my face. “We’ll sort out the semantics later. Just tell me what’s going on inside your head.”

“I don’t want to cheat. I guess it comes down to that. I’m a commitment guy, and I want to be with someone who feels the same way about relationships. I’m afraid if I never get this desire satisfied to be taken and fucked into oblivion, that I’ll feel like I’m missing out. And not just physically. I feel like you don’t want *me*. Like I’m not enough for you. The truth is, I’m not. I’m a bottom, and you want a top. I’m never going to be what you need me to be, and that terrifies me because in every other facet of our lives so far, you are my match. Our sexual desires are the only things that don’t fit together like a Ravensburger puzzle. I want *us* to fit.”

Stone pulled my fingers up to his mouth and kissed them. He closed his eyes and breathed me in. He looked mournful. “I never realized I was hurting you this much. I wasn’t rejecting you, but I can see why you’d feel that way. I’m sorry.” When he looked up at me, he had tears in his eyes.

“I’ll never force you or try to talk you into topping. I couldn’t. But I don’t know where that leaves us,” I admitted.

“Me either.”

We had very little contact for ten days. Nearly a week and a half. We both needed time alone to sort out our thoughts.

It about drove me crazy.

I had no idea how much a part of my life Stone had become until he was suddenly not around at all. I’d become used to talking to him about my day and venting my frustrations and stresses his way. I missed listening to him do the same thing.

I tried talking to Gina. It was different. Somehow best friend status had transferred from Gina to Stone without me even realizing it.

She tried her best to help me come to terms with the possibility that Stone and I would break up. I didn't want to. He knew more about me than anyone ever had. I told him secrets I'd never allowed Gina to know, and he read me so easily.

He made me into a cliché because I was better with him, and I didn't give a shit that I was now a romantic fool.

The rain was coming down hard on day eleven. It was the third weekend in September, hot, humid, and I'd taken a week's vacation from my job. I was either going to go crazy or call Stone to pathetically beg him not to break up with me. After a dissatisfying cup of coffee, I decided to get out of the apartment so I didn't do anything stupid before I had a chance to consider exactly what I was going to say to him. I knew I had to say something.

I packed, then drove. I didn't want to be in the city waiting around for him. I felt claustrophobic. I wanted wide-open spaces, so I headed toward my mom and dad's lake cabin an hour away. Rain beat down on the windshield as I got closer, and the inside of the windows steamed up. I turned on the air conditioning.

I got soaked making my way from the car to the cabin. It smelled musty, so I turned on the fan to get the air moving, and I dried myself off. I read a little, then turned on the television, and almost immediately turned it off when the poor reception made me irrationally pissed. I attempted to write down the things I felt I needed to say to Stone depending on whether we were going to continue or end our relationship. Within five minutes, I had several pieces of crumpled notebook paper surrounding me. What I really wanted to do was go out to the water and take in the view.

Opening the front closet, I dug around for an umbrella so I wouldn't get soaked again. The only one I could find was a large rainbow one. I had no idea why I still had such an issue with this symbol, but I did. I didn't like the assumptions people made when they saw rainbows, mostly because they jumped to conclusions about my sex life. Initially, it had been because I didn't have a sex life, but now, it was because I had a mismatched one.

My stupid sex life. Why are we making such a big deal about this? And why does sex have to be such a major focus?

It was a major focus because of Stone's last relationship and because of my inexperience.

I headed for the shore, opening the colorful umbrella the moment I was outside. The few cool raindrops that hit my bare arms felt good on my skin. The lake was beautiful because of the state of the sky: tempestuous. I looked out over the water and contentedly sighed. Probably the first time I'd sighed in anything other than frustration in days, possibly weeks. My mind drifted to everything that had happened since the night Stone and I found out we were both exclusive bottoms.

I didn't want to break up. I was positive about that, but staying together meant I'd have to take a risk. I'd have to put my heart on the line and be direct like my dad had told me. No more subtlety. Somehow, I'd have to find the man inside me that Stone wanted, the one who knew how to take charge of things. I wanted him to do the same.

I took a step into the water. It was cold, and the shock to my body was exhilarating, so I took a few more. I didn't care that my shoes and jeans were wet. The chill seemed to help give my jumbled thoughts some much-needed clarity. The raindrops started to dissipate, but I was thankful for the umbrella protecting me.

I knew what I needed to do, and no amount of planning would make it better.

Conceived under a rainbow of daisies; becoming a man under a rainbow umbrella. I can do this.

I called Stone. He answered, but his voice sounded wary.

"I love you through and through," I said. My voice cracked, but I swallowed, determined to keep my wits about me. "I love things about you that I've hated when other people did them, like when you laugh so hard that you gasp for breath and snort. You fold towels all wrong, you never hang your coat on a hanger, and you think the best way to organize your movie collection is to throw them all in that huge basket that sits on a shelf. How do you find anything in there? I'll tell you. You've allowed me to come into your life and sort things. You've certainly organized things in *my* life. You made me see who I really am. I don't want this to be a crossroads that separates us like it so easily could. Yes, there's a divide in what we want sexually, but can't this simply be a turning point for us, one that gives us an opportunity to grow closer? Can't we walk down a new road together rather than trying to follow some map that doesn't make sense to either of us?"

Stone swallowed loudly. "I don't want to lose you. You're my soul mate."

“Can we make this work?”

“How?”

“Sex has never been the ultimate with us, so we can continue with what we’ve been doing all along. But when we want to spice things up a little and have those *other* needs met, let’s turn into kinky bastards and play with all sorts of things in the bedroom,” I threw out without thought. “The only thing I need when it comes to sex is to know I’m wanted... craved.”

“You are, Bridge. I want you so badly it hurts sometimes. This last week without you... It almost destroyed me. Mostly, I miss the way you feel in my arms and the way you make my life more enjoyable. I love *you* through and through. Come to my place tonight. I need to hold you while we talk.”

I was there in less than an hour, willing to stay for a week if I was invited.

8. White

Finding Pieces

I was a sweaty mess. Stone had been filling me with a dildo while he sucked me. I was doing the same for him, and there were several occasions where we both lost track of what we were supposed to be doing because of the pleasure we were each experiencing. Neither of us complained.

He moaned around me, and I came. He panted against my groin as I worked to bring him the same ecstasy. It wasn't going to be long.

We'd found a work-around or seven. Much of the time, as we had discovered over the past months, we found we were content with less. We both loved to kiss for eons. We spent most nights cuddled close on the couch or in bed with no urge to get sexual, but then there were times we wanted more. When one or both of us wanted an intense orgasm, toys were our first choice.

We discovered the thrill of trying to give pleasure to each other without removing one item of clothing. Then at other times, we'd crave face-to-face naked intimacy while wanting to be fucked, so we used dildos that had a suction cup on the bottom. Any smooth, hard surface, and we were in business. That didn't happen a lot, but when it did, it was the tender touches and the sense of connectedness that we both truly enjoyed.

"Com—" he almost managed to get out as I swallowed everything he gave me. He laughed then released a contented sigh. I popped into the bathroom and cleaned the toys while he recovered.

I loved the way I could make his body all loose and relaxed afterward. I came back into the room and lay with him. He was the little spoon this time. I wrapped him in my arms and kissed his neck until he practically purred.

We hadn't been insatiable. I made it sound like we were having sex all the time. If anything, I'd say we were in a honeymoon period and had been nearly all winter. But when you're forced to stay inside because of the cold and snow, what better way to spend time? We definitely weren't afraid to try new things.

Like the anal plugs I brought home in the spring. We slid them into each other before we went out for the evening with our friends. That was hot in and of itself and ended with an amazing kissing session that almost made us late.

Gina had chosen a noisy restaurant, much to my delight. No one would hear a thing when I...

I reached into my jacket pocket and turned on the remote control to low. Stone's back straightened so he had perfect posture, and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. Then he looked at me. If looks could kill but then thank and then caress... Luckily, the rest of our friends were deep in conversation, so they didn't have a clue I had turned on the vibrator in Stone's plug. Only Gina noticed something was out of the ordinary, but after a sharp look from me, she ignored what was happening right in front of her.

I shut off the remote and reached into my other pocket, passing my remote to him so two could play this game. He stared me down. The plug already felt amazing on its own, and I loved that I was out in public with this spectacular little pleasure happening without a soul knowing about it aside from Stone. Then it started buzzing.

I was surprised my eyes didn't roll into the back of my head and that I didn't moan out loud. I wanted to rock to feel the sensations everywhere, but then he turned it off. He could probably read my desires because he gave me a few more seconds of delight before he shut it off again. Then the appetizers arrived.

We were kind to each other, not controlling the devices for too long or so often that we couldn't enjoy the rest of the evening. But we did leave the restaurant with a completely different satiation than our dining companions.

That was the night he fucked me for the first time, too. He pulled my plug out once we got to my place and immediately started licking me. There was little foreplay, or perhaps a whole lot if you considered all of dinner as our foreplay. He was aggressive and horny and dominating. Some of his reaction might've been frustration for messing with him in such a public place, but I loved how he took control. I loved how he felt inside me.

More than anything, I loved how *he* made me feel.

Him.

Stone.

He made me feel loved, appreciated, wanted, needed. None of that had to do with sex, I realized that night as he slept behind me.

"I'm sorry," I told him the next morning while we were both still groggy and waking up. "I thought the plugs would be a fun surprise, something new. Getting you to fuck me wasn't my intention in using them last night."

“I know.”

“I was just trying to think outside the box, to make things more exciting and spontaneous.”

“You mastered spontaneous,” he said through a laugh as he shook his head.

“I’m really sorry.”

“You’re acting as if you violated me.”

“I feel like I coerced you. That’s what I’m worried you’re thinking, at least,” I admitted.

“No,” Stone said as he leaned in and then kissed me. “Not at all. I fucked you because I wanted to. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, but I’ve been waiting for something to spark my desire enough to take charge. I guess I needed batteries.”

I laughed loud and hard. “Well, now we know what works if we want to go there again.”

If we didn’t, I thought I’d be okay with that. Considering ninety-eight percent of the time we were together we were doing anything but having sex, I refused to allow the other two percent to dominate my life.

Even if having him fuck me was one of the most amazing things I’d experienced in my life.

I knew we were well into the serious couple zone when we bought bicycles together. They weren’t the same color, but they were the same style. I insisted on a very different helmet than the one he chose for himself. No need to look like twins.

Then we started training for a marathon together. Me, running. I didn’t run unless it was on an elliptical, remember?

I was obviously smitten.

That was easy to admit, especially to Gina. She heard more than an earful and recognized how new this was for me. I didn’t just love Stone, I was crazy for him. I was willing to risk my knees so I could spend more time with him. Marathon training was time consuming. It was also painful and exhausting. Humiliating too, because I thought I was in shape until I was summarily proven wrong in our very first week of training.

Stone lived for the runner's high. I lived for the moment I could sit down on a comfortable chair after a cool shower. But I loved how he pushed himself to go places he never thought he could. It felt good to do that myself.

We didn't spend every waking moment together, though. Both of us spent time doing individual projects or hung out with our friends, even if we thought about each other constantly while we were apart.

I hoped we never turned into that couple that was so sickeningly sweet that people no longer wanted to hang out with us. So far we'd avoided that sort of feedback.

Yet our lives were merging closer each day.

By the next summer, we had managed to negotiate a comfortable sexual relationship that was no longer in that frenzied honeymoon phase. We'd settled into a relaxed way of being around each other. We still kissed like crazy, but we talked, debated, traveled together, and socialized with our friends much more.

Conversation had always been the cornerstone of our relationship, and it still was. We'd been talking most of the day away as he showed me all around his childhood home. He'd grown up on an idyllic farm that overlooked the Mississippi River Valley. I'd met his parents before, but this was going to be the most time I'd spent with them at once. Stone and I had taken vacation time during the same week, like a married couple did.

"Come on. I want to show you something." He reached for my hand and tugged. I easily followed.

We were walking among tall grasses that felt a lot like natural prairie. I wondered where he was leading me. To an old tractor? To a field? It ended up being a cliff where we could see the river sparkling below.

"It's beautiful," I said. Everywhere I looked were green and gold fields in various stages of maturity. The Mississippi looked like a sparkling field nestled in the valley. I leaned in and kissed Stone's cheek. "Thanks for bringing me here."

"I'm glad you could come. I'm not sure you'll be thanking me tomorrow once all my siblings have taken over the house. You thought twenty questions from my parents was bad. Just you wait for my brothers and sisters. They can be ruthless."

I smiled. "I'll answer a million questions if it means I get to be with you."

He bumped his shoulder against mine and then pulled me in for a hug. "I would too."

"Really?" I withdrew so I could look at him.

"Really."

He clasped my hand, and we walked along the bluff's edge. I glanced at the water every now and then but was satisfied with our silence. I was content with nearly everything I had with Stone.

He cleared his throat in a nervous way, and I stopped so I could watch him. Right away he knew I was on to him, so he started talking. "I know we haven't talked about it for a long time, but I'd really like you to move in with me. I think we're ready. What do you think?"

I answered him with a kiss and then nodded, brushing my nose against his.

The only shitty part about moving in with Stone was that I no longer lived across the hall from Gina. There had been tears the day I moved, but many promises to spend a lot of time together. It wouldn't be as simple as crossing the hall and knocking on her door when I wanted my friend, but I was excited about starting that future with Stone we'd talked about so long ago.

I was in his place by October, right when my lease was up and nearly two years after we'd started talking online. We'd been officially dating nineteen months, which was a lot better than five months when I'd first mentioned living together.

We knew each other better, and I knew myself as a gay man now. I was now willing to put on that label as well as both a rainbow and an equality sticker on my car, thanks to all of Stone's and my parents' patient interventions. It was a great feeling to not shrink away from questions about my sexuality anymore, but to have a definitive answer.

Stone and I took a few weeks to settle into our new life together, but it wasn't difficult, at least not as challenging as everyone around us warned that it would be. There were no ridiculous fights over where furniture went or how I folded towels. They were going to be folded my way, and he had no problem making that concession. It was, again, easy. It felt like we were made for each other.

Yet I held my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It had to.

When October easily transitioned into November and then December, I let my guard down. Maybe we really were as good together as all our friends and family had always thought.

I felt blessed. When I saw his dark red hair, the cleft in his chin, and his huge smile, I *knew* I was blessed. It wasn't just a feeling.

It was more.

9. Gold

The Future

It was five years ago when two bottoms fell in love and discovered they were sexually incompatible, at least according to most people's standards. Not ours. We discovered many ways to love on each other, both sexually and non-sexually. We learned to give and take, to put our immediate desires aside for a moment while we satisfied another's.

On the nights Stone held me close, releasing damp breaths against my neck, I felt nothing but love. I rubbed the bottoms of my feet on the top of his until the winter chill was driven away. He'd whisper words of love and comfort into my skin or sing to me until I fell asleep. That wouldn't go away any time soon, or so I hoped.

There were still times when we allowed hands to wander and we'd reach for favorite toys. We tasted each other, sucked each other, and licked our ways into dark and secret places to bring pleasure. He loved to get me begging. I loved to hear him whine.

A cry pierced the dark, and Stone groaned as he rolled off me. "It's your turn."

We had to be a lot quieter these days. Or a lot quicker.

"Fine." I pulled jeans on and made my way into the living room. Our puppy, Gabby, bounded out of her kennel, tail wagging in delight. She lived up to her namesake. "She's playing us," I said loud enough so Stone could hear me.

"Why do you think I said it was your turn?" he asked.

I hooked her up to her leash, took her outside, and waited while she took care of business. She was a pokey one. She was also nocturnal and cried at every little peep.

Rather than putting her back in her kennel, I brought her to bed. She was excited to see Stone and tried to lick all over his face in greeting before she created a nest for herself in the bedding. He somehow managed to stay mostly puppy slobber free.

"We made a real serious commitment now, didn't we?" Stone looked at me, and his eyes gleamed.

I pushed back hair from his forehead and leaned in for a kiss. He opened to me, so I lingered and let myself taste him. “We sure did. Having second thoughts?”

“No. I’m glad we did this. That means I’m guaranteed to have you around for at least... twelve, thirteen more years.” He reached for my hand and touched my ring, spinning it once.

“Or longer. Yep, I think a lot longer.”

We instinctively wove our fingers together until our wedding bands knocked, and I stared into his enchanting eyes. He gave me a look of pure love that made me see I would always be enough for him.

“I’m glad I gave you my heart,” I whispered.

He brushed his nose against my cheek. “It fits so beautifully with mine.”

The End

Author Bio

Posy Roberts writes about real life, particularly men in love who face both mundane and extraordinary circumstances. Her characters have to find a way to make their relationships thrive, even when all hope seems like it is gone. Families are often at the heart of her stories, and she's not afraid of digging into some deep psychological issues where characters are challenged with difficult choices. She lives in the land of 10,000 lakes with her husband and daughter. When Posy isn't writing, she enjoys karaoke, hiking, and singing spontaneously about the mundane, just to make normal seem more interesting.

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THE FOURTH ACT

By LE Franks

Photo Description

A lithe young man is suspended horizontally in the air by a long piece of red silk. He is naked apart from the silk which is wrapped around his hips. His curly, blond hair hides his face, and his upper body is slightly twisted away from the viewer.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Can you help...?

I watch him from the shadows. He is seduction. He casts his web of magic. Suspended high above, in this cavernous space, he seems untouchable, held in his own spell. Does he control the red silk or does it control him? Can he be lured from its web?

Sincerely,

—Elizabetta

P.S. Please, a Contemporary setting, no GFY, would prefer no pnr/fantasy/sci-fi or other-worldly shenanigans; can be plot driven or porny, up to you.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: coming of age, coming out, first time, intern, performance arts, silk aerialist, suspense, theater

Content Warnings: no HEA or HFN

Word Count: 14,100

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THE FOURTH ACT

By LE Franks

Act One

The suspended bridge above the stage shimmied and creaked under his bulk. Every movement and every noise was amplified, screaming his presence to the sea of empty seats dotting the blackened theater.

He froze, and adrenaline surged, rising in him like a spring thaw gushing through a dam in a river of ice. It sent blood pounding like storm debris against his eardrums—dampening every sound his shallow panting made as he hunched, cringing in the dark. In an odd way, it kept him anchored in place until the grating stabilized, and the shifting underfoot ceased.

Pulling oxygen into his chest, he felt the burn inflate his lungs for what seemed like the first time in years. He savored the pain. It sharpened his senses, focused his intention. Failure would not be rewarded. One more deep breath and he was back to feeling his way along the walkway, straining his eyes until he could just make out the crossbeam rising out of the gloom, fifty feet above the stage.

So close. Confident now, he quickened his pace beyond a crawl, zeroing in on the spot where the apparatus and safety lines were secured.

As he leaned over to get a better look, the platform swayed, tilting outward as if obliging him with a closer view. It was help he could do without. The warm trickle down his pant leg seemed to punctuate the moment his vertigo struck.

He couldn't do much about the roll of steel he was trying to fuse to the bones in his hands through the sheer force of his grip, or the iron tang leaking from his tongue, so he waited, letting the catwalk and his stomach settle until he could slide one sweat-slick palm off the railing and rub it dry against a thick, wool-covered thigh—the rough fabric scraping the feeling back into his skin.

He took another deep breath. Carefully working the fingers of his free hand into his front pocket, he groped, searching out the warm metal of the Leatherman nestled there. The thought of dropping it, of watching it spin wildly into space before disappearing from view only to land with an explosion of sound, made him nauseous.

He licked his dry lips and, squeezing tight, pulled it out, running a practiced thumb across the pocket tool set, the weight of it comforting in his hand.

He eased it open, unfolding the pliers with a *snick* that froze him in place and sent his heart clogging his throat for what felt like five minutes before another thaw eased him to his knees. He was getting too old for this work.

This time he was prepared for the shifting and lay almost belly flat, his heavy, dark coat bunching over his meaty shoulders, as he reached the nose of the pliers into space, letting the tool guide his hand. It took four agonizing tries before he snagged enough of the rigging to tow it close enough to grab.

The heavy fabric spilled onto the catwalk, covering him in a pool of red so dark in the dim light that, up close, it looked like congealed blood. He bit his tongue to stifle the nervous giggle at the thought and turned his attention back to his task. This time, he carefully folded the handles of the tool forward to cover the plier head, giving him a solid grip for the blade he now eased out.

It was razor-sharp, he knew it—he'd put the edge on it this morning—even so, he couldn't resist brushing his thumb across it just to feel the *scritch* of protest it made where biting steel separated the whorled flesh from his thumb. Somewhere, floating through the night beneath him, like a macabre snowflake, was the one tangible proof he was here.

Shrugging, he straightened the cloth and began scraping his way across the red silk, letting the pressure of his hand drive the naked blade sideways into the fibers. Just the barest hint of encouragement and the threads would unwind themselves, fraying under the weight of the man suspended in midair.

With any luck, this time, the artist really *would* be hanging by a thread.

He let go, letting the weight of the fabric slither through his fingers, dragging it back into place ready for the next performance.

By this time tomorrow it would be done.

Act Two

It was worse than I expected.

It stood between a Starbucks and an Armani Express, shedding brick dust and paint. A lone monument to time among the architecturally bland.

Somehow, the Goldwyn Theater had resisted the thrall of modernization that spread like a virus through every corner of a neighborhood once better known for its tenements and factories and immigrants struggling to survive. Now chrome and glass store fronts beckoned to tourists wandering the streets, hoping for pushcarts and pickle barrels, but finding instead the designer clothes, designer coffees, and designer restaurants found everywhere else.

I stepped into the dark.

Five seconds into this year's summer internship at one of New York's oldest and sorriest theaters and I'd moved back in time. One minute I was brushing past clusters of hipsters lingering on the sidewalk flicking through the apps on their iPhones, and the next I was in a scene from a Hollywood production from the '30s.

All I was missing was a guest appearance by Bela Lugosi.

Outside, the sunshine had danced across my shoulders in a celebration of summer. In here, behind heavy red velvet curtains covering the glass doors I'd passed on the street, the dark gloom was oppressive. I could barely make out art deco fixtures and threadbare carpeting. The only light cutting through the gloom came from an old-fashioned popcorn machine wedged between two candy counters.

Dust and heat swirled around my head, coalescing into a heavy fist shoving its way down my throat, trying to clog my lungs. I resisted the urge to fan the air in front of my nose. Awareness of the futility of that act had me chugging down the last of the tepid water in my bottle instead.

The drapes muffled sound as well as light, and the empty foyer of the theater ate my footfalls as I moved deeper, my senses twitching. Straining, I could hear laughter filtering in—the hipsters hadn't moved on. Checking the glowing dial of my diving watch, I wondered what time the box office opened. Maybe four o'clock, maybe five, or maybe 1945, it was hard to tell given the general air of neglect.

As if on cue, a doorman appeared. Dark and looming, he melted out of the shadows like an extra from central casting, playing the part of henchman number three. The man towered a good foot taller than me, swarthy and silent, his suit hanging off shoulders so rounded that the jacket fell away from his body, revealing a white button-down blousing over a waistband three inches north of fashionable.

We stood eyeing each other, the blinks of my lids counting time, my tongue drying against my palate, until I stepped back, breaking contact. There was no question which one of us was the extra here.

I resisted the urge to raise the water bottle to my lips for the last few drops, but it was a near thing with his gaze drilling through me.

He raised a single brow, an inky slash taking flight above a glittering black eye, and I dug into my pocket for the only offering I had. He took one look at the sweat-dampened note in my hand and gave a silent jerk of a thumb.

Trailing after him like a puppy at the heels of his master, we wound through a warren of gloomy hallways until, reaching the last door on the left, my guide halted. He gave me a single grunt and melted away, back into the shadows, leaving me alone.

I glanced down at the paper. My grandfather's scrawl disappeared into a smudge, but I could still see that the name written in his trembling pencil matched the antique gold lettering stenciled across the rippled glass. Saul Davidovich, Manager.

This was it.

I checked my watch again and was amazed. Time in this place seemed very flexible. What had felt like hours trekking through the theater had only been minutes. Still, I was late.

One last deep breath, one sharp rap, and I opened the door on command.

My new boss sat behind a battered wooden desk circa 1940, the stain worn away, leaving only a border of well-aged wood to support the two beefy arms stretching the seams of his sweater. He in no way resembled the wiry, hardboiled character formed in my imagination from too many Saturday matinees.

His torso was twice as wide as it was long, with shoulders sloped so perilously that his navy cardigan seemed like an alpine skier poised to start, only waiting for a shot from a pistol to begin the race downhill to the floor.

This odd combination of body physics brought to mind the cartoonish figure of Popeye. His meaty fists only seemed to underscore this idea as he leaned across his paperwork, one gnarled hand the size of a mitt propping up his head while the other raked through thin gray hairs still sprouting out of his pink scalp.

He might have been fifty, he might have been eighty—it was impossible to tell with his face in shadow. But the blend of vitality evidenced by the barrel chest and swollen biceps was diminished somewhat by his height, his lack of shoulders, and a general sense of ennui that hung over him like a cloud.

I couldn't find a place for him in my head among my grandfather's usual circle of friends. He was a mystery, and that terrified me.

I held my breath and stood there, feeling every ounce of my inexperience and silently cursing my grandfather's interference in my life. I fidgeted for a moment, shifting from foot to foot.

"Misha Glazerooff? You're late." Mr. Davidovich didn't look up, he just held a clipboard out in my general direction.

"Michael, Michael Glazer... my father..." I trailed off. Davidovich was apparently indifferent, or deaf, and the clipboard continued to flap in front of my nose.

"Take this to Ford... he's been bitc—"

A radio squawked, interrupting him, and the clipboard rattled to the desk. I watched the handset vibrate across an old green leather ink blotter as Davidovich tugged at his few remaining strands of hair before snatching up the radio.

"What is it now, Ford?" The bark was sharp and impatient.

"I need the set list. You want this done without problems from the union you must bring..."

"For fuck's sake! The boy just got here."

"Don't swear, Saul." This tone was chiding, disappointed, and it seemed to light a fire under the little man as his face flamed in irritation.

"Oh, for crying... Ford, you overreact, *again*. You can wait five minutes once in a while. It won't kill you!"

"You fail to understand the simplest thing about running a theater—" The patience of a man talking to a dimwitted child, overlaid with a hint of disdain, crackled through the office.

The snort Davidovich returned was rude, the exasperation coming over the radio in return loud and clear. So much of their relationship was revealed to me in the noises they made between their words.

“Why must we do this each time, Saul? Why do you wait until the very last second of the very last minute of the very last hour of the very last day before you...?”

I listened as they continued to argue back and forth until the thread of their conversation broke under the weight of their verbal shorthand, and my thoughts drifted on a river of sound rather than the words. The accent coming through the radio was thick and Eastern European. I envisioned a broad Slavic face with a flat nose above full lips turning down at the corners.

I pegged Ford as Ukrainian, despite all the static, which meant it sounded a little like home to me. I'd heard those softly rounded, slurred consonants coming from our tiny drawing room all my life as my grandfather's friends gathered once a week to share the news and a bottle.

One of the most frequent guests was a carpenter from Kiev who gave fiery speeches after too many glasses of “tea”—railing against the Russian state much to the annoyance of the rest of the room.

And I knew for a fact that Davidovich was a second or third generation Russian Jew with those cultural inflections blending with his Brooklyn roots. I had never met him in our home, though his name had often been on my grandfather's lips throughout the years. Prior to this moment, my impression was that Mr. Davidovich was a devout man. Listening to him swear at Ford... I wasn't sure. Not that it mattered.

My grandfather—though raised Russian Orthodox—hadn't bothered to imprint any religion on me. He'd yet to forgive God for taking his son and daughter-in-law, almost a killing blow after he'd already paid such a high price to save what was left of the family.

Ours had been a rich, fertile tree, stretching back centuries in Mother Russia until its decimation, branch by branch. First, it was at the hands of the Tsars, their feudal repression choking the breath of the middle class, then came the Bolsheviks with their idealism expressed in blood, but it was the Nazis that laid waste to our heartwood when Stalin tossed almost the entirety of a generation onto the fires of war. The Soviet system took their time, year-by-year, pruning away all but the last few twigs.

Seeing the inevitable, my grandfather bundled up his wife and son and immigrated to America.

I watched my new boss snap his radio handset to the off position before tossing it back on the desk, breathing one last curse in Ford's direction before finally turning to me.

He looked me up and down with eyes the color of surf after a winter storm, still flashing and turbulent and half-hidden under heavy brows. The rest of his face was softly folded like the sheets in a linen closet.

He was a man of opposing physical forces: soft and hard, big and small, fearsome and... well, in this case it was only fearsome.

I shivered under the weight of his stare and wondered what he saw as he cataloged me. Whatever it was must have passed muster. He gave me a nod and thrust out the clipboard once more.

"Go."

This time I took it and fled.

I didn't hesitate. How hard could it be to find the stage?

I'd soon kick myself for the rhetorical question.

I made a wrong turn off one of the hallways. Instead of working my way back to the front of the theater, I found myself in another narrow passage containing a series of doors. I discovered storage rooms, cleaning closets, what appeared to be a business office from the fifties—working mimeograph included, if the whiff of alcohol perfuming the tiny space was anything to go by.

The next door opened into a stairwell, the risers sinking away from view until completely swallowed by the black void. I stepped in, leaning over the railing and peering down for any sign of life. The unmistakable sound of an automatic lock engaging behind me froze my bowels.

It was pitch black.

Fuck.

This was fast becoming a scene from a bad slasher movie, and here I was... the only virgin around.

I eased down the steps, turning my mind to all the movie killers, monsters, and supernatural beings I'd become acquainted with over the years. Chances were slim that I'd get one of the fun ones. More likely I was walking into a

scene from *SAW* than something campy from the sixties like *The Blob*, though anything was better than dwelling on my lack of love life.

Looking for a distraction, I counted stairs... thirty-five, thirty-six... I imagined the squawking going on in Mr. Davidovich's office right now... thirty-eight, thirty-nine... maybe Ford would send a search party. I hoped it was soon. I'd even welcome Igor the doorman at this point. An eternity later, I counted off the last step and embraced the dim glow of emergency lighting illuminating the entrance to the tunnel running under the stage.

Progress, even if it came clogged with old backdrops and rigging. I kicked a clown painted on plywood and got moving.

The man glowering at me as I exited the tunnel was probably Ford, and he looked *nothing* like I imagined.

He was tall and thin, with a rigid spine, like a piece of rebar had been fused with the bone. His features were vulpine, sharp instead of broad, the nose long and aristocratic rather than flat. His eyes a piercing jade under thick sable locks that brushed the collar of his dark shirt—hair I found myself wanting to touch.

I swallowed my tongue as I tried not to drool in front of this dark angel. He was as beautiful as a renaissance painting—his skin glowed a pearl-white, almost translucent in the low light. And not unlike the avenging angels depicted in paintings of the era, he was a man without humor.

There were no smile lines at either the corners of his mouth or eyes, and his skin, reaping the benefit of his serious nature, was unblemished and smooth. He could pass for any age within a forty-year span, though I guessed it to be on the short side of thirty rather than close to forty, if pressed.

He had a controlled energy flowing off him that gave him a gravitas which was written into every movement he made and every look he shared, and when he turned that force in my direction, I almost burst into flames.

Softly, he condemned me. "You walk like an elephant. You will not last." He snatched the clipboard from my hand and spun lightly, like a dancer, disappearing up the stairs.

I followed, not wanting to risk finding my own way out, not wanting to leave that first impression on his lips. Already I wanted to please him, and the fact that I didn't weighed heavily on my heart. So I kept him in sight, kept

watching the slim hips, kept following the flex of his buttocks as he climbed higher. He was a metronome of elegant seduction, and were it not for those hard, damning eyes drilling into me, I could lose myself in his motion.

Watching him, I regretted my lack of experience.

To be gay and living in New York and still a virgin at nineteen felt shameful, wasteful, *juvenile*.

I hated to think about the handful of “almost runs” I’d had so far, but living with my overprotective grandfather had done nothing for my love life.

He was my only family left, and until I was sure of what I wanted—or *who* I wanted—I wasn’t prepared to bring home a casual boyfriend and ruin his dreams for our family’s future. But I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t wish I was the kind of person who could say yes to an offer implicit in a glance or a sway of the hips, or that I hadn’t dreamed of catching the attention of a beautiful man like Ford and seeing the desire for me in his eyes.

Ford cast a single, stern, look over his shoulder.

My cheeks burned.

“We are now backstage. No words. No sounds...” Ford narrowed his eyes. “Don’t even breathe.”

With that, I followed him into the magical chaos of his world and found breathing wasn’t going to be an issue. If I thought Ford was the angel of darkness, then what I saw before me—suspended twenty feet above the stage from a single red ribbon—was the angel of light.

Act Three

His name was Semyon Borodin. And he had no words for me.

I learned this from the man in the folding chair.

I had been standing in the wings, hidden in the folds of the heavy black curtains, watching the man floating above the stage, when an utterance cut through my consciousness.

I turned. Another Russian.

A man sat, hands folded precisely across his rounded stomach, the metal creaking beneath his bulk. I'd barely glanced at him when he first spoke, my eyes quickly returning to fix on the twisting form of the man moving through space in front of me, but I'd seen enough to wonder what he was hiding. Despite the thermals rising off the stage lights, the man was cloaked in a heavy, gray overcoat.

"Semyon Borodin. He has no words for you." The heavy accent came on a breath, thick with the smell of sauerkraut and onions, reminding me of Zabar's on a Saturday. I could practically taste the marble rye.

"No words?" I was confused. Maybe the blond was mute, or the man's English was just bad.

The "Da" was growled, and I bit my lip to prevent myself from asking the follow-up question dancing on the tip of my tongue.

I'd seen his type before—my grandfather had made a point of steering me away from men like him all my life—men who seemed more comfortable in the shadows or standing at the shoulders of others.

I turned back to the stage.

The aerialist rose rapidly through space—hand over hand, twisting his body as he climbed the red fall, wrapping it around his naked torso—a slash as bright as fresh blood on snow.

Over and over the ribbon wound—his flexing muscles, his straining thighs drawing him higher until he reached his pinnacle and twisted, suspended in air nearly forty feet above the stage.

I held my breath. Even the muttering Russian behind me stilled.

We watched him, mesmerized by his iron strength and dancer's delicacy as he told his story of an angel fascinated by the mortal below. Moving through

his forms, his body was fluid and apparently weightless, until finally he hung anchored only by his feet in an inverted cross.

The spotlight pinned Borodin against a black backdrop, golden curls shining like a halo around his head, and I was close enough to see when the concentration and control he'd been maintaining morphed into a singular expression of utter peace.

He let go.

Releasing his foothold, he flung himself backwards through the darkness, through space, falling to earth in a twisting crescendo of unwrapping silk. The end of the ribbon twisted around his forearm was the only thing halting his momentum, saving him from a hard impact with the stage. My imagination, however, couldn't help but fulfill the plausibility: the angel twisting through air in a death spiral until colliding with earth, the impact violent rather than the artistically broken repose he currently held as the music faded.

"Goluboi." The Russian growled out the slur with such venom that I looked away from the man stretched out on stage.

The word stung.

I'd heard it used too many times by members of our community, and it was a painful reminder of the real reason I hadn't revealed a preference to my grandfather. Until I knew for sure I'd still be welcome in his home, I was frozen in place—neither in nor out—preferring a state of stasis to confrontation or confirmation.

I let the notion that my virginity was somehow pinned to my grandfather's acceptance skitter away as the Russian stood, towering over me.

This close, the man's florid features were clear. He was heavy browed over watery blue eyes, and displayed the pitted, sallow skin of a man who'd spent too many days and nights in a bottle of vodka.

His overcoat had flopped open, and I could clearly see the bulge under his suit jacket as intended. The shoulder holster had been designed not to conceal but to intimidate. I'd been warned.

My emotions were all over the place.

In just the last hour, this theater and its occupants had sent me spinning out of my nice safe orbit, and I didn't like it. I'd dealt with homophobic assholes before, but I hadn't expected it here or from someone so objectively lethal.

The Russian gave one brief look behind me before shoving past to join the blond on stage.

“It is the *Fall From Grace*.”

“What is?” I was admittedly still thrown by all the non-sequiturs being tossed around me like juggling pins, and I was annoyed that part of my brain seemed to be telling me that *I should know this one*.

“The name of his piece. Semyon Borodin has been doing this for a while now...”

Ford had snuck up on me while I was having my stare-off with the aerialist’s... bodyguard? Keeper?

I ignored the tingle running down my spine as Ford’s full vowels formed words filled with contempt, and went back to admiring Borodin—the golden curls sticking damply to pinked cheeks was just one of his celestial features...

“Fitting...” I murmured, my attention now on the pair of nude-colored capris molding the man’s thighs and ass. The aerialist was tugging on the red fabric, causing the muscles of his back and arms to ripple with each jerk. His bare skin glistened under the hot lights, holding my gaze while he continued his work and I avoided mine.

Ford leaned in, lips so close they almost touched my ear as he breathed out his words.

“Are they?”

I held my own breath in surprise and embarrassment. Getting caught checking out the man felt worse when it was Ford doing the catching.

“Stay away from him, Misha.” The expectation of obedience clear in Ford’s tone.

“*Michael*.”

I muttered the correction under my breath, glancing back at him, not sure if he meant Borodin or the Russian thug—though in the case of the latter I was happy to comply.

Ford’s expression darkened, and he didn’t respond. He just stood—a granite presence next to me. The silence ticked on until I couldn’t restrain myself from filling the breach with my babble as we watched the blond work.

“Where’s he from?”

Whatever objective Borodin had been aiming for apparently wasn't fulfilled, so hopping up, he gathered the two panels into a single handful and began to climb. Hand over hand he rose, letting his lower body swing like a pendulum until halfway up he stopped and resumed jerking on the material, bobbing up and down with each flex of his biceps.

The silence lay between us once more, only this time it was Ford who broke it.

"Borodin?"

"Mmm..."

"Nowhere. He is a ghost with no story but the one he tells new each day."

"And his friend?"

The hulking Russian paced back and forth across the stage, his eyes never moving from the form rising steadily higher, above him.

"Ah, Yuri. He gives him the stories."

Sounds of the aerialist arguing with the Russian from twenty-five feet up, rose above the general background noise of the stage crew. I couldn't follow more than every third or fourth word.

My Russian was rudimentary and domestic at best, my grandfather refusing to teach it to me at home, so the bulk of my vocabulary consisted of terms of endearment, and the slang I picked up at the student center.

Ford wasn't handicapped in the same way.

The blond finally slid down the red panels to confront the Russian face to face, and in an instant, Ford was there, moving smoothly towards them, scattering crew with a wave of his hand as he went.

I admit that I enjoyed the view as he walked away from me—Ford hadn't lost any poetry in his motion. He successfully drew my eye from the blond long enough for me to ogle him, though embarrassment burned when he looked back and caught me.

Ford stopped at center stage, and the instant he approached them, Borodin and his Russian stopped bickering. "What is the problem?"

"No problem." The Russian glowered, folding his arms across his chest.

"Yes, problem!" Semyon shoved in front of him. "There is too much give in the silk."

“You imagine things like usual, Semy. Always a prima donna.” The older man seemed to inflate, his gray wool coat hunching up on his shoulders as he curled over the aerialist with menace. “Be grateful you are still working, as old as you are!”

“Is that a threat, Yuri?” The aerialist turned on the Russian, shoving him with the flat of his hand. It was like trying to move a mountain by blowing bubbles at it. The Russian didn’t twitch.

Now that I saw the men together, I could tell that Borodin was a few inches taller than my five foot eleven, making Ford and the Russian closer to six foot four or five. The Russian had used his height to intimidate me offstage, but from my perspective it was Ford, with his lean wiry build, that stood like a steel-forged blade among stalks of wheat.

“I’ll check it myself.” Ford’s word was absolute, and Borodin gave a sharp nod, golden curls bouncing around his face.

“Misha!” Ford barked at me, and I meant to walk over with dignity, three pairs of eyes watching me as I went, but I hesitated. Only one man appeared happy to see me, and I was reluctant to act like a pet coming to heel in front of him.

I stalled, surveying them.

Ford had the cold, blank face I was coming to expect whenever he looked at me, no matter how mobile his features had been the split second before. A random thought drifted through my mind... someday I wanted to be there to see Ford smile—it could only be spectacular.

The Russian, on the other hand, made no effort to hide his dislike. Under the lights, his eyes gleamed like polished obsidian as he drilled his hate into me. I didn’t understand what I’d done to cause this enmity. If I ever ran into this man on the street, I would run, but here in the theater, next to Ford, he was easier to ignore.

Standing next to him was the last man in their trio—a golden flame, the light to their darkness. Semyon stood like the dancer he was, shoulders thrown back, head tilted proudly. His cascade of blond curls spilling over his brow gave him a mischievous air matching the glint in his blue eyes.

I couldn’t help my smile as the blond moved, his steps flowing like water as he crossed the stage to greet me.

As he drew closer everything else faded into shadow, and I was struck dumb, captivated by the brilliant glow surrounding him. Some part of me knew

it was a trick of the light, but the impression he'd made on me during his performance still lingered, and I didn't care. The fantasy was only inches away from me, close enough to grab if I was brave enough to reach for it.

"Misha? I am Semyon Borodin—call me Semy." He took my hand in his, pulling me into the circle of his light and I melted.

"Michael." I corrected automatically. The nickname was a diminutive that I'd been trying to duck since first grade.

Semy raised one perfect gold brow in disbelief, and I was sold. He could call me anything he wanted as long as he kept his ethereal gaze on me.

If I'd been in my right mind I would have sworn he'd drugged me. If I were home, the little old lady who spent her days in a chair outside our local bodega would have said he'd spelled me with the kind of magic that came from deep within the ancient forests of the Ural Mountains. Either way I was lost in him.

I took half a step closer—well, I tried—the firm tan hand and elegant fingers wrapping over my shoulder prevented me from making a fool of myself by throwing my body at Semy. From the wolfish smile that transformed the blond's face from angel to predator, Semy hadn't missed a thing. The invitation was plain even to my inexperienced self.

Ford's grip tightened, and he leaned in. "Misha, come. Time to see if you have anything inside that pretty head of yours beyond the stars. So far I haven't seen any sign of intelligent life. Surprise me. Yes?"

Looking over my head to Semy, he continued. "I'll take a look. We have three hours until curtain."

Semy gave us an elegant little bow before retreating to the edge of the stage to gather his things. I watched him make a show of wrapping a towel around his neck, wiping his forehead with long fingers.

He shot me a look from across the stage, pinning my feet in place.

Semy cracked the seal on his water, eyes heavy-lidded and so full of invitation that I felt my dick perk up. Tilting his head back to drink, I admired the white column of throat undulating, and I became jealous of the plastic rim of the bottle pressing against his full, pink bottom lip.

Ford paused at the back of the stage. The eyes of both men rested on me like poles in a magnetic field, each trying to draw me close. I was caught between them.

“Coming, Misha?” Ford’s words cracked like a hot whip.

His disappointment in me was palpable, and I was grateful for small favors—Ford only saw half the picture—my attraction to Semy wasn’t the only one I was currently struggling with. My desire for both men was heady, and apparently doomed, and I’d only been on the job for two hours.

I needed to get laid, preferably somewhere very far away from here.

“Michael. My name is Michael,” I told the blackout curtains as I passed behind them, following in Ford’s wake.

It was going to be a very long summer.

“Hold this.” Ford handed me the line he used to pull Semyon’s rig onto the bridge. “Don’t drop it.”

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I held back; Ford had me convinced he had a pair of eyes in the back of his head to go along with his ability to read minds.

It was fascinating to watch him. His calm efficiency carried over to his work, his fingers nimble as they straightened and rearranged the red fabric panels.

I’d followed him up into the rafters, carefully stepping across the bridge hovering over the stage.

It was obvious even to me that Semyon wasn’t imagining things—the fabric had gotten hung up and twisted on one of the wires that attached the rig to the steel beam running just below the bridge.

I leaned over to get a better view from above, ignoring the dirty look Ford gave me as the bridge shifted with my weight.

“Is it always this touchy?” I was making small talk while he finished, pretending to pay attention when instead I was busy looking around.

The view was spectacular.

From up here, I could see all the way to the back of the theater where Saul stood talking to the big guy I met haunting the lobby earlier, before disappearing out through the swinging doors. I could just imagine what it would be like to watch Semyon’s act as he moved through the air below.

I glanced at Ford as he got up and took the ropes back from me, lowering the rigging into place.

“Can I come back up and watch the show from here?”

He eyed me like he was seeing the answer to a question he hadn't asked.

“Maybe.” He finished tying off his knot, ignoring me until I started to move away.

“Go find Saul. You're his problem now.”

I was halfway down the stairs when he called out. “It wouldn't hurt to have someone here to keep an eye on that rig... You can't move a muscle during the show. Can you do that?”

His stare was back.

This time I couldn't stop the goofy smile that went along with the nodding.

Ford shook his head. “Be in place twenty minutes before curtain.”

I saluted him, jumping the last four steps off the stage and taking the direct route, jogging through the theater to get to the lobby where I'd start the process of finding Saul's office all over again.

I figured I'd had enough adventure for one day, but apparently Mr. Davidovich had other ideas.

I rapped on his door, ready to get down to the heavy filing my Grandfather warned me about, until it was time for the show.

“Ford sent me back...” I leaned around the partially open door waiting for his invitation.

“Good. Come.” Saul waved me all the way in.

“I'm glad you're back. I have...” He trailed off, busy pawing through the top drawer of his desk, pulling out odd bits and pieces of junk and examining them before tossing them back. “Ha!”

He raised a shaggy brow in triumph and tossed me a bent piece of metal. “Take this. It opens up the paper towel dispensers in the bathrooms. You just need to... hmm... wiggle?”

He looked back and forth between the object and me as if I were capable of confirming the accuracy of his words. I shrugged, and he went back to poking through his desk.

The radio squawked, and I felt like I was in a Fellini film—one of the obscure ones that I barely managed to sit through for my History of Film

course—it had already been two of the most confusing hours of my life. This time Saul had his headset on, and I only got half the conversation.

“He’s here. No. No. I told you. Yes. For—” Saul rolled his eyes and slammed his drawer shut.

“He’s *my* inter—”

I wandered over to the window and left Saul to his argument with Ford. The traffic on the street below was heavier, filling up with the early commuters and the minivans full of kids being shuttled to their afternoon dance classes and soccer leagues. The front door of a karate dojo across the street opened up, a flood of gis spilling out onto the sidewalk.

Leaning on my elbows, I looked out over all I’d missed growing up on three square blocks with a relative who didn’t drive and preferred to spend our time together playing chess and drinking tea.

Saul’s “Misha!” jerked me back to the present, and I turned. He was off the radio, and his headset was on the floor, across the room.

“Michael,” I reminded him absently, picking it up and handing it to him.

I got a grunt in return, as Saul fiddled with an earpiece. He sighed and looked up at me.

“We got a flood in one of the dressing rooms. Find Johnny. He’ll show you the supply closet, take you backstage... just...” He trailed off, dropping the headset onto the stack of Playbills weighing down the corner of his desk. I watched him tug on his full lower lip.

“What?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing. Ford is having kittens—stay out of his way when you’re back there.”

“Why? What’s going on?” My gut clenched a little at the thought that Ford didn’t want me around.

“Nothing, nothing. Ford is an odd one, but brilliant. All artists are. You and me? Our job is to clean up after them and make their lives simple, so they can make their magic, which makes me money.”

“Even Ford?” It seemed strange to think of Ford in that light—as the talent.

“*Especially* Ford. He should be up on that stage instead of that has-been, pipsqueak diva.”

“You mean Semy?” That got another raised brow from him.

“So you call him Semy? No wonder Ford’s shorts are in a bunch. Yes. *Semy*. Be careful with that one—Ford says this will be his last tour, and some hold on a little tight and don’t know when to retire gracefully.”

“You said Ford should be on the stage...” I wanted to know more.

“Ah, that you’ll have to get from Ford, himself. You may be the grandson of one of my oldest friends, but he is my godson. Now, go. Find Johnny. You can’t miss him, I think he lives in that lobby.”

Dressing Room B was one of four situated at the back of the building on the same level as the stage.

Dressing Room A was the largest, being ringed with counters and mirrors and enough seats for an entire chorus to dress and do makeup together. It had one wall dedicated to lockers but no bathroom of its own.

Neither did Dressing Room C or E. Johnny had taken me on the full dressing room tour and was surprisingly chatty when it came to bathroom access, and which performers could or could not use which one. I hope they had a handout prepared unless this was a standard backstage protocol across the tri-state area. Somehow I doubted that.

“Here it is. Dressing Room B. We keep the *talent* here.” Johnny was serious.

I wanted to smile every time he used the word “talent”, which was often, sprinkled through his monologue on the wonderful Mr. Davidovich, and how lucky I was to work for him. Johnny’s Brooklyn accent was as thick as mustard on a corndog, and once you got him going, he wouldn’t shut up. I almost missed his lumbering, ominous presence from earlier.

Johnny left me then, fading away back to his post in the lobby while I stood there, mop in hand, hesitating. This felt... I was about to take a step back when the door slowly opened.

“*Misha.*”

Semyon.

Swallowing air, my tongue stuck to the roof of my gaping mouth.

I was so dead.

Act Four

“Michael,” came out as a croak, not a whisper, the Pavlovian response to my nickname automatically falling out of my mouth to land somewhere between me and the naked man standing in the doorway.

I was just thankful no drool followed along behind my words. I brushed a hand across my mouth and chin, just to be sure.

At that, Semyon Borodin smiled. Not the beatific smile of saints, no, this one had more in common with the pigmented grins of satyrs cavorting with Rubenesque beauties in painted woodland scenes. This was no angel.

Stretching further across his face, his parted lips showed off snaggletoothed canines, so wickedly sharp they were as dangerous to me as to a nice filet. My knees shook just a little, and I felt a surprising kinship with a platter of meat.

“Misha...” Semyon purred, grabbing me by the shirt and pulling me inside. “...you are *just* in time.”

I found myself standing inside Dressing Room B with my back to the closed door, staring at Semyon Borodin. He stood five feet and a million lifetimes of experience away from me, in all his glory.

With my mop and pail, I felt overdressed.

He wasn't *entirely* naked—he still wore his wolfy grin, and there was a tiny scrap of white covering his groin and most of one hip. If I had to guess, it was either a gym towel or the world's most generous washcloth.

Heat sizzled through me, battling my discomfort at being so close to someone I'd just been fantasizing about. From above the stage, hanging from his crimson rope, Borodin had seemed lighter than air—sleek and fluid in his movements and forms and *angelic*, which made it worse. My thoughts had been anything *but*.

Uncomfortable, I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye, resting my gaze on his plum red lip, instead. It curved above a sweetly rounded chin that added to the illusion of his celestial nature, one that the fine scattering of bronze stubble along with the wickedly curling lip destroyed.

So I kept going.

Like a theme park ride, I was powerless to stop myself once my visual journey began sinking lower, bobbing along the fall of his white throat, tracking

the line of his carotid artery and the ligaments of his neck, snagging on his prominent Adam's apple before finally getting caught in the eddy made by the hollow of his throat.

I remembered where I was. "Mr. Davidovich sent me."

My whisper echoed in my ears, crackling with the sound of wax paper wadding in a fist, jolting me out of my hesitation. I raced on, hoping to discover all the treasures, the hills and valleys his marble flesh held, before I was stopped, and I lost this chance forever.

Semyon's shoulders rose, a towering mountain range of power above the landscape of his chest—years of training left it a broad mesa broken only by the undulation of his pecs and the pink nipples surrounded by a few translucent hairs. The power of his frame was mirrored in his sculpted biceps and arms.

Down I went, skittering over his navel and the impulse to dip my tongue in the divot it left in his perfect skin and run it across his rippling abdominals teased me, my fingers tingled, itching to touch the Y of abs sinking out of sight behind the white terrycloth.

It was all too much, and the heat that started in my cheeks the first second he opened the dressing room door now spread like a brush fire, igniting every cell in my body with a singular point of desire currently manifesting itself painfully in my jeans. I had to pull myself together or risk the ultimate humiliation of spontaneous combustion.

Licking my lip, I tried to see around the very human mass of hard muscle and pale skin into the room beyond.

"Saul... he said you have a flood in your dressing room?" I asked as I finally met his eyes—a glacial blue with an intensity that did nothing to cool me down.

Instead of answering me, Semyon reached for the large bottle of water resting on the counter, cracking the seal. He took one sip, then upended it, letting the water cascade onto the painted concrete floor. It splashed over his bare feet and onto the naked skin of his legs, forming a puddle that grew between us.

Watching water drops slide down one well-formed calf, it struck me that up until this moment, Semyon Borodin had been *completely dry*. Subconsciously, I had assumed I'd either pulled him out of the shower with my knock or caught him shortly after he took one. But now...

Semyon tossed the empty bottle aside and walked across the watery divide to reach me, though his perverse parody wasn't intended for my salvation.

"Misha..." The hand that slid around me, cupping the base of my skull, was as warm as his breath on my lips, the thumb caressing my cheek as gentle as his tone. It was the approach one would make to a wild animal or stray dog, and half of me resented the assumptions he made about me while the other half didn't care, melting against him.

"You are so beautiful..." The lips were closer, and my guts froze, terrified about what might happen... and what might not.

I screwed my eyes shut tight and held my breath.

"I saw you, from above. I saw you watch me, want me..." He was nuzzling under my jaw, and I tried to swallow against the desert that had sprung up in my throat under his ministrations. I felt the wire handle of the bucket cut into my palm as I flexed my hand, willing myself not to move.

"...I wondered where you came from..." His lips parted, and I felt teeth trace the trail his nose had blazed.

"...like a vision from my dreams." His breath in my right ear was the only warning I got before a sharp pain rocketed my arousal to new heights. Semyon bit down on my earlobe, working it with his teeth—tugging and sucking on it.

I heard the clatter before I realized my hands were empty.

"So sweet. You taste like honey cake and tea..." He leaned into me, barely touching his chest to mine, but it was almost more that I could take. Without the mop to hold onto, my hands hovered at my sides, rising and falling like a kestrel riding the thermals on a sunny day. I wanted to touch him back, to hold onto something that would anchor me in my skin. Instead, I grabbed air.

"Shhhh... Misha, relax. I won't hurt you..." Gently uncurling my fingers enough to unclench my fists and slide his fingers between mine, Semyon simultaneously soothed me and ratcheted me higher.

Easing my hands over my head as he took full advantage of the opportunity I presented, he continued his invasion, leaning his full body weight against me.

"You like this—I can tell..."

I felt the heat rise in my face as he pressed a lean thigh between my legs, and I could feel his erection against my stomach. Slowly he began to move, grinding against my dick until I lost the ability to breathe, to think—all neurons

firing with singular focus on the stimulation working its way through my jeans and up my spine.

“Let me have you, Misha. Let go and I will catch you.”

It was almost sweet, and the sentiment almost genuine if the cadence of his words weren't matching the undulations of our rut. He had his own thrusting urgency, pressing long and hard against my abdomen.

I was about to pull away to argue the point when an explosion of sensation tore through me in a blinding wave of white light, incinerating any humiliation before it could form as I came, and Semyon finally, *finally* kissed me, wrapping me in his arms.

I shook with the aftershocks of my first orgasm outside of my own lubricated fist, and he pulled his mouth away from exploring mine. “So pretty, Misha... if you could only see yourself now... as I do.”

He didn't wait for me to respond. The only sounds I could make alternated between pants for breath and moans.

He took the sag of my body against his as some sort of green light to continue doing whatever he wanted. So he did. Digging under my waistband, Semyon tugged at my shirt until the tail pulled free, and he could reach the skin underneath.

I'd worn a French blue button-down to work—Grandfather had made noises about my first choice—so I compromised on the shirt but drew the line at the rest, and after stumbling through the bowels of the theater I was glad I left my slippery dress shoes at home.

But Semyon didn't seem impressed. Grabbing my shirt placket, he yanked, tearing it open in a hail of buttons.

“Fuck, Semyon!” I gasped at the unexpected violence as he dragged what was left of my shirt off my shoulders, pinning my elbows behind me in a tangle of cotton.

He ignored me, dropping to his knees and yanking first one running shoe off my foot, and then the other. I was torn between wanting to yell at him—demanding that he release my arms—and wanting him to continue.

“Hush, Misha. Too many clothes.” He kissed my stomach and worked the zipper on my jeans, though it parted easily under his practiced fingers. I shuddered as he brushed across the sticky mess under my boxer briefs.

“Don’t...” I was horrified, realizing that Semyon wasn’t stopping, and I started to struggle, trying to free my hands from my buttoned cuffs and the fabric that still bound me. “...please...”

He looked up. Kneeling at my feet, he was a living statue. The golden curls framing his face softened the dark look he gave me. This close I could see the fine lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

“There is no shame in your body expressing pleasure, Misha.”

It was the only acknowledgment I got, beyond a large hand splayed across my bare torso as he stripped away the rest of my dignity along with my underwear.

As long as I was restrained, I wasn’t responsible for what my body did, and any objection I had was next to go as his mouth descended to my groin, and he cleaned me of all evidence of my emission. Gently licking the head of my penis, running his tongue along my slit and through the hair at the base of my shaft.

Each lick, each suck was on replay in my head as I imagined the sensation on my own tongue—the taste in my own mouth.

“Oh, Misha... so good.” He kept me pressed against the door as I writhed—his tongue and mouth now working my ballsac, gently sucking first one testicle then the next.

He worked his way down, firing the nerves ringing my hole, darting the tip of his tongue into my folds—the sensation was a wet, warm fire, the tingle burning bright when he replaced his tongue with his thumbnail—scraping across my taint as he moved back to the head of my cock.

“Holy fuck!” I was hard again, had been practically from the second I’d first come, but to have this man sucking me down, the head of my penis bumping across the roof of his mouth while the suction he applied sent my head spinning—it was too much, and I could feel my balls tightening with the urge to come.

He pulled off me. And stood.

Shit.

“Ah... look at you, so ready for me again. So beautiful, Misha.” Semyon towered over me, keeping a hand wrapped around my prick.

“Michael.” I could only gasp the correction—it was the only thing I had at my command. I wanted to grab him and drag his head back down, so I could

come in his mouth, but I was in no condition—even without the use of my hands he had me shaking with helpless need.

“Let’s do this together—eh, Misha?” The towel disappeared, and I almost swallowed my tongue at the sensation of Semyon’s elegant cock sliding against mine, friction heating my skin as we moved in sync.

It didn’t take long to push me over the edge again. A few short strokes under his iron grip, and I was flying apart. I felt the shock wave of his own release shuddering through his body, thick, white spurts of cum flooding his hand and covering my own ejaculate. He bent, laughing and riding out the last of the waves, touching his forehead to mine for a brief moment, eyes closed.

I went cross-eyed in my desire to etch the memory of his face permanently in my mind. All I could focus on was the brush of white-tipped lashes against flushed cheeks. I was mesmerized by his vulnerability, though as soon as his eyes cracked open, it disappeared.

His lupine nature came rushing back with a grin and a lick of his hand.

Reaching down, he extracted my soiled boxers from the tangle of my jeans and wiped his hands and stomach. His pause spoke volumes. I could read the instant he stopped himself from tossing them at me—the minute he finally looked at me again. I saw myself through his eyes... debauched, slumped against his door wearing only my skin and the shirt he’d torn open and shoved behind me still keeping me a prisoner.

The smile changed. Became guarded. False.

He wiped me down with the clinical efficiency of a veteran nurse, brusquely pulling my shirt back over my shoulders, effectively freeing and shaming me at the same time. Standing there, my shirt hanging open and penis dangling, left me more vulnerable than I’d been at any other point in my life.

I gathered up my jeans, one leg sopping wet from where it landed in the puddle, and started looking for my shoes.

It was the distraction that Semyon must have been watching for. As soon as I was on the floor reaching under his dressing table for my left shoe, he was backing away towards the small bathroom in the back. He paused in the light spilling from the open doorway.

“Thank you Misha...” Tossing the fouled underwear in my direction, he turned, calling over his shoulder, “Don’t forget to clean up before you go.”

He shut the door, the click of a lock echoing in my head.

Going commando in wet jeans and a dusty T-shirt taken from the wall of the concession stand was uncomfortably embarrassing.

Saul hadn't bothered to look up before sending me off to get water for the green room. Johnny, on the other hand, had taken one look at my torn shirt and disheveled appearance and barreled straight back to the dressing rooms, intent on tearing Semyon apart.

He was quick for a big guy. And while it was nice that he cared, it was hard work to catch him. Stopping him long enough to confess the humiliating truth—that I'd let Semyon relieve me of my nineteen years of buildup—was almost unbearable. Johnny just slapped me on the back and got me the shirt.

Bumping into Ford backstage was another matter entirely. One look at me had him frozen in place—a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. He cataloged the change in my appearance, and I could practically read the lecture in the way he held his body.

He had time—the curtains were drawn, and the stage set for the first act—so I wasn't surprised when he pulled off his headset, dropped it onto his podium, and then took me aside. I felt the heat of his body as he leaned in to wipe something off my cheek with his thumb. I tried not to dwell on what that might be.

"Misha..." Ford's features were dark, and it looked like he was struggling with his words. I brushed him off.

"You can't understand how much I hate that name." I said it as if that was the answer to everything.

I wanted to tell him to back the fuck up, to stay out of my business. Instead, I walked away. Annoyed. Apparently, I now wore a giant letter "L" stamped onto my forehead—just laid. The fact that I was smaller than all these guys didn't make me a girl that needed protecting.

I no longer held any illusions about Semyon Borodin, but he'd done me a favor by liberating my dick and teaching me the difference between love and sex, emotion and lust. I was nineteen, and it was just in time. I didn't need the burden of a first crush or wasted nights dreaming of Disney endings. His role, flying above the stage, was pure fantasy, when in reality he was just another asshole.

But Semyon had shown me something no one else had, and I was sold—given another chance to have his mouth on my dick I couldn't honestly say I wouldn't unzip my jeans myself.

My leg was beginning to cramp from my perch above the stage, and I was desperate for the current act to finish, so I could adjust my position during the applause. I'd moved into place on the bridge above the stage during intermission, nodding to Ford as I slipped by him to make my way to the stairs. I could tell he wanted to say something to me, but I didn't linger.

I hadn't been as lucky with the Russian. He was back—same gray metal folding chair, same position in the wings—watching me wind my way past stagehands and performers alike, waiting until I was close enough to trip. He stretched one long leg between mine as I moved past.

To the casual observer, it looked like he rose just in time to save me from falling. By the glances he kept darting over my shoulder, I suspected that Ford was occupied or the Russian wouldn't have chanced it, grinding the bones in my wrist together as he pulled me in close, our legs tangled.

I tried yanking away, but the grip tightened and pain flared.

"I tell you once, Semyon is not for you, but you ignore me..." The words drowned in his heavy accent, but his intention was clear. He kept growling. "...for the last time, stay away. I will not speak of this again to you."

I ignored the threat, which was probably stupid given the fact that he still had me pinned.

I'd been called out for acting rashly before, but I had no idea what kind of threat I could possibly be to the performer, and my sense of fair play demanded that I was in no real danger. After all, between the two of us, I wasn't the one playing the predator to Semyon's prey.

Maybe it was the way of all bodyguards—or maybe just the Slavic ones. Ford seemed to be made from the same overprotective cloth, though in my case he appeared to be a reluctant defender. Or possibly it was some weird theater hazing ritual: gaslight the poor naïve intern on his first day of work.

But the discomfort pulsing in my body flared, pushing away everything but the pain, and the hold on my temper snapped.

"Don't worry, I got all I wanted from your precious pet!"

Snarling in his face wasn't the smartest thing to do. Usually I have better control than provoking an angry bear, but after my day so far and the chafing from my damp jeans, I'd had enough.

We were still too close for comfort—our farce of a lovers' embrace—entwined with a man emitting enough menace to make me disappear from the face of the earth through sheer ill will alone, and my bravado failed.

By the time the Russian released my arm, I wondered if he'd broken a bone... or two.

He thrust me away with a hiss. "Stay away from Semyon." His push sent me rocketing backwards, I was in danger of tumbling out of the wings and onto the stage to join the Russian acrobats busy balancing on stacks of chairs.

This time, I did need an arm wrapping around my waist to keep my face from meeting the floor.

Ford.

Again.

This constant rescuing was eating away at me, so I left them, ignoring the angry hiss of Russian following me up the stairs.

Settling down on the bridge high above the stage, I waited, watching the performers and enjoying the change in perspective. From here, I could see the crew working in the wings and backstage, dancing in their own ballet, working ropes and props and backdrops in concert with the acts on stage.

It was peaceful above the lights, and being so removed from the action made me reflective. I was nineteen—still living with my Grandfather, still hiding myself from him in an effort to save him more pain—I didn't know how he'd react to an announcement that his last living relative was gay, but continuing the family was everything to my grandfather.

While being gay no longer meant an automatic end to our genetic line, the idea of having children made me shudder. I wasn't so naïve that I didn't realize it had more to do with me being closer in age to a child than to an adult, but only time would tell.

The idea that I could possibly lose the one absolute in my life was unbearable, and now, in one short afternoon, I'd managed to ditch my virginity and out myself to half the theater. Saul was one of my grandfather's oldest friends and wasn't as oblivious as he made himself out to be. I'd be a fool to think he didn't know everything that went on here.

And then there was Ford.

My wrist throbbed. It was a reminder of the altercation that put me in Ford's arms, stirring up feelings of confusion when he pulled me closer into his chest for the barest fraction of a second, before abruptly releasing me when I caught my balance.

It might have been my imagination, except that at his touch I'd forgotten all about the Russian, or the sex I'd just had with Semyon. Instead my senses were filled with Ford's scent and the warmth of his body against mine.

I looked out over the crowded theater from my perch, trying to decide what to do next.

Only one thing was certain; I'd run out of time to play my game of denial.

Semyon Borodin was an artist. A silk aerialist. A devil in angel's wings. My first "lover" and my first lesson in the nature of seduction. But when he started his act, I lost my ability to hold a grudge against him. Gratitude and appreciation flooded my senses as he rose above the stage.

He'd held me with those hands now gripping the red silk, he'd shown me the same strength taking me apart with his body as he did now controlling his own. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his beauty and his grace. I watched his muscles flex, and I felt their ghost on the skin of my hands.

He was beautiful and heartbreaking, and I realized that he'd let me off easy. He could have kept me in his thrall, made me love him. Even from this distance I could see the eyes of the audience shining as they watched from the front row. But instead, he gave me himself, as much as he could at any rate. A pain I hadn't identified eased in my chest. I'd let him hurt my feelings, but now... I could see the care he'd taken to protect my heart, and I was grateful.

The music swelled, and the tension inside me built as I watched Semyon begin his final climb before his big leap. I turned, hearing a small noise behind me. Ford had joined me. Squatting down, he handed me an icepack, silently gesturing to my wrist. The searing cold felt wonderful, numbing the pain I'd been pushing to the back of my consciousness. If there was light enough, I'm sure I'd see heavy purple bruises ringing my wrist, matching the ache I felt down in my bones.

I smiled, but the distraction had been enough to break the enchantment Semyon had woven around me with his performance. I barely glanced at him,

feeling Ford's presence acutely. I silently chastised myself for allowing an attraction to flare so quickly on the heels of my tryst with Semyon.

Slut.

Semyon was moving into his inverted-cross position when I heard the first threads breaking and fabric parting, like a bizarre echo from earlier in the day when Semyon had torn my shirt open.

The cloth!

I moved as fast as I could, legs tangled under me as I scuttled along the lurching platform. Five feet felt like fifty as I lunged over the side, grabbing for his rig.

The sound of ripping was as unmistakable as Semyon's gasp.

Time became a stop-motion stutter: Semyon exploding out of his curl into the spring that would launch him—the shock in his eyes—the panel of cloth separating from his rig fluttering past his face, the last thing I noticed before he was gone, flying into the light, was Semyon's cry, ricocheting in my ears.

I couldn't breathe.

Whether it was the severed ribbon falling to the stage, or Semyon's furious Russian that drew attention to his plight, but a shout from the audience triggered the rising tide of panic that now filled the theater with a thrum.

I blocked out the noise.

Semyon still had one panel anchoring him to his rig, and my hands clamped around it, desperately wrapping the material around my wrist and forearm. The burn was immediate.

I braced myself as best I could with the bridge swinging wildly, trying to use the brute strength of my arms and shoulders to keep Semyon safe long enough for him to untangle himself and land.

I could feel him out of control below me, and the drag on my body was relentless.

My wrist screamed in pain, and as I slid closer and closer to the edge, the reptilian part of my brain flared to life, shocking me with the realization that he was pulling me over with him. I wanted to gag at the instinct screaming in my head to let go of the panel and save myself.

The relief I felt when Ford landed on top of me, stretching across my body, pressing his length into me, was explosive.

He was a rock, and the weight almost crushing me was a gift. I felt him reach along my arms, past my hands, twining enough of the fabric into a tight grip of his own that some of the pressure was removed.

Together, we kept Semyon anchored, and we stayed that way—rocking together, every breath lasting a lifetime—until the strain on our arms was gone, and Semyon was down.

Ford was the first to let go, flicking the red silk off his body before gently unwinding it from my own. He was still pressed against me, though now it seemed far more intimate than desperate.

I felt his lips kiss the back of my head, and his body sink deeper onto mine—my own shuddering in welcome as his pelvis ground into the cradle of my ass. My arousal in response was instantaneous, my attraction to him still hovering from before, and I let the moment drift.

I wasn't sure if the desire I felt was real. We seemed to be operating on pure instinct amid the backwash of adrenaline.

There was a primal urge to celebrate our victory in battle with sex, and it was strong, but I couldn't tell if what I wanted from Ford went beyond it. Without a doubt, I craved the feel of him—the idea that with him I could be as naked physically, as I was raw emotionally, sent my heart racing.

The moment passed, and Ford buried his face in my hair even as he was lifting himself off me.

“Thank you.”

He paused at my whisper to press a final kiss behind my right ear before moving away, making enough room for me to sit next to him.

We stayed that way. Sitting side by side—exhausted and pumped full of adrenaline.

I looked down at the man taking his bows at center stage, acting as if nothing had happened, and was irritated all over again.

Ford stared at the remnants of the panel that had torn free from the rig. Leaning over, he ran his finger along the frayed edge.

I'd seen Ford annoyed enough times, I'd seen him pissed when he confronted The Russian after he accosted me, but this was a new level of fury. I was pretty sure it wasn't directed at me, so I asked him.

“What?”

“Fabric doesn’t tear like that... not in a nice even line like it had the little holes that let you tear pages out of a book.” Ford’s accent was hard now.

“Perforated?”

“Yes, that. Without it, you might have a tear start where there is damage, but then it doesn’t tear so nicely—it would be stretched in places until the fibers gave away. See how nice and neat the line is? It is only stretched at the very edge before it gave way completely.”

“You mean this was on purpose?”

“Yes.” The word was diamond like—hard and reflective as Ford’s eyes.

“Who would cut it?”

“Who indeed. If there has been a tear, it would have been seen during inspection. We checked the panel where it attached to the rig—where you would see wearing from rubbing against the frame. If there were nicks further down they should still have been visible during the visual...”

“You think Semyon did this?” I couldn’t believe it. The shock and fear I’d seen in his eyes as the fabric tore away seemed genuine. “He wouldn’t risk his own life!”

Ford grunted. “Maybe, maybe not. People do many things for money. This is his last season on tour...” Ford stood before bending down to pull me up by my elbows. “It is not our problem, Michael. We leave it to Saul and his men in the suits. We’re done here.”

I followed him back downstairs, and he was right. Saul was already waiting for Ford.

Saul took one look at me, patted my cheek, and ordered me to the hospital to get my wrist checked. I couldn’t argue—it was red and swollen, the silk had rubbed raw furrows into my skin, which stung. If I had to bet, I’d put money on me wearing a cast before bed.

So much for my newfound sexual liberation; I’d have to put my plans for a trip to the city on hold for the time being.

I walked slowly back through the hallways, thinking about Semyon and his act. About his bodyguard and the seduction.

I was bothered enough that I found myself standing outside of Dressing Room B, opening the door without knocking.

Semyon and I no longer had the same boundaries for personal space, not after all that had happened between us. We'd lived a lifetime together within a single afternoon.

He wasn't surprised to see me.

"Are you okay?"

I wanted to be done. I'd wanted to ask him "why" but instead, watching my entrance from his makeup mirror, Semyon had looked haggard and twenty years older. It bothered me that I hadn't noticed before.

He ignored the question and resumed cleaning the makeup from his face, not meeting my eyes, and I let the silence bloom until he looked up again.

He was expecting me to ask him another question, or maybe even the same one. Instead I looked around, and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen The Russian since our altercation backstage.

"Where's your guy?"

"Who? Ivan?"

I shrugged. Ivan seemed like a fitting name for a Russian thug.

"He left. After..."

"After what? After he nearly killed you... and you nearly took Ford and me along for the ride?"

He didn't answer, his eyes traveling across the room to fall on the open gym bag filled with the tools of his trade. I guessed if I looked through it closely enough, I'd find the answer for myself—but I wanted him to say it, and he looked like he might.

Semyon sat, lips pressed together as if he had to work hard to keep words from passing his lips in confession or accusation. Not that I cared about Ivan—he was the cartoon character villain of the piece—but Semyon... they say you always remember your first time, but it was supposed to be young love. Not this.

I was tired of dancing around the truth.

I was tired of feeling like a fool.

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks, the leading edge of the anger that had been building from the moment I'd stepped through his door.

“You put me there—didn’t you? On that bridge? To make sure I was interested enough, invested enough... just in case?”

“Did you have your pet threaten me early on, so I’d be curious? I wondered about that... what was the point? I was never any threat to you.

“You... *you*, on the other hand...” My whole arm throbbed, and my shoulder ached from the strain of keeping Semyon from landing headfirst on the stage.

I was pissed, and he owed me.

Semyon flushed. At least he felt a little shame.

“I was not expecting you to be there... I wasn’t expecting it at all...” The face reflecting back at me from his mirror looked haunted instead of the imperious façade I expected to see.

“Without you there... Thank you.” Semyon trailed off, and a chill ran down my spine. I had a flashback to that moment of terror above the stage when I thought we would both die.

“Can you at least tell me why?”

He didn’t answer right away, just sat wiping off the face cream before leaning into the mirror to dab at the dark circles under his eyes with fresh concealer.

There was so much about him, I hadn’t noticed before.

I was beginning to think he wouldn’t answer me at all when he turned. Gone was the beautiful seducer, the angel of light. In his place was a hard, brittle survivor who exuded fragility—a man who could have stepped from the pages of Tolstoy—tragedy was written all over him. I steeled myself against a flood of sympathy and waited.

“You always know, when you get into bed with men like the ones who own us, that you are only as safe as you are profitable... there are always insurance policies.” He shrugged. “Apparently my contract with them is at an end.”

His stoic recitation sounded like a catechism he’d been weaned on, and given the Russian zeitgeist for fatalism, it probably was.

If it was true that I only stumbled onto Ivan’s sabotage plot by accident, and that Semyon hadn’t used me as a fail-safe in some publicity stunt, then I remained uncertain about his original reason for seeking me out.

Here I was, standing in almost the exact spot where Semyon had seduced me earlier in the day, still feeling like the same nineteen-year-old virgin. Blushing.

I hated that. “Why me?”

Semyon smirked, looking like himself once more. “You were so young and pretty, and you liked me. Why not?”

He stood then, walking close enough to run a calloused finger across my hairless cheek, his touch lingering as if comparing it with his own roughened one.

“One day, Misha, you will be old. You will see.”

He cupped my face and leaned in to kiss me, and I realized I was done with him.

I was embarrassed that I'd fallen for the illusions he'd spun, the web of deceit he made for himself, the fantasy he clung to that left him vulnerable to the men who controlled him.

He was a handsome man at any age—the face he'd bared to me, without the makeup and tricks, was appealing—it was just the man inside who wasn't.

That he was hiding what was real was a waste, but at least we had that in common.

Just thinking about it made me uncomfortable.

I could spend my life creating my own illusion designed to prevent the world from finding out I was gay. Eventually it would fail.

Or even if it didn't, if I left it in place until my grandfather was dead, what would I have left? Who would I be?

So far I'd lived my short life avoiding the question altogether, but the fire Semyon had lit in me, the first time he put his hands on me, would burn for a lifetime.

I thought of my grandfather again, the man who loved me so fiercely, who protected me with every breath he had, and I was ashamed.

I owed him the chance to love every part of me, and I owed myself the chance to be loved completely by him.

And if he didn't?

It would hurt.

But I also thought about Saul and Ford and Johnny—even Semyon. In the space of a single day my world had broadened with possibilities for friendship, for lust. Maybe even for love. I would survive.

Semyon wouldn't, not unless today's events shocked him into action—he was literally at the end of his rope with nowhere to go.

He wouldn't age gracefully like my grandfather whose vitality shone like a beacon in my life every day. He wouldn't age like this theater, enduring shabbily through time, resisting the march of change all around yet prevailing all the same.

Grateful that he hadn't lingered in my life long enough to do more than superficial damage, I was happy to shut the door on him, figuratively and literally.

Without a word, I pushed him away before he could touch me with his mouth.

Stepping away felt good, the tension I'd been carrying all day dissipating as I turned to face the open door.

Ford was there. Standing in the hallway, he held out an old leather jacket. I could see him trying to read my face.

"Michael." He breathed my true name, his accent was like a balm to my nerves, and when I smiled, his blank façade cracked just a little.

I shut the door on Semyon and moved stiffly over to join him.

"Thank you." I nodded to the jacket, but we both knew I meant more than that.

He draped it across my shoulders, and as its warmth enveloped me, I caught a whiff of new wood and machine oil, the scent I now associated with Ford.

He was treating me like a girl, but this time I welcomed it. I was exhausted and in pain. I had no doubt that the smallest kindness from Ford was more valuable to me than any grand gesture men like Semyon could offer.

I followed him out, willing to trust in this man who'd saved me at least once tonight.

The End

Author Bio

LE Franks is an author of Gay Romance fiction, living in the SF Bay Area surrounded by inspiration; and after years of ignoring the voices in her head, she's now giving them free reign in the form of her characters.

Don't expect the typical rugged hero or sophisticated businessman with the world at their feet; LE's men are living in the margins—they're in the middle of their journey, doing the best they can while searching for a connection with something bigger than themselves.

Her stories are a unique mix of humor and drama with enough suspense to produce fast-paced stories filled with emotion and passion, and featuring characters that are quirky and complicated. With a little effort and a lot of luck they may actually find their happily-ever-afters, but not until LE is through with them.

These days LE Franks can be found frequently writing stories about sexy men who desperately need a happily ever after while wrangling an odd assortment of jobs (six—at last count), houseguests (including pro baseball players), family, and friends. Manifesting an odd combination of contradictory talents and traits, LE is tragically honest and personally deceptive, and makes a damn fine pie.

LE Franks and her occasional writing partner Sara York are finalists in the 2013 Rainbow Awards.

Also By:

Can This Be Real, MLR Press

First Last Kiss, Grand Adventures Anthology, Dreamspinner Press

6 Days to Valentine, Wilde City Press

Snow Globe, Dreamspinner Press

Prodigal Wolf, Book One, Wolves and Waves Series with Sara York, MLR Press

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FOXES OVER FLOWERS

By J. Colby

Photo Description

A man wearing nothing but small black briefs, lying on beige carpeting, arches his back and lifts his hips upwards slowly and sensuously into the touch of a second man's hands.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This guy is perfection, I want that smooth taut stomach under my hands. But I know not to touch him. Were-foxes aren't the easiest kind to get into bed with; they're tricky and won't be pinned down by anyone until they've met their match. And I'm not the smartest guy around, not a Were either... but if I could just get my hands on this guy. I'd make it so he'd never want to get out from under me.

Come on author, help this guy catch a wily fox ;)

Sincerely,

Alex

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: acts of kindness, blue collar, gardener, implied psychic ability, shifters, slow burn

Word Count: 7,995

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FOXES OVER FLOWERS

By J. Colby

Green eyes.

Connor was sure that he'd never seen green eyes on a fox before.

With his knees cushioned by freshly cut grass and strong hands buried in rich, dark dirt, he couldn't look away. He was entranced.

Crouched at the edge of the property, the fox seemed to be watching him with those striking and wary eyes. It wasn't too ridiculous of a thought. With this client's property edging a rather expansive forest there were always animals on or around the gardens he was continually working on.

Still, the way this fox was looking at him was with an expression of far more awareness than any simple animal should have. Connor knew that there was a small chance that the fox was a Were, but Were-creatures were few and far between these days, what with the industrial revolution and all. Even here in Cork there was more than enough city sprawl to push them into numbers that put them on the verge of extinction.

Leaning back on his heels, Connor felt one corner of his mouth lift in a faint and crooked smile.

"Are you just going to stay over there, then?"

The petite animal's green eyes narrowed in a look that Connor would have considered disdainful had the sleek red fox been human. It was so full of emotion that it made him consider the possibility of the animal being a Were-fox even more.

Predictably though, the fox didn't answer. Nor did it choose to move any closer. Shaking his head and smiling fully, Connor gave his attention back to the delicate plants in front of him. He couldn't exactly forget about the fox, but neither was it possible for him to waste a sun-drenched workday trying to coax it closer.

Inhaling the intoxicating scent of the surrounding flora as he worked steadily, Connor paused after a while in order to reach for his nearby bottle of water. Dirt-covered fingers left dark smudges of mud in the condensation as he did so, but it didn't matter to him.

Looking up he noticed that the fox was now on the far side of his small plot of flowers. Its paws were neatly folded beneath its body as it observed him in a seemingly royal and haughty manner.

“Can I help you?” Connor asked after taking a deep drink of his water, throat working steadily as he swallowed. He wondered when it had approached.

The fox blinked slowly as if in direct response to his question.

Again, Connor got the feeling that the animal understood every word he was saying—and that if it had been able to, it would have responded.

Tugging off his dirty gloves, he held out one hand to the fox. He watched patiently as it looked at his hand and then back up into his eyes before it got to its feet and took a few tentative steps forward.

Connor didn't move. He forced himself to keep his breathing soft and even as he kept his hand still, palm up, and watched the fox approach slowly.

Under the heat of the bright summer sun, he was sure that the sweat trickling down the back of his neck and under his arms wasn't the most pleasant of aromas, but hopefully it wasn't enough to send the fox running.

At the soft snuffle of the fox's damp nose against his fingertips and then his palm, Connor felt his lips twitch in a faint grin at the sensation.

“Cute.”

The small animal stilled at his soft word, meeting his gaze with narrowed eyes that seemed to express their disapproval for Connor's choice of adjective. It bumped its head against his hand just faintly before turning and loping away, back into the lush trees that surrounded the property.

Snorting softly at the visible attitude the animal had given him, Connor turned his attention back to his work.

Green eyes again.

Finishing the last of his beer, Connor returned the gaze steadily from across the crowded club. He might have been imagining that the other man was looking at him in particular, but that didn't mean he couldn't encourage him to approach anyway.

It didn't seem possible that he should be able to see the colour of the man's eyes from here, but they were such a clear and sharp shade of green that they acted like a beacon in the dimly lit club.

Maybe it was his imagination, or just wishful thinking, but Connor was sure those eyes were the exact same shade of green that had graced his newfound fox friend.

As he leaned against the hard, polished wood of the bar counter, Connor contemplated the wisdom of getting another beer. It would be his third in less than as many hours, and while he wasn't drunk just yet, he wasn't really looking to be either.

As he straightened out of his slouch and looked away from those piercing eyes for a moment, Connor glanced around the crush of bodies that filled Sinners tonight.

Sinners was one of Cork's top gay nightclubs, which meant that it was almost always full, especially on a Saturday night. Still, despite the number of subtle and unsubtle overtures he'd received tonight, Connor couldn't completely shake off thoughts of his fox friend and the idea that it was far more human than it had let on.

"You're staring. That's rude, you know."

Startled by the words unexpectedly spoken next to his left ear, he jumped hard enough to be glad that he hadn't had the chance to order another beer, because he definitely would have dropped it. Still, he managed to compose himself quickly before turning.

While the voice had caught him off guard, he was less surprised by the green eyes currently looking up into his brown ones.

"Was I?"

Connor felt his mouth twitch as he tried not to laugh at the way the stranger's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned at his response. The indignation all over his face was cute.

"You were."

"Well, if you say so, then I must have been," Connor said, his voice light and just a little bit playful. He allowed himself to look at the other man properly now that he was right in front of him and not across a crowded room. He had to admit—even if it was just to himself—that he definitely liked what he saw.

Dark red hair that looked just long enough for him to tug, feathered softly around sharp and pale cheekbones and a small, elfin-like jaw was set stubbornly while those captivating eyes held his gaze. It wasn't difficult to see that the other man wasn't quite sure what to make of him.

Connor knew he'd never be considered the sharpest tool in any shed; he'd only barely managed to finish school after all, and he'd had no inclination afterward to further his studies. He'd always been far more comfortable doing physical labour and it hadn't ever bothered him that he was looked down on by a lot of so-called intellectual types.

Still, what he lacked in book smarts he made up for in handiness and people skills. He was good at reading others, and good at sensing feelings. If empathy could be considered a superpower then Connor might have thought himself gifted with it. Which was why he merely smiled in the face of the stranger's obvious confusion and irritation.

"Did you really come all the way over here just to tell me not to stare?" Connor asked as he turned where he stood, resting one arm on the bar top and looking at the other man evenly. "You could have just moved out of my line of sight, you know. Maybe you weren't as bothered by my staring as you say you were."

The man's thin lips curled into a pout, but green eyes never looked away from his. The pout was kind of cute, and it made Connor grin.

"You're really cute. You know that?"

The pout turned into an outright frown and Connor laughed. If the other man was going to be this fun to play with all the time, he definitely wasn't going to give up on trying to lure him in.

A barely audible huff greeted his laughter, and the other man crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't walk away though, so Connor had to take that as a sign of encouragement despite the rather sullen body language.

"Are you going to tell me your name, or should I just make one up for you? I can think of a few things I'd like to call you if you're going to give me the option of choosing."

The man narrowed his eyes at that, as if he could tell exactly what kind of names Connor was thinking of. It was probably the thought of ending up with some sort of ignoble nickname that finally prompted him to speak.

"Lorcán. My name is Lorcán."

His tone was as petulant as his expression and it took all of Connor's willpower not to outwardly laugh again. He was pretty sure that wouldn't go over well at all.

“It’s nice to meet you properly, Lorcán,” Connor said. He couldn’t prove that the pretty redhead in front of him was the fox that had been keeping him company at his client’s gardens over the last week, but there was just something about the other man’s eyes... “I’m Connor, by the way.”

He held out his hand, but he honestly didn’t think that Lorcán would take it. If the other man really was a Were, they were notoriously fickle about who they touched. It was unlikely that someone like him passed muster.

It came as no surprise when Lorcán merely lowered his gaze to look at his extended hand for a brief moment before looking up once more. His expression didn’t show any outward sort of disdain, but neither did he make any attempt to reach for Connor’s outstretched hand.

“Since you did come all the way over here... will you at least dance with me?” Connor asked, though that prospect seemed even more unlikely if Lorcán wasn’t even willing to shake his hand. “Or at least let me get you a drink.”

Thin lips twitched ever so slightly in response to his mildly exasperated tone and Connor returned the not-quite-smile with one of his own.

“So you do have a sense of humour. I was beginning to worry.”

Lorcán’s smile quickly disappeared and Connor couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the man’s mercurial mood changes. “Maybe I was wrong.”

He turned to face the bar anyway and lifted one hand to get the bartender’s attention to order their beers. All the while he felt Lorcán’s gaze on him, like tiny prickles on the back of his neck. Connor wondered briefly as he waited if it was even worth pursuing him.

Turning back to hand the redhead one of the pints though, just looking into those sharp green eyes removed any doubt he might have had about walking away. Even if the man in front of him wasn’t the fox from his client’s yard, he still wanted to get to know him. He felt compelled to.

“So... *are* you going to dance with me?” he asked again after taking a deep drink from his beer. He couldn’t seem to look away from those sharp cheekbones and seemingly bottomless green eyes. Even in the dim lighting of the club it was impossible to ignore how beautiful Lorcán was.

Not answering his question, Lorcán looked at him in a way that should have made him squirm uncomfortably. It was piercing, like he was trying to see inside his head. In that moment Connor tried to remember all that he knew about Were-folk, because he couldn’t recall for the life of him if telepathy was among their talents.

“Wouldn’t it just be easier to ask me what I’m thinking?” he asked after the silence had stretched long enough to become awkward. Despite the constant music and chatter in the club, it wasn’t too loud to be heard regardless of the distance Lorcán insisted on keeping between them.

Connor didn’t miss the way his words caused the other man’s eyes to widen, and he was left with the impression that whether he was actually able to or not, Lorcán had been trying to read his thoughts.

Despite the opening he’d given him, however, Lorcán remained stubbornly silent. He drank from his beer with a rather put out expression and Connor felt a flash of mild irritation. Why had he come over here if he wasn’t even going to talk? Connor was easygoing, but Lorcán was stretching that to its limits.

Suddenly Lorcán stepped closer, and Connor’s breath caught in his throat at the unexpected movement. He soon felt like he couldn’t breathe at all as Lorcán leaned in to reach past him and set his half-full pint glass on the bar. From this close, Connor imagined he could feel the warmth of Lorcán’s breath on his neck, and it caused a faint shiver to run down his spine.

The feelings he had around Lorcán were unsettling. It wasn’t like he walked around getting turned on by random people every day, and to be so affected by a near stranger was disconcerting.

“One dance.”

That voice again, so close to his ear. Unwilling to take the time to even smile in triumph at the words when Lorcán could change his mind at any moment, Connor set down his nearly empty glass and stepped forward, letting one hand brush lightly against Lorcán’s waist. The other man stiffened faintly at the presumptive touch, but he didn’t pull away. Connor took that as a good sign and slipped past him gracefully towards the semi-crowded dance floor. He couldn’t seem to stop himself from letting the hand on Lorcán’s waist slide across the firmness of his belly as he moved past him.

The feel of hard muscles underneath the soft fabric of the other man’s shirt, however, had him thinking less about dancing and more about other things. He almost regretted the touch when he knew it was unlikely Lorcán would be coming home with him tonight. Or ever.

Once on the dance floor, he didn’t reach for Lorcán like he would have with anyone else. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to, because he did. It would just mean more to him if Lorcán made the choice to touch him, rather than merely accepting his touch.

Moving to the heavy beat of the music, Connor watched Lorcán with hot dark eyes. More than anyone he'd ever wanted before, he wanted Lorcán. Whether it was just the lure of the unknown or the fact that the other man was just really attractive, he wasn't sure. It might even have been Lorcán's contrariness, which normally wasn't an attractive quality.

Lorcán pushed him away and pulled him close in equal measures and it was annoying and enticing all at the same time.

He wasn't usually one for games, but Lorcán didn't seem to be playing. He just genuinely seemed interested and repelled simultaneously. That alone was enough to make Connor want him; he felt like he had something to prove.

Keeping his eyes locked with Lorcán's, Connor had to hold back the smug grin that threatened to blossom on his lips when Lorcán gradually moved closer. Gloating before an actual victory was a quick way to lose.

Watching Lorcán dance, Connor felt like he was being hypnotized. Slender but strong limbs moved gracefully, ever so slowly closing the space between them until the fabric of their clothes brushed together with every move they made.

Still, Connor didn't reach out. It didn't matter that it was bordering on painful to ignore his need and want to settle large hands on Lorcán's waist and close that last inch of space between them. He couldn't miss the frustration in the other man's eyes, and that made him wonder. He knew that Were-folk were averse to touching strangers, but he hadn't ever put stock in the rumours that it was because they could feel a person's emotions while doing so. He wasn't sure if it was true, but the thought that he wasn't the only one suffering right then was both pleasing and encouraging.

A low growl escaped Lorcán, and if the music hadn't chosen that moment to lull just slightly before changing to another song, Connor would have missed it.

The noise was soft, and dare he say it, cute. Unable to hold back any longer, Connor allowed himself to grin.

"Did you just *growl* at me?"

"You're not touching me," Lorcán replied, ignoring the question.

Connor's grin widened.

"No. I'm not."

Those magnificent green eyes narrowed, but Connor merely smiled placidly. It felt good to be on the leading side for once.

When Lorcán's arms came up and wrapped around his shoulders, warm hands brushing against the bare skin of his neck, Connor felt like he'd won. It may have been a small victory, but it was a victory nonetheless. Not one to brag, he answered the unspoken plea and finally settled his hands on Lorcán's waist, enjoying the feel of firm muscle underneath the soft fabric of the other man's T-shirt.

All it took was that one touch and Lorcán closed that gap of space between them, allowing Connor to feel the press of his body from chest to upper thigh. It was a horrible tease when Connor couldn't even bring to mind the last time he'd gotten off with anyone other than himself.

Leaning down just slightly as they moved to the sultry beat of the new song, Connor inhaled the scent of soft red hair. It smelled like grass in the sunshine and it made him smile. He was rather partial to that scent considering what he did for a living, and he enjoyed it far more than any sort of store bought cologne.

"This doesn't mean anything."

With the other man unable to see his face from this angle, Connor allowed himself to grin faintly at Lorcán's nearly inaudible words.

"I wouldn't dream of thinking it did," he replied, tone even and not giving away the amusement he was feeling. He thought that if he could convince Lorcán to let him walk him home though, he might just have a chance with him.

For now, he was going to take what time Lorcán was willing to give him and enjoy it while he had it.

"What're you doing?"

The words were soft and slurred and it took Connor a moment to process them as he stopped what he was doing and looked up to see Lorcán standing in his now open doorway.

"I'm working on your garden; I would have thought that was rather obvious."

Lorcán glared and Connor just returned the look evenly. He'd learned from walking Lorcán home the other night that he tended to posture when he felt out of his comfort zone. It made Connor inexplicably happy to know that he took him out of his comfort zone quite regularly.

“Why are you working on my garden?” Lorcán asked, each word bitten off like he was talking to either a dimwitted person or a child. Connor wasn’t sure which one he’d rather it be, though ideally it would have been neither.

“Because you live in one of the most beautiful cottages I’ve ever seen,” he said after thinking for a moment. “You have all this land, and yet it had absolutely no garden at all, decent or otherwise. You didn’t even have a single bush or flower. It was a tragedy, to be quite honest. I thought I was going to cry at the sight of it when I brought you home on Saturday.”

He hadn’t really of course, but it had been quite painful to see a place with so much potential being so resolutely ignored. While Lorcán had allowed him, rather ungraciously he thought, to walk him home from the club on Saturday, he hadn’t bothered to try for so much as a kiss at the door.

If he were honest with himself, a part of the reason was because he’d been so taken aback by the neglected bare grass around the cutest cottage he’d ever seen. It was the kind of cottage that was made for postcards or tourist brochures, and yet it didn’t have so much as a hanging basket of flowers to add to its allure.

“You’re working on my garden?”

The way Lorcán repeated the words prompted Connor to laugh softly. He seemed completely puzzled by it, as if he couldn’t understand *why* Connor was doing such a thing. It made Connor wonder if anyone had ever done something for the other man simply because they wanted to, and not because they wanted something for it.

“Yes. I’m working on your garden. I am a professional landscaper after all. I even have one of those custom-painted trucks.”

He gestured to where his pickup truck, painted a deep blue with his company name and phone number on the side of it, sat out of the way further down the man’s long drive.

Lorcán remained silent, and Connor wasn’t quite sure what to make of that silence. He didn’t seem upset by his taking over of the garden, but he didn’t seem exactly thrilled by it either. Connor wondered if maybe he’d overstepped his bounds. Sitting back on his heels, hands covered in dirt, he met Lorcán’s gaze.

“I can stop if you’d like. I’m sorry. I just thought that a garden would suit it and I didn’t stop to think about how you would feel about me just barging in like this.”

He might not have been the kind of person to speak without thinking, but he was definitely someone who often did things without thinking them through. At the time that he'd had the idea to give Lorcán a garden, Connor hadn't even stopped to consider that he might not like it.

Unable to look away from Lorcán, though the man remained silent, Connor searched sharp features and sleepy eyes for any indication of what he was thinking. The other man was at times both easy and impossible to read. Some thoughts seemed to be printed right on his face, but others, like now, were locked away tight.

"It's fine," Lorcán said after a long moment of silence.

"It doesn't really sound like you think it's fine," Connor said. "If it were truly fine, I doubt you would have taken so long to say so."

"I said it's fine, so it's fine. Do whatever you like. It's plants. I'm not going to argue."

Refraining from pointing out that Lorcán was already arguing, Connor let the matter drop. He wasn't looking to push Lorcán into telling him to stop and go away, but nor did he want to feel like Lorcán was merely letting him do as he wished because he didn't want to start anything by saying no.

"All right then... any requests?" he asked, giving Lorcán what he hoped was a charming smile. He certainly hadn't gained any ground with his attempted favour, so he could only hope that he'd be able to sweet-talk Lorcán into a second date. Or even a first, since he wasn't quite sure that a dance or two and a walk home actually qualified as a date.

Lorcán merely shrugged in response, and it took a great deal of effort for Connor not to sigh. He didn't want to push, but at the same time, neither did he want to spend hours putting together a garden only for Lorcán to decide that he didn't like any of the flowers or bushes he'd picked.

"As long as you're not allergic to anything," he said, trailing off and allowing Lorcán to jump in.

"I'm not. Anything's fine. You probably know better than me what looks good together anyway," Lorcán replied. It was strangely close to a compliment, and it made Connor smile.

Without waiting for a response, Lorcán turned and went back inside. Connor watched him go until the door shut softly and blocked his view. Staring at the freshly dug earth in front of him, he sighed. He had a feeling it was going

to be a long while before Lorcán warmed up to him. It was a good thing he was patient.

“I’m all done.”

It had taken him a week to finish the garden completely, and in that time he’d only seen Lorcán a maximum of once a day. Occasionally he’d seen the front curtain twitch as if the man was checking to see if he was still there, but he’d only ever come out once to check the mail before retreating back inside.

Now Lorcán looked past him to the freshly planted flowers and bushes that edged the small cottage as well as the long and narrow drive that led to the main road.

Connor always felt nervous when a client was giving the finished landscape a once-over, but this time it was different. This time he was sure that if Lorcán didn’t like it, he’d have absolutely no chance with him at all.

“It’s beautiful.”

Lorcán’s softly spoken words were unexpected. He hadn’t said a thing to him on his daily trips to the post box at the end of the drive, nor had he even seemed to notice the slowly burgeoning garden around his cottage.

“You really like it? Because you don’t have to lie to make me feel better. It’s never too late for me to change things if you want.”

Lorcán shook his head. Red hair shivered faintly with the motion, and Connor had to resist the urge he had to reach out and run his fingers through the silky-looking strands.

“No, I mean it. I was worried... but it really does look beautiful.”

Connor was surprised. Not just by the compliment itself, but by how it made him feel. It wasn’t like customers had never told him he’d done a good job before, but somehow this felt a little bit different.

“Thank you. I’m glad you like it.”

Lorcán said nothing in response, and Connor looked over at him. For once the other man was looking directly at him, his expression one of confusion.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” Lorcán said. His green eyes reflected his bewildered tone.

“Dinner would be nice,” Connor replied, not looking away. He wasn’t going to lie about the fact that he’d done this to get Lorcán’s attention. “Will you?”

“Will I what?”

Connor laughed. “Will you have dinner with me? It doesn’t have to be in public if you’re embarrassed to be seen with me...”

“I’m not. I mean... I wouldn’t be.”

The blush that tinted Lorcán’s cheeks had Connor grinning widely. It was cute to see the other man looking something other than completely calm and collected for once.

“Then will you?” Connor repeated softly.

Lorcán nodded, and Connor just barely managed to contain himself. It would hardly be attractive if he started bouncing all over the place like a hormone-crazed teenager.

“I’ll pick you up later then, around six, if that’s all right?”

“Six is fine.”

That calm and cool demeanor was back again, but now Connor knew what lay beneath it and it was impossible to dampen his excitement. It was enough to know that he was slowly making progress in breaching Lorcán’s defenses.

He could only hope that dinner went well, and that it helped him move forward and not back in his relationship with the prickly redhead.

“Can I kiss you?”

The words came out without conscious thought and Connor could have kicked himself as soon as he said them. Though their dinner had gone well, in his eyes at least, that didn’t mean that Lorcán was ready to take things further. It didn’t even mean that the other man liked him, just that he was able to be polite in public.

Unable to see green eyes clearly when it was dark out, the man’s porch shrouded in shadows, Connor waited nervously for Lorcán to answer. In the meantime, he couldn’t seem to stop himself from reaching out and lightly touching one soft cheek.

Lorcán leaned into the touch of his hand and Connor’s heartbeat sped up. Even though he wanted more, in that moment it was enough for him that Lorcán trusted him and allowed that small touch.

“Just a kiss?”

Connor's eyes widened slightly at Lorcán's soft words. He hadn't expected to be allowed even that much, so the idea that Lorcán might want more was truly surprising. Running his thumb gently across the other man's soft bottom lip, he leaned in slowly.

“A kiss would be a good start,” he said before pressing his lips to Lorcán's. Feeling them soften and part beneath his own was encouragement enough to continue the kiss, his hands coming up to frame Lorcán's face.

Kissing Lorcán was everything he'd thought it would be, and with every second that passed, Connor wanted more. It was that urge that made him pull back, breathing heavily to catch his breath as he rested his forehead against Lorcán's.

“Why... why did you stop?”

It was gratifying to hear that Lorcán was having as much trouble catching his breath as he was, and it made Connor smile. Sliding one hand down from Lorcán's cheek to settle at the back of his neck, he pulled back in order to see what he could of the other man's face.

“Because I don't even know if you like me, Lorcán.”

It hurt a little to say, but if there was any time that Connor needed to be honest it was now. Despite his obvious interest in the other man, Lorcán had been painfully reluctant throughout their whole courtship—if Connor could even call it that. Now more than ever he needed to know where things really stood between them.

The silence seemed to stretch awkwardly between them after his words and Connor wondered if maybe he'd said the wrong thing. He couldn't seem to regret it though, not when it needed to be said.

“Will you come inside?”

Lorcán's voice was soft as he pulled away from his touch, and Connor felt a squeeze in his chest. Just from the hesitancy in his words, Connor wasn't sure whether this was a step forward or a step back.

“Of course. If that's what you want.”

He wasn't going to say no, not if it meant finding out for sure what all of this was to Lorcán and whether he stood any sort of chance with him.

Following Lorcán into the small cottage, Connor allowed himself to look around as he followed the other man's lead and took off his boots just inside the

door. Leaving them on the small mat next to Lorcán's, he shut the door behind him and let Lorcán lead the way through the small, cozy kitchen and into the living room.

The inside of the cottage was as beautiful as the outside, and Connor wasn't entirely surprised by how tidy it was. Lorcán didn't seem the type to let anything be outside of his control.

"Thank you for dinner tonight. I had a nice time," Lorcán said, turning to face Connor as he moved to sit on the edge of a chair.

"A nice time?" Connor repeated, wondering if maybe he'd misinterpreted the other man's level of interest. "That doesn't really sound like something you'd want to do again..."

Lorcán laughed.

"I'm sorry. I really did enjoy myself."

Easing himself down on the couch opposite Lorcán, Connor felt relieved by his words. He also realized that this was the first time he'd heard Lorcán laugh.

"Sometimes it's hard to tell with you. You don't say too much, and you're not exactly the emotive type either, *a ghrá*. I don't always know where I stand with you."

"I'm not used to this."

"Used to what, Lorcán?" Connor asked, not having missed the way the other man's expression had changed with his use of the Irish endearment. It was small, but enough to have Connor getting up off the couch and crouching in front of the chair where Lorcán sat. "I can't understand if you won't tell me what's going on."

Meeting his gaze, Lorcán's eyes looked faintly sad. It hurt Connor to see him look like that, especially if it was because of something he'd done.

"I'm not used to being treated like I'm normal."

The words were softly spoken, but as close as Connor was, he couldn't possibly have misheard them. It wasn't an outright confession of what he'd thought Lorcán was, but it was definitely close. Taking one of Lorcán's hands in his, Connor kissed the back of it.

"You seem pretty normal to me."

Lorcán's fingers twitched at the press of lips to his skin, and his breathing quickened noticeably.

“But I’m not.”

“How are you not?” Connor asked, trying to gently lead Lorcán into telling him the truth. He could tell that it was something that was weighing on Lorcán’s mind, or he wouldn’t have tried to push the other man.

“...I’m a Were,” Lorcán said, voice nearly inaudible. “A fox.”

“I kind of figured that, *a ghrá*. It was one of the things that drew me to you in the first place, I’ll admit,” Connor replied, giving Lorcán’s hand a soft squeeze and smiling reassuringly when the other man met his eyes in surprise. “But it’s not why I asked you to dinner.”

Lorcán flushed once more, and Connor couldn’t stop himself. He pushed up off of his knees just enough to be able to reach Lorcán’s mouth, and kissed him softly before speaking against his lips. “It doesn’t matter to me what you are, or aren’t. I want *you*.”

With one hand on Lorcán’s thigh, it was impossible for Connor to ignore the slight tremble that shivered through the other man’s body. He just didn’t know if it was because of his words or his touch. If Lorcán really could feel his emotions, Connor hoped that he could also feel his sincerity.

“Tell me what you want from me, Lorcán. I can’t read your mind.”

“I...” Lorcán hesitated. “I want you too. I just don’t know why.”

Relieved to know that this attraction wasn’t just on his side, Connor got to his feet and used his grip on Lorcán’s hand to heft the other man up and pull him close.

“Does it matter why?” he asked, one hand on the soft skin of Lorcán’s neck and the other on the curve of his waist. “I’m not asking for forever if that’s not what you’re looking for, Lorcán. I’m just looking for a chance. A chance at something. Even if that means it’s just a chance for you to enjoy yourself and be happy for once.”

Watching Lorcán as he shut his eyes and reached out to touch his chest, Connor felt his pulse speed up. He was being completely honest and he could only hope that Lorcán would be able to feel that.

When Lorcán’s body softened in his embrace and his arms wrapped around him, Connor felt elated. It seemed only right for him to kiss Lorcán again, though it wasn’t as soft or gentle as the first.

Hungry for a touch that he'd been denying himself all night, Connor kissed Lorcán eagerly. He was rewarded by Lorcán pushing up onto his toes and into the kiss, closing any remaining space between their bodies.

Feeling Lorcán hard against him, Connor slipped his hands up under the hem of his shirt. A soft gasp against his mouth at the touch of his work-callused hands against Lorcán's soft and warm skin had his cock swelling inside the tightness of his jeans.

"A *ghrá*, you need to tell me how far this is going," he said, hands stilling on Lorcán's skin. It was difficult to hold back when Lorcán was looking up at him with lust-filled green eyes, lips parted and slightly swollen from the force of their kisses. Seeing Lorcán like that was enough to make him want to push the other man down to the floor and fuck him right then and there.

"Going?"

Amused by the breathless word and dazed tone, Connor smiled and slipped his hands down under the waistband of Lorcán's trousers. Pulling him back against his body and nuzzling his cheek, Connor allowed Lorcán to feel just how much he wanted him. "I want all of you, Lorcán. I just need to know if that's what you want too, or where the line is."

"All of you. I want all of you, please."

Surprised by Lorcán's response, Connor took a moment to search beautiful green eyes. He was relieved when he saw nothing but need and honesty there.

"In that case, I hope you're not tired," he said, though he wasn't really looking for an answer. He simply leaned in and kissed Lorcán once more as he eased them both down to the floor and onto the bright and colourful rug that covered the cottage's smooth hardwood.

Encouraged by the soft moan that Lorcán let out as he kissed his way down the side of his neck, Connor pulled back only to help Lorcán out of his shirt as well as tug off his own. As much as he wanted to just get them both naked right out of the gate, he couldn't quite push Lorcán's earlier hesitancy from his mind.

Admiring smooth and pale skin with his gaze, Connor smoothed rough palms up the flat expanse of Lorcán's stomach. It was gratifying to see the way Lorcán squirmed under his touch, hips lifting and cock tenting the front of his trousers.

Touching the hardness of Lorcán's erection through soft fabric, Connor smirked when Lorcán moaned and opened hooded eyes.

“You’re teasing. Stop it.”

“Yes I am,” Connor said, idly touching himself through his jeans as he popped the button open on Lorcán’s trousers and tugged the zipper down. It was easy enough to pull them down and toss them to the side, and he knelt between Lorcán’s legs to slide his hands up the man’s hips. Watching the other man writhe beneath his touch and push up eagerly into it, Connor shifted just enough to hover over Lorcán.

Pressing a line of kisses down the side of the other man’s neck and drifting down to his chest, Connor paused.

“Lorcán...”

Green eyes narrowed in obvious irritation, and Connor laughed softly.

“Don’t worry *a ghrá*, I’m not changing my mind. As if I could when you’re looking like this...”

“Then why did you stop?” Lorcán asked, voice throaty and a shade lower than normal.

“Because unless you just want me to suck you off...” Connor trailed off, leaving the rest of the sentence implied. By the flush across Lorcán’s cheeks, the implication was clearly understood.

“...night table. Bottom drawer.”

Reluctantly getting to his feet, Connor followed Lorcán’s directions to the bedroom and went straight to the aforementioned night table. At any other time, he might have been interested in looking around Lorcán’s home, especially after being curious about him for so long. However, the reminder that the other man was mostly naked and waiting for him was enough to keep Connor on task.

Returning to the living room as quickly as he could, Connor pushed off his pants and kicked them away before kneeling back between Lorcán’s legs.

“You look beautiful. I hope you know that,” he said, as he set the small bottle of lube and condom off to the side before curling his fingers under the elastic waistband of Lorcán’s underwear. He was rewarded with a blush that blossomed not only across sharp cheekbones, but spilled down the other man’s chest as well.

Lorcán didn’t respond, and Connor smiled. It was seriously cute how shy he was about certain things.

Connor settled on his belly and tugged Lorcán's underwear down just enough to reveal the head of his cock. The pressure of the hard floor against his erection was enough to draw a soft hiss from him, but the sight of Lorcán's face as he leaned in and sucked the head of his dick between his lips was enough of a reward.

Keeping his eyes on the other man as he slowly swallowed around the length of his erection, Connor was encouraged by the way Lorcán's back arched and his eyes slid shut. Taking his time, Connor pressed in close and pulled back in equal measures. He especially loved the way Lorcán whimpered just faintly when he held him in his throat and swallowed.

When his jaw began to ache from the pressure of being stretched wide around Lorcán's dick, he pulled back with a soft and damp pop of noise. Connor grinned wickedly when Lorcán's eyes opened and he lifted his head to glare at him.

"Don't worry, there's more," he said, pulling Lorcán's underwear down and off before reaching for the lube and slicking it over his fingers. Pressing soft kisses up the inside of one pale thigh, he pulled back in surprise when Lorcán began to squirm and let out helpless stifled snorts of laughter.

"You're ticklish there of all places?"

"It's not like I can choose where to be ticklish," Lorcán replied with a huff.

It was such a cute expression that Connor couldn't resist. Lowering his head, he rubbed the roughness of his close-cropped beard against the inside of Lorcán's thigh, prompting him to dissolve into laughter once more.

That laughter turned into a soft gasp, though, when Connor pressed slick fingers against the entrance to Lorcán's body and pushed them slowly inside. Taking the other man's cock back into his mouth as he teased and worked him open, Connor considered for a brief moment just letting Lorcán come like this.

The only thing that stopped him was the urge to feel Lorcán tightening around him as he came, at least for their first time together.

All traces of laughter were gone from Lorcán's face when Connor finally rolled on the condom and began to push slowly inside him. Tight heat combined with the look on Lorcán's face, was enough to have Connor's breath catch in his throat as he propped himself up above the other man.

Lorcán's normally pale skin was flushed with arousal, and his fine red hair clung to sweaty temples as Connor moved lazily inside of him. Pausing to lean

back and rest on his heels, Connor settled his hands on Lorcán's hips and pulled his body close as he resumed moving slowly inside of him.

After waiting to get to this point, there was nothing he wanted more than to take his time. The only problem with that was how hot Lorcán looked beneath him, and the feel of his body against and around his. Both of those things combined were enough to push him to the edge faster than he would have liked.

Stroking the softness of Lorcán's inner thigh with one hand before wrapping it around the hardness of Lorcán's cock, Connor was pleased by the soft moan the other man let out.

"Will you come for me, *a ghrá*?" he asked softly, callused thumb rubbing over the soft and sticky head. "Because I'm not sure I can hold out much longer, and I think that I'd really like it if you came before then."

Hazy green eyes opened just a slit to meet his brown ones. Enticed by the sight of Lorcán licking dry lips, Connor moved his hand slowly at the unsteady nod the other man gave him. Jerking Lorcán off with a tight and rough grip as he moved inside of him, Connor's breath left him in a soft wheeze when the other man came, body clenching tight around his.

Forced to stop moving until Lorcán's body relaxed, Connor brought cum-stained fingers to his lips and licked them clean. At the faintly bitter but pleasant taste of the other man's release, he decided that he was definitely going to suck the other man off until he came next time. He wanted to taste it all, and then to keep sucking even when the man was done coming.

Still painfully hard with Lorcán relaxed and melted beneath him in the wake of his orgasm, Connor settled both hands on the backs of Lorcán's thighs. Spreading him open and keeping him pinned as he began moving once more, hard and fast, it didn't take long for him to be pushed to the brink. With nothing holding him back, Connor closed his eyes as he finally came, hips stuttering and pushing against Lorcán's body as he spilled into the tip of the condom.

It was with shaking arms that he kept himself propped up over Lorcán's prone body as he came down from the high of his release. Letting himself gradually relax on top of the other man, he caught soft lips in a lazy and deep kiss.

"You know... if you really liked it, I'll come and do your back garden too," Connor said softly as he pulled carefully out of Lorcán's body and rolled to lie beside him on the rug.

“Is that a euphemism for something?” Lorcán asked, his voice tired but tinted with humour.

Laughing, Connor reached out to play with red hair that had been enticing him for over a week now. “It’s not, but I’m sure it could be if you wanted. I meant if you liked the front garden I planted.”

“You just want me for my unplowed acreage, don’t you?”

“Among other things,” Connor said, splaying one tanned hand on the soft skin of Lorcán’s pale belly and admiring the vivid contrast in their skin tones. “You were pretty damn cute as a fox, too.”

Lorcán pouted at that. Connor had a feeling he objected to being called cute, in any form, but he refused to take it back. The other man was cute. He was just going to have to make him accept that, no matter how much time it took.

The End

Author Bio

J. Colby has been writing for as long as she could hold a pen, pencil, or crayon in her hand. Her mind never stops creating, which often leads to interesting dreams—and sometimes nightmares.

She has two cats that own her more than she owns them, and a full-time job to pay the bills that owns her more than her cats do.

Food, sleep, the smell of old books, and knitting are all things she loves on top of creating new worlds and the people in them. Though sometimes food more than any of the others.

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FROM THE ASHES

By Leah Miranda

Photo Description

Two men sit on the wet ground, at the bottom of a ravine, with smiles on their faces. One man is leaning against the other while they hold hands, their arms outstretched as if they are about to take flight. They look happy and worry-free, and completely at ease with each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Insecure, self-conscious, shy, geeky, clumsy. In other words a walking disaster.

It is the only way I could describe myself. My past boyfriends didn't help any with their constant criticism and belittling comments about my person.

So you can't be really surprised that I have given up finding my knight in shining armour.

But I have never taken into consideration the one beautiful man, who is so far out of my league that it is not even funny. He became the only source of my self-esteem.

But when he started acting suspicious all my insecurities came back full force.

Please give us a HEA. I love him too much to lose him because of a misunderstanding.

****No cheating, threesome or BDSM. Otherwise, get as creative as you like****

Sincerely,

MrzoroChan

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, sweet/no sex, humorous, businessmen/lawyers, writers, anxiety disorder

Word Count: 17,187

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FROM THE ASHES

By Leah Miranda

Winter in the city was a drab and dreary affair, even more so when mountains of dirty snow competed for sidewalk space with aggravated natives dodging and cursing the herds of tourists who move too slowly for their fast-paced New York life. Space was always at a premium, even among pedestrians.

Noah's third-floor apartment, which he shared with his best friend, was in a five-story building with a handsome limestone façade and classical stone corbels that hold up the bay windows on one side. It was narrow, but had a deep lot, and was squeezed incongruously between a tall, more modern condo building and an even taller, wider apartment block (more posh, Ben would say), manned by a doorman and a security guard. Their apartment looked tiny in comparison, dwarfed as it was by its gigantic siblings.

They compensated by painting the walls white and draping sheer curtains on the windows, which Noah tied back every morning to let as much light in as possible. The floor-to-ceiling column of bookshelves that dominated one wall were also white, to coordinate with their white kitchen cabinets and counters, which Ben said occasionally blinded him when the light hit them just so, but Noah liked things that matched. He conceded that a white couch was just asking for trouble yet vetoed Ben's attempts to talk him into buying a dark sectional for their small living room. They ended up compromising on a cream leather couch that he forbade Ben to eat on.

It was starting to look a little institutional, even for Noah, so he grudgingly allowed bold splashes of red and yellow here and there at Ben's insistence, though they were mainly things that could be easily replaced on his whim, namely pillows and artwork.

Noah sat on the window seat, his attention split between the project in his hands and the rain lashing against the double-paned glass. He hoped it would be enough to melt some of the snow that had piled and piled relentlessly over the long winter months. He was tired of hearing Ben complain about walking on slush.

"I'll stop by the cleaners on my way home. Do you need anything from the store?"

Noah looked up from the scarf he was knitting and gave Ben a smile. "I think I'm okay. You'll be late if you don't hurry up, and then Daddy Bill will have smoke coming out of his ears again."

The other man snorted. "Bill always has smoke coming out of somewhere, whether I'm late or not." He straightened up from where he was peering in the fridge, fixing the dry erase board that had slid down when he brushed up against it.

Noah put down his yarn and stood up to stretch. He admired his friend's navy suit and examined his own threadbare sweatpants with a self-deprecating smirk. The elastic was nearly gone and they had an annoying habit of sliding down whenever he walked, so he'd taken to folding the top and rolling it twice to secure them. Ben, the fashionista that he was, spared no expense on his clothes, and it showed. He looked very handsome and lean in his tailored two-button suit jacket. His tie—a novelty, cow-print one he occasionally wore as a strange homage to Noah (who had an unusual affection for the creatures)—would have looked ridiculous on anyone, and no doubt would earn him a mild reprimand from his father. He wore it so confidently and so matter-of-factly that he made it look good. Noah doubted he could pull off such a look himself. He hitched his pants up so he wouldn't trip over them as he walked towards Ben.

"You always work hard; you'd think he'd ease off on his nagging once in a while," he said, holding out Ben's messenger bag for him.

Ben just rolled his eyes. He shrugged on his coat before turning to Noah with a smile.

"Vietnamese okay for tonight?" he asked, grinning when Noah returned his smile.

"Saigon Grill?" Noah loved the Grill's sea bass with spinach dumplings, but it came with a staggering price tag and he was reluctant to let Ben spend that much money. Ben seemed to have read his mind. He hooked an arm around his shoulder and shook him gently.

"Stop worrying about how much it costs, seriously."

Noah laughed. He often wondered how it was that Ben knew him so well. He would have loved to have had him as a friend back in high school. As it was, a sickly, stick-thin, slightly effeminate boy like him—who was constantly outshined by his athletic older siblings—barely had anyone to hang out with

besides the chess club people, and he hadn't even known how to play chess. Still didn't.

Ben looked up at the cat-shaped wall clock ticking along above the hall table and grimaced. "Definitely have to get going, Princess. The evil lawyer-father is bound to be breathing flames by now."

Noah handed him an umbrella and opened the door for him, wondering what Ben would do if he gave him a gentle kiss on the lips. He gave himself a mental kick to erase the suddenly domestic scene in his mind. He knew Ben saw him as a brother, and despite Ben being attracted to a wide variety of men, he'd never showed any interest in Noah as anything but a friend.

He wouldn't describe himself as handsome. His aversion to public spaces guaranteed a paleness acquired from spending too much time indoors, and he was far from model-level attractive with his short height. Not that he was doughy, but he certainly wasn't sculpted either. He'd never be able to compete with the men his friend preferred. Still, he couldn't stop himself from leaning in to kiss Ben's cheek.

"I'll see you later." Ben gave him a salute before walking out.

Noah went back to the window seat and leaned against the window, giving Maisie, his seven-year-old orange tabby, a cuddle when she jumped up on his lap. He let her rub up against his face briefly before propping her up so she could rest her white paws against the glass. He traced raindrops sliding down the glass while he kept an eye on the pedestrians down below. The sidewalks were flowing with umbrellas bobbing and weaving their way up and down the streets, but he made out Ben's tall form in the crowd easily. He chuckled at his friend's purple, polka-dot umbrella, shaking his head in amusement.

"He's so good to me, Mais. I don't know what I'd do without him."

Maisie meowed before wiggling away. Noah picked up his scarf again, already counting down the hours until Ben came home.

The prewar apartment building was tucked up on a quiet street between Union Square and Gramercy. What it lacked in creature comforts—the tiny elevator was claustrophobic enough to make even the hardest of people pull their hair—it made up for in location. It was a stone's throw away from Barnes & Noble (really the only store he'd willingly go to), and if he took a Xanax beforehand, he could occasionally be persuaded to meet Ben in Madison Square Park for a short tête-à-tête dinner.

It had to be a late dinner, too, with Ben having to work overtime to make up for his tardiness that morning. Noah didn't care. The late hour meant fewer people and less chance for him to embarrass them both with a panic attack.

He hunkered down on the park bench uncomfortably, wondering if it made him look more or less threatening to the couple who'd been eyeing him for a while from where they sat cozied up a few benches away.

"Hey there, oh creature of the night!"

Noah jumped. Ben was making his way towards him quickly, chuckling when he noticed Noah's nerves.

"One of these days, I'll keel over from a heart attack if you keep sneaking up on me like that," he scolded.

His friend just laughed and wound an arm around his shoulder as they made their way out of the park. "Okay, so the Grill is out of the question, obviously, as it's all the way Uptown. How do you feel about Korean?"

"It's not crowded, is it?"

"Would I ever take you somewhere you can't handle?"

Noah gave him a look. Did he really need to remind Ben about that BBQ place on 23rd?

Ben paused, thinking. "Yeah, okay. Never mind. Clearly not one of my most brilliant ideas," he grimaced. Neither one of them would ever forget the spectacular way Noah had lit out of that place, like he was on fire—nearly getting run over in his desperation to escape that madhouse.

"But this place is quiet, I promise."

Ben took him to a nondescript building with a stern-faced doorman and an elevator just slightly bigger than the one at their apartment (it could fit six people, if they were willing to get personal). Noah wasn't sure of the place at first, but was pleasantly surprised when the doors opened to a dim, casual place. They were quickly seated by the window as the place was nearly empty, and Noah could almost pretend they were on a date. He looked at Ben over the glow of the candle.

"So far, so good," Noah teased, his shoulders starting to relax.

Ben laughed. "Well, I'm glad to see you have faith in me."

They shared a quiet laugh. *This is nice*, Noah thought. He felt mellow from the antianxiety med he took earlier, and the ambiance was quite soothing. It felt

safe in the low light, with just him and Ben in their little nook. Quiet strains of Korean pop serenaded them as they looked over the menu. Noah winced at the prices. Why anyone would willingly pay that much money for some poor cod's sperm sac was beyond him.

Ben looked at him knowingly. "Order whatever you like. This is my treat for you getting out of the apartment, okay?"

They ordered appetizers to share between them, and for the main, Noah decided the dumplings were a safe bet; they were both affordable and something he liked. He knew Ben hated it when he got hung up on the prices. He just didn't feel comfortable having other people spend so much money on him, and frowned when Ben added *go-deung-uh gui* to his order.

"Jesus, Ben, I don't want a mackerel half the size of my fist for twenty dollars! It's just too much money."

"You've been craving fish all week, so I figured it's about time you got your fish. And it's my fucking money I want to spend. And I want to spend it on you."

"I don't like the idea of you wasting your money on me. It makes me uncomfortable," Noah insisted. He didn't like feeling inadequate around Ben, or having Ben think that he was taking advantage.

Ben took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself. This was an old argument between them.

"Noah, you are my friend. I want to treat you once in a while. Who else would I spend my hard-earned money on, other than on the people I care about? And why are we arguing over food? Let's save that for if I buy you a house or a car."

Noah couldn't say anything to that, not without upsetting Ben even more, so he just nodded and turned to look out the window.

They were silent for a while, and Noah realized he was probably coming off as ungrateful. He turned back to Ben with a small, conciliatory smile. He hated it when they argued.

"Thanks," he said.

"Hey, no problem." Ben gave him a slight smirk in response. "You worry about the littlest things, though."

Noah kicked Ben under the table, and then tried to make out it was an accident. Ben grabbed Noah's leg and pinched him on the thigh.

“Ow!”

“Keep your dangerous limbs to yourself, or pull back a bloody stump,” Ben threatened, but the grin on his face undermined his serious tone.

Noah huffed and glared at him accusingly, rubbing his thigh to ease the sting. Ben didn't look apologetic in the slightest. He just sat there, with that same grin, wagging his eyebrows comically. Noah shook his head in amusement. Whether he wanted it or not, he had to admit that Ben had a way of making him laugh.

The food arrived, and the conversation turned to mundane things. Noah soaked it up. He watched his friend, his blond hair like burnished gold in the candlelight. A wave of melancholy swept over him, as, for the hundredth time, he resigned himself to the truth that this was all Ben would ever see them as. He would only ever allow them to be friends. Noah rubbed a hand against his chest to ease the ache.

“...So he says to me—Noah? You okay?” Ben asked with concern.

Noah took a deep breath. “Huh? Oh yeah, I was just—you know, thinking about my deadline,” he explained.

The other man scoffed and waved a hand in dismissal. “You always make it on time. I just realized, I don't even know what you're writing now.”

And you never will, Noah thought. Not when the story was so suspiciously about them.

He reached across the table and put a hand over Ben's.

“Thanks. Thank you, Ben. I don't know what I'd do without you.” He gazed at him earnestly, trying to convey his true feelings.

Ben shook his head, looking uncomfortable as he slid his hand away to reach for his wallet. “You're my best friend, practically my *brother*. No thanks needed.”

Noah nodded tightly and excused himself to go to the restroom while Ben dealt with the check.

Passing the restroom mirror, Noah took a moment to study his reflection. He'd seen Ben eyeing their waiter, and the man looked just like Ben's type—tall and dark-haired with a little meat on his bones. Noah, despite Ben's valiant attempts at getting him to eat more, looked ready to tip over from the slightest breeze.

He left the room feeling despondent, even more so when he caught sight of Ben chatting up their waiter with obvious interest. And why wouldn't he? The guy was gorgeous. Noah dug his nails in his palms to stop his train of thoughts. His sister was always getting on his case for putting himself down. It was a hard habit to break.

Ben quickly stood up as Noah came closer. If it was his goal to unobtrusively slide the slip of paper he was given in his pocket, he failed abysmally, but Noah pretended not to see.

A few nights later and he couldn't pretend anymore. Not with the rhythmic banging of the headboard against the wall, or the orchestra of grunts and moans serenading him from next door. He turned over and mashed the pillow harder against his ear, trying to block out the rising crescendo of, "Oh! Oh!" going on in Ben's room, and only partly succeeding.

"Fucker," he whispered with uncharacteristic venom. It didn't help that he was aroused as all hell.

Noah tossed the pillow away in anger. He wasn't going to get any sleep anytime soon. Refusing to give in to the insistent thrum of arousal coursing through him, Noah stomped out of his room and into the darkened living room. Maisie sat on her climbing post, watching him with eerie, golden eyes.

"Might as well get some work done, huh?" he said, stroking his cat gently when she joined him at his desk.

He turned on the antique banker's lamp he inherited from a great aunt and looked at the mess of papers, all filled with copious notes about his new book.

It was usually easy to immerse himself in another life when he was sitting in front of his computer. He was another person, in other circumstances, doing things he would never do in real life. Ben had asked him at the restaurant what he was writing, and he wondered what Ben would say if he found out that he was writing about them. It was a memoir loosely based on the trials of being in love with your best friend and the damning cliché of it remaining unrequited. He'd thought of giving it a happy ending many times, but it didn't seem right. And so here he was, as stuck in writing limbo as he was in his personal life.

The noise in Ben's room had died down a few minutes ago, but Noah didn't get up. He sat at his desk and stared at the blinking cursor until it was all he could see, and still the words wouldn't come.

There was a spot on the floor just off the bedroom hallway that always creaked no matter how carefully you stepped on it. Noah tensed when Ben cursed behind him.

“Fucking stupid, loud floor! Probably needs a hammering.”

“Not as loud as you,” Noah wanted to say. He kept quiet and resolutely didn’t turn to look at the other man.

“Hey, I hope we didn’t keep you up.”

Ben was equal parts saint and asshole, Noah’s sister had always said. He wasn’t sure which one he was being now.

“Couldn’t sleep anyway.” He wrinkled his nose at the scent that assaulted him, wondering if it would be gauche to suggest a shower.

“Hey listen, I thought we could go up to the Vineyard next weekend. It’s my mom’s birthday, and she’s been saying she doesn’t see you enough.”

A weekend away sounded good, even if Noah was still a little miffed with his friend. Certainly, Noah was equally fond of Ben’s family as they were of him.

“Okay. What should I get her?”

“She’s always loved your chocolate mousse cake. I wouldn’t say no to some peanut butter cookies, either.”

Noah couldn’t help but laugh, despite his earlier mood. “It’s not your birthday.”

“Do I need to wait for my birthday to get some cookie goodness?” Ben pouted, though he didn’t really have to wait for anything, because Noah would give him whatever he asked for. Maybe. Within reason. Okay, he didn’t think he was desperate enough to be a yes-man, even for Ben.

He deliberately kept his eyes away from Ben’s half-naked body, feeling embarrassed and upset for some reason.

“We’ll see.”

Ben got to his knees in front of him (boy, did that make a nice picture) and batted his eyelashes, making Noah laugh again. He was always amazed at the way Ben could make him get over a snit, whether knowingly or not, and he was more than willing to return to their status quo by deliberately putting Ben’s infuriating exhibitionism out of his mind.

“Get up, you idiot. You look ridiculous.”

“I will, but only if you promise me cookies!” Ben bargained, grabbing a chair leg for balance when Noah tried to push him away with his foot.

“Okay, fine. Fine! Just stop giving me those goo-goo eyes. It looks scary on you.”

Noah nearly toppled out of his chair when his foot was grabbed, Ben making a claw out of his hand in obvious mischief.

“No, don’t you dare! Benjamin!” He howled out a laugh, trying to yank his ticklish foot away from those torturous fingers, and failing.

Ben had tears in his eyes from laughing so hard. His face had a ghostly blue look from the computer glow and his hair was sticking out in clumps, but Noah thought he looked good. He gave another yank, and his foot came free with a jerk that sent his knee up, hitting Ben on the chin. This caused them to go into fits of laughter again, until they were both lying on the floor breathless.

“Give me cake, or give me death,” Ben panted.

“That could be arranged.”

Noah rolled on his side. It felt good to joke around with Ben like this. He could almost pretend it was just the two of them in the apartment, goofing off. He moved to snuggle up to Ben’s side like he had any right.

“You know, it’s rude to keep people up with your noise at this ungodly hour.”

They both turned around to see Ben’s date scowling at them from the hallway. He gave Noah a disdainful look before turning his attention to Ben. The light was poor, but Noah could still see the dark bruise on his neck. His mood soured.

“Wow, with the way you talk about your friend, I thought I had some competition. But I don’t have anything to worry about, do I?” the other man sniped in a fake whisper.

Noah could feel himself flush in embarrassment. No longer comfortable being in the same room, he quickly stood up and grabbed Maisie. He ignored Ben and the other man and slipped around them, not meeting their eyes as he nearly ran to his room. The door’s lock latched noiselessly, all but drowned out by the pounding in his head. He didn’t think he was having an attack, even with the loud, racing thump-thump in his chest and the shaking he tried to control, but he fumbled for the orange prescription bottle on his nightstand anyway.

He could hear them arguing outside as he pet Maisie's fur almost hypnotically, willing his heart to slow. The slam of the front door made him jump and tighten his hold on the squirming cat. She hissed at him in displeasure.

"Sorry," he whispered, not sure whether he was apologizing to her or to Ben. He tried to ignore the knocking on his door, muting Ben's pleas to open up with his pillow until he quieted down and the apartment was silent again.

Breakfast the next day was a somber, awkward affair. Noah found himself tiptoeing around the apartment and trying to quietly put down his mug on the cold, granite countertop, but then realized he was acting guilty for something he hadn't done.

He slammed the pan on the stove with some satisfaction. In a rare show of pettiness, he also loudly rattled the silverware, cursing under his breath when the drawer closed on his thumb.

The toast had just popped up when Ben slunk his way into the kitchen and sat with slumped shoulders on the barstool.

"Noah—"

Whatever he wanted to say was drowned out by the shrill whistle of the kettle, and Noah remained turned away. He busied himself with preparing his tea and buttering his toast, deliberately chewing loudly to muffle the sound of Ben's voice. It was childish but made him feel better.

Ben sighed and came around the counter to put his hand on Noah's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know he'd be such an asshole. Besides, he had every reason to be worried. I mean, look at you," he pointed out.

"Yeah, look at me... a very short and scrawny scarecrow."

Ben gave him a disbelieving look. "You're just the right height to put your head on my shoulder when we're watching movies on the couch. And you've always been thin, it's genetics. Supermodels would be jealous of you."

Noah pulled away.

"What?"

"You're so clueless," he accused Ben.

“So clue me in, then.”

They were less than a foot apart, but Noah felt the distance between them like an ocean. Cluing Ben in on what was really wrong wasn't something he was comfortable with, and all this talk about his appearance was starting to make him discomfited.

“You know how I feel about strangers in the apartment. I don't feel comfortable being around people I don't know,” he accused instead.

Ben rolled his eyes. “You don't feel comfortable around people, period. Stop making excuses about strangers and shit, because we both know you're one antisocial bastard.”

He gave Noah a shrug, obviously trying to find a way to say what he was thinking delicately, but clearly failing. “Look, I know you can't help it when you have panic attacks, but you should have some exposure therapy to desensitize yourself or something. Just go out there and immerse yourself in a crowd—that sounded way better in my head—but you can't possibly enjoy being locked up in the apartment all day.”

Noah wasn't sure where this was coming from, but Ben had been increasingly insistent about him going out lately. For instance, Ben had bought tickets to Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater a month ago without consulting him, and it upset him. He didn't go, of course, and Ben was equally upset when he had to find someone else to go with on such short notice. However, whatever guilt Noah felt for letting Ben down was quickly forgotten when Ben apologized for not asking him first.

“Actually, I do enjoy being in the apartment all day. It's safe here, it's familiar. I don't have to worry about my heart jumping out of my chest when someone looks at me funny, or worry about the crowds squeezing me in.”

“The city's not one giant mosh pit with hordes of people just waiting to swarm you!”

“Ben, really—”

Ben stalled him with a hand.

They were now standing opposite each other with the island between them, and Noah thought it ironic. He felt that there would always be something to separate them, whether it was his illness, or his unrequited love, or even this blocky, white island, and Ben would always find a way to drag Noah across to his side kicking and screaming.

“Noah,” Ben said soothingly, hands out in front of him as they both stood there, staring at each other. “Noah, I want you to have a life outside of this place. I want to do things with you, to take you to restaurants, to the park. I want us to see plays or musicals and laugh at silly paintings that don’t make sense at the museum. Do best friend things together again.”

Noah could feel himself tearing up but he swallowed it down. He didn’t want Ben to see him as even more weak than he already did.

“I want-I want-I want,” he mocked. “It’s nice of you to plan my life for me with what you want. What about what I want? I want to stay home and watch bad sitcoms on TV and laugh at their terrible jokes. I want to play board games and video games and sing bad karaoke with my best friend.”

“Look around you!” Ben yelled, whirling on the spot and gesturing wildly. “Everything here in this place is what you want. I can’t even feel at home in my own apartment. And you know what? I can live with that, because it makes you comfortable. But I can’t live with the fact that you’ve become a hermit, while life goes on outside.”

Noah looked at him in disbelief. “You know why I can’t be in crowds.”

He couldn’t believe that Ben would forget something he’d have to live with for the rest of his life. He still heard the screams of panic when he was alone in bed at night, still smelled the smoke, felt the heat creeping closer.

Ben looked at him with sympathy, but he took a deep breath and plowed on. “I can’t say that I know what it feels like, but what happened at the club wasn’t your fault, Noah. It’s time to move on. She’d want you to move on.”

“No, you don’t know what it feels to be trapped in a burning building, suffocating in smoke and trampled by panicked people. You can’t possibly understand what it feels like to be the one who survived, when my sister didn’t.”

He wouldn’t give Ben the satisfaction of seeing him cry so he left his cold breakfast and turned away, preparing to spend the rest of the day locked up, as Ben would say, in his room. Ben stopped him.

“Don’t you want to let go of the fear? To go out there and experience things other people do? Meet someone and go out on dates? I just want you to find the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Being in here all the time isn’t good for anyone. You’re lonely.”

Noah let the tears fall as he walked away.

How do you know I haven't met him? he thought.

They didn't see each other for the rest of the weekend and well into the following week. Noah hid out in his room when his friend was home, though Ben seemed to be going out of his way to remain AWOL anyway. He'd left shortly after their fight and didn't come home until late Wednesday afternoon to take Maisie to her vet checkup, and to drop off a small box of scarves and hats that Noah had knitted for the LGBT homeless youth center uptown.

After the door closed, Noah crept out of his room and perched on his window seat, watching Ben walk down the street.

This had been the longest they hadn't talked since they'd known each other. Noah could admit to himself that it was driving him crazy, but he wouldn't be the one to budge. It was hard to keep up his resolve, though, when he lay in bed at night, knowing there was no one in the room next door.

Now he looked around the empty apartment with new eyes. The walls were white, broken up with only splashes of color from paintings Ben had acquired sometime during their cohabitation. He liked it this way. White was a simple, clean color, and it made the place look bigger than it really was. On the other hand, Ben hated it. He hated the way it showed scuffmarks when accidentally kicked, or when something leaned against it that would rub off on it. He always thought it looked sterile and cold, and had at one time come home with paint chips he wanted to paint the walls with. Noah had put his foot down. If he was the one home all the time, he didn't want to be stuck with a color he absolutely didn't want, and he wouldn't be able to decide on any one color, anyway. He'd won that battle and the white had stayed.

Despite Ben's initial complaints that he wasn't allowed to eat on the couch or put his feet up on the glass coffee table, he did a good job of following house rules with minimal fuss.

Noah's shoulders slumped. All around him were things he'd accumulated to make himself feel safe and comforted. Ben's things were few and far between, hidden in his own bedroom because Noah claimed they clashed with the decor. He realized that he always got his way and that Ben, despite living in the same space—and even paying more rent—was the one who compromised the most.

Okay, so maybe it was time for him to be the one to give in, after all. Time to meet Ben halfway.

“Right,” he said with resolve.

He looked at the time. It was another two hours before Ben finished his volunteer work at the shelter, and while Noah had been there a handful of times, he never lingered longer than it took to drop off donations, and he never, ever went alone.

He had time to whip up some reconciliation cookies, and maybe cook one of Ben's favorite dishes for when he came home—if he came home. Noah shook the thought from his head.

The cookies were cooling and he'd just slid the ziti in the oven when the front door opened. Ben was clearly not expecting him to be in the kitchen because he stopped warily, as if he thought that Noah would bolt.

“Hi,” Noah greeted shyly. “There's still fifteen minutes before dinner's ready. You have time to change and wash up if you like.”

Ben slowly closed the door behind him. He glanced at Noah but didn't say anything, just turned away to hang his coat in the closet. Noah fidgeted. “There's a new episode of *Grimm* I recorded last night. We can watch it while we eat.”

He gave Ben a small smile, but Ben didn't see it, and walked past without a word. Well, dinner suddenly seemed like a bad idea, if Ben wouldn't even look at him for longer than a few seconds.

Noah was tearing up a paper towel, debating whether to turn the oven off and retreat back to his room in defeat, when Ben emerged from his room in sweats and a shirt. The timer sounded and Noah hurried to take the pasta out, his hands shaking so much he nearly dropped the pan. Ben took it from him and set it on the counter with a quiet click.

“It's nothing fancy,” Noah excused nervously, using a rag of paper towel to mop up the dots of sauce that had dripped onto the floor. Ben took the rag from him gently.

“It smells good,” he said. He reached for a cookie and broke it in half, offering to share it with Noah. A relieved whoosh of breath escaped him. He accepted the half a cookie.

“Is it okay to have dessert first?” he asked.

Ben chuckled. “It's always okay to have dessert first. Who could say no to peanut butter cookies?”

Noah shook his head in amusement. "It clearly won't be you."

"Clearly not. Mmmm, my favorite!" Ben wiped his lips, dropping crumbs on the floor.

Noah looked at the mess, but didn't say anything. It wouldn't do for him to get upset over something as silly as crumbs when he and Ben had only just started talking to each other again. Still, the urge to sweep up the mess was strong. He hated crummy floors. He looked up to find Ben smiling at him.

"I'll clean it up before your head explodes," he told Noah.

"Don't worry about it," Noah said, not really meaning it.

Ben knew him too well, though. He just shook his head and grabbed the vacuum before Noah could protest some more.

That done, Noah dished up and set the food on the coffee table, while Ben turned on the TV. It wasn't often they ate in the living room, but it was one concession Noah had no problem making, as long as they sat on the floor and not on the couch.

"Which episode are we watching?" Ben asked as he sat down next to him. He arranged the green bench cushion they had purchased for sitting on the floor more comfortably.

"It's the latest one—the one with Wu. I think he's going to find out about Nick being the Grimm."

They were silent for a few minutes, both busy eating and watching the show. Noah had missed this when they weren't talking. He wasn't too much in denial to admit that Ben was right, and he hated the idea of being left behind. It was only a matter of time before Ben moved on without him.

"Oh come on!" Ben complained. "I can't believe Nick and Frank would just leave him in the dark like that! What the hell?"

"Yeah, they should tell him."

Noah fast-forwarded past the commercials, and for a few seconds only the sound of Ben's fork scraping against the plate filled the room. But then Ben turned towards him and asked, "You would tell me though, right? I mean, if you had a deep, dark secret like that. You wouldn't keep it from me?"

"Not that I'm the Grimm or anything, but yes, I'd tell you if I was, just so you wouldn't think you were crazy if you suddenly started seeing monsters everywhere."

Ben snorted out a laugh, but didn't say anything else as they turned back to their show. Once or twice Noah had to stop himself from leaning against him. He would have done so without hesitation in the past, but now he felt awkward and was still feeling the weight of the angry words spoken between them.

"How about you? Will you tell me if you have a deep dark secret?" Noah asked when they were putting the leftovers away.

Ben paused from where he was scraping a plate to nudge Maisie out of the way. She was hovering around the garbage, hoping for scraps.

"I suppose. Like, you tell me yours and I'll tell you mine. Though I think mine would be pretty mundane."

"I don't think secrets are ever mundane. They've got to be pretty scandalous if a person's keeping it a *secret*," Noah pointed out. He was almost sure that Ben knew his.

They were quiet for a while, concentrating on cleaning the kitchen. Ben wandered over to the couch and began flipping channels. Noah joined him. They sat on opposite sides, both having claimed their own corners a long time ago, but they both had a habit of stretching out their legs to meet in the middle. Noah tucked his feet up between Ben and the couch.

"I still can't believe they left Wu hanging like that. What kind of friends are they?" Ben grouched.

"Maybe they thought he was better off not knowing?"

"How? He checked himself into a psych facility. Would it be better for him to think he was crazy than let him in on the secret?"

Noah hugged a pillow closer. "I don't know. Maybe Nick thought the price of knowing was higher than not. Maybe by not telling Wu, he was protecting him from becoming involved in his world."

"Some protection!"

"Everyone who's known so far has been in danger one way or another," Noah reminded him. "Besides, maybe Nick is worried that he'll lose a friend if he told him."

Ben tilted his head to stare at him. "Maybe Nick should give him the benefit of the doubt. He could just as likely strengthen their friendship even more."

Noah had the strange feeling they weren't talking about the show anymore. He wasn't sure if he was comfortable with it or not.

“Their friendship is riding on a lot of maybes.”

Ben didn't have anything to say to that, so they both turned back to the movie they were watching. Maisie joined them at some point, snuggling up to Ben with a purr. Noah watched them with a smile and made himself more comfortable on the couch, letting the low noise of the TV wash over him.

Eventually, Ben reached for Noah's leg, and Noah wriggled deeper into the cushions as his friend massaged his foot firmly, occasionally sweeping up to his knees before sweeping back down in a soothing caress.

He didn't realize he'd fallen asleep until he was shaken gently and he looked up to see Ben's face in shadow. The apartment was dark.

“Time for bed, sleepyhead.”

“What time is it?” Noah asked, untangling himself from the blanket he didn't remember draping over him and sat up, yawning. Ben mussed Noah's already messy hair, and Noah pushed him away.

“It's nearly eleven. Come on, I'll even tuck you in and read you a story if you want.”

“Ha ha.”

Ben grinned at him as he made his way unsteadily into his room. The cat was there on top of the blankets, but she jumped down when they came in. She clambered up the shelves in the corner to look at them from the top of the tallboy, her tail flicking back and forth.

“Is she going to be staring at you the whole night?” Ben asked. “Because, damn, that's creepy!”

“She'll get bored eventually and come down. Just don't close the door all the way.”

Noah slid under the blankets, chuckling as Ben pulled the cover over him and smoothed it, pulling it right up to Noah's nose. He started making cooing sounds, like one would for a child, which set them both off into giggling. Noah sighed contentedly, rolled on his side, and burrowed deeper in the warm sheets. Ben sat on the edge of the bed and started running his hand up and down Noah's back. Noah smiled over at him and let Ben push him closer to sleep.

He was drifting off, between that strange state of being awake and asleep at the same time, as Ben leaned closer.

“Good night,” he whispered, but Noah couldn’t resist the pull of sleep anymore and he didn’t hear. He could have blamed his imagination for the kiss on his forehead, too.

Noah knew something was wrong when he started to see smoke coming out from behind the stage. The band had stopped playing, and stage crews were rushing behind the curtain with an urgency that didn’t bode well. He was just edging towards the restrooms where his sister had gone when a loud shout cut through the heavy din of chatter.

“Fire!”

The crowd went wild immediately, making a mad dash to the exit as fire started to lick along one side of the curtain, spreading fast and making its way up to the ceiling. Noah pushed against the panicked mob just as he saw Emily come out of the women’s room. She quickly realized what was wrong and struggled towards him when she saw Noah a few feet away, but the press of bodies pushing and shoving around them made it hard for her to take his outstretched hand.

Noah was dragged farther away and lost sight of his sister.

The noise was horrendous, everyone was yelling as a loud whoomp, followed by a few smaller explosions as the fire finally reached the bar, echoed above their heads. A ceiling beam crashed down somewhere behind him, and he was being crushed as he lost his footing and nearly got trampled on. Another series of explosions amped the frenzy as everyone fought to get out.

Noah felt something hot on his back as embers from the burning ceiling rained down on him and he yelled—

“Noah!” Ben yelled back.

He woke with a gasp, wide-eyed and unsure where he was until Ben’s worried face registered in his mind.

Ben sat on the edge of his bed and peered down at Noah. “Take deep breaths. That’s it. You’re okay.”

Noah let himself be comforted as he came down from his nightmare. He could still hear the echoes of screaming and feel the heat against his face, though he was unsure if the latter was a remembered sensation from the fire or embarrassment from being caught screaming in his sleep again.

Ben’s fingers caught on the scar where he was rubbing Noah’s arm. Noah wasn’t sure how he got out of the club relatively unscathed. A small, uneven

scar on his arm from someone's ring was the only physical sign of his ordeal, but he hadn't healed on the inside. He pulled away from Ben, not needing another reminder of that night.

"You want to talk about it?" Ben asked him.

"Not really. It's the same thing as usual, anyway."

He could see that it was just past midnight, and though he knew he wouldn't be getting anymore sleep, he didn't want to be alone. He also didn't want to ask Ben to stay like he was a little kid still afraid of the bogeyman under his bed. Ben needed to get his rest so he could go to work in the morning.

Ben gave him a long, considering look before pushing him away slightly. "Scoot over. I don't think I can walk back to bed without falling asleep in the hallway," he said nonchalantly.

Noah obediently made room for him until they were pressed together. He felt the bed dip at his feet, and he shifted to make a small furrow for his cat between them.

"This is cozy," Ben yawned.

Noah murmured an assent then turned to face his friend. "Just don't squish my cat."

"I won't. Good night."

Eventually, Ben's breathing evened out and his snores cut through the silence.

Noah lay awake beside Ben, afraid to go back to sleep. He hugged a pillow tight as he waited for dawn.

Sunday night was a quiet one in the apartment. Ben had left earlier in the evening to attend a company party, with promises to be home before Noah went to bed, but Noah waved him off and told him to have fun. He turned down the lights and sat in front of his computer, filled with purpose. Maisie came over and draped herself on the keyboard. He gave her a quick pat and moved her onto his lap as he fought off a yawn.

Ben's date from that night weeks ago hadn't made a second appearance, but he had taken someone else to this party. Noah could hardly stand it, despite encouraging Ben to do so. He was honest enough with himself to admit that he should have been at Ben's side tonight. He'd said as much to his mom when he

spoke to her after Ben left, but if he wanted a sympathetic ear to commiserate with him, he'd picked the wrong person.

"What are you going to do about it?" she'd asked. "You're either going to live life knowing that you let him go without a fight, or that you fought to keep him at your side. Which one will it be?"

He let her talk, railing at him with equal parts encouragement and scolding, before promising her that he was still her child and that yes, the blood of his warrior ancestors ran in his veins. She, in turn, gave him the number of a therapist cousin when he insisted he wouldn't be comfortable airing out his dirty laundry to a stranger, after she'd urged him to see a professional for help. As it was, just looking at the string of contact information scribbled almost illegibly on a piece of paper made his knees shake. He picked it up and put it down, picked it up again and looked at it for a long time, thinking up different ways of how it'd never work. He was mentally making up a list of reasons he shouldn't call, when his phone buzzed.

Shoot me now X_X.

Can't be that bad, he texted back.

They just served d 'amuse-bouche. Leave it 2 Bill 2 find d most pretentious catering service in town.

I thought being pretentious was a given, what with lawyers & all.

Hey, watch it you!

Noah shook his head in amusement. He could just imagine Ben sitting at the big boys' table, surrounded by his father and the senior partners of the firm. He would be hiding his cell phone under the tablecloth, his knee jiggling up and down, while pretending to listen to the conversation. Fifty-fifty chance that his father would be glaring at him, too. Bill hardly missed anything, especially when it concerned his youngest son.

Bill's giving me stink-eye lol :D

U can behave 4 ur mom tho, ryt? Noah asked, though he knew Ben would behave for no one. His mom was more likely to cheer his misbehavior on, anyway.

Nah, she's trying 2 figure out how to leave early, too. Brb.

Ok.

Noah gave Maisie a scratch, already missing Ben. The therapist's phone number was still staring up at him so he flipped it over. He pretended not to feel guilty.

The phone rang again just as he was getting a drink.

"You don't have a sudden need for me to be home, do you? Like an emergency or something?"

Noah sighed. "We had this talk already, Benji. I can't keep faking emergencies to get you out of things, or your dad will start to think I'm even more of a lunatic than I really am."

"If Dave Perry's wife tells me how delightful it is to know a gay man, again, I will throw her out the window. She wants me to go have lunch with her begonia society, Jeeeeesus!" Ben's voice echoed strangely. Noah wasn't sure where his friend was, but then he heard the loud rush of water in the background.

"Are you hiding in the men's room again?"

"You should see this place, it's got a couch."

Another rush of water sounded, and another, followed by the banging of a door. He heard the hand dryer go off and gave in to the sigh he was holding in.

"Ben—"

"Okay, can I just be honest?" he asked, cutting Noah off.

"Fine, be honest."

"I'd rather be home watching cheesy Hong Kong flicks with you, than be stuck in this boring grown-up party and feeling like a little kid again."

Noah was charmed, wishing Ben was home, too, but he also knew how important it was for Ben's career to attend these social gatherings.

"It's only for a few hours, and you know your dad loves to show you off," he said, knowing it was true. Despite Bill's strictness, he really was fond of his son.

"He's been asking about you. He and Mom both."

"Tell them I said 'Hi', and stop hiding. The sooner you go back out there, the sooner you can leave."

They said their goodbyes and Noah went back to his desk. He sipped at his wine while he looked at his computer screen, his gaze drifting down to the paper he'd turned over.

“What do you think, Mais? Can I do this?”

He gave in to the urge to look at the phone number again before reaching for his cell. His mom was right. He needed to do this for himself and for Ben. Before his confidence could leave him, Noah took a deep breath and dialed.

Ben came home very late, hours after the dinner party ended, reeking of alcohol and tobacco smoke. He crept into Noah's room with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop and knelt on the floor next to his bed with a thud that made Noah wince.

“Noah,” he called out.

“Shut up, idiot. It's three in the morning, for heaven's sake.” Noah sat up to turn on the light and felt a small surge of satisfaction when Ben shied away like a vampire. He took in his friend's rumpled appearance.

“Good grief, Ben. How can you go into work like that?”

“'ll be fuhhn. Jus-jus lemme close muh eyes for a sec, yeah?”

Noah already knew he'd be too sick to even think about getting up in a few hours, so he reached over and pushed Ben's jacket off his shoulders, trying to haul him up on the bed. Ben followed compliantly, clumsily attempting to unbutton his shirt and kick his shoes off until Noah was forced to take over. He didn't think it would be like this when he imagined taking Ben's clothes off. He was out of breath by the time he managed to wrestle him under the covers.

“Next time, I'm leaving you on the floor,” he muttered.

He turned to face the other way, aware of Ben's heat behind him. Noah was dozing when the bed shook slightly and Ben pressed up against him. Ben had always been affectionate with him, and though Noah himself was more physically distant and not likely to be touchy-feely with Ben, his friend had no qualms about wrapping his arms around Noah, like he was doing now.

Even knowing that, he still felt uneasily aware of how strange it was to be lying in bed with his best friend—the man he was in love with and had no chance to be with.

“You shmell goooood. Next time, go to the party with me and we'll get waaaaasted,” Ben giggled. He huffed a breath in Noah's ear and giggled again. Noah elbowed him in the stomach.

“You smell like a pig. Go to sleep already,” he hissed.

Ben hummed in acquiescence and Noah let the silence lull him back to sleep. He was finally on his way to drifting off when Ben rubbed his nose against his shoulder and said, "I love you, Noah. Why can't you love me, too?"

He stiffened, breath caught in his throat, unable to think what he should do. Ben was drunk, though. Surely he didn't mean what Noah heard him say? The effects of the alcohol he'd consumed had finally caught up with him, as his breathing evened out and he started snoring. Noah disentangled himself and sat up, staring at Ben in disbelief.

"You love to make my life that much more complicated, don't you Ben?" he asked. Ben huffed in his sleep and moved to lie on his back, the white undershirt he was wearing twisting around him uncomfortably. Noah pulled at it to straighten it out.

"Will you wait for me, Ben? I need you to be patient with me for a little while longer." He didn't expect an answer now, and surely Ben would have forgotten about this when he woke up, but Noah knew it was all up to him now.

He lay back down, but sleeping was the furthest thing from his mind. Noah listened to the radiator turn on with a few banging noises and whistles, Ben's quiet snores joining in chorus behind him. He squirmed around restlessly, trying to find a comfortable spot, but soon realized he wouldn't be getting any rest until he could say what he wanted to say.

"I'm in love with you, Ben," he whispered, half-afraid that saying it out loud would jinx him, but also relieved to finally be able to give it a voice. Saying it made it seem more real and unable to be denied. Ben's snores abruptly stopped with a sudden intake of breath, and Noah froze, his eyes wide. He waited a minute to see if his friend woke up, but Ben just snuggled closer and put an arm around his waist. His snores resumed seconds later and Noah breathed out in relief.

Thursday couldn't come soon enough.

Three days later and he was being ushered into a room with rich yellow walls and large windows, waiting for Philippa to return from where she was schmoozing with his mom out in the waiting room.

Philippa was his second cousin on his mother's side. Noah remembered her as having big hair and big glasses, and a penchant for smoking behind their grandparents' garage in middle school. She still had the big hair, but was minus

the glasses, and the cigarette smoke had been replaced by incense so pungent it made Noah's eyes water. She had her office on the tenth floor of a concrete and glass building within spitting distance of Wall Street; Noah wasn't quite sure whether the location was fortuitous or deliberate.

Her office faced southeast, so he busied himself watching the ferries on the river as they crossed back and forth between the Manhattan and Brooklyn before disappearing out of view.

Noah made himself comfortable on the plush gray couch and picked up one of the throw pillows so he could have something at hand to fiddle with once the session started.

He didn't have to wait long. She came in with a huge smile on her face just as he started to second-guess himself, and sat down on the overstuffed leather chair across from him.

"Hi, Noah. I'm so glad to see you again."

She was just as cheerful now as she was as a teen, which was the opposite of what he'd thought a therapist would be. Philippa brought her legs up sideways on the chair and opened her Hello Kitty notepad to a blank page.

"I can't say I'm happy to be here, but it's good to see you, too," he said.

"I don't think anyone's ever happy to see a therapist. How's Ben?"

He was surprised she asked. The last time she saw Ben was at his sister's funeral six years ago, and they had barely spoken at all. He wasn't aware that she'd remember him.

"He's good. Working for his dad's firm. Um, so how are we going to do this?"

"Well, you probably feel awkward, since we are related after all, but don't think too much on it, okay? Just say what comes to mind. This is only our first meeting and I want you to feel at ease."

Noah took a deep breath and nodded. He wasn't quite sure where to start, so he let his gaze roam around the office, slowly losing his nervousness. He took another breath of the vanilla and clove incense and let it soothe him until he could recline on the sofa, more relaxed than before.

Philippa watched him quietly, her gaze kind and patient.

"I need your help," he blurted out. "I want-I want to stop being afraid of crowds. Ben wants me to go back out there, but I can't, and I feel like I'm letting him down."

“And do you feel like you’re letting yourself down?”

“Sure. I hate myself for letting it get this far.”

Now that he’d made a start, he let it all pour out. He told her about his sister and the fire and of being trapped in the club with a panicked crowd, and although it was something that she already knew, as everyone in his family did, she couldn’t possibly know what it had done to him and to his friendship with Ben.

“I’m tired of leaning against Ben. He must be so sick of me depending on him so much.”

She let him talk until he ran out of words, shaking and teary-eyed, yet at the same time strangely relieved. He told her things he hadn’t told anyone, not even Ben. Philippa leaned forward to pass him the tissue box and patted him on the knee.

“Ben’s opinion matters to you a lot. Are you doing this for him or for yourself?”

Noah thought about it. He could admit that Ben was the reason he was doing this, but there was a part of him that wasn’t happy with where his life was going and he’d managed to ignore it until now. The thought of having Ben think he was more trouble than he was worth was terrifying, even more so when he realized that he wouldn’t be able to run after Ben with the way he was now.

“I am doing this for me. I love Ben and I’m selfish enough to want to keep him.”

“What does Ben think about all of this?”

“He doesn’t know I’m doing this, but I know he’d say it’s been a long time coming.”

He told Philippa about the night he had Ben in his bed, and told her about his hope that Ben had meant what he said, but that he was also afraid it didn’t mean what he thought it did.

“He’s frustrated with me, and I think he’s at the end of his rope. He told me he loves me. He said it while he was drunk so I can’t really believe it.” He clutched the pillow tighter, fingers catching on the silk ruffles. He wanted to tear them out in annoyance with himself.

“I don’t really know if he meant it or not. What if he just loves me like a friend?” he thought aloud. He didn’t know what he’d do if that were the case.

“That’s going to be something for both of you to discuss. He obviously cares for you very much.”

Noah’s phone buzzed but he ignored it. He and Philippa spent the last ten minutes just catching up on family gossip, letting him wind down from the session. He was surprised how comfortable he felt talking to her, and grateful when she said he could call her anytime.

“Whether it’s as your therapist or your cousin, it doesn’t matter,” she said as she walked him to the door and gave him a hug.

His mom was waiting in the reception room and she, too, embraced him.

“Ready to go, Sweetheart?”

“Yeah, let me just check my phone.” He fished it out of his pocket and smiled when he saw who it was.

I’ll get pizza. U pick the movie?

W pineapple? he texted back.

Ok, pineapple.

Great. I have perfect movie in mind.

C u later.

Noah followed his mom out to the car, looking forward to movie night.

Ben hadn’t said anything about his drunken confession, and Noah wasn’t in any hurry to bring it up. So he pretended nothing earth shattering had happened, and Ben was none the wiser.

Nor did he tell Ben about Philippa or the sessions he was having on Thursday afternoons, planning to surprise him when he was more confident to be outside on his own. Maybe he’d visit Ben during his lunch break or meet him out for dinner. Noah hadn’t felt this excited and empowered in a long time, and even though his fingers still shook at the thought of being immersed in a crowd again, he found he liked it. He felt high from the adrenaline.

He and Philippa kept in contact outside their sessions. She had recognized that Noah was the type to keep things inside him, only letting people see the surface, so she tried to encourage him to open up a bit more, by talking about what he was passionate about. They talked about his story, the things he knitted for the Center, his cat, and most importantly, they talked about Ben.

Sometimes they reminisced about their childhood, when they used to go to their great-grandparents for vacation and get chased around by angry goats. Other times Philippa listened to him cry as he talked about his sister, and his guilt for having survived when she didn't.

He felt guilty for not confiding in Ben, too.

It's for a good cause. Ben will be so surprised and excited when he finally finds out, he reassured himself.

"What's on your mind?" Ben asked one night, after dinner had been cleared and Noah wandered off to work on a new blanket.

He paused in counting rows to answer. "What do you mean?"

"You've been quiet lately. Is everything okay?"

Noah picked up his knitting again, watching Ben hang on the couch's armrest upside down. His shirt rode up as he stretched, and Noah jokingly threw a balled up piece of paper at him. It bounced off his stomach.

"Someone's been letting himself go," Noah teased.

Ben sat up quickly and glared at him. "I have not been letting myself go. These abs are made of steel!" he protested, throwing the paper back at Noah. He stretched on the couch with a groan and pointed at Noah accusingly.

"So, what's wrong with you?"

Noah shrugged and kept on knitting. He had about a dozen things wrong with him, but he was pretty sure they weren't the problems Ben wanted to know.

He'd been distracted the whole week, thinking about Philippa's coming assignment for him. She wanted to meet him for a rendezvous as some sort of exposure therapy, though she reassured him that it would be brief and that he could choose any location he wanted. Noah agreed to meet her at Barnes & Noble. Now he was waiting for her callback so they could discuss what time.

"Oh, I've just decided to put my story aside for now. The more I try to force myself to write, the less the words come," he excused.

"I guess whatever works, yeah? I still don't even know what it's about."

"And I'm not telling."

"Not even a hint? Oh, come on!"

Noah hadn't really put his story aside, but he couldn't tell Ben that. In fact, recently he'd been motivated to write something more positive, because his book-self was on a journey of self-discovery, just as he was. It was both exciting and terrifying.

"Nope, not even one hint," Noah said, laughing at the faces Ben made at him before putting aside his work. Ben tried to grab him, which he avoided, nearly tripping over the rug as he hurried off to the bathroom. He looked at himself in the mirror while he washed his hands. He'd always been thin, but up until recently he was bordering on gaunt. His weekly appointments with Philippa made him feel healthier, and he was eating more. He felt light, yet at the same time grounded. His eyes were brighter than they'd been for a while, and he was sneaking some workouts on Ben's treadmill during the day. Noah liked the feeling.

He stared at his reflection in satisfaction. Perhaps once he was more confident, he could sit on a bench in a park somewhere and soak up some sun. He didn't like seeing his pale hands next to Ben's tanned ones.

Noah stepped back into the living room, still with a smile on his face.

"I recorded the new *Grimm* episode. Want me to make popcorn while we watch it?" he asked as he sat down next to Ben.

"I think I'll go to bed early. I'm not really in the mood for Nick and his damned secrets." Ben got up without another word and walked to his room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Noah watched him go in confusion, feeling like something had happened while he was in the bathroom, though he couldn't think what it was. He shooed Maisie off the coffee table and noticed his phone blinking green against the polished surface. He thought he'd left it on his desk before going to the bathroom, but he could be mistaken. He checked his messages and realized that Philippa texted him.

Meet you @ BN around 2pm. Wear something sexy. <3 Phil, it said.

Ben was oddly distant in the days following, and any attempts to coax him into a conversation longer than five minutes were met with resistance. Noah didn't know what was wrong, but chalked it up to his work and the recent overtimes he was clocking in.

He was distracted himself.

Philippa had called that morning to confirm their appointment for the afternoon, and he was on pins and needles. He walked around the apartment restlessly, unable to concentrate on anything for very long, so he called it quits, packed up his knitting, and soaked in the tub.

He was up to his nose in bubbles when his phone rang. Cursing, he stood to grab it, nearly slipping on the puddle he made, and saw that it was his cousin.

“Hey, change of plans. Is it okay if Hank comes along?” she asked.

Hank was a young man interning at her office. He and Noah hit it off the last time he went to see Philippa, bonding over a mutual love of books, though their preferred genres differed greatly. He reminded Noah of Ben, if Ben was more excitable, into fantasy RPGs, and decidedly less gay.

“Yeah, I guess that’s okay. Maybe I can convince him to finally give Jim Butcher a try.”

“You can certainly try, but the boy reads nothing but dragons and elves,” she laughed. They chatted for a few more minutes. All the while, Noah was dripping on the floor and shivering. Philippa finally let him go.

The time seemed to crawl on endlessly. He busied himself with his story, his mind racing over the possibilities of where it was going and where it might end up, until he was so worked up that he couldn’t stay seated anymore. Concentration shot, he wandered over to Ben’s room. He didn’t intend to snoop, but the door was open and he peeked in, noticing Maisie was on the bed. He and Ben didn’t condone her getting on the furniture, but she took advantage whenever either of them weren’t looking. Noah guessed they were at fault, too, since they didn’t enforce it and he even sometimes let her sleep on the bed with him.

“You’re a brat, aren’t you?” Noah asked her as she flicked her tail at him.

He shooed her out and was about to follow her, when he noticed the new picture on the dresser. Ben had an assortment of them, some of his family and mostly of the two of them together, but this photograph was new and one that Noah hadn’t seen before. He sat on the bed as he looked at it, wondering when it was taken and how he didn’t even notice Ben take it. It was a black and white photo of Noah sitting on his window seat, looking down, presumably, at the crowds below. The raindrops on the glass he was leaning on made a somber backdrop for the solemnity of his pose.

He had never felt so lonely as he did until he looked at the picture of himself, and wondered if this was how Ben saw him as well.

His phone's alarm started to make a ruckus. He smoothed the sheets and walked across the room, giving the picture one last glance before closing the door behind him.

In retrospect, the anticipation was worse than the actual trip. The five-story bookstore across from Union Square Park was two blocks away from their apartment and one of the few places that Noah could go to with minimal fuss and anxiety, though he took his antianxiety medication before stepping out of his front door. There was no use borrowing trouble, and he felt like he made the right choice when he crossed Park Avenue and ended up in the throngs of people wading through the controlled chaos of the Square's Greenmarket.

"Jesus, it's like the Apocalypse," he mumbled, dodging fellow pedestrians and scaffolding supports, fighting the growing panic and the sensation that the sidewalk was getting narrower.

He spotted Philippa waving at him and hurried to her in relief. She grabbed his arm and led him to a small alcove just past the revolving door, shielding him from sight as he got his breathing in order. Hank appeared beside her with a small smile.

"Took your sweet time getting here. We were starting to worry you wouldn't make it," he said.

Noah straightened up and peered over their shoulders. The market was in full swing behind them.

"I forgot the farmers' market would be open today. I would have picked a different day if I'd known."

Philippa patted him on the shoulder. "Rate your anxiety for me, from one to ten."

He took a deep breath. His heart was still pounding a rapid staccato drumbeat in his chest, and his head felt squeezed in and too small a room for his brain. Noah wiped his clammy, trembling hands on his jeans. Beneath all that was the rush of adrenaline that made his knees go weak and, oddly, want to ask for more.

"I feel like I'm about to explode, but I'm a five right now. I took a Xanax before I left," he explained, rubbing a hand against his chest. His heart was calming and no longer felt like it was going to beat its way out onto the sidewalk.

“Okay, that’s alright. Whatever it takes to get you here,” Philippa replied, though Noah knew her goal was to get him out and about without needing to use the medication as a crutch. He wasn’t sure what to feel about that.

“You ready to go in?” Hank asked.

They made their way inside without a word, and it was just as crowded in there as it was outside. Noah led the way to the escalators up to the children’s floor, where he liked to hide. There were no chairs or tables there, but people often sat on the floor against the wall and Noah liked to sit in the corner where the picture books were shelved. It was mostly quiet in the mornings, only picking up pace when the schoolchildren got out of school. Noah found that he didn’t mind their company. He liked to listen to the younger kids try to read their one-syllable-word books.

He sat on the dark carpeted floor and the others followed suit, the three of them in a loose circle by the corner shelves. They people-watched for a while before Philippa turned to him with a question.

“So, you haven’t run away screaming yet. How does this place make you feel?”

A toddler waddled by with a book nearly as big as her. Noah watched her with a smile on his face.

“I love all these books; I wouldn’t mind living here or in a library. They make me feel content.”

“Kind of crowded downstairs, though,” Hank observed.

Noah nodded as he scratched his back against the wall. A group of preschoolers were giggling nearby as their chaperone read them a story about dinosaurs.

“Yeah, that’s why I come up here. Not too many people.”

They talked about unimportant things for a while, though Noah knew that the other two were observing him as well. He usually didn’t come here this late, preferring to be gone before the kids got out of school and the afternoon crowd got thicker, but Philippa had morning engagements and couldn’t fit him in until after lunch.

An employee trundled by with a cart stacked high with books. Noah could see a group of teenaged girls huddled around a small table in the Young Adults section, and their discussion was getting loud enough to make him feel uncomfortable. He jumped when Hank nudged him.

“Focus, Noah,” Philippa told him. She moved to block his view of the arguing teens. Noah released the grip he didn’t know he had on his shirt and nodded to let them know he was alright. The employee finally ushered the group away before returning to his cart, giving them a suspicious look.

Philippa ignored the man and tucked her legs under her. “Maybe in a while we’ll go down to the café. How does that sound?”

The café was on the first floor. Noah never lingered too long there, and didn’t know if he could sit there with all the noise and the people around him.

“I don’t know,” he said hesitantly.

“Five minutes, that’s all. You might even surprise yourself and stay for longer,” Hank coaxed.

Philippa nodded in agreement. “Remember why we’re here.”

He did remember, but the theory of slowly coming out of his comfort zone was a little harder to practice and he was starting to doubt himself. He didn’t want to lose his composure in his favorite store, aware that he would never feel safe here again if he did.

“Okay, let’s do it now before I change my mind,” he said as he hauled himself up.

He dodged a stroller on the way to the escalators, nearly missed a step as the stairs moved and gripped the rail in fright before regaining his footing. He surveyed the scene below him as the escalator steadily made its way downstairs.

The main floor was packed. One long wall held busy cashiers with waiting lines that snaked around the display tables and shelves. They competed with the idle browsers and serious shoppers and the coffee shop that claimed the back corner behind the escalators, which Noah and his companions made a beeline for. There was none of the hush of a library and even Hank looked overwhelmed with all the noise. He tapped Noah on the shoulder before urging him to an empty bistro table in a much calmer corner, dragging a third chair over so he could sit between Noah and Phil.

“What’s your rating right now?” Philippa asked Noah as soon as they sat down.

He looked around with wide eyes. Someone bumped his chair from behind and he scooted closer to the table, feeling its edge press up against his chest. He

could see the blinking cashier lights on the far wall and hear the buzz of conversation around him, but the café was separated from the rest of the bookstore by an iron railing that seemed to be the divide between chaos and calm.

“An eight, definitely an eight,” he told them. He rubbed his hands together to try to get some warmth in them.

Hank excused himself to get them hot chocolate and, Noah quickly switched seats with him. Putting his back against the wall, so he didn't have a direct line of sight to the crowds anymore. Then he did the breathing exercises Philippa had taught him to slowly calm down.

Philippa gave him a few minutes, by which time Hank had come back and they quietly sat with their drinks.

“How do you feel about all of this?” she finally asked.

“Crazy. Overwhelmed. Can't believe I'm doing this, but I haven't run out of here screaming yet, so I guess I'm good.” Noah didn't admit that the urge to bolt out the front doors was as strong as it was when he'd seen them from the escalators.

He took a sip of his hot chocolate and burned his tongue. That little bit of pain gave him something else to focus on.

“I consider it a success,” Philippa told him. “You are here and, as you've said, you haven't left. Would you be willing to do this again?”

Noah wasn't sure he could do it again, but he was in it for long run.

“Just promise that you'll let me pick the place, yeah?” he asked. The last thing he needed was to be dragged somewhere he didn't want and feel boxed in.

“Of course! We go at your pace.”

Philippa's phone rang and she excused herself to answer it. Hank tried to engage him in a conversation about books; Noah slowly relaxed as they made fun of each other's preferred genres and trash-talked those they both disliked.

“Sorry to run out on you, but I just got an emergency call from another client,” Philippa said as she came back to gather her purse. She gave Hank strict instructions to make sure Noah got home safe and bent down to give Noah a brief hug, promising to call him soon. He gave her a weak smile.

“Or you can call me whenever you want to talk.”

“Okay, I’ll see you on Thursday,” Noah told her.

As they watched her walk away, Noah wondered how he could also leave, without making things awkward. Hank moved his chair closer and gave him a knowing look.

“You want out of here really bad, don’t you?”

Noah could feel heat creeping up his cheeks, but he didn’t disagree.

“I’m ready to lock myself in at home and pig out on Ben & Jerry’s,” he confessed.

Hank leaned his chair back and studied him quietly for a few seconds, making Noah flush even more under the scrutiny.

“I’ve always been curious what motivates a person to face their fears. Why are you doing this?”

Noah shrugged, “I don’t want Ben to leave me behind, and I’m tired of being a wimp.”

Hank leaned close to put a hand over his. “Just the fact that you’re doing this means you aren’t a wimp. It makes you strong.”

“Noah?”

He turned to see who had called him and was surprised to see Ben standing there with a frown on his face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

His friend held up the bag he carried. “It’s a bookstore. I bought a book. Who’s this?” he asked, giving Hank a suspicious look.

Noah raised an eyebrow, unused to Ben’s rudeness but introduced the two men anyway.

Hank stood up to shake Ben’s hand. “Hey man, Noah’s told me lots about you.”

“Funny, he’s never once mentioned you,” Ben said. He gave Hank a tight smile, though he shook his hand anyway.

Hank sat back down, and he and Noah looked at each other uncomfortably while Ben loomed over them.

“So, done for the day?” Noah asked his friend. He pushed the empty chair closer to Ben, but he waved it away and remained standing.

“Yes, and I thought I’d get that new Dresden book for you on the way home. Imagine my surprise,” he said, giving Noah a sarcastic smile.

Noah looked over at Hank, but the other man just shook his head and shrugged. He gave Hank a smile as he grabbed his jacket and stood. This sudden sullenness from Ben was highly unusual and he had a feeling that it had something to do with him.

“Thanks for the company. I’ll see you next week?” he asked.

“Yeah man, good job today. Call me.”

Ben took a step away when Noah tried to reach for his arm. “There’s no need to interrupt whatever it is you’re doing. I’ll see you at home,” he told Noah. He walked away without waiting for a reply. Noah couldn’t believe it.

“Dude, definitely not unrequited,” Hank whispered to him.

“What?”

He could just barely see Ben from behind the racks of bargain books, and he knew that if he didn’t catch up, whatever it was that had Ben in such a mood would only get worse.

“If your friend could glare me to death, I’d be six-feet under by now. You better catch up or Romeo will think you chose me over him.” Hank laughed, shooing him away.

Noah stood there for several seconds, not really believing it. He looked over his shoulder in time to watch Ben walk out the doors and quickly put his jacket on, hurrying to catch up. Getting out of the store was just as much of an obstacle course as it had been coming in. Plus, he had to dodge customers with nonexistent grace, earning him dirty looks and curses, but his attention was focused on only one thing. This time, his anxiety had nothing to do with the crowds. Only with catching Ben and clearing the air between them. He couldn’t let Ben’s misunderstanding of the situation go on.

Ben was standing at the curb, waiting for the light to turn. Noah darted around the group of loiterers in front of the bookstore and just barely managed to reach him. He squeezed between the other pedestrians right before the crosswalk light turned green and snagged Ben’s arm.

“Hey, wait up.”

He kept pace with his friend as they crossed the street, but tugged him to a stop as soon as they got to the other side.

Noah pulled Ben to the side so they wouldn't get trampled on and peered up at him. "What's the matter with you?"

"Remember that conversation we had before about secrets?" Ben asked.

"Okay, no answering a question with another question."

Ben huffed in frustration. Another wave of pedestrians walked by, and Noah drew them both further away from the street corner.

"First there's a Phil, now there's a Hank, too?"

Noah frowned at Ben in confusion. "What? How do you know about Philippa?"

"Who's Philippa?"

It was now Ben's turn to be confused. He looked down at Noah with his mouth open and a furrow on his forehead. They stood there staring at each other for a good minute before Noah realized how silly they were being.

"I've been seeing a therapist," he finally confessed.

"A therapist? For what?"

Noah thought Union Square was hardly the place for such conversations.

"It's a long story. Come on, let's go home and I'll tell you all about it," he said, linking arms with Ben as they made their way down the street. Ben looked bewildered, but he pulled his arm away to wrap it around Noah's shoulder instead and brought him close.

The walk home was quiet but not uncomfortable, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Noah was almost giddy with anticipation and alive with an excitement he hadn't felt in a long time. If he had any doubts that going to therapy was something he could do, being close to Ben and having him hold him like this erased any of it. They stood at another curb to let the cars pass by and Noah took the opportunity to look at Ben, digging his chin lightly into his friend's shoulder to get his attention.

"There's a good explanation for all of this, right?" Ben asked him.

"Definitely. Whatever you thought was going on back there, you're wrong, and I'll explain everything in a little while."

Ben gave him a small, hopeful smile that he returned with a bigger one. He wrapped his arm around Ben's waist as they crossed the street and made their

way two more blocks to their apartment. By now, the clouds had grown darker and the light flurry of snow that had been falling all afternoon turned heavier, the flakes big and sticky enough to start accumulating on the ground.

Noah's hair was soaked and his hands were cold and stiff by the time they made their way inside, where it was warm and the air thick with the overwhelming scent of laundry and spices. They opted to take the narrow stairs up to their floor, bypassing the single, claustrophobic elevator that made everyone in their building nervous.

"Let me make hot chocolate while you change into something dry," Ben offered as soon as the door closed behind them.

Noah hung up their coats and gave him a grateful smile.

"Thanks, I'll hop in the shower real quick. I'm frozen."

The water took a while to warm up in the shower, so Noah turned on the ceiling heat lamp before taking his clothes off. The warm air raised goose bumps on his skin, but it felt good. He watched steam curl up over the shower curtain and decided it was warm enough.

He'd just started to rinse off when Ben knocked on the door and announced that their drinks were ready.

"I'll be right there!" he called out.

Noah hurried to put his clothes on, shivering as he stepped out into the hallway. The lights were turned down low, and by the time Noah sat down on the couch, Ben had started a fire in their rarely used fireplace. He waited until Ben joined him before reaching for one of the steaming mugs on the coffee table.

"I'm surprised you didn't burn the kitchen down," he teased.

Ben shot him an offended look. "Hey! You know perfectly well that it could have happened to anyone!"

Noah laughed and shook his head, remembering the near disaster of Ben's attempt at cooking hard boiled eggs a few months ago. His friend had gotten distracted by a book and let the water boil and evaporate, until the eggs exploded and shot the lid off the pot several feet away. Noah had looked on in horror as he watched Ben use a tea towel to grab the pot off the burner and the towel caught on fire. They'd had to stomp on the burning rag to put it out, while the smell of charred eggs filled the air and the smoke alarm went off, adding to the chaos, until Ben finally climbed up on a chair to remove the wailing alarm.

"The fire department had to come because the neighbors complained of the smell," Noah reminded him, bursting out in renewed laughter. Ben joined in.

They lay helplessly on the couch for several minutes, struggling to get their breathing under control, and Noah was relieved to see Ben laughing and joking with him again.

"So, you ready to tell me what's going on?" Ben asked after they had calmed down.

Noah nodded and twisted in his seat so he could look at Ben. His friend did the same, knocking their knees together. Noah didn't know where to start. He'd wanted to surprise Ben, but that idea had backfired on him, and now that the chance for him to come clean had come, he was nervous about what Ben would say. Noah rubbed his hands together and took a deep breath to steel himself. Ben leaned close to stop the nervous tapping his fingers had started doing unconsciously.

"You said something about a therapist," he coaxed Noah, giving him an opening.

"Okay, yes, my mom recommended Philippa—she's the crazy cousin who came with that biker dude to Emily's funeral, remember? Anyway, she's a therapist and I've been seeing her for the past month."

Ben was silent, but he took Noah's hand in his own and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

"She's helping me with my anxiety, and today was some sort of exposure therapy I had to go to, as part of the program."

"Oh," Ben said quietly, as if he'd just realized something that made his world go round again. "So Phil is Philippa? I read that text you got, but I swear I thought it was your mom and that's why I looked at it," he said. Noah put two and two together.

"Phil is a girl, yes. She met me at the bookstore today, with Hank, but she left early. He's her intern."

He watched Ben think about what he'd just told him, and couldn't help but smile when Ben's face lit up.

"I didn't interrupt a date?" he asked.

"Nope. He doesn't even swing our way, and he's not my type."

Ben let out a relieved sigh, then, as if he couldn't help himself, "So what's your type?"

"Someone with blond hair and blue eyes, who probably needs glasses but is too vain to admit it. Someone who gets all my jokes, even the lame ones, and has put up with me for years with unbelievable patience."

He gazed at Ben as he spoke. When he was done talking, he let the silence hang between them. Ben cleared his throat and rubbed a hand against his cheek—a nervous tic.

"I wasn't really drunk that night," he confessed.

It took Noah a while to figure out what he meant, and when he did he blushed.

"You weren't?" Noah asked, feeling faint.

"I was a little tipsy, but I knew what was going on. I heard everything you said."

Ben scooted up the couch until he could sit side by side with Noah, their thighs touching. He wound an arm around Noah's shoulders and tugged at him so that Noah could lean against him, but Noah felt embarrassed so he resisted.

"It's okay, you know. I'm glad," Ben told him, still trying to tug him close. Noah laid his head on his shoulder stiffly, not sure what to say.

He watched the flames flicker in the fireplace, and the eerie shadows they cast, while Ben gently rubbed his arm until he relaxed against him.

To hell with it, he thought. Ben was one of the reasons he was going to therapy, and he suddenly wanted Ben to be part of the process, too. He owed him that much. Ben had been with him every step of the way, so why not be part of his recovery as well?

"You've inspired me to do therapy. I miss all the fun things we used to do together," he said. He felt Ben nod against his head.

"Yeah, we used to go to Bryant Park and watch the concerts all the time," Ben reminisced. He pulled away slightly to look at Noah. "I'm so proud of you."

Noah's eyes misted up and he hugged Ben with heartfelt enthusiasm. He let out a shaky, relieved sigh when he felt Ben hug him just as tightly.

“My next appointment is on Thursday and Mom takes me. Would you go with me next time?”

Ben cupped his face and beamed at him. “Of course!”

He hugged Noah again and laughed almost giddily. Cupping Noah's face in his hands, Ben leaned in to give him a small kiss. It made Noah's lips tingle and the hair on his arms stand on end. It was the briefest kiss, but it meant the world to Noah.

“Just so we're clear and there's no doubt about my sobriety, I'm telling you again.” Ben paused to make sure he had Noah's fullest attention. “I love you,” he whispered.

Noah's world tilted and righted itself again with that declaration. He couldn't even begin to imagine what Ben saw in him, but at this moment he felt he was the luckiest man in the world.

“I love you, too,” he told Ben with a smile.

Noah was the happiest he'd been in a long time. After all the years they'd known each other, it was funny now to feel so shy and tentative. It tickled Noah to see Ben as careful as he with this new dynamic between them.

Now it was Thursday, and Ben sat next to him on the long, padded bench in the waiting room, holding his hand while they waited.

“How about we grab a bite after this?” he asked, leaning down to give Noah's shoulder a quick nuzzle.

Noah had discussed with him the importance of exposure therapy as part of his recovery, and Ben was eager to suggest they go to dinner dates and frequent, quick visits to the grocer a block away from their apartment. He promised Noah he'd be with him every step of the way, and Noah found himself getting so caught up in Ben's enthusiasm that he offered to meet him for lunch the following week.

He loved being able to plan dates with Ben, and with continued therapy he could see them even going to a play or two, which they used to do before his trauma.

“Okay, what are we in the mood for?”

Ben raised an eyebrow in question. “Vietnamese good?”

“Mmm, more than good.”

They were debating the merits of where they could go when Philippa stepped out of her office and made her way towards them. Noah introduced her. Ben quickly stood up and shook her hand.

“Nice to see you, Phil,” he said, giving Noah a small, knowing smile at what was becoming their private joke.

“Ben! What a surprise! I guess Noah finally told you he’s been coming in to see me,” Philippa beamed. She quirked an eyebrow at the possessive hand Ben laid on Noah’s waist and gave them a wink.

“He has,” Ben confirmed, “and I’m here for moral support.”

They chatted for a while before Noah followed his cousin back into her office and sat on the loveseat. He pretended not to notice the curious look Philippa was giving him as he made himself comfortable against the seat’s arm.

“Sooo,” she said leadingly. She wagged her eyebrows at him, making him laugh.

“So, Ben knows. He found out about the Barnes & Noble thing and thought I was meeting Hank on a date!”

They both giggled at that. Noah went on to tell her about their budding relationship.

“We’re going out for lunch after this,” he announced proudly. Philippa smiled, clearly very happy for him.

“You’re probably sick of me asking, but how does that make you feel?”

Noah sat back against the pile of pillows with a smile. He usually took a while to answer her, but this time he answered confidently and right away.

“I feel great! I never thought I’d say it but, I haven’t felt this alive in a long time.”

Ben had a big smile on his face when Noah came back out. He held Noah’s jacket out for him before taking his hand as he led the way to the elevator.

“Did I tell you that I’m almost finished with my story?”

“You never tell me anything about your story,” Ben groused good-naturedly.

They stepped out of the building and into an unseasonably warm March day, and Noah could see steam come up from the subway grates on the street. Most of the snow had already melted as well. He linked his arm with Ben's as they walked down the sidewalk, already looking forward to spring and their upcoming trip to visit Ben's parents.

Noah snuggled up to Ben. "Well, it's about this boy who's in love with his best friend, and—"

3 Years Later...

The crocuses were poking their heads out of the snow, and Noah knew that spring was at hand. He couldn't wait to look out the kitchen window and see the daffodils' cheery yellow heads blooming among the red tulips after a long, hard winter. He wanted to plant roses around the patio so he could enjoy their scent while he worked on his new story. Ben and his readers were constantly asking him for a sequel, and Noah had finally caved in and started working on one, which was inspired by his long road to recovery and the early years of his relationship with Ben until their commitment ceremony six months ago.

He gazed into the backyard as he took a sip of his cocoa and dreamed of his new garden. Arms embraced him from behind, and Noah laughed as Ben blew a raspberry against his neck.

"Dollar for your thoughts?"

Noah leaned back against him with a smile. "I think the saying is 'penny for your thoughts'."

"Nah, we're talking inflation here, Baby."

Ben turned him around in his arms and gave him a long kiss before pulling away.

"Are you going out?" Noah asked as he watched his partner put on his jacket.

"Just to the hardware store. I need to get paint for the bedroom."

Since buying their home four months ago, their days were occupied with renovating most of the rooms, and they were almost always covered in dry wall cement and carpet remnants. Now, the master bedroom was almost finished, and Noah could see paint chips of different shades of white peeking out of Ben's pocket. Noah let out a rueful sigh before reaching for his own coat.

"I think I better go, too, or you'll come home with more white paint than we'll know what to do with."

Ben frowned at him. "How hard can it be to pick a color like white?"

Noah just shook his head. He pulled out his own stack of paint chips from the drawer and handed them to Ben, who looked surprised.

"That's very blue," he told Noah as he shuffled through the selection.

Noah couldn't hold his laughter in, realizing how ironic it was that Ben was the one to balk at colors. He grabbed Ben's arm for support. "Blue's your favorite color."

"Yeaaaaah," Ben said slowly.

Noah sighed and shook his head as he showed the other man a design catalogue that had come in the mail. Noah chose the blue because he found a shade similar to his favorite shirt that once belonged to Ben.

"White's boring. I don't want a boring color in our bedroom. Look at how nice this one is," he said, pointing out pictures that he'd bookmarked.

Ben studied the pages quietly for several minutes. "So you're saying that you don't want white? Because white gets me excited," he told Noah seriously.

Noah scoffed and poked his stomach. Ben poked him back, and they tussled briefly in the kitchen before Ben trapped him against the fridge.

"All this talk of paint is turning me on," he grinned.

"Benjamin," Noah warned. It wouldn't do for them to get sidetracked or the day would go by with them having done nothing productive.

Ben gave him a hangdog expression, but he did step away to put his shoes on.

"You sure you're okay with blue? Because I can live with white walls if that's what you want," he asked Noah. And Noah knew that he was telling the truth, but this was all about a fresh start in the home they bought together. They were living their lives as best friends and partners without the past dragging them down, and the only way to go was forward.

"I'm sure," he said firmly. "I think the office could use yellow walls, too, don't you think?"

"Maybe we'll put sliding doors in there. Then you could see the garden while you're on the computer," Ben told him as they settled in the car. "We

should build Maisie catwalks throughout the house. Hahaha, catwalks... get it?"

Noah smiled at him fondly. He and Ben made for a good team, and he could see them living in their house for a very long time. He looked down at his list and wrote "patio furniture" on it; after all, they had a housewarming party to plan.

The End

Author Bio

I live in a small town in New Jersey (no Jersey Shore jokes, please) where—although there are officially four seasons—it is cold three-quarters of the year, and the weather forecast could turn on a dime.

Besides a love of reading, I also love to crochet, watch baseball (I'm a rabid Yankees fan) and garden. I can't resist a good bargain when it comes to plants and am automatically drawn to the garden centers whenever I'm at the hardware store. On that note, I also can't resist yarn.

Although I have been writing fan fiction for several years, my participation in this year's Love's Landscapes event will be my first published work, and I hope to participate in many more to come.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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GAME ON

By Olley White

Photo Description

Two men, in their early twenties, lean towards each other for a kiss. Both smiling, they have their eyes shut. One boy has tousled hair, an earring and an upper ear piercing. He's wearing a bright turquoise T-shirt while the other has neater hair and is wearing a checked shirt. Their hands are held, and a gaming controller nestles between them. A computer screen with a game playing on it is visible in the background.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We met in the strangest way.

I was convinced he was a girl because of his choice of character, and he thought the same thing about me. You can imagine how surprised we were when we first met in person. How confused I was about my feeling for him. I was already in love with the person behind the character, but I had never been attracted to a man before.

Can you tell the story of how we became that happy couple in the picture?

Sincerely,

MC

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, UST, gaming, humorous, geeks, men with pets

Word Count: 35,979

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Dedication

This story is for all of us who have made a judgment—intended or not. It is for all of us who have learnt from those judgments. It is for all of us who love love and hate labels.

I have loved every minute of this writing challenge and would like to thank MC firstly for such a great prompt.

Without the support of my fellow Unicorns who, underneath all the smut, have hearts of gold and are generous to a fault, this wouldn't have been possible. Those layers of smut can be kinda deep though, just as a warning. ;) As morale boosters, question answerers and doubt bashers they are amazing. Thanks Uni's, you truly are the best and I love you all.

Enormous thanks to Sara for beta-reading and editing and giving me confidence.

Also a big thanks to Natasha Snow for my beautiful cover—I love it hard, and for believing in these boys from the start.

I wouldn't be me without my husband and children. They complete me and let me be just me. They let me listen to the characters in my head—even if it means I burn tea. Thanks guys, I love you so, so very much.

GAME ON

By Olley White

1. The Chapter Where Everything Max Thought He Knew Proved Wrong

Max slammed shut his car door and locked it. He looked down at his dark jeans and shirt combo—god he hoped he looked alright. Was he too casual? Too smart? Should he have worn a T-shirt or trainers? He closed his eyes, took a breath and shoved his keys into his jacket pocket. He was here, this is what he was wearing, and if Stef judged him on that, then the relationship they'd built up wasn't as good as he'd thought. Right? Besides, they'd both agreed to wear the colours of their Final Fantasy characters so they'd recognise each other, and this was as close as it got for him. For a start, he didn't own a dress of any description—drag wasn't his thing—but the colours were similar to what MAX11, the Elezen archer he played as, wore. He knew he was looking for someone in a silvery top and navy blue bottoms. He wondered if Stef would have on the long, flowing skirt and top combo her Miq'ote, Keeper of the Moon wore. He tried not to think about the knee-high boots the feline creature wore, because even on the cat avatar they were a bit of a turn on.

He walked towards the zoo entrance, eyes, hidden by his sunglasses, constantly scanning the crowds for anyone who could be Stef. He ground his teeth together nervously and wished he'd suggested sending photos to each other in the chat room they occupied. He'd obviously read far too many crappy novels where the characters met and could only be identified by the outfit they wore. It had seemed a little romantic at the time for him not to know—now it just seemed cheesy and ridiculous.

At the entrance he leaned back against the wall, knee bent up, foot pressed flat against it—he was aiming for casual nonchalance, but as crowds of families passed him he thought perhaps looking too casual wouldn't be the best way. He wanted to make a good impression after all. Having a crush on someone you'd never actually met was ridiculous wasn't it? Even if he had spent more hours with her than his so-called best friend recently. He stopped that thought in its track—Aaron had just become a father, and he was already a nominee for father-of-the-year as far as Max was concerned. His best friend had gone from *gamer extraordinaire/lad about town/last to leave the pub* to a dedicated, *do the middle of the night feeds and still work all day as a mechanic to pay the bills*, kind of guy. Max wouldn't have thought such a one-eighty would be possible if he hadn't witnessed it himself. That was love he supposed. Maria had walked

into his life, given him one look with her huge Bambi eyes, and Aaron was smitten. Max would hate her for taking his bestie away if she wasn't so damn nice. It wasn't like she was his type or anything; he preferred a more—practical—woman than Maria. She must appeal to Aaron's Neanderthal side, the protector part of him that he'd managed to keep well-hidden for the first twenty-two years of his life.

He stood up straighter as a tall girl, wearing long flowing clothes in light blue shades, walked towards him. His heart thudded as he patted his hair and adjusted his jacket. Her hair was short and she had a piercing through her lip that Max really liked. He moved forward and was about to speak when a man ran up to the girl, slung an arm around her shoulders and planted a kiss on her mouth. Shivers ran down Max's spine—that was too close for comfort. He slumped back against the wall and checked his watch, it was only ten-twenty, five minutes after they'd agreed to meet. Traffic was horrendous—at least it had been on the small bit of the A11 he'd had to travel on. Meeting on a bank holiday Monday perhaps wasn't the brightest idea he'd ever had. *Patience is a virtue*, he reminded himself in a voice that sounded an awful lot like his mother's.

The August sun was beating down, and he slipped off his jacket, being sweaty when he met Stef for the first time was not going to win him any brownie points. The chatter of monkeys and the excited squeals of children could be heard coming from inside the zoo. More and more cars pulled into the car park and families and couples drifted past—excited children and parents who already looked worn out. He wasn't the only person waiting though, another bloke stood to his left scanning the crowd with the same faux-casual nonchalance as Max. Max was rather envious of the cut-offs the guy had on, and the short-sleeved, pale grey top looked much cooler than the shirt he was wearing. Cooler, in both senses of the word, Max realised in dismay, as he noted the Final Fantasy logo on the front of it. Suddenly he felt very overdressed. What if Stef thought he was a toff prick? He had to wear shirts in the week, but he always wore T-shirts outside of work. Always. At least he'd got his favourite boots on—they were hot in the summer, but they were comfortable. Not as impressive as the well-worn, brown lace-ups Mr Cool was wearing though. Max wouldn't mind getting his hands on a pair of them, they looked good and comfortable. He realised he was staring at about the same time Mr Cool caught him. A grin plastered itself across the other man's face and Max blushed. How friggin' embarrassing. He nodded his head in the way that

dudes did when trying to be cool—though god knows, he didn't have a cool bone in his body. Geek to the core and further out of his comfort zone than he'd ever been in his life.

Purposely turning his head in the other direction, he scanned the crowds and checked if he could see any girls waiting alone by the gates. Nada, nobody, not a person in sight—well excepting Mr Cool obviously. Wishing he'd brought a bottle of water with him, he glanced once more at his watch. Just gone half past. Fuck. What did he do? Did he carry on waiting, did he go into the zoo—perhaps Stef had got it wrong and thought they were meant to be meeting inside the gates not outside. Or did he just go home? Running his fingers over his short hair, he wondered if he should muss it up more, make it look less preppy. Why hadn't they exchanged numbers? It wasn't, you know, like it was the twenty-first century or anything. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and stared at it as if it would help—then he thought about sending a message to the chat room, maybe, just maybe she'd see it and let him know what was going on. Or maybe she'd already left a message there to say that she wouldn't be able to make it. What if she'd had an accident on the way or something... He could virtually feel his blood pressure rising as he accessed the internet.

The chat room was empty when he entered, but he left a message for Stef anyway—both in their private chat space and in the main forum. It was ridiculous, if, hell *when*, anyone asked about Stef he could talk about her like he'd known her forever. He could tell people what kind of sense of humour she had—a downright dirty one that he loved. He knew what a wicked fighter she was in the virtual world, how she fiercely defended waifs and strays and took on enemies for the weaker characters. He knew her love for waifs and strays bled into her real life, that she worked in an animal re-homing centre and she loved all of the creatures, but that the cats were her favourite. It was one of the things they had in common; he was a cat lover to the core. He knew she liked silvery blue and also turquoise and bright yellow. He knew summer was her favourite season, and she loved nothing better than a walk on the beach as the sun was either setting or rising. She preferred early mornings to late nights, dessert better than mains and her taste in music was eclectic to say the least. He felt like he knew her inside out—nobody else had seemed to understand his sense of humour like she did. Even Aaron looked at him sideways sometimes with a bewildered look on his face. It was all those little bits of the puzzle that he'd slowly fallen in love with over the past year—but now he was looking at

the whole picture he couldn't see a damn thing. What did he really know? Not what she looked like or how to get hold of her; that was a fact.

Cold dread that this was going to turn into an episode worthy of that Catfish show gripped him as he refreshed the page for the chat room. Nada. He scanned the crowd again praying someone in silver and blue would come into sight. Nobody—except Mr Cool, giving him a strange look. Max frowned, what was up with *him*? Turning away again he refreshed the page on his phone and was pleased to see that Stef was in the chat room.

5t3ff: *Hi MAX11 ☺ Everything ok?? I can't see you anywhere??*

MAX11: *5t3ff - R U at the zoo??*

5t3ff: *At the front gates as promised.*

Max looked up and scanned the area. He couldn't see anyone waiting there other than him and Mr Cool. Was there another entrance—were they both at the right zoo?

MAX11: *R U at Banham zoo??*

5t3ff: *Yep! I can't see you...*

MAX11: *Um - are you in silver and blue? Can you wave or something?*

5t3ff: *LMAO - sure thing MAX11!*

Max once again looked up and searched the people coming in to the zoo. Nobody was waving—then a movement caught the corner of his eye. Slowly, he turned and watched as Mr Cool waved. He was facing directly towards Max and grinning like a loon. A feeling of horror came over Max. He looked down at his phone, as he watched a new message appeared on screen.

5t3ff: *Are you by any chance wearing a blue shirt, dark jeans and are a bit of a hunk? ☺*

Max could feel the colour rushing to his face as he lifted his head once more. Mr Cool was looking straight at him, the grin tempered to a welcoming smile. Warmth and kindness lit up his face, and he took a small step towards Max. Max was frozen to the spot, staring straight ahead. His phone beeped—another message in the chat room.

5t3ff: *Hi MAX11 - you're not exactly what I expected. From the look on your face, I'd say you're feeling the same. Lol. I'd still really like to see the animals though - if you'd like to.*

Max looked at the phone in his hand and tentatively typed:

MAX11: *sure*.

He then watched as Mr Cool walked slowly towards him, smiling that goddamn smile.

“Hi Maxi.” Mr Cool stopped right in front of him.

“It’s Max,” Max said, the millions of greetings he’d rehearsed in his head gone.

“Hi Max—it’s nice to meet you. I’m Stefan—or five T three F-F as you know me!”

Max shuffled uncomfortably. “I thought it was Stef, short for Stephanie,” he admitted.

A chuckle escaped Stef. “And I thought you were Maxi—short for Maxine.” Stefan grinned again, and Max couldn’t help himself; he joined in.

Offering his hand forward, he said, “Let’s start again—hi, I’m Max, nice to meet you!”

“And I’m Stefan,” said the other man before pulling him in for a hug. “I don’t do handshakes, sorry, too formal for me.” He let go, and Max, the least huggy person he knew, couldn’t help giving him another great big cheesy smile.

“So, shall we go and see what the monkeys are up to?”

2. Monkeying About

By the time they'd made it through the pay point and were poring over the little leaflet map of the park together, Max was feeling easier. He'd stuffed all the preconceived notions he'd had of Stef into a quiet part of his head and was trying to think of Stefan as an entirely new person. Not the someone he'd been convinced he was in love with for the past six months.

"So I reckon if we go round this way and see the monkeys first, by the time we've done this section here," Stefan pointed to the map, "we'll be in time to see the birds of prey display. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me." Max folded the map, and they started walking. "I love the howler monkeys. I remember when my mum and dad brought me here as a kid, and they were calling to each other, it was brilliant."

"I'd ask you to do an impression," said Stefan, "but I'm pretty sure you're not drunk enough for that."

"I'd never be drunk enough for that!"

Stefan stopped and looked at Max. "Well that sounds like a challenge, if ever I've heard one." He raised his eyebrows, charcoal eyes glinting in the August sun. They were a really unusually deep grey, Max found himself thinking, kind of like the deep, purpley-grey clouds that were collecting in the distance.

Max shook his head and circumnavigated a group of girls in party dresses squealing at each other, while two very tired-looking mums checked their map. "No way—not gonna happen. The one and only time I got drunk it was a complete disaster. It's *never* happening again." The memory of the night he and Aaron had discovered vodka for the first time was ingrained in his head so hard it still caused him to blush when he thought about it, three years after the event.

"If you think that's going to put me off trying, you really don't know me very well at all."

Max sighed, the truth of that was more than apparent.

By the time Max's stomach started growling at one o'clock, they'd done a good third of the zoo. They'd seen all the primates and caught a birds of prey show. Max had nearly had a heart attack when the vulture had swooped straight towards them, skimming over the tops of their heads. Stefan had just clapped

his hands together and laughed. He was like a child in a toy shop at Christmas, over-excited and expressive. Instead of finding it annoying though, Max found he loved how happy Stefan was, enjoyed how he delighted in everything.

“Pit stop?” asked Stefan, as Max’s stomach grumbled again. They queued for sandwiches, drinks, crisps and cake in the small cafe, and then took them to a quietish, shaded spot under a big, old oak tree to eat.

“I like your T-shirt,” said Max as he swallowed down his cheese sandwich with a mouthful of orange juice.

Stefan looked down at the grey shirt with its entwined everlanders on the front. “Is it really sad that I own about a million T-shirts like this—gaming, Game of Thrones, Big Bang... You name it, and I’ve probably got it.”

“The Bazinga one? I’ve got that too. And one of the iron throne. And a Kvothe King Killer one.”

“And there I was thinking you were such a yuppie in your shirt and ironed jeans.”

Max threw a crisp at him. “I don’t think yuppies exist outside of the 1980s,” he said, batting away the rolled-up chocolate wrapper Stefan had used as his own missile. “I knew I was overdressed.”

“Nah, it suits you.” Max was thankful that, at that moment, Stefan lay back on the grass with his hands under his head because, for the third time, at least, that afternoon, he blushed.

As the sounds of the zoo carried on around them, they relaxed in the sun. There was still a good five hours before the park shut. With his eyes closed and his booted feet crossed, Stefan looked so comfortable. The bit of leg that showed between the ragged edges of his denim cut-offs, just above his knee, and the top of his, mid-calf length, unlaced biker boots looked muscled and well-formed—and a much nicer shade of tan than my own milk-white legs, thought Max. A peep of toned stomach was showing where his T-shirt had slid up, and Max self-consciously sucked in his own stomach, not that he was fat, but there was also nothing washboard about his abs. Stefan’s biceps bulged slightly where his arms bent up, so his hands could form a pillow under his head, they were that nice kind of bulgy—not overdone gym bunny, but formed from honest outdoor work. *Though, thought Max, Stefan works in an animal sanctuary, how much physical work is there in that?*

“Do you work out?” he asked before his brain caught up with his mouth. Stefan laughed as his eyes shot open, and his gaze found Max’s. Max had to

force himself not to look away, certain he was scarlet again. How mortifying, to wear your emotions on your face, he'd never been so self-conscious of his blushing in his life.

"I, er, I... I mean does your..."

"I have to do a lot of lifting, not to mention grooming, cleaning and dog walking," said Stef, apparently enjoying Max's discomfit. "I run occasionally, bike a bit, play the odd game of footie... I don't go to the gym or anything. Why? Do you?"

Max snorted and held his arms out to indicate himself. "Seriously, do I look as though I work out? The most I do is a bit of walking, I should think that's pretty obvious." He couldn't help the derogatory tone that slipped into his voice. Geek might be the new chic, but when he'd been at school, pale and nerdy wasn't a hit with anyone. Funny really, he hadn't felt like a loser for years.

"Hey, I'm telling you, everything I see looks pretty darn fine to me," said Stefan, with that damn lazy grin of his again. Max turned crimson for the gazillionth time, and Stefan chuckled. The thought slipped into his head that Stefan was flirting with him. He tucked away that deliberation with the others he was going to examine at a later date and added in the recognition that he didn't feel all that uncomfortable with it.

"Come on," Max said. "Shall we go and see the rest of the animals?"

After a quick look at the zoo map, they headed off towards the giraffe enclosure. The heat was really oppressive now and Max undid another button on his shirt. Despite the high temperature and the glaring sun though, dark clouds were gathering rapidly and heading towards the zoo. The giraffes were eating from feeding baskets wired up near the visitors' walkway. One looked up as Stefan and Max approached.

"Giraffe selfie," said Stefan, grabbing hold of Max and pulling him close. They both grinned manically and Stefan took the picture. He looked at his phone and started laughing. Before long, tears were streaming down his face, and Max just looked at him bewildered. He was unable to stop the grin rapidly spreading across his own face at Stefan's hysterics. Once he'd composed himself a little, Stefan held up the screen so Max could see and there, right between the two of them, was a giraffe looking slightly bonk eyed at the camera. Max couldn't help it; he snorted loudly and erupted into his own giggles—setting off Stefan again. It took ages to stop laughing, and several zoo

visitors gave them odd looks as they passed them on the walkway. A few grinned along with them—and more than one mum dragged her children by, as if their hysteria was catching. Of course this only served to make things seem funnier, and they both set off again. Finally, they'd got their mania just about under control and made it to the end of the giraffe enclosure.

By mutual agreement, they were saving the big cats for last. The afternoon flew past—they laughed at the prairie dogs as they popped in and out of holes. They pretended they weren't freaked by the fifteen-foot python, Max even tentatively ran his fingers over the smooth scales on a Honduran milk snake. Snakes weren't his thing, but he didn't want to look a complete wuss in front of Stefan. Hand shaking, he touched his fingers to the scaly reptile. The keeper offered Stefan the same chance. Stefan, though, took one look at the snake and stepped backwards.

"There is no way, in this kingdom or the next, you are getting me to touch that thing," he said. "Even at work they know better than to try and get me near any snakes."

"You don't like them, huh?" Max asked and led the way out of the reptile house.

"Do you know what, Max?" Stefan's grin returned. "You're my hero." Max laughed loudly, he was the least hero-like person he knew. "Nope, seriously dude, you the man!"

At last they'd been everywhere except the cat enclosures. First they visited the cheetah area and observed silently through one of the viewing windows as one cheetah strolled around its compound, while another lazed on a platform basking in the sun.

"See how magnificent they look." Stefan's voice was full of wonder as he watched. "See how sleek and muscled they are. They can run up to about 75 miles an hour, just for a short burst, but still that's impressive isn't it?"

Max's eyes darted to Stefan, there was something about the awe in him that filled Max with joy—he liked Stefan being happy. "They really are magnificent, Stefan."

The other man looked at him. "I'm not boring you am I? I know I go on a bit when I get around animals. John hated it, it was one of the reasons we argued all the time."

"Not at all," stuttered Max, simultaneously thinking he couldn't imagine Stefan ever being boring and wondering who John was.

Stefan held his gaze for a few seconds, those damn grey eyes searching for something but Max had no clue what. A small smile creased the corners of his eyes, and Max released a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

The snow leopards and Sri Lankan leopards held Stefan just as rapt, but it was the Siberian tiger that stole him away. Max wasn't quite sure where Stefan had gone to in his mind while they were looking at the tiger prowling round its domain, but at least part of him wasn't in the zoo with Max. A mixture of awe and disappointment writ themselves across his face, and Max saw more than the happy-go-lucky Stefan who had been with him all morning.

"Last stop, the small cats," Stefan said eventually, and Max ignored the stab of disappointment that struck when he realised the day was almost over. They lingered by the small cat cages. Max pretended to himself he was going slowly because he really liked the ocelots, and that the Geoffroy's cat was too beautiful to whiz past. It was nothing to do with how much he'd enjoyed being with Stefan. At least, that was what he told himself.

3. Talking Chicken

The rain that had threatened to fall for the last half an hour started as Max drove carefully out of the car park. He tried not to think of it as allegorical. The zoo had been fun, and he tried to talk himself out of rushing in and getting straight on to the computer to disappear into the forests of Eorzea in the hopes that 5t3ff would be there. The rain splattered against the windscreen, and the wipers almost hypnotised Max with their back and forth motion. He thought about the journey there—how he'd been so convinced he was about to meet the love of his life. God he needed to get out more; he sounded like such a teenage girl.

Turning down the puddle-strewn lane to his cottage, he slowed to let next door's chickens scatter from the middle of the road. Actually, next door was a relative term—so was road come to think of it. "Next door" was a good fifteen minutes' walk down the pothole-ridden track that passed itself off as a "road".

Darting in out of the rain, he was assaulted in the kitchen by two bundles of fur. "I've only been gone a few hours," he said to the *miaows* that accompanied him opening a tin of tuna. Eric stretched out tall, reaching his paws to the bowl on the surface, and Max swiftly pushed it back. "I know someone who'd like you," he muttered, stroking the black-and-white cat's head. "And you too," he added to Polly as he placed the full bowls down, and the cats both stopped head butting him and gulped at the food. Typical, they hadn't missed him at all, just his opposable thumbs and tin-opener wielding abilities.

Eyeing the computer in the corner of the higgledy kitchen, he forced himself to walk away from it. Half an hour later and freshly showered he was standing there again, trying to think of another reason not to turn it on. He picked up his Kindle and fired it up, maybe getting lost in Karthain with Locke Lamora and Jean Tannen would do the trick. When he'd read and reread the same page for the third time, however, he knew that it wasn't going to work. He couldn't remember the last time a book had failed to distract him. Sighing, he put it down and tried to think of another distraction. Realising it was nearly seven o'clock and he'd not had any tea yet, he emptied a tin of beans into a saucepan and put some bread in the toaster.

By the time seven-thirty ticked round, he'd prepared, eaten, and washed up from his meagre evening meal, fussed the cats, swept the kitchen and picked up, then discarded his Kindle again. He'd talked himself into going on Final

Fantasy—and talked himself out of it again. He'd sat for a second and questioned his sanity, fully aware that he wasn't now, nor had ever been, a teenage girl with a new best friend. Or worse, a crush. He was twenty-three years old for fuck's sake. He was a bloke. A bloke-y bloke—okay, a geeky bloke, but last time he'd checked, his balls were firmly intact. When he started analysing why he wasn't more disappointed that the girl of his dreams turned out to be a hairy-arsed chap instead, he gave up on not giving in and finally powered up the PC.

Within minutes he found himself wandering through the Twelvewoods that surround the city of Gridania, hoping 5t3ff—or Stef—would be around somewhere. Sure enough, the familiar feline form of his favourite Miq'ote was gathering wood by the light of the moon. MAX11 pulled an arrow from his quiver and aimed the bow just above 5t3ff's head, the Elezan's aim was superb, and the arrow whistled within inches of the Moonkeeper's ears. He swung round, dropping the wood and pulled his own weapon free. Laughing, Max shifted in his chair waiting for the tirade that he knew would follow. Trying to earn back the love of his friend, he moved his avatar over so that MAX11 was collecting the dropped wood. The Moonkeeper was a serious personality, and, as he helped him re-collect his wood, Max had to wonder why Stefan had chosen that character—it was the complete opposite to the man he'd met today.

For a while they wandered round the woods, collecting supplies, interacting with some of the other characters they came across. For the first time in ages however, Max couldn't get into the game. He just wanted to chat with Stefan. He never got fed up of playing this soon though, and he didn't want Stefan to think he was being weird. His brain was working overtime and he was relieved when Stefan finally suggested meeting in the chat room.

5t3ff: Had fun today. It was nice to meet you.

*MAX11: Me too—even if you weren't what I was expecting!!
O__o*

5t3ff: LMAO at your face. Can't believe we stood there like lemons beside each other for ages!!

MAX11: IKR. Doh! 5t3ff is a lot prettier than Stef though. ☺

5t3ff: Bastard! I'd say the same but with those eyelashes—you're defo prettier than Maxii...

MAX11: Hey MAX11 is plenty pretty. MAX11 btw NOT Maxii.

5t3ff: *Whatever...Maxii ;-)*

MAX11: *You are so going to pay for that next time we meet up. Steffi?*

5t3ff: *Steffi—is that the best you can come up with??*

MAX11: *Challenge accepted. Stiffy.*

5t3ff: *Stiffy—PMSL. What are you 13??*

MAX11: *Only my shoe size and you know what they say about big feet. O ____o*

Do not press send Max, do not press send. Don't do it... Max thought as his finger hit the enter key. What the actual fuck. Oh my god. Why? Why in the name of all that Joss Whedon holds dear would he write something like that? He stared at the screen, watched the little *5t3ff is typing* sign flash on and off. Breathing was getting kind of difficult and he had to concentrate really hard on getting air in and out of him. Oh crap, he was starting to get a little dizzy. Was this the verge of a heart attack? Or a panic attack? Or...

5t3ff: *Isn't more than a handful a waste???*

Breathe. In. Out.

Holy crap.

MAX11: *isn't that boobs?*

5t3ff *is typing...* ..

5t3ff: *Wouldn't know, not really my area of expertise. ☺*

Not really my area of expertise. What the hell did that mean? Max wasn't exactly Mr Popular on a Saturday night; it wasn't like he was beating them off with a stick or anything, but he wasn't exactly a virgin either. He'd manage to cop a feel of enough breasts in his time to know that, whatever their size, they were squashy wonderfulness. And even he could see Stefan was more likely to score than he was, good-looking, funny, kind—he probably had the girls tripping over him.

MAX11: *You more of a leg man?*

Max hit return, and as soon as his finger left the button he cringed and prayed for a glitch that meant the message wouldn't get sent. It sounded like he was talking about a chicken take-away. Lad speak wasn't his style, it was much

more the kind of thing Aaron would come out with. At least it was before he'd turned into the domesticated, loved-up creature that now inhabited his body. Staring at the screen, he prayed for an error message. But, of course, they were purely the reserve of important communications, not to be wasted by the fates on trivial matters, such as him not appearing to be a complete knob.

4. Closets Are for Clothes and Mothballs

5t3ff: *I'm more into nads.*

Stefan stared at the screen, his finger poised to hit return. Should he? It was brash, but no cruder really than what Max had sent. His heart pounded. Not because he was outing himself—he'd never really been in the closet. Fuck he hated that term. He'd just been him, and no one had batted an eyelid when he'd brought home a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend. He was lucky, of that he was aware. Many people he knew had found telling their families the hardest thing they'd had to do. Some hadn't spoken to their parents since they'd uttered those two words—I'm gay.

No, it wasn't the fact of letting Max know he was gay that concerned him. It was the fact that since he'd spotted the guy standing there at the zoo entrance, looking far too hot in a shirt and *beautifully* fitted jeans, he'd been yearning after him. He'd taken a look at first and memorised him for the wank-bank later, then it had become apparent that Maxi, the girl he was thinking of as his BFF, was actually Max. The bloke was top tossing totty, and he'd moved into full on lust mode.

Slowly, he let his finger descend... and pressed delete. Changing nads to men he hit send and waited. Max was obviously into women, but they could still be friends, right? It should all be good, as long as he wasn't a raging homophobe, and Stefan was pretty good at picking them out. Of course, he'd also thought Max was female so...

MAX11: *oh, sorry. Well I'll take your judgement on whether more than a handful is too much then.*

Stefan might have squealed a little—though if pressed, even in a court of law, he wouldn't admit it. He'd just thrown his well-worn copy of *How to Avoid Masochism 101: Don't Crush on Your Straight Mate* out the window, but he didn't care.

With reluctance, Stefan signed out of the chat room. He was on earlies tomorrow and was already tired. Besides, he wasn't sure he trusted himself at the moment. The memory of Max's tall, perfect body and conker brown eyes was already invading his brain, and the internet was far too easy a place to flirt. He'd demonstrated great willpower so far, but he couldn't guarantee he could

keep it up much longer. After the fantastic day he'd had, he really didn't want to spoil things with misplaced innuendo.

Far too soon it was morning. Stefan dragged himself away from his dream of slowly peeling the shirt off a very hot and sweaty Max and rolled himself out of bed. A shower and a strong cup of tea soon sorted him out. He fed his ginger toms, Tigger and Oscar, and promised them bigger cuddles when he'd done for the day. He couldn't complain about getting his backside to work; he'd had the bank holiday off, which wasn't always guaranteed in his job. After all, the animals still needed feeding and plenty of people decided a sunny bank holiday was the best time to give a pet a new home. Gripping his hastily buttered and Marmited piece of toast in his teeth, Stefan rammed the keys in the ignition and made his way out of Ely to Precious Paws, the animal sanctuary he worked at. Tally, the night supervisor, and Stefan's best friend, smiled wearily at him as he let himself in.

"Tough night?" he asked.

"A bitch has been brought in, thin as a rake and trying to feed four pups. Two have gone already, and if the other two make it I'll eat my hat. Not sure about mum either; she has no energy to look after them."

Stefan didn't need to say anything; they'd all been there at some point. You didn't do this job unless you loved animals, but unfortunately, not all the human population thought the same way. When he'd first started, he'd gone home distraught when he'd seen the state some of the animals came in. He wouldn't have lasted six months though if he'd let every case tear him apart like the first couple did. He still carried a sadness for the mistreated and abused animals, but he didn't let it rule him. Once the other day staff arrived, Tally handed over, giving a detailed account of the residents who'd needed help overnight and a lowdown on any new arrivals.

"Get you home and to bed," said Stefan, handing Tally her bag. "I'll call you later, okay?"

"Sure thing, sugar. I want to hear all about Maxi, this girl who's rivalling me as your BFF!"

Stefan grinned. "I'm looking forward to telling you. Now scram!" Tally didn't need telling again and blew Stefan a kiss as the door swung shut behind her.

Stefan poked his head into the room with the cages for the more poorly animals, the ones not up to being re-homed yet. "How're they doing?" he asked Jilly, the nurse on duty.

“Poor little buggers, don’t think they’re gonna make it.” She syringed some liquid into one of the tiny pups’ mouths. Stefan gave a half smile and left her to it. These dogs were getting the best care they could, and there were still plenty of other animals that needed feeding, cleaning and exercising.

It was three in the afternoon when Stefan was able to take some of the dogs out for a run. Technically his shift had finished, but this was one of his favourite parts of the job. Sometimes the dogs only got a couple of short walks round the sanctuary. There was a big field that was part of the complex, and they often took the dogs there to play fetch for half an hour at a time, but Stefan liked to get some of the bigger, longer-term residents out for a better walk if he could. He put leads on two Labradors and an old red setter. All were older than people tended to look for when getting a rescue dog, but they were all lovely animals and Stefan wished he could take them home with him. Unfortunately, his small two-up, two-down, with its patch of weeds that passed as a garden, really wasn’t suitable. Cats were fine there, but it really wasn’t the best place for dogs.

Both the Labradors had problems with their back legs—old age and a too rich diet before they’d moved into the rescue centre were to blame. They’d both been with the same owner, an elderly lady, who’d died suddenly, and been loved to within an inch of their lives. Stefan hated that they were ending their years here after they’d had more than enough home comforts for the majority of their lives. And Alfie, the red setter, well, he’d been found wandering alone at night in the middle of the city. Nobody had ever come forward to claim him, and, to the best estimation of the vet, he was nearly reaching his first decade on this earth, too old for the majority of people to want to re-home, despite his stunning beauty. These were the dogs Stefan would take home if he could. Instead, he settled for special walks and fusses whenever he could.

Stefan walked them by the river, watching the boats chugging lazily past and the ducks enjoying the bread they were being thrown by a group of toddlers and their parents. It was a beautiful day, and as he walked Stefan found himself wishing that Max was there with him. He’d been at the edge of his mind all day, but keeping busy had proved to be a blessing in disguise. Now though, with just the peaceful, scenic waterfront of Ely and three plodding dogs to occupy his mind, his thoughts rapidly returned to his gaming buddy.

Yesterday had been surreal. He’d been longing to meet the girl who could make him laugh in the chat room. He’d joked with Tally how the only thing that would make MAX11 even more perfect would be if he turned out to be a

six-foot hunk. He'd got carried away, describing the beautiful man MAX11 would have to be to go along with the humour to sweep him off his feet. The textbook Adonis was nothing compared to the Max he had met though. He'd stood there, in those tight jeans and that blue shirt. As soon as Stefan had clocked him, he'd been trying to work out if it was rude to try and get a number when he was meant to be meeting someone else. Hell, he hadn't even cared about a number, he just wanted a chat, see if his gaydar pinged. He was screwing up the courage when he realised that it was well past the time MAX11 was meant to meet him. He briefly contemplated just going up to preppy guy and trying to wangle a day with him—after all he appeared to have been stood up too judging by the way he kept searching the onslaught of zoo visitors—but his good manners wouldn't let him. Besides, he was slightly concerned as to what could have happened to her.

The mix-up between MAX11 and 5t3ff hit him about six seconds before it hit Max. Watching the slow realisation dawn on Max's face was both nerve-racking and amazing. Every emotion Max had ever had must have been displayed for the entire world to see because he had one of the most expressive faces Stefan had ever seen. And when he blushed? Stefan choked back a groan, the way that flush slipped up his face... Stefan could definitely get used to that. The way he'd stroked the snake when he was obviously terrified, the fact he was that willing to come out of his comfort zone was a turn on in itself. He was everything Stefan didn't know he wanted in a man—and a lot of what he did. Funny, gorgeous, kind and a gaming nerd to boot. Even better, he was pretty sure they'd enjoy some of the same types of books. An image of the two of them lying in bed on a Sunday morning reading together slid into his head, and he had to concentrate on not hardening at the thought. He was perfect. Totally perfect—as long as you overlooked the fact that he was straight.

Leaving the main riverfront behind, Stefan hit the grassy scrubland that followed the next bit of meandering river for about a mile. He unhooked the dogs' leads and fished out his small dog whistle. Age and injuries meant none of them strayed too far, and they were all pretty good at coming when called, but it didn't hurt to be careful. He tried as hard as he could to stop thinking about Max, but the man was a wet dream come true. He knew it would be in his best interest to just go back to the online friendship they had, but he was already yearning to see him again. Already wondering how many times he could make him blush. Already longing to see him come out of his comfort zone. *Fuck, I'm screwed*, he thought as he strolled along.

"I'm so bollocks'd," he said down the phone to Tally later that day. She had five minutes to spare in between feeding the family and leaving for work and Stefan felt a tiny bit guilty about stealing that time. This was almost as important as life and death though. At least, it felt that way to him.

"Okay, so are you talking to Tally, the practical, or Tally, the romantic, just so I know?" asked his friend, and the distant sound of a toilet flushing echoed down the line.

"Tal, are you on the loo?" he asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

"It's the only place to get any bloody quiet in this house," she said, "besides what does it matter to you, the phone don't have pictures."

"Tal, that's just... Ugh... Okay, moving on. I'm asking Tally, the practical," he paused, "no, no wait, I'm asking Tally, the romantic."

"Oh boy do you have it bad," she said. "Okay, well Tally, the practical, would say give it up right now, you'll only end up hurt or embarrassed. Tally, the romantic, would say go for it boy. It's better to have tried than live with regrets. You never know, he might just feel the same."

"Gay for me, you mean?" He sighed down the phone.

"I don't know, Stefan, but what I do know is that I've got to shift me arse or I'll be late. Follow your heart, you won't be far wrong. Okay?"

Follow your heart. What kind of crappy advice was that? How the hell was he supposed to know if it was his heart or his groin he was following? He needed to get out of there, go somewhere he could think—or even better, not think. The beach was his haven, even though the nearest one was an hour's drive away. He opened the sun roof in his Nissan, stuck the *Pitch Perfect* soundtrack into the CD player and started the familiar drive. As ever, traffic seemed to be mostly going in the other direction on the A10 today, people tended to come back from the beach in the evening, not go. Stefan though had always preferred the evening or early morning for his beach time. The only thing that would make it more perfect would be if he had a dog to take with him. One day, he thought, one day he would live nearer the coast and have a house with a big enough garden for a dog or two. Maybe some chickens or ducks or a goat. They might not be your typical twenty-something's dreams, but they were Stefan's.

It wasn't until he reached the roundabout at Downham Market that he realised Max lived around here somewhere. Between Downham and Lynn was

all he knew, and King's Lynn was just ten miles away. Stupidly, Stefan couldn't stop looking around—as if Max was going to magically appear as he drove past. He also couldn't quite temper the disappointment that rose in him when he made it past the last turning into Lynn without a glimpse of Max. He'd got it freaking bad. He was soon in Hunstanton and followed the road through the new resort to the old village.

The beach was deserted, apart from a couple of dog walkers and some hardy bathers giggling as they jumped in and out of the waves. The temperature had dropped, but it was still a muggy evening, and Stefan considered copying the bathers and jumping into the water. Only the knowledge that he'd have to drive home either dripping or naked stopped him.

Enough breeze blew to take away the uncomfortable humidity, and Stefan walked slowly along the sand, watching the sun sink slowly into the horizon. Tangy sea air filled his sinuses and clamshells crunched underfoot. The quiet *rush rush* of the waves, as they ebbed and flowed, started working their magic on him almost instantly. He couldn't think of another place more relaxing, another place that let his thoughts just be. Of course, it didn't stop Max from filling his head. It had been a long time since Stefan had had such strong feelings for someone he'd just met. It was ridiculous. *Though really*, he justified to himself, *they'd known each other for a lot longer*.

Bending down, he pulled his trainers off and let the sand trickle between his toes. A jogger thudded by on the compact wet sand nearer the water's edge, and he watched him for a while. How was he to know whether he should follow his heart or his head? He started walking slowly again, pondering the question. Well it wasn't love, that much he knew—one day was not enough to declare being in love. There was definitely lust involved. One thought of those long, lean legs and rangy body had him twitching in his trousers. It was more than just lust though. He wasn't gagging for Max to get him out of his boxer shorts and bent over. Not that he'd say no if it was offered. He wasn't a freaking saint, but he wanted to get to know Max more. He wanted to chat and laugh with him. He liked the easiness they'd had, the comfortable feeling when they were together. That was what he truly craved more of, and if the thought of Max's perfect mouth capturing his entered his head from time to time—well he was only human, wasn't he?

A gull swooped by, cawing loudly to its mate and pulled Stefan from his thoughts. The sun was dipping just about on the horizon, and flaming waves washed in and out beneath the mottled-purple sky. A fog of melancholy settled

on him as he turned and headed back. The bright lights of New Hunstanton were glimmering from the clifftop, the distant flashes of the fair and amusements. He didn't mind the occasional walk through the hubbub of the town, but this quiet stretch of the old Norfolk coastline was where his heart was. The thing was he realised, as he rambled along in the near-dark, Max would appreciate Old Hunstanton too. None of his other friends, or even his family, understood the draw of the quiet stillness he found there. He knew in the core of him, though, Max would, and that about summed up why he wasn't ready to just let things go yet. Some things were worth fighting for, and he was pretty sure he could handle being just friends with Max, the lust would fade eventually. Right?

5. BFFs

The Hunters Rest was as crowded as it usually was on a Friday night. The unmistakable aroma of stale beer and too many bodies assaulted Max's nose as he wrestled his way to the bar. "Two pints please, a packet of cheese and onion and some pork scratchings." Max appraised the pretty, young barmaid as she filled his order—she was new since he'd last been in here. He passed over the money then balanced the drinks and snacks and made his way outside. The evening was sultry to say the least; the air was thick and gnats attacked. The pub garden would be called bijou by any estate agents looking for a sale, for normal Norfolk folk though, "fuckin' small" usually fit the bill okay. It may be no more than two tables and four benches but at least he could breathe a little out here.

"Here you go." He put down one of the pints and the pork scratchings in front of Aaron, who yawned widely and muttered thanks. "So, how have you been Aaron? How's fatherhood treating you?"

A beam lit up Aaron's face and erased the tired lines. "It's amazing, thanks. More than amazing. Tabitha is just the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. Here look..." He fished in his pocket for his phone and swiped the screen to turn it on. Max's vision started to go blurry as image after image was flashed in front of him. He'd heard the term proud parent, but he'd never really understood it 'til now.

"Aw, look at her here." Aaron thrust his phone under Max's nose and showed him yet another picture of his daughter. Apart from the fact her outfit had changed, it looked pretty much the same as the last twenty.

"She's certainly cute, good thing she takes after Maria, huh." There were only so many things you could say about baby photos. Only so many ways to lie about how sweet the baby was. After all, no one wanted to hear their child looked like ET in drag. Max might not know much about the whole having children thing, but even he knew that.

"I know, right?" Aaron beamed. "Imagine if she'd got my ears or nose, poor thing. Did I tell you she's nearly sleeping right through? Doesn't..."

"Aaron, you told me, okay." Max sipped his pint, wondering if he should've gone for something stronger.

"Sorry." Aaron looked once more at his phone and then put it away. "I'm all yours. Well unless there's an emergency because..." Max stared at him. "Okay,

there's not going to be an emergency, or probably not but... alright, shutting up now." Max glared a little longer for good measure and then returned his focus to his beer.

"So how is everything with you?" asked Aaron around a mouthful of pork scratchings. "Did you ever meet that Stef bird from the computer?" For a minute second, Max considered talking about Tabitha again. Aaron was his best mate and everything, but he could rip the piss like nobody's business.

Taking a deep breath and hoping that fatherhood had mellowed him enough to not completely pull him to shreds, Max explained the Stefan situation. "So there I was, standing at the gate looking for this Steffi, and instead, I got to meet Stefan."

Aaron swallowed the mouthful of beer he had before he started laughing, and Max gave him points for managing to not spit it everywhere. "Let me get this straight—you were waiting for some fit bird and ended up meeting some hairy-arsed bloke instead." He shook his head, sides shaking as he tried to suppress his laughter. "That is the funniest fucking thing I've ever heard."

"Yeah, well glad I'm here for your amusement," Max said, "and to be fair, I had no idea what she looked like, that was kind of the point remember? Also, I have no idea if Stefan's arse is hairy or not because I haven't seen it." He paused as his cock twitched, flushing at the thought of Stefan's backside. He swigged his beer, hoping Aaron hadn't noticed anything. He really needed to get laid if just the mention of the word arse was enough to get him horny.

"You're kind of missing the point, Max." Aaron smirked at him. "I mean, how long is it since you and Kate broke up?"

"Nearly a year." Max shrugged. "Kate and I weren't a good fit, you know that. She's happy now, and it would never have worked out between us. I mean the girl was a technophobe and hated the country. I love the country and spend far too much time gaming. It was never going to happen." Sighing loudly, he drained the dregs from his glass. "Wouldn't mind some company though, know what I mean?"

"You mean you need to get laid?" Aaron never was one for beating round the bush. "Trust me bro', I know the feeling."

Max snorted. "Yeah, right—you have a live in girlfriend. On-tap nooky is what you told me."

Aaron snorted even louder. "Yeah, then Tabitha happened. If Maria's not too sore, she's too tired or just not feeling sexy or horny or..." he trailed off,

the tired look returning to his face. "I love her, man. So much, and I love Tabitha more than life itself, but..."

"A man has needs?"

Aaron shrugged. "That's crude, but yeah. I miss her—not just the sex. Just having that time together. Jas says it'll sort itself out, that time will do wonders, but what if it doesn't?"

"I'm not the right person to ask Aaron, but your sister is wise, I'd trust her. She knows what it's like to have youngsters around, and I'm sure she's talking from experience."

Aaron nodded. "I suppose." He tipped the pork scratchings into his mouth and crunched the last of them down. "Back to you though. You do need a shag, right? Have you got your eye on anyone?"

"Nope. That's the problem—who do I meet? I mean, the barmaid here is pretty cute I guess..."

Aaron chuckled. "Yeah and her boyfriend is pure American beefcake, so I wouldn't even try that."

"Figures." Max grimaced. Honestly, the girl behind the bar was pretty, but she hadn't really done anything for him. Not really. A picture of Stefan flashed into his head again and he shook the image away. If only Stefan *had* been Steffi—all his problems would be solved. He sighed again. When did life get this complex?

Max went and got them both another pint and they sat until nearly eleven chatting. He was pretty sure he'd been eaten alive by gnats, but it was nice to spend time with Aaron. Finally, he was ready to call it a night and rang for a taxi. It wasn't far from Old Scytheton to home, but he really didn't feel like walking. "Aaron, if you want me to babysit for you at all so you and Maria can have some time together... well you've got my number okay?"

Aaron looked at him, and if Max hadn't known him so well he'd have sworn there were tears in his friend's eye. "Hay fever," Aaron mumbled as he reached forward and pulled Max into a hug. Untangling himself from his friend's grip, Max clambered into the taxi and waved goodbye. He wasn't sure what had just happened—except that fatherhood had definitely changed his friend. As the taxi pulled down the winding roads, he shook his head; he hoped against hope Aaron didn't take him up on his offer—he had no bloody idea how to look after a baby.

The humidity didn't leave, even as the sun set. At home, Max stripped to his boxers and got into bed. It took two seconds to fling the covers off and another two to stick the fan on and point it at himself. The conversation with Aaron ran through his head. He'd never been one for needing to be in a relationship. Truth be told, he was perfectly happy alone. Or at least, he had been until recently. He couldn't really pinpoint the moment the aching loneliness started gnawing at the pit of his stomach, he assumed it was when Aaron started moving on with his life. Doing those things grown-ups did: buying a house with someone, starting a family...

It wasn't that Max craved this; there had been nobody he could imagine living with. Well, apart from Aaron, when they'd talked about flat sharing way back when—before they'd both realised neither fancied living in town too much and that flats in the middle of the fenland countryside were so few and far between they were virtually non-existent. But sometimes he did long for someone there when he came in at night. Someone to share a meal with or a walk or even the chores. Someone to tell about his bad day, or the great film he'd just seen or the new book he was dying to read. Sighing, he pulled the quilt over his legs, the fan was cold but he couldn't be bothered to get up and turn it off.

Of course, sex was an added bonus of having a partner—at least until children came along apparently. Sex was sex he supposed, but, as jaded as it sounded, he couldn't really get into random one-night stands. The sex was great—of course it was, but honestly he wanted more, and he had yet to find it. There had been nobody that'd caught his interest enough, nobody that he felt he could share stuff with as well as he could his mates. He'd always got on with boys better than girls, he felt embarrassed and a bit of an oddball around females for the most part. Especially if they'd shown any sign of interest in him. Kate was a prime example—beautiful, kind, and funny, but it just hadn't felt right. As sweet as she was, he just couldn't feel properly comfortable around her. It was fine when they were out as a group and he let Kate and Maria pal up, but once they were alone he always felt as though he was saying or doing the wrong thing.

Flipping onto his stomach and stuffing his arms under his pillow, he closed his eyes, remembering the stilted argument he'd had with Kate when he'd first signed up to the Final Fantasy page. He'd tried to convince her to join with him. It would be a fun thing for them to do together, that was his line of thinking. It wasn't even as if he was hung up on Final Fantasy, he'd have chosen any of the MMORPG games out there. But Kate wasn't at all interested.

Not only was she not interested, but she resented the time he did spend gaming. Gah. Why was he thinking about her? He'd not exactly been pining for her. It'd been the first argument they'd had when he'd actually joined up and entered the fantasy realms, the place that he'd first met 5t3ff. It hadn't taken long for him to prefer spending time in the virtual world with her—or so he'd thought—than in the real world with Kate. Of course, he hadn't known that had been the beginning of the end for him and Kate, not for a few weeks anyway, and it had taken months after that for him to fancy himself in love with 5t3ff.

And look how that turned out, he muttered to himself, throwing the covers off again and getting out of bed. He wasn't going to be able to sleep with his brain being noisy, and he really needed a slash. He used the loo, poured himself a drink of orange juice and switched on the laptop. Even at this late hour there was bound to be someone to chat with. Opening the window to try and let in a breath of air he stretched his legs out in front of him on the settee and waited for the computer to boot up. Before he went to the main chat room he pinged off a message to Stefan to see if he was around—more out of habit than anything else. While he waited for a reply, he checked his social media. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Goodreads, Instagram... the list was endless, and pretty pointless. He didn't want to drop any in case he missed something. A sad sign of the times.

Once he'd liked and commented and reposted everything he wanted to, he checked in the chat room. Conveniently ignoring the way his heart skipped when he saw Stefan's name in there, he started composing his first message.

MAX11: *how was your day?* ☺

5t3ff: *:/ Not so good. Had two dogs left outside the shelter today and they both had to be put down. Extensive injuries, look like they were fighting dogs and we couldn't risk it. Feeling pretty pissed off at the moment TBH.*

MAX11: *Oh Stefan—that is so crap.* ☹ *I don't know how people can treat animals like it. Why...*

I'm sorry, I don't know what to say.

5t3ff: *There is nothing to say. Sometimes I really hate people though—do you know what I mean? Crap. I thought I was toughened up against this stuff—maybe this isn't the right job for me after all. Sorry Max, didn't meant to dump all my rubbish on you. How was your day?*

Max pushed his laptop to one side and stretched his legs out. Reaching across he found his phone and, finding Stefan's newly procured number in his contacts list, pressed call. The phone rang out, and he waited for Stefan to pick up.

"Max?" Stefan sounded breathless, his voice catching in his throat like he'd been running or crying or... Christ, Max did not want to finish that thought.

"Hi Stefan, I thought you might need someone to talk to. It sounds like you've had a hard day." Silence met him down the phone. "Or not, whatever. I can go, I just thought you sounded like you needed to vent a little." He paused for a second and when no response came he sighed and said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called. Just, you know if you need to talk..." He trailed off, reluctant to hang up but feeling awkward about phoning. As he was about to press the end call button, a muffled sound came down the phone.

"Stefan?"

A sniff and the distant sound of someone blowing their nose. "Max? Are you still there?" Stefan's voice sounded thick and swollen with tears. "I'm so sorry Max, you must think I'm such a wuss, I..."

"I think you sound exactly like someone who cares about the animals left in their charge. Nothing more and certainly nothing less." A fresh wave of sobbing came down the phone. Max just held the phone to his ear and waited. After a moment he murmured, "I'm still here Stefan, take your time okay?" Shifting his legs a little, he used one hand to navigate the internet to an animal cruelty site. He clicked on images of dog fighting and cringed at the results. Dogs with torn ears, ripped snouts and chunks missing from their bodies filled his screen. He felt bile rise in his stomach and shut down the site. No wonder Stefan was a mess if this was what he'd had to face today.

Max could hear Stefan getting control of his breathing as the time passed, not a lot, just a few minutes really. It was hard to picture the cool, together, quick-witted, jovial guy he'd met as a sobbing mess. Then he remembered the faraway look on his face when they were looking at the caged big cats and recognised the passion that the other man exuded. He was too tired to analyse the tightening in his gut at the muffled sobs. The urge he had to get in his car and drive to Ely, just so he could wrap his arms around Stefan and take away the hurt, was strangely overwhelming, but he forced himself to just sit there quietly.

When it seemed Stefan was calmer, Max spoke. "I can't believe you have to deal with this stuff, Stefan. Those animals are so lucky to have someone to care

so much for them. I know you wish you could have done more today, but you couldn't and you have to remember all the ones that now feel loved because of you. The ones you could help." Max stared out the window as he spoke. The moon was high and lit up the front yard, the trees dancing silhouettes in its light. He hoped he didn't sound patronising. After all, what did he know? The most heartbreaking thing that happened to him at work was someone forgetting to replace the teabags.

A sniff echoed down the phone. "Thanks Max, I know, it's what Tally told me too, and she's always right."

His stomach clenched. Who was Tally? His mind went blank, conversation seemed to disappear, and all he could say was, "Oh."

"Yeah, she's been doing it longer than me and is usually right. I thought I'd managed to toughen up but..."

Oh thank god, a work colleague. "Well, she probably knows what she's talking about then."

"She does. Tally's great, you should meet her—she takes no bullshit from anyone, but she's the kindest person I know."

"I'd like to meet her. I'd like to see where you work; you always sound so passionate about it. I wouldn't want to disturb you though, or get you in trouble or anything." He stifled a yawn as he spoke. It was past midnight, and finally, he was starting to feel tired.

"You would?" Max could virtually hear the smile in Stefan's voice as he spoke. A warm feeling spread up inside him that had nothing to do with the muggy weather.

"Yeah, we'll definitely have to sort that out." They chatted for a while longer. When Max could hold back the yawns no more, he hung up the phone and went back to bed. Thoughts of dogs and a laughing Stefan tumbled into his head as sleep stole in, and the dreams that followed were happy.

6. Dog Eat Dog

It was actually several weeks before Max managed to get to the animal shelter. Summer had passed and autumn was well settled in. Winds blew and leaves swirled, and it was absolutely Max's favourite season of the year. The past month and a half had been a whirlwind. He'd chatted to Stefan on the computer nearly nightly, they'd met briefly in Max's lunch hour when Stefan had been in Lynn. He'd been dying to see the place where Stefan worked. Stefan was so passionate about what he did, Max felt as though going there would complete the picture of Stefan that he had.

Driving into Ely, Max was wowed by the beauty of the tiny city. It had been years since he'd been there and the city had been regenerated and looked amazing. Maybe he could persuade Stefan to have a walk around the cathedral later. It was huge and dominated the flat fenland landscape, and he'd love to see inside.

Following the sat-nav he turned left into a windy road of small terraced houses. They were pretty, but, even from the outside, you could see they were minute. He knew Stefan longed for space to have a dog or two, and he felt sad for him that there wasn't room here. Pulling up outside number twenty-one, he appraised its shiny black door and pretty window boxes. Stefan took care of this place, Max liked that. He hadn't even got out of the car when the door opened, and Stefan came over. "Saw you from the window," he explained, "do you mind if we get going, and I'll give you the guided tour later? I really want you to meet Tally, and her shift finishes at two."

"Sure." Max waited while Stefan climbed in and then followed his directions to the shelter. The building was more modern than Max was expecting. A spacious car park was half full, and he could hear dogs barking as he exited his car. "Wow, it sounds like there are hundreds of them."

"Unfortunately there are. Well, just over a hundred at the moment. Several puppy litters but they should go soon." Stefan held the door open for Max then followed him into the building. He waved at the girl on the reception desk but didn't stop to chat. Max offered her a smile and followed Stefan through another set of double doors. Here the sound of dogs was much louder. Some barking, some whining. A strong smell of dog, disinfectant and pee filled the air, and Max wrinkled his nose.

“You soon get used to it.” Stefan grinned at him. “Come on, Tally should be through here.” He pushed through another door marked “Staff Only” and into a clinical little room that reminded Max of his vet’s surgery.

“Tal?” Stefan called as he pushed through yet another door into an inner room with the same clinicalness as the first. Antiseptic scented the air, and a woman about ten years older than them was leaned over a table syringe feeding the tiniest puppy Max had ever seen.

“Stefan.” The woman smiled, gently squeezing a tiny drop more liquid into the pup’s mouth. “Can’t stay away huh? And you must be Maxi, I’ve heard a lot about you.” She smiled tiredly. “I’d shake your hand, but as you can see...”

She shrugged, and Max said, “They’re full, and it’s Max by the way. Nice to meet you Tally, I’ve only heard good things.” Tally snorted loudly and raised her eyebrow as if she didn’t believe a word of it.

“What?” Stefan asked, Max’s favourite grin on his face as he lifted another puppy from the basket they were bundled in. “I’ve only ever been perfectly nice about you Tally.” He affected a sad look on his face and nuzzled the little puppy up under his chin. “Want to try feeding him?”

Max opened his eyes wide. “Oh I couldn’t, he’s so tiny, I’ll hurt him.”

“You’ll be fine. Here.” Stefan reached forward and opened Max’s hand. “It’ll be easier than holding your cats, I promise. Okay, snuggle him close, keep him warm.” Max did as he was instructed and the sweet smell of puppy filled his nose. “Okay, take this and just drip it into his mouth. Yep, just like that.”

Max grinned as the tiny bundle lapped at the drops of liquid dripping onto its tongue. “Oh my—this is just the sweetest thing ever. Where’s its mother?”

“In one of the kennels, her body was too undernourished to feed these two. We’ve left her to rest and taken these to be fed by us.”

Carefully, Max coaxed the fluid from the syringe into the puppy’s mouth. He gently stroked the little thing then let Stefan put him back, all bundled up with his brother.

“So what are you boys up to today?” asked Tally as she disinfected and tidied round the small room.

“Just showing Max around the joint, then who knows. A meal maybe?” Stefan looked questioningly at him.

“Whatever you want, Stefan, I’m easy, honestly.”

Stefan and Tally snorted in unison. "Don't say things like that around our Stefan," said Tally, wagging her eyebrows up and down, "he'll consider it a challenge."

"Tally!" Stefan hissed as colour flooded Max's face. Knowing he was blushing made Max even more uncomfortable. It was so damn embarrassing acting like a school girl caught behind the bike sheds.

"Ignore her," Stefan said to Max, "she's just grumpy because I get more than her." He poked out his tongue to his colleague, and Max felt his stomach tighten, though he had no idea why.

"So would you be if you needed another four hours in the day just to get your jobs finished, and the only sex you're getting is a quickie when your children are asleep and you're praying they don't wake up. I love my kids but their timing stinks. Between Jim's night shifts and my night shifts, we're lucky if we have time to fit in even the quickest of quickies these days. And nine times out of ten you can guarantee the painters are in when we do both happen to be at home. God forbid all our balls fall into place because it's pretty much a certainty one of the kids'll be ill or something and Jim won't get his balls where he wants 'em to be."

"Tally, really that is way too much information." Stefan laughed loudly, but Max just squirmed. What kind of person told a complete stranger she couldn't get any action because she was having her period? "You'll get used to her," Stefan said, grinning again as he looked at Max. "Okay, I'm showing Max round the rest of the place now. Go home Tally, you look exhausted again." He leaned forward and hugged her then tugged Max's hand and pulled him out of the room.

Cages after cages were filled with dogs and cats and while they were impeccably clean and all the dogs were well groomed it broke Max's heart to see them confined in such small spaces.

"I don't know how you do it, work here every day, see these animals shut up." He was sitting cross legged in the middle of a cat cage with a patchwork, dog-eared tom cat on his lap and a pretty little kitty head butting him, wanting a stroke.

"You get used to it and do the best you can," Stefan said, laughing as a kitten chased round after its own tail.

"No Stefan, you have to be special to do this kind of job."

"If by special you mean..." started Stefan when Max interrupted him.

"Don't. Don't knock what you do Stefan. You are a good guy, and the world is a better place for having you in it." He pushed the cat gently off his lap and stood up. "I mean it Stefan, I've known you for nearly a year now, and even without meeting you, I knew you were amazing. And now I have met you, I can see for myself how true it is." For some reason he needed to make Stefan understand what an exceptional person he was. Time slowed and Max could have sworn the air in the cage thickened as he stood staring at Stefan. He was certainly finding it harder to breathe. Stefan stared at him. He looked as though he was on the verge of saying something and a feeling of euphoric-laced terror grabbed hold of Max.

"Max, I..." Stefan faltered and breathed deeply. "I..." Max looked at him and took a step closer. His heart thumped hard. He wanted to speak, and he wanted to be silent. He wanted Stefan to say the words—but he didn't want to know what words Stefan was going to say. He yearned to hear them, and also dreaded hearing them, despaired at having to face a truth he wasn't ready for.

"Can we go and see those dogs you talk about? Sandy and Sooty?" Max broke the spell. He watched as Stefan masked the disappointment that briefly crossed his face with his trademark grin.

"Sure, how do you feel about taking them for a walk?"

The afternoon passed quickly. A walk by the river, a meal in the pub, a conversation that never quite happened. The ball was in his court, of that Max was certain, but quite what he wanted to do with it he wasn't sure. Should he serve it high, play it for what it was worth and see what Stefan could hit back? Should he carry on with the volley they were playing at the moment, back and forth, simple and not taxing? Or should he just call it quits and walk away before injury called halt to play? He wasn't sure, and as he had no idea whether an injury would occur, he felt unable to assess the damn thing properly.

7. Skater Boy

The clack and slide of roller skates droned around the rink, only barely audible beneath the sounds of the '90s tunes screaming from the huge overhead speakers. Stefan watched the crowd whiz round the rink under the flashing disco lights. He swung his skates from where they hung by their laces over his shoulder and loosened them enough to fit his foot in. The Bauers were old, but he wouldn't change them for the world. If skates could talk they'd certainly have more than their fair share of tales to tell.

"Stefan, mate, didn't think you'd make it." Nick high fived him as he skidded to a halt in front of him.

"Old Skool '90s night, who'd miss it?" he asked raising his eyebrow.

"Er, you—the last three times," said Nick pointedly.

Stefan shrugged. "In my defence, last time was '80s, not '90s and the time before I was working..."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say. It's good to see you though. Charlie's trying to persuade Andy to play bulldog already. You up for it?"

Stefan looked over to the DJ booth and saw Charlie chatting away to the DJ. That girl had a competitive edge like no one he knew. "In a minute, I'm just waiting for someone."

Nick raised his eyebrows and leered at Stefan. "Ooh, you getting laid Stefan, knew there had to be a reason we hadn't seen you around. Who's the lucky fella?"

Stefan pushed him and grinned. "No I'm not, he's just a friend, and it's nobody you know."

One eyebrow remained raised, and Stefan couldn't stop himself from grinning back. If Max still wanted to be friends after tonight he'd be more than a little surprised. Kill or cure right?

Smiling back, Nick headed onto the rink while Stefan finally got his skates on. Nick was right, it'd been far too long since he'd been here. He raised his hand to greet several familiar faces as they skated past. The temptation to get on the rink was strong, but he wanted to make sure Max could find him when he got here. Fishing his phone out of his pocket, he made sure it was on vibrate.

There was no way he would hear the ring tone over the music blaring out, and he didn't want to miss it if Max called.

He was just about to give up and hit the rink when he saw Max walk in through the entrance, his face bearing a slight "rabbit caught in the headlights" look.

"Maxi!" He skated up and spun round him before coming to a halt dead in front of him.

"Max," the other man repeated. "Wow," he said looking around. "I can't believe I've never been here before." And Stefan couldn't believe he'd spent half his teenage years mere miles from Max's front door with no clue he existed, but he had.

"Me neither, it's what, ten miles from you?"

"Eight," agreed Max. "I'm just more a *both feet in shoes* kind of person. The wheels are scaring me a little."

"It'll be fine," Stefan said. "We'll have you skating like a pro in no time." He couldn't resist executing a twizzle, showing off a little, and damn didn't he appreciate the admiration in Max's eyes. "Come on, let's go hire you some skates."

Tentatively, Max stood, gripping Stefan's hands tightly. He wobbled as the beige hire skates he was wearing shifted a little, but Stefan steadied him. This was an unexpected bonus to bringing Max skating that he hadn't considered. "Steady," he said, "just get used to the feel of them at first. I know it'll probably make you feel silly, but what do you think about trying the practice ring first?"

Max glanced over to the tiny wooden ring and then onto the heaving disco rink behind him. "Honestly, I think I'd feel dafter going head over heels in front of that lot." He jerked his head, indicating the skaters behind him—it turned out to be a big mistake as he teetered precariously and squished Stefan's hands gripping them tighter. Stefan moved his booted foot in front of Max's wheels to stop them slipping further forward and held him tightly until he'd regained his balance.

"Good call," he said, ignoring the sparks that zipped up his arm from their joined hands. Skating backwards and keeping their hands tightly gripped together, Stefan slowly led Max to the practice rink.

"So, are you telling me you've never been on a pair of skates before, ever? Not even those strap-on adjustable ones that fitted over your shoes as a kid?"

Max shook his head. "Unless you count putting on my brother's and falling over straight away and ending up with a fractured elbow. As I didn't actually skate anywhere apart from on to my jacksie, I wasn't counting it."

"Ouch," Stefan sympathised. "No wonder you've never been before. Well, I promise you I'll keep you safe, okay?"

"I trust you completely." Max smiled at him and promptly wobbled again. Using all his strength, Stefan kept him upright. Maybe he wasn't in such a rush to teach Max how to keep balanced, it was a great excuse to hold hands.

"Steady. Okay, when you've got your balance I'll just pull you round..." A look of horror covered Max's face. "Don't worry Maxi, I'll go really slowly and let you just shuffle forward. You'll get a feel for it really quickly, I promise."

"It's Max," he said as he slowly pushed one foot forward on the slippery surface. Stefan wasn't sure if the gritted teeth were because of the name or the skating.

Slowly, they made it round the tiny training rink. Stefan kept a firm grip on Max's hands as they slowly built up speed. He resisted the urge to show off, he wanted Max to trust him. Though he couldn't resist singing along to "Tragedy" as the DJ started a Steps mix-up.

"Steps? Really?" asked Max, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "And there I was thinking you were so cool." Stefan grinned and just sang louder, ignoring the way his heart raced at Max's unintentional compliment. Max thought he was cool.

"Okay I'm gonna try letting go now and see how you do." A brief moment of panic from Max, but Stefan just smiled what he hoped was an encouraging smile. As he skated slowly round, Max kept his balance and grew in confidence with every skate he took forward. Suddenly, all the lights came on and the DJ started talking over the softened music.

"What's going on?" Max came to a juddering halt beside the wooden barrier.

"Game of bulldog." Stefan looked over to the main rink.

"Do you want to join in? I'll be fine if you do." Max looked across the rink. "Just help me to one of those seats first."

Lined up along the edge of the rink, Stefan eyed up the taggers. Nick, he knew, would go straight for him. At this stage of the game, though, there were

enough skaters between them for him to get safely across. The whistle blew, and, like thunder on a stormy day, the sound of skates thudding forward echoed round the old warehouse. As predicted, it was easy to keep out of Nick's way and none of the other taggers headed for him. There was far easier prey to tag first. If he was being honest with himself, he'd have had to admit that he was trying to impress Max with his skating prowess. *If* he was honest with himself, he'd have admitted that he was showing off. But he wasn't being honest; he was ignoring honesty like a pro. As the skaters thundering across to the other side grew fewer and those in the middle grew more, Stefan ducked and dived and twisted and turned to get safely to the other side each time the whistle sounded. Soon there were only five of them trying to get across and the DJ told everyone to get off the rink except the original three taggers and those still left in. Nick was coming after him, Stefan knew it. A shrill toot and Stefan waited. Two taggers went after three of the remaining players. One lad beside Stefan set off, and he feigned as if to follow. Nick fell for it and darted left. Changing direction, Stefan pushed off as hard as he could sliding to the far side of the rink.

"And we have a winner," the DJ announced. "Nice one Stefan. I think he's still beating you Nicko, but who's keeping score hey?" Nick stuck his fingers up at the DJ, a huge grin offsetting the gesture. The lights faded, and the disco started again.

"Stefan got you that time, babe." Charlie skidded over to them and wrapped her arms round Nick. "Don't worry, I'll take him out for you next game."

"Charlie, you won't catch me—though you'd do a better job of it than your boyfriend. I practically had time to walk across the rink, how slow he goes."

Nick gave him the V again and they all laughed. Out of the corner of his eye, Stefan caught sight of a figure tottering towards them.

"Max!" he scooted forward and grabbed Max's hands, enjoying the small smile of relief that crept across the other man's face as he helped him balance.

"Wow, Stefan, I had no idea you were that good. You need to go and skate, it will be totally boring staying with me all night."

Stefan raised his eyebrows, a glint in his grey eyes. "Oh I'm getting on the rink very soon, and you're coming with me."

Max shook his head. "No way, Stefan, they're far too fast for me."

"We'll just take it slow, everyone'll skate round us, I promise."

“But they’re all so better balanced than me.” As if to prove his point he wobbled precariously, his feet threatening to shoot out from beneath him. Stefan tightened his grip with one hand and moved the other one to support under Max’s elbow. He held him close until he’d regained his balance.

“Thanks, Stefan.”

“No problem... now come on I’ll keep you upright, I promise.”

The look of trust that Max wore made Stefan’s heart skip a beat. He liked Max having faith in him to make sure he was safe. He liked it a lot.

“Are you sure your friends won’t mind me taking up all your time?” Max asked as they slowly skated on the wooden floor.

Stefan crossed his feet behind him as he swerved slowly into the corner. “They won’t care. I’ll introduce you in a minute. They’re a good bunch.”

“Nick looks pretty competitive—he’s not as good as you though.”

Stefan could feel the smile spreading across his face and knew he must look like a complete loon. He didn’t care. “Thanks mate, I’ll love you forever if you tell Nick that!”

“Undying gratitude?” said Max, pretending to ponder the situation before wobbling ferociously. He bit his lip and leaned into Stefan’s steadying embrace. “Thanks. I think I owe you anyway, of course I’ll tell Nick.” A wicked smile, that Stefan liked very much, split his face in two.

They made it round the rink safely three times before Max said he was ready for a drink. Stefan reluctantly led him from the rink; he liked having an excuse to hold hands. Max didn’t drop his hand though as they made their way to the small cafe where Nick, Charlie and the rest of the gang were sitting. In fact, it wasn’t until he’d sat down that he let go of Stefan’s fingers. Nick gave Stefan a pointed look and raised his eyebrow questioningly. Stefan gave a minute shake of his head before he started the introductions. As good as his word, as soon as Nick was introduced, Max grinned and said. “Oh yeah, you’re the one whose arse Stefan kicked.”

Nick widened his eyes in mock shock. “Only this time,” he said, “I have to let him win occasionally or he feels bad about himself.”

The crowd at the table erupted into laughter, good-natured ribbing and side-taking. Max joined in, the slightly awkward geek he really was masked by the easy-going nature of the gang. They were all kind of misfits in their own way.

"I'm winning at chariots though," Nick said eventually. "Right, Tommy?"

"Well with me onside you're bound to win."

"You do realise you're pushing, right?" Charlie asked Tommy. "He needs me to be the other half of the chariot." She smiled up at her boyfriend.

"James, Andy? Up to being on team Stefan?"

"Are we up to being on the winning team? What do you say James?" Andy flicked Nick. "You're going down Nicko!"

"Ooh, is that what the loser has to do?" giggled Charlie.

Nick shook his head. "My girlfriend has a mind like a sewer."

"Yeah, like you mind!" She stuck out her tongue.

Stefan sipped from the bottle of fizzy orange that someone had placed in front of him. "What do you say to consequences?" he asked Nick.

"I'm not going down on you," Nick said promptly. "I don't care what Charlie's fantasising about."

"Nick, I do have standards you know."

Charlie punched his arm. "Hey, that's my boyfriend you're insulting."

"And you should have a medal for putting up with him." He blew her a kiss.

"Oh, he's not too bad." She pecked Nick on the cheek.

"Wow, ringing endorsement there girl." Nick smiled at his girlfriend and returned the kiss—with slightly more passion than she'd shown. "I know, I'm just not geek enough for you," he said to Stefan after breaking contact with Charlie. "I can't help if I'm too much of a sex god and you're into gamers and stuff." His eyes darted to Max and back and Stefan was glad he wasn't prone to blushing.

"So what about the consequences?" he said, changing the subject back and risking his own look at Max who thankfully hadn't cottoned on to Nick's innuendo. He'd definitely have to have words with Nick before he brought Max up here again.

"I know," piped up Tommy, "losing team has to dance in public for half an hour one Saturday lunchtime."

"Seriously?" Nick said. "Where do you come up with this shit?"

"YouTube." Tommy shrugged. "Come on—not afraid of losing are you?"

“Not at all. Besides even if I do, you know I’ve got the moves...”

Eventually, they got the terms of the dare sorted out, and Stefan turned back to Max.

“Are you alright? You’re not bored are you?” He broke off a chunk of chocolate and passed it to Max.

“Not at all. I just want to know what chariots are, other than Roman transportation obviously.”

“Okay, it’s where two skaters sit on each other, face to face, forming, well, a chariot then a third person pushes them round the rink.”

Max just looked at him blankly.

“I suppose that does sound odd. Okay, imagine I get down on the floor, on my hands and feet, facing the ceiling.” Max nodded and Stefan continued. “Okay then the other half of the chariot would sit on my lap and I’d hook my arms over their thighs... see?”

“Maybe,” said Max. “I think I’d best give it a miss for now huh? I have no idea how you’d skate like that, but I guess I’ll find out soon.” He looked confused, the corners of his eyes screwing up, as he tried to figure out the logistics of it all.

“You sure will. Up for another skate?” Stefan asked. He needed to get up and moving. He’d never had to explain how to do a chariot before, and he’d never really thought about quite how erotic it actually sounded. Now all he could think of was how much he’d like to do one with Max. Then he had to stop thinking because those thoughts were taking a definite turn south, and that was a complication he could do without tonight.

8. Boys Will Be Boys

This time on his way round the rink, Max could feel his confidence growing. As long as he kept pushing one foot in front of the other and tried not to overthink it, he didn't find it too difficult. He was almost ready to let go of Stefan's hand. Almost. And he wasn't even thinking about how weird it was to be holding another man's hand. He wasn't thinking about it at all.

Nick and Tommy sped past backwards, calling something to Stefan as they went. Max didn't hear under the sound of Shaggy blaring from the speakers, but judging from the V Stefan flicked them it had been something rude.

"Go on, have a proper skate, I'll be alright," he said. He released his grip on Stefan's hand and immediately felt like he was going to fall over. "Go on." Stefan faltered for a second, looking unsure but, as Max tried to keep his momentum going, he suddenly took off, leaving behind a lingering smell of musk. Max came to a slow halt and breathed deeply as he watched him glide backwards round the rink, he'd never before paid attention to quite how a man's body looked before—well not anyone's other than his own. There was something though about the way that Stefan weaved in and out of the other skaters, the way his muscled legs pushed him round. The way his T-shirt clung to his torso. Max forced his eyes away. *Left foot push, right foot push, left foot...* he muttered to himself, denying the direction his thoughts had been headed.

He teetered round a couple of times, managing to stay upright and feeling quite proud of himself in the process. Stefan zipped by, stopping sometimes and then whizzing off with his other friends. Max was trying to concentrate on what he was doing but he couldn't help his eyes straying to Stefan. Carefully he made his way to the edge and rolled out the exit ramp. Feeding some coins into the vending machine, he grabbed the bottle of water once it had dropped and glugged at it. Using the back of his hand, he wiped his forehead, skating was hot work. Finding himself a seat near the barrier, he let himself watch Stefan. The man had some serious skating moves, and Max was very impressed. He came round forwards, backwards and sideways.

"Side surfing," said a quiet voice beside him. Surprised, he turned his head and saw Charlie standing there. "That's what it's called when they skate like that." They both turned and watched Stefan and Nick side surf round the rink together. By just turning their bodies slightly, they were able to weave in and out of the other skaters.

"They're good, aren't they?" he said. "I have no idea how he stays balanced like that."

Charlie chuckled. "He's been doing it for years, they both have. Though, of course, he is showing off a little tonight!"

Max glanced at her and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, trying to impress the novice is he?" He shifted his leg so there was room for Charlie to sit beside him. As she sat, a waft of vanilla reached his nose—it was nice, but Max had to say he preferred the muskiness that Stefan smelt of.

"I'm not sure it's just because you're new to this he's trying to impress you." Charlie sighed and watched her boyfriend for a few seconds. Then she caught Max's gaze, her moss-green eyes searching his for something, quite what Max wasn't sure. "He's a good bloke, Max. The best." Max nodded, quietly agreeing with her. She sighed softly. "I really don't want to see him get hurt." And with that she stood and skated away. Slipping in between Stefan and Nick, she grabbed both their hands and the three skated round the rink together, pulling each other faster and faster.

Max sat and watched for a bit longer, a disconsolate gloom settling on him that he couldn't quite explain. He watched Stefan skate for a while, the gloom spreading through him as he watched him laugh and joke with his friends. Every now and then, he glanced over and waved at Max. Deciding to call it a night, Max slipped off his skates and walked over to the hire bar. Just as he was handing them over a body slammed into his back. Long arms wrapped around him and hugged him tight, stopping him from falling.

"Whoa, sorry I completely misjudged that stop." Stefan grinned at him. "Are you going already, Max? I'm sorry I've been mean, ignoring you while I skate."

"Oh, no, that's okay... your friends are here, I understand."

"You're my friend too, Max. At least, I hope you are." He pulled Max round so they were looking at each other. "I just get carried away when I'm skating. Let's go and have a drink, or better still some chips, I'm starving!" Max stood and looked at Stefan for a moment.

Stefan returned the look, doing a great hangdog expression, and Max couldn't help but smile. "Sure, some chips sound great, do they do cheesy ones?"

"Cheesy chips—a man after my own heart." Stefan's smile stretched wide.

"Yeah you'll need your energy if you're going to beat Nick at chariots right?" Max said, leading the way to the cafe.

Chariots, as Max was about to find out, *were* actually easier than they looked. At least for the person on the bottom—Stefan had assured him of this and who was he to argue?

"You'll be fine, honest," said Andy wincing as he slipped his boot off his twisted left ankle.

"Bloody idiots not looking where they're going. Here, you may as well borrow these if you're replacing me." He shot his skates over to Max.

"Stefan, I'm really not sure about this, I bet there's hundreds of people you can ask who will be better than me."

"Just get your skates on man. Honestly, it'll be fine. All you have to do is hold yourself up on my legs and keep your feet pointed in the right direction—I'll be steering and everything else. Okay?" He looked so hopeful that Max couldn't find it in his heart to say no. And that was how he found himself on the rink with Stefan holding onto him.

"Just watch how Charlie and Nick get into the chariot," said Stefan and so Max watched as they faced each other, held onto each other and then seemingly fell backwards, legs entwining and catching each other in the sitting position.

"Holy Frodo—there is no way I'm going to be able to do that!"

"Honestly, as long as you can hold your weight over my legs once we go down I'll do all the work." Max wasn't sure—he was so unsure he didn't even laugh at Stefan's unintended innuendo.

Somehow, and he really wasn't sure how, they made it safely into the chariot position and James pushed them slowly round the rink as Max got used to it. It was, as Stefan said, a lot easier than it looked, he literally had to keep his arms hooked over Stefan's knees. Stefan somehow managed to steer and avoid all the other skaters, Max had no idea how and he wasn't twisting to try and find out. The strangest thing was getting used to Stefan sitting on him, his arse pressed firmly into Max's groin. Max liked it more than he cared to admit.

"Ready to race?" asked Stefan and Max found himself nodding. It wasn't true; he was in no way ready to race. This *might* be easier than it looked, but the idea of zooming round so close to the floor with only his meagre arm strength

holding him up was daunting. If he admitted that though, he'd feel like a total dweeb in front of Stefan—and that for some reason bothered him.

James tightened his grip on Stefan's shoulder, Charlie, Nick and Tommy lined up alongside them. From the sidelines, Andy counted down from three and yelled go. Suddenly, he was gliding over the wooden rink clinging on to Stefan for dear life. Going backwards was a really bad idea he realised, closing his eyes briefly. Nope, that was worse, he shot them open again and looked straight up into Stefan's laughing face.

"Watch where you're going, you sadist," Max said.

"Stop worrying Max, just hold on, we'll be fine, I promise."

"That's easy for you to say. You can see where you're going!"

Stefan laughed and shifted his boot minutely so they turned the corner. "Just trust me." He looked down at Max. "You do trust me, right?"

"Right now, I'm not willing to answer that. Ask me again at the end of the race," Max said, then let out a scream as James suddenly picked up the speed, and Stefan swerved round a slower chariot.

Round and round the rink they raced. The aim was to be the first to get to ten laps, and both Stefan and Nick were equally determined to do it. Max gripped the rough denim of Stefan's jeans and willed his legs to hold on as they sped past other skaters. The noise of the skates on the hard floor was nearly deafening when you were that close to the ground, the music barely audible above it.

Lap eight and they were neck and neck, then Stefan managed to swerve them in front of another chariot, holding Nick and Charlie up. For nearly a lap and a half, they were in front. The edges of the rink raced past, and Max relaxed into the end of the race.

"Shit!" cursed Stefan, and before Max could begin to process the remark, he slammed into something hard, and his feet shot out from under him. Stefan's leg dug into his side, and he shifted a little to remove the wheel of a roller boot that was jammed into his back. Then he lay on the rink, flexing his legs, trying to assess if he'd done any damage. Thankfully nothing hurt too bad as he moved, and he sighed.

"Stefan, are you okay?" He tried to move his leg from underneath the other man but couldn't shift the weight there.

“Uuugghh—I think so.” Carefully, Stefan moved and rolled so he was sitting beside Max. “Are you okay, James?” he asked as the other man skated up beside them.

“Yep, totally missed it all. How about you two?”

“I wish we’d missed it,” groaned Max as he unlaced the boots on his feet. “I’m sticking to computer games, they’re much less damaging to your health.”

Stefan laughed before apologising again. “I’m so sorry, Max, that other couple just collapsed in front of us, I had nowhere to go.” He glared at the two girls giggling their way off the rink. “Really not a good idea to go in the bar and then skate,” he called after them. They just giggled louder and poked their tongues out in unison.

“Charming.” Max looked at Stefan and the smirk pasted across his face. “I thought you said this was safe.” He grinned to show he didn’t mean it.

Stefan groaned, “It is. I just didn’t factor in drunken idiots!”

Max hauled himself to his feet then turned and held out his hand for Stefan. Warm fingers clenched his, and a spark of electricity shot down his arm. Stefan stared at him, his hand wrapped around Max’s and the jolt continued, even as Max pulled Stefan to his feet. “Whoa, static,” said Stefan as he slowly released his grip. Max just nodded—it was the strangest static shock he’d ever had. He could still feel the burn of it, even without Stefan’s touch.

“Get out the fucking way!” The yell broke him from his reverie, and he padded off the rink, aware of Stefan skating slowly behind him. How weird. He handed Andy his skates back and took the condolences and ribbing at losing good naturedly. He even managed to join in the joking and blame it on Stefan—but his head wasn’t really there. He rubbed his palm, the place where he could still feel the ghost of Stefan’s touch. His hand felt empty—hell, *he* felt empty, he wanted to reach forward and brush against him. Link fingers with him or hug him or sit next to him and feel the warmth of their bodies together.

Max slammed his car door shut and started the engine. Even as he put the car in gear and turned the steering wheel, his hands still felt Stefan’s touch. He’d mumbled a goodbye—leaving Stefan, Nick and the others joking about the consequences they were going to have to do, arranging the details of their public humiliation. Honestly, Max didn’t give a fuck, he just couldn’t stop thinking about Stefan.

The winding fen roads were lit only by the light of the moon, a low-level fog hovered over ditches and fields—an eerily beautiful sight that would usually have entranced Max, but tonight he barely noticed it. Tonight he was remembering the feelings he'd had going to meet Stef at the zoo—and was wondering why he was feeling the same now for Stefan. That excited knot in the pit of his stomach, the way his hands felt bereft from his touch. He couldn't even begin to analyse the longing in his groin when he thought of him. He forced himself to stop thinking—he was too tired and too confused to try and make sense of it all now.

He'd never been so thankful for poor weather in his life. The fog got thicker and thicker as he drove, and he strained to see through it, his headlights bounced off of it, reflecting back at him instead of lighting the way. He had to focus purely on the driving, and for that, he was thankful. Even as he slowly pulled his way into the lane leading to his house, he told himself he wouldn't let his thoughts slide back to Stefan. To the yearning to talk to him that he didn't understand. As he let himself in, fussed the cats, pulled out his phone and composed a text message, he carried on telling himself that he wasn't thinking of the other man. It was the right thing to do to check he'd got home safely in the fog. That was all.

The wait for a reply was endless—Stefan lived a lot further away from the skating rink than he did and every minute ticked by slowly. Every second he waited though, he still told himself he wasn't thinking about Stefan. In fact, it wasn't until he'd climbed into bed and, safe in the cocoon of his covers, had reached down to stroke his cock, had built himself slowly, deliciously up to climax, that he dared to admit the truth to himself. In that moment of abandonment, where the truth was exposed, laid bare and impossible to ignore did he let himself admit how fully Stefan was in his thoughts. It was both uncomfortable and delightful. Uneasy and wonderful. In that moment, when there was no space for lies, he admitted the truth. He had a crush—on a man.

9. Facts Are Facts

Unfortunately, once he'd admitted the truth he couldn't un-admit it. It was there when he went to sleep, it was there in his dreams and it was there when he awoke. The fog had cleared and the day was bright, holding the promise of being a perfect autumnal day. For possibly the first time in his life, he wished it was a work day; that he was at his boring-as-all-hell job just so he'd be distracted from his own thoughts. He considered popping round to his parents or calling in to see Aaron—neither option appealed though. All he wanted to do was see Stefan. Keeping busy might help, so, before the sun was barely above the horizon, he started up the lawn mower and cut his grass. He strimmed the edges, dead-headed dying plants and basically gave his garden more attention than it had had in the entire time he'd lived there.

By the time he stopped, he was sweat-soaked, despite the chill in the air, and his garden looked fabulous. He also had to admit that keeping busy was only partially working. Downing a glass of icy summer-fruit-flavoured squash, he gave up trying to not think and decided the opposing tactic might work. He cooled off and cleaned up in the shower, sat down and deliberately let himself think about Stefan. The truth was sometimes an uncomfortable thing, but Max wasn't stupid enough to deny it. Instead, he approached it like the methodical geek he was.

You're so anal, he muttered to himself as he dug in the drawer for a notebook. He grabbed a Biro and split the page in two. Down one side he wrote pros and the other he wrote cons. And he stared at the paper. He put the pen down on the page and took it off again. He let the thoughts swirl round his head and tried again. Eventually, he gripped the Biro tight and scribbled out the headings—he wasn't trying to buy a car, he was trying to work out his feelings. *Except*, he thought, *I already know what my feelings are*. With a sigh, he screwed up the piece of paper and chucked it towards the bin. The fact was he fancied Stefan—it didn't matter that he'd never thought about another bloke like that in his life before, he was now and facts were facts. Oh, dear god, but he had no idea what to do now. Just because Stefan was gay didn't mean that he felt the same about Max, that would be like assuming every woman you'd ever met had a crush on you—and Max knew from long and many painful experiences that this just wasn't true.

Eric jumped up onto his lap and, purring loudly, head butted him. "What do I do Eric?" he asked, stroking him behind his ears. Did he completely ignore

Stefan? Say something? Carry on like nothing had happened? He stretched, literally he had no answers—would he feel this way about other guys? Would he still fancy women? What the hell was he going to do? His head was spinning trying to think about it, a crush had never been this complicated before. He was about to turn on the computer when his phone beeped. He checked his messages and there was one from Stefan.

I'm going to Sunny Hunny—fancy coming with me?

Max's heart skipped a beat, and he'd texted back "yes" before he'd had time to even think about it. What the actual fuck was he doing? Really, this was the worst idea he'd had. Ever. He knew this even as he arranged for Stefan to pick him up. It didn't stop his stomach from tightening and him running round the place madly with a Hoover or showering again. Nope, apparently knowledge was useless in this situation because it seemed he was going to ignore whatever good advice he could come up with.

Glancing at his watch, he anticipated that Stefan would be here any minute. He checked the house with a sweeping look—other than redecorating there really wasn't a lot more he could do to make it look better. He put biscuits down for the cats and topped up their water. He grabbed a pullover and stood at the back door, listening for the telltale sound of a vehicle coming down the lane. When the familiar sound of tyres crunching over the gravel road reached his ears, he could have sworn his heart rate doubled. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to sit as nonchalantly as possible at the kitchen table looking at a paper he really wasn't reading. He'd told Stefan to come straight round the back—most people did, and, with every footstep that sounded on the path outside, his pulse thudded in time. He'd never felt more like a teenager in his life. And that included when he was actually a teenager.

The rap of knuckles on the backdoor was a relief, and he jumped up. "Hey Stefan, come in. Do you want a drink before we go?"

Stefan grinned at him from the doorway, and Max couldn't help noticing the way his eyes crinkled ever so slightly at the edges. "I'm good, thanks, Maxi. Nice place you've got here, it's huge compared to my place."

Max loved his cottage, but he was under no illusions about its size. "Wow—your place must be really small, and it's Max." He grimaced as the words left his mouth—did that sound too critical? And was he destined to overanalyse every word he said now?

Thankfully, Stefan just widened his grin. "It really is! This is great though." He turned and looked at the garden. "I'd love to have a space like this, then I could have the dogs I want."

Locking the door, he followed Stefan to the car. "You'd really like a dog wouldn't you?" he asked, buckling in the seatbelt.

"I'd love to give Sooty, Sandy, and Alfie a home. I'd like to re-home the old dogs that nobody really wants anymore. The trouble is I just don't have enough space for them. I take them for tons of walks and things in my spare time, but..." He trailed off and glanced at the sat-nav. "Don't suppose I can convince you on the virtues of dog ownership, could I?"

"Nah, I'll stick to the cats, as lovely as the dogs were, I'm not really here enough in the day to give them a proper home. I'd love to visit them again though."

"Really?" Stefan asked. "I'd love that Max." He started telling Max about the dogs' recent antics, and Max couldn't help but notice how animated he was.

"Did you always want to work with animals?" Max asked and, despite Max's fears, the conversation flowed. Before Max knew it, they were in Hunstanton and heading towards the clifftop.

"I've never been here before," he said as they rode past the new part of town towards the original village.

"You've never been to Hunstanton?" Stefan's eyebrows shot up. "You live half an hour away, and you've never been here before."

Max chuckled. "No, I've been to Hunstanton, just never the old bit. Everyone I ever came with always wanted to go to the funfair and on the slot machines."

"I promise, walking along this bit of beach, with the sun setting—it's one of the most beautiful places on earth." Stefan parked the car and screwed up his nose. "I sound like such a dork, don't I?"

Max shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. He didn't sound like a dork to Max at all—he sounded perfect.

As they made their way down the cliff path, the sun beat down on their backs, warm and lovely, despite the late month of the year. The sea breeze, though, brought a freshness and Max enjoyed its cooling touch on his skin. The beach was still fairly crowded, a mix of families, couples and dog walkers. Max

followed Stefan, and they headed away from the busy area. They walked along in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Max stopped and slipped off his trainers, letting the dry sand trickle through his toes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been to the beach, and considering how close it was, this was really sad. Gulls swooped together on the horizon, dipping down into the water and then flying back to the cliff where they nested. A golden retriever sped past them in hot pursuit of a ball. They both watched him, laughing as he plunged straight into the water and proceeded to shake his coat, soaking the young boy running after him.

"Did you know more than seven thousand dogs were abandoned in East Anglia in 2012?" Stefan said as they started walking again. Max glanced sideways at him.

"Really, wow—that is a lot. How many of them are re-homed?"

"Not enough." Stefan looked out to the water, lost in his thoughts for a moment. Max studied him, the pain was written across the other man's face for the entire world to see. Then, in an instant, it was gone. He smiled up at Max. "Sorry, no getting maudlin. How about a paddle?"

Max smiled and dropped his shoes in the sand. "Sure thing—last one to the water buys the ice cream."

Hurtling down the sand, Max couldn't help laughing. He glanced over his shoulder at Stefan hopping round trying to pull his trainers off. Slowing down he turned and grinned. "I'd like a Ninety-nine, please," he called back over the expanse of sand between them.

"You've not won yet," Stefan called back, finally dumping his shoes with Max's and sprinting towards him. Stefan was certainly faster than Max, but with the gap he'd already created, it wasn't hard to race to the water first. Damn was that water cold though. It showered up his calves and he paused to roll his shorts up a bit further.

"Very sexy," Stefan sniggered splashing alongside him. He was only joking, but Max's heart still beat a tiny bit faster than it was. There was no point denying it, Max knew it was nothing to do with the mad dash down the sand.

"Don't you know it," he said, glad the setting sun would hide the red in his face. "It takes a whole lot of sexy to rock rolled-up shorts like I can." He pulled them up even further exposing to mid-thigh. "I bet you'd give your left nut to look this good!"

I bet you'd give your left nut to look this good. What the fuck... Since when did he flirt?

"I bow to your superior sexiness." Stefan made bowing actions. Max snorted and splashed water at him. He couldn't quite figure out who had taken over his mouth—but he'd quite like control of it back. He didn't like not knowing what was going to come out of it next.

"Oh, so that's how it's going to be, is it?" Before Max could ask what Stefan meant, a tidal wave of water cascaded over him, aided by Stefan's foot. Stefan was grinning so widely Max wondered if his face would split in two. *Really? So that's how he's going to play.* Feigning anger, he moved away a little, then turned and swept his hand through the water. Handfuls of it swept up into the air completely drenching Stefan too.

He regretted it as soon as he'd done it. The playful look on Stefan's face increased tenfold and he launched himself at Max. It was like being hit by a wrecking ball. Well, maybe less painful—and certainly more enjoyable—but wrecking ball or Stefan, Max did not stand a chance of staying upright. With Stefan's arms round his neck and legs wrapped around his waist they both fell into the water. Salt water doused him, they may have only been in the shallows, but there was definitely enough water to saturate the pair of them.

Max lay in the sea with Stefan sitting on top of him shaking water over him like the Labrador they'd watched. Euphoria swept through him, and the urge to laugh became overwhelming. He tried to hold it back, but he couldn't and snorted loudly. The harder he tried not to, the louder he snorted, and soon, full blown gales of laughter ripped from him. Proper belly laughs, the kind that you couldn't stop no matter how hard you tried. As at the zoo, the laughing was contagious, and Stefan joined in, gasping to try and breathe. The happy sounds echoed above the gentle splash of the water, and Max couldn't have told you how long they'd lain there like loons. The sky was rapidly darkening, and it was only when he shivered violently that Max realised this was probably not the smartest idea he'd ever had. Not that he was taking the blame for this; it was one hundred percent Stefan's fault as far as he was concerned.

"I'm so cold," he said, pulling himself up from the water.

"This was not a good idea," Stefan agreed, climbing up too. "I do have some spare clothes in the car. Come on jog, it'll help warm you up."

"You p-p-planned this?" Max stuttered, the cold making him shiver.

“Not exactly planned it, but I was prepared.” Max must have looked puzzled because Stefan chuckled. “I came up here a few weeks back and wished I could have a dip but didn’t have a change of clothes, so I stuffed a couple of spare sets in for the future and a towel. You look so cold.” Max startled when Stefan reached back and grabbed hold of his hand, with no option but to follow, he found himself pulled along the sand. Pausing only to gather up their shoes, Stefan kept his grip firm on Max’s hand. The running was definitely helping, at least, Max told himself it was the running even though the warmth radiated up from their linked hands.

They got to the top of the cliff, and Stefan released the grip, opened his boot and chucked a towel at Max. “You use it first. You’re much colder than I am.” Turning his back and slightly embarrassed, Max stripped off his sodden T-shirt and wrapped the towel round his torso, enjoying the meagre warmth it offered.

“Here, these should fit.” A T-shirt came his way followed by a pair of shorts. As quickly as he could, he stripped off his wet stuff, dried and slipped on the dry clothes. Bundling up his sopping things, he turned to hand the towel to Stefan. He stopped short—the other man stood staring at him, for once the mischievous grin gone from his face. The look Stefan wore sent all the blood rushing south, and Max started moving round the side of the car before his knob became too hard.

“Nice arse,” said Stefan reaching for the towel, the cheeky tone he usually had mastered so well, sounding a little off to Max.

“Er, thanks,” he said, not quite sure how to respond. God knows, he knew how he wanted to respond, but this was more than just unknown territory. If he was wrong about this, if what he thought he knew was really just a flash in the pan, a moment of curiosity, then he risked ruining a great friendship. Even with his thoughts scattered all over the place, he knew that would be a bad idea. While Stefan was changing, Max climbed into the passenger seat. *Nice arse.* The words echoed round in his head. Did he mean it, did it mean anything if he did? And what made a backside nice anyway? Sure, he liked the peachy softness of past girlfriends, but he’d never really thought about a man’s arse before. Now the thought was in his head though. Damn it. He stared at his hands, willing himself not to glance in the mirror. But, why shouldn’t he—after all he wouldn’t be doing anything Stefan hadn’t done first. *Could he sound any more like a school boy?* Still, one little peek wouldn’t hurt. And this is what he was thinking as he let his eyes slide towards the passenger-side mirror.

One look couldn't hurt. Except he hadn't counted on that one look almost causing his blood pressure to drop. Or rise. Or whatever. It did something inexplicable that left him hard as a rock and dizzy as all hell. He'd been in changing rooms before, he'd seen naked men—not that he'd ever paid attention as he was usually trying to get dressed as quickly as possible to hide his own geeky trimness—but anything he had seen had never been as perfect as the sight he was looking at now. Rounded and taut and holy fuck, what was going on with him? Fuck, fuck, fuck. What the hell was he going to do?

“Ready to go?” Stefan climbed into the driver's seat. “I know I owe you an ice cream but I'm not sure we'll find anywhere serving one at this time of night. Can I give you an IOU?”

“Sure thing.” Max couldn't bring himself to look at Stefan and was glad that Stefan was having to concentrate on driving. The ride home seemed both endless and the shortest trip ever. Conversation was mumbled, muted. He hoped Stefan was putting it down to him just being tired. He wanted to go home and pretend he'd never met Stefan—that he was just still 5t3ff, his computer friend. Then the thought of never seeing him again hit, and he felt sick to the stomach. Damn he needed to sleep; maybe things would seem clearer in the morning. Though, that hadn't worked out too well for him yesterday.

“Earth to Max!” A hand waved in front of his face, and Max was woken from his reverie. “Are you okay? I've just been talking to you for ten minutes, and I don't think you've heard a word I've said.”

“Sorry, I'm... just tired. What were you saying?” Max tried to look interested in the conversation and not focus on the outline of Stefan's face. How his nose was almost perfectly straight, with just the tiniest upturn at the end. How, even in the dark, he could make out the laughter lines that feathered the edges of his eyes and gave him a look of permanent happiness.

“Just asking about work tomorrow. Didn't know when you wanted that ice cream, I like to get my debts paid.” The grin returned, and Max's stomach flipped.

“Um, no, tomorrow's no good. Can I let you know?” His fingernails dug into the bare skin at the bottom of his shorts as he lied. He needed to get his head straight, and he wasn't going to do that by seeing Stefan. He knew he'd have to see him again soon though. This was seriously, seriously fucked up.

“Sure thing.” Stefan shrugged and flicked the indicator on, navigating the roundabout and remembering which turn was Max's.

The night was long, and so was the next day. And the day after. And the one after that. Max threw himself into his job. The office of an insurance firm wasn't the most fun place to work, but it was busy and distracting, and for that he was thankful. Thursday rolled round, gaming night. He'd managed to avoid Stefan so far, just sending a text to say he'd washed the clothes and would return them soon. He'd had time and space to think. And think he'd done. He'd gone over and over things in his head. Thought endlessly about his reaction to Stefan, how he felt when he was with him. He knew how he felt; he wasn't stupid enough to deny it to himself. Analysing it would be silly, he liked Stefan, and Stefan turned him on. End of. The thing he wasn't sure of was how to deal with it.

September was unusually bright, the weather that perfect combination of sunny but not too hot. Still it was a rare day that found him gardening when he didn't have to be. Tonight though he found it was quite urgent that he cut the grass again—even though he'd only done it on Sunday. With the evening sun lowering but still warm on his back, he strode up and down pushing the mower. In the distance, a tractor chugged up and down fields doing whatever tractors did at the start of autumn. The apples on the tree at the bottom of the garden were about ready to pick, he noted as he cut the grass there, and the grape vine that ran riot over an old shed was full of grapes. Too sour for human consumption, the birds loved them.

A breeze added some freshness to the air as the evening drew in. Finishing up, he put the mower back in the shed and poured himself a tall glass of pineapple juice. Sitting outside as darkness descended, he could hear no sounds of human life in the still of the evening. No neighbours calling or children playing. Some might think it lonely, but to Max it was perfect. Finally, sipping at his juice he could avoid thinking about Stefan no longer. Past eight and he was pretty sure 5t3ff would be travelling through the Twelvewoods looking for him. How did he carry on pretending everything was hunky dory? He rubbed his hands over his face, this was so damn complicated.

Option one—ignore Stefan completely. Stop playing Final Fantasy, don't call him or meet in chat rooms. But... but... that would be so stupid. And ridiculous. Giving up before you'd begun. Option one was not an option, he decided as he thought about option two. Carry on like before. That seemed sensible and it shouldn't be too hard. Except when he thought about it, he realised it would be hard—fine on the computer and in the game. But what about when they met up, and if he wasn't going to meet up, how would he

explain his sudden reluctance? He didn't want to hurt Stefan. Except, he thought, that's not the full truth. Of course, he didn't want to hurt Stefan, but what he was really afraid of was not seeing him anymore. Or pretending the whole time they were together. Pretending that it didn't feel like he was on fire every time they touched. Nope, that was no option either. Which left him with choice three—tell Stefan how he felt. Tell him. “Well fuck a duck,” Max muttered to himself as he chucked the dregs of his pineapple juice on the grass and went inside to the computer. After all that thinking, the decision wasn't so hard really.

10. Game On

Stefan was kind of sick of wandering around a computer game searching for Max. The fact that this was the fourth night on the row he'd been *in* the game and not actually *played* the game smacked of desperation even to himself. So much for keeping his feelings under control. Paranoia was not his usual mindset, but, since Sunday evening and Max going all quiet on him, paranoid was exactly how he was feeling. Had he overstepped with the remarks about Max's arse? He honestly didn't know, and he hated second guessing himself—he hated even more that he was so worked up about this. He was a grown man for fuck's sake. So, he'd found himself moping at work, avoiding anyone who was going to ask him questions about Max and spending a lot of time in a virtual realm.

Actually, being on Final Fantasy and not actually playing Final Fantasy was harder than it sounded. Other players kept trying to rope him into stuff; he'd had three requests to make up raiding parties in the last half hour alone. Just drifting around the area was getting difficult, another Miq'ote had questioned him twice in the past fifteen minutes. He could always turn off the computer and do something else. He could... but maybe just five more minutes. Turned out he'd never been so thankful to give anything five extra minutes in his life. He returned to his hideout with another huge bundle of sticks—his Miq'ote was never going to suffer from the cold if the towering pile he'd collected over the past few days was anything to go by—and a familiar Elezen figure waited in front of his log pile. As relief and joy wrestled inside him, Stefan only let himself consider briefly how truly pathetic he was before he let his avatar stroll on over to MAX11.

It was well after eleven when Max suggested the chat room, and Stefan practically sighed in relief. Okay, he *did* sigh in relief and was thankful nobody was there to hear him. At least, he knew he hadn't frightened Max off completely. This was the most goddamn ridiculous thing ever, never had he had a crush on someone like this before. Not even when he was a teenager. As he exited the game and signed into the chat room, his hands started to sweat a little.

5t3ff: Hey. ☺

MAX11: *Hi Stefan. Good gaming tonight, huh? Glad we avoided getting caught by that Lalafell gang. I don't like them, far too conniving!!*

5t3ff: *IKR! How are you? Haven't heard much from you this week. Thought I'd scared you off *G**

Stefan tapped his keyboard impatiently as he waited for a reply. Communicating via keyboard had its advantages—but it also had disadvantages. At least, when you were actually speaking to someone you could see their reactions and not guess at their mood entirely. Outside a rowdy group wandered past. Thursday night was student night at The Bell where they served cheap drinks from six 'til eleven. He'd long since given up trying to sleep on a Thursday until the drunken mass exodus concluded just before midnight.

MAX11: *Lol—no way. Just busy at work. ☹ I was wondering if you wanted to meet up tomorrow evening?*

Stefan's heart rate doubled, and his hands shook. With nerves, excitement, or apprehension, he wasn't sure. He thought for a second before he typed.

5t3ff: *I'd really like that Max, did you have anywhere in mind?*

Stefan waited for the “typing” icon to start flashing. And waited. And waited. Just as he was about to give up and offer a suggestion, Max started typing.

MAX11: *Do you know The Badger's Retreat at Elmsley? How about we meet there for a meal, then decide? How does 7.30 work for you?*

5t3ff: *Sounds great! 😊 CU then.*

The days had turned cold, and Stefan added a tank top to his outfit, carefully pulling the collar of his shirt straight at the neck. The deep plum colour complemented the charcoal shirt and teamed with jeans was the right kind of smart/casual for a pub meal. He hoped. He glanced back at the bed, piled high with the contents of his wardrobe, most of which he'd tried on at least once. He *never* had this much trouble deciding what to wear, usually he didn't really care what he looked like and choose comfy over cool every time. Today though... Max always looked so well dressed, even when he was in jeans and T-shirt, he appeared ironed and well groomed, and for some reason Stefan wanted Max to feel as though he'd made the same kind of effort.

Well, not *some* reason, he thought as he started hanging his clothes up again. *The* reason; he fancied the pants off the man. Unfortunately, he didn't

think it likely he'd get into the guys trousers, far less his pants. Except... why suggest a meal, that was like a date. Wasn't it?

He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialled Tally's number. "It's not a date if he's straight," she said before he'd even asked the question.

"How do you do that?" He looked in the mirror and used one hand to add a little gel to his hair and tousle the front up a little. "How do you know what I'm going to ask?"

"Because sugar, I know you. I know that despite your supposedly laid-back attitude, you really like this Max, and you're conveniently trying to overlook the fact that he's not gay and are wishing desperately that this was a date."

Stefan pouted at his reflection. "But you said to go for it."

"No, romantic Tally said go for it, and only practical Tally is in the house this evening."

Stefan laughed, despite himself. "Oh, domestic bliss not quite as blissful as it should be?"

"Don't you know it," Tally said, through what sounded like gritted teeth. "I'll bore you with the details next shift. Just don't ever decide to use washing up liquid instead of washing powder because you've run out. The clothes won't like it and neither will your partner."

Laughing again, Stefan hung up. Tally was an angel, and she always knew just how to make him feel better. Poor Carl was in for it tonight if he really had bugged up the washing machine. Shoving the rest of the clothes onto hangers and away, he checked his hair once more to make sure it wasn't too boy band and grabbed his car keys.

Thirty minutes later, he walked into The Badger's Retreat and looked for Max. He knew he was here already, his car was in the car park. The bar wasn't overly full, and it didn't take long to spot him leaning on the bar cradling a drink. Fuck he looked good. Dark jeans and a bottle green jumper that looked so freaking hot on him. Max turned around and looked at the door, and a slow smile spread across his face when he saw Stefan. Circumnavigating the tables, Stefan went over. Max ordered drinks, "Another shandy and... what would you like Stefan?"

"Just a coke," he said, and when the bartender had served them, he followed Max to a small table in the corner.

“Hi.” Max smiled at him, and a thousand volts jolted through his body. That smile—was it how Max usually smiled at him? It seemed more... possessive. More wanting. Didn't it? Or was he overanalysing it? Flustered, he grabbed a menu and studied it intently. Max smiled at him and picked up the other menu. Stefan scanned the list of foods without taking it in. Max shifted in his chair, and their knees brushed together. Was it intentional? Had Max meant to do it, or was it a complete accident? Heart thudding, Stefan focused on the writing, willing himself not to look up. Resistance it seemed was futile, and, apparently with a will of their own, his eyes turned up, and he looked at Max over the top of his menu. Max was perusing his menu with more calm about him than Stefan had ever seen. It was almost complete role reversal, and Stefan wasn't sure he liked it. In fact, no he didn't like it—so he was going to change it.

“Seen anything you fancy?” he asked, making sure his grin was just a little bit suggestive. A bit wider than usual, eyebrow tipped up a little. He knew how to tease and tempt if need be. He could feel the grin widen as Max's smile faltered, just a little, but enough that Stefan knew he wasn't as confident as he appeared.

“Maybe,” said Max, recovering quicker than Stefan would have liked. “I usually go for something vegetarian, but I'm thinking of trying some meat tonight.” He cocked an eyebrow of his own and stared directly at Stefan. Good god, was that innuendo? Stefan's dick certainly seemed to think so anyway.

“I'm thinking the rump steak looks good. I usually find it's the best thing on the menu.” Stefan had to hold back a leer as the faint touch of a blush started to creep up Max's neck. Two can play at this game.

“I'll take your word for it.” Max smiled back, still blushing a little but holding his own. Fuck he was sexy like this. Stefan really hoped that Max was flirting, because if this was just one major misinterpretation he wasn't sure he could cope.

Wriggling in his chair to adjust himself a little, Stefan stared at Max, devouring him with his eyes. Confidence suited him—but that edge of insecurity, the bit that caused the blushing and Max to lower his gaze, that did Stefan in. When Max was flustered, his mouth ran away from him. He said the darndest things, then blushed like a virgin. When Max was flustered, he was as sexy as all hell. “I'll go and order shall I? You definitely want the steak?”

“Without a doubt.” Max looked directly at him. Stefan could see the effort it was taking for the other man to not lower his gaze, and *parts* of him really

appreciated it. He gave himself a second to adjust himself and then went and gave their order. Standing at the bar, he thought about Max. Carefully he snuck a look at the other man. God, he looked hot tonight, especially now as he sat there fiddling with a beer mat, rolling it up then stretching it flat. Looking away again before he got caught peeking, Stefan tried hard to describe Max accurately. He wasn't vulnerable or delicate, that wasn't the right way to depict him. At first glance, he could appear to lack confidence, but truly he didn't. He didn't wait for others to make choices for him or try to fit into a mould, he just *was*. His train of thought was interrupted as a barmaid came over to take his order.

"For table seven?" she repeated back to him after he'd relayed what they wanted. Grabbing them each another drink, he went and sat down. He shifted his chair a little closer to Max's and flipped open the menu again between them.

"Best decide what we want for pudding—it is the best bit of the meal after all!" Max looked at him sideways and purposely opened his legs so their knees rubbed together.

"I hadn't forgotten that dessert was your favourite course." Max moved a little, leaning towards Stefan so as well as their knees rubbing under the table; their arms were touching on top of it. If Stefan had thought it felt like volts of electric had zapped him before he was surely mistaken. Because this. This is what touching an electric fence must be like. Well, except less painful. And less dangerous. But the feeling like a pulse of current running from every point touching, that, that must be the same.

"Feels like being permanently statically shocked, doesn't it?" Max spoke quietly but moved his arm slowly against Stefan's. Stefan could only gape and nod his head. "I guess we need to talk, huh?"

Stefan nodded again. "I guess so," he said, feeling more out of control than he ever had in his life.

"So, I suppose I'm making it pretty obvious I like you in a *more than like* you way?" He posed it as a question, but Stefan felt sure it was more a statement and just nodded. The smile that crept across Max's face turned his stomach inside out. "And I'm hoping you do... are... feeling the same?" The last part of the sentence rushed out of his mouth, confidence faltering at the last minute. Before Stefan could speak, could confirm or deny, Max gabbled on. "It's not that I assume you'll like me like that just because you're gay, but I thought we had... it felt like..."

"I do like you Max. I more than like you." Stefan paused. He needed to be careful, words could be so misleading sometimes. The same sentence, with a different nuance on a different word could sound so poles apart in meaning. While he'd never been a shag, fag, fart, sleep kind of bloke he also didn't turn down sex if it was someone he was really attracted to. Frankly, this situation was completely new to him. And who the hell had even mentioned sex anyway, talk about jumping the gun. But, well they were men and men did like sex. A lot. He assumed it was the same for straight men, as it was gays. "But you're straight," he finally blurted out, coming to the crux of his problem in the most inelegant way possible.

"Gay, straight, bi—labels, schmabels." Max sipped at his shandy and let his little finger rub gently along the side of Stefan's hand. "Why? Why do I have to be straight... maybe I've just never found a man I've been attracted to before. I'll admit I'd never thought about it before, but trust me, since we went to the zoo I've thought about little else."

"I..." Stefan started.

"Steak, chips and peas?" a waitress stood beside the table holding two plates of steaming food. Stefan pointed to Max. "And steak, jacket and salad?"

"That's me, thanks." He moved his hand so the plates could be put down and missed the feather-like touch of Max's finger immediately.

"Can I get you anything? Sauce, salt? Another drink?"

"No, we're good, thanks," Stefan answered, too eager to continue his conversation with Max to worry whether the other man did want any condiments.

"Enjoy your meal." The girl finally left them alone. But now Max had picked up his fork and was attacking his chips like he hadn't eaten for a week.

"You're a big chip fan, huh?" Stefan sliced his own steak carefully and enjoyed the look of enjoyment on Max's face as he ate.

"The hugest!" Max agreed once he'd swallowed his mouthful. "I don't have them very often because I hate exercise and chips are fatty. A chip butty is the food of gods though."

"I'm afraid I'll have to disagree with you there. Pavlova is the most divine food on the planet. And in the heavens," he added quickly. Max smiled again before continuing his meal.

They ate in relative silence, but Stefan was all too aware of Max's leg periodically brushing up against his and he was convinced it was by design rather than accident. He so wanted to just give in, to fall into whatever this was, but, after months of longing for this very thing to happen, he was having doubts. *Worrying*. And, *what the actual fuck*, screamed his brain. He'd been lusting after Max since he'd seen him standing awkwardly against the wall at the zoo, and each time he'd seen him since had been like slow torture. He spent weeks trying to convince himself they would only ever be friends, and the friendship they had was different to any of his others. He craved their time together. Longed for it, obsessed over it, if he was being honest with himself—which apparently he was tonight.

He chewed his steak slowly and thought. All his dreams of the last few months could come true tonight, and he was hesitating. Why?

"You're worrying about ruining our friendship, aren't you?" Max asked.

What the... "How do you do that, know what I'm thinking?" Stefan put down his cutlery and stared at Max.

"Because it's exactly what I worried about. Well, you know, after I got used to the idea of you being a man and all."

"No labels, right?"

"Exactly. But, I don't want to ruin our friendship..." his voice dropped, and he looked down at the table, "no matter how much I want to kiss you." The telltale red started to creep up his neck again, and, between that and the fact that Max had just admitted wanting to kiss him, Stefan was as hard as a rock. Sometimes, just sometimes, he envied females and their ability to not let the world know every time they were as horny as hell.

With his knob straining against his jeans, and the thought of Max's mouth against his, it was with great difficulty that he managed to keep his mind on the conversation. "You don't want to ruin our friendship? So what are we doing flirting with each other then?" Stefan thought for a moment. "I mean, how many of your exes are you still friends with? What happens if we do try something and it all goes wrong?"

"And what happens if we don't start something and miss out on the best relationship of our lives because we were too scared to try it?" Max put his fork down and stretched his arm across the table. Gently, he caressed Stefan's hand. "I can tell you now, my mum would say my dad is her best friend and vice

versa. Sure, there are times they'd happily kill each other, and sure, they have other friends they spend time with, but for the most part, they have their best friend there with them every day of their lives. I guess you just have to fight for what you want and not be afraid of what you might lose."

11. Fight or Flight

If anyone had ever asked Stefan if he would be a fight or flight kind of guy, he would have emphatically stated FIGHT. He wouldn't have hesitated. Not one doubt would have crept into his mind. Except now, *now* when he was faced with having to make some kind of choice, all he could think about was the possibility of losing Max altogether, and he wanted to retreat as fast as possible. Tally's voice echoed in his head. She'd been his go-to-gal for advice for so long he couldn't dismiss what she'd said earlier. Even if his dick wanted him to.

"I'm going to the loo," he said, abruptly snatching his hand back and moving away. In the toilets, he splashed water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. What was wrong with him? This was what he wanted, what he'd been thinking about day after day and now it was a possibility he was, what? Running scared? How did he do this? Did he give it a go, run away—what was going to risk the friendship more?

Heading back towards the table, he could see the pensive look on Max's face. The mask of confidence had gone and doubt was there instead. Slipping into his seat, he let his hand caress over Max's. "I'm scared of ruining what we have Max—but I'm also scared of not trying."

Max looked at him, his dark eyes searching Stefan's face for answers. Hope glistened under the pensiveness. Stefan thought carefully before he spoke again. "I want to take it slow. Like really, really slow—I'd rather have our friendship than a short-lived, lust-fuelled affair."

Max nodded his head and turned his hand, catching Stefan's caressing fingers in his. "Sounds like the perfect idea to me. Slow and steady wins the race anyway, hadn't you heard?" Stefan smiled, not entirely sure if he was less or more apprehensive than he was previously. "Now though," Max continued, "we have a very important decision to make." Furrowing his forehead, Stefan looked across at Max. "What we want for pudding?" Max said.

"Seeing as there's no pavlova, I'm going for spotted dick." Stefan grinned and raised an eyebrow.

"And there I was thinking we were taking it slow," said Max, scanning his own menu. "Are you having cream with that?"

Stefan just raised his eyebrow further until Max blushed. “Nope, I’ll have custard, thanks.” Max chose a knickerbocker glory and, smiling like the Cheshire cat, Stefan went to place their orders.

A strange sense of relief settled itself round Stefan. It was tentative, as if it were a cloak of feathers that could blow away at the first bit of breeze, but it was there. A relief. His cards were on the table, but so were Max’s. There was no wondering or second guessing. They stated their positions and knew which path they were taking. And edging the relief was anticipation—and anticipation was a huge turn on. Slow was good. Slow could be fun.

They waited and chatted, and then ate their desserts when they arrived. Hands bumped together and so did knees, but no touch or caress was too long or too blatant. The joy was in the subtlety. In the quiet possibility of a friendship becoming something more. Soon their meal was finished and last orders had been called. “Ready to go?” asked Stefan. Max nodded. Stefan wasn’t entirely sure he was. Conversation with Max was so easy, time passed without him realising.

Outside the air was chilly, and Stefan wished he’d brought a jacket, even for the short journey across the car park. “I’m over there...” Max pointed, then stopped when he realised Stefan was parked next to him.

“It’s been a great evening, Max,” Stefan said, standing between their cars, near Max’s driver’s door. Suddenly, he felt awkward; this was new territory for him. There was no going slow usually, not since his first boyfriend had he not ended up shagging when there was a mutual interest with someone. This was different though. Not because Max had never fucked another man before, but because there was more at stake than just some bad nooky.

“It’s been a nearly perfect evening,” said Max.

“*Nearly* perfect?” Stefan stepped forward, so the gap between them closed. It was Max though that reached forward. Warm hands stroked gently down the side of his face. He’d never been touched so softly in his life, but the feather touch sent chills through him that had nothing to do with the season. Even in the dark, Stefan could see the delicate features of Max’s face. Such fine bone structure, he was almost pretty. Long lashes framed his dark, dark eyes, and Stefan was hypnotised by the warmth he saw in them. The pupils, blown and full of want. His lips were perfectly shaped, and a scratch of stubble glinted in the moonlight. The power of speech had seemingly abandoned both of them, and they stood for either the longest or the shortest time, just staring.

They moved forward together, an unspoken agreement of symmetry. Lips brushed his; tentative, hesitant, needing. Every nerve in his body sang. His arms reached round Max's waist and pulled him closer, and the kiss deepened. It was sweet and light and hot and fiery. Chocolate and delicious and Stefan wanted more. Max pressed harder into him, a soft graze of teeth across his bottom lip. Hands twined into his hair, clutching and caressing. Need for more simmered just beneath the surface, but either chance or willpower kept them from acting on it.

An eternity later, they pulled apart. Words seemed redundant; they'd just spoken silent prose after all. A brush of hands down his face, the promise of tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow and Max got in his car. With just a brief lift of the hand goodbye, he drove away, and Stefan climbed into his own car, only aware of the cold evening air again now Max had gone. It was just a kiss he told himself as he started the engine, just a kiss. But a kiss had never felt like this before.

If anyone had asked Max the next day how he'd gotten home, he wouldn't have been able to tell them. The same autopilot locked his car, let him in the house, fussed the cats, brushed his teeth and got him into bed. Then and only then did the world come back into focus. As he snuggled down into his pillows and pulled his quilt up around his neck, every memory of the evening fought its way to the surface of his mind. It was thoughts of the kiss, though, that consumed him. Stefan's lips had been softer than he'd thought they would be—yet rougher than he was used to. No lipstick, or gloss, or balm had greased them, and he'd loved the naked feel of them beneath his own mouth. He'd tasted of the sweetness of his pudding. He'd made soft moaning noises as he'd kissed that turned Max the fuck on and that, Max was sure, Stefan was completely unaware of making. It had been the most perfect kiss ever and, while he yearned for more, he also wanted to take it slow. For all the reasons they'd discussed. For the sake of deepening a friendship and not just blowing it.

Eventually, sleep drifted over him and, though he couldn't remember them in the morning, his dreams were full of Stefan and full of joy. The days once more blended together and thoughts of Stefan filled his mind. This time though he wasn't trying to desperately avoid him. Social media made keeping in contact a breeze without him looking like a total loser waiting anxiously for a phone call. Comment, tweet, like, update status, share a picture... it made the wait between texts and calls and visits to the chat room bearable.

The thirty-five minute trip between their houses wasn't far, and it was a cold Friday evening when Max next made his way to meet Stefan. Tally and some of the other people from Stefan's work were celebrating a colleague's birthday at a riverside pub. Max parked his car and pulled his scarf tighter. Winter definitely wasn't far away if the bitter evenings were anything to go by. His breath huffed out in front of him, and he hurried to the metal steps leading to the private party in the upstairs bar. The river twinkled in the moonlight, stars reflected in its rippling surface. His feet clanked up the steps where noise and warmth spilled out into the bitter night. For a second, he stopped and stared at the people he didn't know, laughing and joking together in the brightness of the disco lights. Happiness was all he could see, and he couldn't help himself smiling, even as nerves started to kick in.

He'd spent all day not thinking that this was the first time he'd seen Stefan since the kiss. He'd spent all day not thinking about how he was going to react to him. He thought it'd all be cool, they'd communicated every day in one way or another, but right now his hands were shaking slightly, and his heart was beating just that bit faster. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the door open and walked into the room. He walked over to the bar and ordered a pint, scanning the room for any sign of Stefan. It wasn't long before the other man caught his eye. Deep in conversation with Tally and, he assumed, other work colleagues, he had his head thrown back in laughter. Wearing jeans with a shirt and suit jacket he looked as hot as all fuck, and Max took a moment to appreciate the other man's beauty. His heart pumped hard as he noticed the artfully ruffled hair and the touch of guy-liner. He liked dressed-up Stefan. A lot.

Clasping his drink, Max pushed through the groups of people scattered across the small dance floor and joined Stefan and his friends. Tally saw him first and smiled at him. Max was nervous about seeing her too. He knew she was Stefan's best friend, he also knew that Stefan set a lot of stead in what Tally said. Max needed to make a good impression tonight. As Olly Murs pumped out from the speakers, Stefan finally noticed Max as he joined the group. A wide grin spread across his face that went straight to Max's groin. He'd never known anyone to turn him on so quickly before.

"Wow, I like your earring, does it hurt?" said Max noticing the bar through the top of Stefan's ear. He repeated the words back to himself and cringed.

Stefan smiled even wider and grabbed Max into a hug. "It's a scaffold piercing, and it hurts just a little. Do you really like it?" He loosened his grip on Max but didn't release him completely. Standing looking directly at each other, it was as if the rest of the room had disappeared.

Nodding, Max said, "I really like it. It's very sexy—so is the eyeliner. You are hot, mister, very hot." Max didn't know what taking it slow entailed exactly, but he was pretty sure compliments were allowed. Besides, he liked the way Stefan's eyes widened just a little at the compliment.

"You remember Tally?" Stefan asked, and as Max nodded, he found himself swept into another hug. Hugging was not his thing, not at all, he much preferred a handshake, so he just let his arms curl awkwardly around Tally's shoulders, not quite sure how tight to pull her or where to place his head. It was only once she'd pulled away and given him a knowing grin that he realised there was none of that awkwardness with Stefan. When Stefan drew him into a cuddle it felt like the most natural thing on the planet. The rest of the group were introduced—a Sandy, Graham, Joshua, Liam. Max knew he wouldn't remember their names by the end of the night, but he tried to anyway.

The music blared out of the speakers, the DJ playing top forty songs relentlessly. They weren't necessarily the current top forty, but they were all loud and they were all upbeat, obviously designed to get people on the small square that counted as a dance floor. And they all made conversation nearly impossible. The small space and mass of heaving bodies meant that it was as warm as hell in there, and he shrugged off his scarf and jacket pretty quickly. When he found himself next to Tally, she leaned into him and said, "Nice shirt." Max looked down, though he knew which one he was wearing. The black silk T-shirt was plain and tight, but he liked it. It was just the right amount of sexy, and Max felt good in it.

"Thanks. How are those puppies now?" She frowned as she thought back, then told him they'd all found new homes as soon as they were old enough.

"I don't know how you don't get attached to them and want to take them all home." He leaned back, resting against a table, arms folded across his chest.

Tally shrugged and smiled. "I literally don't have the room for all the ones I want to take home. There would be no point taking them from the potential of a family that can look after them properly to crowd them into my house. It would be kind of counterproductive."

"That makes sense." Max thought for a moment. "Is it hard though, seeing them day in, day out in those cages?"

Biting her bottom lip, she paused before answering. "It is, but you can't think about it. If you were falling apart every time you went to work, what use would you be to the animals?"

Max swigged his drink. “Stefan said pretty much the same thing. I don’t think I’d be very good at it. I’d try and take them all home and...” he shrugged and let the sentence trail off, flushing a little as he realised how much of a wuss he sounded. Tally just looked at him and offered a sympathetic smile.

“Oh god, I love this song! Fancy a dance?” She grabbed hold of him and pulled him onto the dance floor before he had a chance to say no. As he passed Stefan, the other man raised his eyebrows, smirked and deftly took the bottle of beer out of Max’s hand. Stefan was definitely going to pay for this, Max thought as he started imitating Tally’s moves. Friends—boyfriends?—did *not* do that to one another. They helped each other out.

It had been so long since Max had been dancing, he’d forgotten how much he actually enjoyed it. Once he got over the self-consciousness—usually aided by an alcoholic beverage or three—he was actually quite a good dancer. Despite his long limbs and tallness, he had a natural grace that didn’t present itself in his everyday life. Tally was easy to get along with he discovered as they twisted and swayed together. She was very blunt, but even Max could work out her heart was solid gold.

Tune after tune played, and he lost himself to the music. Rhythm and a steady beat and he felt freer than he had in a long time. Song after song played, yet Max made no move to come off the dance floor, even when Tally gave up and went to get herself another drink. He hadn’t danced in so long, it felt good to let himself go a little. Finally, the current run of old rock songs came to an end, and the DJ swapped them for some rapping stuff, so Max decided he was ready for another drink. He made his way towards the edge of the dance floor where Stefan was. As he found his way through the bodies still dancing, he saw Stefan watching him, an indescribable look on his face.

Silently, Stefan held out a glass of orange juice to him, and Max downed the contents thirstily. Still without words, Stefan grabbed Max’s jacket with one hand and Max’s hand with his other and pulled him out of the room, back down the metal steps outside into the frigid night air. The coolness hit his skin and soothed the heat away, and Max relished it, even as he wondered where they were going. Max had never seen Stefan like this before, so... purposeful. He opened his mouth to ask where he was being taken and then changed his mind. Instead, he enjoyed the warmth of Stefan’s hand in his, the way he gripped his fingers tightly, the way his thumb stroked up and down. They rounded the corner of the building, the river flowing quietly in front of them. Boats moored for the night bobbing up and down, only the quiet slap, slap of water on their

hulls making any noise. Stefan stopped and turned, gripping the front of Max's T-shirt the best he could with his handful of coat.

"You never told me you could dance." His voice was low, gravelly like he'd smoked one too many cigarettes.

"I... I... uh..."

"You are so fucking hot right now. I'm just reminding myself *slowly*."

Max frowned, confused as Stefan looked him up and down.

"You have no idea what you do to me, do you?" Stefan asked. Max barely had time to shake his head when he felt himself being pushed backwards, up against the hard brick of the pub building. "No idea," Stefan murmured again as his mouth closed over Max's. Heat seared through him as Stefan claimed him. Rough lips, hot breath, sharp teeth. Sucking, kissing. A tongue swept over his bottom lip, parted his mouth. A low moan and a hard body pressed against him. Wanting him. Claiming him. Every nerve in Max's body sparked to life. Nothing. *Nothing*, had ever felt like this before. He let his own tongue search Stefan's mouth and was rewarded with another soft groan that headed straight to his groin.

Suddenly, Stefan placed his hands at the side of Max's head and pulled them apart from each other. Caressing the side of Max's face, he muttered under his breath, *slowly, slowly*, then swallowed and looked at Max; want gleaming so obviously in his eyes, Max could see it, even in the moonlight.

"We'd better get back upstairs before I forget the slow part." Stefan still clasped Max's face in his hands. Max was in no hurry to move away, he wanted nothing more than the taste of Stefan's mouth in his again.

"Max?" Stefan asked, finally moving back. Max shivered as the frigid night air made its way into the gap between their bodies. Stefan smiled softly and passed Max his jacket then wound Max's scarf round his neck. It was warm and soft, but Max still would rather have Stefan providing the heat.

"What if slow isn't right?" Slow meant pulling away from long, deep kisses apparently, and Max's willpower was pretty shot because all he wanted was to kiss Stefan.

"Max." Stefan caressed the side of his face. "I have never once worried about the sensible thing when it comes to... this." He waved his hands between them. "But..."

“Yeah I know.” And Max did know. Did understand. “Do you really want to go back upstairs?” Max asked. “If I promise not to molest you totally, how do you feel about a walk? It’s such a beautiful night.” He caught Stefan’s hand in his, twining their frozen fingers together.

Stefan swallowed hard. “That would be perfect.” In unspoken agreement, they walked alongside the river. They went in the opposite direction to that which Stefan took with the dogs. The moon flooded the sky with silvery light, and in an eerie mystical way, it was almost as light as in the daytime. Everything was bathed in soft sparkles. Muted and beautiful. The quiet lap, lap of water splashing on the riverside was peaceful, and they walked in silence. Fingers still threaded together, their breath billowed in foggy puffs, and the sharp crunch of gravel underfoot echoed into the night. No words were exchanged for the longest time but contentment cloaked Max; a blanket of soft happiness.

“It’s a good job your dancing skills are top notch, they’re going to come in useful next Saturday.” The words penetrated the silence, extra loud though quietly spoken. “Nick’s decided it’s time to pay our dues, and it’s the first Saturday I’m free.”

It took Max a minute to catch on to what he was talking about. “Oh god, no, Stefan. I was just a stand in. There is no way I’m dancing in public!” Stefan slowed and twisted to face Max, his usual grin spread across his face. His eyes were darker, sexier in the moonlight and make-up, Max swallowed back a moan.

“You wouldn’t back out of a bet would you?” Mischief danced across his face. “How about if I promise to make it worth your while?”

Max’s heart stuttered as he asked, “How would you do that?”

“I could cook you dinner—I’m a very good cook, and we could get a film... you know, have a quiet night in?”

Max’s heart stopped. Just for a second, but he would swear under oath that it did physically stop. “Is that the same as asking me in for coffee?” he asked after a moment.

Stefan paused, then swallowed hard and shook his head. “Slowly,” he whispered, as though the word pained him. *Slowly*. Max stared at him, wishing he knew how to change the other man’s mind. *Slowly*. The word hung between them then dissipated in the night air as lips found lips again.

12. It's Dance Stefan, But Not as We Know It.

"How did you know you were in love with Maria?" Max asked Aaron as soon as he'd picked up the phone. Lazily, he trailed his hand over Eric's back, trying to appease the head-butting cat.

"Max," Aaron said yawning loudly into the phone, "what time do you call this?"

"Er, it's only just past eleven," Max said guiltily.

"Hmm, well Tabitha's teething, so I've been up since four. Never mind—what do you mean how did I know I was in love?"

"Just that, what did it feel like, what gave it away?" Eric purred loudly in Max's ear, and he pushed him down the settee a bit. "Why Maria, out of all the girls you dated?"

A muffled yawn then, "I just knew. I couldn't stop thinking about her, my heart beat faster when we were together, I imagined us together when we were old... and couldn't imagine not having her with me. I knew she'd be a great mum. I don't know Max, I just knew. Why, have you met someone since we last met?"

"Not exactly, I've just been thinking about my feelings when..." A wail could be heard from Aaron's end of the phone.

"Look Max, I've got to go, Maria's had even less sleep than I have. I'd say if you can't imagine your life without her then I think it's fair to say you're in love. I'll talk to you soon." The empty nothingness of the phone being hung up reverberated down the line, but Max thought he'd got his answer. He'd have to explain to Aaron it was a him and not a her causing the feelings, but that could wait for another day.

The first Saturday in November wasn't grey and drizzly as Max had hoped, in fact, it was a nearly perfect day in Max's opinion, bright sunshine and freezing temperatures. A crisp frost covered the ground and hung from the trees, Jack's art left for all to see. Max threw back the quilt and shivered in the chill of the room. Yawning widely, he cleaned out the fire before even putting the kettle on; a cuppa would be so much nicer in the warmth. Igniting the fire-lighter, he watched as the flames took hold of the kindling and added coal when

it had taken enough. A quick shower and finally a cup of tea, his stomach was churning too much to even think about eating. Today was D-day. Dance day. And dick day, if Max had his way. In no other circumstances would he agree to this, but the need to impress Stefan, to convince him to take that next step was overwhelming his fear of looking like a twat.

The bandstand in the walks in King's Lynn had been decided the appropriate place to do this. Lynn was nearer to him than any of them, by designation or chance he wasn't sure. Stefan was coming to pick him up and they were meeting the others at ten. It was already nearly nine. The house was spotless; he'd made sure of that. He brushed his teeth. Again. Checked his hair, grabbed a coat and fussed the cats. He watched the clock. Did the seconds usually pass so slowly? At last, the telltale sound of a car on the gravel outside and Max did his best to look casual.

This time when Stefan made his way to the door, he greeted Max with a kiss. Every time their lips touched, Max's knees weakened. There was not an inch of this man he didn't want to know. Playfully, Stefan sucked Max's bottom lip. Max forced himself to pull away. "We've not got long until we meet the others." His voice broke with the effort of speaking—to do this he had to make Stefan want him as much as he wanted Stefan. He trusted Aaron, and that was that.

In the car, Max casually laid his hand on Stefan's leg, stroking his thigh, supposedly absent-mindedly. "So what do you think Nick will have dreamed up?" he asked, letting his hand creep up, nearly to the groin, then back down again. "You've known him a long time. How evil is he?"

Stefan laughed. "Oh, he's got a nasty streak. It's not aided by the fact that last time I may have made him go to a party dressed as a nurse. A female nurse," he added for verification.

"Why do I feel that I've got myself into something I really shouldn't have?" Max *accidentally* let his fingers trail lightly across the crease in Stefan's thigh before moving his hand to check his hair in the passenger mirror. Out the corner of his eye, he caught a look of yearning wisp across Stefan's face and suppressed a small smile. "Take the third exit of the roundabout," Max directed as they came into town. "So, do you have any idea of what Nick will have planned?"

"Not a sausage." Stefan indicated left and followed Max's directions. "I guess we're about to find out though," he said pulling into an empty parking

space. Nick and Charlie were already waiting at the bandstand and across the green Max could see Tommy, James and Andy heading towards them. The walks were a historic part of King's Lynn. With the ancient city wall still visible in parts, and the Red Mount, a fifteenth century chapel sitting alongside small streams full of ducks, playing fields and a free-running course, its Victorian tree-lined walkways combined history and modern beautifully. Unfortunately, even in this weather it was popular. Teenagers hung around the play equipment, tourists photographed the historical memorials and families fed the ducks. The look of glee on Charlie's face was a little too sadistic for Max's liking.

"I suppose there is no way I'm getting out of this is there?" Stefan just grinned and shook his head.

"Hallo, hallo—hope you have brought your leg warmers with you, my darling girlfriend thought up the perfect, er, forfeit for you all." Tommy cackled at Nick's smirk and high fived Charlie. James sighed dramatically and Andy laughed out loud.

"Don't know why I'm here, I technically wasn't part of the losing team—I guess I'm a glutton for punishment."

"Hmmm, nothing to do with the fact you're a drama and dance whore and are hoping to pull a hot chick with your moves then?" James smacked Andy playfully round the head.

"Oh, yeah there is that." Andy grinned.

"Actually, it's thanks to you that I came up with this idea," Charlie said. "I remember going through those dances with you for your audition last April and thought, 'what about a homage to some of the best dance films out there'?"

Andy was the only one left smiling at this point. "Basically, I've got some tunes, from soundtracks; if you manage to dance some of the actual dances from the films then we're going to let you get away with just twenty minutes instead of thirty. Oh, and you need to wear these." She fished out some glittery cowboy—cowgirl?—hats and handed them round. Max wasn't sure he could do this after all, he already felt like a major fucking idiot.

"What..." Max started, but Charlie jumped right in.

"If you don't know the moves copy Andy, I know he does. Hey, I'm more than happy for you all to look like twats, this is a forfeit remember—there's supposed to be a certain amount of humiliation involved."

“You really are a sadist, Charlie, no wonder you and Nick get on so well together.” Stefan was grinning madly, not seeming to be at all perturbed by the idea of dancing in public. Max wondered briefly if trying to impress Stefan was really worth this amount of public humiliation. A quick glance at him, how even in his tracky bottoms, he looked fit as hell confirmed that, yeah, humiliation would be worth it.

“Well guys, no point in wasting time.” Charlie clapped her hands together then fished an iPod out of her bag. Nick laughed and stepped down from the bandstand. Max saw him look gleefully around at the people wandering around the walks. Not many were near yet, but... how had he got into this? It wasn't a usual turn of events for him. He had a feeling this type of thing did happen to Stefan though. A lot. With that in mind, he swallowed hard, stared at Charlie and said, “Bring it on.”

The sound of Greased Lightning blasted out of the iPod and with more enthusiasm than he actually felt, Max started swinging his arms in the moves he remembered from long ago school discos. He felt like a twat, no doubt about it, yet Stefan's giggles as he mimicked Andy's moves were endearing, to say the least.

Grease segued to Hairspray segued to Dirty Dancing. The more the music played and the more Stefan and Andy laughed, the more Max found he didn't care about the little group that had collected around them. Charlie was unabashedly dancing with them, and Nick and Tommy were busting a few moves too. It was fun. Max had stepped out of his comfort zone, and he was loving it. As the Bella's finale from Pitch Perfect came on, he laughed out loud. This one he knew.

Composing himself, he channelled Anna Kendrick and grinned at Nick who was shaking his head at them all, as they forgot to give a fuck. Apparently, the others had seen the film too, and between them they managed a half tidy version of the dance. Stefan camped it up as fat Amy, Max thought he was going to die from trying not to laugh and remember his moves. Nothing, he had ever done, had been this much fun before. He literally didn't care that they were making fools of themselves in front of a crowd. Okay, so it was only a small crowd, but nonetheless, he knew he wouldn't have done it before Stefan. It was okay, he was king of the world. He could do anything.

13. One Small Strip for Stefan, One Giant Leap (of Confidence) for Max(kind)

Anything. The world was his oyster. There were no barriers. The biggest roller coaster in the world, the highest bungee jump couldn't produce the endorphins this did surely. Max glanced at his watch, they were nearly done with their "show". He felt fit to burst, and knew that, despite him puffing and being out of breath, he had the biggest, most stupid grin on his face—and frankly, he didn't care. He could do anything.

Hot Stuff came on, and Max copied Andy as best he could, trying for the life of him to remember what film it was from. Concentrating hard, he shrugged his shoulder up and down and stepped his leg forward, then back.

"Please tell me you didn't?" Stefan shouted to Nick, and Charlie, who'd left the bandstand, and was smirking madly beside her boyfriend.

"Didn't what?" Max huffed out, turning.

"Of course, I did," Nick shouted back. "A whole night in tights and a skimpy nurse's outfit, remember, Stefan? Now you know why you needed the hats."

"Revenge is a dish best served cold." Charlie cackled, and Max stopped dancing.

"I've got a feeling I've missed something." He looked at Stefan who was still moving in time to the music. "Stefan?" Stefan smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry," he mouthed.

"Can somebody tell me what is going on?" Max asked, noticing for the first time that a couple of ladies in the crowd were giggling away to each other.

"Nice show, boys," said another, "but I'm guessing this is our cue to leave." And she grabbed hold of her toddler's hand and led him away across the green. Some of his euphoria dropped a little, and he looked pleadingly at Stefan.

"Keep dancing Max, there's no get-out-of-jail-free card for being new. You joined the losing team, you get to pay the price." Said with a glint in her eye, that Max found hard to dislike, Charlie raised her eyebrow at him. Resigned, he started moving again before chucking a beseeching glance her way this time.

"Okay, okay," she said, "don't say I didn't give you anything. What film is this song from?"

Max turned again, following Andy's lead. "I don't know, it's on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't remember."

"Steelworks close down, a group of men are desperate for cash... they perform the..."

"Fuck me, The Full Monty." Max glanced at Stefan who offered him a small sympathetic smile before laughing out loud.

"No way!" There was no way Max was going to strip off in public. Not a friggin' chance. "Never. Not going to happen..." He looked at the other two lads dancing and then down at the small crowd watching them.

"What's the matter love, got something to be ashamed of?" The twenty-something drew deeply on her cigarette, blew a steady stream of blue smoke into the air, then added, "cos from where I'm standing everything looks pretty good to me." She leered at his denim-clad groin to emphasise her point. Max could feel the red shooting up his neck and staining his face.

"There's not one of us ashamed up here, Ma'am." Stefan said in a Texan twang and bobbed his hat. "Right, Max?"

The lady laughed and whispered, none too quietly, to her mate. "That one's mine." Max just looked at Stefan, felt his heart beat faster at the wink he gave him and gave the hell up worrying. He could always move right? He'd heard Scotland was great if you liked the snow (he did). The end notes of Hot Stuff sounded, and, as predicted, You Can Leave Your Hat On started. A cheer went up from the small gathering of people—led by Charlie, Max noted. There were probably only about ten people there, but it may as well have been a hundred. It was only then that he noticed Charlie and Nick seemed to be on quite good terms with some of them. The arseholes. Swallowing hard, he looked across the expanse of grass, realised the bandstand sides would hide his junk and jacksie from anyone but those standing directly in front of them, and decided that he may as well just get on with it—you only live once and all that crap. He wished he could regain some of the euphoria he'd had just a few moments ago though.

He looked over at Andy, who seemed to be relishing every second of the dancing, neither James nor Stefan seemed to be bothered they were about to take their clothes off in public either. Swinging his arm up and turning in time with the others, he swallowed his pride and decided he could at least admire Stefan instead of worrying about getting naked.

Of course, in the film they'd had on velcroed outfits and here, in real life, they didn't. Stefan's trousers slipped off quite easily, but he, James, and Andy

had more trouble getting out of their jeans. And bugger was it freezing. The sun might be out, but it was still effing nippy. Thankful he'd stuck to plain black boxer shorts and not gone with the Where's Wally ones he'd toyed with putting on just a few hours earlier, he stripped off his jeans and shoved his feet back into his boots. Cat calls and whistles erupted from the crowd. Max ignored them as best he could. Risking a glimpse sideways he loved the fact that Stefan had on the brightest pair of turquoise pants he'd ever seen. With purple piping round the edge they were not the underwear of someone with any shame of what he was packing and holy hotness did they cling nicely to his arse. Realising he was staring, and really, now was not a suitable time, he raised his gaze, kept swinging his hips, and caught a wink from Stefan. That wink and that arse almost made this public humiliation worth it.

Thrusting in time with the music, he prayed and prayed that the twenty minutes would be up soon and they could get the hell out of here. A change in movement and Andy started stripping off his T-shirt. What the hell was wrong with these people, it was freezing and not one of the other three seemed at all embarrassed. As he bared his pecs to the chilly November air he felt his nipples harden. He had absolutely no idea at this point if that was a good or bad thing, one thing was for sure though; he wasn't going to try out for the Chippendales any time soon.

The wind gusted and swirled leaves around the base of the bandstand. Goose pimples spread all over his body and he raised his hand to keep his hat on. Of course, he wasn't planning on keeping it on at the end of the song—there was only one person here he had any intention of showing his knob to, and that certainly wasn't in the middle of a very public park. The end notes of the song sounded and bile rose in his throat as he gripped his hat with one hand and the waistband of his boxers with the other. Just as he started to push on the elasticated band the music came to an abrupt halt. Max's hand stilled and it took him less than a second to figure out that it was indeed planned. Stefan was good-naturedly calling Nick every name under the sun, and the crowd was booing in such a way that Max suspected they realised there had been no intention for them to strip completely.

"Bastard," he called over the wooden surround to Nick as he hastily re-clothed himself. It really was too freaking cold out here. He slipped his jumper back on and bent to re-lace his boots. Standing up, Stefan was just behind him, holding out his scarf.

“Thanks,” Max said reaching forward for it, but Stefan shook his head slightly and leaned forward wrapping the scarf round Max’s neck before kissing him briefly on the mouth.

“You are perfect,” he said, turning away to pick up his own coat and put on. Max shrugged into his jacket, sure that the loud thudding from his chest must be able to be heard by all.

“Told ya,” he heard Charlie say to Nick. “You owe me dinner and wine. When will you learn that I am always right about these things?”

Stefan overheard the comment too and winked at his friend. Nick narrowed his eyes at him but was wise enough not to remark any further on the matter.

“Do you fancy going into town?” he asked Max. “We could get a hot chocolate, see what’s on at the pictures?”

“A hot chocolate sounds great.” Max rubbed his hands together, a small smile playing on his lips. Stefan’s heart warmed. He was trying not to think about just how perfect Max was. He had come here and done something completely out of his comfort zone to honour a bet he’d not really had a part of making. Also seeing Max in his underwear had only served to remind him of how hot the man was.

Saying cheerio to the others, Stefan followed Max across the expanse of green space to where it bordered the town. Leaves swirled about underfoot, a crunchy carpet of red, gold and brown. Stefan found it hard to not beam constantly, everything felt so perfect at the moment. He almost wished he could freeze time, make it stop right here in this moment of blue skies, biting wind and rustling leaves.

“I know a great cafe that does hot chocolate with cream and marshmallows,” Max broke into his reverie. “It’s really delicious, do you fancy that?”

“Sounds good.” Stefan shoved his hand in his pocket to keep from linking his fingers with Max’s, the looks they would get just wouldn’t be worth it—besides, he selfishly didn’t want to do anything that would make Max change his mind about them. Stefan knew he was the one with the *slowly, slowly* mantra, but, in all honesty, he was pretty sure even now his heart would break if Max called a halt to things.

They left the green of the park for the hustle bustle of town. Circumnavigating a man on a step ladder stringing Christmas lights outside an electric goods shop, Stefan pondered the fact that soon the season of goodwill would be here. He wondered what he should get Max and looked forward to a day in town shopping. Generally, shopping was on his top ten list of hated activities—all that changed when it came to buying Christmas gifts though. Whether it was the lights, the atmosphere or just taking the time to pick out something special for those he loved, he wasn't sure, but whatever it was, he always loved it.

“Earth to Stefan!” A hand waved in front of his face, and he realised they'd stopped. “Is in here okay for a drink, they do great hot chocolates, I promise.” Max smiled at him and indicated a pokey little cafe that looked like it had been new about sixty years ago and redecorated at the same time. Not that it was dirty, just old fashioned, with frilly nets at the window and chequered tablecloths across the tables. “Nan used to bring me here when I was little.” Max pushed open the door, and a bell tinkled above. Warmth hit Stefan as he stepped inside, warmth and the smell of cinnamon and cakes. He followed Max to a small table in the corner of the room and shrugged off his jacket.

They placed their orders with a waitress who oohed and aahed over Max and what a big boy he was now and how it had been too long since he'd been in there. As she bustled back to the counter, Max discreetly rolled his eyes at Stefan. “She has a heart of gold. This is the kind of place that the same people have been coming to for generation after generation. No WiFi, so our generation doesn't stop in much unfortunately. The food is fabulous though.”

At that point in time, Stefan felt as though, if someone was to X-ray him right now, they'd literally be able to see his heart expanding and swelling in his chest because he was sure he could feel it doing just that. The word *perfect* slipped into his head, and he fought to push it back out again. Unthinking, he reached across the table and took hold of Max's hand.

“So, honestly did you have any clue what Nick was up to today?” Max asked, curling his fingers into Stefan's.

Stefan shook his head and absently stroked Max's hand. “I mean, I guessed it would be something humiliating, but I didn't know what.”

Max painted a look of mock horror on his face. “More humiliating than dancing in public? And you didn't let me know!” He tutted and then laughed, his eyes crinkling just a little at the corners and glinting mischievously.

“Hey, you have no worries about dancing in public, you can *move*.” Just the thought of that lithe body and how it could move made his trousers uncomfortably tight around the groin. Max just raised his eyebrows and rubbed his thumb along Stefan’s forefinger.

“I can honestly say I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared and exhilarated at the same time.” Max reached forward and clasped his other hand round Stefan’s too. “I don’t know whether to kill you or hug you.”

“Well, I know which one I’d opt for.” The cafe was filling up as lunchtime approached and Stefan shuffled his chair round a bit to let an old man past. Leaning on a walking stick, he hobbled round them towards the counter. He mumbled something under his breath but Stefan couldn’t work out what, none of the words sounded like thank you though. And they moaned about the younger generation’s manners. “I think I owe you a trip to a theme park if that’s the most excitement you’ve ever felt,” Stefan told Max.

“Theme parks are good, but I’m sure I can think of something exciting to do much closer to home.” He wagged his eyebrows up and down, leaving Stefan in no doubt as to his meaning.

“Slowly,” said Stefan grinning.

“Back to mine for coffee,” said Max widening his eyes, and his grin, as the old man made his return journey.

“Bloody queers.” The old man’s mumbled words were much clearer that time, and, while he didn’t stop or look at them as he made his way past them, Stefan felt himself freeze. Not at the insult, as lucky as he’d been in his family and friends accepting him, there were always those who wouldn’t. A level of homophobia that he wasn’t hit over the head with, but of which he was aware. There was the coming out every day that occurred, the assumption he was straight every time he met someone new meant he came out of the closet again. It wasn’t always prejudice, sometimes just old-fashioned ignorance. He tried to pull his hand away from Max’s, he could already feel a look of apology arrange itself on his face, and as much as he hated it, he felt responsible for Max being insulted by a stranger. It hurt that it was because of him Max was being insulted at all.

Max though, Max closed his fingers tighter round Stefan’s and didn’t let him pull away. The smile didn’t leave his face; there was barely a falter in his conversation, even though Stefan knew that he’d heard the old man’s insult. “I mean we could genuinely have coffee—or, you know, we could *have coffee*.”

The quotation marks were implied, but Stefan clearly heard them. Max continued to rabbit on, without further innuendo, only relaxing his grip on Stefan's hand when Stefan had stopped trying to pull his away.

It was at that moment that Stefan realised *slowly* was no longer going to cut the mustard. It was at that moment that Stefan realised he was in love.

14. Roses Are Red...

Max gripped Stefan's fingers until he could feel the other man relax his grip. Seeing the grin drop, the look of worry that replaced it, made Max's heart ache. Everything in the cafe narrowed to just the two of them. He pushed the tone of normality in his voice, hating himself for faltering even a little. Wow, so he'd been called queer. It hurt, of course it did, he'd done nothing wrong. He was no different to the person he was twenty-four hours ago, or seven days ago, or a month ago or even a year ago. At least, no different in any way that counted. He didn't hurt people, steal or manipulate. He was a good person. He knew that, his friends knew that, his family knew that. He wasn't going to let one word get to him. He didn't want to give Stefan any excuse to reiterate his *slowly* mantra.

"We could genuinely have coffee," he found himself saying, a verbal two fingers at the old git shuffling past, "or we could *have coffee*." The way the blood rushed south at his own innuendo was alarming, and he moved swiftly onto other topics. Sporting an erection in a cafe was further out of his comfort zone than he hoped ever to travel. Public naked dancing or not.

"How are Sandy and Sooty?" Dogs were a safe topic of conversation and slowly the world widened out to more than the two of them. Customers talking, teaspoons rattling on saucers. A baby crying loudly and the gentle shushing of its mother.

"Here you go love, two hot chocolates, extra cream." She put the tray on the table. "Now Max, don't be a stranger, we miss you since your nan passed on, bless her soul. I didn't even know you had a boyfriend, love. Your nan would've approved, he's a looker." The stage whisper was so loud, Max didn't know whether to laugh or blush, so he compromised and did both.

"I promise to visit soon, Ivy." He raised his eyebrows at Stefan and mouthed sorry across the table. Stefan just spooned a marshmallow out of the hot chocolate and offered it across to Max.

"Boyfriend, huh," he said and Max shivered, god that word sounded good. *Boyfriend*, Stefan muttered again under his breath as if trying it out for size.

"Sandy and Sooty are great." Stefan answered Max's earlier question, "More than great really. I keep thinking about trying to get some place with a bigger garden so I can adopt them and Alfie, but I'm not sure I could get a bigger mortgage on my wages. Renting's always an option, I suppose."

Sipping at his sweet, hot chocolate Max nodded in sympathy. "It's a huge shame you don't have enough space for them. They couldn't have a better owner. Imagine taking them for a walk along the beach, they'd love it."

"It would be so perfect, wouldn't it? Alfie would love the waves." He chuckled, a low sound that caused Max to shiver again. "I'm not sure Sooty would though, the only way he likes water is to drink it." The love Stefan had for the animals was so obvious, Max wished he could give them to him. Finishing their drinks, they put on their coats and braved the chill outside again. The wind had picked up and was particularly biting now. This time, Stefan did reach for Max's hand as they walked back to where they'd parked the car, and, while no words were exchanged, Max was pretty convinced that something had completely shifted between them.

The perfect November day had turned grey and miserable by the time they'd driven back to Max's place. The air in the car was thick with anticipation, the conversation light, casual with an undercurrent of sexual tension that the pope would find hard to miss. The ball was in Stefan's court, but that didn't mean Max was out of the game. He let his hand rest lightly on Stefan's knee—no teasing strokes this time though. As they talked, he found his gaze straying to Stefan, watching as his perfect mouth formed each word, wishing he could taste those lips again.

"So fancy some Minecraft this afternoon?" Stefan asked, braking gently to let a couple of hens scatter to the side of the lane. "It really is like the good life out here, isn't it?"

"Hmm, next door aren't too good at keeping their chickens caged, they really are free range. To be fair though, as I'm the only one who lives further along here than them, it isn't exactly Piccadilly Circus. And yes to Minecraft, we can split screen some survival challenges. Prepare to lose!"

Stefan just snorted loudly and turned into Max's yard. He stopped the car and pulled up the handbrake. Max's heart thudded hard in his chest; all the non-words that had been floating around among them since they'd left the cafe like a wall between them. His seatbelt clicked undone, though he hadn't touched it, and a strong hand gripped his chin and turned his head. Grey eyes stared into his, searching for something, though Max knew not what. A deep breath and soft groan and those perfect lips found his in the softest, most gentle kiss ever.

"I'm done with slowly," Stefan whispered, "if you still want more?"

Max replied by finding his mouth again and promising the world with a slow, sultry kiss. His heart pounded, and his breath caught in his throat. This

was everything he wanted and somehow managed to be everything he was scared of having as well. Quite how they made it from the car to the house, Max couldn't really say. It was an unimportant moment between fuck-hot kisses and underlying decisions. They stood in Max's kitchen, staring at each other, and then Stefan was pushing him backwards, pressing him to the wall and kissing him like both their lives depended upon it. Soft mouth and hard kisses. A sweep of tongue parting his lips. Sweet chocolate breath and want, so much want.

The kiss sparked a need in Max that he hadn't realised was there before. Every previous kiss he'd experienced felt chaste by comparison. He truly didn't care it was a man he was kissing, was needing—to him it was just Stefan, the person who he was falling in love with. Even as the thought tumbled through his brain, and both terrified and delighted him, Max knew he was lost. Lost to lust and love and need and friendship. Lost to a man who he hadn't known he'd want.

He reached up and helped Stefan shrug off his jacket and unwind his scarf. Their lips only parted for brief moments at a time, but each time they touched together again, his body reacted electrically. Charged and alive. "Is this what you want?" Stefan whispered, even though they were alone.

Max nodded. Apprehension pooled in his belly, a fear of the unknown—an unknown he wanted and desired more than anything else. And then Stefan kissed him fiercely before pulling away. "I'm not saying no, I'm not even saying slowly anymore but we don't have to rush. We don't have to try everything at once. There is so much to discover about us, about each other..."

"I want you Stefan, I've never felt like this before, not for anyone but, I, um..." Stefan looked at him, concern etched in his lust-filled face. "I'd like a shower first. I feel gross from the dancing and hot and cold and..."

Stefan laughed loud and hard and some of the high tension in the air dissolved. "I wouldn't mind one either," he said caressing Max's cheek and kissing him again.

"We could share?" Max's chest was nearly bursting his heart thudded so hard. "To be honest Stefan, I need to do this, it's... new to me, though sex is sex is sex, right?"

"Sex is sex is sex," Stefan agreed, "but I want this to be more than a quick fuck, more than just a hook up." It was more than that already as far as Max was concerned, but he knew what the other man was trying to say.

Steam filled the bathroom, and slowly, they peeled off each other's clothes, revealing what before had only been seen by half-hidden glances. Max traced his fingers across the tattoo Stefan had on his chest, following the intricate Celtic design carefully. Then, tentatively he let his fingers trail over Stefan's nipple, eliciting a sigh from the other man that set him on fire.

They stepped into the spray together, and as warmth cascaded over their bodies, they explored each other. Hands and mouths. Softly, gently, then with need and passion. Frotting, hands together encircling their hardened cocks. Need filled and swelled inside Max until everything was concentrated on the fire in his groin, pushing and pulsing and then spurting onto soapy bodies and away down the plughole. Stefan came too, and Max watched fascinated by the sight of another man's dick in orgasm. It was beautiful.

"You're perfect," Stefan said claiming his mouth once more. As the fire faded and the urgent need lessened slightly, they cleaned each other. Contentment radiated from them both, and Max felt like a cat wanting to purr. He understood what Stefan had said; this wasn't a quick *wham bam, thank you Stan*. This was just the beginning. The beginning of a path he hoped they'd walk down together.

Soft towels and warm clothes, a roaring fire and computer games. Talking and laughter and the first tentative steps together. Perfection found in all its imperfect glory.

15. Happily Ever After... The End

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Stefan, happy birthday to you.” Max rolled over and laid across his boyfriend, placing a soft kiss on his mouth. Then he rolled back again before things heated up too much. He had a game plan this morning, and as much as some nooky would be a fun part of it, it wouldn’t fit his carefully made schedule.

“Come back here.” Stefan reached out and tried to pull Max back onto him.

“Nuh uh. We need to get up, and then there will be presents!”

Warm hands smoothed over his backside, and Max flipped out of bed before they reached somewhere he wouldn’t be able to ignore. “Later birthday boy, come on—I’ll do you a bacon buttie and a nice cup of tea.”

He was in the kitchen, bacon sizzling in the pan, when Stefan came through, a pair of jeans thrown on and nothing else. Max poured the tea and handed Stefan a gift from the badly wrapped pile teetering on the edge of the table.

“How many are there?” Stefan laughed, as he kissed Max and started ripping into the paper.

“Twenty-six, one for each year of your life.” Max smirked to himself, knowing Stefan would count them. Sure enough as he unwrapped them and gathered piles of CDs, socks, computer games and silly knick-knacks he started counting.

“That’s only twenty-three,” he said as Max handed over the last one. “I know Maxi, because I know exactly how many times I got to snog you.”

Max just raised his eyebrows and smirked. He listened carefully, hoping to hear the telltale sound of tyres on gravel any minute now. He and Tally had planned this meticulously, and he’d hate for it to go wrong now. In fact, it couldn’t have worked out more perfectly. As Stefan laughed and cursed at the sticky-tape Max had wound round and round the gift and tried to figure out how to get into it, the sound of a car pulling up outside made him look up.

“Who’s coming to visit us at this time of the morning?” Stefan said.

“Visitors for you no doubt, I’ll go and let them in while you get into your prezzie.”

It took all his willpower not to skip down the garden path to meet Tally. As she opened the back of her car, three dogs bundled out and started sniffing Max.

"Tally," he swept her into a hug, "thank you so much for bringing them. Stefan doesn't suspect a thing."

"Nothing makes me happier than to see you two happy," she said clicking leads onto the dogs' collars. "Come on then, let's go surprise the birthday boy."

Max's heart was racing. He hoped he'd judged this right. Eight months ago they'd met at the zoo. Stefan had moved in a month ago and found work at an animal shelter nearer to home, every weekend he'd gone to see Sooty, Sandy and Alfie though. Not once had he suggested bringing them to Max's place—their place—but Max knew he would love nothing more than to see his favourite dogs homed. Some sneaky phone calls to Tally, and a little rule bending on her part, and he had managed to adopt all three dogs.

"Tally—Sooty, Sandy... what the...?" Stefan asked bending down to ruffle each of the dogs necks before sweeping Tally into a bear hug.

"Twenty-four, twenty-five and twenty-six," said Max, biting his bottom lip, "happy birthday, Stefan."

Stefan released Tally and looked up. "They're here... to stay?" he asked hesitantly. Max nodded, holding his breath.

Tears swam in Stefan's eyes, and he ducked down and hid his face in Alfie's neck. Max swallowed. He really hoped he hadn't misjudged this.

"Here, I'll take them for a sniff round the garden," said Tally tugging on the leads. As she led the dogs away, Stefan stood up and wrapped his arms round Max's neck. "Thank you," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Thank you."

"Happy birthday, Stefan. I love you." Max found his boyfriend's mouth and kissed him fiercely.

"I love you too, so, so much." He leaned into Max then turned and watched the dogs sniffing out each corner of the garden. "I guess this explains the bowls I just unwrapped, huh?"

"I guess it does," Max agreed.

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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GEEKING OUT ON 11C

By L.L. Bucknor

Photo Description

A guy with golden skin, washboard abs and a scruffy, sexy grin is staring off into space. He looks like he's thinking about something hot as he lifts up his sleeveless shirt.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Mateo is the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. He lives in my building, but I didn't think he would ever notice me. I'm shy, I'm a geek and I'm probably too old for him. The other day he passed me in the hall and winked at me. Of course I completely clammed up, blushed and rushed by him. I can't even say hi to the man without being completely flustered. But I can't get him out of my mind.

Requests: Contemporary, age difference, opposites attract, some humor and smexin' would be nice, HFN or HEA.

Sincerely,

Valerie C

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: age gap, opposites attract, smaller top, geeks, men with pets, blue collar

Word Count: 14,521

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone that I pestered about Edgar. Many thanks to the MMR Team!

GEEKING OUT ON 11C

By L.L. Bucknor

“Sounds like someone’s home, huh?”

Pausing for a moment to listen, Ed heard loud laughter coming from the hallway outside his apartment door. It was nearly four o’clock in the morning. Whoever was out there—Ed had a sure bet on who—did not care about the time. Ed shook his head briefly and went back to enter his cheat code for the computer game.

“I bet you an extra shake of fish flakes it’s our neighbor from across the hall.” Ed looked at his goldfish, Atari, and sighed. He was talking to his goldfish and playing Sims 2, instead of tumbling home, like the loud group outside his co-op door. He definitely was not going to tell the party to keep it down. He didn’t like confrontation. Also, he didn’t have the balls to say anything to anyone... especially *him*. Him being Ed’s hunky neighbor. Almost a year after the walking deity moved in the unit across the hall, Ed had yet to learn Mr. Hotness’s name.

He did not want to be a creepy stalker at his age. Not that thirty-four was decrepit or he should look into retirement housing. Edgar Horace Brown—named after both of his grandfathers—did not inspire men, especially those like his younger neighbor, to lust after men like him. Besides the geriatric moniker, Ed was too shy, too set in his ways to even talk to him. He sighed at his character on the computer screen. Okay, maybe a little stalker-ish—he made a character on the computer game that looked like his neighbor. And maybe he gave him a love interest that sort of looked like Ed. Creepy? A little. Pathetic? Atari told him that from the start. Ed wanted a little bit of fantasy, since he was pretty sure Mr. Live-Tumblr was straight.

The noise from the hallway sounded like more than one person, so out of curiosity, Ed got up from his computer desk to look through his peephole. He saw the object of his boners talking to another man. And the other guy seemed to fawn all over his neighbor. Couldn’t blame him, he would do the same if he were in his shoes. His tall, scruffy neighbor with golden skin, dark, spiky hair and eight-pack abs. Ed recalled the memorable summer of his neighbor shirtless, with a basketball under his arm, in the building hallway. The man’s

chest was sculpted like a living statue. *Quit fantasizing.* He listened in on their conversation as he watched. Didn't hurt to be a little nosy.

"So Mateo... I've been thinking." *His name is Mateo?* Ed silently did imaginary backflips in his mind. His neighbor had a sexy name to match his appearance. Guess he could change Eleven Cee, named after his neighbor's apartment number, to Mateo in the Sims game, now that Ed knew that was his name. *Not creepy at all.* Ed peered closer and listened.

Mateo smiled. Ed could see the gleam off those shiny, shiny white teeth.

"Don't gimme that look." The guy standing next to Mateo leaned closer to Mateo, as did Ed, behind his door.

"Trev, you know I'm usually busy." Mateo murmured something that Ed couldn't quite hear.

"We haven't hooked up in ages." Ed watched Trev lean closer, with his front on Mateo's side. "Why is that?"

He's gay? Ed looked down at his crotch; apparently it was very excited for tonight's date with Sir Right Hand. Ed stopped paying attention to the conversation briefly, just to think of the possibilities that would never happen in this lifetime.

Mateo pushed away while shaking his head. He murmured something to Trev, who frowned. Ed tried to listen to whatever the two were saying, but could barely hear, as their voices got lower still. It was either put his ear against the door to listen, or peep through his peephole. He'd rather watch. Trev tried to kiss Mateo, but Mateo pushed him away and muttered something.

Trev made an exaggerated pout and walked away, in the direction of their elevator.

Mateo, while groping his pants pocket, glanced to Ed's door. Ed jumped back and stubbed his toe on his doorstep. Of course, it made a loud bang. At this time of night, any noise over a whisper sounded like a bomb going off. He grasped his foot and tried to jump up and down quietly. *Please don't let him have heard me.* He was too tempted to not peep once more. He tiptoed to his front door and looked to where his neighbor had stood, but Mateo had already gone inside his apartment. Ed backed away with a smile on his face. The injury was worth it for what he learned tonight. He shook his head at himself and checked to see if he had done any permanent damage to his foot.

Even if a zombie apocalypse started tomorrow and he and Mateo were the last two human beings on Earth, Ed knew he'd never stand a chance. He was

too old and too nerdy—certainly not compatible with someone who looked like a walking wet dream. Mateo looked well under thirty, well-toned and tall, whereas Edgar, at five eight (but who's counting?) never met a gym he liked. He had a soft waist to maintain, thank you very much, and his perfect night was doing just what he'd been doing tonight: checking on his couples and families on Sims 2, and talking to Atari. To add to his shyness factor, Ed had a tendency to blurt out odd things at weird times when he was nervous. Edgar didn't think he was so unattractive that he should wear a bag over his head when in public. He managed to snag a few hookups in his lifetime, but no one he'd ever been with could pass for a *GQ* model. They were normal, like him—geeky gamers, whose description of a hot night would be having an all-night Super Mario Bros tournament.

It'd been quite a while since Edgar's last hookup—two years ago, with an old college acquaintance. Some days he wanted to have someone to sleep next to. He had needs. He even tried Grindr a year back and then chickened out. His older sister Melanie sent links to online dating sites from time to time, which Ed never tried. He talked himself into it and then talked himself right out of it again. His social life wasn't exactly buzzing, but he wasn't complaining. He worked at home as a web designer, which was perfect for his homebody lifestyle. When he tired of staring at his four walls, he visited the local library, or traveled into the city for museums, expos or shows. He was more resigned to how his life currently was: porn and fantasies of hot men... Okay, one hot man seemed to be the main star.

Ed looked to his apartment door again, turned away and bumped his injured toe into a wall corner. "Fuck!" He jumped and held his toe once again.

Edgar was late for his meeting with Melanie. They were going over web design plans for her bakery, and she thought it was better to meet at her shop to get Edgar out of the house. Truthfully, he would have rather met at his place, but Melanie had cupcakes and he could never deny baked goods. He slung his messenger bag over his shoulder as he opened his front door, and turned around to search for his apartment key to lock up. He had fifty million key chains and was struggling to find the right key when he heard a throat clear behind him.

Please don't let it be Mateo. He dropped his key ring, nervous just thinking about his name. He bent down to pick up the keys and looked behind his feet while on the floor. *Fuck, he's standing behind me.* Ed snatched his keys, quickly locked the door and looked at his feet. He knew it was odd but he couldn't help it.

“Nice to meet you.”

Ed nodded to his feet. He turned away from his door, looked briefly to the side of his left shoulder and panicked. It *was* his neighbor, Mateo, wearing just basketball shorts and bedhead. Mateo, up close and personal, could wreak havoc on anyone with a pulse. Ed wished he could get a string of coherent words together or say something witty, but the words were stuck in his throat. He stared a little over Mateo's shoulder and blushed. Damn, he couldn't help it.

Mateo held out a hand for Edgar to shake. Ed stared and silently berated himself for not responding like a normal person.

“I'm sorry if me and my friend were noisy late last night,” Mateo said. He continued to hold his hand out. “Actually, early this morning.”

Ed nodded his head and looked to the ground, willing himself to respond. *Say something. Anything. Please. Tongue... work!*

“We've never had a chance to meet with my weird hours. I'm Mateo.” His neighbor smiled and put his hand to his side. “I'm in 11C.” Ed stared at Mateo's shiny, shiny teeth. *What to say?* Ed blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Chillier in the hallway than I expected.” He mentally kicked himself and rushed toward the stairway, too chickenshit to wait for the elevator and further embarrass himself for the day. He didn't look back to see Mateo's face.

Two days had passed since Ed's remarkably chilly hallway incident. Thankfully, or not so thankfully, he had not seen his neighbor in that time—he could only imagine what other “winning” repartee he'd have bumbled out loud. Ed brushed back his curly hair from his forehead and looked through his peephole. It appeared that the coast was clear. He listened for a few seconds and confirmed all quiet on the hallway front. He wanted to run to his floor's garbage chute, get rid of his trash and scurry back to his apartment without encountering anyone.

He grabbed his trash bag, unlocked his door and turned right, toward the little room. But before he could grab the handle, the door swung open. Ed held his breath and let it go when he saw it was his elderly neighbor, Mrs. Gladstone. She was a sweet lady who was a little hard of hearing and loved to discuss her cats with anyone and everyone who'd listen. She had chosen her next victim and blocked Ed's way to get into the room.

“Oh, Ned! You gave me such a fright!”

During the eight years he lived in the building, Ed had corrected her many times, but his neighbor kept calling him Ned. Or Fred. Even Jed once. He gave up trying to correct her at this point.

“Hello, Mrs. Gladstone! How are you?” He raised his voice. He tried grabbing the door, hoping his neighbor might get the hint, but she didn’t budge. *Great.*

She nodded and smiled. Ed felt unsure when he noticed a gleam in her eyes. “Such a dependable young man you are. How many years have we been neighbors, hon?”

“Eight years, ma’am.” Ed sighed and tightened his hold on his bag. He attempted to walk around Mrs. Gladstone, trying to inch his way through the blocked entrance, hoping she would get the hint. She didn’t.

“So polite. Ned, you know my friends from the senior center in town? They have a few available young women in their families. I could bring you to our next family social to meet them, if you’d like. You’re so quiet and reserved. Better than what passes for acceptable suitors these days. You have a steady income and good manners. You’d give someone a solid, steady life.”

Ed would rather meet the available men, but he let Mrs. Gladstone go on and make her assumptions about him. She started to go on about her friend Esther’s granddaughter who was divorced and lonely. She emphasized the lonely with an eyebrow wiggle and took a deep breath.

“Wow,” Ed had to cut into the spiel before she got her second wind, “thank you for the compliments, Mrs. Gladstone. But you see, I—”

“Speak up a little, hon.” She tilted her head closer toward Edgar.

“Is that Mrs. G. I hear?” someone boomed from behind the door. Ed hadn’t heard the elevator chime. Didn’t matter, as he was blocked between Mrs. Gladstone and... Mateo. *Just great.* Mrs. Gladstone finally moved from blocking the doorway to giggle and preen at his neighbor.

“Hello, Mateo darling.” Ed couldn’t believe she called Mateo the correct name. He guessed a handsome face could do that. Mateo moved closer to the duo—fully clothed this time. Ed was grateful for small miracles. All he needed was to pop a boner in front of Mateo or, God forbid, Mrs. Gladstone. “I am trying to talk Ned into joining me at my senior center’s family social. Get him to socialize a little. Not that you’d need to come, Mateo dear. With your face, I’m sure you leave trails of broken hearts by the dozen.”

Fuck it. Ed didn't have to stand around to hear this. He let go of the door and turned toward his apartment, trash still in hand. He'd throw it out later. Mateo looked him in the eye and Ed felt his stomach tighten, a ball full of nerves and lust. He began to look down to the floor and tried to move aside, but Mrs. Gladstone touched his shoulder. "Oh, Ned, your trash, hon! Don't forget to throw it out."

Ed blushed at the attention and moved around the old woman while she gabbed to Mateo. Ed got rid of his garbage bag and slowly closed the chute. The bag got stuck, and he played with it until it went down. He heard Mrs. Gladstone wish Mateo a "good evening" and figured waiting a minute or two would give Mateo enough time to get back to his apartment.

Ed entered the hallway and stopped walking when he saw Mateo still standing by the door. He didn't know what to say, but he was beaten to the punch.

"You're right," Mateo told him.

What? Ed tilted his head and looked at Mateo's shoulder. It beat having to look the other man in his brown eyes.

"It *is* chilly in the hallway," Mateo said.

Ed nodded and started toward the safe zone of his apartment. Mateo walked beside him down the hallway. "Ned, is it?" Ed got to his door, his hand almost on his doorknob. *Just wish him a good day like a normal person.*

"No. It's Edgar. Ed." *Look at that. You are almost having a conversation.* Now he just needed to get control of his racing heart.

"Oh. Well it's nice to finally meet you. I haven't seen you at the co-op association meetings."

Ed hummed affirmatively and briefly looked toward his crush, still in shock that he, Edgar the geek, was talking to Mateo, the star of some *very* erotic fantasies. Well, sort of, if muttered sentences that were five words or less counted.

"Not that I have time to go there every other month with my weird hours," Mateo continued. "I bartend at my family's bar and grill. Maybe you've heard of Tino's?" He leaned against the wall across from Ed, not budging, just looking comfortable in his own skin. Ed was a little—fine, a lot—jealous of the ease.

Ed's throat was getting drier and his tongue felt like it was stuck to the roof of his mouth. His plan to avoid Mateo for weeks was a bust. He figured it would have given him enough time to study witty repartee. Not going to happen now, since each time he interacted with Mateo, Ed further proved how socially inept he was. He nodded in response to Mateo's question and gulped loudly, staying focused on Mateo's chin scruff while Mateo continued to talk.

"We are forever busy at work. I'm filling in tonight, so I rushed home to try to sleep for an hour or three before running back in." Mateo didn't hesitate to keep their one-sided conversation going. Edgar assumed his hot, friendly neighbor was just trying to learn about the person living across the hall from him. Nothing more.

"It was nice to finally get to chat, E. Catch you around, man."

E? Edgar frowned at the one-letter nickname. He was unsure how he felt about it. E sounded like a secret agent or someone younger. He was still contemplating the reasons why he didn't think E was acceptable as a name choice as Mateo's door closed shut.

Ed replayed the last sentence in his head. Mateo made it seem as if the two would see more of each other or, God forbid, interact... socially. It would have been his finest dream of dreams come true but for the fact he couldn't speak around him.

He shook his head and walked inside his apartment. He was getting ahead of himself. It wasn't like the two were going to become friends.

Nearly two weeks passed without what Edgar dubbed *Mateo incidents*. He was happy about this. He didn't want to embarrass himself further. Life was back to what he was used to. The first day after Mateo spoke to him, Ed was afraid Mateo would seek him out to talk about neighbor things. But he never saw him. Most late nights, Ed was playing his vintage Super Nintendo system. He was going through a Ms. Pac-Man phase and would hear Mateo's door closing in the wee hours of the morning.

Edgar imagined Mateo was probably meeting tons of hot guys who would have no problems talking. They probably flirted with no issue, which ultimately led to sex and Mateo would top. Though in Ed's sex fantasies, the two of them would switch and leave no body part unexplored. Edgar stopped thinking that route to smutty encounters. He needed to empty his garbage and didn't want to

pop a boner until he returned. He was lazier during his Pac-Man one-man tournaments. He slept late and let the trash pile up. The smell was getting pretty toxic and he couldn't avoid taking it out any longer.

"Another eventful night at *Casa de Atari*." Ed smirked at his goldfish.

After eating, he showered and changed into a very comfy pair of white boxers and a T-shirt. The boxers were old and threadbare, but he couldn't throw out his favorite pair of underwear. It was late in the evening, when there normally wasn't a lot of foot traffic in Edgar's corner of the hallway. He put on old rubber flip-flops to start his mission. As he opened his front door, a loud *crack* of thunder boomed and echoed in the empty hallway. Edgar made sure to flip his door lock so as to not lock himself out, and made his way to the trash room. He slid on the wet marble floor in front of the elevators, his sandals providing no grip. Moving slowly, he inched his way to the garbage room with no accidents.

His return trip was a different story. Edgar managed to finish in the trash room and walked back to the wet floor in front of the elevators. Unfortunately, someone was coming off and was in the process of closing their soaked umbrella, not seeing Ed. Their collision was unavoidable, as was Ed's slippery entanglement with the other person and their inevitable meeting with the floor.

Ed huffed out and did a quick mental check for anything hurting. *No pain yet. Just cold and soggy.* Ed rolled from on top of the person he collided with, apologizing profusely, while the other man did the same. Just his luck, it was Mateo. Edgar tried to offer a hand to Mateo while he also attempted to stand on his own independently, since gracefulness was on a yearlong vacation around the world at this point.

He clutched Mateo's arm, since his poor choice of shoes were not helping. Mateo made it to his two feet first, and caught Ed's arm, before Ed fell again. Ed tried to pick up Mateo's umbrella, but Mateo wordlessly shook his head, held Ed's shoulder and bent to retrieve it. Ed wished he was any place but here. His face reddened as he felt his cold, wet underwear stuck to his skin.

"I am very sorry," Ed croaked for what was probably the fiftieth time. He looked up into Mateo's face quickly to see how pissed Mateo might be.

Mateo just grinned and shook his head. "It's my fault. I didn't look where I was going. Are you okay?" Mateo let go of Ed's shoulder but stood close by as Edgar tried to situate himself. Mateo looked Edgar up and down, stopping below Edgar's shirt for some reason. Edgar frowned as he looked in that

direction. He didn't think anything was interesting and, *oh my God*, his frigging underwear were practically transparent due to the rainwater. His dick was on display. Ed looked up and spluttered. Mateo looked him in his eyes, smiling but not looking apologetic for being caught.

Edgar put his hands in front of his fly and tried to move away. "Very sorry. I'm wet. I mean, you made me wet." Nope, not *any* better. Now, he sounded like a pervert. "You didn't make me *wet*."

"I kinda did," Mateo pointed out. Thankfully, he didn't look down to Ed's boxers again, well, not that Edgar could see, while chastising himself for leaving his apartment in his underwear in the first place. *Why was Mateo home so early? Fuck. Fuck! Fuck!* He needed to get out of there before his cock rose and drew more attention.

"I need to go. Sorry once more." Edgar turned toward his door, praying to hit dry floor so he could run.

"Let's call it a no-fault accident, E." Mateo started to walk beside him.

Edgar barely paid attention to him as he ran through his klutzy blooper reel of the last minute or two in his head. Walking in front of Mateo, he made it to his apartment without further incident. He looked over his shoulder while opening his door, "Good night," he called out in Mateo's general direction and scurried inside to a faint, "G'night."

He went over the last thing Mateo said to him. *E*? He still wasn't too sure how he felt about it. But instead of pondering about the one-letter nickname, Edgar thought about maybe hiding out in his apartment for at least the next year and the feasibility of this plan.

He just accidentally flashed his neighbor. *Holy shit*.

Ed's yearlong plan of remaining inside his apartment didn't happen. He had to leave to buy fish food the day after *Wet Dick-gate*, as Ed embarrassingly dubbed "the incident". Edgar left in the morning and didn't run into Mateo upon return. Maybe he was blowing it out of proportion. The spot of blush-worthy excitement was probably nothing to Mateo. Edgar tried to brush it off as small potatoes as he went about his business for the rest of the week. His days went back into normal routine. He made sure to complete his short checklist when throwing out his trash: 1) fully clothed and 2) in the morning. There were no Mateo sightings, so it was gravy. He might have made sure to play more

Sims 2 for the last couple of days and possibly listened out to hear his neighbor getting in from work in the early morning, so Edgar could sort of schedule ways to avoid him. And it was working.

A week and a day later, fate had other plans in store for Edgar. Returning from a visit to his sister's bakery that afternoon, Ed spied Mateo talking to their neighbor from 11G in the hallway. He kept his eyes trained on his key ring in his palm and walked around the two in conversation. However, he couldn't help but look at Mateo, and in doing so, caught Mateo looking at him. Edgar quickly looked down again, but not before catching Mateo's wink.

"How's it going, E?"

Again with this E.

"Not raining," he murmured and rushed to his door. Edgar was proud he actually spoke words, but pissed that he chose to remind Mateo about the last time he saw him.

Mateo laughed. "Good one, E. See ya later, man!" He resumed his conversation.

Edgar went inside and dropped his laptop bag at the door. *Were they friendly neighbors now?* He was so underprepared.

He tried to put it out of his mind because he would only obsess about the minor interactions he and Mateo had had since they became neighbors. He showered, changed into sweats and had leftovers for dinner; basically, a typical night. He switched it up by starting his Super Nintendo. He was in a Super Mario Bros. mood. He'd just sat on Yoshi, Luigi's dinosaur, when someone knocked on his front door.

Edgar paused his game and checked the time. 10:49 p.m. He wasn't expecting anyone, but he stood up to check anyway. It was most likely one of his neighbors' visitors who got mixed up with apartment numbers. He looked through his peephole and rubbed his eyes. He must be hallucinating.

"Hello?" Mateo called out, looking straight at Edgar's peephole.

Edgar backed away from the door in disbelief. He quickly came back to reality after bumping his hand into the door, realizing he'd made his presence known. He didn't think Mateo actually meant he'd see him later, as in today, as in now.

"E?"

Too late to pretend he wasn't home. Edgar opened the door halfway and stared. Mateo looked great, as usual, and smelled even better. "Er, yes?"

"Not wet, I see."

"What?"

"Because it's not raining."

"Dry. I'm dry. Yes." Edgar clicked his teeth loudly. *Real smooth.*

Mateo stopped grinning widely. "I hope you weren't hurt from our accident. I haven't really seen you since, I think." He scratched his head and moved closer.

Edgar was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that he was speaking to *him*. He figured Mateo was just doing his neighborly duty in finding out if he was okay. Totally nice, and another attribute that added to why Mateo was a great human being.

"I'm fine. Dry and fine. Thank you for your concern. I hope you were okay as well." Edgar gave himself a mental high five for remembering to return the gesture, and pushed away from the door frame. "Have a nice ni—"

Mateo cut him off. "No injuries on my end. Anyway, the reason why I stopped over before work was because I wanted to let you know about our bar's Singles Night. I'm not sure where you usually hang out, but we have two-for-one drinks eleven to one on Thursday nights. Ladies free from eleven until closing."

Edgar raised his eyebrows. Mateo thought he had a social life? "Er, thank—"
Ed squinted his eyes "—you?"

"No problem, E. I've been meaning to invite you and your friends to our weekly event. Couples are good to attend too, in case you want to bring your honey." Like Edgar was dating anyone. "I think you're the only apartment I haven't asked. Mrs. Gladstone thought I was joking when I invited her. She just touched my cheek and chuckled."

"Probably the highlight of her day."

Mateo tilted his head and grinned. "I wouldn't underestimate her. She's a charmer. Hey, what game are you playing? That is a game I'm hearing, right? Unless that's some kind of new genre of music I've never heard."

Edgar turned in the direction of his television and stared like it was a new invention. The entire moment was surreal. "Super Mario Bros: All-Stars." *How could he not know this classic?*

"I've heard of it. My older brother and sister used to play that, I think." Mateo grinned and tried to peek over Edgar's shoulder. "I gotta ask the next time I see them if they remember the game." Just letting Edgar know he was ancient in comparison—a reminder that he and Mateo had nothing in common.

"Do you mind if I take a look? I don't usually play video games, but maybe it's something I should check out."

Edgar wondered why Mateo wanted to even come inside, but figured he was just being friendly, like inviting Mrs. Gladstone to his bar. *He's a businessman. Of course he has to promote for new customers.*

"Uh, sure." Ed walked toward the television, past Atari's tank. He didn't look behind him to see if Mateo followed. Mateo exclaimed loudly how cool it was that he had a goldfish and chattered about not having time to take care of a pet. He walked away from the tank and came to look at the large flat screen television.

"What kind of game system is that, E?"

"Super Nintendo. It's Ed, by the way." No one had ever called him by that nickname, not that he considered a singular letter a true nickname. It made him sound cooler than what he was. And tonight's choice of activity should prove this to his neighbor.

"How awesome is it that you play this?" Mateo looked down at the controllers and sighed. "I wish I had time now to play with you." Ed couldn't help but mentally smirk at that. "Not that I'm an expert or anything, E." Apparently Mateo had ignored Edgar's name correction. "I'm off Sunday night. My brother owes me for covering for him. You've got to show me the ropes. I think he'll be jealous that I get to play." Mateo walked away, moving to the front door, yet still facing Edgar. "What time works for you? Unless you have plans?"

What the hell was happening? "Er, no?"

"Great. So I'll catch you and goldfish—"

"Atari."

"Excuse me?"

"My goldfish's name is Atari."

"Cool. You must be a hardcore gamer."

"I had two."

“Ataris?”

“No, goldfish. Atari and Sega.”

“Get out.” Mateo leaned against Edgar’s door.

“Honest. Atari ate Sega.”

Mateo chuckled. “Dude, Atari sounds like a badass. Remind me to stay on his good side.” Mateo winked and stepped out of the door. “See you later, E.”

“Edgar or Ed is fine.”

“So ten-ish Sunday night. I should be back by then. Have a good night, E.” Mateo waved and closed the door. Once again ignored. *The story of his life.*

Edgar switched the locks. *Seems I have a new acquaintance with a selective hearing problem?* He didn’t understand if this was Mateo being really polite or interested in learning a new video game. Hopefully, it was a passing fad. Once Mateo saw how boring Edgar really was, he would go back to the friendly-in-passing type of neighbor.

This was only going to get Edgar’s hopes up for a friendship. The disappointment wouldn’t be as bad if he understood why Mateo was interacting with him on a more frequent basis.

Edgar didn’t want to consider Sunday night anything more than it was. In fact, since Thursday night, he’d rationalized it as him offering his tutorial skills to a novice. Nothing more. He fixed his brown-framed glasses on his nose—seasonal allergies made wearing his contacts uncomfortable—and was trying to walk at a normal pace, when he heard his apartment buzzer ring.

He’d wanked off earlier in the afternoon in hopes of preventing any surprise erections during Mateo’s visit. Edgar’s crush had done nothing but get stronger with the increased interactions. He knew he could play it cool when Mateo was here, though, because of his new ability to form more coherent sentences when conversing with his sexy neighbor. The guy made this talking business seem easy.

Edgar opened the door and breathed out slowly. Mateo looked fine. He’d lick him from head to toe, not missing anything in between. He wore fitted jeans, a henley shirt that outlined the picture-perfect torso, and a smile. A very bright smile.

“Do you brighten your teeth?”

“Hello, and how are you?” Mateo didn’t seem fazed by the word vomit.

“Your teeth are very white, like a toothpaste commercial.”

The body part in question continued to gleam as Mateo rubbed his chin slowly. “Thanks?”

Edgar moved back to let Mateo in. “I have a tendency to say things as they come to mind.”

A brief shrug was all that Edgar received as a reply, as Mateo made his way over to the goldfish. “Atari, how’s it hanging?”

Edgar stared, as Mateo made himself comfortable inside his home. He might have not cleaned up as much as he wanted. He wasn’t trying to impress anyone, but he had set up a few snacks and soda cans on an end table by his couch.

“Er, I didn’t know how long you planned to stay, so ignore the snacks if you just wanted to play for a couple of minutes.” He watched the other man put a tortilla chip in his mouth and sit down. *Guess he’s not planning to leave anytime soon.*

“Totally set up for a night of fun. Thanks for the eats, E.” More crunching from the couch.

Edgar moved to sit at the other end of the couch. “About the shortening of my name—”

“Do you hate it?”

“No. But I’m—”

“You look like an E.” Mateo left his explanation at that and picked up the controller from the coffee table in front of them. “I meant to tell you, I spoke with my brother about your Mario Bros. game. He was fucking jealous. Then he laughed at me because he knows how horrible of a scorer I am when it comes to video games. I’m bad when playing for fun and worse in competitions. But eager to learn.”

Edgar frowned. He knew tutoring was on the menu for the night, but the way Mateo described his skills, Ed would have a long night and not get to the levels he wanted to finish in time. And if Mateo knew how bad he was, why invite himself at all?

“By the look of your face, you’re not too keen. Regret accepting my pushy invite?”

Yes. But looking at you more than makes up for it. “No,” he finally answered. *Real smooth.*

Mateo stared at Ed, looking at his face for what felt like an eternity, causing Ed to sweat heavier than normal. “I think you’re lying.” Mateo laughed and grabbed another chip. “Think about it, you can sit superior and smug when you watch my person die or make a mistake for the fifty-millionth time.”

Ed would have done that anyway, while he mentally sucked on Mateo’s neck.

“The appeal is there. C’mon, E. Put me out of my misery, so I can give you misery instead, with my non-gamer skills.”

Ed turned to his controller and chose the Mario avatar on-screen. After he finished, Mateo copied him. This was familiar turf for Ed. He finished his level. Now it was Mateo’s turn, and he hadn’t been exaggerating. He barely made it past the first area before he died.

“Not like that,” Ed said. “You need to jump.”

“Can you show me?” Mateo held his controller in front of Ed’s face. Edgar reached for Mateo’s controller to pause the game. He explained what each button did and repeated any instructions if Mateo didn’t seem to get it. “Thanks,” Mateo said.

Ed restarted level one, coaching Mateo through it, and he made it out of the first area but struggled when he got to the next. Edgar moved closer without realizing and put his hand over Mateo’s to guide his actions in the game. He forgot himself, sitting closer until their thighs touched. Ed’s nipple brushed against Mateo’s forearm while he was helping him to finish. Once the castle flag was drawn down to signify his completion, Ed peered over and caught Mateo looking at him rather than the screen. Edgar moved away back to his cushion, aware he probably made Mateo uncomfortable.

“So basically, it’s like that.” Edgar quickly grabbed a bottle of water and started to drink. He wasn’t really thirsty, but it gave him something to do with his hands.

“It’s your turn, right?” Mateo reminded as he ate another chip.

Edgar closed his water bottle and grabbed his controller. He played and looked at only the screen.

“So, I know I kind of asked last minute on Thursday, but do you think you could make Tino’s any night this week? It’s usually packed Thursday to

Sunday. Though it's been busier during the week as well. Live DJ, if you're a dancer."

"I'm not," Edgar continued to focus on the screen, Mario almost falling off a cliff with his hesitation.

"That's fine." Mateo was not deterred. "There're tons of ladies every night."

Did Mateo really think Ed danced? Or went bar hopping? Or looked for ladies? "Mateo. I appreciate the invitation. But I'm not a fan of the bar scene. Or looking for ladies. No offense."

"None taken." Mateo was quiet throughout the rest of Edgar's turn. Mateo started his turn just as quietly. The silence from the chatterbox made Ed feel slightly uneasy.

Edgar started to worry. *Maybe Mateo thinks I will jump him?* He would love to, but he didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable... intentionally. He opened his mouth to apologize, but couldn't bear to look at Mateo.

"It's safe to assume you're gay, then," Mateo murmured and continued playing.

"Yes," Ed replied gruffly. He picked up his water bottle and played with the bottle cap. Why did it feel like coming out all over again? He'd been out since junior high. The same geeky, shy preteen who figured out he preferred his popular male classmates over girls, grew up to be a shy, geeky man who still hadn't learned to stop crushing on men out of his league.

"Not a secret, is it?"

Ed looked to Mateo briefly. Mateo paid him no attention. Ed looked away before he got caught staring. "No."

Mateo's Luigi avatar died. He had to restart again but paused to look at Ed. "That's cool. Me neither."

Ed started to feel the intensity of the moment. Or maybe it was all in his head. *Stop overthinking.* "I know."

Mateo tilted his head. "Oh really?"

"I sort of heard you with a friend in the hallway. It's not a big deal."

"My bad."

"It is more than fine. You're at that age, you know."

"At that age? How old do you think I am?"

Ed really put his foot in it. "Twenty-one?"

"Try twenty-four. I don't know what you saw with my friend, but I can assure you, I work pretty hard. I don't just bartend. I own Tino's... well, partly. It's split between my bro, sis and me."

Ed didn't think there was big difference between twenty-one and twenty-four. However, owning and running what he knew to be a successful business was commendable. He figured this was the reasoning behind Mateo's invitation.

"Besides, you're not exactly ready to join AARP. How old are you?"

"Thirty-four." Ed put his bottle down before he ended up spilling his beverage all over himself. *Soggy underwear is not hot unless from cum.*

"You haven't hit your prime yet, E. I'm sure if you walked into Tino's any weekend night, you'd be swarmed with numbers."

"Sure." *Getting a dating pep talk from a twenty-something. Great.* "You should jump right now or you're going to get hit by the swinging platform and die. That's what happened the last time." He didn't want to think about the probability of nothing ever happening to him like that. Better to talk about the video game.

"Sorry." Mateo followed Ed's instructions while biting his lip and moving his controller along with his Luigi avatar. Ed side-eyed him and smirked to himself. *Fucking adorable.* Mateo finally finished.

Ed started to play, anxious as to what else Mateo would discuss. Mateo was the baby of the family and it seemed he liked to get his way. He was certainly pushy enough. Ed was able to halfway listen as he got into his game. Mateo occupied himself with chips and dip, watching Ed's Mario character move.

"I usually work on Thursdays. So when you decide to visit, just let me know. I have a hookup with the bartender."

"I thought I explained why I can't—"

"—won't—"

"—am not interested—"

"You're turning down my invite?"

"I thought I established this earlier."

"It'll be fun." Mateo's kind of fun—not for Ed. He imagined being too shy to speak in a crowded room, staring at the beautiful people making their selection for the night and being overlooked. Not Ed's first or hundredth choice for fun.

"Describe a fun night, Mateo. If you could choose a fun activity."

"For myself? Or for us?"

Like his wishes would finally be answered. "Obviously for yourself."

"Hanging out with my closest friends. Good convo, good food, good music. And getting laid at the end of the night." Getting laid was always a highlight, especially getting laid *well*, in Ed's opinion. And by Mateo? Even better.

"See, this is where you and I differ. My perfect night is playing a video game all night and beating all levels. Or reading a great book. Or watching the History Channel. A true nerd to the core." Ed hoped Mateo would finally see he was a lost cause.

Mateo only shrugged. "Differences makes life more enjoyable, don't you think? Besides, the more I hang out with you and learn from your ninja gamer wisdom, I can probably join you for an all-night session. Maybe beat you, too."

Ed kept a straight face and looked Mateo in the eye. "I doubt that." *Seriously.*

"Me too. So should I expect you this Thursday? I have an in with the bouncer."

Ed shook his head, but couldn't hold back a smile at Mateo's persistence. He figured Mateo was trying to either drum up new business, or help Ed get some action from drunk singles. By the end of the night, he was sure Mateo would understand he was a lost cause. Then Ed could go back to normalcy: sort of stalking Mateo from afar and having him star in his sex dreams.

What Ed thought would be a one-time curiosity of his social, fuck-hot neighbor turned into a weekly video game tournament. Mateo tried to play video games with Ed on at least one of his days off, and at first Ed tried to keep Mateo at the level of acquaintance—brief nods of hello and discussions of weather in passing. But Mateo ignored his attempts. Several weeks passed, seasons changed, and now it was early October: six months since Mateo's first time playing Super Mario Bros. with him.

In all that time, Mateo didn't get any better playing video games, which both men knew. What Ed didn't expect was that he gained a friend—actually, two—Mateo and Mateo's older brother, Martino. Martino and Ed were in the same age range and shared more in common. Mateo brought Martino over to Ed's apartment one night in August to show off Ed and his *Mortal Kombat* game. They were both geeky homebodies who enjoyed a great book over popular television shows. Ed would have crushed on Mateo's brother if the man wasn't straight and happily married. At least Ed knew how much hotter Mateo would be in fifteen years.

Ed also learned Mateo was an all-around great guy. More than a handsome face, his neighbor was a great family and business man. Mateo inherited Tino's, the family bar and grill, with his brother and sister. The younger man put a lot of himself into making the business last for his nieces and nephews, although Mateo did have a bit of a temper when serious issues were involved, such as having to fire an employee who drank on the job. He also maintained his social butterfly status—partly because of the job and partly because he genuinely enjoyed people. Even so, he managed to fit a day each week to hang out at Ed's apartment. Ed also visited 11C once, but he didn't stay, since Mateo expected friends over and Ed didn't want to be in the way. After all, he was the just short, nerdy guy who got flustered when put into a social situation and eye-fucked Mateo when he was sure the other man wasn't looking in his direction. It might not go over so well.

Mateo didn't stop inviting Edgar to Tino's. At least once a week he would work it into their conversations—conversations Ed found easier to participate in when he had the drool-worthy man on a one-to-one basis. Unfortunately, Ed's lust didn't simmer. It exploded. And even worse, he actually liked Mateo as a person. He had met Martino, learned Mateo's quirks and laughed at his job stories. It was different now that he knew him.

Edgar watched from the sidelines of Mateo's life. And Ed was horny. He decided tonight to accept Mateo and Martino's—Mateo enlisted his brother as well—invitation to visit the bar. Did Ed think he was going to go home with a barfly? No. Ed was reaching the end of his horny rope, lusting for Mateo in secret and only having his hand to satisfy him. It was different having his crush in front of him on a weekly basis, accepting Ed's nerdy ways and encouraging him to get out on the dating scene.

Ed was close to desperate at this point, and tired of coming up with different ways to hide his boner from Mateo whenever he came over. He even

considered trying Grindr again. But before he embarrassed himself, he figured some practice wouldn't hurt. He held conversations with Mateo for long periods of time without inserting his foot in his mouth... mostly. Old habits are hard to break. It should be sort of easy with someone who he shared interests with. He and Mateo did have a weird affinity for fish jokes. Martino didn't get their odd humor.

Martino and a couple of members of Martino's bowling league would be at the bar tonight. Martino had a few possible customers looking to start or update their business websites. If the night was a bust, at least Ed would leave with possible business prospects. Two birds with one stone.

Ed looked in the mirror one last time. His brownish-auburn shaggy hair was tamed. There were no glasses covering his hazel eyes for the night—contacts on, of course. He wore a white *Tron* vintage T-shirt over jeans. Ed's version of dressing up: wearing a black blazer over his shirt and adding a folded handkerchief in his breast pocket.

Ed took a cab over instead of driving, since he planned on drinking. He tipped the driver and looked the building over. *Not so scary, Ed, you can do this.* He walked through the front door with sweaty palms and looked around. A DJ played dance music—not anything Edgar could name, but it was tolerable. From across the dance floor, he spotted Martino sitting by the bar and made a beeline. He didn't look left or right and blurted out a "Hey!" as he stood in front of his neighbor's brother. Ed had tunnel vision upon seeing Martino, and completely forgot Mateo worked tonight. Mateo noticed Ed first.

"Are my eyes deceiving me? E, what are you doing here?"

Ed looked behind Martino and noticed his friend in his usual bartender gear, a black "Tino's" T-shirt and jeans. Ed also noticed Mateo's clothes could have been painted on. If this were months earlier, he would probably have walked into a wall. Now he could function normally, at about ninety-nine percent—he was only human. He didn't miss a beat to answer. "Haven't you invited me a hundred times?"

"Let's make it a hundred and one," Mateo smiled from behind the bar.

"I'm sure it was more. Atari is the only one who kept record."

"And he'll never talk." Both of them laughed at their running joke about Ed's fish being his apartment record keeper.

"You guys and your lame goldfish jokes." Martino shook his head.

Mateo ignored his brother and stared at Edgar, taking in Ed's attire. "I can't believe you're here. You look great."

Ed nodded in embarrassed appreciation, his face warmed from Mateo's perusal. "Thanks."

"Seriously, why are you here?"

"Don't you have drinks to sling, little bro? I'm trying to hook him up."

Ed watched Mateo's eyes widen, then his eyebrows furrowed. Before Mateo could open his mouth, he was called away to the other side of the bar by a patron. Mateo made his way over there but kept an eye on Ed.

Ed sat down next to Martino.

"Ed. You finally made it. Jack, the accountant I was telling you about? He's here. Lisa, the dry-cleaning business owner, she had to call it a night. Jack just went to the bathroom. You took his seat, actually."

"Should I move?" Ed wondered about proper bar etiquette and if he'd flunked already.

"No, it's cool. I'm not staying much longer anyway. I figured I would introduce you two if you came. Or have a beer or two if you didn't. Either way, it's a win-win."

"I should have brought my laptop." How would he make the proper presentation without it? "Do you think I have enough time to go home and get it?" A woman sidled up to the space next to Ed, waving her arm for the bartender's attention. Mateo finished with his customer and made his way back toward her.

"Nah. It's not like you need to show a PowerPoint presentation at this time of night. I already talked you up to Jack, so this should be a piece of cake."

"Martino! Is this the guy?" A tall, skinny African American man held a hand on Martino's shoulder and smiled at Ed. A bottle of Corona with a wedge of lime appeared in front of him. He looked up to see Mateo wink in his direction and assist the woman next to him. The woman, of course, flirted while giving Mateo her order. Mateo showed off his shiny teeth, reeling the woman in. *Good luck, lady.*

"I guess I'm the guy?" Ed finished weirdly. Martino introduced Jack to Ed. Both men shook hands awkwardly. Ed let Martino lead with small talk, since Jack was Martino's friend. Ed listened to them discuss the night's bowling game. He took a sip from his bottle.

Mateo came back and leaned down in front of him, beckoning Ed to come closer. He spoke softly in Ed's ear. "Your drink's on me."

Ed leaned away and looked Mateo in his eyes. "Thanks."

"So, Ed, Martino tells me you're a computer whiz, mega-genius."

Ed took a huge gulp and almost choked. Mateo reached over to pat Ed's back a couple of times. Ed put his beer down and held out a hand for Mateo to desist.

"I wouldn't," he cleared his throat, "say all of that."

Mateo watched on for a moment, but had another patron to take care of. He walked away with an expression of concern.

Hmm? Food for thought. Ed was unsure why Mateo was worrying. *Maybe he thinks I need help?* Ed missed a question from Jack. He turned back to face the man standing next to him. *Great first impression, Ed.* He tried to focus on Jack and Martino's questions, but he kept noticing whenever he looked away that Mateo's eyes were on him. Ed finished his beer and placed the empty bottle on the bar. Another open Corona appeared not a second later. Ed glanced up. The second bartender behind the bar grinned at him.

"From the boss." She pointed to where Mateo stood. "He says on the house." She turned away and flicked her mane of black, glossy hair over her shoulder.

Ed made eye contact with Mateo, who winked at him, and attempted to return to the conversation. Again he missed a question. Mateo and his beers kept distracting him.

"I'll leave you two to hash out the details then." Martino rose, shook their hands and wished them a good night.

Jack took the vacated seat and smiled. "If you have any more offers to make, Ed, you can save them. I'm definitely hiring you. Martino vouched for you, and your ideas mesh with mine. What are you drinking? Corona? Next two are on me."

"That's okay. I appreciate the offer."

"It's not fun to drink alone. That's why bars were created, man." Jack patted Ed on the back and signaled for Mateo to come over.

"Hey, Jack. What can I get you?"

“Four Coronas—two for me and two for my new friend here.” Mateo walked away to fill the order. Jack eyed Ed’s *Tron* T-shirt.

“Great shirt, man. Did you see the remake?”

“I bought the Blu-ray.” Mateo returned and placed the bottles in front of them. Ed nodded in thanks and faced Jack. “Haven’t watched it yet because I don’t want to ruin the memory. I feel like a backstabber for even buying it.”

Jack drank from a bottle and nodded. “The original definitely is a classic. I have both versions on Blu-ray. You should join us in the bowling league. We usually meet up Tuesday or Thursday nights. Maybe we could have a *Tron* marathon afterward?”

Mateo jumped into their conversation. “Jack, there’s a lady trying to get your attention, over by the DJ booth.” Ed looked to where Mateo pointed, to see a lady gesturing for Jack to come over.

“Oh, it’s a friend of mine. Be right back, Ed.” Jack finished his first bottle and took the second with him.

Mateo folded his arms. Ed appreciated the stretch across the biceps. His cock appreciated it even more. “You didn’t tell me you were dating,” Mateo said. “Jack’s okay, I guess.”

Wait. What the hell was he talking about? “Excuse me?”

“You said Martino was hooking you up—”

His eyes bulged in disbelief. “And your mind went to dating? Me? Mateo—”

Mateo moved closer to Ed’s face. “One, Jack’s gay. Two, he’s making his signature move on you. Three, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re good-looking, smart, funny, a great catch. Why wouldn’t he want you?”

“He is?” Not that Ed could ever tell when someone hit on him. “I doubt it. He just bought the beers because I’m going to work with him.”

“Work?”

“Yes, work.”

“When does it start? Later tonight at his place?”

Ed hadn’t seen this side of Mateo. He appreciated Mateo looking out for him as a friend. But there was no need for worry. “Look—”

A bunch of guys called Mateo over. "Shit. I'll be right back, E. Don't leave yet."

Somebody went past jumping to conclusions and moved there. Ed finished his Corona. He started his third. He watched Mateo talking loudly to the men, who seemed to be friends. Ed noticed the guy from many months before, Trevor, was part of the group. He watched Trevor grip Mateo's arm and fawn over him.

Ed continued drinking. He turned to see Jack dancing with his friend and shrugged. Somehow he finished that bottle and the next without realizing it. As he sat there, he planned to notify Mateo about... something. Another Corona popped up from the female bartender and Ed did his duty to the good deed. He drank.

He finished that bottle too. And people-watched. Time passed by. *This going out business isn't so bad. Especially if magical Corona bottles are involved.* Ed chuckled out loud and caught himself. Maybe he should stop drinking the magical bottles before he embarrassed himself further. *Good plan.* Another good plan was to find the restroom. Ed's bladder liked that plan a lot. He stood up straight and turned his head from side to side to make sure everything was in working order.

Not even drunk, E, good on you. Damn it, Mateo has me calling myself E. This was going on the list of things he needed to talk to Mateo about. Ed tried to remember what else was on that list while on his restroom mission. He didn't figure it out until he returned. He went to an empty seat in the corner of the bar, where the nice lady bartender gave Ed another beer and a bowl of nuts. Ed liked the beer fairy and planned to give her the biggest tip ever.

Ed ate his nuts—they tasted so good—and sipped his beer. He wanted to walk out of there on his own. He'd lost Jack and Mateo. But he was fine because he had his nuts. He laughed loudly at himself. A bottle of water appeared in front of him. *Was there a water fairy too?*

Mateo scowled and crossed his arms. "I thought you'd left."

Ed scowled back but didn't know why he was being scowled at in the first place. "Nope. Just me and the beer fairy."

"Beer fairy? You must mean Angela, the bartender."

Ed shrugged and continued to munch on the nuts.

"D'you know how many you've had? Did you drive here?"

“Nope on both counts.”

“Stay here. I’ll bring you home.” Mateo added more nuts to the bowl in front of him.

“You’re beautiful,” Ed muttered and grabbed a handful. Mateo paused and murmured something that sounded like, “You too,” but Ed had a bowl of nuts with his name on it. *Have they ever tasted so good?* Ed had to make another restroom trip. When he was done, he noticed his bowl of nuts was gone but the water was still there. *A travesty.* Ed glared at the injustice and jumped when he felt a tap on his back.

“Hey, man, I was looking all over for you.” Jack looked sweaty. *It must have been from looking all over for me. Right.*

“You wanna join me? There’s a twenty-four hour diner that makes the best pancakes at two in the morning.” Jack moved closer to stand directly in front of Ed. Pancakes did sound great.

“E, you ready?”

Ed turned a little too quickly and the floor moved just a bit. He stumbled but remained upright. Mateo and Jack reached out a hand to help but Ed shook his head.

“E, huh? How about those pancakes, E?”

“He actually prefers Edgar or Ed.”

Ed told him that all the time and now Mateo remembered. Mateo did not smile. Mateo always smiled. Ed noticed. *Something is wrong.*

“E, you’re hungry?”

“Negative, Ghost Rider. I’m full of nuts.”

Mateo laughed. “You’re going to be so embarrassed later. Sorry, Jack, you heard the man. He’s full. We’re heading home now. Catch you later.”

Jack nodded. “All right. Maybe next time.”

Ed focused on walking out of the bar. Mateo walked behind and directed him to the car. Ed sat in the passenger seat and buckled himself in. Mateo slammed into the driver’s seat, turned on the radio and drove. Ed watched Mateo, who kept his eye on the road for the entire ride. No words were exchanged, but Ed couldn’t help feel some sort of tension floating between them, or control the lecherous thoughts invading. He was hard and tipsy. He couldn’t add another worry, since those two predicaments reigned supreme.

Luckily, they arrived at their co-op building garage. Mateo parked the car silently and shut off the ignition. Ed grabbed the door release to get out, but Mateo turned to look at him. Ed stared, waiting for Mateo to speak. It looked like he really wanted to say something. He watched Mateo open his mouth and close it again.

“Yes?” he prompted.

Mateo shook his head and held his door handle. “Forget it.”

Ed got out and walked around as Mateo locked the car doors. They walked to the elevator, and before he could press the button, Mateo grabbed his arm. He looked down to where he was being held, surprised at the contact—even more surprised that Mateo did not let go.

Ed was led away from the elevator, down into a darkened corner, away from the cameras and any other neighbors’ prying eyes. The above light flickered lightly as Mateo leaned against the brick wall. Ed stood in front of him, his arm still in a vise-like grip.

“Did you want to hook up with Jack?” Mateo asked.

“Yes.” Edgar didn’t understand what the problem was. He just got a new client. And Jack liked pancakes. *Mateo doesn’t like pancakes?*

“I’m not apologizing for ruining your night, E.”

Fuck is he yapping about? “You didn’t ruin my night.”

“I’m not following.”

“Good. Me neither.” Ed tried to walk away, but Mateo held on and moved in closer.

“You had my brother set you up with Jack is what I’m talking about, E.”

“Yes.”

“For a date.”

“Negative.” *Where was this guy getting his information?*

“So why would you meet with him? I’ve asked you to come to the bar nearly every fucking week.”

Ed paid attention to the first question. “You want me to make you a website?”

“What?” Mateo finally let go and ran his hands through his hair. Ed wished he could have done the same. He already missed Mateo’s hand on his arm.

“Since we’re neighbors and friends, free of charge.”

“Website?”

Ed watched Mateo look down at the ground. He didn’t understand why they were standing in the basement garage when they could have been upstairs.

“You met with Jack for business?”

Hello! “Yep.”

“And not for a date?”

“Is there a special answer you want me to say? Because I don’t know it.”

Ed was startled by Mateo’s lips brushing against his. He had an out-of-body experience feeling those soft lips on his. Mateo didn’t push him for more, just kept his mouth on Ed’s.

“Now, do you get it, E? Do you understand?”

Ed only just heard Mateo over the fireworks that exploded in his head. He grabbed the taller man’s forearms and put his tongue inside the hot mouth he’d dreamt about for over a year. If this was his one chance, he was going to make it count. He ignored the feeling of regret in his stomach. He had his dream man to kiss.

Mateo’s mouth opened and Ed’s tongue was there. He moved one hand to hold the back of Mateo’s head, tilting to change the angle. Mateo growled—a sound Ed had dreamed of, and now he was hearing it for real. He wanted more and everything in between. He pulled back for air and looked into lust-filled eyes. Mateo’s brown eyes were laser-focused on Ed. His cock went full mast.

Ed took a deep breath and pulled Mateo closer, nibbling on his bottom lip. Mateo wrapped both arms around Ed’s body, rubbing his back and bringing them even closer. Ed felt Mateo’s clothed erection press against his own and gave in to the urge to grind against him. Mateo moaned while they sucked on each other’s tongues. That shit drove him wild. Ed pushed Mateo against the wall, leaned in to rub against his cock, not sure what was on the menu. Whatever they did, he wanted to rock Mateo’s world.

He didn’t expect Mateo to switch them around, making Edgar lean against the garage wall. Mateo pressed into him, moving his mouth across Ed’s cheek. He whispered into Ed’s ear, “E.” Ed opened his eyes and watched as Mateo unbuckled his belt. Ed felt he should reciprocate the gesture. *Okay, mutual hand jobs with Mateo in the basement garage, for the win.* Ed grinned as he

unfastened Mateo's fly. His cock got harder as he heard Mateo's zipper go down. Mateo pushed Ed's pants and boxer briefs out of the way, looking into his eyes all the while. Ed didn't break the stare as he fumbled with Mateo's pants. He tried to move his hand into the open space, but Mateo shook his head.

Ed raised an eyebrow. Mateo pulled away, spat in his own hand and palmed his own cock. *No fair, I want to see it. Or least touch him.* Ed tried to reach for Mateo's dick again. He could see the head peeking out of Mateo's underwear waistband. *Damn, I'd like to taste that.* Again, Mateo shook his head wordlessly. Ed wondered if he thought out loud and had his lips kissed roughly once more. Then he felt Mateo's mouth descend to the side of his neck.

Ed turned his head to give Mateo more access. He wanted to get some part of his body on Mateo's cock, be it his mouth, hand, cheek... ass. *I ain't too proud to beg.* Ed tried to lower himself so Mateo would get the hint. Mateo placed a hand in the middle of his chest to hold him in place. Mateo squatted in front of Ed's dick. Thoughts were swiftly vacating the big head and rushing down to the little head.

Ed watched Mateo's face and its proximity to his penis. He watched him mouth the word, "Nice," and couldn't stop his grin. Ed's uncircumcised dick was more thick than long. Mateo tapped Ed's chest twice. He got the message; he needed to stay put. He leaned heavily against the brick wall and watched Mateo's hand move from his chest. Mateo placed his free hand on Ed's erect cock and gave it a firm stroke. Ed curled his toes and bit his lip to silence himself, before he woke the entire building. *Quiet, must remember to be quiet.* It was just... Mateo from 11C fondling his penis in a semi-private area. *Wet. Suck. Warm. Yes.* Correction, Mateo from 11C mouthing his penis in a semi-private area.

Mateo held Ed's shaft and licked the veined underside.

"Fuck," Ed murmured. Mateo looked up into Ed's eyes, held his gaze and opened his mouth on the tip. He sucked tentatively at first, gripping his lips around the head. Ed groaned as Mateo flicked his tongue across the tip and sucked his way down his shaft. He saw Mateo's other hand in his pants. *He's jerking off.* Mateo pulled out his cock and balls but didn't push his underwear further, his erection in his hand. Ed only glimpsed at the cock; the flickering light caught the pre-cum at the tip. Mateo moved his tongue, licking the side from tip to base and back up again.

"Fuck," Ed whispered and closed his eyes. He felt Mateo move his flattened tongue across the hardened shaft. Mateo started fondling Ed's balls as he

slurped his shaft. Ed moved his hands down to his crotch and grabbed Mateo's head with both hands. Trying to keep his eyes open to watch, Ed saw Mateo work his mouth back to the tip. He watched Mateo flick his tongue under his foreskin and around his cock head—one of the most erotic things he'd experienced in a long time.

Mateo moved his mouth to Ed's fuzzy balls, sucking on each one, then tonguing his sac. Ed gripped Mateo's hair and pulled, watching the man return his mouth back to his shaft. Mateo increased his efforts, making Ed lift his lower back off the wall and hump deeper into that suckling mouth. Mateo sped up, bobbing his head in time with his hand on the shaft.

"Yes," Ed grunted. His balls tightened. Mateo kept up the motion, and Ed knew he was going to come.

"Mateo," he tried to warn. He tried to pull Mateo's head back but Mateo pushed Ed's dick further into his mouth. Ed thrust deeper inside. Between Mateo's sucking and playing with Ed's balls, Ed couldn't hold back.

"Sorry," he groaned as he came into the hot mouth. Mateo swallowed, which caused Ed to jerk his hips and tighten his grip in Mateo's hair. He tried to catch his breath as he watched Mateo jerk off in between his open legs. Mateo moaned and slurped, still sucking Ed's cock. Ed watched Mateo shoot his semen on the ground. His hand moved rapidly, squeezing a few loads out of an impressive cock. Ed was a little jealous.

He continued to breathe heavily from his cataclysmic orgasm. He looked around the area and down again. Mateo breathed just as heavily as he looked up into Ed's face. As the high started to wear off, Ed began to worry. Should he thank Mateo? Apologize? He understood this was not the start of a relationship. He wanted it to be. But he was sure that tomorrow, once Mateo realized what he'd done, he'd regret his actions. *I'm just a friend. A video game buddy. Not your lover. Don't get your hopes up.*

Ed bent down to pull his boxer briefs and pants up, and tucked his sensitive, semi-erect cock into his pants while internally berating himself. He still held onto a sliver of hope that maybe Mateo would want to do this again. He expected to see a blissed-out Mateo, kneeling before him. Instead, Mateo wore a frown and a trickle of drool and sperm on his chin. Ed focused on Mateo's glistening chin. He wanted to lick Mateo so bad. *Get it together, loser.*

Ed figured he should pay attention to the immediate need of wet chin. He pulled out his handkerchief, negative thoughts swirling in his head. He didn't

want to ask Mateo what was wrong. He had a feeling it was regret. Or that this was a one-time affair, and he didn't want to hear Mateo say the words. He went into shutdown mode and threw the piece of cloth in the direction of Mateo's face. He thought Mateo would catch the cloth but it landed on his chin. *Shit! Escape, dumbass!*

He wriggled away with a gruff, "Thank you," and watched Mateo lose his balance.

"I... good night." *Fucking smooth.* Ed ran away toward the stairway on the other side of the elevator. He heard Mateo hoarsely call his name as the door slammed behind him. Edgar ran up eleven flights of stairs. His heart knocked the bottom of his throat, he ran so hard. By the time he collapsed on the eleventh floor exit door, he was drenched in sweat, his buzz long gone. He struggled to breathe and rushed to his apartment.

He heard the elevator door arrive on his floor and dodged inside his apartment to avoid Mateo. He knew it would be too awkward. He gasped for air as he looked through his peephole and took the coward's way out. He watched Mateo walk toward the door and stare. Mateo grumbled something and turned away to his own apartment.

I really fucked this up.

"I... good night. Bet he's glad to be rid of me," Edgar thought out loud. It hurt all the same.

Ed barely slept all night.

He replayed his foolish actions, reviewing the highlight—the epic blow job—and lowlight—basically everything after his brain was sucked out his dick.

He wanted more, as foolish as it may be. He knew Mateo just wanted to have fun, and now he would have to go back to watching from afar. He just took the first step. But he didn't like the way he left things. The guilt was killing him.

He called Mateo in the afternoon and got his voicemail. He didn't leave a message and definitely wasn't going next door. Instead he stayed in bed all day and tried to distract himself with a book. However, he didn't get very far because he kept thinking about dialing Mateo's number again. He looked at the clock. 10:05 p.m. *He's probably on his way to work. I'll call him later.*

Of course, later turned into tomorrow, since Ed finally fell asleep. The day turned into missing Mateo all over again because the times Ed remembered to try to call were inopportune. Maybe he subconsciously chose to contact Mateo when he knew the man couldn't pick up.

This head in the sand game lasted for over a week. Mateo never called, or showed up for their usual video game night. *A telling sign, if anything.* Edgar felt wretched. *That night's* replay weighed him down.

The next evening, Edgar played with his Mateo avatar on his computer. It'd been a while since he'd played the game. He heard someone in front of his door and couldn't stop the touch of hope he felt in his gut.

No one knocked at his door. *This is bullshit. I should just get the inevitable over with.* He paused his game and grabbed his keys before doubt could enter his mind.

He crossed the hall and knocked on Mateo's door. He breathed out when the door opened. Mateo stared blankly. Ed took him in from top to bottom. *Still gorgeous, even when he's pissed.* Ed stared back, not knowing what to say for a while.

Mateo continued staring ahead and prepared to close his door.

"Wait!" Ed put his hand on the door before Mateo closed it in his face.

"I'm busy, Ed."

He called me Ed? "I'm sorry."

"Okay." Mateo tried to close the door again.

"Could I possibly talk to you inside, please?"

Mateo opened the door wider and walked toward the living room. Ed moved inside and locked the door behind him.

Ed stood in front of Mateo, a coffee table separating them. "The game was Zelda this week. We missed you."

Mateo stared. "I was busy. I still am."

Really? "Doing what?"

"Ed—" He rolled his eyes. "You apologized. I'm busy. You should go."

I'm messing this up again. Edgar looked around and noticed a blue goldfish swimming in a bowl on an end table. "You bought a fish?"

“Yes.”

“I thought you didn’t—I mean.” Ed looked to the ground to get a moment and let the words settle down in his head. “I like you. Not because you have a fish. Though your fish is nice. I liked you before the fish. In fact, I liked you before you noticed me. And I noticed you from the day you moved in. A lot. I mean. Lusted over you for many a night,” he confessed.

“You have a funny way of showing it—throwing a handkerchief in my face, like a whore.”

“You had my cum on your face. I thought you’d want to clean up. So I left because it was weird. I’m weird.”

Mateo put his hands in his pockets and shook his head. “You’re logical, E. I actually get your fucking logic. But it still was a dick move.”

“You called me ‘E’ again.” *Progress?*

Mateo lowered his eyebrows. “I thought you didn’t like it.”

“It’s grown on me.” Ed moved closer to Mateo and looked into his eyes. “I miss you.”

“I live across from you, E. You know where I work. You could have easily found me.”

Ed shook his head. “It’s easier for you.”

Mateo looked confused. “What’s easier for me?”

“You try living your entire life being me, then live across the hall from someone like you and see what you come up with.” *Must I spell it out for him?*

“Someone like me? Clarify.”

“You could have anyone from eighteen to one hundred lining up to be with you. You look like... you. A walking gay Tumblr gif come to life. I look like, well me. Short and geeky. Men like you who probably have fans around the world don’t look at men like me—guys who hold the wall and hide in corners. Guys who are comfortable there. You’re *Details* magazine. I’m *PC Gamer*.”

Mateo squinted his eyes. “I’m guessing *PC Gamer* is a magazine?”

Ed pointed at him. “You just proved my point.”

“E, I don’t give a shit about your perceptions. I fucking like you. I have for months. I sucked your dick in the garage. Maybe I wasn’t clear enough, so let

me make it crystal. I get that you can be clueless at times, which I adore, by the way. But you need to look in the mirror. There's nothing wrong with you. I'm willing to start reading *PC Gamer*." Mateo touched Ed's face. "I'm a fan of you, quirks and all."

This guy. "You should look at men closer to your age."

"Did you?"

Ed paused. He tried to think of another reason why he couldn't be with Mateo. "That's not the point."

"Let me cut into your excuse brigade with an important question."

"There're not excuses. If you just—"

"Right, right. You're older and prefer to stay at home. I'm younger and like a good party. I studied the CliffsNotes. I truly couldn't give a shit about the differences. I've been with guys who liked to party and have a good time. I'm looking for substance. Now, listen to the question. Do you want me?"

"Of course I do," Ed admitted gruffly.

Mateo smiled. "I still want you. I wanted to be a friend in the beginning. But once I got to know you, I was attracted to you as a person. Plus, I think you're hot. Thought you should know." He held onto Ed's hand. Ed smiled back.

"I'm truly sorry for not talking to you sooner. I never meant to treat you like a whore."

"You could in the future. I really like role-playing. A lot." He grinned his Mateo grin—a grin that turned Ed on. Of course, his cock hardened.

Mateo lowered his head, resting his forehead against Ed's. "My schedule just became clear. How's yours looking, E?"

"I could fit you in."

Mateo grabbed Ed's cock and rubbed him through his sweatpants. "Really? Wonderful. Because I want to fit you in my bedroom. Right now."

Edgar surged forward and pressed his mouth against Mateo's. Mateo grabbed his waist and pushed him toward the bedroom. Both men grappled with removing their shirts, throwing them haphazardly on the bedroom carpet.

Once the clothing was out of the way, Ed drew Mateo's mouth back to his and pulled at Mateo's hair.

"I like hair-pulling too," Mateo murmured against Ed's lips while rubbing his back.

"Make a list. I'll research it properly."

Mateo pushed Ed backward onto the bed and pulled his pants down. He was free-balling. Ed liked this hard. He started to fondle himself, thinking lecherous thoughts. Mateo bent down to remove his pants from his feet. He was smooth... all over. *He waxed? Yes!*

Finally, he saw Mateo in all his glory. And in full daylight, with no crevice unseen. He looked at the package first, of course, since he only had a shadowed memory. His mouth watered at the long, circumcised cock, making plans on where to begin his exploration. He could finally touch this man in the flesh.

"Come here," Ed beckoned, while putting his hand under his waistband and into his drawers. Ed placed his other hand on his lightly furred chest, tweaking his nipple.

"That's hot," Mateo growled as he kneeled above him. He licked the unoccupied nipple below him and teased the raised flesh. Ed pushed his chest closer to Mateo's mouth. "This is hotter though," Mateo spoke against his skin and freed Ed's erection. Ed watched Mateo lick a strip down his belly, bypassing his cock to continue down his right thigh. He tried to kick off his pants but only dislodged Mateo off his leg. Mateo removed Ed's pants for him and licked his lips as he stared at Ed handling his cock.

Ed shook his head. "Uh-uh. It's my turn to taste."

"I'd rather ride, E." Mateo placed his hand over Ed's to help him stroke.

"You want to bottom?" He assumed he'd be ass-up. The taller men he'd been with always wanted him to bottom.

"I'd love to have you fuck me. Been dreaming of it since I sucked you off."

Ed forgot to stroke and stared. His porn dream come true. Mateo continued to play with his shaft, fingering his slit. "Get a condom." Mateo teased him by kissing and sucking the tip. Ed squeezed his nipple harder. His dick responded enthusiastically. "Please."

Mateo let go with a loud pop and crawled over Ed toward a side drawer to his left. His cock dangled close enough to Ed's mouth for him to suck. Ed couldn't resist groping and sucking the deliciously bulbous head.

"E, babe. Wait."

Ed swirled his tongue around the leaking head, getting off on the taste. Mateo started to thrust and stopped his search. "Fuck. E." Ed moved his other hand on Mateo's firm ass. *Maybe I could rim him now?* He wanted to. "Jesus, E," Mateo groaned. "Fuck me first."

Ed reluctantly let go with his mouth. He kept his hand on his ass, though, squeezing a cheek. Mateo fumbled with getting the condom and lube. Once he found them, he crawled back over Ed, who licked his dick as he passed by.

"Later." Mateo pressed his lips against Edgar's, licking into his mouth. Edgar squeezed Mateo's ass with both hands, ghosting his fingertips along his crack. Both of them thrust against each other while they kissed. Mateo lifted his head to breathe. "Sit up."

Edgar complied, propping himself against some pillows and watching Mateo open the condom packet. He slicked the condom smoothly over Edgar's extremely hard cock. *I hope I last long enough.* Mateo flipped the bottle top and squirted lube over the thickened penis.

Mateo rubbed Ed's sheathed cock a couple of times, then pressed his lubed finger into his ass to lubricate himself. Edgar watched Mateo straddle and hover over his erection, holding it steady for Mateo to sit down on, which he did slowly. When Mateo bottomed out, Ed moved his hands to hold his waist and waited for Mateo to give him the okay to thrust. Mateo wrapped his longer legs around Ed's back, hooked his hands around Ed's neck and lifted his hips slowly to Ed's tip. Then pushed himself down. *Fuck yes!* Mateo's ass felt fucking great gripping his dick.

Mateo laughed out loud. "You're crossing your eyes, E."

If Mateo had enough thought to pay attention, Ed was not doing his job. While guiding Mateo's hips, he thrust upward as Mateo moved down. Mateo grunted and closed his eyes. *Yes!* Ed tried to pace his thrusts just right. Mateo increased his rhythm, but Ed wanted this man crooning. He moved a hand up Mateo's back, grasped his shoulder, pulled out and twisted Mateo onto his back.

"E?"

Edgar moved back between his opened legs and ordered Mateo to hold his legs. Ed lined his cock up at Mateo's entrance and pushed in. Mateo groaned deeper.

"Good?" Ed pulled his hips back and made a shorter thrust inward.

“E,” Mateo grunted even lower and tightened his grip on his thighs. *That’s the spot, then.*

Ed started powering his hips into Mateo, maintaining the angle, and stroking Mateo’s leaking cock. Both ground and pushed themselves faster. Ed leaned over, stroked Mateo’s cock with his hand and licked his neck.

Mateo moaned. Edgar slammed inside, tightening his firm hold on the steadily leaking dick. He continued thrusting. Mateo’s cock throbbed and he shot across his chest. Ed thrust harder a few more times and came inside of him. Once Ed stopped moving, Mateo dropped his legs. Ed released Mateo’s cock and licked the cum off his palm.

Mateo shuddered. “I have plans for you later. Many in the future.”

Ed held his gaze, lowered his mouth to lick the globs off his chest and winked. Mateo pulled Ed in for a sloppy kiss, both men thrusting their tongues deeply. Ed lay on top of him, basking in the afterglow. Mateo hugged him tightly. Ed was super-content, the sweat cooling on their bodies. Of course, Mateo had to have the last word.

“Just so you know this means we’re exclusive, E.”

“Okay.” Ed pulled out and removed the used condom. He tied it and threw it in the waste bin at the side of the bed. Ed walked to the en suite bathroom and returned with a wet washcloth to clean them.

“As in together.” He pulled Ed back onto his chest.

“All right.” Ed was tired. He hoped Mateo wanted to take a nap because he planned to, right now.

“Boyfriends.”

Ed smiled. “I believe I agreed to the terms.” *This guy and his selective hearing.*

“And the goldfish needs a name. I figured Atari was lonely. It was going to be a surprise last week, but a certain someone—”

“Pong.”

“What?”

“Pong for your goldfish.”

“It’s more our goldfish. Pong the goldfish. It works.”

“I thought Xbox would be a bit much.”

Mateo bit Ed's lip and laughed. Ed, however, kissed him fully, properly and deeply.

The End

Author Bio

L.L. Bucknor loves to read... a lot, drink caffeine (coffee and tea the best, yum) and has been known to do some things for chocolate (there might or might not be a case pending—j/k, maybe). She writes sometimes too. She used to write slash fan fiction for the masses many years ago. She figured it's time to get back into the game. A staunch believer in happy endings and the various paths one can take to get there, she does.

Contact & Media Info

Did you like what you read? Want more? Less? Just want to give a shout? She's not a fan of Facebook—she has a page but barely goes on it, but she has Twitter (@BooksForShe). To best reach her, email her at the email address below.

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GET OFF MY CASE

By Lisa Oliver

Photo Description

Two naked men lying on a bed; the smaller one on top of the bigger one, his head resting on the other man's chest. The man underneath has his arms up around his lover. There is the hint of a white fluffy rug covering them from the hips down. The two are obviously lovers and are at peace with each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He was my nemesis all through school. I was the gay kid who he treated as contagious. Now I'm a successful detective, and he has just transferred in to my Police Department. Everyone knows I'm gay, but I'm a damn good detective so no one says anything. I refuse to be bullied again, and I'm not giving up the career I've fought so hard for.

Thanks,

Isla

P.S. How did they go from the above to the picture? I'm looking for GFY and enemies to lovers. Hot sex and a HEA is a must!

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: detectives, law enforcement, wolf shifters, gay for you, enemies to lovers, first time, bonded/mates, mystery

Content Warning: death of a secondary character

Word Count: 22,111

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Dedication

Thank you to the M/M Romance Group at Goodreads for putting this event together. A huge thank you also to Isla for her lovely letter and to Stephanie for her skills as beta reader and editor.

GET OFF MY CASE

By Lisa Oliver

Prologue

Eight years ago

Shane was running as fast as he could, the sound of his pursuers' feet ringing in his ears. He was sweating bullets, his heart was pounding, and his lungs felt as though they were going to burst right out of his rib cage. But he didn't stop. He knew if he could get through to the school's cafeteria he would be safe, at least from a physical beating. Sure, the taunts and name calling would still continue, and he would probably be humiliated in front of the entire school, but he wouldn't be touched. All he had to do was duck down the alleyway coming up, run about another hundred feet or so after that, and the cafeteria building would be in sight. Shane ran faster.

As soon as he turned into the alley he realized his mistake. There, leaning against the wall, was his biggest nemesis—Dimitri Polst. Tall, dark, and too fucking good looking for his own good, he had been tormenting Shane for as long as Shane could remember. Shane had heard that Dimitri had gone through his first shift on the last full moon, so he'd actually thought the male had left school already. Seemed Shane couldn't be so lucky especially as he saw the narrowed glare of pure hatred in the other shifter's eyes.

"There you are, little pretty boy," Dimitri snarled. "I was hoping to get one more crack at you before I left."

Shane skidded to a halt and looked behind him. Three of Dimitri's friends, humans, but big jocks all the same, were blocking the entrance to the alley. The only way out for Shane was past Dimitri. If Shane had shifted before, he would have probably taken on his human predators, but Shane was two years younger than Dimitri, and although his shift could come at any time, it wasn't likely to happen in the next five minutes. Besides, it was against pack law to shift in front of humans. Much like it was against his pack's law to be gay, or apparently, to look gay.

Taking a deep breath Shane adjusted his weight on his feet and then without warning, took off running again—his plan simply to get past Dimitri and hopefully to safety. Shane was a fast runner, one of the fastest in the pack, but Dimitri had quick reflexes on his side. Before he even had a chance to get away, Dimitri had grabbed him, snagging him around the waist with one strong arm and pulling him towards his chest. Shane cringed, and raised his arms above his head in the hopes of forestalling the inevitable blow.

The blow never came.

Daring to peek at his attacker, Shane could see an absolutely stunned look on Dimitri's face. It was like he was seeing Shane for the first time. Then without warning Dimitri pushed his face into Shane's neck and sniffed him, really sniffed him. Shane thought he imagined a little groan escape Dimitri's mouth although it was more likely to be a growl, but before he could process what was happening Shane heard the catcalling from Dimitri's friends.

"What you trying to do, D?"

"Gonna play smoochy face with the fag?"

"Gonna give him a hickey?"

Shane felt Dimitri push him away with a snarl, and he landed in a heap on the ground.

"Course not. I'm more inclined to rip his throat out with my teeth," Shane heard Dimitri say, "but I can't be bothered with this shit. Don't want to get blood on my jacket. Come on, let's get a beer." With that, Dimitri walked away, gathering his friends as they left Shane alone in the alley.

What the fuck had just happened? Had Dimitri Polst just saved him from a beating? Why on earth would he do that?

Dimitri had been Shane's nemesis since Shane had started kindergarten. It seemed wherever Shane went, Dimitri and his inevitable gang of friends were always there—calling him names, stealing his lunch money, making him cry, stuffing him in lockers, throwing his shoes in the dumpster.

As Shane got older the threats became more physically violent, and many times Shane had gone home from school with a black eye or worse. While his mother fussed over him, his father refused to say anything to the Alpha about it. In his father's opinion, Shane just needed to toughen up, and cut his hair. Shane lived for the day when he would go through his first shift, because the first thing he was going to do once he knew he could access his wolf form successfully, was get the hell out of his pack, and as far away from Dimitri Polst, and the others like him, as possible.

And that is what he did. When Shane was seventeen, he went through his first shift and became a full wolf. He went home, packed his bag, told his mom and dad he was gay, and walked out of the house as the shouting started. He had never gone back.

Chapter One

“So did you have a hot date last night?”

Shane heard his very pregnant partner's whispered comment even as he tried to slip unobtrusively into his seat. The regular Monday morning meeting had already started, and Shane was more than five minutes late. He had been out in the park the night before having a well-needed run in his wolf form. There had been squirrels, and rabbits, and time got away from him. He hadn't crawled home until well after three in the morning. The last place Shane wanted to be was at an early morning meeting listening to his lieutenant drone on about statistics and the need for the police to present a caring face to the public.

Handing a large cup of hot chocolate to his partner, Ruby, Shane wagged his eyebrows at her, but didn't say anything. He was too busy trying to inhale his own jumbo cup of coffee. That was the only thing he needed—well that and a couple of cigarettes, but as smoking had been banned in the precinct building for a while now, that would have to wait until after the meeting had finished.

Leaning back in his chair, Shane half closed his eyes and let the drone of his lieutenant's voice wash over him. Really, the man never said anything new, and Shane was sure the only reason for these mandatory meetings was so that the lieutenant could hear the sound of his own voice. He was almost asleep when he heard a loud, brusque voice yell out, “Listen up, people.”

Shit, when had Captain Reynolds come into the investigations room—the captain never attended these meetings. Shane sat up a bit straighter in his chair and took another long sip of his coffee. He looked up over his cup to see what the captain was doing, and stared straight into the eyes of Dimitri Polst.

Hell no, what was that man doing here?

Vaguely Shane heard the captain introduce Dimitri as a new detective to the precinct, starting immediately. He registered that the captain was waffling on about making the man feel welcome and all of that shit. But his mind couldn't get past the fact that after eight years, Dimitri Polst was not only in his fucking precinct, but he was coming here to work. Shane was just astounded.

“Hey, you look like you've seen a ghost.” Ruby smacked his arm, and Shane looked around, noting that the meeting was over.

“Yeah, it's nothing,” Shane mumbled, “late night last night and all that, you know.”

“I don’t know, pretty boy. I’m pregnant—didn’t you notice?—and haven’t done anything exciting for months. So tell me, did you have a date?”

Shane laughed and shook his head. Ruby Pearl was a fine detective and a really good partner. She was a short little thing and perps often underestimated her fighting ability, her smart mouth and quick wit. Before she had gotten pregnant, she could almost outrun Shane, and that was saying something. Shane was going to miss her when she went on leave at the end of the week.

“You know I don’t date, Rubes. I just fuck, often,” he commented wryly, opening his drawer and pulling out his case files. They currently had three open homicides, and Shane wanted to go over the material to see if he could come up with anymore leads. All three of the victims were young gay men, who had all been out clubbing when they were apparently intercepted on their way home and brutally beaten to death.

Despite the amount of carnage on the bodies, not one drop of evidence pointing to a possible killer had been found yet. While Shane wanted the cases brought together as a possible serial killer, so far the department, or rather his lieutenant, had been reluctant to do it. But as Shane went over his files again, he realized what he actually wanted to do was anything he could in the hopes he would forget that Dimitri fucking Polst was going to be working in his department.

“Come on, pretty boy,” Ruby coaxed, “you can tell me. You know I live vicariously through your exploits.”

“I can’t think why,” Shane replied as he started reading. “You know darn well I’m gay. Not as though you would be doing any of the things I like to do anyway.”

“I’m not doing much of anything lately,” Ruby said with a pout in her voice. The phone beside her rang and she picked it up. Seconds later she put the phone down and tapped on Shane’s arm.

“Come on, pretty boy, the boss wants to see us.”

“Who, the lieutenant?”

“Nope, you’d better put your jacket on, ’cos it’s the captain that wants to see us both, right away. What have you done this time, Shane?”

“I haven’t done anything,” Shane hissed, even as he ran his mind over his recent busts. Because his senses were that much sharper than humans, Shane would usually scent out more in a scene than humans could. Unfortunately that

also meant there had been occasions where Shane hadn't wanted to wait for back up, or he had taken what some might consider unacceptable risks when collaring a perp. Those occasions had seen Shane and Ruby pulled up in front of the captain for a lecture on teamwork and acting in a responsible manner.

Shane knew it was only because of his exemplary arrest record that he hadn't been fired before today, although he had been suspended on full pay a few times. He always made sure the captain knew that Ruby wasn't responsible for his actions, but as his partner, she still had to suffer through any lecture they might get. Following his partner out through the Investigations Unit and down the corridor to the captain's office, Shane was certain there wasn't anything he had done lately to cause his boss to have another go at him.

Maybe the captain wanted an update on the three open cases he and Ruby had. No, that couldn't be it. All updates had to go through the lieutenant first. That's why no one had recognized the fact that a serial killer was on the loose. But as Shane and Ruby went into the captain's office, Shane was surprised to see the lieutenant was in the office as well. That was unusual.

Shane turned to close the door behind him, and all of a sudden his senses were bombarded by the most amazing smell—jasmine, rain on a summer day, a hint of citrus and the underlying throb of wolf. Forcing himself *not* to groan out loud even as his cock rose and throbbed in his pants, he was hit with the overwhelming urge to just find the source of that scent and wallow in it. Shane resisted banging his head on the door he was closing, and instead turned to face the others in the room. Captain Reynolds, the lieutenant, Ruby of course and Dimitri Polst.

For a moment, all Shane could do was stand there, staring at the man who had been the source of so much of the bullying that Shane endured growing up. Dimitri hadn't changed much since Shane had met him in that alley all those years ago. He still had dark hair, now cut short enough at the back to conform to police policies but long enough on the top for Shane to fist if he ever got to fuck the man's delicious mouth. A man who could be the central character in Shane's wet dreams from now on with his height, his well-formed chest and shoulders, trim waist, long legs and edible ass. Dimitri, who had the face of an angel with his dark eyes, straight nose, sinfully full lips, and a scent that Shane knew was going to drive him to hell, every single day. Dimitri—the straight man who should be his fucking mate! Oh hell no.

As Shane looked into those deep chocolate eyes, he could see the amusement in the man's face. The sneaky fucking wolf already knew. He knew

that Shane was his mate and he obviously thought the whole situation was hilarious. Well Shane didn't think it was funny at all. He was so angry he could spit.

What the hell was the man doing here, and how in hell did a straight homophobe become his mate? Were the Fates having an off day or something?

Shane didn't have time to consider those questions, although he would as soon as he could get some time to himself, but he noticed the captain and Ruby looking at him with concerned expressions on their faces. Shane drew on the years of experience he had of keeping his feelings to himself and slapped a questioning look on his face, saying quietly, "You wanted to see us, Captain?"

"Yes, West, I want you to meet your new partner. Polst here will be taking over from Ruby at the end of the week, and I thought it would be a good idea for the three of you to work together this week so that Polst is up to speed with your cases and how we do things here before he starts his job officially on Friday."

The captain looked as professional and calm as ever. The man had no idea he had just officially thrown Shane's life into a living hell.

Refusing to look at Dimitri's smug face, Shane concentrated on Captain Reynolds.

"Respectfully, sir, I thought we had agreed that the department couldn't afford to replace Ruby while she was on leave, and that I would be working my cases solo from now on. I have no problem doing that, as I explained at the time. I totally understand the department's need to make budget cuts." Shane added the last bit because he knew that would appeal to the lieutenant, who so far hadn't said a word.

The same lieutenant who was now looking more than a little bit uncomfortable. "I understand what you are saying, West, and I appreciate your concern about the department's budget," he said curtly. The lieutenant was one of the few men in the Investigations Unit who blatantly didn't approve of Shane's sexual orientation and he made his distaste for Shane abundantly clear. The feeling was mutual.

"However," the lieutenant went on, "I have been informed that taking Polst here into the department will be a positive move given his skills, and as he specifically requested a transfer here, we would be foolish not to take him up on his offer."

In other words, Dimitri was prepared to work cheap. But Shane's head was reeling—what skills? Since when was Dimitri even a detective? And why the hell did he request a transfer to the very station where Shane had established himself? Totally unsure about what was going on, Shane decided the best defense was a good offense and he decided to fight with the one weapon he knew would put Dimitri off—the gay card. There was absolutely no fucking way he wanted to work with Dimitri, and once Dimitri was aware that he was out at work, then Dimitri wouldn't want to work with him either.

"Sirs." Shane included the captain and the lieutenant in his sweeping gaze, although he steadfastly refused to acknowledge Dimitri. "You are aware of my sexual orientation, and the fact that many of the cases I work on and the informants I deal with are mostly related to the gay community. I remember Polst from school, and I think it would be unfair to put a man like him, with the skills you tell me he has, in a situation that he might find difficult or unpleasant to handle. Ruby, here," Shane nodded to his partner who was looking at him like he had grown three heads in the past five minutes, "has never had a problem working with me, the cases we deal with, or the informants and places we go to chase leads. I doubt I would be able to have the same sort of working relationship with a man like Polst given his *conservative* views."

Captain Reynolds glared at Shane. "There is nothing in this man's resume to suggest that he has a problem with homosexuals. I'm sure regardless of his personal viewpoint on the subject, that Polst is capable of conducting himself in a professional manner regardless of the environment. Isn't that right Polst?" Both the captain and Shane turned to look at Dimitri who still had that smirk on his face.

"I have to confess I don't have a lot of experience in that type of lifestyle choice, Captain," Dimitri said in a deep sexy drawl. "We don't have many gay people in Jacobs Lake. However I am confident that I can work with West here without any problems. I am sure he can show me the ropes."

When the fuck did that man's voice get so deep and downright sexy? All Shane could ever remember about Dimitri's voice in the past had been his snarling and the hate that poured off that delectable tongue. Damn it, Shane thought his cock would just explode and he needed to get out of the office and away from Dimitri fucking Polst as quickly as possible.

It was that need that made Shane swallow his pride and accept the inevitable. There was no way he was going to point out what a homophobic bully Dimitri was because to do that would mean admitting his own past

weaknesses. “My apologies, Captain. Polst. I had no right to judge a person without assessing their experience in an environment in person. Is that all now, Captain?” Shane spoke directly to Reynolds. “Only if it is, I do have some leads I need to follow up. I am sure Polst won’t mind if Ruby shows him our case files, and gets him set up on the computer. I can fill in both Ruby and Polst on any information I get later today.”

Captain Reynolds looked at Shane with that knowing bloody stare of his that always made Shane feel about ten inches tall. It was that look that suggested that Reynolds knew every single thing that was going on in Shane’s head, and it took all of Shane’s willpower not to flinch. Reynolds knew that Shane had never played the gay card in the office before. Sure everyone knew of his sexual orientation but Shane never spoke about it, never complained that most of the cases he dealt with were gay related, and never did he bring it up as a means of trying to get out of what was essentially a direct order from his boss. Shane had a sinking feeling that he was going to be called into the captain’s office again before the week was over.

But for now Reynolds simply nodded his head. Shane leaned down close to Ruby’s ear and said, “I’ll call you for your lunch order, okay?”

Ruby looked confused, but she said, “Yes, sure, see you at lunch.”

Shane nodded curtly at Polst and then fled the office. He grabbed his keys from his desk along with his notepad—he always preferred to write things down rather than record them on any of the plethora of electronic devices available, and headed out. He needed fresh air in his lungs and fast if he had a hope in hell of getting his cock under control.

Back in the office Captain Reynolds looked at Dimitri. “Is West going to have a problem with you, Polst? I have to tell you he is one of our best detectives and he does have innumerable contacts in the gay community that have been invaluable to our office.”

“No sir, no problem at all,” Dimitri said firmly. “I’m sure West and I will get along just fine.”

Of course at the moment the captain had no idea just how fine the two of them would be getting along. Dimitri hadn’t left his home, his pack and his job for nothing. He was going to get Shane in his bed and in his life if it was the last thing he did. At the moment he didn’t have a clue what he would do with him once he got him there, but hey that was what the internet was for, and if

there was one thing Dimitri was really good at doing, it was research. So he plastered a smile on his face and decided that for now he would make an ally out of Ruby. He had waited eight years to claim his mate—he could wait a little longer.

Chapter Two

"I'm just not making any headway," Dimitri whined down the phone line.

"Well what did you expect, sweetie? You made the man's life a living hell while he was at school. He's not going to come running just because you have turned up, is he?" Angela's laughing voice mocked him over the phone.

"But he should," Dimitri persisted. "This 'thing' between us should make him want to be around me, not run out of the office every time I show up."

Dimitri was as frustrated as all get out. For an entire week, Shane had flitted in and out of the office, leaving Dimitri with Ruby to go over case notes, files, office procedures, and a host of other stuff that not only bored the hell out of Dimitri, but made him more and more agitated. Every time Shane came near him, Dimitri felt his body respond. It didn't matter how many times he beat off in the shower or in bed at night, one whiff of Shane's scent was enough to set his cock off again—hard, leaking and so damn needy.

"Well, have you told him you want to go out on some of his enquiries with him?" Angela asked. "You know, do some interviewing yourself, meet some of the local informants; that type of thing?"

"Yes, I've suggested it—every freaking day. But he always has some excuse and takes off on his own."

"Well why don't you do your wolf thingy, and track him down at night?"

"Grrr..." Dimitri said, "Because he reckons he works at night as well. He comes in for morning roll call, then goes out. Comes back at lunch and fills me and Ruby in on anything he has found. Then he goes off and says he needs to rest so that he can hit the streets at night. Ruby tells me that has been his routine for like, forever, and until she got too pregnant, she used to do the same thing."

"And he goes out at night without backup? Didn't you tell me he was a pretty little thing?"

Dimitri sighed. Angela knew all about Shane because Shane was the reason that he couldn't commit to Angela in the first place. The two of them had gone out for three years but when Angela said she wanted more, Dimitri was forced to tell her he actually had a mate and it wasn't of the female persuasion.

After laughing her head off, Angela made it her mission to get the two men together. Although she was human, she knew all about Dimitri's wolf side and

the whole concept of mates—thanks to Dimitri getting really drunk one night and telling her. Now Dimitri considered Angela one of his very best friends—she was definitely the only person he had told about his male mate.

His parents, his brother and sister, his pack, and his other human friends that he had grown up with, all thought that Dimitri was off in Stockton being the same womanizing asshole he used to be before he met Angela. None of them knew that Shane was in Stockton either. It seemed that when Shane had shifted and then left the pack, he left them entirely, and no one in the pack ever spoke of him.

Dimitri had heard a few unsubstantiated rumors that Shane had come out to his parents before he left, and that could account for the fact that the man was no longer welcome in the pack. Dimitri had used Social Security and DMV records to find out where he had gone.

“Yes, he was a pretty little thing, but damn Angela, he has grown up to be a fine-looking man. He has lost weight and packed on the muscle. There is not an ounce of fat on him. His long hair is now short as fuck but that just highlights his amazing green eyes—and cheek bones to die for. Oh shit, I’m mooning over him again, aren’t I?” It wasn’t the first time in the past week that Dimitri had waxed lyrical about how awesome he thought Shane looked now that he had grown up.

“Yup,” Angela said without a trace of rancor in her voice.

“It’s not just his looks. He smells like sex. All. The. Time. It’s driving me nuts and I have the worst case of blue balls I’ve ever had.”

“Do you even know what you are going to do with him when you do get him in bed?”

“Well,” Dimitri drawled out, “not exactly. I... er... watched some porn but it didn’t do anything for me. I think I know the mechanics, but watching two guys get off on each other really doesn’t get me hot or anything. I simply tried to view it like an academic exercise and took notes.”

“You took notes!” Angela was laughing so hard Dimitri thought she would have a coronary.

“I’m not gay, okay? I don’t know how I’m meant to learn about this shit.” Now Dimitri was getting pissed off. He had been a sexually confident, straight man since he was fourteen. He didn’t need to be mocked because he didn’t have a freaking clue what he was going to do with his male mate.

“Dimitri, hon, are you doing the right thing here?” Angela’s voice had softened now. “If you get together with Shane, mate or whatever you call it, then people are going to think you are gay even if you only get hard for the one man. If you can’t handle that then maybe it would be better to come back here and marry some female. She won’t be your special one, but you stayed with me long enough for me to know you can fake it.”

“Shit, Ang, I’m sorry. How many times do I have to tell you I’m sorry? If it was going to work with any woman, then it would have been you.” Dimitri’s voice was tinged with regret. He did love Angela in his own way and for the longest time he thought he could marry her and have the kids his parents were expecting. But the closer he got to making that commitment, the more he remembered the absolutely delicious way that Shane had smelled when he had tackled him that last time in the alley back at school.

After eight years apart from Shane, the memory was still fresh in his mind and it got to the point where he avoided having sex with Angela because it felt *wrong*. Dimitri knew it was his wolf signaling him that it was time to get his mate. The fact that Shane was totally the wrong gender, at least from Dimitri’s human perspective, was nothing to his wolf. His wolf didn’t care about discrimination or labels about sexuality. His wolf knew his mate existed. His wolf had smelled him, and damn near tasted him, and the older Dimitri got, the stronger that urge to claim his mate became.

“I’m not worrying about that now,” Dimitri said forcefully. “I don’t care what other people call me—that’s their labeling system, not mine. Shane copes with it, and anything he can do, I can do as well.”

Angela sighed down the phone. “Okay then sweetie, where is Shane supposed to be tonight? You said that Ruby left today so you are now *officially* the man’s partner. Why don’t you head off, find him, and offer him some backup?”

Dimitri thought about what Shane had said at lunchtime. Shane was convinced the three unsolved homicide cases they had were the result of a serial killer, and Shane mentioned going to a gay club in town to do some looking around, and talk to some people he knew. He did mention the name of the club, and Dimitri had written it down somewhere so that he could do some research on the place.

“Thanks Ang, you’re the best, you know,” he said to his friend fondly. “I guess I’m off to a gay club.”

“Don’t forget to wear tight jeans, and phone me tomorrow to let me know how you get on.” Angela laughed as she hung up.

Chapter Three

Shane couldn't decide if he was in heaven or hell. On the one hand, dancing at Club Trucker was heaven. Surrounded by hot, sleek, masculine bodies; feeling and moving to a thumping beat; being caressed and stroked by more than one interested hand. Yep, this was gay heaven. But it was also hell in a big way. Because no matter who stroked him, or who pressed a solid cock against his back, Shane automatically moved away. His wolf knew he had a mate, and he didn't want anyone touching the human side of Shane unless it was said mate.

Which, Shane figured as he danced and kept an eye out for his contact, actually put him in a type of purgatory. A sexual limbo, and one that he would probably continue to be in for the rest of his life unless his mate had a change of heart and decided to embrace the rainbow side of life. Like that was ever going to happen. *Fuck*, Shane thought, his life couldn't get any worse.

Every day brought delicious torment. Every day Shane's wolf pined to see his mate—Shane refused to consider that his human side might want to as well. Every day for the past week, Shane had gone into the office, made small talk with Dimitri and Ruby. He filled them in on what he was doing, and set them routine tasks to follow up on any leads that he had found. Dimitri seemed good at that sort of thing, and he had solid research skills. Not that Shane had noticed. Well maybe a little.

Every afternoon had found Shane desperately doing chores around his small house—anything to get rid of the tension that came from having a perpetually hard cock. Yes, he was supposed to be getting some sleep because he had been out at the clubs and on the street every night for the past week. But he couldn't sleep, was having trouble eating, and he was feeling so strung out he was starting to think he wouldn't be able to wait until Sunday night to have his weekly run.

As of today, he really couldn't stop Dimitri from coming out with him while he went about his work. Ruby had phoned him a couple of times through the week going on about how unusual it was for him to go out alone. Shane and Ruby had been almost inseparable at work, going everywhere together. Ruby had a good instinct for people, and she was invaluable in talking to people that might be nervous around Shane. His wolf nature, although hidden, seemed to leak out sometimes, and humans, especially those trying to hide something,

seemed to pick up on it. Her perky nature combined with her small stature encouraged interview subjects to trust her, and they often let on more than they might have simply because of her charm.

So, starting on Monday, Shane was going to be in permanent purgatory, because how the hell was he going to be able to keep his hands off his mate when the guy would be in his car, walking with him on the streets, and coming with him to clubs just like this one. Okay, well that might be amusing. Shane couldn't imagine that Dimitri had ever been in a club like Truckers, and it would be kinda funny to see just how professional the homophobe could be when faced with so much blatant male sexuality.

Shane spotted his informant on the edge of the dance floor, and quickly wove his way through the throbbing bodies to meet him. CJ was a cute little twink with bright blond hair and sweet blue eyes. Shane had met him when the young guy was homeless on the streets. After stopping CJ from getting a hell of a beating from a couple of much larger men, CJ had become a friend. He was also an incurable gossip, and seemed to know everything that was going on on the streets, even though he was no longer homeless, having quickly taken up the offer of help with an apartment when Shane offered it to him.

"Hey CJ, how's it going?" Shane asked quietly as he quickly slipped the young man into his arms, and pressed into him, much as he would if he was looking for a hookup.

"All good, boss man," CJ breathed in his ear as he slid his body along the detective's muscled frame. "Got some news, if you're interested."

"Always interested, little man." Shane glanced around. There were too many people around for them to talk in private. For a second he frowned. He could have sworn he had seen Dimitri's head across the room, but then Shane shook himself. There was no way that wolf would be in a gay club unless he had to be.

"Want to head out the back?" CJ cupped his hand suggestively over Shane's cock, which of course was hard again, because he had been thinking about Dimitri. "Looks like you might have something there for me to work with."

Shane gritted his teeth to stop the urge to bat CJ's hand away from his crotch. This was a game they played when they were at the club. Shane had never and would never take CJ up on his sexual offers, even if he hadn't met Dimitri. The boy was too young, too pretty, and he was a friend—not a fuck buddy. But he had never reacted so negatively to having his cock stroked before. Damn mating bond.

“You know that’s not on the table, blondie, but let’s just play it like it is until we get out of here, okay?” Shane whispered in CJ’s ear as he led him through the club and down a hallway to the back entrance. The door was supposed to be alarmed but it never was. Too many people used the alley beyond for their quick blow jobs and even full-fledged fucks.

Shane found a spot on the wall, deep in the shadows, and leaned against the bricks, encouraging CJ to climb his body. CJ wrapped his legs around Shane’s waist and buried his face in Shane’s neck. To any casual onlooker it would look like the two men were necking, but Shane had found it was one of the most effective ways of getting information without making CJ out to be an informant.

CJ rubbed his hard little cock against Shane’s abs and groaned appreciatively into Shane’s neck.

“I could get off on this, you know,” he whispered.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Shane growled. “Tell me what you’ve got and let’s get this over and done with as quickly as possible. I have other people to see tonight.”

“Ever impatient aren’t you, big boy,” CJ mumbled even as he continued to rub himself against Shane. “Okay, here’s what I heard...”

Dimitri had found Shane at the second club he went into. He hadn’t been able to find the piece of paper he had written the name of the club on, so he did a Google search for gay clubs in the area and found three possible venues. As he entered the club, Dimitri spotted the wolf dancing in the middle of the dance floor, but from where Dimitri was watching he could see that Shane was keeping an eye out for someone. Just a few minutes later—just enough time to appreciate how well Shane filled out his tight black jeans, Dimitri saw Shane cross the dance floor and latch onto a small, pretty, young man with a shock of blond hair. The way the blond was clinging onto Shane made it clear that they were more than casual acquaintances, and when Dimitri’s enhanced eyesight picked out the way the little blond brazenly cupped Shane’s cock through his jeans, his anger started to burn. It only increased when he saw Shane lead the smaller man out the back of the club.

“No fucking way,” Dimitri snarled to himself as he forced his way through the Friday night crowds. The look on his face was enough to make most people

get out of his way, although it might have also had something to do with the fact that he couldn't stop growling. He might not have claimed Shane yet, hell, he hadn't even really talked to him about their mating bond, or the issues between them, but that didn't mean that Shane could just go off and let any young blond thing play with what belonged to his mate.

By the time Dimitri got to the back door of the club, he knew his wolf was close to the surface. He could feel his eyes changing and the hair on his arms start to tingle. It was only through sheer force of will that he stopped the change completely. Must not shift in front of humans, he tried to remind himself as he searched the dark alley, sniffing for his mate's unique scent. There, deep in the shadows. The young blond was wrapped around Shane's waist and neck like he belonged there.

Growling loudly Dimitri strode over to where the two men were hidden, his hands changing into claws as he itched to grab the little interloper and tear his body to inch-sized bloody pieces. He couldn't and wouldn't hurt his mate, but he could and definitely would shred the little blond until he wasn't a threat to Dimitri's mating again.

"Dimitri, stop damn it!" Shane called out in a low voice as he carefully unwound the young blond's arms from his neck. "This is not what you think."

Dimitri stopped himself, just, and watched as Shane spoke in a low voice in CJ's ear and then gave him some money. CJ looked up at Dimitri, and scowled at him, then took off back into the club. Shane flung out his arm, and grabbed Dimitri by his belt loops, and smashed him into the same wall he had been leaning on while he was entangled with his blond. But Shane's eyes weren't full of passion, Dimitri noticed. His mate was pissed off with him, big time.

"You just cost me some valuable information, fuckwit. Now what the hell did you think you were doing?" Shane snarled at him in a low voice.

"Is that how you get all of your information, officer," Dimitri snarled right back. "By giving sexual favors to your tipsters?" Fuck, with Shane so close Dimitri could barely breathe. His cock was so hard in his jeans that it hurt, and he couldn't break his stare with his mate. Man, this guy was awesome when he was angry.

Shane tipped his head to the side and then took in a deep breath, obviously smelling Dimitri's arousal. For a moment he looked confused, but that expression was gone in an instant and Shane's angry gaze was back again. He leaned in flush against Dimitri's body and growled softly in his ear, "CJ is an

informant of mine. He's been beaten before for talking to the wrong people, and I don't want to see my friend in the hospital. We act like a hookup so he will be safe, asshole. So don't go judging what you don't understand."

"But you've fucked him, right?" Dimitri regretted the words the instant they came out of his mouth as he watched a flash of pure murderous intent race across his mate's hard face.

"Not that it's any of your business, fuckwit, but I have never done anything sexually with CJ, or any of my informants. Unlike you, I have standards." Dimitri knew Shane was referring to the fact that when Dimitri was still in school, he used to fuck anything in a skirt regardless of who it was. With his jock reputation, and good looks, he never lacked for girls willing to lift those skirts and give him what he wanted.

But right now Dimitri didn't care that Shane was angry with him, or that he might have fucked up an investigation. Shane was leaning on him, chest to chest, but had kept his groin area away from Dimitri. And Dimitri was so turned on he couldn't think. He needed friction on his cock and he needed it now. He reached out, grabbed Shane by his hips, and pulled the man's groin into his. Both men groaned as their erections nudged each other, and Dimitri rocked into Shane looking for more.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?" Shane snarled. Dimitri could see Shane's eyes were blown with lust and the man was panting softly. Against his cock, Shane's sizable erection nudged his, and for the first time in his life, Dimitri wanted to see another man's cock. But not just any cock—Shane's.

"I haven't got a clue," Dimitri said honestly, his own deep voice raspy with lust, "but I know I like it."

Chapter Four

Shane decided his brain was on the fritz. In one respect, this was his dream, his mate wanting him as badly as he wanted his mate. But this was Dimitri, someone who Shane had pegged a long time ago as a bullying homophobe. The fact that this man was now rubbing his hard dick into Shane's like a cat in heat would be laughable, if it wasn't for the fact that Shane was so damned aroused he could barely keep his control.

Looking up at Dimitri's face, Shane thought he had never seen anything so beautiful. Even in the dark of the alley, Shane's eyes could pick out the lust in Dimitri's shining gaze, the flared nostrils, and the smell of arousal that was threatening to overwhelm the pair of them. Dimitri hadn't lied, he did like this, and if the rubbing was any indication, he wanted a lot more.

Without a thought for consequences, Shane did what he had wanted to do since the first time he'd seen Dimitri in his captain's office. He ran a hand up to Dimitri's neck and pulled the man closer, crushing the man's lips beneath his own. Oh fuck, sweet heaven, one taste and Shane knew he was never going to be able to get enough of this man.

Dimitri didn't know what to think when Shane's lips hit his, but he quickly decided it didn't matter. Kissing Shane, because yes damn it, he was going to kiss the man back while he had the chance, was nothing like the thousands of kisses he'd shared with girls. Shane's lips were soft, but they were applied with precision and confidence. The man knew what he was doing, and he played Dimitri's lips like a finely tuned instrument.

As the kiss went on, Dimitri noticed other subtle differences. There was no gooey lip gloss for one thing, which was a nice change. And stubble. Who would have thought that the faint rasp of Shane's stubble against his chin would feel so erotic? Every rasp sent tingles down Dimitri's spine and reverberated through his cock.

It wasn't just the facial thing that was different. Shane's body was plastered against Dimitri's and there wasn't anything soft about the man, at all. Shane's chest pushed into Dimitri's in a way Dimitri found intoxicating. The hips that Dimitri still held in his large hands just fit, perfectly. Taut with controlled power, Shane rocked against him, their erections urgently seeking release as the

kiss started, blossomed, and then swiftly moved both men to the point of no return.

Shane had forced his lips from Dimitri's and was nibbling up the man's neck. "What do you want?" he rasped quietly against Dimitri's ear, and Dimitri shuddered.

"You. Everything." It was all he could say and he knew it to be true. Whatever misgivings Dimitri might have had about mating with a man were gone the moment Shane's lips touched his—his need for his mate was so intense, and Shane's body against his felt so perfect, that he didn't want the man to ever stop. If that made him gay, then who cared. No one had ever made him feel this good, so alive and so full of want. The Fates weren't wrong—Shane was perfect for him.

"Have you ever done anything with a man?" Shane asked quietly as his assault on Dimitri's neck and chin continued. Dimitri shook his head. There was no way he would have ever considered doing anything remotely sexual with anyone from Jacobs Lake—that would have been enough to get him shot, beaten, or at the very least expelled from the pack.

"So you've never known what it's like to have another man handle your cock." It wasn't a question this time but Shane's hand was working its way between their bodies, and seconds later Dimitri felt Shane's quick hands deftly undo Dimitri's jeans. The cold air hitting his cock was a relief, and Dimitri groaned as his hard length was wrapped firmly in Shane's grasp.

Shane's hand explored Dimitri's length before gathering the pre-cum, using it to smooth his way up and down over Dimitri's shaft. Unable to help himself, Dimitri groaned again as he thrust himself up into the channel created by his mate's hand. The tension was so perfect. The calluses on Shane's hand added to the friction, and Dimitri knew he had never felt anything so exquisite in his life.

"I bet you taste delicious. When I get you in my bed," Shane promised as his hand continued its magic, "I am going to strip you down and take you apart. My mouth will be the first man's mouth you've shot your spunk into. I will lick you, suck you, and drive you to distraction before I roll you over, and rim the hell out of your ass. I'm going to tongue you, finger fuck you, and spread you wide to get you ready for my big cock."

Dimitri groaned as he pictured the things that Shane was saying. He had never been so turned on in his life. Shane's hand's pressure and speed on his cock had increased, and Dimitri knew he was close to coming.

“And then, when you are positively begging for it,” Shane continued in his ear, “I’m going to slide my fat cock straight in your willing hole. I’m going to fill you up so far you will feel me in your throat. I’m going to pound into you so hard, so deeply that you won’t be able to think of anything but me, and the way I am making you feel. You’re going to feel what it’s like to be possessed, to be owned, and when I shoot my spunk deep into your ass, I’m going to make you *mine*.”

Shane growled his last words, and it was that growl, combined with the vivid imagery that Shane had given him, that drove Dimitri over the edge. He came groaning Shane’s name as his semen pulsed out of his cock as it never had before. Shane kept working him until he was done, kissing his neck softly, and nipping at the joint between his neck and shoulder.

Dimitri slowly came down from his orgasmic high. He became aware of the fact that they were still in the dark alley, and Shane’s covered erection was still pressed against his thigh. Dimitri thought he should offer to do something about that, but all of a sudden, he felt strangely shy and unsure of himself.

He looked at Shane who had a small smile on his face.

“What do we do now?” he rumbled quietly as he gave into the temptation of touching Shane’s face. Damn, the man had perfect cheekbones.

“Now,” said Shane as he tucked Dimitri’s cock back into his jeans and zipped him up, “you go home, and I go back to work. I’m still on the clock you know.”

“Can I come with you?” Dimitri asked, unwilling to let Shane out of his sight just now. His nerves felt jumbled and he knew he was tired. He also assumed he had a lot of thinking to do about this whole gay sex thing, but right now he needed the reassurance of Shane’s presence. Shane made him feel complete, both man and wolf, and Dimitri knew this was what he had been missing his whole life.

Shane looked at him in the darkness and Dimitri couldn’t read the look on his face. Then he nodded, stepped back, and headed out of the alley, indicating for Dimitri to follow him. As Dimitri watched Shane’s tight ass rolling in the man’s jeans, he couldn’t help but note to himself that if he felt this amazing after one hand job, how on earth was he going to feel after Shane had fucked him.

Chapter Five

Shane let himself into his small house a little after four a.m. After he had dropped Dimitri back at his car, he had driven around to see if he could catch sight of CJ, but he couldn't find the little man, and could only presume that his friend had gotten lucky. Which was more than could be said for himself, he thought wryly. Dimitri might have gotten off in a spectacular fashion, but Shane's cock was still rock solid in his jeans, and Shane quickly made his way to the shower, dropping his clothes as he went.

Once the water was piping hot, Shane stepped in and allowed himself to get completely soaked. The hot water pounding away at his muscles helped him to relax for the first time in days. As he soaked himself and started to get himself clean, his mind drifted until he was thinking about Dimitri again. Like he could ever stop thinking about him.

The man had looked amazing in that alley. First, his jealous anger when he caught Shane with CJ, and then the way he had been so open and honest. Dimitri hadn't been with a man before, that was clearly obvious, but the way he had kissed Shane back, after just one small moment of hesitation, and then responded to Shane's touch—the memory was enough to make Shane groan.

And when Shane was talking dirty to him. Spelling out how he was going to go down on him, rim his ass, and then fuck him. Dimitri didn't falter, didn't look shocked. In fact, if anything he got more aroused, if the solidness of his cock and the increased thrust of his hips was anything to go by. But for Shane, the most spectacular part was when he had growled the word “mine” and Dimitri flew apart.

Dimitri's face as he threw himself into his orgasm was a joy to behold. The scrunched eyes, the flared nostrils, the slack jaw, and the way he said Shane's name as though it was a benediction. Shane had loved every minute of it, and the only thing he would have changed was their location. Because if they had been in Shane's bed, then Shane wouldn't have stopped there.

Shane's hand dropped to his own cock as he thought about the muscles Dimitri hid under his shirt. Dimitri was solid, like most wolves, and Shane had caught a hint of a definite eight-pack as he had trailed his hand down Dimitri's chest and abs, hell bent on getting to the man's zipper. What would it be like to be clasped in those big arms, to be allowed to run his hands, fuck that, his

mouth, over all of those muscles and warm skin. Shane's hand on his cock sped up as he dreamed of exploring Dimitri's body from one end to the other.

As he reached the point, in his mind, where he had circled his lips over that divine cock, Shane came with a roar, his cum showering the walls until he had to lean on the tiles to catch his breath. Fucking hell. If thinking about being with Dimitri in a bed made him come so hard, the real event would probably kill him.

But, as it does when you have had a spectacular orgasm on your own, when the endorphins slow down and the heart rate goes back to normal, reality sets in. Rinsing himself off, Shane shut off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel. If he thought about it logically, Dimitri was probably just impacted by the double blow of jealousy and the mating bond. As the two men had gone around, seen a couple of Shane's other contacts, and checked on a couple of gay prostitutes who worked on the streets, Dimitri had been professional and polite. He hadn't touched Shane in any way, nor said anything inappropriate for an officer.

Shane was pleased that Dimitri seemed to agree on the serial killer theory for the murders—that was supportive in its own way. But Shane didn't think that Dimitri was doing it to be supportive. He just had a good eye for details, and there were too many similarities between the three murders for it to be coincidence. Of course, the biggest problem with trying to solve the murders is that there was not one shred of physical evidence at any of the crime scenes that could be used against anyone they might bring in for the crime. Basically, unless they caught the guy in the act, or a person confessed during a police interview, they were screwed.

And as for Dimitri and him being mates? Yes, well if they didn't consummate their affair soon the pair of them were going to be really snappy wolves. Unclaimed mates could end up going feral if the situation got bad enough, and given that Shane and Dimitri worked together, their attraction cycle would heat up, fast. It was Fate's way of ensuring that a matched pair became a matched pair in every sense of the word. But what happens if one of the pair wants but can't trust, and the other part of the pair isn't even gay?

Tossing his towel on the floor, Shane climbed into bed naked. He was just too tired to think about any of this now—he'd worry about his serial killer, and why Dimitri had actively sought Shane out after all of this time apart, in the morning.

Dimitri woke up with a hard on from hell and his nose filled with the scent of his mate, thanks to his shirt that he had dropped by his pillow the night before. He groaned as he rolled over onto his back, and stared at the ceiling of his motel room. Thoughts of the night before ran through his brain like a slide show along with a gamut of emotions.

The jealousy, the anger, the kiss, the passion, and man, oh man, the orgasm. They were all really positive things. But afterwards, when Shane had walked out of the alley and the two of them entered the real world, so to speak, Dimitri just couldn't shut off his fear of being exposed as gay. The deep-rooted hatred his father had for gay men had been as much a part of Dimitri's upbringing as his mother's apple pies.

Taking a deep breath, Dimitri calmed his nerves as he thought about what his father would say if he knew that his son had taken a gay mate. If... no... when, Dimitri went through with this then he would have to leave his family and his pack forever—just like Shane had done. From watching Shane as he grew up, Dimitri knew the man didn't have a good relationship with his family, although as a boy Shane had been close to his mother. How Shane had the strength to walk away after his first shift amazed Dimitri.

Unable to think clearly, Dimitri reached over and picked up his phone, calling Angela. She was the only one who could help him think about this with a cool head.

"Hey, lover boy." Angela's happy voice rang out over the phone. "How did your night mission go?"

"It had its good points and its bad points," Dimitri said cryptically.

"Oh goody, tell me the good points first, and don't leave out any details."

Dimitri explained about the night's events—finding Shane, the anger about CJ, the kiss, and the hand job. Okay, he skimmed on the details about how amazing the hand job had felt, but he did allude to sexual activity, and how he and Shane had then gone on to speak to some informants before Shane dropped him back at the club's parking lot so he could get his car.

"Wait, wait," Angela said when he was finished, "there's some holes in your story. You did get the guy off in return, right? And you did at least kiss him goodnight when he dropped you off, yes?"

"Er... that would be a no, on both counts."

"Well, aren't you a selfish date," Angela spat out. "If you had treated me like that, I wouldn't go out with you a second time."

“Well what was I expected to do? I’ve never touched a guy sexually before. Should I have just undone his pants and pulled his cock out?” Dimitri was getting angry because he was feeling defensive.

“What did Shane do to you?”

Thinking for a moment, Dimitri got it. “He... er... opened my pants and pulled my cock out.”

“Right, well that doesn’t sound that hard to me. You know how the zipper on a pair of jeans works, and I’m sure you’ve given yourself enough hand jobs to know what feels good. So you really slacked off there. Why didn’t you kiss him when he dropped you off? You had already kissed him by that point.”

“We were in a parking lot for goodness sake.”

“So?”

“Someone could have seen us.”

To his surprise, Angela started to laugh and at that moment Dimitri was really starting to hate his best friend.

“Er, Dimitri sweetie, don’t you remember the last game of the season? In the parking lot? In the back of your car to be precise? I don’t remember you being worried about people seeing us then.”

Okay it was official—he did hate his best friend. He did remember that evening. Dimitri had been playing and had scored a winning touchdown. He was flush with success, and had taken Angela rather roughly in the back of the car without any thought to who might have seen them. It wasn’t the first time he and Angela had engaged in risqué sexual activities, and even before Angela, Dimitri hadn’t cared if people had seen him when he kissed and fondled the girl of the week.

“But if I had done that, and someone had seen us, then they would have thought...”

“They would have thought that you were gay,” Angela finished for him. “Which you are.”

“You know I can’t be gay. I mean, shit, I watched all that gay porn and that didn’t do anything for me at all.”

“Yet you are sexually attracted to Shane. You can’t stop thinking about him. You think he’s amazing to look at. You can obviously get off from what he does to you. That, my friend, makes you gay, at least with Shane.”

"I can't be. I've never been attracted to any guy, only Shane." Dimitri could be stubborn when he wanted to be.

"Listen to me, Dimitri. If an alcoholic goes six years without a drink and then has just one, then he is an alcoholic. Okay, not the best analogy because once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. If a smoker gives up and doesn't smoke for a year, but then has a cigarette then he is still a smoker. If you think about Shane all the time, are sexually attracted to him, want to go to bed with the man, and spend your life with him, then, given that he is the same sex as you, you are gay."

"I don't think either of your analogies work. Maybe my wolf is gay," Dimitri said sullenly.

"Or maybe your wolf doesn't care," Angela shot back. "From what you've told me about mating, the animal side of you doesn't care what your mate is actually like. He just knows what he wants, who he is drawn to, and gets on with it. Besides didn't you hash over all of this stuff before you pulled up stakes and moved, and made your decision to be with him?"

Dimitri said, "Yeah, you're right. I did, and I do want to be with him." Dimitri heard a ping to indicate he had a text message. "Hey, look Ang, I've got to go. I've got someone trying to get in touch with me."

"Okay, sweets, phone me when you can." With that Angela hung up.

Checking his text messages Dimitri saw it was from Shane.

There's been another murder, will pick you up as soon as you text me your address.

Quickly Dimitri texted back the details of the motel, and jumped out of bed. He didn't have time for a shower, or for coffee for that matter, and as he pulled on his suit pants and buttoned his shirt, he hoped that he could convince Shane to pull into a drive-thru so he could get the coffee at least. Because as much as he wanted to see Shane again, Dimitri could feel the flutter of butterflies in his stomach. Hopefully, the coffee would help calm his nerves at seeing his mate again.

Chapter Six

Shane was surprised that Dimitri had given his address as a motel complex, but as he pulled into the parking lot beside the unit, he reasoned with himself that the man had not been in town long, and probably hadn't had the time to find a place of his own yet. Of course, if he and Dimitri completed the mating bond, the pair of them would live together. Shane allowed one brief image of what it would be like to wake up with Dimitri every day, before he firmly squashed that notion on its head. Dimitri didn't want forever with a man; he was just caught up in the mating bond.

Sitting in his car, Shane flicked off a quick text to Dimitri to let him know he'd arrived. Yes, he could have gone to the room. Yes, he could have gone inside the room if Dimitri had asked him too, but he didn't. Because if he did that, then he would want to kiss the man senseless and Dimitri wouldn't want that in the cold light of day. So Shane kept his face neutral and stayed in the car. And if he groaned at the sight of Dimitri opening the door to his place and stepping out into the cool sun-washed day, then only Shane would know about it.

"Did you sleep well?" Dimitri asked as Shane navigated the car out of the motel lot and headed into town.

"Nope," Shane replied shortly. Then realizing he must sound like maybe he couldn't sleep because of Dimitri, he added, "I went looking for CJ after I dropped you off, but couldn't find him. I'm a bit worried about him."

Dimitri sat and stared out of the window, and didn't seem to have any response to what Shane had said. The look on his face suggested the man had plenty to say, and Shane quickly realized that maybe Dimitri was still jealous. After all, Shane didn't get off the night before, so maybe Dimitri thought he went looking for a hookup. Shane decided it was too much fun to not disabuse the man of his thoughts and left Dimitri to sit in silence.

"Any chance of getting coffee before we get to the scene? I didn't have a chance to grab any before you texted me," Dimitri said suddenly, his voice jolting Shane out of his own thoughts about the night before.

"It's the first thing I do every morning when I head out," Shane said. "I can't live without my coffee."

"I'm the same," Dimitri replied, but he didn't say anything more.

God, the tension in the car was unbearable. It wasn't just the sexual angst, although that was there in spades, but there was something else. Dimitri had something to say, Shane could sense it. But whatever it was, Dimitri wasn't talking. Reminding himself he had a job to do, Shane resolutely put all thoughts of mating, relationships, and all that other shit in the back of his head as he got them coffee, and then headed to the crime scene. Apart from thanking him for his coffee—black, Shane noted—Dimitri didn't say a word.

The crime scene was a lot like the others Shane had been to. Yellow tape protected the area across both ends of a darkened alley. A body was still lying on the hard ground, partially covered by a tarp. Nodding to the two officers waiting for him, Shane bypassed the tape, and headed straight for the body, a feeling of dread settling in his bones. As he got closer, all Shane could see was a mop of blond hair, and even as he prayed, *fuck no*, his fingers twitched aside the tarp to reveal CJ's battered face.

Forcing himself upright, Shane moved to the edge of the alley. Behind him, he could hear Dimitri make enquiries of the two officers at the scene, and Shane knew he had a job to do. But right now he wanted to remember how amazing his little friend had been. CJ, with his bright hair and flashing smile. The sexy body and the outrageous personality. The man who had been beaten more than once for being gay, and for knowing too much, talking to the wrong people. The man didn't deserve this type of end. He deserved to be happy, with someone to love him and care for him for the rest of a long life. Now CJ would never have any of that, and it was up to Shane to find this killer once and for all and put him down. This was more than a job now; this was personal.

Had CJ known more about the killer than Shane had realized? Is that what he was going to tell Shane before Dimitri interrupted them? Had someone seen CJ with Shane at the club, and taken out CJ before he could reveal what he knew? If that was the case then that person had to have been following them, and Shane couldn't think of anyone who had been in the alley with them the night before, except Dimitri. Shane briefly considered the idea that Dimitri could have killed CJ, but quickly dismissed it. The markings on CJ's face, the way he had been killed in the alley, were all the hallmarks of the same man who had murdered the previous three victims, and Dimitri hadn't been in town during that time.

Lost in his thoughts, Shane didn't hear Dimitri approach, but as his smell tantalized Shane's nose, Shane stifled a groan. He couldn't deal with the man right now. He had to get his shit together. Find this killer and stop him before

any more innocent lives were being taken purely and simply because they were gay.

“Hey Shane, are you okay?” Dimitri asked softly.

Shane nodded.

“That’s the guy, isn’t it? Your friend, CJ?”

Shane nodded again. He felt if he spoke, he would just explode. He was so angry and yet he was on the verge of tears. He knew as long as he lived, he would never forget the sight of CJ’s battered face.

“Could you smell anything?” Dimitri said, stepping even closer and dropping his voice so they wouldn’t be overheard.

Shane shook his head, embarrassed that he hadn’t even thought to sniff for clues. Usually the victims weren’t found until they had been dead for a few days, and there hadn’t been anything for Shane to find. But CJ had been alive the night before, so even without time of death, Shane knew this kill was recent. It was also the first time the killer had left the victim out where the body would be found quickly. The other three victims had been found in dumpsters.

Looking around quickly, Shane noted two dumpsters lined along the alley. The leaving of the body out in the open had to be deliberate, because CJ’s body could have been stashed in either one of the open garbage containers.

“I think I might have found something,” Dimitri said. “Or smelled it at least. Come over here.”

He led Shane to the corner of the alley, beside one of the uncovered dumpsters. The two men stood in a huddle like they were still talking while Shane took a surreptitious sniff. Decay, rotten food, garbage and yes, there amongst the stench, the tiniest hint of expensive cologne. Shane recognized it immediately. He had treated himself to a bottle of the stuff the Christmas before.

“Clive Christian’s X Factor,” he said quietly.

“What?” Dimitri looked stunned.

“It’s a men’s cologne. I bought myself some last Christmas as a treat.” Shane explained hurriedly. “Real expensive, and totally out of place in this alley. I barely ever wear it because my wolf doesn’t like it much even though I do.”

“So a clue for us, then, even if it’s not something we can use officially,” Dimitri said.

“Yes,” Shane said. “Did you find out anything else from the...” he took a deep breath, “body.”

Dimitri shook his head. “Nothing I could see. From what I’d read about the other killings, I’m guessing this is the same MO except CJ wasn’t put in the dumpster. Someone wanted this one to be found quickly.”

“My thoughts exactly. The question is why?”

By this time, the two men were walking back up to where the body was now being looked over by the medical examiner and his team. Shane and Dimitri would wait for the preliminary findings and then start looking for clues. For Shane, that meant finding out what CJ had done after he went back into the Truckers Club. Looking around the alley, Shane saw the huge sign advertising the club just a few blocks over. CJ hadn’t gone very far at all.

His thoughts were derailed by the over-the-top entrance of his lieutenant. The man’s car came flying down the road, stopped with a squealing flourish, and the man himself got out, flanked by two other men from the precinct. Shane recognized Jones and Parker from the Internal Affairs department. What were they doing here—at a murder scene no less? The lieutenant never came out into the field, not for anything.

Lieutenant Anthony Green was a big man, but most of it was fat. At six foot tall, and appearing just as wide, the man was the picture of overindulgence. His face, currently wearing a sneer, was pudgy and without form. Shane would have hated him even if the man didn’t make his position on Shane’s sexuality abundantly clear every chance he got. The man personified a mean spirit and a narrow-minded attitude.

Ignoring Dimitri, the lieutenant spoke to Shane. “West, I understand you knew the victim, is that right?”

Frowning, Shane stood taller as he answered, “Yes, CJ was a friend.” What the hell did the man want, or more to the point what was he trying to imply? He found out soon enough.

“We received a tip that you were seen leaving with the victim from the Truckers Club last night. I’m here to take you in for questioning.” The man positively gloated as he spoke the words almost guaranteed to drum Shane straight out of the police force.

“You have got to be kidding me.” Shane was stunned. He didn’t realize the lieutenant hated him quite that much.

“Now, Detective, it’s just routine, you know that. Can anyone verify that CJ was alive after you left him? After you had finished your sordid little interlude?”

Shane felt Dimitri stiffen beside him. Yes, of course, Dimitri could certainly clear Shane with one well-placed word, but the lieutenant obviously didn’t know that Dimitri had even been in the area. And Shane wasn’t going to give the lieutenant any ammunition on Dimitri. Dimitri wasn’t gay. He could play at being straight with the best of them, even after he had come apart in Shane’s hands. No matter how Shane might feel about Dimitri’s presence in his life, the man was his mate, and must be protected at all costs. That protection wasn’t just from rogue wolves and fights. It meant protecting his integrity and honor as well. The lieutenant was on a gay vendetta, and Shane wasn’t going to have Dimitri caught up in it.

“No, sir,” he said, even though it twisted his gut to say the words.

Smirking at him, the lieutenant indicated to the two men beside him to handcuff Shane, and lead him to the car. Shane got in without a fight, and steadfastly refused to look at Dimitri. He didn’t want to know what his mate thought about him protecting his ass. He needed to find a way to protect his own without giving up anything about Dimitri.

Standing in the alley, Dimitri was stunned beyond belief. He couldn’t understand why Shane hadn’t said anything about him being in the alley at the same time as CJ and Shane. He could tell the lieutenant hated Shane with a vengeance, and he guessed from the lieutenant’s comment that it was because Shane was openly gay.

For one brief second, Dimitri considered the idea that Shane was the killer. After all, Shane had said that he owned a bottle of the cologne that the two men had smelled in the alley. Shane had also told him that he had gone looking for CJ after he had dropped Dimitri back at his car. Just as quickly, Dimitri dismissed the idea. Shane had done his best to protect CJ from Dimitri when he had threatened to go all wolfy in anger. Plus Shane was gay—openly so. There is just no way he would kill other gay men. He had no reason to.

Shane wasn’t a killer. Dimitri knew he didn’t know his mate very well, but he knew *that* about the man. Shane was decent, honest, and he worked bloody hard to do his job in an unfriendly environment. Aside from a couple of men in the department who obviously had a problem with Shane being gay, most of the department treated Shane with friendliness and respect.

Okay, so why didn't Shane clear himself before he was taken away in handcuffs? Dimitri kept thinking to himself even as he cleared the scene, took the ME's report and headed out to Shane's truck. Shane had left the keys in it, which was a good thing because Dimitri hadn't thought to ask him for them before the man was taken away.

When the answer came to him, as he was sitting in the truck wondering what the hell he was going to do, he hit his head on the steering wheel to punish himself for his stupidity. Shane was protecting his mate. This slur on Shane's character could cost him his job, even if the police couldn't prove that Shane was the killer. Simply being a suspect was bad enough unless he was cleared outright. If the police came up with enough circumstantial evidence against Shane, and Shane was actually booked for the crime, his life as a detective would be over the moment he hit the cell block. Dimitri had to do something and fast.

Driving into the precinct, Dimitri didn't have a definite plan in mind. He knew there was a possibility that he would have to lie, and there was also a strong possibility that even if he didn't out himself as gay, the suggestion would be enough to tar him with that brush for life. At least in the eyes of the police force. That was what Shane was protecting him from. If anyone knew how hard it was to be a gay officer, it was Shane. And Shane worked hard every single day just to prove he was as good as the next man.

All of a sudden, Dimitri was hit with how unfair the situation was for Shane and men like him. Sure Dimitri had been one of the bullies that had made Shane's life hell at school. But no one knew for sure then that the man was gay. Dimitri probably knew before Shane did, when he realized Shane was his mate all those years before. Shane hadn't shifted—and as wolves didn't get a handle on their sexuality until after they had their first shift—he couldn't have known for sure. Shane had been picked on at school because he *looked* gay. He had been small, with long hair, and a beautiful face. A natural target for bullies like Dimitri and his friends.

Not for the first time, Dimitri regretted his actions as a youth. He could have protected Shane the way a mate should, as soon as he realized that was what Shane was to him. But instead, Dimitri had left school, and gone to work at the local police department because that was what his family wanted him to do. It was a sheer fluke that when Dimitri had decided to search for Shane, the man had taken the same career path. Or maybe the Fates were working behind the scenes after all.

Regardless, Dimitri knew now was the time to either put up or shut up. Arriving at the precinct, Dimitri strode straight to the captain's office. Knocking once, he entered without waiting for the captain's invitation. Reynolds was sitting behind his desk, and looked up in surprise when Dimitri just marched in.

"What do you want, Polst?"

"West is innocent, sir, and I can prove it," Dimitri said in a rush.

Captain Reynolds raised an eyebrow at Dimitri's words, but he stood up nonetheless, picked up a piece of paper from his desk, and grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair.

"Come on then, let's go see what this is all about. The ME's report has just come through giving time of death as between four-thirty a.m. and five-thirty a.m. Well after West was seen with the victim."

"I see, well I can still clear him," Dimitri said. "Sir, what's your policy on people in a relationship working together in the department?"

Reynolds led Dimitri down to the first interview room and entered without knocking, Dimitri directly behind him. Shane was sitting on one side of a table, still in handcuffs, while the lieutenant and the two men from the IA department were on the other. Dimitri's heart broke over the dejected look on Shane's face. The man was prepared to give up his career, damn near his whole life to protect Dimitri. And Dimitri hadn't even claimed him as a mate yet.

"Why is this man in cuffs?" Captain Reynolds barked. "He is a material witness, not a bloody suspect."

"Sir," the lieutenant said, obviously surprised to see both Reynolds and Dimitri in the room. "We have a witness statement that shows that West here was probably the last man to see the victim alive. That means he is a suspect until he's cleared."

"I was with West and the victim," Dimitri blurted out, "and I can vouch that the victim was alive when he left the alley."

Chapter Seven

As Shane was being driven back to the station, he figured the best thing he could do for himself and Dimitri was to say as little as possible. Shane knew it could be easily proven that he was in the Truckers Club—the place had excellent video surveillance. The video may or may not show that Shane had gone out the back with CJ, but there would have been enough people in the club that night, who knew both Shane and CJ, that it wouldn't be hard to confirm that they left together.

The fact that they left by the back door did imply a sexual liaison. That is why Shane and CJ had established that very system of passing information about a year before. CJ had been beaten by a couple of gang members that he had offered to testify against. He had been seen talking to the police, and it had damn near cost him his life.

So Shane and CJ pretended to hook up every time CJ had information to pass on. They had done it before countless times and never had any trouble. Shane was known at the clubs in town as a man who liked a quick rough fuck or a blow job, and it was nearly always in some alley behind the establishment he was in. The fact that Shane was good at pleasuring the men he hooked up with meant he never had a shortage of partners, despite the fact that most of the patrons knew he was a detective. As far as anyone was concerned, CJ was one of those hookups.

If the time of death came back to the time when he and Dimitri were interviewing other informants then he could be cleared of the murder. There was no way he could hide Dimitri's involvement there, because too many people saw them together, but the two of them had maintained professional standards from the moment they left the alley. It was perfectly plausible that Shane had called Dimitri in after he had seen CJ, and that they had interviewed informants together. That wouldn't do anything to blow Dimitri's cover as a straight man.

Unfortunately determining the exact time of death would take a little bit of time given that it was over the weekend. Shane knew the ME would put in a preliminary report before the end of the day, which would establish time, and possible cause of death. So all he had to do was stall the bozos who would be questioning him long enough for that report to come through. The less information he offered, the better it would be for both him and Dimitri.

As expected, once he was put in an interview room after being paraded right through the investigations department, the taunts began. The lieutenant refused to take the handcuffs off Shane's wrists, which were starting to hurt, but he refused to be goaded. All he would admit to was that yes, he had been at Truckers. Yes, he had seen CJ, and yes, he did leave with CJ by the back entrance of the club.

"And what were you doing in the alley behind the club, West? Exchanging crochet tips?"

"What do you think I was doing, Green?" said Shane, refusing to give the repugnant piece of shit any respect whatsoever. If he was going to be treated like a criminal, then he wasn't going to make it easy on the man.

"I imagine you were having sex with the victim, West, so I don't see why you won't admit it. I am sure the ME's report will show evidence of anal intercourse when it's done."

Shane certainly hoped not. Not because he had sex with CJ, but because it would mean that the man was probably raped as well as murdered, and that was just too horrific to think about. Keeping a bland look on his face, he said smartly, "Not if he gave me a blow job."

"What?" Lieutenant Green looked outraged. His face was so red that Shane thought he might have a coronary. "So you admit you were having sexual relations with the victim?"

"No," Shane said quietly. "I said that if CJ had given me a blow job there would be no indication of anal assault. Likewise, if he had fucked me there would be little, if any evidence of that, in CJ's autopsy report. I didn't say that he had done any of those things. I was simply pointing out a flaw in your logic. You were the one who admitted to imagining me having sexual relations with the victim."

Shane thought he saw Parker hide a grin behind his hand, but he couldn't be sure. He was too busy watching the lieutenant getting closer to his heart attack.

The lieutenant leaned over the desk and sneered at Shane. "What were you doing in the alley with the victim," he snarled, flicking spittle all over Shane's face. Shane leaned back in his chair and made no secret of wiping his hands over his face.

"I was talking to him, Green. He was a friend of mine. I talked to him. He talked to me. He left. End of story."

"I don't believe you," the lieutenant sneered.

"Look, Green," Shane said with an exaggerated patience he didn't feel, "just because two gay men get together doesn't mean they are having sex. Gay men are just like straight men. We have friends. We talk to each other. Being gay isn't all about sex. It's also about being supportive of each other when someone is having problems."

The lieutenant shook his head and pulled out a piece of paper that was in a folder on the table. "The eye witness we spoke to said, and I quote, 'the victim was all over the cop in the club, rubbing on him, groping his crotch, and whispering to him. It seemed the cop enjoyed it. Then they left the club together out the back door,' end quote."

"CJ was affectionate," Shane said.

The pudgy piece of shit had the audacity to laugh, and Shane fumed silently, although none of it showed on his face.

"I can be affectionate too, West, but I don't go around groping men's crotch area," the lieutenant said, the sneer in his tone evident.

"No, I imagine you don't," Shane said, "but then you don't know what you're missing. CJ was just appreciating the package. Didn't mean he planned on doing anything about it, nor does it mean that I would have let him." Shane sat up, he'd had enough of this already, and he really hoped the ME's report came through soon. Shane didn't want to share anything else about his night until he knew time of death.

"Face it, Green, you have nothing except that I was seen with the victim before his death. But I wasn't the last person to see him alive. The killer was. Now give me the time of death. I will tell you where I was, and this can all be cleared up," Shane said with more strength than he felt. If CJ was killed any time after three a.m. when he dropped Dimitri off at his car, then Shane was screwed. He'd spent an hour driving around looking for CJ before going home and there was no one to verify his whereabouts during that time.

"The time of death hasn't come through yet, West, and you know it. And if you think I'm going to believe a fairy tale like two gay men just talking in a dark alley, then you are ridiculing the years I've spent as a police officer. I know what you perverts get up too," the lieutenant said with a smug look on his face.

Shane raised a single eyebrow at the man, but didn't say anything. Instead, he slumped back in his chair, determined to say nothing more until he had more

information. He knew the lieutenant was fishing, and Shane couldn't stop him. But Shane wasn't going to out his partner, and he would just put up with the shit that Green threw at him until more details came to hand.

The door to the interview room opened, and in walked Captain Reynolds, with Dimitri behind him. Shane barely heard the captain's comments about his handcuffs, although he was happy when Parker came forward and took them off. He was too busy trying to catch Dimitri's eye. God the man was infuriating, especially when Shane was working so hard to protect him.

Then he heard it. Dimitri's statement, "I was with West, and the victim, and I can vouch that the victim was alive when he left us."

"You weren't in the club," the lieutenant blustered.

"Check the video surveillance tapes," Dimitri said. "West called me, and said he was meeting a friend at the Club. I got there a bit late, and saw West and his friend head out the back. I followed them out, was introduced to CJ, and was there during the conversation. CJ left after about ten minutes and headed off back into the club."

"What were you all talking about, Polst? West here seems to think it was personal, and doesn't want to share," the lieutenant said.

Dimitri smirked, and Shane couldn't believe the bolt of lust that shot through to his groin. He didn't know what his mate was doing, but damn he looked real good doing it.

"Penis size," Dimitri lied with a straight face. Parker and Jones weren't being as professional, and were both hiding their grins behind their hands, while Captain Reynolds laughed outright.

"It seems..." Dimitri made as if to go on but Captain Reynolds stopped him.

"That's quite alright, Polst, we get the gist. It was a personal conversation."

"Yes, sir."

"Unfortunately," the captain said, "I'm still going to need to know your whereabouts for the rest of the evening, West. The victim was killed between four-thirty and five-thirty this morning. So what happened after you left the alley."

Fuck, now Shane knew for a fact, he was screwed. He had no verifiable alibi for that time of day, and with the lieutenant hell bent on reaming his ass one way or the other, he knew he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon except a jail cell. Shane didn't have a clue what he was going to say.

But it seemed that Dimitri did. "He was with me, sir."

"What, all night?" The lieutenant again.

"Yes, sir," Dimitri lied. "After CJ went back to the club, we went and spoke to some informants. We checked on a couple of gay prostitutes who work the streets, then West took me around and showed me some of the town hot spots. After that we went back to pick up my car from the Trucker's parking lot, and I followed him back to his place. I've been staying in a motel and it is not very comfortable. We were there from about three a.m. until we got the call about the murder this morning. We dropped my car back at the motel and then headed out to the crime scene."

Now everyone was looking at the lieutenant who had gone purple in the face, and there was a large vein pulsing in the top of his head. The man was obviously thinking hard enough to generate steam.

"It doesn't mean that West didn't do it," he said triumphantly. "You weren't actually together in the same room all night. West could have sneaked out, found the victim, killed him, and got back before you noticed."

The idea was plausible although really weak by anybody's standards. Shane looked at Dimitri pleading with him not to say any more.

Dimitri just shook his head slightly and said, "Nope, lieutenant, that wouldn't have been possible at all. You see..." He leaned down and whispered in the lieutenant's ear. The lieutenant's eyes just got bigger and bigger, then all of a sudden he pushed away from Dimitri, and hurried out of the door. "You're freaks," he yelled back through the door, "you and West both, freaks."

The captain frowned at the sight of the lieutenant's back heading down the hall, but then he shrugged, and turned looked at Parker and Jones. "As far as I am concerned this interview is over. Did you two have anything else you need to know?"

"No, captain, we didn't think that Detective West here had anything to do with the murder of his friend in the first place. But the lieutenant was rather insistent," Jones said.

"Good," said the captain, "then let's get out of here. It's the weekend and I'm sure you guys have other things you would rather be doing. West, I can't have you investigating your friend's murder. You know that, but I'll put Trent and Mace on it so that they can keep you in the loop, unofficially of course. On Monday I want to see what evidence you have connecting this murder to your other three outstanding cases."

The captain smiled at Shane's look of shock. "Yes, West. The lieutenant did tell me your theory, but he was extremely unflattering about it, and I have to confess I did dismiss the idea at the time. But if there is a serial killer in our city then I want him found. So I will expect you and Polst in my office after the Monday morning meeting." Nodding at Parker and Jones, Captain Reynolds left the room.

Parker and Jones went to leave too, but at the door, Jones turned back and said, "You know, West, that Green really has it in for you. I'd watch your back if I were you."

"Yeah, I know, Jones. That's why I didn't want my partner involved in all of this," Shane said. All of a sudden, he felt dead tired.

"It seems your partner can take care of himself." Jones laughed. "Hey Polst, what did you tell the lieutenant to make him run out of the room like that?"

"Not telling you, Jones," Dimitri drawled. "I'm not the kiss and tell type." Jones and Parker were still laughing as they went out the door.

Shane looked up at Dimitri who was still standing by the door, looking so fine in his grey suit and the smirk on his face.

"Why'd you do it, Dimitri?" Shane asked softly. "I know you aren't gay, and I don't want you tarred with the same brush I am. I was trying to protect you from the likes of the lieutenant."

"You are mine," Dimitri said firmly. "Yes, you are my partner, but you are also my mate, and I guess in the eyes of the department that means you are going to be my boyfriend until we can get married. I checked with the captain before I spoke up, about interoffice relationships, and he said he was fine with it so long as it doesn't interfere with our work, and we both know it won't. I figured I was going to have to come out sooner or later, and given what you were going through, sooner seemed better."

Shane shook his head, and got up from the table. He wandered over to Dimitri and leaned on his chest, saying softly, "I'm never going to be able to thank you enough. You know that, right?"

"Oh yes, you will," Dimitri said confidently as he led them out of the room, down the hall and out to the car.

As he went to get into the truck Shane said, "So are you going to tell me what you said that freaked the lieutenant out so much?"

“Nope,” said Dimitri. “I’m going to take you out for lunch, and then home to rest. And when you have been fed for the second time, I’m going to get you to show me what I said in graphic detail. I don’t want you making a liar out of me.” The grin he gave Shane over the top of the truck was positively feral, and Shane felt a shiver of excitement run down his spine and lodge firmly in his groin. Somehow he didn’t feel so tired anymore.

Chapter Eight

Lunch was excellent. Shane directed Dimitri to a small diner he knew of on the edge of town where they could eat good food in relative private. After they had ordered, Dimitri looked down at his hands, and then up at Shane.

"You know I never did apologize for the way I treated you growing up," he said quietly.

"There's nothing to apologize for," Shane said. "You were doing what you were programmed to do by your parents, the school social system, and the pack. I know I was small and too pretty for my own good." He smiled. "If it hadn't been you and your friends, it would have been someone else."

"How can you not be upset about it?"

Shane shrugged. "It happened a long time ago as far as I'm concerned. Once I 'grew up', I got the hell out of town and I don't plan on ever going back. The negative thoughts, and any hurt I might have felt at the time have long gone. You know, in a way, you guys did me a favor. I mean, look at me now. I'm bigger, stronger, and a lot less pretty. I doubt I would have made those changes, which incidentally have worked really well for me, especially with the men I attract, if it hadn't been for what I went through at school. So don't worry about it, okay?"

"There's more," Dimitri admitted.

"What more can there be?" Shane said. Then his face darkened. "You didn't tell anybody I was out here, did you? Anyone back at Jacobs Lake?"

Dimitri shook his head. "No, Shane, I wouldn't do that to you, although I may have to tell my mother when I let her know you and I are mated. I owe her a phone call at least."

"How did you leave things with your pack and your family?" Shane asked.

"I didn't really tell them anything," Dimitri said as he fiddled with his napkin. "Look, I knew you were my mate that last time we met up in the alley at school, and I admit it, I ran for it. I couldn't get away from you fast enough. I kinda figured you wouldn't have felt the same pull because you hadn't shifted yet, but I did, and I freaked the fuck out. I feel awful about it now, but at the time all I could think about was fitting in with the pack, living up to the expectations of my family, and getting a job."

“You knew and you left?” Shane couldn’t begin to describe the hurt that punctured his heart at the moment. He struggled to put things into perspective. He had only been sixteen years old at the time, while Dimitri had been eighteen. They both would have been too young to cope with the pressures of mating, even if same-sex partnerships were accepted in their pack. But the fact that Dimitri knew they were mates, and had left him to the mercies of school bullies for the next two years was really hard to take. A mate was to be cherished and protected—not abandoned.

Shane could feel Dimitri watching his face which no doubt betrayed the range of emotions he was feeling. Taking a deep breath, he deliberately configured his face into the bland, professional expression he used at work.

“That would have included getting married and having kids then,” he said calmly.

“Yes or at least it would have, if I had gone through with it,” Dimitri admitted. “I was with this girl, Angela. She was human but she had accepted my wolf. We were together for three years. She was pushing for a commitment, but I just couldn’t do it.”

Dimitri looked Shane straight in the eye. “Angela is the only one who knows about you, what you mean to me, and why I sought you out after all of these years. In fact, she encouraged me to come here. My parents simply think I got offered a better job, and they expect me back for pack meetings and holidays. Of course, once I tell my mom we’re mated, I will be as cut off from my family and the pack as you are. But I know that, and I accept it.”

Now the pain Shane was feeling was for his mate. Dimitri was going to lose everything. But this was something he had actively chosen for himself. No matter what had happened in the past, Dimitri cared enough about them being mates to give up his whole life and move to a new place, without even knowing what type of a welcome he would get.

It really wasn’t easy for a wolf to give up his pack. Shane had been able to do it relatively easily because he had never been one hundred percent accepted by the other pack members. Despite his problems with the pack, his wolf still missed the company and sense of belonging that any wolf craves. Dimitri had been with the pack a lot longer, and unlike Shane, he had been an accepted member. He had friends and colleagues, and he could have had a mate, if not a true mate. But anyone of the single female wolves in the pack would have taken Dimitri in a heartbeat.

“Why didn’t you try for a pack female? Surely that would have been easier for you, rather than a human, and the pack would have been more accepting,” Shane asked.

“I couldn’t do it,” Dimitri admitted. “I did try with a couple after I found out about you, but my wolf just wouldn’t let another wolf close to me. He was kinda accepting of Angela, in that I didn’t get an instant droop every time I went near her, but as I got older, and she got more insistent about a commitment from me, my wolf got more and more adamant that he wanted his mate.”

“So this wasn’t really a choice you wanted then,” Shane persisted, although he really didn’t know why he was saying these things. Especially not when Dimitri looked a damn sight more edible than the food on his plate.

Dimitri shocked him by putting his hand over Shane’s as it sat on the table. There, out in the open for anyone to see.

“I do want you, Shane,” Dimitri said, his voice low and ringing with honesty. “I want you more than you could ever know. Not just in my bed, or up my ass, but in my life, forever. You have all of the qualities I want in a mate—honesty, integrity, strength, not to mention the desire to protect me. You work hard, and you care about your job, and the people you serve. You’re a good man, and one I will be proud to call mine. I know you might have doubts, and I know it might take you some time to trust me after what I put you through in the past. But I will wait as long as it takes for you to be my mate.”

Wow, okay, Shane could safely say he never expected anything like that to come out of Dimitri’s mouth. He knew the wolf was pulled by the mating bond, but Dimitri’s little speech showed that the man had thought long and hard about what it meant to take a mate like Shane.

Suddenly the past really didn’t matter anymore. Sure, Shane had been hurt by his past, but through the years, he had been determined not to let his past dictate his future actions. If Dimitri could go out of his way to give up everything just to be with his mate, then Shane could let down the walls in his heart and give this man his forever.

Dimitri had grown up too. Yes, he had become even better looking, but that wasn’t the main selling point for Shane. By his actions that very day, Dimitri had shown that he could be counted on. He could be trusted. Hell, he could even be counted on to lie to anyone just to save his mate. That took a lot of guts, and a commitment that Shane had never experienced from another person before in his life.

Shane looked up into those steely eyes that had captivated him from that day, just a week ago in the captain's office.

"I have been so mixed up this week," he confessed shakily. "Wanting you and telling myself time and time again it could never happen between us. I needed you to show me that you wanted me before I could trust you. And today..."

Shane couldn't speak for a moment. He was so overwhelmed. First, CJ's death, and now Dimitri accepting him as his mate. He wanted to laugh, and cry, but most of all he wanted Dimitri in his bed with his teeth firmly embedded in his mate's neck as he fucked the man who had haunted his dreams for the last week. Once mated, the two men would be together forever. Dimitri would never be able to lie to him, would never hurt him, and would always be there, just for him. Faced with all that, the past really didn't matter at all. They would face whatever the future brought together.

"Today you gave me every reason to trust again," he continued. "Every barrier I have put up to this, you have torn down, without even trying. By being yourself. I have never wanted anyone the way I want you. And like you, it's not just in my bed, although I want that really badly. You are a decent man, Dimitri. You gave up everything to come here and be with me. How could I not want you? I don't need to wait. I don't need anything else to be sure. I want you in my bed and in my life. But being gay is not easy, and no matter if you and I both know the only man you will ever get hot for is me, those who don't know about us, and about what being mates is all about, will assume that you are gay. Are you really sure about this?"

"I've had eight years to think about this, Shane. I have never been more sure about anything in my life," Dimitri said simply.

When it came down to it, for wolves it really was that simple. Mates wanted each other regardless of the labels outsiders might put on their relationship. That want, that desire, and that passion would never die. And when life was put into perspective like that—where one man would remain steadfast to another regardless of what life threw at them, then there honestly wasn't any reason not to jump right in and hold on tight.

"You know I'm not going to want to rest when we get home, don't you," Shane said quietly.

"I'm counting on it," Dimitri said as he signaled the waitress for the check.

Chapter Nine

Shane didn't know how he managed to contain himself on the drive back to his place, but he did, barely. But the moment the two men were inside his door, he turned and had Dimitri up against the door. Reaching up, he cupped Dimitri's neck and pulled the man down so that he could fasten his lips on the mouth that had plagued his thoughts throughout their meal.

Dimitri didn't hold back either. The moment their mouths touched, Dimitri kissed right back, his big arms coming around and cradling Shane as though he was the most precious person in the world. Lost in their passion for each other, time stood still. Together they stood, their bodies perfectly fitted to each other, their mouths fused as the kiss went from sheer relief in coming together, to soft and searching and then as the need between them grew, the passion returned with vengeance as both men dueled for dominance. Hands flew as both men tried to touch as much of each other as they could reach, clothes frustrating their way.

His hands fisted in the top of Dimitri's hair, Shane pulled the man off his mouth so he could speak.

"I need you in my bed and naked, Dimitri. I'm not having your first time in a fucking doorway."

Shane could see that Dimitri's eyes were blown with lust and his lips were swollen. Dimitri nodded, and Shane led him upstairs to his large open bedroom. The room was dominated by a huge bed with head and foot boards of solid wood, and covered in white linens. Shane loved the faux fur throw on the foot of the bed, loved how it felt on his skin, and he wondered what Dimitri would look like splayed out across it, and if he would enjoy the same sensations. But for now it was more important to get the man naked, and Shane skillfully pulled off Dimitri's jacket and started working on the buttons of his shirt. Dimitri obviously had the same idea, and was tugging at Shane's clothing.

Of course, they both got in the way of each other; clothes do not magically fall off. By unspoken accord both men stepped back and worked on their own clothes, stripping down without any embarrassment. Shifters were used to nudity, but this was something more. Something far more powerful and intimate.

When they were both naked, Shane stepped forward and pushed Dimitri on the bed. Scooting along the bed until he was in the center of it, Dimitri settled back and let Shane look at him, his gaze possessive and full of lust.

Shit, Shane thought, he is so beautiful. Shane had never seen Dimitri naked. He hadn't shifted when Dimitri had, and the first time he had shifted himself he was on his family's land, not on the pack grounds. Now Shane was really glad he hadn't set eyes on Dimitri at that time. His lust for the man would have been really hard to hide. He was all broad shoulders, lean muscle lines and tattoos. When the hell had Dimitri gotten those tattoos?

There was a yin/yang symbol on one shoulder, with a gorgeous wolf head beneath it. Underneath that was a tribal cuff, and down his forearms Dimitri wore a combination of characters and letters. There were two more tattoos on his pectoral muscles, and damn Shane just wanted to take the time to trace every single one with his tongue. The only tattoo he had ever gotten was a series of paw prints that he wore as a cuff around his bicep—a reminder to him of the fact that he had walked away from his pack. One day he would get Dimitri to tell the story of his tattoos, but that could wait, because aside from the fascinating ink, the man had the most amazing body.

Growling his appreciation Shane stalked toward the bed. Grabbing a bottle of lube off the side dresser, he climbed up and straddled Dimitri's slim hips, the man's hard cock pulsating under his balls as he sat. Dropping the lube on the bed beside him, he leaned forward, grabbing Dimitri's hands with his and holding them fast on the bed.

"You need to tell me what you want," he said softly as he watched a play of emotions run over his mate's face.

Dimitri had never been so turned on in all his life. His cock was so hard it hurt, and looking at his mate, so self-assured and sexy sitting above him, it was all he could do not to flip Shane over and plunge his cock deep into the nearest orifice he could reach.

But he wasn't going to do that, although he couldn't help but rock up into Shane where he was pressed down over his hips. Hmm, the friction on his cock felt so good, so he did it again. He groaned at the sensation of Shane's balls rolling over his cock as he considered his answer.

In most situations during the mating, the more dominant wolf would fuck the lesser one. Dimitri was the stronger and bigger wolf. But as far as male-on-

male sex went, he was also the least experienced; hell, he was a virgin, and Dimitri didn't want to hurt his mate by doing the wrong thing. He figured it would be better to let Shane be the top. He could learn by following what Shane was doing and hopefully get to be the giver the next time.

Besides, if anything was going to test this whole gay thing in Dimitri's mind, then getting fucked was the right way to do it. Although Dimitri didn't have any doubts in his head that he could tell, he had no way of knowing just how deep-rooted his family and pack prejudices went in his psyche. The other thing was that Dimitri had fucked before—heaps of women, none of whom had a place in this bed. What he hadn't done was given himself to another person, and he wanted that person to be his mate.

"What you said last night," he said roughly, rocking again into Shane's touch. "I want you to give me what you promised me last night in the alley. What I told the lieutenant you had done."

Shane groaned then, and let go of Dimitri's hands. Leaning over he murmured against Dimitri's lips, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Dimitri breathed against Shane's lips before closing the distance between them. Their lips met and this time Dimitri let Shane take over. Shane played him, beautifully, expertly. Kissing him firmly, he gently encouraged Dimitri to open his mouth and slipped his tongue inside. He mapped out every part of Dimitri's mouth, spending a lot of time running his tongue over Dimitri's fangs, which Dimitri found to be a huge turn on.

When Shane seemed satisfied that Dimitri had been kissed within an inch of climaxing—because damn, the man was still sitting on him, and the feel of Shane's cock against his abs, and the man's balls teasing his cock kept Dimitri on the fine edge of coming—Shane allowed his lips to move lower, kissing over his chin and jawbone and then down his skin-covered jugular vein. Dimitri lifted his chin to give Shane more access—his submission not a gift given lightly, and he knew that Shane was aware of that. The soft growl he heard reinforced his belief that he was doing the right thing.

Shane kissed, licked, and nibbled his way deliriously slowly over Dimitri's collar bone, his pectoral muscles, giving particular attention to Dimitri's stiff brown nipples. Dimitri growled as Shane bit him, nipping the nub sharply, but Dimitri grabbed hold of Shane's head and held him there. Dimitri had never thought his nipples would have a direct line to his dick, but having Shane nip and lave his way over his chest had Dimitri writhing hard against Shane, begging for more.

Finally, Shane headed south again, down Dimitri's body. He mapped out the solid muscles that formed Dimitri's eight-pack, licking along each groove. Dimitri groaned, and shifted beneath Shane's explorations, causing his cock to bump Shane on the chin. Shane looked up at him then and grinned, his eyes almost black, before moving down, bypassing the needy cock in his face, and nuzzling Dimitri's balls. Carefully he licked over each one before taking them gently in his mouth and tonguing them. Dimitri arched his back in pleasure. No one had ever done that to him before, and fuck it felt so good.

"Shane, please," Dimitri begged, his low voice raspy with lust. If he didn't get some attention to his cock soon, he was going to burst. Shane chuckled around Dimitri's balls, and damn it all if that didn't make Dimitri want to come even more. But Shane must have taken pity on the man because finally his mouth encircled Dimitri's cock, and Dimitri couldn't help himself. He thrust upward into that enticing wet warmth, shaking with pleasure as he felt Shane's tongue map out the sensitive skin under the head of his cock, before swirling down the vein that ran the length of Dimitri's shaft.

Dimitri felt the head of his cock hit the back of Shane's throat, and Dimitri expected the man to stop there. But seconds later Shane relaxed and swallowed, taking the man deeper than he had ever been in a mouth before. He was going to come if Shane kept this up—he didn't know how he could stop himself.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Shane, you're killing me here," Dimitri cried out.

Shane nodded, which felt slightly strange because he still had Dimitri's cock deep in his mouth, but he eased back a bit. Dimitri panted hard, praying that Shane would understand how close he was. It seemed that Shane did, because moments later, after bobbing up and down Dimitri's cock for just a little bit more, he let the cock slide from his mouth. Dimitri groaned at the loss, but then inhaled sharply as Shane's wicked mouth went below Dimitri's balls and started licking along his perineum.

Almost howling in delight, because damn it, that tongue on that sensitive piece of skin did feel that good, Dimitri slid his feet up the mattress and opened his legs wide to give Shane more access. Using his devastating combination of sucks, licks, and nibbles, Shane moved closer to Dimitri's anus. Dimitri tensed for just one second when Shane's tongue flicked across it, but then he relaxed into the faint touch. It felt foreign, strange, but not unpleasant.

Encouraged, Shane pressed closer, using his broad tongue to soften the tight muscles protecting Dimitri's most private space. But Dimitri's butt was still too

close to the bed for Shane to get decent access, and Shane raised his head long enough to ask for a pillow.

Arranging Dimitri with the pillow now firmly under his ass, tilting it to give Shane better access. Shane looked up at his mate who was flushed and sweaty, his cock hard and solid against his stomach.

“You okay up there,” Shane asked softly.

“More than,” Dimitri rasped out, “but please Shane, please can you speed things along just a little bit. I am hanging onto my control with a thread here—a very tiny thread.”

“I could make you come right now if you like, lover. But then it would make it even harder for me to penetrate you because your delicious ass muscles would tighten up even more,” Shane explained. “Can you hold on just a little while longer?”

Dimitri nodded, pleased that his mate was trying to be so careful.

“And,” Shane said, as he bent his head again, “don’t be worried if your impressive erection here flags a bit as I prepare you, I’ll get you back up again in no time.”

Considering Dimitri didn’t think anything would make his cock go down in the foreseeable future except a mind-blowing orgasm, Dimitri just nodded that he understood. His body tingled all over. His nose was filled with the scent of his mate. He knew he needed something, he just didn’t know what. He just felt this need and it was driving him insane.

When Dimitri felt the tip of Shane’s tongue actually enter him just a little bit, he damn near shot off the bed. Shane soothed, and petted his thighs and belly before dipping his head down, and repeating his actions. This time Dimitri was better prepared and he relaxed into the touch. The fingers Shane had lightly running up and down his cock certainly helped.

Soon Shane pushed his tongue deeper, and before he knew what he was doing, Dimitri pushed back into the touch. There was no pain so far, just a wickedly sinful sensuality that appealed to Dimitri on a level he had never experienced before. Soon Dimitri was rocking onto the touch, pushing his ass at Shane’s face as Shane eagerly ate him out. If the man’s moans and growls were any indication, Shane was really enjoying himself, and Dimitri realized he was close to coming again.

Almost as though he was a mind reader, Shane slowed up his actions, and then Dimitri felt the soft push of a harder digit—Shane’s finger eased into

Dimitri alongside his tongue. Dimitri groaned, but he didn't stop rocking against Shane's face—it honestly felt so good. When Shane pulled his head back, Dimitri actually whimpered, but he was soothed again as Shane petted him, stroked his cock, and murmured softly, “Shush my lover, it's coming. I need to use the lube now because spit is just not enough. I don't want to hurt you and your virgin ass is so fucking tight.”

Quickly, Shane lubed up his fingers, three of them Dimitri noticed. Then he slid one of those fingers inside of Dimitri, taking the head of his cock in his mouth at the same time. Dimitri didn't know which way to move. The finger felt good, especially with the added glide of the lube, but the mouth on his cock was a known entity, and Dimitri loved getting a blow job.

As Dimitri allowed himself to get lost in the sensation of Shane licking and sucking the head of his cock, he felt Shane slip another finger inside his tight muscles. This time there was a slight bit of discomfort, but it eased quickly as Shane kept sucking his cock, and moving his fingers in and out of his ass. Suddenly Shane's fingers angled slightly and Dimitri groaned as a bolt of pleasure shot through his system.

“What the hell was that?” Dimitri asked, his voice quivering even as his ass sought out that sensation again.

Shane dropped his cock long enough to answer with a grin, “The reason gay men have sex,” before he went back to what he was doing.

“Do it again,” Dimitri demanded. Shane obliged and Dimitri moved into the touch, forcing more. Fuck. That just felt so amazing Dimitri knew he could come from that stimulation without anything else. Who knew his ass could feel so fucking good?

Shane had widened the gap in his fingers now, and Dimitri could feel the stretch, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. By the time Shane had added a third finger, Dimitri was fucking himself on Shane's hand in earnest, too lost in the pleasure to care that he actually had part of someone's hand up his ass. Dimitri just let himself feel. He could smell his mate, and that comforted, and aroused him all in one go. As the fingers moved in and out of him, he quickly got to the point where it wasn't enough.

Letting Dimitri's cock fall out of his mouth, Shane said quietly, “Sorry, can't wait anymore. I'm going to fuck you now, lover. It would be easier for you if you were on your hands and knees for the first time, but I think your wolf will handle it better if you can see me when we do this. Is that okay?”

Dimitri took in the lines of tension on Shane's face, and noticed for the first time how hard and leaking Shane's cock was. The man had been so very patient, but it was clear his control was damn near shattered. And so was Dimitri's. He wanted this. He wanted Shane inside him so badly he ached.

"Please Shane, fill me. Fuck me, mate with me, and claim me. I'm yours," Dimitri said, the truth of his words shining in his eyes.

Growling possessively, Shane removed his fingers, and inching forward on his knees, he raised Dimitri's legs, putting them on his shoulders. Dimitri could feel the blunt head of Shane's cock push up against his anus, and for a moment Dimitri tensed, worried that it wouldn't fit. But Shane had done a good job of stretching him as much as he could, and with a sharp little thrust, the head of Shane's cock pushed past Dimitri's muscles and into the heat inside.

Okay, damn! Dimitri could feel that. He tightened up as felt the burn race through his nerve endings. Shit. Shit. Shit. Above him Shane had stilled completely simply letting Dimitri adjust to his size. Shane's cock wasn't huge by wolf standards, but all shifters were well endowed, and Shane was bigger than most humans.

"Relax, hon," Shane soothed, "breathe out and try and relax."

Dimitri didn't even realize he had been holding his breath. He let out a long exhale and consciously tried to relax his anal passage. As he pushed out, he could feel his body accepting more of Shane's length and Shane pushed in a bit more. Trying hard not to tense up, Dimitri breathed, and pushed out again, and Shane gained even more ground.

Together the two men worked until Shane was balls deep inside of his mate. He stilled completely again—a sexy-as-fuck shifter statue with a body so perfect Dimitri knew he was going to spend a lot of hours exploring his mate. But for now he had a more pressing need—he needed Shane to fuck him, and fuck him deep.

Reaching his hands out, Dimitri grabbed Shane's hips and pulled him as close as he could with his legs still on the man's shoulders. The action caused Shane's cock to sink even deeper into Dimitri, and they both moaned. Looking deep into his mate's eyes, Dimitri growled, "Move mate. Make me yours."

His wicked grin lighting up his face, Shawn rocked against Dimitri, setting a shallow rhythm to get Dimitri used to the sensation. As his strokes became longer, Dimitri could feel the need escalate between them. Within minutes

Shane was pounding in and out of his mate's ass with Dimitri begging him to go harder and faster.

Yes, Dimitri knew he was acting like a prize slut but he really didn't care. Shane felt so good inside of him, so very right, and when the man tilted his angle slightly so that his cock was brushing across Dimitri's prostate, Dimitri knew he wasn't going to last much longer. Releasing one hand from Shane's hip, Dimitri fisted his own cock, desperate to come.

Still keeping up his punishing rhythm, Shane let Dimitri's legs drop as he moved his chest up over Dimitri's.

"Ready to be mine," Shane growled at him.

"Fuck yes," Dimitri yelled as he felt the beginning of his orgasm hit him. Shane bit down hard on the juncture between Dimitri's shoulder and neck muscles, and Dimitri howled as his orgasm overtook him. And he was lost to it. Dimly Dimitri realized that his own wolf had come out to play, and as he sunk his teeth into Shane's neck his cock burst again, his orgasm stretching on and on, bathing Dimitri in unimagined pleasure. Seconds later Dimitri heard Shane howl as his orgasm overtook him, and Dimitri moaned long and low as he felt Shane's hot spunk bathe his inner channel.

Around them the mating bond swirled—two wolf souls joining just as the human bodies had—meeting and then coming together. Two wolves forever entwined; their mating bond permanently in place. A bond that could only be broken in death.

Shane went to move off of Dimitri, but Dimitri held him close, pulling him against his chest. He felt satiated, complete in every way. He didn't care what anyone else thought. This was too perfect to be wrong, no matter what society, his family, or his pack thought. The ache that had manifested in Dimitri's chest the day he pushed Shane away eight years ago was finally filled.

Sure there may be problems at work. Yes, they still had a murderer to find. And Dimitri was going to have to phone his mother at some stage. But for now he had his mate in his arms. A mate who was snuggling into his neck, breathing in his scent.

Unbelievably, Dimitri felt his cock start to rise again, and he wanted nothing more than to push Shane on his back and start exploring. Filled with a confidence he hadn't felt until now, Dimitri did just that. The men's problems weren't going to go away overnight, but they had forever to solve them. But for

a while the rest of the world could just damn well wait until Dimitri had shown his mate just how precious he was.

To Be Continued...

Author Bio

Lisa Oliver had been writing non-fiction books for years when visions of half-dressed, buff men started invading her dreams. Unable to resist the lure of her stories, Lisa decided to switch to fiction books, and now stories about her men clamor to get out from under her fingertips.

When Lisa is not writing she is usually reading with a cup of tea always at hand. Her grown children and grandchildren sometimes try and pry her away from the computer, and have found that the best way to do it is to promise her chocolate. Lisa will do anything for chocolate.

Contact & Media Info

Lisa loves to hear from her readers and other writers.

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GRAVITATIONAL FORCE

By C.M. Walker

Photo Description

A slim, dark-haired man pins a bare-chested, muscular blond man against the wall by holding his shirt above his head. The dark-haired man fondles the goods inside the blond's open pants and kisses his neck. They partially cover an Avengers poster that is hanging between a bookcase and a door.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I could get free in a heartbeat. I was strong enough and had the right training that should make it simple to break loose from my roommate's weak grip on the shirt trapping my arms to the door. So why couldn't I do it? Was it because I was trembling with the need for skin to skin contact? Maybe it was the fact that my brain had shut down the second my roommate had cupped my crotch through my pants. Or could it be those damned dreams that had been haunting me every day since I first set foot in this dorm room? Those dreams where my hands were roving over pale skin, where whimpers and mewls of pleasure came from between soft pink lips, and where the world fell away as I watched every inch of my cock disappear between ivory cheeks.

(I think it's sexy and sweet when the bottom takes the lead, especially when the top is too shy to make the first move. I want to know how these boys got to this point and just a little of what happens after, a HFN ending please.)

Sincerely,

Viv

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: college, barely legal, roommates, shy top, grief

Word Count: 9,920

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And finally, last but absolutely not least, thank you to every single person who reads *Gravitational Force*. Thank you for letting me tell you a story.

GRAVITATIONAL FORCE

By C.M. Walker

My heart pounded in my chest. I rolled onto my side and opened my eyes. Across the room, just a few feet away, my roommate Nate stirred. That's when I noticed the sticky mess in my briefs.

Shit.

I'd have thought I was too old for *those* kinds of dreams, but apparently not. The images rushed back to me: Nate, on his knees in front of me, sucking down my dick like he was starving; his green eyes staring up at me; my hand buried in his dark hair, pulling through the strands.

These dreams about my roommate needed to stop. They were like torture. Especially since he was right there, living in the same cramped space.

I sat up in bed; the dog tags around my neck slid into place between my pecs. The jingle of their movement reassured me every morning that they were still there, that I would never forget. Taking them off felt like betrayal, so I only took them off when I absolutely needed to.

I shoved the covers off, hoping to escape the room before Nate woke up, but as I was about to stand, he stretched.

"Mornin'," he drawled sleepily.

I yanked the sheet back over my lap, glancing down inconspicuously to make sure there wasn't a wet spot on the sheet, too.

"Hey," I said weakly, waiting for him to turn away before daring to stand.

Why did dorm rooms have to be so damn small? Had he seen anything? Probably not. Nate seemed to have a comment about everything, so I felt safe.

For now.

He flopped over on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. I took the opportunity to get out of bed, quickly rearranging my sheet to cover the spot. I grabbed my towel and held it casually—I hoped—in front of me.

"So there's a party tonight," he said. "We should go."

I stopped rummaging through my drawer for a fresh razor blade and looked over at him. "We?"

"Yes," he declared as he sat up. Every morning, his dark hair stuck up in all directions, begging to be touched. "After six weeks, you haven't been to a single party. There's something very wrong with that."

Nate, it'd turned out, was not the quiet nerd I'd assumed he was when we first met. Very quickly, he'd made lots of friends, joined several clubs, and even found a boyfriend.

"Not really into parties."

"Maybe you just haven't been to the right one yet. With the right person."

Like you? That's what my troublemaker of an inner voice wanted me to say. What I managed to choke out was, "I'm just gonna hop in the shower now."

"So think about it, okay?"

"Sure," I agreed as I casually bolted from the room.

Once I was under the hot, hammering water, my thoughts drifted to my dream, the vision of Nate on his knees in front of me. Now his words twisted themselves into it.

"You just haven't been with the right person yet," he'd say, just before taking me into his wet mouth.

I squirted some bodywash into my hand to work into a lather over my rising dick and leaned my head against my arm on the shower wall. My eyes closed, and with the steam swirling around me, I could almost feel the heat of his mouth surrounding me as I stroked.

He'd look up at me with those green eyes, and I'd have a hand twisted into his thick, dark hair, controlling his speed and depth. And he'd take it all with the hottest sounds because he'd be unable to speak with my dick shoved down his throat. Moans and hums and grunts and even whimpers.

I let out my own groan, so ready to explode. I imagined pulling his head to me, until his nose brushed my skin, forcing him to swallow every drop. Not that he'd resist. He'd wrap his arms around me and clutch my ass as I empty into him. I stifled my shout into the crook of my elbow as my jizz swirled down the drain.

I opened the door to my room and was greeted by the wet, slurping noises of Nate and his boyfriend Justin going at it. They still had their clothes on, thank God. Justin's bony ass was not what I wanted to see, especially not after wanking to the idea of Nate blowing me. And, yes, I knew Justin's ass was bony, because last week I'd walked in on them grinding away.

I tried to ignore the sloppy sounds. Jesus, didn't Justin know how to kiss a guy properly? And what the hell was he doing here so early in the morning?

Nate sat up and separated himself from Justin. "Shit. Told ya he'd be back. Sorry, man."

Justin eye-fucked me, right in front of Nate, without the decency to even try to hide it. Nate was about four inches shorter than me, neither fat nor muscular, just perfectly proportioned, and he could probably snap Justin in half. Despite my six-workouts-a-week build, I tightened the towel around my waist to keep his greedy little eyes out and didn't say anything.

"Hey, so what about that party?" Nate asked.

I suppressed my grimace at the return of the "party" subject. "I gotta study. Physics midterm."

"I'll help you study," he offered. "I took AP Physics in high school. Got college credit for it and everything."

"Better idea," Justin singsonged. "You could join in with us right now."

I glared at his wagging eyebrows.

He puffed out his lower lip and half-hid behind Nate. "Or not."

Nate shoved him playfully. "C'mon, let's go. I don't think Luke's into that kind of thing."

Justin petted the Avengers poster. "Later, Thor. Nate will miss you *so much* while he's gone."

Nate laughed and opened the door. "Shut up."

And then they were gone, Justin smacking Nate's ass as they went.

What did Nate see in that asshole, anyway?

I grabbed the toothbrush and toothpaste I'd forgotten to take with me when I escaped for my shower and headed back to the bathroom. Nate and Justin were down the hall, walking away from me.

“Goddamn, sweet thang, I thought your roommate was gonna kick my ass. One scary mo-fo.”

“Nah, Luke’s just a big pussy cat.”

“Rawr,” Justin replied.

Their laughter died off as they turned the corner.

In the bathroom, I ran my toothbrush under the water. Like most people, Justin found my size intimidating. The truth was, lifting weights was like yoga for me. The burn of my muscles, the concentration, the solitary focus to push my body harder each set... it was all a form of meditation. And something I desperately needed after the previous summer.

Let Justin think what he wanted about me. Maybe he wouldn’t come around as much. But did Nate not realize I was gay? The day we’d moved in, he’d asked me point blank if him being gay was going to be a problem.

“Of course not,” I’d replied. What I should have said was, “So am I.”

Why hadn’t I? I wasn’t in the closet. And now that conversation felt so long ago, I didn’t know how to bring it up again.

If Nate thought I was straight, and if he’d ever noticed the... effects... of the dreams I had, at least he wouldn’t realize they were about him. That was the good news. The bad news?

Nate thought I was a pussy. I might not be a fighter, but I sure as hell wasn’t a pussy.

I sighed at my reflection. Toothpaste foam outlined my lips. Physics would have to wait, and parties would have to become my thing. I had a roommate to impress.

When I got back to my room after class, Nate was on his phone, his back to the door. I tried to quietly grab my books and leave to give him privacy, but he heard me and turned around. Something in his face made me stop. He looked younger, like a kid. Scared?

He shook his head at me and waved his hands, which I interpreted to mean that I could stay. I didn’t mean to listen to his conversation, but it mostly consisted of “Mm-hmms.” Then he said, “I’m coming tonight. I’ll catch a bus.”

He clicked his phone off, and I pretended to look busy with homework.

“Rain check on the party tonight?” His voice sounded off without his usual happiness.

“What’s wrong?”

He sat at his desk, staring at his phone. “My grandpa. He had a heart attack last night. He didn’t...” He sucked in a breath. “He was so healthy.”

“I’m so sorry, Nate.” My throat closed as the dog tags resting against my chest seemed to freeze to my skin. I wanted to say more; sorry wasn’t enough. It didn’t mean anything. It was just something people said because they felt like they had to. You could only hear it so many times before it made you want to scream.

He opened his laptop. “I gotta figure out when I can catch a bus.”

I stepped up behind him and leaned on the back of his chair to study the schedule with him, like he couldn’t possibly figure it out on his own. “I’ll give you a ride to the bus station.”

“You don’t—”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I want to.”

He looked up at me. “Thanks.” His voice was barely above a whisper, and our eyes locked.

I squeezed.

He sucked in his bottom lip against his teeth, slowly releasing it before turning back to the screen. “There’s a bus at three. Think we can make that one?”

“No problem.”

Nate stared out the window as we drove off campus. I mostly kept my eyes on the road, glancing sideways at him from time to time. He twisted and untwisted the strap of his bag. Watching the turn of his wrist and those long, thin fingers tangling in the strap, I couldn’t help imagining what they’d feel like on my body. I took a steadying breath. This was *not* the time to be thinking about Nate in that way.

He hadn’t said anything since we left our room, which felt strange because Nate always had something to talk about.

Just say something. Anything.

I had the words, but no sound to say them with. My voice felt like it had been stripped away.

If you need to talk, I'll listen.

You can cry. You don't have to be strong.

Things won't be the same, but I promise you'll be okay again.

"How long of a bus ride is it?" I finally asked, after having to clear my throat.

"Six hours or so," he said, still facing the window, in a voice that sounded far away. I missed the Nate I knew, the one that would chatter on about how the first hour was the best and the middle ones were boring but the last hour was the absolute worst because it seemed to take the longest.

Since he didn't want to talk, I didn't try again. After several more minutes of silence, he said, "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I just... wish there was something I could do for you."

My face was burning hot by the time I finished the sentence, so much so that I wish I hadn't said it.

He finally looked at me. A few tears had rolled down his cheeks. "Giving me a ride to the bus station is enough. I really appreciate it."

I nodded. My throat tightened at the tears on his face. If only I could take away his pain instantly. Grateful for the excuse of driving, I focused on the road.

Silence filled the rest of the ride, but at least Nate didn't turn away again. As we neared the bus station, I headed towards the parking lot.

"Oh, you can just drop me off out front. You don't need to wait with me."

I glanced at him. "You sure?"

"Absolutely. You've done more than enough already."

I switched back to the right lane, having to cut off a minivan to do so. The horn blared behind us. Nate looked sheepish.

I pulled over to the curb and stopped. Nate opened the door, grabbed his bag, and climbed out. He popped his head back in. "Thanks, man. Really."

I glanced at his lips that looked so red compared to his pale face, momentarily frozen by the desire to kiss him good-bye. I looked back to his eyes quickly. "It was no trouble."

"Later, Luke."

He shut the door, and I watched him walk away. When I couldn't see him anymore, I merged into traffic and headed back to campus.

The dorm room was too quiet without Nate around—completely ridiculous because half the time he was out at some club meeting anyway. I should have welcomed the silence, but I couldn't concentrate on formulas and theories. Even my workout didn't erase the feeling that I was a jerk for dropping him off at the bus station. For all I knew he was still sitting there. No, no, that's what he wanted. Hell, he hadn't even wanted me to drive him to the station in the first place.

When my phone buzzed with a text message, I welcomed the distraction.

Nate: *Made it here. Thx 4 the ride.*

I had a moment of illogical panic when I saw it was from Nate, like he could somehow tell that I was thinking about him. But then warmth filled my entire body. Nate was thinking of me too, even if it was just for a minute.

I was still staring dumbly at the phone when a second message came in.

Nate: *Sorry I didn't txt u b4. Crazy here w fam.*

Realizing I should reply, I took the time to spell out everything.

Me: *How are you?*

I pressed send and immediately wished I could unsend. Would he think I was being pushy? Annoying?

Nate: :-)

Me: *I want to do something for you.*

No response.

Me: *I mean I wish I could make it better for you.*

Was I helping or making it worse? I wasn't sure.

Me: *I know nothing can make it better. I just wish I could.*

I should have stopped then. Turned the phone off and pretended it didn't exist. But it buzzed again.

Nate: *Thank you*

Me: *But I haven't done anything. I feel helpless here.*

Nate: *I appreciate your words, they do make me feel better*

Me: *I'm glad.*

Nate: *This is the most you've ever said to me ;-)*

I chuckled. He was probably right.

Me: *Sorry. It's not you.*

Nate: *Are you breaking up with me?*

Me: ?

Nate: *Its not you, its me?*

Nate: ;-)

Me: *Haha*

Nate: *I know your shy but 6 weeks! I wanna be friends, I don't bite. Unless you want me to ;-)*

Like I needed more material for my spank bank. So lost imagining Nate's teeth nipping at my neck, chest, thighs, it wasn't until my phone buzzed with another message that I realized I hadn't replied.

Nate: *Sorry if that made you uncomfortable*

Me: *It didn't.*

No response for a few minutes.

Nate: *I have to go*

Nate: *I mean it about being friends*

My inner voice replied, *What about boyfriends?* But I couldn't even dare to say that out loud in the solitude of my room, let alone in a text message.

Me: *Ok. Good night.*

Nate: *Night*

I was once again glazing over my Physics textbook Sunday afternoon when my phone buzzed with another text from Nate.

Nate: *Distract me*

Me: ?

Nate: *What's Newtons 1st law of motion?*

Me: ??

Nate: *I promised to help you study*

Me: *You don't have to.*

Nate: *Yes I do. Newtons 1st law*

Me: *Inertia*

Nate: *Which is?*

Me: *Body at rest stays at rest. Body in motion stays in motion.*

Nate: *With no outside force. What's Newtons law of universal gravitation?*

Me: $m_1 \times m_2 / r^2$

Nate: *You forgot to multiply the gravitational constant*

Me: *The what?*

Nate: $G=6.67 \times 10^{-11}$

Me: *Right.*

Nate: *What does it mean?*

Me: *Idk*

Nate: *Its the amt of force 2 objects attract each other with*

Me: *You know all this by memory?*

Nate: *Got my old physics book. Even I'm not that good. ;-)*

Nate: *Don't let anyone steal my posters. Especially Thor*

Me: *I'll guard them with my life.*

Me: *How are you doing?*

Nate: *Better. You made me smile. Thank you*

So much I could have said. *I want to make you smile all the time. I love your smile. You have the best smile. I could jerk off to your smile.*

I shook my head at that last one and typed out, *You're welcome.*

Besides, I wasn't the one who should be cheering him up. It should be Justin. Had Nate even called Justin? He left in such a hurry. If Nate were my boyfriend, I'd want to know what was going on.

I sighed and tossed aside the textbook. Physics wasn't my best subject even when I could concentrate completely on it. Absently, I scrolled through my Facebook feed. I realized I could find Justin through Nate's friends list. I scrolled through and clicked on the Message button.

Me: Thought you should know Nate went home. His grandpa died.

A moment later, I got a reply.

Justin: he called me from the bus station

Of course Nate had called him. Duh. A friend request from Justin popped up. I rolled my eyes.

Me: Sorry, it happened so fast. He should have called you 1st in case you wanted to go with him.

Justin: he's a big boy. but maybe not as big as u. ill cum and tell u whos bigger

My fingers flew over the keyboard before I had a chance to reconsider.

Me: You don't deserve him. He needs some moral support even if he doesn't ask for it.

Justin: u could be the one to support him if you think its so important

I could picture the sneer on his face as he typed it.

Me: I'm not Nate's boyfriend.

Justin: no your not. wonder why?

My fists clenched. Asshole. Did he have a single redeeming quality? He must, hidden somewhere. Nate wasn't an idiot.

I clicked "deny" on his friend request and closed the chat window. When my screen refreshed, a status update from Nate appeared with a link to his

grandfather's obituary. I skimmed for the important part. The funeral would be held tomorrow afternoon.

I put the address into my phone. Five hours, six with traffic. I could leave in the morning and make it there in time for the service. I'd flunk the Physics midterm, but some things were more important.

Thank you, Justin, for being the outside force to my inertia.

I didn't exactly have funeral wear in my closet, so I hoped I wasn't too underdressed. It was bad enough I'd be a wrinkled mess from driving all morning. Thankfully, my only non-jeans pants were black, and I had a white dress shirt. I didn't have a jacket, so I settled for a maroon sweater over the dress shirt. It would have to do.

The funeral home was stuffed with people I didn't know. I closed my eyes and took three deep breaths. What was I thinking? As I searched desperately for Nate, I realized what a bad idea this was. Nate would have to be with family; he might have obligations. I couldn't cling to him the whole time.

Another deep breath. *This is for Nate. I can do this.* I could stay for a little while, and then drive back to campus. I could handle this.

I finally spotted Nate off to the side, surrounded by people. What looked like a confusing mass of people resolved itself into a receiving line. I found the end of the line and took my place. What was I doing here? I felt like an impostor, crashing the funeral of someone I didn't even know. I started to sweat.

For Nate.

I considered leaving, but then Nate saw me. His eyes widened, and he blinked slowly.

I smiled weakly. Would he be angry that I came?

As the line of consolors moved forward, he spoke with the short, dark-haired woman next to him and moved to the end of the line so he'd be the first person I'd come to.

My body relaxed. I didn't know how he knew, but somehow he did. I felt guilty for his effort to make me comfortable when I should be the one comforting him. He looked good—very handsome in his suit, of course, but also holding up well.

“Hi,” I started awkwardly when I reached him. “I’m sorry if you didn’t want me here—”

Nate pulled me into a hug. His arms wrapped around me so tightly I thought I wouldn’t be able to breathe. I folded my arms around him and squeezed back. Our chests pressed together. I couldn’t tell if the heartbeat pounding against my skin was mine or his.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said against my shoulder.

His arms didn’t loosen from around me, and all at once I could sense the line of people behind me, waiting their turn to see the family. My shirt felt damp.

“Nate,” I choked out.

He released me and stepped back. “Sorry.”

I shook my head and was about to tell him he had nothing to be sorry for, but I realized his family was staring at us. My face warmed.

Nate turned to the woman next to him. “Aunt Jenny, this is my roommate, Luke.”

Aunt Jenny held out her hand and I stepped over to shake it. “Very pleased to meet you, Luke.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, ma’am.” I didn’t cringe outwardly as I said it, but I sure did on the inside. Now I was just another jerk spouting the same well-meaning-but-useless words at a person who deserved more.

“Thank you.”

I looked down the line of people I didn’t know, then glanced back at Nate. He smiled and gave me a small nod. Somehow just that tiny gesture gave me enough strength to move to the next person.

It got easier as I went down the line. Shake hands, “Sorry for your loss,” and continue. To those that introduced themselves to me, I introduced myself simply as “Nate’s roommate.”

The second-to-last person in the line, the woman Nate had been standing next to when I arrived, pulled me into a quick hug before I could say a word.

“You must be Luke. Nate’s told us so much about you. How wonderful of you to come. I know Nate appreciates it. Oh, I’m Nate’s mom, by the way.”

It was easy to see who Nate took after. She seemed so genuinely pleased to meet me, like we were meeting at a restaurant, that I almost forgot my line. I didn't even know if this was her dad's funeral or her father-in-law's and, again, felt that awkward sense of panic. She patted my hand as if I were the one mourning.

Next to her, the last person in the line, was Nate's father, who was as tall as I was and much more stoic than his wife.

I'd made it through the entire line. I'd survived. I considered leaving, but I really wanted to talk to Nate more before I left. I watched him move back to his original place in line, next to his mother. She smiled warmly at him. I found a chair in the back of the room, away from everyone else.

Once everyone had been through the procession, Nate walked over to me. He stayed by my side, introducing me simply as "Luke" to everyone who came to talk to him.

One elderly woman looked from him to me. "Is this your... oh, dear, what do you people call it? Partner?"

"Luke's my roommate," Nate replied quickly.

"Roommate," she repeated as her hands fluttered around her pearl necklace. "Oh. Well. Okay."

I opened my mouth to assure her that roommate wasn't some gay slang for "boyfriend," but she was already moving on.

"Sorry about her," Nate said.

"You people?"

"Yeah, well"—he gave a little laugh—"you know, she's from that older generation."

Although I'd originally planned to only stay a short while and then head back to campus, I found myself relaxing as the day wore on. Nate almost never left my side. So many people came and went. Apparently, Nate's grandfather was well-known in this town.

The crowd had died out considerably when Nate touched my arm. "Come with me?"

I agreed, of course, although it wasn't until he walked toward the front of the room that I realized where we were going.

We stood in front of the open casket. The last funeral I'd attended required a closed casket, so this was the first time I'd ever seen a dead body. Nate's grandfather looked peaceful, like he was sleeping. That's how people should look in death.

His grandfather had been tall, like Nate's father was. I could see the resemblance to Nate's father, though not much to Nate.

"Grandpa was a basketball coach," Nate explained. "He really wanted me to play. Bought me one of those adjustable hoops for my first birthday."

He let out a laugh that sounded choked at the end. "I never was very good, no matter how hard I tried. Dad would spend hours practicing with me. When Grandpa came over, we'd shoot hoops, and I'd pretend to love it, and he'd never ever say anything about the fact that I couldn't make it in the basket to save my life."

I watched his face as a few tears slid down his cheeks.

"When I was a freshman in high school, he asked me if I'd made the team. I said, 'I've got a confession, Grandpa. I suck at basketball, and I really don't even like it all that much.' I thought he'd be angry for lying to him all that time, but he just laughed and said, 'I wondered when you were finally going to admit that to me'."

I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and held him against me. We stayed like that for a long while. His shoulders jerked against me until his sobs subsided. I rubbed his back. The rest of the world had melted away, and it was just him and me and his Grandpa.

This was why I was here. To be the one Nate could lean on as he mourned, to give him the strength he needed because he didn't have to comfort me in return. I didn't have to say anything; I just had to be here. I gave him everything I'd needed last summer but denied myself because I'd closed myself off to every friend I had.

"Thank you for coming," he whispered, looking up at me, not at all ashamed of his red eyes.

"You're welcome." I squeezed his shoulder, wanting so badly to kiss him, even if just on the forehead.

I stayed through the entire service and burial, and still longer as Nate's family and friends slowly trickled out from the cemetery. This was the most

time I'd ever spent with Nate, even though we lived together, because he always had somewhere else to be.

Reluctantly, I told Nate I had to go and he nodded. "It'll be a late night of driving for you."

"I know."

"You mind some company?"

"You're coming back already?"

Nate shrugged. "Why not? There's nothing really left for me to do here. I don't want to keep missing classes and have more work to make up."

I nodded.

"Come back to my house. I'll pack my stuff real quick, and then we can be on our way."

He told his parents the new plan, and then we drove back to his house.

Nate went upstairs to change out of his suit and pack his bag. I took off my sweater and dress shirt and untucked my undershirt. Waiting in the kitchen with a glass of water, I studied the pictures of a younger Nate on the fridge. He was a photogenic child, always smiling. I recognized his grandfather in some of photos. It was easy to see the two of them had a special bond. When I heard Nate's footsteps on the stairs, I sat at the table and tried to look nonchalant.

"All set," he said as he poured himself some water. "I just want to wait 'til my parents get back before we take off."

"No problem."

He sat at the table across from me. "I grabbed my physics book so we can go over it in the car."

I looked at him quizzically. "That sounds fascinating."

He laughed. "I still owe you some tutoring, remember?"

"Oh. That. Don't worry about it."

"No way. I promised."

"Doesn't matter. The midterm was this afternoon."

Nate set his glass down and stared at me. "You missed it? Why would you do that?"

I looked at the table, sure my face was turning red. Why did he have to ask those hard questions?

“Luke,” he prodded when I didn’t answer. “Why would you skip a midterm to come visit me?”

I slowly raised my head. His eyes caught mine, and he seemed intent on holding my gaze, refusing to let me look away again.

A drop of sweat trickled down the back of my neck. I swallowed. *I wanted to be here for you. I like you. I want to be your boyfriend.*

The words were there, in my mind. I could hear myself say them, but I couldn’t get them out through my mouth.

“Just tell me,” he whispered.

“I...” I swallowed again. Another drop of sweat. Was my whole face sweating? I felt so hot all of a sudden. I wanted to look away from him, but somehow he still had me trapped. “I just—”

The sound of the front door opening managed to break the hold his eyes had on me. I sat back in the chair. I hadn’t realized I’d been leaning forward. I closed my eyes and raked my hand down my face. *What an idiot.*

By the time Nate’s mom reached the kitchen, Nate and I were drinking our waters in silence, and I was avoiding his eyes. We said good-bye to his parents, and his mom hugged me again. I tried not to be too awkward when I hugged her back.

“Drive safely. And let us know when you get back, no matter how late.” She waved from the driveway as we set out.

I didn’t say anything in the car. I wanted to, but I wasn’t sure what to say. I was afraid that if the silence between us lasted too long, Nate would bring up whatever had happened between us at his kitchen table. I wasn’t ready to open up about that yet.

It was stupid, I know. How would I ever get what I wanted if I refused to do anything about it? But what did it matter anyway? Nate was with Justin, and I had to respect that, even if Justin was a jerk. Even if Nate didn’t see it. If they broke up, though, then I would make my move. Yes. I would suck it up and just do it. And if Nate turned me down, it didn’t have to get weird between us. Not any weirder than me jerking off while thinking about him. Maybe if he did turn

me down, those fantasies would stop, and I wouldn't have to worry about him finding out. That was probably the best outcome of all of this.

Nate pulled out his phone and started texting. Justin, I assumed.

He chuckled, and I glanced at him. He was staring at something on his phone.

I turned on the radio and hit scan until I found a pop rock station. My fingers tightened on the steering wheel. This was going to be a long drive.

"You could probably get a retake of your exam," he said later, after sending a zillion texts. "Just ask your professor."

"Doubt it."

"Doesn't hurt to ask, right?"

I shrugged.

"If you don't, I will."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

Before I could argue further, Nate's phone rang. I turned down the radio as he answered it.

"Luke came to the funeral. We're driving back now... Of course not...! Ugh. Justin, you're an ass... Oh. My. God. He's not interested. Give it a rest... Bye, dickface."

He shoved his phone back into his pocket. "Un. Fucking. Believable."

"Justin?" As if I hadn't just overheard everything.

"Yeah."

"He seems like kind of a jerk." And that was being polite.

"You don't know him."

"That's what people always say about relationships they know deep down aren't working."

"It's not like I'm planning to marry him or anything." He shook his head and squeezed his forehead.

“Look, I’m sorry I said anything.” The last thing I wanted was to fight with Nate. I was supposed to be making him feel better, not worse. “It’s just... he should be here with you, not me.”

Nate jerked his head up to stare at me. “I didn’t ask you to come. You don’t have to feel obligated to be here.”

“That’s not what I meant at all. Forget it.”

I returned to my regular quiet self. Opening my mouth only caused trouble.

Nate sighed and leaned his head against the window. Sometime later, it sounded like he was snoring lightly. I glanced over and sure enough, he was asleep. He probably needed the sleep, and I didn’t mind losing myself in my thoughts while I drove.

We were within an hour of campus when Nate jerked awake. His gaze darted around the car before he finally stared at me with big, not-quite-focused eyes.

“You okay?” I watched him as closely as I could while still keeping one eye on the road.

He seemed to remember where he was and nodded. He pressed his fingers against his eyes. “Just dreams.”

I returned my focus back to the road.

“I came out to Grandpa while I was in high school,” he said quietly. “The first person I ever told.”

I looked over to see him staring at his hands in his lap. In the passing streetlights, I could see a tear in the corner of his eye. “What did he say?”

“Same thing he said about basketball: ‘I wondered when you were...’” His voice broke then and he swallowed back a sob.

“Finally going to admit that to me,” I finished softly.

He looked up at me with a sad smile as the tear fell from his eye. I brushed my knuckles over his cheek to wipe it away. He swallowed tightly, and realizing what I’d just done, I withdrew my hand and clutched the steering wheel.

My own tears stung my eyes as I remembered coming out. I blinked them away.

“I told my brother. Michael.” My voice was thick.

I could see out of the corner of my eye that he was watching me. “Was it okay?”

I smiled despite the heavy mood. “Yeah. He was cool with it.”

It was after midnight when we finally made it back to our room. Between the driving and the crowd of people at the funeral, I was exhausted. Although Nate had slept in the car, the emotional day must have taken its toll on him as well. I wondered if he'd really be ready to go to class in the morning.

He called his mom to let her know we arrived safe and sound, but instead of heading to bed afterwards, he planted himself in front of me and said, “You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

He looked me directly in the eye. “Why did you skip your Physics midterm?”

So much for him forgetting.

“I’m just going to keep asking,” he threatened. “So you might as well give me a straight answer right now.”

“I...” I looked down at the floor. How to explain without sounding like a creep? “I know what it’s like to lose someone important. And to feel like you have to be the one to hold everything together because everyone else around you needs you to be strong. Sometimes you just need an outsider to be there and say, ‘Yes, it’s okay’.”

My voice broke, and I swallowed down the rock that had risen in my throat. “It’s okay for you to cry too. I wanted to do that for you. To be there for you, in case no one else was. That’s more important to me than any grade.”

Nate stepped closer to me and cradled my face between his hands. “Thank you.”

Before I could reply, moist, warm lips touched mine, capturing my bottom lip with the lightest amount of suction. Sparks shot down my spine and ended at my dick, which jerked into life. His fingers reached around to the sides of my neck, tickling the tiny strands of hair there.

Nate pulled back just enough for me to see him grin, then he kissed me again. Harder this time, licking at my lips with his tongue. I opened to him, and when our tongues touched, my dick twitched again, growing harder. He stepped closer, one hand reaching into the longer strands of my hair in the back. Our noses bumped, and we both giggled like little girls, but we reattached immediately, no hesitation in bringing our tongues together again and again, exploring, tasting. I needed as much as I could get before I woke up from this very cruel dream that would surely leave my sheets soaked in the morning.

His hands slid down my chest, and he fingered the bottom of my undershirt. As he reached under the fabric, I quivered—fucking quivered—anticipating his fingers on my skin. The light scrape of his nails traced the line of hair just below my belly button that led down into my pants.

He broke the kiss off suddenly, and I prepared to wake up from this awful, wonderful—awfully wonderful—dream. His breath rasped, and his eyes stared intensely into mine. He pressed his hands more firmly against my stomach, and I let him push me. A thrill shot through me, and I grunted as my back hit the wall behind me, right against one of his treasured Avengers posters.

One of his legs shoved between mine as he popped open my pants and slowly slid the zipper down. My knees nearly buckled when his hand cupped my balls inside my pants. My dick pulsed with need for him, need for his hand to wrap around me, as pre-cum leaked out.

He scrutinized my face until he seemed convinced that I was one hundred percent okay with everything he was doing to me. More like three hundred percent. The stroking and occasional squeezing of my sac continued as his other hand slid my shirt up my chest. When his knuckles grazed my skin, I cursed through clenched teeth, trying not to squirm.

As he pulled the shirt over my head, I raised my arms, expecting him to pull it all the way off, but instead he clutched the shirt, trapping my hands against the wall. I could break his grasp easily if I wanted, but he'd pinned me to the wall with his look and his touch. In that moment, I was so completely his; my insides melted into jelly.

The hand down my pants glided over my dick with just enough pressure for the pre-cum to seep into my briefs. Over the taut ridges of my abs, his smooth hand swept upward to the dog tags hanging around my chest. He read the embossed words, and I saw the realization in his eyes as he worked it all out. He didn't have to ask why I was wearing my brother's dog tags and Michael wasn't.

I drew in my breath, resisting the urge to break his hold, turn away, and hide what I was feeling. This was Nate, who had cried openly in front of me earlier today without shame or embarrassment. He reverently laid the tags against my chest, and then he leaned forward and pressed his lips to my neck.

I wanted to stop him, to push him away, and stalk off somewhere alone. Somewhere I could focus on the ache inside my chest because I shouldn't be feeling this good when Michael never could again. Too bad the gym wasn't open this late.

Except... Nate was mourning, too. Maybe he needed this, to be close to someone, to be in control. I closed my eyes and let him soothe away the pain with his tongue and his hot breath on my skin.

I leaned my face down into his hair and breathed in the clean, sharp scent of his shampoo. I'd sniffed traces of it in our confined room, especially after his showers, but this concentrated form, this assault of pure Nate on my senses, hardened my dick again. I nuzzled his hair until my lips found his rough, stubbly cheek to kiss.

"God, I want you," he said against my neck as he slipped his hand back into my pants to fondle my balls through the soft cotton of my briefs.

Yes, I wanted to shout. But all I could do was nod and hope he felt it.

He kissed the hollow under my Adam's apple and then looked directly in my eyes.

"Undress me," he whispered as he pulled my shirt off my arms and tossed it aside.

I undid the buttons one by one, from the top of his dark blue shirt all the way to the bottom. My hands smoothed over his chest and pushed the loose, open shirt off his shoulders. It landed in a heap behind him. I'd seen him shirtless before, but this was different. This was permission. Now instead of admiring from afar those dark patches of hair surrounding the pink nipples, I could brush my fingers against them. He shivered.

Trailing down his stomach again, I began working his jeans open. I pushed them halfway down his thighs and then I hooked my fingers beneath his boxers' elastic and slid them down. I squatted in front of him, and he lifted each leg for me to remove his pants.

He was naked, hard, and mere inches away. I wrapped my hand around the bottom of his dick and my lips over the head. Focusing on wetting his shaft

with my spit, I went down once, twice on his length, and then stood up. I stroked him, slowly at first, from all the way down to the tangle of dark hair and up until my palm glided over his sensitive head.

He moaned and rested his head against my shoulder. "Tha... gah..."

I'd reduced him to syllables instead of words. I grinned as a surge of bravery coursed through me. "Like that?"

He hummed, and then his hands were working my pants the rest of the way off. He stepped back to look me up and down. "Your body is perfect. Just perfect."

My hand ran through my hair, and I had to look away.

"Hey," he said softly, taking my chin and turning my head gently. "It's just me. No need to be shy. Okay?"

I nodded. "I heard you the other day with Justin, what you said, about me being a pussy."

"I definitely would not say that." His forehead creased as the thought back, and then recognition flooded his face and he chuckled. "I called you a big pussy cat."

His fingers trailed down my arms, across my abs, up over my pecs, and behind my neck where he laced them together. "You're strong and powerful, like a tiger, but you're gentle, like a kitten. That's one of the things I like so much about you."

"Yeah?"

"You're like my own personal Thor." He grinned.

A laugh escaped my lips, part amusement, part incredulous.

"Did that sound too dorky?"

"What I like about you is that you just say how you feel. No hesitation. No fear."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I hear myself speak, and it just sounds stupid. Wrong. Not what's in my head at all."

"Words are overrated sometimes."

"Like now."

I stepped closer to him, fisted my fingers in his hair, and latched my lips onto his before I could second-guess myself. Rather than soft and gentle like his kiss had been, I poured every ounce of desire I had for him into that kiss, delving my tongue deep into his mouth. Our chests crashed together as I slid one hand down his back. His arms wrapped around my waist. My dick poked the soft flesh of his stomach, and his heavy, solid rod pressed against my thigh. We rocked against each other, trying to find that perfect friction while standing.

My hands palmed his ass. He whimpered into my mouth and didn't resist when my finger trailed along his crack. I wanted to fuck him so bad, needed to be buried inside of him.

I broke off the kiss but held his face close to mine. We panted into each other's mouths.

"I want you." I didn't even sound like myself.

Nate pulled me towards his bed. My hands closed around the dog tags, and I thought about Michael. About the way he'd always gone for what he wanted, how we were so different in that way. He'd be honored that I wore his tags, but he'd also understand if I took them off sometimes. He'd want me to. For the first time in fifteen months, I lifted the chain over my head because I wanted to, not because I had to.

Nate sat down on his bed and watched me place the tags gently onto his desk. He took my hand and squeezed gently, rubbing his warm thumb over my fingers. I sat next to him on the bed. He kissed me again, deeply, and then laid me down on the bed as he continued his kisses from my lips to my neck down my chest. His hands constantly stroked my skin, like he was exploring every inch of my body.

He worked down to my abs, licking with his tongue. I squirmed. He laughed. His hands caressed my thighs as his lips moved lower and lower. His chin brushed against my dick, and it pulsed upwards, poking him. When his hands slid around to my inner thighs and his thumbs gently ran up my balls, I thought I was going to melt into the mattress.

When he licked my dick, the entire length to the head, I cried out. He took me into his mouth, still playing with my balls.

No fantasy I'd ever had about Nate sucking me off lived up to the reality of his lips and tongue working my dick. My hips thrust up to meet his strokes, my fingers clutched at his hair.

Abruptly, he pulled off with a *smack*. He kissed me, sharing my taste. “You still have to fuck me.”

Our cocks rubbed against each other as he reached under the bed and groped around for something. My hands slid down his sides, grabbed his ass, and squeezed.

“Yeah, baby,” he encouraged. He sat back on his knees and triumphantly shook the bottle of lube he’d found.

He took my hand from his side and squirted some lube onto it. Then he reached behind himself to position my hand where he wanted it—at his hole. I massaged the puckered skin, letting just the tip of my finger breach his entrance. A constant stream of moans and “yeahs” and “right theres” flowed from his lips. In another situation, this might have annoyed me, but it all mingled together to make the best sound I could have possibly heard: Nate wanting me.

With each stroke, I pressed my finger inside him further and further. I added a second finger as he lubed up our dicks. My moans joined his.

His hips rocked, pushing back on my finger and sliding our dicks together in his hand. Flattening against me, he reached under the bed again, this time returning with a condom. He leaned back, burying my fingers inside him as he ripped open the foil packet. I watched him roll it down my rock-hard dick.

He scooted forward, and my fingers slipped out of him. I rubbed my dick against his crack, finding that sweet spot. Slowly he sank down on me, squeezing his eyes closed. I clutched at the sheets to keep from bucking up against him as that heat surrounded my shaft, letting him control the speed and depth. Finally, an agonizing eternity later, his ass was flush against my hips. When he was ready, he opened his eyes. He raised himself up and then came back down. Again and again, increasing the speed, until he threw his head back in sheer pleasure as he rode me.

I supported his thighs, tracing circles on them with my thumbs. He reached down and started stroking himself. Watching him jerk off while he fucked himself on my dick was the hottest thing I’d ever seen, and I’d watched my share of porn.

The slap of our skin, the coolness of the sweat that trickled down his face and landed on my abs, his ass swallowing my dick over and over... I slammed my hips up against him as the waves of pleasure rocked through me and

exploded. I was still coming inside him when hot drops splashed on my belly and chest, his hand slick with cum as he stroked himself the rest of the way.

When he was spent, he gingerly lifted off me. I removed the condom, tied the end in a knot, and threw it into the wastebasket.

"Show-off." Nate chuckled. He swirled his fingers in the drops of cum on my chest. "I made a mess on you."

I grabbed his hand and lifted his fingers to my lips. Very thoroughly, I licked and sucked each one clean of the salty moisture.

"Jesus fucking Christ. You're gonna get me hard again."

I grinned. "Oh yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. We have a high gravitational force."

"A what?"

He gazed at me through heavy eyelids. "You already forgot Newton's law of universal gravitation?"

"Something about two objects and... something."

He shook his head like I was hopeless. "The closer the two bodies are, the more attracted the bodies are to each other, and the greater the gravitational force."

I must have still looked hopeless because he sighed and said, "Forget it. Physics jokes lose something when you have to explain them."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure physics jokes are only funny to nerds."

"Hey!"

"C'mon. You took college physics in high school and offered to tutor me. You're a nerd."

He pretended to look offended. "I prefer the term 'geek', thank you very much."

"There's a difference?"

"Of course there is." He yawned. "If I wasn't so damn tired, I'd explain it to you."

I laughed. "Sure. It's been a long day. Let's get some sleep."

He snuggled in next to me, practically on top of me because the beds were so narrow. "Sounds like a good idea."

He grabbed the sheet to cover us with. His hand absently played with the hair at the base of my cock. Good thing I was too tired to get it up again, or we might not have gotten any sleep.

"If you hadn't noticed," I said in his ear. "I happen to like nerds."

His body shook with a soft laugh. "Hope you like geeks, too."

It was easy to ignore the pounding on the door while Nate was kissing my neck. I could get used to waking up like this. The kissing, not the banging on the door.

The noise finally stopped. "Thank God," Nate murmured against my skin. His breath tickled.

The pounding resumed. Nate and I groaned at the same time, then chuckled. He kissed me once on the lips before dragging himself from his bed.

"This had better be important," he called as he hopped into his boxers.

"Oh, it is, sweet thang," came the response as Nate opened the door.

Shit.

"Um, morning?" Nate said as Justin pushed past him to eye me in Nate's bed.

"Well, well, well, what *do* we have here?" Justin turned back to Nate and wagged his finger. "You naughty boy, you!"

I shot out of bed and jumped between them before Justin could take a step towards Nate. "Look—"

Justin glanced down my body and hummed his approval. I'd forgotten I was naked. My face warmed, and I could already feel the sweat starting to gather on the back of my neck.

He licked his lips. "What do you say all three of us hop back in that bed?"

Nate pushed himself in front of me. "Hell no. He's all mine."

I thought we were fighting over Nate, but they were fighting over me?

Justin grinned. "You are hella sexy when you get all possessive like that."

"You're not... upset?" I asked.

"Psh! I've been trying to get you and sweet thang together *forever*. About damn time you boneheads got over yourselves." He rolled his eyes.

“You what?” Nate asked.

Justin waved his arms towards the bed. “Please, carry on with what you were doing. Just forget I’m here.”

Nate glanced at me. “No thanks. We prefer privacy.”

Justin sighed dramatically. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.” He kissed Nate quickly on the lips and then headed for the door.

“Hey, what was so important?” Nate called as he walked out.

“Never mind,” Justin sang from the hallway before the door closed.

Nate laughed and shook his head.

“What about you and Justin?” I asked.

He shrugged. “We’re not dating. More like friends with benefits.”

I considered that as I picked up Michael’s dog tags from the desk. I sat down on the edge of Nate’s bed, turning the tags over and over in my hands.

Nate crouched in front of me so we were face-to-face. He balanced himself with his hands on my knees. “What’s wrong?”

“What about us? Was last night just...” I couldn’t finish the sentence. I didn’t want to hear out loud what I already knew... that sleeping together was only a distraction from the pain.

His hands covered mine. “No. Gravitational force doesn’t just exist one night and go away. The attraction is constant. There’s even a gravitational constant in the equation.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at how pleased he was with himself for bringing physics back into it.

“Furthermore, the attraction exists between every point mass to every single other point mass.”

I tried to make sense of that. He was really optimistic about my understanding of physics. “So when you said I was all yours, you meant it literally?”

“Something like that. Was that okay?”

I envied the way Nate could be so direct, without hesitation or nervousness. I knew that wasn’t in my nature, but I could make an effort now and then. I met his eyes and told him the truth. “I’ve been yours since day one.”

He let out a soft chuckle. “I wondered when you were finally going to admit that to me.”

I brushed away the tear that slid down his cheek and pulled him close to me.

“I’m sorry about Michael,” he said against my neck as I stroked his back.

The dreaded s-word... but somehow, coming from Nate, it meant everything.

The End

Author Bio

C.M. Walker lives in Maryland with her husband and two children. She read her first M/M romance story out of curiosity, decided that books were better with two men instead of one, and hasn't looked back since. When C.M.'s not reading or writing, she's either next to a bright light cross-stitching with fancy thread, at the computer digi-scrapping, or at the sewing machine making cute clothes for her daughter.

Download C.M. Walker's debut novella, Pledge Number Seven, for free at the [M/M Romance website](#).

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GRAVITATIONAL PULL

By Jill Prand

Photo Description

These two guys in the picture are best friends Dustin and Eric. They've been secretly in love with each other for a long time but neither one wants to risk their friendship. One day at the gym, Dustin can't fight the pull anymore when Eric spots him at the bench press.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We have been best friends since forever and now we're both in our mid-twenties. You have always been there for me, through thick and thin. You even set me up with your workmate, now my girlfriend. I've been with her for a couple of years now and I do love her, but I'm slowly realising that while I do still love her, I'm no longer in love with her. Because it's you I'm in love with, and have always been. I don't know why I'm just realising this now because I've never made a secret of my attraction to both men and women, and you have been just as unapologetically open about the fact that you're gay. Do you feel the same way about me? You haven't had a steady boyfriend since we were in college. Is that because you it's me you want? I don't want to risk our friendship, but I don't think that I can deny my feelings for you any longer. We could have something great, something that will last for the rest of our lives if we can just take that last step towards each other...

Inspired by the lyrics of "You Make Me Wanna" by Usher which can be found [here](#).

Sincerely,

Aniko

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: best friends, friends to lovers, teacher, infidelity, UST

Word Count: 8,489

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GRAVITATIONAL PULL

By Jill Prand

Chapter One

Dustin

Could this week get any longer? The students in my last period of AP American History class were going to drive me insane. There were only two weeks until spring break, and the kids were going stir-crazy. You would think these college-bound seniors would put a little more effort into trying to ace the class, but for the last week all they seem to want to do is slack off.

It must be the weather. Record-breaking snow totals for a winter in New Jersey has kept many people indoors. Navigating side roads is hazardous to your health, especially when snow banks take up three feet from either curb. I hope the weatherman is right and we get the week of above-freezing temperatures he promised. Maybe then I won't have to protect the parking space in front of my house with a chair. Hell, the space took me three hours to clear—I'm not giving it up.

My phone chirps as I get to my car.

Eric: *Going 2 gym. Join me?*

I do need to work out, maybe it will help with my own spring break fever.

Me: *Cya there have 2 get bag @ home*

Eric: *@ home now will grab it*

Me: *K on my way*

It's been a while since Eric and I hung out alone. Usually I'm with my girlfriend, Amy, who is a coworker of Eric's. Eric set us up almost two years ago, and Amy and I hit it off. She's a great girl, she even understands my bi-urges, and doesn't blink an eye when I visit the local gay bar. I'm lucky to have found her. We've even had a few threesomes with me in between her and a guy she used to date in high school. He's bi too, so Amy and I both get what we want.

Too bad Eric is only into guys. I would love to have him in bed with Amy and I. Hell, I would love to have Eric any time. We've been best friends since kindergarten, and if truth be known, I've wanted him for a long time, but I'm not willing to screw up our friendship. We've lived together since college, but I've never made a move, though it's getting tougher to ignore how much I want

him. He's never given me any indication that he thinks of me as anything more than a friend.

I get to the gym first and wait for Eric in the locker room. I text Amy to let her know what's going on. She's going out with the girls tonight, so I won't see her until tomorrow night, or maybe even Sunday. When she gets together with her girlfriends, it can be a whole weekend event. I'm actually relieved that we have some time apart. Amy has been hinting about taking our relationship to the next level. I love her, but I'm not *in* love with her. Amy will never be enough for me, and I will not commit my life to someone I know I will be cheating on. I need to find that person who will satisfy me enough that I don't think about anyone else.

Eric finally walks in and gives me my bag. "Hey, D, you look like someone stole your dog." He sits down next to me. He's already dressed in his workout clothes—a loose pair of shorts and a tank top that shows off the definition in his arms. Eric works out almost every day, and his body is cut but not overly muscled. He looks good enough to eat, and I wouldn't mind finding out what he tastes like.

I pull my polo over my head. "Just trying to figure out my love life," I sigh. "I mean, I love Amy and all, but she's not who I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Eric sits on the bench and looks at me incredulously. "You know she's looking to get married soon, right?"

A sigh escapes my lips as I plop down next to him. "Yeah, she's been hinting about getting engaged." I run my fingers through my hair. "I don't want to hurt her, but there is *no way* I'm getting married. At least not to Amy."

"I thought you guys were good. She doesn't even mind that you have a few extracurricular romps now and again."

"But that's just it. If I really loved her, wouldn't I want to just be with her? I want to find that person that I can't live without. I hate cheating on her, no matter if she knows or not. I always end up feeling guilty just getting my rocks off." I stand up to take my pants off, and Eric turns away from me. What's up with that? It's not like we haven't gotten dressed around each other most of our lives. Granted, I usually try not to see him semi-nude now because I don't want him to see my reaction. Hell, just thinking about his tight butt gives me a semi.

Eric gets up and starts toward the gym. "I'm going to find an open treadmill, you running first?"

“No, I’m going to do a round of weights. Can you spot me on the bench press after your run?”

“Ugh, yeah sure,” he says, kneading the back of his neck. He usually only does that when something is bothering him. I wonder if he is having problems at work.

I finish dressing and make my way out to the floor. Eric is running on the treadmill like something is chasing him. He moves so fluidly, his arms pumping, his stride long and even, I am mesmerized by sight of him. I have to get my shit together. I’m not going to jeopardize my friendship with him by making a move, no matter how hard my cock gets.

Forty minutes later, I’m ready to take on the bench press. I don’t go for big weights—I’m not looking to impress anyone, well maybe today I am. I set the bar with one hundred sixty pounds. I can do this without a spotter, and I start to warm up my arms. Eric is on his slow down on the treadmill so I know he’ll be a couple more minutes, just enough time for me to figure out how much weight I want to add today. I do eight reps and add on another ten pounds. This goes up pretty easily as well, so I add another ten. I can start to feel the burn as I’m pushing up on the seventh and eighth rep, so I know I’m close to my maximum for today. Eric walks over as I add another five pounds.

“How much you lifting?” he asks.

“I’m at one-eighty-five with this,” I tell him as I set the clip collars. “Since you’re here I want to see how far I can push it today.” I lie back on the bench and take hold of the bar. I push up, exhale, and almost drop the bar. Eric is standing right over my head, his legs are apart, and damn if I can’t see right up the leg of his shorts. I close my eyes and stifle a groan. Unfortunately, closing my eyes doesn’t help when I bring the bar close to my chest and inhale. My nose is bombarded with Eric’s scent—his sweat and musk, and the smell that is just *him*. I quickly push the bar up and exhale, trying to rid myself of the urge to lick my lips. I repeat the process six more times, choking back moans, and hoping like hell that Eric can’t see the way my cock is jerking in my jockstrap. A whimper sneaks out as I place the bar back on the stand.

“Do you want to add more?” Eric asks, looking down at me.

I don’t think I can be in this position for another set, my jock strap is just barely containing my growing erection as it is. “Why don’t I spot you?” I say, sitting up.

“All right. I don’t need to change anything, just switch with me.” That comment causes my dick to jerk.

As he lies down and I move over his head, I realize this position isn’t much better. Now as I look down at him, his mouth is between my legs, and the image of thrusting into him until I’m lodged in his throat has me angling my hips back to prevent Eric from noticing my discomfort. He’s making quick work of his reps. “Can you add another fifteen onto this for me?”

I start working the clips and pick up the disks I need, and when I turn back Eric is watching me with a strange look in his eyes. It takes me a moment to move as his eyes have me frozen. I feel heat working its way into my cheeks. Holy hell, am I blushing? I drop my eyes and work on getting the weights sorted out. What is wrong with me? We live together and see each other every day, and now I can’t stand to look at him? I get him set up and Eric grabs the bar. He looks straight at me as he pushes the weight up, no strain showing on his face. His green eyes hold mine as he does his reps, and I am lost. I don’t know how many reps he does; it is way more than his normal set. Finally, his arms must be tiring, because he can’t get the bar all the way up to the stand. I reach for the bar and my hand touches his. Heat runs up my arm and I pull away as soon as the weights are secure.

Stepping back, I look over towards the treadmills. “I think I’m going to run for a while.”

“D, will you talk to me?” Eric asks, sitting up.

Shaking my head, I start to walk away. “I just need to go run, Eric.” I know we should talk about this but I need to get my head sorted out first.

I set up the machine for five miles, stick my earbuds in, and start the warm up. What am I doing with Eric? I want him. I’ve wanted him for years, probably before I would even let myself realize that I liked both boys and girls. Our friendship has always been more important than the urges, but that seems to be changing. I almost don’t care if I put our friendship at risk. But if this goes wrong, my whole life changes—Eric is the most important person in my life. He knows me better than my own parents do. And if we do this, it’s not only us we’re risking, it’s Amy too. She and Eric have to work together, and I can’t see how that could end well. Eric and I have to discuss all of this before we do something we can’t take back. But even if we decide it’s not worth the risk, how can we go back to what we were before? He’ll know I want to be with him, and from the look in his eyes, I think the feeling is mutual. My five miles

is almost up, and the cool down is starting. Time to man up and tell my best friend I want to fuck him. No, with Eric it would be more than fucking. That's the problem—if it was just a hookup it would be easy—this is more.

Eric is leaning against the wall by the doors to the locker room, a pensive look set in his deep green eyes. He straightens as I get close to him. "I'm going home to shower," he says. "We need to talk when you get there."

I nod my head. "I know. I won't be long." I feel the need to reach out and touch him, to somehow say we are in this together, but I chicken out. Turning away from him, I go into the locker room and hope a shower will ease the tension in my neck.

Chapter Two

Eric

I'm sitting on the couch waiting for Dustin to come in. Things are going to be different from now on. I have to tell him I've been in love with him for as long as I can remember. He was my first fantasy. When I first realized that I was gay, the only person I wanted to be with was Dustin, but he wasn't ready for that, and I couldn't risk losing his friendship. Having Dustin in my life as just a friend was better than no Dustin at all. But now I can't fight the pull of him anymore, and if I was reading him correctly at the gym, he is starting to feel the same way about me.

I'm hoping that what he said about his relationship with Amy means he's ready to move on from her. I love Amy, but I kick myself every time I remember that I introduced them. I thought they would go out a time or two, and Dustin could get a little hetero action, and that would be it. I didn't think they would be together for almost two years. Now I'm going to have to deal with the fallout at work because Amy will surely not take it well when Dustin tells her it's over.

I'm getting ahead of myself here. I don't know for sure that Dustin wants to change our relationship. He may decide that he's not ready, or that he really does want to stay with Amy. God, I think I will have to move out if I have to hear them together again. I want Dustin to moan for me when I bury myself in him. Hell, I don't bottom often, but if he wants to top me, I will let him just to be able to touch him, to taste him. I want him to come down my throat while I ready his ass for my cock.

I have to calm down—it will be a disaster if Dustin walks in and I have a hard-on tenting my sweats. I don't want to scare him off before we even start to talk. I go over in my head just what I want to say to him. I'm attracted to him, and I want us to try to be together but I want to promise him that no matter what happens we will always be friends. I just need a chance to make Dustin see how good we could be together. When Dustin was talking about Amy earlier, I realized that he may actually be ready for a lifetime relationship, and I'm just the man who can fill that spot.

I sip my beer and watch a report on spring training. My father and I have Yankee season tickets, and I can't wait for opening day. Dustin walks in and

takes his jacket off. "I'm gonna get a beer." He walks to the kitchen. My stress level has jumped to epic proportions. He wouldn't even meet my eyes before he fled the room. I've got to find a way to relax both of us if we want to have a chance of getting through this without killing our friendship.

Looking like a sheep being led to slaughter, Dustin sits on the other end of the couch, as far away from me as he can possibly get. We both reach for the remote at the same time, but as our hands brush together, I capture his, interlocking our fingers. He gasps and tries to pull back. I wonder if he feels the electrical charge from just our hands like I do. Needing to put him at ease I say, "No matter what happens, D, we will always be friends." Rubbing my thumb over the racing pulse on his wrist, I put my beer on the coffee table, grab the remote and turn the TV off. Moving closer to him, I lift our joined hands to my chest. "You are the most important person in my life."

He closes his eyes and his shoulders sag. "I can't lose you, Eric," he whispers. "I won't survive it."

"You'll never lose me," I assure him, reaching out to caress his stubbled jaw. I want nothing more than to hold him, kiss him and lose myself in this man. His eyes open and hope blazes for a second before apprehension takes over again. "Never," I say, as my hand moves around to fist in the hair on his nape. I pull him into me. "Ever," I whisper, as our lips brush together for the first time. Closing my eyes, I press my lips against his harder, and when he cracks his mouth open to let out a hissing breath, my tongue dives into the crevice. The taste of him, beer, mint and something uniquely Dustin, fills my senses and causes my dick to throb. Releasing his hand, I wrap my arm around his waist and drag him with me as I fall back on the couch. Groaning more from the feel of us pressed together than his weight, I pull my leg out from under him so he is cradled between my legs. I thrust my swollen cock up, needing the friction of his erection to press against mine. Gasping, Dustin lifts up on his arms, changing the angle and driving himself against me again. His eyes are now dilated and his mouth is open as he rocks his hips again. My balls are aching for release, so I grab his hips to still him. "D-man, you need to stop or I'm gonna come in my pants." I can already feel pre-cum seeping from the head of my cock. "I've wanted you for too long."

Snapping his gaze to me, "How long?" he demands.

"Feels like forever." I reach out to push his hair back from his eyes. "I think I've always wanted you."

He sits up straddling my legs. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

Clutching the back of the couch, I haul myself up so we are eye to eye. "Probably the same reason you never said anything. I was afraid to lose you."

"And you're not anymore?" he questions.

I nod my head. "Still scared shitless, but I don't want to fight it anymore." I pull my legs out from under him and cross them. "I won't let this ruin our friendship, but I need you, Dustin."

He drops back on his heels, hands on his knees. "Shit, Eric, we've been stupid huh?"

That's the understatement of the world. "Yeah, we have, but Dustin, I can't picture a future without you in it. I just can't go on wanting you and not touching you—it's killing me. I haven't even hooked up with anyone in almost a year because they're not you."

His sharp intake of breath lets me know my admission is a surprise. "Eric, I had no clue. I know I've been staying at Amy's a lot, but really, almost a year? And here I was trying to not jump you when I saw you walk around here half naked. My cock was perpetually hard."

Laughing at the irony, I tell him, "And I was walking around that way to try and entice you to make a move."

Grabbing my hands, he asks, "Why now? What changed?"

"I thought you really loved Amy. The way she's been talking, you two are getting married."

Shaking his head, he says, "No way. I mean I love her, but not enough to marry her. For months now, I've been trying to figure out a way to tell her that. I just don't want her to hate me." Dustin's head drops. "What the hell is going to happen when she finds out about us?"

Squeezing his hands to get him to look at me, I ask, "Is there going to be an *us*, D?"

Releasing one of my hands, he cups my cheek. "God, I hope so."

Wrapping my free hand around the back of his neck, I pull him forward. "Me too," I say as our lips meet. I lick around his partially open mouth. He sucks my tongue in, and my cock jumps at the thought of replacing my tongue. I groan as the image of his lips wrapped around me dances in my head.

Uncrossing my legs, I move to my knees and haul him against me. Grabbing his hips, I thrust my erection against him in time with my tongue. The friction of our cocks, even with layers of clothes between us, threatens to send me over the edge. Breaking free of his mouth, I lick and suck along his jaw until I get to his ear. "Need to feel you skin to skin."

Dustin shudders. "Damn, Eric, I almost came just from your voice," he says as he looks at me.

Reaching back to pull my shirt over my head, I freeze with it still around my shoulders when I notice Dustin has already removed his shirt and is working on ridding himself of his pants. My mouth is watering at the sight of his chest—lean, sculpted, but not overly muscled; a spattering of hair across his pecs with a thin line of hair from his belly button to the waistband he's currently pulling down. I can't stop myself from moaning when his erection pops out as he pushes his pants and underwear down to his knees. "Like what you see?" he taunts.

"God, yes," I stammer, throwing my shirt behind me before I push Dustin backwards on the couch and strip his pants and underwear fully off him. I part his legs and lean down until my nose is pressed to his well-trimmed pubes. His smell is intoxicating, clean and musky, and I need to taste him. I turn my head and take one of his balls into my mouth, and we both moan. I'm holding his thighs open as my thumbs press on his perineum, stroking back and forth between his balls and his puckered hole. He tries to push his pelvis up, but I hold him still as I move to his other testicle.

"Eric... Eric... God, that feels so good," he moans. I glance up and his eyes are shut tight, his mouth is open and his white-knuckled hands are gripping the armrest behind his head. He's the sexiest thing I've ever seen, and he's all laid out just for me.

"Tell me what you want, D," I say against his balls. "What should I do to you next?"

Opening his eyes, he looks down at me and groans. "Blow me, finger me, fuck me. I don't care, just don't stop."

I half-smile, a smirk really, as I lower one thumb to rim him. My other hand moves up his side, over his pec, along his throat, and I push two fingers into his mouth. "Get them wet for me, babe." He sucks and licks my fingers while I watch. My cock jerks and weeps in my pants.

He's pushing against my thumb, but I don't want to enter him dry, so I pull away and palm his balls. He releases my fingers. "Please Eric," he begs. I nudge his knee up with my shoulder to tilt his pelvis and give me better access to his hole, drop my head down and lick him. My hand releases his balls and I fist his cock and stroke up to his tip. I rub my palm against him, collecting the pre-cum to lubricate my hand, and then pump him hard twice. "Oh God, Eric! I'm gonna come," he yells.

I lift my head and stop my hand. "Not yet. I want you to come in my mouth, Dustin." I bring my still-wet fingers down and press the middle one against him. He takes it to my knuckle in one push. At the same time, I lick between his balls and up the underside of his shaft, which is weeping onto his stomach. I pump him again, and another drop beads on his tip; I slurp it up. Damn, he tastes good, salty and woodsy, so uniquely Dustin. I take him in my mouth as far as my gag reflex will let me while adding a second finger into him. I curl my fingers to find his prostate, and once I find it, I separate my fingers to either side of it as I thrust in, bringing them together to drag across it on the outward stroke. Dustin moans out my name again, and his whole body quivers. I suck my way up to the tip of his cock, then take him deep again. It seems like mere seconds before Dustin screams out, "I'm coming!" and I feel the first stream hit the back of my throat. I circle my fingers around his gland to prolong his orgasm, and he shoots off twice more in my mouth. I keep licking him until he's clean, then gently take my fingers out. I kiss my way up his body to capture his mouth.

Chapter Three

Dustin

Still coming down from the best blow job I've ever gotten, I realize that Eric still has his pants on. I yank his hair to break our lips apart. "Why do you still have clothes on?" I ask.

That cute smirk is back on his face, and his eyes are shining with mirth. "Because when I saw how hard you were for me, I couldn't control myself." I wonder if it's too early to tell him I love him. "Besides, if I had been naked, I would have had to be inside you and we don't have any lube down here."

The thought of him inside me has blood rushing back to my dick. Damn, I've never gotten hard again so fast. I push my growing erection into him. "Well looks like I'm ready for round two." I pull him down so I can lick his neck. "I want you inside me." I run my tongue up to his ear. "I've been dreaming about it for years." He grinds against me. "But my favorite fantasy is you on your knees spreading yourself with your hands, offering up that ass to me." I tug on his earlobe with my teeth and feel the ripple throughout his body. I lift my head and look into his green, passion-filled eyes. "I know you don't usually bottom..."

"I will for you," he says before I can finish my thought. "I've dreamt about you taking me too." Holy shit! Why the hell did we waste so much time? "But tonight, your ass is mine."

Suddenly Eric stands up and pulls me with him. "We need to go upstairs now. I won't last much longer with you naked underneath me." My dick jerks at his words. I want nothing more right now than to be naked under him with his cock buried in my ass. As I turn around to head up the steps, I hear Eric groan, and now it's my turn to smile, loving the fact that he's ogling my ass.

When I reach the top of the stairs, I turn around and ask, "Yours or mine?"

"Mine," Eric states as he reaches the last step. He bends and throws me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "All fucking mine." He nips the side of my ass and gropes the other cheek with his hand. I'm no lightweight at one hundred eighty-five pounds, but it doesn't seem to bother him. He strides into his room and deposits me on the edge of the bed, growling. His pants and underwear disappear, and he stands before me gloriously naked. Greek gods have nothing

on Eric. His body has no fat anywhere, but he's not bulky like body builders. Broad shoulders, well-defined pecs with erect nipples just begging for my lips, his six-pack abs have that dip in the middle that I can't wait to taste with the tip of my tongue. His belly button is an outie, and I ache to see how sensitive it is. As my eyes drift lower, over the perfect V of his hips, I finally see his cock. He's not much more than average length, but damn, he's thick. I lick my lips and just know my jaw is going to hurt tomorrow from how wide I'm going to have to open it. As if it knows what I'm thinking, his cock jumps and pre-cum glistens at the tip. I slide off the bed onto my knees, and moan as his taste hits my tongue. I wrap my hand around the base of his cock, and stroke roughly a couple times to be rewarded with another shot of moisture. I slurp him like a straw then delve the tip of my tongue into his slit. I continue to pump him, twisting my hand as I look up at him.

Eric's eyes are dilated and strained, his mouth hanging open and his breathing coming in short sharp gasps. "I want to fuck your mouth." His gritty voice goes straight to my balls. I can't do more than nod. "Let me know if it gets to be too much," he says as he pushes into my mouth. He thrusts to the back of my throat a couple of times, and even though I don't have a gag reflex, I can't get all of him into my throat. He withdraws, looking down at me. "You okay?" I nod. "Tilt your head back against the bed." I do as he tells me, and he steps forward to plant his feet at my hips. He leans his one hand down on the bed and grabs my chin with the other. "Open wide, baby," he grunts as he feeds his cock into me from above. The angle gives him a straight shot down my throat, and he takes full advantage. I moan as his balls slap my chin and feel him getting even thicker. "Fuck, D, this feels awesome," he cries out as he increases his tempo. I grip his thighs and feel his straining muscles. My jaw starts to protest and my eyes start to water, but I'm not going to stop him. I want him to let go and use me as he wants. I know the second he feels my tears because he quickly withdraws and drops down to straddle my knees. "Dustin, did I hurt you?" He wipes my eyes with his thumbs. "Why didn't you tell me to stop?"

The concern in his eyes makes me smile. "It was just the pressure. I'm okay," I assure him as I draw him down for a kiss.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs against my lips.

I pull back and stroke my fingers over his lips. "There's nothing to be sorry about. I loved that you lost yourself in me." I smile. "But right now my legs are falling asleep."

He jumps up and lifts me onto the bed. "I'm sorry." He starts messaging my thighs.

I grab his face. "Stop. I'm fine." I don't want to be treated with kid-gloves.

He falls to his knees in front of me. "I never want to hurt you, D. I love you."

My breath catches, and I stare into his eyes, brimming with tears. "I love you, too, Eric. I have for a long time." I lean over and kiss him, groaning as our tongues dance. He fists my hair and tilts my head for a better angle. I wrap my arms around his back, and pull him with me as I fall back onto the bed. My legs fall open and our cocks press against each other. I grab his ass and hook my legs around him; I never want to move. I want to stay like this with him for the rest of our lives.

Eric pushes up on his elbows, breaking the kiss. "I love you, Dustin." I'm never going to tire of hearing that, especially with his voice hoarse with emotion. I can't stop the smile from my lips. "I love you, too." He smiles back at me, but his eyes fill with tears. He buries his face in my neck.

"Eric, what's wrong?" I roll us onto our sides. "Talk to me, baby."

His breath hitches as I wipe his face. Eric finally opens his eyes, and the love I see there makes my own breath catch. "I'd almost given up the dream that we'd ever be together. It's a little overwhelming that it's finally happening." His lower lip quivers so I suck it into my mouth, licking it with my tongue until I feel the vibrations stop.

I release him and rub my thumb along his jaw. "This feels like a dream to me, but the reality is I've always felt pulled to you, like you're my gravity."

"You're it for me, D. I've known it for a while. I don't want anyone but you ever again." That should scare the shit out of me, but it doesn't. I feel a kind of peace come over me, and I realize I don't want anyone else either. I don't have the words to tell him right now; all I can do is show him. I kiss his lips and sigh as he opens for me. I run my hand over his pecs and abs, down to capture his cock. He's fully erect again, and as I twist and pull his shaft he moans into my mouth.

Eric's hand moves to my dick but I stop him. "If you touch me right now, I'm gonna shoot. I want you inside me when I come."

I start to roll over onto my stomach but Eric stops me. "On your back, D. I want to be able to see your face as I make love to you." My whole body

trembles in anticipation, like a Chihuahua, as I turn over. Eric reaches into the drawer of the nightstand for lube and a condom. He kisses me as he pulls my right leg up, moving between both of my legs. He pushes my other leg up as well, and the heels of my feet are now next to my hips. Eric sits back and looks at me. "You're so fucking sexy, Dustin."

"You're pretty hot too, but you're too far away." I reach out my hand to him.

He shakes his head. "I want to watch you take my fingers." Wow, that's hot. He opens the lube and pours some on his fingers. As he spears me with the first one, he asks, "When was the last time you bottomed?"

I can't believe this but I'm blushing. "Over a year ago. But I have a couple of toys I like to play with that I've used recently." Wonder if I should tell him that he's what I think about when I use them. I even called out his name a few times when I climaxed.

He cups my balls as he adds another finger, scissoring them and stretching me. He grazes over that spot that makes me want to blow, and I push down onto his hand. I need more, I need him inside me now. I groan out my need, "Now, Eric, stop teasing me."

He grabs the condom and rolls it on, then climbs up me, tracing his tongue along my body. He stops and laves my nipple as he positions himself. The head of his cock rims me, and I want to impale myself on him. He's torturing me, and I try to push my body up but he grabs my hips and holds me still. "So impatient," he mumbles against my chest. "I'm enjoying driving you mad."

"I didn't know you were a sadist. If I knew I might have reconsidered falling for you." I smile because it wouldn't matter to me if he wanted to spank me nightly—I love him no matter what. He nips at my collarbone, and then sucks my neck. I'm sure I'll have a mark there, but I plan on wearing it with pride. My hands can finally reach his ass and I try to pull him into me, but he only moves enough to press just the tip of him in me. I can feel myself trying to stretch to give him entrance. The man really is thick, and I know the burn is going to be incredible. I'll be walking strange for a week, and sitting will probably hurt for a while, but I will love the reminder that we finally consummated this passion for each other.

Finally, he braces one arm on the bed and looks into my eyes. "I love you, Dustin," he says as he thrusts forward. When the head of his cock enters me, I swear I hear "Like a Virgin" playing in my head. It feels like the first time I

bottomed—there is pain, but also that feeling of wonder. He slows his entrance, moving in a little more with each breath we take together. All the while, I'm looking into the deepest green eyes filled not only with passion but love. I reach up and pull him down for a kiss. "I love you, Eric." I lose myself in the sensation of both the kiss and being filled by this man. When I feel his pelvis finally meet my skin, I know I've taken him all and I wrap my legs around his waist.

Eric moans into my mouth, "You're so fucking tight, D. I want to stay inside you forever but I have to move." He plants his elbows by my head and kisses me again as he pulls out until just the head of his cock is still in me. He snaps his hips forward, the pain and pleasure vying inside me. I arch my back, and my cock bobs against our stomachs as I moan out his name. He sets a steady pace, and the pain recedes as my body adjusts to him, leaving only the feeling of being filled to the brim. He hooks his arms around my knees and pulls them up, changing the angle of his thrusts. This time he hits my sweet spot with every movement. I'm too close to coming so I grab my dick, pressing around the base hoping to hold off my release. Grunting with each stroke, I grip Eric's back and bury my teeth into his shoulder. I can't hold back anymore, and I scream out his name as my balls pull up and my cum coats our stomachs. Eric pounds into me a few more times before I feel him pulse with his own release and he drops down onto me.

Once we've both caught our breaths, Eric starts to roll off me, but I hold him to me. "Don't move yet. I don't want this to be over."

He pushes my sweaty hair back off my forehead. "It's not over, D. We're only beginning." His lips find mine, and the kiss is sweet and tender. His softening cock slips out of me, and I moan with its loss. This time when he rolls off me, I let him go. I don't think I can move enough to even clean myself up. I've had the two best orgasms of my life, and my body is totally drained.

Eric gets off the bed and goes to the bathroom. Even admiring his tight ass can't stir my cock. He comes back a minute later with a washcloth and wipes me off. I smile at him. "I hope you're not planning on doing anything tonight. I don't think I can move."

He lies down next to me and starts drawing circles on my chest. "I have no intention of going anywhere. I do hope you recover soon though. I'd like to try out your fantasy next."

"So we're both gonna be walking funny tomorrow?" I say, turning on my side to face him.

“Baby, if I have my way, neither of us will be walking anywhere tomorrow. Other than kitchen and bathroom trips, I plan on us spending the rest of the weekend right here.” He lays back and pulls me to him. I tuck my head against his neck and inhale. Musky male and sex—my two favorite scents. With our limbs entwined, we fall asleep.

Chapter Four

Eric

Waking up on Saturday morning with Dustin in my arms is the best thing to ever happen to me. I'm not sure what woke me, but I take the time to study the man next to me. Dustin's hair is at odd angles from his scalp; his long black eyelashes caressing his pale skin, a total contrast to the dark stubble on his jaw. My man is gorgeous and so at peace. We talked for hours, and he's going to break it off with Amy as soon as he sees her again. We want to try to make this thing work between us without any other interference. I know it will be tough on both of us. Dustin doesn't want to hurt her, and I have to see her every day. I just hope she can forgive us both.

I hear someone walking up the stairs, and I think Dustin's going to have his chance right now. I shake Dustin awake. "Hey, D, I think Amy's here," I whisper to him.

He groans and rolls over. "Too tired to wake up."

I try again, "Dustin, you gotta get up, man. You don't want Amy to find out like this."

There's a knock on my door. "Eric, you in there?" Damn, she should be hungover from her night out with her friends. What is she doing here? "Eric?" She knocks again.

"D, wake up," I say more forcefully, shaking his arm. He's still not responding other than to groan at me. I put a pillow over his head and pull the sheet up over him so Amy won't be able to identify him, and then pull on some underwear. I run my fingers through my hair as I walk to the door. I open it and yawn, "What's up?" I ask, trying to block her sight into my room.

"I'm looking for Dustin, do you know where he is? His car is out front but he's not in his room." Amy looks like she had a long night. "I texted him a couple of times last night and he didn't answer me. That's not like him, Eric. I'm starting to get worried."

Shit, I have no idea where his phone is, but I do know neither one of us heard it or cared last night. "Did something happen last night?" I ask.

"A couple of the other girls' boyfriends showed up last night so I called to see if he wanted to come out. That was around ten o'clock, but he didn't pick

up or answer my texts.” Shit, she sounds pissed already. She’s gonna flip when Dustin breaks up with her.

The jig is up the moment I hear, “Damn, E, what are you trying to do, smother me? Why did you put the pillow over my head?” I groan and look at Amy. The color drains from her face. I open my mouth to try to comfort her but nothing comes out. What do you tell your best friend’s girl when she catches him in your bed?

She shoves her way past me and stomps to the bed. “What the fuck, Dustin?”

I turn and watch the scene unfold. Dustin sits up and the sheet falls, barely covering his cock, and damn the man looks good with that just-fucked hair. He rubs his eyes like he’s hoping Amy standing there is a dream, but his mouth falls open when he realizes it’s not. He stammers out, “Amy, what are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? I came looking for you, and where do I find you? In Eric’s bed! How long has this been going on behind my back?”

Dustin looks at me with sorrowful eyes then turns back to her. “Amy, we need to talk. Can you give me a couple of minutes to get dressed?”

“No, Dustin, you don’t get a couple of minutes to work out your story. I want to know how long this has been going on.” Her hands are on her hips and her face is getting red. I’ve never seen her this angry before, and she sort of scares me. I want to defend him and tell her it was just last night, but I can’t deal with this for him. He needs to tell her what’s in his heart, and I need to just let them talk.

“I’m going to go make coffee,” I say as I leave the room.

“Eric,” Dustin calls out. I turn back around and I see he wants to say something, but he looks at Amy and then just nods at me.

I stop at the bathroom before going downstairs. I take care of my morning routine, but my mind is firmly planted in that room. I hear Amy crying and then she yells, “Don’t touch me!” I cringe at the sound. When I finally make it to the kitchen, I busy myself making the coffee and straightening up the empties we deposited in here at around two a.m. I look around for something else to occupy my time, but nothing jumps out at me. Finally, I just sit at the table and put my head in my hands. This is so bad. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy for Dustin to break it off with her, but this is just excruciating. I hear when she leaves my

room because she is still yelling. I can't make out exactly what she's saying because she's started to screech. I hear her coming down the stairs and I hope she goes straight out the door, but my luck isn't that good.

She walks into the kitchen, heads directly to me and slaps my face. "How could you do this, Eric? Does our friendship mean nothing to you? Why did you set us up in the first place if you wanted him?"

Her tear-streaked face breaks my heart. She's become a really good friend, and she's right, I did this. I set them up knowing I was in love with him. I've been trying to seduce him for months, and we should have stopped last night until Dustin could talk to her. I have no way to defend my actions. "I'm sorry, Amy, I really am. I never wanted you to get hurt, but I love him and I can't stop no matter how often I tried."

She's crying again, and my instinct is to hug her, but I'm the last person she wants comfort from right now. "Don't talk to me at work, Eric. I don't know if I'll ever forgive either one of you." She turns and walks out. I sit there and berate myself for causing her pain, but the truth is that even though she's hurt, I can't stop loving Dustin.

A few minutes later, he comes down. I look up at him as he walks in, and he looks like shit. I stand as he walks up to me and take him into my arms. "Are you okay?" I ask.

He hugs me tighter. "I wish that would have gone better. I never meant to hurt her that way."

"I feel like a shit too. She didn't deserve that." I pull back so I can see his face. "But I'm not sorry for what we did last night. I love you, Dustin."

"I love you, too, Eric," he says before slamming his mouth to mine. So many emotions are in his kiss—desperation, need, and as he eases up, love. "So are we still going to spend the weekend in bed?" he asks with hope in his eyes.

I know in that moment that we'll be okay. We'll weather the storms put in our path because we'll hold onto each other and be each other's gravity.

The End

Author Bio

Living in Northern New Jersey, originally from Long Island, Jill Prand is a wife and mother of two girls. She's been an avid reader all her life, spending Sunday afternoons curled up with a good book. "We had a huge bookshelf in our den when I was a child with a diverse set of authors like Ayn Rand, Stephen King, Mario Puzo and Danielle Steele. I cut my literary teeth on Walter Farley, Judy Blume and SE Hinton before raiding my parents' library." Jill is currently working on the Walking Series as well as a standalone novel. She loves to hear from readers.

Contact & Media Info

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GUARDED

By Kim Fielding

Photo Description

Two very muscular, shirtless men stand under a cascade of water. The man on the left kneels and rests his head against the other's torso. His eyes are closed and his palm is pressed against the other man's heart. The man on the right leans over his companion slightly and gathers his companion's long wet hair with one hand. He looks down at his companion with tenderness and concern.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

We are on the run, me—a bodyguard—and him—a prince. I have admired him for so long, but he hates me.

**Can be set as a fairy tale/fantasy/medieval. No sci-fi, dystopia, contemporary.*

**Feys, warlocks, vampires, shapeshifters if you like (not necessarily), no ghouls, ghosts or zombies.*

**Lots of erotic tension, other partners/threesome welcome, non-con okay.*

**Must have fighting scene(s) (each other or others) with/without weapons. Slow growing of love. HFN or HEA please.*

Thank you very much,

Margitta

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: royalty, military men, enemies to lovers, hurt/comfort, prison/captivity

Content Warnings: rape

Word Count: 36,774

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GUARDED

By Kim Fielding

Chapter One

Volos was not afraid.

He had watched his family slaughtered when he was just a boy, but he had survived to grow strong. As an adult he had faced hordes of angry sword-wielding men without backing down. He had spent nearly a year as a prisoner of war under conditions as terrible as the third hell, but he had endured and escaped and continued his life. He was certainly not frightened to have a conversation with one old man.

Not even if the old man was the king.

Captain Hiwot walked so quickly that Volos, despite his longer legs, had trouble keeping up with her. His sword swung at his hip; he hadn't had time to adjust it properly when she came to fetch him. Still, he managed to sneak a few looks at his surroundings as he rushed by. He'd never been in this part of the castle before. The hallways here were narrow and the decorations finer but less lavish. It was a more intimate space than he was used to.

The captain came to a halt in front of a door flanked by two guards who saluted her and gave Volos very slight nods. He knew these men, but not well. Captain Hiwot knocked firmly and opened the door even before receiving an answer. Volos followed like an obedient puppy.

He found himself in a room that was smaller than he had expected and considerably more pedestrian. The most striking feature was an oversized fireplace with roaring flames. Several padded chairs were scattered about, three battered tables supported piles of papers and scrolls, and more papers sat on overloaded shelves. Heavy curtains shrouded the single window, and as elsewhere in the castle, the floor was stone.

Two men stood near the fireplace. One of them was King Tafari. He nodded at Captain Hiwot, who bowed and quickly retreated from the room. At the same time, Volos dropped to one knee and bowed his head, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Get up," the king said. "Formalities aren't wanted now."

Volos rose. "Yes, Your Majesty."

He kept his eyes trained carefully on the floor, but he could still feel the weight of the king's gaze—not to mention that of the other man, Prince

Berhanu. The prince always looked at him with contempt and disdain, but this afternoon he looked furious as well. Volos wondered what he had done to enrage him.

“What is your name?” the king asked. He didn’t sound angry, at least.

“Volos Perun, Your Maj—”

“And is it true that you speak Kozari fluently?”

Volos snapped his head up in surprise. “I... My father was...”

“Your father was Kozari, yes. I am aware of that. But do you speak the language?”

It had been Volos’s first tongue, and although he’d had little occasion to use it for some years, he still dreamed in Kozari. “Yes, Your Maj—”

“Good.” The king turned to Prince Berhanu. “He will accompany you.”

“No,” growled the prince. “I told you. I don’t need a nursemaid.” He stood with his hands on his hips, perhaps deliberately displaying his impressive musculature. He was a couple of inches shorter than Volos but as well built.

“He’s not a nursemaid, he’s a guard. It’s not fitting for a prince to travel alone, not even under these circumstances. And it’s not safe. I won’t allow you to go unaccompanied.”

Any man but the prince would have been tried for treason for glaring at the king like that. “Fine,” Berhanu spat. “Give me a guard. But not him.”

“He can speak the language. His presence may ease your interactions with the Kozari.”

“I won’t spend days with that Kozari trash at my side!”

Volos had beaten men senseless for lesser insults. But now he stood with his face carefully blank, pretending Berhanu’s words hadn’t pierced him like poisoned arrows.

The king had gray hair and a grizzled beard and was much slighter than his son, but when he stomped closer to the prince, Berhanu took a step backward. King Tafari poked him in the chest. “This man is a citizen of Wedeyta. He was born here. His mother was from one of our prominent families. And he proved his loyalty during the war. He was a hero. I’m told he saved several dozen Wedey prisoners.”

A flash of sense memory: the reek of urine, shit, and sweat; the sounds of harsh breathing and terrified screams; the taste of blood. Volos hoped neither of the men saw him flinch.

Berhanu shook his head. “I don’t care if he saved half the damn country. I won’t go with him. Surely someone else speaks Kozari. One of our *own* people.”

King Tafari opened his mouth, then closed it. His shoulders slumped slightly as he gave his son a long look. He turned to face Volos. “My apologies. It seems your services will not be needed in this matter. You may leave.”

Ignoring the prince’s triumphant smile, Volos bowed. “Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you.” He hoped that his failure to address the prince wasn’t taken as an unforgivable slight—but then, the prince hadn’t said a single word to him. Ever.

Captain Hiwot waited in the hallway. Perhaps she had overheard the conversation through the closed door, or perhaps she could judge the situation from Volos’s expression. She was a very perceptive woman. In either case, she motioned him back in the direction of the guards’ quarters. Then she entered the room with the king and closed the door behind her.

Whack! The wooden sword slammed into his face, delivering a jolt of pain and a fountain of blood from his nose. Volos staggered a half step backward and glared at his opponent. “You almost broke it,” he said, gingerly touching the bridge of his nose.

Seble cackled and waved the tip of her sword in his direction. “No use being vain now. It’s been broken before.”

“In battle, not in practice.” He grabbed his tunic from the floor where he’d flung it earlier and used it to wipe the blood from his face. The flow was slowing already—it had been a glancing blow—but he’d likely end up with an ugly bruise.

“And if you’d been as fuddle-headed in battle as you are today, you’d never have lived this long.”

He grunted at her, but she was right and they both knew it. If he’d been paying full attention, she never would have been able to strike him so well with her sword. He knew as well as anyone that distraction was fatal in a fight. If he

and Seble had been sparring with real swords, she would have killed him with that blow. He growled at himself, gave a last swipe to his face, and tossed the wadded fabric aside. "Again," he said, bending his knees into fighting stance.

But Seble shook her head. "I'm done with swordplay for today." She wagged her eyebrows. "Want to wrestle instead?"

"I'm far too heavy for you. You couldn't possibly win."

"Who says winning is my goal?" She flashed a grin before striding to the end of the practice room to stack her sword in a cabinet. Most of the other guards had already left to wash up before lunch, although two women were restringing their bows and a man was tossing a hammer at a target. Volos rarely trained with anyone but Seble. She was shorter and lighter than he was, but then, so were most of the men. She was very quick and clever, however, and he liked to fight her because she forced him to think. She also liked to flirt, even though she must have long ago accepted that he wasn't interested in fucking her. She probably just liked the challenge.

Abandoning his ruined tunic, Volos followed Seble out of the training room. But when she turned left toward the mess hall, he continued forward. He wasn't hungry. He'd lost his appetite two weeks earlier, a few days after meeting with the king, and while he still forced himself to eat breakfast and dinner, he spent his lunchtimes running a circuit atop the castle walls. The guards mocked him as he sped by, but they were friendly taunts, and he simply gestured rudely in return without slowing down.

He'd have to get rid of his boots before he climbed the stairs to the rampart. The heavy footwear was fine for sparring, but he preferred to run barefoot. After he reached the dormitory and sat on his cot, he found himself frozen in the act of unlacing. The large room echoed with emptiness—eighty narrow beds neatly made, eighty locked trunks containing the worldly possessions of their owners. Volos knew what was in his trunk: several clean tunics and trousers, identical to those worn by the other guards; socks; his razor, comb, soap, and tooth-cleaner; a favorite knife in a worn leather scabbard; a few coins; a single set of plain civilian clothes. Not much to show for a lifetime, especially considering that the bulk of it wasn't truly his.

He finished unlacing his boots and pulled them off. But instead of standing, he collapsed back onto his thin mattress and stared at the timbered ceiling. He very rarely spent time alone in this room. Usually there were seventy-nine other men and women talking, squabbling, laughing. Playing cards or dice, bragging

about deeds on the battlefield or in the bedroom, complaining about the food or the drills or their pay. Even at night the room was filled with snoring and farting. Men and women called out in their sleep. Cots squeaked and bedding rustled as people sought a bit of solo pleasure in the false solitude of the dark.

But now Volos lay alone on his cot. His nose throbbed slightly, reminding him of his foolishness.

There was another man who neared Volos's strength and prowess in fighting. Prince Berhanu. He could have practiced on his own; he could have hired whomever he wanted to train with. But he seemed to prefer joining the guards. He arrived nearly every day, attired not in his royal costume but instead wearing the same plain tunic and trousers as the guards. He fought like the guards too, never sparing the force of his strength and always becoming furious if he suspected they were returning less than their full efforts. He was excellent at hand-to-hand combat and skilled with blades. The prince in combat was a fine sight indeed, especially when he took off his tunic and the sweat gleamed on his heavily muscled body. But although they were closely matched in size and skill, he refused to spar with Volos.

Volos liked to believe this was a blessing. It meant that he'd never forget himself when that solid body strained against his. He'd never be humiliated by stroking silky black hair when he ought to be wrestling, or by losing himself entirely in the heat of contact and rubbing his aching cock against his handsome partner. But no matter how many times Volos reminded himself of these things, he didn't *feel* blessed. Not when the prince shot him contemptuous looks, when he deigned to notice him at all. Not when the prince muttered darkly about Kozari scum.

Although Prince Berhanu fought with barely restrained ferocity, he was charming when he relaxed with the other soldiers. He would squat against the wall with a few other guards, sipping at a cup of water and watching others spar. He joked, laughed, and teased with the easy comfort of a comrade, and he never minded when friendly mockery was made at his expense. He even joined the troops at meals sometimes—although he certainly could have found better food at the royal table—and he'd dig into the plain, hearty fare with as much gusto as anyone else. But every bit of light banter the prince exchanged with others and every good-natured smack to another guard's shoulder wounded Volos worse than a wooden sword ever could.

The dormitory was dark even at midday. The windows were set high in the walls, tucked under the tower's eaves, and received direct sunlight only during

a short period every day. Sometimes the vast room felt like a cocoon and sometimes like a prison. Lately it had been feeling like a tomb. But Volos had keen eyesight, so even in the dim light he could make out cobwebs among the rafters. When he was very young, his father used to tuck him in at night with folktales from his homeland. The Kozari said that the universe was spun by a spider and each of the stars was a glittering jewel caught in a vast web. “We’re all caught as well,” his father used to say as he smoothed the hair from Volos’s forehead. “Every one of us. The trick is to keep fighting to be free. We will never achieve freedom—not until the very end—but the fight can be so beautiful.”

“Liar,” Volos whispered into the empty dormitory, speaking in Kozari.

After several long minutes of listening to his own breathing, Volos sat up. It wasn’t Prince Berhanu’s hatred that had stolen his appetite and his attention. He’d become used to that hatred over the years, so much so that now he was bothered by its absence. The prince hadn’t appeared at practice for two weeks—not since the night Volos had been summoned before the king. Sometimes Berhanu missed a day or two, but he’d never been gone so long. Surely the other guards must have noticed, but nobody mentioned it and Volos hadn’t wanted to broach the subject himself. Everyone already knew that Berhanu detested him. It would kill Volos if his comrades suspected that the prince haunted Volos’s dreams, if they knew that when Volos furtively pleased himself in the slumbering company of seventy-nine other guards, it was Prince Berhanu he was thinking of.

Volos stood, shook his head, and tucked his boots under the cot. Then he set off for the wall at a jog.

The Thieving Goose was crowded this evening, but Volos managed to snag a small table in the back. He sipped his ale slowly and watched the other patrons, nodding and waving at a few familiar faces. The Goose stood only a few yards outside the castle walls and catered mostly to off-duty guards and certain civilians who were attracted to the guards. These civilians tended to be fairly well-to-do merchants and craftsmen who added a bit of thrill and ersatz danger to their lives by dressing down and consorting with soldiers. The guards never minded. They had all grown tired of fucking each other, and any willing body was good enough.

Volos must have had a reputation, because although women liked to eye him appreciatively, it was nearly always a man who worked up the courage to

sit with him. Such as the man—only a few years past boyhood, really—who grinned at him now and folded himself gracefully into an empty chair. He was very pretty. Delicately built, with honey-colored curls and cinnamon-hued skin, and green eyes twinkling with slightly predatory glee. His tunic was probably meant to look plain, but even Volos could discern the fine quality of the cloth and tailoring. “I’m Adiso,” the young man said, speaking loudly over the din.

“Volos.”

Adiso’s gaze sharpened slightly at the foreign name, but he didn’t appear surprised. No doubt he’d heard of Volos already. There were those who sought him out specifically because he was half Kozari. They liked the hint of exoticism, perhaps, or maybe it added to his allure as an almost-ruffian. Not like Prince Berhanu, who was—No. Not Prince Berhanu, whom Volos shouldn’t even be thinking about.

“I’d like to buy you a drink,” said Adiso.

“I already have one.”

“I’ll buy you another.”

Volos sighed and rubbed his face, wincing a little due to his sore nose. He’d thought the bruise might prove off-putting, but apparently not. “Why don’t we just go somewhere and fuck?”

A wide grin bloomed on Adiso’s face. “I should have known you’d be a man of action.” He stood. “I’ll get us a room upstairs. Come on.”

The ale at the Goose wasn’t bad and the location was handy, but the upstairs rooms were the main draw: cheap by the hour and reasonably clean, not to mention conveniently close. The civilians who came to the Goose certainly wouldn’t be eager to bring a guard back to their fancy houses, and trysts inside the barracks were impractical.

A few people hooted as Volos followed Adiso to the shadowed exit in a corner of the room, but Adiso walked jauntily and Volos ignored the catcalls. No doubt some of his colleagues would ask him later for details about the pretty youth he’d bedded, but Volos was rarely willing to share. Sometimes these brief assignments felt more like a duty than a conquest or diversion.

The stairs were right outside the door. They hugged the exterior of the building tightly, as if emulating all the would-be lovers who’d passed that way. The old man on the stool at the upstairs landing was missing a leg and an eye, and his face was terribly scarred. He’d been a soldier once, according to

rumors, a fighter in some war nearly forgotten now. He held out his hand expectantly. "Two coppers," he croaked.

Volos had a few coins in his purse, but he let Adiso pay. Adiso's purse was probably always full.

"Seven," said the old man as he handed Adiso a folded white cloth.

Ten identical doors lined the hallway, five on either side. Most were closed, and Volos heard grunts and laughter as he walked by. But the door with the large black 7 painted on it was ajar, and he trailed Adiso inside. The wooden floor and walls were unpainted and unadorned, and there was a tiny uncurtained window. The only furniture was a cot somewhat wider than the one on which Volos slept. Its mattress was very thin, but then, it wasn't meant to be slept on.

With a little flourish, Adiso spread the cloth over the mattress. Then he pulled a small object from his purse and held it up with a rakish grin. "Olive oil with frankincense. Expensive, but so much nicer than plain oil, don't you think?"

Volos shrugged. There were plenty of times when he would have been grateful for plain oil but made do with saliva instead. And then there were the months in captivity, when he hadn't even been granted—He didn't want to think about that.

Apparently undaunted by Volos's lack of enthusiasm, Adiso tossed him the little glass vial. Volos uncorked it and took a sniff. Nice, he supposed. And Adiso was nice too, because now he'd kicked off his sandals and stripped off his clothes, standing naked and already erect. He was thin, with neither muscle nor fat padding his bones, and his body was nearly hairless save for the curls at his groin. He wasn't really Volos's type—something Volos had known from the start. But Adiso was willing and he was there, and that was enough.

"I'd like to see what's beneath your clothing," said Adiso. So Volos pulled off his tunic, and Adiso's eyes grew round and shiny. When Volos finished undressing, Adiso licked his lips. "Gorgeous," he purred before closing the distance between them and dropping to his knees.

Just as some wealthy citizens like Adiso got a thrill out of bedding guards, some of the guards got excited over rich men and women kneeling before them like this. It was a little game of sorts, with each side play-acting their roles. Nothing wrong with that, but it wasn't what Volos yearned for. In fact, given his choice, he preferred to be the one on his knees, tasting another man, feeling

him deep in his throat or experiencing the burn of hot flesh in his ass. But he'd learned some time ago that it wasn't what men like Adiso wanted from him. They saw him standing there—bulky, battle-scarred, a little foreign—and stirred at the pretense of being taken by a brute.

Tonight, Volos gave Adiso what he wanted. And Adiso must have been satisfied, because instead of hurriedly dressing and scurrying back to his home, he nestled against Volos on the uncomfortable bed, one thin leg thrown over Volos's heavy ones. They waited for their breathing and heartbeats to even out.

Adiso trailed a fingertip across an indentation on Volos's chest. "Where did you get this one?"

"Guna, I think."

"Was it a sword?"

"No. Just a knife." A knife could be as deadly as any sword, though. He'd taken lives enough in close combat with nothing but a short blade.

Adiso's eyes glittered in the lantern light. "It must be so exciting to be in a real battle."

This wasn't the first time Volos had heard those words, and he knew what Adiso wanted in response: a few fine tales of adventure and bravery, stories he could embroider a little before boasting to his friends about the savage he'd bedded.

But Volos wasn't in the mood to lie. "It's not exciting. It's... terrifying. Confusing. Everyone's screaming like they're in the third hell, everything's moving so quickly while your own body seems so slow. The air reeks of shit and blood and..." He trailed off and didn't try to meet Adiso's eyes.

"Why do you do it then?"

Maybe at one time, the answer would have come easily to Volos. Vengeance. Patriotism. Valor. But now those words would only taste bitter on his tongue. "What else would I do?" he replied, a response not far from the truth.

"What about your parents? Couldn't they give you a profession of some kind?"

"No."

"Ah," said Adiso, probably guessing—incorrectly—that Volos's family was poor. "Well, it's not so bad, really. You got to see something of the world. And life in the castle's pretty posh, isn't it?"

“Sure,” said Volos, thinking of his narrow cot in the crowded dormitory, of his pitifully small trunk only half-full of possessions. “Not so bad.”

He might have drifted off after that. The heat of another body against his was pleasant, and Adiso's fingertips soothed him. But a knock rattled the door. “Time's up. Two more coppers or get out,” called the old man from the hallway.

Adiso sighed. “We'll be out in a minute,” he yelled back. He rolled out of bed and began to dress, wincing slightly at the discomfort he must have felt in his ass. But when Volos was dressed and standing there somewhat awkwardly, Adiso smiled at him. “Want that drink now?”

The angry little knot deep in Volos's chest loosened a bit and he smiled back. “Just one. I have early watch tomorrow.”

“And I have to help my parents with a new shipment of Vuorian tea—which is even more boring and tedious than it sounds.”

They chuckled when they passed room four and heard a woman loudly urging her lover in the foulest terms imaginable. Downstairs, they had a tankard of ale together, and afterward in the darkness of the street, Adiso pulled Volos down for a hard little kiss. “Stay safe, warrior,” Adiso said.

“Best of luck battling the Vuorian tea.”

Long after they'd gone their separate ways, Volos could still hear Adiso's soft laughter.

“Volos. Come with me.”

Captain Hiwot knew better than to stand close to his cot when she woke him. That was fortunate, because if she'd been within reach, he would have struck her when he leapt to his feet. His body always awakened before his brain, and when he was startled, his body launched into full defensive mode. The reflex had saved his life multiple times during the war. He'd once become fully alert only to discover a bloodied sword in his hand and a severed head at his feet, the man's still-twitching body next to it. He'd been enormously relieved to find that the man was an enemy instead of one of his fellow soldiers.

Now, Volos blinked for a moment at the lamp the captain held, then hastily pulled on his trousers and tunic. He lifted his sword from its hook beside the bed and belted it around his waist. Running his fingers through his unruly hair, he hurried after her.

“What is it?” he asked as they descended the stairs from the dormitory to the ground floor.

“The king,” she answered.

Volos knew that if the king were in danger, the whole dormitory would have been awakened. But just as he let go of that thought, his breath almost stopped. “But... I look like I just woke up. My uniform...”

“He doesn’t want you for a beauty contest. Just hurry.”

“What does he want me for?” Volos rushed to keep up.

“He’ll tell you that himself.”

The king waited in the same crowded room as before, but this time the fire was barely more than glowing coals. Before Volos could even drop to his knee, King Tafari stopped him with a gesture. “I’m sorry to wake you,” said the king.

Volos was nearly speechless with astonishment. “I... I... I’m at your service anytime, Your Majesty.”

“Good.” The king stepped closer, and a nearby lantern illuminated his face. He looked older than Volos remembered, and tired, with dark circles under his eyes. “I want to apologize first for my son’s behavior the last time we met. He was unconscionably rude.”

Again, Volos didn’t know what to say. He could hardly argue that Prince Berhanu *hadn’t* been rude, and the king would think him an idiot if he claimed not to have noticed. He settled on an untruth. “Thank you, sir. But it’s not important.”

“Treating others as they deserve to be treated is always important. But you’re right. It’s not the most pressing matter at the moment.”

The lantern flame fluttered slightly as a door in the dark corner of the room opened, then shut. Someone stepped closer, and for a brief moment Volos’s heart stuttered in his chest. But then the man came close enough to be seen properly, and Volos realized that while there was a definite resemblance, the newcomer was not Prince Berhanu. This man was far less muscular and several years older, his dark hair shot through with many strands of gray. He looked nearly as haggard as the king.

The king made a small gesture with his hands. “Chide, this is Volos Perun. He’s a member of our guard.”

Chide—more formally, Crown Prince Chidehu—nodded. “I’ve seen him around the castle, I believe.”

Unsure of the proper etiquette, Volos executed a clumsy bow. He was used to royalty ignoring him, not conversing with him. “At your service, Your Highness.”

“You’re half Kozari.”

“I... yes, sir. But my mother—”

“I know. And my father has told me that my brother was inexcusably ill-mannered to you.”

Was the entire royal family intent on apologizing for Berhanu? “I believe the prince dislikes Kozari.”

Chidehu’s answering laugh held no humor, and his face twisted so bitterly that Volos thought he might even cry. “Two of our brothers were slaughtered by Kozari during the war. One was a soldier but the other—Faraju—was only a child. But perhaps you knew that already.”

Volos gave a cautious nod. “Yes, sir. And I’m sorry for your loss.”

The king made a small noise deep in his throat. “I understand you lost your own family to the Kozari.”

The sharp pang never dulled, not even decades later. Even before the war had begun, Volos’s father—an ardent advocate for peace—had been forced to flee Kozar. He hadn’t been safe in Wedeyta, though. Kozari assassins had tracked him down eventually. While Volos hid in terror inside a cupboard, the men had murdered everyone. They’d likely have sought out Volos and killed him too, but a neighbor had been visiting at the time—a sweet boy who was friends with one of Volos’s sisters—and the assassins had mistaken the child for Volos.

“Yes, sir,” Volos said evenly. “My parents and my siblings.”

“How do *you* feel about the Kozari?” asked Prince Chidehu.

“I don’t...” Volos scratched at his hair. “I killed a lot of them during the war.”

“And?”

“And... it didn’t bring my family back to life.” Did admitting this amount to treason?

"It never does," the king replied sadly. Then his gaze sharpened. "How far does your loyalty to the crown go?"

"As far as it needs to." Volos's heart began to pound heavily, although he wasn't sure why.

"You've risked your life in service to this country. Would you do it again?"

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"Why?"

"I... I took an oath, sir."

The king continued to stare at him. "An oath is only words."

"No, it's—" Volos stopped himself. Took a deep breath. The ground beneath him now felt more dangerous than any battlefield. "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty. But to me, an oath is much more than that. My promise is... apart from my sword, it's the only thing of value I possess. And even the best sword can be replaced. My... my integrity cannot."

It was an honest answer, and perhaps also the right one, because something in the king's eyes softened slightly, and he nodded. But he wasn't through with the interrogation. "Captain Hiwot informs me that Berhanu's display in this room was hardly the first time he's treated you with... scorn."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I've tried to behave respectfully toward him, and—"

"Yes. Your captain tells me this as well. She says your restraint has been quite admirable, in fact."

Another shift of the floor beneath him. Volos wished he had something to hold on to for balance. "Thank you, sir."

"Volos Perun, does your loyalty to the crown extend to Prince Berhanu? Would you risk your life for him as well?"

"Yes, sir," Volos answered immediately, even though his tongue was thick.

King Tafari and Prince Chidehu exchanged a very long look, clearly having a silent conversation. Perhaps they reached an agreement, because they both turned to him at once.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Chidehu. "Because you may very well end up dying on my brother's behalf."

Chapter Two

Sitting at a table with a bottle of wine in front of them, exhaustion making gray shadows under their eyes, King Tafari and Crown Prince Chidehu looked remarkably human. They looked like two men sick with worry about their son and brother.

Chidehu stood, walked to the fireplace, and coaxed fresh flames. After he sat down again, he poured wine for all three of them. But while the other two men took healthy swigs, Volos had only a polite sip. His head was swimming enough already.

“Berhanu is a stubborn fool,” said the king, sounding more sorrowful than angry. “He should have taken you with him, as I told him to. You might have been able to protect him.”

“Protect him from what, sir?” asked Volos quietly. He didn’t truly want to hear the answer.

And the king didn’t give him one, at least not immediately. Instead, he toyed with his wineglass, rimmed in gold and inset with jewels at the base. Volos had an identical glass. He hardly wanted to touch it for fear of breaking it.

“There have been rumblings of war from Mudedye,” the king said at last, naming the country to the southeast. “It began as a border dispute after the river changed its course, and now... well, sometimes these things take on a life of their own. The king of Mudedye is not well liked, and I expect he hopes a war with us will improve his popularity. I do not want a war, Volos.”

Volos nodded solemnly. He didn’t want one either.

King Tafari took another gulp, refilled his glass, and continued. “Kozar is a strong ally of Mudedye. Strong enough that the Kozari queen might be able to persuade Mudedye to find a peaceful settlement with us. The trick, of course, is getting her to believe that peace would be in her best interests as well. And as you know, our relationship with her is... complicated.” He paused, perhaps waiting for Volos to digest this knotty situation.

“I see, sir,” Volos said after a moment. It occurred to him that King Tafari must have to juggle these delicate, complex matters all the time. Volos was suddenly very grateful to be simply a guard.

“Even approaching the queen to discuss these issues is something that must be done with a certain amount of secrecy. It wouldn’t do for Mudedye to discover our conversations too soon. So instead of going myself or sending a large delegation, I thought to send a single man. And someone to guard him and translate for him.”

“But—forgive me, Your Majesty. May I ask a question?”

The king waved his wineglass slightly. “Of course.”

“I don’t mean to be impertinent. But was Prince Berhanu the, uh, best choice? Considering his feelings about Kozari, I mean. Sir.” He steeled himself for punishment.

But all he got were bitter chuckles from the other men. “He was a terrible choice,” said Prince Chidehu. “But there weren’t any good alternatives. The journey was bound to be hazardous, and Father didn’t wish to...”

“To risk the heir,” finished the king. “Not to mention that you have a beloved wife and four children, and Berhanu has only his nightly conquests.” He gave his son a fond smile before returning his attention to Volos. “And any messenger but royalty would have offended the queen and doomed us from the beginning. In any case, Berhanu pledged to put his prejudices aside and do what was best for his country. He’s impetuous at times, and he requires a more civil tongue in his head, but he’s a good man, Volos. I trust him.”

Oddly, Volos agreed. Aside from his hatred for Volos, Prince Berhanu had a reputation for fairness and intelligence. Had Volos been in any position to do so, he would have trusted him too. And if Berhanu was able to set aside his ill will for the Kozari enough to travel to their country and negotiate with the queen, Volos refused to be devastated by the revelation that he was unwilling to have Volos at his side as he did so.

“What happened, Your Majesty?” he asked.

It was Prince Chidehu who answered. “He took a translator with him. Some old lady from the university. She may or may not have been adept with the language, but she certainly didn’t know how to wield a sword.” He swallowed the last of the wine in his glass before rubbing his face.

This was the part Volos had been dreading almost since the beginning of the conversation. “A sword would have been useful?” he asked quietly.

“Probably.” Chidehu spoke without any inflection, the way a bored fishmonger might state the price of the day’s catch. “My brother was kidnapped shortly after he crossed the Kozari border.”

The blood rushed loudly in Volos's ears. "Kidnapped by whom, Your Highness?"

"Juganin."

It wasn't an unpleasant word, objectively speaking. In Kozari, it meant "hands". But it actually meant much more than that, because the Juganin was the branch of Kozari military charged with carrying out the most unpleasant tasks. Even Kozari citizens feared them. The assassins who killed Volos's family were Juganin. As were the soldiers who ran the prisoner of war camp where he'd spent eleven hellish months.

Volos downed the entire glass of wine in one long draught and then—without asking permission—poured himself a refill. But even as panic scrambled his thoughts, a single voice of clarity reminded him that the king was asking for help. And that meant that perhaps there was still hope. "Does Prince Berhanu yet live, sir?" he whispered.

King Tafari and the crown prince both nodded.

"The interpreter's body was found several days after they left Wedeyta," said the king, his lip curled with disgust. "But not my son's. And we have recently... we recently received a message from Queen Draga. She says that the men who took him are extremists. Rebellious Juganin who wish to stir hostilities between us. They would have known Berhanu was coming, but she says she did not authorize his capture."

"Is she telling the truth?" asked Volos. Apparently tonight was his time to question the actions of royalty.

"I hope so," the king answered grimly. "And we are... placed in an awkward situation."

Volos frowned slightly as he tried to comprehend the ramifications of Berhanu's kidnapping. He was relieved when Chidehu offered further explanation. "Queen Draga cannot send in her own soldiers to fetch him because doing so would mean she was publicly endorsing his attempt to negotiate with her—and she cannot do that without angering Mudedye. Likewise, she cannot allow us to send our own soldiers to fetch him, although that's clearly what the rebels are hoping for. Besides, it's an embarrassment to her that some of the Juganin have escaped her control. And if we do nothing at all, the Juganin will soon conclude their ploy has failed and they'll simply kill Berhanu. His only value to them is as bait for us."

Volos had never been a strategist, and his head spun with all the impossibilities. In the end, though, he decided it came down to only one thing. “How can I help, sirs? Please. What can I do?”

It had been a night full of surprises, but perhaps none of them greater than the warm, grateful smiles now bestowed on him by the king and prince. King Tafari even went so far as to reach across the table and briefly lay his hand over Volos's. “Good man,” he said, squeezing firmly.

When he took back his hand, he wrapped it around the stem of his wine glass and stared into the ruby liquid as he spoke. “The queen has told us where she believes Berhanu is being held. She's granted us permission to send a single man to attempt to rescue him. And she has pledged that if Berhanu is freed, she will listen most carefully to our entreaties.”

As simple as he was, Volos understood what this meant: it wasn't only Berhanu's life that hung in the balance, but also the lives of the thousands of men and women who would suffer if Mudedye went to war with Wedeyta. “Why only one person, Your Majesty? I see why she wouldn't allow an entire company of soldiers, but surely a small squadron would work, or—”

“Only one,” Prince Chidehu interrupted. “So that if he is caught, both sides can claim he was merely an aberration. A man defying orders. A larger group—even two or three—looks much more like something planned.”

Volos nodded. “When will I leave, sirs?”

Prince Chidehu held up a hand. “You understand that... that the likelihood is high that you will be killed.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if you are taken alive, we will not send anyone to rescue you. We cannot. If asked, we will claim you acted without orders.”

An echo of pain—years old—resonated in Volos's body. “I won't be taken alive.” He'd die by his own hand first.

“Very well,” said King Tafari solemnly. “And if you are successful, our gratitude will be... very generous.”

Would the king be incredulous if Volos told him he needed no incentives or rewards to take on this task? In truth, Volos would have attempted to rescue Berhanu even had the king expressly forbidden him to do so.

He didn't drink any more wine. And although the hour was very late and he'd had only an hour or two of sleep, he was no longer tired. For the first time

in years, he felt a sense of purpose—suicidal as it may have been. After a few final arrangements were made, he bowed to the king and prince and hurried to the dormitory to pack his things.

Chapter Three

Although it had been some time since Volos had traveled far from the castle and he'd very rarely had the benefit of a carriage, he didn't enjoy the trip to the border. The road was rutted, and the carriage progressed with jerky rattles. His fellow passengers—two women, a man, and a young child—filled the small space with the reek of their perfumes and stared at him distrustfully the entire way. But the worst part was the slow speed of the journey. Yes, they were going faster than if Volos had been walking, and with fewer stops to rest. But it wasn't fast enough. He wished he were a horseman, riding a steed at full gallop the whole way. No, he wished he could *fly*.

But all he could do was sit, jolting from side to side, trying to distract himself from thoughts of death.

They spent the night at an inn near a busy crossroads. The food was bad and overpriced, but at least his pallet on the floor was no more uncomfortable than his usual cot, and the shared sleeping quarters had a familiar feel. The innkeeper's daughter flirted with him, as did a handsome middle-aged man who was journeying in the opposite direction. But Volos turned them both down and slept with nothing at his side but his pack and sword.

Shortly after dawn, the travelers ate a breakfast of sausages and bread and then set out again on the road. Volos hadn't managed to wash more than his face and hands, and he felt grimy. His unfamiliar civilian clothes chafed. And the toddler was fussy all day, alternately whining and crying or throwing her food on the floor.

During the war, Volos and his fellow soldiers had complained about marching endless miles. His feet had always been sore and blistered, his mouth always tasted of dust. But his current journey was far worse—both the company and the agony of waiting. Besides, he hated having to sit for so long. His ass hurt and his legs were cramped.

A low range of mountains marked the border between Wedeyta and Kozar. As the evening fell, the setting sun turned the ridge dark and forbidding. The last time Volos crossed those mountains, he'd been going the other way. His body and mind had been battered, and his soul had felt more sullied than the dirt beneath his boots. But he was alive, and so were the men and women he'd rescued from the Kozari prison, and he'd counted that as a victory. He'd also sworn never to return, but it seemed he was bound to violate that oath.

The carriage clattered to a stop well after nightfall. Bright lanterns glared in front of another inn, this one much smaller. Even with the war long over, few people crossed the border. But three other travelers were spending the night there: two women who looked to be in their thirties and constantly touched each other, and an older man with a completely bald head. They were all Kozari. They sat at a table together over dinner while Volos sat alone, but even with his attention focused on his meal, he could feel their scrutiny. He had to make an effort not to twitch with discomfort. He hadn't spent time with any Kozari since the war—and the time he'd spent during the war had not been pleasant.

He was grateful to discover that he had a private room for the night. It was tiny—just large enough for a lumpy bed and small washstand—but that was fine. Someone had filled the washbasin and left a towel, so after he undressed, he gave himself a quick wash. He doused the lantern, lay down, and pulled up the covers, but he couldn't fall asleep. Perhaps he was kept awake by the absence of seventy-nine other sleeping companions, or by anxiety about what was to come. In either case, he squirmed unhappily for a long time.

Finally, he sighed with resignation and began to stroke his cock. It didn't remain soft for long under his steady hand. He thought of Adiso—of his fine skin and firm little ass, of the lean planes of his hips and the dark, sensitive nubbins of his nipples. He thought of the scent of olive oil and frankincense, and of tight heat drawing him in. But even as Volos's wrist sped its motions, his thoughts strayed to a larger body, rippling with muscle. Straight hair, dark as a raven's wing, long enough to cover a broad neck. And a wide mouth that turned easily into a grin. Except that grin was never for Volos.

Volos came with a strangled sob.

Volos hadn't said a word to his new companions over breakfast or as they climbed into the rickety carriage that would take them over the mountains. He'd squashed himself as small as possible into the corner, uncomfortable already with the way the springs poked through the seat's ancient padding. He stared out the window while the others stared at him. After several miles, the red-haired woman could apparently contain her curiosity no longer.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

Volos startled slightly when he realized she was addressing him but then gave a small shrug. "I've lived many places," he answered in Kozari. It was the

first time in years he'd spoken the language out loud, but the words felt comfortable and familiar to his tongue.

"Are you Kozari? I can't place your accent."

"My family is Kozari," he replied half-truthfully. "But it's been a long time since I was there." *Since the war*, he didn't add. *Since your Juganin tried to steal my humanity*.

"And why are you returning?"

He'd forgotten this about his father's people—they were very direct in their dealings. Rude, according to Wedey customs, but his father had claimed there were benefits to plain speaking. You knew what people were thinking. It was much easier to exchange information.

"Family business," said Volos. Again, a not-quite lie. He never said the business involved *his* family.

"Maybe you're coming to find a Kozari wife," said the other woman, who was curvy and dark. She leaned against the redhead so completely as to be almost in her lap. "The Wedey women are very beautiful, but they're strange. Close-mouthed. And they have terrible fashion sense." She smoothed a hand over her brightly patterned tunic.

Volos was making an effort to be polite. "I'm not looking for a wife."

The redhead cocked her head at him. "A husband, then? We used to be short on young men due to the war, but not so much anymore. Besides, I suppose Wedeyta had the same problem."

He did not want to talk about the war. "I'm coming to search for some lost property. And maybe to see some old acquaintances."

For the first time, the man chimed in. "You should consider staying. The prospects in Kozar are better and the cost of living is lower. What do you do for a living?"

Protect my people from Kozari. No, probably not the right answer. Would his fellow passengers be so friendly if they knew his bag hid a sword? Volos attempted a smile and thought quickly of a profession that sounded boring yet plausible for a man built like him. "I work in a quarry. I began as a laborer but now I supervise others."

"We have quarries in Kozar. We produce some of the best marble in the world."

“Maybe I’ll take a look.” And then inspiration struck. “Hey. Since it’s been so long since I visited, maybe you folks could recommend some sites to see. What should I see?”

As he’d hoped, that turned the conversation away from him. The others were eager to tell him about stunning scenery, educational historic sites, and all the best places to eat and shop. He pretended to listen eagerly, as if he really were a tourist, but he was relieved when the swaying carriage made the redhead ill and everyone else sleepy, and the conversation faded away. Volos leaned his head against the carriage wall and watched as they ascended the mountain.

Kozar’s weather was wetter than Wedeyta’s, the fields still green even in late autumn. But the winters were harsher. Volos remembered marching down snow-dusted roads, watching his breath form dragon plumes in the morning air. And shivering, naked in a cell, body curled into a fetal ball, wishing the cold would at least dull some of the pain. Sometimes even in the sweltering height of summer, he’d wake up from dreams where he was still in that cell, and he would step outside into the searing morning sun just to remind himself where he was.

Now, though, as he walked over rolling emerald-colored hills under an ash-gray sky, he was only a little chilly. He’d been traveling in Kozar for three days—more jostling carriages full of curious locals—but he wasn’t yet used to this place. He was constantly unsettled. The soft consonants and liquid vowels reminded him of family and childhood, but the landscape brought memories of blood and fear.

Shortly after his arrival, he’d bought local attire: loose red trousers that cinched at the waist with a black fabric belt, a billowy white shirt with brightly embroidered animal motifs, a thick black cloak with embroidery along the edges. He’d felt ridiculous when he’d first put on his new outfit, although he had faint recollections of his parents dressing him in something similar when he was very young. Back then, he’d been proud of the thread-work dragons and phoenixes that danced across his shirt—so much more interesting than his friends’ plain, dun-colored tunics.

No public carriages served the little village where the queen claimed Berhanu was being held, so Volos had spent the past day on foot, his sword still tucked into his bag. Aside from the slowness of his journey, he didn’t especially mind. He didn’t have to converse with anyone; the inhabitants of a

few tiny hamlets and several little wooden farmhouses only stared curiously at him as he walked by. He wondered if these Kozari thought he was one of them. If they noticed the very slight hitch in his gait, did they guess it was a remnant of the war? And if so, did they assume he'd received the injury from a Wedey weapon rather than a Kozari one?

Volos reached his destination just before sunset. A single sign announced the name of the place: Chorna. The painted lettering was tiny and faded, as if the inhabitants assumed that nobody would care about the name of their town. It certainly didn't seem a place that attracted many visitors. There was a single market square with worn cobbles and a fountain near the middle, and a few streets lined with slumping brick-and-timber buildings. As far as Volos could tell, there was only one tavern, apparently nameless. He went inside.

It wasn't crowded. Perhaps fifteen men and women sat at the tables, drinking ale and eating plates of food. The ceiling was low, the air was close and smoky, and the room smelled strongly of drink and charred meat. Everyone watched while Volos chose an empty table near the door.

"Do you want dinner or just a tankard?" asked a tall young man with a green apron tied around his waist. His blond hair stuck straight up in tufts and his blue eyes were set at a slightly oblique angle. He was smiling.

"Both."

"Are you sure? The food's not that good."

"I'm hungry. Do I have any alternatives?"

"Nope," the man replied cheerfully. "But I thought I'd warn you. Are you from Felekna?"

Volos wasn't particularly adept at Kozari geography, but he knew Felekna was the capital. It had been Berhanu's destination. "No."

"Oh. But you must be from a city, right? You look like you belong in a big city."

"I'm from the south," Volos said truthfully. "But I've lived in cities."

The innkeeper's grin increased. "I knew it. Then you'll really be disappointed with our food, I'm afraid. It's not fancy."

"At this point, I'd eat a raw dragon," said Volos. "I'm starved."

"Well, hunger does make an excellent spice. I'll be back in a moment."

Volos waited impatiently, trying to sneak looks at the other patrons. It was killing him to know that Berhanu was probably somewhere close by, probably in wretched condition, while Volos sat comfortably waiting to be fed. But it was impossible to know where, exactly, Berhanu was; the queen's information had not been specific. Volos was going to have to be patient until he found out.

Most of the other people in the room had returned to their meals and conversations, but a few still stared at him quite frankly. None of them looked like Juganin—but then, maybe Juganin looked perfectly ordinary when they were out of uniform, enjoying a pint or two instead of torturing prisoners. Maybe Juganin even had homes and spouses and children, and maybe they had friends and hobbies too.

The innkeeper was back with a large tankard and an overflowing plate, which he set in front of Volos. But he didn't seem inclined to leave. He watched as Volos picked up a fork, stabbed a chunk of meat, and took a bite. The meat was tough. But the spices... he didn't know what they were called, but he recognized the flavor at once. His father had used them in his cooking.

"You're not dying," the innkeeper observed. "Or puking."

"It's not nearly as terrible as you led me to believe."

The man beamed. "Good. I guess low expectations are the key to customer satisfaction. Is there anything else I can get you?" He wagged his eyebrows slightly, perhaps gently suggesting that he wasn't talking about food or drink.

Volos ignored the innuendo. "Do you have rooms to let?"

"You mean you intend to stay in Chorna?"

"For a little while, yes."

"Why in the third hell would you want to do that?"

Volos had been concocting this tale for days. He hoped it was convincing. "My employer wants to move somewhere quiet. He thought Chorna might do, so he sent me to scout things out." He made a face intended to convey his belief in his employer's eccentricity.

"Well, if he wants lots of nothing, this is the place to find it."

"Good."

"Is this your regular duty—searching for places in the middle of nowhere?"

"I'm his bodyguard."

That earned him an impressed look and, he hoped, added to his credibility. He *looked* like a bodyguard and could even speak intelligently about the needs of the job, if pressed to do so. He shoveled more food into his mouth while the innkeeper rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We don’t have rooms,” the man said after a moment. “We don’t get much tourist trade here. But my family owns a building on the opposite side of the square. The one with the red door? My grandparents lived there, but they’re dead now and the house is empty. You can stay there if you don’t mind some dust and spider webs.”

“I don’t mind. How much?”

“Oh, let’s say twenty fals a night. And you can take all your meals here.”

They both knew that was an exorbitant price. Volos had paid half that at the inns along the way. But he was playing the servant of a wealthy man. And in truth, King Tafari had given him money—enough that Volos could have fled and lived a comfortable life for many months—which was a mark of trust that had made him proud. “All right, twenty. With clean bedding to sleep on and ale with my meals.”

The innkeeper grinned. “Done. My name’s Mato, by the way. Yours?”

“Volos.”

“Welcome to Chorna, Volos.”

Mato was right—dust lay thickly in the house and cobwebs festooned the ceilings and furniture. But Mato lent Volos a broom and some rags, and Volos was able to get an upstairs room tolerably clean. After years spent sleeping on the ground or worse, he wasn’t particular. At least the room had a large bed with a decent mattress, and Mato gave him the promised clean bedding, which smelled of lavender. The window looked out on the square, allowing Volos to keep a furtive eye on the villagers’ comings and goings. He hoped to spy the Juganin going about whatever errands they might have.

But tonight he was exhausted and worried. And strangely uneasy, because Mato had been friendly to him. Had even flirted a little. With the exception of his own father, Volos was used to thinking of Kozari as hostile and foreign. They were the enemy—the people who’d tried to kill him. The people he’d killed. They weren’t ordinary folk with unruly hair, who told jokes and worked hard serving mediocre food and drink.

Before he readied himself for sleep, Volos practiced his daily strength and agility exercises and then ended with a meticulous sharpening of his sword and knife.

Chapter Four

Mato's breakfast wasn't much more impressive than his dinners, but again the tastes were familiar on Volos's tongue. And Mato himself smiled and joked, setting his hand familiarly on Volos's shoulder when he passed by.

Rain was spitting down from a leaden sky, making Volos grateful for his hooded cloak as he investigated the village. He found nothing remarkable. Villagers going about their daily errands or stopping to chat with each other under the overhangs of doorways. Merchants looking slightly gloomy under canopies in the square. Sleepy cats staring at him from windowsills. Volos wanted to grab every person he passed, shake them violently, and demand they take him to Prince Berhanu. He wanted to summon an army and command them to search every room in every house. He wanted to stand in the center of the square and scream Berhanu's name.

He did none of those things.

Instead he wandered restlessly, first through the village and then down muddy roads into the countryside. He found nothing more interesting than a few curious cows. He had lunch at the inn—at least the bread was fresh and good—before setting out again. But by the time night fell, he felt no closer to Berhanu than he had in the castle.

It was a very slow night at the inn, and an older woman who looked very much like Mato attended most of the customers, leaving Mato free to sit opposite Volos. "You look discouraged, friend. Have you decided already that Chorno won't suit your employer?"

"I don't know," Volos sighed. He was beginning to hate lying to a man who'd been nothing but pleasant to him.

"If he does move here, will you come with him?"

"I... I suppose."

"Nothing much to guard anyone from around here. Were you always a bodyguard?"

"For a long time."

Mato had brought over a little dish of walnuts. He cracked one with his fist, dug out the meat, and ate it. He dropped the shattered shell onto the floor. "Were you a soldier first?"

“Yes,” said Volos.

“I thought so.” Mato looked thoughtful. “My father was a soldier. He died. So did my older brother.”

“I’m sorry.” Volos *was* sorry, although as far as he knew, he could have been the one who’d killed Mato’s family.

“I was only a boy. I hardly remember them. I wonder, though. If they’d survived, would they have been able to come back to boring old Chorna and back to their boring old lives? Some of the other men and women in the village were soldiers too, and most of them... well, I think the war changed them.” He blinked and gave an embarrassed smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply...”

“I don’t mind. You’re right. War changes everyone.” It was the first time Volos had ever had this sort of discussion with anyone, and he was surprised to find himself soothed rather than discomfited.

Mato crushed another nut, but this time he handed the meat to Volos before cracking one for himself. “Do you want to be a bodyguard, Volos? I mean, if you could capture a wizard and make him do your will, what life would you have him give you?”

Volos had thought about this before, but briefly, furtively, as if even hoping were forbidden. “I’d like to put down my sword. I’d like someone who loves me. A family. I’d like a home.”

“But not here in Chorna, I’m betting.”

“No. I’m sorry. Not here.”

“I understand.” Mato gave him a sweet, wistful smile. Standing, he pushed the bowl of nuts across the table. “I’ve dishes to do. I hope you find what you’re looking for, Volos. The war’s a long time past. You deserve your peace.”

If Volos failed on his mission, he and Berhanu would die. War would likely break out. And young Mato would be called away from his cozy inn in his sleepy little town to become a soldier.

A storm blustered overnight, making the shutters rattle. Volos huddled in a warm bed, wondering if Berhanu was dry. Assuming he still lived, that was. When Volos had been a prisoner, he’d had mixed feelings about the rain, which leaked in through the patchy ceiling high above him. On the one hand, it soaked

the stone floor and made him colder than ever. But on the other, it was fresher than anything the Juganin gave him to drink. It also washed the filth from his body—the blood, dirt, and cum—and sluiced the piss and shit away from his cell.

Tonight he slept fitfully, awakened often by the moan of the wind.

When he awoke and saw the rain still pelting the cobblestones, he decided to delay his search. He had nowhere fresh to examine anyway. He hurried across the square for breakfast, then back to his upstairs room, where he paced back and forth on the creaking floorboards.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and he was contemplating going out again when he heard voices below. There was nothing unusual about that—all the villagers passed through the square many times each day. But there was something different about these voices, something louder and more swaggering than the villagers' quiet conversations. Volos crossed the room and lifted a shutter slat so he could see out.

Three figures were crossing the square. He could not see their faces from above, and they all wore dark cloaks with hoods. As far as he could tell, they were not in uniform, but they all moved with the confident grace of seasoned soldiers, stepping almost in unison. They carried large baskets filled with what appeared to be vegetables and meats.

Pulling on his cloak as he went, Volos hurried down the stairs. He didn't have time to strap on his sword, but then perhaps this was not yet the time for an open display of weapons. He rushed out the door and into the square, where the three men were nowhere to be seen. But he knew what direction they'd been going, and he thought they couldn't be far ahead.

He almost lost them at one of the few cross streets, but Chorna was a quiet town, and their loud voices echoed against the buildings. Following their sound, Volos turned to the right and spied them far ahead where the village petered out into countryside. He trailed them, pressing up near the houses and hoping they didn't bother to look behind themselves. But when he ran out of houses and all that remained were sodden fields beside the road, he had to stop. He'd be far too obvious following them outside the village.

The remainder of the day crept by. Volos made an effort to be cordial to Mato, but didn't succeed very well. "I'm sorry," he said when Mato frowned at him worriedly. "I'm not feeling well today. The rain."

Mato nodded. "I can make you some tea, if you like. It soothes my mother when her bones ache. My mother's not quite a witch, but she's good with herbs."

"Thank you."

The tea tasted like honey and sunshine—and exactly like the brew his father gave him when he was a child and had bruised himself roughhousing with his friends. Volos managed to smile his gratitude to Mato before returning to his room and waiting for nightfall.

The rain stopped completely by the time it was fully dark. Volos strapped his knife under his shirt and his sword around his hips. He tightened his boots. If he'd been the sort to pray, he would have, but he'd forsaken the gods long ago as he cowered in a cupboard. He tied his cloak and stepped down the stairs and into the night.

He'd gone this way during his earlier explorations, so he knew there were few houses beyond the edge of the village. The first one he came to was quite close, and light spilled out from between the cracks in the shutters. Somewhere behind the low building, chickens clucked sleepily. Feeling like a thief, Volos crept into the front yard. He was thankful that the mud muted his footsteps. He peeked inside and saw a family sitting around a large table. A young woman sang a tune that sounded familiar, while an old man knitted and an old woman sat and smiled. Two young children ran around, half-dressed and laughing, while their father chased them in circles and pretended to be a bear.

With a pang in his heart, Volos moved on.

The next house was dark and quiet, and in the one after that, two old women rocked by candlelight, chatting too quietly for him to hear. The house after that was nearly the last one before the forest began. It was two stories tall and might once have been a fairly grand place, although it looked decrepit even in the dark. Several half-tumbled outbuildings were arrayed at the back. When Volos had passed this way the previous day, he'd thought the farm abandoned. There were several such places surrounding Chorna. Now, though, faint light shone from some of the windows and he heard voices. And laughter—loud, mocking crows that made the hair on his neck stand up.

With his boots squelching in the mud and his heart hammering in his chest, Volos moved closer to the house.

If the Juganin were staying here, it was quite possible they'd posted guards. If so, they would raise the alarm and he would be unable to kill them all single-

handedly. But his situation was never going to get better than it was now, and their patience at keeping Berhanu alive might end anytime. He could not force himself to walk away, knowing Berhanu was almost within reach. Instead he had to hope that the Juganin were as cocksure and overconfident as they had been during the war. They'd been so certain then of their superiority over battered, unarmed prisoners that their defenses had been inadequate. With persistence and desperation, Volos and a few others had managed to overcome their captors at last.

Nobody raised the alarm as Volos reached the house. He hugged the ancient walls, moving to the side, where the noises seemed to be coming from. This house had a cellar with a few small windows set low to the ground, shining with flickering candlelight. Volos had to crouch to look inside. What he saw very nearly made him cry out.

A naked man was tied facedown to a table. His legs were spread, the ankles and knees bound tightly to sturdy wooden legs. His arms, stretched over his head, were attached to the other two table legs. He was thin and dirty, and his pale skin was marred with mottled bruises, bloody lash marks, and oozing burns. His face was turned away from the window, allowing Volos to see only his matted long hair.

Seven men slouched against the cellar's stone walls. Several of them clutched bottles of ale. Two of them had their belts unfastened, their trousers pushed low on their hips; they were fondling their cocks. All of the men had swords either around their waists or near at hand.

As Volos watched in horror, one of the men set his bottle on the floor, unbuckled his sword and set it aside, and prowled to the table. When he got there, he slapped the naked man's ass several times, the crack of flesh on flesh very loud. When that brought little response from the captive, the man laughed. He pushed his trousers down, revealing his hard dick. As his companions shouted obscene encouragements, he shoved three of his fingers roughly into the bound man's ass.

"Gods, no," cried the naked man in a voice raspy from either shouting or disuse. He said it in Wedey.

Unable to bear watching the Juganin raping Prince Berhanu, Volos shoved his fist in his mouth to muffle his own screams. He spun around so his back was against the house, and as his knees gave out, he slowly sank down until he was kneeling in the mud. For an immeasurably long moment, his head was

nothing but a raging maelstrom, and he saw only red. He even tasted blood, but that was probably from biting his hand. Not since he had been a young man intent on wreaking vengeance had he so ached to kill.

He had to walk away from the house when the screaming began.

He didn't go far—only to an outbuilding with a mostly intact roof and a scattering of ancient hay on the hard-packed floor. He could crouch far back in the mouse-scented darkness and keep an eye on the house, yet run little risk of being seen. He was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to sleep.

Chapter Five

By dawn, Volos was cramped and hungry. He should have brought some food and a waterskin, although he wasn't certain he'd be able to keep anything down. He'd witnessed an endless parade of horrors during the war. He'd seen friends die terrible, shrieking deaths. And he'd been subjected to worse than what the Juganin had done to Berhanu the previous night. But now he kept envisioning the prince, pale and battered, spread out like a feast before ravening dogs. Volos's skin felt clammy and too tight, and his palms had been bloodied by the press of fingernails in his clenched fists.

The Juganin did not awaken early. There were no signs of life around the house until midmorning, when men began straggling forth to use the outhouse and to wash themselves at the pump. They moved slowly, probably still groggy from the night's drinking. None of them so much as glanced in Volos's direction, but he gripped his sword so tightly that his hand cramped.

He'd seen seven men the night before, but that didn't mean there weren't more. Some of them might have been absent from the torture and rape session. So now he watched carefully, taking note of each one's features, trying to get an accurate count. He also assessed their weaponry. Each had one of the thin, slightly curved swords beloved of the Juganin, and Volos knew each man was well versed in the use of his blade. Volos used a straighter, heavier sword, one that would soon tire a soldier unless he was very strong. But Volos *was* strong, and his weapon had the advantage of a longer reach. If Volos wielded it well, a Juganin opponent would be dead before the curved blade struck Volos.

But that was the rub—an opponent, singular. He was badly outnumbered here, and even the best warrior held little chance against seven or more.

Eight, actually. He watched all day and concluded there were eight. And when the sky darkened again, he was no closer to rescuing the prince.

Well into night, Volos crept out of his hiding place. He stretched his muscles carefully and took a few handfuls of water from the pump, which leaked. Feeling as if he might be sick, he peeked into the cellar window.

Of course the Juganin were drinking again. They'd have little to entertain them here except ale and their prisoner. Oh gods, their prisoner. Berhanu's upper body was tied to the table, this time face-up. His arms were stretched cruelly—even from afar, Volos could see the strained muscles and tendons. The

front of his torso was as badly injured as his back. Maybe worse. Nothing was left of his left nipple but a blood-crusted wound. His legs were trussed in a complicated manner, spread, and held high by ropes attached to the ceiling beams. One of the Juganin was fucking him so hard that the entire table shook. But the worst part was Berhanu's bruised face, because although his eyes were open, he stared expressionlessly upward. If it weren't for the hitching of the prince's chest, Volos would have thought he was dead.

Volos could break into the house and slaughter the men in the cellar. But he'd never kill all of them before they stopped him. And two of the men were missing, no doubt elsewhere in the house.

Gods, I know I don't deserve your grace. But please, I beg you. Show me how I can save him.

The gods didn't answer his silent prayer. But just when he'd decided he'd rush into the cellar, suicidal as that attack would be, his gaze was caught by the pile of empty bottles that littered one corner of the room. Perhaps it was divine inspiration. In any case, he formulated a plan.

He took off running for the village before the voice in his head could convince him how stupid the plan was.

"You look as though you earned your dinner tonight. I hadn't realized exploring a village was such strenuous work."

Mato sat opposite Volos in the inn, watching him devour a huge plate of food. The door to the inn had been closed when Volos arrived, breathless, but after a few heavy knocks Mato had opened it for him and hadn't complained about stoking the fire and heating some food.

"I wasn't exploring," Volos said with his mouth full. He took a generous swig of water and let out a deep breath. "I lied to you. I'm not here on behalf of an eccentric employer."

Mato raised an eyebrow but didn't look angry. In fact, his eyes sparkled with excitement. "Why are you here then, my friend?"

Gods, if Mato couldn't be trusted, all was lost. And he was a Kozari, dammit. During the war, the Wedey soldiers said Kozari were lower than snakes—spiteful, malicious, demonic. And although Volos had known better—his father was a good man—he'd believed what he heard. Yet Mato... had been *nice*.

Volos gave him a long look. "Are there other strangers staying in Chorna now, Mato?"

"Not *in* Chorna. Nearby, I think. They come into the village now and then." He narrowed his eyes. "Are you one of them?"

"No. Gods, no. Do you know who they are?"

Mato shook his head. "No. But they're nothing good, I think. There are rumors. Some think they're spies, although I can't imagine what they'd be spying on. Some think they've plans to seize property from the villagers. Do *you* know who they are?"

Volos nodded slowly. "Juganin."

Mato's lips pressed together into a hard white line and he stared fiercely for a moment at the wall. "Why are they here?" he finally asked.

"It's... it's a long story. I'm not at liberty to tell it all. But they're holding—" His voice broke. He swallowed and tried again. "They're holding a prisoner. They're hurting him. Eventually—maybe soon—they'll kill him."

"And you're here to free him?"

"Yes."

"By yourself?"

Volos sighed. "Yes."

"Is he your lover?"

Volos laughed bitterly. "No. He despises me."

"Then why risk your life for him?"

A simple question with complicated answers. Volos settled for one of them. "It's my duty," he said quietly.

Mato might have been a young man, an innkeeper in a gods-forsaken village, but he was no fool. His gaze felt sharp enough to strip away all of Volos's secrets. But he nodded slightly. "Some of the villagers used to be soldiers. I suppose they still remember how to handle a weapon. I'll gather them and—"

"No." Despite the grim circumstances, Volos smiled at Mato's generosity. "It's a delicate situation. It's... if things aren't handled well, there could be another war. I have to do this alone. But... maybe you could help."

"How?"

“Do the Juganin buy their ale from you?”

“There’s nowhere else in Chorna to buy it.”

Thank the gods. “And will they buy more soon, do you think?”

Chewing his lip thoughtfully, Mato seemed to calculate. “Yes. In fact, if they keep to their usual schedule, they’ll come in tomorrow or the next day.”

Although the battle was far from over, Volos felt a trickle of relief. “Good. You mentioned yesterday that your mother is good with herbs. Do you think you could slip something into their ale? Something they wouldn’t notice?”

“Poison?”

Volos had considered that idea and rejected it. Many poisons left telltale signs on their victims—vomit, skin discoloration, swelling. If anyone investigated, it was important that Mato’s role not be apparent. And other poisons took far too long to work, or were unpredictable in their effects. “I was thinking more of something to slow them down and make them... woozy. Something that they might mistake as simply being the effects of strong ale.”

“So you could kill them all yourself.”

“Yes.”

After another long pause, Mato stood. “Wait here,” he said and then disappeared behind a door at the back of the room. As far as Volos knew, Mato could be summoning the villagers to seize him. He could be sending someone to warn the Juganin. But Volos waited.

When Mato reappeared, perhaps fifteen minutes later, he was grinning widely. “Mother says yes,” he announced.

“And you—you and your mother—are willing to do this?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Mato ran his fingers through his clumps of hair. “We don’t get much excitement here. We don’t get *any* excitement, actually. And we certainly don’t get handsome, mysterious heroes. Maybe you’re a story I can tell my grandchildren someday.”

Volos snorted, then drank the last of his water. He pushed his chair back with a noisy scrape and stood. Gods, he was so tired. He felt *old*. “I’m going to try to sleep while I can.”

“Sounds wise.” Mato walked him to the door but stopped him at the threshold with a hand on a shoulder. “Who are you really, Volos?”

“Just what I told you. I was once a soldier. Now... now I’m a guard.” He gave Mato a tired smile and exited into the night.

He did not sleep well. He tried, and the bed was certainly more comfortable than the outbuilding had been, but every time he closed his eyes, he saw Berhanu. Suffering. Dying. Gods, what if the Juganin had grown tired of their games and were murdering him this very moment? Even when Volos did manage to slumber, he was plagued by nightmares of cold cells, cramped cupboards, ropes and chains and whips and blades.

When he awoke in the morning and went downstairs, he discovered a basket just inside the front door. It contained bread still warm from the oven, a pot of berry jam, several cold sausages, a boiled egg, and a glass jar of milk. Volos took his breakfast upstairs and watched out the window while he ate.

Nothing interesting happened all morning. Villagers passed by, dogs barked, a bit of rain fell for a while. A small girl slipped on the cobblestones and fell, and her father soothed her crying with a funny little song Volos remembered from his childhood. At lunchtime, Mato crossed the street with another basket. He glanced at the shuttered upstairs window and gave a small smile but didn’t otherwise acknowledge Volos. He left the food just inside the door.

Late in the afternoon, when Volos had grown nearly mad with impatience and felt as if the floorboards would soon give way beneath his restless pacing, three of the Juganin appeared. One of them pushed a small handcart. Volos watched with narrowed eyes, his hand on his sword, as they entered the inn. They came back out onto the street a few minutes later and loaded armfuls of bottles into the cart. With the glass clanking and wheels rattling, they went back the way they’d come.

Mato brought more food soon afterward, but Volos couldn’t eat it. His stomach was clenched as tight as a fist. Instead, he sharpened his blades—which didn’t actually need it—and tightened and retightened the scabbard around his hips. He’d never felt this keyed up before battles, not even when he’d been certain he wouldn’t survive. The sun took a thousand years to set that night.

A few villagers still passed through the streets when Volos went outside, so he walked instead of ran and hoped they didn't notice the sword beneath his cloak. As soon as he passed the edge of town, he quickened his pace to a lope. The muddy road sucked at his boots, slowing him down.

When he arrived at the farmhouse, he snuck around the back. The hour was still quite early, and he wasn't sure Mato's ale had been able to do its job yet. He waited near one of the outbuildings and was thankful for his caution when a man appeared around the corner of the house. He held a candle, which lighted his way but didn't illuminate Volos's hiding spot. Volos waited for the man to enter the outhouse, then crept closer. He was waiting, knife in hand, when the man emerged.

Juganin were good fighters. Very good, most of them. But this one was taken completely by surprise when Volos grabbed him from behind, muffling his mouth with one hand. Volos dragged the man backward against his own body and slit his throat. The candle tumbled to the mud and guttered out. A moment later, the Jugan fell. He landed facedown and didn't move.

Volos felt nothing over the man's death aside from slight relief that the odds had now shifted a bit more in his favor.

The remaining Juganin were gathered in the cellar, but tonight they were considerably more subdued. Some of them sat on the floor, cradling bottles in their hands, while the others slumped against the walls. None of them were fucking Berhanu, who was again bound facedown on the table, but fresh blood glistened on his back and ass and trickled down his sides. He wasn't dead, though. Thank the gods, he still wasn't dead.

The house's side door stood ajar. When Volos went inside, he found himself in a kitchen lit only by a bit of moonlight that fell through the windows. He wished for once that he was a smaller man because the floorboards creaked under his weight as he walked. But the Juganin downstairs were talking; he hoped they wouldn't notice his footsteps.

He opened two doors, but one led to another room and the other revealed a stairway rising to the second floor. The third door, however, rewarded him with the stairs to the cellar. Volos considered waiting a while. But he wasn't sure how strong the drugged ale was or whether the Juganin would notice their missing comrade. Besides, he couldn't abide the thought of Berhanu tied to that damned table for another minute. So he descended.

From a tactical standpoint, his best place to make a stand would have been a few steps up from the bottom. In addition to the advantage of height, he'd be

able to attack any Juganin who tried to escape the cellar, and the tight quarters meant they wouldn't fall on him all at once. But if he fought there, Berhanu would be undefended. The Juganin weren't stupid. While Volos stuck to the stairway, a few of them would kill the prince.

Volos paused on the bottom stair. From this angle, he saw Berhanu's battered face. And Berhanu saw him, because his dazed eyes cleared and widened. He didn't move or make a sound, however. Volos shrugged off his cloak, drew his sword, and with a roar that seemed to shake the rafters, he threw himself into the cellar, rushing to Berhanu's side.

The Juganin were slow to react. In fact, the nearest one was dead already, his head nearly hacked off his shoulders, before the others seemed to realize Volos was not an apparition. Shouting with alarm, they scrambled for their weapons.

Two of them closed in on Volos at once, but he was ready. He was in that strange state that used to settle on him during battles, when time seemed elastic and space seemed to bend. He stopped thinking and let his body do what it did best, what he had spent nearly his entire life training to do. He fought.

Nearly effortlessly, he lopped off the sword arm of one man, then slashed the other deeply in the belly. He was dimly aware that one of their blades had pierced his skin, but he didn't yet feel pain and, since he was still moving, the wound didn't matter.

Four, said a dry voice deep in his brain. The emotionless little accountant who kept track of lives instead of coins—lives taken, lives yet to take. *Four more remain.*

Ah, but only three, because Volos's sword slashed a tall man's face. The man shrieked inhumanly as his eye burst, and he fell back, pressing his hands to the gushing wound. He tripped over the Jugan with the belly wound and tumbled to the floor. Maybe not dead, but no longer of consequence.

The remaining three were more cautious. One of them kicked his fallen companions to the side, and then all three advanced on Volos at once, tips of their blades held forward. Volos backed up until he was pressed against the table. He wished he could take a moment to free Berhanu, but any attempt to do so would mean death for them both. He wanted to say something to Berhanu, but words failed him. He settled for a single grunted Wedey word: "Soon."

"Who are you?" demanded one of the Juganin, a muscular man with a deep scar on his face. He spoke in heavily accented Wedey.

Volos answered in Kozari. "I am the prince's bodyguard." And before the final syllable had quite left his lips, he lunged forward.

Some of Volos's fellow soldiers were known for their style and grace with a sword, the speed with which they could make metal sing. Not Volos. He was all about power. Raw strength. In the heat of battle, when enemies had pressed against him, striking his body innumerable times, he had forged ahead. Among the Kozari, Volos meant dragon, and more than one person had commented on the aptness of the name.

Volos roared like a dragon as he fought. He kept his body between the Juganin and Berhanu, using the advantage of his long blade and long reach as much as he could. He felt the sting of his opponents' blades and smelled his own blood. But none of the Juganin could get close enough to inflict a mortal wound; from a distance, their sword thrusts lacked the force to kill him.

Deep in his head, Volos was thankful for his sparring partner Seble, who had taught him how to counter quickness. When one of the Juganin swept his sword at Volos, Volos stepped forward rather than away, using the man's own momentum to help impale him on the tip of Volos's weapon. That left Volos momentarily undefended as he tried to yank his sword free, and the two remaining Juganin were on him at once, slashing fiercely. One blade bit into his side and the other hit his shoulder. But Volos spun, ducked, and hacked at the nearest legs. His hands slick with blood, he lost his grip on the hilt and dropped the sword. One of the men managed to kick it out of reach. But Volos still had his knife, which he drew from the sheath belted to his chest. He collapsed to his knees and hamstringed one of the Juganin, then stabbed him in the throat when he fell. The last man's sword cut deeply into Volos's back. But Volos simply rolled, grabbed him around the legs, and pulled him down to the floor. After that, it was a simple thing to thrust the knife into his heart.

Nobody was attacking Volos any longer—but some of his enemies still lived. With a cry more beastlike than human, he killed them all. One of them was a man he dimly recognized as one of Berhanu's rapists, and even as the man gasped his last breaths, Volos stabbed the point of the Jugan's spear into the man's groin.

It took some time for Volos to come back to himself. When his sensibility returned, he found himself on his knees, surrounded by corpses. He had to use a table leg to pull himself upright, and it took nearly all his remaining strength to cut Berhanu's ropes. Berhanu collapsed to the floor, and Volos fell next to him.

No. It was stupid to have accomplished this much and yet die anyway on this bloody stone floor.

“Can you walk?” Volos asked.

But Berhanu had curled into a tight ball and didn't answer him.

If anyone had asked Volos to carry Berhanu up the stairs, he would have said it was impossible. Volos could barely stand upright on his own. And yet somehow he hoisted the prince over his shoulder and got them both up to the ground floor, out the door, and into the muddy side yard. Where, by some small mercy of the gods, the Juganin's handcart was waiting.

Volos dropped Berhanu into the cart with a thud and didn't have enough breath to apologize. He realized blearily that the prince was naked and brutalized and that he was a fucking mess himself. His sword and knife were still in the cellar. His cloak was at the bottom of the stairs. And no way in the third hell was he going to be able to retrieve them.

There comes a point when a man's body is stretched to its absolute limits, when he has done all that the restrictions of muscle, bone, and sinew permit, when he hasn't the strength left to work his heart and lungs. And then there is the point slightly *past* that, when he discovers he can do more than he dreamed. When all that's left of himself is desperation and tenacity. That was Volos's reality as he stood outside the farmhouse.

He pushed the goddamn cart all the way back to the village.

He made it as far as the inn. He even managed to pound once or twice on the closed door. And then he fell on the cobbles in a senseless heap.

Chapter Six

“Well. This is more excitement than I thought I’d ever see.”

Volos opened heavy eyelids to find Mato kneeling beside him, hair in more disarray than ever, eyes sparkling. It took a moment for Volos to recognize where they were: on the ground floor of Mato’s grandparents’ house. Volos lay on a pallet on the floor while Mato smeared a stinging medicinal onto his wounds.

“Berhanu!” cried Volos and tried to sit up.

It was a testament to Volos’s weakness that Mato held him in place with a single hand to his chest. “He’s here,” Mato said softly, jerking his head to the side.

A few paces away, Mato’s mother attended a figure who lay sprawled on his back. A lantern lit the two of them oddly, putting Volos in mind of a witch preparing a sacrifice. But when she glanced at Volos, her expression was grave but kind. “He’s very weak but he’ll live,” she said.

A little of the tension in Volos’s chest loosened.

“Volos?” Mato said. “The men who did this to you...”

“Dead.”

Mato nodded. “Good.” He smeared more of the acrid green poultice on Volos’s shoulder. It hurt, but Volos remained still. “You have a lot of scars,” observed Mato.

“I told you. I was a soldier.”

“This man you came to rescue... he has a Wedey name.”

“That’s because he’s from Wedeyta.”

Mato moved back a bit and looked solemnly into Volos’s face. “He’s a Wedey who was captured by the Juganin. Does... does he mean us harm, Volos? Do *you* mean us harm?”

Gods, Volos was so tired, and he hurt, and although he should have been rejoicing over Berhanu’s freedom, he only wanted to sleep. “No. You have my word. He came here in search of peace.”

“And you?”

Volos couldn't exactly say the same, not when the blood of eight slain men still stained his skin. "I came here to save him. That's all."

After a pause, Mato nodded. "Well, you have. Although it looks as though you nearly got yourself killed in the process." He scrunched up his mouth and then patted Volos's uninjured shoulder. "Roll on your side, please. Your back needs tending to."

Volos did as he was told. That left him facing Mato's mother and Berhanu. With her lips pressed together in a grim line, she was smearing some sort of ointment in the crack of Berhanu's ass. Perhaps mercifully, the prince appeared to be unconscious. Volos didn't want to look, yet couldn't seem to avert his gaze. The wounds on his own back burned fiercely, and a part of him was glad for it—penance for not being faster, stronger, more clever. Penance for killing. Penance for living when others died.

Sometime later, Mato covered Volos with a light blanket. "I'm sorry we had to put you here. Mama and I couldn't carry either of you up the stairs to the bed."

"This is fine. This is... Thank you. For caring for us. If you hadn't..."

Mato smiled at him. "You should sleep. Your Wedey friend will need help soon, and Mother and I need to get to the inn."

"Gods, Mato, I'm sorry. You must be exhausted."

"It's no matter. Rest. I'll bring you food and drink soon."

Mato rose to his feet and gathered up the remains of the supplies he'd used to doctor Volos. His mother did the same after laying a blanket over Berhanu. She was unusually silent for a Kozari, but Volos detected no hatred in her expression. Just a sort of weariness that suggested she'd done this sort of thing before.

"How long until he's able to travel, do you think?" Volos asked.

She glanced at her patient. "A few days, if you go slowly."

"You don't have to go," Mato said. "Stay here awhile."

Oddly, Volos wished he could do just that—spend a few weeks in the sleepy village, pretending he was a man with no cares. But he shook his head. "He has to get to Felekna."

"The capital."

“Yes.” Volos didn’t explain. “Besides, if more Juganin come...”

Mato exchanged quick glances with his mother before turning to Volos. “Where did... where was he being held?”

“A big farmhouse near the woods. One with lots of outbuildings.”

“I know the place. Few people pass that way and the house has been empty for years. Since the war. I think your secrets will stay safe for a while.”

Volos nodded gratefully. Mato and his mother left, but they kept a lantern burning on the floor not far from Berhanu. Volos lay and watched the prince slumber until sleep came washing over him as well.

The day crawled by in a haze of sleep and ache, and sometimes Mato stopped in to bring fresh water or a little food or to check on his patients’ wounds. Berhanu had remained unconscious the entire time. But now that night had fallen and the lanterns were lit, Volos sat on his pallet with a clay goblet of water in his hands and Berhanu lay awake, staring at him.

“He sent *you*.” Berhanu’s voice sounded raw and painful. This was the first time he had ever addressed Volos directly, but the bitterness of his words hurt worse than any of the Juganin’s swords.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Berhanu hissed at him. “Don’t call me that!” He shifted a bit under the blanket, perhaps attempting to sit up, but then moaned and went still. He looked terribly frail, as if he might fall apart at any minute, but his glare was strong. “Why only you? Did you convince him you were capable of taking on countless enemies by yourself?”

“No.” Volos decided not to inform Berhanu that Volos himself had been fairly convinced his rescue effort would fail. “He said it’s a sensitive situation. The queen wouldn’t permit a... larger effort.”

Berhanu seemed to consider this for a while. “But she did allow... you. Which means she didn’t command those bastards to... to capture me.” His voice wavered a little on the last words.

“Your fath—The king told me these Juganin were rogues acting without her consent.”

With a deep, shuddering breath, Berhanu seemed to shed some of his pain. “Then she may still listen to me? There’s still hope?”

“I think so.”

Berhanu pulled the blanket away, and this time his intention to sit up was very clear. “We have to go.”

Moving more quickly than was prudent given the state of his body, Volos slammed down his cup and scurried to Berhanu's pallet. He set a restraining hand on Berhanu's shoulder. “Not yet!”

“I'm not a fucking weakling!” said Berhanu, snarling and showing his teeth like an angry dog.

Suddenly furious, Volos snarled right back. “You're injured! It's a long walk to Felekna and I'm in no condition to fucking carry you there.” He realized, somewhat belatedly, that yelling at a prince was a bad idea and bullying a man who'd recently been tortured was cruel. He modulated his tone to more reasonable levels. “A few more days won't matter. Heal a bit first, then we can go.”

“We?”

Volos bit back more anger. “I'm sure as all hells not letting you go alone.”

Berhanu narrowed his eyes and turned his head away. Staring angrily at the wall, he said, “It was stupid of you to come here alone.”

“It was my duty,” Volos responded quietly.

“Your duty almost killed you.”

It was ridiculous. As angry and hurt as Volos felt, he had to fight desperately to stop himself from reaching out to untangle Berhanu's hair with his fingers. From stroking his overly gaunt cheeks. From holding him tightly to assure them both that they were alive and safe. Abruptly aware that he was naked—that they both were—Volos hurried back to his pallet, where he pulled the blanket over his lap and picked up his cup of water. He stared into the clay vessel as if it were fascinating.

Berhanu said nothing more. Perhaps he had fallen asleep.

The next day, Mato brought clothing for them. Both sets of trousers were patched and the shirts were very plain, but everything was clean and fit them well. Volos had to help Berhanu get dressed, which angered Berhanu and made Volos blush and stutter like a schoolboy.

Mato wordlessly handed over Volos's sword and knife, as well as the cloak he'd abandoned in the stairway.

Volos took the items and just stood there, chewing his lip. "Mato, you don't—"

"I'm an innkeeper. If I'm fortunate, I'll never have to be a soldier. But that doesn't mean I can't be a little brave, now and then. And it certainly doesn't mean I can't do what's right." He sighed. "There were eight of them, Volos. You took on eight Juganin by yourself."

"Only because they were drugged."

"But you'd have gone in there anyway, even if they weren't. Even if there were eighty of them."

Volos only shrugged.

"What are you saying?" Berhanu demanded in Wedey. He was sitting on his pallet. "Who is that Kozari?"

Volos scowled. "His name is Mato, and neither of us would be alive if it weren't for him. Hate me if you must, but try to at least be civil to him."

A strange look crossed Berhanu's face, one Volos couldn't read. Then he looked away.

When Volos turned back to Mato, the innkeeper had a thoughtful expression. "You speak Wedey well, don't you?"

"At least as well as Kozari."

"But what are you—Wedey or Kozari?"

"Depends who you ask," Volos answered with a sigh.

"I'm asking you."

"I... I don't know." He looked at Mato sadly. "When I was a soldier, I wore a Wedey uniform. I'm sorry."

Mato settled a hand on Volos's uninjured shoulder. "Thank you for being honest. You know what? When I was a boy, after my brother and papa died, I was so angry. I hated Wedeyta. But Mama told me it's not the color of a person's uniform that makes him a good man or a bad one. It's what's in here." He patted Volos's chest, right over his heart. Then he smiled and left the house.

Volos was still standing there, clutching his things, when Berhanu made a small noise. "You're fucking him," Berhanu said.

"No, I'm not. And it wouldn't be any of your business if I was, Your Highness." Let the prince be angry with him. He always was anyway.

That night, Volos suggested to Berhanu that they go upstairs, where the bed would be more comfortable than a pallet on the floor. Berhanu agreed with a grunt. Volos had to bear most of Berhanu's weight as they climbed—and good gods, that small gift of warmth and pressure felt so fucking good!

Berhanu lay down on the mattress with a relieved little moan. "Where are you going?" he asked when Volos started for the door. He sounded slightly panicked.

"I'm fetching my blankets from downstairs."

"Why? It's warm enough and there are plenty here."

"Because I don't much fancy sleeping on bare boards." Volos stomped his foot for emphasis.

"Oh, for—We can share the fucking bed. It's big enough for two and I don't bite."

The air was suddenly too thick for breathing. Volos wanted to share Berhanu's bed more than he desired nearly anything else on earth. And he wanted to avoid it as fervently as if he had to face additional hordes of Juganin. He couldn't think of a reasonable way to refuse. After several long moments of ridiculous dithering, he unlaced his boots, crossed the room, and got into bed. He was still fully dressed, and he hugged the edge of the mattress.

Berhanu doused the lantern.

Rain pelted the rooftop and pattered against the windows, but inside the attic room, the men's breaths were very loud. Volos could feel Berhanu's body heat pooling under the blankets, caressing him, making him hard and a little light-headed. He fisted his hands, squeezed his eyes closed, and prayed for sleep to overcome him.

"What reward did my father offer you?" Berhanu asked in a hoarse whisper.

"He didn't specify."

"Something grand?"

"I suppose."

"You suppose." Berhanu was silent a moment. "Isn't that why you came here? Why you risked your life?"

Volos sighed. "Not really. I don't... there's nothing I really want." Nothing he could ever have, anyway.

"Then you did it for glory? No. That doesn't make sense. You're a hero already."

Volos's stomach made a strange lurch and he didn't reply.

"Why did you do it, Volos?"

It was the first time Berhanu had ever spoken Volos's name. Although the room was too dark to see anything—and besides, Volos's eyes were closed—he knew Berhanu had turned toward him. The prince waited for an answer.

Volos intended to say something about duty and respect for the crown. Instead, what came out of his mouth was "I didn't want you to die."

For a long time, Berhanu said nothing, which was a mercy. Volos was grateful he couldn't see the prince's face. But he could still *feel*, and when Berhanu reached over and placed his hand on Volos's bicep, Volos very nearly wept.

"Thank you, Volos."

The mattress shook as Berhanu turned to face the other direction.

Chapter Seven

It was a familiar dream.

Volos was deep within the prison run by Juganin. He was naked, beaten, and cold, and he was so starved that he couldn't remember not being hungry. And he was running, his bare feet slipping on wet stone. He was lost, and he wasn't sure whether he was running *from* something or running *to* it, but either way it didn't matter because he was terrified. Each breath tore from his lungs painfully and his heart felt ready to burst.

He turned a corner and found a squalid room piled high with corpses. He recognized some of them—his parents, his sisters, the little boy who lived nearby and who'd been murdered in his stead. Although they were dead, they looked at him, held their hands out toward him. "Why did you let this happen?" wailed his sisters. "Why didn't you join us?" his mother said. His father just looked at him and shook his head.

He backed away and ran, but his path dead-ended in another room, this one more enormous than the castle training hall. But it too was filled with corpses. Every Kozari soldier he'd slain, every Wedey soldier who'd died at his side was there. They screamed and moaned and blamed him for their deaths.

He wanted to apologize or explain, but his tongue filled his mouth and he couldn't find words in either language. With that strange knowing that comes to one in dreams, he recognized that the ability to speak had been taken from him as punishment and he'd never be able to communicate with anyone again. Nobody would ever want him, neither Wedey nor Kozari.

The third room held Juganin. They drank from ale bottles but weren't sleepy. They waved their curved swords at him. "You're next," sang one of them with a ghoulish grin. "See what we've planned for you!" The Juganin moved to the sides of the room so Volos could see what lay in the center. A naked body, hacked to pieces yet still bleeding. The severed head blinked up at him. "Did you get your reward?" it asked, and of course the body was Berhanu's. "Did you get your glory?"

Volos began to scream.

"Volos! Volos! Wake up! Wake up, dammit!"

Someone was shaking him, and after a few moments Volos realized he was no longer in his dream. The room was still dark, but Berhanu was next to him, jerking Volos's shoulders.

Volos took a steadying breath and willed his heart to slow to a normal tempo. "I'm... I'm sorry."

Berhanu stopped shaking him but didn't move away. His body remained pressed tight against Volos's, his long hair hanging down to tickle Volos's face. "You sounded like you were dying."

"I'm sorry," Volos repeated.

The prince fell to the side, making the mattress shake. "What the *fuck*, Volos?"

Last time he'd had a nightmare like this, someone had poured cold water on his head to wake him up. But he wasn't the only guard to suffer from bad dreams, so nobody complained. "I... It's all right. You can go back to sleep now. I never have them twice in one night."

"But you have them often."

"Not *too* often. Usually."

"What haunts you so badly? What do you dream of?"

"The prison," Volos whispered. He'd never spoken to anyone about this.

"How long were you there?"

Volos didn't really want to answer, but he said, "Nearly a year."

"A year. And those bastards—did they treat you like they did me?"

Worse, sometimes. But Volos didn't say so. "Yes." Nobody had ever asked him what happened during those long months, and he'd never before mentioned it.

"Fuck." A long silence followed, then a tentative question. "How did you survive that, Volos?"

Although nothing was funny, Volos laughed. "I had no alternatives."

Berhanu didn't say anything else. But he shifted a little closer so his shoulder just barely touched Volos's. And for some reason Volos couldn't discern, that small contact was enough to calm him and send him into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

For two more days they healed. Berhanu spent a lot of time sleeping, curled up in bed with the blankets pulled nearly over his head, his breathing slow and

steady. On Mato's recommendation, Volos made sure Berhanu ate small but frequent meals. When he wasn't eating or sleeping, Berhanu paced the upper floor cautiously, sometimes holding on to the walls for support. He spoke very little. But at night he always managed to position himself with some part of his body just barely touching Volos: foot against foot, shoulder to shoulder.

Volos paced too, although he kept himself outside of Berhanu's orbit. His wounds were mending well—they itched like mad but no infection had set in, and he was regaining his full range of motion. Mato smiled and told him he'd collected some impressive new scars.

After dinner on the second day, Berhanu set down the bowl of stew he'd been eating. It was a little watery because he couldn't yet handle rich foods, but it contained good meat and nice chunks of vegetables. "We have to go," he said.

Volos would have preferred to wait a few more days, but he nodded. "All right. In the morning."

"I can't wait—"

"The road is too dark. I don't want to trip over something and break my neck." Didn't want Berhanu to collapse in the night, far from help.

Berhanu bristled. "Since when do you give me orders?"

"My job is to get you safely to Queen Draga, Your Highness. I will fulfill that duty even if it means tying you up and carrying you over my shoulder."

After staring incredulously at Volos for a moment, Berhanu barked a short laugh. "You're a stubborn bastard, aren't you?"

"If I wasn't, we'd both be dead."

They shared the bed in silence that night, Berhanu's leg touching Volos's.

Mato brought them food and waterskins in the morning, but as the three men stood downstairs in his grandparents' house, he looked worried. "Are you sure you won't stay a little longer?"

"He's restless. He has a mission to fulfill."

"And so do you." Mato sighed. "Take care, Volos."

"I will. And gods, I don't have the words to thank you for what you've done. You're a true hero, Mato."

Mato blushed and ducked his head, but he was smiling widely. When he looked up again there was a gleam in his eyes. "Maybe someday you'll return for a visit. You're always welcome here."

Well, that was an odd sort of thing—to know there was a little village in Kozar that Volos could call home, if he wanted. The knowledge glowed warmly in his chest. "Thank you." He reached into the pocket of his cloak and pulled out a heavy purse, which he held to Mato.

Mato took the purse, weighed it in his hand. "This is far too much."

"It's not nearly enough. Besides, he can afford it." He jerked his head in Berhanu's direction.

Berhanu glared. "Stop gossiping with the innkeeper. It's time to go."

"What is he saying?" Mato asked.

Volos allowed a grin to tug at the corners of his mouth. "He's saying he's an impatient fool."

Mato laughed as he tucked the purse into his clothing. And then he grabbed Volos's head and tugged him down for a hard and passionate kiss. Volos was taken by surprise. For a moment or two, he permitted himself to be lost in the delicious sensation of another man's lips against his, another man's tongue entering his mouth. When he pulled away, he was slightly breathless and Mato's lips were reddened.

"Safe journeys, Volos," Mato said. Then he turned to Berhanu and executed a deep and graceful bow.

Berhanu looked as if he wanted to tear someone's head off, yet he managed to bow back. "Thank you," he said in heavily accented Kozari.

Clouds shrouded the sun as Volos and Berhanu began their walk, but the road remained dry. Volos's sword felt comfortable and comforting around his hips, and the bag containing his and Berhanu's few possessions hung on his back. Berhanu carried nothing—he could barely carry himself—but Volos had given him the knife, more to stop Berhanu from complaining than from any real hope that the prince could use it effectively.

And in the unforgiving daylight, the sight of Berhanu broke Volos's heart. Where once the prince had been brawny with muscle, now he was little more than a skin-covered skeleton. Once he'd swaggered; now he stepped slowly, carefully, like an old man on the way to market. And he stopped often, his

expression promising murder to anyone who said anything about it. He'd sit for a few minutes on a large stone or fallen tree before slowly levering himself upright and continuing their march.

Around midday, Berhanu stumbled. He would have fallen if Volos hadn't caught his arm and grimly led him to the grassy roadside, where they both sat down. "Fucking weak," Berhanu mumbled.

Volos opened his bag and took out some of the food they'd packed. He handed Berhanu a bread roll stuffed with minced meat and vegetables. "When I first became a soldier I was still a boy. I was gangly. Scrawny. I could barely hold a sword. My captain told me that the only true weakness is to give up."

Berhanu snorted, but perhaps the tense lines of his body eased a bit.

Walking at a normal pace, Volos would have reached the nearest city before the evening meal. As it was, however, they didn't get there until very late. Berhanu had spent the last several miles leaning on Volos, no doubt seething silently over the need for support. Eventually they shuffled into town, and Volos steered them to the first inn he saw. The proprietress—a young woman who wasn't pleased to be roused at such a late hour—gave them a small private room, along with some cold meat and cheese and a couple pints of watery ale.

The room had only one bed, which was fine. There was also a washbasin and a pair of towels. While Volos finished eating, Berhanu wearily stripped off his clothing. Volos averted his eyes, which was silly. But he leapt to his feet when Berhanu collapsed onto his knees. "Get in bed!" Volos ordered, attempting to drag Berhanu there.

But Berhanu fought back weakly. "I'm filthy from travel. I hate sleeping in dirtied linens." So Volos grabbed the towel and gave Berhanu a wipe-down. He wanted to linger over the task, but Berhanu could barely remain upright, and Volos didn't quite trust himself to not get carried away with touching him. Besides, after what had happened with the Juganin, surely the last thing Berhanu wanted was another man pawing his body.

Tucked into bed, Berhanu apparently had no compunction about watching Volos undress and wash himself. Volos's skin itched under the close scrutiny. He prayed for his cock to stay soft, and he cast about desperately for the most disgusting memories he could dredge up. Still, he was half erect when he doused the lantern and dove beneath the blankets.

"I didn't realize you were wounded so badly," said Berhanu, who seemed to find conversation easier in the dark.

"I've been hurt worse."

"Like the injury to your leg. That's why you limp a bit after you've exercised hard."

"Yes." Volos wasn't sure what to make of the fact that Berhanu had noticed his limp. Prior to their Kozari adventure, he didn't think the prince had spared him more than a few disdainful glances.

"I don't understand you. You keep risking your neck for Wedeyta, and for what? To prove you're a true Wedey patriot?"

"That's not... I fought because Kozari slaughtered my family and I wanted revenge. By the time I realized how foolish I was, we were in the middle of a war, and I'm no deserter. After the war I became a guard because what else was there for me to do? And I came after you because—" He stopped so suddenly he nearly bit his tongue.

"Because?"

"I told you. I didn't want you to die."

"Why not? I've always treated you like shit. I'd think you'd be thrilled to be rid of me."

"No," said Volos thickly. "I wouldn't be."

Berhanu said nothing else, and Volos thought he must have fallen asleep. But then Berhanu shifted position, making sure he lay touching Volos. He sighed loudly. "Good night, Volos."

Over an early breakfast, Volos made inquiries about how to find a carriage to Felekna. The landlady assured them that carriages were frequent, but they'd have to pass through most of the city to catch one. So Volos pulled his cloak tightly around himself in hope that his sword would be less obvious, and he and Berhanu set out. The prince looked drawn and pale, and the planes of his face were set with pain. But he struggled along and didn't lean on Volos at all.

It was past midday when they reached the street where the coaches were. But the man in charge informed Volos that the last one for Felekna had already gone. "I can get you on the first one in the morning, though. Thirty fals each and you'll be there by lunchtime."

If Berhanu hadn't been completely exhausted, he probably would have thrown a tantrum after Volos translated. Volos paid the man sixty fals and received two tokens in exchange. Berhanu glared bloody murder at everyone until Volos dragged him to an inn, this one larger and more crowded than the previous night's.

"It's just as well, don't you think?" said Volos as they sat with their tankards of ale. "This way you'll be fresher when you speak with the queen."

"Fresher!" Berhanu took a large swallow and slammed his tankard onto the table. "I'm not a fucking flower, Volos. I'm a man and a prince and—"

"And you'll be there tomorrow."

"Do you realize what's at stake?"

Volos was tired of being angry at this man. "I may not be royalty, but I'm not an idiot. Of course I realize. I just don't think one more day will make a difference." He lowered his voice, although he doubted anyone here understood Wedey. "If she knew where you were, she probably has had news that those men are dead."

Berhanu rubbed his face. "Gods. I should have been there weeks ago. I should have... The interpreter I hired—they killed her. She's dead because of me."

The statement was true, so Volos didn't argue with it. He'd seen many innocent people die. Infants. Old people. His own family.

"She was a terrible interpreter anyway," Berhanu said. "She didn't speak Kozari nearly as well as you do. And she kept flirting with me even though she was old enough to be my mother, and she complained constantly about the journey, and..." His voice broke, and for a shocking moment, Volos thought he might cry. But Berhanu just cleared his throat and shook his head. "If I'd fought better when they attacked us, she'd be alive and I wouldn't..."

"There were eight of them."

"*You* managed it."

"Only because Mato and his mother drugged their ale."

Berhanu's face twisted. "Mato. You kissed him."

"He kissed me." Volos frowned. "You did know I prefer men, didn't you?"

"I knew. I've heard about you. You prefer those insipid twits who frequent the Thieving Goose."

Volos blinked at him. Since when had the prince been keeping track of who he fucked? “They’re willing and convenient. I wouldn’t say that I prefer them.”

Berhanu opened his mouth, then closed it. He shook his head before downing a good bit of his ale. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled after a moment. “It’s none of my fucking business, is it? Tell me something, Volos. Be honest. Forget for now that I’m a damned prince. Do you hate me?”

“I... No. Gods, no.”

“But I’ve treated you so badly. And you saw me... You saw what those fuckers did to me.”

Volos decided to ignore the first part of Berhanu’s statement. “I didn’t see anything I haven’t seen before.” He looked the prince carefully in the eyes. “I didn’t see anything I haven’t experienced myself.”

Berhanu’s jaw worked. “Have you—”

But before he could finish his question, a large man with a wild beard parked himself next to their table. He had a soldier’s stance. “What are you doing, talking that Wedey shit here?” he demanded in Kozari. “Who the fuck are you?”

Narrowing his eyes, Volos growled at him. “None of your business.”

“This is *my* city, *my* country. That makes it my business.” He took a step closer. “Who are you anyway? Wedey scum?”

Volos stood. He allowed his cloak to fall open and he placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I am Volos Perun, and I am this man’s guard. Stop being an ass and show some courtesy to a weary traveler.”

“Courtesy!” The man drew a knife from his belt. It had an impressively big blade, but it would be no match for a sword. Besides, his eyes were red and he reeked of alcohol. “I’ll show him the courtesy of a quick death,” he snarled.

Berhanu stood too. But although he clutched his borrowed knife, he wouldn’t last a moment in a fight. He looked as if a strong wind might knock him over. A crowd had formed, the other patrons of the tavern gathering in a rapt circle just out of reach of Volos’s sword.

Instead of drawing his sword, Volos stepped closer to the bearded man. Fear flashed in the man’s eyes, which was good. But it would be unwise to back him into a metaphorical corner when he had an audience.

“Friend,” Volos said calmly. He shot Berhanu a quick warning look before turning his attention back to the bearded man. “I understand your feelings about Wedey. I fought in that war too.” He didn’t mention for which side. “But the war is over, man. Let us show the Wedey that Kozari can practice peace as well.”

The man wavered visibly, and a few members of the crowd shouted words of agreement.

Volos managed a smile. “We were nearly done here anyway. Put your knife away and we’ll leave.”

When the man hesitated, two men and a woman stepped forward to grasp his arms gently. They tugged him backward.

“Let’s go,” Volos said to Berhanu in Wedey. For a terrible minute he thought Berhanu was going to refuse, but then the prince growled and resheathed his knife.

An older woman moved to their table. “I’m sorry for this,” she said, giving Volos and Berhanu a smile. She dropped a few coins on their table—enough to pay for their ale. “We’re not all rude.”

“Thank you,” said Volos. Then, hoping that Berhanu would follow, he walked to the stairs leading to their room.

Chapter Eight

Berhanu said nothing as they readied themselves for bed, but he was clearly furious. He threw his boots onto the floor, tossed the holstered knife across the room, and stripped off his clothes so viciously that he nearly ripped them. He leaned against the washstand as he towed himself off, but the tightness of his wasted muscles was very apparent on his thin body.

Volos waited stupidly in the corner until it became clear that Berhanu did not intend to get into bed anytime soon. Volos sighed and slowly began to undress. He was down to nothing but his baggy Kozari trousers when Berhanu whirled around to look at him.

“You just walked away from that bastard,” Berhanu spat.

“Yes.”

“He threatened us, didn’t he? And I don’t know what he said but I’ve no doubt it was insulting. And you just smiled and walked away.”

“What did you want me to do, Your Highness?” Volos allowed a mocking tone into his voice. “Kill him for insulting us?”

“Yes!” Berhanu’s hands were fisted at his side.

“Just because someone is an ill-mannered oaf doesn’t mean he deserves to die.”

Berhanu stomped across the room until they were nearly chest to chest. Volos was certain Berhanu was going to hit him, and he prepared himself to restrain the prince without injuring him. Which was why he was taken completely by surprise when Berhanu kissed him instead.

It was a fierce kiss. Berhanu’s lips pressed against Volos’s teeth so hard that Volos tasted blood, and then Berhanu’s tongue invaded his mouth as ferociously as an army. At the same time, Berhanu held tightly to handfuls of Volos’s hair and pushed their pelvises together.

Volos didn’t know what to do with his hands, but they seemed to make a decision on their own, settling on Berhanu’s bare shoulders. Volos hung on as if for dear life.

Oh gods. He’d never even dared dream of this, and now Berhanu was so real against him, so *there*. They were grinding their groins together and Volos was distantly aware that he was very close to coming.

But Berhanu pulled himself away, staggering back a half step. His cock was fully rampant, the head slick and red. He looked down to where Volos's own erection tented his trousers. Then he growled like an angry dog and surged forward so quickly that he pushed Volos backward against the wall.

Volos could only tip his head back and squeeze his eyes shut as Berhanu's mouth roved everywhere—licking and biting at his chin, his jawline, his neck, his collarbones. Sucking and then nipping his tingling nipples. Somehow Berhanu managed to avoid the healing wounds on Volos's body, but he was surely leaving marks nearly everywhere else. Some of the bites might have been deep enough to draw blood, but Volos was a thousand leagues from minding.

Berhanu's hands were busy too, tugging at Volos's waistband until the trousers fell to his knees and then squirming between Volos and the wall and grabbing on to his ass. His fingers dug into the crack, burning sweetly, while he urged Volos's hips forward so their cocks could find better friction.

"Gods," Volos moaned. He was so overcome with pleasure that he felt turned inside out, his nerves singing more loudly with every passing second.

Moving more quickly than Volos would have thought possible, Berhanu spun him around to face the wall. The trousers fell to Volos's ankles, hobbling him, but he spread his legs as far as he was able, pressed his palms and forehead against the smooth wood, and canted his ass backward.

Rough, spit-slicked fingers entered his body, first two and then three. It hurt. But the keening noise Volos made was due to disappointment that Berhanu wasn't giving him more. He wanted to be filled so tightly that there was no room left inside him for anything but Berhanu. He wanted hard and fast and merciless.

As if in answer to Volos's unspoken pleas, Berhanu lined up the tip of his cock against Volos's twitching hole and then plunged deep inside. They both cried out. Berhanu's fingers bruised Volos's hips as he fucked Volos quickly. When his furious pumping became uneven jerks and he sank his teeth into the meat of Volos's uninjured shoulder, lightning struck the deepest core of Volos's body. His untouched cock spurted a thick stream of seed against the wall.

For just a moment, Berhanu sagged against Volos's sweaty back—contact so sweet that Volos very nearly climaxed again.

But then Berhanu withdrew with a ragged cry, making Volos feel empty. Bereft. Berhanu stumbled a bit, snarling when Volos reached out to steady him. Hectic spots of red colored Berhanu's cheeks, and his eyes were as wide and wild as a terrified animal's. He made another sound—a sob?—before staggering to the bed and burrowing under the covers like a frightened child.

Volos stood there, panting, feeling warm liquid drip down his inner thighs.

After a while, he pulled his trousers high enough so he could walk to the washstand and give himself a cursory cleaning. He was usually fastidious after he fucked, but he was sorry to remove Berhanu's spend from his body. He tied his trousers around his waist before dousing the lantern and getting into bed.

Berhanu was still awake; his breathing remained ragged. But he didn't say anything, didn't move over to make contact with Volos as had become his custom. They simply lay there on their backs until exhaustion overcame them both.

Chapter Nine

Volos expected Berhanu to be surly in the morning, but instead the prince was subdued. His body seemed to take up even less space than usual as they made their morning ablutions and dressed, and he didn't say a single word over a breakfast of cold meat and hard bread.

When their carriage was ready, Volos handed the tokens to the driver while Berhanu climbed carefully inside. Volos moved a bit carefully too. He was sore. If Berhanu had seemed happier about their coupling, Volos might have welcomed the twinge in his ass, the protests of bruised and bitten skin.

They were the only passengers. They sat opposite one another—Berhanu facing forward and Volos backward—not quite letting their eyes meet. Berhanu picked at the threads of the fraying upholstery. The journey took a thousand years.

Felekna was a much larger city than the Wedey capital. It had not been besieged during the war, and its buildings sprawled well beyond the ancient city walls. As impressive as it was in size, large portions of it were shockingly squalid. The carriage rattled past reeking neighborhoods with houses that leaned drunkenly, scrawny children who stared with hollow eyes, and both trash and humans scattered in the gutters.

But the city became increasingly grand as they neared the palace, which ruled flamboyantly atop a hill. The carriage let them off near the bottom of the slope. After Berhanu got out, he started marching upward right away, not checking to make sure Volos was at his heels. By the time they reached the gilded palace gates, Berhanu was out of breath and looking angry about it.

The gates were guarded, of course. A half-dozen men and women in gaudy uniforms and ridiculous braided hats stood at somber attention, hands on the ornamented hilts of their swords.

Berhanu stopped several paces away. "I had a letter from my father—all done up with seals and everything. But it's gone now. And I'm not exactly looking princely. I don't know how we'll get in." He looked discouraged. Broken.

Volos patted his shoulder awkwardly. "Let me try." He walked confidently to the guards, who eyed him—and his sword—distrustfully.

“My name is Volos Perun. I am here as bodyguard to this man, who has a vital message for Queen Draga. I know we don’t look like much—it’s been a hard journey. But I assure you, she will want to see him. And if she finds out you’ve turned him away, the consequences will be dire. Go verify what I’m telling you. We’ll wait.”

The guards exchanged glances. Volos knew that they were thinking he was probably lying, but none of them wanted to bear responsibility in case he was telling the truth. Finally a guard with red hair coiled into braids lifted her chin at him. “Who is he?”

“You can tell her... he’s the man from the south, the one she’s been waiting to see. The man who was recently freed.”

The guard was clearly still skeptical. “If this is a ruse—”

“It would be a very stupid one.”

She thought for a moment before giving two sharp nods. “You’ll wait in the courtyard. In chains.”

That proposition didn’t thrill Volos, but it didn’t surprise him either. “Fine.” He turned to Berhanu and spoke in Wedey. “They’ll give her my message. But they’ll bind us in the meantime. Please don’t put up a fuss.”

“I’m not a child.”

“I know.”

One of the guards scurried away to convey the news. Meanwhile, the others frowned at hearing Wedey, then ushered Volos and Berhanu through the gate and into the courtyard. The redhead put manacles on Volos first, binding his arms behind his back, but she made sure the irons weren’t too tight, and she didn’t take his sword.

Berhanu went pale at her gesture to put his hands behind his back. “Volos,” he said quietly. He sounded strangled. “I can’t...”

Volos answered in a soothing tone. “It’s only for a few minutes. These are not the Juganin.”

“Yes. All right.” Berhanu stepped very close to Volos and looked as if he wanted to run, but he placed his hands as ordered. When the shackles clinked shut, he winced.

They ended up having to wait considerably longer than a few minutes. Volos understood—it wasn’t as if royalty was available at a moment’s notice.

Perhaps noting the way Berhanu swayed slightly on his feet, the redheaded guard led them to a stone bench near the wall and asked them to sit. They did, Berhanu so close that his thigh was pressed against Volos's.

"Do you think we should get a fountain like that at the castle?" Berhanu asked after a while. He nodded his head toward an enormous monstrosity covered in gilded dragons, lions, eagles, and gods knew what else.

"I think you should get two of them."

Volos was rewarded with a brief smile—one of the first Berhanu had ever given him—and then Berhanu spoke. "Once when I was still a boy, my mother bought my father a statue as a gift. It was hideous and it cost a fortune. My brothers and I used to call it the Nightmare. Father was forced to keep it in his study so he wouldn't offend her. After she died, he moved it into his bedchamber." A softness settled on Berhanu's features. "I think my mother would have loved this fountain." He sighed. "What's your mother like, Volos?"

"Dead. Juganin killed my whole family when I was a child."

"Gods. I'm sorry. I didn't... I'm so sorry."

Volos shrugged, which was a bit awkward in chains. "It was a long time ago."

"And you've no family left at all?"

"No."

"My father said your mother's family is prominent."

"They weren't pleased she married a Kozari." Volos had never met them and knew little about them. His mother had preferred not to speak about her relatives.

"Then who did you go to for comfort after you were... after the prison?"

Volos looked away.

Perhaps Berhanu would have asked more questions, and perhaps Volos would have answered, because at least the conversation was distracting the prince from his unease. But two important-seeming men came marching purposefully in their direction, both of them looking appalled.

"Unchain these men at once!" ordered the one with a narrow face and long beard.

His companion, almost his twin but for the missing beard, bowed deeply to Berhanu. "I beg your pardon, sir. I do apologize for this horrid treatment."

Volos translated while the redhead unlocked Berhanu's manacles and then Volos's. Berhanu bowed back, albeit not quite so deeply. "It's not necessary. Of course you must be very careful about security. Your guards were not at all unkind."

When Volos translated that little speech into Kozari, the thin-faced men looked relieved and the redhead smiled slightly.

Berhanu and Volos were led into the palace, an edifice of endless marble hallways lined with colorful carpets, paintings, tapestries, and statues. Passersby gaped at Berhanu and Volos, then scurried out of their way. The foursome finally arrived at a large room with silk-upholstered chairs and more tapestries. Large windows overlooked an elaborate walled garden, while inside the room, numerous vases overflowed with fresh flowers.

"Her Majesty will join you very shortly," said the bearded man. "Would you, er, care to freshen up first?"

After Volos translated, Berhanu shook his head. "No. All the freshening up in the world won't make me look less disreputable."

The men listened as Volos conveyed the message, and then they bowed and hurried out of the room.

Berhanu paced while Volos waited near one of the paneled walls. It wasn't long before a door swung open and a woman stepped into the room. She wasn't what Volos had expected. For one thing, a detailed rendering of a flowering vine crept from her neck up one cheek. Volos had never seen a tattoo before but vaguely remembered his father once mentioning that Kozari nobility applied ink to their bodies. The queen was in her sixties and had probably never been beautiful, but her clear eyes showed keen intelligence. Her trousers, blouse, and long vest were obviously made of expensive cloth yet were mostly unadorned. Her gray hair formed a nimbus of tight curls around her face.

"Prince Berhanu," she said and curtsied. "I am so relieved to see you." She spoke in heavily accented and quite formal Wedey.

Berhanu's answering bow was very deep. As battered and poorly dressed as he was, there was no mistaking him for anything but a prince. "Your Majesty. Thank you for agreeing to speak to me."

“Of course.” She frowned. “I cannot properly express my regrets over the treatment you have received in my country. I know you understand why I could not act more directly. But please understand how pained I am at what you have endured.”

After a very brief pause, Berhanu bowed again. “I do understand. And I’d like you to know that I owe my life, in part, to the kindness of some of your subjects.” He gave an unhappy little smile. “Every country has its villains and its heroes.”

She trailed her fingertips along an ivory-inlaid tabletop. “And speaking of heroes...?” She gave Volos a significant look.

Berhanu turned to look at Volos, who tensed. But then Berhanu shocked him with a warm smile. “I apologize, My Lady. Let me present my bodyguard, Volos Perun.”

Volos felt huge and shabby. Rather belatedly, he dropped to one knee, but the queen quickly motioned for him to stand. She gave him a very close look, and then her eyes widened. “Perun! Your father was Rok Perun!”

“I... Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I should have seen it immediately. You look so much like him.” The corners of her lips twitched. “I had a terrible crush on him when I was a girl.”

“You... you knew my father?”

“Not well, but yes. He was one of my mother’s advisors. He was very young for that position, actually, but I believe he inherited it. And he had a reputation for plain speaking. If more people had listened to him, a great deal of pain could have been avoided.”

Volos didn’t know how to respond to that. His tongue felt thick and stupid, so he nodded awkwardly. Then he risked a glance at Berhanu, who was giving him an odd, unreadable look.

“So many sorrows,” said Queen Draga. “But perhaps due to the bravery of both of you, we can avoid yet more.”

“That’s my hope too,” said Berhanu.

“Good. And I must apologize again, but I was in the middle of a meeting. I think perhaps you might like some rest and refreshment after the ardors of your journey. Will you accept my hospitality? This evening we can begin our discussions in earnest.”

“Thank you, My Lady.”

“Good. Please wait here. In a few minutes someone will come to take you to your rooms.”

But before she could leave, Berhanu held up a hand. “My Lady? I’d prefer it if Volos stayed with me. He can translate for me if necessary. And he’s my guard.”

“Of course.”

A brief round of bowing and curtsying accompanied the queen’s departure. Afterward, Berhanu crossed the room to the window, leaned against the sill, and looked out at the thick afternoon mist. Not only did Volos have no idea what the prince might be thinking, he wasn’t all that sure of his own thoughts, which were jumbled and confused.

“Do you think she’ll be sympathetic to my arguments?” Berhanu asked, still facing away.

“I don’t know. She seemed... well-disposed.”

“Maybe. But you never know with royalty. Quite often we say or do one thing and we mean something else entirely.”

Volos was still chewing over the meaning of that statement when a woman arrived to lead them away.

Chapter Ten

Berhanu and Volos were taken to chambers fit for a prince. The main room was large and generously furnished. An elevated platform held an enormous bed, covered by an opulent bedspread and piled with pillows. In a smaller attached room, a spacious window provided a fine view of the city from the carved wooden table placed in front of it, which was set with gold cutlery and gilded plates. A small feast awaited them under covered dishes. But the accommodation that excited them both was the washroom with a huge porcelain tub filled with steaming, scented water. The room also included a pile of thick towels, a painted washbasin, a mirror with an ornate frame, two sets of toiletries, and a rack hung with several sets of clothing.

"I suspect the queen thinks we're filthy," Berhanu said with a small grin. "And she's right. What do you think—eat first or bathe?"

"I... uh..."

"Bathe, I think. Better a cold dinner than cold bath water." Berhanu sat on a marble bench to remove his boots. Then, while Volos stood like a complete fool, the prince stripped completely and climbed into the tub. He uttered a deep sigh and submerged to his neck. "Heaven."

Volos was carefully averting his eyes, as if he hadn't already seen Berhanu naked many times. As if he hadn't felt him, deep inside, just the night before.

Berhanu made an exasperated little noise. "Get in the tub, Volos."

"But you're—"

"It's big enough for us both. No point in you having to endure cold, secondhand water."

Volos hung his sword on a hook and quickly undressed. He felt acutely self-conscious as he crossed the room, but Berhanu didn't say anything as he climbed into the tub. They faced each other in silence. The deep water was soft with scented oil; it felt wonderful.

After lifting a large cake of soap from a basket, Berhanu gestured imperiously. "Turn around. I'll wash your back."

Were all princes so inscrutable? Volos turned around, sloshing some of the water onto the tile floor in the process. He tried not to swoon like a lovesick

maiden when Berhanu set one slick hand on his shoulder and used the other to smooth the soap over his spine. Volos had never been bathed before—well, not since he was a child. In the quiet of the washroom, with the only sounds being their breaths and the small splashes of water, the act was strangely intimate. More intimate, in fact, than most of the fucks he'd had at the Thieving Goose. And Berhanu was taking his time over it, moving the soap in small, slow circles.

"There's no tub in the barracks, is there?" asked Berhanu.

"No."

"Then how do you stay clean? When you spar, you never—" He stopped suddenly, then cleared his throat.

"We make do with wash bowls. When my purse is feeling especially full I might go to the baths."

"I have a private washroom. I've never been to the public baths." Did Berhanu sound slightly wistful?

"They're not nearly as nice as this. At least, not the one I go to. It's near the Goose."

"I've never been there either."

Volos twisted his head around to look at him. "Really?"

"I'm a fucking *prince*, Volos. Do you think I'd be allowed in a place like that without an entire company of guards?" He sighed. "My social life happens at official dinners where I have to pretend to be fascinated with the Duke of Dumbshit or the Baroness of Boredom. And when I want to get a leg over, there's a list of whores who are approved for royal use. They're all very clean and pretty and proper."

That was an aspect of Berhanu's life that had never occurred to Volos. Berhanu trained with the guards and, to the extent Volos had thought about it at all, he assumed he played like the guards as well. He opened his mouth to say something—an apology, maybe?—but Berhanu snorted at him. "Tilt your head back. I'll wash your hair."

Volos closed his eyes as Berhanu upended several cups of bathwater over his head. And then... good gods. Berhanu used his fingertips to massage soap into Volos's scalp; it was a gentle sensation since his fingers had lost some strength during his captivity. Volos had thought it felt good to have his back

soaped, but *this* was unbelievably wonderful. It was altogether possible he might climax from it.

Berhanu chuckled. "You're moaning, Volos."

"I... uh..."

"Feels nice, doesn't it?"

"Gods, yes!"

The answering laughter sounded delighted.

Before Volos could quite melt with pleasure, Berhanu dumped more water over his head to rinse away the shampoo. Then he patted Volos's back. "My turn!"

More water sloshed out as they both turned around.

As much as Volos had enjoyed being bathed, he enjoyed bathing Berhanu even more. It was a wonderful excuse to touch him, to examine him not as a combatant or a patient but as a man. He had wide shoulders dotted with a few freckles, which Volos would have liked to lick. The knobs of his spine were still too prominent, but his skin was soft, and the nape of his neck looked so tender and vulnerable that Volos nearly bit through his own lip.

Volos spent a very long time cleaning Berhanu's hair, gently working out the tangles with his fingers. Not that Berhanu minded—the sounds he made were positively obscene.

About the same time that the water cooled, Volos's empty belly growled, making Berhanu laugh again. "I guess your stomach cares little about your outsides being clean."

With a slight tangle of limbs and considerable splashing, they climbed out of the tub. Volos gasped when he saw that Berhanu's cock was as erect as his own. Berhanu licked his lips and gave Volos one of his long, unreadable stares before shaking his head and grabbing a towel. "We'd better eat before the queen sends for me."

There was enough food to feed a small army, and even though most of it had cooled to room temperature, it was delicious. Berhanu ate slowly, no doubt mindful of his still-recovering digestive system, but in the end he managed to down quite a lot. Volos ate like a starving wolf—albeit one with relatively good manners.

They had just finished their meal when a knock sounded at the door. Volos answered it, not especially surprised to discover the thin-faced duo from earlier in the day. "Her Majesty requests the presence of her guest," said the bearded one.

Unlike Volos, Berhanu wouldn't have noticed the singular *guest*, but he put up his hand when Volos tried to leave with him. "This is bound to be long and tedious, Volos, and I don't need you to translate. Stay here."

Volos set his jaw. "I'm your guard."

"I know. But if she decides to do away with me, even you can't stand up to a palace full of soldiers. I'll be fine." He gave Volos a stern look. "Stand down."

"Yes, Your Highness," Volos replied, feeling like a sullen child. But then he hastily added, "Wait!" and trotted to the washroom. He returned a few seconds later with his scabbarded sword, which he held out to Berhanu.

"That's generous of you. But I can hardly lift it in my current state."

"You're a warrior. You ought to look like one."

Berhanu gave him a strange smile as he took the blade.

Volos had experienced far too much idleness lately. He wasn't used to it and didn't like it. There was little in the bedchamber to keep him busy, and he had the feeling he wouldn't be very welcome were he to prowl the palace halls. He paced instead, staring out the windows where darkness hid the gardens, and examining the details of the tapestries on the walls. On close inspection, one of them turned out to depict couples—and threesomes and foursomes—in a bewildering variety of sexual positions. Volos looked at that one for a long time, which was probably a mistake. Two well-built men in the lower right-hand corner were happily sucking each other's cocks. One of them had long dark hair.

Even though the bath was long over, Volos's dick had never quite softened all the way. Now it perked back up, and a pleasant little twinge in his ass reminded him of the previous night. Gods. With a sigh of resignation, Volos closed himself in the washroom and dropped his trousers. He sat on the edge of the tub while he stroked himself, and when he thought of Berhanu marking his shoulder with his teeth, Volos came.

Berhanu returned very late. He weaved slightly as he walked, perhaps from the exhaustion that was plain on his face. Perhaps from the wine that scented his breath. He slammed the chamber door behind him and staggered to the room with the table, where he found some leftover ale. He swallowed it in one long draught.

Volos hovered.

Then Berhanu slammed the empty tankard onto the table, snarled, and swept the tankard aside. It clattered loudly against the floor. "Fucking royalty!"

"Is she not—"

"Oh, she'll come around. But not until after I spend days talking myself in circles and making all sorts of promises. It's a power thing. Prove you have the upper hand by stringing the other party along until he wants to strangle you." He unbuckled the sword and hung it over a chair back. "Not that I'd be able. I couldn't strangle a newborn kitten right now."

Volos made a face, and Berhanu grimaced. "I don't strangle kittens, Volos. It's a *saying*. Gods, I hadn't realized you were the savior of animals too. Is that what I am to you? A fluffy little puppy, maybe? A baby bunny?"

"No. You're a prince."

This time, Berhanu shoved a plate to the floor. It shattered. Then he stomped over to Volos and stood so close that they almost touched. "*A prince?* A precious little bundle of blue-blooded titles. The living embodiment of your patriotic fucking duty."

Fuck. "A man!" Volos yelled at him. "That's what you are to me." The living embodiment of his deepest desire.

And of course Berhanu kissed him. There was no tenderness to it, just a bruising invasion that tasted of wine and ale. Volos's scalp hurt where Berhanu gripped his hair. But then Berhanu grabbed one of Volos's hands and pushed it to Berhanu's groin, where the hardness of his cock was very evident. "A man like this?" His voice was deep and raspy. "You want a man like this?"

"Yes. Please, yes."

This time, some of their fine borrowed clothing might have been torn—Volos wasn't sure. What he did know was that very soon he was naked and bending over the thick mattress with Berhanu pounding into him with all the ferocity of a winter storm. Volos was thankful for the friction of the smooth

bedcovers against his cock, but even more thankful for the heat that filled him. The massive bed squeaked as they shook it; their skin slapped together and their lungs labored. When Berhanu angled himself just right, setting off colored lights behind Volos's closed eyelids, Volos swore in Wedey, Kozari, and a smattering of other tongues as well.

He moaned when Berhanu pulled out of him.

This time at least Berhanu met his gaze. "I'll go wash up," said Berhanu. "And then I'll go to sleep. I have hours of talking to look forward to tomorrow."

"All right."

Volos wasn't really tired. But he went to bed when Berhanu did and lay beside him in the huge bed, listening to him whimper slightly in his sleep.

Chapter Eleven

The next several days dragged by. Berhanu spent long periods of time in conversation with Queen Draga, returning to his room for meals and brief rests. He didn't tell Volos much about what went on in those meetings, although he did say he was optimistic about a positive outcome in the end. But in the meantime he alternated between foul moods and despondent ones, and Volos got only brief glimpses of his spirit and humor. While Berhanu's physical state gradually improved, Volos imagined that underneath the healing skin was a thick layer of jagged glass grating painfully over heart and nerves.

Volos spent most of his time caged in their chambers, although one afternoon a smiling guard took him for a long tour of the palace. She showed him the grand public spaces such as the throne room and ballroom, and she even allowed him to see the more pedestrian areas where the guards trained.

"How does it compare to your home?" she asked.

He'd never really thought of the castle as home—it was just the place where he lived. "The training space isn't much different."

"I suppose we all need the same things, more or less." She cocked her head slightly. "You sound like a Kozari but you're from Wedeyta."

"Some of my family was from here."

"Ah. Well, you should consider this your home too, then. You'd be welcome here."

"Thank you."

She found cloaks for them both and took him on a tour of the gardens.

When Volos and Berhanu were in their room together, they fucked. Three, sometimes four times a day. Each time, Berhanu took him brutally, so they were both raw when they finished. He saved his gentle touches for the bath and for just before they fell asleep. Volos took whatever Berhanu gave him and was thankful for it, but he gradually realized that it wasn't enough. Which was stupid. Less than a month ago he would have been thrilled for any crumbs of Berhanu's affection. But now he'd become a glutton, always hungry for more than he received.

They had been at the palace for a week—and Volos was beginning to go slightly mad from confinement—when Berhanu returned to their chambers

looking more relaxed than usual. "She's finally agreed," he said as he unbuckled Volos's sword from his hips. "She's going to tell Mudedye that unless they cease their hostilities with us, she'll cut off trade with them. And they can't afford that because they're landlocked."

"So it's the outcome you hoped for?"

"Yes. Mostly. I had to agree to a few concessions. She wants better prices on some of the goods we send them, and she wants a monopoly as our only supplier of linen and pearls. It'll drive up the costs on our end and people will grumble, but the people who buy those goods can afford to pay more for them. We've made some mutual compacts of defense support, which I think will please my father as much as the queen. And she's going to come visit us in the spring. It'll be the first official delegation from Kozar since the war. The entire Wedey nobility are going to be thrilled about that." He gave a wry smile. "Queen Draga has some marriageable nieces and nephews, and she's not averse to creating some Wedey family ties."

"That's wonderful! You've saved... gods, you've probably saved thousands of lives."

Berhanu shrugged. "Maybe. I don't feel very heroic. Although anyone who can survive three days of Kozari equinox ceremonies probably deserves a fucking medal."

"You'll have to make sure the king has one struck for you."

"Yeah," said Berhanu with a sigh. "Look. She's going to do some goodbye thing in the morning. She wants you there. And then she'll be giving us a private carriage and escort all the way to the border. She's promised me there will be no more problems from the Juganin."

"Do you believe her?"

"Yes." He sat on a chair to take off his boots, then wiggled his toes as if they were cramped. "Now that my presence here is more official, she's arranged a reception tonight. There will be a lot of Kozari there in their very best clothes, and tons of food." He glanced at Volos, then away. "And dancing."

"Oh." Volos had attended similar events at the Wedey castle, but as security rather than a celebrant. Everyone always seemed to drink and gossip too much, but they seemed to enjoy themselves.

"Will you come with me tonight, Volos? Please?"

“Of course. It’ll be my privilege to guard you.”

Berhanu made a sour face. “Not to guard me. Come as a guest. Have some fun. Get a chance to chat with more of your—with more Kozari before we leave.”

“I don’t think someone like me is meant—”

“Oh, fuck that! You’re a hero how many times over? You’re a better man than all the Kozari and Wedey nobility put together. They should be thrilled to have someone of your quality attend.”

Volos’s chest warmed with the unexpected praise, and he had to look down at the floor. “I’ll come,” he said.

“Good. Because I’ve already asked them to bring you something to wear.”

If left to his own devices, Volos would have stayed close to the walls of the huge room. Instead, Berhanu had dragged him right into the center and everyone was staring openly at him. He wished he were smaller. He wished the clothing he’d been given weren’t quite so gaudy. He wished he were back in Wedeyta, sweaty and bare-chested, crashing a wooden sword onto someone’s head.

Berhanu presented him formally to Queen Draga. Volos attempted to fall to his knee, but Berhanu wouldn’t let him. So Volos made an awkward bow instead, which the queen gracefully accepted.

Then they got to sit at a long table with an elaborately inlaid top. Berhanu was seated right next to the queen, and Volos beside him. Although the seating order might or might not have been according to Kozari rules of etiquette, it served the handy function of sandwiching Berhanu between the only two people in the room with whom he shared a language. And it made Volos feel more comfortable, although that had probably not been the intent.

Dozens of people lined their table and several others. Everyone was so brightly dressed and chattering so loudly that they reminded Volos of a flock of parrots. But they were well-fed parrots, with servants bringing them plate after plate of delicacies. Queen Draga must have spoken to someone about Berhanu’s somewhat delicate constitution, because his portions were very small. Volos, on the other hand, was given enough to feed a dragon.

During the meal, the queen engaged Berhanu in small talk about things like roads and crops, and although Volos suspected the prince had little interest in

these topics, Berhanu managed to be witty and engaging. Volos said very little, although he appreciated Berhanu's occasional attempts to include him in the conversation.

When the mountains of food were gone, Queen Draga stood. The room went instantly silent. "My dear guests, thank you for joining me tonight. I am delighted to present to you His Highness, Prince Berhanu of Wedeyta. He is accompanied by Volos Perun, a man whose heroic feats honor his Wedey and Kozari forebears." She spoke in Kozari, of course, which meant Volos leaned close to Berhanu's ear to translate. The nearness of the prince's face was terribly distracting—Volos wanted to kiss those cheekbones and smooth his thumb along the dark brows.

Everyone clapped politely after the queen's introduction, then listened with various degrees of interest as she gave a longish speech about the importance of setting aside past differences and growing peace between the neighboring countries. She said that, together, Wedeyta and Kozar would prove a force too powerful for any other nations to challenge. And so forth. Volos whispered his translation into Berhanu's ear, and Berhanu sipped slowly at some very fine wine.

At very long last, the formalities were over. Servants hurried in to take away the tables, while a troupe of musicians filled one end of the room and began to tune their instruments. Queen Draga smiled at Berhanu. "I am afraid I must only watch. An old injury prevents me from participating. Please, will you choose your partner for the first dance?"

There were many handsome men and beautiful women in the room. Volos looked around, wondering which one Berhanu would pick. He was startled when he realized Berhanu stood directly in front of him, hand out. "Dance with me, Volos. I'll let you lead."

Volos felt his face grow red. "I don't really know..."

"Then I'll lead instead." Berhanu grabbed his hand and dragged him to the center of the floor.

Members of the nobility no doubt spent many hours receiving dancing instruction. Volos had not. In fact, his only previous experiences consisted of drunken revels at firesides and in taverns, when the steps were more like rhythmic stumbles than anything else. But Berhanu grinned charmingly, wrapped an arm around Volos's waist, and quietly gave him instructions as they moved.

Probably Volos was fooling himself, but he felt so wonderful in this embrace that he imagined he didn't look too much an idiot.

"Very good," Berhanu encouraged. "Think of it like fighting. You always know how to move your body so well when you fight. You're naturally graceful, Volos. I don't know how you manage it when you're so big. Now, pretend we're fighting... only slowly, and to a beat."

Volos obeyed. And it turned out Berhanu was right—as long as Volos didn't try to think too hard about what his body was doing, he managed to move with a modicum of grace.

"Wonderful!" said Berhanu. "You're amazing."

Volos smiled at him. "Some might say it's the man who teaches an ox to dance who's more amazing."

"You're no ox. You're a dragon, right?"

Before Volos could think of an answer, the song ended. A tiny woman with blonde hair in a gravity-defying arrangement glided up to them. "May I have the next dance, Your Highness?" she asked.

Berhanu apparently didn't need an interpreter for that. He nodded regally and took her hands.

As Volos attempted to make a dignified journey to an unobtrusive corner, his way was blocked by a man who was as tall as he was—maybe even a bit taller—but much more slender. He was in his mid-thirties and dashing handsome, with a square jaw, sparkling green eyes, and sand-colored hair. He had a small crescent moon and stars tattooed near one eye. "Will you dance with me, sir?" he asked.

"I'll probably step on your feet."

"No, I was watching you with your prince. You were beautiful. Please?"

Volos couldn't refuse without giving offense. He smiled wanly and nodded.

The music started up again, the man grasped Volos's waist, and they began to move together. "My name is Klemen," said the man. "Of course, I know your name already."

"Shouldn't I call you by a title instead?"

"Oh, I'd rather you wouldn't. It always makes me think of my father when someone does that. It makes me feel old." He had dimples when he smiled.

“Then Klemen it is.”

“Excellent! Have you visited Kozar before, Volos?”

Volos winced. “Um, during the war...”

“Oh. Of course. You hardly saw us at our best, then.” He frowned slightly. “I fought as well.”

“And it doesn’t bother you to dance with me?”

“It bothers me... but only in a delicious sort of way.” Klemen waggled his eyebrows to make his meaning clear.

Allowing himself a small smile, Volos said, “I see.”

“Oh, but you could see much more, my dear, if you wanted. Give me a bit of time and I can whisk you away. I know where there are quiet rooms.”

Once upon a time, Volos would have been both flattered and aroused. He would have eagerly joined Klemen in a deserted palace nook, and they would have fucked until neither of them could walk straight.

“Thank you,” said Volos. “But I can’t.”

“You don’t fancy men?”

“I do. But...” He didn’t know how to express this. Although he and Berhanu had been having a lot of sex, they weren’t truly lovers. Berhanu used him to work out his frustrations and anxieties and as a way of reclaiming his body after the mistreatment by the Juganin. Volos understood that. And he was happy to provide that service. He was. But by all the demons in the third hell, he was pretty sure he’d allowed himself to fall in love with the prince.

“I’m sorry,” said Volos. “But I can’t. I have... obligations.”

His gaze must have momentarily strayed to Berhanu, because Klemen nodded. “I see. He is more than your dance partner.”

“No. I mean... I’m his guard and... and...” Gods, what had happened to his tongue? “And I can’t,” he finished lamely.

“A pity. But you can dance with me at least, can’t you? Seeing as how your prince is otherwise engaged.”

“Of course. I’d like to.”

So they danced. Klemen was very good at it, and he was patient when Volos was clumsy. The song ended, Berhanu switched to an older man with a very

straight posture, and Volos remained with Klemen. He remained for the next song as well, and then the next. Nobody else tried to cut in, so either Klemen was the only one interested in a Wedey guard or he was subtly motioning others away. Berhanu, on the other hand, had a different partner for every song. He must have danced with nearly everyone there except Klemen—and except Queen Draga, who watched from a padded chair near the musicians.

The musicians took two breaks, during which people pressed wineglasses into Volos's hand. Then Klemen captured him again, and by the end of the evening, Volos was doing most of the leading, much to Klemen's delight. They spoke of boots and weapons and terrible food—soldiers' talk—and it didn't matter that they'd fought for opposite sides. Klemen laughed easily, told jokes, shared little anecdotes about various places in Kozar. Volos felt comfortable in his presence.

But as the hour grew late, Volos glanced across the room and saw Berhanu dancing with a pretty young woman. Berhanu smiled at his partner, but Volos could see the strain and fatigue in his face. The prince was moving a bit too slowly for the beat, his footsteps slightly unsteady.

"I'm sorry," Volos said, pulling away from Klemen. "I have to go."

"You won't reconsider my offer? I've had such a good time with you tonight."

"I have too. But I can't."

Klemen bent in a courtly bow. "Then thank you for a lovely evening. I hope you return to Kozar soon, Volos. For pleasure instead of business. And when you do, please come stay with me at my villa."

"Thank you." Impulsively, Volos gave him a quick hug. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Instead of going to Berhanu, Volos hurried across the room to where the queen sat, chatting with an older man and sipping from a goblet. Volos dropped to his knee before her.

"Oh, you need not be so formal with me," said the queen, waving her hand. "Are you enjoying the evening?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you. But... I beg your pardon, but Prince Berhanu has been through... quite a lot lately. I think he needs to rest." Not wanting anyone else to understand, he spoke in Wedey.

She looked over at Berhanu. He still danced, but he was staring at Volos and Queen Draga, his eyes narrowed.

"You are right, of course," said the queen. "Please forgive me for failing to notice." She stood and made a motion with her hands, and the musicians stopped at once. She spoke loudly in Kozari. "I am afraid the hour is quite late and I must retire. Thank you all for your attendance."

It must be nice to be queen, Volos thought, as the guests immediately filed toward her to pay their respects. Berhanu limped over and stood near her, nodding slightly at everyone, while Volos took a position directly behind his prince. He wished he could have offered Berhanu his body to lean against.

It took forever for the guests to disperse, and then Berhanu spent a few minutes chatting with the queen about the following morning's arrangements. But Berhanu said nothing at all to Volos as a servant led them back to their quarters.

Even when they were alone again, Berhanu began to undress in silence. His expression was stony.

"Do you need anything?" asked Volos. "I can ask a servant for some food. Or maybe you'd like a bath or—"

"I don't need anything."

"All right." Volos sat on the edge of the bed to take off his boots. His feet were a little sore.

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself," Berhanu said quietly.

Volos smiled at him. "I learned to dance."

"That duke or whatever he was seemed appreciative."

"I suppose so. Is there something wrong with that?"

Berhanu had been in the middle of untying his belt, but he stopped and lifted his chin. "He wanted to fuck you."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure he wanted me to fuck *him*. But I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Kozari custom frowns on sex in the middle of the dance floor."

Berhanu stomped over, barefooted, and pointed his finger in Volos's face. "But you wanted to!"

“No. I didn’t,” Volos replied honestly. He didn’t understand why Berhanu was so upset, but then there were many things about the prince he failed to understand.

After making a rude sort of noise, Berhanu whirled around and stalked to the washroom. He spent a long time in there, doing gods knew what. Meanwhile, Volos stripped off his fancy attire and put on plainer clothes. He stood staring at the small mountain of clothing and other things he and Berhanu had recently acquired. Were they supposed to leave the things here, or were they expected to take them back to Wedeyta? If the latter, how in the third hell were they supposed to get them there? Would someone at the palace be giving them luggage?

Volos was still puzzling over these matters when Berhanu emerged from the washroom. He was completely naked and he’d combed his wet hair back from his face. He’d gained back a little weight already, thanks to the palace’s variety of good foods, but he was still far too thin. The scars were evident on his pale skin, and the marks and scabs where his left nipple had been were especially nasty-looking. “I’m going to bed. If you want to go off in search of your duke, you can. I doubt anyone here will murder me in my sleep.”

“He’s not my duke. And I’ll stay here.”

“Of course. You wouldn’t dare abandon your duty.”

Volos wanted to strangle him. “It has nothing to do with my sense of duty.”

“Right.” Berhanu sat heavily on the bed but didn’t cover himself. “Did you know you never call me by name? You say ‘Your Highness’ when you’re being sarcastic, but that’s it. Even when we’re fucking you don’t use my name.”

“I’m sorry. Berhanu.”

The prince shook his head irritably. “Is it out of excessive politeness? Because I’d think we’d be past that by now. Or is it out of disgust?”

“Disgust? Why would I be disgusted?”

“You saw them. The Juganin. You saw me tied up and begging, and you saw them rape me.”

Gods. “And I told you already. I’ve seen them do it to others. They did it to me, again and again.”

“Right. But you didn’t need someone to come running to your rescue, did you? No, you’re a hero. Volos the Dragon, who breaks free of the prison. Who kills eight enemies single-handed.”

"I'm just a man," Volos said thickly. Before he could add anything he'd regret, he went into the washroom. He took as long as he reasonably could in there, hoping that Berhanu would be asleep when he came back out.

But he wasn't so lucky. Berhanu sprawled naked atop the bedcovers, looking disturbingly like a sacrifice. His face was turned toward the washroom and he tracked Volos with his gaze. Volos stopped in his tracks, unwilling to get closer to the bed and hesitant to remove his trousers.

"Do you want to fuck *me*?" asked Berhanu. And before Volos could answer, he flipped over, raised himself on all fours, and wagged his ass slightly. "Is this what you've been wanting?"

Volos's mouth was desert dry. He *did* want that, but he wouldn't have it. Berhanu was too damaged right now—psychologically, if not physically.

Angered at Volos's silence, Berhanu got off the bed. He stalked closer. "What's wrong, Volos? A poncy Kozari duke is good enough for you but I'm not?"

"Are you *jealous* of him?" Volos asked, slightly incredulous.

"You danced with him. All fucking night."

"But you were busy. And I never thought..."

"What?"

"I never thought it would matter to you."

"Matter? We've been sleeping with each other every fucking night. We've been... I know every inch of your body, inside and out. I know every one of your scars. I know the way your face goes all soft for a moment and you make a surprised little gasp when you climax. I know the taste of you. How could it not matter?"

Volos felt exactly like he'd been whacked in the face by a wooden sword. He blinked quickly and tried to make sense of his thoughts. "I didn't realize..."

Berhanu's face hardened. "You thought I was just using you. And you allowed it because it was your damned *duty*."

"I told you! This has nothing to do with my fucking duty! It never has."

"I hurt you. I bent you over and I fucked you raw. I marked you. And you liked it, didn't you? The Juganin twisted and warped you and now you get off on being used."

Volos's roar was equal parts anger and frustration. He surged forward like a wave, driving Berhanu backward with the force of his body until Berhanu's legs hit the mattress and he fell back. Volos landed on top of him and pinned his wrists to the bed. He could kill this man so easily. He could snap his neck, bash his face to bloody pulp, pummel his chest until his ribs were nothing but splintered bone.

Volos kissed him on the forehead instead.

"I let you fuck me like that because it was all I thought I could have from you," he said, his voice as raw as his nerves. "And I *did* get off on it because it was you, and so it was *good*. It's the most I've ever had, Berhanu."

He was far too close to crying. He released Berhanu's wrists and lifted himself off the limp body. And because he was still caged in their quarters, he walked into the washroom. He didn't light a lantern. Moonlight shone softly through the window, making the porcelain and marble glow. He sat on the edge of the tub with his face in his hands.

Soft footsteps padded against the floor, then stopped near the doorway. "You want *me*?" asked Berhanu.

"Yes." His answer was slightly muffled by his palms.

"Because I'm a prince?"

Volos snorted. "I wouldn't care if you were the man who mucks out the pigsties. I'd still want you." A tiny sob tried to escape, but he swallowed it.

Berhanu moved closer, crouched beside him, balanced himself with his hands on Volos's leg. "Why?"

"I always have," Volos admitted with a heavy sigh. He still hid his face. "From the first time I saw you. You were beautiful and... you had this *light* to you. It drew me like a moth. I thought, *This is a man powerful enough to let me protect him and strong enough to take me*. I thought, with you, maybe sometimes I could let my guard down at last. Except you hated me."

"Gods, Volos. I never hated you."

Volos lifted his head and gave Berhanu a very skeptical look. Berhanu barked a short laugh in return. "Yes, I know. I treated you like garbage. Called you names. I was a complete and utter shit. Still am."

"You're not like that to everyone else."

Berhanu sighed. "Not generally. Gods, Volos. When I saw *you* for the first time, you were perfect. So handsome, and a true warrior. Brave—everyone says

what a hero you are. I wanted to seduce you. But I didn't know if you were... seduceable. And even if you were, I wouldn't have had any idea what to do with you. You're not remotely like the pretty little whores I usually have. So I asked around about you. Subtly. And I found out you liked to go to the Thieving Goose and fuck the effete twits who take it up the ass from a hulking brute, then scurry back to their shops to boast how brave they are." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Sorry. Being a bastard again."

"You are," agreed Volos, somewhat amused despite everything.

"Yeah. I tend to do that when I feel defensive. My father says my tongue is sharper and faster than my blades have ever been. I'm sure the boys at the Goose are lovely people. It's only... they aren't me. They're nothing like me."

"That's true."

"I assumed they were what you wanted, and therefore you'd never fancy me. So I tried to tell myself how much I detested you. 'Filthy Kozari,' I said. But by all the gods in heaven, I swear I never meant it."

Volos's hands were clasped in his lap. "All right," he rasped. He'd never in his life had a conversation anything like this. He'd possibly have rather gone into battle.

Berhanu chuckled. "For a Kozari, you're a tight-lipped son of a bitch." He suddenly sobered. "But sweet gods, Volos—what I've been doing to you these last days! Maybe I can be forgiven for speaking harshly, but not for—" His voice broke. He stood, walked to the doorway, and leaned his forehead against the smooth wood of the frame.

After a moment, Volos stood and followed him. He pressed close, with one hand on Berhanu's bare shoulder. "I could easily have stopped you if I wanted to. I didn't want to. As you pointed out, I got off on it."

"How?"

Volos closed his eyes. He smelled the citrus oil and soap they used in the tub and the slight odor of wine from Berhanu's breath. It was a heady combination. It made him dizzy.

"After I escaped from the Juganin prison, for a long time I couldn't bear for anyone to touch me. I didn't even want them standing close. It was a lonely way to live. I was still a young man. Eventually I went to taverns or brothels, and I'd choose partners who were very small, and I'd fuck them hard. But it didn't... I'd be pounding away at someone, and suddenly I'd picture the Juganin and... and sometimes I wondered if I was so very different from them."

“You’re nothing like them!” Berhanu snapped.

“Maybe. But I wasn’t convinced. And more than that. The more often I fucked these men who’d never fight back, the weaker I felt.”

“I... I understand that.”

Although Berhanu couldn’t see him, Volos nodded. Then he nestled his forehead into the crook of Berhanu’s neck. “Eventually I got the courage to ask men to fuck me. It was very difficult at first. I didn’t even get hard. But gradually... I realized that although I was the passive partner, I was controlling what happened to my body. I was receiving them by choice, not force. That’s when I began to enjoy it. When I felt as if I’d got my own body back.” His smile was a little bitter, but it was real. “I’d lay there and I’d think, *Look at me now, Juganin. You’re dead and I’m alive, and this man’s cock is inside me because I want it there and it feels so fucking good.*”

“Sex as a victory dance.”

“Perhaps.”

Berhanu squirmed around until he faced Volos. They wrapped their arms around each other in a tight embrace. Gods, Berhanu felt so good and right against him!

“I can’t...” Berhanu began. His throat clicked. “I’m not ready for a victory dance, Volos.”

“Of course not. It’s been only a few days.”

“I want to give you... what you want. What you deserve. I want to love you.” His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “I want to be *your* guard, Volos.”

Although the room—and the embrace—were quite warm, Volos shivered.

But then Berhanu pulled away. “I’m not sure I’d have been capable of that ever, and I’m certainly not now. I can barely keep my own pieces together.”

“I understand.”

“I might... I might never be what you need. And I don’t expect you to wait for me.” He stood straighter, squared his shoulders, and lifted his chin. “But I’m sure as all hells going to try.”

Volos felt a smile spread across his face. He executed a brief but perfectly sincere bow. “Being afraid, being uncertain you’ll succeed, but going ahead anyway—that’s what makes a hero, Berhanu.”

Chapter Twelve

The carriage that Queen Draga lent them was luxurious. The interior was spacious, with clever fold-down tables on which to place food and drinks. The walls were paneled in precious woods in an intricate inlaid pattern. The seats had good springs, a thick layer of cushioning, and plush velvet upholstery. And they didn't stop at inns like regular people. Instead they spent two nights in mansions that may or may not have belonged to the queen, where armies of servants fell over themselves trying to cater to Volos and Berhanu's every need.

Volos had never journeyed in such comfort and probably never would again. But he was miserable. He had traveled with a broken body before, but traveling with a broken heart was worse.

There was Berhanu, so close to him for league after league. And at night, beside him in bed, protecting him from nightmares. But they spoke very little, and Berhanu's eyes were dark and haunted. Volos wanted to hold him tight all the time, to keep him close until all the shattered bits fell back into their proper places. But he suspected that the more protectively he acted and the more desperately he clutched at Berhanu, the more irreparable the damage might become.

"We wasted all that time," Berhanu said suddenly as they neared the border. He was staring out the window and his voice sounded far away.

"What time?"

"These past years when I was too stupid to understand what was right in front of me. We could have been fighting together, fucking... loving."

Volos's thoughts had been along similar lines. "But suppose you had spoken to me, Berhanu. You'd have had me with no effort at all. One soft look and I'd have fallen at your feet."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at first. But eventually you'd have learned what happened to me when I was a prisoner. I wouldn't have told you the details and... I doubt you'd have been able to comprehend it all. But you'd have heard my nightmares and you'd have known enough. And then how would you have felt about me?"

"I would have—" Berhanu stopped and covered his mouth with one hand. He closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were in pain, and when he opened

them again they glistened. "I would never have understood, Volos. I might I have tried. But you know me—I'm impatient and stubborn and fucking spoiled. I would have wrecked us."

Volos nodded. "I need... I'm a guard. I'm strong. I'd protect you to my last breath. But I need someone who... who's there for me if I start to crumble a little."

"Even a dragon has his limits," Berhanu said with the shadow of a smile.

When they reached the border, Berhanu sent a messenger on a fast horse to the castle, letting the king know they were on their way. He and Volos had to give up the queen's fancy carriage for a much more prosaic one with sagging seats and a pervasive smell of old cheese. They were trying to travel incognito because that was simpler, but the innkeeper that night must have smelled money in the quantity of their luggage and the cut of their expensive Kozari clothes. Instead of pallets on the floor of a shared room, they were given a small private chamber with a lumpy bed and tin washtub.

"Do you want a bath?" Berhanu asked, eyeing the tub doubtfully. "I'll pay extra for it."

"No, thank you. I'll go to the baths when we're back home."

"Home." Berhanu rubbed his chin. "For a while, I was certain I'd never see it again. I missed it much more than I would have expected. Where did you think about when you were in that prison?"

Volos sat on the edge of the bed. His bones were still rattling from the journey, and his head ached. "I didn't have a home then. So I thought about the home I'd like to have someday."

"Not a barracks, I assume."

"No."

Berhanu walked to the washbasin, poured some water from a pitcher, and splashed his face. He frowned at himself briefly in the cracked looking glass before turning around and beginning to undress. "So what *did* you imagine? A castle? A hut in the wilderness? A Kozari palace where they cover you with gilding if you stand still too long?"

"Doesn't matter. The... the structure could be anything with a roof. All I dreamt of was a place I could always go back to. Where somebody waited for me."

“You still don’t have that, do you? Not really.”

“No.” Volos shrugged. “Maybe I haven’t made enough effort to find it.”

Berhanu drew his tunic over his head and carelessly tossed it aside. “Let’s sleep. We’ve one more day to go.”

Their messenger must have fulfilled his duty because a royal coach waited at the last carriage stop. Berhanu hurried into the coach with his head down, while Volos helped a porter transfer their luggage as curious bystanders stared. The coach hurried through the city. The capital of Wedeyta was smaller than Felekna and showed little in the way of garish magnificence, but there was also none of the wretched filth and poverty Volos had glimpsed in Kozar.

The coach sped through the castle gate without pausing, careened around a few corners, and came to a sudden stop near a door close to the royal quarters. Servants, guards, and various agitated men and women swarmed out to greet them, all of them seeming to chatter at once. Volos would have quietly snuck away, but Berhanu clutched his sleeve and dragged him into the castle, down a long hall, and then into a room with high vaulted ceilings. Someone slammed the door in the faces of the concerned retinue, leaving Berhanu and Volos alone with two other men—King Tafari and Prince Chidehu.

As the king and crown prince rushed over, Volos tried to drop to his knee, but Berhanu’s grip wouldn’t let him. “Stop doing that,” Berhanu grumbled at him.

And then Tafari and Chidehu were embracing Berhanu. Volos stood back to watch. He saw tears in the men’s eyes. For a few minutes, they weren’t a king and two princes, but instead a family—father and sons who loved and worried over one another. Volos’s heart ached and he had to look away.

Finally, with considerable throat clearing, the embrace ended. But the king kept a hand on Berhanu’s shoulder. “Are you well, son? You look...”

“I look like I’ve been dragged through the third hell. Feel like it too.”

“I’ll call for a healer and—”

“I don’t need one.” Berhanu attempted a smile. “Some Kozari friends tended to my physical injuries and I’m healing well. I just need rest now and some time to mend.”

King Tafari nodded, but then his expression darkened. “Those Juganin—”

“Are all dead. Volos killed them.”

Everyone turned to look at Volos, which made him acutely uncomfortable. He executed a rather stiff little bow.

And to his complete astonishment, the king bowed back. “For saving our son, we owe you our deepest gratitude.”

“We owe him for more than that,” said Berhanu. “He saved my stupid neck, and because of that, I was able to get to Felekna to parley with the queen. She’s agreed to support us, Sire. In fact, she’s agreed to better than that. She wants to negotiate an alignment of mutual defense and cooperation.”

King Tafari closed his eyes briefly as relief flooded his features, and Prince Chidehu raised his gaze to the ceiling in silent prayer. “With Kozar backing us, Mudedye won’t dare to continue offending us,” said Chidehu.

Berhanu nodded. “I know. Volos didn’t just win me my freedom—he’s won peace for us all.”

Volos fought the instinct to duck his head when everyone looked at him. He kept his chin up and shoulders straight but couldn’t avoid a slight blush across his cheeks. King Tafari strode closer and clasped his hand in a hearty shake. “Before you left, we promised you our gratitude if you were successful. It appears as if you have more than fulfilled your duty. Name your reward and it is yours.”

“I... Thank you, Your Majesty. But there’s nothing—”

“We can grant you a title. Land. Enough money to live extravagantly for the rest of your life. Whatever you wish. You deserve it.”

“Thank you,” Volos repeated. “I appreciate your generosity. But... please. I’d just like to return to my place as guard. There’s honestly nothing else I want.” Nothing he could have, in any case.

King Tafari gave him a very long look before slowly nodding his head. “Very well. But we remain in your debt, Volos Perun. If ever there is something we can grant you, we will.”

Volos bowed.

Berhanu had watched the entire interchange solemnly. Now he came over and, like his father, bowed to Volos. “I think you know how much I owe you, Volos. I hope... I hope someday to see you get what you deserve.” And then he pulled Volos into a fraternal embrace that didn’t seem to shock Tafari or Chidehu.

After Berhanu drew back, the king addressed him. “We’ve much to discuss. But perhaps you’d like to rest first.”

“No. Just give me some food and wine and let me sit, and I’ll be fine.”

“Very well. Volos, you’ve certainly earned some rest. If we have any questions for you, we’ll send for you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Volos allowed himself one last glance at Berhanu—who was looking at him—before bowing and leaving the room. His narrow cot in the barracks sounded welcoming.

Chapter Thirteen

“If you fight that slowly in battle, your opponent will have time to go home, eat dinner, fuck her husband, and then come back and eviscerate you.”

Volos's opponent scowled and lowered his sword. “I was lining up for a proper angle.”

“And you think the person who's trying to kill you will stand there patiently while you calculate this proper angle?”

“No. But if I don't get a killing blow in, if I only wound her, she's just going to get angry and—”

“And she was already in such a good mood, seeing as how the two of you were engaged in mortal combat.”

The man hung his head. No, not a man; although he was nearly as big as Volos, he was still a boy. He looked as if he was straight off the farm, although he'd evidently spent a few months as a foot soldier, guarding the Mudedye border. His captain must have decided he had potential, so the boy had been sent to the castle to be a guard. Perhaps the captain was correct, but in Volos's opinion, the boy had a long way to go.

“Look,” Volos said, trying to suppress a sigh. “It's true that it's best if you can kill the enemy right away. But that's not always possible. And it's far better to only wound her than to be killed yourself. Sometimes even a minor injury can be enough to throw someone off or make them panic, and then it's much easier to aim for somewhere deadly.”

The boy nodded. “All right. Thank you, sir.”

Volos winced. “I'm not nobility, an officer, or your master, so don't call me that. My name is Volos.”

“I know. I've... I've heard lots about you.”

Oh, good gods. The boy was blushing.

“Is it true you killed an entire company of Juganin single-handedly?” asked the boy eagerly.

“There were eight of them, not a company. And I wasn't acting alone. They were drugged, or I'd never have been able to handle that many. Nobody could.”

He pointed his finger at the boy. "Don't go getting wild ideas about being a hero. You'll get yourself killed. You do your best to do your duty—that's all."

"Words of wisdom."

Volos spun around at the new voice, although of course he'd recognized it at once. Berhanu stood very close, grinning. He wore nothing but a pair of the loose trousers the guards practiced in. In the months since they'd returned from Kozar, he'd regained the weight and musculature he'd lost in captivity, and although his chest was now marred with many scars, he was more magnificent than ever. He'd been sparring with the guards nearly every day for weeks, and every time Volos caught a glimpse of him, his breath would catch in his throat.

But a glimpse was nearly all he'd been given, because just as before, Berhanu had practiced with nearly everyone except Volos. And these were the first words he'd spoken to Volos since they'd returned.

Perhaps the boy wasn't a lost cause. He certainly wasn't a complete fool, because he caught on to the charged atmosphere at once. He mumbled something unintelligible and scurried away.

That left Volos and Berhanu staring at each other.

"You haven't lost your sense of duty," Berhanu said mildly after a long moment.

"No."

"Good. Because I've specifically requested that you lead the ceremonial march to welcome Queen Draga in a couple of weeks."

"Trotting me out like a pet monkey?" Volos growled.

"Oh, good gods. You know that's not how I think of you."

"I wasn't aware you thought of me at all." Volos knew he sounded petulant. But Berhanu's disregard had hurt.

Berhanu wrapped a hand around Volos's forearm. "We talked about this, Volos. I told you... I want you more than I've wanted anything in my life. But—"

"But you can't because you're healing. I know. I understand. But does that mean you can't even look at me?" Volos wrenched his arm away. A few people were still in the training room, so he tried to keep his voice quiet. It came out as an angry hiss. "I tried to check on you. Just to make sure you were all right. But your servants wouldn't let me anywhere near your apartment."

“I’m sorry, Volos, I—”

“And then you started coming here, but you stay at the opposite end of the room, and... I understand that we can’t be lovers. But I’d hoped maybe we could at least be friends.” He tried to stalk away, but Berhanu caught his arm again.

“We *can* be. It’s just—”

“Never mind.” This time when Volos jerked himself free, it hurt. “You don’t have to be nice to me.”

Berhanu danced around to block his exit. “I *want* to be nice to you.”

“But you don’t—Argh!” Unable to articulate his feelings, Volos was left with nothing to do but growl like a beast. Even he wasn’t sure why he was so angry at Berhanu. Or maybe he was mostly angry at himself.

“Do you want to fight?”

“What?”

Berhanu pointed at the wooden sword Volos held. “Fight. We never have. Hang on.” As Volos waited dumbly, Berhanu sprinted across the room, grabbed a practice sword from a rack, and ran back. He positioned himself in front of Volos with his wooden blade raised.

Maybe he thought Volos would refuse, or at least be confused over his offer. But Volos didn’t hesitate. He lifted his own sword and swung it straight at Berhanu’s head. If Berhanu hadn’t jumped back with a startled yelp, he might have ended up with a concussion. But he was quick, and the blunt tip of the wooden blade merely grazed his head. Not only that—he immediately took a good swing of his own, lunging forward at Volos’s chest. Volos leapt nimbly to the side.

After that, they began to spar in earnest.

Neither of them said anything as they fought, although they grunted loudly and soon their breaths were noisy. Sometimes Volos’s sword smacked against Berhanu, although never in what would have been a mortal blow had they been fighting with steel. And sometimes it was Berhanu’s weapon that hit its target, sending jolts of pain through Volos’s body.

It was a good fight. They were very evenly matched. Volos had a somewhat longer reach, but Berhanu was better at controlling his attacks. Both had considerable strength and stamina, so even as their fight grew long and their

bodies became soaked with sweat, they didn't stop. Their bare feet shuffled on the floorboards, and the swords thud-thwacked against their flesh. They'd both have bruises by morning.

Berhanu spun and clipped his sword against Volos's hip. Volos countered with a lunge at Berhanu's neck, but the prince managed to duck out of the way. While he was still off-balance, however, Volos slammed the flat of the blade against his back hard enough to make Berhanu lose his footing and go sprawling facedown. He rolled over at once, sweeping the sword at Volos's legs. But this time it was Volos who danced up and away. And when he landed—his legs straddling Berhanu's supine body—he jammed the rounded point of his sword into Berhanu's chest, right over his heart. Berhanu cried out in pain.

But then the prince caught his breath and said softly, "Go ahead, Volos. Punish me for what I've done to you."

Volos bellowed and heaved his sword away. Still wearing nothing but his sweat-soaked trousers, he stomped out the nearest door.

The spring sun was already strong, casting sharp shadows onto the courtyard. Queen Draga had sent a gift to King Tafari in advance of her visit: an enormous stone fountain. It had arrived as several wagonloads of pieces and had taken a team of workmen weeks to assemble. Fortunately, it wasn't nearly as gaudy as the one in her palace, although it did feature multiple cascades of water flowing into a shallow pool. The guards had taken to using it to cool down after practice, and nobody had objected.

Volos headed straight for the fountain. He stepped over the low marble wall, splashed through the pool, and stopped directly underneath the largest water flow. It was like standing under a waterfall, and although it soaked his body instantly, it did nothing to cool the flames of his emotions. He closed his eyes and imagined giant plumes of steam rising from his head, far above the castle walls and into the flawless blue sky.

"Volos."

Over the roar of the water, Volos heard Berhanu call him. He opened his eyes to find Berhanu striding through the pool toward him. Berhanu's wet trousers clung to his body, revealing the narrow curve of his hips and the heavy muscles of his thighs. The large scar on his chest looked red and angry. He stopped in front of Volos, just out of reach.

"Stop running away," Berhanu said.

Volos's jaw was clenched so hard it ached. "Why?"

"Because I've been thinking about this for months. I've thought of almost nothing else. I've thought of *you*. I wake up in the middle of the night, wondering if you're having a nightmare and wishing I was there to comfort you. Sometimes—no, *often* I think about those Juganin bastards, the feel of them when they used me, and I chase that away with my memories of feeling *you*. But then you're not there and I'm empty, and..." He stopped and tilted his head into the cascade, letting it soak his long hair. He smoothed the strands behind him. Then he looked at Volos. "I told you I needed to put my pieces together before I could come to you. That was a fucking lie, Volos. I know that now. The only way I'm ever going to heal is in your arms."

Berhanu stepped forward and then fell to his knees in front of Volos. He leaned his cheek against Volos's torso. "Please," he said, just loud enough to be heard over the fountain.

"People are watching us."

"I don't fucking care if the entire kingdom watches. This is where I need to be. Please, Volos. I need you. I'll always need you. Guard me. Guard me here." He pressed his palm against Volos's heart. "Keep me safe in here, Volos, and I swear I'll keep you safe as well."

Volos looked down at the powerful man who knelt before him, who leaned against him. And something as ferocious as a dragon grew inside him. It wasn't a desire for vengeance, and it wasn't a sense of duty. It was love—a love that meant not only would he give his life for Berhanu, but also that he'd trust Berhanu with his.

He leaned forward slightly and gathered Berhanu's hair tenderly at the nape of his neck. It was a gesture a parent might make to comfort a child—or a lover to comfort his beloved.

"I'll guard you always, Berhanu." He said it first in Wedey, and then in Kozari. "And please... please guard me back."

Chapter Fourteen

Volos trailed his fingertips along a familiar stretch of wall and didn't startle when boot steps clomped behind him.

"Don't tell me you're missing the barracks. Surely your current quarters are much nicer."

He turned to smile at Captain Hiwot. "They are."

"And if you left something of yours behind, I'm sure the other guards took it weeks ago."

"If I did leave anything, they're welcome to it."

"Well, is there something I can do for you, Count Volos?"

He winced. "You don't have to call me that."

"You prefer the title the Kozari queen gave you instead? Let's see... Marquis, wasn't it?" Captain Hiwot's mouth quirked into a crooked smile.

Volos hadn't asked for any titles. But during one of the countless—and endless—ceremonies they'd attended during Queen Draga's visit, Berhanu had unexpectedly dragged him to the center of the stage. Volos had blushed and glared at his smug lover, while King Tafari had made a speech and then granted Volos a fancy title—and, Volos learned later, some very nice farmlands to the south.

Apparently not to be outdone, the following day Queen Draga made a speech of her own, and before Volos realized what was happening, he was somehow also Kozari nobility. His Kozari title came with an entire village.

Berhanu had later calmed Volos by pointing out that the dual titles helped to reinforce the new alliance between Wedeyta and Kozar. "And," he'd added with a grin, "it wouldn't do for the prince's betrothed to have anything but a long string of impressive designations after his name."

So Volos couldn't exactly complain. But ownership of property in two countries had got him thinking about home. His heart felt so much stronger and his soul so much lighter now that he had places to call his own. The best of those places was here in the castle, in a quiet corner of the royal apartments, where he and Berhanu shared a room, a bed, a life. And because Berhanu was gone all this afternoon on some business related to the queen's imminent

departure, leaving Volos feeling a bit at loose ends, Volos had wandered to the barracks to meditate a bit.

Captain Hiwot walked closer. As always, her back was very straight, but now there was a softness to her expression that Volos had never seen from her before. "I've been hearing some stories about your father from our Kozari guests," she said.

He automatically tensed. "You knew my father was Kozari. I've never tried to hide that." Not even when his life might have been easier had he changed his name to a Wedey one. He wouldn't dishonor his father's memory that way.

"No, you never have. But now I've learned that Rok Perun risked everything he had in an attempt to keep peace between Kozar and Wedeyta. And even when his efforts failed and he was forced to flee over the border—to a country where he knew he'd face prejudice—he kept trying."

"It cost him his life. Cost my entire family their lives."

"I know. But consider what he was trying to do, Volos. Even if he wasn't successful, even if it led to tragedy—do you think he did the right thing?"

Volos considered this question for a moment, but deep inside he knew the answer. "He did," he said quietly.

The captain nodded. "He would be so proud of you, Volos." She turned around and marched out of the barracks.

Volos paced the spacious room he now called home. He had put on the ridiculously extravagant clothes he was expected to wear to formal ceremonies: shiny black boots; soft trousers so tight as to leave little to anyone's imagination, the outer legs marked with a stripe of elaborately embroidered red ribbon; a shirt in a matching shade of silk; and a black velvet vest, pinned with various gold and silver insignias of rank and the buttons capped with rubies. His familiar old sword was strapped around his waist in a new bronze-and-steel scabbard, and he wore a cloak—midnight-black on the outside, red silk on the inside, and trimmed with soft black fur. A heavy gold chain hung around his neck, suspending a gold and ruby pendant at his chest. That was the only bit of finery he treasured, because it had been a gift from Berhanu to signify their union. Volos had given Berhanu a finely made sword with a jeweled hilt—by far the most expensive item Volos had ever purchased—and Berhanu wore it every day.

But right now Berhanu was missing and Volos paced. Berhanu had said he'd return to their quarters to change after his afternoon duties were over and before the queen's farewell dinner began. The dinner would start very soon, and there was no sign of him.

When a knock sounded on the door, Volos rushed to answer it. A maidservant bowed at him. "Prince Berhanu awaits you in the Grand Hall, my lord."

Grumbling to himself, Volos followed her down the hall.

Every Wedey citizen with a drop of noble blood had turned out to say goodbye to Queen Draga, and she'd brought a large retinue of Kozari with her. As a result, the hall was packed and the noise level was high enough to give Volos a headache. Still, he found Berhanu right away—the prince was even more breathtaking than usual in his royal finery, and he smiled at Volos from across the vast room.

Getting to Berhanu was like fighting a battle, only instead of swordplay there were handshakes and bursts of greetings in two languages, and enough glittering jewelry and shining silk to make Volos's head spin. But Berhanu fought to get to him from the other direction and they met halfway. They embraced, but Berhanu quickly made a startled grunt and drew back.

"Is something wrong?" Volos asked.

"No. And I'm sorry for the delay. My... errand took longer than I expected."

"But your clothes..."

"I had a servant fetch them when I started to realize things were dragging on." For no reason Volos could discern, Berhanu snickered. "Dragging on. Anyway, the servant told me you weren't in our chamber."

"I went for a walk."

"Good. Now come eat." Berhanu took his hand and led him through the throngs to the dais at the end of the room. A long table had been arranged on the platform with ornate chairs for King Tafari and Queen Draga, who sat side by side. Still not quite out of the habit of kneeling before royalty, Volos executed an awkward bow. They both smiled and nodded back.

Although Volos had been seated at the royal table for the past several weeks, he still felt as though someone had made a mistake, putting him there

among men and women who ruled nations. Not that the others seemed to mind. Berhanu had a private conversation with his father very soon after he and Volos had pledged to one another, and King Tafari had welcomed Volos with open arms. Sometimes, when it was just the king, the princes, and Volos in the room, King Tafari called Volos *my son*. Every time he did so, Volos felt warmed from head to toe, and Berhanu smiled so widely his cheeks must have ached.

So now Volos took his seat beside Berhanu, servants filled their glasses with wine, and the speeches began. Everything took twice as long because it had to be translated, and the more wine the speakers drank, the longer and more flowery their addresses became. Volos might have been more bothered, but Berhanu was leaning against him, holding his hand, and exchanging funny little comments about the speeches in half-choked whispers.

Halfway through Queen Draga's gushing praise over her new Wedey friends, Volos had a very strange moment. He looked out over the sea of richly dressed people—people from both his mother's country and his father's—and then he turned his head to look at the handsome man seated beside him. Berhanu squeezed his hand. And briefly, everything seemed so wonderful, so too-good-to-be-true, that Volos was convinced he'd blink his eyes and wake up on a lonely barracks cot. Or naked and broken in a prison cell. But after he blinked his eyes, he was still on the dais with his belly full of good food and his beloved at his side.

An ancient shard of ice deep in his soul softened at that moment and began to melt.

"Hey," Berhanu whispered, giving him a nudge. "What's wrong?"

Volos smiled at him. "Nothing. Nothing at all, actually. I'm just... happy."

Berhanu's eyes glittered and he swallowed twice. "Me too," he finally rasped.

After the din of the Grand Hall, Volos welcomed the hush of their room. A servant had set a fire against the evening's chill and placed some fruit and bread on the table for the unlikely chance that Volos and Berhanu might still be hungry after the dinner.

"Would you like me to call for the bath to be filled?" asked Volos as he untied his cloak.

"No, not tonight. In the morning. Or... better yet, we'll spar and have a nice run, and then we'll bathe."

“Fine. But if you think you’re going to win, you’re mistaken.”

“What if I choose to practice wrestling instead of sword fighting? Then I’ll win no matter what.” Berhanu wagged his eyebrows.

Volos hung his cloak on a hook, shrugged off the vest, and pulled the shirt over his head. “I don’t know that we need to practice *that* sort of thing. We’re already pretty good at it.”

“Ah. But one must always strive for perfection.” Berhanu strode closer and caught him around the waist, pulling him close. He nuzzled under Volos’s ear. “In fact, I think we should practice tonight too.”

Volos would travel through the third hell a thousand times over just for the touch of this man’s hands on his skin. He growled deeply and grabbed Berhanu’s muscular ass with both hands.

But Berhanu abruptly drew away and took a few steps backward. “I have a surprise for you.”

Volos liked Berhanu’s surprises. “Oh?”

“Finish undressing first. Then kneel on the bed.”

Over the past few weeks, they had discovered they both enjoyed it when Volos bossed Berhanu around in the bedroom. But tonight, it seemed, Berhanu was in charge—and Volos liked that even better. He quickly stripped out of his boots, trousers, and stockings. By the time he was on his knees on the mattress, with the necklace warm around his neck and his hands resting on his spread thighs, his cock was already bobbing eagerly.

Berhanu spent a long moment staring at him, licking his lips hungrily. But then he shook himself slightly and bent to remove his boots and stockings. His trousers came off next and then his vest, until finally he wore only his blue silk shirt. He walked slowly to the bed. Then in a movement as graceful as any dancer’s, he drew the shirt over his head and tossed it away.

Volos gasped.

A dragon curled around the large scar on Berhanu’s chest. Although the dragon lay at rest, the fierceness of its gaze left no question that it would protect what it held dear. Its scales were executed with fine detail in red, gold, and black. Around its neck hung a golden chain with a familiar ruby pendant.

Volos reached forward to touch, but then drew his hand away. The skin under and around the tattoo was still a bit red and inflamed. “Wedey don’t tattoo themselves,” he said stupidly.

“No. But Kozari do. And as it happens, one of the members of Queen Draga’s retinue is also one of her country’s most skilled tattoo artists. Do you like it?”

“It’s... it’s beautiful.”

“I wanted... It’s guarding my heart, Volos. It’s not that I need a reminder of what you are to me. It’s only that you’re so *important* to me, so deeply imbedded in my skin, that I wanted to mark that. It’s like when my ancestors won a battle and put up some sort of gaudy monument. I won... I won so much more.”

“We both did.” And Volos couldn’t follow orders any longer. He launched himself forward, nearly knocking Berhanu off his feet, and then allowed his mouth to speak his love without words. Soon Berhanu lay beneath him on the mattress, splayed like an offering, whimpering as Volos licked and nibbled at his remaining nipple. When Volos moved down to Berhanu’s lightly furred belly and then his heavy balls, the whimpers turned to loud moans.

And here was a thing they had both learned lately. Sex didn’t have to be a hard, quick fuck—although that was fun too, sometimes. It could be slow and sweet, and they could torment each other with tender torture until nothing was left of them but raw nerves and straining flesh. It didn’t really matter whether they gave or received, because either way the pleasure was equal, each of them delighting in the other’s bliss as much as his own.

Volos slid the heavy, salty head of Berhanu’s cock between his lips and teased a moistened finger into Berhanu’s body, making his lover writhe and thrust, and pull at Volos’s hair. “Voloooo,” Berhanu croaked after a few minutes. “I order you to—Oh gods!—f-fuck me. Now. P-p-please.”

Laughing, Volos released Berhanu’s cock and wriggled up his torso. “Of course, Your Highness. I am yours to command.”

Berhanu squirmed beneath him, bending his knees, folding himself, spreading himself for Volos’s entry. Pre-cum was plenty to smooth Volos’s way in, and they both shuddered as their bodies fully connected.

“Hard,” Berhanu ordered.

Volos obeyed—pistoning his hips and driving deeply inside—because their bodies were strong and they could take it. But he also bent down and licked at Berhanu’s tattoo and mouthed gently at his neck, because both men needed soft as well. Berhanu’s cock was trapped between them, and that must have given

him enough friction, because when Volos captured his mouth in a kiss, Berhanu's cry slipped right down Volos's throat. Clenching muscles were enough for Volos too—he buried himself to the root and jerked helplessly.

Afterward they lay with legs entangled, Volos's head on Berhanu's shoulder while Berhanu slowly stroked his hair. The room was dark and smelled intoxicatingly of sex; sweat still cooled their skin. Volos was safe. Needed. Wanted.

"I love you," Berhanu murmured sleepily.

"I love you too. But I'll still beat you when we fight tomorrow."

"I wouldn't depend on it, Count Volos. I've been practicing my swordplay lately."

"Ah, but so have I." Volos reached down and began to stroke his lover's soft, damp cock.

Berhanu reacted by quickly flipping them over, straddling Volos, and rubbing their groins together. Volos countered with a hard swat to Berhanu's ass followed by a shimmying twist of his hips.

What followed then was somewhere between wrestling and lovemaking. But as they moved together, perhaps the best part was their laughter. It rang out freely, loudly. Unguarded.

The End

Author Bio

Kim Fielding is an award-winning author of several dozen novels, novellas, and short stories. She is very pleased every time someone calls her eclectic. Having migrated back and forth across the western two-thirds of the United States, she currently lives in California, where she long ago ran out of bookshelf space. She's a university professor who dreams of being able to travel and write full time. She also dreams of having two perfectly behaved children, a husband who isn't obsessed with football, and a house that cleans itself. Some dreams are more easily obtained than others.

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GUARDING DIZZY

By Casey K. Cox

Photo Description

Two young men lounge comfortably on a couch. One wears a collar and leash, has his shirt open and his jeans undone, the second smaller man leans against him with the leash in his hand. He wears a waistcoat and shirt with a silk bow at the neck and kisses the fingers of the first man.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The picture above is of two younger guys; high school- or university-age. They are both smart. The one lying down is a delinquent (looks can be deceiving!). The only one who can keep him under control, and who he listens to, is the one sitting up with a collar on. They had heard of one another but never met until that fateful day... How did they meet? Did they get along at first or did they grow on each other? How did they end up on the couch with a leash and collar? Perhaps, it was a dare at first, but it blossomed and opened them both up to a new world...of fun...

I would like a HEA/HFN ending. No cheating either.

Sincerely,

Jeanne

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: university/college, virgin, sex-lite, sexual exploration

Content Warnings: very lite exploratory D/s scene (no full sex)

Word Count: 19,434

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GUARDING DIZZY

By Casey K. Cox

Miro Kahn lounged in his chair letting the words from the book in his hand wash through his brain. He'd often sit in the student union bar with his friend, Will, and just while away the hours, still working, but having the buzz of life around him. He was in his third year of a four-year Master's degree in Sports and Exercise Science. The course was full-on, and his dedication was legendary. The only time Miro left the comfort of his books was to row. Rowing was his passion. Slipping through the water like a hot knife through butter gave him an immense feeling of power and grace. The stillness in speed as he cut a pace was meditative. His focus for rowing was renowned, and many of the younger students asked to train with him, but he preferred to keep to himself whether on the water or in the gym. Except for Will. And Jerry. Miro glanced up at the door just as Jerry burst through it.

"That annoying little ponce did it again." Jerry slammed his backpack on the table and dropped into an empty chair. The insult reverberated around the student union and several people turned to look.

"Oi," Miro said, throwing a beer mat at him. "Watch your language." So much for a quiet five minutes in the bar with Will before class. Will looked at Miro and rolled his eyes, and they smirked at each other. The three of them had been friends for almost three years, but Miro and Will had been through high school together too. They'd adopted Jerry during Fresher's and were amused he was still around. He was becoming a good friend and part of the furniture. Unfortunately, his moods were becoming notorious. Jerry spit forth some more gay vitriol, and Miro kicked Jerry's chair. "Quit it."

"Eh?" Jerry looked up; the black thundercloud over his head seemed to disappear for a moment before he replaced it with a scowl. Miro raised an eyebrow in his direction, a trademark move to suggest Jerry should rethink what he'd just said. "Oh, well he is. Always twirling and flouncing around. He's like a snappy little terrier. Every time I get within a few feet of Jenna he starts with that bloody mouth of his."

Jenna. Of course, it was about a girl. With Jerry, it was always about a girl. And, in this instance, the snappy little terrier who seemed to be plaguing Jerry's

every move on said girl. Miro had to admire the terrier's tenacity even if he was obviously a few planks short of a load to mess with Jerry. "No excuse," Miro said, throwing another beer mat that bounced off Jerry's head. "Perhaps if you had a bit more respect for her friends she'd be a little more responsive."

The tension puffed out of Jerry's chest, and he deflated in resignation. "He just drives me insane."

"You should look at that." Miro threw the last beer mat from the table and Jerry caught it as it flew past his shoulder.

Jerry looked over at Will. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Will chuckled. "Be careful. He's about to give you one of his 'people are mirrors for your own issues' speeches."

"It's true." Miro straightened in his chair. "Whatever pisses you off about him is what you need to address in yourself."

"That he's gay? I'm not gay."

Miro's eyes widened. "So you're a homophobe now?"

"No, of course not. I just... he's snappy."

"And you're not?" Will leaned over and patted Jerry on the back. "Miro may have a point after all, mate. You're not the most approachable guy in the world yourself."

Jerry looked crestfallen. "I don't snap at strangers. I don't." He was quiet for a few minutes. "I do, don't I? Fine. He gets up my nose because he reminds me of me. If that's the case, why isn't Jenna interested? They're practically joined at the hip. If he's so much like me, she should like me too."

"Perhaps she does," Will suggested. "You just have to get near enough to find out."

"Yeah, well, that's easier said than done with twat face always on the scene."

"What you notice in others..." Will and Miro said in unison and then burst out laughing, drawing the attention of the other students dotted around the bar.

"Sod off." Jerry stood sharply and grabbed his bag. "I've had enough of the life philosophies; I'll be in the gym."

"He really likes this girl," Will said, as he watched Jerry stomp across the room. "Perhaps we should help him out."

Miro dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. "If he can't respect her friends, he's got no chance. Best to let him crash and burn on his own." He paused for thought. The idea of a little guy snapping at Jerry's heels was intriguing. "Who's the kid he's slating all the time?"

"He's in her dance class, and a few music and drama groups."

"Ah, that explains the twirling."

"And the flouncing." Will grinned. "But I think he's studying Architecture. Bit of a wild card though, apparently. Kate knows a few of the guys in one of his modules. He's on the verge of being kicked out because of his attitude. Jerry isn't the only one who finds him... difficult."

Even more intriguing. And fiery. And fascinating. "Can they kick you out just for attitude? It isn't high school."

"If you get kicked out of enough classes and lose your attendance, I guess they can. Why are you interested?"

Miro disconnected the fantasy train preparing to leave the station in his mind. "Anyone who pisses off Jerry to the point he willingly accepts he's not perfect gets my vote. I should find the kid and shake his hand."

Will kicked against Miro's foot under the table. "Is that all you want to do to him?"

"Not listening anymore. Need to focus." Miro raised the book in his hand so it covered his face.

"Yeah, right. Need to get laid, more like. You should go and find the hotshot. Get some R&R."

The book flopped back onto his lap and he glared at Will. "Just to satisfy your curiosity? I don't think so."

"Miro, it's me, Will. I know you're gay. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed of who I am, Will. Besides, just because he flounces and twirls, it doesn't make him gay or likely to bend over for every guy who propositions him. *And...* I'm here with a purpose, and that purpose doesn't involve... getting involved."

"Not even with hot little architects who can do the splits and bend in all sorts of interesting ways?"

Pictures danced across Miro's mind before he could stop them, and he shifted in his seat. "Not even with one of those." He smirked but he hadn't been

able to hide the throatiness of his voice or the slight parting of his lips before he spoke. He kicked himself inwardly for being so readable. "If I was so inclined, of course," he added in an attempt to recover his position of asexual robotic study fiend.

Will sighed. "Of course. You know, you're as bad as Jerry."

Miro focused on the text in front of him. "I don't deny it," he said, refusing to look at Will even though he could feel Will's gaze boring into him. He focused on the text but he didn't see the words. His mind had hopped aboard the previously abandoned fantasy train and was busy inventing a flouncing, twirling, fiery little terrier with a perfect body that flexed and twisted in interesting ways. With tight dance shorts that left nothing at all to the imagination. Miro shifted in his seat again and the image dispersed. He sighed and let the text of his book wash the last of the colour from his mind... *'effect the stimulation of the T-cells to open and close 'the gate' so that the pain signals cannot be passed on, they do this by inhibiting the a-delta and c fibres in the substantia gelatinosa.'* And he was back on track.

It had been a hard rehearsal and Derrick Harris, Dale to his friends and Dizzy to his nearest and dearest, was shattered. Every muscle in his body, and a few he was sure he hadn't been aware of previously, were screaming at him for a hot shower, but the girls, his best buddies Amy and Jenna, were still buzzing and wanted to stop off at the juice bar on the way home.

"I am way too stinky for a public place," Dizzy protested. "It's okay for you two, you still smell all flowery even if you are a bit damp around the edges. I reek of musky maleness. It's nasty."

"Oh, stop it," Amy said, drawing him into a hug. "You smell sexy. Ripe sexy, admittedly, but a public place is perfect for those pheromones, sweetie. We need to unleash you on the unsuspecting male population."

"Of a juice bar?"

The girls giggled. "Of any bar," Amy said linking her arm through his and dragging him away from the path that led to his room, his shower, and his bed.

"Fine," he mumbled. "But don't complain when we get kicked out because of my stench."

"You're such a clean freak." Jenna linked his other arm and patted his shoulder. "So your hair is stuck to your face, so what? You still look awesome."

“Yeah, well you don’t have sweat running down your balls and seeping along the crevices of your manhood.”

“Granted, but I do have it chafing under my boobs and between the creases you’d rather not think about. So we’re even.”

“I still smell like a skunk.”

“You’ve never been near a skunk. Stop being so melodramatic.”

“But I’m a Queen, darling,” Dizzy said, spinning out of their grip and twirling off in front of them. “I simply *must* have drama to breathe.” The girls giggled and Dizzy pirouetted around them to end with a curtsy.

“Uh oh,” Amy said, nodding over his shoulder. Dizzy turned to see what she was looking at. “Neanderthal at fifty paces.”

Dizzy seethed. He grabbed Jenna’s arm and marched her off in the opposite direction. “Dizzy,” she complained, “I want a juice.”

“Not if he’s there. He’s a bully, Jenna. You stay well clear.” The guy heading in their direction was bad news. Dizzy could feel it with every cell of his body. They’d had numerous run-ins already and all because Jenna wouldn’t bow and scrape at his feet or worship his mightiness. Dizzy had made sure he was always between them and the guy really didn’t like it. He shouted, gesticulated, and generally made a nuisance of himself, which made Dizzy even more determined to keep Jenna entertained elsewhere.

Amy caught up with them and joined Jenna’s other side. “I don’t think he’s as bad as you make out, Dizzy. He’s friends with Miro Kahn.”

“Who’s that when he’s at home?”

“Only the most gorgeous creature to ever grace the halls of Bath Uni. How could you not know who he is?”

“Oh, he’s awesome,” agreed Jenna. “He rows and everything. You should see the crowd that gathers when he’s in the gym.”

“How is it possible I have never heard of this god?” Dizzy stopped and turned to stare at his friends. “Since when have you been ogling without me?”

“He trains when you’re in class.”

They took up a slow meander towards the dorm rooms. “So Neanderthal and gym god are friends, that doesn’t make either of them good people.”

Amy smiled. "Miro Kahn is perfection itself. Fit, unbelievably focused. The girls swoon, the boys are desperate to get his attention, and he blazes right through it all with the workout from hell then waltzes out as though nobody has given him a second glance. He trains with the Olympic Team too. They say he'll make the grade this year. He walks around in those cool Crew Bath tight shorts when he's down on the water."

"A rower, you say?" Dizzy pictured long, lean limbs, reaching and stretching and bunching, and had to clear his throat. "Well, I've never heard of him so he can't be that special."

Amy scoffed. "You'll be drooling with the rest of us once you see him."

"Wait." Jenna pulled them all to a stop. "There he is."

Dizzy looked towards the student union. As he paused, his bag dropped to the floor, along with his jaw. Tumbleweed skittered through his mind as his eyes took in the sight. Tall, surprisingly slender, wrapped in creamy skin and topped off with a mop of jet black hair. A god, indeed. Dizzy watched him hold the door open for another guy and his heart dropped as he threw his arm around the shorter, stockier guy's shoulder and hugged him. The other guy was blond, and tanned, and gorgeous in his own way. Together they were breath-taking.

"Which one is he?" Dizzy spluttered.

"Tall, dark, and handsome," said Amy. "The other guy is Will Pritchard."

"They look good together."

"Oh, they don't swing your way, petal. Sorry to disappoint." Amy picked up his bag and pushed it against his chest. "Will has a reputation. One I'm hoping to test for myself." She flicked her hair over her shoulder and grinned. "I'll let you know how I get on."

Jenna tsked. "He doesn't know you're alive, honey." She took Dizzy's arm and started walking him back in the direction of the juice bar. "There's a really long queue," she said. "For both of them."

"Not that Kahn ever samples the goodies," Amy added.

"Then how do you know he doesn't swing my way?" Dizzy cringed at the hopeful tone in his voice. Amy considered his words, thoughtfully.

"It's true, there is no direct evidence to either confirm or deny the persuasion of our rowing god. In which case," she said, holding out her hand, "may the best girl win." Dizzy shook on it, without really taking in the words.

He was still mesmerised by the way Miro Kahn's trackies hugged the curve of his arse, and his T-shirt stretched over well-developed traps and delts.

"Dizzy?" Dizzy looked at Jenna. "Are you okay?"

"I think I need a shower."

"Not that again."

"I think I need a *cold* shower."

Both girls grabbed an arm and dragged him away to a chorus of giggles.

The sun blazed overhead, and Miro stretched his arms, complete with the book he was holding, over his head. Good weather always made it difficult for him to study as he'd much rather be on the water. He sighed, stretched out in front, twisted to the side, to the front again, to the other side. Light bounced off the pond, and Miro shaded his eyes from the sun as he was momentarily blinded. When his focus came to again, he blinked a few times to clear his vision, but the lithe body twirling before him stayed put. Miro stared at the stretch and flex of the muscles, the flick of overly long hair which each twist, a dip to the floor with the hands and a leg extended into the air. Miro flushed and looked around to see whether anyone else was staring or had noticed him gawping like an idiot. Nobody else was paying attention. Miro caught the end of a flick-flack tumble and found himself blinded again, this time by the guy's smile as the girls with him cheered and applauded his display.

A group hug followed, and Miro cursed himself for how much he wanted to be part of it. The guy was little; shorter than the two girls he was with but after seeing him move, Miro imagined those arms were firm and strong. The girls blew kisses and waved as they wandered away, and Miro watched the guy collect his bag, which was almost as big as he was, and walk in the opposite direction. His hips swayed hypnotically and highlighted his killer arse sheathed in tight Lycra. Miro let his mind wander a little, savouring the fantasy. It ended abruptly with a ripple of danger in the air. The mood changed, the guy's hackles rose, and he stalled, fixed to the spot staring off into the distance. Miro was already on his feet, making his way towards him with an overwhelming urge to protect. He scanned the area and paused when he saw Jerry stomping towards the guy, who now looked ready to pounce. Shit. Miro broke into a trot and arrived just in time to jump in front of Jerry, without having tuned into the heated exchange of words.

"Jerry, mate, what are you playing at?"

“Step out of the way. This doesn’t concern you.”

“It doesn’t concern you, either,” the guy said over Miro’s shoulder. His voice was surprisingly deep and resonant for such a little guy. It rippled through Miro’s body, and he shuddered involuntarily. It was long enough for Jerry to step around him and reach for the guy. Miro caught his arm and flipped him around.

“Jerry, for fuck’s sake, are you trying to get kicked out?”

Jerry struggled against Miro’s grip. “He needs teaching a lesson.”

“Think about it.”

Soft hands tugged on Miro’s arms. “Let him go. I can look after myself. Let him try it. He thinks he can push me around because he’s all tall and muscly. I’ll put him down before he can—”

“Quit it!” Miro turned on his assailant, still holding Jerry in an armlock. Snappy terrier Jerry had called him. He was right about that. There was a moment’s silence while the guy stared at Miro, his lips slightly parted, his face flushed, his eyes widened and then thunderclouds rolled in.

“I don’t need you to fight my battles. I don’t even know you. I don’t need defending like some delicate flower. I—”

“I told you, be quiet.” There was a pause again. “It’s Jerry I’m protecting. From his own stupidity. Now run along with your little friends and leave us be.”

“I don’t have to go anywhere. He’s the one who got up in my face. Who the hell—”

“Enough!” This time the guy stepped back and dropped his head. Miro turned his attention to Jerry. “Can I let you go without you doing something stupid?”

Jerry nodded once, and Miro released the hold. “I told you what he was like. Derrick Harris, troubled terrier at large.” Jerry spat on the ground, and Miro rolled his eyes.

“You didn’t tell me you were playing schoolyard bully boy. What do you expect?”

The yapping from behind started again and Miro turned just in time to see the guy launch himself towards Jerry. Miro caught him around the waist. “Time to leave, Jerry. I’ll catch you later.”

Miro shielded himself as best he could from the flailing.

"I don't need a guard dog," Jerry said, and turned to stomp off towards the bar.

As Jerry walked away, the flailing stopped leaving Miro with the guy in his arms, feet dangling a good six inches off the ground. Miro didn't want to let go. It felt oddly comfortable just holding him. *Derrick Harris.*

"I'd like it if you'd put me down now, please."

"Oh, sorry." Miro placed Derrick on his feet. "I, uh... I'm sorry about that. It was instinct. Jerry's a big guy."

"And I told you, I can take care of myself." Derrick pulled his T-shirt down from where it had ridden up with his wriggling and started to walk towards the bag he'd dropped a moment before.

"Derrick, wait."

Derrick spun on his heels. "Only my mother calls me Derrick. *You.*" He jabbed a finger in Miro's direction and it felt like a dagger in Miro's chest. "You don't get to call me anything, Mr Manhandler."

"Hey, come on. I was just trying to help."

This time the jabby finger actually touched Miro, right in the sternum. "Just because I'm little doesn't mean I need some beefcake to jump in and save me. I'm stronger than I look and I don't need..." He looked up into Miro's eyes and his words fizzled out along with the anger. They stared at each other for what seemed like an age. Miro felt the heat pooling in his guts, fought the urge to sweep Derrick into his arms. Derrick broke the contact and turned to walk away. "Stay out of it next time."

"Wait." Miro trotted to catch up with him. "I feel bad... about picking you up. I shouldn't have, it was instinct." Derrick ignored him and kept walking, his head down. Miro needed more, wanted a reaction. "Derrick, I'm trying to apologise."

Derrick stopped and turned, face like thunder. "I said, *nobody* calls me Derrick. Now quit following me or I'll kick your—"

Miro crushed his lips over Derrick's, slipping an arm around his waist to pull him closer. Derrick stiffened and Miro started to pull back, realising his mistake, but before their lips parted, Derrick reengaged, pressing closer against Miro's body, wrapping his arms around Miro's neck.

Miro's head swam. It'd been too long. He groaned at the feel of Derrick's tongue searching for his. He reached to cup an arse cheek trying to get closer, lifting Derrick slightly off the ground.

"Get a room," someone shouted, to a chorus of cheers and laughter.

They jumped apart and Miro found an interesting patch of grass next to his foot to stare at. He didn't know what to say and he couldn't look up. What the hell was he thinking? *Let him walk away. Let him walk away. You don't have time for this. You don't have time for him.*

"So, uhm... My name's Dizzy."

Miro looked up and a sunshine smile greeted him that chased the words out of his brain and left him staring.

"Amy said you don't usually... I mean, she didn't think... well, what I'm trying to say is..."

Miro grabbed Dizzy's hand and dragged him towards where he'd abandoned his books.

"Where are we going? I have to get ready for class." Miro ignored the babbling. He had to get out of sight, they had to talk, and he had to get this kid to leave him alone. Focus was what he needed. Focus, and a few minutes behind a closed door to get those super sweet lips out of his system and get back to work. "Hey." Dizzy tugged and slipped free with a self-defence move. So he could look after himself, after all. Miro stopped and turned towards him. "I'm not a toy," Dizzy spluttered. "You can't just pick me up and take me wherever you want." Dizzy rubbed at his wrist.

Miro grabbed it again. "You're coming with me."

Dizzy squeaked as Miro pulled again. "Where? Why can't you just ask me out like a normal person?"

Miro let him go and gathered up his things. He shoved and pushed until everything was in his bag before throwing it over his shoulder and grabbing Dizzy's wrist again.

"I can walk on my own," Dizzy protested, tugging against the grip. "Don't make me drop you on your arse. Let go."

Miro stopped, still holding tight. "I don't trust you not to run off."

"Tell me where you're taking me."

The tone of the voice was authoritative, commanding, and Miro shuddered lightly. "To my place. I have to prepare lunch but we need to..." What did they need to do? "I want to..." Even worse. "You're coming with me." He avoided the questioning look and started walking, pulling Dizzy behind him.

"We're going to your place and you're going to cook lunch?"

"Yes," Miro snapped. "Now keep up."

"Your legs are longer than mine," Dizzy grumbled. "Slow down a bit."

"I'm in a hurry."

"You don't say. Most people would say, 'hey, Dizzy, do you fancy joining me for lunch so I can eat your face off again?' But not you—you just drag me off like some kind of caveman."

Miro glared behind him as Dizzy jabbered on to himself. Dizzy looked up and paused mid-sentence. "You do want to eat my face off, don't you? I mean, you like me, right? You want us to go somewhere private. You're not going to beat me up, are you?" Miro sighed and walked faster. "'Cause you won't be able to is all I'm saying. I can defend myself. Just so you know. I don't want any funny business." Miro stopped outside his apartment to open the door. "Wow, you have one of the single units. How did you swing that?"

"Do you ever stop talking?" Dizzy flushed, and Miro immediately felt guilty. "Sorry. I'm stressed. You've stressed me out."

"What did *I* do? You're the one who came bounding over and swept me off my feet."

"You're not good for my focus. I have to work. You shouldn't be here."

Dizzy scowled. "I tried to walk away. You're the one who abducted *me*."

Miro kicked at the door and it flew open. "Get in there, now."

"No." Dizzy folded his arms against his chest.

Miro grabbed him around the waist, bag and all, and placed him inside the door before pushing him further into the apartment and slamming the door behind him. They stared at each other. Miro hadn't realised how heavily he was breathing, or how tight his pants were around his groin. No sooner than he'd acknowledged it in his mind, Dizzy looked down. His eyes widened. "Oh, my."

Miro cursed under his breath and bundled Dizzy along the corridor into the kitchen. "Sit there." He pointed to the kitchen table. Rather than take a chair,

Dizzy dropped his bag and jumped up to sit on the kitchen counter, letting his feet dangle over the edge.

"Fine, so now you have me here, what are you going to do with me?"

"I'm going to fix lunch. Stir-fry beef. You want some?"

"Nah, I don't eat lunch on a Saturday." Miro glanced over at him. "Not enough time between classes. I'll eat later."

"You have classes on a Saturday? What time?"

"Two-thirty. It's an extra-curricular."

A quick look at the clock told Miro they had almost two hours together. "You've time for a snack."

Dizzy shook his head. "It's a really strenuous class this afternoon. I daren't risk it. You carry on."

"What class?"

"Dance. We're rehearsing for a show." Miro busied himself getting out the ingredients and starting to chop. "So, why am I here, exactly? You haven't even introduced yourself."

Miro's shoulders slumped, and he shook his head. "Everything is messed up with you already. Miro. My name is Miro. I just, I need you to know I don't have time for this. You're a distraction. I can't afford to get caught up in something right now. You need to stay away from me."

"I need to stay away from you?"

Miro carried on chopping, focusing all his energy into slicing his beans. "Which means you need to stay away from Jerry."

"He needs to stay away from me, you mean."

"I don't know what's going on between you two, but it has to stop."

"Now you hang on just one cotton-picking minute."

"No!" Miro spun round, pointing the knife in his hand. "*You* need to realise I'm here to work. I cannot afford to lose my focus. I've worked too hard to have you come in and trash everything."

"And I'm telling *you*, that I've done nothing but stroll across campus on a Saturday afternoon. Anything that came after is down to you, not me, so you'll damn well be civil to me or I'm leaving, gym god or not." Miro blinked. "Do you understand?"

“There’s no need to get grouchy.” Miro went back to chopping. “Gym god?” Miro smirked and gave Dizzy a sideways glance.

Dizzy jumped down. “You’re impossible. I’m going home.”

Miro picked up the wok and waved it in the air. “You will sit there, and wait.”

“For what, exactly, you to find some manners? And quit waving kitchen paraphernalia at me.”

Miro put the wok down. “I’m sorry, again. Please,” he said taking hold of Dizzy’s shoulders. “Just sit and talk to me for a bit. I’ll be finished cooking in a flash and then we can sort out this mess.”

“There is no mess on my side, other than being dragged off against my will.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that. I’m making no sense at all. I don’t know what the hell is going on with me right now. I’ve never done that before.”

“Fine, I’ll stay. But you need to show me you can be at least half-normal. I don’t like your friend Jerry because he’s a bully. To be frank, so far you seem the same.”

Miro turned on the heat and poured some oil into the pan. He knew he deserved that comment, but it didn’t stop it hurting. He threw in the beef and started to brown it, swishing it around with the spatula. “Jerry isn’t a bully usually. I don’t know why he’s being that way with you.”

“I guess that’s my fault too? You’re not normally like this; he’s not normally like that. I’m the common denominator.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Miro tossed the beef and shook it around.

“Wow, you can really cook.”

Miro chuckled. “It’s just stir-fry. Anyone can throw a stir-fry together.”

“So *you* say.”

Miro glanced over to where Dizzy had taken up his seat again on the kitchen counter. “You want me to teach you?”

“Maybe.” Dizzy grinned, and Miro swallowed hard. He turned his attention back to the beef. “Depends what you want in return.”

Miro tried to ignore the comment. He slipped the beef into a waiting dish and tipped the sliced veg into the wok and started to stir. The silence stretched

on, and Miro added bean sprouts. He could feel the tension between them and knew Dizzy would walk if he didn't do something soon. "Will says you're about to be kicked out of school. What's up with that?" Anger flared from Dizzy's direction, and Miro regretted his words.

"Who the hell is Will, and why is he gossiping about me?" Dizzy jumped down. "You lot think you own the world just because you're third years."

"That's not fair."

"Well, I don't need to sit around wasting my—"

It was a smooth move as Miro put the pan aside and swept Dizzy into a long, hard kiss that left both of them breathless. Miro held on to Dizzy as the kiss ended and they stared at each other.

"You need to stop doing that."

"Then stop shouting at me."

This time Dizzy initiated the kiss and Miro lifted him back onto the kitchen counter and pressed himself between Dizzy's legs.

"You like picking me up, don't you?" Dizzy smiled shyly and Miro kissed him again. He tasted so good, and his lips were the perfect shape to fit his own. Miro wondered if he'd ever have enough. They paused, heads together, breathing settling.

"I have to finish cooking. Stay?" Dizzy nodded, and Miro moved back to the stove. "I didn't mean to upset you. Will doesn't gossip. I asked him who you were after Jerry had a hissy fit. If there's anything I can do to help... with your classes, I mean. Why aren't you studying dance?"

"I'm good at what I do." Miro caught his eye and Dizzy smiled. "I mean with my classes. I'm studying Architecture, and I'm good at it."

"So what's the problem?"

Dizzy shrugged. "I'm outspoken. The tutors don't like that I question them, or their methods. My grades are phenomenal but they are forever sending me out of lectures like I'm some kind of delinquent."

"And are you?"

Dizzy sighed heavily. "I guess. But they just rub me the wrong way with their righteous attitude. They think I can't possibly know anything about anything. My father is an award-winning architect, and he studied with the best, all over the world. I know what I'm talking about."

“Sometimes, you have to let the other person win one.”

“I know. I just... I’ll try harder. To do that.” There was a brief pause for thought. “So why couldn’t we talk outside?”

“I needed to get lunch. I have to eat regularly.”

“Okay, and what’s the real reason?”

A glance in Dizzy’s direction told Miro he needed to step up and be honest. “Fine, I didn’t want an audience.”

There was another pause for thought. Dizzy lifted his legs and sat on his hands. “You’re not out to your friends then?”

“I’m not *not* out to my friends. I just haven’t dated since I’ve been here so they don’t know one way or the other for sure.” Except for Will, but he didn’t count.

“You’re in year three, right?” Miro nodded, hoping to avoid the next inevitable question. “So what, you’ve been celibate for three years?”

“Pretty much.”

“I’m your first kiss in three years?” The disbelief was heavy in Dizzy’s voice, weighing it down with the threat of walking out.

“I’ve had my moments. During the holidays. Nothing serious.”

“One-night stands?”

“Not really. A bit of groping, some heavy petting.” Miro looked Dizzy straight in the eye. “No exchange of bodily fluids, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Except from the kiss.”

The taste of Dizzy’s lips, tongue, and teeth washed over Miro and he took a deep breath. “Except from kissing.”

“But you have... before now.” Dizzy tilted his head to the side as though trying to gauge the truth of his statement for himself. “Shared bodily fluids?”

“I’m almost twenty-four. I took a couple of years out to travel—and train—before uni. I’m not a virgin, if that’s what you’re really asking.”

Dizzy’s shoulders hunched. “Oh. Just checking.” He fidgeted a little, pulling his hands from under his legs and staring at his fingernails. Miro turned back to the stove and tossed the wok. “I am,” he blurted out. Miro stopped but didn’t turn around. What did you say to that? “Just so you know. Don’t want you thinking I’m some superhot sex-kitten just because I’m a dancer.”

Miro smiled, still not looking round. "All dancers are superhot sex-kittens, are they? I'll have to remember that."

"People seem to think so. But I'm not."

"Is there a particular reason for that? I mean, you're what, nineteen? Are you... saving yourself or something?" Miro poured the beef back into the wok and mixed it with the overcooked vegetables and wilting bean sprouts. It wouldn't be the best meal he'd ever cooked, that was for sure.

"Not really." Dizzy sighed, a deep chest rattling sigh. "I guess. My parents are kind of religious. They're okay with the whole gay thing though," he added quickly. "But they're heavily into chastity and virtue. I've lost count of the number of times I've had the 'gay doesn't mean promiscuous' lecture."

Miro chuckled at the intonation he'd added, imitating what Miro guessed was Dizzy's father. "And you agree with them, or just go along with it?"

"A bit of both. I do think it should be something special, or with someone special, but I'm not waiting till I get married or anything. Just want it to be right, you know?"

"I do." Miro smiled at his choice of words, not that marriage was on his mind. *I do, indeed. I certainly would do him given half the chance.*

"But you still like me, right? Well, I didn't let you answer the question before. I chat a lot when I'm nervous or just kind of all the time actually. But you kissed me, broke your focus or whatever it is, so you must like me."

Miro paused his stirring. "Uh, you kissed me."

"I kissed you back, but you definitely initiated it."

"Not from where I was standing."

"You most certainly did. How could I even reach you? You're about a foot taller than me. I'd have never managed it on my own. I didn't climb up you."

Miro turned off the stove and turned around to look at Dizzy. He still sat on the counter, legs swinging, with a supernova grin and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "You know I'm right."

Miro sighed. He was in deep already, could feel it from his fingertips to his toes. "I know you're trouble."

The dance hall was busy as usual. Dizzy felt oddly self-conscious escorted by his buff new friend. Was he a friend, or a boyfriend? The boundaries weren't really established and it gave him an uneasy rumble in his gut. They'd talked a bit, about embarrassing stuff. Dizzy was still kicking himself for admitting he hadn't had sex yet, and in the first conversation to boot. Damn and blast his chatty mouth. They'd kissed some more. A lot more. And Miro had decided they should spend the rest of the day together to... well, he hadn't really said but after all the kissing and the feeling of being close to such a hot guy, Dizzy was ready to agree to anything. What would he say if somebody asked who Miro was and why he was there? Dizzy stopped and Miro, who was following a little too closely, walked into his back.

"Sorry," Miro whispered in Dizzy's ear. He slipped a hand around Dizzy's waist and squeezed—just enough to make Dizzy, well, dizzy.

"You can sit over there," Dizzy said, pointing at the benches on the far side of the studio. "I have to warm up over here."

"Okay. Be good." Miro kissed him on the cheek and Dizzy felt himself flush. He watched as Miro walked across the dance floor and settled himself right in the centre of the longest bench. Dizzy would be able to see him in the mirrors that lined the walls of the studio from every angle. How the hell was he supposed to concentrate on work with such potential on show? It was there. He could feel it. Miro was special. Miro could well be his first lover and, dear lord, he wanted it. All the wet dreams and endless fantasies of romance and love and superhot sex, rolled into one and Dizzy's body ached for Miro's touch. The kiss seemed to linger on his cheek, teasing him into a puddle of helplessness. If Miro wanted him, even if he wanted him tonight, Dizzy knew he wouldn't be able to resist. He didn't want to. He wanted Miro to want him, to take all of him. Dizzy shuddered, and then blushed as he realised he had distinct cockswell going on. Luckily, he'd worn tight shorts under his loose pants or he'd have a tent situation.

He dropped his bag against the wall and kicked off his outdoor shoes. Did he need bare feet? He scoffed at himself as he realised he had no idea what they were rehearsing. He'd never forgotten anything in his life until today.

"Dizzeeeeeee," came the screech from the door and Dizzy turned just in time to be enveloped in girly hugs from his nearest and dearest, Jenna and Amy. "Sweetie, you look peaky." Amy pinched his cheek. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just had a weird day after I left you, is all."

“That bully didn’t get hold of you did he?”

“Uh, kind of, but not really. Weird, like I said.”

“Ooo, what’s *he* doing here? Diz, did you see who he came in with?” Amy scouted the room, scowling at the prospective man stealers and Dizzy gulped.

“Um, he’s with me.”

“Don’t lie.” She pushed him playfully and as he stumbled against the wall, he saw Miro’s reflection and the involuntary move towards him that Miro caught at the last minute before settling back into his seat. *Wow. So cool.*

“He really is with me. We met a few hours ago. He, uh, saved me when the Neanderthal tried to crush my skull in his hand.”

“Holy crap.” Jenna giggled. “I knew you had it in you, pumpkin, but Miro Kahn? Damn, girl, you are on fire.”

“We’ll see about this,” Amy said, and marched off towards Miro.

“Amy, don’t,” Dizzy called, too quietly for her to hear.

“Hello, handsome.” The girl smiled and Miro sighed. He would have preferred to skip the friends’ interviews altogether, but if he had to go through it, a more private setting would have been better. “So, Dizzy tells me you’re an item.”

“Does he?”

“So, are you? I’m his best friend, Amy. I have to check you out, make sure your intentions are totally dishonourable.” She chuckled at her own joke, and Miro stifled another sigh.

“Let’s say I’m still undecided. I’m here to check out his superhot sex-kitten status. Find out if he’s as flexible as I’ve heard.”

She turned on her heel and marched back to Dizzy, and Miro wished he could take back his stupid words. *What an idiot.* He groaned inwardly as he watched the colour drain from Dizzy’s face and his hackles rise. In a flash of movement, he was an inch away poking Miro in the shoulder with every word. “Undecided? You weren’t undecided when you had your tongue down my throat an hour ago. And what the hell are you doing hanging around here if you aren’t really intere—”

Miro reached up and crushed his mouth over the words to stop them and Dizzy melted against him. His hands tangled in Miro’s hair and he pulled.

Hard. It spurred Miro on to kiss him deeper, squeeze him tighter. He pulled Dizzy down onto his lap and cupped a butt cheek in each hand. Firm. Amazingly firm. As Dizzy tried to break the kiss, Miro followed to prolong it. Just a little more before the poking and the telling off started again. Just to say “sorry”, and “I was stupid”, and “forgive me for being a twat”.

Dizzy finally got away from him and stared, his soft lips slightly parted.

“You’re not going to shout at me again?”

Dizzy shook his head, and wriggled deeper onto Miro’s lap.

“Nothing to say at all?”

Dizzy grinned—a momentary flash of sunshine—before kissing the end of Miro’s nose. “Undecided, my arse,” he said, standing up.

“Definitely not undecided about your arse,” Miro mumbled. But Dizzy didn’t hear it; if he did, he didn’t acknowledge it. He strutted back to his friends and threw a final, sultry look over his shoulder that set Miro’s guts on fire. “You are going to be a whole heap of trouble.” Miro pressed his head back against the wall and closed his eyes to get a grip on himself.

“I think it’s safe to say he’s made up his mind.” Dizzy put a finger to Amy’s chin to close her jaw. “Any doubts from you two?”

“I think all you need is a collar and leash, and he’d follow you anywhere.” Jenna pulled Dizzy into a hug. “Well done, sweetie. He’s a real big fish.”

Leash? Dizzy threw a look over his shoulder to where Miro was leaning back against the wall, baring his throat. *Oh, that would work in so many ways.* He shuddered, surprised by how powerful the mental picture of a thick leather collar around that creamy skin could be, and was thankful again for the tight shorts.

“You rock,” Amy said, joining the hug. “Get him to introduce us to his friends. I want a year three boyfriend too. O.M.G... I’ll get to meet Will Pritchard.”

“And me.” Jenna grinned, and they bounced and squealed together.

“Mr Harris, ladies.” The dance teacher, Janet, swept into the room and deposited her things in one graceful movement that ended with her at the front of the group. “I don’t see much stretching going on. We have a full program this afternoon. I need your best game.”

"No chance," Dizzy said to the girls. "Not with him watching me."

"Show him what you've got," Amy said. "Shake your tail feathers, make him sweat."

"What about what he's doing to me just by sitting there?" Dizzy bent forward and hugged his knees as he started his warm up routine.

"Believe me, the way he went at you with that kiss, the man is hungry for you. Whatever the damage he's inflicting on you, he has it ten times as bad."

"You really think so?"

"Hell, yes. He's got it bad for you, Diz. Whether he knows it yet or not."

"Oh, he knows," Jenna piped up, stretching an arm high over her head and arching sideways. "And he's going to fight it every step of the way. Janet's right. You need to bring your best game to make sure he doesn't run in the opposite direction."

"Maybe I need that collar and leash after all." Dizzy stole another look at Miro who was now watching his every move, and slipped smoothly into the splits. "Because he's not going anywhere, unless *I* say so."

"Ooo," Amy chuckled, sliding into place next to him, "we'll have to start calling you Dizzy, the little Dom." And the three of them collapsed into a heap of giggles.

Within moments of the class finishing, Miro slipped his arms around Dizzy's waist and pulled him back against him. "You're amazing," he whispered.

"Get off." Dizzy slapped his hands away. "I'm all sweaty."

Miro grabbed him again, tighter. "I don't care. I need to touch you. You drive me crazy."

Dizzy revelled in the hot breath against his neck for a short moment, trying to control the grin threatening to break out across his face, and then slapped the hands away again. "You'll have to wait. Touching me like that, I'll get a boner, and I am not gonna let everyone see my dick peeking over the top of my pants."

Miro spun him around and looked at his crotch. "It would do that?"

"Let me cover up. You should know how important it is to keep warm after exercise."

Miro backed off just enough so that Dizzy could pull his hoody over his head and push his arms through before he was back with wandering hands. "Quit it." Dizzy slapped him away again. "We'll never get out of here. And I really want to get you alone right now, so help me out and sit." Dizzy pointed to a nearby chair and was surprised when Miro plopped on to it.

"Good boy." Amy snickered, and patted Miro's hair. "You are going to be so much fun to have around."

Dizzy gathered up his workout gear and stuffed it into his oversized holdall. He hefted it over his shoulder and Miro jumped up from his seat. "I'll carry that."

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying my own bag. I've been doing it for years."

"I want to." Miro wrestled with the strap. "I said, I *want* to. Let. Go."

"Fine. But just know I'm not the girl in this relationship." He flushed as his own words sunk in. Talk about freaking the guy out. Why the hell had he said relationship? Dizzy let Miro take the bag and watched as he threw it over his shoulder as though it weighed nothing. A ripple of excitement fluttered through Dizzy's body. *I bet he could throw me over his shoulder too, if he wanted.*

"I'll follow you." Dizzy looked up, confused. "You're heading back for a shower, right?"

"Oh, yeah. Um. You want to come with me?" *After the relationship remark?*

"That's why I've been sitting here for the past two hours, missing my swimming session and fighting the boner from hell with all your twirling and gyrating."

"Right. Let's go then."

They walked in silence. Miro wasn't sure what to say. Should he hold Dizzy's hand, put an arm around his waist? It'd been a long time since he'd had to think about such things. He walked slower this time, letting Dizzy lead the way when really he wanted to drag him along at a much faster pace to get him behind closed doors.

Dizzy opened the door to the building and then his shared flat. He paused at a door in the hall. "This is me. Do you want to wait in the kitchen while I change?"

“No. I’ll wait in your room.”

“But it’s tiny.”

“Good. We’ll be nice and cosy.” Miro noticed the hesitation and placed a hand on Dizzy’s shoulder. “I’m not going to jump you, or make you do anything you don’t want.”

“That’s not what I’m afraid of.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s what I *want* to do that’s the problem.”

Miro reached down and placed a chaste kiss on Dizzy’s lips. “Your virtue is safe with me.” He grinned. “For this evening, at least.”

Dizzy flushed scarlet and put all his focus into unlocking his bedroom door. “It’s probably a mess.”

“I don’t care.” Miro pushed him through the door and closed it behind them. Before Dizzy had a chance to say anything else he swept him up and planted another kiss, this one deep and lingering. His body was boneless and pliant in Miro’s arms and Miro lifted him off the floor and pinned him against the wall. Dizzy wrapped his legs around Miro’s waist and whimpered. The sound hit Miro right in the balls and awakened the need to bury himself deep in the lithe little body wrapped around him. *Slow it down. Slow it right down.* He found the strength to pull back, breathy and unfocused, for long enough to see the need mirrored in Dizzy’s eyes. “We take it slow,” Miro said, placing Dizzy back on his feet. “For both of us, okay?”

Dizzy nodded, a delicious little pout forming on his lips. “I don’t want to though.” He pushed past Miro and disappeared through another door. “Just so you know,” he called back.

Miro glanced around the room. Most of it was a mess. Clothes hung from practically every surface, books and papers littered the bed and floor. In the far corner was an oasis of calm around a small angled desk with a half-finished plan of something. Pens stood neatly to attention, the books on the shelf above the desk stood ordered by size, and a set of trays held folders and paper. Miro shuddered. There was something eerie yet commanding about the two distinct personalities inhabiting the space. He turned to follow through the other door. “Dizzy, we should tal—”

“Get out,” Dizzy bellowed. “I’m—”

“Stop with the shouting.” Miro grabbed his arm and pulled him around to face him. “You’re not naked.” *Thank goodness, because I wouldn’t be able to control myself.* “Not yet, anyway. Your flat mates will think I’m trying to kill you.”

“Sorry.” Dizzy bit his lip. His cheeks had flushed slightly and Miro couldn’t help but stare. “I’m a bit melodramatic sometimes. It runs away from me.”

“A bit?”

Dizzy had already stripped off his hoody and vest. Perfectly defined abs without an ounce of fat. Nicely developed biceps, quads and pecs. Pleasingly formed obliques. A very nice little package indeed.

“What are you staring at?”

“You.” Miro ran his hand over Dizzy’s chest. “You’re beautiful.”

“Okay, and I suppose you’re not?”

“I didn’t say anything about me. I’m looking at you.” Miro touched a hand to Dizzy’s cheek. “You blush really easy. It’s kind of cute.”

“Yay for me.”

“What’s wrong now, I can’t pay you a compliment?”

“I’m not used to it. Not used to any of it.”

Miro stepped back, letting go of Dizzy’s arms and smiled. “Show me your trick then. Break the ice.”

“What trick?”

“Where your cock pokes over those stupidly high-waisted trackies when it’s hard.”

“I will *not*.” Dizzy flushed harder, and Miro laughed. He pulled at the waistband of Dizzy’s pants and looked in.

“Flipping heck. How’d a little guy like you get all that? No wonder it pops over the top when you’re horny.”

Dizzy slapped Miro’s hand away and then slapped his cheek.

“What the f—”

Dizzy shoved a hand over his mouth. “No swearing. I don’t like it. And who said you could look?”

Miro dropped to his knees and grinned. "I'll do more than look if you let me."

Dizzy spun away from him. "That's disgusting. I'm all sweaty." He pushed down his pants and shorts, his bare arse just inches from Miro's face, and stepped out of them. "I'm getting in the shower. Watch if you want. But no touching. Not until I'm clean."

"Can I help?" Miro's voice was hoarse and croaky. Dizzy was taut and surprisingly muscular all over. And completely smooth. Even his legs were free of hair. The water started running and Dizzy stepped in. He hadn't said no. Miro got to his feet and stripped out of his own clothes, his cock already at half-mast. He stepped into the small cubicle behind Dizzy and took a deep, laboured breath at the feel of skin on skin all the way down. His cock nestled into the very top of Dizzy's buttocks and over the small of his back. "Can I touch now?"

Dizzy leaned back against him and sighed contentedly. "Touch all you want." He guided Miro's hand over his chest and down to his crotch where there was a definite reaction happening. He had an impressive body, sure, but his cock was even better. Long and fat, it grew steadily in Miro's hand and for the first time in his admittedly limited sex life so far, Miro felt the need, not to bury himself balls deep, but to be well and truly ploughed by the cock in his hand. He nestled into the crook of Dizzy's neck and kissed a line along to his ear. Was it too soon to ask him? To make plans for when they finally got around to it? "I want—"

Dizzy turned slowly in his arms and pressed himself against Miro's body. "I want you too. I don't want to wait. It feels right. I don't want to lose this moment."

"Dizzy, I didn't mean..."

"It's okay. It's my choice. You're not rushing me into anything, Miro. I promise." And he kissed Miro long, and hard, and needy, and it rattled Miro's cool and stole his words and his thoughts until he found himself wrapped up again with Dizzy's legs tight around his waist, and his cock gliding over Dizzy's virgin pucker.

"Stop." It was more of a squeak, but Dizzy stopped wriggling and looked at him. The water was losing heat, but Dizzy's face looked flushed, and his wet hair trailed over his face. "We can't do this yet." Miro hated his own words, his own prim attitude. Dizzy's father would be proud.

“Why?” The longing in Dizzy’s tone threatened Miro’s resolve.

“We don’t have lube, or condoms, and...”

“And?”

“I was trying to tell you something. You distracted me.”

A sunshine smile, a wicked chuckle, and Miro couldn’t resist kissing him again, relishing the feel of Dizzy’s hard cock against his stomach. He wanted it so badly. Wanted him. Just him. He’d let other guys—two other guys—but he hadn’t wanted it, just wanted to keep them happy. He hadn’t really enjoyed it, not the same as topping, but this time he needed it, wanted to be prised open and laid good and proper by his little firecracker of a dancer.

Dizzy broke away and nuzzled into Miro’s cheek. “What do you need to tell me?”

“The water’s getting cold.”

Dizzy’s body stiffened. “Seriously? You interrupt my moment to tell me the bloody water is getting cold? What kind of pansy-arsed attitude is that?”

“Don’t get all prickly on me. I’m having a moment of my own okay, and I’m feeling a bit... Just, can we get out now?” Miro placed Dizzy on his feet and pushed past him out of the shower. “Where’s a towel?”

“Top cupboard.” Dizzy stepped out behind him, grabbed a spare towel and wrapped it around Miro’s waist. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. Are you okay? It’s just that I forget sometimes, to... I don’t know.” Silence hung in the air. “Miro?”

Miro ignored him and dried quickly, pulling on his clothes as soon as was possible. He fought with his jeans as they stuck to his damp legs and refused to budge over his thighs.

“Hey.” Dizzy touched a hand gently to his arm. “Come on. What’s up?”

Miro grabbed his shoes off the floor. “I should go.” *I need to get away from you before it’s too late.*

“Oh, no you don’t.” Dizzy jumped in front of the door, almost slipping. Miro grabbed him just before his head hit the wall.

“Jeez, be careful will you?”

Dizzy placed a hand flat against Miro’s chest. There was a power behind it, an unspoken command that rooted Miro to the spot. “I’m not letting you out of

here until you tell me what's going on. We can sit in the other room, but you aren't going anywhere." Dizzy stared hard and Miro looked at the floor. "Do you understand?"

Miro fought the urge to run. He wanted out of the room and out of Dizzy's presence so badly, but he couldn't push past the authority in the hand and voice that held him spellbound, and the cruel tease of hidden possibilities. "Fine, whatever. Just put some bloody clothes on. I'll wait out there."

"You'll stay where I can see you." Dizzy flipped down the toilet seat. "Sit."

Miro plopped himself down and Dizzy took a deep breath. "Now stay there while I get dry."

Miro couldn't watch. He felt like such an idiot. Dizzy was supposed to be the blushing virgin and yet he'd been the one to have a meltdown. "Derrick, I..."

Dizzy spun round, nearly losing his pants around his ankles. "I told you, only my mother calls me Derrick."

"Well, I'm not going to call you Dizzy anymore, and that's the end of it."

"How about honey?" Dizzy grinned, but Miro wasn't feeling it. There was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he had a headache. "Too soon. Okay, before I stepped into my fabulousness as a raving Queen," he flicked imaginary hair over his shoulder and Miro chuckled, "my friends called me Dale."

"Dale." Miro was still grinning, despite the turmoil going on inside. "I can live with that."

"But can you live with me?" Dale flushed. "Not literally, I mean, you're not having second thoughts already are you?"

Second thoughts, third thoughts, and fourth thoughts. Miro's mind was flip-flopping all over the place. He wanted, and yet it was too much to risk everything he'd worked so hard for. The room started to spin and he could feel acid churning in his stomach. He looked up to meet Dale's quiet gaze. "Can I have a glass of water? I don't feel so good."

Dale pressed a hand to Miro's forehead. "You're really clammy." With that, Miro heaved from the bottom of his guts. He stood and flipped up the toilet seat just in time to hurl his lunch into the bowl. "Holy crap," Dale spluttered. He rubbed a comforting hand over Miro's back as he heaved until there was nothing left and then heaved a few more times for good measure. "I'll get that

glass of water,” he said once Miro was able to sit back on his heels without retching.

Miro flopped onto the floor next to the toilet and put his head in his hands. He was definitely having a moment, that was for sure. Dale returned a minute later and held the glass for him to drink out of.

“I’m okay now. I just need to go home.”

“I meant what I said. You’re not leaving until you tell me what’s wrong and don’t try and fob it off with you being sick. You can’t get me naked and then bugger off. Either sleep here tonight, or I’ll come back to yours to look after you.”

“I don’t need looking after.”

“And I say you do. It’s not optional. My place or yours?”

Damn and blast. The tone in Dale’s voice had a finality to it Miro couldn’t argue against. “Mine. I have a king-size bed and your friends won’t have to listen to me hurling every hour on the hour.”

“I thought you said you were okay now?”

“Just help me up. I need to call Will.”

“What is it? What’s wrong with you?”

Miro struggled to his feet with Dale’s help, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and speed dialled Will. “Hey, mate. I’ve just had a funny turn. Any chance you could pop out and get me some electrolyte sachets? Nah, I’m fine. It’s already passing. I just know I’m out at home. Not at the moment. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes. Okay. See you there.” He put his phone away. “Come on then, Florence Nightingale. Pack an overnight bag. Something tells me you have a ton of products you’re going to need in the morning.”

Dizzy wasn’t sure what to do with himself. A surreal silence hung between them as they headed back to Miro’s apartment. There he’d been, ready to get down and dirty with the hottest guy he’d laid his hands on to date, which was only the second guy period, and it had all gone down the pan—literally—with a very unpleasantly smelling regurgitated beef stir-fry. Was there even a way to come back from that? And there was the whole “Will as a knight in shining armour” thing that was pissing him off. If there was something wrong, why couldn’t Miro just say so, why did he have to call backup?

Dizzy stood aside as Miro unlocked his door. There was movement inside, and Miro called out, "Hey, Will, just me."

"And me," Dizzy said, poking him in the side. Miro glanced round. "He has a key to your place?"

"Of course he does." Before Dizzy could protest, Will appeared in the hall.

"Oh, you brought a friend." His smile was warm and open and Dizzy hated him instantly.

"Bit more than a friend, actually," Dizzy snapped.

Will grinned but Miro pulled Dizzy to one side. "What the hell was that?"

"What?"

"Will is my oldest friend. He looks out for me, and I look out for him. You have a problem with that, you can walk out of here right now and don't bother coming back."

"But—"

"Not up for discussion."

Dizzy felt heat pool in his cheeks. "Fine. I'm off. I hope the two of you are very happy together." He flounced from the apartment and slammed the door behind him, regretting it immediately when the evening air hit his skin. *You total pillock. You've just thrown away the best thing ever because of your stupid gob.* He walked a few feet and then leaned against the wall. Shit. He couldn't go back, could he? He slipped down the wall and sat staring at his knees. He jumped a mile when the door opened again. He looked up to see Will grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"I don't think you wanted to do that," he said, taking a seat on the floor next to Dizzy.

"And what do you know about it?"

"Would it help if I told you I'm straight?" Will bumped his shoulder. "Come on, you know Miro's the hottest thing since sliced bread. Surely you're not going to give that up for nothing?"

"Too late." Dizzy knew he sounded like a petulant kid but he couldn't help it. He felt stupid, and like he had a neon "virgin" sign flashing over his head.

"Let me tell you something about Miro." Will hunched closer in conspirator's fashion. "He's as nervous and half-brained as you are about whatever it is going on with the two of you."

“There’s nothing going on.”

“Yeah, go tell some other dumb chump, Cinderella. I’m not daft. Miro’s rattled because he likes you. He never likes anyone. And you just flew off the handle and stomped out in a jealous fit after meeting one friend. And I’m just a friend.”

“What’s wrong with him? Why did he need you to bring that stuff?”

“That’s for him to tell you when he’s ready. Now I want to like you, I really do, but you flip him off like that again and we’re going to have a serious falling out and I’m not a Jerry. I won’t shout first, I’ll just pummel you into the ground. Do we understand each other?”

Dizzy nodded glumly. “Do you really think he likes me?”

“Oh yeah.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“Okay, I’ll let you in on another little Miro secret. He’s shy. Really shy.” Dizzy started to protest but Will held up his hand to silence him and continued his story. “Everyone thinks he has this cool, calm confidence going on, but that honed focus he has with everything is to protect himself. If you knew him in high school... well, different story altogether.”

“Was he bullied?”

“Mercilessly, for anything and everything. It’s why we took two years out before coming to uni. He needed to hunker down and recuperate.”

“But he’s so outgoing.”

“No, he isn’t. Sure, he’ll stand in between a fight, shake hands and smile at the right people, but if it wasn’t for me... and Jerry, he’d never leave the comfort of his books other than to row.”

Dizzy let the information sink in. He felt even more stupid for the way he’d behaved and stormed out. Will got to his feet and held out his hand. “Now get back in there and say sorry before I kick your arse to Timbuktu.”

Dizzy took Will’s hand and let himself be pulled to his feet. “But I feel stupid.”

“And so does he, for throwing up all over you just because he got spooked.”

“Spooked?”

“Miro’s deep. It’s why he usually keeps to himself. But he’s putting himself out there if you’re man enough to take him on.”

“Right.” *I’m not man enough for anything at the moment.* “Guess I’ll go back in then.”

“Atta boy.” Will slapped Dizzy’s shoulder and sent him flying a few steps towards the door. “And a few more.”

Dizzy took a deep breath, opened the door and walked in.

“What did he say?” Miro came bounding into the hall and his face dropped. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Yes, it’s me. Sorry to disappoint, but I’ve decided not to take no for an answer.”

“I told you. If you can’t accept Will...”

“Will and I made up, so that excuse is out of the window. You’ll need to find another one to get rid of me.”

Miro huffed. “What if I don’t want to get rid of you?”

Dizzy relaxed a little, but didn’t dare let go of the smile threatening to break out across his face. “Well, that would suit me just fine.” They stood eyeing each other warily. Dizzy took another breath and decided it was his turn to eat humble pie. “I’m sorry. For being stupid. I just got it into my head that Will was some kind of boyfriend and I don’t like to share.” Miro’s jaw dropped. “I mean it. I don’t like to share anything. Not clothes, not pens, definitely not boyfriends.”

“Not pens?”

“I’m an architect. And I’m old school. Pens are important to me. I have favourites and I don’t like people pawing them. I’m the same with my men.”

“You have favourites?”

“Stop being a smart ass, you know what I mean. I don’t like the thought of people touching what’s mine.”

“What’s yours?”

“Fine, I’ll spell it out for you. I am not interested in casual. You are either my boyfriend... in which case you’re mine and nobody else gets to touch you, or you aren’t, in which case I walk. No more kissing, no more naked—”

Dizzy melted into the kiss, hot and claiming and everything he wanted. Everything he'd dreamed of for so long and he didn't want it to end. He reached up to stroke through Miro's hair, realised he still felt clammy to the touch, and pulled away. "We shouldn't... are you sure you're okay to be doing this?"

But Miro grinned, and lifted him off his feet. "I'm just peachy."

"But you were so sick."

"I cleaned my teeth."

"No, are you sure you don't need to lie down or something?"

"I should probably take it easy for a while, but you can stay. If you want."

"I do want." And the magic was broken. Miro tensed and placed Dizzy back on his feet. "Now what did I do?"

"We should talk."

They sat awkwardly on the sofa. Two cups of herbal tea stared at them from the coffee table and Dizzy stared back. After another moment he started to chuckle.

"What is it?" Miro poked Dizzy's leg when the response was only louder giggles.

"It's Saturday night." Dizzy flopped back into the comfort of the couch and held his ribs.

"And?"

"And we're sitting here like some little old couple with herbal tea. What happened to drunken parties and all night revelling during the uni years?"

Miro stiffened. "I don't drink. I prefer to take care of my body."

"Same here." Dizzy roared with laughter, curling into a ball and leaning against Miro's shoulder.

"You're mad," he scoffed, pushing Dizzy back to his side of the sofa.

Dizzy sobered a little and shook himself out. "You have to admit it's funny." But Miro wasn't laughing. He looked as though he was about to implode with stress. "Hey, come on. There's nobody else around, you can loosen up a bit." Miro glared at him. "It's just me." Dizzy snuggled against Miro's side. "Isn't this like a date or something?"

Miro stood up quickly, and Dizzy fell into the space he left behind. "I can't do this." He started pacing the room. Dizzy couldn't stop the tears suddenly welling into his eyes. "You don't understand. I'm not..." He looked down at Dizzy. "Oh, shit... don't cry on me. I really don't do crying."

"I'm not." Dizzy sniffed. He wadded his sleeve and rubbed furiously at his face. "I've got something in my eye."

Miro sat down and pulled Dizzy against his chest. "I'm not good with intimate. I have my moments."

"Like earlier in the shower? Before..."

Miro sighed. "Yeah, exactly. Before it sunk in what was going on."

"And what was going on?"

Miro's body was a tight ball of stress and Dizzy held tight hoping to disperse some of it with sheer willpower. He could offer a massage, but somehow he thought that would make the situation worse. He'd always been good with his hands, and getting to stroke and half-moon over Miro's tight muscles sounded like a whole lot of fun. Particularly with warm oils and bare skin. The ongoing silence brought Dizzy back from his little fantasy. "What were you trying to tell me before I flipped out on you?" Dizzy kissed Miro's shoulder. "You can tell me, I promise it's going to be okay."

"It's not even really about you," Miro snapped. Dizzy stroked and soothed, refusing to react to the tension and Miro relaxed a millimetre. "Well, it is, obviously." Miro cursed under his breath. "Sod it, I'm just going to say it." Silence. Dizzy kept up the stroking and kissed Miro's shoulder again. "I wanted you to..." Silence again, and Dizzy noticed the colour flush over Miro's cheeks.

"It's very likely I'll be happy to do whatever you want me to," Dizzy purred. "I know I'm new at this, but I want to learn, and I'm certainly not a prude."

"Yeah, okay. What was all that, 'get off me till I'm clean', then?"

"You want me sweaty and stinking, I'm yours. Is that the problem, you didn't want me to shower?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Miro shook Dizzy off his arm.

"Look, I'm trying here, but you're not exactly making it easy for me." Miro tapped the arm of the couch and Dizzy snapped. "Oi! I'm talking to you. Have

enough damn courtesy to respond and have half a sense to realise this is difficult for me too. You're the one with all the experience. Help me out here."

Miro started bouncing his leg. He angled his body away from Dizzy, and Dizzy sighed. He was about to just get up and leave when Miro grabbed his arm and held him in place. "I wanted you to do me. In the shower. I wanted to bend over and let you pound me till I couldn't walk straight." He let out a breath. "There, I said it."

"What's so wrong with that?"

"You were all sweetness and romance and wanting your first time to be all gentle and fluffy. I just wanted you to ram me." Miro gripped the arm of the sofa. "And I'm not ready for that... with you. I'm not used to wanting *that*, and you wanted something else and... it just freaked me out." Miro looked briefly in Dizzy's direction but didn't hold the eye contact. "I can't do casual. I'm all or nothing."

Dizzy stared for a moment. "Well that's good, I don't want casu... wait, you'd want me to... *do* you?" Dizzy blushed at the thought of spearing Miro's firm, muscular body, of having it laid out before him, waiting and eager for his attentions. He hadn't got much of a look in the shower, but he'd felt it, warm and solid, caught a glimpse of Miro's arse, perfectly sculpted, as he'd tried to escape.

"Is that so strange? I mean, I am gay, just like you. You want me to do you. What's the difference?"

"Dunno. Just didn't think you'd want a guy like me... never mind. I'm a virgin, what do I know about anything?"

"You don't want to."

Miro looked so dejected but Dizzy couldn't hold in his chuckle. "Oh, I want to. Now you've suggested it I won't be thinking of much else for the foreseeable future. I'd just never really thought about topping before. Is that weird?"

Miro shrugged. He looked so deflated. Where was the happy? Why weren't they both excited? It would be normal for them to be a little nervous maybe, but not depressed.

"Hey?" Dizzy rubbed his hand over Miro's knee. "Look at us; I've barely known you a day and we're already thinking of breaking up because things are too serious." Dizzy slipped along the sofa and settled against Miro's side again.

Miro's whole body went rigid. "Relax," Dizzy said, leaning his head on Miro's shoulder. "I'm not going to jump you." He smiled to himself at the repeat of Miro's own words from earlier. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but only a few hours had passed.

"But you want to, and that makes me nervous."

Dizzy wriggled closer against Miro's unrelenting body. "Sure I do, but that's part of the fun, isn't it?" Miro still didn't relax and Dizzy sat back a little. "Tell you what, why don't we go old school?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We've just met. There's nothing to say we should be having sex straight away. I'm from a religious family and you don't do casual. Why don't we just take sex off the table altogether?"

Miro turned in his seat to face Dizzy. His eyes looked brighter. "So we see each other regularly, get to make out but no grabby hands or bodily fluids?"

"Yeah, until we know each other better."

"I can do that."

Dizzy snuggled back in and slipped his arm around Miro's waist. "Maybe some grabby hands," he said, brushing his lips over Miro's neck and along the line of his jaw. "I might grope your arse, just a little, but no frontsies."

This time Miro moulded into the touch and made a grab of his own to pull Dizzy across onto his lap. "I don't mind a little frontal action." Miro's voice was hoarse, and he pulled Dizzy close to his chest. "Dry humping is good for the soul."

"Over clothes only then?" Dizzy bared his throat so Miro could nibble and lick over it and rocked over Miro's hard cock beneath him. His own erection strained against his jeans and he really wished he hadn't just negotiated a term of chastity.

"Have you ever had anyone suck your cock?"

Dizzy groaned at the words, shook his head, and held on tighter to Miro's shoulders. Miro shifted his position and laid Dizzy back on the sofa. He crawled between his legs and continued the dry humping, kissing over Dizzy's neck and cheeks and grinding his hips against Dizzy's body.

"I think I should do it for you," Miro whispered against Dizzy's ear. "Just so you have an idea of the treat waiting for you after some time passes." More

kisses and Miro pulled up Dizzy's shirt to expose his chest and kissed a line down to his stomach. "Just a one-off, you understand." Miro's tongue snaked over Dizzy's skin making his blood run first hot, then cold, then hot, the promise of what was to come almost pushing him over the edge. Miro stopped. Dizzy waited. Nothing. He looked down at Miro, who was grinning from ear to ear. "You're supposed to stop me. Say it's too soon. Wriggle away."

Dizzy pushed himself onto his elbows. "Are you freaking serious?" Miro rubbed his face over Dizzy's erection and mouthed his cock through his jeans, but then stopped again.

"Over clothes only. It's the rule. It's *your* rule." Miro sounded serious but he was still grinning. Dizzy was losing all reason. He grabbed hold of Miro's hair. "Ow, why so rough?"

"It's punishment for teasing."

Miro glanced up at Dizzy, his pupils completely blown as though he'd been smoking weed for days, and it sent a thrill through Dizzy's body. A little door in his mind swung open and Dizzy felt a rush of power. They both wanted, but couldn't quite close the deal, but an opportunity had presented itself that would overcome their issues. Dizzy wasn't sure whether he had it in him to follow through but the look in Miro's eyes spurred him on. "I'm going to give you one opportunity to tell me whether you want to stop. Do you understand?" Dizzy gripped Miro's hair tighter, and he whimpered, his body spasming out of his control. "If I do something you don't want, or you're not comfortable with I want you to tap my leg three times." Miro nodded. "Do it now, so I know you understand." Miro tapped Dizzy's knee firmly three times. "Good. Now, you don't get to tease without being punished." Dizzy had no idea where the words were coming from, but damn it was hot, and powerful, and oh, so sexy seeing Miro so open and needy before him.

"I'm going to take out my cock, and you're going to suck it like a good boy. Do we understand each other?" Miro swallowed hard, but nodded. "It's a one-off, just like you said." Dizzy opened his zip, still not quite believing what he was doing or where it had come from, and wriggled his jeans and shorts down past his thighs with one hand still in Miro's hair. He didn't want to break the spell they were both under, like they were somewhere else, somewhere outside of themselves and the stress that had held them prisoner ten minutes before. Miro's lips parted automatically as Dizzy's cock bounced free, and he licked his lips. Dizzy had to steady himself, and breathe deeply. He was so close already, just seeing those perfect lips waiting to suck him in. Miro moved

towards his cock and Dizzy pulled him up short. "Wait until I tell you. I'm the one in control, remember?"

Dizzy could see a spreading damp patch in Miro's jeans and wondered if he'd blown a full load or was just really, really getting off on the little scene they had going on. "Open wide." Miro looked up into Dizzy's eyes and opened his mouth. Dizzy started shaking as he fed the head of his cock between Miro's lips; he couldn't believe it was really happening, that Miro hadn't just slapped him. "Now you can suck it." Miro closed his mouth and slipped over the shaft of Dizzy's cock. "Holy freaking—" Miro suctioned himself on. "Ugh..." And it was all over. Dizzy shuddered as he shot into the back of Miro's throat and everything else slipped away.

Dizzy wasn't sure how long had passed when he finally opened his eyes. Miro had wrapped himself around him, and it was getting dark outside.

"Hey." Miro grinned at him and nuzzled against his shoulder.

"Oh, hey." Dizzy tried to sit up but Miro held him down. He fought the panic threatening to well up in his gut. "I, uh, are we okay?"

"We're great," Miro said, squeezing him. "You made me come in my pants. I haven't done that in years. And you didn't even touch me."

"And that's okay?"

"It's more than okay, it's amazing."

Dizzy relaxed a little. "I didn't overstep boundaries after we'd decided to wait?"

"You read the situation perfectly. Just what I needed to chill out about it all. Besides, you gave me a get out if I wanted it." Miro grinned again and kissed the end of Dizzy's nose. "I didn't want it."

"And I didn't embarrass myself by coming too soon?"

"You lasted longer than me and I didn't have my cock down your throat."

Dizzy wondered whether they should talk more about what had happened. Before he could think it through the words tumbled out of his mouth. "You get off on being told what to do." It was a statement, not a question.

"You didn't enjoy it?" Miro stilled against Dizzy's side. It seemed as though he was barely breathing.

"I think the answer to that is pretty obvious." Dizzy knew he was blushing. "I didn't know I had it in me."

"I'm glad you found it." Miro relaxed against him and nuzzled gently sending shivers through Dizzy's body. "I was worried you might not have liked having to do that."

"*You* found it. Up until this morning I'd always thought of myself as a sparkly bottom waiting to be ploughed into the mattress by his Prince Charming."

"And now?"

"Now I find myself wanting to slap a collar on you and ride you into the sunset."

Miro sighed contentedly. "That's the picture I have too."

OMG, I'm gonna come all over again. "We should still wait, though." Dizzy realised his fingers were threading through Miro's hair. "Before we have sex."

"I know." Miro traced patterns over Dizzy's stomach and kissed his chest lightly. "I've always known," he said. "I think that's why I can't do casual. It's too easy for me to fall into line, even when I shouldn't."

"When we do it, I want it to be on equal terms." He shuffled to look directly into Miro's eyes; he didn't want any misunderstandings between them. "I love the idea of playing games but the first time..."

"It's okay." Miro settled back onto Dizzy's chest. "I don't want that all the time. I still want to bang you senseless, and put you over my knee to spank that attitude out of you."

Dizzy shifted as his cock perked up at the thought of being over Miro's knee, his naked, vulnerable arse stuck in the air at the mercy of his beefcake lover. He swallowed hard. Oh, were they in trouble. *Big* kinky trouble.

Miro sighed contentedly. He hadn't felt so relaxed since... well, ever. Not even on the water. Dale was sex on legs and man, did he have magic in his hands. And his lips. And his voice. Lord, that voice drove Miro to so many interesting places. He flicked back a page of the book on his lap and realised he hadn't taken in a single word he'd read. So much for laser focus. He sighed again and looked up to see Will grinning at him. "What?"

"You," he said, the grin getting wider. "You're all fluffy around the edges. I swear you'll start purring in a minute."

"Get lost." Miro hurled a wad of paper he grabbed off the table in Will's direction.

"He's good for you."

"Not if I can't get my brain back into gear."

Will opened his mouth to say something but groaned instead as the door to the bar crashed open. Miro looked round to see Jerry making a beeline for them. He hadn't seen him around for a few days and his face was a funny shade of purple.

"You two-faced wanker," he spat at Miro. "You've sat by and listened to me moan about the fru-fru fairy and all the time you've been fucking him. I thought we were friends."

Miro blinked a few times trying to process the words Jerry had hurled at him but he came up blank. He looked at Will who just stared open mouthed.

"Well, say something! Are you fucking him or not?"

Interest picked up around the Union and people appeared out of the woodwork, sensing trouble. "I don't think this is the place," Will said, standing to confront Jerry. "Let's take it back to mine."

"I'm not taking anything anywhere until he tells me, face-to-face, has he been shagging the kid all this time behind my back or not?"

The cool bliss of ignorance vanished and Miro saw red. He jumped up from his seat and dived on Jerry, knocking him to the ground. "What the fuck?" Jerry just managed to cover his face as Miro landed the first blow. "Get him off me!"

Miro felt Will's arms under his, but he threw a few more punches before he let Will drag him off. Jerry lay huddled on the floor. He peered out from under his arm. When he realised it was safe, he sat up. "You fucking psycho. What the hell?"

"You mind your mouth when you talk about Dale. He's not some cheap tart you can slag off every time you're in a bad mood."

"Obviously not," Jerry said, rubbing his arm where a punch had landed. "I can't believe you'd lie to me. I thought we were close."

"Lie? I haven't lied to you and unless I've missed something, it's not as if we're dating. If I want to see someone I shouldn't have to okay it with you first."

“But it’s *him*. Of all the guys, Miro. How could you go for him?”

“We should take this somewhere more private,” Will said, nodding towards the crowd forming around them.

“No need.” Jerry stood up and brushed himself off. “I know when I’m not wanted. I trusted you.” He glared directly at Miro. “And all the time you were playing guard dog to your little Princess.” Miro dived at Jerry again but this time Will caught him. “If he’s the snappy terrier I guess you must be a Doberman. I’m sure your puppies will be really cute and leave a trail of bloody corpses in their wake.” Jerry was still muttering under his breath as he walked away, pushing through the circle that had formed around them.

Miro flexed his hand. It was sore and the knuckles looked bruised. The crowd started to disperse and he looked at Will. “I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry you had to step in.”

“I should have let you finish him off, the twat. I don’t know what’s got into him lately.”

But Miro had figured out exactly what was really going on with Jerry. “It’s the girl.”

“What is?”

“Jerry. He’s acting just as I would with Dale, how I did with Dale. You’re right, we should have helped him and now he’s hurting because he can’t have her, and because he’s lost us. Well, me. In his mind at least.”

“Are you sure that’s it?”

“What else would it be?”

Will stared at him for a minute. He had the look he usually wore when he couldn’t believe he was the only one who knew what was going on. “You don’t think he’s gutted he didn’t realise you were gay because he fancies you?”

“What, Jerry? Nah.” Will raised an eyebrow and it caused Miro to go through what Will had said again. “You think?”

“After that little episode, I definitely think.”

Miro settled back into his chair and picked up a book, smarting slightly at the pinch in his knuckles. “Well, bugger me. I’d never have come up with that one.” Miro pondered the idea that Jerry might be gay. It was something he’d never considered. He’d wondered about Will before now, they’d always been touchy-feely together, lots of hugs, cuddles and kisses on the cheek but there

had been no evidence of real interest. Miro thought Will was just being supportive. But Jerry? It just didn't compute. He'd always had girls hovering around him, and—much like Will—had taken full advantage of that fact. Miro couldn't recall half of the girls he'd seen either of them with over the last few years. "You think the girl is just a cover?"

"You really are the most naïve plonker in the history of the world." Will gave an exasperated snort.

"Now you've really lost me."

"Who is Jerry always talking about?"

"That girl, Jenna, or whatever her name is."

"He mentions her name now and then, sure, but who is he always describing in great detail and relaying every word, and encounter?"

"I don't..." And the penny dropped. "Dale. You think Jerry fancies Dale." Miro bristled. "You think Jerry fancies Dale and you didn't tell me?"

"Keep your knickers on, it's news to me too. I think Jerry dislikes Dale because he makes Jerry feel things he doesn't understand. I'm not sure Jerry's quite figured it out himself yet. But after the way he just kicked off at you, like some jilted boyfriend, or a friend you've just stolen a potential date from, I'd say that pretty much sums it up."

"Great. Now I not only want to rip his head off, I want to tear him limb from limb."

Will patted Miro on the shoulder. "That's love, buddy. And love triangles. At least you know Dale is only interested in you."

"He bloody well better be after his 'I'm not sharing' speech." *And pulling that sexy Dom crap on me that makes me melt.*

"Would you share?" Miro glowered at Will. "If he changed his mind, I mean?"

"Not even if hell froze over."

Will smiled. "Then I think you'll both be okay."

Dale or Dizzy? Dizzy Dale seemed appropriate for the moment as Dale watched Miro put the rowing machine at the gym through its paces. They were

five days and two blowjobs into the relationship, and Dale was ready to reciprocate. Why should Miro get all the fun of seeing him squirm? He was feeling mature, responsible, and unbelievably horny. He'd even started to think of himself as Dale instead of Dizzy and had introduced himself to Amy's brother as Dale before she had the chance to forever brand him with his Dizzy nickname yet again. The look on Amy's face had been memorable to say the least.

He glanced down and straightened the bow on his shirt. Reverting to Dale was one thing, but there was no way he was ditching his sense of well-honed style even if it was a little flamboyant. Not that Miro had even raised an eyebrow when he'd put the shirt on that morning. That morning after yet another night of sleeping curled around each other. Miro had ravaged him without a mention of his choice of attire, and they'd dry humped almost to the point of no return. Oh, how Dale wanted to take Miro past that point, and he had an idea how to go about it, it was just whether he had the confidence with his virgin skills to pull it off. He'd been thinking about it since the first blowjob where he'd taken control. The new fantasy consisted of Dale pinning or tying... Dale swallowed hard... definitely tying Miro down before teasing him slowly and thoroughly whilst testing out various blowjob techniques. Miro was certainly more than competent in his cocksucking skills. So competent, Dale really didn't want to think about what that meant. It was too soon to have the ex-boyfriend talk anyway, but part of him really didn't want to know the details. He wanted to think of Miro as just his—past, present and future.

As Dale looked over to Miro, he caught him flinching at a particularly hard pull on the machine. He let go of the handle and slowed to a stop before flexing his right hand. Dale made his way through the machines and leaned over Miro's rower.

“What happened to your hand?”

Miro didn't look up. “I punched Jerry.”

A thrill ran through Dale's body, but he was pissed off at the same time. “You're done for the day. You can't train with bruised knuckles, it'll make them worse.” Miro was about to protest. “And we need to talk. Now.”

Miro sighed. His shoulders slumped, but he grabbed his towel and water bottle and made his way to the lockers. He stopped to collect his bag and turned to face Dale. “Say what you have to say. Just know I won't be apologising for it anytime soon.”

“Attitude?”

“It’s not attitude. Perhaps I just don’t want to talk about it.”

Dale smiled coyly and slipped his arms around Miro’s waist. “What about if I ask really nicely?” He slipped his hands over Miro’s butt cheeks and squeezed.

Miro huffed. “Fine. What do you want to know?”

“I want to get you into the shower first. Get comfy.”

“Dale, I’m not ready for...”

“I know. It’s okay.” It would have to be okay. For now. Miro was still skittish and a definite flight risk, so it would have to be one thing at a time. For the moment, that was laying boundaries about fighting and protection and finding out exactly what Miro thought he was doing punching anyone, let alone someone who’d been classed as a friend a week before. Dale didn’t want to be the reason for Miro losing one of the few close friends he had, and however much of an idiot Jerry seemed to be, if Miro needed him around, Dale would have to live with it.

Dale guided Miro out of the gym and across campus to his apartment. He backed off and gave Miro some space to shower, change, and throw some leftovers in the oven to heat through. There hadn’t been any evidence of ill health or funny turns since that first night, but Dale was mindful not to come between Miro and his food, just in case. After they’d eaten, and Dale had cleared the plates, he settled astride Miro’s lap on the sofa and nuzzled into his neck. “So, tell me what happened to make you punch your friend.”

“Jerry isn’t my friend anymore.”

Dale rocked forward and Miro hissed. “And why is that?”

“He needed putting in his place.” Miro groaned as Dale kissed along his jawline. “I wanted to make sure he left you alone.”

“Why would you do that?” Dale kissed each of Miro’s cheeks. Keeping it calm and a little sexy was working. Dale could see Miro was slipping into a space where he could talk without thinking. “I’ve told you I don’t need protecting,” Dale said, moving round to nibble Miro’s earlobe.

“He was saying stuff. Shouting in the Union, in front of everyone. Making you out to be some kind of...” Miro straightened out of his daze and Dale nearly fell off his lap. “I didn’t like it, so I hit him.”

Dale held up Miro's hand and kissed his bruised knuckles. "Aw, defending my honour? That's so sweet, but really, I'd have laid him out cold without a single bruise." Another gentle kiss on the cheek. "Let me handle it next time."

"You say that, but Jerry is a big guy and solid. I know this now."

Dale nuzzled again, trying to get Miro to relax and let go of the tension. "And I have a black belt in karate and took kickboxing for seven years. No punches required."

Miro sighed and shifted Dale on his lap. "It's my job to protect you."

Dale clenched his teeth. He didn't want to lose his temper, he didn't want to upset Miro any more than he already was but lord, he was difficult. "I've already told you," Dale tried to keep his tone in check, "I am not the girl in this relationship. We look out for each other."

"I *want* to protect you." Miro pouted and Dale's stomach flipped over with how cute he looked.

"And I love that you do." Dale cupped Miro's cheek in his hand. "But not if you're going to get hurt in the process. No more fisticuffs. Understood?" Miro looked away and Dale guided his chin back so he could look him in the eye. "I mean it, Miro. Promise me."

Miro nodded. He wore the same compliant look he had when Dale stepped up their petting, and he knew that would be the end of the matter. It was cool how they were able to read each other so easily after such a short time. Dale figured they had an hour or so to play before he needed to think about meeting the girls. Heavy petting was out with Miro feeling chastised and delicate, so he'd have to make do with long lingering kisses and some light stroking. But soon they'd both be ready for a whole lot more.

"Are you sure you want to brave meeting the girls for coffee?" Dale asked, straightening the bow on his shirt and checking his hair in the mirror. He slipped a small hair clip just above his ear and snapped it shut. Perfect.

"I'm going to have to get used to them babying me eventually, though why they think they can pinch my cheeks and pat my head, I'd love to know." Miro stared at Dale and Dale felt the colour flush his cheeks.

"I haven't said anything, Brownie's honour. I told you, it's from that first day in the studio when you sat after I told you to. They remember shit like that. Forever." Miro groaned, and Dale turned to pinch his cheek. "Don't worry,

pumpkin, I'll look out for you." Miro dived for him and Dale jumped out of the way with a screech of giggles.

"It's lucky you're quick. One of these days, I'll put you over my knee, and spank you till you can't sit down."

"Oh, how I wish you would." Dale wiggled his arse to tease and Miro swiped for him. "Not fast enough, muscle boy."

"You little..."

Dale hightailed it out of the door, leaving Miro cursing behind him.

Hand in hand. Dale's chest swelled as they walked across campus hand in hand. It was a dream... it had to be. He glanced up at Miro who smiled and pulled Dale's hand to his lips for a quick kiss. Dale swooned and his heart started racing. Dale insisted he wasn't the girl in the relationship, but crikey, did he feel like a ditzzy daisy when Miro pulled romantic crap like that. Miro chuckled to himself and Dale squeezed his hand. "What is it?"

"You, looking at me all doe-eyed. I'm nothing special."

"You are to me." Dale caught Miro's small smile and his heart skipped. *If only you knew how special.* Dale opened his mouth to say something but caught it just in time. No need to spoil it, not with Miro so relaxed. Dale was already so much better at minding his mouth and thinking before blurting out whatever was on his mind. If only Miro could realise how good he'd been for him already.

Dale spotted the girls waiting outside the juice bar and waved. He felt Miro tense and squeezed his hand for moral support. "It'll be okay, they're great once you get to know them."

"It's not them I'm worried about." Miro motioned to his right. "Jerry's heading this way."

"Let me deal with him."

"Dale, I'm not going to let you slug it out with Jerry any more than you would let me. Just ignore him."

"I won't let him hit you."

"He's not that stupid. He's going to spout his mouth off and leave. Just don't give him the satisfaction of answering back, okay?" Dale gritted his teeth.

"I mean it." Miro wasn't messing around so Dale nodded and gave a grim smile. They arrived at the juice bar just as Jerry intercepted them. The girls looked worried and Dale bristled with anger.

"Nice to see the lovebirds out walking," Jerry spat. He pulled something out of his pocket but Miro clenched Dale's hand so he wouldn't react. "Not sure who's taking who for walkies but this might come in handy." Jerry threw something at Miro's feet and started to walk away. Dale lost focus for a split second as he saw the dog collar and lead Jerry had thrown at them. It was all Miro needed to grab Jerry's T-shirt and throw him to the ground.

"Miro!" Dale grabbed Miro's arm, just as he swung it back to land a punch. "Don't you dare, not after what you said to me just now." Miro relaxed his arm and stepped back. Dale pulled him to one side. "We ignore it, just like you said, okay?"

"Okay."

Jerry was on his feet by the time Dale turned around again. "See what you've done? Three years I've known him. You've been here all of five minutes and all of a sudden he wants to rip my head off."

"I think you caused that on your own," Dale said. "I only met him because you were stalking my every move trying to intimidate me."

"You're the one who was always in my way! Don't forget that, numbnuts. I only wanted to chat to the girl, but would you let me get anywhere near her? Oh, no, I'm not good enough for you and your friends."

"Excuse me," Jenna said, pushing Jerry on the shoulder from behind him. Dale stepped back. Jenna looked mad. He'd never known her as much as raise her voice, but with the look on her face he certainly wasn't going to get in the way. "If you wanted to come and speak to me so badly, why didn't you do it when Dizzy wasn't around?"

Jerry turned, his face flushed. "But he's *always* around. That's my point."

"You are so full of shit." Jerry's jaw dropped. "I've been in the gym a hundred times or more with you when Dizzy's been in class and you haven't even noticed me." Jenna prodded Jerry's chest, hard. "*You* need to own up to the fact you notice Dizzy first and me second. That's the only reason he's always around."

The noise around them stilled as the revelation sunk in. Jerry looked at Dizzy, then back to Jenna. "But I..." His head dropped.

“What? You’re just going to clam up, now? I’m right here, you have my full attention, and all you can do is stare at your feet?”

“I don’t know what to say.” Jerry didn’t look up. He reminded Dale of a scolded puppy—perhaps it was Jenna who should take the dog collar.

“Sorry, might be a good start.”

“I am sorry, I...”

“Not to me, idiot. To Dizzy. You’ve made all of this his fault when really you’ve been looking to pick on him from the start.”

“That’s not true. It’s not.” Poor Jerry, he looked exasperatedly at Jenna but she just glared at him. Jerry turned to Dale. “Derrick, I wasn’t out to get you. I really thought you were going out of your way to make my life difficult.”

“Only my—” Miro pinched Dale’s arm. He’d been so quiet Dale had almost forgotten he was there. “I’d rather you call me Dale, if that’s okay?”

“Dale, I didn’t mean to pick on you.” Jerry smirked. “Well, I kind of did, but not for no reason, if you see what I mean?”

“Not really,” he said to Jerry. Jenna glared hard at Dale and he realised he didn’t want to get on her bad side. “But I accept your apology.”

Jerry offered his hand and Dale shook it. Jerry reached out his other hand towards him and Miro intercepted it. “I was just going to...”

“You don’t touch him. Ever.” The venom in his words made Dale shudder.

“Oh for goodness sake, down boy,” Dale said, pushing Miro’s hand away.

Jerry chuckled and carried through with his action to sweep Dale’s hair out of his eyes. “You’re kind of okay when you aren’t trying to bite my hand off.”

Dale felt Miro ripple with anger behind him and reached back to make contact, a small comfort and confirmation that he knew how hard it was for Miro, and that he was there for him.

“I’m sorry to you, too,” Jerry said to Miro. “You kept telling me I was being an idiot, and you’re usually right. Forgive me?” Miro nodded once but his mood didn’t lighten even a shade. “I’m actually glad he’s got you,” Jerry said to Dale. “It’s about time he had someone to remind him what his dick is for.”

“I have that covered.” Dale forced a grin to seem friendly and leaned back against Miro, noting the tension still radiating through his body. “I suggest you deal with your new lady friend before she brains you.” *And stop worrying*

yourself about Miro's dick, and what it is or isn't getting up to before I brain you instead, just for thinking about it.

Jerry turned back to Jenna. "I really don't know what to say."

"Well, you can start by taking me for a coffee, and we'll discuss all the things you should be saying and plenty of things you're not. And while we're at it, flirt like that with Dizzy again and I'll rip your hand off."

"I wasn't, I was just trying... okay. You're always right, I'm always wrong, I get it."

"It's the law," Jenna said. She linked his arm and pressed against him, reaching up to kiss his cheek. "I can't believe it took you so long. All you had to do was ask me, instead of fighting with Dizzy all the time."

"You could have asked me," Jerry grumbled. "You didn't have to stand back and let me make such a mess of it."

"Oh, I did."

Dale and Miro watched them walk away and Amy followed them with a shrug. "You're still mad," Dale said, turning in Miro's arms. "What's up?"

"I don't like the way he touched you."

"The way he touched me, or the fact I let him?"

"Both."

"Thought so." Dale grinned. "I should make something very clear to you, just in case I wasn't clear enough the last time." He nestled against Miro's strong chest. "I am not interested in anyone else. Not that I'd be interested in Jerry the Neanderthal anyway. But seriously, I'm all yours, for as long as you're willing to give me a little of your focus." The feel of Miro relaxing into his touch gave Dale a power rush. "What say you to a little private time, so I can prove my point?"

"I'd like that very much. But, Dale, I really won't be able to cope with you letting other men touch you, however innocent, and however loyal and faithful you are to me. I trust you; I know you aren't going to play around. I just..."

"It's okay, I get it. I was interested to see what he was going to do. I didn't mean to upset you." Dale slipped his hand into Miro's. "Come on. Let me show you how sorry I am."

The butterflies in Miro's stomach were running wild. He couldn't get a grip on anything as Dale took his hand and led him into the bedroom. Dale had a plan. Miro could see it on his face. What Dale didn't realise, was that Miro had a plan of his own, and it involved a small prop Dale hadn't seen him salvage from their latest, and hopefully last, Jerry-disaster.

Dale pushed Miro down onto the bed and sat astride him. "I think you ought to let me show you how very sorry I am, and how much I appreciate you," Dale whispered in his ear.

"Dale, I know what you're up to."

"Shhh, it's okay. I'll go slow."

"What if I don't want you to go slow?"

Dale sat back and looked Miro in the eye. "Be very clear with me about what you're saying, Miro. I've said I'm sorry. I thought you were up for this."

Miro smirked and he saw Dale's cool exterior ruffle. "I'm not very good with my words, you know that." He raised a hand to prevent Dale interrupting. "Perhaps," he reached into his pocket, pulled out the dog collar and dangled it next to Dale's face, "perhaps this might help communicate what I mean."

Dale's eyes widened and he swallowed deeply. "You want me to?"

Miro nodded.

"Me or you?"

It was Miro's turn to swallow hard. He hadn't considered putting the collar on Dale, but actually, that would work too. Not this time. But soon. But then, it was Dale's show, he should be the one to choose. "Whatever you want, Dale." He touched his lips gently to Dale's. "I'm yours." He smiled as Dale's breath hitched. "Completely."

Dale's hands shook as he placed the collar around Miro's throat, but it was nothing compared to Miro's insides. "It's not too tight?" Dale asked, running his fingers around the length of it.

"It feels perfect."

Dale pulled on the leash and Miro dipped towards him. "Holy cow, I'm going to come in my pants," Dale spluttered. "You have no idea what this is doing to me."

Miro stroked a firm hand along Dale's erection and smiled. "I think I do, and I can match it." They drank each other in, flushed skin, full lips, breath

coming fast. "What's your plan, Casanova?" Miro smiled. It was interesting to see Dale lost for words.

"I'm going to ravage you."

"Mmm, yes please."

"You're not going to stop me?"

"You're fully in control." Miro wrapped the leash once more around Dale's hand. "This proves it, right here. I know I still have a get out if I need it."

Dale slipped off Miro's lap and onto his knees before him. He reached up and unzipped Miro's jeans, and Miro helped him push them down past his hips until his cock broke for freedom. He looked up and met Miro's gaze. "I'm going to practise my cocksucking skills, and you are just going to sit there and take it."

"Yes, sir."

"If you move, I'll be very cross."

"I'll try very hard not to, but I might move."

Dale pulled firmly on the leash. "You will not move."

Miro's cock was already painfully hard. He wasn't sure how much practise Dale would get. If he didn't start sucking soon it would all be over and the game would be wasted. Miro was just wondering whether he should tell Dale to get a move on when the flat of Dale's tongue swept over Miro's cock to the head and he groaned. Dale's lips slipped over Miro's cock and suckled gently on the head, his hands pressed hard against Miro's thighs. Miro knew he wouldn't last long and yet there wasn't quite enough pressure to push him over. Dale teased and tasted, licked, sucked and nibbled Miro to the edge of distraction and back until he was incoherent with need and still Dale played without really trying to finish him.

"Please," Miro begged. "Dale, please finish it."

Dale put in a concentrated effort, with speed and suction, and Miro shuddered with his release, gripping Dale's shoulder and biting back the cry in his throat. Dale kissed over Miro's stomach and climbed onto the bed. His hand still fisted the leash. "Thank you," he said shyly, and snuggled into Miro's side. "I hope it was okay."

"It was perfect. Just like you." Miro kissed Dale's forehead and sighed contentedly. "Do you want me to finish you?"

“I’ll wait.”

“Is everything okay?” Miro shifted so he could see Dale’s face.

Dale gave a supernova grin. “It’s great. I’m just a little overwhelmed by how good it feels to hold this in my hand and see that collar around your neck.”

“It does feel good.” Miro felt Dale’s energy shift. “Hey, what is it?”

“Do you think Jerry fancies you?”

“What would it matter if he did?”

Dale wriggled around and curled over Miro’s chest. “If he’s going to be dating Jenna, we might see more of him.”

“And?”

“What if you decide you like him more than me?”

Miro chuckled. He sat up, plumped the pillows and leaned against the headboard of the bed. He pulled Dale onto his lap and touched the butterfly clip in his hair, smoothed the bow at his neck, and kissed the tip of his nose. “And do you really think Jerry is my type?”

Dale threw his arms around Miro’s neck. “You don’t mind that I’m... quirky?”

“I love that you’re you, and everything that is you. Remember, you’re the only one who broke through my focus.”

Dale grinned. “And you’re the only one who broke through my inner queen.”

“Well, don’t let her float too far away; I’ll be needing her later.”

“Yeah?”

“When it’s your turn to wear the collar.”

Dale tugged on the leash until their lips met and Miro relaxed into the kiss knowing everything was going to be okay.

The End

Author Bio

Casey K. Cox hails from the West of England and dabbled in several genres before settling into m/m romance and erotica. Casey sees fiction as an adventure and a form of escape and has a wish to bring a touch of fantasy and a taste of the forbidden from the depths of the mind onto the page through the written word. You can contact Casey via email.

Other titles by Casey are available from Amazon and a selection of Free Reads can be downloaded from Goodreads. You can follow Casey's work at Casey's blog.

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HALF PAST FOREVER

By A. Morell

Photo Description

Two men huddle naked in shadows, one perched on the edge of a seat and the other kneeling between his spread knees. The seated man is faceless in the dark, but his hands lie tenderly on the back of the kneeling man's neck and shoulder.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This man I'm kneeling before isn't someone I know well, matter of a fact we only met three days ago. Yet he tells me something that's hard for me to believe, he tells me he is immortal. That's not all though he seems to believe I'm the man he has dreamed about for thousands of years, that I'm his mate. The more I think about it the more I believe, well I believe that he isn't exactly human I'm not so sure about the mate part. Still I can't imagine what's supposed to happen now.

Requests: please; have story taken place in current time period 2014, Tell how they met, characters in late twenties early thirties, No instant love but should be a happy ever after.

Sincerely,

Shepley

Story Info

Genre: contemporary supernatural

Tags: immortal, folklore, stripper, soulmates/bonded

Word Count: 14,695

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HALF PAST FOREVER

By A. Morell

Prologue

Passing Into Legend

In the time of fallen empires and embattled kings, a son was born of a demon and a mortal woman. Though she loved her beautiful and unholy child, she could not hide the stain of sorcery that had brought him into this world. Cast out by all who laid their eyes upon them, she met her end while he was still a boy.

Alone, discovered and taken by traders, the boy soon revealed that he possessed unnatural strength and was insusceptible to harm. His training as an invincible warrior began, and soon the boy became a man who bathed in blood.

The wars raged on across the known world for generations, each with its own tales of one great and terrible soldier who could fell entire legions and walk away unscathed like an unstoppable human plague. He held no loyalty, for all men were of no consequence to he who had been made so by their own hands. With nothing of his own left to fight for, he turned his back on mankind and retreated to the great forests of his homeland, and all who dared pass through emerged with nightmares and warnings of the Madman of the Wood.

He knew no longer the measure of days, nor years. Time passed, until one moonless night another of his kind entered the woods, one who would see himself woven into the myths and legends of man. The all-powerful seer and sage, the keeper of knowledge and secrets of the arcane, the son of a devil and a servant of God.

"I have seen your plight, my brother," he said. "I come to end your madness."

The half-man half-demon saw the stranger was one of his own. Touched by the last Druid, he learned the truth of his birth and was foretold of a life of solitude and observance until he found that which he sought above all else. But, he was warned, in finding it he would also bring about his own doom.

That night in his dreams he beheld a vision, a man almost bare and bathed in blue light. Every night the silent man came to him, always in the same light and always with the same eyes piercing into him, never reaching for him and never allowing him close, until at last the moon waned and vanished once more.

Every new moon it came—the vision of his destined mate. Through centuries and dynasties and darkness and rebirth it came, as steady as the rise of the sun. A thousand years passed, and the world began to expand. Still he endured, and still he waited for the one that would seek to claim his heart and destroy him.

It's not an impulse that pulls him inside. Still he thinks nothing of it—why should he, when he comes to these kinds of places on his own so often? Man, woman, or more, he takes wherever he knows he can.

But the instant he's through the door he feels it. It's the pulse of the universe aligning every star just so to center around this one moment, around him. It's all, everything he's seen and heard and smelled and tasted before, but never felt.

He feels it now.

The floor circles and sprawls around him, wide and deep and drenched in the blue that haunts his dreams. He understands now what it was, what it's been all this time. A stage rises in front of him. He feels the music beating in his bones and rooting his feet to the ground.

He's lived forever, and only now does he feel the clock begin to tick.

Chapter 1

First Sight

The paltry smattering of people gathered at the tables in front of the stage was just as small as Callum had feared. Just another hazard of working in one of the older clubs on the last edge of Soho. He sighed.

“Let’s go, Diego, you’re on in two.”

His eyes rolled heavenward. He hated his stage name. The closest he came to Spain was having a grandmother born in Catalonia and raised in Ireland, whom he hadn’t spoken to in over a decade. Aside from that there was nothing Spanish about him, and yet the man in charge seemed to think dark hair and darker eyeliner was enough to pass him off into his loathsome stereotype.

He came away from the curtain and started after the stage manager. “Malcolm, I’ve been doing these pissant weeknight shifts for a month now, when will you put me on Saturdays?”

The wiry ginger guffawed and shook his head in disbelief, adjusting his glasses. “When you have a chance of pulling in as much as Hawk or Christian. You might want to settle in, love. Face it—you’re past your prime.”

Callum seethed but didn’t have time to get into it with his boss now, only just managing to hold back the string of invectives he wanted to hurl after Malcolm. Right now he had to make do with what he had, and looking enraged onstage never helped anyone get better tips.

“Fucking twenty-nine is not past my prime,” he muttered. He huffed and quietly asked the universe for patience as the maracas at the start of his cue music sounded, and he did his best to tune out his ridiculous introduction.

“...so get your maracas rocking for our own local Latin loverboy, Diego!”

The curtain flew back to the rowdy catcalls of the daytime drinkers who had time to waste away weeknights in strip clubs, and for those three and a half heart pumping minutes Callum was gone.

Blue eyes lined in black pierced through the stage lights to gauge the slow-growing crowd, searching for those who might shell out for a private dance once he got down to the floor. Most were balancing bills and beers in their hands, some more precariously than others as they followed his gyrating and

flexing as the light played along the sheen of oil on his muscles. Honestly they all looked the same to him at this point. It was the size of the note he was concerned about.

Every motion of his routine was just muscle memory by now, and as it neared the end he caught sight of a dark figure at the back of the room and right in the middle of the floor. Callum couldn't make out his features from here but he could tell he was staring, and he thought it odd the way he didn't move at all.

It wouldn't be Monday without a creep hanging around, he supposed, and he finished his dance by tossing his tearaway shorts into the crowd. God, those things were awful. He had never expected to be back in them four nights a week, but then he'd never expected that the budget crisis for social workers would result in him losing his job, either. Life was just full of surprises.

A few more groups of people had wandered inside by the time Callum made it down to the floor and his mood improved marginally. Pasting on a flirtatious smile, he headed for the tables to go make some new friends, scouting for the bigger spenders—and then stopped short.

The man doing his best statue impression was right in front of him. He was tall, with light eyes and fair hair that glowed in the blue phosphorescence of the club lights, and a dark coat that hung at a perfectly tailored endpoint at the thigh. He was still here, still staring, still as a ghost. Callum half expected him to disappear if he blinked—he almost wished he would, then maybe those eyes wouldn't be lancing right through him.

He couldn't tell if it was a small eternity or the skip of a heartbeat before the silent man turned on his heel and walked away, vanishing through the doors as another small crowd of people came in.

"Creepy," a voice said in Callum's ear, making him jolt. It was Jordan, one of the drink servers, a waifish man who looked bored even when he was happy.

"Don't do that," Callum said, grabbing a drink from Jordan's tray.

"You'll owe me for that one," Jordan drawled, but he was looking at the doors the strange man had disappeared through. "You know him?"

"No." Callum paused with the drink at his lips. Did he know him from somewhere? The man hadn't looked familiar, but he had almost looked upset. Callum hoped to God he wasn't some old teacher of his—or worse, someone he'd met in the field.

He drained the glass in one go, setting down the empty and taking up a fresh one. "Put it on my tab," he said before Jordan could complain, leaving him to pout and get back to work.

Aside from one patron getting too handsy and being tossed out by security, the rest of the night passed uneventfully. The cash wasn't bad for a Monday. A few more nights like this and he might be able to wrangle that Saturday shift after all.

He bid his coworkers goodnight and let one of the bouncers walk him to his car, sending him off with a pat on the shoulder. It was a nice touch and quite the upgrade compared to how it had been when he had been stripping his way through school, and that was less than ten years ago.

Callum paused, lips pressed thin as he had to shove Malcolm's earlier words back out of his brain. He was not *old*. He bet half those younger gits Malcolm favoured would kill to have his core strength and flexibility. Little brats.

"Do you make it a habit to hang around dimly lit parking lots by yourself at one in the morning?"

Callum whirled around and felt his heart stop, his hand flying to the can of pepper spray attached to his key ring when he froze. It was him.

"You're the only one who's lain in wait for me so far," he said after forcing his heart back down his throat and yanking his guard back up. He pulled out his phone, ready to dial inside the club for Big Mike.

"You don't need to call your friend back," the man said, drawing Callum's accusatory gaze back up.

"I'll do worse than that if you don't get going." His hand tightened on the pepper spray.

The man's eyes gleamed oddly in the sharp light from the neon signs. "I am going. You ought to do the same."

Callum stared right back, determined not to be taken lightly. The stalemate seemed likely to last forever when the man shifted and turned abruptly, just as he had in the club.

"You have no idea how long I've lain in wait for you," the stranger spoke to the darkness, letting the words carry behind him. Callum felt them trickle down his spine, but the man never turned back and soon disappeared into the shadows. Callum couldn't get into the car fast enough.

Chapter 2

Challenge

Callum stared into his cereal and wondered why he felt vaguely hungover. Two drinks over the span of one night was hardly enough to do him in, but he had spent most of the night struggling to stay asleep and not think of the strange man's parting words to him.

He looked at the clock. He had errands to run before heading out for work—or he could go back to bed.

Bed, he decided without even finishing the question. He dumped the last of his soggy breakfast and went to fall joyously back between the sheets.

He felt better when he awoke and decided to keep this luxurious feeling going with a long hot shower and eggs with toast, and by treating himself to a coffee from the bean house down the street from the club.

"What're you so happy about?" Jordan said when he walked in.

Callum gave him an odd look. "Who says I'm happy?"

"The first time you walk in here with a smile on your face I'm gonna notice," Jordan said, giving Callum a once-over and a knowing smile. "You finally get laid?"

Callum scowled. "Like I'd tell you if I did. And what d'you mean, 'finally'?"

"Darling, we all know those pastures have seen greener days. We're all pulling for you."

"Go pull yourself, you wanker." Callum gave him the two-fingered salute and hurried to the dressing area backstage, brow still furrowed. So much for his good mood. And of course Jordan just had to bring that up.

He set his coffee and bag down in front of the long mirrored counter with a sigh. It wasn't Jordan's fault that he didn't know it was a sore subject with him—well, he probably knew that now. But he definitely didn't need to know it wasn't the sex Callum was missing so much as the roof over his head when his supposed-boyfriend but really roommate-with-benefits had kicked him out, probably for one of those "greener pastures." Social work was barely enough to

cover the rent on a place of his own in this part of London, and then that had been taken away from him too.

Callum caught his reflection in the mirror, back to his now typical surly self. Coming back to dancing had enabled him to get his own small space in nearby Battersea, but this was all getting very old, very fast. Was there even a point anymore when he was supposed to be working to help other people, not just to survive?

Disgusted at where his thoughts were heading, he grabbed his coffee and downed nearly all of it before tossing it into the rubbish bin. One day he might stop fighting, give up clawing his way through life. But not today. Maybe things were shit right now, but they had been shittier, too.

Resolved not to give in to self-pity, he threw himself into work and hit his stride right around midnight, after his second performance of the evening. The crowd seemed more eager than usual, and he took that energy and made it his own.

It was then, as he sauntered around the floor looking for his next special patron, that he spotted the familiar figure in black by the bar, drink in hand and close enough for Callum to see his gaze locked on his every move.

Callum narrowed his eyes. Perhaps it was the electric vibe in the air or his determination not to be conquered tonight, but rather than fear or anger, he felt rebellion burning brightly in his chest as he stared back.

If the stranger was someone he couldn't remember from his past, he would rub the man's face in the truth. And if he was just some creepy stalker, Callum would show him exactly what it was he wouldn't be having.

He followed the fistful of twenty-pound notes waving him over, sending a look of challenge to the man by the bar as he slid amiably into the patron's lap. He didn't like getting too touchy with any customer, but he had a point to make and felt a bit drunk from the heady power he knew he could hold over these people. He was grinding into the man's lap while his group of whooping friends egged him on, smirking when he felt the telltale hardness beneath his ass and turning to look back over at the bar.

The man's eyes blazed with heat so intense Callum felt himself flushing, and for that brief second he couldn't look away, thrown by the pure passion and lust burning there. It wasn't the grotesque lechery or disgust he was expecting, and it made him feel as though he was the only other person in the room.

His customer's hands quickly brought him crashing to reality, and he gave him a coy look as he brushed sweaty palms from his hips.

"Don't be a naughty boy, or you won't get to see me anymore," he admonished, affecting a throaty tone that he despised but that worked on everyone.

"Sorry," the man said with a grin, resting his hands on his thighs to frame the obvious bulge in his pants. "I'll give you double if you help me with this though."

"Sorry, love." Callum offered no excuses as he pulled away, smiling as he wrapped his fingers around the last bill in the man's hands. "But come see me again soon."

He walked away to the sounds of groans and protests and fought the urge to roll his eyes. He looked back at the bar—the man was gone, as was the high he'd been riding all night.

He couldn't explain it, not even to himself. He had no reason to feel annoyed, or like the customer he had consciously decided to work into a frenzy had taken something away from him. But why the hell did that freak keep vanishing like that? And why couldn't he get those eyes out of his head?

The end of the night took an eternity to come. He had made a lot of good money, so much that on his way out Malcolm stopped him to tell him to take Thursday off so he could work his first Friday night. It was all good news, but all Callum could think of was what might be waiting for him out in the parking lot.

He had Big Mike walk him out uneventfully and sent him on his way as he had the previous night, lingering outside his car and wondering what the hell was wrong with him. He couldn't seem to help waiting, even turning subtly to peer into the darkness for signs of movement. But he was alone.

Eventually he saw Big Mike heading back out with another dancer, and he huffed as he got into the car. Was it a death wish, or was he just stupid?

Neither, he decided, starting the engine and gripping the wheel. He had questions, dammit, and he had every right to the answers.

Chapter 3

Brush With Fate

The obnoxious buzzing of his alarm dragged Callum rudely from a heavy and exhausted slumber. He gave the clock a slap to shut it up and glared at the red analog digits. No skipping out on errands today.

Spurred on by the thought of what would be his sixth egg-and-toast meal in a row, he sat up with a groan and tossed the warm covers away before they could trap him for another hour like they had yesterday. Maybe he'd go out for breakfast.

A quick shower and twenty minutes later he was out the door.

The fresh sun of mid-spring had deigned to make an appearance today, and Callum felt himself enjoying it through his sunglasses. He took a coffee and a bacon sandwich to go, indulging as he opted for a walk to the grocery store. Even his cynical heart could be warmed by the sight of a blue sky and window boxes full of tiny flowers that stretched open for the light.

He grabbed a small trolley when he got to the store, hooking his sunglasses into the front of his shirt as he blinked quickly to adjust to the change of light. Not the type to concern himself with shopping lists, he headed down to one end of the store to start making his way up and down every aisle. Produce seemed as good a place as any to begin.

He rounded the corner and stood to one side to take in his options. Bananas were on sale, as always, but he was sick of bananas. Maybe he ought to have gone to the back end of this aisle first, with all the lettuces...

He blinked. What had he just seen over there, heading for the breads? He had to start going to bed earlier, because he was clearly imagining things—

No, no. He wasn't imagining that. It was definitely *him*.

Questions raged in his mind, but he hurried to push his trolley behind the tall display of bananas and peered out from behind it. What the hell was Mr. Tall, Fair and Creepy doing here? Though he supposed it was a good sign that he could appear out in daylight without turning to ashes.

He waited until the familiar form in the black jacket—did he own only one?—vanished round the bread display and into the next aisle before he slowly

emerged from his hiding spot. Did the man actually know he was here, or was this just an insane coincidence? He did live less than four miles from work, so it wasn't entirely impossible for the man to be shopping like a normal person might if he happened to live nearby.

A shudder went up Callum's spine. He didn't want to think about how close the man might live to him, unknowingly or otherwise.

But he felt a small spike of panic now that he couldn't see the man at all. It was like knowing there was a giant wasp in the room but not being able to see where it had gone. Without a second thought he was powering through the produce, tossing a few things into his trolley as he passed to avoid rousing suspicion as he followed after the mystery man.

He stopped short in the next aisle, already spotting him. He fumbled for his sunglasses, grateful for their wide frames that might hopefully work to help conceal his face. Taking a breath to calm his pounding heart, he kept his distance and watched.

The man was browsing jams and jellies. Callum couldn't say he saw a sinister affectation to his movements, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. He watched through narrowed eyes as the man picked out a jam and added it to his basket, and followed him around the next bend.

Three more aisles and several hasty additions to his trolley basket later, Callum was forced to admit to himself that the man was doing nothing except apparently restocking his kitchen like everyone else. He didn't even seem aware Callum was there. It should have been a relief—it was, really—but it still bothered him seeing the man here, so close to home. He wondered what might happen if he took his turn to confront the man with the piercing eyes. He could still see them even now...

By the time he shook himself out of his thoughts, the man was gone again. Just as well, Callum supposed. Out of sight, out of mind. And he really needed him out of his mind.

"Pardon me," someone said beside him, and he realized he was blocking the toilet paper.

"Sorry," he said, turning quickly to get out of the way and freezing when he saw who it was. And yet it was hard to feel entirely surprised.

"Quite all right." The man half-smiled at him in a way that set him to frowning. No more skulking and skirting, Callum decided. He took off his sunglasses.

“You and I need to talk.”

The man didn't seem moved by the reveal. He looked evenly at Callum. Green, he noted. His eyes were green.

“Do we?”

“Yes,” Callum said, feeling his ire flare back up. “You've been following me.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “That's interesting. I could've sworn you were the one following me around here.”

Callum glowered to hide his embarrassment. “So you did know I was here.”

“Not especially,” the man said with a shrug. “I just saw you looking surly over here. Can I get at the toilet paper, please?”

Callum huffed but stepped very slightly aside to let the man at his paper products. “You can stop playing innocent. You've been hanging around the club the last two nights, you expect me to believe this is just a happy coincidence?”

The man set his toilet paper neatly in his basket. “No.” He smiled wryly. “Maybe fate?”

“Don't make me vomit.” Callum wondered if this man was for real, or if maybe this was all part of one of those hidden camera shows. He prayed for the latter. “Why do you keep showing up wherever I am? Do I even know you?”

The man looked at him, and it was there again—that distant, penetrating, unfathomable expression that seemed to see past everything. Every shield, every pretence, every outward display was shaken before those eyes.

“Do you feel like you should?” the man said.

For a split second, Callum felt the truth ready to fall from his lips, and he barely caught it in time. He was not spilling one word about the way this man gripped his psyche even when he was gone, not when that was probably just what he wanted to hear.

“Do you need some help?”

The man gestured to Callum's near empty trolley. The abrupt change of subject threw him, and he had the distinct impression that the man had gotten the answer he'd wanted anyway. It pissed him off.

“All I need is for you to stop following me around,” Callum snapped, bumping his trolley against the man’s leg. It would be the only warning he’d get.

The man’s free hand rested gently on the front of the trolley. Suddenly it wouldn’t move.

“I can’t do that,” he said softly.

Callum tried not to focus on the stuttering of his heartbeat as he fought back panic. How strong was this guy? “It’s easy,” he said, pushing past the tremor in his voice. “If you see me, just turn around and go the other way.”

The man’s gaze never wavered. It was disarming from this close up. “I’ve been doing that.”

Callum refused to admit the man had a point. “Stop coming round the club.”

Something in the man’s eyes changed then, like he was battling something within himself. Callum wasn’t sure he wanted to know what that was. “I will,” the man said, his voice still gentle. “If that’s truly what you wish.”

It is. The words lodged in Callum’s throat and refused to emerge. He tried to force them out, but remained steadfastly silent even as anger made him run hot.

He wanted to know who this man was. No, he needed to know. He was already losing sleep over this; if he went the rest of his life not knowing he might truly go mad. More worrying, though, was the fact that despite his brain doing all it could to warn him away, despite the very real sense of danger clinging to the man and even despite his own fears, Callum’s fight or flight instinct was utterly shut down around him. Was it a mental block? Some kind of trick? Brazen stupidity?

The man’s hand slipped away from the trolley. There wasn’t triumph in his eyes as Callum expected, only something like understanding.

“I’m glad,” he said, taking a step backward. “It’s taken me a long time to find you.”

The kindness left Callum rubbing at the goosebumps on his arms. “I wasn’t lost,” he said tersely.

“To me you were.” The man’s gaze was soft and lonely for a moment and he made to leave.

“Wait,” Callum heard himself saying. He cursed mentally when the man stopped and half turned to look at him. “What’s your name?” Why was it such an embarrassing question?

The corner of the man’s lips curved upwards. “Levin,” he said, and he turned to go on his way.

“Hey!” Callum hurried indignantly after the man—Levin. “Don’t you want to know my name?”

Levin had his hand in his pocket and an amused smile on his face. “I already do. Diego, right?”

Callum felt what was becoming his customary angry flush around this man return. “Of course that’s not my name,” he said through gritted teeth. “Who would perform with their real name? And do you think a real Diego could bring himself to dress up like that?”

Levin shrugged, seeming awfully comfortable to be walking with Callum already. “People do all sorts of things.”

“Well I don’t do that,” Callum said. “And my name’s Callum. Don’t bloody call me Diego, my idiot of a stage manager came up with that.”

“Callum,” Levin repeated. He paused and glanced into Callum’s trolley. “Well, Callum, are you actually going to do any shopping while you’re here?”

With a start Callum realized he’d lost track of how long he had spent tailing the other man, but a quick check for the time had him breathing a sigh of relief.

“Yeah,” he said, aiming himself back toward the produce section and latching onto Levin’s hand basket. “And if you’re going to be a stalker, you might as well be a useful one. Come reach things for me.”

It was disturbingly easy to drag the taller man around as he sped through the aisles again, and Levin was bizarrely complacent in allowing it. Callum wondered if this was what it felt like to keep a beast on a leash.

As he was comparing costs between two brands of biscuits, he suddenly became aware of a lot of eyes aimed his way. He raised his gaze cautiously and found a good half dozen people staring—not at him, but at the man behind him. He looked up at Levin, who didn’t look any different than he had before, and unconsciously sidled a bit closer.

“Why is everyone gawping at you?” he whispered, a bit freaked out.

Levin rolled his shoulders a bit and cleared his throat, seeming to shake something off. "Are they?"

Callum frowned up at the other man, but when he looked again only two of the shoppers still had their gazes trained his way. He definitely hadn't imagined that. "Do you just bring weirdness and oddity wherever you go?"

Levin smiled. "I like to think I attract it. You're still here, after all."

Unamused, Callum tossed the winning biscuits in amongst his other groceries. "I think you're done helping now."

"If you insist." Levin's smile widened just enough to irritate Callum, and he bowed his head faintly and headed for the registers.

No promises or other words of parting were made, but Callum knew they were unnecessary. He would be seeing Levin again.

He grabbed some gum as he checked out and realized only after swiping his card that he still had to walk back home. With a jug of milk, a dozen containers of cheap yogurt, and about ten pounds of fresh meat and produce among everything else.

"Fuck," he said under his breath when he reached the halfway point, wincing at the bite of the shopping bags in his palms. Maybe he should have made Levin stick around a bit longer after all.

Chapter 4

Circumventing

He had to give himself a quick rinse at the kitchen sink after putting the groceries away, but still managed to toss in two loads of laundry and have a quick bite to eat before heading back out for work.

He got to the club early, unable to ease the subtle urgency that kept him wound up just below the surface. None of the other dancers were around yet. He stared at himself in the mirror and pulled out his makeup and tools.

If he was extra meticulous with the lines and shadows around his eyes, he didn't question it. Nor did he question his sudden compulsion to fuss over the pattern of his five o'clock shadow, to dab on just a touch of his favourite scent, or to make sure his lips were softened to irresistible perfection. But as he slipped into his best fitting cobalt blue briefs, even he didn't believe it was just to encourage extra tips.

The urgency mellowed to a low burn of anticipation, as night fell and ushered in those eager to take whatever it would offer. He didn't think of Levin, only saw him in his mind. The music started. Callum couldn't decide if it had come too soon or too late.

He stepped out onto the stage, one of three dancers for the opening performance. He could imagine Levin's eyes on him—could practically feel them—but refused to look for him. All the same, the other people in the room became an afterthought, and he danced knowing Levin was watching.

As soon as he was on the floor, the familiar dark figure emerged from a shadowy corner of the club. Callum lifted his chin defiantly.

"You're going to have to pay for my time here," he said. He watched as Levin slipped his hand out of his pocket and offered up a hundred-pound note between two fingers.

"What'll this get me?" Levin said smoothly.

"The same as everyone else," Callum said, snatching the note before the other man could take it back. "A private dance."

Levin didn't seem perturbed. "How private?" He was grinning again.

Callum's brow furrowed but he was determined to get the better of the other man this time. He gestured to one of the open tables arcing around the stage. "Take your pick."

If Levin had a comeback, he kept it to himself as he led the way to a free table near the back, away from the rowdier guests. All of a sudden, Callum's stomach clenched into knots. He had the freedom to deny any customer he wanted; why had he just agreed to this, exactly?

Levin sat down and smiled softly up at him. The knowing look in his eyes should have bothered Callum, but the hints of desire behind it gave him power and settled his nerves. This was why, he remembered.

Slowly, he let the beat of the music drive his body into motion, sliding sensuously closer to the other man. His hands slid over his own bare skin to tease himself and to guide Levin's gaze, showing him everything he had to admire.

Levin seemed willing to follow his lead, and Callum grew bolder. Leaning in too close, he rested his hands on Levin's thighs for balance. They were strong and warm to the touch, and it was all too easy to roll his body forward to straddle them.

A few inches of body heat were all that separated them. Callum could see fire in Levin's eyes and he felt the faint kiss of the other man's breath on his face. He had to go that one step too far. He made sure Levin was looking at him as he gave another roll of his hips and pressed their groins together.

The soft exhale of shock was enough to know that Levin was the one at his mercy now. The hardness growing against Callum was just icing on the cake. A reckless notion crossed his mind then, that he wouldn't mind if it stayed this way. Rationality returned quickly to chase the fleeting thought away, and he let his fingertips brush Levin's rough stubbly cheek as he slid off his lap.

Victory was his—then Levin broke the rules, his strong fingers catching hold of Callum's hand before it was out of reach. Callum could only think of the way those very fingers had so effortlessly drawn him to a halt in the store earlier today, though Levin's grip was gentle. He turned to admonish the man, but the need to ask the question that had been burning in his mind all day finally overtook him.

"What are you?" he murmured.

If anything in the world could shake Levin, this apparently wasn't it. On the contrary, he looked to have been expecting it. "You really want to know?"

Callum nodded.

Levin dug into his pocket and slipped another hundred into Callum's captive hand. "Just come sit with me then."

Callum hesitated, but knew he was willing to listen even without the money. Taking it just meant he wouldn't get in trouble with the boss. He joined Levin at the table and sat quietly while the man ordered himself a drink.

Once the server was gone, Levin leaned in slightly to keep his voice for Callum's ears only. "Are you familiar with the stories of people—husbands, housewives, the occasional priest—who, rather than take responsibility for their infidelities, opt to blame a supernatural force they claim led them astray?"

Callum blinked hard. This didn't bode well. "You mean like... 'the devil made me do it' kind of people? Or witches?"

"Kind of," Levin said. "You're on the right track. 'Demon' might be a better word, specifically the kind dealing in carnal desires and temptation."

Callum couldn't help the way his gaze flicked up to Levin's forehead at the mention of demons. Of course there were no horns that he could see, and he frowned as he processed Levin's words. "What, like a succubus? And why has this suddenly turned into twenty questions?"

A faint smile curved Levin's lips. "Those are the females."

Callum stared hard at the man beside him, trying to gauge how likely it was he was pulling his leg. "You're an incubus."

"Half, actually."

"Right. Half sex demon." It was official. This guy was definitely insane.

Levin's smile never faltered. "You don't believe me?"

"Oh, I believe you're something all right." Nothing good for him, that was for sure. Maybe Levin was just a really strong madman—one who happened to like following him around. Great.

"I can offer you proof if you'd like," Levin said.

"What are you going to do, have sex in front of me? I hate to tell you this, but we, er, *humans* do that plenty."

"Indeed you do," Levin said with that flicker of amusement and heat in his eyes. "I've always enjoyed that aspect of humanity. But I did have something else in mind."

“Like?”

At that moment Jordan came over with a tray full of drinks. He winked at Callum and then sidled up to Levin. “Hey there, gorgeous, I’ve got a whisky on the rocks with your name all over it.”

“Watch,” Levin whispered. He didn’t move as Jordan leaned over to set down his drink. In fact nothing changed at all about him, but all of a sudden Jordan turned to look at Levin with wide eyes and parted lips. Everything about his body language screamed instantaneous interest in Levin, which was all wrong. Callum knew Jordan was happily devoted to the man he’d been with for seven years and never let his flirting at work go too far. As Jordan’s tray of drinks began to slip from his hand and he looked about to climb into Levin’s lap, Levin reached out to keep it balanced before it could fall.

“I think that table behind you is waiting for you,” he said kindly.

Jordan’s eyes were still wide, but whatever spell he’d been under was clearly broken and he fumbled a bit as he straightened and took several steps backward. “Er, yes... just—just flag me down if you need anything else.” He sent Callum one last look of discomfort and hurried off. Callum whirled on Levin.

“What the hell was that? Did you make him do that? You bastard, he’s got a bloody boyfriend—”

“You believe me now then?”

Callum’s protests died on his lips. It was absurd, but what choice did he have but to believe at least some of what Levin had told him? If it had been anyone but Jordan he could have maintained his doubts, but Jordan was the most monogamous serial flirter he’d ever met.

“You still didn’t have to do that to him,” he seethed.

“I’m sorry if he’s your friend,” Levin said. “But I did stop him before he did anything.”

“What was it, then? You just look at people and they want to jump on your dick?”

“It’s seduction,” Levin said as though he were commenting on the weather. “There are a few things dear old dad passed down to me, and that would be one of them. I can’t participate in sex dreams the way he could, but I can give them to people if I want.” He smiled again, and maybe it was because of what Callum had just seen him do, but it was more disarming than usual.

It was hard to process. He barely understood what an incubus was, let alone how one could be half. Mostly though Callum was stuck trying to imagine what had made Levin, whatever he was, come from out of nowhere and threaten to turn his world upside down. “Why are you here?” he said after a lengthy pause.

“Is this really the place to start getting existential?”

Callum tried for a scowl but was still too shaken. “What do you want with me? Why are you suddenly here all the time—why are you everywhere I go?”

For the first time Callum actually saw what looked like a flash of uncertainty on Levin’s face as he turned away. He was almost afraid of what the other man might have to say, and it took some time in coming.

“...If you saw the same man in your dreams every new moon for the past thirteen-some-odd centuries, and then finally saw him in the flesh, wouldn’t you chase after him just a little bit?” Levin still wasn’t looking at him. He knocked back his drink and let out a quiet breath, contemplating his empty glass. “Wouldn’t you want to find out anything you could about the one you were supposedly fated to be with?”

There was a sudden ringing in Callum’s ears, but he had no chance to even begin trying to comprehend Levin’s words, as the DJ’s voice boomed through the club and announced him as the next dancer. He had two minutes to get back into his costume and stage ready.

Levin looked at him again, nodding faintly for him to go. Callum wanted and intended to, but remained frozen because he could at last read that unfathomable depth in Levin’s eyes. It wasn’t danger or mystery or even lust—it was an endless and unimaginable desolation.

Callum had no choice but to go, and by the time he made it onstage Levin was gone, his table taken over by a group of unruly college boys.

He passed the rest of the night in a quiet daze, and despite doing rather well in his takings, his mind was consumed by Levin. He didn’t know what to feel about the things he had seen and heard tonight. They were obviously crazy—*he* was obviously crazy to even consider believing them, but there were some things he just couldn’t deny. Now it became a question of which was crazier, believing a fantastical truth or ignoring its undeniable proof?

It was impossible to avoid catching his own gaze in the mirror as he slowly took off his makeup, and the distress on his face gave him pause. It wasn’t a

new sensation where Levin was concerned, but what disturbed him this time was that it wasn't worry for himself he felt but rather a sort of grief for the other man.

He couldn't let himself believe that Levin had really been alive for more than a thousand years. It was just incomprehensible. And yet the mere glimpse of the isolation and sorrow in Levin's eyes was enough for a hundred lifetimes, and Callum couldn't get the image out of his head. What had they seen to reflect such anguish?

He was usually the first one out at the end of a shift, but tonight he was so distracted one of the doormen actually had to come tell him to get a move on. He hurried to finish getting dressed and dumped everything back into his bag before trotting to the entrance, waving off the offers to see him to his car this time.

He watched as the club doors were locked and the last of his coworkers scattered, and he waited even after they were gone. Five minutes passed, then ten, and he finally leaned back against the wall.

"Are you waiting to get robbed?" The clipped question came from the dark.

"Depends," Callum said, trying to spot him. "Are you planning on robbing me?"

Levin emerged from the recessed entryway of the dry cleaners next to the club, his arms folded across his chest. "Why do you insist on tempting fate?"

"It's not my fault this is the only way I can actually reach you." Levin's casual mention of fate had Callum's stomach clenching, but he ignored it valiantly. "You could carry a phone like a normal person."

"I do," Levin said, pulling one out of his pocket.

"Well obviously I don't have your number," Callum said shortly. "I just learned your name today."

"Does that mean you want to talk?"

Callum faltered. It was hard letting his guard down enough to be so honest, but at the same time he couldn't just brush Levin off as he had before. His instincts had tried to warn him away from his last lover and he hadn't listened. He wanted to trust them again, even if what they were telling him to do right now was stupid.

"Yeah," he said at last, "but not here. Take me to your place."

It was Levin's turn to be taken aback, one heavy eyebrow arching slowly. "Self-preservation really isn't your strong suit."

"You've had plenty of opportunity to kill me or worse and you haven't yet," Callum said, only grasping the truth of this fact as he spoke. It did make him feel more confident in his decision though. "Do you want to get to know me better or not?"

Levin seemed at a loss for words, grasping until he managed to settle on one. "Yes."

"Then let's get going, it's late and I'm hungry. How close are you to here?"

"I... not too far," Levin said, still looking a bit dumbstruck. "I usually walk though."

"I'll drive then," Callum said. "Come on."

Without looking back or waiting to see if Levin would follow, Callum pushed away from the wall and began striding to his car. A few seconds later he heard the other set of footsteps behind him and felt pleasantly vindicated.

Chapter 5

Unbound

Callum was no stranger to awkward car rides. Even so, he thought he would have taken the one post-coming-out to his very Catholic parents again over this one right now. At least he had been able to run away from the former.

The man beside him was quiet aside from giving him directions, and it was barely ten minutes in when Levin told him to pull up. They were in the heart of Kensington, and Levin's building took up half a block on its own. Callum only realized he was staring when he felt Levin touch his arm.

"Come on, it's cold and we've got to go up to the top."

Of course he had the penthouse. "You've been walking all this way from the club each night?"

"It's not that far."

Callum certainly wouldn't go traipsing around at two in the morning for three and a half miles each night, but he said nothing more to argue as they entered the quiet building.

The lobby's inoffensive shades of cream and grey were bathed in criminally tasteful lighting provided by seamless wall sconces, and even the silent stature of the bamboo plants in their nondescript corners were in perfect symmetry. Callum was glad to escape into the elevator, which was just as modern but so much less oppressive for its size. Sterile places like this made him itchy.

They reached the top level in silence, Callum too preoccupied with clearing his mind of such cultivated perfection to bother talking. He couldn't imagine what to expect when Levin opened the door to his penthouse for him, and he couldn't stop his eyes from widening as he stepped numbly inside.

He had seen luxury before—in magazines and movies. As someone constantly scraping and clawing to keep his head above water, he refused to be impressed by money. And if Levin's penthouse had looked like it had sprung right from the pages of a real estate listing, that would have been easy. But while the interior was spacious and had all the trappings of modernity, it was filled with the opulence of plush furniture, fine rugs, and rich woods. The television wasn't even bigger than what anyone else might have at home if they

invested a few hundred pounds. It felt real, lived in, and strangely inviting. At that point Callum became aware that he had been moving along on his own to take in more, and he was already at the sparkling Parisian-styled kitchen.

“Want something to drink?” Levin offered, moving past Callum and pulling open the fridge. There were bar stools along one side of the marble-topped island and Callum slid onto one, unable to keep his head from swivelling and craning. It seemed like the more he looked the more there was to see, from the proudly displayed and obviously well-used copper-bottomed pots hanging on the wall, to the recessed shelves showcasing what looked like treasures from around the world.

He heard Levin clear his throat softly and returned his unblinking gaze to the other man. He had quite forgotten the question in the wake of his own. “What on earth do you do for a living?”

Levin stared at him and then snorted, cracking open a sparkling water and pouring himself a glass. “Technically, I’m an investment manager. Does that mean you’re not thirsty?”

Callum waved a hand at the bottle in Levin’s hand. “That stuff’s fine. What’s technical about it? ‘Technically’ incubuses don’t really have jobs?”

Levin poured some of the fizzy water into a second glass and slid it over to Callum. “Technically, I just manage my own investments. I can’t speak for them all, but we half-incubuses still need to put food on the table.”

“You’ve a lot more than just food on this table,” Callum muttered into his glass before taking a sip.

“I’ve got more rainy days to save up for than most.”

It was a fair point and Callum had no retort, so he continued to sip his water as he eyed Levin over the rim of his glass. There was that thousand-or-more-years-old thing again. The longer he stared at Levin, the more questions came rushing into his mind.

“Levin—is that your real name?”

Levin blinked. “As far as I know, though the spelling’s changed a bit. Keeping with the times and all.”

That was something, at least. Callum straightened on his stool. “Well if you’re really an incubus—”

“Half-incubus.”

“Whichever.” Callum waved his hand. “You have all these weird powers, right? Why haven’t you used them on me the way you did on Jordan then, especially if…”

“If you’re supposed to be my mate forever?” Levin provided the words Callum couldn’t bring himself to say. He nodded.

Levin let out a breath and went to put the water back in the fridge. “First of all, I’d like to make one thing clear, and that’s that I don’t typically use my ‘powers’ on unwilling participants. I made an exception tonight to show you I’m not full of shit, and I never intended to let it go further than it did.”

The relief hit Callum harder than he expected, and he ran a hand through his hair to try and redirect attention from the feelings that were probably written all over his face.

“They don’t work on you anyway.”

Callum stilled and looked up. “What?”

“I said they don’t work on you.”

“I bloody heard you. I meant, what do you mean? How do you even know that?”

Levin came hesitantly back from the fridge looking a shade guilty. “I, um, I was just curious. I tried them out on you in the store.”

Callum was about to demand more clarification when he bristled, suddenly remembering the glazed faces of the shoppers at the end of their little interlude at the grocery store. His mouth fell open. “You—that was—what the fuck!”

“Hang on, hear me out!” Levin leaned back from the counter that separated them, hands up in surrender. “Please. I’d just been trying to give you those dreams ever since that first night, but you never seemed affected. I just did it to see if that was true for everything. I’m sorry.”

Callum glowered across the span of cold marble, arms folded as he thought of the best way to verbally mince the other man.

“Truthfully, I didn’t want to use them on you at all,” Levin went on, perhaps spurred by the stony silence. He sighed. “I don’t want to take the reins for Fate, Callum. If we are somehow destined for one another, she shouldn’t need my help.”

If Callum had had the proper time to really think about all this, he knew he would feel the same way. He detested being forced or coerced into anything.

He just wasn't sure if he liked or loathed that he and Levin were agreed on that count.

"Why did you try giving me weird dreams, then?" he said.

Levin fumbled for words. "I... it was the moment I saw you. After waiting so long to stumble upon you by accident, all I could think was that I wanted to try giving you even the smallest taste of the torment I've been through—always seeing you in my dreams and never being able to get any closer." Pale green eyes locked onto his, and Callum felt his heart thud in his chest. "I would still like to get into your dreams—just the old fashioned way for once."

Levin downed the rest of his water and slid the glass out of the way before making his way slowly around to where Callum sat, pinned in place by those eyes. He couldn't possibly tell Levin about his sleepless nights, especially not now when he knew no incubus sorcery was to blame for them. But he couldn't deny that he was sorely tempted by Levin to test those old fashioned powers of seduction, and he didn't move away when Levin stopped in front of him and brushed warm fingertips over his arm.

"I thought you brought me here to get to know me," Callum said, his voice involuntarily hushed.

Apparently encouraged by his lack of resistance, Levin let his hand move to graze Callum's cheek, never looking away. "That's not what you want right now though, is it." It wasn't even a question, and he was right, damn him. "I'm happy with that too."

Callum didn't know where his voice had gone, but it wasn't anywhere near him now. His pulse quickened as Levin leaned in, and he let his eyes shut softly as he felt the faintest brush of the other man's lips on his cheek.

"Will you let me have a bit of you?" He felt Levin's words against his skin more than he heard them, and he had to force his head back a little to clear it enough to think.

He wanted Levin. He wanted to ride his dick into next week right now if he were perfectly honest, and it was about time he was. But Levin had a lot more trust to earn.

"I'll try you on," he said at last. "But the moment I don't like something, I'm out the door."

If he'd expected Levin to be at all put off by that, he was dead wrong. A grin broke out across the other man's face and he reached out to cup Callum's

cheek. "I'd better do my best to please you, then." Without another word he guided Callum's lips to his, and Callum allowed it.

Something about the contrast between supple lips and the scrape of stubble dragged Callum under quickly, and he clung to Levin like his mouth was air. It annoyed him to no end that for whatever reason Levin didn't need his stupid powers to get his motor running, and the thought prompted him to kiss him a bit harder as though it were somehow a punishment. He felt Levin's warm hands smoothing over his sides and sneaking up under his shirt to press against bare skin, and retaliated by fisting both hands in the other man's hair. One of Levin's hands slid back out and further down until it cupped him through his pants, and it was fine until Levin began to work his hot palm over him, squeezing and teasing until Callum had to pull back gasping.

Without warning, his feet were off the ground, and Levin's arm was tight around his waist until he felt the soft cushions of the couch beneath him as he was laid down gently. It shouldn't have made his belly tighten with want, but it did, and it was all he could do to nip at Levin's lips until they moved to trail down his neck and chest. He felt deft hands at his belt and zipper, and then the cool air of the apartment hit his straining cock as his pants were tugged down his hips. Before he could utter a sound, Levin had him in his mouth.

It was a struggle to hold back, and Callum had to throw his arms up behind him to grip the armrest of the couch until his fingers cramped. Maybe it had been too long of a dry spell for him, but Levin's mouth seemed made for pleasure—it could have been, for all Callum knew. It worked him into a hot, damp, sticky mess, swallowing around him gloriously as one hand teased his balls while the other pinned his hip down. Callum couldn't remember ever falling apart so completely so quickly, and it was lucky Levin seemed to be able to sense his impending orgasm, because he was so beyond words he couldn't warn him off. Even so, Levin didn't shy away. He stroked Callum hard and fast, sucking mercilessly at the soft, wet head until Callum's back arched off the couch and he came in Levin's waiting mouth.

His aim must have been impeccable, because by the time Callum had come down enough to use his brain again, Levin was neatly licking his lips, not a spare drop of anything anywhere.

"You've had a lot of practice with this," Callum said, still panting softly.

Levin's eyes caught his and the look of unapologetic pleasure in them made Callum's dick throb. "Well I have been around awhile."

If this was what over a millennium of experience could be like, Callum had to wonder what else Levin might be impeccable at. But then Levin's hand was on him again, only to tuck him back into his pants. Callum frowned. "Is that all you're going to do?"

He saw Levin smile as the other man rested a cheek against his thigh. "Do you want more?"

Yes I fucking do. Callum had to bite back the words and the urge to demand it. "Yes."

Levin's smile grew too knowing, but Callum was horny enough to let it slide this time. He let Levin take him by the hand to help him onto his feet, leading him to the master bedroom. Callum was sure it was lovely and breathtaking but didn't give a damn about the details now.

Levin was gratingly calm and collected despite Callum already having come undone. He was struck suddenly with the need to see Levin lose that tight control he had on himself, to see if he couldn't draw out the so-called sex demon in him. He turned to face Levin, letting go of his hand and grabbing the front of the man's shirt to steal the breath from his lungs in a searing kiss. Maybe he didn't have lifetimes of experience to draw from, but he knew how to get a man's attention. He gave Levin no room to breathe as he sucked and bit at his lips, pressing flush against him and rolling their hips together to feel the hardness encased by Levin's trousers.

Finally Levin yanked himself back, mouth bruised red and panting. "What was that for?"

Callum didn't know if that meant Levin had been intending to be slow and gentle, but if he had he was definitely changing his mind now. Callum smirked. "Just some insurance that you'll come at me hard."

Light flashed in Levin's eyes. "If you want me that hard I can leave you simpering."

It was just what Callum wanted, and he took hard hold of Levin's jaw to get into his face. "Prove it."

He couldn't say who moved first, but it didn't matter. He was kissing Levin when he could reach the other man's lips in between rough passes of hands over flesh that moved frantically to get under hindering clothes. He got Levin's shirt off first and drank in the sight of him, wanting to grab fistfuls of him and sink his teeth into his muscular body. In his distraction he heard his shirt

ripping along the collar but couldn't spare it the slightest thought, instead pulling away to rid himself of every last scrap of fabric. He felt like a man possessed as he pushed Levin's pants down and shoved him to sit on the edge of the bed, sinking to his knees on the floor.

He didn't understand it. He'd meant to drive Levin into a fever of need, and now here he was running his hands and mouth down Levin's intoxicating body and kneeling before him, needing to taste more. His blood was pounding and making his head spin and his cock ache again. He rested his head on Levin's powerful thigh and resisted the urge to squeeze himself when he felt tender hands on his shoulder. They began running through his hair, and he lifted his gaze to meet green eyes that seared.

"I could return the favour," Callum said, not sure why he felt the need to explain himself to the other man.

Levin's smile brought to mind a wolf about to take down a mighty meal, but he leaned down to kiss Callum with such slow passion it left him trembling with arousal. He pulled Callum to his feet. "I want you on your hands *and* your knees."

The low growl beneath those words echoed in Callum's head as he let Levin pull him close for more, stumbling into the other man's lap. He held on for dear life, but now he could feel the hard strength of Levin's dick against his own, and he moaned quietly as he imagined how it would feel inside him.

The sound seemed to be the last straw for Levin's control, and he wound his arms around Callum's waist to lift him as he got to his feet. He spun quickly and tossed Callum onto the bedspread, which felt softer than silk against his naked body. Levin was gone for a moment, and when he returned he was wearing a condom and coating his fingers with clear lube and making sure Callum was watching.

Callum didn't have a chance to so much as prop himself up on his elbows before Levin was bending his knees and spreading them, his fingers smearing lube all over Callum's hole and pressing inside to stretch the tight ring of heat. They worked him quickly, maybe even too quickly, but Callum was already tossing his head back and biting his lip in anticipation of more and he didn't care. He made no protests as Levin flipped him over onto his stomach and clamped his hands on Callum's hips, pushing his way inside him in one thick and jarring slide.

It felt like too much and yet not enough when it was all Callum could do to keep his head down and his hands digging desperately at the sheets, pushing

back against every thrust. Every slap of flesh against flesh made him need it more, faster and harder and deeper. His back arched until it was almost painful to take Levin's dick as deep as he could, but he felt more alive than he had in months, maybe years. Panted moans and hissed curses escaped him as he felt the coil of tension building again, and then Levin slowed his pace.

He barely got a pleading whimper out before Levin buried himself as deep as he could go, reaching around his front to press a hand to the base of Callum's throat to lift him until he was pressed flush to Levin's chest. Callum felt teeth sinking into his shoulder and cried out, trapped tormentingly on the edge.

"Do you want more?" It was a demand this time.

"Yes," Callum rasped. He needed nothing else. "Y-yes..."

Seemingly satisfied, Levin released him and pushed him head first back down to the mattress to fuck him in tight and punishing snaps of his hips. It took only a touch of Levin's hand wrapping around his cock for Callum to explode, muffling his scream in the lush bedspread. He felt Levin pull out of his constricted body, reluctant to admit he missed the feeling of fullness already.

He couldn't move and panted shallowly, feeling lightheaded and like he'd just had a full body shock when he heard Levin grunt behind him and felt his warm, sticky release shooting all over his back. For some reason he felt a bit proud—he'd gotten an incubus off.

Levin rolled him onto his back, apparently unconcerned with keeping his bedclothes clean. He hovered over Callum until their eyes met, sliding his palm absently over Callum's stomach.

"I'm going to leave you a complete mess," he said.

Callum smiled sleepily. "Can't be worse than the one I am already." He reached for Levin when the other man pressed close again. He was ready for more.

Chapter 6

Day Vision

Callum stirred with the heavy limbs of a perfect slumber. The light was too bright to be of the morning and the bed was empty but for himself. He could hear quiet movements outside the room, probably in the kitchen, and felt content.

He finally rose and made it to the window to take in the spectacular view, mulling over the fact that only a few miles and the Thames had been separating the two of them these past months. As though on cue, that was when Levin came back into the room, filling it with the scent of coffee. He had obviously already showered but didn't seem to mind Callum's debauched state as he kissed him good morning and handed him one of the cups, joining him at the window.

"You seem to have slept well," Levin said.

"Yeah..."

So many questions ran through Callum's mind he couldn't focus on the sprawl of buildings or the river with Levin beside him. The silence stretched as his mind raced with curiosity—did Levin eat normal human food? Did he sleep like normal people did? Did anything weird happen to him during the full moon? Just how immortal was he?—but there was only one big question the others were circling around. It wasn't about whether or not he could believe that Levin was what he said anymore. That was no longer an issue.

He didn't realize he'd been staring until Levin caught him. "What?"

"Nothing," he said, fiddling with his cup. "Just..."

"Hm?" Levin prodded as he sipped his coffee.

Callum huffed softly. "Just—we're not 'mated' now that we've, well... mated, are we?" He felt his cheeks warming and refused to acknowledge it.

But rather than poke fun at his embarrassment, Levin smiled and shook his head. "No. You'd have to give me your heart for that to happen."

Callum raised an eyebrow. "Not literally, I hope."

Levin frowned. "That is an old wives' tale. And a great misinterpretation of lore."

“It was a joke, don’t get all huffy on me.”

As Callum ignored the hypocrisy of his own words to taste his coffee—which was exquisite, unsurprisingly—he felt the stirrings of regret for Levin. Even after two years with his last lover he’d never quite fully come to trust him, and in the end that had been the catalyst of their messy undoing.

“It won’t come easily,” he said softly, almost to himself.

He felt Levin’s fingers playing with the hairs at the back of his neck before the other man stepped away with his empty cup. “Nothing worth having ever does.”

Chapter 7

Two Sided

It wasn't hard to decide that he wanted to see more of Levin, and it didn't take long for him to find out the answers to the questions that were nagging at him. Levin ate like anyone else might, though perhaps rather healthier; he was a light sleeper and only needed five or six hours a night; and the only weird tie he had to the moon was to dream of Callum whenever there wasn't one, and he didn't expect to have that problem anymore.

The questions about his immortality were trickier to navigate, and details of his past were slow in coming. Callum didn't mind that however, since he had his own demons to deal with, his present company excluded.

They saw each other every day. For someone addicted to having his own space, Callum wasn't used to wanting it to be this way. But Levin seemed to know just when to show up, when to pull back, when to leave him wanting more. The bastard. Some days Callum only saw him from onstage, and sometimes for just one dance. Those days drove him mad. The first time he actually dreamed about Levin was after one such night, and it made him angry enough to drive over to Levin's place at eight in the morning to slap him awake and ride him until he could barely walk. Then he made him pay for lunch.

It was after reading off Levin's credit card number to the delivery boy that his eyes lingered over the name in raised block letters. He had long since learned Levin's surname but had never seen it spelled.

"What kind of name is Thais, anyway?" he said absently after hanging up the phone, tossing Levin's card back at him and flopping against the pillows. God, he'd never tire of this heavenly bed.

"An old one. It was my mother's."

Callum grew quiet. He had asked casually about Levin's family before—obviously he'd had a family at some point if he was half-human—but Levin had always brushed the subject aside. Until now.

He wet his lips a bit nervously, not wanting to say anything to discourage Levin from talking. "You're named after your mother?" His voice sounded too light even to his own ears.

But Levin shook his head as he slipped his card back into his wallet and settled back down, the sheets pooled carelessly in his lap. "I was named after a saint. My father had no surname, so they used Thaisson. They thought it would help our family settle peacefully in a village—any village—but none would have us. At best they assumed I was the bastard of the man and his mistress, at worst word seemed to follow that my father wasn't of this world. We weren't welcome anywhere."

Callum felt like he had ice in his stomach. He knew Levin's parents weren't around and hadn't been for a very long time, and he hesitated to ask his next question. His voice could barely go beyond a whisper. "What happened to them?"

The distance of lifetimes came back into Levin's eyes and he stared straight ahead, perhaps back through countless years. "I was just a boy when the men of the village came for us, I don't remember more than a flash here and there. I was told much later what happened that night. My father sacrificed himself to get us out. He didn't know that my mother's life force was tied to his. They both died that night."

Callum couldn't imagine what he might possibly say to make this better. Even if a thousand years or so had passed since then, it couldn't be an easy event to bring up, and an "I'm sorry" would never cut it.

"What do you mean, their life forces were tied together?" It wasn't much of a deflection, but it was all he had.

Levin's gaze became less inward, and he shifted a bit to look up at the high ceiling. "Apparently when an incubus becomes mated to a mortal, their life forces become one. No one's really sure what that means—there's not really anyone to ask. But the best guess is that the immortality and the mortality combine somehow, making for a very long life that can be taken just like anyone else's. They share it though. So if one dies, so will the other. That much I know for certain."

Callum gravitated naturally to rest against Levin's chest, poking absently at it as had become a habit. He wanted to ask if that was what would happen if the two of them were mated, but Levin had already made it clear he had no definitive answers about it. He frowned softly as he thought on that. "If there's no one around to ask, who told you all this, then? I mean, you said you found out later, and your parents weren't... sorry."

He felt Levin's arm come comfortably around his shoulders. "Don't worry about it. It's a valid question. In all my life I've only met one other halfie, and

he tracked me down for his own reasons. Whether it was because he had foreseen himself doing it, or if he actually did feel sorry for the state I'd fallen into, I'll never know. But he set me right somehow, and he told me my own past and then my future. He was the one who gave me that dream."

It almost felt like he was hearing a fable. For all Callum knew, he was. "Who was he?"

Levin shrugged. "He has lots of names—happens when you live for so long and can't be killed so easily. Some people think he's still alive, actually. I think you lot call him Merlin mostly."

Disbelief cut sharply like a record scratch in Callum's brain. *Merlin?! He couldn't even think past the name, and he tilted his head to look frankly at Levin.*

"...I'm just going to stop asking you about these things."

Levin's laugh was quick and earnest. "Somehow I doubt that."

He was right of course, the tosser. Callum had to know more about him, and after that initial breakthrough he couldn't go a day without asking questions. It started innocuously for the most part, pointing to or picking up a trinket or piece of decor in Levin's apartment and asking what it was. Calling the collection of things there antiques was barely scratching the surface; Callum imagined any museum curator would get a hard-on just getting a glimpse of the stuff Levin had picked up over the years.

Levin's early life was still an uncomfortable subject, and Callum had the impression he was the first person to actually hear it from Levin's mouth. The time when he had no family, his name had been written Levan, and he had been a great and feared warrior passed from master to master. It was hard to imagine the gentle and considerate man he now knew Levin to be as such a fearsome entity. The more he learned of it, all he wanted was to pull Levin back from that place in his past, to make his eyes light up as he recalled the wondrous things he had witnessed through history all over the continent instead. Some nights he drifted off to sleep with the low timbre of Levin's voice in his ear, filling his mind with images of the old world growing up around him.

It all made his own battle scars seem so faint in comparison. He knew it wasn't about who had it worse or suffered more, but Levin's unwilling endurance put his own struggles into perspective. And yet, while anyone else would have to call his life boring after hearing Levin's, somehow Levin was always interested. Callum didn't think he'd ever met anyone so engaged and

non-judgemental in hearing about his past mistakes and hopes for the future—he hadn't even shared the latter with anyone before. It was far too personal, far too close to his hurt to ever say aloud.

A home for displaced youth, like he had been. It was such a pipe dream.

"I think it's a great idea," Levin said, while Callum felt the tips of his ears burning. "Was that why you went into social work?"

Callum nodded, then sighed. Six months ago, he'd at least been vaguely on the right track toward his goal. How far he was from it now...

Levin's hand was warm on his cheek and drew his gaze back to him. "You'll get there someday."

Callum cocked an eyebrow. "If I recall, you're not the half-incubus who could see the future."

Levin smiled as he leaned in for a soft kiss. "I believe you'd call that a technicality, and I believe you like to ignore those."

"We're talking about you here."

"I'll ignore it too, then."

"Ignore this."

Chapter 8

Unstoppered

Callum had no idea what prompted him to ask Levin one day out of the blue, but the question was already falling out of his mouth and he couldn't stop it.

"Does my job bother you?"

Immediately feeling stupid, he looked down and tried not to fidget. They were in his cramped Battersea apartment and he was slowly getting ready for bed. Levin was already undressed and under the covers while he finished up in the bathroom adjacent. Somehow over the months, they had both managed to invade each other's living spaces, to the point where it didn't matter where they wound up at the end of the day. And considering he'd never cared to worry about what a man like Levin might think of his job or how he lived, the question really had come from nowhere. He quickly finished scrubbing his face and ducked his head down to rinse in the sink, maybe even hoping just a little that Levin hadn't heard him.

"No."

Levin had answered as soon as Callum had shut off the faucet, and he let his face drip for a moment before patting it dry with the hand towel. He peeked over it at Levin. "Why not?" he said into the damp terrycloth, and held his breath.

Levin rolled his eyes a little. "Well, aside from the obvious, since I would hope you understand by now the nature of my existence..." He snorted when Callum pouted at him but then softened, turning onto his side to watch Callum from the bed. "Because you're not ashamed of it, even if it costs you some things. You don't give up, you own it and you make it work for you. And I like watching you dance when you're up there enjoying yourself, even if you have to let others touch you sometimes. You can tempt me and test me and challenge me to do something about it all at once, but it's me you still want in the end."

There was nothing particularly remarkable about Levin's little speech, and yet they were words Callum had never heard before, not from anyone he'd been with as a dancer even during his first run of it. It usually started off well enough for a few turns in the sheets, but the jealousy always kicked in soon after. Just

having Levin say he was okay with it would have been enough, but this—this was something serious, and something very real. He felt... not just important or wanted, but cherished, and he wasn't used to that. He wasn't used to giving a damn what anyone thought of him either, but with Levin it was suddenly important, maybe even everything.

Everything. It was everything. Levin was everything.

He felt numb with shock as he stood in the doorway, afraid of what might happen if he were to move or even breathe wrong. He had no idea what his face must have looked like, but it was enough to draw Levin to his feet to retrieve him.

He took Callum by the hand and tugged him away from the door frame, guiding him into his own bed. They slipped under the covers and held each other close, nestled in the warmth of the blankets and their bodies. Levin's lips trailed all over his face and neck as his hands travelled the smooth skin along Callum's spine, no trace of hurry in his touch.

They had taken their time with each other in the past, but this was something different. It wasn't the torment of denial, nor was it drawn out from laziness. Rather than lavishing affection along every inch of Callum to drive him crazy or make him beg, Levin was appreciating every last bit of him just to enjoy him, to let Callum enjoy himself.

His body was humming by the time Levin pushed inside of him, and a sharp jolt of pleasure he'd never felt before made him reach for the other man to pull him as close as possible. The scant space between them was filled with their shared breaths until they seemed to be one and the same. Callum could feel Levin's heartbeat pounding inside him and against him until his own began to match its strong pace. The pounding swelled in his head, in his chest, in his entire being until he felt it in his bones, and then somehow deeper.

Mating, we're mating, the words reverberated in his head. A moment of panic threatened their perfect synergy, but the gentle guidance of the beat soothed him, and Levin felt too good inside him to stop. Panic gave way to the thrill of feeling all of Levin inside him, of knowing that Levin must have felt it too. He gave himself over to it completely.

When Callum awoke he felt different. Warm. Alive. And safe.

Levin's arms were around him and his nose was pressed into the crook of the other man's neck. He felt so much more aware of Levin even with his eyes still shut—he could tell he was awake.

"Morning," Levin murmured. Maybe he could tell the same.

Callum grunted softly and opened sleepy eyes. He had to blink a few times. Was he crazy, or did Levin look different, too? He couldn't quite put his finger on it until he quite literally did, reaching up to trace the lines of Levin's handsome face.

"You've got wrinkles."

Levin let out a short bark of surprised laughter and began poking at his cheeks. "How kind of you to point out. I guess it's a consequence of giving up immortality."

They were really only faint crinkles around Levin's eyes and mouth. Laugh lines. They were somehow appealing. "I like them," he said, running his fingertips along the ones by his dimple. "You look more real now."

"I'm a real boy, just like Pinocchio."

"Stop it."

Neither seemed inclined to move, and that was just fine with Callum. He wondered if he looked any different now too. He wouldn't have minded losing some of the frown lines in his brow.

"Do you regret it?"

Callum couldn't actually hear Levin's thoughts, and he certainly hoped Levin couldn't hear his, but even if "it" hadn't been obvious it seemed a lot easier to read between the lines now. He wondered if Levin had been able to feel his brief panic last night, and only hoped that he would feel his sincerity too.

"No," he said, "I don't. I guess it's true that just how we can't choose our families, we can't choose who we give our hearts to. I've just never managed to give it to someone who truly wanted it before. At least I know it's somewhere safe." He paused, craning his neck to look up at Levin. "Just treat it better than I have."

Levin's eyes were shining brightly as he leaned down to kiss Callum and held him tighter. "You can do as you please with mine. I'm ready for it."

Callum couldn't tell if they could share feelings now too or if they were just both obvious in their happiness, and frankly he didn't really care to know. He had all he'd ever wanted and never allowed himself to wish for—the love of his life.

Levin was elated. He was no slave to Fate, but she had come through for him in the end.

He had no idea what was coming for them next, and that was thrilling. For a millennium and a half, no matter what happened, what he endured, he'd always known he would live to see the next day. Time was precious only to those who had limited amounts of it. He was one of them now, and he was lucky as hell. He would get to spend the rest of the time he had with the one he'd given his heart to months ago. He finally had a future, not just an endless present.

He smiled down at Callum, who was dozing in his arms again. Callum had no idea he was working toward giving him a future too, the one he really wanted. No idea of all the investments Levin had made on his behalf, not the faintest hint of all the available properties around town that he would soon be able to afford and rebuild from the ground up to be the shelters he'd dreamed of.

A couple more weeks would do it. He couldn't wait to see the look on Callum's face.

After so long on his own it was hard to believe, but they really could live happily together—not forever after, but for a good long while.

The End

Author Bio

A. Morell has been writing for fun for the past decade. She once dreamed of being a professional chef—now she knows better and is taking a stab at becoming an author. Without so much as a Creative Writing 101 class under her belt it's a bit of a stab in the dark, but she is comfortable flying by the seat of her pants.

She enjoys food, baseball, classics, word games, tattoos, shoes, handbags, escapism, and creating characters. She is averse to over-used words, spiders, zombies, tardiness, camping, and people who misquote movie lines and lyrics. She has one cat.

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